

The Political Animal: The Conquest of Speciesism

Richard Ryder (1998). McFarland & Co Inc: North Carolina, USA. 147pp. Hardback. Obtainable from the publishers, Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina, NC 28640, USA ; or order line 1-800-2532187 (ISBN 0786405309). Price US\$28.50.

This book is, quite simply, a short history of the animal welfare movement in (especially) the UK and the USA, as seen through the eyes of one of its pioneers. Richard Ryder coined the term 'speciesism' in 1970 to describe the 'irrational prejudice' which discriminates between animals simply on the basis of species. The concept was later developed in depth by the philosopher Peter Singer. He pointed out, for example, that a law which permitted humans to conduct experiments on a chimpanzee that it would not permit on a terminally brain-damaged person could not be justified in relation to the sentience of the subject, and was based on nothing more than discrimination in favour of our own species.

The subject of animal welfare is considered under four headings: history, ethics, science and politics. In fact, it is the history theme that pervades the entire book. The chapter actually entitled 'History' is perhaps the most interesting. It begins with the ancient Egyptians and their reverence for animal gods, and examines the development of religious and humanistic arguments advanced to justify compassion for or indifference to animal suffering (eg St Francis, Jeremy Bentham – good guys; St Thomas Aquinas, Descartes – bad guys).

In the chapter on ethics, Ryder outlines his own ethical position which he calls 'painism' and is intended to convey a sense of concern for any creature that has the capacity to suffer. This does not differ in essence from Bentham's classically expressed utilitarian concern for all sentient species. 'The question is not, can they reason? nor, can they talk? but can they suffer?' So, 'why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive species?' This chapter is frankly disappointing, since it does not attempt to explain or analyse the ethical basis of our concern for well-being, autonomy and justice for our fellow mortals. At one stage speciesism is redefined as 'hurting others because they are members of another species'. That may be a consequence of speciesism but it is surely not a definition.

Once again, the chapter on animal welfare science does not attempt to review the logical and experimental techniques necessary for a proper scientific study of the welfare state of an animal. Instead, it is a history of the scientists involved, one way or another, in matters of animal welfare. It charts the emergence of animal welfare science as an academically respectable subject in universities. On the other hand, it exposes and analyses some of the defence mechanisms that scientists can erect to protect themselves from guilt when working with animals. These include detachment, concealment, misrepresentation and shifting blame.

The final section, on politics, describes (mainly) the history of 'European animal welfare campaigns with political objectives from 1970 to the present day'. Inevitably (and rightly) this draws heavily on Richard Ryder's own career as an active and politically effective campaigner for animal welfare. It is, therefore, a very personal view of who met whom and did what and when and does not attempt to itemize the consequences of all this endeavour in terms of new legislation, and the growth of improved, quality assured, high-welfare systems of animal husbandry.

I think anyone who approaches this book looking for new insights into the science, ethics and politics of animal welfare will be slightly disappointed. On the other hand, it is a good read.

A J F Webster
University of Bristol, UK