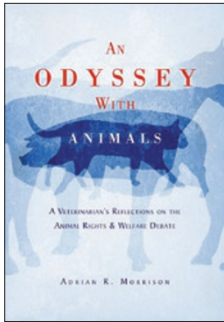


Taking animal rights personally



An Odyssey with Animals: A Veterinarian's Reflections on the Animal Rights & Welfare Debate

by Adrian R Morrison

Oxford University Press, 2009
288 Pages, hardcover, \$29.95
ISBN 0195374444

Reviewed by Kevan A C Martin

Nowadays it is certainly impossible to write any book about animal rights and animal welfare without raising the ire of a subset of readers. *An Odyssey with Animals* by Adrian Morrison, a professor of behavioral neuroscience at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine, is likely to be no exception. However, Morrison's breadth of experience across a wide range of contentious issues in our relationship with animals makes his an unusual book. Whatever side of the fence you believe yourself to be on, after reading his book you will surely come to appreciate that there are many fences and Morrison has worked harder than most to break them down.

The 'Odyssey' of the title reflects Morrison's own often challenging journey from a childhood on a farm, to veterinary training, to a long academic career using animals as subjects for sleep research, to an advocate for humane use of animals in biomedical research, to an expert witness in the controversial Silver Spring legal case, to a prime target for the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), whose actions against him sparked this book. The polemic against his attackers that he began writing in 1993 has quieted over the ensuing years to the far more nuanced reflection of the relationships of humans and animals that we read here.

Morrison's baptism of fire came as a defense witness in the prosecution of Edward Taub for cruelty to monkeys. Taub is now more widely known for his development of the successful 'constraint-induced movement therapy' for rehabilitation of stroke patients, but in 1981 he was carrying out the research in monkeys that eventually led to the therapy used in humans. He investigated strategies in which monkeys could recover the use of one arm in which all of the sensory nerves had been cut, which typically leads to severe neglect of the affected arm. PETA cofounder Alex Pacheco posed as a research student to gain access to Taub's monkeys and he and his accomplices photographed them while Taub was on vacation and then alerted the Maryland police. Morrison describes the appearance of the monkey's deprived arm as 'ugly' as a result of the neglect typical of this

sensory loss and then answers, perhaps too briefly, the question as to why he agreed to appear as a witness for the defense, that the monkeys were otherwise healthy and maintained in relatively good conditions. The support of Morrison and his colleagues was crucial and Taub was exonerated on appeal. However, as a result of his advocacy of animal research, Morrison himself became a target of organizations such as the ALF and PETA, a persecution which continues to this day.

Morrison writes revealingly of how he has found his path through the ethical maze of science, politics and the practices of animal rights organizations of all hues. He also explores the multiple ethical views of the ways in which humans use animals: in research, as pets, as laborers, as entertainers, as sport and as food. It is paradoxical that although biomedical research is the most ethically defensible use of animals because of the measurable benefit to both humans and animals, it has been the chief target of a wide range of animal welfare and anti-vivisection organizations for well over a century. Indeed, researchers are now the most scrutinized and strictly regulated of all animal users. Thus, although any homeowner can kill or poison a rodent at will, the laboratory rodent is protected by a wide number of regulations. Although many more animals are raised or hunted for food than are used in research, the issue of agriculture and fishing seems simpler: most animals are farmed or caught, killed, dissected, sold and eaten. However, these arguably more common and morally less defensible actions have received far less scrutiny from many animal welfare organizations than research aimed at gaining scientific knowledge.

This book is not just the story of Morrison's personal travails. He also discusses several cases of sustained harassment of other scientists by animal activists, including arson attacks and death threats to their families. The protests are not all one way, there are voices standing up for animal research. Morrison acknowledges the assistance of the Research Defense Society, set up in London in 1908, as perhaps the earliest of the pro-animal research organizations. The most recent voice is Pro-Test, which was originally established to counter animal rights protesters who sought to stop new laboratories being built in Oxford, but is now an international organization whose leaders include several researchers who have themselves been the targets of animal rights activists, including Tipu Aziz, Dario Ringach and David Jentsch.

The closing chapters of Morrison's wide-ranging and thoughtful book concern vexed questions of ethics and, in particular, the concept of the 'rights' of animals. In Europe, the issue of animal rights is intertwined with the concept of dignity, to the extent that in Germany and Switzerland the Constitution requires consideration to be given to the 'dignity of creation'. Against this trend, the English moral philosopher Mary Warnock has argued that the concept of rights is being debased in a number of key areas, including child and animal welfare. With respect to animals, her view is that although it is morally wrong to be cruel to animals, animals have no such obligation toward one another and therefore the duties we have to respect in regard to nature do not entail that nature has rights against us. Morrison concurs and concludes that in the end we are the only species capable of being stewards of nature and so we necessarily must take care of it, for "our humanity depends on it."

The author is at the Institute of Neuroinformatics, University of Zurich and ETH, Zurich, Switzerland.
e-mail: kevan@ini.phys.ethz.ch