

Session 1

Introduction to Human-Animal Relationships – 2006

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In Honor of Dr. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, DVM, AM, Ph.D. (1929-2003)

The goal of this lecture is to introduce (1) the course, (2) the Ethics and Values Signature Program, and (3) the many features of the changing terrain we walk regarding our relationship to the living beings in and around our homes and human communities.

Consider what answer you might give to these obvious, though hardly simple, questions:

- What factors shape human-animal relationships?
- Are the principal factors social and/or cultural?
- How do political factors affect our relationships with nonhumans?
- What of historical, religious and/or economic factors? Just how do they impact what various individuals think and feel about animals?
- What roles might more personal factors play in our current views, such our own personal histories with the specific animals we grew up with or near?
- Are there genetically-based inclinations in our human nature, a kind of *biophilia*,¹ that attract us to other living beings?
- What role(s) should (1) science(s) and (2) ethics play in the study of human-animal relationships?

When one inquires about views of animals held by family, friends, teachers, and even rigorously trained scientists, one discovers that **most claims about nonhuman animals have some interesting ... and even some peculiar ... features.** Consider, for example, how many of the following observations are true in some respect or another about not only the views of others, but of *your* views as well.

- ◆ Some or all portions of claims about animals have been “inherited,” as opposed to such claims having been empirically verified by the person making the claim.
- ◆ Many views are often held with a special fervor because they have been inherited from respected authorities in one's life (parents, religious authorities, educators).
- ◆ Similarly, since childhood, each of us has been making important choices on the basis of inherited views, all of which can result in a special “investment” in one's current views.

1. This word was made popular by Harvard's E. O. Wilson, who defined biophilia as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” Wilson, Edward O. 1984. *Biophilia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1.

In some crucial ways, most people's ideas and views about nonhuman animals are anchored by the practices regarding these animals which one has been taught as part of a specific family and community. For example, when a young person and their extended family have long been eating a certain kind of animal, that young person mostly likely will not *see* such animals in the same ways as does someone who has *not* been eating this particular species of animal. This fact, when stated so analytically, doesn't seem surprising. But day-to-day realities can be quite different—attitudes about dogs found in those who eat dogs seem callous to those who learned in their early life to care about dogs and have them as family members. Different cultures get used to their own practices, but are startled by unfamiliar practices. Consider how the indifference of most Americans to cattle (because they grew up eating beef) strikes religious believers in India, who hold cows to be sacred, as unethical.

We often talk as if our ideas come first and then, through a logic-like process, are developed and become the basis for our subsequent actions. But this isn't a good description of many people's approach to nonhuman animals. With regard to them, we often don't notice that the familiar, traditional ways of acting that we inherit from our family, local community and general culture dramatically affect what we consider valid ideas about the world and animals around us. Thus, in the area of our relationships with nonhuman animals, our ideas often *follow from*, rather than lead, our practices (the vast majority of which, of course, we have inherited from our society and family). In a way, practices often cement our understanding in place, making it very difficult for new information (even when backed by good quality science) to make its way into our lives.

When contemporary thinkers probe such things, especially in terms of the broad study of "human-animal relationships," they stand on the shoulders of pioneers like Dr. Betty Lawrence. Such pioneers have helped us observe, for example, that Cartesian views of animals heavily influence Western culture and many daily practices regarding nonhuman living beings.

Dr. Lawrence was an early advocate of the notion that it is **important for veterinarians to understand and take into account different views of animals in their own society, as well as views found in other societies and cultures**. Given the broad scope of contemporary veterinary medicine, this has become an essential task.

This lecture introduces students to the ways in which this course asks us to consider our relationships to nonhuman animals. Such an approach is a central part of the Ethics and Values Signature Program, where an analytical approach to our relationships with other beings draws upon both our scientific abilities and our ethical impulses. Combining these two approaches allows one to see the importance of both learning and, sometimes, *unlearning* what one has been taught about the world around us.

It is for these reasons that we will ask in this class and throughout other courses and lectures that are part of the Ethics and Values Signature Program about issues such as the sources of our view that something is "right" or "wrong," "ethical" or unethical. We also look at various changes across time and place in the ways our society has viewed those

beings we call “animals.” Of course, *humans are, scientifically speaking*, primates, mammals, chordates, etc., and thus “*animals*.” But consider the extraordinary prevalence of the phrase “humans and animals” in every circle of our society. This habit of speaking (and thinking, no doubt) has prompted some to wonder why our society is so heavily invested in such an obviously *unscientific* phrase. Note that the phrase is not merely *non-scientific*—it is, instead, decidedly anti-scientific, for there is no science in which humans are not fully acknowledged to be animals in every sense that, say, a chimpanzee or a pig is also an animal.

But words and phrases from our culture are important to us, and no one can be completely immune to how words are being employed in conversations that surround us. Notice then that many speak of “animals” and mean, scientifically, “all animals other than humans.”

It is precisely this kind of open-minded questioning about *both* senses of the word “animal” that strengthens one’s analytical muscles, as it were. When it comes to engaging our relationships and thinking about other animals, it helps if we look at our relationships with all animals, for this will help us see multiple features of those relationships.

We also acknowledge at the same, however, that such candid questions have often provoked disapproval—lots of people are invested economically and otherwise in certain traditions and practices affecting nonhuman animals. How we talk about “them,” how we use them, how we live near them—all of these are matters of deeply felt emotions and vigorously held opinions. Because of such intensity, some people simply aren’t that interested in wide ranging questions about human-animal relationships. They already “know in their bones,” as it were, what the right answer to any questions about the “proper” form of human-animal relationship.

But in education, and very likely in life itself, self-awareness and rigor of analysis are helpful. Indeed, seeing all sides of debates is the heart and soul of both good scientific investigation and caring ethical inquiry.

Because we want to inquire into different sides of many debates, we also will look at issues such as the following:

- ◆ Differing views that *now exist in our society* regarding nonhuman animals and their place in our communities
- ◆ Increased emphasis on the human-animal bond and the role of pets/companion animals in our lives (consider, for example, the importance of pet loss and client bereavement counseling)
- ◆ The role of the individual veterinarian in society, as well as the roles that can be played by veterinary education and the veterinary profession as a whole

- ◆ On the issue of the world around us, where might the average citizen’s primary (or even secondary) focus be? How about the veterinarian who lives in a local community? Which animals, human or otherwise, *should* any of us care about? Which should we notice and take seriously? And what of the broad notion “animal protection”—what is its relationship to more specific terms like “animal welfare” and “animal rights”?
- ◆ What is the relevance of science-based evidence that some nonhumans are demonstrably self-aware and/or intelligent? What is the role of the veterinary profession in answering this question?
- ◆ What are the benefits and costs of focusing on the individual animal as opposed to focusing interest primarily on the herd, local population, species or ecosystem?
- ◆ What is the relationship of environmental and conservation concerns to those concerns that begin (and sometimes end) with a focus on nonhuman animals?
- ◆ How, when they conflict, do we sort out our deep concerns for the interests and lives of nonhuman animals relative to our deep interests in the interests and lives of humans?
- ◆ Changing gender demographics—will the dramatic increase in numbers of women in the veterinary profession influence human-animal interactions within the profession and/or change the policies of organized veterinary medicine?

In the past, Dr. Lawrence used various examples from around the world to illustrate how diverse our relationships have been with nonhuman animals and the natural world generally. Her examples included the mustang controversy in the United States, Maasai cattle herders of Africa, Lapp reindeer herders from Scandinavia, pigs in New Guinea, and Native American views of other animals and nature. Dr. Lawrence’s groundbreaking scholarship included detailed case studies of other peoples—for example, she produced a book-length examination of the role and importance of nonhuman animals in the culture of the Crow Indians of Montana. How might other cultures’ visions of “human-animal relationships” impact our awareness of what we and our society can do in this regard?

When she instituted this course, it was among the first ever that studied “human-animals relationships.” We stand on her shoulders as we continue her legacy in this and the next ten sessions of this course.