

Reading #1
Humans and Other Animals—
The Changing Terrain of Human-Animal Relationships

Matthew Scully, a well known American conservative voice and until Fall 2004 special assistant and deputy director of speechwriting to President George W. Bush, published a widely reviewed and discussed book in 2002 entitled *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*. The book begins with these four striking paragraphs:

It began with one pig at a British slaughterhouse. Somewhere along the production line it was observed that the animal had blisters in his mouth and was salivating. The worst suspicions were confirmed, and within days borders had been sealed and a course of action determined. Soon all of England and the world watched as hundreds, then hundreds of thousands, of pigs, cows, and sheep and their newborn lambs were taken outdoors, shot, thrown into burning pyres, and bulldozed into muddy graves. Reports described terrified cattle being chased by sharpshooters, clambering over one another to escape. Some were still stirring and blinking a day after being shot. The plague meanwhile had slipped into mainland Europe, where the same ritual followed until, when it was all over, more than ten million animals had been disposed of. Completing the story with the requisite happy ending was a calf heard calling from underneath the body of her mother in a mound of carcasses to be set aflame. Christened “Phoenix,” after the bird of myth the rose from the ashes, the calf was spared.

The journalist Andrew Sullivan discerned in these scenes a “horrifying nothingness,” something about it all that left us sick and sad and empty.... One knew that something had gone terribly wrong, something deep and serious and beyond the power of vaccines or borders or cullings to contain. We wall in all of their simplicity the facts of the case: Here were innocent, living creatures, and they deserved better, and we just can’t treat life that way. We realized, if only for an instant, that it wasn’t even necessary, that we had brought the whole thing upon them and upon ourselves. Foot-and-mouth disease is a form of flu, treatable by proper veterinary care, preventable by vaccination, lethal neither to humans nor to animals. These animals, millions of them not even infected, were all killed because their market value had been diminished and because trade policies required it—because, in short, under the circumstances it was the quick and convenient thing to do. By the one measure we now apply to these creatures, they had all become worthless. For them, the difference between what happened and what awaited them anyway was one of timing. And for us the difference was visibility. This time, we had to watch.

Silent while all of this was unfolding in early 2001 were people usually quick to caution against “sentimentality” toward animals. Looking out upon those fields of

burning pyres, no one could claim that mankind is going soft. The images bore witness, instead, to an incredible hardness and abandon. It was an “economic disease,” as one writer put it, revealing attitudes there all along and now, in desperation, grimly carried out to their logical conclusion.

The drama had a familiar feel to it, for in a strange way mankind does seem to be growing more sentimental about animals, and also more ruthless. No age has ever been more solicitous to animals, more curious and caring. Yet no age has ever inflicted upon animals such massive punishments with such complete disregard, as witness scenes to be found on any given day at any modern industrial farm.

Scully’s book, which is written from a conservative political viewpoint and which utilizes the concepts and vocabulary of the conservative or right wing of the Christian religious tradition, goes on to examine sport hunting, international fishing policy, what the US government calls “confined animal feeding operations”, and many other points of intersection between our human community and the diverse realm of nonhumans who live amidst or near us. The theme “something [has] gone terribly wrong” occurs again and again, and Scully tries to use his Christian values to exhort humans to more compassion and realism in their relationships with nonhuman animals.

The prestigious *Wall Street Journal* included a review of Scully’s book by Fred Barnes, who observed, “Folks in the Washington political community, conservatives anyway, had been buzzing for months about this book, which pleads for the humane treatment of animals. It was odd, some thought, that a conservative Republican should side with the animal-rights crowd.” *The New York Times* also reviewed the book under the title “*Dominion: The Most Compassionate Conservative*” (October 27, 2002). The reviewer, Natalie Angier, opened her evaluation by calling upon humans to relate to their own experiences with a companion animal, and then expand those outward:

Have you ever met a cat that was weaned too early and so developed the disturbing habit of nuzzling and kneading compulsively in your hair, your sweaters, your blankets, the crook of your elbow? Well, pigs prematurely taken from their mothers also root incessantly for something to chew or suck on; and if they are pigs spending their abbreviated lives in a factory farm, where maybe 500 animals are crowded into a space no bigger than a living room, the thing they try to chew on is the tail of the hog in front of them. This is not a happy habit for the industrial farmer: chewed tails can result in infections, and pigs that die, in Matthew Scully's pitch-perfect phrase, "an unauthorized death."

The factory farmer's solution? When the piglets are weaned, a good 12 to 16

weeks before nature had planned, their tails are docked, the lower part amputated with a pliers-like instrument. That small operation leaves the pigs with hypersensitive tails, which means the animals will not get complaisant and will struggle ever after to keep their clipped, throbbing appendages out of the mouths of their penmates.

Should you be inclined to pity the beasts for that or any other detail of their treatment in today's giant meat-making plants, however, the executives in charge of booming factory farms like Smithfield Foods in Virginia, which kills 82,300 pigs a day -- a quarter of the nation's total -- are eager to set your conscience at ease. When Scully asked Sonny Faison, head of Smithfield's Carroll's Foods division, in North Carolina, whether there isn't something "just a little sad" about confining millions of animals to cramped concrete enclosures, where there is no sun, wind, rain or even so much as a scattering of straw to sleep on, Faison declared *au contraire*. "They love it," he insisted. "They're in state-of-the art confinement facilities. The conditions that we keep these animals in are much more humane than when they were out in the field." Another Smithfield supervisor seconded the notion, painting a bleak picture of the life of free-ranging swine: "I mean, you put 'em out, they kind of scrounge around in the mud, and in the summer, around here, animals that are outside risk getting mosquito bites and things."

Dominion is a horrible, wonderful, important book.

As we will discuss in any number of ways in this course and as you will discover throughout your time at TCSVM, our society is undergoing profound forms of self-examination regarding "human-animal relationships." For veterinary students, of course, human impacts on and intersections with nonhuman animals are a major feature of life.

But what of the rest of society? Are they aware of the magnitude of our larger community's impacts on nonhuman animals? Consider the follow general estimates of the number of animals involved in various uses and "relationships" with nonhuman animals—these are very general estimates meant only to reveal the relative magnitude of different kinds of human-nonhuman interactions.

- 15-30 million laboratory animals are used annually in the US
- 100-200 million companion animals live with humans in US (more households now have companion animals than have children)
 - About 10,000 unwanted companion animals are killed each day in the US
- 9,000–10,000 million (yes, 9–10 *billion*) food animals are killed annually in the US (this doesn't count fish)

- Wildlife killed annually are hard to estimate with any real accuracy
 - is the number 1 billion, 10 billion, or 100 billion?
 - impacts here go well beyond hunting and road kill, of course
 - many habitats are poisoned by environmentally disruptive toxins
- The *worldwide* total, many of which are killed for the consumption of the industrialized countries, is, if we add in fish, clearly in the scores of billions.

Of great significance is that this list includes radically different kinds of *intentions* toward the lives around us. We clearly intend that tens of millions of cats and dogs be members of our families, and this is increasingly true in many societies around the globe. This altogether positive version of “human-animal relationships”—which contemporary veterinary medicine is at pains to promote—contrasts remarkably with the problems that sparked Scully’s poignant language about “horrifying nothingness” and “something about it all that left us sick and sad and empty.”

Consider this interesting question—how significant is it that Natalie Angier, a New York Times correspondent who has been very critical of some figures in the animal protection movement, calls upon a very positive image of human-animal relationships in her review of Scully’s book? Angier pushes readers to see certain features of the lives of those mammals thought of merely as *food animals*—she is asking us to consider if the clear difference we draw between different kinds of nonhumans really is all that clear.

We might also ask, why does Angier disbelieve the corporate officials who insist “They love it” when asked about the pigs’ attitude toward their confined lives? Is there relevant scientific evidence available to assess the validity of the pigs’ attitude toward their confinement?

These are complex questions, and they signal that we begin our journey toward understanding “human-animal relationships” amidst a bewildering array of options and extremely serious tensions regarding how we *should or should not* think about nonhuman animals. The continuum of options is anchored at one end by those who *truly* believe that nonhuman animals don’t deserve any protections at all and are here solely for our use. The other end of the vast continuum of views of nonhumans is populated, of

course, by some who *seriously* suggest legal rights for nonhuman animals that would, if implemented, curtail humans' rights to own and dispose of nonhuman animals.

Each of you will practice in a world which will, no doubt, continue to examine humans' interactions with nonhuman animals. Given that there will inevitably be many tensions as our human community works out our possibilities with other animals, veterinarians and others who study the larger features of "human-animal relationships" can help the public see various features of this intricate, inevitable, confused and yet ever-so-malleable set of relations. Veterinarians and students of "animals and public policy" are potentially tomorrow's guides through this maze of problems, for each of you already reflects something that Scully suggests about our relationship to the nonhuman world and, in particular, our fellow animals—human-animal relationships will continue to be "a test of our character, of mankind's capacity for empathy and for decent, honorable conduct and faithful stewardship."