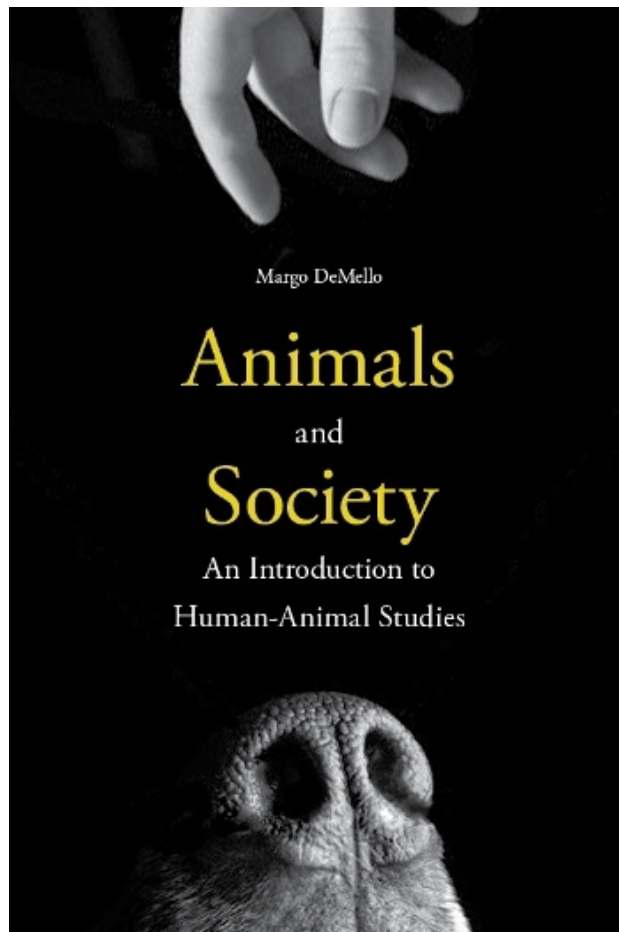


Reviews

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**A Bold Introduction to Human-Animal Studies**

Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*.  
New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 488p. \$34.50.



**Overview.** In 2012 Columbia University Press released *Animals and Society*, the first textbook for the rapidly burgeoning, multidisciplinary field of Human-Animal Studies [HAS]. While collections of primary source materials have been organized into readers and some books are self-titled introductory texts, *Animals and Society* is the only HAS textbook. Margo DeMello is well suited to be its author. For years, DeMello has performed substantial service in the development of HAS through her work at the Animals and Society Institute and several other HAS books she has written and edited.

In addition, DeMello has had years of hands-on experience with a variety of nonhuman animals at home and at sanctuaries.

The comprehensive 420-plus-page overview of HAS is written and structured to be accessible to those unfamiliar to the subject matter. *Animals and Society* is divided into 20 chapters, translating into a reading load of two 20-page chapters a week over a 10-week course. Vocabulary is emboldened and usually clearly defined. Gray “boxes” scattered throughout the book highlight legal documents, animal advocacy organizations, animal biographies, and anecdotes in the news. Many topics are lightened up with Bizzaro comics, while others are introduced with anecdotes from contemporary life or passages from classical texts.

*Animals and Society* is also a great departure point for curious students. It offers an extensive index, a 36-page bibliography spanning multiple disciplines, and a handful of suggested books, films, and websites at the end of each chapter. Further, most chapters conclude with an autobiographical essay by a researcher in HAS. These essays personalize the research and subject matter in each chapter, revealing the heterogeneous motivations and methodologies of researchers in the multidisciplinary field. However, conspicuously absent is a glossary of the vocabulary words emboldened throughout the textbook. A glossary would be much welcomed both for convenience and since some emboldened words are not defined in-text. The book also does not feature any discussion questions or classroom activities, perhaps leaving pedagogy concerns to DeMello’s previous publication, *Teaching the Animal* (2010).

The textbook is divided into five parts: the social construction of animals, the uses of animals, the link between violence against humans and nonhuman animals, representations of animals in culture and media, and the study of and advocacy on behalf of animals.

**Defining HAS.** Part one of *Animals and Society* serves to introduce HAS and describes the social construction of animals. As the first HAS textbook, DeMello’s introduction of HAS has more than immediate relevance. Her introduction not only sets the stage for the rest of the book and the readers’ interest and experience, it exposes a new generation of college students — some of who may pursue a future in HAS — to the comprehensive research on the human-animal relationship. Her definition of HAS and the following chapters thus may leave an enduring first impression on student attitudes toward nonhuman animals and HAS.

In chapter one, DeMello answers the questions: what is HAS, why engage in it, what research methods are used, and what are its policy implications? The chapter opens with a demonstration that human interest in animals is ubiquitous, yet they have been largely ignored as subjects by most disciplines until now. Given the ubiquity of animals in our everyday life, it is this lack of inquiry into human-animal relationships that is “bizarre,” not our interest in studying them (7). Since the 1980s, HAS has developed out of multi- and inter-disciplinary inquiry into the *interactions* between humans and nonhuman animals in society and culture. DeMello describes HAS as a holistic “way of seeing” that places our lives with animals into a social context (9). Inquiring into our relationship with nonhuman animals means both understanding and questioning the taken-for-granted meanings and roles that we have assigned to them.

DeMello acknowledges that many people drawn to such inquiry are personally invested in the well-being of nonhumans, yet is firm that HAS “is not about animal advocacy” (17). While “no scholarship is truly objective,” HAS is juxtaposed with critical animal studies, an academic discipline that does have “an explicit political agenda” (17). DeMello reassures her audience that, like other fields of study, HAS “adheres to the requirements of evidence-based scholarship” (17). After all, some HAS researchers are afraid that animal advocacy may “inhibit the growth of the field because many scientists will be threatened” (416). Research into human-animal relationships may not be without its obstacles, but researchers in each discipline have their own methods. The results of HAS research have had real policy implications that have led to the proliferation of animal assisted therapy and the detection of domestic abuse. No policy implications that aid non-companion animals are named. However, DeMello’s decisive claim that HAS “is not about animal advocacy” comes under question throughout the book.

**A Critique of Animal Use.** In chapters two and three, DeMello presents a brief overview of the social construction of nonhuman animals across time and cultures, focusing on Western classifications. The use of animals has particularly impacted the social construction of animals, especially the most significant categorization of animals as either wild or domestic. Since how we classify animals impacts our treatment of them, we are confronted with the question of which stories we ought to tell about nonhuman animals. Classification may be inevitable, but hierarchical ranking is not. DeMello proposes that seeing the world through nonhuman eyes may help us decide.

Part two is divided according to a variety of uses humans have applied to animals: sport, display, food, companion, research, and assistance. In chapters four and five, DeMello traces the shift in Westerners' relation to so-called wild animals from being respected to being eradicated, to being romanticized, to being bureaucratically killed. She also includes a list demonstrating how relatively recent most domestication has been in human history, and references the role that domestic animals had in the colonization and conquest of indigenous territories. Domestication is depicted as an evolving process of engineering, body mutilation, and dependency. That nonhuman animals originally benefited from domestication is not disputed; however, DeMello asks her readers, "do modern domesticated animals [still] experience the same benefits?" (89). Even more provocatively, she asks "[d]oes this unwillingness to release ourselves from our dependence on domestic animals stem from love, greed, selfishness, or a desire to dominate others?" (95).

Next, DeMello documents the consequences stemming from humans' insatiable dependency on nonhuman animals. In chapter six, she writes on the various displays of animals — in zoos, marine mammal parks, racetracks, and fighting rings — arising from desires to see, to profit, and to dominate. The desire to see is the consequence of the disappearance of wild animals from everyday life. The history of animal displays is traced from ancient to modern times, before DeMello delves into the contradictions and harms of zoos and marine mammal parks. "Is all this attention good or bad for the animals," DeMello asks (100). After reading the tragic stories of Keiko and Tilkum, it is difficult to imagine any answer less critical than "bad."

Chapters seven and eight repeat much from chapter five. Here, DeMello juxtaposes two distinct categories into which animals are born with two very different outcomes: food and pets. First she describes the psychological and institutional production of "meat," about which the public is largely ignorant. The "absent referent" and "carnism" are heuristic concepts for discussing the process by which violence against animals goes undetected via objectification, as well as the process by which the normality of meat-eating goes unquestioned via ideology. DeMello also juxtaposes the naturalness of a diet high in meat consumption with the diet of most Westerners up until the 20th century. She describes the meat industry as "one of the nation's most powerful businesses," and details how technological inventions, vertical integration, lobbying, cronyism, marketing, and PR campaigns have resulted in current consumption levels (136).

Like meat-eating, pet-keeping has long been a universal practice but only exploded within the last century. The rise of a pet industry arose with urban living, smaller homes, more wealth, and a desire for children to model kindness. Yet, despite all the affection pets bequeath upon humans, millions go homeless, and half of them (3-4 million) are killed every year due to lack of resources. Again, DeMello is not too shy to describe the situation as one of “the most egregious examples of America’s throwaway culture” (162). In chapter ten, she writes about how species we designate as pets also serve people with disabilities, provide therapy, and serve in war, but that there are few studies on whether they also benefit from being used.

Chapter nine is more “balanced” than the previous chapters on animal use. Here she begins by describing animal experimentation as “complex” and “controversial” (170). DeMello notes the contradiction that animals are sufficiently like humans to model human illnesses, yet sufficiently unlike humans to have a similar moral standing and the very illnesses (like depression) for which they are being tested on. She then presents the history of the anti-vivisection movement as well as moral and epistemological objections to animal experimentation. Rather than asking if we should save the rat or a child, DeMello suggests we ask, “How can we save the child without sacrificing the rat?” (191).

**Interlocking Violence.** After section two’s focus on the welfare of animals in various industries, section three is slightly more focused on how violence against animals impacts human welfare. Chapter eleven is a sympathetic look into the lives of those who work in animal rescue, in shelters, on ranches, in labs, and in slaughterhouses. DeMello defines the method of participant observation and notes that it neither involves animals’ standpoints nor is it neutral. One phenomenon it discloses is that people who work with animals say that they love animals, yet their actions directly or indirectly harm them. For instance, shelter workers may cope with making end-of-life decisions by emotionally distancing themselves from their animals, and also sometimes — like the pet owners disposing of their animals — externalize the blame onto others.

Chapters twelve and thirteen are an account of violence against nonhuman animals and its intersections with violence against humans. Dramatically, DeMello draws the reader’s awareness to forms of violence against animals that are so routine and displaced that the public is oblivious to them as violence. She classifies violence against

animals as institutional, culture-specific, and deviant. In the case of institutional violence, “[w]e not only tolerate violence ... that is invisible and distant, we commission it” (239). In contrast, culturally-specific violence by ethnic minorities (e.g., dog slaughter and Santeria) is very salient and frequently objectionable to dominant societal norms. Finally, deviant violence is defined as that which is perceived as socially unacceptable and “unnecessary.” Psychologists, social workers, and lawyers have established a consensus that there is a link between deviant violence to human and nonhuman animals, including the domestic violence and sexual abuse of women, children, and their pets.

This link has also been theorized to occur at the institutional and cultural levels. First, social hierarchy in Europe and Asia developed out of the surpluses animal labor enabled, and has since taken on a new form within a capitalist economy (in which animal exploitation has increased exponentially for the profits of the rich). Second, through the tactics of othering and essentializing, gender, racial, class, and species hierarchy are justified: “as long as there is a line separating some from others, then no group is safe from being on the losing side of it” (261). In addition to the link with domestic abuse, women and animals are linked in being historically defined by their bodies and reproductive abilities to serve male power and desire. Likewise, people of non-European descent have historically been harmed from such a link through dehumanizing animal metaphors and being “treated like animals” through the policies of slavery and eugenics. DeMello, however, cautions animal activists on drawing analogies to other oppressions and targeting the actions of racial minorities since both potentially verge on racism.

The role of animals in language, art, myth, and media are covered in the subsequent chapters of part four. The central theme is how animals are good to think with because they are both like and unlike humans. Animals thus are a means for human reflection and projection (from practices of masculinity to criticisms of politicians). DeMello displays an impressive familiarity with cultural practices and stories, but at times the text is dry because it privileges numerous examples from many cultures over depth regarding any one culture. The tone is decisively less normative than previous chapters when cultural practices and beliefs outside of DeMello’s own are described (e.g., animal fighting and animal sacrifice). Nonetheless, ethical concerns are raised about the representation of animals in language — as pejoratives, idioms, and absent referents — as well as the use of wild animal actors and the voyeurism of wildlife. My favorite sections of part four are the appended essays. Carol Gigliotti’s experience role-playing an elephant, Laura Hobgood-Oster’s enthusiasm for animals in Christianity, and Philip

Armstrong's analysis of animals in literature add an extra layer of provocation and context to the chapters they follow.

**Thinking, Feeling, Acting.** *Animals and Society* concludes with a discussion of animal behavior, ethics, and advocacy. Chapter seventeen opens by reminding us how much scientific and public opinion has changed over the last few decades. Early ethologists theorized the evolutionary development of behavior in natural habitats, while comparative psychologists studied the environmental causes of behavior in labs. Both fields generally avoided ascribing agency to animals. In the 1970s, primatology and cognitive ethnology changed this. Since, researchers have concluded that many mammals and birds use tools and what might be called "language," as well as displaying emotions like grief and empathy. Further, animals such as chickens and fishes are now believed to have more complex mental lives than previously thought. DeMello asks "If these animals share so many mental and emotional capacities with humans, what does that mean about our treatment of them?" (372).

Chapter eighteen starts with a scenario in which intellectually superior extraterrestrials invade earth and begin farming humans. DeMello believes this is a good starting place for discussing animal ethics because it propels us into reflecting on moral value. The remainder of the chapter is a conventional narrative of the history of Western moral attitudes regarding animals spanning from the Pythagoreans to Peter Singer, but it also includes "other approaches," such as the capability approach, virtue ethics, phenomenology, and feminist ethics of care. Although speciesism is referenced earlier in several chapters, it is not defined until here (383). While DeMello does cover the most fundamental animal ethics, students would really benefit from supplementary material. *The Animal Ethics Reader* may be one such complimentary text.

The final two chapters are a look at the past and future of animal advocacy. DeMello traces the building sentiments toward animal protection after the Age of Enlightenment. In the 19th century animal protection was advocated by two movements: one for the prevention of cruelty to animals and children, and the other opposed to vivisection, comprised of abolitionists and suffragettes. While the former resulted in laws and SPCAs around the US, the latter accomplished little to protect animals. DeMello describes a few tactics practiced by contemporary animal advocates. She expresses favoritism toward welfare legislation over direct action, comparing the

latter to tactics from the pro-life movement. While she does not acknowledge the victories such tactics contributed before the passing of the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, she does note the conspicuousness of the extra protections afforded to animal industries. DeMello concludes the book by noting the simultaneous increase in affection and violence toward animals, the legacy of “an enduring and necessary link” (420).

**Final Reflections.** While there are other introductory texts for HAS, this is the most accessible for the students and teachers of a multi- or interdisciplinary introductory course. For more advanced or specialized HAS courses, *Animals and Society* may not be a good fit. DeMello has fit an impressive quantity and variety of information into the text, but not without sacrificing depth. Organizing a new, interdisciplinary field is no easy task, and overall DeMello has done a very fine job. There is some tedious repetition, but the chapters have a logical flow and are of an appropriate and consistent reading length for an introductory class.

One aspect of the book’s organization I considered odd: after reading so much on the social construction of animals the reader will not learn anything about the impressive capabilities of actual animals until page 360. Placing cognitive ethology, ethics, and advocacy at the end of the book is climactic. It also creates a space at the end of a course for students to reflect on the treatment of animals and consider their place in the history of animal advocacy. On the other hand, tucking cognitive ethology and moral theory at the end of the book has the effect of diminishing their significance throughout the previous sections of the book — especially if these chapters end up being rushed or cut (as readings at the end of a quarter often are. Introducing the material earlier in the class would give a greater appreciation of the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of nonhuman animal existence and better equip them with moral concepts (such as speciesism) during class discussions.

The role of ethical theory in *Animals and Society* may be limited, but that is not to say the book lacks a normative edge. When I originally read that “[HAS] is not about animal advocacy,” I anticipated *Animals and Society* was going to walk a safe line, “balancing” the perspectives of animal activists with those profiting from the animal industries (17). Needless to say I was surprised by the overall critical analysis of animal use, the structural analysis of violence against animals, the self-reflexive marking of anthropocentric bias, and the inclusion of provocative — if not radical — questions in nearly every chapter. (For those who identify with critical animal studies, *Animals and Society* is worth checking out for a very accessible analysis of violence against animals and interlocking oppressions). I imagine that most instructors will be



comfortable with DeMello's presentation of HAS; however, teachers with strong personal or professional investment in the use of animals may be less enthusiastic.

Having been immersed in HAS literature since 2006 and with no expectation of teaching an introductory to HAS course in the near future, I had little need to read *Animals and Society*. My interest came not from need, but from curiosity and care. How will the upcoming generation of students be exposed to HAS for the first time, I wondered. What meaning has been constructed from decades of multi- and interdisciplinary research into human-animal relationships? After reading the book, I am prompted to additional questions. To what extent should the natural sciences (e.g., cognitive ethology, conservation biology, and urban ecology) play a role in an introductory course and HAS research in general? To what extent does ethical theory have value in an introductory HAS courses? How can HAS escape complicity in the objectification of animals through emphasizing the meanings humans assign to and the values humans reap from human-animal relationships? How can HAS at once adhere to rigor and "the requirements of evidence-based scholarship" *and* delve into the ambiguity of nonhuman animal perceptions, experiences, and desires through the sympathetic imagination?