

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor  
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The class Mammalia, to which we belong, has the fewest genera and species of all classes, yet evolutionarily, we consider ourselves the “top of the heap.” The Judeo/Christian tradition teaches that all creatures, including other mammals, are divinely segregated to “serve” us. A phrase from a childhood-learned hymn keeps popping up in my mind—that we (humans) “have dominion over palm and pine...” For many, whether we really do have “dominion” has not been resolved, but I think all agree that we retain contradictory perceptions of other animals, particularly mammals. Although recent genetic research shows that we share a resoundingly high percentage of genes with chimpanzees (our closest primate kin), we nonetheless have conflicted feelings about our treatment of fellow (non-human) mammals. This month’s letter will consider some of these seemingly irrational and incompatible feelings and possible explanations for them.

Humans in different cultures vary tremendously in their attitude towards a single mammal species. Dogs (*Canis familiaris*) are but one example of this disparate range. At one end are the Dyaks of the southern-most Philippine archipelago and from the adjacent northern Indonesian islands. These people raise, fatten and eat dogs—a practice thought by other cultures, including our own, to be almost sacrilegious. In between are those who breed dogs to help hunt game, track miscreants, race for wagering, pull sledges, or fight each other. Practically speaking, because we have evolved as carnivores, we are able to eat and digest meat from any source. Is it intrinsically “better” to keep a dog whose sole “job” is to greet your return with happy yelps and wagging tail, than one chained to protect an auto wreck in the junkyard? Rationally, the answer has to be no.

The pet dog and cat industry is booming thanks to a prosperous American middle class that can afford such luxuries as professional dog walkers and sitters, special diets, regularly scheduled veterinary check-ups, complex life-sustaining operations and elaborate grooming. Visitors to our country from rural Sudan would have to witness some of these examples to believe them. Nonetheless, I do not consider such indulgences with pets to be necessarily a moral issue. It can, however, lead to satire and even ridicule, as in *Best in Show* (2000), a film about the behavior of owners and handlers at a Westminster Kennel Club-like dog show. It was absolutely hilarious.

Horses, too, generate strong passions. Humans hunted horses long before they domesticated them for draft or riding. Horse meat is still consumed in parts of Europe and Asia and even by Englishmen, as Robert Scott did to avoid starving on his trek to and

from the South Pole. According to a full-page spread in the *New York Times* (p. A17 of October 19, 2006) protesting the export of horsemeat from America, there are three U.S. abattoirs that process about 100,000 horses a year. Although I am sure the number of swine and cattle processed for food in America far exceeds that of horses, I cannot help wondering why horsemeat should be so contrastingly perceived by what I am sure are multitudes of beefsteak eaters. To avoid treating horses like cattle, elaborate Federal adoption procedures exist to reduce the size of feral bands, but this approach covers only a tiny fraction of the available stock.

The equine's special niche in a large segment of our culture is reinforced by the popular image of a thundering herd of unbroken mustangs galloping across the prairie. That idealized scene is depicted at the bottom of the full-page spread in the *Times*. Close inspection, however, showed a dozen horses that looked to me like thoroughbreds galloping across a mowed paddock with nary a pinto in sight—quite different-looking from the mixed-coated, scrawny bands that, with specific federally legislated protection, range across the desert scrub of the Great Basin. In fact, this protected status also applies to feral burros, which are even better adapted to desert conditions than their popular congeners. It is the image, then, of the wild mustang stallion that captures our dreams and imagination, rather than the reality that most bands, if not all, are descended from escaped stock or horses purposely released by bankrupt ranchers. Humans may have played a role in the late Pleistocene (12 to 14,000 years ago) extinction of horses in North America where they had evolved from the fox terrier-sized eohippus. Well before they disappeared from our continent, horses had migrated across the Bering land bridge to spread throughout Asia, Europe and Africa, where some species were eventually domesticated. In the XVIII century, Plains Indians successfully broke feral horses introduced by early Spanish explorers.

Chickens evolved in Southeast Asia and a few truly wild species still thrive there. These jungle fowl, as they are called, resemble bantams. The cock's crow is higher-pitched and shorter than that of their domesticated relatives. Many more people kept chickens when I was growing up and, as a five-year-old, I remember being nervous when reaching under the hen in my uncle's hen house to retrieve a freshly laid egg. Courage triumphed as I watched my girl cousin (also five) calmly do the job. I also vividly remember the slaughtering of a bird with an ax and seeing in action the old saying of someone "running around like a chicken with his head cut off." This beheaded chicken was hung by its legs and later plucked by hand.

Today, raising cattle, swine and poultry is big business. The enormous feed lots in the Corn Belt generate such huge volumes of manure that for disposal it has to be dried and burned rather than spread on fields. Similar disposition problems exist for "factory" swine and poultry. How will this all end? A change in attitude has started and I believe may have been triggered by Jane Goodall's observations in the 1960's of the chimpanzees she had been studying for years at the Gombe Stream Wildlife Research Center in Tanzania.

Goodall watched “her” troop commit infanticide and wage war against other groups. Only humans were supposed to behave this way. What was going on? Yet since we share ancestors, should we not have expected this? What she observed redrew the fuzzy line between animal and human behavior. The killings appeared deliberate, not instinctive, which is what ethologists (scientists who study animal behavior) had heretofore espoused. In other words, the chimps seemed to be thinking and behaving like us and not just instinctively killing at random.

If such chimp actions were indeed deliberate, could equivalent behavior be identified in other species? Ethologists soon learned that Bottle-nosed dolphins teach their young how to adapt to their pod and that chimpanzees teach their young to extract termite larvae from their nest mound with thin sticks.

Even moral behavior is easily observed in primates, which appear to follow a human cross-cultural paradigm of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” An example is the mutual grooming within bands, dividing food and even enforcing social behavior. Although perhaps not as highly developed as it is in great apes and dolphins, ethologists are continuing to discover subtle manifestations of equivalent behavior in other mammals. Recently, three female Asian elephants at the Bronx Zoo appeared to recognize their own images in a large, stout mirror in their enclosure, further expanding the panoply of consciousness in other non-humans, including some cephalopods (octopus, squid).

This new knowledge of animal behavior has initiated striking changes in animal husbandry—on farms and ranches, in zoos, circuses, kennels, stables, etc. Specific examples abound, but most would agree that humans—at least in the developed world—are treating animals with more care and sympathy than ever before. Supermarkets now promote meat products as “certified humane” and various organizations are setting standards for suppliers to meet in order to gain this and similar labels on their products. Such classification can promote sales, but at a 30% to 40% premium. In time, such costs may decline, but they will always be higher than most developing countries can afford.

I rejoice in the progress we have made and recognize we still have far to go. My own experience with pets includes horses, dogs, gerbils, various birds, anolis lizards, turtles, fish and even a kid goat. I would encourage people to have pets, particularly those with children, if only to help teach responsibility for creatures that are dependent on the human guardian for survival. Arguments about appropriate treatment of animals under our care will doubtless continue as long as *Homo sapiens* are the dominant mammals.

The thrust of this letter, therefore, is to stress our moral responsibility to treat humanely the animals over which we assert “dominion.” We should continue debate on such controversial subjects as whether it is more humane to cull an over-dense deer herd

or let the surplus weaker ones succumb to winter starvation. What do we mean by humane? Universal agreement is unlikely and our individual judgment on appropriate animal treatment will doubtless follow the aphorism attributed to Henry Kissinger—“perception is reality.”

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