***Animal Welfare: A Cool Eye Towards Eden***

John Webster (1995). Blackwell Science Ltd: Oxford. 273pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0EL, UK (ISBN 0 632 03928 0). Price £17.99.

This is a most welcome book and one which could only have been written by the sure hand of John Webster. The book complements Marian Dawkins' fascinating book *Through Our Eyes Only?* (1993) which explores animal consciousness. It also shares many of the ideas in *Animals and Ethics* (1980). John Webster attempts to analyse the nature of animal mind, animal welfare and animal suffering and suggests possible ways forward. Although the greatest part of the book is devoted to farm animals, he has brief chapters on horses and pets, wild animals, and animals used in science. He combines the skill of a first rate teacher with a keen desire to see practical improvements in animal welfare which he feels can best be achieved through cool and pragmatic thinking. He addresses the book to anyone who wishes to improve the quality of life for animals and through it he himself makes an outstanding contribution.

The book is written in three parts. Part 1 discusses man's dominion over animals stressing that present day man has 'complete dominion, sufficient power to destroy the majority of species of "higher" animals . . . but sufficient wealth to allow (him) to behave towards them with responsibility and altruism . . . it is not sufficient simply to feel compassion . . . we need more than right thought, we need right action', he says, and also that it is easier to care for others when one's own survival is not under threat.

Using the Farm Animal Welfare Council's (FAWC) 'five freedoms' as a basis, Part II of the book pursues the question *How is it for them?* on sections covering, 'Animal mind and animal suffering, hunger and thirst, housing and habitat, pain, sickness and death, and friends, foes, fears and stress'.

Part III *What we can do for them* sets out to offer constructive suggestions as to possible ways forward.

The three parts of the book are pursued by asking the questions: 'what do animals want? how is it for them? how do they perceive their own quality of life?' and then turning 'to the issue of rebuilding nature's social union in a way that best reconciles our aspirations with those of the animals over whom we have dominion.'

John Webster takes as his definition of welfare: 'the welfare of an animal is determined by its capacity to avoid suffering and sustain fitness for', he says, 'sentient animals are not only aware that they can feel bad and feel good, they know it *matters* to their welfare to feel good and to avoid feeling bad, not only to sustain fitness but also to maintain a satisfactory state of mind.'

The point, important and so often overlooked, is that '*our motivation* would be of no concern to the (animal). Its perception of its own welfare is determined entirely by its own view of the world. If we are to do our best for the welfare of the (animal), whatever our ultimate intention may be and however good or bad they make us feel, we have no option but to do our best to understand how the (animal) perceives and interprets its world and adjust our actions accordingly'. He endorses what Professor Brambell stressed thirty years ago – that both farmers and their animals would benefit from systems devised to work with the animal rather than in spite of it.

His arguments and advocacy are based on cost: benefit ratios at two levels – firstly for the animal itself, using the work of Marian Dawkins and others who measure the cost that an animal will pay to achieve or avoid a particular commodity or experience. Secondly, that between man's needs or desires and those of the animal.

He stresses that market forces alone cannot form the basis for decisions and cites the Adam Smith argument that the invisible hand of the market has operated for the general good, in both the economic and moral sense of the word, because everyone is a consumer. He says, however, that his argument cannot be applied to livestock production, for it 'involves a third party, namely the sentient animals involved in the enterprise, who are not consumers and therefore have no mechanism for achieving their needs through the operation of market forces.'

FAWC's 'five freedoms' (1993) – freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition, from discomfort, from pain, injury and disease, to express normal behaviour, and freedom from fear and distress, are updated from a distillation of the provisions Webster made for FAWC, following many wide-ranging, round-the-table discussions and decisions which were presented in FAWC's first Press Notice (December 1979). Neither FAWC nor its predecessor were ever 'obsessed with space requirements' as he asserts.

Throughout the book he appears to show confusion – widely shared – over the difference between the Council of Europe and the European Community (EC). In the 1970s it was the Council of Europe which was concerned with farm animal welfare, and the EC thankfully left these discussions to them. Far from being obsessed with space requirements, the Council of Europe's *European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes* (drawn up in the early 1970s and ratified by the UK in 1979) has as its first principle: 'Animals shall be housed and provided with food, water and care in a manner which . . . is appropriate to their physiological and ethological needs . . .' and this remains the cornerstone of their elaboration of more detailed recommendations.

John Webster suggests that 'the question, Where do we stand with regard to the animals?' can be built up from four 'facts of life':

1) 'man has dominion over most animals, whether we like it or not.'
2) 'we care for animals in direct proportion to their value to us (whether we admit to it or not). Value here implies both wealth and the quality of our own life.' 'Thus matters of animal welfare cannot be considered as absolutes but on the basis of cost: benefit analyses'.
3) 'it matters not to the animal how we feel but what we do' – 'spare parts or sausages, its all the same to the pig'.
4) 'being dead is not a welfare problem for the animal that is dead.'

He thinks it would be fair to say that most animal species do not fear the concept of death. He cites the case of deer shot in the field which do not react to the shooting of their companions, and for the shot deer, death is unperceived – it is feeding one second and dead the next. This is unquestionably more humane for the deer than the extended distress of conventional handling, transport and slaughter. It formed the subject of a minority report in FAWC which curiously, considering the views he expresses here, he did not support.

John Webster points out that the welfare of hens in large commercial colony systems is at least as bad as in conventional battery cages and that this leads to a continuing debate as to the future of battery cages.

It is a pity that John Webster omits all but a few references in his book, 'to avoid making it unwieldy'. There are ways of including references which do not impinge on the text and they are important to enable the reader to judge for himself the basis of the arguments.

In discussing systems for laying hens, John Webster makes some statements (unsubstantiated by references) which are very much open to question. He says that 'hens will . . . work to achieve increased space per se, up to an area of 900cm$^2$.' I know of only one small series of experiments which has been done on letting hens work for more space, and in that experiment they were prepared to work (part of the time at least) for the area of the experimental cage, ie 1500cm$^2$ per bird. They might even have worked for more had the experimental design permitted it. He further discusses the possibility that 'when the dust bath . . . is out of sight, it is also out of mind'. Marian Dawkins in *Through Our Eyes Only?* deduces from her work with hens that they seem to give dustbathing and associated behaviour high priority even when they have to pay a cost to get it. Her colleague, Norma Bubier 'found that hens would repeatedly squeeze through small gaps to get to floors made of loose material, to get at food and to enter a nestbox'. Following his own, in my opinion, questionable conclusions John Webster advocates modified cages giving 900cm$^2$ per bird, a perch and a nest box, but no litter. Now it has been found extremely difficult to incorporate litter into modified cages. But from the hen's point of view (and this surely is what the book is all about), the evidence shows that for the cage to be even remotely 'acceptable' it must contain litter.

The overall magnitude of the welfare debate on farm animals is demonstrated by the following statistics: 'In a lifetime of 70 years, the average British citizen manages to consume some 550 poultry, 36 pigs, 36 sheep and 5 oxen, plus 10,000 eggs and dairy products . . . equivalent to 18 tonnes of milk'.

Most criticism has been levelled at systems of pigs and poultry production, whilst cattle and sheep at pasture have been regarded as 'natural'. John Webster demonstrates that these presumptions are markedly incorrect. But even so, the consumer has shown that factors other than animal welfare govern their buying habits, for 'the systems that attract most criticism on welfare grounds (pig and poultry production) are those that attract most custom in the supermarket'.

Chronic pain causes animals to suffer without reducing productivity. Thus the benefit of the doubt accrues to the producer rather than the animal. Chronic lameness in particular is suffered by breeding females, dairy cows, ewes, sows and laying hens. It is also suffered by approximately a quarter of broiler chickens and turkeys, for a third of their lives. With the vast poultrymeat consumption in the UK, 'this must constitute, in both magnitude and severity, the single most severe, systematic example of man's inhumanity to another sentient animal.' I would like to see this damning criticism emblazoned above all poultry counters in every supermarket in the land.

In the developed world the vast majority of people eat far more animal products than they actually need. They eat them as a perceived improvement to the quality of their lives. 'This imposes on them an obligation to ensure a fair deal for the animals', he says, 'imposed methods of breeding, feeding, housing and any artificial manipulations, should not be allowed to compromise (the animal's) ability to live its allotted . . . lifespan without suffering from physical problems such as chronic pain, hunger or exhaustion'.

Throughout the book he stresses the importance to the animal of being able to contribute constructively to its own quality of life. Any animal, however well cared for in other respects, will suffer if it has no control over its environment. It may become apathetic: 'Experimental psychologists . . . call it "learned apathy"' he says 'I prefer to call it hopelessness. This may be one of the greatest insults to welfare'.

John Webster analyses, species by species, the shortcomings of many present ways of keeping animals and brings together ways forward, including some recommendations for changes in legislation. For example, a change in slaughter legislation from the present 'animals must be rendered instantaneously insensible to pain', should be changed to: 'at the place of slaughter animals must be handled, rendered unconscious and killed in such a way as to minimize pain and suffering'. This would cover the movement and handling of the animals in the slaughterhouse as well as the act of slaughter. The wording also permits gas stunning of pigs. Stunning with a high concentration of $CO_2$, which is a currently 'acceptable' method, has now been demonstrated to be extremely distressful to pigs and is being superseded by the use of a mixture of argon and a low concentration of $CO_2$. It is also being tried for the slaughter of poultry. I suspect that John Webster has not thought through his suggestion that birds could be killed in their cages with gas since it would involve enormous practical difficulties.

Since animals hunted for fun have no protection in law, John Webster suggests protection should logically be extended to them. Just as the cost: benefit approach has been extended from scientific procedures to food animals, so the five freedoms can be extended to assess the welfare of animals in science, pets and indeed all animals managed by man. On the use of Bovine Somatotrophin (BST) on food animals, he comments: 'if cows for commerce had the same rights as rats for research, then this cost would have to be assessed against the potential "benefit" to society of a drug which consumers in the rich world do not want, those in the poor world cannot afford, a product which no dairy farmer actually needs and one which would drive some out of business. I rest my case.'

Payment for improved welfare can be made by redirecting some of the enormous subsidies now being paid out under Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). For example the set-aside subsidy which has demonstrably failed in its objective to limit production.

May I suggest that before the next edition, John Webster corrects his quotation of the UK law to protect calves. This should read 'the width of the pen or stall is not less than the height of the calf at the withers'.

Finally, John Webster states that the book is 'intended for anyone who feels it essential not only to the dignity of mankind but also to the quality of our own life to extend to other animal species the concept of man's humanity to man'. I hope the book will achieve a very wide readership.

**References**

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