

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
*Slaves of Our Affection:
The Myth of the Happy Pet*

Charles Danten
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Part memoir, part polemic, *Slaves of our Affection* (hereafter *Slaves*) charts the veterinarian author Charles Danten's growing disaffection with his former profession, and with the pet trade as a whole. Drawing on his own experiences (including an array of harrowing anecdotes about the quotidian use and abuse of animals he witnessed during his career) and the available empirical data, Danten aims to dispel the popular belief that companion animals are "treated altogether differently from other domestic animals," systematically dismantling the myth of the "pet on a pedestal" (Danten, 2015, 100-103).

Danten largely succeeds in his objective, documenting how the – astronomically profitable – trade in companion animals is antithetical to animals' welfare, let alone to any more robust notion of animal rights. He details how, at each stage of the supply chain, animals are relegated to "objects of consumption" (Danten, 2015, 1470-1472), fungible commodities to be appropriated, transported, stored, modified, displayed and sold as their human custodians see fit. In spite of tightened legislation around the importation and sale of wildlife, wild birds, reptiles and "large exotics" continue to be plucked from their natural habitats and deposited in suburban homes in the care of would-be "parents" (Danten, 2015, 1493-1495) pristinely ignorant about their basic needs. Similarly, there is no law to prevent dilettantes from moonlighting as casual breeders "without any real knowledge of genetics or the physiological and psychological needs of the animals they want to reproduce" (Danten, 2015, 323-327).

In fact, as Danten notes, the majority of pets are not born but "made" (Danten, 2015, 701-705), engineered to meet eye-wateringly impractical breed standards – the squashy-faced English bulldog whose endearingly neotenous facial appearance is ac-

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accompanied by eye and breathing problems; the Great Dane or Doberman whose impressive size is associated with a reduced lifespan and propensity to hip dysplasia and gastric torsion; the Sphinx cats and hairless rats destined to shiver through every mildly chilly day. Once sold, companion animals continue to be refashioned to satisfy human preferences. Just as our sense of aesthetic whimsy translates into lifelong health problems for our unfortunate creations, our desire for convenience prompts many of us to surgically excise irksome habits, or body parts, declawing, debarking or clipping the wings of our companion animals so that they might more neatly conform to their allocated role as our furry or feathered “children” (Danten, 2015, 351-357). When such non-therapeutic “surgical mutilations” (Danten, 2015, 1500-1507) prove ineffective, large numbers of pet owners resort to abandonment and even convenience euthanasia: vets, after all, are in the employ of animals’ human caretakers rather than the animals themselves, “the friend of those who exploit them and pay [...] for services rendered” (Danten, 2015, 1612-1618).

Danten constructs a compelling case for his primary claims: that the booming trade in companion animals is directly responsible for an immense amount of animal suffering, and that this current state of affairs is not a remediable historical accident but a logical, and unavoidable, consequence of their being treated as living “merchandise” (Danten, 2015, 351-357). Our continuing commodification of animals is, he contends, ideologically and materially incompatible with any meaningful consideration of their interests. Staunchly abolitionist, Danten opposes small scale, band-aid solutions such as animal adoption and no-kill shelters, arguing that such institutions are, in actuality, supremely anthropocentric, bad faith attempts to salve participants’ troubled consciences or burnish their self-

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image at the expense of the animals languishing in their care. Danten's arguments here are somewhat less successful, in part owing to the text's lack of substantive engagement with the work of other animal ethicists. This results in an authorial tendency, at times, to reinvent the wheel or, as in this section, to frame potentially contentious assertions as neutral observations.

For example, while criticizing no-kill shelters, Danten asserts that (painless) death through euthanization is not a harm for animals as they are "not conscious of [and therefore cannot fear] their impending death" (Danten, 2015, 3305-3307); in other words, unlike humans, animals cannot be assumed to have a categorical desire to go on living, since they have no concept of annihilation. Yet, as Tom Regan points out, such arguments presume that "the only harm we can do to animals is to cause them to suffer" (Regan, 2004, 100), ignoring the possibility that depriving an animal of any future experiences, good or bad, might itself constitute a significant harm. This potential counter-argument is not addressed in any depth; Danten rather asserts that, since "rescued" companion animals remain in domestic servitude, their prospective future lives are probably not worth living.

Relatedly, *Slaves* is something of a single issue text; as a former veterinarian Danten quite understandably chooses to concentrate on the area of animal exploitation with which he has most experience, and which seems to him to involve the most hypocrisy and doublethink. However, this unwavering focus can at times prove frustrating, affording the reader tantalizing glimpses of thorny ethical issues which the text simply sidesteps. When discussing the nutritional bankruptcy of mass-produced pet foods, some of which contain meat from

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4D (or diseased, disabled, dead and dying) animals, Danten is critical of the pet food industry's tendency to incorporate agro-industrial "leftovers" (Danten, 2015, 1147-1153) too unappealing or unhealthful for human consumption. Yet, from an environmental perspective and, one might assume, from the perspective of livestock themselves, using up such by-products is surely preferable to slaughtering additional animals, whose own interests must be weighed against those of our obligate carnivore companions.

To belabor such points would, however, be churlish. As a text aimed at a popular, rather than a solely philosophical, audience, and dealing for the most part in facts and vivid emotional appeals rather than conceptual niceties, *Slaves* is a lively, accessible and persuasive entry point for readers interested in the ethical problems of the "pet phenomenon" (Danten, 2015, 234-238).

References

- Danten, Charles. 2015. *Slaves of our Affections: the Myth of the Happy Pet*. Translated by Erin Lestrade. Amazon Media E.U. S.à r.l. Kindle Edition.
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