

2019

[Review] Lesley A. Sharp, *Animal Ethos: The Morality of Human-Animal Encounters in Experimental Lab Science*. University of California Press, 2018. 312pp

Denise Russell  
*University of Wollongong*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj>

Part of the [Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Australian Studies Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Legal Studies Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), [Public Health Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Sociology Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Russell, Denise, [Review] Lesley A. Sharp, *Animal Ethos: The Morality of Human-Animal Encounters in Experimental Lab Science*. University of California Press, 2018. 312pp, *Animal Studies Journal*, 8(1), 2019, 237-240.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol8/iss1/17>

---

[Review] Lesley A. Sharp, *Animal Ethos: The Morality of Human-Animal Encounters in Experimental Lab Science*. University of California Press, 2018. 312pp

**Abstract**

*Animal Ethos*. What is that? This heading on its own is a puzzle. Taken together with the subheading and reading the book it seems that 'Animal Ethos' means the customary way of interacting with animals in lab settings. The sub-heading led me to believe that the book would be not just about the ethos in the sense just described but about what is right and what is wrong in the human-animal encounters in animal experiments. Lesley Sharp coming from the discipline of anthropology shies away from making such judgements with some very rare exceptions, for example, when describing the abhorrent ways that mice are sometimes killed in labs.

[Review] Lesley A. Sharp, *Animal Ethos: The Morality of Human-Animal Encounters in Experimental Lab Science*.

University of California Press, 2018. 312pp

---

**Denise Russell**

**University of Wollongong**

Animal Ethos. What is that? This heading on its own is a puzzle. Taken together with the sub-heading and reading the book it seems that 'Animal Ethos' means the customary way of interacting with animals in lab settings.

The sub-heading led me to believe that the book would be not just about the ethos in the sense just described but about what is right and what is wrong in the human-animal encounters in animal experiments. Lesley Sharp coming from the discipline of anthropology shies away from making such judgements with some very rare exceptions, for example, when describing the abhorrent ways that mice are sometimes killed in labs.

For the most part, morality in this book consists of the practices engaged in by lab researchers, veterinarians, and lab technicians. It is possible for the reader to form views about whether the practices are right or wrong, but Sharp usually holds back on any such judgement. I find this stand frustrating as I remain unconvinced about the value for humans of animal experimentation. No cures for human diseases have resulted from animal experimentation. Animals have been our testers, in that they trial new drugs for us so we can see if they die or develop side effects. This is not reliable as some medications useful for animals are deadly or dangerous for humans. Also, a moral argument could be made here that we are not morally justified in treating animals as testers given their sentience. Alternatives can and are being used

to test medications. These include *in vitro* studies and computer simulation. A common trend is also to trial, in humans, the use of a drug for one disease that has proved useful for another.

Animals have been cut up and examined for studies in physiology and anatomy and used to perfect surgical techniques. Now however the alternatives just mentioned can be used. We do not need to kill or injure animals to advance in these fields. This is evidenced by the phasing out of animal experimentation in university courses in medicine and even vet science in the US, a point which could well have been included in *Animal Ethos*. However, it is unfair to criticize the book for something that it does not attempt to tackle: i.e. whether animal experimentation in 2019 can be justified. It is assumed that it can be. It is assumed that millions of animals will be involved. It is assumed 'that physical and psychic pain, and further death, are inevitable consequences for the vast majority of these experimental subjects' (228).

If we accept these parameters for the discussion of animal experimentation, then the value of the book can be seen to lie in the unmasking of the ethos. Sharp has done ethnographic studies in labs in the US and she also has some data from the UK. She concentrates on mammals and in particular mice, dogs and non-human primates, but not chimpanzees as they are now almost completely phased out of experimentation. The non-human primates are macaque and marmoset monkeys.

One of the important aspects of the book is the revelation about the clear delineation between animal researchers, veterinarians and animal technicians. The researchers secure funding for the studies and design them, hopefully complying with the 3 Rs: reduce, refine and replace. The vets do checks to make sure the welfare provisions have been met (which is odd given that the animals might have been poisoned or cut up as part of the experiments). The vets are there really to make sure that the animals don't suffer more than is necessary for the research, but they are not there to question the justification for the research. The technicians look after the animals while they are waiting to be experimented on and may be involved with killing them when the research is completed or aborted, though the researchers may have a part in this.

Sharp notes that the technicians generally understand the needs of the animals more than the researchers who tend to remain aloof while not actually engaged in experimenting. The technicians witness the suffering of the animals more than the researchers and experience the loss of life when the animals are killed. This is given practical force in photos and memorabilia which are placed around the technicians' workplaces and sometimes in the attempt to rehouse animals that have been used in experiments.

In the institutions Sharp studied, the animal researchers displayed little remorse when their research animals were killed, either in the experiment or when they were no longer useful. Standardly the researchers might have a coffee together as a sort of 'wake' but not show signs of grieving that were much more common among technicians.

Sharp gives a good account of the language of animal experimentation which no doubt helps the humans not to care. Talk of 'suffering' or 'death' is shunned. The killing of animals is talked of as a 'sacrifice' or 'being sacked' (for short). Isn't this the ultimate insult? The poor animals are cut-up, maimed, given toxic substances and then *sacrificed*. Who is doing the sacrificing and for what reason? Sharp claims "Sacrifice" is a powerful term that shifts the animal, at the time of death, away from its position as a subject (or object) of study to one that gives its life to science' (128). Could *anyone* believe this? Could anyone believe that animals have a choice in this matter? Humans decide that animals should die when they are no longer useful. The animal isn't sacrificed or sacrificing itself. It is simply killed and changing the language doesn't destroy that fact. An incurably sick pet dog might be taken to a vet to be killed. We might talk about that act as euthanasia to soften the language, but it would make no sense to say we are sacrificing the animal. Given that the majority of research animals used in experiments are rats and mice, hence cheap, it can't be that the researcher believes that in killing the animal he or she is destroying a valuable research tool. Talking about sacrifice I believe is just trying to disguise the objectionable practice of just throwing research animals away as if they were a rag, instead of sentient beings. Sharp points out how differently other animal deaths are treated when the animals have helped humans in warfare, in police work and in fighting fires. Their achievements are often celebrated. Sometimes monuments are erected, for example, for Laika,

a Soviet dog sent into outer space. (I should add in here too the wonderful play *Warhorse*). It's a great insight and interesting to contemplate why there is such a difference.

Most animals used in American experiments are not regarded as animals (121). These are the rats and mice bred specifically for lab purposes. Sharp points this out but does not draw out the consequence of this language absurdity. It means that they don't come under the ethics guidelines of the 3 Rs as they do in countries outside the US that have such guidelines.

I would like to have seen a lot more discussion about ethics and morality in animal experimentation in this book, both in the sense of the 3 Rs and in the sense of what is right and wrong about everyday practices. The secrecy with which animal experimentation is conducted and the withholding from the public what the rationales are and what the results are mean that most people feel they can't make a judgement about the practice. The common story is that we hear that there has been a particular finding that 'holds out the hope for cures of human disease'. It may even be headline news. The cures don't eventuate but that isn't news, so we forget about the rash claim. We forget about all the animals who have died. Lesley Sharp doesn't go into these points but what she clarified in my mind was the hopelessness of the whole enterprise. The emotionally distant scientist who pursues a direction in research which cannot be held up to scrutiny (see Andrew Knight, *The Costs and Benefits of Animal Experiments*, Palgrave, 2011); the technicians in the animal labs who often form bonds with the animals in their care and are torn apart by their suffering and their death. It may only be a matter of decades before the tide turns against the practice of animal experimentation for ethical, scientific and even economic reasons. (It is already starting.) Meanwhile we should be grateful for books like this which to some extent lift the lid on what is happening in these labs.