Just a Dog
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Conclusion

Cruelty Is Good to Think

“We need Westy to become the new Democratic mascot. Everybody loves Westy. I’m going to take him on tour with me.” Senate President Stan Matsunaka—who’s also running for governor—commenting on Westy the cat, who survived being set on fire by two teenagers last year and who was at the Capitol on Tuesday to help pass an anti-animal cruelty bill.

—Denver Post, January 31, 2002

When Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) observed, “animals are good to think,” meaning that they are food for symbolic thought, he inspired anthropologists to examine how different groups think about animals (Shanklin 1985). While some sought to discover the principles of classification involved in this thinking, and how these principles compose logical systems of belief and action (e.g., Tyler 1969), others explored the metaphorical use of animals in nonwestern cultures (e.g., Leach 1964). More recent anthropological work extends this tradition by examining the symbolic and practical value of animals in Western societies (e.g., Lawrence 1984; Marvin and Mullen 1999; Noske 1997).

This thinking about animals is shot through with contradictions, as is our thinking about their mistreatment. On one hand, it is hardly surprising that people disagree about whether certain acts constitute cruelty. The most common explanation is that suffering’s subjectivity guarantees a struggle over what it means. Since animals cannot speak for themselves, people must guess their inner states, opening the doors to a flood of divergent interpretations. And the very notion of suffering, whether in animals or humans, is inherently unclear.

These explanations are problematic because they blame our confusion on the inability of animals to articulate, in human terms, their suffering or on the inherent ambiguity of suffering itself. Our confusion about which acts constitute cruelty, and how much we care if they qualify, can better be explained by the symbolic interactionist approach underlying Just a Dog that sees the meanings of objects and events—and
cruelty is certainly one—as products of people’s interpretations of them. Since this process of human sense-making is social, we should look to explain our contradictory stance toward cruelty by focusing on the interpersonal context that embeds it.

As the discussion and examples throughout Just a Dog make clear, the situational nature of cruelty causes confusion over its meaning and significance. The same treatment of the same species in one context can be regarded as cruel, while in another it can be considered culturally acceptable. We saw this confusion when complaints were reported to and managed by humane law enforcement agencies. While dispatchers were quick to see suffering in debatable situations, agents were not; certainly, complainants and respondents were miles apart in their perception of what constituted cruelty and whether it was acceptable to treat animals in certain ways. There also was confusion when adolescents thought about their abusive behavior; some felt substantial guilt because they caused animals to suffer; others seemed indifferent and unwilling to acknowledge much if any animal suffering. We also observed rancorous division among shelter workers about what it meant to be cruel to animals in their charge. No-kill workers saw the euthanasia of adoptable animals as a form of cruelty, while their more traditional peers saw the warehousing of animals as cruel. A different kind of conflict over cruelty existed among hoarders and their supporters who ignored or denied suffering, while various authorities had no problem labeling their behavior as neglect. And finally, humane marketers did not deny suffering but hid from and avoided the most ghastly incidents of it, fearing charges of incivility or sensationalism. Such situational definitions explain at least some of our conflict over the meaning of cruelty.

Just a Dog also reveals that the ability of cruelty to confer identity causes confusion over its meaning and significance. As groups define the meaning of cruelty, they are able simultaneously to use this definition to create their own image or project one for others. Because the ambiguity of cruelty invites many groups to find their own identity, multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions of cruelty can result, coloring whether and how strongly we think certain acts are acceptable or not. We saw how images of cruelty can address the shared concerns or interests of group members—whether they were law enforcement agents, adolescents, hoarders, shelter workers, or humane society
employees and supporters. For each of these groups, harming animals was a symbolic device that allowed them to spin off conceptions of self or other. Humane agents narrowly interpreted potential cruelty to preserve their dignity as law enforcers, while at other times they liberally interpreted it to appear to have more authority than respondents willingly granted; adolescents saw their dirty play with animals as a sign that, though briefly, they had become adultlike; hoarders defined their extreme neglect of animals as evidence of saintly behavior, while readers of news stories about hoarders could feel beyond reproach; shelter workers could reject some of their former tasks, now considered to be cruel, as a way to rediscover their true identities; and humane society marketers could use the most egregious cases of cruelty to give coherence and hope to staff members and supporters.

Finally, this chapter adds cultural anxieties as one more cause of our confusion. These concerns are not limited to a few discrete groups struggling over ambiguous cases of animal mistreatment but exist throughout society. There are collective worries and fears that affect how society thinks about the suffering of animals and that lead to this confusion. These shared concerns act as a cultural filter for how people describe and understand cruelty. Because of this filtering, descriptions of cruelty are not conventionally “objective” or “factual”; they are narratives or stories with many meanings and purposes, not all directly related to the harmed animal’s experience. They can, instead, tell a story about the kind of people we are, the nature of our society, and the sort of qualities that make us unique as living creatures. Nor are they always simple and consistent stories, because part of our shared identity is made up of modern apprehensions, doubts, and conflicts. These concerns, however inconsistent they may be, must be teased out of the mix to better expose how we think and feel about the abuse and neglect of animals.

It is reasonable to argue that such concerns affect our interpretations of and reactions to cruelty when it is very ambiguous, inviting wide-ranging opinions and feelings about whether suffering occurred and, if so, to what degree. In other words, when the nature and extent of suffering is most easily contested, there is plenty of room for conflict and confusion. Conversely, it might be argued that our collective concerns and fears would be least intrusive in cases of cruelty that are apparently clear-cut and extreme; here, it would seem, there is little room for debate over moral impropriety. If there is confusion, it cannot be so easily written off
to the “inevitable” ambiguity of suffering. Yet, on closer inspection, there is confusion even with what on the surface seem to be incontestable cases of extreme cruelty. This is all the more evidence for the intrusiveness of our identities onto a playing field that narrowly pits abusers against animals, and that alone.

**Understanding Ugly Cases**

Beautiful cases of abuse, described in the preceding chapter, are not the way that most people learn about extreme cruelty. More commonly, they hear and read about it when the media reports ugly cases. These tell a different tale about harming animals than do beautiful ones. They expose the general public to the unseemly, sordid, and hopeless side of cruelty. Animal victims are not always cute and appealing—less-than-movie-star pets and unpopular wild animals get tortured or killed. Happy endings almost never occur—abusers are rarely found and their victims usually do not end up healthy and adopted. Most important, abuse is often ghastly, even unimaginable—cats are mutilated with knives, then chopped up with an ax (Oppenheimer 2002), a pet llama is beaten to death with a golf club (Quioco 2001), and a family cat has industrial-sized staples driven into its head (Henry 2000). And in addition to egregiously harming animals, people may be victims too.

Ugly cases create alienation and tension. People feel uneasy after they hear about these cases because the abuse is gruesome, the crime, if unresolved, is threatening, and the human victims are distraught. Because these acts are extreme, they make transparent the social forces behind our society’s confusion and conflict over cruelty. These forces are evident in three tragic cases extensively covered by the local and national media.

The first case happened in 2001. Two adolescent males in a Colorado parking lot set fire to a tabby cat, called Westy because he was found in the town of Westminster. A veterinary nurse described his condition: “He had third-degree burns over forty percent of his body, which smelled of smoke and charred fur. His pepper coat had mostly melted onto his body, his hindquarters were burned to the muscle and his whiskers singed away from the heat.” He was not expected to survive his massive injuries. Veterinarians considered putting him down to end his suffering. Westy was hospitalized for four months,
enduring five operations, including two skin grafts. He eventually lost one rear leg, his tail, and both his ears. Media attention turned Westy into a celebrity and a cause célèbre against animal cruelty. The hospital was flooded with telephone calls from as far away as Germany and France with offers of support, money, and adoption. Financial support poured in from sources that ranged from children raising a few dollars selling lemonade (Robinson 2001) to larger donors, whose contributions totaled thirty thousand dollars. Some of the donations covered the five thousand dollar Westy reward fund. After failing to find his owner, one of the veterinary technicians on Westy’s case adopted him, edging out hundreds of people who had come forward to do the same. On June 8, 2001, Westminster police arrested two boys on animal cruelty charges who were turned in by their parents. The boys, ages sixteen and seventeen, who harmed the cat did so, according to the prosecutor, because they were curious about what would happen if the cat’s tail were set afire “like the cartoons” (Channelone.com 2002). The boys served two days in jail, paid a five hundred dollar fine, and received an eighteen-month probation after pleading guilty to the charges.

The second case occurred in 1992. Three young men in Boston “lured” a black Labrador-shepherd named Kelly onto train tracks, where the dog was crushed. The boys had thrown the dog over a fence bordering the tracks, trapping her and making escape from the oncoming train impossible (Cullen 1992b). It was said that the boys had been drinking beer and laughing as they coaxed the dog so that she would be in the middle of the tracks when the train came. The dog’s leg was severed and much of her skin was ripped from her body by the impact; she died soon after. Two girls who regularly played with Kelly watched in horror as these events unfolded. They saw the dog suffer enormously before she died. The three young men were acquitted because of insufficient evidence, leaving the dog’s owner outraged (Schutz 1992).

And the third case took place in 1997. Two teenaged males broke into Noah’s Ark animal shelter in Fairfield, Iowa, and beat twenty-four cats with baseball bats, killing sixteen of them. The cofounder of the shelter described what he saw: “It was like a mad scene out of some horror movie. What must have gone on was beyond comprehension—there were pools of blood everywhere. It’s a nightmare” (Dalbey 1997a). He went on to say: “Most of the cats must have been trapped and unable
to escape. They had broken legs and jaws and skulls” (Greco 1997). A veterinarian said that injuries included severe head trauma, damage to the eyes, broken jaws, broken limbs, and multiple fractures causing severe pain and shock. Media attention generated financial and volunteer support for the shelter and put animal cruelty in the spotlight, though briefly (Dalbey 1997b). In the weeks following the incident, thousands of telephone calls and letters poured into the shelter and, in the years that followed, hundreds of Web pages provided information about the case and memorials to the lost animals. The trial drew national attention in the media, including coverage by television programs such as 48 Hours, The Today Show, and Court TV, among others. Most of the state’s evidence, including photographs of the injured and dead cats, and a suspect’s bumper sticker reading “Missing your cat? Look under my tires,” were thrown out because the defendants admitted their guilt. The jury found the adolescents guilty of felony charges because they broke into and burglarized the shelter, but the charges were reduced to a misdemeanor violation; the teens were sentenced to twenty-three days in jail, twenty-five hundred dollars in fines, four years in a youthful offender program, and three years’ probation.

Why is there confusion and conflict about the nature and importance of suffering even when it is egregious? Examination of these three incidents, along with other extreme cases, can help us understand what complicates our thinking about animal suffering and cruelty. Because these cases are reported in the media, reaction to them becomes a collective experience involving thousands and even millions of people who tune in and perhaps identify with abused animals and saddened owners they never met or, alternatively, disapprove of the “flap” over them. The extent of their alarm or indifference about these reports has roots deeper than sheer sympathy for or disinterest in animals.

Our understanding of social problems is shaped by abstract and invisible social forces. Consequently, most people are unaware of these influences on their thinking and behavior. For one, collective fears and anxieties color our thinking about social problems, and this is true for animal cruelty, too. Reports of egregious cruelty describe more than the “facts” of each case. In addition to detailing the kinds and numbers of animals harmed, how they were mistreated, the background of known abusers, and the circumstances surrounding the abuse, these incidents reveal as much about ourselves as they do about animals. Through
them, as others have observed (e.g., Granfield 2005), we express our modern concerns and worries.

**Being Vulnerable**

A sense of vulnerability permeates everyday life in western societies (Furedi 2004). Many people believe that life is riskier than ever—that we live in dangerous times when unpredictable violence threatens us all. Fear of being victimized is high, causing widespread feelings of insecurity. Yet we enjoy an unprecedented level of safety (Furedi 2002). Evidence suggests that only a few will become targets of violence and the rates of violent crimes are dropping. For example, rates of youth homicide have dropped noticeably over the past decade (Glassner 2000). Despite this reality, feelings of vulnerability are built into our culture, influencing our attitudes and behaviors at every turn, including how people tell the story of cruelty.

A sense of vulnerability informs the coverage of ugly cruelty cases. For one, cultural anxiety about violence by male teenagers, in this case toward animals, colors news reports, even though humane societies claim that teens annually account for only 20 percent of cruelty cases, and there is no evidence that this percentage is increasing. Articles establish that individual incidents of cruelty are not isolated pranks or occasional lapses in good judgment but part of a larger pattern of disturbed and “violent [male] teenagers” (Catsinthemenews.com 2002) who deliberately harm animals. Speaking of the Westy case, one author concludes that he is not “surprised to learn that police suspected the criminals to be young and male.” Brutality to Westy, he claimed, was just one more instance of what havoc can be wreaked by “deranged” adolescent boys. After establishing that the perpetrators of specific incidents are troubled young men, articles often report other attacks on animals to reinforce the idea that these crimes are part of a larger pattern. For example, some articles about Westy focus on this cat but remind readers of unprovoked, egregious attacks on helpless animals by other young men. Other articles focus less on the Westy case in particular and more on other cases of adolescent-male attacks on animals. By clumping individual cases, the press creates the impression of a trend or growing social problem. Articles with titles like “Teens Attract Attention for Animal Cruelty” (ChannelOne.com 2002), “Grisly Animal Abuse Cases Puzzle Colorado Police” (Planet Ark 2002), and “Aggression Against

What makes people feel vulnerable is the perception not just that male teens are becoming more violent but that their violence is unpredictable and senseless. And this, too, is emphasized in reports of ugly cases, even though the perspective of abusers, no matter how unsavory, is ignored. Articles stress the gratuitous violence of young men run amok, harming, torturing, or killing animals without reason. Kelly, Westy, and the animals at Noah’s Ark were all intentionally tortured or brutally killed by young men who burned, beat, or crushed them. The abusers offered no self-defense that the animals were threatening or attacking them, or even harming their property. For example, in the Boston case, the dog Kelly was lured to railway tracks by three adolescent boys looking for fun. Their intent was clear, according to news reports: trick the dog to cross the tracks just as a train was approaching so that it would be crushed to death in front of the horrified girls. In the reports, the striking innocence of both the dog and the girls is contrasted to the reckless and wanton sadism of the boys. The casualness, indeed moral indifference, of the boys particularly outraged the public. Of particular note in the news was the degree of “callousness police say the suspects displayed even after they were arrested” (Cullen 1992a). A local police officer said that the boys “thought this was entertainment. They thought it was funny. In fact, when we arrested them, they were still laughing... The poor thing was really suffering. And these guys walked away, drinking beer and laughing” (Cullen 1992a). And in the Westy case, one outraged citizen speculated that Westy’s abusers were “intentionally tormenting animals for their own sick pleasures... It’s very pathetic that these teens have to take their problems out on innocent animals that have done nothing wrong. To think the United States is always talking about children being the future, well look at our ‘children’ now” (Channelone.com 2002). Their senseless cruelty was portrayed as evidence of moral depravity, as highlighted in one article that compares Westy the cat’s “braveness” with his abusers’ “cowardice” (Green 2001).

At the core of this vulnerability is the fear that random acts of violence against animals will eventually be redirected toward humans. This concern influences how ugly cases are presented to the public,
despite mixed evidence for the link. Discussions of specific cases often include dire warnings that abusers will eventually harm people, repeating the same shock-biographies of a few serial killers who allegedly abused animals in their youth. For example, reports of the brutality inflicted against Westy were indistinguishable from other ruthless acts of “carnage and mayhem” by humans who “inflict pain and suffering” (Salazar 2001, J5). One letter to the editor accepts the link as fact: “Even those who aren’t animal lovers should be concerned. . . . Mental-health professionals, crime researchers and law enforcement officials have proven that people who abuse animals are likely to be violent toward other people” (Rohde 2001). Shortly after the capture of Westy’s abusers, an article quoted a state representative who seems also to accept the link: “These people later go on to murder. These people really need to be put away . . . and taken off the streets.” A few sentences after noting that teenagers served two days in jail for Westy’s injuries, the article says: “As a child, serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer decapitated a dog and David Berkowitz, New York City’s ‘Son of Sam’ murderer, killed a number of his neighbor’s pets” (Hamilton 2001).

To strengthen this connection, some reports characterize animal abusers in a language normally reserved for particularly viscous killers of humans. Abusers, for instance, can be called “serial killers.” Perhaps intended as tongue and cheek, the front-page headline of a Manhattan tabloid featured a story about a pigeon serial killer. There was little real danger to humans, but the article’s emphasis on a serial killer on the loose could certainly resonate with readers’ fears of the human equivalent. The reality was far less dramatic: an exterminator made two known sprayings after being hired by a building superintendent to rid window ledges of pigeons. While this spraying was illegal and unlikely to get rid of the pigeons, the choice of the banner headline made more of this individual incident than was justified by the case’s raw details. Similarly, other reports express the public’s anxiety about “psycho killers.” This anxiety was apparent in one media-instigated story. Television reporters contacted the state humane society about an apparently extreme case—two animals found dead, with parts of their legs cut off; one dog had its front paws cut off, the other dog was missing its back legs. According to the society’s media affairs representative, the reporter’s theory was that “a psycho” was roaming around a small Massachusetts town cutting off dogs’ legs, and the story was filed, even
though the society’s agents had not completed their investigation and had warned the reporter that animals in this rural part of the state sometimes are harmed or killed accidentally by farm equipment. A number of television stations picked up the story and calls came into the society about people wanting to know about the “psychopath who was cutting off dogs’ legs.” It turned out that one animal’s rear legs had been surgically amputated by a veterinarian and the other dog lost its paws in a train accident. “It wasn’t a psycho out there endangering people’s pets and yet the media jumped all over that because it was so sensational,” the media affairs staff member claimed.

To ensure that readers make the link, reports of ugly cruelty anthropomorphize animal victims, according them status akin to that of human targets of violence. Interspecies boundaries are blurred as the victims are given the status of children, mates, and others humans who are significant in our lives. These metaphors make it easy for readers to identify with these victims. For instance, some people saw Westy, or at least his public image, as akin to that of a human child by highlighting his innocence and vulnerability. His owners were never found, suggesting that he was possibly unloved, abandoned, and alone. One article referred to him as “helpless” and looking like “a victim of warfare” (Catsinthenews.com 2002). Another likened Westy’s brutalization to “murder, another baby left in a back-alley dumpster, or children killed in a bombing in the Middle East.” And yet another likened Westy to an infant by describing him, minus his ears, tail, and one leg, as “swaddled in a baby sleeper on a blanket inside an incubator” (Hamilton 2001). Some articles even diminished Westy’s size to make it easier to think of him as a kitten or infant. For example, one article described him as a “little cat,” even though veterinary reports referred to Westy as a large tabby.

Once cruelty victims are anthropomorphized, readers can easily identify with the animals and their suffering or death can be transformed into something positive. It becomes a sacrifice for a greater good rather than a senseless crime (Bakan 1968). In Westy’s case, his death first led to calls for severer punishment of abusers. Although people were thankful for the arrest of Westy’s abusers, many feared they would “walk away with only a slap on the wrist.” For example, one Web site that lists cruelty incidents said: “It breaks my heart to post yet another case where a defenseless cat was set on fire . . . the boys accused are charged with
only misdemeanor animal cruelty. If they are convicted, their only punishment will be a $400 fine and mandatory anger management” (Lovecats4x.tripod.com n.d.). Stronger penalties, it was argued, would make the point that cruelty to animals needs to be taken seriously as a form of violence (Ridge 2001).

These calls snowballed into a drive to rewrite and improve existing anti-cruelty laws in Colorado, in the name of Westy. One article about him refers explicitly to this symbolic transformation, saying that his “sacrifice ensured that any animal-torturing bonehead in the state of Colorado must now make a nice long visit to a concrete jail cell . . . where he/she belongs!” Passage of Westy’s Law upped the possible punishment of animal abusers, accomplished after considerable lobbying in the name of Westy and other animals. Westy, in fact, made an appearance in the Colorado legislature after enduring a “painful ordeal” and “four grueling months of care and operations.” This appearance, plus all the other attention Westy garnered, put him at the head of a furious statewide campaign to change the law. The article pointed out that when Westy is not playing with his toys, he is promoting animal rights. It quoted Senate President Stan Matsunaka, after Westy appeared at the Capitol to help pass an anti-animal-cruelty bill: “We need Westy to become the new Democratic mascot. I’m going to take him on tour with me” (Catsinthenews.com 2002).

As these cases demonstrate, our feelings about violence cannot be easily separated from how the news reports cruelty. When the way we understand cruelty becomes inexorably intertwined with our own anxieties and fears, it is more likely that animal mistreatment will be thought to constitute cruelty, reflect significant suffering, and merit serious criminal punishment than to be construed as a fleeting indiscretion where cruelty and suffering are doubted and criminal penalties seem excessive.

**Being Human**

Issues plaguing our identities do not always create heightened sympathy for abused animals or concern for preventing future cruelty. Sometimes our collective anxieties and fears resist seeing them as victims. When cultural worries prevent abused animals from being anthropomorphized or accorded victim status, cruelty will be regarded as a less serious, even trivial matter.
Rather than focusing on an individual animal’s plight, cruelty discussions can become a battle to defend what it means to be human and to guard centuries-old moral distinctions between people and animals. Crossing the boundaries between humans and animals is taboo in Western societies. “When boundaries intersect, many fear that the ‘primary’ category may be influenced, changed, corrupted, or co-opted by the ‘other’ category. It is believed that if this occurs, there would be a loss of control, which produces anxiety and fear in those who are aligned with the ‘primary’ category” (Greene 1995). Those who are particularly anxious over such boundary blurring are likely to diminish the significance of cruelty, arguing that if taken too seriously, let alone on a level with violent crimes against people, it will degrade what it means to be human.

In the Westy case, some construed the incident as an example of how people have greater interest or compassion for animals than they do for humans. Inflamed reactions to this cat’s abuse pricked the sensitivities of those who argued that it is immoral to care so much about the plight of animals. To make this point, they drew, for comparison, on dire situations facing the most helpless humans. One opinion piece, “Is Dead Baby Less Important Than Cat?” criticized those who called for Westy’s abusers to suffer everything from probation to the death penalty. The author claimed that there should be equal or greater outrage over a recent case of a brain-injured baby allowed to die: “Where is the same outrage for Tanner Dowler? A cat has some defenses like scratching, biting and running, but baby Tanner did not. This helpless, tiny, precious boy suffered in a way no one should. Yet the voices of Boulder County have remained, for the most part, silent. We should be asking how we failed baby Tanner. We should demand an investigation into how our local government allowed a 34-year-old man and a 19-year-old girl, living in cars, to take that baby out of the hospital, especially after being warned by the grandparents. Where are the cries for justice? Where are the tears, outrage and sorrow for the families? Will the same people who screamed about animal cruelty display an equal if not louder response to the death of a baby boy?” (Peters 2002). Others expressed moral unease with the outrage over Westy. A district attorney who commented on the emotional stir of the case said that if extra prison beds were available either for those who are cruel to animals or for those who sexually assault children, “I’m going to take the latter” (Hamilton 2001).
Apparent dismissal of human concerns over those of animals also concerned people in the Boston cruelty case. Some were offended that the death of a dog provoked such fury when headlines about violence against people often generate little response. The presiding judge did not understand why this incident disturbed people so much more than any of his prior murder cases (WCVB-TV 1992). He received more than one hundred letters, three hundred phone calls, and several petitions about the case demanding that he mete out justice (Cullen 1992c). “I find it very disturbing that I received more phone calls and letters about the death of an animal than any homicide case that’s come before this court in my twenty years on the bench. . . . . A black man was chased onto the tracks by a gang of whites. He was struck and killed. Not a word. Not a call. I heard from no one” (Cullen 1992c). One well-known columnist picked up on the judge’s irony, writing a column about the case entitled “Society Skews the Value of Life” (Barnicle 1992). To show the moral mistake of people deeply troubled by the murdered dog and the acquittal of charges against the accused, the author lists many examples of human misery and crime that drew no attention, including no telephone calls to the court house regarding any of the sixty murders during the preceding year, a baby girl who had been smashed against a wall by her mother’s boyfriend (who “must be as traumatized as those children who saw the dog get hit by the train”), and a young boy who witnessed a murder and was sodomized by his stepfather, who also raped the boy’s sister. The columnist’s not so subtle message was that there were other, more important victims being overlooked, and that public outrage over the animal cruelty case was misdirected.

Coverage of these cases reinforces traditional boundaries between the species when the news reminds readers that the law regards animals as property. When so classified, they are denied victim status, at least in an official capacity. In the Noah’s Ark case, readers were reminded of the lesser status of animals by the testimony, verdict, and sentence imposed on the teens. Lawyers defending the teens admitted that they were guilty of intentionally entering the shelter with baseball bats to kill cats but framed their actions as a “stupid, teenage mistake.” Admittedly, the abusers’ attorneys were forced to take this perspective to represent their clients, but it nevertheless articulated a view of animals that resonates with some people. In other words, it was a freak one-time event; the boys posed no further threat of violence to animals, let alone
to people. Although they were initially found guilty of a felony crime, this charge was for breaking, entering, and burglarizing the shelter, rather than for harming animals. Human property, not animal lives, was more important under the law. The jury was required to find the value of the animals in excess of five hundred dollars to uphold the felony charges, but the defense argued that a stray cat’s life was basically “worthless.” Despite the prosecution’s response that a great deal of money had been spent on veterinary bills for the injured animals and the care and medical procedures the cats received prior to their abuse, as well as lost potential adoption fees from cats that were killed, the jury failed to find sufficient monetary value in the animals and the charges were reduced from a felony crime to a misdemeanor violation. Such court decisions reaffirm the belief that animals are lawfully different from humans, thereby preserving the sociozoologic order that culturally separates species from one another (Arluke and Sanders 1996).

Nor is it only strays that the media reports as property. Owned companion animals, too, are sometimes classified this way, providing a justification to minimize or ignore their mistreatment to those readers so inclined. In one well-publicized case in 2001, an irate California driver threw a Bichon Frise to its death in traffic because he was upset by a minor car collision. Although many people were horrified by this road-rage abuse and readily defined this dog as a victim whose mistreatment called for serious criminal penalties, there were some who did so only grudgingly, if at all. On a radio program in Boston callers discussing this case thought there was too much fuss over the incident. One caller said that the owner should adopt another dog from an animal shelter and get on with her life; another said that if there were veterinary bills, perhaps they should be paid for but mused that damage to a car is an equally important issue. Underlying these reactions was the notion that animals occupy a lesser moral status to humans, and that because of this lower status, cruelty should not be taken so seriously.

When anxieties about boundary blurring are expressed in reports of ugly cases, both sides of the issue are often presented together, emphasizing the controversy. Often vehement in response, those more comfortable with such blurring lash out at those who decry it. When this occurs, the exchanges focus less on the specifics of individual ugly cases than on general concerns about the moral distinctions, or lack thereof, between humans and animals.
For example, reactions throughout the country to the Westy case were so intense and alarming that one newspaper cartoonist spoofed the cottage industries that often follow major media crimes. Entitled “A Full Line of Blazing Westy Souvenirs,” the Denver newspaper *Westword* published a cartoon that many readers understood as an endorsement of pet-burnings. This “humor” offended them because they believe that suffering, regardless of species, should be taken seriously. One reader made this point by expressing the hope that the person behind this insensitive and tasteless cartoonist might “experience the pain that Westy suffered and still is suffering.” And yet another was disturbed that the newspaper’s “flippancy” and “trivialization” made “light of such a heinous crime and the horrendous suffering of an innocent animal.” Others elevated the moral significance of the Westy case by analogizing it to senseless crimes against helpless and powerless humans. As one claimed, the cartoonist’s “sickness” was as morally offensive as running cartoons on the “rapes of women in Boulder, or the shooting of high school students, or the Sudan slave trade.”

A profound issue underlies the exchange between the cartoonist and these readers. Being outraged and eschewing outrage are two predictable counterpoints in the larger cultural debate over how alike or unalike we are from other animals and, consequently, the nature and significance of their suffering. The Westy case merely provided fodder to express this opposition and continue the debate. Those who responded to the case drew liberally from our culture for the substance and power of their thinking about cruelty and in turn about themselves. Some drew from our culture’s trivialization of animal abuse, while others tapped into our culture’s growing sensitivity to the proper treatment of animals and their moral and emotional importance. In short, individual cases, and our responses to them, are not just about the facts and circumstances surrounding the harm of animals; they are reflections or symptoms of wider concerns about how different we are, or are not, from other species, and how these boundaries should affect our perception and management of cruelty.

As long as these underlying questions continue to be answered in different ways, we will continue to have different thoughts and feelings about cruelty. The multivocality and ambiguity of modernity precludes our ever reaching consensus on the meaning of cruelty. In this modern context, different and sometimes conflicting voices will continue to use
cruelty as a metaphor to express interests and identities. As a metaphor, cruelty invests events, situations, and people with purpose and meaning, inextricably linking how we think about ourselves to how we think about animals. Cruelty becomes a way to tell a story about the kind of people we are and the kind of society we live in, just as cockfighting in Asian cultures provides a tool for people to define their social order (Geertz 1972). The harmed animal’s raw experience is transformed as we think about and make sense of cruelty in human terms. And this thinking will be colored—whether it is impassioned or disinterested—by larger cultural concerns and anxieties. We are all, in the end, as much a part of our mistreatment of animals as are animals themselves. Cruelty is good to think.

**Rethinking Cruelty**

*Just a Dog* examines how humans think about, define, and use animal cruelty. Because my sociological perspective dictates a descriptive rather than a normative stance, the book does not decry such treatment. Nonetheless, discourse about cruelty, including my own, is moral. We therefore must question how we arrive at these descriptions and understandings; our thinking will have real-world consequences for animals. I am particularly concerned about the glossing of cruelty’s meaning by policy makers, activists, law enforcement agents, lawyers, journalists, and social scientists. Of course, some of the reasons why we obscure or bury the suffering of animals may not be easily remedied, if at all, but being aware of these constraints can inform, and perhaps elevate, dialogue and debate about this issue.

Ironically, there is one area where attempts to prevent the glossing of cruelty can do a disservice. There are frequent calls to better specify existing “antiquated” cruelty codes that can, if rewritten, inadvertently prevent the identification of certain forms of abuse and neglect. While most efforts to revamp these codes focus on strengthening penalties or reclassifying animals to change their property status, others lament the vagueness and subjectivity of the wording of these laws that cause discomfort for those trying to interpret and apply them (Patronek 1997). Indeed, even when laws are fairly specific, language may still be so vague it requires substantial interpretation, as in the use of the phrase “unnecessary physical pain or suffering.” Some believe that humane law
enforcement agents are one group, in addition to veterinarians, lawyers, and court officials, that could benefit from clarifying legal codes by reducing the amount of interpretation needed to determine whether or not certain acts qualify as legally defined cruelty. These pleas are well intentioned but must be cautiously approached, at least with regard to humane agents. Rewriting current codes can expunge old-fashioned terms and modernize the language, but ever-greater legal specification will not remedy the need to interpret and apply law. In practice, all police find that laws—regardless of attempts to rid them of ambiguity—can never specify in sufficient detail every situation that they encounter on the streets. Agents use cruelty codes as a general guide to interpret what constitutes abuse or neglect case by case; assessing situations for potential suffering requires their discretion. Well-intentioned efforts to improve and update the legal definition of cruelty can inhibit the informal and discretionary powers of agents, thereby limiting their ability to extend the meaning and scope of this problem as they see fit and as our society grows increasingly intolerant to the harm of animals. Ambiguity, in this instance, may be useful.

In other areas, however, glossing the meaning of cruelty is more problematic. For example, the age-old distinction between abuse and neglect that is built into the Western tradition of jurisprudence creates the idea that some forms of harm are more serious than others, based on the actor’s intent and on the immediate and dramatic nature of the crime. Abuse is done deliberately, while neglect is unintentional or even accidental; abuse results in tragic injury to animals, while neglect only creates a hardship for them. Some have even suggested that the term cruelty should be reserved for a subset of abuse cases where the offender gains satisfaction from causing harm (Rowan 1993). This “deliberate bad actor” approach (Berry, Patronek, and Lockwood 2005) focuses on human motivation rather than animal suffering, thereby privileging abuse over neglect in terms of imputing seriousness and resulting criminal penalties. However, neglect can result in more prolonged suffering, as in cases of hoarding where animals endure weeks or months of starvation and painful disease. And neglect is far more common than abuse, representing about 90 percent of all cruelty cases (Solot 1997) and being the kind of mistreatment most often encountered by humane agents, shelter workers, and veterinarians. To upgrade the seriousness with which we regard severe neglect, some have proposed calling it “indirect”
or “passive” cruelty, although this language may just perpetuate our confused thinking about the harm of animals. When discussing penalties, then, it may be more useful to focus on the consequences or omissions of human acts rather than on the motivations behind them.

Media thinking about abuse and neglect has limitations too because it glosses cruelty, first by not detailing it, then by exceptionalizing it. In the name of civility, reports even of ugly cruelty cases are strangely silent about the presumed suffering of cruelty victims. They stop short after describing the basic information behind each case. We learn about the victim’s species, breed, or appearance, and we learn how the victim was tortured, killed, or left to suffer slowly, but the animal’s subsequent experience is left to the reader’s imagination. By editing cases to make them more civil or by focusing on the human side, these reports gloss the primal experience of cruelty, leaving it cleaned up, overshadowed, or otherwise diminished. Palatable versions, then, of cruelty can be read, but with less emotional clout than would be possible with more detail and description. The result is that the public’s stock of knowledge about cruelty is significantly curtailed, as happens with other social problems such as wife abuse (Loseke 1987). Equally important for what the public learns is the fact that by covering extreme cases of abuse and neglect the media ignores more routine cruelty.

The media also glosses stories about cruelty by presenting them as very rare and unique events, just as stories about child abusers describe only the most immediate details of each incident (Nelson 1984; Wilczynski and Sinclair 1999). This focus on bizarre one-of-a-kind episodes prevents readers from seeing or thinking about them as part of a larger pattern of such cases or as part of animal cruelty in general. In the absence of reports about more routine, less dramatic kinds of abuse or neglect, the public comes to regard unacceptable behavior toward animals in fairly narrow terms, limited to situations in which animals are egregiously tortured and killed or are kept in horrendous conditions for long periods, when in fact the vast majority of anti-cruelty code violations involve animals in less dramatic situations.

Glossing prevents moral indignation. When not glossed, social problems can benefit from press attention. The power of the news media derives from its ability to elicit emotions in readers that not only draw their attention but promote action on certain issues by helping “new” social problems gain support and momentum (Spector and Kituse 1977).
For example, publication of child-abuse horror stories has played a prominent role in the success of the child maltreatment movement during the past twenty-five years (Johnson 1995). The news made it quite clear to readers that child abuse is indisputably wrong by presenting a consistent picture of this act as a serious crime and those who commit it as serious criminals. Journalistic conventions used to report these stories angered readers by detailing horrible injuries or gruesome circumstances and by showing that abusers were “bad” people who were solely responsible for intentionally and heinously harming their victims. Some have even referred to the “moral panic” created by these cases as part of the media’s sensational approach to child abuse. This process also included the orchestration of expert opinion that contributed to increased demand for state intervention and the formation of popular consensus.

Instead of moral panic, the press has created moral confusion when it comes to those who harm animals. This is not to argue that they should be demonized, as the news has done to child abusers, but the comparison sheds light on just what the public and professionals do or do not learn about cruelty. And what is learned does little to mobilize effective public support for dealing with it. With extreme abuse, public indignation is balanced by equal amounts of dismissal of these cases as overblown or trivial. With extreme neglect, public scorn is curtailed by more frequent expressions of sympathy. The result is that community outrage—so common in reports of child abuse—is either curbed or absent in stories about animals being harmed. Indeed, with hoarding, the press often reports help from the community in terms of food and cash for hoarders and their surviving animals, in one case amounting to forty thousand dollars, as well as interest in adopting the animal victims. Until the press consistently deprecates animal abuse and neglect as serious crimes along the lines of its treatment of child abuse, the public will be unsure how to morally categorize and approach these acts.

Although the press’s handling of animal cruelty helps to sell newspapers by appealing to the public’s anxiety and concerns or by pandering to the public’s curiosity for the bizarre or their sympathy for the pitiful, it does not encourage an in-depth understanding of animal abuse and neglect. Without such understanding, society is ill-equipped to deal with cruelty and those who behave inappropriately to animals. Assumptions about what is “real” abuse and neglect will remain unchallenged,
and in this context public policy debates about the proper treatment of animals and those who mistreat them will continue to be played out in trivial and distorted terms.

Finally, some might argue that sociologists gloss cruelty by giving a voice to abusers and neglecters. Such humanizing, critics claim, does a disservice to animals that are mistreated because it indirectly forgives such acts by making them understandable. Moreover, these critics allege that it is not the right image to give the public; in their view, society would be better served by a more one-dimensional portrayal of these people that says in no uncertain terms that harming animals is indefensible and that those doing it should be punished. *Just a Dog* does humanize its research subjects, if humanizing means their voices are sought and taken seriously, no matter how contradictory or offensive they might be. For example, some of the people I interviewed did make cruelty into ordinary behavior by ordinary people. In one case, students who had no criminal record remembered being cruel as a particular form of play that was just part of growing up, something that most of their peers did at “that stage of life.” These recollections permitted cruelty to vanish beneath their constructed horizon of unacceptable violence toward animals. Limitations they claimed to have imposed on torture and killing set this horizon, beyond which their identities would be suspect as disturbed if not evil people. This ideological work enabled them to define their prior acts as ordinary cruelty, an interpretive process also done by those who are cruel to humans (Knox 2001), leaving some completely untroubled and others just momentarily guilty when pressed to talk about what they had done. This finding might disturb those who mistakenly understand it as saying that harming animals is acceptable if it is not linked to other criminal behavior. Understanding rather than glossing perspectives does not mean that we are forgiving or excusing people who harm animals. Rather, it is a way to better inform the public and professionals who must weigh in on new policies and programs to deal with cruelty.

Yet it is unavoidable that sociological thinking and writing glosses cruelty, and my work is no exception. This problem stems, in part, from the rhetoric of objectivity that constrains social scientists to use arguments and images that are not overly dramatic or outlandish (Cheyne and Tarulli 1989). Even if they are not so constrained, there are very real limits to language’s ability to convey the inchoate psychological
experience of suffering. I certainly struggled for the right words to describe the mistreatment of animals, but no matter how I expressed my thinking, it always fell short of what I suspected was the reality. Finally, sociological conventions to understand and describe our subjects’ worlds take the pathos out of cruelty because they distance analysts—and subsequently their readers—from whatever topic is being addressed. Once I began to capture and interpret my subjects’ perspectives, my own thinking and writing moved me one more step away from the abuse or neglect under consideration. However, this glossing—which represents another transformation in the meaning of cruelty—has practical value because it sanitizes the unthinkable in ways that make most readers comfortable enough to consider the suffering of animals, though briefly and with regret. As sociologists unpack why cruelty is good to think, we will not only stimulate further discussion and debate about the nature and impact of cruelty but prompt the public and professionals alike to consider broader concerns about the origin and meaning of our disconnected relationships with animals.