Bestiality

Commonly defined as sexual relations between humans and nonhuman animals, bestiality has a complex legal, social, and political history and geography. Many react to bestiality with revulsion and rejection, based on concerns ranging from animal liberation and welfare to simple disgust. However, in order to understand bestiality as both a type of erotic practice and an extreme example for debates around ‘proper’ human-animal relations and related social issues, one must consider where it comes from and how it emerges today.

Bestiality has a long history of legal criminalization, though it has rarely been singled out and named explicitly. More often, bestiality has been criminalized as an act of ‘sodomy,’ a category that has historically included human-human and human-animal sexual ‘crimes against nature.’ Individuals engaged in bestiality have been persecuted under the same sexual norms that have criminalized same-sex acts, non-reproductive heterosexuality, and masturbation, though each act has also carried relatively distinct social meaning and legal punishment. This broad criminalization has taken hold in many Western contexts, including pre-1950s United States and Sweden and colonial-era Latin America. Other places have their own unique histories.

Criminalization and punishment for bestiality have often been applied unevenly according to a person’s social position. For instance, in 17th and 18th century Sweden, it was most often younger men living in rural farming communities who were accused of bestiality with farmed animals. This stereotype about rural life also appears elsewhere. For instance, “sheep shagger” is a contemporary insult in the United Kingdom for Welsh people and in Australia for New Zealanders. The slur implies negative imaginations of rural and agricultural lifestyles, socio-economic underdevelopment, and cultural backwardness. Bestiality has also often been prosecuted unevenly according to sex, more often affecting males. This is due largely to the dominant definition of sodomy as penile penetrative sex, which makes authorities largely oblivious to both female-female and human female-animal sex. However, in colonial New England, women were convicted and burned as witches under the charge of bestiality.

As some nations have made uneven moves to decriminalize homosexual sodomy, bestiality has been increasingly separated from other sexual practices that are considered to be outside the norm and established as its own category. This has at times created confusion and anxiety, leaving some places without any clarity on the legality of bestiality. For instance, in 2005 in the US state of Washington, after a man died from injuries sustained while receiving anal sex from a horse, lawmakers moved quickly to recriminalize bestiality (Brown and Rasmussen, 2010). They rallied public support for recriminalization by invoking feelings of disgust towards bestiality. This recriminalization has also occurred in other US states. As of 2014, bestiality was a felony and/or misdemeanor in a majority of states, including Washington, even while there
existed no federal law on bestiality. Laws in Northern Europe have become similarly patchwork and complicated. Though bestiality has been banned in the UK, the Netherlands, France, and Switzerland, as of 2015 it is still legal in Belgium and Denmark, allowing for the existence of a small “bestiality tourism” circuit. Sweden passed a law in 2013 making bestiality a crime. Prior to this law, however, only instances involving evident animal abuse – at times hard to prove – could be prosecuted.

Indeed, much of the criminalization of bestiality has been organized around the argument of animal cruelty. Animals can experience physical and psychological violence during sex with humans, though the type and degree of violence varies based on the type of sex act and the bodily structure and species of the animal. Indeed, some though not all who engage in sexual acts with animals intentionally harm or even kill the animal as part of the sex act. While violence against animals absolutely can and does occur, however, some who engage in sex with animals, many of whom identify as ‘zoophiles,’ argue that their sexual relationships with animals can be nonviolent, consensual, and mutually beneficial.

This debate around consent raises questions not only about whether and how animals can consent to sex with humans – likely a question with no easy or clear answers – but also about how people understand human-animal relations more broadly. For instance, while debates around bestiality often center on questions about nonhuman animal consent, consent is rarely considered in the contexts of other human-animal relationships, such as animal farming for meat, milk, and eggs. Indeed, farmed animals like dairy cows are often artificially inseminated – a practice that involves inserting human hands and mechanical devices into a cow’s vagina. However, these practices are categorized as economic production, not as sexual acts. As another example of how debates over bestiality reinforce certain social norms, in the effort to recriminalize bestiality in Washington state, supporters of the anti-bestiality bill often referred to the animals as if they were human children, relying upon assumptions about children’s helplessness, instead of considering how nonhuman animals were affected as animals. As a final example, disgust towards bestiality often reinforces the socially-constructed boundary between animals and humans. Humans are also animals, of course, but the categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ are often kept separate. The taboo against bestiality may be as much about maintaining these separate categories as it is about concern for animals. Given these complex issues around bestiality, it is important not only to consider the wellbeing of the animals and humans involved, but also the cultural context in which these practices of sex and sexuality emerge.

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See also: Zoophilia

Further Reading:


The term ‘zoophilia’ was coined in 1886 by Austro-German psychiatrist and sexologist Richard von Kraft-Ebbing (1840-1902). Zoophilia has since been defined according to psychiatric and medical institutions as a sexual fixation on or attraction to nonhuman animals. Zoophilia is therefore distinct from bestiality, defined as human-animal sexual acts. Numerous debates surround zoophilia and bestiality, often invoking questions of morality, im/proper sexuality, animal rights and welfare, and consent within human-animal relationships. To understand zoophilia, however, it is necessary to look back at its history as a category that emerged within psychological and medical institutions but that has more recently become connected to other social categories.

A number of terms exist to name different sexual practices and erotic attractions between humans and animals. For instance, many scientific scholars and self-identified zoophiles distinguish zoophilia from zoosadism, which refers to the deriving of pleasure from inflicting pain on animals and may or may not involve sexual acts. The American Psychiatric Association’s 5th Edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) – often considered the leading authority on psychiatric knowledge – classifies zoophilia as a “specific paraphilic disorder” – paraphilia meaning a sexual ‘perversion’ or ‘deviation’ from typical human sexual behavior. Even more specifically, researcher Anil Aggrawal, in the Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine (2011), classifies almost a dozen different distinct types of zoophilia, including human-animal sexual role-play and zoophilic fantasies, among others.

Since the late 20th century, an increasing number of zoophiles have found community support and information exchange on the Internet, producing cyberspaces where they can spark public debate around their sexual desires and practices. These moves to publicize zoophilia have coincided contentiously with increasing efforts to criminalize bestiality as an act of animal cruelty. For instance, in response to a proposed anti-bestiality law in Denmark, zoophiles have sought to re-define zoophilia as an innate sexual orientation and sexual identity similar to lesbian, straight, or bisexual identity and therefore deserving of legitimacy, rights, social acceptance, and legal protections.

While these moves to associate bestiality with homosexuality have taken place within popular culture, several scholars of queer theory, which seeks to understand and often challenge culturally-dominant ideas and values around sexuality, have also taken up zoophilia as a subject of study. Colin Carman (2012) writes about how an extreme love of animals can undermine dominant ideals about sexuality and human-animal relations. For instance, Tim Treadwell, whose life and death became the subject of the documentary Grizzly Man (2005), loved grizzly bears so much that he expressed a desire to become a bear himself and he spent much of his life living among them. Feminist scholar Kathy Rudy also associates zoophilia with sexuality that varies from culturally-dominant norms. She argues that extreme animal love, including forms of zoophilia, create possibilities for
ethical relationships between humans and animals because it denies a taken-for-granted hierarchy between the two. And Colleen Glenney Boggs writes about how accusations of zoophilia and bestiality have often been connected to reinforcing culturally-dominant sexual norms. For instance, owning and loving pets in an ‘appropriate’ or ‘proper’ way has been a hallmark in popular culture representations of the happy, heterosexual nuclear family like the 1954-1973 television show *Lassie*. However, people who live with and love pets ‘inappropriately’ or too much are seen as weird and queer. For instance, so-called ‘crazy cat ladies’ are seen as women who love cats when they ‘should’ have a husband and children.

These debates over zoophilia reflect the tension between psychiatric and popular understandings of sexuality and desire. They also reflect ethical debates over human sexuality and the proper treatment of animals. Many zoophiles argue that they develop mutually beneficial relationships with their animals. On the other hand, scientific research suggests that both abuse and care occur within zoophilic relationships (Beetz and Podberscek 2005). As popular attitudes around sexuality and human-animal relationships shift, these debates are likely to continue. By knowing the history of zoophilia and its creation as a social category, we can better understand these conversations.

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See also: Bestiality

Further reading:


