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Using a colloquial style and clearly aiming at a general audience, John Webster presents his opinions in a way which is readable and useful but, nonetheless, annoying to scientists involved in animal welfare research. The best parts of the book for me are the well-thought-out ideas and general conclusions based on a wide perspective of the problems. The point, first made some years ago by Webster, that if a rabbit is living in cold, hungry isolation, whether it is a pet, food or experimental animal does not matter to the rabbit, or indeed to a scientist assessing its welfare. Statistics concerning the 630 farm animals which the average person will consume during a lifetime, as compared with the two mice per person used in scientific research, are interesting and justify the fact that three-quarters of the book is principally concerned with farm animals. Webster argues that veterinarians should treat symptoms resulting in suffering as well as diagnosing and curing; overheating is a significant but avoidable cause of death in housed and transported animals, and the leg problems of broiler chickens affect very many individuals and are a particularly serious issue for the farming industry.

The book is infuriating because the author skates, pontificating, across a sea of partially presented evidence and variably justified assumptions. Many of the ideas which are presented are not attributed to their originator. Among the assumptions used but not justified are: hens which do not go outside in free-range units suffer from agoraphobia (p. 13); a tortoise which wanders, apparently at random, bumps into a lettuce and eats it may not want food (p. 20), and stereotypies look like a source of pleasure (p. 58). Indeed references to stereotypies range from the statement on p. 61 that the author does not accept that a system is cruel because it predisposes to stereotypies, to that on p. 84 that locomotor stereotypies are a sign that something is wrong.

Webster criticises ‘single sentence definitions’ of welfare, seriously misquotes (p. 10) this writer’s definition, ignores the 1993 Broom & Johnson book, and then offers (p. 11) as his definition ‘the welfare of an animal is determined by its capacity to avoid suffering and sustain fitness.’ This is not a definition and whilst welfare is clearly much affected by such a capacity, it is not entirely determined by it.