

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

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How do animals communicate their welfare?

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Abstract

The title for this symposium urges us to look for the animal in animal ethics, but it is equally urgent to search for the animal in animal biology. Scientists are taught from the very beginning to adopt a mechanistic approach, that is, to fragment animals into separate functional elements and investigate the complex causal relationships between these elements. Such an approach produces an intricate knowledge of an animal's organisation, including its capacities for intelligent thought and emotion. However it addresses these capacities from the outside, as objects, and does not touch on their subjective aspect, on what it is actually like to be those animals in a given place or time. Scientists tend to take it as given that the inner, personal aspects of experience are irretrievably private and hidden from view. However the world in which we live is not just one of object-based knowledge and experimental control; we also communicate with other living beings as subjects, and wonder about their point of view. In this outlook we perceive others as whole individuals; we see their actions, not as a series of physical events, but as an integrated psychological expression, a 'body language' that speaks to us of the other's perspective. As we get to know animals in different situations, we learn to discern whether they are calm, anxious, enthusiastic or agitated, whether they are generally happy or in distress. Such judgements of expression can be liable to misinterpretation, particularly with species that are physically very different from human beings. However communication is a skill, that with sufficient training, practice and experience can improve and lead to better, if not perfect, judgement.

There is no reason why such a subject-based approach could not make a legitimate and valuable contribution to scientific research. In fact its contribution is essential, in that assessing animals as expressive beings conceptually anchors our understanding of their physical organisation. Physiological processes do not come with interpretative labels attached; only through observing how animals express themselves can we interpret their experience, and the coherence between their constituent parts. The goal of the 'whole animal' research project at SAC has been to develop a methodology suitable for

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investigating animal expressions, for the benefit of the study of animal welfare. Research with pigs and other farm animal species has demonstrated judgements of animal expression to be reliable, repeatable, and coherent with quantitative measures of animal behaviour and physiology; in sum, to be scientifically robust. At present we are engaged in further developing the 'whole animal' approach for practical welfare assessment on farms. I will provide an overview of this body of work, and discuss how seeing animals whole is essential for understanding how they suffer under intensive farming regimes.