Is ‘a life worth living’ a concept worth having?

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Abstract

A recent FAWC report introduced ‘a life worth living’ as a useful concept in farm animal welfare discussions and policy. But what does this concept mean? And is it a useful one? This paper extends FAWC’s approach in several ways. It firstly provides an account of the concept of a life worth living in more detail, in relation to current animal welfare thinking, such as experiences and quality of life. It then describes how the concept might be applied in animal welfare management decisions and in setting standards for regulations and farm assurance schemes. The paper identifies several advantages to the concept: it is animal-based, intuitively understandable, and has direct prescriptive force in decision-making. But the concept also has certain limitations, especially that it is potentially complex and subjective and that it cannot include all ethically relevant concerns about farm animal welfare. Nevertheless, the paper concludes that the concept may become a useful addition to welfare dialogue, and finishes by identifying the core areas where further work is necessary.

Keywords: animal welfare, euthanasia, insentience, life worth avoiding, life worth living, quality of life

Introduction

Animal welfare concepts affect how animal welfare is assessed, and consequently can be important determinants of how farm animals are treated. Decisions are made on-farm about individual animals, such as those concerning euthanasia, breeding or mutilations. Broader decisions are made about what standards should be set in regulations or labelling schemes. Animal welfare assessment and policy evolve, and new underlying concepts and approaches to assessment are suggested. Each novel suggestion needs to be analysed and evaluated within the animal welfare literature, in order to establish its usefulness and limitations.

One recent suggestion is that of a life worth living (LWL). This idea was introduced by Stephen Clarke and Michael Reiss (D Morton, personal communication 2009). Its use was suggested in various contexts (eg APGAW 2007; European Commission 2008; Wathes 2008) and eventually formed a prominent component of the Farm Animal Welfare Council’s Past, Present and Future Report (FAWC 2009).

This concept “capture[d] the current zeitgeist” (Wickens 2010) and has since been used by the UK Government (DEFRA 2009) and EU Commission (Paulsen 2010). It may have the potential to be useful in various situations, but before it can be applied, the concept needs definition, clarification and analysis. There are many questions to be addressed that the FAWC document does not answer. What does an LWL mean precisely? How does the concept extend animal welfare thinking? And how does the concept affect animal welfare management practically?

This paper presents a framework in which the concept can be considere in relation to current animal welfare concepts based on experiences and quality of life (QOL). This provides a definition of the concepts of a life worth living, and of related concepts of a life not worth living (LNWL) and a life worth avoiding (LWA). This allows us to identify some cases in which the concept might be useful in management decisions and in setting standards for legislation or labelling schemes. These applications highlight several advantages and limitations to the concept.

LWL as an extension of current animal welfare concepts

It is possible to consider the LWL concept as the culmination of thinking that progresses through a series starting from basic units of single welfare states, through wider concepts that combine multiple states, such as overall welfare and quality of life, and concludes with the concept of an LWL. The concept of an LWL is therefore not a replacement or substitute for other ideas, but is an holistic idea of an animal’s welfare over its whole life, based on more fundamental concepts.

Basic welfare states (worth having)

Animal welfare traditionally focuses on states of an animal. For example, Broom famously described animal welfare as “the state of the animal as it attempts to cope with its environment” (Broom 1988). States of an animal have certain ‘qualities’ that make them relevant to that animal’s welfare. These are qualities that are important from the animal’s