Animal welfare science, varieties of value and philosophical methodology

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Abstract

There are competing conceptions of animal welfare in the scientific literature. Debate among proponents of these various conceptions continues. This paper examines methodologies for use in attempting to justify a conception of animal welfare. It is argued that philosophical methodology relying on conceptual analysis has a central role to play in this debate. To begin, the traditional division between facts and values is refined by distinguishing different types of values, or norms. Once this distinction is made, it is argued that the common recognition that any conception of animal welfare is inherently normative is correct, but that it is not ethical normativity that is at issue. The sort of philosophical methodology appropriate to use in investigating the competing normative conceptions of animal welfare is explained. Finally, the threads of the paper are brought together to consider the appropriate role of recent empirical work into folk conceptions of animal welfare in determining the proper conception of animal welfare. It is argued that empirical results about folk conceptions are useful inputs into conceptual philosophical investigation into the competing conceptions of animal welfare. Further mutual inquiry by philosophers and animal welfare scientists is needed to advance our knowledge of what animal welfare is.

Keywords: animal welfare, folk conceptions, methodology, philosophy, prudence, values

Introduction

Philosophers and scientists alike have raised questions about the nature of inquiry into animal welfare. Many have claimed that the study of animal welfare is not purely scientific, because the concept of animal welfare itself is “inherently a normative concept” (Fraser 1999; p 182). Specifically, Tannenbaum (1991) claims that “animal welfare science is as much ethics as it is science” (p 1361) largely because “[d]etermining that the welfare of a particular animal is worth studying is an ethical activity” (p 1363). As well, the decision whether to adopt one or another of the competing conceptions of animal welfare is a decision involving values (p 1368). David Fraser is the animal welfare scientist who has most carefully considered the connection between animal welfare science and values. He emphasises that “our conception of animal welfare inherently involves value notions about what is better or worse, more important or less important, for the quality of life of animals” (1995; p 113) and that “any assessment of animal welfare is underlain by value notions of what makes for a better or worse life for animals” (1999; p 182). Sandæ (a philosopher) and Simonsen (a scientist) agree that scientists make evaluative philosophical assumptions in their research on animal welfare that need to be made explicit (1992; p 257-258). Philosopher Bernard Rollin (1993, 1995) also agrees, and points out that even purportedly objective measures of animal welfare that stress health and the absence of disease “are inextricably bound up with value judgments, including moral ones” (1993; p 46).

While the recognition that the concept of animal welfare is inherently normative is quite important, and while the dialogue between philosophers and scientists investigating animal welfare has been productive, more remains to be done. What is lacking in all of the accounts just mentioned is an adequate characterisation of the sort of norms or values that the concept of animal welfare involves. In this paper, a distinction is drawn between different types of value in order to make precise what sort of value is inherent in the concept of animal welfare. It will be argued that the concept of animal welfare, although it is inherently normative, is not inherently moral. That is, we can sensibly speak of what is good or bad for animals without simultaneously speaking of what is morally good or bad.

Once we are clear on this distinction, we can profitably move to an explanation of a typical methodology often used in philosophy. Understanding this methodology will be important in moving forward a programme of co-operation between animal welfare science and philosophy that many have called for or contributed to (eg Tannenbaum 1991; Sandæ & Simonsen 1992; Sandæ & Simonsen 1992; Sandæ 1996; Fraser 1999; Appleby & Sandæ 2002; Fraser & Preece 2004; Nordenfelt 2006; Haynes 2008; Schmidt 2011).