How happy is your pet? The problem of subjectivity in the assessment of companion animal welfare

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Abstract

The ability to evaluate the welfare of non-human animals accurately and objectively is influenced by a variety of factors including the nature of our relationships with them. Subjective biases in the perception of an animal's quality of life can have either positive or negative consequences for its welfare and are likely to be particularly exaggerated in the case of companion animals, such as dogs, cats and other pet species, with which people tend to form strong anthropomorphic, attachment-based relationships. The consequences of these subjective biases are likely to be further exacerbated by the fact that many of the physical and behavioural attributes that humans find appealing, and have selected for, in companion animals, are inherently detrimental to their welfare. Using a range of examples, this paper explores some of the complex ways in which anthropomorphism and subjectivity can cloud our ability to make reliable judgements concerning the welfare of companion animals, even in the face of seemingly obvious and overt indicators of pain and suffering.

Keywords: animal welfare, anthropomorphism, companion animals, health, pets, subjectivity

Introduction

Detachment and objectivity are values that inform how science, ideally, should be practiced. When attempting to uncover truths about some aspect of the natural world, scientists are expected to be aware of, and to attempt to eliminate, personal biases, prejudices, and a priori commitments while also detaching themselves emotionally from their subject matter (Howard 1985). In practice, of course, true objectivity in science is aspirational rather than fully achievable. Scientists are only human and, like everyone else, may find it difficult to remain detached and objective when they have a strong personal interest in their object of study.

An illustration of the nature of this problem is provided by Fraser et al (1997) who posed a hypothetical scenario involving two dog owners who meet while walking their dogs. One of these owners:

...had grown up in a small family that valued health, safety and orderly, disciplined behaviour. The dog of this owner received regular veterinary care, two meals a day of low-fat dog food, and was walked on a leash. The other owner had grown up in a large community that valued conviviality, sharing of resources and close contact with the natural world. This dog (the owner’s third — the first two had been killed by cars) had burrs in its coat, was fed generously but sporadically, and had never worn a collar in its life. Each owner, judging quality of life from very different viewpoints, felt sorry for the other’s dog

The obvious point of the story is that each person tends to view the quality of life of non-human animals through the lens of his or her own subjective beliefs, attitudes, and values, and that these inevitably colour perceptions of the animals’ welfare. The conventional welfare scientist’s response to this dilemma is to focus on the accurate and objective measurement of things that are likely to be relevant to the welfare of these two dogs — eg regularity of meals, levels of physical restraint, risks of injury, and so on — while also acknowledging that the ultimate determination of how well or poorly each dog is faring is going to be largely subjective, since it will depend on the individual, and potentially biased, perceptions and beliefs of whoever is making the judgement (Mason & Mendll 1993; Fraser 1995). If this is the case, however, it raises important questions regarding the particular factors that may interfere with our ability to recognise and prioritise the things that actually matter to the animals, and hence make sensible and effective recommendations to improve their welfare. In Fraser et al’s (1997) example, the emphasis is on differences in personal values — health, safety and discipline versus laissez faire communal life and contact with nature. The current discussion will focus instead on the influence of past and current relationships with animals, particularly companion animals, on our ability to make objective assessments of their welfare.