Understanding the multiple conceptions of animal welfare

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Abstract

Academics working on animal welfare typically consider the animal’s affective state (e.g., the experience of pain), biological functioning (e.g., the presence of injuries), and sometimes naturalness (e.g., access to pasture), but it is unclear how these different factors are weighed in different cases. We argue that progress can be informed by systematically observing how ordinary people respond to scenarios designed to elicit varying, and potentially conflicting, types of concern. The evidence we review illustrates that people vary in how much weight they place on each of these three factors in their assessments of welfare in different cases; in some cases, concerns about the animal’s affective state are predominant, and in other cases other concerns are more important. This evidence also suggests that people’s assessments can also include factors (like the animal’s relationship with its caregiver) that do not fit neatly within the dominant three-circles framework of affect, functioning, and naturalness. We conclude that a more complete understanding of the multiple conceptions of animal welfare can be advanced by systematically exploring the views of non-specialists, including their responses to scenarios designed to elicit conflicting concerns.

Keywords: animal welfare, animal well-being, experimental philosophy, good life, happiness, moral dilemma

Introduction

Academics hold multiple conceptions of animal welfare, and in some cases adhering to one conception rather than another can lead to different conclusions about what types of treatment are better for the animal’s welfare. We suggest that academic argumentation has been unsuccessful in providing a clear basis for resolving such disagreements, and that a better understanding of the diverse conceptions of welfare can be derived via the systematic investigation of how non-specialists (‘folk’) respond to specific scenarios designed to elicit different concerns. We further suggest that this research on folk conceptions of welfare can be used to describe a broader set of welfare conceptions than are typically considered in the academic literature.

Academic conceptions of welfare

Bentham’s (1789) famous “Can they suffer?” quote directs the reader to focus on the animal’s affective experiences as the relevant feature in the moral consideration due to animals. Current thinking by many animal welfare scientists would agree that considering how an animal feels is an important part of animal welfare. For example, Ross and Mason (2017; p 46) specify that animal welfare interventions are “beneficial if they have measurable, positive influences on animals’ affective states.” Some authors have gone farther, arguing that the subjective experiences of the animal are the only thing that can ultimately affect their welfare. Duncan (2004) provided an example of this purely hedonistic approach when he claimed that “…animal welfare is all to do with… subjective feelings, with the absence of negative feelings, particularly the strong negative feelings we call suffering and with the presence of positive feelings that we call pleasure.”

Other conceptions of welfare focus on additional issues, such as impaired biological functioning. To the strict hedonist, impaired functioning is a welfare concern only when it results in some change in the animal’s subjective experience. But what is conducive to good functioning and what is pleasant do not always fit together neatly. For example, some types of poor physical health need not make you feel ill (as with sub-clinical infections). Academics are not always clear about why they consider measures of biological functioning as relevant to animal welfare, but at least some scholars (e.g., Broom 1991) have claimed that poor functioning is a welfare concern even if there is no effect on the animal’s affective state.

Naturalness, including the ability to perform species-specific behaviours, is also considered by some as a component of animal welfare. As with concerns relating to biological functioning, scholars adopting a more purely hedonistic (or instead functionalist) approach would see