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## What Prevents Us from Recognizing Animal Sentience?

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I propose to identify and illustrate what might be described as ‘the powers that be’ – four mechanisms that prevent us from recognizing sentience in animals – and to indicate the challenges that should follow for future work in this field.

### **Misdescription**

The first is what Denys Turner has recently called ‘that most powerful of human tools, *the power of misdescription*’. In a paper, provocatively titled ‘How to kill people’, he argues:

Let me tell you how to kill people efficiently; or rather, here’s how to get yourself, and, if you are in the business of doing so, here’s how to get others to kill people. First you have got to call your proposed victims names . . . if we propose to kill a fellow human being and justify it, we have to redescribe him in such a way that he no longer belongs to us, becomes an alien being . . . and in that way the inhibition against killing is effectively weakened.

He provides the examples of how some newspapers, in the time of the Falklands/Malvinas war, described the Argentinians as ‘Argies’ or ‘wops’, and how, in the Vietnamese war, US soldiers called the North Vietnamese ‘Gooks’ (Turner, 2002). In order to kill or abuse we need to create an *artificial* distance from the one who is to be killed or abused.

Similarly, we have created an artificial distance between ourselves and other animals. There are differences, sometimes important ones, both between and among species. It is not difference *per se*, but rather the *denigration* of difference that is significant morally. It is how we *use* differences to justify unjust treatment and, specifically, how these are embodied in our language. Consider the historic language we use about animals: ‘brutes’, ‘dumb brutes’, ‘unfeeling brutes’, ‘critters’, ‘sub-humans’, ‘beasts’ and ‘wild beasts’. Also consider the adjectives, ‘brutal’, ‘bestly’ and ‘bestial’. The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, which is

still in use, recommends that marriage should not be undertaken ‘to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding’. By definition, it is difficult to champion the rights (though some undoubtedly have) of ‘beastly’, ‘brutal’ or ‘bestial’ life.

So pervasive is this language that it is difficult even for ‘animal advocates’ (itself not an unambiguous term) to find an alternative nomenclature. ‘Our Dumb Friends’ League’ was the title of an animal-friendly organization that was set up in the late 19th century. And the term ‘non-human animals’ (used by pioneering animal advocates in the 1970s) is hardly unprejudicial either. In a class on sexual ethics at Oxford University, I recall one student saying how much he opposed adultery because it was ‘ratting on one’s partner’. I had to point out that some rats are more monogamous than some human beings. In doing so, I had, as it were, ‘to take the bull by the horns’, not let ‘sleeping dogs lie’, ‘be as sly as a fox’ and even act as ‘a snake in the grass’; the point to be grasped is that these are not just libels on human beings.

Unless we address the power of misdescription, we shall never be able to *think* straight, let alone *see* straight (that is, impartially, or, at least, with some measure of objectivity). Even ‘animals’ itself is a term of abuse (which hides the reality of what it purports to describe, namely, a range of differentiated beings of startling variety and complexity). The language we use is the language of *past* thought. We shall not possess a new understanding of animals unless we actively challenge the language we use, which is the language of historic denigration. The challenge is how to create a nomenclature – born of moral imagination and a sense of fellow feeling – that does justice to animals.

## Misrepresentation

The second mechanism that prevents us from recognizing sentience in animals is the *power of misrepresentation*. It is important to grasp that the artificial distance between ourselves and other animals does not arise from nowhere. It has been fuelled by both religious and scientific ideologies. In Christianity, that ideology is Cartesianism – the doctrine largely originating with the 17th century French philosopher Descartes that animals are unthinking automata. The reasoning goes like this: because animals possess no rational (and therefore immortal) soul they cannot therefore think, possess self-consciousness and language, and, therefore, they cannot experience pain. In short: they cannot feel pain because they do not have the mental wherewithal to do so.

In other words (and at the very least), animals are unthinking organisms that operate by instinct. We cannot assume that their organs, though similar to our own, carry the same, or even similar, sensation since this is the function of the rational soul, which is unique to human beings. The argument is entirely *a priori*. It is difficult to see how any empirical evidence could count against it. The effect of Cartesianism was to devastate earlier Christian traditions of kindness to animals. It is doubtful whether the Jesuit Joseph Rickaby could

have written that ‘we have no duties of charity, nor duties of any kind to the lower animals, as neither to stocks or stones’ (Rickaby, 1889) without the influence of Cartesianism.

Cartesianism was paralleled by a scientific doctrine called ‘behaviourism’. Behaviourist ideology – which has so influenced American and British psychology – only allows for descriptions of *learned* behaviour. Subjectivity in animals was jettisoned. In order to preserve scientific objectivity, scientists ‘totally ignored any subjective dimension of feeling, and dealt only with the neurological and chemical substratum, the “plumbing” of pain’. The result, as Bernard Rollin indicates (Rollin, 1990, 2006), was an extreme scepticism about the existence of animal pain. ‘Animal anaesthesia was known only as “chemical restraint” throughout most of the 20th century, and the first textbook of veterinary anaesthesia, published in the United States in the middle of the 1970s, does not list control of felt pain as a reason for anaesthetic use’ (Rollin, 2006).

In fact, there is no good reason to deny that all mammals are sentient. ‘Sentience’ is defined in some dictionaries as ‘sense perception’, but it is commonly used by philosophers to denote the capacity for pain and pleasure. The issue is not just about pain, however. Pain may be defined as an ‘adverse physical stimuli’, but there is ample evidence that all mammals experience not just pain, but also mental suffering, that is, stress, terror, shock, anxiety, fear, trauma and foreboding, and that only to a greater or lesser degree than we do ourselves. Animals and humans exhibit a common ancestor, show similar behaviour and have physiological similarities. Because of these triple conditions, these shared characteristics, it is perfectly logical to believe that animals experience many of the same emotions as humans. Logic tells us this. Thus we do not need scientific data to believe in the suffering of animals. Rather, the onus should be on those people who try to deny that animals have such emotions. They must explain how nerves act in one way in one species and completely differently in another. They must explain why we believe that a child who cries and runs away from us after we have trodden on his or her foot is unhappy, while a dog who behaves in the same manner is said to present us with insufficient information for us to make a judgement.

That is not to deny, however, that the scientific evidence is not there for those who want it. As early as 1872, Darwin devoted a whole book to *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (Darwin, 1872). Since then, there has been a wide range of scientific findings, especially ethological and epistemological findings, on animal learning, tool making and self-consciousness. The conclusion is clear: ‘The available evidence suggests that most or all vertebrates, and perhaps some invertebrates, can suffer’ (DeGrazia, 1996).

The misrepresentation of animals is paralleled by the misrepresentation of their advocates. The British TV presenter Jeremy Paxman introduced an item on BBC2’s ‘Newsnight’ concerning the Great Ape Project, by asking: ‘Should we give *human* rights to apes?’ In fact, no animal advocate (to my knowledge) wants to give apes *human* rights. The notion conjures up – as one suspects it was designed to do –

visions of apes in polling booths, ape MPs, apes demonstrating for better pay, ape trade unions and so on. By the misuse of *one* word, the case for not harming apes was subject to public ridicule. The power of the media to misrepresent can frighten us out of most moral sensibilities. Who wants to be known as a ‘bunny hugger’, a ‘Bambi lover’ or a ‘friend of the dumb brutes’, or, less benignly, a ‘sentimentalist’, an ‘extremist’, a ‘fanatic’ or even (most regrettably of all) a ‘terrorist’?

The second challenge, then, is to seek non-pejorative, even convivial, representations of animals, and less than partial labels for those who try to protect them.

### Misdirection

The third mechanism is *the power of misdirection*. I mean by that, the way in which suffering in animals, even when acknowledged, is minimized, obfuscated or its moral significance belittled. There are several arguments.

#### The ‘we can’t really know’ argument

Academics frequently exhibit the ‘scepticism of the wise’ tendency, that is, when presented with what to most ordinary mortals appears as a case of abuse, if not downright cruelty, they invariably inflate uncertainty and in so doing misdirect our attention away from the harm inflicted. Here is an example:

TV interviewer: ‘Don’t pigs suffer when immobilized in these crates?’

Respected scientist: ‘You are assuming of course that pigs suffer just like we do. We do not really know that. It’s a very complex question.’

TV interviewer: ‘But don’t most animals have the need to turn around?’

Respected scientist: ‘But, again, you’re assuming that the needs of pigs are identical to our own. We have to move beyond naïve anthropomorphism.’

TV interviewer: ‘So you’re saying that they aren’t suffering then?’

Respected scientist: ‘I think we would need a great deal more research in order to reach a definite conclusion about such a complex question. We can’t simply assume that pigs suffer in circumstances that would make us suffer.’

TV interviewer: ‘So what do you think should be done?’

Respected scientist: ‘I think we need much more research. We don’t know how animals feel because they can’t tell us about it. We should set up a scientific committee to explore this question, make experiments, obtain research grants and find really objective ways of measuring what may be at issue here.’

TV interviewer: ‘Thank you, Professor, for your fascinating insights.’

The interview is imaginary, but not wholly fictional. Such are the legacies of Cartesianism and behaviourism that academics find it as difficult to talk about emotion in animals as 19th century clergymen found it difficult to talk about sex. It is something that they cannot easily do without blushing. They would have to live with the most dreaded accusation that can be levelled at any academic, namely, being a ‘sentimentalist’. What is worrying is that this professional scepticism (which, in other contexts, we should welcome) is increasingly taken over by government ministers, officials and especially by their committees (who are usually packed full of appropriately appointed academics) so that government policy becomes itself unreasonably sceptical about animal sentience.

Philosophers have sometimes compounded the scepticism of scientists by reason of their own agnosticism. Modern discussion has been influenced by Thomas Nagel’s well known essay, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ (Nagel, 1979) His answer (not surprisingly) is that we cannot know much – actually nothing – about what it is like to be a bat. But we do not need to know precisely how a bat thinks or feels or mentally encounters the world in order to know basic things about how it can be harmed, for example, by mutilation, by deprivation of its instincts, by isolation from its peers, by subjecting it to invasive procedures and by the infliction of adverse physical stimuli. We can, and do, know these things without scientific evidence and without knowing everything possible, philosophically or scientifically, about the mental consciousness of a bat. We can know these things, at least, *as reasonably* as we know them in the case of most humans. The same is also true of the many millions of mammals that we regularly harm in research, recreation and farming. We should not allow not knowing everything to prevent us from acting ethically on what we can reasonably know.

### **The ‘we must have scientific evidence before we can make a judgement’ argument**

The desire for data, for evidence of all kinds, rather than simply assertion, is to be welcomed in moral debate, but when it comes to animals this desire is hardened into a precondition of judgement. The Burns Report on Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales provides an example. Commissioned post-mortem evidence showed that hunted foxes died from ‘massive injuries to the chest and vital organs’. Yet, the Report concludes that there is ‘a lack of firm scientific evidence about the effect on the welfare of a fox of being closely pursued, caught and killed above ground’. Hunting is judged to ‘seriously compromise the welfare of the fox’ (Burns Report, 1999) but it is not ‘cruel’. Lord Burns, in a subsequent speech in the House of Lords, explains why:

Naturally, people ask whether we were implying that it was cruel . . .

The short answer to that question is no. There was no sufficient

verifiable evidence or data safely to reach views about cruelty. It is a complex area ... One cannot ask an animal about its welfare or know what is going on inside its head.

(Burns, 2001)

But the idea that there must be ‘sufficient verifiable evidence’ before we can know that a fox suffers when it is being disembowelled by dogs is as unreasonable as supposing that we cannot know that a whip lashing a child’s back is ‘cruel’. If Burns’s attitude of extreme scepticism were maintained in the face of similar evidence of cruelty to children, the noble Lord would justifiably be the subject of public ridicule, even though infants cannot tell us ‘what is going on inside their heads’ either.

### **The ‘we mustn’t be anthropomorphic’ argument**

There is a bad as well as a good anthropomorphism. Bad includes the attempt to project obviously human needs and emotions onto animals as when, for example, we enter the Beatrix Potter world of animals dressed up in human clothes and enjoying gardening. But these fantasies should not detract from the truth of good anthropomorphism, which accepts as a reasonable assumption that, in their own individual manner, mammals suffer only to a greater or lesser extent than we do. The ‘anthropomorphic’ view was ably expressed by the ‘ethical approach’ of the former Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Committee in 1970: ‘The fact that an animal has limbs should give it the right to use them; the fact that a bird has wings should give it the right to spread them; the fact that both animals and birds are mobile should give them the right to turn around, and the fact that they have eyes should give them the right to see’ (FAWAC, 1970).

In fact, it is a very reasonable assumption that animals denied use of most, or all, of their natural instincts – without any compensating factors – are ‘unhappy’. That is exactly what we *can* – and *should* assume. We do not need science to know that intensive farming harms animals, deprives them of their natural life and makes them liable to suffering. We have seen a 30-year industry in which academics have been paid sometimes huge sums to investigate whether animals in intensively farmed conditions are ‘suffering’. But if anthropomorphism is so ‘unscientific’ and so flawed, why is it that subsequent research has vindicated almost all the objections to factory farming, based on ‘naïve anthropomorphism’? The very systems that attracted criticism – battery cages, sow stalls, veal crates – have all been shown to make animals liable to harm or to engender suffering. The words of Konrad Lorenz cannot be gainsaid: ‘The similarity [between humans and animals] is not only functional but historical, and it would be an actual fallacy not to humanize’ (Lorenz, 1966).

### The ‘they may feel pain, but not as we do’ argument

This is reminiscent of Mr Spock’s famous line in *Star Trek*, ‘yes, it’s life, but not as we know it’. The origin of this view is the idea, so central to Cartesianism, that animals are incapable of rational thought and therefore cannot really suffer like us. But the moral issue is not whether their suffering is identical in all respects to our own, but rather whether their suffering is *as important to them as ours is to us*. Rationality may, plausibly, increase suffering if there is anticipation or foreboding involved. It may be, for example, that animals have no concept of death and therefore cannot fear it. But it does not follow that the suffering of non-rational beings (if that is what mammals are) is always less intense.

If animals are (as we are told) devoid of rational thought and therefore live closer to their instincts, then it may be that a calf immobilized in a crate or a lion caged up in a zoo experiences a mental kind of torment that we can only imagine. Terry Waite, who suffered five terrible years in captivity, said that in order to alleviate his suffering he, *inter alia*, composed novels in his head (Waite, 1993). But such consolations are not available to animals. If animals are not rational, then it follows that their suffering cannot be softened by an intellectual comprehension of the circumstances – they just experience the raw terror of not knowing what has happened, why it has happened and how long it will endure. If, as some philosophers have claimed, animals are not intelligent like us, it is possible that some forms of suffering are actually *worse* for them than they would be for us. Rationality requires (of us), at least, an attempt at even-handedness.

### The ‘animals experience pain, but it’s not morally important like our pain’ argument

Looked at objectively there are good rational grounds for regarding the suffering of animals as especially significant morally. Consider the case of children, specifically infants. In recent years there has been an increase of sensitivity towards children, which is rather remarkable in the light of their low status historically. Is this sensitivity well founded philosophically? I think it is. Consider further that infants are, strictly speaking, morally innocent, they are vulnerable and powerless in relation to us, they cannot fully represent themselves or articulate their needs, and they are subjects of a special trust. All these considerations make the infliction of suffering upon them not *easier* but *harder* to justify.

Now, these considerations also apply to animals, perhaps even more so. Animals also are morally innocent – they cannot morally be bettered by pain or be improved by it; no pain in animals can be ‘deserved’ (as some have argued may be true in the case of some humans); they are also, at least mostly, vulnerable and powerless in relation to us and they are incapable of representing themselves, of giving ‘informed’ consent or articulating their needs. They are

also subjects of a special trust in that they are (in the case of domestic animals) wholly dependent upon us; we have (in most cases) deliberately chosen to make them so dependent. It is precisely these considerations that should mark out both infants and animals as justifying special moral solicitude (Linzey, 1994).

In short: we need to reject the common rationalizations that animal pain, even when acknowledged, is not morally important like *our* pain. On the contrary, not only is human pain not the only morally significant pain in the world, but there are also rational grounds for supposing that suffering in animals, like suffering in children, should make a special moral claim upon us. There is something particularly poignant about the sheer vulnerability and helplessness both of infants and animals. When we grasp that fact, it should inform our moral reckoning.

In addition to these philosophical considerations, there is an underlying theological one. It concerns the Christ-like nature of animal suffering. What should ‘move our very hearts and sicken us’, according to John Henry Newman, is the realization that animals are morally innocent, ‘that they have done no harm. Next, that they have no power of resisting; it is the cowardice and tyranny of which they are the victims that makes their suffering so especially touching . . . there is something so dreadful, so satanic [sic] in tormenting those who have never harmed us, and who cannot defend themselves, who are utterly in our power, who have weapons neither of offence nor defence that none but very hardened persons can endure the thought of it.’ And he concludes: ‘Think then, my brethren, of your feelings at cruelty practiced upon brute animals, and you will gain one sort of feeling which the history of Christ’s Cross and passion ought to excite within you’ (Newman, 1868).

The third challenge, then, is to find the moral and intellectual resources to face the full reality of animal sentience without trivialization or obfuscation.

## Misperception

I turn, lastly, to the *power of misperception (or, rather, to the power of perception)*. I begin with an example that I have used before (Linzey, 1999). The university where I once used to work as chaplain was situated in acres of 18th century parkland. From my office, I was able to look out over the undulating hillside populated with rabbits. At first, I used to just notice things moving here and there as I occasionally looked up from my computer. But as the weeks and months progressed, I slowly began to marvel at the complexity, intricacy and beauty of their lives. I used to say – only half jokingly – that it ‘was worth coming to the university to see the rabbits’. Whenever visitors came I used to point out the rabbits, and some would indeed say, ‘How wonderful’, but for many others it was as if I had pointed out the dust on the carpet or the faded colour of the paint. Whatever they saw they did not *see* rabbits.

Many people still do not *see* animals. They may have seen things moving, objects out there, even ‘pests’ that invade ‘their’ territory. But they have not yet



seen other living, sentient beings. Our language, our philosophy, our science, our history, our theology and our culture, by and large, prevent us from seeing. I recall after lecturing one day in Oxford, a student came up to me and said: ‘Well, Dr Linzey, I found all your arguments very interesting, but there’s something I don’t understand. What are animals for, if they are not to be eaten?’ The person concerned was being perfectly serious and sincere. She just had not seen animals as anything more than lumps of meat. We have to move from an anthropocentric – indeed gastrocentric – view of animals.

The change of perception – or rather insight – can be stated quite simply: it is the move away from ideas that animals are commodities, machines, tools, things or resources here for us, to the idea that animals have their own value – what we may call an ‘intrinsic value’. Animals are not just ‘objects’ out there; they are – in the words of Tom Regan – ‘subjects-of-a-life’ (Regan, 1983; Linzey, 1987). As I have put it elsewhere, ‘this is a moral and spiritual discovery that is as objective and important as any other fundamental discovery, whether it be the discovery of the stars or the discovery of the human psyche’ (Linzey, 1998). It is the ‘Eureka!’ experience, the ‘Aha!’ experience, ‘the moment when the penny drops’ experience. It is when we make the *moral* discovery that animals matter in themselves, that they have value in themselves and that their suffering is as important to them as ours is to us.

There are still many human beings out there who have not had this experience, this insight. They do not think that animals matter or that there are other creatures of value in the world. They think that human beings matter, but that the rest is just ‘the environment’, the theatre or backdrop to what really matters, namely themselves. They suffer, theologically, from the terrible delusion that God only cares for the human species – among the millions of species that she has made.

## The educational agenda

Now, this insight cannot be programmed or, even worse, indoctrinated. But it should, at least, be on the educational agenda. There are few examples of where the possibility of seeing animals differently forms part of the curriculum at any level of education: primary, secondary, tertiary or higher. In many courses, whether they be in animal husbandry, animal conservation, animal science or even sometimes in animal welfare, students are not required to challenge, or at least address, the dominant perceptions of animals as commodities, resources, tools, machines or things.

Indeed, courses in animal conservation seem to miss the point entirely. For they often presuppose that animals are not individuals, but just collectivities or species. Hence, so-called ‘conservationists’ are in the forefront of killing ruddy ducks, hedgehogs or grey squirrels in order to preserve other species. Conservationists see species, but they fail to see *individual* animals that deserve our protection. Similarly, courses in animal science are often so ‘scientific’ that they

fail to see animals as anything more than objects of dissection or complex machines. It never seems to occur to zoologists, any more than to conservationists, that animals are not just animals but *individual* animals – each with their own unique, morally significant, individuality.

History, it has been said, is the province of the winners; what we see all around is the embodiment of what was once thought. Think of what a zoo or a factory farm is – it is not just a building or a piece of geography – it is a living embodiment of the past view, the historic view, that sees animals as commodities to be put on display or simply bred for human use. Education needs to give people the chance to think and imagine differently, to conceive of other, better worlds for humans and animals.

The final and most important challenge, then, is to find ways of institutionalizing, embodying and incarnating new perceptions of animals so that as a matter of course all students in education – at whatever level – are encouraged to rethink the dominant intellectual paradigm. Only then shall we be in a position to effectively counter the moral and spiritual impoverishment revealed in our maltreatment of animals. ‘We need another, and wiser, and perhaps more mystical, concept of animals’ wrote the enlightened conservationist Henry Beston; ‘they are not brethren, they are not underlings, they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth’ (Beston, 1928).

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