

Animal suffering and human bias

Commentary on [Ng](#) on *Animal Suffering*

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Abstract: Ng proposes concrete ways to decrease animal suffering on the basis of commonsense economic logic and research in welfare biology. But to reduce animal suffering effectively in livestock farming, animal experimentation or the natural environment we have to become more aware of our pervasive and spontaneous but unreliable intuitive moral judgments. These can generate biases that prevent us from decreasing animal suffering effectively.

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Ng (2016) discusses some simple, low-cost strategies for improving animal welfare in livestock farming, entertainment (e.g., horse rearing), medical experimentation and the natural environment. But although welfare improvements in livestock farming can be cost-effective, they do not necessarily reduce animal suffering and rights violations in the most effective way because they are still based on “speciesist” attitudes: the judgment that humans have a higher moral status than non-human animals and that human welfare and rights are hence more important than animal welfare and rights (Bruers 2014).

In the 19th century, Jeremy Bentham’s and John Stuart Mill’s analogy with slavery had already identified this bias (Bentham & Mill 2004). Imagine welfare economists studying the impact of slavery on black people. Would they propose improvements, such as sufficient nutrition, sufficient rest breaks and less whipping? Such proposals presuppose that black slaves are mere property and that their welfare has lower value. Although livestock and slave welfare improvements might be low-cost, quick-win measures, they are far from sufficient ethically.

We can increase the size of cages (without substantially decreasing the number of caged animals) or we can reduce the number of cages and caged animals. Consumers can demand more meat, from animals raised in bigger cages, or they can demand less meat. The latter points in the direction of the end goal of veganism where no animal is harmed or used as a means against its will (Bruers 2015). Decreasing the livestock sector will be an effective, low-cost, quick-win strategy with immediate benefits for public health (lower risk of zoonotic infectious diseases), consumer health (lower risk of cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes and food-borne illnesses), producer health (lower risk of accidents and diseases in agriculture and food industries) and environmental health (less biodiversity loss).

The strategy of transforming the livestock sector with animal welfare improvements often results in a trade-off with environmental goals. Eating more beef instead of chicken may be better for some animals (fewer animals are used), but beef has a higher ecological footprint. Less intensive production (e.g., slower growth of animals) is better in terms of animal welfare but also results in decreased resource efficiency and hence a bigger ecological footprint.

Ng also mentions the importance of medical research using animal experimentation: the resulting scientific knowledge can reduce human and animal suffering in the long run. But it is important that the experimenters are not biased towards undervaluing animal welfare. Unfortunately, in our current society, almost all animal experimenters have a very strong speciesist bias. They would never do similar experiments on humans without the subject's consent.

In animal experiments the principle of the 3Rs is important: replacing animal experiments with animal-free alternatives wherever possible, reducing the number of animals used in the irreplaceable experiments, and refining the procedures to make them less painful for the animals. But can animal experimenters make an unbiased judgment as to whether the 3Rs are being respected? This is unlikely, as almost no animal experimenters are vegan. In consuming animal products, an animal experimenter violates the 3Rs on a daily basis without even noticing it.

Welfare biology also raises concerns about wild animal suffering. In recent years, there is growing concern about the fate of animals in nature and how we can decrease their suffering and increase their well-being with minimal environmental costs and risks (Dorado 2015).

Just as welfare biologists study ways to decrease welfare loss, conservation biologists study ways to decrease biodiversity loss. Ecosystems, however, are insentient; they do not care about biodiversity, whereas sentient animals do care about their welfare. In this sense, the justification for a science of welfare biology is stronger than the justification for a science of conservation biology.

If we strive towards a more rational ethics, free of bias, the importance of welfare biology will become clear and we will become more effective in reducing all kinds of suffering. Ng has made an important contribution to this effort.

References

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