



Animal welfare and animal rights: Ethics, science and explanations

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Introduction

Animal welfare has received a considerable amount of attention in recent years and remains an important issue in animal agriculture. But what is it? How we treat and care for animals? While it is true that the manner in which we treat animals does affect their welfare, animal welfare is not defined as the treatment an animal receives. Rather, animal welfare refers to how an animal is coping with its environment and living conditions. Animal welfare can vary from poor to good, along a continuum. This means that animal welfare is not absolute, but can vary and range along a scale. Animal welfare changes over time, and in some cases from moment to moment.

To understand what animal welfare is, it is helpful to examine some definitions. In 1986, Dr. Donald Broom defined animal welfare as the ability of an animal to cope with its environment and living conditions. Since then, organizations such as the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA, 2017) and World Organization for Animal Health (OIE, 2020) have incorporated this explanation into their definitions of animal welfare.

Most people who have a basic understanding of animal welfare are familiar with the Five Freedoms (1. Freedom from hunger and thirst. 2. Freedom from discomfort. 3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease.

4. Freedom to express normal behavior. 5. Freedom from fear and distress. (FAWC, 1979). The Five Freedoms is a framework that is central to animal welfare. The Five Freedoms were developed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in the United Kingdom, following the release of an investigation by the Brambell Committee into the conditions in which farm animals were kept. The Five Freedoms have been incorporated into definitions of animal welfare and continue to be widely used by organizations and people who formally evaluate or audit animal welfare. An explanation about animal welfare certification and auditing programs is provided in the Extension bulletin by Weimer et al. (2018).

Another important framework for explaining and evaluating animal welfare came from Drs. Fraser, Weary, Pajor and Milligan in 1997. They contended that animal welfare includes three important concepts: 1) an animal's feelings or emotions; also called affective state, 2) an animal's ability to perform natural behavior, and 3) an animal's health and biological functioning. These ideas have also been incorporated into the AVMA and OIE definitions of animal welfare.

Animal welfare is about how the animal is doing, and how the animal is perceiving its environment. How an animal perceives and reacts to its environment is not the easiest thing to measure. This is where animal welfare science comes in. To effectively evaluate or measure animal welfare, all three concepts (behavior, affective state and health and biological functioning) need to be considered. Animal welfare scientists can examine different aspects of the animal itself, using animal-based measures, and the animal's environment, using resource-based measures, to assess the animal's welfare. Resource-based measures (e.g., the number of drinkers or feeders available per animal) focus on how to design facilities and equipment for housing animals and are indirect measures of animal welfare (Whay and Main, 2009). Resource-based measures do not provide any information about how an animal is actually coping with its environment (Whay and Main, 2009). In contrast, an animal's ability to cope with its environment depends on several factors, including neural and brain mechanisms, and physiological and behavioral mechanisms. These mechanisms are animal-based

measures that can be studied, measured and quantified. Animal-based measures (e.g., behavior or body condition) assess animal welfare in terms of the consequences or outcome for the animal and directly measure the animal's actual welfare status (Whay and Main, 2009). Therefore, animal-based measures have become increasingly important in assessments and audits of animal welfare (Blokhuis et al., 2010).

Ethical views and animal welfare

Animal welfare is a contentious issue, partly because people's perceptions about animal welfare are driven by their ethical views. There are many different ethical views regarding the use of animals. Some ethical views are in opposition to each other, which explains why people may not agree about animal welfare. It is easy to see why animal welfare can be such a contentious issue. Most people have ethical views that are a combination of different views. For each ethical view, there is a range or a spectrum, with some people agreeing more strongly and others agreeing less strongly with a particular ethical view.

Below is a summary of some prominent ethical views regarding the use and treatment of animals. To find out what your ethical views are, you can create your own profile using the Animal Ethics Dilemma website (<http://aedilemma.net/home>). The website is a free learning tool that was created by Alison Hanlon, Trine Dich, Tina Hansen, Hillar Loor, Peter Sandøe and Anne Algiers.

Prominent ethical views regarding the use and treatment of animals

1. Animal Rights

Animal rights deals with moral rights, not legal rights. Legal rights are rights that are protected by law; moral rights are not necessarily protected by laws or regulations, but rather are governed by personal ethics and experience. According to the animal rights view, animals have inherent value and some things should not be done to animals, even if those things are beneficial to humans or other animals. Therefore, animals have certain moral rights, and those rights should be protected, no matter what. In its most extreme form, proponents

of the animal rights view argue that animals should have rights equal to those of humans. Some will seek to end the use of animals by humans for all purposes including meat, milk, eggs, transportation, entertainment, or even as pets. Two examples include the right to 1) not be used in scientific research because the animal cannot consent to participation and 2) to not be used for food production because the animal cannot consent to sharing of milk or eggs or to be slaughtered. Other animal rights advocates believe that animals have the right to be treated respectfully, but may still have roles in the human world.

2. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism deals with 1) the interests of those involved, which may include the animals being raised for food production and the humans consuming those products, and 2) the consequences of those actions. The utilitarian view weighs costs vs. benefits and examines how activities influence the welfare of all of those involved. In simple terms, utilitarians argue that it is justifiable for some activities that negatively affect the welfare of some animals to be done, if there is an overall increase in welfare for humans and/or animals. For example, some utilitarians may argue that it is morally acceptable to raise and slaughter animals for meat if the animals had a reasonably good life, were humanely and painlessly slaughtered and the welfare benefits to people who eat that meat outweighed costs to the welfare of the animals that were used for meat. If the animals lived a life in which their welfare was not (or minimally) negatively affected and they are humanely slaughtered, then that may justify the use of those animals for food because that food will increase the welfare of those consuming the food.



3. Contractarianism

Contractarianism asserts that people should act morally because it is in their own self-interest to do so; in other words, you will benefit if you act morally. According to the contractarian view, people enter into contracts or agreements with one another because both parties derive benefits from participating in the agreement. Therefore, people depend on each other's cooperation. Animals cannot make agreements or enter into contracts, but people should be concerned about how animals are treated because the animals may matter to other people who are part of the agreement or contract. For example, animals may matter if the animals are considered to be property of one of the people in the agreement, or if the animals are of some instrumental value to one of the people in the agreement. The contractarian view does not deal with the animals per se, but is concerned about the people who care about how the animals are treated.

4. Respect for nature

The respect for nature view is concerned about the loss or extinction of species. According to this view, animals are valuable because they are part of a species or a group, and the loss or extinction of a species is a concern. Some people who support the respect for nature view argue that species should be protected from alterations to their genes; in other words, humans should not be changing the genetics of animals, for example, through genetic manipulation, and species should be protected because they are valuable.

5. Contextual views

Contextual views about animal ethics group together several ethical positions. People who support contextual views argue that the other views, such as animal rights and utilitarianism, are too narrow and do not take into consideration that people have different relationships with different animals or that people have different feelings and emotions about different animals. Therefore, people have different obligations to animals depending on how they interact with some animals vs. others, or people treat animals differently depending on the emotional relationships they have with certain animals. For example, people have different responsibilities to their pets than they do to animals in the wild, because people have a different relationship with the animals in their care than with animals that they rarely, if ever, interact with.

The difference between animal welfare and animal rights

It is very easy to find information about animal welfare on the internet, but there is a lot of confusion about animal welfare. Often, what is perceived as animal welfare has more to do with animal rights, the ethical view that deals with how animals ought to be treated, whether animals should be used by humans, and under which circumstances animals should be used by humans. Animal welfare can be evaluated scientifically, whereas animal rights is an ethical view and cannot be evaluated in the same scientific sense. Animal welfare can be evaluated scientifically using animal-based and resource-based measures that include animal behavior, biology, physiology, and access to resources.

The importance of animal welfare

Animals are used for a variety of things. Why should society be concerned about their welfare in the first place? One argument is that humans have a moral obligation to care for animals because many domesticated animals and animals in captivity depend on humans for their survival. Humans have relied on animals (non-human animals) for survival and have used animals for different purposes for thousands of years. Today, animals continue to be bred and used for various purposes, such as food, fiber, medicine, research, companions, service animals and pets, to name a few. Many people will argue that it is only right that humans care for animals.

For animals that are used to produce food, animal welfare is linked with animal health and productivity, in some cases. If an animal's welfare is poor, the animal will not grow as well or produce as well. For example, an animal that is sick or injured is not going to grow at the same rate as a healthy animal. However, it is important to note that an animal that is productive and growing is not necessarily in a good state of welfare. Animals can continue to be productive and grow even if their welfare is poor. For example, laying hens have been selectively bred to be very efficient at producing eggs, and a hen will continue to lay an egg almost every day even if it is injured. Animals that are sick or injured can pose food safety risks. The disease can pose a risk to humans as other animals.



People's concern over animal welfare continues to increase. The increased interest in animal welfare in recent years is reflected in the number of laws that have been passed pertaining to animal agriculture. Since 2019, 12 U.S. states have passed some type of legislation or policy pertaining to farm animal housing; some examples are California (Proposition 2 of 2008) and Michigan (Public Act 117 of 2009). Along with the increase in animal welfare-related legislation, there has been an increase in the number of animal welfare organizations and certification and food labeling programs. The increase in legislation and certification programs has been driven, in part, by consumers' interest in, and concern for, animal welfare. Indeed, animal welfare is incorporated into the decisions that consumers make when they buy food products (Olynk, 2012). Concern for animal welfare differs depending on the species of animal being considered. For example, a recent study found that concern for animal welfare among U.S. residents is higher for dairy cattle than for turkeys and chickens (Bir et al., 2019). Concern for animal welfare depends on several factors, such as gender and whether people own pets, among other factors (Bir et al., 2019).

Today, animal welfare remains an important topic in animal agriculture, and it is important to understand what it means, so that people can make informed decisions when voting on legislation and buying products at the grocery store. The choices people make affect the animals, farmers producing the animal products, and consumers of animal products.

Sources

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