

ANIMALS – MORE THAN SENTIENCE: ETHICAL AND WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

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The welfare of animals, and especially the 'higher' animals, remains a serious concern. Welfare is difficult to promote if animal life itself has, globally, little intrinsic value, even though positive change in this regard is taking place. Humankind only regards animal life highly if species are endangered (and this is progress and a legitimate concern), but negative approaches will not change unless individual life is regarded as important.

In the western world, the impact of the Cartesian automata view on animals (the belief, following Descartes, that animals are non-conscious biological machines) is still substantial. This can be seen in animal rescue, which is written off as emotionalism and sentimentalism: most people do not think that there could be more than emotionalism in this activity. This can be changed by education if information on animal consciousness, with an emphasis on rationality, is forcefully disseminated. The picture outside a western context is even more disturbing: the killing (and eating) of bonobos and chimpanzees by people in tropical Africa unaware of the philosophy of Descartes, and the killing of orang-utans and other species in the Far East, imply other degrading instrumentalist world views on animals.

Sentience is an important and necessary condition for a change in outlook. It is, however, not a sufficient condition. Rational consciousness in animals may just do the trick! Firstly, because it is true: problem solving as well as deductive thinking have been confirmed by repeated experimental testing. Secondly, philosophy in conjunction with other sciences, in using tested insights on the brain-consciousness issue, could effect a global change in outlook. It could be less connected with emotionalism than with sentience – important as that is. Rationality is not an uncritical anthropomorphism. On the same basis of rationality, John Locke eventually succeeded in bringing the human rights movement to life. Why not in a new and fresh way?

Counter arguments that the ecosystem with its cycles of nature does not allow for the intrinsic value of higher animal life (eg elephant culling), are fundamentally flawed and to be demolished: in practical terms, a balance can be struck between legitimate concerns of ecotology (the view that measures to protect the ecosystem as a whole should have priority over the interests of individual animals) and the intrinsic value of animal life.