BOOK REVIEW


This book is a collection of 25 chapters by leading veterinarians, philosophers and animal scientists who contributed to an international conference entitled From Darwin to Dawkins: the Science and Implications of Animal Sentience, held in London in 2005. They are collected into four parts: Animal Sentience: evidence and interpretations; Ethics, Law and Science; Implications for Farming and Food Production; and Animal Sentience in International Policy. There is a comprehensive introduction and conclusion by the editors, which is invaluable given the varied nature of the contributions.

The contributions emphasise the role of animal sentience, or feelings, in determining how we should look after animals. Although there is some agreement that sentience is probably not the only criterion in determining animal management, nearly all the authors agree that it is an important factor. Tom Regan, however, advocates that rather than sentience being important, the more aware animals should be given the benefit of being ‘subjects of a life’, which gives them intrinsic value. He supports this by arguments that some humans, for instance infants and the mentally disabled have less feeling capacity than higher animals but far greater rights. This is supported by Andrew Lindsay, who believes that the recognition that animals have intrinsic value is a major advance in recent years.

In relation to this, there are many authors arguing that the physiological similarity between animal suffering and our own demands greater attention to their welfare. In the words of Jane Goodall, who wrote the first chapter of the book, ‘if we see that look with our eyes and feel it in our hearts, we have to jump in and try to help’. Several authors, including Goodall, suggest that the tardiness of scientific investigation may be holding up progress on animal welfare. In contrast to the mood of the last century, when anthropomorphism was scorned in favour of a reductionist science, leading American philosopher Marc Bekoff presents an impassioned plea for the use of anthropomorphism to understand animals in the absence of scientific data. I am sure this has its place, to help us understand basic responses of animals to different circumstances, but there is a grave danger that if taken to extreme we will infer animal capabilities that simply do not exist. This is particularly true for the higher level cognitive functions of animals, where mental processing is known to be at a qualitatively similar but quantitatively much lower level than in humans. Alternatively it is important to remember that we may underestimate the scale of animal suffering because of the inability of animals to comprehend their plight, an argument well made by Andrew Linzey. He comments that the plight of Terry Watts, whilst held hostage for five years, was reduced by his ability to construct novels in his head, a consolation not available to animals.

We must remember that the different biological function of animals ensures that their sensory capabilities are often very different to our own. Who has Sandoe’s argument that common sense should be used to augment science’s contribution in the understanding of animal welfare. An alternative and useful particular their timing, is vastly superior to most other mammals. Less contentious, perhaps, than the plea for advanced anthropomorphism, is Peter Sandoe’s argument that common sense should be used to augment science’s contribution in the understanding of animal welfare. An alternative and useful view comes from Steven Wise, who advocates a scale of autonomy based not just on sentience, but also on the ability to understand symbols, to communicate, to deceive, pretend and imitate, and to solve complex problems, as well as the level of consciousness of their own and other animals’ intentions.

These attempts to circumvent the normal processes of scientific investigation by creating rather arbitrary rules (anthropomorphism, commonsense and autonomy scales) to justify potentially radical changes in the management of animal systems are clearly a response to the growing demand for change from the general public. The trade response is presented by Keith Kenny of McDonald’s, who are trying to quiet public pressure through their own Animal Welfare Council, comprising many senior academics in the field of animal welfare science. Although Kenny argues that trade involvement is difficult because it is high up in the supply chain, the counterpoint that the trade buyers are few in number and highly influential is well made by Tim Lang. Several articles address the implications of agricultural globalization and intensification. Although the major concern surrounds the impact on the environment, Kate Rawles believes that the environmental challenge will require a complete rethinking of values, including compassion for animals, an attribute which, according to Andrew Lindsay, humans used to acquire through the scriptures. The intensification in developing countries, and the ensuing welfare problems, also bring concern that trade and long-distance transport of animals will increase as the European Union increases the scope of animal welfare legislation. The solution may be worldwide standards developed by the Office International des Epizooties (OIE), as described by David Bayvel in the only contribution from the Southern Hemisphere. In the developing countries, there is pressure on the World Bank to include animal welfare considerations in livestock development projects, and some comfort may be taken from Oliver Ryan of the World Bank Group that this will be done to limited degree in future.

The teaching of animal ethics to all those with responsibility for animals is considered important by Michael Reiss, in order to increase their knowledge about contentious animal issues and their sensitivity to animal suffering. This view is amplified by Linzey, who believes that all educators of students dealing with animals have a major role in revealing the extent of animal suffering. There is a reminder here for those educating veterinary students of their responsibility to familiarise the students with animal ethics issues that they may be confronted with.

This collection of articles is generally unanimous in calling for a greater recognition of animal sentience and hence suffering. Veterinarians who are interested in either the ethics of their practice on animals, or the growing impact of the world trade in animals and animal products, will find much of value in this book.

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