Animals can’t speak for themselves

Who determines what counts as proper animal welfare? There is a widespread expectation that science will deliver a decisive verdict in highly-charged social controversies; but are such expectations justified?

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Dr Karel de Greef
Dr Bram Bos

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“Animal welfare”, a term with a wide range of meanings

Whatever farmers, animal protection organisations, legislators, admen, consumers and animal scientists may say about animal welfare, it is no more than human interpretation. No human being can determine whether an animal is happy or not. People differ in their interpretation of what constitutes a good life for an animal.

For one person, this may mean being well looked-after, for another it may mean a natural environment, with all the associated risks. This is not to say that every opinion about animal welfare is of equal value. Animals are certainly not dumb. The sounds they make, their behaviour and their physiology provide signals we can use to investigate what they find pleasant and unpleasant.

Chronic stress and stereotypical behaviour are significant and measurable indicators of the quality of life of animals. We must consider whether we can use scientific investigation to determine whether animals are experiencing sufficient distress. It is not susceptible to scientific proof. No human being can place themselves in the position of an animal because we share significant human characteristics with animals. The animal feels very different in all kinds of circumstances.

All the same, there are those who will say that the mud bath is a precondition for proper welfare for pigs, because their species use mud baths in their natural environment. That is not a persuasive logical argument: our food animals do not live in nature; their life is different in all kinds of ways. It can, however, constitute a legitimate normative position: “the life of production animals should approximate their life in natural conditions”. But like any normative position, it is not susceptible to scientific proof.

Two perspectives on animal welfare

The differences in the interpretation of animal welfare have led to the Animal Sciences Group’s proposal to the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality that a distinction should be made between two perspectives on animal welfare:

A. Knowledge about and observations of animals: all forms of distress experienced by animals whose nature and existence we are able to establish and evidence scientifically.

B. Human perspectives on what animals deserve, and what may harm them. The Ministry asked the ASG to draw up a scientific overview of welfare problems in the animal husbandry sector, setting priorities for approaches to these problems. The ASG wished to draw a sharp distinction between these statements about animal welfare which can be supported scientifically and those which can not. The ASG further concluded that any conclusion about what constitutes proper animal welfare must be the result of social consensus. On the basis of the first perspective, the ASG have provided an evidence-based estimate of the degree to which our farm animals experience the environment as harmful. We have placed this under the heading of “distress”, in order to make a distinction with the broader concept of “animal welfare”. For this purpose, the ASG used data relating, for example, to the health condition of animals and their levels of anxiety, stress and deviant behaviour.

Many welfare problems in the animal husbandry sector in the Netherlands are associated with such distress, for example the consequences of a lack of movement, poor flooring, boredom and parasites. But what are we to say about welfare problems where it is not possible to establish the animal’s level of distress? How “wrong” is the killing of day-old chicks? How important is outdoor access for animals? How necessary is it to prevent short-lived painful interventions (like the castration of pigs)?

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A multi-level discussion

Questions like these suggest that the debate about animal welfare is taking place at multiple levels: what people think animals deserve, or what people feel may be harmful to animals, is equal in significance to scientific knowledge about animal suffering. Views about what is natural, matters of scale, standardisation, the intrinsic value and the integrity of animals, and our responsibility for animals have shaped to our own ends by breeding, all these count in forming our judgements about whether a particular welfare problem should be prioritised. This is separate from the question whether that problem is the most urgent for the animal itself, or whether it actually exists at all.

Human convictions about animal welfare arise partly from our implicit knowledge about animals, and partly from the way we have learned to justify these ideas (like the killing of day-old chicks). How important is outdoor access for animals? How necessary is it to prevent short-lived painful interventions (like the castration of pigs)?

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