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Jonathan Balcombe: 'Stop being beastly to hens'

Animal behaviour scientist Jonathan Balcombe says that our treatment of animals remains medieval despite a flood of studies shedding light on how they experience the world

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James Randerson The Observer, Saturday 24 April 2010 Jump to comments (13)



Jonathan Balcombe: 'Sentience is the bedrock of ethics.' Photograph: Katherine Rose

Chickens recognise human beauty, starlings can be pessimistic and elephants grieve for their fallen comrades: these are the perhaps surprising claims of Dr Jonathan Balcombe, an independent animal behaviour research scientist. In a new book, he argues that a flood of studies of species ranging from minnows to monkeys adds up to a revolution in our understanding of the way other animals experience the world. "Just 30 years ago, it was scientific heresy to ascribe such emotions as delight, boredom or joy to a non-human," he writes in *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals* (Palgrave Macmillan). "[But now] researchers have found that there is more thought and feeling in animals than humans have ever imagined."

For Balcombe, who was born in the UK and now lives on the east coast of the States, this new understanding leads to radical conclusions.

So the idea that chickens have an aesthetic sense, for instance... we should pay attention to this because it seems to have profound implications for the way in which we treat animals.

For much of the 20th century, it was taboo to ask questions about what animals think and what they feel. That's changed; now we have a spate of studies of phenomena that show that animals are, in all the important ways, sentient in the manner that we are. They may not lead the same sorts of lives that we have, but they feel pleasure and pain just as intensely. They have just as acute emotional experiences as we do – there are studies showing that there are real inner lives to these animals.

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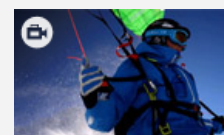
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What does this say about our relationship to animals? The paradox is that as our knowledge of animals increases, our treatment of them falls further behind because we still live according to a might-makes-right strategy, which is the kind of thinking that justified colonialism and slavery. Unfortunately, our treatment of animals remains pretty much medieval.

Could you clarify this point about sentience?

Sentience is the capacity for feeling things, usually pleasures and pains – but it's a very broad concept, ranging from grief to optimism, from positive to negative feelings. The key is that it's the bedrock of ethics: humans are moral beings, what the philosophers would call moral agents, who are able to make moral decisions, and sentience is what makes those moral systems. It's what makes a human life important – it's what makes murder, ultimately, a terrible crime. It's because you've deprived the individual of a future life. Given that animals are acutely sentient in the important ways – I'm not talking about building computers or reading books – we need to expand our moral circle to include them.

In a study titled "[Chickens prefer beautiful humans](#)", human faces were photographed and digitised, so they could be presented to undergraduates, who then rated them according to attractiveness. The male faces were rated by female students and vice versa. They came up with a gradation of the most and least attractive. Then chickens were presented with the same faces and strikingly, the chickens' preferences in binary choices, for whatever reason, showed a 98 per cent overlap with the humans' ratings.

It doesn't necessarily mean that the chickens found those faces more attractive – though that's what the authors seem to suggest. What meaning that has in a chicken's world I don't know. But what it does say to me is that they're very perceptive about cues and those perceptions are very similar to ours in terms of aesthetics.

In your book you write: "Why should chickens find us beautiful at all? Today in the US we kill and cause suffering to more chickens than there are human beings on the entire planet." Surely there's a danger of taking individual studies and over-interpreting them, reading too much into them. This particular study had six chickens in it: to go from the preferences they exhibited to an idea about beauty, isn't that a bit of a leap?

In the time it took you to ask that question, about 3,500 chickens were slaughtered in the US, so that gives an idea of the scale of the killing of these particular animals. Some biologists would call them the most successful animals on earth because there are so many of them now, but I would call them the least successful because the vast majority lead such short, miserable lives. If you look at it from a population outcome, it's a very different outcome than if you look at it as individuals, but it's individuals who are sentient.

But just because chickens rate humans in the same way as humans do in this particular study that doesn't mean their sentience is the same as ours, and I certainly wouldn't claim that. Although I wouldn't necessarily claim that they're less sensitive to the pain of a broken wing than we are to the pain of a broken arm: that can be debated. That is accessible to science. But what the study does say – and this is just one study of many – is that chickens have lives that matter. And this gets to the heart of some of the cognitive and emotional studies that I'm trying to bring to light: animals don't merely live in the moment. They have lives, moods and dispositions. They really have a welfare in the richest sense of the term. That means we have to look hard and reconsider the current relationship we have with them.

People tend to see faces in clouds or hear voices in draughty buildings; we're very good at anthropomorphising our surroundings. Whether what we now believe that animals experience is really the same thing as human emotions is a very open question, isn't it?

Here's an example of an emotional study that's based on rigorous science. It's [a study of the chacma baboon](#). These particular populations have been studied in Botswana for 30 years by the same scientists, so you have long-term observational and experimental studies with animals in their own milieu. It's known that for women who lose an infant, it's a terrible, traumatic, sad event. It's known that they grieve, naturally, and that grief is reflected physiologically by an increase of glucocorticoid



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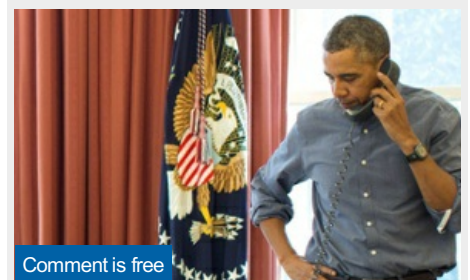
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hormones in their blood for a month or more. These baboons show a similar pattern of behaviour; if a baboon mother in the Okavango Delta in Botswana loses her baby, the scientists are able to measure the hormone levels in her blood in a very non-invasive way. They don't have to take a blood sample, they simply keep an eye out and when the female defecates they shout: "Oh, Lucy just shat, go get that!" and they analyse the faeces.

This shows that their glucocorticoid levels also go up for about a month. And the levels of their closest associates, of the female baboons which they relate to and have friendships with, also go up: there's an osmotic effect. Again in parallel with humans; humans rally round, support each other, increase our social networks. Baboons show a similar pattern. Females who have lost an infant will groom more during that month and receive more grooming. It's thought to be a form of therapy to help overcome the grief that presumably they're experiencing.

This is the challenge with emotions: they're private feelings – and that's why science did neglect these questions for a long time.

There are all sorts of nasty things that go on with predators catching prey, male lions killing the young when they join a new pride. Do animals have any kind of moral responsibility?

Absolutely. One of the frontiers of science is this study of virtue in animals: increasingly it's coming to light that animals have a moral awareness, or a moral consideration about how they behave. This is particularly the case with social animals, who've evolved to live in groups. Living in groups is full of compromise, you give and take and you want to sustain good relationships with others or you may be an outcast, and that's not in your self-interest – so one can make genetic arguments for the evolution of virtue and moral behaviour – certainly we manifest it in many ways.

A recent study of dogs shows they have what's called inequity aversion – that is to say a fairness awareness. If you have two dogs sitting next to each other, and you offer to shake their paws, and you only reward one of the dogs when they both shake paws, after about 10 or 12 trials the one who's not getting the treat will refuse to shake paws. Whereas the other one will continue happily to shake paws. In control experiments, when there's only one dog not getting any treats, he will continue shaking the paw much longer. So it's not just fatigue or frustration, there's an awareness that this is not correct – "He's getting rewarded for what he's doing and I'm not getting rewarded for doing the same thing."

Do plants have an intrinsic value?

Albert Schweitzer advocated an idea of "reverence for life". He coined that phrase in 1915 and I love it. It speaks to plants because plants are also living organisms. We could quibble about whether or not they're sentient, although most scientists would say they're not. But even if they aren't sentient, we should respect them and that relates to the broader issues of our relationship to animals.

People often ask me as a vegetarian – a vegan in fact – "What about plants? If you're a vegetarian, you're consuming plants!" But if you're a meat-eater you're indirectly consuming many more plants, because you're higher on the food chain and cows have to eat plants to make muscle. Being a vegetarian is a more plant-friendly way of life anyway. I believe in respecting all life – I don't want to see trees uprooted any more than I want to see cows slaughtered, but there is a moral difference because cows are sentient and a plant is not.

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mothmoth

25 April 2010 12:39pm

6

News item I waited 50 years to read.

Much appreciated and can we look forward to the prompt closure of factory farms and crowded zoos and livestock markets worldwide, the end of it being legal to gain commercially from same, and a complete review of all so called bloodsports and hunting practices?

Can we look forward to the involvement of vets and everyone who teaches them at college, to end collusion with cruelty and emerge on the side of the animal like this good man? Can we have genuine welfare-friendly meat, eggs and dairy in our diets, or is veganism the only logical outcome of what he's discussed?

Report



archipet

25 April 2010 1:09pm

2

This excellent article explores the basis for codes of ethics and morality that are rooted in rationality and reason rather than supernatural faith and belief. As a student of psychology in the 1980s, I disliked the behavioural approach that saw animals as black boxes interposed between stimulus and response. I look forward to reading this book and learning more about the inside of the box.

[Amanda Geffer](#) reviewed another new book on rational morality in last week's New Scientist; Paul Thagard's, "The Brain and the Meaning of Life". From Geffer's review, I understand that Thagard sees morality as a component in the the evolution of animal brain structure. If that is correct, these two books should complement one another very nicely.

Report



Wolfbone

25 April 2010 1:30pm

2

Chickens recognise human beauty, starlings can be pessimistic and elephants grieve for their fallen comrades: these are the perhaps surprising claims...

What's surprising to me is the perverse assumption. held even by some otherwise

...that's surprising to me is the pervasive assumption, made even by some extremely intelligent scientists until recently apparently, that all other animals - even chimps? FFS! - are so different that they do not have feelings etc. Well... not really surprising, I suppose... :(

Report



wanderingone

25 April 2010 8:22pm

0

The key is that it's the bedrock of ethics: humans are moral beings, what the philosophers would call moral agents, who are able to make moral decisions, and sentience is what makes those moral systems. It's what makes a human life important ? it's what makes murder, ultimately, a terrible crime. It's because you've deprived the individual of a future life.

The sentiment expressed by this sloppy statement only makes sense on the assumption of some form of utilitarian ethic. Utilitarianism is popular in part due to the ease of quantifying such terms as 'future life', which thus fit within an economic calculus that can drive public policy (e.g., as seen in health care). Utilitarianism is not the only moral system, though, much less an uncontroversial 'bedrock of ethics'. Do you really want to maintain that the murder of a 90 year old (with few future years of pleasure) is better than the murder of a 40 year old, or that persons with *psychologically* painful conditions should be killed because they are suffering just as we euthanize animals to alleviate their suffering? Would you be happy to defend the right to life of human fetuses who, after some point of development (20 weeks?), probably have sentience comparable to some animals that you would protect on account of their sentience? There are other arguments for better treatment of animals, but... long story short: please leave ethics to the philosophers. Scientists can investigate animal behaviour, but that only tells us what *is* the case, not what *ought* to be, which arguably is the properly ethical question to be handled by ethicists, not scientists (nor religious leaders).

Report



Viridis

25 April 2010 9:51pm

6

Anybody with a dog could tell you that animals are clearly sentient. They are, however, different from chickens in that chickens prefer beautiful humans whereas my dog prefers humans with cheese, sausages and the like.

Report



RobCampbell

25 April 2010 11:16pm

1

I have chickens and they prefer humans with pasta or bagels. They probably wouldn't say no to cheese and sausages either. I've trained them to come when I whistle—they now know that whistling means something tasty.

Report



Borte

26 April 2010 5:46am

7

I've been telling people this stuff since I was six! It's great that there's new research, but shame on us for needing 'proof' that animals have meaningful experiences when it's always been there. I hope it will encourage people not to treat other beings as 'production units'.

Report



ringtaillemur

26 April 2010 1:00pm

3

Battery farming really ought to be a thing of the past. We have progressed so far in other places, but are still lagging behind here.

If you've ever watched apes in a zoo what is so striking is how human they are. You could put a juvenile orangutan and a juvenile human together and they would probably interact like they were members of the same species.

Report



maradonut86

26 April 2010 3:17pm

6

On the whole, for humans, life is convenience store, fast food gallery, etc. Human ethics are a sham. This is the species that still practices slavery in various forms against its own species, (we call it globalism), and blabbers endlessly about morals and selfless service. Knowing of the sensitivity and intelligence of species it exploits, tortures or exterminates means damn near nothing to most people. (aren't about only 1% of the world's humans vegan?) The only time the typical human feels strongly about anything is when they are either being emotionally manipulated by a Steven Spielberg movie or in opposition to Obama (etc) for some unknowable and unintelligible resentment. The fact is that the human population has more than tripled from 1900 to 2000. They all want to live like Americans, eat like Americans, worry about being too fat and not being able to buy the latest electronic garbage made in China. Their ethics are limited by their hearts and minds, which is obese and imploding all at the same time. The whole world is becoming a huge Idiocracy. There

improving and at the same time, the whole world is becoming a huge laboratory. There is no hope. There's too many of them and they are, collectively, a lot of murdering, torturing ravenous apes. I call them hitler-chimps. The ape that talks incessantly about inherent virtue, yet is all about necrophilia and extermination. Sound familiar? This ape, the hitler-chimp, also purports to be made in god's image, god being an elderly white man in a dress. This is terrifying to me on a number of fronts. In any case, that the factory farming system so accurately replicates the nazi extermination system should be no surprise. It is a human endeavor, one of heartless, monstrous, efficient cruelty, based on a hierarchy of species. (They now factory farm dogs in China too, so it's a multicultural monstrosity too. I'm sure that helps assure concerned that the benefits of modernity haven't graced all nations.) The hitler-chimps are a narcissistically bloated species, hellbent of the death of all it can influence. Beware and watch the death of the world unfold in under a dozen mechanized generations.

Report



TerriOrange

27 April 2010 9:35am

0

My family keep a few hens for their eggs. We have more than enough to feed them on a bit of corn and our food scraps- it's amazing how much hen-edible waste a small family can produce while preparing meals.

Having a regular supply of eggs means we eat less meat and get a good portion of protein, I've lowered my intake of meat without even noticing. Small-scale farming is a small, accessible rebellion against the mass producers of factory animal products.

Report



booler

27 April 2010 1:42pm

0

@wanderingone : I fail to see why the paragraph you posted leads unavoidably to a utilitarian view of ethics. The statement, as far as I can see, reduces to 'sentience is a necessary condition for morals and ethical systems'. I would be interested to know how you reached this conclusion.

Report



Affirmative

27 April 2010 4:56pm

2

Jonathan Balcombe

animals don't merely live in the moment. They have lives, moods and dispositions. **They really have a welfare in the richest sense of the term.** That means we have to look hard and reconsider the current relationship we have with them.

This research is steadily growing, more than suggesting improved standards of welfare are required in our dealings/management of these animal groups, in contact with humans.

One thing that immediately comes to mind, pet owners can become informed ([www](#)) on how best to provide **habitat enrichment** for their pets and provide routines that elevate their pet's **welfare** (as defined above).

Greater effort involved but

Albert Schweitzer advocated an idea of "reverence for life".

is surely an axiom to live by?

Report



Ren55

29 April 2010 11:17pm

1

Wanderingone: "...please leave ethics to the philosophers. Scientists can investigate animal behaviour, but that only tells us what is the case, not what ought to be, which arguably is the properly ethical question to be handled by ethicists, not scientists (nor religious leaders)."

I disagree with this point, i believe that ethics and science often (and should!!!) go hand in hand. In the past the ancient philosophers came up with their ideas just by scratching their beards and pondering on aspects of life such as human nature. Descartes, for example, sat in his house and came up with the idea that animals are nothing more than 'biological machines' incapable of conscious thought (let alone sentience!). Descartes did not test this theory, he just reasoned in his mind that it must be so.

In modern times we can test philosophical questions like the sentience of non-human species with scientific trials which can give hard evidence to back up the original ethical theory.

Oh and i agree with Viridis... anyone who has owned an animal can tell you that they are definately sentient! to me its just common sense!!

Report



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