



## Methodological and Ideological Options

## Animal Welfare and Social Decisions: Is It Time to Take Bentham Seriously?

Olof Johansson-Stenman<sup>1</sup>

Department of Economics, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Box 640, SE, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes and questions the standard welfare economics assumption of *anthropocentric welfarism*, i.e., that only human well-being counts intrinsically. Alternatives where also animal welfare matters intrinsically are analyzed both theoretically and empirically. The general public's ethical preferences are measured through a survey of a representative sample in Sweden, and the responses from a clear majority suggest that animal welfare should indeed carry intrinsic weight in public decision making. Current legislation in many countries is consistent with this. A brief review of moral philosophy on animal welfare indicates that a large majority of philosophers believe that animal welfare should count intrinsically. It is moreover demonstrated that it is theoretically and practically possible to generalize welfare economics in order to give intrinsic value also to animal welfare. The paper concludes that there are strong reasons to (sometimes) generalize welfare economics in order to take animal welfare into account directly, i.e., in addition to effects through individual utilities. The practical implications of doing so are likely to be more important over time as the scientific methods of measuring animal welfare are gradually improving.

“Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. The end is man. [...] Our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity.”

Immanuel Kant (1963 [1780])

“The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. [...] The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?”

Jeremy Bentham (1996 [1789], Chapter 17, Footnote b)

## 1. Introduction

As suggested by Samuelson (1938), welfare evaluations in economics are typically based on revealed preference methodology, implicitly assuming that people choose what is in some sense best for themselves. However, Kahneman et al. (1997) argue in an influential

paper that since psychological research has identified large and systematic decision errors, normative economic theory should be based on the hedonic measure *experienced utility*, as in Bentham's usage, rather than *decision utility* as revealed by people's choices. Since the publishing of Kahneman et al.'s paper, a literature on paternalistic interventions has evolved, where people when analyzing appropriate regulations and laws are essentially protected from their own limited self-control and/or cognitive ability.<sup>2</sup>

The present paper suggests another, but related, potential reason to take Bentham seriously, namely the issue of whether we should devote intrinsic concern for animal suffering (or welfare more generally) in public decision making.<sup>3</sup> Here too, revealed preference methodology is insufficient, mainly for two reasons: First, animal suffering is a non-market good (or bad). Hence, since there is no market, it is hard to reveal people's preferences for such issues. While some people are willing to pay an additional price for a good that is associated with less animal suffering, i.e., a price premium that is possible to estimate (see, e.g., Chilton et al., 2006; Chang et al., 2010; Norwood and Lusk, 2011a, 2011b; Vander Naald and Cameron, 2011), some people also seem to value animal well-being beyond what is associated with their own

E-mail address: [Olof.Johansson@economics.gu.se](mailto:Olof.Johansson@economics.gu.se).

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Gruber and Köszegi (2001), Camerer et al. (2003), O'Donoghue and Rabin (2006), and Thaler and Sunstein (2008); yet see also Bernheim and Rangel (2007, 2009) and Sugden (2004, 2009) for choice- or opportunity-based approaches when people do not have coherent preferences.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, biologically speaking also humans are animals. What is written here about animal welfare and animal suffering should thus be interpreted as *non-human* animal welfare and suffering.

consumption choices. For example, I may value that also the animals associated with your consumption choices are treated reasonably well, and vice versa. Second, people may choose, or prefer the government to choose, based on other ends than their own well-being. For example, in a governmental choice between policies A and B, where A implies greater well-being for all humans (taking into account indirect effects of animals' well-being on humans' well-being) and B implies greater well-being for animals, it is possible that some people would like the government to choose policy B.

Conventional welfare economics is based on what Sen (1970, 1979) denotes *welfarism*, i.e., that social welfare depends solely on utility or well-being, as well as *anthropocentrism*, meaning that it is only human utility or well-being that counts intrinsically. Both of these assumptions, and the latter in particular, are so commonly made that they are usually not even mentioned in the literature, including in advanced and extensive textbooks in microeconomic and environmental economics such as Mas-Colell et al. (1995) and Hanley et al. (1997). It is of course still possible that people are willing to pay for reduced animal suffering and for improved environmental quality (and for public goods in general) to the extent that their utility is affected by such changes. However, social welfare is then only affected *instrumentally* and not *intrinsically*. Although such an anthropocentric view dominates in welfare economics, it is thus rarely expressed clearly in plain English. Baxter (1974) is an exception:

Penguins are important because people enjoy seeing them walk about rocks; and furthermore, the well-being of people would be less impaired by halting use of DDT than by giving up penguins. In short, my observations about environmental problems will be people-oriented, as are my criteria. I have no interest in preserving penguins for their own sake.

(Baxter, 1974, p. 5)

This quote makes clear that Baxter holds purely anthropocentric values, yet it does of course not follow that most people would agree.

The fundamental question that the present paper asks, and tries to answer, is this: *Is there reason to relax the anthropocentric assumption in economics, and hence to allow for incorporating non-anthropocentric ethical assumptions?* This question is important for at least three reasons: (1) The size of the animal-based food sector is large, and the treatment of animals in that sector is important for food prices; it is consequently important to be able to analyze optimal regulations with respect to animal treatments in an adequate way. (2) An increasing number of people appear to be concerned about animal welfare and rights issues. (3) The motives behind current legislation are often expressed in clearly non-anthropocentric terms.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly discusses whether we can measure animal welfare at all, because if we cannot, it may not matter much whether we in principal think we should take such concerns into account. It is concluded that there are indeed scientifically established measures of animal welfare. Although such measuring is typically more difficult than measuring human welfare, it is certainly not impossible, and available measurement methods are likely to improve over time. Section 3 discusses whether we can model animal welfare in a social welfare function framework and demonstrates how such a framework can indeed be enriched with animal welfare concerns. More specifically, it shows how the crucial concept of Pareto efficiency as well as monetary welfare measures in terms of private and social willingness to pay are modified in a world where animal welfare is taken into account intrinsically, i.e., valued beyond human well-being. Section 4 discusses briefly how animal well-being has been handled in moral philosophy over time, as well as at present. It concludes that, although there is substantial heterogeneity, in most approaches at least some weight is given to animal welfare beyond indirect effects through human well-being. Section 5 concerns people's view on these matters and starts off by reflecting on current legislation as well as engagement in animal rights organizations. It then presents

the result of a Swedish survey, where a representative sample of Swedes were explicitly asked about the extent to which they believe animal suffering should count, per suffering unit, compared with the same amount of human suffering. It is found that a clear majority is of the opinion that animal welfare should indeed carry intrinsic weight in public decision making. Section 6 concludes that, in light of the findings here, it is problematic to maintain the view that welfare economics should always be based exclusively on the well-being of humans.

## 2. Can We Measure Animal Welfare?

Before proceeding, it is useful to reflect on the measurability of animal welfare. After all, if we cannot measure it in any reasonable way, it will not make much sense to include it in economic welfare analysis. When reflecting on this, it should immediately be obvious that it is not possible to measure animal welfare very accurately. Indeed, we can hardly conclude that it is possible to measure *human* welfare, including interpersonal comparisons, very accurately, and measuring *animal* welfare is of course even more difficult, e.g., since it is much harder to communicate with animals. Yet, this does not mean that it is impossible to measure animal welfare. In fact, there exist accepted measures based for example on physiology (e.g., immune function and hormonal status) and observed behavior; see, e.g., Dawkins (2006, 2008), Mellor (2009) and Mench (forthcoming) for overviews of issues related to scientific measurements of animal welfare. However, some insist that we, at a deeper and more fundamental level, cannot really know that animals experience pain. Singer's (1993, p. 69) response to such doubts is:

We can never directly experience the pain of another being, whether that being is human or not. When I see my daughter fall and scrape her knee, I know that she feels pain because of the way she behaves—she cries, she tells me her knee hurts, she rubs the sore spot, and so on. I know that I myself behave in a somewhat similar—if more inhibited—way when I feel pain, and so I accept that my daughter feels something like what I feel when I scrape my knee. The basis of my belief that animals can feel pain is similar...

Overall, hardly anyone in the scientific community denies that animals do feel pleasure and pain in the ways we normally think of these words. Moreover, animal welfare is now an established scientific discipline with established journals such as *Animal Welfare* and *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*; see, e.g., Coelho et al. (2016) and Grist et al. (2017).

What about the comparison of the capacity to feel pleasure and pain among different species? Here most existing literature seems to suggest that “higher animals” are likely to suffer more from similar treatments than animals with less complex nervous systems. For example, it is reasonable to expect that killing an ant will cause much less suffering than killing a cow in a similar way. Yet, comparing the suffering capacity among more advanced animals is less straightforward. For example, Richard Dawkins has argued that our likely initial conjecture that there is a positive correlation between such a capacity and intellectual capacity may be wrong:

I can see a Darwinian reason why there might even be a *negative* correlation between intellect and susceptibility to pain. I approach this by asking what, in the Darwinian sense, pain is for. It is a warning not to repeat actions that tend to cause bodily harm. Don't stub your toe again, don't tease a snake or sit on a hornet, don't pick up embers however prettily they glow, be careful not to bite your tongue. [...] Isn't it plausible that a clever species such as our own might need *less* pain, precisely because we are capable of intelligently working out what is good for us, and what damaging events we should avoid? Isn't it plausible that an unintelligent species might need a massive wallop of pain, to drive home a lesson that we can learn with less powerful inducement? At very least, I

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