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Abnormal Behavior as an Indication of Immaterial Suffering

Hans Hinrich Sambraus

I do not believe that I am the only one who has occasionally been satisfied to take three steps forward and two steps back. Despite the setback, "progress" of one step has been made. At present, the task of animal welfare seems to me to be the preservation of that small bit of progress. In the animal welfare laws of various countries that have come into force in the last few years, terms like "appropriate conditions" and "species-specific activity requirements" have appeared. (These are the three steps forward.) Only the ethologist can determine what they mean in specific cases. But many ethologists who have never concerned themselves with animal welfare problems also feel called upon to voice their opinions. Because the necessary competence is lacking, the resulting judgments are often very curious. Recently a prominent ethologist felt obliged to contribute seven theses to the animal welfare problem. Only a few excerpts will be quoted here (They constitute the two steps back.):

"The animal welfare law that insures the safety and well-being of animals does not protect the animal's legitimate interests, which we cannot even identify..."

"The goal of animal welfare laws is not the well-being of all animals, but rather the education of man with respect to humanity... Cruelty to animals is forbidden only so that we will not become innured to it and be cruel to other people."

Is it really true that we cannot say anything about the pain and suffering of animals? And if we do say something about it, is it only speculation, or in any case not objectively measurable?

I believe that much more than this can be said about the problem. Pain and suffering are feelings, and feelings as such cannot be ascertained by scientific/theoretical means. This is not only true for our judgments concerning the feelings of animals, but also for our judgments concerning the feelings of other people. One could argue that man has language, and hence sufficient possibility to communicate. But we can also simulate pain and suffering or avoid talking about that pain and suffering which we feel. Deceptive behavior therefore leaves room for error in human judgment. But let us also consider preverbal children, the mentally retarded or people whose language we do not understand. In these cases we can recognize pain and suffering from certain symptoms. Some of these in humans include the following: crying; clenched teeth; unusual movements (physical contortions); protection of wounded area; direction of attention to painful spot (looking at, touching); and breaking out in sweat. The same symptoms can also be witnessed in animals in corresponding situations. When a person confirms pain or suffering in another person or in animals, it is done only through reasoning by analogy. We ourselves know how it is to experience pain or to suffer, and also know our corresponding expressions. When we see the same symptoms in animals or other people, we can conclude that they are feeling approximately the same things that are familiar to us from our own experiences.

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Many scientists question the legitimacy of analogous reasoning with respect to animals. The argument is founded on the attitude that humans and animals are basically different. But this is surely an outdated concept. There is constant confirmation and widespread agreement in the fields of morphology, histology and physiology that the differences between humans and "higher" vertebrate animals are slight. The same holds true for behavioral patterns. The pharmaceutical industry tests drugs intended for use on humans (including psychopharmacologicals) on animals first. In the field of psychology one has arrived at much basic knowledge about the human psyche through research on animals. These procedures are only permissible and meaningful if analogies exist.

I do not want to exclude the possibility that one occasionally arrives at false interpretations when making judgments about pain and suffering in animals. But where in the field of biology does one completely avoid error? Scientists attempt to proceed as carefully as possible in their experiments, finally dealing with their findings statistically. It is possible that the results arrived at are significant, in which case one acts as though the facts had been definitely explained. But this is seldom the case. A certain probability of error is always present. Why should we apply more stringent standards to questions concerning an animal's reaction to fear, suffering or lack of well-being?

To this point I have spoken of pain and suffering. It is not generally doubted that animals can experience pain although no one can objectively prove it. The case in which symptoms of pain are registered while corresponding feelings of pain are denied is certainly an exception. If an animal had just broken its leg, only a very few people would fail to notice more than the fact that it cries, tends its leg and tries to run away. Later one would ascertain a dull look, loss of appetite and lack of bodily care. Every well-meaning person would conclude from these symptoms that the animal is in pain and see to it that it is cared for so that the pain will pass. In this respect the evaluation of "technopathies" is relatively simple. These are considered to be diseases or disorders which are the result of poor husbandry. One could therefore pass legal guidelines as quickly as possible permitting only those systems of animal husbandry which cause the slightest amount of technopathies.

But there is also suffering that is not morphologically or physiologically ascertainable. This "immaterial" suffering is considered only fleetingly, if at all, in questions of animal welfare. It is true, for instance, that German and Swiss animal welfare laws call for species-specific diet and care as well as appropriate shelter, and state that the activity requirements (*Bewegungsbedürfnisse*) may not be limited so as to cause suffering. These laws show a basic recognition of immaterial suffering as suffering which arises from an animal's inability to do something in its natural behavioral repertoire. The difficulty is that there is nothing obviously clinically identifiable about this kind of suffering — and only this kind of measure seems to count. Lorenz also regretted this insufficiency: "The heresy exists in the opinion that the real has existence only as that which can be expressed in exact, scientific terminology and mathematically quantified. In so doing one explains away the emotional as unreal illusion." It in no way suffices that scientists committed to animal welfare are convinced that immaterial suffering exists. The ethological signs of immaterial suffering must be made clear for others as well if animal welfare is to continue its progress.

Reactive abnormal behavior is the convincing proof of immaterial suffering for the ethologist. We consider abnormal that behavior which does not correspond to,

or is without object, which appears with sharply increased or decreased frequency, or which is abnormal in its motor pattern. Moreover, much reactive abnormal behavior manifests itself in stereotypies, *i.e.*, the movement is repeated continuously in the same way. Among wild animals and in traditional forms of animal production abnormal behavior is unknown. However, it is encountered often in animals in intensive husbandry systems, and it can be demonstrated that abnormal behavior is actually brought about by conditions of husbandry. It first appears when animals are transferred from good to poor conditions of husbandry. When the conditions are improved the abnormality declines. Often, however, it remains to some extent for a prolonged period even after conditions have been improved. Abnormal behavior is then characterized as residual-reactive. The obstinacy with which the abnormality remains is a further indication that the animal is highly neurotic.

Abnormal behavior appears frequently in two areas: feeding and locomotion. Search for fodder, fodder intake, mastication and swallowing of food all belong to feeding behavior. Abnormality can appear in each of these stages, be it empty chewing or bar-biting in sows (Fig. 1), cannibalism in fattening pigs, tongue rolling in cattle, sucking wind in horses or feather pecking in poultry. All these behaviors show that the animal is frustrated. Similar to the above are "weaving" and mouth movements which appear in numerous species. These are stereotypies of locomotion in animals that want to move forward but are prevented by confinement from doing so.



Figure 1
Sow biting the bar
of her box stall.

Some abnormal behavior is prevented through force. Tongue-rolling cattle receive a ring in the frenulum under the tongue which causes pain, resulting in reduction of the abnormal activity. The muscles of the pharynx are severed in horses to prevent them from sucking wind. Intervention of this sort is unsatisfactory from the ethologist's point of view. It eliminates the symptom only; the cause of the ailment remains. The animal has the right to an alteration in the conditions that provoke abnormal behavior. In some cases a prevented abnormality is replaced by another. The conditions of husbandry for fattening pigs are generally so poor that cannibalism is almost unavoidable. That is why the piglet's tail is docked. Economic losses are thus prevented, but not the active animal's tendency to bite. A frequent result is that the pigs begin biting the joints, ears or vaginas of animals in neighboring stalls. In some cases the tendency to bite and root up leads to anal massage of other pigs (Fig. 2). This results in a bloody, inflamed anus of the affected pig, which loses its appetite and does not grow in the desired manner. Economic losses still occur although abnormal behavior, namely tail biting, has been prevented. It is a mistake to believe that only the animal whose tail is bitten suffers; the active animal also suffers.

As early as 1968 M. Fox wrote a book entitled *Abnormal Behavior in Animals*. In spite of this valuable and highly respected work we still know very little of the relevance of abnormal behavior to animal welfare. Animal welfare means helping suffering animals. But we can only help them if we know exactly when they are suffering. Abnormal behavior is a key to recognizing suffering in animals. We still have a long way to go before we can more closely describe and understand the significance of all abnormal behavior. We have still a longer way to go to convince producers and legislators that conditions of animal husbandry leading to immaterial suffering too must be changed.



Figure 2 Anal massage of a fattening pig kept under poor housing conditions.