# What's the common sense of just some improvement of some welfare for some animals?
Commentary on Ng on *Animal Suffering*

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**Abstract:** The goal of Animal Welfare Science to reduce animal suffering is commendable but too modest: Suffering animals need and deserve far more.

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The recommendations of Ng (2016) are unfortunately representative of what has become the tragic flaw of Animal Welfare Science (AWS) (Broom 2011, 2016; Dawkins 2006). The scientific position of AWS has been to acknowledge, on the one hand, the physiological and cognitive needs and capacities of non-human animals (including their capacity for pain, suffering, frustration, and even happiness), but, on the other hand, to limit the bearing of this acknowledgment on animals and situations where the "science is not yet in."

For example, Ng states that "it is difficult to establish with certainty that any individual animal or species is capable of feeling and hence that their welfare is a matter of concern." Although he immediately goes on to state that "this difficulty must not be over-emphasized" and that the "feelings and, hence welfare needs, of all mammals, if not all vertebrates" have been "established in the recent field of affective neuroscience," he uses the argument of "lack of knowledge" to draw an unwarranted distinction between farmed and wild animals. Ng states that because we have "less knowledge of them and less influence over" wild animals, we should limit our attempts to care for wildlife, and instead our practical duty of care should focus on farmed animals.

Moreover, Ng attempts to deal with the "world knot" of consciousness by arguing that behavioral flexibility is an evolutionary indicator of a species' capacity to feel. This approach is problematic, as it immediately sets up to exclude certain species: We may fail to observe the relevant behavioral flexibility because of limits in our methodology, which may be insensitive to species differences in the nature and degree of behavioral flexibility. We must nevertheless ask

ourselves: Would we be surprised to learn yet again that, with the proper methodology, yet another species has the capacity for complex cognitive processing, for feeling?

Ng is right to urge that common sense can "reduce animal suffering," but not in the ways he suggests. Knowing that a dog would suffer from confinement or would experience joy from basking in the sun, should we then be surprised "to learn" that a pig or mouse or tortoise would do so as well? Should we be surprised to "learn" that a fish can feel pain — and should we be waiting to try to "prove" it before we stop hurting them (see commentaries on Key 2016)?

Ng is advocating practical ways to reduce the harm done to a great number of animals under our care and management. Housing, handling, invasiveness, method of killing, etc. are indeed very real concerns for (but not limited to) farmed, laboratory, and other captive animals. However, how do we best stand to improve the lives of animals? Do we just continue at a level where we ask whether 10 cm of extra space may make a positive difference or do we admit and confront what we all know to be true: that animals do not want to be confined at all and that the suffering we inflict on them goes far beyond the bounds of either doubt or necessity – or the scope of incremental improvements in their welfare?

We should be advancing beyond an approach that has come to focus only on mitigating inhumane extremes under conditions in which animals maintain little agency. We should be moving toward a "science of animal well-being" that has as its first principle that nonhuman animals have an interest in the outcomes in their lives, just as we do. As in human research on well-being, a science devoted to the well-being of animals should be asking "what makes life worth living?" (Franks & Higgins 2012).

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