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Animal suffering calls for more than a bigger cage

Commentary on [Ng](#) on *Animal Suffering*

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Abstract: Ng (2016) argues for incremental welfare biology partly because it would be impossible to demonstrate conclusively that animals are sentient. He argues that low-cost changes in industrial practices and working collaboratively may be more effective in advancing animal welfare than more adversarial approaches. There is merit in some of Ng's recommendations but a number of his arguments are, in my view, misdirected. The fact that nonhuman animals feel has already been adequately demonstrated. Cruelty to animals is intrinsic to some industries, so the only way to oppose it is to oppose the industry.

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Professor Ng's (2016) target article has two separate – almost stand-alone – components. The first is his section on “Welfare Biology vs. the World Knot,” which centres on whether animals are conscious and capable of suffering. Ng concludes that animals are indeed capable of suffering, which leads him in the second half of his article to suggest ways in which their suffering can be minimised. Here he argues that animal suffering can be reduced through low-cost, common sense approaches, working collaboratively with industry, and with animal advocates gradually gaining more influence.

In my judgement the first section of Ng's article still expresses uncertainty about a premise – that animals feel – that has by now been recognised as true by almost everyone. A weakness in Ng's second section is that Ng does not seem to realise how inseparable nonhuman animal suffering is from the nature and product of certain industries. There are other elements of Ng's argument that I struggle with; but none of this is to deny that adopting a co-operative stance has sometimes achieved some results and will continue to do so in the future.

Ng's Welfare Biology vs. the World Knot

Discussions centring on the World Knot (consciousness) are not for the faint-hearted; this is the least accessible component of Ng's target article. Although Ng seems to dismiss the idea that the concept of consciousness will be understood any time soon, he does suggest that if a species is capable of acting flexibly, then it is capable of feeling, hence of suffering and

enjoyment. He states that the only certainty of feeling is what we as individuals experience, and that we cannot extend this certainty even to our spouses. (I like this observation.)

But to my mind the argument about whether nonhuman animals feel is already won, as summarised, for example, among scientists, in the *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* (Low et al. 2012). As expressed for laymen in the words of the Andrew Linzey (2011) of the [Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics](#): “scientific data demonstrate that all mammals, at least, experience not just physical pain, but also mental suffering, including fear, foreboding, shock, trauma, stress, distress, anticipation, and terror – all states previously regarded as exclusive to human beings.” Versions of this position have been held by scientists and philosophers, from Darwin to Bentham. It is puzzling that we still need to justify this today. According to Rollin (2007), questioning whether nonhuman animals possess minds and consciousness only came about because of a change in values and not through any scientific justification. In addition, although I am not sure whether Ng had this in mind, the insight he offers in referring to the inscrutability of his spouse is that if within our own species it cannot be known with certainty whether and what someone else is feeling, then we could argue that the situation with animals is quite comparable: Yet we do not allow industry to cause our spouses to suffer, nor merely to diminish their suffering incrementally as long as it involves no additional cost to industry.

Ways of reducing animal suffering

The principle that policy makers should ban mild to deplorable cruelty is unassailable. But Ng’s point about increasing the minimum cage size for factory-farmed chickens suggests that he does not fathom the depth of the problem. For several years now I have kept ex-battery chickens; I have not noticed any difference in the condition of “rescued” hens since battery cages were replaced by so called “enriched” cages in 2012. Owing to the stress of their earlier lives, mortality is very high – few rescued chickens live for even a year after release, whereas a chicken’s natural lifespan is [15 years or more](#). And well before that, all male chicks are either gassed or “macerated” irrespective of whether they are free-range or not. It is nearly futile to rescue broiler chickens because soon after release they invariably die from heart failure. (This is no problem for the industry, as these unfortunate creatures are routinely slaughtered when they are between 5 and 7 weeks of age.) In other words, as Berkman (2012: 135) argues, “cruelty is not a mere evil side effect or by-product ... cruelty is ... an essential and necessary part of the logic of factory farming.” To eradicate suffering in the poultry industry requires the elimination of the industry itself.

In addition to seeming unaware that all animal farming inescapably entails animal suffering, Ng suggests that to improve animal welfare we should focus first on farm animals and not on wild animals and their suffering and destruction from habitat encroachment. When Ng writes “it may be wise to leave most measures on [wild animals’] behalf to the future,” the obvious retort is that, unless we act, wild animals won’t have a future (Ceballos et al., 2015).

Ng also argues that animal advocates would achieve more if they resisted exaggerating. He says Bekoff’s (2013) book is hyperbolic because of the claim that the size of an animal’s brain is not related to its capacity to feel. Surely the important point is that while we may feel intuitively that size matters, when it comes to feelings, empirical evidence increasingly suggests that this is incorrect. When we learn that ants can die of loneliness (Koto, 2015) and

that woodlice have different personalities (Tuf, 2015), it should make us think about such invertebrates rather differently.

Ng closes noting that the easy, low-cost options are just the starting point for eliminating suffering. Perhaps, but Ng fails to realise that animal suffering is an inherent component of some industries; hence campaigning against those industries themselves would seem the only possible route to eliminating cruelty.¹

In some circumstances the principle of working with rather than against industry may be an efficacious strategy. I am not convinced, however, that incremental welfare biology can contribute as much to relieve animal suffering as the call by Bekoff and Pierce (2009), Safina (2016), and others for a fundamental change in our relationship with animals in view of the fact that they feel – rather than just (as Ng perhaps inadvertently implies) giving them a bigger cage.

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¹ This should perhaps not be assumed for all forms of farming: Although it is clear that, in practice, the approach could not scale up to global consumption levels, at [Ahimsa Milk](#) no cows are ever slaughtered, including male calves, so, in principle, producing modest quantities of milk need not be cruel.

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