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What is the pressing “animal question” about? Thinking/feeling capacity or exploitability?

Commentary on [Marino](#) on *Thinking Chickens*

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Abstract: Marino’s timely review highlights what humans go to great lengths to ignore and suppress: non-human animals such as chickens have rich inner lives. Although I share her belief that such evidence should provide the impetus for ending the exploitation of chickens, the psychological literatures on motivated reasoning and group-based dominance suggest not only that this is unlikely but that people will push back precisely because of the implications (as they do for climate change). Human psychology has done a great deal to suppress the recognition of sentience in animals, but it can also shed insights into ending exploitation.

Keywords: exploitation, speciesism, dehumanization, dominance

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Marino (2017b) does the field a great service in summarizing and synthesizing the scientific literature on the inner lives of chickens. Particularly admirable is her consideration not only of cognition but emotions, personality, and social interaction. I agree fully with the assessment of Bottomley and Loughnan (2017) that, in light of her review, we can be “left in little doubt that chickens have attributes far closer to complex mammals than is routinely recognized” (p. 1). But the real story, in many ways, is revealed in the title she chose for her synopsis in *Animal Sentience*: “The inconvenient truth about thinking chickens” (Marino, 2017a). As a package, Marino has delivered an impactful *one-two* punch: here is the rich seam of evidence that chickens possess tremendous capabilities and experiences, but be forewarned, you’re not going to be comfortable with the implications. As with climate change research, there is a growing consensus among scientists that stands at odds with our past conceptions and indeed the current conceptions of the public at large. As with climate change, therefore, cue the pushback.

As a psychologist, I am surprised and somewhat dismayed that it remains newsworthy that non-human animals (henceforth “animals”) have capabilities and experiences that approximate or exceed those of humans. For all of its critics, the basic tenet underlying the practice of null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) is admirable: assume no effect or difference until a distinction is clearly demonstrated. Should not the default assumption be that

the null hypothesis is true — that is, that Animal X does *not* differ from humans in Quality Y — until it is clearly and unequivocally demonstrated otherwise? As a psychologist studying predominantly adult populations (but see Costello & Hodson, 2014), I similarly marvel at how developmental psychologists react with surprise and incredulity when children exhibit a capacity or ability typically considered absent in children. Consider that even children in their first year in primary school show evidence of political thinking (Van Deth, Abendschön, & Vollmar, 2011). Such a finding goes against established orthodoxy that children are apolitical. But it is in keeping with evidence that political orientation has a strong genetic component (e.g., Ksiazkiewicz, Ludeke, & Krueger, 2016) and that psychological needs (epistemic, existential, relational) underlie differences in political ideology (Jost, 2017). Why, therefore, would one expect children not to exhibit the early markers of political thinking? Indeed they do: ratings of children by their teachers have proven remarkably accurate in predicting self-reported political identification in adulthood (see Block & Block, 2006). Struggling to demonstrate that the differences are more relative than absolute has come at a cost of better understanding political thinking among children, much as the fight to convince others that chickens have rich inner lives has come at a cost of better understanding chicken sentience.

Claims of absolute (vs. relative) differences are especially surprising in the context of interspecies comparisons. As noted by De Waal (2016) “evolutionary science ... is uncomfortable with black-and-white distinctions” when considering, for instance, whether gorillas are capable of self-awareness (p. 240). He also observes that “cognitive psychology doesn’t like absolute differences either” (p. 241). Together with my earlier point about null hypothesis testing, this leads to the following recommendation: (a) start with the assumption that different populations (humans vs. animals; adults vs. children) do *not* differ fundamentally in their capacity for a quality or characteristic; and (b) be open to (if not outright accepting that) observed differences will reflect a matter of degree (as opposed to a binary difference).

So why isn’t this already the norm? Quite simply, denying advanced qualities in animals often has motivational roots in the human observer (see also Bottomley & Loughnan, 2017). In short, when we use, harm, and exploit an animal, we typically deny the existence or presence of the relevant mental states (e.g., “mind”), capabilities, or subjective experiences in the victim. This is especially true in the case of chickens, the most consumed animal in the US (Erbenraut, 2017). Indeed, although overall meat consumption in the US is declining, chicken consumption is increasing (Bentley, 2017); this is also mirrored globally (OECD-FAO, 2014). These are worrying trends for those concerned with the welfare of chickens. After all, as revealed through research by Loughnan and colleagues (Bottomley & Loughnan, 2017; Piazza & Loughnan, 2016), when eating animals, we rob them of mental states and mind capacity. With rising chicken consumption, human nature is such that we are more (not less) likely to rob chickens of sentience. Worse, learning about animal intelligence has little impact on moral concern for the animal concerned (Piazza & Loughnan, 2016).

Such findings are consistent with the wider psychological literature: people engage in *motivated cognition* (Jost et al., 2003; Kunda, 1999), being very flexible in their thought processes in order to maximize personal or group goals and ambitions. Indeed, animalistic dehumanization of outgroups (i.e., conceptualizing “them” as less human and more animal-like) has not only cognitive but motivational underpinnings (see Hodson, MacInnis, & Costello, 2014). For example, it serves dominance motives to emphasize human superiority over animals, and

also to liken human outgroups such as racial minorities to animals (for related work, see Dhont, Hodson, & Leite, 2016; Hodson & Costello, 2012; Hodson et al., 2014).

Human outgroups, therefore, get “demoted” to being animal-like in their representation for the purpose of excluding the human group from concerns and protections ordinarily afforded to humans. Similarly, animals can be “demoted” on the scale of importance and moral concern. In India, for instance, moves have been made to reclassify peacocks as “vermin” (Is it a Bird?, 2016). The reason is clearly motivated – vermin enjoy fewer rights and moral concern than birds, so their reclassification will facilitate their curtailment or elimination, a goal of local officials. I refer to this, admittedly paradoxically, as the *dehumanization of animals*. Specifically, animals are considered to be “less human” than us but can become represented as even less human, further stripped of the “human qualities” that afford protections. As much as I applaud Marino’s goal to further the standing of chickens in light of their rich inner lives, as a psychologist I am pessimistic about this potential in practice (as seem my fellow psychologists Bottomley & Loughnan). Humans, at some level, are already aware that most animals have capacity for complex thinking, that they have desires and fears, and that they differ meaningfully from one another. The problem is that humans are experts at suppressing this knowledge and rationalizing away that which is difficult to suppress or ignore. Unfortunately, when we think about animals and meat consumption, we are *particularly* adept at rationalizing and downplaying psychological dissonance (see also Loughnan, Bastian, & Haslam, 2014; Plous, 2003; Zentall, 2016). This is why morality needs to play the dominant role in promoting animal rights. Consider that failing to adopt a meat-free diet for social justice reasons is a key factor in predicting a lapse back to eating meat, even above hedonistic factors such as craving meat (Hodson & Earle, 2018). Morality matters in predicting and shaping behaviour.

The psychological literature paints a pessimistic picture, particularly where people express dominance motives and have the exploitation of others in mind. Recognizing sentience alone is not enough to bring about the change needed. Women’s rights have been slow to be realized, even in the West, in no small part because men have much to “gain” by exploiting women (for sex, domestic labour, commercial labour, etc.). Men are fully aware of the capacities of women, from their intelligence, to their varied personalities, to their emotional states, but this does not eliminate the exploitation. Indeed, with women earning substantially less than men, they work from November 10th to the end of the calendar year “for free” in countries like the UK (Gender Pay Gap, 2016). All the time that animals are considered as commodities, property, or as simply lying outside the circles of moral concern (Opatow, 1993), they are easy targets for exploitation (e.g., food, clothing, research, entertainment): Their *exploitation value* motivates a disregard for their inner thoughts and feelings, regardless of the objective facts. None of this detracts from Marino’s efforts. With any luck, future generations will look back with amazement that her review was considered newsworthy (as it clearly is today).

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