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Why factual appeals about the abilities of sheep may fail

Commentary on [Marino & Merskin](#) on *Sheep Complexity*

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Abstract: Marino & Merskin (2019) express hope that providing people with positive information about the abilities of sheep (factual appeals) will improve perceptions of them and thus improve their welfare. However, these factual appeals can, and do, fail to change perceptions of animals. This commentary considers why and when factual appeals fail, and with whom they may be effective.

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Marino & Merskin (M&M, 2019) provide an informative review about the abilities of sheep, about which the majority of people are probably unaware. M&M suggest that many people incorrectly stereotype sheep as unintelligent. They accordingly recommend that highlighting (counter-stereotypical) information about sheep abilities (factual appeals) will improve our perception of sheep and, by extension, their welfare. However, as we discuss here, the psychological literature suggests that such factual appeals can fail because of *motivated cognition* and *self-relevance*. Motivated cognition is a biased form of reasoning, whereby we interpret information in ways favourable to us (Balcetis, 2008); self-relevance refers to the extent to which an animal is used by any one individual (e.g., as food, clothing, or entertainment; Piazza & Loughnan, 2016). Hence sheep are self-relevant for people who consume sheep (lamb) or other sheep products (e.g., wool).

1. Previous commentaries. Previous commentaries have referred to the widespread use of sheep as property or commodities (e.g., **Baker**, 2019; **Correia Caeiro**, 2019; **Davis**, 2019; **Hermanson**, 2019; **Palmer & Sandøe**, 2019; **Rollin**, 2019; **Sevillano**, 2019; **Woodford & Carter**, 2019). Some suggested that our negative perceptions of sheep result from our treating them as property (Correia Caeiro, 2019; Davis, 2019). We will try to expand upon this idea of “sheep as property” by considering exactly *why* it motivates people to perceive them negatively (because of motivated

cognition and self-relevance) and why people may therefore dismiss factual appeals regarding sheep (cf. Furlong et al., 2018). We also go beyond Davis's (2019) work by offering some hope and considering how factual appeals may be effective with certain audiences.

2. Why may factual appeals fail? People are less willing to help and feel less empathy for self-relevant animals (e.g., sheep, pigs) compared to non-self-relevant animals (e.g., dogs) (Gradidge, 2018). To address this problem, it is important to develop interventions that encourage more positive perceptions of self-relevant animals. Unfortunately, factual appeals may not work, as people often use motivated cognition when evaluating self-relevant animals, including sheep, to maintain a favourable self-image. For example, information about the high intelligence of pigs is typically ignored (Piazza & Loughnan, 2016). Participants give pigs the same moral status regardless of whether pigs are described as having high or low intelligence. This does not apply to dogs or fictional animals, neither of whom are self-relevant (e.g., as food) animals. Instead, perceived moral status is higher when dogs or fictional animals are described as high in intelligence and lower when described as low in intelligence. As both pigs and sheep are self-relevant profit animals bred for consumption, these findings probably apply to sheep as well, suggesting that people will also ignore positive information about the intelligence of sheep.

Individuals can also ignore the *emotional* and *physiological* abilities of animals, including their ability to suffer or feel physiological pain (e.g., Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011). Thus, not only can animals be construed as unintelligent; they can also be evaluated as incapable of suffering and feeling pain, making it morally permissible to consume them. Because of motivated cognition and self-relevance, factual appeals may fail; the information they contain is easily ignored, enabling individuals to maintain a favourable self-image. Hence factual appeals about sheep will not necessarily improve perceptions in consumers for whom sheep are self-relevant.

3. With whom may factual appeals work? People use various strategies to distance themselves from animals they consume (Gradidge, Zawisza, & Harvey, under review). Some use direct strategies (Rothgerber, 2012), including denial of animal suffering and denial of animal mind. These strategies morally justify consuming animals, as their perceived inability to think or suffer renders consuming them harmless. Such individuals can maintain a positive self-concept despite consuming animals. It is therefore unlikely that people using direct strategies will respond positively to factual appeals (Rothgerber, 2012). In fact, they may respond to factual appeals negatively (Dowsett, Semmler, Bray, Ankeny, & Chur-Hansen, 2018; Feinberg, Kovacheff, Teper, & Inbar, 2019; Rothgerber, 2014). For example, people who deny animals' emotions or their ability to suffer can, following exposure to factual appeals, subsequently view meat consumption as more acceptable morally than they did prior to exposure (Feinberg et al., 2019).

Some meat consumers utilise indirect strategies, which often include dissociation from consumed animals (e.g., not thinking about these animals or avoiding information about them; Rothgerber, 2012). Factual appeals can disrupt dissociation in individuals who use indirect strategies (Dowsett et al., 2018) and can thus encourage them to view animals positively and reduce their animal consumption (Kunst & Haugestad, 2017; Kunst & Hohle, 2016). Demographically, females (Rothgerber, 2012) or those who value masculinity less (Kildal & Syse, 2017), and individuals from countries less exposed to animal slaughter (e.g., UK, US, France; Kunst & Haugestad, 2017; Tian, Hilton, & Becker, 2016), are more likely to use indirect strategies. Males

or those who value masculinity more, and individuals from countries more exposed to animal slaughter (e.g., China, Ecuador) are more likely to use direct strategies. Factual appeals may therefore be more effective when targeting audiences that use indirect strategies, although further research should test this hypothesis directly.

4. Conclusion. Factual appeals based on animals' abilities should only be used when likely to be effective. Further research should investigate how factual appeals can be made more effective, particularly amongst individuals using direct strategies. Perhaps individuals can be encouraged to use indirect strategies, and then factual appeals would be more effective. Alternatively, research may show that we should abandon factual appeals altogether with this group and seek alternative interventions.

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