

# ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Phillips, Clive (2022) The question is not “can humans talk?” or “can they suffer?” but “can they reason?”. *Animal Sentience* 31(5)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1704



This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact [wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org](mailto:wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org).

## The question is not “can humans talk?” or “can they suffer?” but “can they reason?”

Commentary on [Rowan et al.](#) on *Sentience Politics*

**Clive Phillips**

Institute of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, Estonia University of Life Sciences

**Abstract:** In their target article, Rowan *et al* (2022) make a welcome attempt to chart the development of Western progress over the past two hundred years toward formally recognizing that animals feel. They outline the heroic efforts of *Compassion in World Farming* to gain for animals the status of sentient beings rather than merely human property. A broader view exists, from human prehistory to the present day, in which animals have been (and still are) understood to be sentient by indigenous peoples as well as by some Eastern religions. Growing recognition in the West that animals feel represents a new age of enlightenment.

[Clive Phillips](#), visiting professor at the Estonia University of Life Sciences and former Foundation Professor of Animal Welfare and Director of the Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics, University of Queensland, has studied the welfare of cattle and sheep, and other animals, and the ethics of animal management. [Website](#)



Rowan *et al* (2022) provide us with the background to the inclusion of the concept of sentience in the [Treaty of Lisbon](#), which governs the EU. That this proved necessary is a valuable lesson in correcting the belief in human supremacy (Chapman & Huffman 2018) that has prevailed in Western countries since the ‘age of enlightenment’, relegating animals to the role of serving human needs. This astoundingly self-confident belief had two main sources: (1), the Judeo-Christian belief in the supremacy of Man (genderised term intended); and (2) the industrial revolution, which showed that humans could invent tools to replace animal (as well as human) labour. Both these forces came together in the age of enlightenment, when philosophers such as Descartes – who, rightly or wrongly, bears the blame for this inferior status of animals in the sentience hierarchy -- argued that animals were automata. The age might better be known as the age of disenfranchisement, at least from animals’ perspective.

As Rowan *et al* point out, however, Descartes had only declared animals to be *unthinking*, rather than *unfeeling*. This has some validity, in that many human cognitive capabilities do exceed those of other animals. However, an alien observer would be excused for thinking that the question about humans is not “can they talk?” nor “can they suffer?” -- for there is ample evidence of both of these -- but “can they reason?”. We inherited a planet that is unique -- in our solar system, at least, if not the universe -- in having evolved a diverse flora and fauna over several billion years. We have deluded ourselves that this planet’s resources are infinite despite evidence of their widespread depletion and pollution from irresponsible use by our own species. The industrial revolution that followed the age of enlightenment also led to

appalling working conditions for those humans remaining in the workforce and widespread pollution from the industries that emerged. The era was characterised by growing wealth for the bourgeoisie and landed gentry, with only some partial trickle-down to the poor (Allen, 2018).

Rowan *et al's* description of the return of human recognition of the sentience of animals in the last 50 years, driven by the English animal advocacy movement, makes sober reading. Time after time the advocates got knocked back; but their persistence has paid off, at least in terms of legal recognition of animal sentience in Europe, and increasingly around the world. This is a fundamental change from regarding animals as mere property. What drove this English animal welfare movement is a matter for speculation. According to Ruth Harrison's seminal work, *Animal Machines* (1964), it was Britain's precarious island status -- which only 20 years earlier had a population on the verge of starvation during the second world war -- that prompted the intensification of agricultural production, including of livestock. Close confinement systems of production were developed that reduced the space available to animals. This meant not only that more animals could be produced from a limited space, but that animals confined in such spaces also moved around less, which improved the efficiency of food utilisation. Harrison alerted the British public to the appalling deterioration of the welfare of chickens when incarcerated in small wire cages, and veal calves and farrowing sows when confined to small crates. The English animal rights movement was born.

From the start the focus was on the pain that the animals experienced. Indeed, Rowan *et al* assume that the pain induced by sores when living in these confined conditions, as well as from mutilations to make the animals able to survive, and from handling, are the biggest welfare issue. If so, then this would reinforce the focus on pain awareness in animals. However, to understand the biggest welfare issues, we would also do well to ask those who are directly responsible for rearing the animals. Research in Australia identified that although animal advocates thought pain-related issues were the greatest of the welfare problems of cattle and sheep, according to farmers, the inadequate nutrition and lack of other essentials that pervaded the animals' entire lives were even more important than the brief pain associated with, for example, branding (Phillips *et al.*, 2009).

In 2008 I toured fifty Australian farms to discuss what were the biggest welfare problems the farmers faced. I met farmers broken by the impact of long droughts, floods and government bureaucracy; they made little mention of the painful procedures their animals had to endure (Phillips and Phillips, 2012). Both pain *and* nutrition no doubt need more research, but what is long overdue is a focus on the impact of nutrition standards on animal welfare in place of the focus on maximising productivity. Perhaps *Compassion in World Farming* will pursue this after its successes with sentience legislation.

Taking a broader view of history, and prehistory, it is evident that before the western 'age of enlightenment', which is where Rowan *et al's* story begins, belief in sentience had pervaded human society to a much greater extent than it does today. In prehistory, people even believed that animals had a soul, let alone sentience. They believed in human descent from totem animals, integrally binding human and non-human animals in a spiritual continuum. Such beliefs still pervade Buddhist and Hindu societies, leading to a regard for animal rights that greatly exceeds that in Western countries (Phillips and McCullough, 2005). Indigenous people in Australia, too, have an attitude toward animals very different from that of their

Western colonisers. Domestic animals, such as dogs, are not owned but are 'attached' to communities, in which they have a central place and are not considered a resource. Because they perceive animals as their totemic ancestors (which, in the Darwinian sense, they indeed are), the relationship between indigenous peoples and their animals is based on a much deeper sense of animal sentience than that of contemporary people in the industrialized Western world.

Finally, we should consider whether sentience is the only criterion for having interests that we should recognise. Do organisms that are, to the best of our current knowledge, insentient, not also have vital interests, such as maintaining genetic and anatomic integrity, species diversity, species-specific life-expectancy and a relationship with humans that befits their shared evolutionary and ecological history? The failure of those in the West to recognize animal sentience for several centuries, and *Compassion's* herculean efforts to redress this injustice, may yet have to be extended to these other nonhuman interests.

## References

- Allen, R. (2018). [Class structure and inequality during the industrial revolution: lessons from England's social tables](#), 1688–1867. *Economic History Review*, 72, 88-125
- Chapman, Colin A. and Huffman, Michael A. (2018) [Why do we want to think humans are different?](#) *Animal Sentience* 23(1)
- Harrison, Ruth (1964) *Animal Machines*. Stuart, London
- Phillips, C. J. C. and McCulloch, S. (2005). Student attitudes towards animal sentience and the use of animals in society. *Journal of Biological Education* 40, 17-24.
- Phillips, C.J.C. and Phillips, A.P. (2012). [Animal Welfare in Australia: a Tour of Cattle and Sheep Farms](#). Amazon Kindle e-books. 359 pp.
- Phillips, C.J.C., Wojciechowska, J., Meng, J. and Cross, N. (2009). Perceptions of the importance of different welfare issues in livestock production in Australia. *Animal* 3, 1152-1166.
- Rowan, A. N., D'Silva, J., Duncan, I. J., & Palmer, N. Animal sentience: history, science, and politics. (2022) [Animal sentience: history, science, and politics](#). *Animal Sentience* 31(1)