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

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**Abstract:** Donald Griffin’s writings, beginning with *The Question of Animal Awareness* (1976), strove to persuade scientists to study the possibility of animal sentience, the basis of Rowan et al.’s efforts to promote animal well-being. Facing great hostility (but also some acceptance) for his ideas, Griffin initially avoided animal welfare advocacy, fearing it would further undermine his efforts to gain recognition of animal sentience. In later years, however, he began to ponder the ethical implications of animal sentience, intending to study wild elephants’ communication and social behavior to better understand their *experienced* life and apply it to improving conservation methods. As he recognized, ethical considerations require strategic prioritizing.

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### 1. Griffin’s *Question of Animal Awareness* (1976)

I have spent the last several years researching and writing a biography of Donald R. Griffin (1915-2003), the scientist who founded the fields of bat echolocation and cognitive ethology. I had the privilege of being a member of his lab at Rockefeller University and knowing him through his later years. For Griffin, cognitive ethology was the study of animals’ mental experiences as they live in their natural environments. The editor of *Animal Sentience* challenged me to “channel” Griffin in a commentary on the excellent target article by Rowan et al (2022). I will try.

Griffin’s essential concern in cognitive ethology was to provide evidence of animal consciousness. He was intent on persuading scientists of the evolutionary likelihood of animal sentience and the need for scientists to study the phenomenon. During his lifetime, some scientists agreed, but overall, he was deeply disappointed in their reluctance and outright hostility.

Griffin would agree with Rowan et al that “it is difficult (and maybe impossible) to prove conclusively that any organism is sentient.” He too searched for the best *approximate* renderings of animals’ internal states, including their feelings. He created the term, “zoomorphism,” as an approach to counter human-centric “anthropomorphism” and “mechanomorphism,” the

behavioristic view of animal behavior. Balanced “zoomorphism” takes into account as much as we can know of the perceptions and world of any individual animal (Griffin, 2003, July 27). (This is closely related to Jacob von Uexküll’s 1909 concept of an animal’s “Umwelt.”) Griffin continually sought converging lines of evidence to support animal consciousness, in particular, potential neural correlates of consciousness, versatile adaptability to new challenges, and animal communication. This includes the challenge of two-way communication between humans and animals, as exemplified by some of the “language” research with apes and parrots (Griffin, 1976).

Griffin would have welcomed the enormous recent growth of interest and progress in the understanding of animals’ mental experiences reviewed in Rowan et al’s target article. He would also be inspired by the ingenious methodologies and “indirect means” used to assess animal feelings, preferences and negative experiences reviewed in Rowan et al. In many instances, these procedures have served to determine better conditions for farm animals, who have suffered so much pain and abuse. In his time, Griffin lauded the preference experiments reviewed by Marian Dawkins (e.g., 1980) as important beginnings in assessing animal suffering, but noted the “many uncertainties in such investigations” (Griffin, 2001, p. 269). Similarly, despite his enthusiasm for new methodologies, in his inimitable fashion, he would subject the studies to his own thorough scientific assessment.

## **2. Ethical Issues**

Initially, Griffin focused on evidence that animals are conscious, and only later the specific content of their consciousness. He avoided broaching animal welfare and well-being because of the enormous backlash he encountered in promoting the scientific basis for the very *possibility* of animal sentience. He feared that any advocacy could only further undermine his efforts.

Yet Griffin was concerned about ethical issues of animal well-being. As a scientist, although he used captive bats and a few other species in his lab’s research, he consistently chose the less harmful intrusions. To determine that bats were relying on echolocation and not visual cues in certain situations, he either used goggles or, if that was inadequate, then temporary cement to shut the bats’ eyelids; unlike others, he did not permanently blind them. He much preferred fieldwork and observations of animals behaving naturally to laboratory-based work with caged animals. In a note to himself, he asked, “Then the ‘ethical thicket:’ What do I really think? At present I know only that I don’t know.” (Griffin, October 30, 2000).

In his last book, *Animal Minds: From Cognition to Consciousness* (2001), Griffin has an entire section on the “ethical significance” of animal consciousness. He immediately goes to the essence of the issue, using as an example, mutilating “an elaborate and efficient machine” vs “inflicting needless pain or suffering” on an animal. Rowan et al. recall Jeremy Bentham’s (1789) now celebrated insistence that “[t]he question is ... can they suffer.” Griffin reflects that we are all, even the confirmed vegetarians, responsible for injury or death to some animals. They might be insects, killed by insecticide on the vegetarian’s produce. So, the question becomes one of values: For what ends may we cause harm? and to which species? Which species suffer more than others? How do we know whether they do? With so little knowledge on which to base our decisions in balancing welfare with other concerns, says Griffin, what we can learn about animals’

subjective thoughts and feelings will be of great utility (Griffin, 2001, p. 264-265). He would surely concur with Rowan et al. that “[we] also need more research on the question of where on the phylogenetic scale sentience emerges.”

Griffin reflects also on various philosophical views, focusing on the presumed sentience and cognitive capacities of animals and humans (Ristau, in prep.). He ruminates about those philosophers who define humans by their unique intellect, linguistic abilities and self-reflection, as distinct from other animals, presumed lacking those same abilities (cf. Chapman & Huffman 2018). This becomes a justification for such thinkers to determine who/which species are deserving of sympathy and moral concern. In opposition to such beliefs are the attitudes held by those who focus on indications that many species are conscious. Such philosophers now minimize Block’s (1995) distinction between perceptual and reflective consciousness and emphasize concern for animals’ well-being. As examples, Griffin cites Routley, Midgley, Jeffrey, Rollin, the Radners, Dupre and Colin Allen (Griffin, 2001, p. 14-17, p. 267-269). Griffin agrees that mankind can benefit greatly from advancements in medicine and science, even though that entails animals suffering pain. He also considers panpsychism but, ever practical, he indicates that, somewhere, one must draw a line (cf. Reber et al. 2022). “How much animal suffering is justified” to engage in activities for our sustenance, our pleasure, our science? These are moral decisions (Griffin, 2000) that should be based on positive values (Griffin, 2001, p. 264-269).

### **3. A Proposed Project about Elephants’ Experience**

Griffin did believe that attempting to understand the *content* of an animal’s consciousness might help us find a way through the “ethical thicket.” The elephant was, to him, a good place to begin (Griffin, 2000, 2003). They are highly social beings, supportive of each other, with an extensive communication system, much of it now tabulated and publicly available (Elephant Voices, 2021; see also Baker & Winkler 2020). Even in Griffin’s time, some elephant groups had been studied extensively for decades, with many videos of social interactions, including vocalizing. A population of 4000 forest elephants in the Central African Republic had been observed intensively, particularly by Angela Turkalo for 23 years. She recognized over 80 individuals by sight and 3,128 with the aid of her notes and drawings (Turkalo et al, 2013). The whale and elephant researcher, Katherine Boynton Payne (Payne et al, 2003), had been among her collaborators with access to many videotapes and notes. Payne and Griffin planned a joint project using these and conducting fieldwork. In the planned endeavor, the scientific advances in understanding the *experienced* life of elephants would be used to help determine the most appropriate conservation and welfare practices. Furthermore, such information could promote effective public education and compassion for the elephants’ and other species’ well-being (Griffin, 2003; Strauss & Ristau, 2022). Griffin died, having barely begun the research.

### **4. Middle Ground**

Griffin’s views are concerned with prioritizing, also a concern of Rowan et al. Although Griffin applauded Marc Bekoff’s research, he probably recognized both the positive and negative effects of Bekoff’s (2022) strong advocacy. Griffin hoped that he himself and the “denier” scientists could eventually reach some “middle ground” with non-hostile, rational discussions (Pepperberg,

2020). Unless the concept of “sentience” is broadened so extremely that its common usage and understanding are lost, I think Griffin would not accept the view of Reber et al (2022) that “All living organisms are sentient.” He would, however, be extremely gratified with a scientific approach that begins “from the bottom up,” recognizing potential precursors and foundations for evolutionarily (or developmentally) later sentience (Ristau, 2016, commentary on Reber 2016; cf. Reber et al. 2022).

## 5. Prioritizing

Griffin emphasizes that “ethics and morals should be based on positive values, not merely on the exclusion of supposed inferiors.” The difficult cases are not the extremes, but the borderlines. “How much animal suffering is justified to grow crops, eat meat, enjoy hunting or fishing, conduct physiological or behavioral research, test new cosmetics, develop new surgical techniques.” (Griffin, 2001, p.268).

I would add that all heterotrophic organisms (Houlbrèque, & Ferrier-Pagès 2009) must consume other organisms to ensure their own survival, whether the consumed organism is an animal or a plant. Prioritizing hence also concerns what humans choose to eat, and, in the case of the farming of animals, how best to breed, maintain and slaughter them. Beyond the realm of nutritional needs, humans face further prioritization and ethical decisions. Why do we generally assume we have a greater right to habitat and a “good life” than do other creatures of this earth? Scientific and medical explorations face still more dilemmas: balancing the discovery of drugs and treatments that might save human and animal lives against the suffering that might be inflicted on animals in the research to discover the drugs and treatments.

Griffin took care to emphasize his and our ignorance about the extent of an animal’s suffering when subjected to different procedures. He also stated, “I do not feel that scientists have any special right to advocate moral judgments in such difficult matters” but cognitive ethology might provide information leading to “better-informed decisions” (Griffin, 2001, p. 268-269.) Finally, it is the balance of demands, the tough ethical decisions that need to be addressed, compassionately and ethically and scientifically. I do believe Donald Griffin would concur with that statement.

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