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Motivated science: What humans gain from denying animal sentience

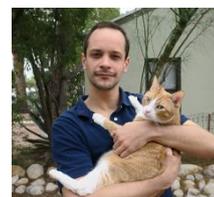
Commentary on [Rowan et al.](#) on *Sentience Politics*

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Abstract: Resistance to the idea that non-human animals are sentient resembles erstwhile resistance to the theory that the earth is not the centre of the universe, or that humans evolved from “apes”. All these notions are psychologically threatening. They can remind people of their own creatureliness and mortality and might make them feel guilty or uncertain about their way of life. An honest debate over animal sentience, welfare and rights should consider the human motivation to deprive animals of these things in the first place. I briefly review empirical evidence on the psychological function of denying animal minds.

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Introduction. The null hypothesis about animal sentience -- and hence the burden of proving otherwise -- could just as well have been that all animals are sentient. It is not by chance that western societies have been historically debating whether they should *grant* to nonhuman animals the desired qualities of sentience, intelligence, and deservingness of basic rights (Rowan et al., 2021). We humans are *motivated* to feel qualitatively different from and superior to all other animals (Chapman & Huffman, 2018). We have a lot to lose by agreeing to an equal playing field. But it's not just greed, apathy or guilt that is driving our negativity towards animals. The mere idea that we are potentially no different from a lizard or a ladybug strikes at the very core of our existence.

Empirical research documenting the human motivation for devaluing and harming animals has been guided by several psychological perspectives (for reviews see Dhont et al., 2019; Dhont & Hodson, 2019). Two theories that have been directly applied to try to explain this phenomenon are terror management theory (TMT: Greenberg et al., 1986) and cognitive dissonance theory (CDT: Festinger, 1957).

Terror management theory (TMT). TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 2015) was inspired by the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973), who argued that much of human behavior is directed at *the denial of death*. According to TMT, because humans (unlike other animals, as far as we know) are aware of their mortality, they can experience potentially debilitating anxiety when reminded of death. To manage this anxiety, humans subscribe to cultural worldviews that allow them to perceive themselves as valuable members of a meaningful universe, and provide them with hopes of literal and symbolic immortality if they follow culturally prescribed standards of value.

As it is our animal-like body that dies, transcending death (in most western cultures) requires some degree of disassociation from both animals and the physical body (Becker, 1975; Goldenberg et al., 2000). Goldenberg et al (2001) found that reminders of death (but not other aversive topics) heightened disgust responses to images of human body products as well as to images of animals. They also increased preference for essays highlighting the differences (rather than the similarities) between humans and other animals.

Tracy et al. (2011) found that reminders of death made participants more inclined to reject Darwin's theory of human evolution, regardless of religiosity, educational background, or preexisting attitudes. Other studies have reported that thinking about human-animal similarities can increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts to consciousness (e.g., Cox et al., 2007) and that individuals who generally perceive themselves as more similar to animals have higher trait anxiety and existential concerns (Lifshin et al., 2021).

To feel powerful and protected from death, people not only need to disassociate themselves from animals but to assert their *superiority to them*. Thinking that we are the only sentient or intelligent creature (Plous, 2003; Chapman & Huffman 2018) reflects just that. Soenke et al. (2018) examined the psychological function of belief in human intellectual superiority over animals. Reminders of death were found to increase negative reactions to a scientific article describing dolphins as more intelligent than humans. Reading the article was also found to increase thoughts about death. Reminders of death can also increase negative attitudes toward animals (Beatson & Halloran, 2007; Beatson et al., 2009; for reviews, see Marino, & Mountain, 2015, 2021; Lifshin & Greenberg, 2019). Lifshin et al. (2017) found that even subliminal reminders of death (presented too fast to be consciously perceived) increased support for killing animals in various domains, which was in turn associated with an increased sense of power and invulnerability.

Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT). According to CDT (Festinger, 1957), people are motivated to try to reduce inconsistencies (dissonance) among their cognitions (regarding attitudes, values, or behaviors). They do this by changing one of the contradictory cognitions, adding cognitions that resolve the inconsistency, or trivializing the inconsistency altogether. People are motivated to justify their past and current behavior so as to reduce feelings of dissonance or guilt, especially when the behavior might have negative consequences for one's self-esteem (e.g., Stone & Cooper, 2001; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Harmon-Jones, 2017). Because humans have long been mistreating and abusing animals, they are motivated to justify this continuing exploitation by denying that animals have minds or deserve empathy. This is very much like the dehumanization of human targets of human aggression (Bandura et al., 1975).

Experiments by Bastian et al. (2012) have found that reminding people of their meat-eating practices and how it harms animals increases the tendency to deny that the animals they eat have intelligence and other "higher" mental capacities (*the meat paradox*; see also Leach et al., 2022). Martens et al (2007; Martens & Kosloff, 2012) report that having people engage in a (bogus) bug-killing task increases the eagerness with which they kill bugs in a subsequent bug-killing task. This effect is stronger among individuals reporting greater perceived similarity to animals, presumably because they feel more guilty about having killed them, and are more motivated to reduce dissonance by doubling-down on their past behavior. It is nevertheless also true that stronger identification with animals has been found to be associated with positive attitudes towards them (Amiot & Bastian, 2017; Serpell, 2004).

Conclusion. Empirical evidence indicates that people’s way of thinking about animals is *motivated*. Research on TMT and CDT suggests that the human tendency to disassociate from and devalue animals serves a protective psychological function. An impartial philosophical, scientific, or legal debate over the subject of animal sentience, intelligence, welfare, or rights should take such cognitive factors explicitly into consideration.

Understanding these human motives may eventually help reduce negativity towards animals. For example, boosting alternative anxiety buffers such as attachment-security or self-esteem may help reduce human apathy or aggression toward animals (e.g., Lifshin et al. 2017.). Promoting pro-animal values and laws could set new standards for the sense of self-worth, and may reverse the effects that reminders of death have on attitudes towards animals (e.g., Lifshin et al., 2022). Declarations and legislation acknowledging animal sentience and protecting welfare, such as those reviewed in Rowan et al.’s target article may yet prove important and effective.

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