

## Workshop 6

### What does it mean to be sentient in the real world and how should that influence attitudes and behaviour of the wider 'public'?

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The draft Sentience Bill requires Ministers to have 'regard to the welfare needs of animals as sentient beings in formulating and implementing government policy'. Recognition of animal sentience and welfare needs at this level makes it essential to consider what 'being sentient' actually means for individual animals in real life situations. What might their experiences be like, and how does this mean people should behave towards them?

The RSPCA has suggested that the definition of sentience should be along the following lines: ***Sentience is the capacity to have positive or negative experiences such as pain, distress or pleasure.*** We have also proposed that the Bill should include further explanation and guidance, including these concepts:

- For an animal to be sentient, the nervous system would have to be complex enough to process sensory inputs and create a subjective (or conscious) experience. For example, input from pain-sensing nerves would be processed and experienced as suffering and distress.
- If endorphins (morphine-like chemicals) are released by an animal in response to pain, it can be inferred that pain is a problem for the animal, and therefore the animal is aware of (experiencing) the pain and is suffering.
- Behaviours that indicate pain/suffering (such as a dog yelping), or joy/pleasure (such as rats 'laughing' in response to tickling by humans, and actively seeking the experience<sup>1</sup>), show that animals are having negative or positive *experiences*, and are therefore sentient.
- Sentient animals can be aware of pain, distress and pleasurable feelings without necessarily being able to reflect on these feelings in the same way as humans.
- Not all animals meet the criteria for sentience set out above, but the number of species regarded as sentient may increase, as new scientific discoveries are made about the physiology and behaviour of invertebrates.

How prepared are people to truly conceive what being sentient means to animals, and how should this influence their attitudes and behaviours? Please consider the following questions:

#### Questions:

1. To what extent can we predict how a sentient animal may feel in a certain situation?
2. Do you personally 'view' the same sentient species differently in different contexts (e.g. as companions, farmed animals, working animals or 'pests')? Does this make you behave differently towards them, or accepting of different standards of husbandry or welfare?
3. Have this morning's talks made you feel differently about any species; has anyone added to their list of species they consider to be sentient (or the opposite). Please list any examples - and anything you want to do differently from now on as a result.
4. Which areas of human/animal interaction, or animal use, should be included when raising people's awareness of the effects they can personally have on the welfare of sentient animals? Please include a range of direct impacts and less direct effects\*.

<sup>1</sup> LaFollette MR et al. (2017) Rat tickling: A systematic review of applications, outcomes, and moderators. *PLOS ONE* 12(4): e0175320. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175320](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175320)

*\* For example, letting an active, energetic dog off the lead in a wood and allowing her to disturb and frighten wild animals living there, or punishing a cat for not using the litter tray (instead of researching cat behaviour and implementing a more appropriate solution), would both be examples of a person having a **direct** impact on animal welfare.*

*Other, **indirect** effects are less immediately obvious to some people, e.g. choosing to buy the cheapest meat or eggs instead of higher welfare equivalents; keeping 'exotic' pets who need to eat dead rodents (reared and killed by companies or backyard breeders); not properly supervising children when they interact with animals; not checking whether 'fake' fur trims are actually real fur. There are also **indirect** effects such as collecting pug memorabilia, thereby helping to 'normalise' animals with inherent welfare problems.*

### **Summary of the discussion:**

Participants reflected on the difficulty of knowing whether another animal is sentient - even in the case of complex beings, or other humans. It was suggested that if we know an animal is capable of feelings, we might be able to make some tentative predictions about what those feelings might be in a certain situation. However, it was generally agreed that predicting an animal's feelings is very difficult, and it may be that all we can do is to predict an animal's response to a situation, based on factors such as observations of behaviours, reactions to stimuli, and brain activity. When considering how this might affect animal welfare, it may also be helpful to think about impacts on an animal's fitness, rather than thinking solely about that's animal's feelings.

There was a consensus that the same species of sentient animal may be viewed very differently in different contexts - one example of this is the existence of specially protected species under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA, which regulates animal research and testing in the UK)), as these species are not necessarily more or less sentient than others, but are viewed differently due to the relationships humans have with them. Similarly, someone living with mice in their house might be unlikely to think about the sentience of these animals when looking to remove them - although knowing that they are sentient might affect what methods of removal are acceptable. It was agreed that humans are often inconsistent in terms of how we view and treat animals, and therefore we have to consider what is achievable when deciding policies and actions relating to animal use.

There was also strong agreement that personal context matters when considering the sentience of different animals - factors such as nationality, culture, socioeconomic background, religious affiliation or job sector can all influence an individual's view of animal sentience, and what is acceptable under different conditions. For example, a farmer might not feel there is any difference in shooting a dog worrying sheep, or a fox attacking poultry, whilst a dog owner might feel that these are two very different matters with different levels of acceptability.

All participants reported that they had not changed their views on which animals are, or are not likely to be, sentient based on the morning's talks. However, they expressed having already had a personal interest in the topic and therefore being aware of much of the information beforehand. It is possible that a more general audience might have been more affected by the information. However, it was noted that simply providing more information often isn't enough to elicit behavioural changes, and it is therefore more important to think about how the information is presented, and whether it is presented in a way which will appeal to people with different viewpoints.

The group discussed whether it is more practical or meaningful to think about sentience in terms of being either present or absent, or else as being on a sliding scale (i.e. some animals being 'more sentient' than others). Participants felt that presenting sentience on a sliding scale might be a

difficult concept for some to grapple with, although they also felt that it would be difficult to justify treating animals differently in different contexts if we consider all animals to be equally sentient.

One participant suggested that asking whether a crab is less sentient than a chimpanzee is not a meaningful distinction - all we can say is that the chimp's experience is likely to be closer to a human's than the crab's. It was therefore proposed that defining some minimum threshold criteria for deciding which animals are treated as sentient would help when moving forward with policy.

Participants identified several areas of human/animal interactions which should be included when raising people's awareness of the effects they could personally have on animal welfare; these were pet ownership (especially adopting pets rather than going to a breeder), diet, tourism, acceptability of media, religious attitudes and identity politics. Participants felt it would be particularly challenging to encourage people to consider the sentience of animals beyond those they are familiar with, such as pets, and therefore a key consideration is how to package information in a way that would allow a wider public to fully engage with the topic.

#### **Key points:**

- The concept or definition of sentience may be unclear or unfamiliar to a wider public, so we need to be critical of constantly using this term.
- The degree to which people are prepared to think about what it means to be sentient is influenced by different viewpoints, different demand on our attention, etc - this generates a lot of noise, which may result in people choosing not to engage with the topic at all.

#### **Workshop held at:**

**Animal Sentience: science, policy and 'real world' application  
2 May 2019, Friends House, Euston**

Conference organised by the RSPCA Science & Policy Group, the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics and the Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities, University of Oxford, supported by grants from the Open Philanthropy Project and the RSPCA.

