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Fish sentience denial: Muddy moral water

Commentary on [Sneddon et al.](#) on *Sentience Denial*

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Abstract: Sneddon et al. (2018) authoritatively summarize the compelling and overwhelming evidence for fish sentience, while methodically dismantling one rather emblematic research paper (Diggles et al. 2017) intended to discount solid evidence of fish sentience (Lopez-Luna et al. 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, & 2017d). I explore the larger practical moral contexts within which these debates take place and argue that denials of animal sentience are really moral canards.

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Sneddon et al. (2018) authoritatively summarize the compelling and overwhelming evidence for fish sentience, while methodically dismantling one rather emblematic research paper (Diggles et al. 2017) intended to discount solid evidence of fish sentience (Lopez-Luna et al. 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, & 2017d). Rather than focusing my analysis on details of this particular dialectic, I prefer in this commentary to explore the larger practical moral context within which these debates take place.

Canonical Western philosophy has been (and to a lesser degree, remains) rife with arguments denying reason, thought, and sentience to animals.¹ Although Descartes's is the most notorious and perhaps extreme view in this regard — a view known as the *bête-machine* wherein animals are nothing more than reflexive automata — many philosophers from Aristotle to contemporary philosophers like Donald Davidson (1982) and Peter Carruthers (1989) deny (to varying degrees) mentation or even sentience to animals.

In response to immoderate views like Descartes's, Hume (2007/1739) boldly opens Book I, Section 16 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "Of the reason of animals," by attacking such views as "stupid and ignorant":

Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant. (p. 118)

¹ Sneddon et al. note that "[s]ome authors even feel the need to refer to 'humans and animals,' as if humans were not themselves animals." Though I sometimes use the term "alloanimals" to refer to nonhuman animals, in this brief piece, I use the term "animal" to describe nonhuman animals while fully recognizing that humans are, in fact, animals.

What reasons have philosophers and scientists offered to deny such an "evident" truth? Sneddon et al. suggest that sentience is often denied because "sentience is at the heart of the decision about whether to provide animals with legislative protection" (p. 3). This sentiment suggests that unwelcomed moral, social, and practical implications may motivate claims for sentience denial rather than objective empirical data in concert with the pursuit of truth. It is this aspect of sentience denial that I wish to explore in this brief commentary.

As noted, it is not uncommon to find arguments denying cognition or sentience — or arguments against employing the precautionary principle (Birch 2017) — to rely on more than merely data (in the case of science) or conceptual arguments (in the case of philosophy). These arguments often argue backwards from unacceptable practical consequences of taking seriously the sentience of some animals, to the conclusion that we can't take the proposition seriously. The general form of these arguments looks something like this:

1. If (certain species of) animals are sentient, then that would have practical consequence X.
2. X is unacceptable.
3. Therefore, (certain species of) animals are not sentient.

In *Discourse on the Method* (1988/1637), Descartes offers a number of arguments against animal sentience, one of which is this: since the possession of sentience requires an immortal soul that survives death, it is "unimaginable" that human souls should share the eternal afterlife with things such as flies and ants, oysters and sponges.

More recently, philosopher Peter Carruthers (1989) argues that since animals lack the ability to entertain second-order beliefs, the "experiences" of animals must be "nonconscious" and thus they feel no pain. Consequently, they are not the proper subjects of moral concern. In fact, Carruthers argues that we have a "moral imperative" to suppress our sympathies when we see an animal in severe "pain" since — given that they are merely reflexive automata — they are actually *not* in pain. Carruthers (1992) goes so far as to describe animal welfare as "an irrelevance to be opposed" (p. 168).

In a recent target article in this journal, Key (2016) denies fish sentience, warning against applying the precautionary principle in questions of fish welfare for fear of "catastrophic effects" including "inappropriate approaches to fish welfare" and negative economic impacts for the fishing industry (p. 3).

What all these views (and others like them) share is a resistance to the moral implications of taking animal sentience seriously. "Unacceptable" moral, practical, or economic consequences should not drive answers to empirical questions regarding animal sentience, specifically in this case, fish sentience. This is bad faith, plain and simple.²

With regard to the precautionary principle as applied to fish welfare (as with any decision that uses the precautionary principle), the proportionality of the risk of harm must be weighed against the cost and feasibility of a proposed action. In the case of fish, the number slaughtered annually is at least twelve times the size of the current human population. This is clearly a moral atrocity. By any moral calculus, applying the precautionary principle regarding fish welfare is reasonable and prudential, if not obligatory.

² See Sanbonmatsu's (2011) masterful essay on the relationship between speciesism and bad faith.

Last, though I whole-heartedly applaud the work of Sneddon et al. (2018) as heroic in its rigor and tenacity as a counterattack in defense not only of fish sentience, but of *fish*, I think the question of fish sentience is actually a moral canard. Let me explain. Currently approximately 68 billion vertebrate land animals (Faunalytics 2018) — whom we know, *with as close to scientific certainty as possible*, are sentient — live lives of abject misery, while they suffer and die in grisly, ghastly, ghoulish ways, all for human consumption. Despite scientific consensus on cow/pig/chicken sentience, and despite legislative welfare regulations, animals still endure horrific unnecessary suffering at the hands of humans. What this shows is that the question of animal sentience is less about the pursuit of truth, and more about a speciesist agenda — a moral conclusion in search of data, scientific findings, and legitimating arguments. Near-certainty regarding sentience will not end speciesism nor human supremacy. That enterprise does not require better science, research methodologies, or conceptual arguments. That enterprise requires moral transcendence.

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The Other Minds Problem: Animal Sentience and Cognition

Overview. Since Descartes, philosophers know there is no way to know for sure what — or whether — others feel (not even if they tell you). Science, however, is not about certainty but about probability and evidence. The 7.5 billion individual members of the human species can tell us what they are feeling. But there are 9 million other species on the planet (20 quintillion individuals), from elephants to jellyfish to mammals, with which humans share biological and cognitive ancestry, but not one other species can speak: Which of them can feel — and what do they feel? Their human spokespersons — the comparative psychologists, ethologists, evolutionists, and cognitive neurobiologists who are the world's leading experts in "mind-reading" other species -- will provide a sweeping panorama of what it feels like to be an elephant, ape, whale, cow, pig, dog, chicken, mouse, fish, lizard, lobster, snail: This growing body of facts about nonhuman sentience has profound implications not only for our understanding of human cognition, but for our treatment of other sentient species.

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