

Why people struggle to believe that animals are capable of feelings

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Scientific advances are forever revealing signs of sophisticated mental capacities in animals that were once thought to be uniquely human—in particular that animals are "sentient," capable of feeling emotions, and

experiencing pleasure and pain.

However, new Kent research indicates that we may not be ready to heed the lessons that science holds for us about the sophistication of animals.

In five experiments with more than 2,000 participants, Dr. Stefan Leach and colleagues from the School of Psychology explored how we think about the sophistication of animals, in particular how people change their beliefs in response to evidence about animals' mental capacities.

Within the study, when the evidence suggested that animals have advanced mental, social, or emotional capabilities, like the empathic ability to mirror others and experience what they are feeling, participants were too skeptical of it, and did not update their beliefs enough. In contrast, when the evidence suggested that animals lack these capabilities, participants were too receptive, and instead became too certain that animals could not think or feel. This meant that participants gave animals too little credit compared to what the evidence demanded.

Now published in *Cognition*, the research reveals an important psychological stumbling block impacting how we see animals, which may be making it difficult to appreciate them as they really are and appropriately regulate our treatment of them.

Dr. Leach said, "It is crucial that we appropriately acknowledge animals' capacity for sentience and suffering. Given that there is no longer any meaningful scientific disagreement about many animals in this regard (e.g., pigs), it is now a question of understanding the psychological barriers that stand in the way of seeing animals as they truly are. Our work is the first to show that people are indeed too skeptical of animal minds compared to what is warranted by the available evidence."

Dr. Kristof Dhont added, "We are used to considering animals as

inferior to ourselves. Although our relationships with animals can be loving and nurturing, they are very often exploitative—as when we use them for [food](#), medical and [consumer research](#), labor, and entertainment. This can lead to animals being seen as basically objects. Our research highlights the ambiguous relationship people have with animals, and will serve as the foundations to helping people to align their beliefs around [animals](#) with their actions."

More information: Stefan Leach et al, Changing minds about minds: Evidence that people are too sceptical about animal sentience, *Cognition* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2022.105263](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2022.105263)

Provided by University of Kent

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