

## Do Animals Think or Feel?

Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions

June 16, 2020

**The Ontario Federation of Agriculture says no, despite clear evidence they do.**

Research shows [cows are bright and emotional](#), and [pigs are intelligent, emotional, and cognitively complex](#)

"...the question is not, *Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?*"

—[Jeremy Bentham](#)

An email about a report called [OFA \[Ontario Federation of Agriculture\] submission to the Standing Committee on General Government regarding the Security from Trespass and Protecting Food Safety Act \(Bill 156\)](#), which contained a quotation emphatically stating, "We simply do not know if animals are capable of reasoning and cognitive thought," shocked me. I immediately read through the report and lo and behold, the authors did make this unscientific and ludicrous claim. And, not surprisingly, there isn't a single citation in the entire in-house report.

Here is the full quotation, because I don't want people to think I'm fabricating what these thoroughly uninformed people wrote.

"The concept of 'sentient beings' refers to beings with the power to reason and think. The term also implies beings with an awareness of their surroundings who respond to sensations, have cognitive thoughts and have the capacity to perceive and experience life subjectively. Feeling is a subjective state, available only to the animal feeling it. As animals and humans are built and function differently, it is unfair to automatically attribute the sensations experienced by humans to be the same as those experienced by animals. Humans have the ability to communicate their experiences, and what they feel. Since animals cannot communicate with us, there's a huge assumption by animal activists that animals have emotional responses and the ability to reason and think, in the same way that humans do. *We simply do not know if animals are capable of reasoning and cognitive thought, therefore we cannot attribute human qualities of reasoning and cognitive thought on animals as the activists would like.*" (My emphasis) —[OFA \[Ontario Federation of Agriculture\] submission to the Standing Committee on General Government regarding the Security from Trespass and Protecting Food Safety Act \(Bill 156\)](#)

When I read this, I was shocked. It's clearly anti-science [given what we know about the cognitive and emotional lives of numerous diverse nonhuman animals \(animals\), including so-called "food animals."](#)<sup>1</sup> And it's also extremely misleading because humans shouldn't be the templates against which nonhumans should be measured. Few people criticize studies of animal [cognition](#) and emotions because nonhumans don't resemble or equal humans. There's no reason they should. People who know anything about the field of cognitive ethology (the comparative study of animal minds and what's in them) pay careful [attention](#) to what other animals know and feel, [capacities and adaptations that allow them to be card-carrying members of their species](#), not ours (or that of other nonhumans). [Intelligence](#) is a slippery concept and should *not* be used to assess suffering. Asking [if chickens suffer less than pigs](#), or [if pigs are as smart as dogs](#), is meaningless and idle speciesism.

In addition, the way in which people treat or mistreat other animals and how they feel about it isn't a matter of how smart they are. [Rather, nonhumans are sentient beings, and it's a matter of how they suffer](#), not *if* they suffer. So-called dumb animals experience deep and prolonged suffering, and, in fact, they're not really dumb!

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture claims we don't know if nonhumans think, so therefore they don't. Both are anti-science, defy reality, and are inane. [Animal sentience and animal emotions matter very much; animal sentience is not science fiction](#), and the life of every single *individual* matters because they're alive and have intrinsic or inherent value. They don't matter because of what's called their instrumental value—what they can do for us.

I wanted to know more about what was happening on the ground in Ontario, so I contacted Camille Labchuk, a lawyer and the Executive Director of [Animal Justice](#). Here's some of what she wrote. The Canadian province of Ontario is currently trying to ram through an ag-gag law in the midst of a pandemic. The bill would outlaw whistleblower exposés on farms and in slaughterhouses, and is fiercely opposed by animal advocacy organizations, consumer protection groups, civil libertarians, and journalists. Instead of acknowledging their own wrongdoing, the response from the powerful farming industry has been to lobby for so-called ag-gag laws that make it illegal to film and expose cruelty in the first place. [The legislative hearings on Ontario's ag-gag bill have given us a rare glimpse of the utter indifference that many farmers still have for animal suffering](#), and indeed their denial of basic science about the emotional and cognitive abilities of animals.

[Canada unfortunately has some of the worst animal protection laws in the Western world](#), and Ontario's ag-gag bill is about to make a bad situation far worse. Governments do not regulate animal welfare conditions on farms, and farmers are typically exempt from general animal cruelty laws. Farmers engage in a variety of standard yet painful practices with impunity, such as slicing off chicken beaks and piglet tails without anesthesia. To make matters worse, there is no public inspection of animal facilities. With no legal standards to enforce, what would be the point? Instead, the farm industry is left to make up its own rules.

Most people have compassion for animals but are often unaware of how badly animals suffer on farms. When they learn the truth, their trust in the farming industry plummets, and they consider dietary changes to avoid contributing to suffering.

### **Where have all the science and scientists gone?**

As a scientist, I often wonder: Where have all the science and scientists gone, and why hasn't every scientist spoken out against such trash. Why aren't they outraged by OFA's utter nonsense? And the OFA isn't alone in putting forth such junk. In the United States, [laboratory rats and mice and other fully sentient animals aren't considered to be animals](#) under the guidelines of the Federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA). No joke. The science that clearly shows these rodents are sentient beings continues to be totally ignored.<sup>1,2</sup>

To summarize, [who \(not what\) we eat](#) is a moral question and scientists must speak out. Concerning the notion of *who* we eat, Ms. Labchuk writes, "Of course, considering the 'who' is a massive public relations problem for farmers. The meat industry's business model depends on ignoring their suffering by crowding chickens raised for meat into dark, windowless warehouses; stuffing egg-laying hens into tiny battery cages; and confining mother pigs in [gestation](#) crates so small that they can't even turn around or play with their babies. Animals are trucked to slaughter when their short lives are over. The victims of the meat industry have few opportunities to experience positive emotional states, and experience significant pain and suffering."

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture's conceptualization of the cognitive and emotional lives of clearly sentient beings is pure fiction and should be read as such. Their misguided views support and will continue to perpetuate the extremely cruel and brutal treatment of "food animals" and ignore a wealth of scientific data. It's high time to bridge the "[knowledge translation gap](#)" and use what we know to truly help other animals. The "knowledge translation gap" refers to the practice of ignoring tons of science showing that nonhumans are sentient beings and going ahead and causing intentional harm in human-oriented arenas.

How we treat these and other clearly sentient nonhumans isn't necessarily a matter of rights. Rather, it's a matter of decency and depends on using what we know—and have known for a long time—on the animals' behalf. Indeed, we are obligated to do so.