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Confidence Levels or Degrees of Sentience?

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Abstract: I applaud Crump et al. (2022) for improving upon previous guidelines for the assessment of pain in non-human species and the application of their framework towards decapod crustaceans. Rather than constituting a mere intermediate solution between the scientific difficulty of settling questions of animal consciousness and the need for a framework for the purposes of animal welfare legislation, I will argue that the longer lists of criteria for animal sentience should make us realize that animal sentience is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that must be studied with a plethora of methods in order to assess its diversity across the tree of life.

I applaud the authors' (Crump et al. 2022) improvement of previous guidelines for the evaluation of whether animals can feel pain and their rigorous review of the literature to assess the capacity of crustaceans (and cephalopod mollusks in their longer report for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; see Birch et al. 2021) to feel pain. As the impact of their work on animal welfare legislation has elegantly demonstrated, research on animal sentience has reached a new height in being considered a legitimate subject of scientific investigation. Yet, it is neither in this update, nor in the serious consideration of sentience in crustaceans that I see the greatest value of their work. Let me elaborate.

Ever since animal pain and welfare became gained serious attention of policy-makers, there has been a tension between the need for official guidelines of animal protection and at the same time the difficulty of studying animal welfare as a state of subjective wellbeing (Browning 2020). Guidelines, such as those by Smith & Boyd (1991) were intended as pragmatic intermediate solutions to the question of which animals should be protected in the absence of a scientific consensus on the neurological basis of consciousness. Many scientists studying animal cognition exhibit something like a double standard for the attributions of sentience when it comes to policy-making and science. As Browning & Birch (2022) have argued, the moral demands of protecting sentient being force us to rely upon precautionary reasoning in a policy-making context. So there inevitably appears to be a gap here between scientific criteria for the protection of sentience-contenders and for the purposes of a science of animal sentience, which partially explains why there is such disagreement about the question of how animal consciousness should be studied scientifically (Browning & Veit 2022; Birch et al. 2022). As I shall argue in this commentary, however, the work by Crump et al. (2022) is moving us towards closing this gap.

Elsewhere, I have argued together with Browning (who is also an author of this target article) that in the study of a phenomena as complex as animal welfare, we require a so-called ‘perspectival pluralist’ approach in order to move animal welfare science further (Veit & Browning 2021). Without diving too much into the philosophical intricacies of what perspectival pluralism means (though see Giere 2006), it can be usefully summarized for as the idea that complex scientific phenomena require a plurality of models, methods, and concepts in order to better understand the target phenomena at hand. Crump et al. (2022) effectively embody this philosophical attitude towards a science of animal sentience well, since they, instead of arguing for a particular theory of sentience or something like a single litmus tests for its presence, remain strikingly pluralist in their attempts to strike a balance between a wide range of evidential resources to better assess the capacity to feel pain in decapod crustaceans. The term ‘perspectivalist’ is elegant to emphasize that despite the fact that the subjective experiences of other animals are inaccessible to direct observation, we can nevertheless use a plurality of difference sources of evidence to illuminate their feelings from a variety of perspectives; thus shining light on a phenomenon that the behaviourists believed would forever remain clouded in darkness.

Scientific progress has often been conceived as the narrowing of methods; a kind of natural selection process, in which only the best methods remain to provide close to certain evidence. So-called evidence hierarchies and gold standards of evidence are commonly discussed in the social and biomedical sciences, yet are lacking in the study of animal sentience. However, scientists and philosophers of science have been critical of the idea that we should rank different methods and models, maintaining that its is precisely their plurality that makes them an integral feature of science, rather than a bug (Williams 2010; Cartwright & Hardie 2012; Veit 2019). It is my hope that the work of Crump et al. will help us to make this idea accepted within the interdisciplinary study of animal sentience. Rather than constituting a necessary intermediate step in a very young science in which the phenomena is still mysterious, yet simultaneously of great ethical and political importance for animal welfare legislation, I believe that these lists will not be replaced with further scientific progress by something like a single litmus test. Simplicity may be a virtue we would like to have in frameworks that are meant to guide scientific policy-making, but animal sentience is unlikely to be a simple phenomena that is either present or not, instead differing in richness across the animal tree of life. As the authors nicely demonstrate, the evidence for sentience differs widely even within the crustacean branch of life.

Instead of admitting a large grey-zone in which we have more or less confidence about the presence of animal sentience in different animals, yet struggle to draw the boundaries of animal sentience (see also Veit & Huebner 2020), I urge the authors to take seriously the possibility that sentience itself is a gradual matter. Rather than assigning a medium-level of confidence to sentience in penaeid shrimps, we should treat them as case of something we may wish to call quasi-sentience as opposed to human-like sentience. That the capacity to feel is either present or not may have been an attractive idea when sentience was restricted to animals very similar to us, but as we gain confidence that insects, gastropods, cephalopods, and crustaceans have a degree of sentience, it makes less sense to speak of it as a primitive. Future progress will not lead to a litmus test of sentience, but longer more pluralistic lists of evidential criteria and more fine-grained distinctions that will show sentience itself to be a ‘pluralistic’: a complex multi-dimensional phenomena that can come in different forms (or as I have called it elsewhere “phenomenological complexity” (Veit 2022a,b,c). And if animal sentience turns out to be such a complex bundle of functional capacities, it will become obvious that sentience itself must be studied with a plurality of methods to understand its diversity as for any other biological trait. Doing so will constitute significant scientific progress and enable animal sentience research to directly

impact our knowledge of how to improve animal welfare, rather than just tell us which animals deserve protection. It is because of this that the plurality of methods we use to assess animal sentience is here to stay and only increase further.

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