

1 The importance of being sentient

Sentience is an attribute that endows an organism with the capacity to perceive and interact with the world in a subjective manner, encompassing a rich network of thoughts, emotions, and sensations (see [1]). This inherent ability grants individuals a deeply personal and unique experience, enabling them to navigate their surroundings successfully, form distinct perspectives, and cultivate a complex understanding of their existence. The interplay between an individual's sentience and the environment is a dynamic relationship, giving rise to an array of outcomes that can vary greatly from one person to another. Factors such as upbringing, cultural influences, genetic predispositions, and personal experiences further shape the sentient experience, leading to a diverse spectrum of interpretations, responses, and outcomes. Thus, sentience is a multifaceted phenomenon that gives rise to the incredible diversity of human and non-human experiences, as well as the infinite possibilities for growth, learning, and adaptation that emerge from the interaction between an individual and their surroundings. For example, a sentient being may feel joy in a beautiful natural setting, or it may feel sadness when it witnesses suffering. It may also feel a sense of connection to other sentient beings, or it may feel isolated and alone. There are some many different ways that sentience can affect an organism's interaction with the environment. The consequences of sentience are not always positive. For example, a sentient being may experience fear or anxiety when it is in a dangerous environment. It may also feel pain or suffering when it is injured or ill. However, even these negative experiences can be valuable, as they can help the organism to learn and grow. Here are some specific examples of how sentience can affect an organism's interaction with the environment. A sentient being may be more likely

1. to avoid dangerous environments;
2. to cooperate with other sentient beings in order to survive;
3. to learn and adapt to changes in the environment;
4. to appreciate the beauty of the natural world.

In general, we should avoid causing unnecessary suffering to sentient beings whenever possible. Is this a moral imperative?

Evidence from some studies [bekoff2009encyclopedia], [fine2015forward] has helped us to understand that a wide range of animals are sentient beings. This means they have the capacity to experience positive and negative feelings such as pleasure, joy, pain and distress that matter to the individual.

“The issue of animal sentience has implications for all areas of human-animal interaction; if animals can have feelings, as we know many can, both their physical and mental welfare needs must be taken into account. This is very important with respect to laws, policies and people's behavior relating to animals and their welfare.

RSPCA: We're the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and we've been here for animals since 1824. We're the world's oldest and largest animal welfare charity, with the primary focus of rescuing, rehabilitating and rehoming or releasing animals across England and Wales.

Science shows us that many species - not just mammals and birds - should be considered sentient. It wasn't long ago that there was a widely-held view that fish don't feel pain, but ground-breaking research found they can. There is currently debate about whether species like decapod crustaceans (crabs, lobsters etc.) and cephalopods (octopus, squid etc.) are sentient. The RSPCA and many others believe that there is sufficient scientific evidence to indicate that these animals should be considered to be sentient, and therefore protected appropriately by legislation. This would help ensure they are no longer subjected to some of the current practices, like boiling crabs and lobster alive, that cause serious pain and distress.

The RSPCA and others are hoping that there will soon be legislation enshrining the concept of animal sentience in law, so that all government departments would have to pay proper regard to (i.e. consider the impact on) the welfare of sentient animals when developing any policies in any area of life. With a Sentience Bill currently in draft form, some progress towards recognising animal sentience has been made."

Observation: Sentient beings have legal rights.

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." RSPCA proposed also that the Bill should include further explanation and guidance, including these concepts:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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 experience¹), show that animals are having negative or positive experiences, and are therefore sentient.
4. 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.
5. 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.

References

[1]