

## WHEN DOGS CARE ABOUT FAIRNESS AND RATS ARE COMPASSIONATE

**Interview with animal ethicist Dr. Judith Benz-Schwarzburg, Senior Researcher at the Messerli Research Institute, University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna.**



### **What distinguishes humans from non-human animals?**

There used to be this assumption that human beings have unique abilities like culture, language, and reason. These abilities distinguished them from supposedly dumb and insensitive animals. Over recent centuries, however, cognitive research has shown that the differences between human and nonhuman animals are rather differences in degree, not in kind.

### **Is there a cognitive ability that only humans have?**

It was assumed for a long time that the ability to act morally is the last big difference between humans and animals. Studies, including one from the Clever Dog Lab at the Messerli Research Institute, show that dogs might even have a sense of justice, for example. Dogs don't like it when they are being treated unfairly in comparison to another dog and will even go so far as to stop taking part in the experiment. Cognitive and social abilities of animals are also being researched in our Clever Pig Lab. Pigs are probably similarly intelligent to dogs but are treated completely differently by people. One wonders why.

### **There are these sayings like “stupid cow” and “you dumb pig”. Why are so many animals regarded as dumb?**

Social psychologist Brock Bastian and his colleagues conducted an interesting study. People were asked to sort pictures of animals according to which ones are edible and which are not. They also had to rank these animals depending on whether, in their opinion, the animal has a range of complex cognitive abilities and the capacity for suffering or not. The result was that the animals, we want to eat, are assessed as being dumb and with a lower capacity for suffering. There are psychological reasons for this. When people want to eat an animal, they are more likely to downgrade it to justify the killing and eating of that animal.

### **What about small animals? Are they underestimated?**

It is very likely that many animal species are more intelligent and more social than we have been assuming. We have to research this whole question further. We do know that rodents, for example, can feel empathy and comfort their fellow rodents. Rats, for example, are used in animal testing worldwide. In the USA, they are not even included in the animal

testing statistics. But rats especially have nevertheless actually proven to have complex capacities like empathy. One experiment locked a rat inside a transparent plexiglass pipe. On the outside, there was a lock through which the door could be opened. Another rat was placed outside the plexiglass pipe. Once the rat outside the pipe figured out how to open the door, the rat intentionally and quickly freed the rat that was locked inside. Even when there is a second plexiglass pipe with chocolate inside, they free the other rat and then share the chocolate together.

### **Can you name examples for undignified treatment of animals?**

In Thailand, there are boxing shows where orangutans have to perform as kickboxers or ring girls in bikinis. In other places, there are dog grooming competitions where dogs are prepared with hair curlers and made to look like a Barbie's horse. Lots of people find it funny to see photos of cats and dogs wearing costumes. Social media is full of such photos, and nobody really even stops to notice how undignified this is for the animal.



### **Not many people care about the well-being of fish. Why is that?**

For a long time, fish were considered incapable of suffering. Today we know that fish do feel pain and avoid it. The “catch and release” practice in fishing, where fish are caught and released back into the water certainly causes pain.

### **Do you see yourself as an animal rights activist? And if yes, how would you define it?**

Animal rights activists demand that we not only cause as little suffering to animals as possible (that is the classic animal welfare position) but also generally question how, and especially if, we should use animals at all. Many contexts in which we use animals are questionable, just think about meat consumption. There are also many arguments against keeping pets, such as breeding of living beings specifically to please our aesthetic preferences (which often results in cruel breeding) or for our own specific personal needs, like social partner-replacement. Why should we have the right to do these things to them? Try justifying that in words ... I personally wouldn't buy bred animals. I do have two guinea pigs from the animal shelter that live in an indoor enclosure. This is compatible with my position towards animals as long as they are kept in accordance with animal welfare, and the animal shelters are still full of animals looking for homes.

Animal welfare ethics is about avoiding suffering. Animal rights activists go one step further. They also talk about some animals as non-human persons and demand special rights for those animals.

They mean, for example great apes, dolphins, and elephants. Many of those animals are cognitively and emotionally on a similar level as small human children. Shouldn't they also have a right to life, a right to freedom and a right to not be tortured? Such rights might be relevant to them as "non-human persons".

At the moment, animals can be killed if someone wants to eat them, they can be locked in a zoo for people to look at them, and they can be subjected to pain, suffering and impairments if someone wants to conduct experiments on them. Animal rights activists often refuse to accept such contexts of use. Furthermore, there are several problems with the treatment of animals that animal welfare approaches don't even begin to cover. Should I, for example, kill an animal for my benefit – even if it takes place without causing suffering? Should I, as mentioned above with the case of orangutan kickboxing shows, make fun of, and degrade them, even if it (seemingly) "doesn't hurt them"?

### **When is it morally acceptable in your opinion to eat animals?**

Honestly? I would say that if you were to starve to death or get sick otherwise, and if there was no other way. This position is based on me not personally knowing of any sound philosophical argument to deprive an animal of their right to life. Secondly, our nutrition, at least here in rich industrial nations, is not a case of "me or the animal"; we can eat very healthily as a vegetarian or even a vegan.

Why should it be necessary that an animal, a living being with capacity for suffering and complex abilities and needs, dies for me? The arguments, "but I like the taste" or "after all, we have always eaten animals" are, compared to the animal losing its life, not really strong arguments. Vegetarian and vegan food can taste very good. And if we always just carry on doing what we have been doing, even though we know better, then there would never be any moral progress to speak of.

### **How will the human-animal relationship change in the next 20 years?**

Animal use will rise worldwide, and at the same time, more people will question the handling of animals. There will be a lot more research about the sentience of animals. This will hopefully change our perspective on them.

### **Thank you for the interview!**

