

# Skepticism, Empathy, and Animal Suffering

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Received: 10 December 2012 / Accepted: 13 May 2013 / Published online: 5 October 2013  
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**Abstract** The suffering of nonhuman animals has become a noted factor in deciding public policy and legislative change. Yet, despite this growing concern, skepticism toward such suffering is still surprisingly common. This paper analyzes the merits of the skeptical approach, both in its moderate and extreme forms. In the first part it is claimed that the type of criterion for verification concerning the mental states of other animals posed by skepticism is overly (and, in the case of extreme skepticism, illogically) demanding. Resting on Wittgenstein and Husserl, it is argued that skepticism relies on a misguided epistemology and, thus, that key questions posed by it face the risk of absurdity. In the second part of the paper it is suggested that, instead of skepticism, empathy together with intersubjectivity be adopted. Edith Stein's take on empathy, along with contemporary findings, are explored, and the claim is made that it is only via these two methods of understanding that the suffering of nonhuman animals can be perceived.

**Keywords** Animal suffering · Skepticism · Animal ethics · Problem of other minds · Empathy · Intersubjectivity

## Introduction

“Animal suffering”<sup>1</sup> is one key notion within legislative policies and normative debate concerning the treatment of nonhuman animals. Yet, it is still often met with a skeptical attitude, the roots of which can be found in infamous Cartesian doubt concerning animal mentation, and—on a more theoretical level—the problem of other minds. Hence, many have presented claims according to which talk of animal minds and suffering easily falls into “anthropomorphism” (see Kennedy 1992; Carruthers 1992).

For some, even in fields such as ethology and animal welfare sciences, animal suffering and other, directly related capacities remain an unknown, “bracketed” terrain. The skeptical approach stipulates that while nonhuman animals may, indeed, be able to suffer, human beings cannot know this for certain, for one cannot gain access to the subjective experiences of other animals. Because of this lack of certainty, it is not considered scientific to refer to such subjective states. Following suit, even the staunch, admirable defender of animal cognition, ethologist Marian Stamp Dawkins, clarifies that her take on animal emotions is based on personal opinion and is thus not “a view that can be grounded in empirical fact.” Moreover, she maintains (echoing many contemporary welfare scientists) that: “I carefully put scare quotes around words such as ‘pleasure’ and ‘suffering’ in describing positive and negative emotional states” (Dawkins 2003, 98–99).

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<sup>1</sup> “Animal suffering” is here defined as a holistic affective state with high intensity (see Aaltola 2012).

While skepticism has been adopted by natural scientists, it in fact remains primarily a philosophical issue: It revolves around epistemological notions concerning what it is to know another mind. The paper at hand explores these notions as related to the suffering of nonhuman animals. First, criticism of skepticism will be mapped out, based on the idea that it asks the wrong question and errs in its attempt to grasp epistemology concerning other minds. Second, alternatives to skepticism, and in particular empathy and intersubjectivity, will be investigated.

Before continuing, it needs to be noted that there are, of course, varying degrees of skepticism. For moderate skeptics, animals should not be described as minded creatures until there is *sufficient* evidence, “sufficient” here meaning evidence beyond reasonable doubt. Moderate skepticism can quite feasibly coincide with and support many of the conclusions offered in this paper and indeed is arguably necessary when dealing with species who express mindedness in radically different ways than human beings. Here, the requirement of evidence acts as a motivation to know more and a guide in grasping animal minds: At best, it facilitates rather than restricts (its facilitating role is particularly poignant when openness and inclusiveness in regards to what counts as “evidence” is maintained).

For extreme skeptics, minded descriptions are only warranted in the light of *absolute* evidence, “absolute” meaning evidence for which there is no alternative explanations. According to this form of skepticism, one will never be able to know anything certain about the mindedness of other animals, and therefore one ought to not only desist from “strong claims” concerning it but even question the sensibility of further scrutiny into animal minds. This paper concentrates especially on extreme skepticism, although some of the criticism presented is applicable also to moderate skepticism.

### Skepticism Over Skepticism

Eileen Crist (1999) has argued that animal minds are approached via *internal* and *external* descriptions. The former rests on the idea of subjective mindedness and experience, and the latter on ultimately mechanical explanations (that involve, for instance, complex relations between the neurophysiological composition of an organism and her environment). The choice of description bears a crucial impact on the extent to which animal suffering is

recognized. According to Bernard Rollin, natural sciences often adopt external explanations, with devastating consequences for our grasp of nonhuman mentation—in fact, the resulting skepticism “in essence removes questions of animal welfare from the realm of legitimate empirical investigation.” Thus, animal experiences are not considered something science should concern itself with, even in the realm of welfare (Rollin 2003b, 70).

In short, if internal states are excluded from the start, the issues of “animal suffering” or even “welfare” do not rise. Yet, in the meantime, folk psychology concerning other animals allows for, and indeed often rests on, the mindedness of at least some of them (the most common example being companion animals). As Rollin argues, internal descriptions are in fact often necessary in order to interact with and (more regrettably) utilize animals effectively: “[W]e could not interpret animal behaviour in ordinary life without imputing such notions as pain, fear, anger, and affection to animals” (Rollin 2003b, 70). Put simply, a dog trainer or a sheep herder would be very unsuccessful if she did not take animal mindedness into account and recognize such subjective states as fear, joy, excitement, and suffering.

Hence, scientific skepticism and folk conceptions offer conflicting takes on animal minds and suffering. This leads to confusion and perhaps paves the path for a situation in which welfare scientists may, on the personal level, see it as self-evident that other animals can suffer while, on the “official” or “public” level, they choose to advocate skepticism. That is, many support both forms of descriptions. Arguably, this adds to the current state of contradictory, fragmented animal imagery, which on the one hand feeds caring, ethical commitment and on the other demands detachment and instrumentality.

Although skepticism is often the chosen scientific approach, there are reasons to question its validity. First of these is rather practical and concerns the nature of evidence. In its insistence that “we cannot know for sure,” particularly extreme skepticism has succumbed to ignoring Occam’s razor. Relatively simple explanations concerning animal behavior, which would confirm mindedness, are often sidelined if other hypotheses, even if significantly more arduous and cumbersome, can be found. Thus, the skeptic will go quite far in her insistence on exceedingly complex mechanical explanations. The plausibility of doing so is to be doubted, particularly in the light of evolutionary considerations that point toward relative continuums between species: If mindedness and subjective states such as suffering

serve an evolutionary function within the human species, would it not be sensible to favor a similar approach in relation to those animals whose behaviors, histories, and physiologies could also reasonably have given birth to mindedness? That is, the question over why look for more arduous and complex alternative explanations remains unanswered.

Moreover, extreme skeptics are posing an impossible demand on those more inclined toward internal descriptions: They are, implicitly or explicitly, suggesting that the latter prove there are no other alternative hypotheses (even if highly improbable and awkward). Even the most creative or complex behavior can, in theory, be explained by references to exceedingly complex mechanisms, which raises the bar for acceptance of animal mindedness impossibly high. (It is perhaps precisely this that sets the way for the type of timidity found amongst ethologists and welfare scientists: They do not dare to refer to internal states, in fear of not having covered all possible mechanical, external descriptions.) Yet, logically this burden of proof is impossible to meet: One can never manifest the absolute nonexistence of alternative hypotheses. If ethologists and welfare scientists accept the burden posed by skeptics, they shall never be able to establish internal states of nonhuman animals—brackets will remain. Thus, Raimond Gaita argues that the skeptic will remain unsatisfied, even when the most obvious, glaring evidence is put in front of her: “Her [an animal’s] howling provides evidence that she was in terrible pain. But it provides evidence only because there is no room for serious doubt whether she is a sensate creature. Should someone doubt that, then her howling and the howling of a million dogs could not convince him” (Gaita 2002, 61; see also Jamieson 2002).

The merits of this criticism become clearer when considered in the human context. Martha Nussbaum is careful to point out one significant pitfall of skepticism: Applied consistently, it would force us to doubt also the mental contents of other human beings, for here, too, certainty is beyond reach (propositional language—Descartes’ answer—does not offer a point of rescue, for language can be infamously misleading, limited, and deceptive). Therefore, attribution of emotions to fellow human beings “involves projection that goes beyond evidence” (Nussbaum 2001, 124); moreover, we do not demand that all alternative hypotheses be dealt with before talk of “human suffering” appears acceptable.

The question becomes: If, in the context of humans, we accept that the problem of other minds (which feeds

extreme skepticism in its demand for certainty and acknowledgment of possible alternative hypotheses) fails to manifest that other humans ought to be approached as zombies or brains in a vat, why should scientists take the very same problem to justify doubt over and exclusion of animal subjectivity? That is, the type of impossible burden of proof placed on claims of animal mindedness is not applied to the human context, and one must question its validity also in the nonhuman setting. Thus, Gaita argues that: “Perhaps, as Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested, we should cease to look for a further justification while at the same time refusing to concede that this is intellectual dereliction” (2002, 50). “Our certainty is without evidence—*completely* without evidence—and is none the worse for that” (Gaita 2002, 62, *emphasis original*).

Skepticism can also be criticized on a more foundational level. It has been blamed for having the wrong approach to epistemology—quite simply, skepticism asks the wrong question (“Where is the evidence for minds of others?”). One of the most famous critics of the problem of other minds is Ludwig Wittgenstein, according to whom “[w]e do not see facial contortions and make the inference that he is feeling joy, grief, boredom. We describe the face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features” (Wittgenstein 1980, 570). According to Wittgenstein, then, acknowledgment of other minds or mental contents is not based on inference—the very method demanded by skepticism. One does not deduce on the basis of evidence that others have given subjective states, but rather the acknowledgment is based on something far more immediate. One common interpretation of what this “immediate” consists of is that one *approaches* others as minded subjects, which again enables recognition of mental states (see Gaita 2002; Jamieson 2002). Indeed, in a famous passage Wittgenstein argues that: “My attitude toward him is an attitude towards a soul: I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul” (1958, 178, *emphasis original*). Therefore, when it comes to mentation, what one sees in others is primarily the result of how others are approached—inference has no part to play and indeed makes little sense in this context (see again Jamieson 2002). We do not approach other human beings as zombies until proven otherwise, because our approach toward other human beings does not include the possibility of zombiehood. Indeed, it would be thoroughly absurd to demand verification or resort to inference in this context. Arguably, the same applies to other animals, who equally ought not be

viewed via the lens of doubt. Accordingly, John Searle has argued that: “I do not infer that my dog is conscious, any more than, when I came into this room, I inferred that the people present are conscious. I simply respond to them as is appropriate to conscious beings. I just treat them as conscious beings and that is that” (Searle 1994, 218).<sup>2</sup>

The key suggestion of the Wittgensteinian criticism is that, instead of evidence, one must search for *meaningfulness*: What types of approaches to or depictions of other individuals are meaningful? From this angle, skepticism is nonsensical, for other minds are not meaningfully approached with the detached demand for verification: Instead, such minds are assumed, because doing so is integral to our very take on reality. For Gaita, we derive the very meaning of a “mind” and related mental capacities from interaction with other beings, including other animals. Therefore, it does not make sense to ask whether animals truly have minds, for they lend us the whole concept: “Out of ... interactions ... between us and animals, there developed ... our *very concepts* of thought, feeling, intention, belief, doubt, and so on. ... If the word ‘consciousness’ means anything then I have no doubt that Gypsy [a dog] is a conscious being” (Gaita 2002, 61 and 62, *emphasis original*). Therefore, to question the mindedness of other animals requires that one forsakes the very root that gives concepts concerning mental capacities their meaning. Daniel Dennett has famously talked of the “intentional stance,” which makes us perceive mental contents in others (and for Dennett 1998, this stance is also the source of anthropomorphism). Within the Wittgensteinian view, the intentional stance becomes a positive, enabling feature that facilitates rather than obscures perception.

In addition to Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are also well-known critics of skepticism. According to Husserl, skepticism of other minds is foundationally mistaken, simply because individuals are not first and foremost a body, possibly combined with a mind; rather, bodies and minds are interrelated and inseparable. This is how we perceive others, how others are felt or experienced:

Now, as to the persons we encounter in society, their bodies are naturally given to us in intuition just

like the other objects of our environment, and consequently so are they as persons, unified with the bodies. But we do not find there two things, entwined with one another in an external way; bodies and persons. We find unitary human beings, who have dealings with us (Husserl 1989, 246).

To see a body is to see a mind. Merleau-Ponty has an equally candid response to the problem of other minds: According to him, it is not a problem to begin with, because we do not approach others as bodies that possibly lack a mind. The problem of other minds is bizarre from the viewpoint of lived experience. This is related to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied experience, within which “mind” and “body” cannot be separated (indeed, even to speak of them separately may be misleading, for there can be no body without a mind, no machine without a ghost). Body senses and experiences, while mental contents are embodied. From this viewpoint, skepticism appears as absurd: “A face, a signature, a form of behaviour cease to be mere ‘visual data’ whose psychological meaning is to be sought in our inner experience, and the mental life of others becomes an immediate object, a whole charged with immanent meaning” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 67). Therefore, the dualism inherent in skepticism is conflicting with our everyday perceptions concerning ourselves and others, which again makes skepticism appear alien to lived experience.

Moreover, for both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, understanding of the reality in itself rests on the idea that others, too, can perceive and experience it, that it is open for a multitude of subjective perspectives. In this way, the reality is “shared” with others, and as a consequence our very worldview requires undoubting acknowledgment of the minds of others. As a result, just as “to ask whether the world is real is not to know what one is saying” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Carman 2008, 141), to ask whether the minds of other beings are real is a point of incongruity. Merleau-Ponty adds to this that even self-understanding develops via a pre- or non-lingual interaction with others, whose minds and experiences we recognize immediately. Doubt in this context is utterly misplaced, for it would force us toward disintegration of self (Merleau-Ponty 2002). Therefore, skepticism goes against key elements of thought: our presumption that the world is perceived by others and our very sense of self. From this light, it becomes not only untenable, but deeply misguided.

<sup>2</sup> Not all are as favorable toward this approach. For instance, the skeptic Peter Carruthers maintains that “[i]t really is something of a scandal that people’s intuitions, in this domain, are given any weight at all” (2000, 199).

Again, implications from the viewpoint of animal mentation and suffering are obvious. The presumption that nonhuman animals are *not* minded creatures comes with a heavy price, for it casts us into a world where other creatures are empty physical shells, lacking interiority. Indeed, Husserl’s pupil Edith Stein goes so far as to suggest that skepticism is the “odium of complete absurdity,” for from the viewpoint of “inference of analogy,” “we see nothing around us but physical soulless and lifeless bodies” (Stein 1989, 26). That is, skepticism leads to a hollow, bleak reality dictated by mechanical bodies and materiality, which radically goes against folk understanding of the world and its habitants—including nonhuman animals.

Therefore, not only our meanings concerning mental capacities but our very epistemology and folk understanding of what it is to exist as an embodied being are based on the assumption of other minds. In short, perceiving a world and perceiving embodied creatures in that world rest on assuming the mindedness of others. This is most evident in the context of other human beings, but there appears to be no reason why the same could not be stated in relation to other animals. Such criticism has clear indications from the viewpoint of suffering: Surely the capacity of other-than-humans to suffer ought to be presumed rather than doubted, if indeed meanings concerning suffering, not to mention embodiedness and a shared world, have any role to play.

As suggested earlier, folk understandings of animals tend to confirm animals as minded individuals: “[C]ommon sense *perceives* mental states in others in exactly the way that it perceives physical states or objects” (Rollin 2003a, 88, *emphasis original*). Hence, *perception* arises as relevant: Others are immediately seen or acknowledged as minded creatures. This suggests that recognizing the suffering of nonhuman animals does not depend solely on the types of meanings constructed around animality (which, as Cora Diamond 2004, has pointed out, can go toward building dichotomies between the minds of humans and other animals), but rather on something much more direct. But what could such perception be based on?

### Empathy and Intersubjectivity

Nussbaum has argued that understanding the mental contents of others requires an empathetic reading; indeed, for her, empathy enables aforementioned perception.

Nussbaum uses as an example studies on learned helplessness conducted by Martin Seligman, in which dogs were trained to respond to a given stimulus in a given way and were then utterly confused by punishing them randomly with electric shocks even when they responded appropriately, until they became emotionally broken creatures. Seligman adopted a factual approach to the animals in question, which enabled him to utterly detach from their subjective experiences and suffering. Indeed, for him, the emotions of the animals were most likely “emotions” in brackets, the very existence of which could be doubted. Empathy would have enabled Seligman to perceive the emotions and suffering of the dogs, which again would quite possibly have eradicated the motivations for continuing the experiment (Nussbaum 2001).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the suggestion is that empathy acts as a perceptive tool, via which the mental contents of others may manifest. The underlying claim is that minds cannot be reduced to proof and evidence—instead, they require a phenomenological approach.<sup>4</sup> Of course, reference to empathy is nothing new. Already David Hume, for whom it was painstakingly obvious that animals are minded creatures, famously emphasized the role of empathy (or what he termed “sympathy”): “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequence, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own” (Hume 1975, 316).

And what is “empathy”? For Edith Stein—one of the first and few Western philosophers to dedicate a whole book on the topic—it “is a kind of act of perceiving *sui generis*. ... Empathy ... is the experience of foreign consciousness in general” (Stein 1989, 11). Significantly, it is representational and not “primordial,” which means that one does not have to experience what others experience (something more akin to “emotional contagion”), but rather one can simply seek to perceive

<sup>3</sup> Using Nussbaum’s reading, Fox and McLean have argued that, within animal experimentation, lack of perception may often lead to similarly monstrous results. In these situations, experiments have allowed researchers’ “perceptions ... [to] become shallow and faint; they don’t see what is there to be seen because they ignore their emotional and imaginative responses and what these responses should reveal to them”—they are taking part in a “desensitised reading process” (Fox and McLean 2008, 167 and 168).

<sup>4</sup> For Husserl, too, empathy was crucial, for it enables one to perceive others as fellow subjects rather than as physical bodies—empathy forms “our primary form of experience of others, as others” (Smith 2007, 228).



what that experience could be. Following suit, many contemporary authors suggest that empathy takes place “off-line,” without the requirement of a “felt” sensation that would mirror what others are going through (see Nilsson 2003; Goldman 1995).<sup>5</sup> However, Stein also emphasizes that empathy is not like fantasy in that it cannot be doubted: It forms an immediate certainty of the experiences of others. In other words, even if empathy is not primordial, it does constitute a feeling of absolute confidence in the accuracy of one’s perception. In this way, although one does not have to feel what others feel, empathy does include an affective dimension: The sense of insight is, in itself, embodied.

Perhaps, then, empathy is best explained as an *experienced insight* into the mental contents of others. Within it, the experiences of others are grasped in an embodied, affective fashion, beyond doubt. In contemporary social and neuropsychological literature, empathy is often divided into “affective” and “cognitive” varieties (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004). The above definition includes both strands, as empathy emerges as a method of understanding others, within which one has an affective response toward the experiences of others, combined with cognitive perception. Indeed, it finds support from current literature, within which empathy has been defined as a “particular orientation toward the other, in which agents are attuned and responsive to the affective states of those with whom they empathise” (Hourdequin 2012, 409).

Although such a notion of a direct, immediate communication may appear thoroughly mystical, it is rooted in sociobiology and finds an evolutionary, physiological basis. Dan Zahavi has criticized the notion, according to which one is imprisoned in one’s internal states, unable to share them with others, and indeed incapable of gaining access to the mental states of other beings. For Zahavi, internal states are embodied and can thus be read from bodily behaviors: “Expressive movements and behavior is soaked with the meaning of the mind; it reveals the mind to us” (Zahavi 2008, 520). Therefore, it is suggested that subjective states, including suffering, are written onto our gestures, impressions, and behaviors, and such writing provides a simple, direct route for empathy. Indeed, this was also

Wittgenstein’s argument: “Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face. This is essential to what we call ‘emotion’” (Wittgenstein 1980, 570). More than this, empathy is also facilitated by physiological, behavioral, and neurobiological responses toward others. Frans de Waal argues that empathy “provides an observer (the subject) with access to the subjective state of another (the object) through the subject’s own neural and bodily representations. When the subject attends to the object’s state, the subject’s neural representations of similar states are automatically and unconsciously activated” (de Waal 2008, 286).

Indeed, neurostudies manifest that observing the pain of others leads to physiological changes in those parts of the brain that handle perception and action concerning one’s own pain. This enables one to “resonate” with the pain of another (Decety and Jackson 2006). In other words, suffering of others may be written onto their behaviors and gestures, and reading these embodied representations is based on one’s own immediate behavioral and physical responses. Empathy emerges as something quite grounded, and the veil of mysticism is lifted. This, again, offers ammunition against accusations of anthropomorphism or sentimentalism. Just as one can perceive, on the basis of neurobiological traits, suffering in other human beings, one may perceive it in other animals—suggestions of animal suffering are not whimsical or purely cultural but based on our biological ability to read others and to respond to them appropriately.

Within empathy there is no inference, verification, detachment, or logical analysis—indeed, when these take place, we may become removed from empathic perception for the simple reason that immediacy is lost. Understood in this way, empathy emerges as a counterforce to skepticism. This is supported by another important aspect of empathy: Empathy forms a bridge, via which others emerge as *subjects* with their own experiences. Thus, Stein argued that:

This individual is not given as a physical body, but as a sensitive, living body belonging to an “I”, an “I” that senses, thinks, feels and wills. The living body of this “I” not only fits into my phenomenal world but is itself the centre of orientation of such phenomenal world. It faces this world and communicates with me (Stein 1989, 5).

Stein’s suggestion has become part of mainstream understandings of empathy, within which empathy has

<sup>5</sup> To use Peter Goldie’s words: “Empathy is a process or procedure by which a person centrally imagines the narrative (the thoughts, feelings and emotions) of another person” (Goldie 2000, 195).

been positioned as a necessary criterion for viewing others as “subjects” in a pro-social fashion. Thus, the renowned psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen argues that: “When you treat someone as an object, your empathy has been turned off” (2011, 7; see also Hoffman 1990). In short, empathy allows one to perceive others as subjects, which forms a radical rift with skepticism: Whereas the former approaches others as subjects, the latter demands one to approach them as mechanical creatures, thus feeding “mechanomorphia” (Crist 1999) and “anthropodenial” (de Waal 2006). In the human context, lack of empathy defines personality disorders such as psychopathy and narcissism; it is a serious condition with potentially severe antisocial consequences. Without empathy, others become manipulatable objects, whose experiences and subjectivity are not noted and who may therefore be violated regardless of their welfare. Indeed, Baron-Cohen (2011) speaks of “empathy corrosion” as a disorder that enables one to overlook the subjectivity of others.

The daunting, yet obvious question becomes: Does skepticism not push us toward behaving in a psychopathic, narcissistic fashion in our dealings with other animals? Expressed more mildly: If indeed empathy is necessary for the recognition of other humans’ subjectivity, does the same not apply also to nonhuman animals? Lack of empathy would certainly explain Seligman’s experiment and indeed many contemporary forms and practices of utilizing animals to be found from animal agriculture, laboratories, and hunting fields. All too often, empathy has been replaced with skepticism, which has allowed one to detach from animal suffering and to thereby question and ultimately sideline animal subjectivity. From this perspective, empathy emerges as a core component in taking animal suffering seriously.

One obvious counterargument is that many struggle to empathize with other animals. As noted by Hume (1975) and de Waal (2008), empathy is strengthened by similarity, proximity, and familiarity: We tend to empathize more with those who are like us, close to us, or personally known to us. Since other animals are potentially striking in their difference and often far removed from our everyday lives, does this not mean that empathy toward them stands on shaky grounds? First, it needs to be stated that one can overcome the difficulties of proximity and familiarity by urging people to get closer to and more familiar with other animals. As the renowned ethologist Marc Bekoff argues: “There are no substitutes for listening to, and having direct experiences with, other

animals”; for him, animals are “a way of knowing” (Bekoff 2000, 869). Similarly, Nussbaum argues (in relation to the scientific study of animals) that it “must begin with experience of interaction between humans and animals” (2001, 92). Perhaps, then, what is needed is better awareness of what types of creatures animals are and how they may perceive the world—in particular, those animals who are utilized the most (cows, chickens, pigs, and others frequently encountered only on a plate) and are arguably very detached and distanced from human experience. Interaction with these animals and their often-miserable condition may help to provoke greater empathy toward them.

But what of similarity? Can humans empathize with other animals, or is empathy mere fanciful projection of human-like qualities? According to Richard Holton and Rae Langton, the sensory worlds of other animals are simply too different for one to comprehend them. Referring to bats and platypuses, they argue that “[w]e have no idea what it is like to see the world this way—and no amount of sharpening our sensitivities could ever help us find out” and, as a result, “the method of imaginative identification has achieved nothing” (Holton and Langton 1998, 15). Now, first it needs to be noted that the physiological and neurobiological grounds of empathy stated above go some way to undermine this argument, particularly as it comes to core subjective states such as suffering whose manifestation includes behaviors (including efforts to escape and vocalizations) that are shared or accessible by a wide variety of species. Yet, differences are real and often nothing short of breathtaking—do they not render talk of animal subjectivity and suffering hopelessly projective?

Stein’s take on empathy suggests otherwise. Significantly, the issue of evidence and objective accuracy are, for Stein, beside the point: Like the problem of other minds, skepticism over empathy asks the wrong question. Empathy is a form of knowledge, which it makes no sense to doubt and consequently the accuracy of which it makes no sense to verify: “The world in which we live is not only a world of physical bodies but also of experiencing subjects external to us, of whose experiences we know. This knowledge is indubitable” (Stein 1989, 5).

Objectively, empathy may lead us astray or it may be spot on; however, the issue of objectivity does not arise when one experiences empathy for another being. Therefore, within Stein’s definition, the issue of *objectivity* is replaced with a sense of *immediacy*, which

again is placed beyond doubt. There is much merit to Stein's stance. Arguably, empathy must be trusted, even if it always includes the element of potential distortion, for it is ultimately all that we have—the most grounded method of understanding others. To question empathy as a method on the grounds that it may not always give us truthful representations would surmount to questioning the very basis of our knowledge concerning others.

What is required, therefore, is an epistemological shift from objectivity toward immediacy. The practical implication of doing so is that, yes, empathy can lead to anthropomorphic projections, just as it can spark accurate perceptions of animal experiences. Yet, this does not mean that empathy ought to be forsaken; rather, a step beyond this problem is required. Following suit, for Stein empathy toward nonhuman animals is possible, despite sensory and physiological differences. Stein argues: “Should I perhaps consider a dog's paw in comparison with my hand, I do not have a mere physical body, either, but a sensitive limb of a living body. And here a degree of projection is possible, too. For example, I may sense-in pain when the animal is injured” (Stein 1989, 59). Indeed, she suggests that understanding foreign expressions (of people) is equal to comprehending other animals: “[T]hus, too, I can understand the tail wagging of a dog as an expression of joy if its appearance and its behavior otherwise disclose such feelings and its situation warrants them” (Stein 1989, 86).<sup>6</sup>

Are there further ways to avoid anthropocentric or anthropomorphic hallucinations that project onto the animal characteristics that suit human interests (see Weil 2012)? One solution is offered by the philosophy of Simone Weil, which centralizes the notion of “attention.” Attention allows attunement with the surrounding world, without misleading preconceptions. It is enabled by letting go of all effort and of allowing the obvious to emerge from behind our attempts to make sense of the world. In particular, one is to let go of self-serving, self-directed conceptualizations. Thus, Weil explains that in order to grasp truth “attention alone—that attention which is so full that the ‘I

disappears—is required of me” (2002, 118, see also Weil 2005). This notion has been made use of in some animal philosophy, and particularly “attentive love” has emerged as an element in feminist care theory (Donovan 2007). Moreover, Anat Pick (2011) has used Weil as a guide to come to grips with creaturely vulnerability. It would appear to be a fruitful concept also in the context of empathy, for it enables us to achieve the type of immediacy empathy relies on (indeed, Lori Gruen 2007, 340, marks that “empathy for different others requires attentiveness to their experiences”). Thus, anthropocentric and anthropomorphic ramifications may be set aside by truly placing one's attention on the animal—exclusive of self-interest and obvious cultural preconceptions. This, again, lays the path for grasping animal particularity in all its nuances. In other words, attention may act as the door to immediacy. Weil continues: “Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns” (2002, 120). It needs to be noted that here emphasis is not on objectivity or neutrality, ideals impossible to wholly achieve; attentiveness simply means placing the animal as a *reference point* of inquiry, centralizing her instead of self-serving motivations or culturally colored notions concerning “animals.” This helps us to avoid naïve or manipulative projections and to truly concentrate on the animal in front of us—even if the accuracy of empathic readings can never be objectively verified.

Therefore, it is here suggested that, instead of skepticism, animal suffering ought to be approached via empathy. Just as in intra-human dealings, also in relation to other animals empathy serves a crucial role in enabling one to comprehend subjectivity in others. Before concluding, it is worth noting one further element that empathy itself relies on—intersubjectivity.

Empathy is commonly offered two grounds. Within “theory-theory,” empathy is based on the capacity to have a theory of mind, and within “simulation-theory,” empathy is made dependent on one's ability to simulate the experiences of others. Yet, both appear to miss something crucial, which is *openness* toward others as minded beings. It is here that intersubjectivity gains its basis, as the argument is that we must be “intersubjectively open” before empathy can take place—we must have a “pre-reflective experience of the other as an embodied being like oneself” (Thompson 2001, 12). In this way, intersubjectivity sparks empathy into existence: It is the approach on which empathy can flourish. In short, intersubjectivity refers to openness

<sup>6</sup> Yet, saying this, differences cannot be sidelined, and it is possible that they hide a great deal of animal suffering from human perception (see NRC 2009; Aaltola 2012). Therefore, empathy toward other animals (and other human beings) must always be accompanied by a sense of regard for the specificity of other individuals.



toward the subjectivity of others; within it, we relate to others as a “you.”

Intersubjectivity should come easy to us, as it serves a key role in mental development. As Zahavi (2008) points out, children learn to approach others as subjects far before they have a theory of mind, and it is here that we find intersubjectivity. Social animals, in particular, are argued to be “intrinsically ‘intersubjectively open’” (Thompson 2001, 14). The constitution of intersubjectivity takes place before the development of lingual ability or indeed theory of mind (Gallagher 2001). Therefore, arguably, noting the mental lives of animals, including their capacity to suffer, is evident before the development of reasoned ability to construct and adopt culturally influenced notions that may go on to support skepticism and mechanomorphia. Although the latter often begin to dominate, intersubjectivity remains an option and gains a pre- or non-lingual basis also in adulthood.

It also may be evolutionarily written onto the minds of particularly social beings and remain manifested in folk psychology—indeed, differing degrees of openness toward intersubjectivity may explain some of the radical differences between individuals’ takes on animal mentation and suffering. Although many are pushed toward becoming increasingly detached from intersubjectivity with particularly those animals used in animal industries and experimentation, it would be beneficial to minimize detachment and increase intersubjectivity. Here we could follow the lesson offered by Merleau-Ponty (2002), according to which it is advantageous to seek the child in us instead of aiming for more abstract, propositional detachment.

Therefore, perceiving animal suffering may depend on the very basis from which we approach others. It is a matter of our own psychological orientation toward the world—not simply a question concerning the psychology of other animals. The most crucial mistake of skepticism can be found from here: Skepticism overlooks the role *our minds* play in determining whether and when nonhuman animals can suffer. In order to become more keen observers, empathy and intersubjectivity need to be rehearsed.

## Conclusion

Skepticism presumes animals to be mindless creatures, and in its extreme form will only accept a contrary claim if absolute verification is offered. It has paved

the way for the still common claim according to which one must speak of the subjective states of animals, including their suffering, only within brackets. Although behaviorism in the context of human beings has become largely defunct, remnants of it live on even among animal welfare sciences. Yet, there are reasons to be critical of skepticism. Skepticism adopts a stance on epistemology that defies core aspects of “sense-making.” Particularly, the problem of other minds is claimed to lead to absurd questions, which would force us to question those very beliefs that our sense of reality is constituted on. It is for this reason that skepticism appears hopelessly awkward—even if theoretically entirely possible—in the human context. It is here argued that the same criticism of skepticism must be adopted also in relation to nonhuman minds. This claim is further supported by the fact that the demand for proof posed by skepticism is impossibly high.

As an alternative approach, empathy and intersubjectivity are offered. Empathy facilitates an immediate sense of the mental contents of others, and although questions of accuracy can be raised, they remain either answerable (given core similarities across species pave the way for also reasoned justification of empathy) or irrelevant (in many cases, both in the human and animal context, empathy resists doubt). Empathy, again, is based on intersubjectivity, which is intrinsically opposed to skepticism, and consists of an openness toward the subjectivity of others—it is an approach toward others that presumes mindedness. Both empathy and intersubjectivity form a way of perceiving nonhuman animals that offers a more fruitful ground than skepticism toward understanding their mental states, including suffering (see also Aaltola 2012).

The core suggestion in the paper is that, paradoxically, whereas skepticism demands validation for claims of animal mindedness, it may only be by questioning skepticism that such mindedness can emerge. Following suit, animal welfare scientist Françoise Wemelsfelder has argued that recognition of the mental states of other animals requires that they be approached via a “first person perspective,” as subjects (Wemelsfelder 1999, 42), and ethologist Barbara Smuts (1999) has offered perceptive accounts of what it is to open toward the mental lives of other animals. It is by paying heed toward such recommendations that “animal suffering,” as manifested widely within animal industries, may finally begin to emerge—beyond doubt.

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