

RECONCILING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Farm Animal Welfare: The New Tower of Babel*

Debates related to different farm animal production practices often claim to use science as their basis. Science has been used to contend that a practice is humane. Science has also been used to contend that the same practice is inhumane. The term ‘science’ refers to a system for acquiring knowledge. To acquire knowledge on animal welfare, we must first understand what we mean by ‘**animal welfare.**’



Dr. David Fraser

Dr.’s David Fraser and Dan Weary, from the University of British Columbia’s Animal Welfare Program, believe confusion exists because people often define animal welfare differently.¹ “People use different criteria in judging what constitutes a good life for animals and how animals ought

to be treated,” says Dr. Weary. “Any conception of animal welfare involves values because it pertains to what is *better or worse* for animals. The approaches and interpretations that scientists use in assessing animal welfare reflect value-laden presuppositions about what is better or worse for animals.”

Fraser and colleagues identified three overlapping views that are expressed relative to animal welfare:

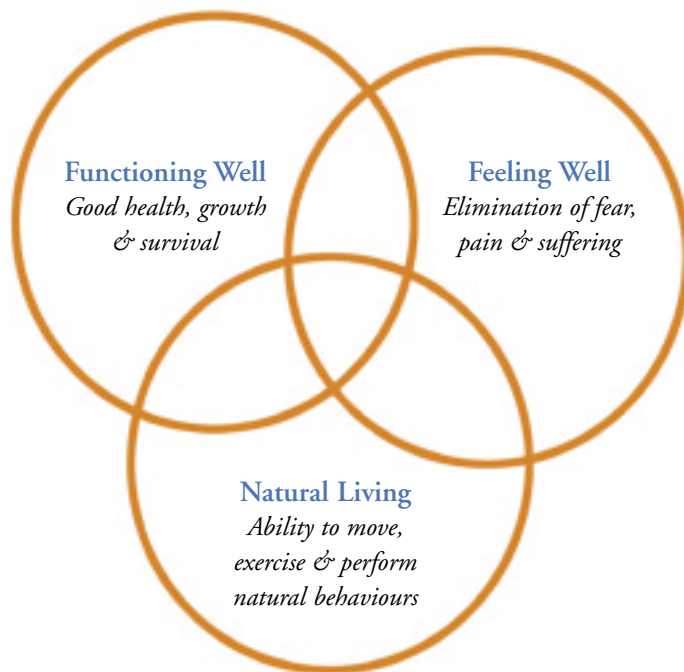
- 1) That animals should function well, in the sense of satisfactory health, growth and normal functioning of physiological and behavioural systems;
- 2) That animals should feel well by being free from prolonged and intense fear, pain, and other negative states, and by experiencing normal pleasures;
- 3) That animals should lead natural lives through the development and use of their natural adaptations and capabilities.

Fraser noted that, although the different views can all be tested scientifically, “the relative importance attached to each is at least partly a matter of value judgments about what is more or less important for the quality of life of animals.” Cultural factors also influence how different societies weigh these views.

“It would be comforting to think that science could arbitrate disagreements on the relative importance of different welfare perspectives,” says Dr. Weary. However, it cannot. “If animal welfare research is to address major concerns about the quality of life of animals, then the concept of animal welfare used by scientists needs to reflect the full range of major views existing within in a society.”

Michael Appleby, in his book *What Should We Do About Animal Welfare*, builds on Fraser’s work, noting that while disagreement as to the relative importance of each concept exists, there is significant overlap. “Perhaps we should focus on the areas of agreement and less on the areas of disagreement”² (see illustration). ■

AN ILLUSTRATION MERGING FRASER & APPLEBY’S CONCEPTS



* MERRIAM-WEBSTER DEFINITION Tower of Babel (Ba·bel)

1. A tower built by the descendants of Noah in Babel and intended to reach to heaven: God punished the builders for their presumption by confusing the language, preventing them from understanding each other and from completing the tower.
2. A confusion of many voices or languages.

1. David Fraser, DM Weary, EA Pajor, & BN Milligan, (1997) “A scientific conception of animal welfare that reflects ethical concerns.” *Animal Welfare*, 6 (1997), 187 – 205.

2. Michael Appleby, *What Should We Do About Animal Welfare*. (Cornwall: Blackwell Science Ltd., 1999), p.39.