

## Good animal welfare in a sustainable food system

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### Abstract

Debates on animal welfare have increased in quantity and intensity. This applies particularly to animal welfare issues in food production, positively and negatively. Polarization is a diagnosis that describes an increased distance between what can be understood as ecocentric and anthropocentric extremes and viewpoints on what good animal welfare is. It is not only those who are in direct relation to animals who are engaged, actors and activists who are not connected to, for example, livestock production, are also involved. In this paper, we explore what animal welfare means in a sustainable food system and ask if animals can be integrated into communication on how good animal welfare can be achieved. What is best for animals? Research on animal welfare started with ethical concerns about the quality of life of animals (Fraser *et al.*, 1997, Tolo and Kittelsen, unpublished data). But how can ethics be integrated into human-animal communication? While acknowledging Habermas' (1995) divide between human and non-human agents in communicative action, we are inspired by Hendlin and Otts' (2016) and Nowak *et al.*'s (2022) revision of Habermas' anthropocentric theoretical foundation and practical discourse and add Nussbaum's (2022) capability approach, to allow for the inclusion of a discussion of the moral importance, wellbeing, and functioning as ascribed to animals. With this, we are extending the discourse community beyond human communication. Through the inclusion of both non-human and human agency, we discuss how we can achieve good animal welfare in a sustainable food system.

**Keywords:** extended discourse, farming, human–animal communication, polarization

### Introduction

A brief historical analysis of journal articles (the Scopus search 'Animal Welfare' returned a match on 41 527 articles from 1918–2024) on animal welfare takes us back to 1908 and the title *Science and Sentimentality* (Bell, 1918). This first recorded article on animal welfare problematizes the effect of morally initiated resistance to using animals in experiments to improve human health. The article calls for a 'better and more effective type of humanness which balances sentimentality for animals and appreciation and understanding of the benefits of biological and sanitary science'. Since then, more than 40 000 titles have been published on animal welfare, most after 1980 and with near exponential growth. Veterinary science and agricultural and biological science account for almost two-thirds of the titles, while humanities and social sciences account for five percent. Palmer and Sandøe (2011: p. 2) argue that 'Assessments of animal welfare rely on assumptions regarding what matters, ethically speaking, in our dealings with animals': Ethics is (yet) a topic in (only) 10% of the titles. Given society's demand for moral and ethical clarification about sustainability and animal welfare in meat production, one could expect the share to be higher.

Societal exposure to bad animal welfare practices in livestock production provokes politicization (Hårstad and Vik, 2022; Vogeler, 2019). In Norway, and responding to Parliament's requirement (2022), the Government is preparing a white paper on animal welfare, evaluating the animal welfare Act. According to then Agriculture and Food Minister Borch (2021a), Norwegian livestock production aims to be 'world-leading in animal welfare' and bad animal welfare practices do not fit within this narrative.

### Section 3

What is perceived as good animal welfare changes over time, morally, in terms of animal welfare as a scholarly field, and practically, from animals' protection against violence, to animals' right to live a good life, and to the safeguarding of animals' intrinsic value (Tolo and Nafstad, 2022). The legal framework for Norwegian Animal Welfare has evolved, from being the Act for *protection* from unnecessary suffering to the current Animal Welfare Act (from 2009). Its purpose is 'promoting good animal welfare and respect for animals' (section 1). This change reflects changing perceptions, and utilization, of animals in history, and more recently represents a move from focusing on the human relationship with animals to the interests of the individual animal and its situation (Tolo and Nafstad, 2022: p. 47) In this paper section 3 is important, the: 'General requirement regarding the treatment of animals: Animals have an intrinsic value irrespective of the usable value they may have for man. Animals shall be treated well and be protected from the danger of unnecessary stress and strains.' The Act further and explicitly stresses that animal keepers shall ensure good welfare on criteria of species and individual needs, natural behaviour, and good health, and contribute to animals' safety and well-being (section 23). From this, we deduce that all animals hold sole rights independent of what the animal can express itself and that animal keepers shall, as a general requirement, respect the intrinsic value of the animals. How animal agency is represented to achieve sustainable food production remains unexplored.

Good animal welfare in an ethically sound animal livestock production system is a basic premise of a sustainable food system. Societal values and attitudes have an important influence on food production and any shift in social attitudes about animal welfare provides both significant risks and opportunities for sustainability. One significant change is to involve animal agency in communication on welfare. The paper proceeds with introducing animal agency into the discourse approach. Results from the GoodAnimal research project are presented to give insight into changing perceptions of animal welfare and animal welfare is explored in a sustainability context. Finally, the moral status of animal agency is discussed in the discourse on animal welfare in a sustainable food system.

### Animal welfare in a sustainable food system — a discourse approach

Theories of justice are outdated if they do not pay attention to global unfairness and do not incorporate justice for future generations and non-human actors (Dryzek and Pickering, (2019). Justice in a modern world require the *representation* of silenced actors in public discourse. The domination of humans over animals as objects allows for, according to Nussbaum (2022, 2023), inconsiderate suffering and cruelty for animals, factory animals in particular. Her capability approach 'says that justice entitles all animals to a set of capabilities and opportunities to choose in corresponding to their species' form of life.

This paper examines the value of extending the discourse community on good animal welfare in a sustainable food system beyond human communication and includes animal agency. A conservative reading of Habermas' theory of communication and discourse ethics will require a distinction between human and non-human moral agency in the discourse community. While acknowledging Habermas' (1995) divide between human and non-human agents in communicative action, Hendlin and Orts' (2016) revision of Habermas' anthropocentric theoretical foundation allows for considering nonhuman moral agency in the practical discourse. Further, Nowak *et al.* (2022: p. 15) acknowledge a change in the animal agency concept, and that 'the chance for proper representation of the animals' "best interests" by humans (or the chance to harmonize animal and human interests) is developing alongside increasing scientific and normative awareness'. This might allow us to play out the analogy to environmental rights and future generations: those who can speak for themselves vs environments and animals who cannot speak for themselves (Alvarez and Thorseth, 2019) into Habermas' framework and in line with Nussbaum's (2022, 2023) emphasis on animals' moral status and argument that animals have the capability of expressing themselves.

Another route is to assign rights to and approve of animals to be represented in this discourse, ‘as individuals in their own right’ (Nowak *et al.*, 2022: p. 15).

### **Human perceptions of animal welfare**

We observe increased polarization in perceptions of animal welfare in knowledge communities and society about the positioning of the animal in the conversation, between what can be labelled ecocentric and anthropocentric perspectives. Whose domain is the discourse on animal welfare? Those who deal with animals, farmers, and veterinarians? Their opponents might be found in philosophical disciplines and civil society, i.e. animal rights organizations and activist groups. Between these, legislators, policymakers, and administrators are situated. Everyone speaks in favour of the animals, but did anyone ask the animals?

Animal welfare is a topic in Norwegian media. As for research publications, the number of media texts incorporating animal welfare has increased exponentially since the turn of the millennia (from 25 in 2000 to more than 7000 in 2021, Norwegian figures). A media study revealed that two public discourses were delivered: One by authorities, politicians, and the livestock production industry in a legitimizing discourse, arguing that animal welfare in Norway is good enough whereas the other by animal welfare and animal rights organizations in a critical counter-discourse of animal welfare not being good enough in Norwegian livestock production (Syversen, 2022). Few posts were found to oppose the two.

The GoodAnimal projects survey of Norwegian farmers revealed a divergence between farmers prioritizing animal welfare aspects of health and basic feelings, and a smaller group prioritizing animals’ natural needs. A rural-urban distinction and gender effect was also found between farmers, in that farmers with an urban background and women farmers emphasized animals’ natural needs more than rural farmers (Logstein and Bjørkhaug, 2023). Tangen (2022: p. 66) found in the same survey that farmers concerned with modernization and cost-efficient production were more concerned with animal welfare, which can be seen in connection with the fact that healthy animals give better results for the farmer.

The GoodAnimal project’s survey of Norwegian *citizens* revealed a ‘remarkable stability’ in Norwegians’ opinions on animal welfare issues. Kjærnes *et al.* (2022) found small differences among groups of people (but gender and age) and an increasing rural-urban divide, where urban dwellers were more critical towards the status of animal welfare than rural dwellers. Johansen (2022) identified in the same survey that citizens value animals along an anthropocentric vs. ecocentric scale: “Ecocists” want to abandon farming animals, eat meat, and use fur/wool. Haugen (2023) found in an in-depth study of Norwegian animal rights actors’ deep concerns about animals’ autonomy and inherent value as beings and acted in accordance with Dryzek and Pickering (2019) formative agents, through ‘active redefinition of the concept of animal justice’ (Haugen, 2023: p. 62).

A deliberation (Ruralis/NTNU, 2023) on animal welfare in a Norwegian mini-public produced a list of principles for good animal welfare and recommendations on how to achieve these. While the mini-public emphasized that animal welfare captures animals’ basic health and functioning, affective state, and natural living (cf. Fraser, 2008), the two first principles defined, revealed an animal-centric perspective: ‘Animal welfare is about welfare from the animal’s perspective’ and ‘Humans do not control, but look after (monitor) animals’ (Bjørkhaug *et al.*, forthcoming). In conjunction with the principles, advice was developed on how these could be achieved in sustainable food production. This involves balancing economic, social, and environmental considerations, and establishing the link between good animal welfare and sustainability.

## The missing link between sustainable development and good animal welfare

Sustainable development (SD) is a necessity. Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway, defined SD as: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Our Common Future; Brundtland, 1987). This definition involves the 'Triple bottom line': Economic sustainability, which aims to ensure a just economy, reduce extreme poverty, and guarantee fair paid employment for all; Ecological sustainability, which aims to protect environmental health, the natural balance of the planet, while limiting the impact of human activities on the environment; and Social sustainability, which aims to guarantee social well-being, access to basic resources and services for all. Sustainable meat production implies securing the triple bottom line and good animal welfare should be a requisite to achieve all. 'Good animal welfare is a common societal good' (Borch, 2021b). Tole and Nafstad (2022) emphasize that conflicts may arise between achieving goals of good animal welfare and other societal goals and that attention to and acknowledgment of these goal conflicts are often neglected. In 2015, the UN called to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The 2015 UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDG) program operationalized sustainability goals in 17 different areas. Goal 12 is particularly relevant for animal welfare: Responsible consumption and production, with target 12.2: 'By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources, ...' and to steer us away from overconsumption, waste, and ecological harm to a more prosperous and sustainable future.' (SDG Knowledge Hub, 2024). Hence, the relationship between farm animals, good animal welfare, and a sustainable food system must be established.

A review of studies of sustainable agriculture and animal production for meat found that common elements included resource efficiency, profitability, productivity, environmental soundness, biodiversity, social viability, and ethical aspects (Olesen *et al.*, 2000). How do these elements apply to sustainable animal welfare? Keelin *et al.* (2019) found in an analysis of animal welfare and the 17 SDG's potential positive effects on animal welfare with goal achievements of 'better education', 'reduced inequality', 'gender equality', and 'enhanced partnerships', while better animal welfare would help 'reduce hunger'. Mutual reinforcing effects were found with better animal welfare and more 'responsible consumption' and 'improved food production on land and in waters'. Visseren-Hamakers (2020) suggests that the definition of SD must be broadened to include the interest of the individual animal and that the best way to do so is an 18th SDG on animal health, welfare, and rights.

Vinnari *et al.* (2017: p. 253) argue that the rights of farmed animals are a missing objective in the traditional framing of SD. Objectives of sustainability are overlooking the interests of farm animals, hence SD, is ill-equipped to take ethical and moral concerns in advancing animals' rights and increasing animal welfare. Verniers (2021) suggests that the sustainable development concept and framework is a good candidate for integrating animal welfare, both concerning a global animal welfare law and for the potential entrenchment of animal welfare at the national level. Establishing 'a sustainable livestock production' would, according to Verniers (2021: p. 11) 'be an example employed to advance both animal welfare and sustainable development'.

### How can good animal welfare be achieved in a sustainable food system?

The 'GoodAnimal' project aims to acquire knowledge that mitigates threats and increases opportunities for good animal welfare in sustainable meat production. Norwegian legislation has responded to societal expectations that animals' intrinsic value must be considered irrespective of the usable value they may have for man. When animal welfare is a topic in the media or explored as an attitude, there seems to be a dominant perception that animal welfare in Norwegian meat production is good enough, while there is a counter-discourse that animal rights are not adequately safeguarded. In this discourse, there is also

a position that demands that animal farming for meat must cease. When animal welfare was placed at the centre of deliberation, the participants agreed that the intrinsic value and agency of animals must be a recurring principle in Norwegian meat production and that it is the task of humans to facilitate this. However, achieving sustainability with good animal welfare also requires attention to the measures that must be taken to ensure that the animal keeper can 'survive' economically and socially.

In line with Dryzec and Pickering (2019) and Nussbaum (2022), we have emphasized animal justice in the animal welfare debate and the need for animals' rights to be heard. According to Nussbaum (2022), the moral status of animal rights is followed by animals' freedom and self-determination. We have shown that when animal welfare was the focus, the deliberative dialogue produced awareness of animal agency. Nevertheless, we recognize that there is a dominant discourse that Norwegian meat production has good animal welfare when the animals' basic needs are met. This may reflect a discourse community in which only human moral agency is represented (cf. Habermas, 1995). The intrinsic value of animals and their right to live their life to their natural needs is a competing discourse, however, there are formative agents (cf. Dryzec and Pickering, 2019) whose mission is to lift the animal's moral agency into the discourse community. We conclude that there is a need to further develop theories and methods to strengthen animal agency in the discourse community on good animal welfare in meat production.

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