

Anti-Depressants for Mentally-Ill Animals

Your dog won't stop sleeping; he seems morose and uninterested in his usual activities. He's picked up some compulsive habits. He just doesn't seem like himself. For humans, these symptoms would be diagnosed as depression. However, for animals, depression and other mental illnesses are harder to diagnose or are not diagnosed at all. Scientists have increasingly studied mental illness within animals.¹ A 2014 Wall Street Journal article featured a veterinarian who worked with gorillas at Boston's Franklin Park Zoo. The veterinarian found that gorillas with mood disorders were successfully treated with "human" psychiatric drugs. In fact, he found that more than half of U.S. and Canadian zoos had treated their gorillas with psychiatric drugs.²

Some argue that treating mental illness in animals is a natural extension of treating physical ailments. If an individual's dog has a broken leg, few would argue that medical treatment would be inappropriate. If that reasoning holds, treating depression or mental illness would be reasonable. In "All Animals are Equal," Peter Singer says, "If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration."³

Critics may argue that animals are not fully rational and autonomous beings and therefore cannot have mental illnesses in the same way humans do. Therefore, humans have no responsibility to treat these illnesses. Further, treatment of mental illnesses in humans ideally requires consent and cooperation of the patient. Critics would argue that animals cannot "consent" to treatment, and therefore ought not be treated.

Others object to the medicalization of animals not because it is *intrinsically* bad, but because in practice it can be used to paper over more fundamental causes at the root of the disorder. Just as the use of anti-depressants on a human would be unethical if it were used to ignore or perpetuate underlying causes that are generating the illness, so too in the case of animals it is wrong to use medication to treat an illness caused by environmental factors within our control (for example, captivity in a zoo). Effective medication does not give us free license to continue to do something that is harmful to non-human animals just because it is convenient for humans and can be treated or significantly mitigated.

Discussion Questions

1. If we assume that non-human animals are capable of having mental illnesses, should they be treated with the same diligence as human mental illness?
2. Given that an animal cannot "consent" to taking drugs, is giving them anti-depressants an immoral act?
3. To what extent is the moral status of non-human animals the same (or different) from the moral status of humans? In other words, how do our moral obligations to non-human animals compare to or contrast with the moral obligations to humans?
4. How does the rationality and autonomy of a being (human or non-human animal) relate to the obligations we owe it?
5. Considering that babies and children are not fully rational and autonomous beings, how do our obligations to babies and children compare to non-human animals?
6. How do the interests of non-human animals compare to the interests of humans?

¹ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/animal-emotions/201111/do-wild-animals-suffer-ptsd-and-other-psychological-disorders>

² <http://online.wsj.com/articles/when-animals-lose-their-minds-1402084124>

³ <http://www2.webster.edu/~corbetre/philosophy/animals/singer-text.html>

