

# Animals have feelings essay

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



The debate whether or not animals have feelings is ongoing and has many social and moral implications. If you ask any dog owner, they would emphatically answer that animals have emotions. However scientists tended to view the question with suspicion; thinking instead that behavior in animals was hard-wired and instinctual. They thought that attributing feelings to the animal was an attempt to anthropomorphize and a consequence of our humanity. Modern investigative techniques though such as fMRI (functional MRI) are shedding new light on the question.

Before a logical conclusion can be reached, we must define the terms emotions and feelings. In a schema laid out by Damasio in 2003, there is a distinction made between instinctive emotions and social emotions.

Instinctual emotions are anger, fear, disgust, surprise, sadness, and joy.

Damasio believes that all animals share this level of emotion. However, the social emotions such as sympathy, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride, envy, jealousy, gratitude, admiration, contempt and indignation, appear more selectively. Finally there is a level of emotion that is self-reflective, those are “ feelings.” There is even another school of thought that views that level of emotions as instinctual. Feelings on the other hand have to do with how information is processed in particular regions of the brain and an awesome self-reflection by the interconnecting parts of the brain. Self-reflection is what seems to set the humans apart from the animals in terms of the ability to have feelings due to a highly developed neocortex.

However, social exclusion was shown to cause activity detectable by fMRI in a series of controlled experiments. When interviewed after patients reported that they had felt “ hurt and excluded.” And more to the point, animal fMRI

scans have shown similar results and young guinea pigs suffering anguish at being separated from their mothers showed similar patterns of brain activity. Finally, the neurotransmitter dopamine plays a role in regulating the processes that underlie the experience of a “feeling,” and research has shown that its use as such is ubiquitous in mammals.

The article seems to take for granted that animals have feelings. While first stating that there was some debate over animals having feelings, Wilhelm presents the case with only providing evidence from researchers that say yes. However, I believe that anthropomorphism may play a much stronger role in our perception of animals as having emotions. However, the fMRI images showed stressors on the mammalian minds exhibiting a level of activation in the brains, shared by all mammals. Depending on our definition of feelings the question whether fMRI patterns means “feelings” the question is still open.

Many interesting things were discussed in the article. From elephants displaying a mourning ritual to animals showing social emotions. The most interesting thing though was the fMRI and the similarities in activated regions between animals and humans. This may lead us to better understandings of how fears and phobia are developed. For people with terribly irrational fears this may lead to treatments and cures. Not far behind in interest though was that the pharmaceutical companies still routinely test their mental health products on animals - indicating their implicit belief that animal feelings may be useful models for human feelings.

The part I found particularly confusing is when the author wrote about animals doing things for no other reason than “fun.” Fun is a human

construct and at the moment it is impossible to prove whether animals experience it or whether we are projecting our own feelings. Play may possess a purpose other than “ fun,” insofar as they are good training grounds for the larger world. A puppy who has played with his littermates will be more agile and prepared to deal with other challenges and obstacles that may come before him in life.

In sum, it will make no difference to the dog owner what anyone says about the debate on whether animals have feelings. The joy that the dog has when its owner comes home is hard to call anything other than a social emotion. If they have feelings they are not able to act on them in the same capacity as humans, and perhaps it is our fault that we can't understand theirs.