How should we treat animals? This is one of the oldest questions of human culture, and it is now being asked again, at least partly because scientific research in anatomy, animal behavior and other fields has gradually narrowed the gap that people perceive between humans and animals.

Different people have different views on animal welfare because of a long-standing tension between “Romantic” versus “Industrial” world-views. The Romantic world-view values freedom and emotion, and it sees a good life as one that is lived close to nature. The Industrial world-view values productivity and “progress”, and sees a good life as one where science and technology overcome the hardships imposed by nature. These world-views have led to competing views of animal welfare. One emphasizes the ability of animals to live reasonably “natural” lives. Another focuses on the “affective states” of animals including comfort, contentment and avoidance of pain and distress. Another focuses on the basic health and productivity of animals. Because these different views of animal welfare are linked to deep-seated cultural values, standards and practices need to find a balance among the three if they are to be widely accepted as promoting animal welfare.

Public reaction to the intensification of animal production also needs to be understood in light of social developments during the Industrial Revolution. During the Industrial Revolution, major concerns arose over the welfare of workers, and a major response was to regulate features of the physical environment of factories and to limit hours of work. In countries that had experienced an Industrial Revolution, the intensification of animal production during the 1900s was widely perceived as another instance of industrialization, and the response was once again to try to safeguard welfare – in this case animal welfare – mostly by regulating features of the physical environment such as space allowance and air quality. However, research shows that the same type of physical environment can produce very different animal welfare outcomes as indicated by, for example, very different levels of health on different farms or ranches. These differences point to an important difference between industrial manufacturing and intensive animal production. Specifically, when animals spend their entire lives under human care, their welfare is affected by many factors – hygiene, nutrition, health care, genetics, handling – which in turn depend on the knowledge, skill and attentiveness of the producer and staff. In short, animal welfare depends not only on the physical environment but also, and perhaps most importantly, on the quality of animal care. How to ensure a high level of animal care in intensive systems is the next challenge in farm animal welfare.

Further reading