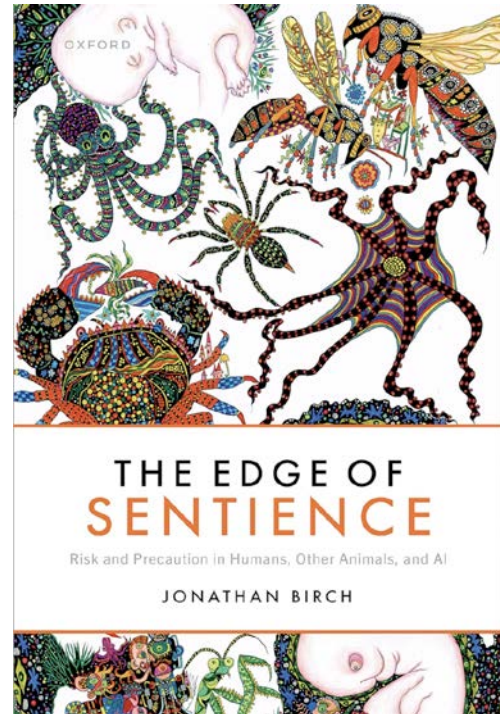


## Listening beyond the human: Reflections on *The Edge of Sentience*

Jonathan Birch: *The Edge of Sentience*.  
Oxford University Press 2024.

Sentience is a concept often misinterpreted across disciplines. This confusion frequently arises from conflating sentience with cognition, language, or rationality, traits traditionally used to privilege humans in moral hierarchies. In Jonathan Birch's account, however, sentience refers to the capacity for subjective experience - the ability to feel, perceive, and be affected by the world from one's own point of view. It is this capacity, rather than intelligence or rationality, that grounds moral consideration. *The Edge of Sentience* by Birch seeks to clarify its meaning, explore its ethical and scientific relevance, and interrogate its conceptual boundaries through an interdisciplinary lens. Birch, a philosopher working at the intersection of ethics and biology, constructs a thoughtful balance between science and philosophy to develop a precautionary ethical framework. Drawing on biological, neurological, and ethical approaches, he expands this framework



to include artificial intelligence and non-traditional moral subjects such as fishes (a term I use, as Birch does, to emphasize their individuality and agency), insects, and other invertebrates, which are often neglected in ethical discourses. The book helps us understand that sentience is neither synonymous with pain nor reducible to intelligence or brain size. The author also invites us to reflect more deeply on interspecies deliberation, personhood, and the future of artificial intelligence.

The book engages with a range of perspectives. One of the most important approaches discussed is biocentrism and ecocentrism (Birch 2024, 77), which both challenge anthropocentric ethics.

Biocentrism extends moral consideration to all living beings, whereas ecocentrism takes a broader stance by recognizing the intrinsic value of entire ecosystems, including non-living elements such as rivers, mountains, and landscapes. This distinction becomes important when considering how different frameworks assign moral standing to individuals and collectives. If we acknowledge the agency of ecological entities such as nonhuman animals, how, then, should we evaluate their level of moral consideration? This question becomes central in Birch's chapter on interspecies deliberation, involving the public and animals in the decision-making process. Birch (2024, 139) uses citizen panels and assemblies with an optimal number of participants, seeking a balance between inclusivity and deliberative efficiency. One of Birch's most important insights concerns what he calls the "tyranny of expert values." While we are avoiding the tyranny of expert values, we should also be skeptical about *the will of the people*. Representatives in decision-making bodies, such as parliaments, citizen assemblies, or policy councils, should not default to anthropocentric biases; rather, they must consider multispecies interests as part of a broader moral community. This also requires rethinking the very structure of deliberation itself: how can political institutions be designed to include or represent beings who cannot speak, vote, or self-represent within

human systems? To address this problem, Birch suggests that certain human representatives could speak on behalf of nonhuman animals, advocating for their interests within these deliberative frameworks. By establishing proportional representation systems, for instance through a certain number of seats or speaking roles for those representing nonhuman animals, we can begin to protect their rights and interests. Yet, as sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois reminds us, "only the sufferer knows his sufferings" (Birch 2024, 151). Listening to the nonhuman world becomes the first step toward speaking on its behalf.

Religions can be important in shaping societies and their views. The book references religious perspectives, including Qur'an passages that permit eating animals (Birch 2024, 86). However, I argue that Islam can also be a significant resource to accept agency and subjectivity of nonhuman animals. As noted in Surah al-Kahf (18:22): "(Some) will say: They were three, their dog the fourth, and (some) say: Five, their dog the sixth, guessing at random; and (some) say: Seven, and their dog the eighth. Say (O Muhammad): My Lord is best aware of their number..." This narrative implicitly includes a nonhuman companion within a sacred framework, opening space for rethinking agency.

The book invites us to think about other animals such as fishes, octopuses,

and insects. This intervention is significant, since these species remain marginal in both academic and activist discourses. One reason lies in our weaker relationships with these animals. Although they may not respond to suffering and injury in the same way as mammals or birds, many nonhuman animal species exhibit forms of sentience and species-specific ways of experiencing the world. However, Birch reminds us that all adult vertebrates are candidates for sentience, a conclusion he supports through neurological and behavioral evidence. In addition to learning, attention, working memory, and planning, Birch discusses the role of the central complex, a brain region associated with integrated information processing, as a possible indicator of sentience in these species. My doubt, rather than criticism, concerns the emphasis on adulthood: while larvae may lack a fully developed central complex (Birch 2024, 272), they are still future adults who deserve to live free from unnecessary harm. These questions further enhance the book's relevance, particularly considering current debates on insect and octopus farming. The rise of octopus farming has sparked global ethical concern due to the species' advanced cognition and complex behavior, which challenge conventional food systems. Within critical animal studies, there is a growing need to address the moral status of species that remain marginal in both ethical theory and activism.

Ethological research can deepen our understanding of these species and provide further empirical grounding for ethical reflection.

The final part of the book addresses artificial intelligence (AI). AI, with its growing opportunities and challenges, will remain one of the most debated ethical issues of our time. AI technologies may also deepen our understanding of nonhuman animals: by analyzing patterns of perception, communication, and decision-making, they can help us reconsider animal agency and reshape their political and legal status within a framework of multispecies justice. AI can serve as an alternative to animal experimentation, reducing the need for animal suffering in research. Ethical caution is essential to ensure that fascination with AI does not eclipse ongoing moral responsibilities toward nonhuman animals. AI-related developments should be evaluated through the lens of animal ethics, so that discussions on machine sentience reinforce, rather than undermine, our commitment to sentient life in all its forms.

*The Edge of Sentience* expands the scope of ethical consideration to include an even wider range of beings, from invertebrates to artificial intelligence. The main aim of the book is not to provide definitive answers but to pose critical questions that shape ongoing debates about sentience and its potential implications, such as personhood and representation.

The book achieves a careful balance between scientific analysis and philosophical reflection, allowing Birch to ground abstract ethical questions in empirical evidence. This integration makes his arguments more compelling to readers from different disciplinary backgrounds. This contribution extends beyond academic theory; it also serves as a resource for

policymakers and civil society, while offering ethical insights relevant to emerging multispecies communities, societies in which human and nonhuman lives are interwoven. Recognizing where the edge of sentience lies will shape how we envision coexistence across species, including our relationship with emerging AI entities.<sup>1</sup>

MUSTAFA DEMIR

*Pompeu Fabra University*

mustafa.demir01@estudiant.upf.edu

---

1 *Note on the use of AI:* No generative AI was used in the background work or writing of this review.