

# Animal pain and human pleasure: ethical dilemmas outside the classroom.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/06/13/ethical-dilemmas-animal/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/06/13/ethical-dilemmas-animal/)

6/13/2014

Ahead of the [March Against Slaughterhouses](#) taking place worldwide this weekend, [Stevan Harnad](#) combines lessons from cognitive science and ethics in order to lay bare the widespread problem of the human treatment of animals. Ethics and law are predicated on the existence of feeling and as such reducing and eventually abolishing gratuitous suffering that humans are inflicting on animals is hence one of the most urgent moral imperatives of our age.



When I teach [cognitive science](#) and we discuss the Turing Test, I point out that the [Turing Test is not a trick](#) or a game. It is a scientific research programme (reverse-engineering) for explaining how the mind works, by designing a system that can do everything that a real person with a mind can do – so much so that it is indistinguishable (for a lifetime) from a real person with a mind to a real person with a mind.

But to bring it home to the students what it really means to pass the Turing Test, I pick out someone in the class, midway through the course, when we all know one another, and ask everyone to imagine that I now reveal to them that this person is in fact a robot who was created in MIT 4 years ago. My question is: would they now feel that it was all right to kick that person? Almost everyone always says no, it would not. And then I ask them why not? And they say that they have no way of knowing that it would not hurt that person, even if they were a robot. I then point out to them that they have no way of knowing with one another either, and that that's the whole point of Turing indistinguishability.

And then I ask them: would they kick their dogs? And if not, why is it all right to do incomparably worse to countless calves, cows, pigs, chickens – and, yes, [dogs](#) and cats – [every minute of every day](#) in order to keep enjoying our carnivore pleasures rather than just satisfying our herbivore needs?

Scholars and scientists are becoming increasingly involved in this question for both ethical and pragmatic reasons. Since the [epochal book by Peter Singer](#) in 1975, not only philosophers but social scientists, biologists, environmental scientists and food scientists have generated a sizeable empirical and theoretical literature on all aspects of human/animal relations, culminating in the [Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness \[pdf\]](#) by a prominent international group of cognitive neuroscientists, neuropharmacologists, neurophysiologists, neuroanatomists and computational neuroscientists gathered at The University of Cambridge in 2012:

*We declare the following: The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective [feeling] states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.*

In other words, animals feel. To give an idea of what is at issue, I would like to try to reduce the problem of the human treatment of non-human animals to a few basics that most of us can agree about. The first and most important one is that humans are animals too. The second is that all animals with nervous systems feel. They are not insensate lumps of matter. The third is that ethics and law – what is right and wrong to do – are predicated on the existence of feeling: In an insensate world there would still be natural laws (laws of motion, gravity,

electromagnetism) but no such thing as morality, or laws of conduct, or right or wrong, because if nothing feels, nothing matters.



**Image credit: [Slaughterhouse Black And White](#) (Pixabay, Public Domain)**

Now, although there is no suffering that we inflict on non-human animals that we do not inflict on humans, the vast difference is that the suffering we inflict on humans is seen as wrong by most decent people worldwide — and it is also against the law. Not so for animals. They are [not protected by the law](#) and most of us are not only [unaware of their agony in slaughterhouses](#) but we are actively [sustaining it](#) as consumers. Most of us believe (1) that meat is obtained humanely, and (2) that it is necessary for our survival and health. Both of these beliefs are profoundly, [tragically](#) [warning: very distressing images] and [demonstrably](#) wrong. Reducing and eventually abolishing the gratuitous suffering that humans are inflicting on animals is hence one of the most urgent moral imperatives of our age.

But even normal human beings have needs – indeed so do non-human animals. For example, they have to eat. And in nature, eating always entails a conflict of interest between predator and prey. Carnivores eat other animals, even though their prey feel and suffer, because otherwise the carnivores suffer. They cannot survive otherwise. So there is the familiar Darwinian struggle for survival between predators and prey.

Herbivores have to eat too, and they too are predators, but their prey – plants — though they are likewise living organisms, are not feeling organisms. They do not have nervous systems. They are living matter, but insensate matter. So the survival needs of carnivores necessarily entail that they cause suffering to other feeling creatures, whereas the survival needs of herbivores do not.

What about our own species? We are omnivores, capable of thriving healthily on either a carnivorous or a purely herbivorous diet. Our ancestors no doubt ate meat, because they had to: there was not enough herbivorous fare for survival. But then we invented agriculture, and it became possible, in principle, to thrive, healthily, on purely herbivorous fare. However, we have not yet taken that route, and the question is why?

*The worldwide [March Against Slaughterhouses](#) on June 14 2014 is intended to open the eyes and hearts of decent people worldwide, to the [enormity of the agony](#) of innocent, helpless creatures in slaughterhouses, to the fact that their suffering is unnecessary, and, to the great urgency of [adopting laws to protect them](#).*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

#### About the Author

**Stevan Harnad** currently holds a Canada Research Chair in cognitive science at [Université du Québec à Montréal \(UQAM\)](#) and is professor of cognitive science at the [University of Southampton](#). In 1978, Stevan was the founder of [Behavioral and Brain Sciences](#), of which he remained editor-in-chief until 2002. In addition, he founded [CogPrints](#) (an electronic eprint archive in the cognitive sciences hosted by the University of Southampton), and the [American Scientist Open Access Forum](#) (since 1998). Stevan is an active promoter of open access.

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.