

## **Doing the Right Thing: An Interview with Stevan Harnad**

From [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)

January 2015

What follows is an interview/dialogue with [Dr. Stevan Harnad](#), the founder and former editor-in-chief of the highly influential journal called *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (BBS) and current editor-in-chief of the new journal *Animal Sentience*

**Marc: You're Canada Research Chair in Cognitive Sciences at University of Quebec in Montreal and Professor of Web Science at University of Southampton in the UK: What do you actually do?**

Stevan Harnad: I do research on how the brain learns and communicates categories. Categorization is a very general cognitive capacity. I think it covers most of [cognition](#). It just means *doing the right thing with the right kind of thing*: Eat what's edible; avoid predators; and call a spade a "spade" (because most of the language is [categorization](#) too).

**And how do you do research on how the brain learns and communicates categories? Do you study animals' brains?**

No. I study how humans do it, I try to model the mechanism generating that capacity computationally, and I test for clues and correlates with brain imagery (event-related potentials). Of these three methods, the third—observing and measuring brain events—is actually the least informative.

**Is that just because you can't get deep enough into the brain, and manipulate it?**

No, even if we could manipulate people's brains any way we wanted, what the brain can do, as an organ, is anything and everything we can do. It does not wear its functioning on its sleeve, to be read off by observation and manipulation, as with the heart, which just pumps blood, or the lungs, which just pump air. How the brain does what it does has to be inferred by designing and testing models that can do more and more of what we can do—eventually so well that the model can pass the Turing Test, which means being able to do anything we can do, indistinguishably from the way we do it. ([We are still light years away from that.](#))

**Do you use animals at all in your research?**

No—and not just because I am studying human cognition rather than heart or lung function.

**What other reason is there? You were editor for 23 years of the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (BBS), weren't you? And that journal published human as well as animal studies, didn't it?**

Yes. And throughout those 23 years I was deeply troubled, morally, about the animal research BBS published. I had been vegetarian since I turned 17. I tried to minimize animal research in BBS, and only to publish papers that reviewed already published research, rather than reported animal experiments directly in [BBS](#).

But I now realize that there was a lot of [self-deception](#) and hypocrisy in my reasoning, and I am deeply ashamed. [I am also now vegan, not just vegetarian.](#)

## **What happened? What changed?**

Nothing acute happened. I didn't learn anything I had not known all along. I just reached a threshold in my own rationalizations where I could no longer deny what had been morally obvious, though unspoken, all along: *It is wrong to hurt or kill a feeling being if it is not vitally necessary.*

## **Vitally necessary?**

That means that there's a conflict of life-or-death interests, as with predator and prey. The Felidae (including lions and tigers as well as house cats) are obligate carnivores; if they do not eat meat, they die. If prey are attacked by predators, they must fight back if they can, otherwise they die. Those are vital interests. In the case of life-saving biomedical research a case can be made for conflict in vital interests: the laboratory animal's life and the human life it could save.

## **Isn't it "speciesism" to save the human's life over the animal's?**

Yes it is. And it's also nepotism to deflect the philosopher's speeding train to kill someone else's child instead of one's own. [And the moral answers there are troubling and far from obvious.](#)

But when we consider conducting and publishing animal research in BBS or any other journal, what is usually at stake is not vital interests, not research that will save—or will lead to research that will save—lives or ease pain. It's much more likely to be curiosity- or [career](#)-driven research. I doubt that there were many BBS articles, if any, that saved lives or eased pain.

## **Who's to judge that in advance?**

Yes, the outcome is uncertain. And judgment is needed, both about whether the pain to the animal victims justifies the potential gain for the human beneficiaries and whether there are alternatives that don't hurt animals. These are all extremely important, deep and troubling questions. And they have to be considered in the context of another question—one much bigger than the question about whether the hurt we inflict on laboratory animal victims is justified by conflict of vital interest.

## **You mean the hurt we impose on animal victims outside the laboratory?**

Yes, the victims we breed and brutalize and butcher for the food and fashion industry, for sports and entertainment, and for habitat encroachment. [Slaughtering animals for food accounts for 98% of the animals we kill.](#)

The humanitarian regulations of university biomedical research laboratories are far from being strong enough—how can you ever make deliberate hurting and killing humane? It's like regulations for making slavery, rape, torture or genocide humane. But at least they do have some regulations, and some attempts in universities to be [conscientious](#) about transparency and monitoring compliance. The regulations for the food and fur industry are in contrast far weaker, compliance monitoring is almost non-existent, [and instead of transparency there are the ag-gag laws.](#)

## **So if humanitarian regulations were strengthened and enforced, everything would be alright?**

Any improvement would lessen the suffering of the victims, so it's of course better than nothing. But what about the conflict-of-vital-interest criterion? As I mentioned, a lot of the hurting and killing we do of lab animal victims is not even justifiable as potentially life-saving or pain-reducing for humans. That kind of research should not just be better regulated, but not conducted at all. And although Felidae are obligate

carnivores, humans definitely are not. So except in subsistence cultures where there is not yet any choice today, killing for meat (or fish; or hurting and killing for milk or eggs) is not necessary for either our survival or our health. Ditto for fashion and sport killing.

### **It sounds as if you think the world should become vegan...**

I do. I think the needless hurting and killing of sentient beings is the greatest moral [shame](#) of our species—the only species that has any choice in the matter, and the species that is doing all the needless hurting and killing, on a monstrous and still mounting scale. Notice that I said *sentient beings*. That covers all needless hurting and killing of human beings too. But the laws forbidding needless hurting and killing of human beings are already on the books just about everywhere, and most of us abide by and approve of them. Not so for the needless hurting or killing of nonhuman animals.

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### **But what can be done about that?**

The principle is there: *It is wrong to hurt or kill a feeling being if it is not vitally necessary*. I even think that most people would agree with it, in principle. But in practice, they may either believe that (1) the hurting and killing is vitally necessary, or that (2) the beings don't really feel the hurting, nor lose anything in the killing: They may believe animals are not sentient, or that their sentience, unlike ours, somehow does not include the capacity to suffer.

### **If people believe (1) that hurting and killing is vitally necessary, or (2) that animals don't really feel suffering, how can they be shown to be mistaken?**

As I am not a dietician or a metabolic biologist, I can't do much about demonstrating that hurting and killing animals is not necessary for human survival or health. I have to leave the task of providing the evidence for that to the qualified specialists ([although I rather think that healthy vegans like me are the living proof!](#)).

But I believe that human minds and hearts can be opened to the reality of animal sentience—and especially animal suffering, which is what matters most—[through a variant of the Turing Test I mentioned earlier](#).

### **Wasn't that only about machine models?**

Not quite. What was pointed out by Alan Turing—the inventor of the computer, and of computation, and the code-breaker who helped save us all by bringing WW II to an end—is that the only way we can know that others have minds, as we do, is by observing what they do, and being unable to tell them apart based on what they do from what we do, and hence what we feel. Philosophers call this the “[other-minds problem](#).”

Twelve years after stepping down from the editorship of BBS I have accepted an invitation from the Humane Society of the United States to serve as editor in chief of *Animal Sentience*, a new journal just about to be launched that is devoted to understanding and protecting the feelings of other species. I hope the findings reported in this journal will help inspire us to “do the right thing to the right kind of thing” so that we can at last put an end to the greatest moral shame of our own species—and [the greatest agony of all the others](#).