

Taste and Torment: Why I Am Not a Carnivore¹

Stevan Harnad
Department of Psychology
Université du Québec à Montréal
Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3C 3P8

"I say that that is fiendish cruelty, and nobody whose natural sympathies have not been warped by dogma, or whose moral nature was not absolutely dead to all sense of suffering, could maintain that it is right and proper that that state of things should continue." --- Bertrand Russell, "[Why I am Not a Christian](#)" (1927)

Abstract: It is easy to cultivate psychopathy in our children: We need only tell them the [lie](#) that eating meat is necessary for their survival and health, that since animals also do it without remorse, it is a Law of Nature, and that in any case animals are raised and slaughtered in a "humane" way (you just have to avoid viewing Google images on [slaughterhouses](#)). In fact, by exactly the same cultural means we could (again) instill in our young the taste and the justification for rape, torture, slavery, and genocide.

Most of us don't consider ourselves [psychopaths](#). Psychopathy is an aberration, rare and odious. Psychopaths are living beings who are not troubled by the suffering of other living beings. To get what they feel like having, they don't hesitate to make others suffer. No scruples, just pragmatics.

Selfish genes. Darwinian evolution, too, is pragmatic. From an evolutionary point of view, we should all be psychopaths. Our genes are selfish Darwinian machines. Survival and reproduction, their only goals, are the outcomes of competition, which has winners and losers. Evolution favours the winners.

The only apparent exceptions to the psychopathy of evolution² (although on closer inspection we see that this is not really an exception) are our next-of-kin, with whom we share our genes. This puts our family in the same genetic boat: kin interest is self-interest. We favour our loved ones. We are not indifferent to their suffering. On the contrary, mammals – apart from a small minority of aberrant individuals (the true psychopaths) - are extremely altruistic toward their own

1 Appeared in French as [Luxe, nécessité, souffrance: Pourquoi je ne suis pas carnivore.](#) *Québec humaniste* 8(1): 10-13

2 It's more complicated than this, because there 's also "[reciprocal altruism](#)" and the more controversial question of "[group selection](#)"; and there's also culture, about which we will speak at the end.

offspring, so much so that they are sometimes willing to sacrifice their own lives to protect them.

Kin detection. This familial altruistic tendency includes an especially acute sensitivity to the needs -- and hence to the suffering -- of our own children. However, for complicated reasons, evolution is unable to implant in our brains a biological sensor of kinship. Mammals have no direct way of detecting blood-relatives. Instead, it is only circumstances that signal, indirectly, who are and are not likely to be our kin. (The only near-certainty is maternity.) That's why mammals sometimes find themselves in the role of foster parents, a role in which they can be just as empathic and self-sacrificing toward adopted young as toward their own flesh and blood. Foster young can not only be the progeny of completely different, unrelated parents, hence carriers of unrelated genes, but they can even be members of other species, sometimes with very little resemblance to their own kind (as we keep seeing in those [cross-species YouTube videos](#)).

It would no doubt have perverse effects for evolution if the conditions in which the descendants of other species ended up in our nests were common; our brains would then have to scrutinize kinship much more rigorously. In practice, though, unrelated young in their cradles are rare enough so that mammals can safely rely on indirect and circumstantial cues: being at the right place at the right time, small size, big eyes; looking dependent, helpless, and needy; emitting strong signals of attachment and affection that mirror our own. These can all serve as reliable signs of kinship -- enough to make us responsive to the welfare of those who are emitting them.

Note that we've already managed to avoid a naive objection from genetic determinists to the effect that it would go "against nature" to adopt unrelated young, because if everyone did that, it would be catastrophic for our selfish genes as well as for the evolutionary selection process itself. Accidental fostering was obviously rare enough in the evolutionary history of our own species to allow us to have gotten this far, steering our course, safe and sound, in our selfish-gene vessels, already seven and a half billion strong. So our challenge today is to take care of the abundance of our own kind that are already on the planet, and reduce the size of the next generation, rather than to invoke the selfish gene to justify psychopathy towards orphans.

Vital necessity. Note also that if what was at stake were a life-or-death choice between the survival of our own next-of-kin versus strangers, it would be another matter. It is not psychopathic to favour your loved ones in life-or-death conflicts of interest. Rather, it's psychopathic *not* to. But the fundamental question I am trying to address here -- about sensitivity to the suffering of sentient non-kin (whether human or nonhuman) -- will be based only on those cases where *no life-or-death conflict of interest (for survival, health or the vital necessities of life, for oneself or one's family) is at stake*: I am talking only about cases where the suffering of others is *not* the price that must be paid for my own survival and health, nor for

that of my loved ones. I am considering only *luxury suffering* – the luxury for me, the suffering for others.

Let's agree that medical research,³ conducted to save human lives, even if it necessitates causing suffering to animals, would not count as a luxury but as a conflict of life-or-death interests. Let's also agree that the same is true for subsistence hunters who inhabit regions where there are currently no other means to feed themselves and survive. No hedonism or psychopathy at issue there.

But let's also note that it is only in a relatively small minority of cases that the cruel demands of biological existence create unresolvable life-or-death conflicts of interest between human and non-human animals -- conflicts in which we must favour our loved ones (or ourselves) at the expense of the suffering of others. Let's now go directly to that [vast majority of everyday cases everywhere](#) in which an inescapable need to cause suffering is *not* at play.

Taste. We don't need to go into details. One example should be enough: I propose a French delicacy called [moineau sans tête sauce chasseur](#) ("headless sparrow with huntsman's sauce").⁴

I will be brutal. Dear [hypocrite lector, my likeness, my kin](#): having -- like one and half billion other human beings ([20% of the planet](#), but only 5% of them, hence 1.0% of the planet, currently doing so by choice) -- lived a healthy life without eating a single piece of meat for the last [50 years](#) I am in a position to testify that if we eat meat, it is certainly not because that meat is [necessary for our survival, or for our health](#): We are doing it just because we feel like it, for the *taste*, unaware of the monstrous misery it inflicts on other living, feeling, suffering creatures. Who among us has dared to face the true cost of our tastes in terms of the daily agony of its innocent victims? (If you have the courage, check out Google images for "[slaughterhouse](#)".)⁵

³ For medical research there are still many troubling questions to ask, but here we will focus on the least complicated yet pressing question of luxury vs. necessity.

⁴ The feeling dimension has its positive and negative poles (pleasure/pain), but the two half-lines are incommensurable -- especially when we are comparing the feelings of two different beings: How many [taste orgasms](#) (of mine) compensate for a single sparrow, felled for [taste](#) (and compensate *whom*)?

⁵ Although slaughter is graphically the most shocking, it also has to be borne in mind that virtually all the victims have also lived the whole of their short lives under conditions of unspeakable misery.

Calculation. I have made neither a logical argument, nor a utilitarian one, for not causing unnecessary suffering to others. There exists no objective law – either mathematical, scientific, ecological, economic or pragmatic⁶ -- according to which causing needless suffering to animals is wrong or forbidden. There are obviously some civil and criminal laws here and there against so-called "excessive" cruelty. But their purpose is to reduce and regulate the needless suffering inflicted on animals, not to abolish it.

Even the pressures of biological evolution do not go further than to favour some individual favouritism toward our kin -- and that, only for survival-and-reproduction purposes, not for sentimental reasons. As already noted earlier, the "[Blind Watchmaker](#)" is an unapologetic psychopath. Organisms evolved feelings just to give them the taste for whatever favours the Darwinian goal of survival and reproduction, and a distaste for whatever conflicts with it.

Feeling. Moreover, the very existence of feelings - felt tastes – poses a profound challenge for causal explanation in biology: We can explain why and how genes are selected to encode our behavioural capacities: These are the skills and dispositions to do what it takes to survive and reproduce: eat what is nourishing, avoid what is toxic, hunt our prey, escape our predators, learn, communicate, talk, prefer our relatives, care for our offspring, mate with members of our own species who are of the opposite sex (but not our relatives), etc. But these are all things we *do*, and the *capacity to do* them. Why are these doings (sometimes) accompanied by *feeling*? Why are these behavioural capacities conscious?

This is the celebrated mind/body problem, and there is still [no solution in sight](#), except that we can be sure it's the genes and the brain that generate the feelings too, just as they generate the doings. The capacity to feel is just another biological trait, like the capacity to fly or walk or talk, except feeling is not something that organisms *do*; feeling is neither a behavior nor a structure; it is a (felt) state, and one that only the feeler can feel. Yet we have no idea how or why feeling would have evolved, since the only thing the [Blind Watchmaker](#) needs to design in order to maximize organisms' survival and reproduction is whatever neural mechanism gives us the capacity to do what needs to be done. The accompanying feeling seems superfluous. This lack of a biological explanation for feeling has left the door wide open for superstitious and supernatural speculation (and hence to the invention of the religions of the world) according to which feeling is an immaterial and immortal substance: the soul.

⁶ The Golden Rule comes closest to being such a law, but it too depends completely on our not being psychopaths, otherwise it can be disputed with endless sophisms.

Creed. Unfortunately, not only does this hypothesis of an immaterial and immortal soul explain absolutely nothing (and rather itself requires an explanation), but all empirical observations to date keep confirming that everything that happens in both the non-biological and the biological world can be explained completely in terms of material causes. And that all living organisms are mortal. So the many competing faith-based fairy tales on the market are not only contradictory among themselves, but none of them has the slightest support from evidence, probability or logic.

We can still ask whether the belief systems that arise from these fairy tales at least mitigate the problem of the suffering of other feeling beings: Not being an expert in comparative religion, I cannot answer with authority. We know that some Eastern religions preach non-violence toward all sentient creatures (and it's mainly thanks to them that 20% of the humans on the planet -- rather than only 1% -- are currently herbivores). However, it's also true that the infliction of some of the most [abominable sufferings](#), even beyond the demands of gluttony, are decreed by certain other cults, for scriptural rather than survival reasons. All told, if I were an animal under the threat of the knife or cudgel, I would place more hope for mercy on human feeling than on human faith.

But feeling based on what? There are no strictly rational grounds for human beings not being completely indifferent to the suffering of unrelated others except when it interferes with our own interests. In other words, there is no *reason* for us not to be psychopathic, if that's what we are, if that's how we feel (or do not feel).

Culture. I think it's more a matter of culture than of creed or calculation: It is easy to cultivate psychopathy in our children: We need only tell them the [lie](#) that eating meat is necessary for their survival and health, that since animals also do it without remorse, it is the Law of Nature, and that in any case animals are raised and slaughtered in a "humane" way (you just have to avoid viewing Google images on [slaughterhouses](#)). In fact, by exactly the same cultural means we could (again) instill in our young the taste and the justification for rape, torture, slavery, and genocide.

Or the distaste. *Why am I not a carnivore?* Because I'm not a psychopath -- I have neither the taste nor the heart for it, and so I choose not to act as if I were one. Is the remaining 99% of the planet really that different - or have they just not yet asked themselves the question?

"I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money... Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? Why can't you?"
--- J.M. Coetzee, "[The Lives of Animals](#)" (1997)