

# Animal Suffering: The Elephant in the Room

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**Prominent cognitive scientist** (name deleted):

*"Infuriating [panel!](#) I have a question for Marian Dawkins (and maybe for you, Stevan....). What does she do when a mosquito lands on her arm? A wasp? When a rat chews through the basket in her garage and eats her expensive, heritage seeds for next year's garden? When a deer eats all her greens? When a coyote kills her pet cat?"*

Your question is not for Marian Dawkins, who is a steady, nonconfrontational welfarist, focussed on reducing some of the suffering of the victims of animal production by trying to appeal to its possible benefits for the producers and consumers (rather than for the victims). That's why Marian says she is not trying to claim animals are (or are not) conscious: because that approach is unconvincing to skeptics and it has not led (by Marian's lights) to much progress in improving animals' lot, either in production or in the wild.

(Marian attributes this to the problem of trying and failing to solve — to the satisfaction of consciousness-skeptics — what has been dubbed the "hard problem" of consciousness. But what Marian really meant was solving the *other-minds problem* to the satisfaction of *other-minds-skeptics*.)

(Although Dave Chalmers did baptize the "hard problem," giving it a name, he did not, of course, invent the problem and his own comment --- that Marian was right to cite the "hard problem" because the other-minds problem in fact follows from the hard-problem --- was just Dave's opinion. And in my opinion, this is easily shown to be wrong: Because even if we had a highly reliable "cerebroscope" for diagnosing which organisms are sentient, and when, the "hard problem" (of explaining, causally, how and why biological tissue generates feeling, rather than just generating function), would still remain unsolved, and would still remain just as hard.)

The "hard problem" is neither an ethical problem nor an animal-welfare problem. It is a problem of causal explanation. The problem for ethics and welfare is the other-minds problem. And solving it, by determining *which* organisms are sentient, and *when*, would not solve the ethical/welfare problem, because you still have to convince people that causing animal suffering matters, and needs to be acted upon.

My own answer to the question you raise about mosquitos and wasps -- (it came up here during the conference as the question about cockroaches and bedbugs) -- was that while there is an elephant in the room (the monstrous suffering inflicted on animals needlessly — for food, fur, and fun -- there is no point fretting about cockroaches and bedbugs (or about being attacked by a predator): In a vital conflict of interest between sentient organisms, where life and death or health is at stake, every member of every species can and should protect its own vital life/death/health interests. The cockroach/bedbug/predator "objection" is hence just deflectionary (rather like Trump's responses to criticism). It's just an attempt to deflect from the implication that we should stop hurting animals needlessly for food/fur/fun today, and that we should start that stopping in our own comfortable western consumer societies where every living,

healthy vegan — like myself -- is irrefutable evidence of the fact that the horrors are not necessary; they are *not* based on life/death/health needs for humans.

So forget about the cockroach/bedbug/predator worry. (Save it for a happier day.) Philosophers would call it sophistry — if it comes from a non-vegan. Coming from a vegan it is premature, like puzzling about Zeno's Paradox instead of just crossing the room. When the whole world is vegan, only vital conflicts of life/death/health interests with no alternatives will justify hurting or killing another sentient being. But today, while the elephant is in the room, the cockroach question is otiose.

*"Worse, the whole discussion is focused entirely on WEIRD\* people -- a lot of the world is not weird."*

By weird you mean the lady who was distributing the pamphlets? She is just good-hearted, and shell-shocked by the unending horrors, rather than a philosopher or a scientist. My own hope is that the majority of human beings are potentially decent, like her, rather than self-interested sociopaths, bent only on holding onto their food/fur/fun perks, with otiose objections, oblivious to the real ongoing cost in needless blood and suffering to their animal victims, come what may.

I might add that nonhuman animals' only hope is that most human beings, thanks to their mammalian ("K-selected") heritage, with its evolved darwinian empathy and compassion for their own young, their kin and their kind, supplemented by the cognitive, social and cultural capacity to learn to do the right thing, by inhibiting and outlawing portions of their likewise darwinian legacy, such as infanticide, homicide, rape, slavery, subjugation torture — the hope that most of our kind have evolved the eyes and hearts that can be opened to the unspeakable agony we are inflicting on other species, on a mounting, monstrous scale.

If we are *not* potentially merciful in the face of the overwhelming evidence (which only ag-gag laws are currently concealing from our eyes and hearts) -- if we are, instead, die-hard deplorables, clinging to our own orgasms oblivious to their cost in others' agony, then of course the animals are lost, and the animal cause is hopeless. And that would perhaps have been the case if human beings, together with all their cognitive and linguistic capacities, rather than having been descendants along the mammalian (K-selected) line, had descended instead along the cold-blooded reptilian ("r-selected") line from their last common ancestor with Donald Trump (who restored the right to import the trophies from elephant-hunts a few days ago, but has just been forced by the protests from decent mammals to freeze his order for the time being).

Let me add that the other-minds problem, in this context, is not an abstract problem for philosophers pondering epistemic uncertainties (as we are doing in much of this conference). The other-minds problem is not even *our* problem. It is the problem of the other minds, the ones that are feeling the agony -- while Descartes, wizard-of-oz-like, urges everyone to pay no attention to their screaming and struggles, they are just reflex robots, behaving as if they were feeling pain, but in reality just "nocicepting" without feeling a thing.

\*My interlocutor pointed out afterward that by WEIRD he had meant Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic and that most of the world is not WEIRD. My reply: It is the well-off weirdos in the west who can and should take the first step when it comes to the elephant in the room. After all, they are also its biggest producers and consumers.

*"Peter Singer is bored to death and ignores questions from the floor because he's on his laptop...."*

Since he wrote his book, *Animal Liberation*, in 1975, Peter Singer has done the most that any human being to date has ever done — especially as quantified by utilitarian calculations — to awaken the potential for human decency and to spur action in generations of human beings.

Although I cannot agree with Peter on everything — utilitarianism is an appeal to just the head, or a computer, rather than to the heart — I think that what is misperceived as “boredom” on Peter's part is just the difference between the cerebral and the visceral — dare one call it the sentient? -- approach to safeguarding the sentience of others.

And for those who are interested in more about Animal Consciousness and the Other Minds Problem:

### The Other Minds Problem: Animal Sentience and Cognition

[Institute for Cognitive Sciences Summer School, June 26 – July 6, 2018](#)  
[Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada](#)



Since Descartes, philosophers know that there is no way to know for sure what — or whether — others feel (not even if they tell you). Science, however, is not about certainty but about probability and evidence. The 7.5 billion members of the human species can tell us what they are feeling. But there are 9 million other species on the planet, from microbes to mammals, with which humans share biological and cognitive ancestry, but not one other species can speak: Which of them can feel — and what do they feel? Their human spokespersons — the comparative psychologists, ethologists, evolutionists, and cognitive neurobiologists who are the world's leading experts in “mind-reading” other species -- will provide a sweeping panorama of what it feels like to be an elephant, ape, whale, cow, pig, dog, chicken, mouse, fish, lizard, lobster, snail: This growing body of facts about nonhuman sentience has profound implications not only for our understanding of human cognition, but for our treatment of other sentient species.

*Partial list of speakers who have accepted and confirmed to date:*

ADAMATZKY, Andrew (UEW) **slime mold cognition**  
ALLEN, Colin (Indiana) **evolution of mind**  
ANDREWS, Kristin (York) **animal mind**  
BALCOMBE, Jonathan (HSUS) **fish intelligence**  
BALUSKA, Frantisek (Bonn) **intelligence (and possibly sentience) in plants**  
BERNS, Gregory (Emory) **what it's like to be a dog**  
BIRCH, Jonathan (LSE) **the precautionary principle**  
BROSNAN, Sarah (Georgia State) **primate sociality**  
BURGHARDT, Gordon (Tennessee) **reptile cognition**  
CHANG, Steve (Yale) **primate preferences**  
CHAPMAN, Colin (McGill) **primate social cognition**  
CHITKA, Lars (Vienna) **bee perception**  
DUKAS, Reuven (McMaster) **insect cognition**  
GIRALDEAU, Luc-Alain (UQAM) **dans l'oeil du pigeon**  
HENDRICKS, Michael (McGill) **perception in c. elegans**  
KELLY, Debbie (Manitoba) **corvid cognition**  
MARINO, Lori (Whale Sanctuary Project) **cetacean cognition**  
MATHER, Jennifer (Lethbridge) **cephalopod cognition**

MENDL, Michael (Bristol) **pig cognition**  
OPHIR, Alexander (Cornell) **vole social behavior**  
OYAMA, Tomoko (McGill) **sensation and cognition in drosophila**  
PHELPS, Steve (Texas) **social cognition across species**  
PLOTNIK, Joshua (Hunter) **elephant mind**  
PRAVOSUDOV, Vladimir (Nevada) **chickadee spatial cognition**  
RATCLIFFE, John (Toronto) **bat cognition**  
READER, Simon (McGill.Ca) **evolution of social learning**  
REISS, Diana (Hunter) **dolphin mind**  
RYAN, Mike (Texas.Edu) **evolution of communication**  
SAKATA, Jon (McGill) **social learning in birdsong**  
SIMMONS, Jim (Brown) **what is it like to be a bat?**  
TENCATE, Carel (Leiden) **avian cognition**  
WISE, Steven (NhRP) **primate and proboscid personhood**  
WOOLLEY, Sarah (McGill) **perception and learning in songbirds**  
YOUNG, Larry (Emory) **prosocial behavior and oxytocin**