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The dissonance between knowing animals are sentient beings yet eating them

Commentary on [Rowan et al.](#) on *Sentience Politics*

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Abstract: Animal sentience is linked to the bigger picture of climate and health crises and “carnism” is a factor in the dissonance among (1) knowing animals are sentient, (2) caring about their feelings, and (3) not acting accordingly. We discuss our responsibility as researchers and as individual human beings.

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1. Crises of our time. Rowan et al.’s (2021) target article surveys the evolving western view of animal sentience, the development of animal sentience research and the efforts of *Compassion in World Farming*. The successes in the ways this organisation put scientific knowledge into practice and policy is admirable and has had an impact on the lives of countless of nonhuman animals (henceforth “animals”). There is no doubt that the efforts of such ambitious animal welfare movements can have a massive influence in changing the system of industrial livestock farming.

As Jones (2022) concludes in his commentary, animal welfare is linked to some of the main crises of our time, including climate change and pandemic risk [see also the target article of Wiebers & Feigin, 2020, its 28 accompanying commentaries and the Authors’ Response, Wiebers & Feigin 2021]. One important link to both the climate and health crises is the farming of animals. About 75% of all emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in nature (Jones et al., 2008). The risk of future zoonotic outbreaks and the severity of their impacts increase with the greater demand for animal-based products (ProVeg e.V., 2020). According

Poore & Nemecek (2018), the most effective behavioural change an individual can adopt to benefit the planet is to shift to a plant-based diet: a global shift could reduce the amount of land needed to grow food by 76% and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from its production by 49%.

2. Individual responsibility. These examples already show the great power of individual consumption choices, but the actions of individual citizens are only one factor in fighting for climate justice. What is problematic is large industrial producers and emitters who offload responsibility onto individuals to divert attention from their own corporate responsibility. On closer inspection such strategies can be seen to be “greenwashing.” An example is British Petroleum’s invention of the “carbon footprint” in 2005 to mitigate its own contribution, as a global oil company, to climate change (see Doyle, 2011, for an overview).

Individual responsibility is still of special interest, however, if we consider the problem from a psychological point of view. On the one hand, most people would state that they like and care about animals (Loughnan et al., 2012). On the other hand, most people still consume meat, even though animals are sentient beings (Rowan et al., 2021), causing pain and suffering with their consumer decisions. The question accordingly arises: How can this contradiction persist?

3. “Carnism”: an unconscious belief system. The concept of carnism has been proposed by the American social psychologist Melanie Joy (2010) to explain the contradiction between values and behaviours in which people make exceptions to what they would normally consider unethical. The concept is important for understanding individual responsibility in animal welfare and consumer choices. The title of Joy’s 2010 book -- “Why we love dogs, eat pigs, and wear cows” -- epitomizes how in western cultures farmed animals are exploited while dogs are treated like family members (Kaminski & Marshall-Pescini, 2014). Carnism is the unconscious belief system that conditions people to eat certain animals and thereby gives rise to a number of defense mechanisms that enable people to sustain the dissonance.

The three primary defense mechanisms are *denial*, *justification*, and *cognitive distortion*. There is denial of any bias and denial that animals suffer in factory farming. Justification can be summarised with three Ns: Eating animals is *normal*, *natural* and *necessary*. These assumptions are cultural. Most people learn them in childhood, so there is rarely any questioning of them. In cognitive distortion, animals are downgraded to objects and abstractions (Rothgerber 2021; Lifshin, 2022). This also includes the arbitrary categorization of different animal species as edible and non-edible. The defense mechanisms and the fact that the belief system underlying meat-eating is institutionalised and deeply rooted in our society, explains how we can sustain the psychological dissonance of liking or even loving animals, yet still eating them.

4. What can we as researchers do about it? In light of the links between factory farming and the crises of health, climate and biodiversity, it becomes clear that we need to go beyond acknowledging the animal suffering that arises from consuming them. Many people are taking this responsibly, engaging at both individual and social levels to confront the multiple crises: consumers are making more and more responsible food choices (Predergast & Tsang, 2019) and activists are joining together in organisations to have an influence at the system level (e.g. the [Fridays for Future](#) movement). The latest IPCC (2022) report warns that global warming of 1.5°C will be reached within the next two decades and that only the most drastic cuts in carbon emissions from now on could help prevent an environmental disaster.

So, how can we use scientific expertise to induce change? We agree with Bekoff (2022); action is necessary. Researchers need to engage in activism, joining groups like the [Scientists for Future](#). Activism has even been reported to enhance personal well-being as well as self-esteem (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Macgillivray, 2005; Snyder et al., 2016). More research is needed on the mechanisms of change and the effects of public and political actions. In the phenomenon of “social tipping points,” self-amplifying feedback from a small change in a relatively small number of people or actions can sometimes shift a sensitive social system into a qualitatively different state (Winkelmann et al., 2022). Knowing that such positive effects are possible can in turn awaken hope, motivation, and action in individuals. Exposing the contradictions inherent in carnism may encourage people to try to resolve the dissonances in their values and actions instead of denying or justifying them (Boykoff, 2022). This is what we take to be the objective of Rowan et al.’s timely target article.

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