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## Compassion: Why it is better to eat fish

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"Eat fish. The fish don't mind!"

Fish, according to [Ilya Farber \(http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/faculty/social\\_sciences/ifarber.asp\)](http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/faculty/social_sciences/ifarber.asp), an assistant professor at SMU's [School of Social Sciences \(http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/\)](http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/), qualifies as morally acceptable meat. Poultry lovers might have a bone to pick with Farber, who deduced this - as a vegetarian - from his understanding of moral philosophy and neuroscience.

How is it more acceptable to feed on fish as opposed to other animals? An answer to that lies in human compassion: the way in which we feel about others' happiness, sadness or suffering. Such feelings can be extended to other human beings, as well as animals and objects; take for instance, how we feel towards our families, friends, pets, or favourite childhood toys.

But are humans naturally equipped with the ability to be compassionate, or do we display compassion only when it serves our selfish desires - to be liked by others, to receive recognition, and to appear gracious?

### Evolving from the selfish man

Pop culture tends to paint an ugly depiction of human nature; that people, if left to their own devices, would only care about themselves and engage in all kinds of amoral behaviour. According to Farber, this assumption was common amongst scientists and moral philosophers in Western civilisations until the early twentieth century. However, by the middle of the century, anthropologists and sociologists challenged the notion with new evidence that human nature may not be all about selfishness and competition.

Farber, who spoke recently at the [Social Sciences Capstone Seminar Series \(http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/events/seminar\\_series/social\\_sciences\\_capstone\\_2009.asp\)](http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/events/seminar_series/social_sciences_capstone_2009.asp), noted that people *do* pursue self-interests to some extent. However, he added: "It's remarkably uniform, worldwide, if you look at very different cultures with very different moral regimes, religions, standards, means of upbringing; you won't find many [societies] where people are just mean to each other all the time or that they are all selfish."

In fact, most studies have shown that people naturally feel compassion for one another, save under extreme circumstances, such as intense poverty, famine, hardship and war. In such circumstances, some moral behaviour might break down. However, researchers found, across many different cultures, that people naturally show compassion even without being explicitly taught or asked to do so.

This puzzled evolutionary theorists. Natural selection seemed to demand that we do everything in our power to ensure the successful passing on of our own genes. In an environment where resources are scarce, the selfish and competitive stand higher chances of survival: thus the belief that man had been predisposed with dog-eat-dog instincts - to secure our own survival and the survival of our offspring.

But if this was true, then why might humans care about others at all?

"Evolution doesn't necessarily dictate that we should be selfish," said Farber. He points out that human beings have strong instincts to care for their children, parents and other close relatives. The evolution of these instincts can be explained by the fact that these people share some percentage of our own genes. But since we can't directly check someone's genes to see how closely we're related, our instincts have to rely on 'kinship markers', such as the way people look, feel, sound or smell.

Since we evolved as social beings, this instinctive compassion might also be triggered by shared experiences or social identities, such as citizenship, social affiliations and alma maters. "Studies have shown that we feel more compassion for people who are more like us, and that it is harder to feel compassion the more different people seem."

Yet, in the absence of genetic similarities, we would still extend much compassion to those unrelated to us - our friends, classmates, colleagues, and even complete strangers. This may be because our instincts are not very specific, or that they did not evolve to deal with the massive scale and complexities of modern life, said Farber.

Compared to the past, the average person today comes into contact with a lot more people in a lifetime - perhaps

up to the millions. Education, media and globalisation also exposes us to a greater spectrum of humanity. Our primitive sense of discerning between similar versus dissimilar humans could be overwhelmed, he said.

However, the principle remains that we tend to feel more for those we identify as being similar to us. "One clear factor [limiting the scope of our compassion] is difference – people who look different, act different, talk different, or if their suffering is the kind that doesn't make sense to you," said Farber.

Our sense of judgment also affects our ability to be compassionate. Naturally, we would be less compassionate towards those who we judge to be wrong.

"This is why it's much easier to raise money for children. Everyone thinks children are innocent. But if you try to raise money for poor adults, you'll run up against those who will say, 'Well, they're poor because they are lazy... If I give them any handout, they'll just stay lazy.' Whether [such arguments are] rational or not, that sort of judgmental behaviour is opposed to compassion," he said.

### **So why eat fish?**

Man had, historically, placed himself at the centre of the universe. Not much stood in the way between his use (and abuse) of animals and the environment – not until quite recently, thanks to a growing number of activists raising awareness in these fields.

"We've come to question privilege among humans. It's now controversial or frowned upon for someone to state that their group is privileged compared to other humans... Our privileged position in the universe has also been called into question. We used to think that it's all about us, but we now realise that we're all just on a rock, circling around one ball of gas; that we're not at the centre of the universe at all... so this notion that we're so special has become harder to sustain," Farber noted.

Scientific advances have also helped humans to appreciate the similarities that we share with animals. After all, much of what we know about the human mind was learnt from the study of animals; because – as Farber put it – neuroscientists don't get to take people apart and have few opportunities to stick electrodes into live human beings.

But more importantly, as we realise, more and more, that animals are similar enough to humans to be scientifically illuminating for our own biological understanding, the basis of mankind's superiority over animals becomes increasingly wobbly. Can we really qualify the way in which we *should* treat animals?

Traditional approaches to evaluating the moral status of animals have focused on tests related to problem-solving, language or self-recognition – all indirect measures of animals' minds. Advancements in neuroscience have, however, enabled us to analyse, directly, the capacities of an animal's brain, including their levels of consciousness.

The study of consciousness (or awareness) is important, according to Farber, as without consciousness, there can be no suffering. Animals with richer forms of consciousness – such as the social consciousness of wolves, dolphins and many primates – may deserve special regard. By the same token, animals with lower levels of consciousness – low enough so as not to register suffering – may not require special regard. This underlies Farber's belief that it is morally acceptable to eat fish.

Fishes do not possess any consciousness. They go through life, guided by basic sensory-motor abilities, which allow them to swim, mate, eat and excrete – according to studies of fish brains. "They can't integrate across sense modalities. They clearly don't have a sense of self. They don't have anything like occurrent contents of attention," said Farber.

Put metaphorically, it is similar to human sleepwalking, minus the dreaming (because fishes have no inner consciousness). Sleepwalkers can navigate around furniture, down the stairs, find snacks, and such. For fishes, interaction with the outside world is guided by low-level systems that do not require consciousness. Even when they produce behaviour that would be emotional for a human (such as fleeing from a predator), there is simply "nobody home".

Can fishes feel pain?

"Few animals can survive without means to detect damage to their bodies... but they won't feel [suffering]. So if a predator takes a bite out of a fish, the fish will swim away, but the behaviour it engages is the same behaviour as if you had flashed a bright light, played a loud sound or slapped the water. It has a startle response and a basic avoidance response," Farber explained, adding that fishes do not even seem to notice when an encounter with a predator has left them bleeding.

### **Finding Nemo**

While it might be morally better to eat fish, rather than animals with the capacity to socialise and feel suffering, it does not mean that is a 'mistake' to feel sympathy or love for fishes. After all, as a species, we have been known to love even lifeless objects like stuffed toys and gadgets.

"Let's say I take a stuffed teddy bear and I knife it in front of you, ripping it from limb from limb, laughing... [Since] the teddy bear can't suffer, would there be anything wrong?" Farber questioned. His answer is yes - not because of what happens to the teddy bear, but because of what this says about the human: "A person who rejoices at the mutilation of teddy bears is probably sick, and may be at risk of hurting humans. A childhood fascination with mutilating animals is one of the classic signs of future violent criminality."

Though he affirms others that it is all right to eat fish, Farber - a life-long vegetarian - prefers not to eat fish, due to strong personal feelings of sympathy towards all animals. "Morally, I think there's genuinely no problem with eating them. But aesthetically, I just can't do it. I look at a piece of sushi and think 'That's part of a dead animal's body' and I can't imagine putting it in my mouth."

Our ability to sympathise and offer compassion, no matter the subject's cognitive ability, is part of what defines our humaneness. This explains why it is easy to feel for teddy bears, fishes, Blackberries and iPhones. Ironically, such feelings of compassion are often not extended to fellow humans.

Today, after two world wars and several genocides, human prejudices are still dealt, with violence and oppression. What would it take for humans to exercise their inner compassion, and can such feelings be nurtured in people - even if they are pro-choice, pro-life, religious, atheists, etc?

Psychological studies have shown that feelings of happiness, anger and sympathy are universal emotional experiences across mankind. What varies from culture to culture, are the triggers that provoke such emotions, said Farber. The good news is that these triggers are malleable, and one powerful way to do so is through education.


"Sympathy is a fundamental thing, and the idea that it tends to trigger for the people that resemble us is very deep. What education can do is to make us see the resemblance where we had never seen it before. So if you're exposed to other cultures, you can then start to see how others sort of resemble you... Education can be an exposure mechanism that takes our pre-existing structures and causes us to apply them in new ways" he explained.


He related the experience of a Caucasian friend who had gone to live in China. When his friend had first arrived, he could not tell Chinese people apart. But about a year-and-a-half into his stay, he found himself thinking of some of them as semblances of relatives back at home: a Chinese man reminded him of his Caucasian uncle while an older woman reminded him of his Caucasian grade-school teacher. Things appeared in ways he had never seen before, Farber said. "It all sort of just clicked!"

So perhaps that is one way in which human compassion is actualised - that while it is easier to mark out our differences, efforts to seek out similarities require time and patience - such that when we are ready, everything comes together in a 'click'.

But until that day comes, we can at least make a point of eating fish.

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