

>> THEORY OF MIND

The Carnivore's Dilemma

Meat eaters selectively deny mental abilities in the animals they consume

On the savanna a lioness will fell and shred her prey without empathy. Yet for we humans who can imagine that a cow might feel pain, pleasure and fear, enjoying animal flesh may have moral overtones. New research indicates that we have developed a mental tool to help us cope with the realities of our carnivorous nature: denial.

In a study that excluded vegetarians, psychologist Brock Bastian of the University of Queensland in Australia and his colleagues first asked participants to commit to eating either meat slices or apple wedges. Before eating, everyone wrote an essay describing the full life cycle of a butchered animal and then rated the mental faculties of a cow or a sheep. Participants who knew that they would have to eat meat later in the study made much more conservative assessments of the animal mind, on average, denying that it could think and feel enough to suffer. The study was published last October in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.



“People engage in the denial of mind in animals to allow them to engage in the behavior of eating animals with less negative effect,” Bastian says. The researchers argue that although humans have the ability to imagine themselves in someone else’s shoes—or hooves—doing

so is not always helpful. People living in carnivorous cultures may have developed this strategy of denial to better align their morals with their traditions so they may continue to consume meat without being consumed by guilt.
—Morgen E. Peck

>> ATTRACTION



The Problem with the Pill

Using oral contraceptives may affect relationship satisfaction

Birth-control pills are known to affect women’s taste in men, at least in laboratory experiments. Now a study of real-world couples suggests that this pill-related preference change could have long-term consequences for a relationship’s quality and outcome.

In the lab, women using oral contraceptives show a weaker preference for masculine men—those with high testosterone levels and the corresponding physical hallmarks—than their non-pill-using counterparts. To investigate this issue in a real-world setting, psychologist S. Craig Roberts of the University of Stirling in Scotland and his collaborators gave online surveys to more than 2,500 women from various countries. According to the results, published online October 12 in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, participants who used hormonal contraceptives while choosing their partner were less attracted to him and less sexually satisfied during their relationship than were individuals who did not use hormonal birth control. Pill users were happier with their mate’s financial support and other nonsexual aspects of the relationship, however, and they were less likely to separate.

This relationship stability might be caused by the bias of women on the pill toward low-testosterone men, who tend to be more faithful. Roberts suggests that women who met their mate while taking the pill might want to switch to nonhormonal contraceptives several months before getting married to test whether their feelings for their partner remain the same.
—Janelle Weaver

>> HOT AIR

Video games are always a waste of time.

Reality: Some video games can be a good vehicle for training specific skills, such as enhancing short-term memory, agility or reaction time.