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The Gravity of Weight

Compassion for Animals in Scientific Research

Regarding the pain of lab animals

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KEY POINTS

- **Centuries of animal research have led to major medical breakthroughs for humans.**
- **Laws govern the ethical treatment of lab animals, but mice are sometimes not well-protected by these laws.**
- **Lab animals cannot give consent, the mainstay of human research, and often endure untreated pain.**
- **Speciesism is the preferrential treatment given to animals for whom humans have greater emotional attachments.**

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," based on Ovid's myth, by Swedish artist Joos de Momper, late 16th century, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Notice how the figures in the painting are not reacting to the amazing horror of a boy falling from the sky.
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

When faced with the suffering of others, many people instinctively tend to turn away. “Attention has become a moral currency,” writes Bernard A. Saltzman in his new book *Turning Away: The Poetics of an Ancient Gesture* (2026). For Saltzman, turning a blind eye is “deeply embedded in the experience of being human.”

This is poignantly illustrated in the painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,* circa 1558, attributed to Flemish painter Peter Bruegel the Elder, in which the artist depicts the myth of Daedalus and Icarus from Book VIII of

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Throughout the centuries, the myth has captured the imagination of many writers and painters, including the 16th-century Swedish painter Joos de Momper, and even Picasso, whose 1958 version is at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

In Ovid's rendition, the ploughman, fisherman, and shepherd continue their work, despite the amazing sight of a boy falling from the sky. The painting is further immortalized in W.H. Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux Arts:* "About suffering they were never wrong, The Old Masters, how it takes place/while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along…how everything just turns away/Quite leisurely from the disaster…" (Karasu, 2009).

Alternatively, some can just as easily "engage in doomsday scrolling," develop a prurient fascination with suffering, and become unable to turn away (Saltzman). We live, writes Susan Sontag, in a "society of spectacle" and can become voyeurs "regarding the pain of others" (2003).

Whether we turn toward or turn away from the misfortunes of others, either gesture is a "poetic way of enacting feeling" (Saltzman).

Viewing suffering can bring compassion, a complex emotion that involves not only the emotional response of recognizing the suffering of others but also a desire and wish to alleviate that suffering. But compassion, cautions Sontag, is an "unstable emotion," and people can become inured to the horror and develop "moral or emotional anesthesia": although there may be both shame and shock initially, the shock can wear off.

Claude Bernard, the father of physiology, was a major proponent of vivisection. The painting, "Claude Bernard and his Pupils," is by French artist Leon-Augustin Lhermitte.
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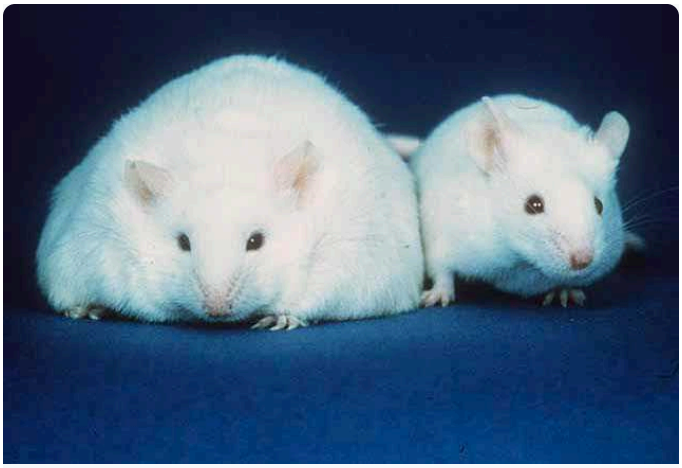
Most who write about compassion focus on the human component, but what about compassion for animals, and particularly those animals used in research?

Animals in research

The use of animals in scientific research has a long history, dating back at least to the Greeks and Romans when Aristotle and later Galen experimented on animals (Hajar, 2011). Nineteenth-century Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch used animal models (Frühwein and Paul, 2025).



An obese mouse, genetically modified, for scientific studies. Mice are the most commonly used animals for research but are sometimes not well-monitored by our laws.
Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

Claude Bernard, considered the father of physiology, was a major proponent of vivisection (i.e., the dissection of living animals) (LaFollette and Shanks, 2008). In more recent years, Jonas Salk used tissue from the kidneys of monkeys to develop his vaccine for polio (Shampo and Kyle, 1998).

There is no question that animal experimentation has led to significant breakthroughs in medicine and is considerably more acceptable than the egregious ethical violations committed not only by the Nazis, who conducted experimentation on concentration camp victims (Carbone, 2026), but also by researchers in the U.S. who, for 40 years, intentionally withheld treatment from Black men in the Tuskegee syphilis study (Tobin, 2022). These abuses led to major reforms in the oversight of human research and the importance of informed consent (Carbone).

The use of animals in research has not been without controversy, particularly stemming from investigations that uncovered overt abuse and mistreatment of animals. Even Harry Harlow, famous for his cloth and wire-covered surrogate

experiments with his infant monkeys, was accused of cruelty and torture for his "pit of despair" (Karasu, 2020).

PETA, i.e., People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, whose motto is "Animals are not ours to experiment on, eat, wear, or use for entertainment, or abuse in any way," was established in 1980. Its staff has gone undercover to document major animal abuse.

Larry Carbone, a laboratory veterinarian for over 40 years, explores the many complexities involved in the use of animals, from primates to fleas, for scientific research in his recently published book (Carbone, 2026; Morton, 2026).

Carbone writes, "A lab vet goes from someone who makes sick animals healthy to someone who makes healthy animals sick." Those who work with lab animals may experience considerable stress, sometimes related to what has been called the "caring-killing paradox" (LaFollette et al., 2020).

A monkey alone in a small cage.
Source: Viktoriia Novokhatska / iStock

In the U.S., the NIH and the U.S. Department of Agriculture oversee lab animals, but no one knows how many are used by labs. There has been legislation, such as the Animal Welfare Act of 1966, to protect lab animals, but well over 99 percent were not covered. Mice, the most commonly used, rats, and fish were not considered animals under this Act nor under the 1985 Congressional update

that established animal ethics committees to self-regulate and monitor some studies (Carbone).

There was another update in 1986 that established the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) to regulate vertebrate research, including mice, but Carbone is critical of its oversight, namely, that sometimes its members focus more on the *technical* justification for an animal study, rather than its *ethical* justification. Admittedly, though, some institutions do a better job of monitoring these rodent studies than others.

Furthermore, Carbone describes what animal ethicists call *speciesism,* namely giving preferential treatment, such as allowing exercise for some animals, such as dogs, based more on people's emotional attachments to them rather than what an animal may require. Writes Carbone, "The great conundrum in animal research...we want animals whose bodies and diseases most resemble us humans, but whose mental and emotional capabilities are so different that we commit no sin in harming them."

And after Jane Goodall's research with her chimps, primates evolved "from subhuman primates to nonhuman primates," but although they are social, they could still be kept alone in a cage for years without exercise.

Carbone believes that too many lab animals suffer from untreated pain, especially after a surgical procedure. Further, they often lack appropriate stimulation because researchers want a so-called *neutral environment* and fear that addressing these issues will "wreak havoc on their data." The problem, though, is that "there is no such thing as a neutral environment."

Significantly, Carbone emphasizes that when animals are treated without regard for their physical and psychological welfare, they can become poor research subjects. For example, grabbing mice by their tails, housing them in sterile, small cages that limit their instinctive ability to burrow, and exposing them to forced-air ventilation, all of which stress them, will potentially compromise data. One challenge, Carbone admits, is that not all those concerned with the welfare of animals agree on a definition of *environmental enrichment.*

"The Revenge of the Animals," a caricature of vivisection, French School, 1909. Charles Richet, Professor of Physiology, is in the left corner.
Source: Copyright Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Images. Used with permission.

Carbone suggests that researchers should always question whether animal experiments are justified, useful, or even potentially misleading. Further, these models have their limitations and are not always "reliable predictors for human disease" (Frűhwein and Paul). Carbone hopes that animal labs will become obsolete eventually, as there will be other means of gathering data. There are three "Rs" of alternatives: *replace, reduce* the number used, and *refine* methods of handling the animals.

Animals are in labs precisely because they are subjected to experiments that cannot be conducted on humans, and unlike human studies, where informed consent is required, animals are not capable of giving us their consent. Consider their pain and suffering, and don't turn away.

Note: Special thanks to David B. Allison, PhD, Endowed Professor and Director of the Children's Nutrition Research Center, Baylor, for clarifying that the institutions with which he has been affiliated have required considerable supervision for his mouse studies. And for a fascinating discussion of Harlow's research, see Deborah Blum's 2011 book, *Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection.*

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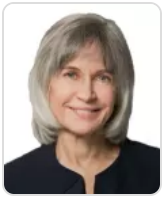
About the Author



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