

The Animal Studies Repository

From the Selected Works of Harold Herzog, Ph.D.

June 17, 2013

Would You Save a Puppy or a Child From a Burning Building?

Harold Herzog, *Animal Studies Repository*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/harold-herzog/55/>

Hal Herzog, Ph.D., Animals and Us

Would You Save a Puppy or a Child From a Burning Building?

A new study shows when we choose pets over people.

Posted Jun 17, 2013

Pretend for a moment that you have come across a burning building. From inside, you hear the howls of a dog and the screams of a human infant. Flames licking at your heels, you run into the building and realize that you only have time to save one or the other. Which one should you choose – the dog or the child?

While unlikely in real life, fantasy situations like the burning building scenario provide fruitful ways of studying human moral intuition. The most widely known of these is the trolley problem. It goes like this. A runaway trolley car is headed toward a group of five people walking along the trolley tracks. You are bystander and can pull a switch which will divert the trolley down a spur where one person is walking on the tracks. If you do nothing, five people will die. But throwing the switch will mean certain death for one person. What should you do? The scenario can be varied in many ways. For example, what if you have to personally push a person onto the tracks in order to save the five people? And what if the person was Adolph Hitler or Peter Singer, the world's greatest living moral philosopher?

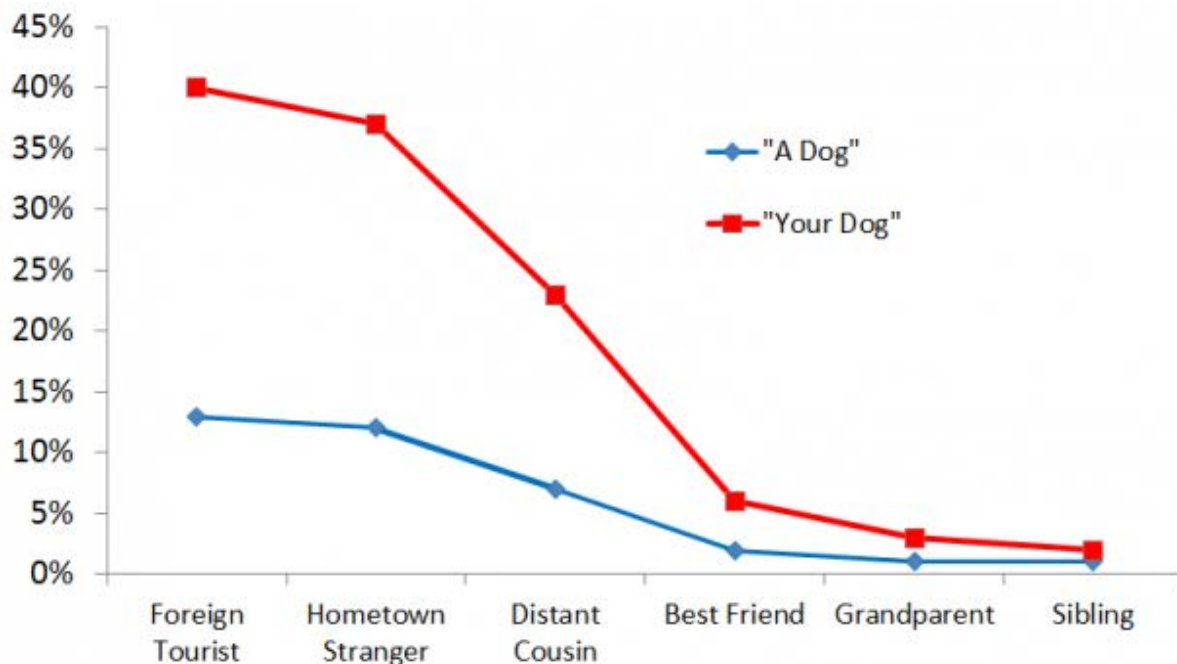
Cognitive psychologists have used situations like the trolley problem to study a host of questions related to the human moral sense. These include the roles of emotion and reason in ethical decisions, sex differences in moral judgment, and the neurobiology of morality

Lewis Petrinovich and his colleagues have used hypothetical moral dilemmas to examine the evolutionary underpinnings of moral intuitions. Some of their fantasy situations involve conflicts between people and animals. For instance, in one scenario, people were asked if they would send a trolley crashing into a young human adult in order to save the last five highland gorillas on the planet (which just happen to be picnicking on the other trolley spur). The researchers presented dozens of variations of moral scenarios to hundreds of people both in the United States and in Taiwan. They concluded that universal moral principles exist, and that among the most powerful of these is “value human life over the lives of non-human animals.” In other words, humans are natural speciesists.

A Person, a Pet, and a Runaway Bus

However, an innovative study recently published in the journal *Anthrozoös* indicates that there are situations in which love for animals can trump our concern for other humans. The research was conducted by a team headed by psychologist Richard Topolski. Their version of the trolley problem involved an out of control bus hurtling toward a person and a dog who are crossing a

street. You are the bystander. There is only time for you to dash out and save the person or the dog. The researchers varied two dimensions of the scenarios – the person and the dog. The “person” options were a foreign tourist, a hometown stranger, a distant cousin, your best friend, your grandparent, and your sibling. The options for the dog were “someone else’s pet” or “your pet.” The graph below shows the proportion of people who said they would save the animal over the human.

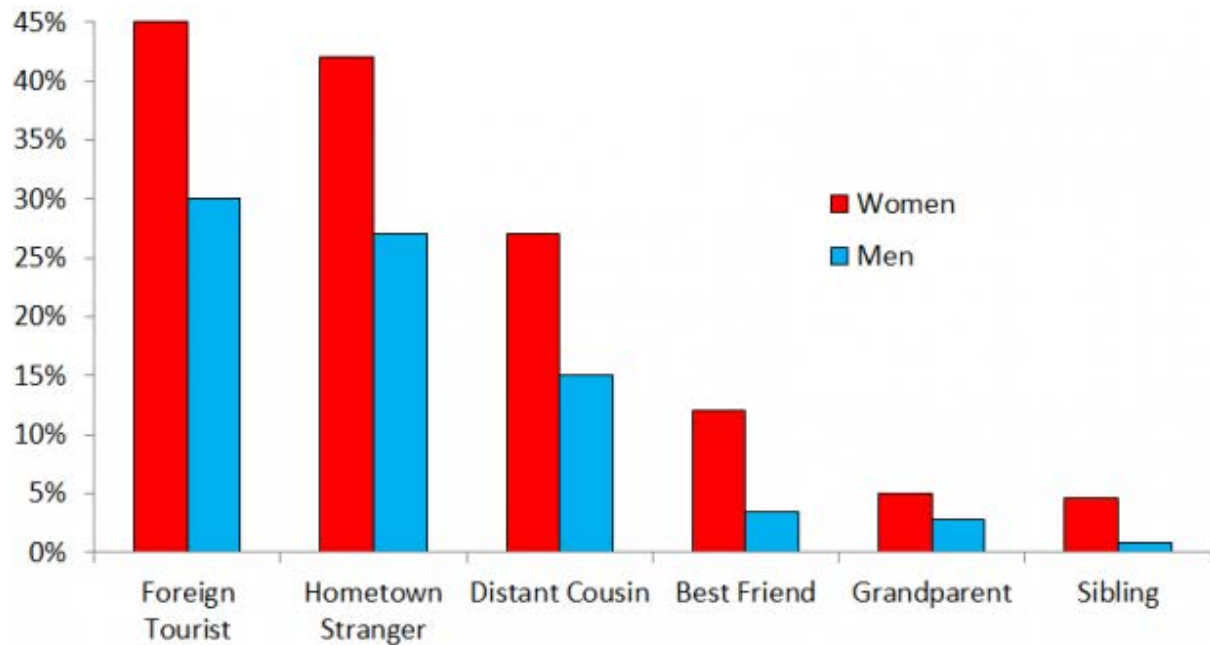


Percent who would save a dog over a person.

In light of Petrinovich’s claim that humans are inherent speciesists, I was shocked that 40% of the subjects said that, under some circumstances (foreign stranger versus their dog), they would save the animal. The graph also shows that when it comes to saving people, the biggest factor is kinship. And when it comes to pets, being your personal companion animal counts...a lot. These results support the notion that for many people, pets are, at least psychologically, full-fledged family members.

Sex Differences In Moral Choices

Another variable also affected the participants’ willingness to throw someone under the proverbial bus – their sex. As you can see from the graph below, women were much more likely than men to say they would save their pet over a person. (This was also the case when it came to saving someone else’s dog.)



Percent of people who would save "their dog" over a person.

What Can We Learn From Fantasy Moral Dilemmas?

Is Topolski suggesting that 40% of people would save their pet over a person if confronted with a real runaway bus, a real foreign tourist, and their real dog? Of course not. However, while responses to fantasy situations do not predict how people will behave in the real world, they do shed light on differences in moral thinking. For example, the researchers asked the subjects to explain why they made their decisions. They found that subjects who elected to save people over pets were more likely to give logic-based justifications for their decisions whereas decisions to save the pet were more likely to be rooted in emotion ("I love my pet.") Further, women were four times more likely than men to give emotionally-laden, care-based reasons for their decisions.

Back To the Burning Building

Now let's return to the yelping dog and the screaming baby in the burning building. For me, this one is a no-brainer. I am going to grab the kid and head for the nearest exit (even if it was my dog and kid was a brat). The animal activist Joan Dunayer would charge me with being a speciesist for reflexively saving the child. In her book *Speciesism*, she proposes a different approach to solving tough moral issues involving animals. She says that when faced with rescuing a child or a dog from death by fire you should reach in your pocket for a quarter -- and flip the coin. After all, Dunayer argues, the child and the dog have the same moral value.

I disagree. What do you think?