

The Meat Paradox: How Are We Able to Love Animals and Love Eating Animals?

Steve Loughnan¹, Boyka Bratanova², and Elisa Puvia¹

¹University of Kent, and ²Université Libre de Bruxelles

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The relationship between people and animals is morally complex. This complexity stems from our ambivalent treatment of animals and is nowhere better captured than in the consumption of meat. Meat eating is morally problematic because it contrasts our desire to avoid hurting animals with our appetite for their flesh. This tension – to love animals and to love meat – is the essence of the meat paradox.

It is clear that meat constitutes an important part of the Western diet. The average Italian eats around 90kgs of meat a year, an increase of nearly 200% since the 1960s (WRI, 2010). To satisfy this increasing appetite, a great deal of meat needs to be produced. Looking only at domestic production, in 2001, Italy produced 4.1 million metric tons of meat (WRI, 2010). This amount of meat requires the slaughter of a truly vast number of animals. In the United States alone the number of meat animals being killed has topped 9 billion animals per year (Joy, 2010). This figure excludes European consumption, growing consumption in non-Western nations, and all sea life harvested for meat. In short, we are eating more meat, meaning more animals have to die.

These statistics might suggest that we are living in an era that does not care about animals. We slaughter them in increasing numbers to feed our growing appetite for meat. However, there is good evidence that we live in a society that shows increasing concern for animals. According to the American Pet Association, one third of U.S. households own a dog (39%) or a cat (33%), and owners spend a combined \$43billion per annum on their pets (APPA, 2009). In addition to owning more animals, we care more about animals in general. In Italy acts of animal cruelty can carry a prison sentence of up to three years and fines of up to €160,000 (GazzettaUfficiale, 2004). These high levels of pet ownership and legislation against animal cruelty seem to stand at odds with our increasing consumption of meat. How can a society on one



hand kill billions of animals for food and on the other bring them into the homes and pass laws to protect them? How can people both love animals and love eating animals? In short, how do people manage the meat paradox?

We suggest that there are two broad routes out of the paradox. The first involves ceasing meat consumption. Since vegetarians do not consume animals, they do not have a tension between loving animals and eating meat. However, clearly an overwhelming majority of people find another solution. The second path, we propose, is to diminish the moral rights of animals. Harming animals is only problematic if you think that animals have moral rights. If you diminish the moral rights of animals, harming them is less problematic. In the remainder of this paper we will present evidence for these two pathways. We will detail research showing that vegetarians view animals very differently to omnivores and that omnivores employ a variety of cognitive and motivational mechanisms to evade the meat paradox.

Corresponding Author:

Steve Loughnan
University of Kent, UK, CT2 7NS
Email: s.loughnan@kent.ac.uk

Don't Eat Meat: Vegetarians and the Meat Paradox

One solution to the meat paradox is to stop eating meat. Endorsement of animal rights is not jeopardized when eating vegetables. People become vegetarian for a variety of health, religious and moral reasons. Moral vegetarians consider killing animals for meat an unacceptable violation of the moral rights of animals (Ruby, *in press*). Thus, we might expect that moral vegetarians endorse animal's moral rights to a great extent than omnivores. Indeed, recent research has indicated that this is the case by examining the ways in which vegetarians and omnivores think about animals. Bilewicz and colleagues (Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogosz, 2011) found that, compared with omnivores, vegetarians have a very different idea about the emotional capacities of animals. In a series of three studies, they showed that omnivores – but not vegetarians – tend to deny animals the capacity to experience complex emotions or inhumanize them. Moreover, omnivores make a clear distinction between the emotions of meat and non-meat animals, a distinction that vegetarians do not draw. This denial of emotionality to animals is important because these are typically the characteristics possessed by human groups that we care about. Denying animals emotions is a subtle way in which they are excluded from moral concern.

From a different perspective, Loughnan and Bastian (2011) examined how vegetarians and omnivores think about the minds of meat animals (i.e., cows, lambs) when reminded that they would be killed. When vegetarians are reminded that an animal will die for meat, they show no change in their attribution of mental states to the animal. By contrast, when meat eaters are reminded of the animal's death for meat, they attribute the animal fewer mental states, essentially seeing it as relatively mindless. These two recent lines of research suggest that the ways in which vegetarians think about animals is fundamentally different to how omnivores think about animals. Specifically, vegetarians attribute animals a rich emotional life and complex minds. These emotions and complex minds endow the animal with moral rights, which the vegetarians protect by refusing to eat meat. For meat eaters, the denial of emotion and mind may serve as a defensive way of continuing to eat meat.

Eating meat but loving animals: Omnivores and meat paradox

One aspect of vegetarianism appears to be recognition that animals possess the types of mental capacities that make them worthy of moral concern. Specifically, that they have emotions (they can feel distress) and they have minds (they have thoughts and feelings). Possessing emotions and a mind that can understand suffering is a

prerequisite for moral concern (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). By thinking about animals in a way which makes their minds appear more basic or simple, omnivores maybe attribute them lesser moral standing and therefore consider their suffering less important. This may particularly be the case for meat animals compared to non-meat animals. Consider for instance the false belief that dogs are far more intelligent than pigs or that fish are not capable of feeling pain (Joy, 2010). We will summarize an emerging consensus in the literature that, through a variety of motivated and non-motivated mechanisms, omnivores are able to continue to eat meat despite recognising that this requires the death of meat animals.

Motivation

Meat eating is a morally problematic issue, and even the most hardened meat lover probably does not want to think about a cow while eating a steak. Why do meat eaters feel uncomfortable? Most people think that animals should not be hurt, and they recognise that they are hurt – indeed killed – by the meat industry. This recognition that their beliefs (animals should not be hurt) do not match their actions (I eat meat), creates an uncomfortable tension. In psychology, this tension is referred to as 'cognitive dissonance', and it is an undesirable state that people want to leave. One way to leave this state is by changing behaviours, and indeed vegetarians avoid this unpleasant feeling by not eating meat. Another way is to change your beliefs. Finding a way to down play or deny that animals are hurt through meat eating serves to avoid this negative tension between beliefs and actions. In recent years several studies have suggested that meat eater do just this; change their beliefs about animals to fit their palate.

In a simple study, Loughnan and colleagues (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010) asked participants to come to the laboratory for a 'consumer choice' task. They are invited to eat either beef jerky or dried banana. After eating meat or banana, participants were invited to a second, supposedly unrelated study. In this study they reported their extent of moral concern for animal and their beliefs about the moral rights of a cow. Participants who had previously eaten beef reported a restricted range of animals as worth of moral concern, and reported that a cow was less deserving of moral treatment. This pattern of findings was replicated both when simply reminding people of the animal origins of meat and when having them write about meat production (Bastian et al., *in press*). These studies suggest that one response to the tension produced by meat eating and animal rights is to derogate the moral rights of the animal.

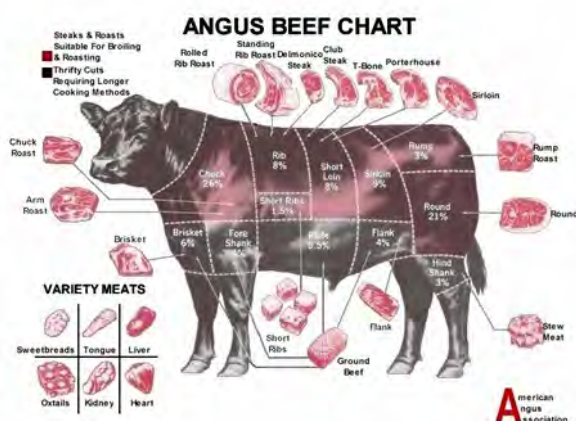
In a subsequent series of studies, Bastian and colleagues (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, *in press*) explored whether this denial of moral capacities to meat

animals actually made meat eaters feel better about their dietary choices. Participants came to the laboratory and were asked to eat either cold cuts of roast beef or slices of apple. Prior to eating the food they were given the chance to rate the moral capacities of cows. Participants who chose roast beef and rated the moral capacities of cows as relatively low reported feeling less guilt and shame regarding meat eating. These results provide critical insight into the psychological process of meat eating. When reminded of the animal origins of meat, people appear to derogate the moral status of meat animals in order to reduce feelings of guilt and shame. Meat eaters' derogation of animals is motivated by the negative feelings aroused by eating another living creature.

Cognition

The preceding discussion of meat, derogation, and guilt may strike the omnivorous reader as overly complex. Most people don't think about animals or feel bad when eating meat; it is just an everyday part of life. This may in part be true, and we suggest that the ways in which we naturally tend to think about animals may serve to avoid the meat paradox. That is, how people tend to think about animals means that our tendency to eat them is not morally problematic.

When we think about an animal, we often have a particular 'frame of reference' in mind. That is, we have a certain framing for how we see the animal; my dog is a pet, my horse is a tool, my pig is a meal. These framings are not necessarily motivated by my own needs; I can recognise that my neighbour's pig is not a pet and is a meat animal. This tendency to place animals in different categories can have wide reaching ramifications for how they are treated (Herzog, 2010). Cognitive psychology has long shown that being a member of a certain category highlights category relevant attributes. Applied to animals, being a meat animal may highlight flesh quantity and quality, whereas being a pet may highlight personality and training.



A recent study demonstrated the importance of these non-motivated categorisation processes for how people think about meat animals. Bratanova and colleagues (Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011) presented participants with an animal that they had never encountered: a tree kangaroo. In addition to basic information about the animal, they were told that tree kangaroos are considered food or no mention was made about eating the animal. Importantly, none of the participants had ever eaten a tree kangaroo, meaning that they were under no personal motivation to deny the animal moral status. Nevertheless, participants who heard that the animal was considered food attributed it significantly less moral rights than participants who did not hear about it being eaten. This finding suggests that simply considering an animal food serves to suppress its moral rights, even in the absence of an explicit motivation to avoid negative feelings.

Framing also play an important role when we think about the human-animal relationship. Thinking about human-animal differences is important for understanding meat eating since humans – despite being made of meat – are typically not considered edible. Differences in framing the human-animal divide have recently been shown to impact on how people think about the moral rights of animals. In a series of studies, Bastian and colleagues (Bastian, Costello, Loughnan, & Hodson, in press) have shown that people who thought about what makes animals similar to humans showed increased concerns for animals' rights. However, this was not the case when people thought about what makes humans similar to animals. Stated otherwise, when the human aspects of animals are emphasised our concern for their moral rights goes up and our willingness to eat them goes down. By contrast, emphasising the animal aspects of humans has no similar effect. This recent finding suggests that by crafting the ways in which we tend to see the human-animal divide we can increase or decrease our concern for animals' rights and our willingness to eat them.

The two preceding lines of work both demonstrate that animals can be denied moral standing by virtue of the ways we typically frame them. Simply recognising that an animal is considered a food animal or thinking about how people are like animals (rather than animals being like people) both serve to make the exploitation and consumption of animals seem more appropriate by reducing their moral rights. In short, omnivores may have a series of chronic tendencies to categorise animals and think about the human-animal divide which act to automatically suppress the moral rights of animals.

Conclusion

There are multiple ways to resolve the meat paradox. Ceasing meat consumption represents one powerful way;

vegetarians do not see any tension between their diet and the moral rights of animals. However, a vast majority of people will not become vegetarians and instead find ways of continuing meat consumption. For omnivores, there are multiple pathways to continued meat consumption. Some of these appear motivated; we minimise the moral rights of animals when we want to eat meat, and doing so makes us feel better (or at least less guilty). However, this is not an entirely cynical process. The way we naturally think about and categorize animals – as edible or inedible – and the way in which we consider the human/animal divide plays an important role in our decisions about meat. There is no evidence that these processes are motivated, suggesting that the meat paradox rarely enters the focus of attention for most people. Given the entrenched nature of these beliefs, it seems likely that many people will continue to find ways to eat animals for years to come.

Glossary

Infra-humanization. The tendency to subtly attribute less of the human essence to social outgroups than social ingroups (Leyens et al., 2001).

(de-)Mentalization. The imputation of minds in others; the belief that others have certain mental states. The denial of mind to an entity that should have a mind is dementalization (Kozak, Marsh, & Wegner, 2006).

Cognitive dissonance. An undesirable emotional state that arises from holding two conflicting beliefs (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

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Steve Loughnan is a research associate at the University of Kent. His research interests include dehumanization and attributions of mind and moral status to human and non-human animals.



Boyka Bratanova is a research associate at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Her present research focuses on social psychological aspects of sustainable lifestyle, including meat consumption.



Elisa Puvia is a research associate in Social Psychology at the University of Kent. Her current research interests are directed toward understanding the phenomenon of female sexual objectification.

