



The Ethics of the Meat Paradox

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The meat paradox—to like eating meat, but dislike killing and harming animals—confronts omnivores with a powerful contradiction between eating and caring for animals. The paradox, however, trades on a conflation of the illegitimacy of harming and killing animals. While harming animals is morally wrong, killing animals can be legitimate if done with minimal suffering and respect for the moral status of the animal. This moral status demands the acknowledgement of a certain justification for killing animals that makes modesty a virtue of the omnivore. The psychological problem with regard to killing animals can persist even if the moral tension is weakened, but only to a certain degree, since emotions and principles are interdependent in moral reasoning. Virtuous meat consumption demands a willingness to face the conflicting feelings involved in killing animals and to tolerate the resulting tension.

INTRODUCTION

Humans and animals interact in a number of ways and establish a diversity of relationships. Humans relate to animals as members of the family, as research objects in the laboratory, as guide dogs, trained animals in sports and shows, and still many other kinds of relations. In some of these relations, animals are edible beings.

The relation between humans and animals that are eaten is a special one. Like animals sacrificed for research purposes, the animals we eat are killed by us. The acceptance and legitimacy of this killing is thus an essential part of eating animals. By eating animals, we enter into a very intimate relation with the animal. We eat parts of the animal and digest the parts, thus allowing these parts to be absorbed into our bodies.

Pets are not considered edible, but with non-edible animals, such as pets and companion animals, we also establish close relations. These relations are of another kind, of care and companionship. In these roles, animals can even be cared for and recognized as members of the family. With farm animals, these relations might intersect: the farmer can both enter into a relation of care with the living animal, and an intimate relation of eating the parts of the killed animal.

Most people eat meat, and meat is at the center of the plate. At the same time, people in general profoundly care about animals and their well-being. To have animals killed and eat their flesh, and at the same time care for animals is a morally and psychologically complex and seemingly paradoxical behavior. The paradoxical nature of this behavior has been strengthened by the growing concern with animal

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welfare over the last two centuries. In the same period, there has been a steady growth in the global consumption of meat.¹ The high amount of animals slaughtered for meat suggests that the killing of animals is quite unproblematic in our societies. Do we hold that the lives of animals have a very low value or even no value?

These parallel processes of objectification and subjectification have led to a possible ambivalence in our relation to eating meat. In the subtitle of the article “The Meat Paradox” by Steve Loughnan and colleagues (hereafter, Loughnan), they ask: “How are we able to love animals, and love eating animals?”² In the article, *The Psychology of Eating Animals*, Loughnan’s formulation of the meat paradox is: “Most people care about animals and do not want to see them harmed but engage in a diet that requires them to be killed and, usually, to suffer.”³ If the paradoxical nature of this behavior is acknowledged, the behavior should be changed, or justified socially, psychologically, and ethically.

In this article, I discuss the formulation, significance, ethics, and metaethical aspects of the meat paradox and the psychology of eating animals. Opposition to eating meat can result from different concerns, most notably concerns about adverse environmental, health, and animal welfare effects of eating meat. I focus on the animal welfare concerns pertinent to the meat paradox. I use the term *animal* to cover all animals, even though I argue that there are morally relevant differences among species of animals. I do not need these differences, however, in the general argument of this article. In using the term *animal*, I have in mind the farm animals most commonly used for meat production.

RELIEVING THE TENSION

It is common for meat eaters to experience ambivalence toward eating meat.⁴ The resulting tension has been the subject of several theoretical and empirical studies recently. In a recent article, Hank Rothgerber lists eight ways to escape the tension experienced by omnivores troubled by eating meat: *avoidance, dissociation, perceived behavioral change, denial of animal pain, denial of animal mind, pro-meat justifications, reduction of perceived choice, and behavioral change*.⁵

¹ Jelle Bruinsma, *World Agriculture: Towards 2015/2030. An Fao Perspective* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003); Vincent J. Knapp, “The Democratization of Meat and Protein in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Historian* 59, no. 3 (1997): 541–51; “Annual Report of 2009,” *United Poultry Concerns* 20, no. 2 (2009), <http://www.upc-online.org/pp/fall2010/2009report.pdf>.

² Steve Loughnan, Boyka Bratanova, and Elisa Puvia, “The Meat Paradox: How are We Able to Love Animals and Love Eating Animals?” *In Mind* 1 (2012): 15–18.

³ Steve Loughnan, Brock Bastian, and Nick Haslam, “The Psychology of Eating Animals,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 2 (2014): 9.

⁴ Mariëtte Berndsen and Joop van der Pligt, “Ambivalence Towards Meat,” *Appetite* 42, no. 1 (2004): 71–78.

⁵ Hank Rothgerber, “Efforts to Overcome Vegetarian-Induced Dissonance among Meat Eaters,” *Appetite* 79 (2014): 32–41.

I focus on the interaction among values, perception, and behavior involved in three strategies to solve the tension of the meat paradox. First, the tension can be dealt with by changing one's behavior to fit one's values. Second, it can be relieved by adjusting the meaning of one's values to fit one's behavior. Third, it is possible to uphold one's values and adjust one's perception of the phenomena to align one's values with one's behavior. I briefly go through each of these strategies to solve or neutralize the meat paradox.

The first strategy is to deal with the tension by changing one's behavior to fit one's values. If eating meat involves animal suffering that is deemed unjustifiable, a solution is to stop eating meat and adopt a vegan or vegetarian diet. By not eating flesh from animals, vegans, vegetarians, and demi-vegetarians express less ambivalence toward their diet than omnivores do.⁶ At the same time, individuals that claim to be vegetarian in order to escape the tension between their values and their behavior are frequently found to eat meat anyway.⁷ A very low percentage of people in developed countries are vegetarian, making the social obstacles of fully implementing a vegetarian diet to be quite troubling.⁸

The second strategy is to relieve the tension by making one's values fit one's behavior. A general way to achieve this tension is to regard the eating of meat and keeping farm animals as legitimate because it is an inescapable part of being human. We should not alienate ourselves either from our omnivorous nature or the responsibility that comes with our power. Nick Fiddes argues that "we do not esteem meat *in spite* of the domination of sentient beings. Rather, excepting the qualms that we may (individually) feel when faced with our responsibility for a living animal's death, we (as a society) esteem meat so highly *because* of that power."⁹ Thus, the domination of animals involved in taking their lives is not an unfortunate consequence of eating meat, but an important aspect of this behavior.

Studies further show that people eating meat score higher on acceptance of controlling others and the endorsement of social hierarchy and inequality.¹⁰ The acceptance of social verticality thus works to ease the psychological tension involved in eating meat.¹¹ Its association with masculinity is also a motivating factor

⁶ Hank Rothgerber, "A Comparison of Attitudes toward Meat and Animals among Strict and Semi-Vegetarians," *Appetite* 72 (2014): 98–105; Matthew B. Ruby, "Vegetarianism. A Blossoming Field of Study," *Appetite* 58, no. 1 (2012): 141–50.

⁷ Hank Rothgerber, "Can You Have Your Meat and Eat It Too? Conscientious Omnivores, Vegetarians, and Adherence to Diet," *Appetite* 84 (2015): 196–203.

⁸ Matthew B. Ruby, "Vegetarianism: A Blossoming Field of Study," *Appetite* 58, no. 1 (2012).

⁹ Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 228.

¹⁰ Kristof Dhont and Gordon Hodson, "Why Do Right-Wing Adherents Engage in More Animal Exploitation and Meat Consumption?" *Personality and Individual Differences* 64 (2014): 12–17; Lauri L. Hyers, "Myths Used to Legitimize the Exploitation of Animals: An Application of Social Dominance Theory," *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People and Animals* 19, no. 3 (2006): 194–210.

¹¹ Kristof Dhont, Gordon Hodson, Kimberly Costello, and Cara C. Macinnis, "Social Dominance Orientation Connects Prejudicial Human–Human and Human–Animal Relations," *Personality and Individual Differences* 61–62 (2014): 105–08.

in endorsing the consumption of meat.¹² An aspect of this motivating factor is the belief that eating meat is a necessity to have a nutritious and healthy diet, especially for men.

The belief that eating meat is a given, a nutritional and natural default, is called *carnism* by Melanie Joy.¹³ In coining the term *carnism*, Joy aims to emphasize that eating meat is a choice rather than a necessity, and therefore is based on a set of beliefs, such as veganism or vegetarianism. If seen as a given, the eating of meat does not really demand any justification, the burden of justification rather lies on those opposing the legitimacy of eating meat, like vegans. Thus, the tension of the meat paradox is numbed by the assurance that eating meat after all is a perfectly normal thing to do.¹⁴

The third strategy is to relieve the tension of the meat paradox by upholding one's values, while adjusting one's perception of the phenomena to align one's values with one's behavior. One way of removing the ambivalence about meat consumption is to modify one's view of the animal itself. A number of recent experimental set ups have examined the psychological dynamics of this particular strategy.¹⁵ The eating of meat has in these experiments been found to lead to a devaluation of farm animals' abilities to suffer. In one experiment, the research subjects were invited to a study of food preferences. After tasting food, the research subjects were also asked about a cow's capacity to suffer. The subjects tasting beef jerky were then found to rate a cow's capacity to suffer significantly lower rather than subjects tasting cashew nuts.¹⁶

An inverse correlation between ascriptions of mind to various animals and their edibility has also been found in a series of experiments with participants from different cultures: the more "mindless" the animal was perceived to be, the less ambivalent participants were about its edibility.¹⁷ Not only are animals deemed less capable of feeling pain by people who actually eat them: simply being told that an

¹² Matthew B. Ruby and Steven J. Heine, "Meat, Morals, and Masculinity," *Appetite* 56, no. 2 (2011): 447–50; Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010); Hank Rothgerber, "Real Men Don't Eat (Vegetable) Quiche: Masculinity and the Justification of Meat Consumption," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 14, no. 4 (2013): 363–75.

¹³ Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Jared Piazza et al., "Rationalizing Meat Consumption: The 4ns," *Appetite* 91 (2015): 114–28.

¹⁵ Michal Bilewicz, Roland Imhoff, and Marek Drogosz, "The Humanity of What We Eat: Conceptions of Human Uniqueness among Vegetarians and Omnivores," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (2011): 201–09; João Graça, Maria Manuela Calheiros, and Abílio Oliveira, "Moral Disengagement in Harmful but Cherished Food Practices? An Exploration into the Case of Meat," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* (2014): 749–65.

¹⁶ Steve Loughnan, Nick Haslam, and Brock Bastian, "The Role of Meat Consumption in the Denial of Moral Status and Mind to Meat Animals," *Appetite* 55, no. 1 (2010): 156–59.

¹⁷ Matthew B. Ruby and Steven J. Heine, "Too Close to Home. Factors Predicting Meat Avoidance," *Appetite* 59 (2012): 47–52; Brock Bastian et al., "Don't Mind Meat? The Denial of Mind to Animals Used for Human Consumption," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 2 (2012): 1–10.

unknown animal is regarded as edible in another culture is enough to make meat eaters devalue the mental capacities of the animal in question.¹⁸

The upshot of these studies is that meat eaters avoid eating animals with high mental capacity for subjective emotional experiences. Eating animals with clear abilities to suffer and to have interests frustrated is ambivalent. In emphasizing the differences between animals and humans, as well as edible and inedible animals, the ambivalence in the eating of meat is reduced. These results are succinctly summed up by Hank Rothgerber in his study of omnivores' reactions to reading simple descriptions of vegetarians:

On the whole, the five studies lend support for a cognitive dissonance framework that offers one way to understand the experience of meat eaters, especially when it comes to resolving the meat paradox, i.e., the simultaneous desire to treat animals well but then eating them as food. Across the five studies, meat eaters attempted to handle reminders that they consumed animals with a variety of mechanisms ranging from denying animals the capacity for pain, to denying their emotional and cognitive states, to endorsing pro-meat justifications, to reducing perceived choice in eating meat, and to the more apologetic underreporting of how much meat they consume. These effects were initiated by relatively minor manipulations including simply stating that an individual followed a vegetarian diet.¹⁹

Another version of the third strategy is to obscure the view of the relevant phenomena, both by moving animals and the handling of animals out of sight, and by hiding the fact that meat comes from an animal. As Klaus Grunert forecasts in *Meat Science*: "Convenience is one of the major trends in food, whereas meat avoidance is a trend restricted to certain consumer groups. But both can lead to similar implications, namely, products with a higher degree of processing that enables both more built-in convenience and less visibility of the meat ingredient."²⁰ The confinement of animals in windowless farm buildings, moving abattoirs out of sight, and presenting meat in a way that erases its origin as part of the animal body are all measures that obscure the troubling aspect of meat as involving the killing of animals. The psychological tension is eased by erasing troubling connections between cause and effect.

UNPACKING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MORAL DILEMMAS

Loughnan describes the tension induced by the meat paradox by the term *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance signifies mental stress by holding conflicting

¹⁸ Boyka Bratanova, Steve Loughnan, and Brock Bastian, "The Effect of Categorization as Food on the Perceived Moral Standing of Animals," *Appetite* 57, no. 1 (2011): 193–96.

¹⁹ Hank Rothgerber, "Efforts to Overcome Vegetarian-Induced Dissonance among Meat Eaters," *Appetite* 79 (2014): 39.

²⁰ Klaus G. Grunert, "Future Trends and Consumer Lifestyles with Regard to Meat Consumption," *Meat Science* 74, no. 1 (2006): 149–60.

beliefs. The experiments of the preceding section can be read as an examination of how people deal with this stress. The experiments show that several strategies are used to minimize the stress, by adjusting behavior or beliefs in order to avoid an incoherent set of beliefs and behavior.

At the same time, the framing of the results from the experiments serves to establish that eating of meat is a genuine problem for people—even when they are not fully aware of the problem. We witness research subjects tweaking facts in order to reflect stressful mental conflicts. Indeed, the problem facing the research subjects does not appear alien. The problem feels real, and it is quite easy to go along with the suggestion that we need to solve it. Moreover, a collective failure to face the facts of meat production is strongly suggested by how we keep and slaughter meat animals such as pigs and chickens: their life and death are kept firmly out of view.

The meat paradox in this way seems to point to a central psychological problem in our relationship with animals. How does this psychological problem translate into an ethical problem? According to Loughnan, the meat paradox “highlights the moral dilemma involved in eating animals, a dilemma that all people resolve.”²¹ The psychological problem studied by Loughnan is here explicitly stated to stem from a *moral* dilemma, a dilemma that *all* people resolve. How should this moral dilemma be understood?

Let’s have a second look at Loughnan’s formulation of the meat paradox: “Most people care about animals and do not want to see them harmed but engage in a diet that requires them to be killed and, usually, to suffer.”²² The most straightforward way to formulate the paradox as a moral dilemma is to say that while all people (should) avoid harming animals, eating meat (by necessity) harms animals. In this formulation, the dilemma can be solved by a simple and valid argument: “Nobody should harm animals, but eating meat harms animals; therefore nobody should eat meat.”

If these formulations indeed capture what is ethically at stake in dealing with the meat paradox, it is no wonder that the paradox feels quite troubling. If eating meat requires endorsing animal harm, very few would find eating meat permissible. Given the fact that the vast majority of people do eat meat, the practical implication of solving the moral dilemma of the meat paradox is quite dramatic for this majority.

I, however, argue against this interpretation of the ethics of the meat paradox. The premise that “harming animals should be avoided” is easily applicable to all people as a simple *prima facie* principle. The second premise, that eating meat harms animals, is however a rather convoluted statement. Unpacked, it could be rendered as follows: “In general, the availability of meat requires that animals are killed by humans, and to kill animals is to harm them.” That killing an animal is to

²¹ Loughnan, Bastian, and Haslam, “The Psychology of Eating Animals,” p. 104.

²² *Ibid.*

harm it, is, however, not uncontroversial.²³ Even the position that killing a human being is to harm him or her is a matter of controversy.²⁴

The crucial question of these controversies is: is death itself, distinguished from the process of dying, harmful for a living being? In the case of beings with a preference for continued existence, it is typically argued that the frustration of this preference makes killing harmful. Against this position it can be argued that death exactly means that all preferences and possibilities of being harmed are erased. In the case of animals, it can be questioned if they have a preference for continued existence.

The tendency to devalue the mental capacities of edible animals can be understood as an attempt to avoid the tricky question of whether killing an animal is to harm it. If the animal in question is unable to have a preference for continued existence, the main reason for moral qualms of killing it falls away. It can in this case still be argued that killing an animal would harm fellow animals or humans, for instance, the offspring or keeper of an animal. It can also be argued that the animal is harmed by any anxiety and suffering involved in the process of killing the animal.

But, provided that neither the process of killing nor the death of an animal involves no or minimal harm individually or socially, other reasons than harm must be found to find the killing morally problematic. One such reason can be to hold that the kind of animal in question indeed does have a preference for continued existence, and that the frustration of this preference by itself is harmful in the special case of death. Alternatively, one could hold that we should not kill animals because of their general relational value for us, or inherent dignity, as fellow living beings.

These qualifications make the argument for the last part of the unpacked second premise above, “to kill animals is to harm them,” rather complicated and controversial. They weaken the case for regarding this premise to be a part of a *moral* “dilemma that all people resolve.”

Another way to unpack the second premise is: “In general, the availability of meat requires that animals are subjected to living conditions that reduce their welfare, and to reduce the welfare of animals is to harm them.” If this is an adequate formulation, then Loughnan’s formulation of the meat paradox can be considered to be trading on a conflation of two quite distinct worries: a concern for the suffering of animals, and a concern for the killing of animals. Loughnan writes that eating meat causes animals “to be killed and, usually, to suffer,” as if suffering and being killed are but two aspects of the concern that creates one half of the moral dilemma of the meat paradox.

²³ Thomas Young, “The Morality of Killing Animals: Four Arguments,” *Ethics and Animals* 5, no. 4 (2011): 68–101; David DeGrazia, “The Harm of Death, Time-Relative Interests, and Abortion” (paper presented at the The Philosophical Forum, 2007).

²⁴ Steven Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lars Ursin, “Harm to Dead Persons,” in Siri Granum Carson, Jonathan Knowles, and Bjørn K. Myskja, eds., *Kant: Here, Now and How: Essays in Honour of Truls Wyller* (Münster: Mentis Verlag, 2011).

To merge death and harm is however a thorny issue, as we have seen. If animals are killed painlessly, very little physical suffering could be involved. Does the intuitive appeal of the meat paradox rely on such a conflation of suffering and killing? Does Loughnan's formulation of the paradox lend rhetorical strength from our clear moral opposition to cause animals to suffer, in order to fortify a rather strong psychological, but shaky moral, uneasiness with the killing of animals?

If this is the case, the meat paradox does not rest on a moral dilemma between eating meat and killing animals, but between eating meat and causing animal suffering. This moral dilemma can then be solved by securing good living conditions and slaughter procedures for the animals we intend to eat. The corresponding psychological dilemma, however, rests on the conflict that follows from (1) having a strong preference for eating meat because it is tasty and nutritious, and part of dominant social and cultural practices, and (2) being uncomfortable with taking part in or even thinking of the killing of animals. Thus, the psychological dilemma of the meat paradox can persist even if the moral dilemma of eating versus killing animals is dissolved—and vice versa.

MORALLY LEGITIMATE MEAT CONSUMPTION

In the article "Moral Vegetarianism from a Very Broad Basis," David DeGrazia defends moral vegetarianism based on the modest view that sentient animals have at least some moral status. The moral status of sentient animals means that we should not harm these animals by making them suffer. DeGrazia offers two versions of the moral vegetarian position. In the weak version of DeGrazia's moral vegetarianism, the suffering that is inflicted to sentient animals by the conditions of factory farming is illegitimate. Thus, "all people with ready access to healthful alternatives are morally obliged to make any reasonable effort not to purchase meat, eggs, or dairy products from factory farms."²⁵ In the strong version, DeGrazia also includes products from "family farms," despite their "more humane" treatment of farm animals.

DeGrazia notes that two reasons might constitute a "possible ground"²⁶ to doubt the strong version of moral vegetarianism. The first reason is that unnecessary animal suffering in principle can be avoided on family farms, and the second reason is that death is a relatively minor harm to farm animals such as chickens and cows.

I think DeGrazia in his description of the moral status of animals, and the moral aspects of the life and death of farm animals, succeeds in pointing out widely shared moral intuitions both by omnivores and vegetarians. As humans, we are acutely aware of our animal nature. This awareness makes us feel empathy with (other) animals, and to react to animal *suffering* caused by humans. At the same time, there is a gap between humans and animals because we lack a common language to share the complexities of our experience of the world, for instance, concerning

²⁵ David DeGrazia, "Moral Vegetarianism from a Very Broad Basis," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2009): 164.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

future expectations. This gap contributes to shaking the ground for judging the *killing* of animals to be harmful and illegitimate.

The gap between humans and animals does not, however, make us feel that killing an animal is morally unproblematic. Taking the life of an animal differs morally from ending the life of a plant. As shown by Loughnan and others, our kinship with animals makes us feel a need to alienate animals from ourselves, in order to ease the psychological and moral qualms of killing and eating animals. This kinship makes us ascribe animals with a moral status that commands us to treat animals with a certain respect. We strongly hesitate or refuse to kill animals that look or behave in some way or other like humans. To kill and eat animals is not the same as harvesting and eating plants. To keep an animal is not the same as growing vegetables.

In her discussion of the kind of participation involved in virtuous meat consumption, Beth Haile quotes Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's argument for using every part of the killed animal:

Offal [organ meats] offers us a chance to pay our respects, in a full and holistic manner, to the animals we've raised for meat. . . . These are sentiments that have long been readily embraced by cultures more in tune with their environments, and more fully and mutually engaged with their livestock than ours.²⁷

A practice of keeping and killing animals without modesty, that fails to respect animals and reduce them to the level of plants, is at odds with a differentiated view of moral status between plants and animals. To make farm animals suffer is obviously wrong. But the differentiated view, importantly, makes it illegitimate to keep and kill chickens and pigs in a way that in effect reduce these animals to plants, just standing there, tightly together or in tiny pens, with fast growing bodies, waiting to be "plucked." Even if they do not suffer.

The concern for respect for animals and animal welfare in such a hidden system of "factory farming" creates a psychological tension that is brought out by the studies of Loughnan and others. For consumers, animal welfare means more than avoidance of unnecessary harm, it also includes the ability of farm animals to engage in species-specific behavior.²⁸ It is not okay to neglect the moral status and species-specific behavior of animals, and let them live and die in a way that is more fitting for plants than animals.

Thus, the psychological tension of current omnivores stems from unease with the living conditions of farm animals as well as the nature and volume of our meat consumption.²⁹ The conditions of life and death for animals in the current factory

²⁷ Beth K. Haile, "Virtuous Meat Consumption: A Virtue Ethics Defense of an Omnivorous Way of Life," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2013): 94.

²⁸ Jesper Lassen, Peter Sandøe, and Björn Forkman, "Happy Pigs Are Dirty! — Conflicting Perspectives on Animal Welfare," *Livestock Science* 103, no. 3 (2006): 221–30.

²⁹ Carolien T. Hoogland, Joop de Boer, and Jan J. Boersema, "Transparency of the Meat Chain in the Light of Food Culture and History," *Appetite* 45, no. 1 (2005): 15–23.

farms and abattoir system are at the same time questionable³⁰ and hidden from the view of most people.³¹

The questionable conditions of farm animals used for meat production makes it imperative for omnivores to ensure that their diet is “cruelty free.” To let animals unduly suffer to produce meat for human consumption is morally illegitimate. Recognition of a failure to comply with this imperative, because of lack of possibilities to demand proper animal welfare requirements and/or akrasia, indeed, creates a moral problem and a psychological tension between personal values and behavior. Thus, morally legitimate meat consumption is not compatible with harmful and inadequate livestock husbandry.

The efficiency of present-day meat industry makes meat readily available and affordable. The very volume of meat that is eaten by the average person today as a result of this availability could be questioned by two central moral ideals: respect for animals and the ideal of personal temperance. Since animals have some moral status, the act of letting an animal be killed for one’s consumption should not be done without a sense of respect and remorse for the animal that is killed. The moral significance of animals makes the killing of an animal an act that needs some justification. One should not kill an animal without any justification, even if it lives a happy life, and this creates a moral imperative to keep one’s personal meat consumption at a justifiable level.

If all or some animals lack moral status, the ethical concern for unjustified or excessive meat consumption based on moral status obviously falls away. This still leaves other concerns with the level of meat consumption, like environmental and health concerns. If, however, the view that a certain form of meat consumption is defensible against arguments for vegetarianism, on the one hand, and is imperative for omnivores because of the moral status of animals, on the other, a pertinent question of this view is whether current levels of meat consumption fall short of an ideal of modesty in having animals killed for food.

This question points toward a moral basis for a certain kind of *flexitarianism*. To be a proponent of this kind of practice has been called for and argued for in several ways, most notably as being *demi-vegetarian*,³² *humanocarnivore*,³³ or a *conscientious omnivore*.³⁴ On the one hand, the flexitarian position of this article would be defined by the moral permissibility of killing animals for food, as opposed to the vegetarian position.³⁵ On the other hand, the flexitarian position would be defined

³⁰ John Rossi and Samuel A. Garner, “Industrial Farm Animal Production: A Comprehensive Moral Critique,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 3 (2014): 479–522.

³¹ Noëlle Vialles, *Animal to Edible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³² R. M. Hare, *Essays on Bioethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³³ Michael Pollan, “An Animal’s Place,” *New York Times Magazine*, 10 November 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/10/magazine/an-animal-s-place.html?pagewanted=all>.

³⁴ Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (New York: Rodale, 2007).

³⁵ Tzachi Zamir, “Veganism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2004): 367–79.

by the imperative of modest consumption of meat, exclusively from animals that are offered good living conditions.

Instead of being a rather unstable pragmatic solution to the current concerns with factory farming, or the social challenges of being a vegetarian, such a flexitarian position would be the right kind of answer, or at least pose the right questions, to reach an ideal of respecting animals and adhering to a *morally legitimate* omnivorous diet. Such a flexitarian position, sensitive to the ethics of human-animal relations and the psychological ambivalences of eating meat, could adequately meet the *ethical* challenges involved in the meat paradox.

THE METAETHICS OF THE MEAT PARADOX

At the end of the article, “The Psychology of Eating Animals,” Loughnan writes that the psychological studies on eating animals can “illuminate how emotions (pleasure, disgust, guilt) cognitions (categorization, attribution, justification) and personality characteristics (values, beliefs, identities) combine when people face every day moral problems. In doing so, researchers have shown how emotion regulation, mind perception, and moral judgment are intimately connected.”³⁶ In this way, Loughnan suggests that the meat paradox provides a case study for a general approach to understand “other domains of everyday morality.”

Our relations to animals are diverse, and the diversity of relations can be quite confusing.³⁷ The classification of animals as animals-to-be-killed-and-eaten or as animals-to-be-cared-for-as-family-members does not seem to be based on clear differences in the mental capacities of the animals that fall into the two categories. To qualify for being a pet or companion animal is more about looks, temperament, size, and functional behavior. The presence of the desirable qualities in livestock and pets are also a product of breeding animals to better fit their purpose—not just to boost the emotional complexity of the dog or dumb the pig. From the outset, it is not because a canary is mentally superior to a chicken, or a dog is mentally superior to a pig, that the former is a pet and the latter is a farm animal.

The complexity of our relations with animals makes it hard to have a clear overview of the different emotional, cognitive, and personal aspects these relations. Like the keeping and killing of livestock, the legitimacy of keeping (and killing) pets can be seriously questioned.³⁸ Loughnan and others show that people, when confronted with cues, framings, arguments, vignettes, etc., aim to find and follow principles that guide behavior in a coherent way. For instance, “An animal is edible only if it has a very limited experience of the world, so, since I eat this animal, it

³⁶ Loughnan, Bastian, and Haslam, “The Psychology of Eating Animals,” p. 107.

³⁷ Hal Herzog and Mel Foster, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat* (Old Saybrook, Conn.: Tantor Audio, 2010); Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*.

³⁸ Jessica Toit, “Is Having Pets Morally Permissible?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2015): 327–43.

must have a very limited experience of the world.” The problem of the meat paradox is that emotions and facts seem to be manipulated by the moral subjects in order to make their moral principles hold: coherent argumentation collapse into circular argumentation, like in the example just given.

One interpretation of such manipulation is that in moral deliberation in general, moral arguments are just *seemingly* central. This is the case if a person states a clear moral argument as the basis for his or her behavior, but at the same time adjusts central aspects of the moral situation. Doing so results in a distortion of the application of the moral argument itself to the actual situation, and consequently the argument is just seemingly followed. In other words: in decision making, people resort to self-deception by clinging to their principles while denying the facts of the situation.

An alternative interpretation of the manipulation described by Loughnan and others is that moral principles are but one of a set of aspects that is taken into consideration in deliberation on what to do. In this view, a person’s moral judgment simply is not the final word in decision making. Ethical concerns are balanced against emotions, perceptions, identity considerations, and other aspects that we would hesitate to call ethical concerns.

In a third interpretation, that I briefly defend here, emotions, perceptions, and identity considerations, are part of, rather than balanced against, ethical concerns. In this metaethical view, emotions are as indispensable as arguments in moral deliberation and decision making. This means that moral acts must be grounded both in sentiments and arguments, and that these aspects can only be removed from morality by abstraction. An ethical principle that does not resonate with or is unsupported by emotions is insufficiently grounded and unstable. Likewise, an ethical sentiment that cannot be supported by arguments is insufficiently grounded and unstable.

Mary Midgley has described the role of feelings in ethics in this way:

Whenever we seriously judge something to be wrong, strong feeling necessarily accompanies the judgment. Someone who does not have such feelings—someone who has merely a theoretical interest in morals, who doesn’t feel any indignation or disgust and outrage about things like slavery and torture—has missed the point of morals altogether.³⁹

Midgley’s point can be brought out by an illustration: If we met someone making a moral judgment, saying “this should NOT be done,” while denying any emotional engagement in the issue, we would question this person’s understanding of his or her own moral judgment. On the other hand, we would not accept someone arguing for a moral position merely on the basis of his or her emotional reaction to the issues. Ethical judgments need both sentiments and arguments.

In the article, “Killing for Pleasure,” Tzachi Zamir illustrates this point in his

³⁹ Mary Midgley, “Biotechnology and Monstrosity: Why We Should Pay Attention to the “Yuk Factor,”” *Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 5 (2000): 9.

discussion of the legitimacy of killing animals for the pleasure of eating meat. While Zamir argues that one cannot prove that it is right or wrong to kill animals for the pleasure of eating them, he thinks that our moral imagination is vital to arriving at a better understanding the issue:

Most meals are uneventful, they may be pleasurable but do not involve intense pleasure, yet do involve animal death. When eating is regarded as a form of participation, it becomes psychologically and morally harder to defend regular mundane animal flesh eating. As for the overwhelmingly pleasurable acts of animal flesh eating, here things depend on the psychological clarity of the equation: vegetarians are just more vividly aware of the animal-death side of it.⁴⁰

We need imagination to see the moral situation in a proper way. As pointed out by Martha Nussbaum, emotions are not just means to intellectually grasp the moral issue, but “emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition. Their responses are part of what knowing, that is truly recognizing or acknowledging, *consists in*.”⁴¹ To merely state, “This animal should not be harmed,” without feeling the wrongness of harming the animal, is to fail to fully recognize the moral situation at hand.

The psychology of the meat paradox is wide open for ethical interpretation. To downplay the mental capacities of animals in order to shun a morally challenging situation is both psychologically interesting and morally reproachable. In my view, however, an intimate connection between “emotion regulation, mind perception, and moral judgment” shown in the meat paradox experiments is a general characterization of sound everyday morality, rather than being metaethically unsound. As arguments as well as sentiments are indispensable in moral judgment, arguments need to connect with sentiments, and vice versa. This means that arguing for and finding the ground for a moral position involves both emotional and argumentative work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The meat paradox involves ethical issues that are both complex and marginal. The variety of our relations to animals, and our relation to our own animal nature, makes the issues complex and confusing. The ethics of the margins of life, of making and killing animals for food, is also hard to grapple with.⁴² It is in general unclear if the moral considerations about phenomena in the midst of life are fully adequate to deal with phenomena at the beginning and end of life.⁴³ Moreover, as

⁴⁰ Tzachi Zamir, “Killing for Pleasure,” *Between the Species* 13, no. 4 (2004): 19–20.

⁴¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 79.

⁴² Zamir, “Killing for Pleasure.”; “Veganism.”

⁴³ David Heyd, *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People* (University of California Press, 1994).

argued above, virtuous meat consumption should include a sense of moral loss or gratitude in acknowledging the moral status of animals. These issues make it hard to arrive at a clear and coherent view of the ethical situation of the paradox.

I have argued that the ethical backdrop of the meat paradox is a widespread concern for farm-animal welfare, rather than a concern for illegitimate killing of farm animals. I have further argued that virtuous eating of meat is possible, if the moral status of animals is respected by securing animal welfare and limiting meat consumption. This position solves the ethical questions of the meat paradox in a way that still leaves a lot to be worked out concerning animal welfare and modest consumption. It also leaves the psychological side of the problem with killing animals quite unsolved. The crucial metaethical point concerning a persistent lack of accordance between our feelings and thoughts about the killing of farm animals will make our ethical judgment about such killing unstable.

A central ethical point of my account of the ethics of the meat paradox is, however, that the ambivalence of omnivores about this killing not just *is*, but *should* be present—without making the killing wrong. Animals do have a certain moral status. Animals should not be treated as plants. We should feel a certain momentousness in killing an animal, a certain remorse. Such feelings opposing the act committed will in general be interpreted as a defect in one's character, or as a lack of moral acceptability of a practice, as argued above. But, in situations with norms and intuitions that are themselves unstable, this need not be the case. Such ethical situations are typically present in ethical decision making regarding the creation and ending of life. One reason for this could be that our ethical intuitions and reflections are developed, used and refined in the midst of life. At the margins of life, our intuitions and reflections are stretched and indeterminate.

It is hard to tolerate the ethical and psychological tensions of such situations. The ethics of abortion is a case in point, where strong intuitions conflict and no solution escape a certain ambivalence. Nevertheless, the imperative of clarity and coherence is strong in ethics: since ethics is about choices, you cannot deal with ambivalence by having it both ways. This may lead persons to aim for a simplified perception of the situation in order to relieve the tension.

But, while the tension between emotions and arguments must be relieved in moral deliberation in general, I argue that the subjects of the meat paradox studies aim to relieve such a tension in a way that does not take the complexity of the moral situation into consideration. Therefore, it seems as though they try to avoid an inescapable dilemma between eating meat and caring for animals by self-deception, while the dilemma in reality is solvable in only two ways: to stop eating meat or to stop worrying about killing animals. In this article, I have argued that the virtuous omnivore should not choose between these alternatives, and accept the resulting tension as a sign of the complexity of our relations with animals.