

Why don't we feel more guilty about eating animals?

November 12 2015, by Caroline Spence



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"Ham is made from pig bum, isn't it Mummy?" This was the question I was confronted with during a recent trip to the local zoo with my young daughter. She had taken a break from feeding Alice, the zoo's resident pig, to inhale her own lunch (a ham sandwich) when suddenly she made the connection: "I like Alice. She's my friend!"

This moment of realisation didn't seem to present a problem for a precocious four year old. But, for many adults, the connection between the meat on our plate and a living, feeling animal is more problematic. This is evident in the increasing [number of vegetarians](#) which ranges from as little as 2% of the population in some developed countries to over 30% in India. The rest of us, those who would rather eat cardboard than tofu, arm ourselves with a variety of psychological techniques to overcome the moral dilemma of being responsible for the suffering and death of another living creature.

This dilemma is often called the "[meat paradox](#)". The term refers to the mental conflict between our moral belief that it is wrong to inflict suffering or death on sentient beings and our desire to enjoy a guilt-free sausage sandwich. This kind of psychological brain squabble is referred to as "[cognitive dissonance](#)".

Mental tug-of-war

Cognitive dissonance occurs whenever someone holds contradictory beliefs – it can manifest as a range of emotions including anger, embarrassment and guilt. We can see it in people's desire to smoke despite the significant dangers to their health or in the continuing use of petrol-fuelled cars despite accepting the threat of climate change. To see this conflict first-hand, try reminding the next person you see eating a bacon sandwich of its cute piggy origin.

Most people are [hardwired to curb the self-flagellation](#) that occurs whenever we focus our thinking on the subject causing our cognitive dissonance. The logical way for us to silence any meat-focused mental backchat would simply be to alter our eating habits and avoid the problem in the first place.

While this might seem like a straightforward change, arguing that it is a

simple move vastly underestimates how deeply ingrained eating meat is in most cultures. Eating meat forms a key part of many traditions and ceremonies as well as everyday cooking, but can also convey status. For example, male vegetarians are often perceived as [less masculine](#) compared with their omnivorous counterparts. Plus, many of us really, really like the taste of it.

This means we need a different approach to end the cerebral tug-of-war playing out in our heads. This typically begins by [undermining the inconvenient belief](#) that consuming animals entails harming them. A common mechanism for doing this is by denying that farm animals think in the same way humans do – or even other "more intelligent" animals (usually pets). This reduces their inherent worth in our minds and places them [outside the circle of moral concern](#). Surely our treatment of a cow or pig is irrelevant if they are too stupid to think and feel?

Some might argue that our designation of certain animals as food is due to our understanding and knowledge of the species inhabiting our world. But this kind of [labelling is socially defined](#). For example, the UK greeted the recent mislabelling of horse meat with outrage because of cultural conventions against consuming it.

Yet many countries, including some of the UK's closest neighbours, have no problem with eating horses. Again, while many of us may be horrified at the thought of eating Fido or Skippy, this is by no means a universal reaction and is heavily dependent on our [cultural and familial influences](#).

Hiding from the evidence

This representation of livestock as dumb allows us to ignore growing evidence that farm animals lead complex mental and [emotional lives](#) and avoid modifying our behaviour. We then reinforce this status quo by

avoiding anything that may trigger further dissonance, including those pesky vegetarians. Just reading a description of this group of people [causes us to increase our disparagement](#) of animals' mental abilities.

Similarly, supermarkets sell us meat that bears no resemblance to its animal origin. Some people are even disgusted by fish with the head on, [never mind larger animals](#). We buy "beef" and "pork" instead of cow and pig to aid the process of dissociation.

We rarely seek out information on farm animal welfare, preferring to devolve responsibility to [higher powers](#). And when faced with evidence of animal suffering, we [under-report](#) our meat consumption. Those of us more aware of animal production methods might buy "welfare-friendly" products to affirm our delusions of cows skipping through green fields. This "perceived behavioural change" reduces our guilt, allowing us to take the moral high ground and still eat burgers.

Avoiding psychological strife in this way might allow us to continue eating meat, but it also reveals a disturbing link between the devaluing of animals and the dehumanisation of our own kind. [Reducing the intelligence](#) and moral worth of people we consider "outsiders" is often linked to discrimination and is understood to be an [important mechanism](#) in the lead up to many atrocities in human history.

But just as our awareness of – and attitudes towards – human discrimination have changed, so may our views on the mass farming of animals for food. The lengths we go to to avoid confronting our cognitive dissonance over eating [meat](#) suggest it might be wise to re-evaluate how comfortable we are with our current level of consumption. The mental hoops we jump through mean feeding Alice the pig might be a joy – but eating her is far from child's play.

[Click here](#) to take part in Queen Mary University of London's survey

investigating people's attitudes to the animal mind and how they think this varies between different species.

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