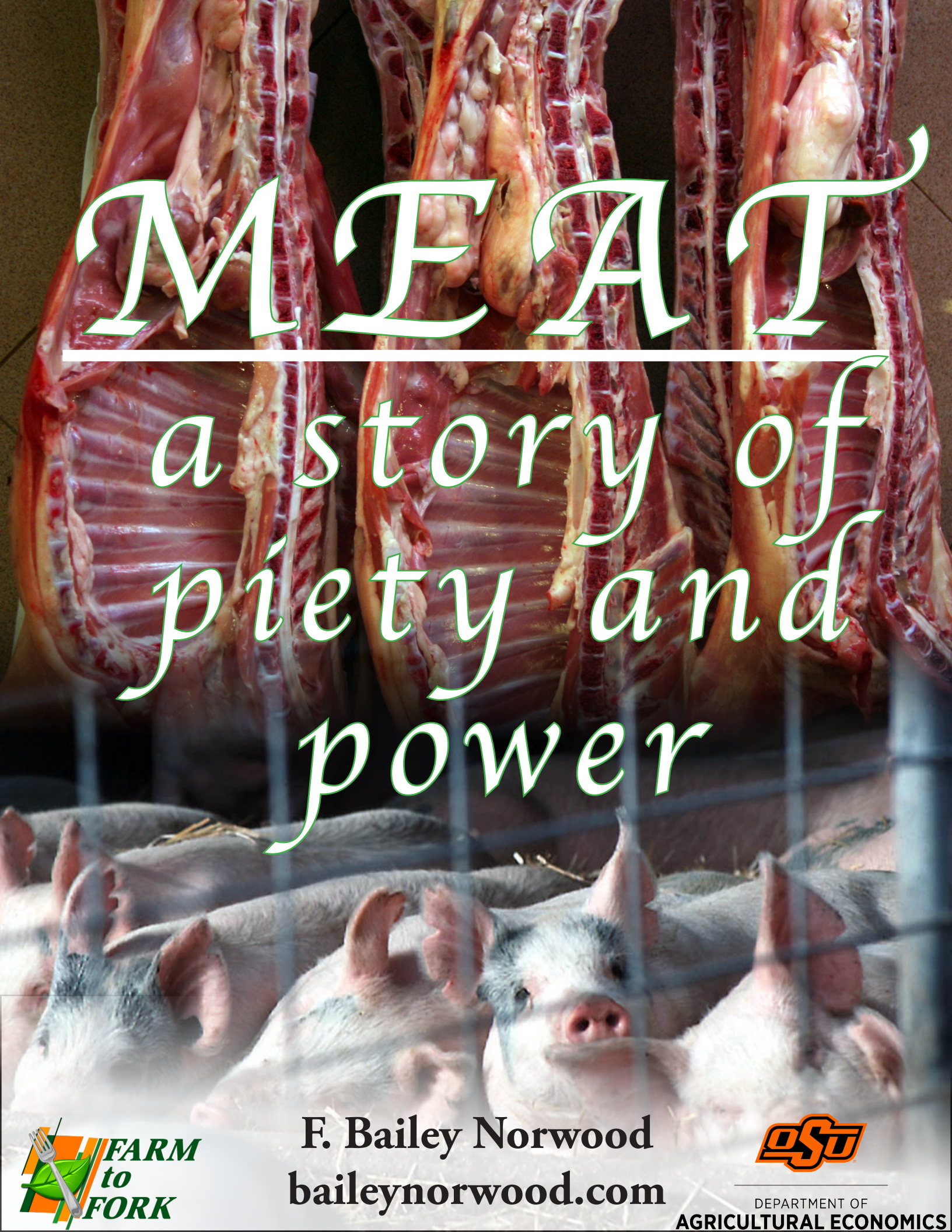


MEAT

a story of piety and power

F. Bailey Norwood
baileynorwood.com

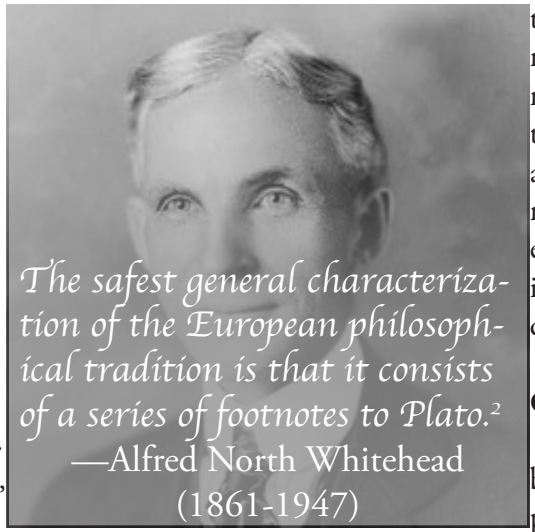
FARM to FORK

OSU
DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

ANCIENT IDEAS

Building a city

The foundation book of all philosophy is Plato's *The Republic*.[1] So influential is this book that all of philosophy is said to be but a series of footnotes to Plato.[2] In this book Plato depicts Socrates trying to describe the ideal city, by which he mostly means the type of city where people live in harmony.



The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.[2]
—Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947)

Plato first describes the city as one where people specialize in different trades. Some are farmers, some are carpenters, and some are cobblers. The idea is that it makes sense for people to specialize in the trade in which they are best at, instead of each person trying to produce everything they themselves consume. At first, this perfect city is vegetarian, eating food made from wheat and barley, olives, cheese, boiled roots, vegetables, figs, and beans. With their desires moderate, and everyone concentrating on the trade they do best, the city will be content and peaceful.

A character named Glaucon then interrupts, arguing that people will not be satisfied with this diet. They will insist on delicacies, he says, which can also be translated as **meats**. Socrates agrees, acknowledging that no humans will be content with a vegetarian diet. However, to acquire the resources for meat they will need more land, which will require the city to conquer land held by others, so the city will also need an army. Socrates remarks, "We won't say yet whether the effects of war are good or bad, but only that we've found the origins of war. It comes from those same desires that are most responsible for the bad things that happen to cities ...".[2,3]

Here we have an ancient and frank admission on the relationship between meat consumption and violence. Notice Plato is not advocating a vegetarian diet; he is instead saying man will never be content with a vegetarian diet. If he was, there would be peace. Man will not, so there will be war. Peace, then, may be possible within a city but war is inevitable between cities because every city will be perpetually seeking more land to raise meat.

With the need for an army, Plato argues (always through Socrates) the city will need people with a warrior spirit. The soldiers' penchant for violence is necessary to protect the city and conquer others, but it is important they not inflict violence on those living within the city. Hence the soldiers must be educated as to when violence should and should not be used, so the city will also needs schools. Hence we see that the major emblems of civilization—armies and education—are made necessary by man's insistence on eating meat. Civilization as we know it, Plato argues, is built upon our desire for meat.

Garden of Eden

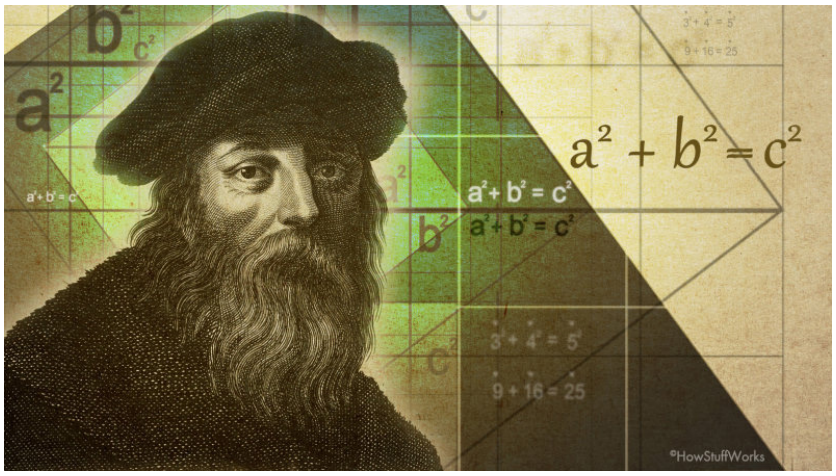
While ancient Athenians were busy inventing philosophy another people were compiling their own book, one that would far surpass *The Republic* in terms of world influence: the *Old Testament* of the Christian Bible. This book not only told the history of the Jewish people but the history of the world itself. In the first book (Genesis) are two creation stories, whereby a single God creates the world, plants, animals, and of course, the first two humans: Adam and Eve. While the two stories have some inconsistencies, they both agree that in the beginning—in the Garden of Eden, a paradise—all animals, including humans, ate only plants. Moreover, it seems as if God preferred that not even plants be killed for food, for God seems to concentrate on seeds and fruits as food, not the whole plants themselves.

"God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food."
—Genesis 1:29-30.[4]

This paradise did not last, as humans repeatedly displeased God, so Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, and later their descendants—save for Noah and his family—were killed in a God-created flood. It was after the flood that God finally allowed humans to eat meat; not as a gift but, but in recognition that humans have evil desires.

Not all meat was allowed, as there were strict rules regarding the types of animals that could be eaten. These restrictions were designed to respect God's original

order of creation. The Garden of Eden contained only vegetarians, which means carnivores were an anathema to God's design and were thus impure, to be avoided. If humans were going to eat the meat of an animal—contrary to God's design—they thus should eat the most pure animals possible: herbivores. This included cattle, sheep, and goats, who were not only herbivores but ruminants: animals who chewed their cud, making them doubly pure by being chewing the same plant twice. Swine were omnivores, and were thus to be avoided. What about wild animals whose eating habits could not be easily observed? The Jews came up with a rule for identifying pure and impure animals: if it chewed its cud and had a split hoof.[4,5]



Borrowed ideas

The Jews may have borrowed this idea from others, as they were not the only culture to consider swine impure. Some ancient Egyptians did as well, for if they accidentally touched a pig they would quickly immerse themselves in a river to cleanse themselves. Pig farmers were not allowed to marry anyone but other pig farmers, and though bovine were sacrificed to a large array of gods, swine could only be sacrificed to the gods Dionysus and Selene.

The god Dionysus also has a variety of stories associated with meat and violence. The god of wine, erotica, madness, and ivy, around 800 BCE numerous cults of Dionysus emerged in Greece, where devotees would meet on mountainsides: dancing, having sex, and getting drunk on wine—working themselves into a frenzy, after which they would tear apart a live animal with their bare hands and consume its raw flesh. It is unclear how often such an event occurred, but it is known that people worshipped Dionysus by drinking wine, believing it to be his blood (an idea that may sound familiar to Christians today).

Strangely, this same god would soon after be associated with peace and abstinence from meat. One myth regarding Dionysus has him being the child of two gods, Zeus and Persephone. A race of gods called the Titans tear Dionysus to pieces, but his heart was preserved, and when Zeus swallows the heart Dionysus is reborn. Seeking vengeance, Zeus strikes the Titans with lightning. As the lightning burns the Titan flesh (flesh containing Dionysus' blood they had consumed) what emerged was the first humans. As the humans had elements of both Dionysus (good) and the Titans (bad), human nature was thus said to be both good and bad.

The Orphic cult developed around this myth as a way to strengthen the good parts of humans and suppress the bad. They believed in reincarnation, where between each rebirth human souls dwelled in Hades, and the only way to escape one's earthly body was to purify oneself, and part of this purification came complete abstinence of meat.

This Orphic view of the soul no doubt inspired Pythagoras of Samos, a Greek. Most readers know the name Pythagoras from learning the Pythagorean Theorem (that the squared length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the squared length of the other two sides, commonly expressed as $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$). The truth is, he probably didn't invent the theorem, but the man himself is much more interesting. Pythagoras was much like Isaac Newton, in that he studied mathematics intensely, was a scientist keen to understand the universe, and was a deep religious mystic. Born around 580 BCE, he spent most of his life traveling the Mediterranean studying under various teachers, some of whom explained the world as natural forces, some of whom were priests. He not only learned advanced geometry but secret religious rituals that would get him killed if he ever revealed them.[6]

Legends developed around Pythagoras. It was said he could walk on water, appear in two places at once, talk to animals, was the son of the god Apollo, was born to a virgin, and that he returned from the dead, three days after dying. If this sounds like Jesus, just wait, for he also taught his students to love their enemies.[6,7]

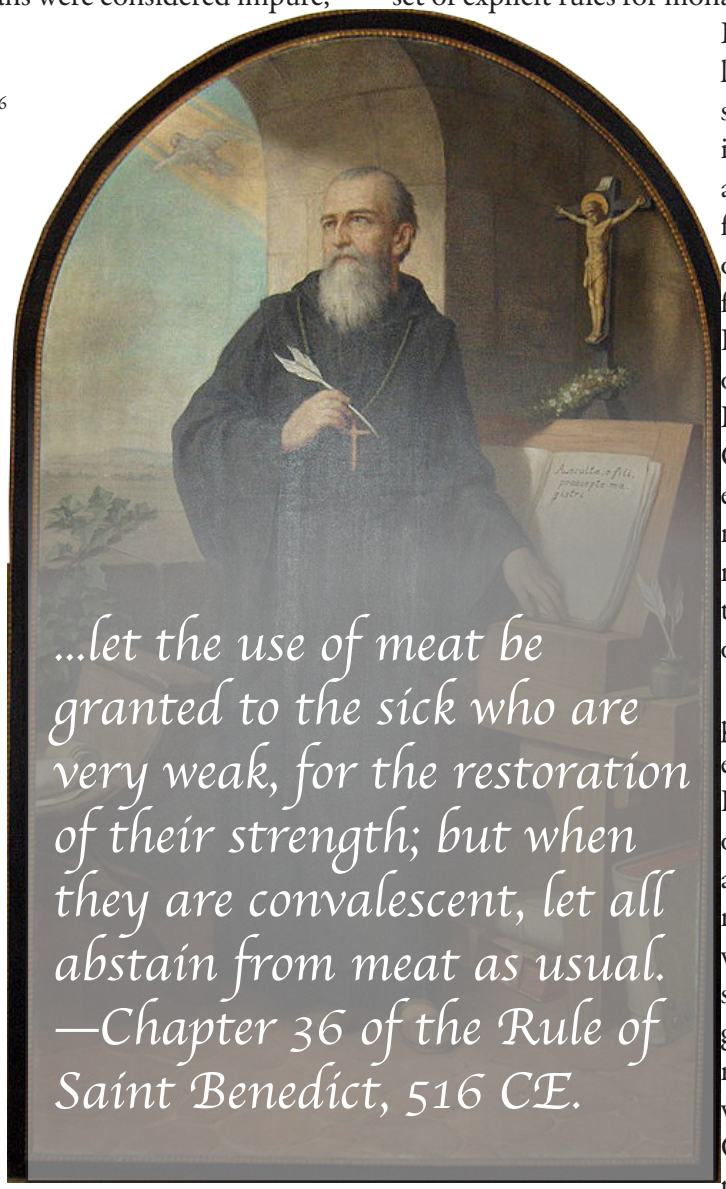
There are of course many differences between Pythagoras and Jesus though, one being their views on meat and the afterlife. Pythagoras believed the soul was immortal, the universe existed in infinite time, and any one soul would be repeatedly reborn in the lives of other living creatures. However, like the Orphic Cult, he believed that through strenuous ascetism one could

break this endless cycle of rebirth. It is likely these ideas of reincarnation were borrowed from the same sources that would inspire religions like Buddhism and Jainism.

With this view of the soul any cow, pig, or wild creature could easily be one's brother or mother from a former life, and for this reason killing and the eating of meat was absolutely forbidden in Pythagoras' cult. Strangely, these dietary restrictions went beyond meat to also include a variety of plant products, including beans. It is not exactly clear why beans were considered impure, but the leading explanation is the flatulence they might produce during a holy ritual.[6]

Piety and subversion

Meat at this point in ancient Greek culture was really only eaten at religious festivals or by noblemen. Pythagoras would have been raised on stories by Homer, like the Iliad and Odysseus, where the heroes ate only meat and bread, and people who consumed large amounts of meat were admired. The poor only consumed meat during sacrifices, when the wealthy donated animals to the gods and for public consumption. Animals to be consumed by the public would first be sacrificed to the gods by priests, where the organs would first be inspected to foretell the future, and the meat would then be cooked and distributed to the public. This meat, then, represented a connection between humans and their gods; it was sacred. By rejecting meat Pythagoras was claiming he knew a better way to commune with the gods. This was a highly subversive act, making Pythagoras a heretic within the prevailing religions of the time. Around two thousand years later in Christendom a similar group would also be labeled as heretics for refusing meat. Unlike Pythagoras, though, they would be brutally punished for their vegetarianism.[6]



Orphic ideas of becoming closer to the gods by abstaining from meat did not go away as Christianity conquered western civilization. Though people now worshipped the Jewish god they believed Jesus set them free from the Old Testament restrictions on food, and so ate pork without fear. Pork was now equally pure as beef, but those who sought closeness to God through self-denial in monasteries would still refuse meat, as it symbolized violence and vanity. One of the first set of explicit rules for monasteries, the Rule of Saint Benedict, allowed only foods like bread and vegetable soups (unless one was sick, in which case meat was allowed). Additionally, for forty days of the year all of Christendom abstained from meat. Before the Reformation there was only one church in western Europe—the Roman Catholic Church—and everyone abstained from meat during Lent. To eat meat during Lent was at times considered a capital offense.

This aversion to meet probably has roots in the early days of Christianity. In the first century CE the ordinary person could not afford meat. Most of their meat came from festivals where the rich would sacrifice animals to pagan gods and then distribute the meat for others to enjoy. It was thus difficult for an early Christian to acquire meat that wasn't first sacrificed to a pagan God.[28]

However, once Christianity became the official religion of western civilization eating meat became acceptable for the average person and on ordinary days. In some cases, though, abstaining from meat outside of a monastery and outside of Lent could get you into trouble with the Church. In the south of France people started developing different religious views than the dogma of the Catholic church. The most famous of these

groups were the Cathars. The Catholic church holds that there are both good (God) and bad (the devil) forces in the world, but the good is more powerful than the bad. The Cathars had a different perspective of the good and the evil. They believed that the bad reigned supreme on earth, whereas the good reigned supreme in heaven. So disgusted they were with the earthly world that they believed procreation to be bad, as it just created more people who would suffer. Since procreation was bad, so was sex, and so was everything that was produced by sex, including animals. Hence, they abstained absolutely from meat at all times.

The Cathars developed their own ideas about how to be saved from the evil earth and join God in heaven, and these ideas mimicked those of our friend Pythagoras (history repeats itself, does it not?). They believed in endless reincarnation unless one became so holy—reaching the status of 'a perfect'—that they can stop the cycle of reincarnation and join the good God in heaven. This is obviously quite different than traditional Christianity. Moreover, they were a threat to the Catholic church because they were more popular with ordinary people. They were less corrupt, they believed in equality between males and females, and seemed to live more like the biblical Jesus than the Catholic priests and monks. They believed in Jesus, but believed that, while on earth, Jesus had been a vision and not an actual human. This was a version of Christianity—the Cathars did indeed consider themselves Christians—the Catholic church could not accept.

And so the Pope called for a crusade. An army was assembled, they invaded, and committed mass murder of Cathars. At times it was difficult to figure out who were Cathars and who were Catholics, and when a Papal Legate was asked how to distinguish between the two he remarked, "Kill them all. God will recognize his own." The Cathars that lived through this crusade went underground, and as the Church sought to detect them the concept of the 'inquisition' originated. This was a program run by Dominican monks who attempted to identify who were good Catholics and who were 'heretics'. People were eager to prove they were obedient Catholics, and one of the best ways of doing so was being part of a family and eating meat. One particular person accused of being a heretic proclaimed in court, "I have a wife whom I love, I have children, I eat meat ...". [6,7]

The Great Chain of Being

We saw previously how warriors in ancient Greece were depicted as ravenous meat-eaters. This relationship between meat and power would arise again in the Middle Ages. The Roman Empire crumbled beneath a series of Germanic 'barbarian' invasions, which then gave rise to the Holy Roman Empire, first ruled by Charlemagne. Anyone seeking to portray power during this era would do so in a number of ways, one being eating an enormous amount of meat. To not do so was considered effeminate, and the mark of one who cannot exude power. In fact, the last member of Charlemagne's family to be emperor was deposed, one reason being, as

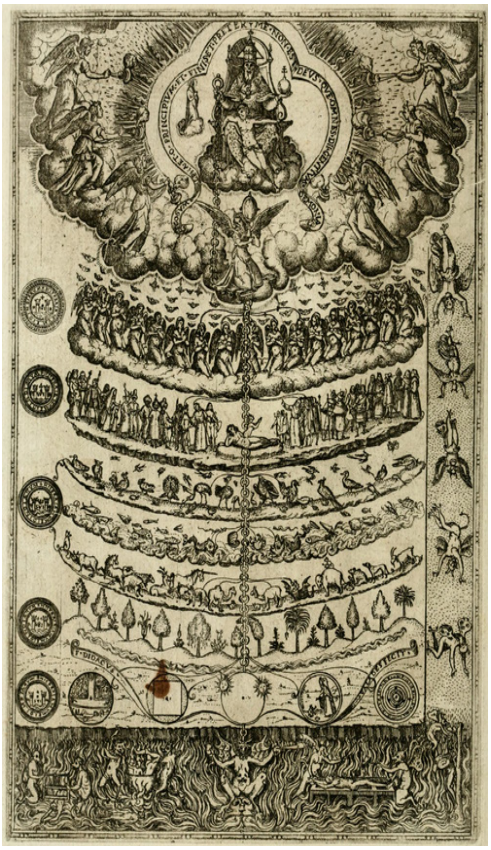
The Native American Perspective

Native Americans had a unique perspective on their relationship between humans and the animals they hunted. The gods / spirits they worshipped were nature-persons, being of both animal and human form. Animals needed to be killed for meat, though, and so in a way they were killing kindred spirits. Thus, just as they entered into reciprocal relationships with their fellow humans (that is, following the Golden Rule) they believed in a similar relationship with animals. They believed the animals consented to be killed, and in return the human would obey all the customs of handling the dead animal's body and not killing animals unnecessarily. Consider the quote from historian Patrick Allitt below.

"[Many Native Americans] lived by hunting. And they believed that if they hunted and killed an animal it was because the animal had consented to be killed. The spirit of the animal had agreed. They knew they had to chase the animal and it would do everything it could to get away, but in the end, if it died, it was because a spiritual contract had been made. And there was an implicit reciprocity in the contract. The animal is saying, "I'll permit you to kill me and eat me, but in return I expect that my remains will be treated with the appropriate rituals of respect."
—Allitt, Patrick N. "Lecture 3: Natives and Newcomers." American Religious History. The Great Courses. The Teaching Company.

the archbishop of Metz explained, "No one who is content with a modest meal can reign over us."[10]

Nobility was also expressed in the type of meats one would eat. Millennia ago, Aristotle had established a concept called the Great Chain of Being that was accepted throughout the Middle Ages.[11] This chain describes the hierarchy of all living beings. At the top of the chain is the most superior being: God. Underneath God are the angelic beings, who have their own hierarchy from angels to seraphim. Underneath them are humans, then animals, then plants. In each of those categories of earthly beings were further distinctions. Within the animal category birds were superior. Under them were land animals, and under land animals were animals that lived in the sea. For plants, fruit was superior to carrots as foods, in the same way that birds were superior to land animals: because fruit hung in the air whereas carrots grow underground.



1579 drawing of the Great Chain of Being from Didacus Valades, Rhetorica Christiana

> *We eat more partridges and [birds] than they [who are lower class] do and this gives us a more supple intelligence and sensibility than those who eat beef and pork."*
> *—Thierriat, a Flortentine, 1608*

> *"He who is used to turnips must not eat meat pies."*
> *—Epitaph on the tomb of a charater in a Late Middle Age story written by Guilio Cesare Croce that became a famous Italian saying.*

The higher the social class of humans the higher up the Great Chain of Being one should eat, it was believed. You've heard the saying that 'you are what you eat' but many people believed this to be true in regard to the chain. A noble was superior to a peasant partly due to their birth but partly due to their food as well. They wanted their social order to reflect God's order, and so a nobleman would not only eat more meat than peasants but would consume more of the meat higher up the chain. When giving a feast to impress others they would always serve lots of birds and very few vegetables. Peasants would be expected to eat mostly plants and (when they did eat meat) non-flying animals. Nobles would consume higher up the chain in terms of plants as well, eating more fruits, whereas peasants would eat more plants from the ground, like turnips. The greater amounts of meat eaten by nobility was clear everywhere you looked. A king might punish a nobleman by prohibiting him from eating meat for a period of time, which was like a temporary reduction of rank. Peasants ate so many vegetables that they were said to smell like vegetables.

This was more than just social convention; it was considered a fact that if one did not consume food on the appropriate place of the Great Chain one would exhibit poor health. Moreover, consuming at the appropriate place on the chain was actually required in some times and places. The ruler of Florence in the High Middle Ages was actually required to consume large quantities of birds, and a Florentine would usually refuse a gift of food if it was higher on the Chain than appropriate for their status.[10,11,12]

Fast forward to the modern age and the perceived relationship between meat and strength persevered. When Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948) reflected on how the British ruled India, he attributed it partially to the vegetarian Hindu diet which he thought made them smaller and weaker.[13] The British themselves felt this way during the Revolutionary War, when British soldiers noticed that the Revolutionary Army soldiers were both taller and consumed more meat.[14] An anonyous cookbook from 1700's Virginia plainly stated that the role of a dinner hostess was to supply "a riot of meat". Accounts of European visits to colonial America testify to the fact that the colonists typically had access to larger amounts of meat than their Old World counterparts.[15a]

SACRED COWS

It is well-known that Hindu Indians worship cattle. The word for cow in Sanskrit, *aghnaya*, literally means "not to be killed." Hinduism is a decentralized religion.

There is no Pope of Hinduism, and no one holy text, so customs, beliefs, and laws vary across regions. In most of India there are either restrictions or bans on slaughtering cattle, and in the Gujarat region the penalty for killing a cow is life imprisonment. In central India there is a region referred to as the "Cow Belt" where armed *gau rakshaks* (i.e., cow protectors) seek to find people attempting to transport cattle for slaughter. When those people are found they might be fined, but they also might be beaten. (Sometimes the cow protectors are more interested in the money raised from fines than they are actually protecting cattle).

Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow. According to some texts she was created at the same time as the universe, and her body contains all Hindu gods. The mother of all cows, some texts also say that one who slaughters a cow will rot in hell a thousand years for every hair on the cow's body.

Though the India constitution bans cattle slaughter, in some regions it is legal to slaughter certain cattle, like male, infirmed, or very old cattle. However, a productive female cow is always considered sacred. It is thus not surprising that India is the world's largest milk producer, but it is surprising that they are the second largest exporter of beef! There are three reasons for this. One is that what is exported as beef is often water buffalo, which are in the *Bovidae* and can be sold internationally as "beef". A second reason is that some cattle slaughter is legally permitted, and a third is that illegal slaughtering is known to take place.

But eight years into BJP rule, it has become clear that talk of cow protection is about politics rather than faith. Life is no betterfor cows. The party's vaunted investment in cow sanctuaries has turned out to be a sham; there is often little effort to provide real shelter. —The Economist. September 25, 2023. "India's movement to protect cows is rooted in politics, not religion."

The eating of beef is explicitly taboo, but the dairy products cattle provide are considered a blessing from the gods. This presents a dilemma for dairy farms: you need cows to produce milk, but what do you do with old and unproductive cows if you can't slaughter them? There are charities that run shelters for old cows. In the city of Mumbai there are about 4,000 so-called cow handlers who stand on the street with adorned cows, charging a fee to feed the cows as a way to please the gods. Even with the shelters and cow handlers there are too many old cows, discouraging dairy farms from expanding their herds in fear they will lose money from caring for old cows that no longer produce milk. Sometimes cows are released to fend for themselves, and if no one takes them in, they live the life of a stray animal: hungry, parasite-ridden, and generally neglected. As they search garbage bins for food they end up consuming so much plastic they die.

While some regions pamper cattle and dress them in flamboyant costumes, other regions have less gentle ways of honoring the cow. In the southern area containing the Tamil ethnic group, they make bulls mad by squeezing lemon in its eyes, and then set them lose in a pen where young boys attempt to latch onto the bull's hump and drag it down. This form of bull wrestling is referred to as *jallikattu*, and reflects an ancient religious tradition, perhaps mimicking the myth of when the god Krishna pacified a bull.

Why do Hindus worship cows? The answer is not clear. Hinduism began with a set of writings referred to as the Vedas, and while the Vedas say to venerate the cow, they also allowed Brahmins (the priestly caste) and certain warriors to eat beef. Some Hindus around 1500 BC ate beef, and so did the gods they worshipped.

By the time of the Christian era it was taboo for any Hindu to eat beef, but the nature of this change and its cause is not known. There are two lines of thought on the rise of the beef eating taboo. The utilitarian explanation says that Indians came to rely heavily on dairy, making the female cow. At the same time they relied more on male oxen for pulling carts and plows. The value of cows for milk and bulls / steers for work became more valuable than the beef, so as greater

emphasis was placed on keeping cattle alive it eventually became embedded in their religion. The ideological explanation has political component. It says that Buddhism began spreading around 500 BC, and its emphasis on non-violence attracted many, so the Hindu priests competed by focusing on the Hindu texts that espoused kindness towards cows. Over time Hindus largely forgot about their beef eating past. India was later conquered by Muslims, and then the British, and during these years of subjegation Hindus sought ways to distinguish themselves as a way to maintain their culture and eventually reclaim their nationality. One way to do this was to reject beef, something the Muslim or the British would never do. Cow worship eventually then became synonomous with Hinduism and the Indian nationality. When India finally achieved independence in 1947, and set about writing a constitution in 1949, its parliament received over 100,000 items of correspondence supporting a ban on eating beef.

Religious notions about cows in India, then, are as much about politics as they are about gods. However, look closely at any culture and religion and you'll probably find the same.[15b]

TOWARDS MODERNITY

Aristotle created the Great Chain of Being to describe the history of plants and animals, but of course we now have a much more advanced understanding of natural history. Some parts of the chain remain. Many still believe in God and angelic beings, and many still believe there is a divine ordering of natural life. Yet we also know from the theory of evolution that all living beings have a common ancestor, and we no longer believe a Canadian Goose to be better or more advanced than Chimpanzees simply because they can reside at higher elevations.

Moreover, we no longer believe in higher and lower classes of people. The elimination of class distinctions began first with the American Revolution and shortly after with the French Revolution. Meat, now, is not only appropriate for everyone, but we now believe everyone has a right to meat. When a young lady of obviously low income in the 19th century purchased a tenderloin from a Boston meat seller, he suggested she could save money by purchasing the round steak instead. Who knows if the remark was made in kindness, but that was not how it was taken, as she replied, "Do you suppose because I don't come here in my carriage I don't want just as good meat as rich folks have?"[14] Even those with the lowest of incomes today receive enough government assistance to be able to afford meat, and when they visit food pantries for food assistance they are always provided access to plentiful amounts of meat.

This article thus far has covered the history of human culture related to meat, and much of it must have seemed quite weird to modern Americans. Not eating a chicken because it might be your former mother (Pythagoras)? Believing our desire for meat to make war inevitable (Plato)? Demonstrating your social status by gorging on enormous amounts of meat, or your piety by not eating meat? A church killing people if they eat meat during Lent?

Times have certainly changed, so let's look at modern American culture concerning meat. Certainly there are still some religious notions about meat consumption; for instance, most Seventh Day Adventists are vegetarians. However, most Americans simply eat whatever meats they want, when they want. Those that do have ethical views on meat consumption, though, tend to do so for secular reasons. Let's explore some of those.

Meat and social identity

In the past, the rich could use meat as a way of signaling their greater wealth, but advances in agricultural technologies have made meat so cheap that this is no longer possible. In fact meat is so cheap that health experts say we consume too much, and those with the highest meat consumption generally have the worst health. (The optimal diet includes some meat, but less than what the average American consumes).[16]

Partly for this reason, portraying oneself as a vegan or vegetarian can enhance one's social status in some cultures (though certainly not rural Oklahoma!). This presents a problem when trying to estimate the percent of non-meat eaters in the US, as it has been documented that some people falsely claim they are vegetarian when they are not.[17]

That said, wealthier people are still less likely to be vegetarian. Meat still plays a role in portraying social identity though, namely in terms of political party. Americans who lean to the political-left are far more likely to be vegetarian or vegan. The young are also more likely to eschew meat. To better understand who some people choose to forgo meat and others do not, let us look at two rather controversial aspects of livestock production: animal treatment and global warming.

Ethics of eating animals

Historically, the question of whether one should eat an animal depended on religious notions. This is seldom

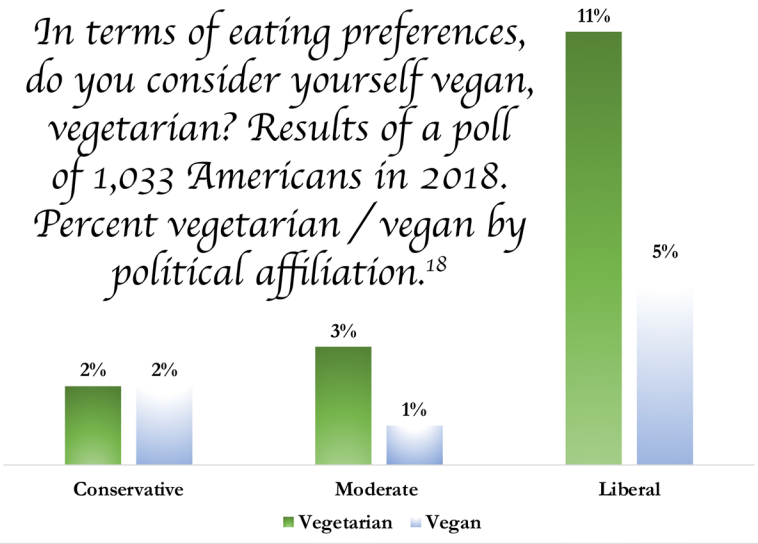
the case today, where ethic decisions are increasingly placed in a secular framework called **utilitarianism**.

This view emerged from the Enlightenment of eighteenth-century France and Scotland, where philosophers purported the idea that reason and empirical evidence are better foundations for morality than religious dogma. Utilitarianism's core tenet was first uttered by Francis Hutcheson, when he remarked that the good citizen is one who promoted 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. The idea is intuitive: to the extent that you can measure happiness, the goal should be to maximize happiness for everyone. He was referring only to humans, but other philosophers argued it should extend to animals as well. The French philosopher La Mettrie extended the idea to animals by altering the Great Chain of Being to depict human and animal to not necessarily share the same level in the Chain but to at least have some overlap.[19]

7% of Americans between 18-29 years of age are vegetarian, compared to 2% of those above 65 years of age.[18]

It would be Jeremy Bentham who would make utilitarianism famous, and it would be Bentham who would make the strongest case for including animal feelings in the utilitarian calculations. When it comes to the treatment of animals, Bentham observed that it matters little whether animals can reason as humans. Instead, he argued, "The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?"[20]

In terms of eating preferences, do you consider yourself vegan, vegetarian? Results of a poll of 1,033 Americans in 2018. Percent vegetarian / vegan by political affiliation.[18]



In regard to modern philosophy and common-sense ethics, this has become the central question. Utilitarianism says it is the consequences of our actions that dictate right from wrong, and our actions should maximize the sum total of happiness of both animals and humans. Just as the suffering of an intellectually disabled person should receive equal consideration as the similar suffering of a genius, the suffering of a pig should count no more or no less than a human. Suffering is suffering regardless of who or what experiences it.

Imbeciles ... are animals with human faces, as the intelligent ape is a little man in another shape.
—La Mettrie in *L'Homme plante* (1748)[18]

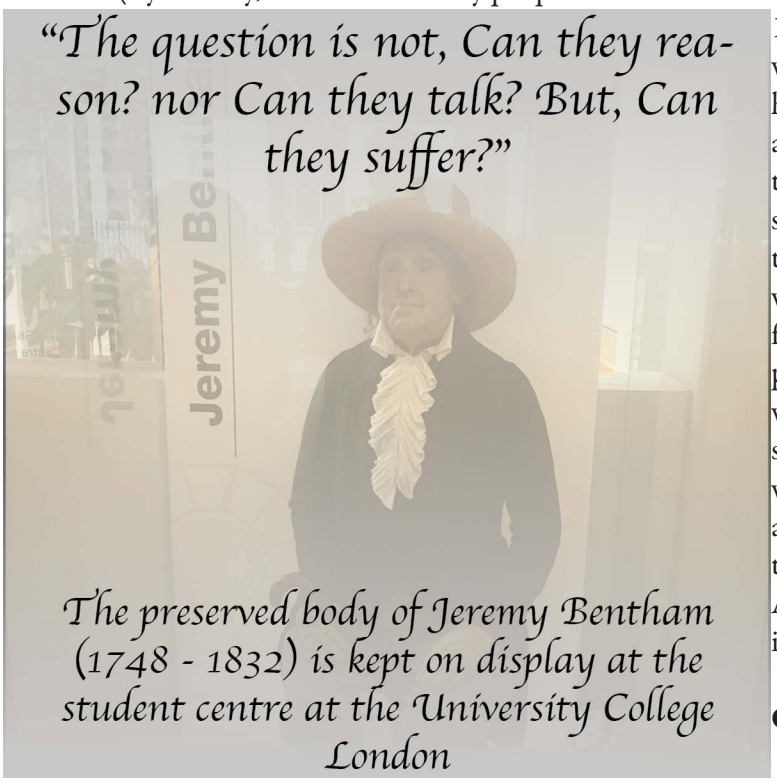
The most famous living philosopher expousing this view is Peter Singer. Though he calls for the abolition of livestock agriculture he has also admitted that it is ethical to eat animals if the animals are given a good life.[21] Cody Brown, an animal rights activist who spent years working undercover on farms secretly filming animal abuse, feels the same way.[22] Like most Americans, Cody and Peter believe that it can be ethical to eat animals, they just believe that animals raised for profit will almost certainly experience considerable suffering, thereby making meat consumption, in their opinion, unethical.

Of course, others disagree. My personal view is that beef cattle (even those raised for profit) experience more more happiness than suffering. The more beef we eat the more happy animals that get to exist. While it is true that beef production uses land that could be used for wildlife, it is not unreasonable to believe that cattle live a happier life than the wild creatures (who receive no health care, no protection, and must compete for food) they replace.

Utilitarianism is, of course, just an idea, and not one that everyone subscribes to. There are some people who feel it is wrong to kill and eat an animal regardless of how the animal is treated, and there are some people who simply don't care about the suffering of animals. Besides, utilitarianism is supposed to be a helpful tool, not a universal solution to ethical questions. No person can actually live their life according to utilitarianism. One reason is that it can be difficult to actually predict the outcomes of any one action. Another reason is that it can lead to conclusions that conflict with our moral intuitions.

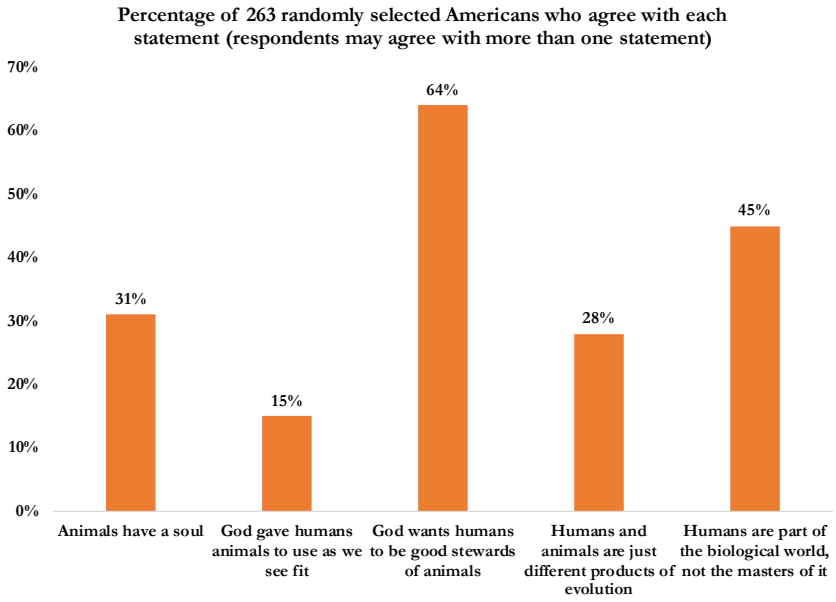
What are ordinary Americans' views on animal treatment? In some of my research I asked a random sample of Americans about their views, the results of which are shown in two graphs here.[23] First we see

that one-third of Americans believe animals have a soul. More people think that God wants us to be good stewards of animals than those who believe God gave us animals to use however we see fit. (By the way, this view is shared by most religious leaders today). Almost half of Americans think that we are no more special than animals, and are just another part of the biological world. What this suggests is that many people still believe there is a divinely-ordered relationship between humans and their livestock, while many other people think humans and livestock and just different accidents emerging on the tree of evolution.



The preserved body of Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832) is kept on display at the student centre at the University College London

So some think animals have a soul, some think they are just another animal product by evolution ... but perhaps the important question is: how should animals be treated? One-third of Americans think that the feelings of animals are not important, which is direct contradiction to utilitarianism. These individuals will permit animal suffering, even if the suffering profound and the benefit to humans is slight. Only one percent of Americans think animals should be guaranteed a 'happy and content life'. Most, it is clear, believe that animals should not suffer, but that we have no obligations beyond that.



These two graphs described the views of Americans when they are explicitly asked about their attitudes, but most of us are allowed to live our lives without really confronting animal welfare issues—and most of us will never actively seek information on animal welfare. This allows us to live in willful ignorance, and willful ignorance is one of the most powerful social forces. Many people will even admit it. I once asked over 1,000 Americans if they would rather not know how pork was produced and 44% agreed, and of those who agreed, 28% said they didn't want to know because they were scared they would feel guilty about eating pork.[24] Admitting to willful ignorance is not something everyone is willing to do, so if 44% admitted to it, you can bet that a higher percentage of Americans actually engage in willful ignorance.

Global warming

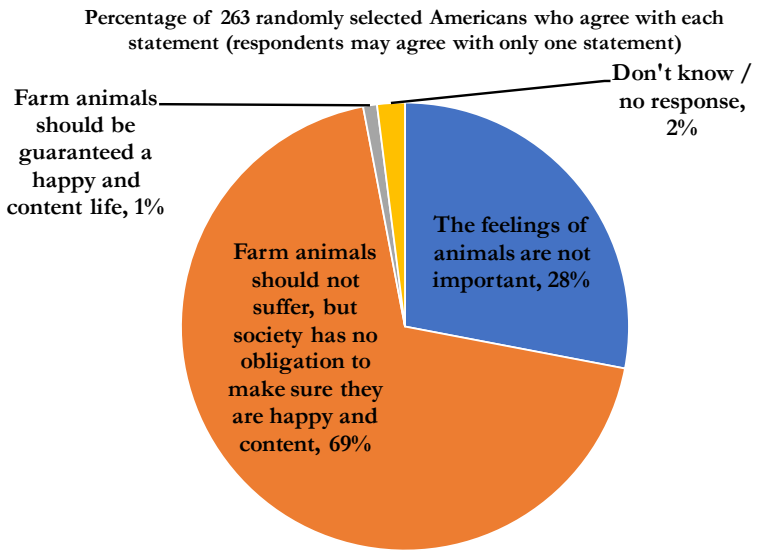
A century ago almost everyone everywhere would want to comsume more meat than they currently do. It is only in the past few decades that meat has begun to be associated with negative outcomes. First there was the anti-fat campaign of the 1980s. Though much of the science behind this campaign would be later debunked, it created a bias against meat fat that is only now starting to reverse. Then there were the campaigns by animal rights activists that had existed in some form for a century but began to really assume force in the 1990s.

Then came our better understanding of global warming. Scientists knew our emissions of carbon dioxide was likely causing global warming since the 1930s, but it was in the 2000s when it started to be seen as a crisis by many. Governments, especially the US, proved unwilling to take any action

to curb emissions, so people started looking at what personal changes they could make, and they looked at their consumption of meat.

What does meat have to do with global warming?

• Meat is a value-added product. It takes products like grass, corn, and water and uses the biological system of the animal to turn it into delicious meat. Anytime you add value to something it requires inputs, and those inputs are always have their own carbon footprint. The more valuable something is, as a general rule, the higher its carbon footprint.



• Generally speaking, diets containing animal-based products tend to have a higher carbon footprint than vegan diets, and vegetarian diets tend to have a higher footprint that diets containing meat.

• Beef (or any meat produced from ruminants) is a particularly high greenhouse gas emitter. On a per-pound basis, beef has a carbon footprint about three times the size of pork and turkey, four times the size of chicken, and six times the size of eggs. This is because beef cattle are less efficient at turning inputs into meat, and cattle produce a particular large amount of methane as they burp—and they burp about once every two minutes.

As global warming activists are increasingly able to mark meat as an enemy of the climate, some have decided to reduce their meat intake. The concept of 'Meatless Mondays' are increasingly popular, where people forego all meat on Monday in an effort to improve the environment. This abstaining from meat is intended as a sacrifice, similar to the sacrifice made by monks a millennia ago when they would not eat meat, except that modern Americans are doing so not on religious grounds, but utilitarian grounds.[25]

Consider the example of Liz Specht, a scientist working to help create food products that taste like meat but are actually made from animal protein. The idea is that most of us will not give up meat for the sake of the climate, so we must be offered climate-friendly meat alternatives that are so close to real meat that consuming them feels like no sacrifice at all.

When Liz was thirteen years old she attended summer programs for intellectually talented students. Though most of the program centered around science, part of it also involved ethics, and it was here where Liz was exposed to the utilitarian theory of ethics. So enraptured was she by the theory that when she went home she announced to her parents that she had become a utilitarian.

Liz has since dedicated her life to using science to improve the world, and she decided the best way she could contribute is by providing scientific guidance to companies seeking plant-based alternatives to meat. There are currently enormous amounts of money being invested in creating such alternatives. You can see the fruits in the Impossible Burger being sold at Burger King and Beyond Meat products sold at many grocery stores. Some people are investing in these products because they believe them profitable, but many are also investing in them because they have performed a utilitarian calculation that suggests what the world needs now more than anything is less livestock production, and thus less meat consumption. Because most of us are not willing to sacrifice giving up meat, people like Liz feel they have to create a desirable alternative for us. Otherwise, they feel, climate change will only get worse.[22]

Stop and consider for a moment what this says about the current American culture regarding meat. Generally speaking, all Americans can be grouped into one of three categories.

1. For those who take climate change seriously, most have concluded that abstaining from meat is good for the climate. This, along with health and ethical considerations, has caused them to view meat as a generally 'bad' thing. Some of them become vegetarian, some become vegans. Others simply reduce the amount of meat they eat. Others continue eating about the same amount of meat, but feel guilt from doing so.

2. Other Americans refuse to take climate change seriously, or they do not believe studies showing meat

to be a high carbon emitter, and thus see no harm to the climate from eating meat.

3. Most Americans resist being called a climate-denier but for the most part ignore the issue. It isn't that they think meat is 'good' or 'bad', they just want to eat it without having to think about the ethical considerations. They are participating in the same willful ignorance we discussed regarding animal welfare.

What all this means is that people who tend to think deliberately about meat consumption and its consequences usually conclude meat is 'bad', while their counterparts try not to think about it. Never in history, to my knowledge, has the consumption of meat been thought of as a threat to the Earth.

> *When dealing with issues as big as global warming ... it's easy to feel helpless, like there's little we can do to make a difference ... But the small changes we make everyday can have a tremendous impact. That's why this Meatless Monday resolution is important. Together, we can better our health, the animals and the environment, one plate at a time.*
>
> *—Los Angeles council member Ed Reyes, coauthor of a Meatless Monday resolution in 2012.*

Ethics and categories

I would like to argue that this current cultural attitude towards meet may be somewhat understandable but is largely unfair. I say the attitude is understandable because humans tend to lump things into broad categories. We can't resist it. Most of the problems we encounter are, in reality, quite complex—too complex for us to handle; and so we simplify them. We saw the Jews group all animals as either clean or unclean. They didn't say one should reduce their consumption of pork, but to eliminate it entirely. Likewise Plato could not envision a city with a moderate consumption of meat, but one where cities would be in constant warfare seeking more land to produce more meat. Pythagoras and the Cathars likewise viewed meat as a complete taboo, and Christian monks felt the same unless one was sick.

The rulers of Christendom, on the other hand, saw meat as absolutely 'good' in that it both bestowed them with power and allowed them to project power.

However, it is my contention that meat should not be considered purely good or purely bad. What matters is the total emissions from one's choices, and the utilitarian theory of ethics should be employed to seek other more desirable ways to reduce one's carbon footprint. Let me explain by concentrating on beef.

• Yes, most meals containing beef will have a larger carbon footprint than meals that do not. However, this does not mean that every vegetarian meal is better for the climate. Replacing a $5 hamburger with a $30 vegetarian meal might very well increase your footprint. The vegetarian meal has a high price for a reason, and that reason involves lots of inputs which have their own carbon footprints

• Replacing a $5 hamburger with a $5 or $4 vegetarian entree probably does result in a lower footprint, but why does that have to be the sacrifice you make? If you like vegetarian alternatives this may indeed be an optimal way of benefitting the climate, but it is not optimal to meat lovers like me.

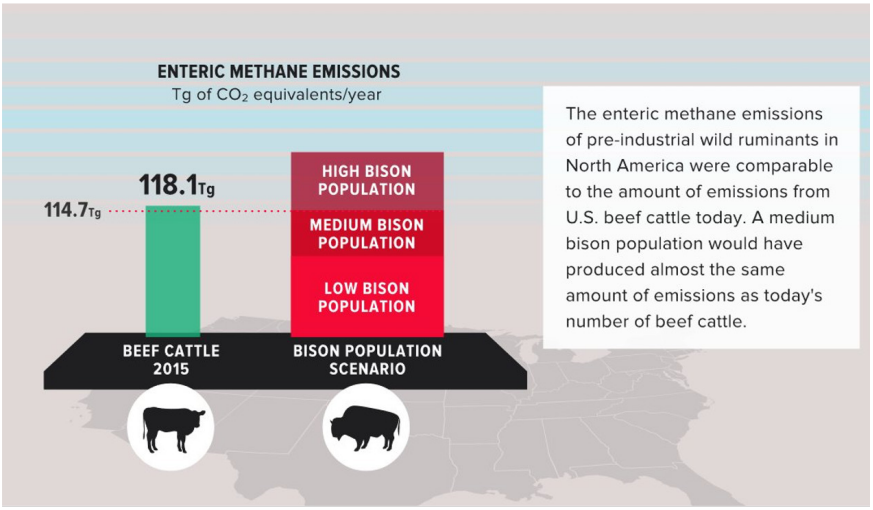
• Beef has certain advantages overlooked in conventional carbon footprint calculations. Many cattle are raised on grasslands that are unsuitable for the production of anything except ruminant animals. Rainfall is too low to produce grains or vegetables, so either we raise cattle on this land or leave it unproductive.[25]

• Methane emissions from the millions of beef cattle we raise today might not even be larger than the emissions from the bison that existed in the US prior to European colonization.[26]

• What if I wanted to achieve the same carbon footprint as a vegetarian but without giving up meat? What other sacrifice could I make to do so? It turns out that giving up beef doesn't reduce your carbon footprint by much, and the size of that reduction depends on where you spend your savings. Beef tends to be more expensive than other foods, so as you give up beef you save money on food. If you then take those annual savings and purchase a plane flight you will probably increase your carbon footprint because jet planes are large emitters. If you take the savings from beef and use it to purchase more chicken, your footprint will decline by only 1.1%. If you stop eating all meat and become a vegetarian your footprint falls by only 3%. For most of us, reducing our carbon footprint by only 3% is not enough for us to sacrifice giving up meat.

• Here's the good news: its surprisingly easy to reduce your footprint by 3% using another strategy. If you simply spend $20 per year in carbon offsets your footprint falls 3%.[27] So which would you rather do: give up meat or spend $20 a year to keep eating the same amount of meat? For most of us the latter is a clearly superior option.

What are carbon offsets? They are programs that pull together money to fund carbon reducing activities like erecting windmill farms, planting trees, preventing deforestation, and capturing methane from landfills. It turns out that a dollar spent on these activities saves an enormous amount of carbon emissions relative to substituting beans for beef. It is my sincere belief that those who wish to reduce their impact on the climate can best do so not by giving up meat but by purchasing carbon offsets. Moreover, they are easy to purchase, as there are many organizations that allow you to purchase fractions of a single offset online, and are third-party verified.



Back to utilitarianism

For people who enjoy eating meat and believe it humane, purchasing carbon offsets is a rational strategy for reducing one's carbon offsets because they are designed to achieve the maximum reduction in emissions per dollar spent. Simply put, offsets yield better outcomes, and utilitarianism is all about achieving better outcomes. You can give up meat and experience the misery of no meat in exchange for a very small benefit, or you can donate a mere $20-$40 for carbon offsets and remain a happy person while doing far more than the average American to fight global warming.

Sacrifice for the common good is a laudable act. However, making your sacrifice accomplish as much as possible without making yourself miserable is, I believe, even more laudable.

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Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a framework for ethical decision making. It says that for any binary decision (e.g., should we do 'this', yes or no?) the decision should be made based on which decision maximizes the total sum of all the happiness of every being that can feel happiness or misery. Sometimes the 'beings' include humans only, sometimes all sentient beings.

While useful, utilitarianism has a dark side. Many Hollywood villains justify their actions by utilitarian measures, like in the Avengers, when Thanos wanted to destroy half of the universe because it was increasing unchecked. The population of the universe was too large, he believed, to afford the average person a decent life, and thus he wanted to kill have the universe to save the other half.

Using utilitarianism can lead to outcomes we deem horrid. For example, if we want to know whether a new potentially dangerous medicine helps or hurts people, we could experiment with it on a small group of people, saying that the harms to those people are outweighed by the benefits to everyone else. This is our justification for experimenting on lab animals, but it could also be used to justify horrendous events like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where African Americans with syphilis were told they would receive free treatment from the government, when in reality they received only a placebo, so that scientists could better document the natural course of untreated syphilis.

We now look back at the Tuskegee study in guilt and shame. We would say that a government able and willing to experiment on unsuspecting citizens has both the means and the will to do great harm to everyone, and thus is not justified on utilitarian ground. The point is that utilitarianism is not a simple as it may at first appear. However, the important thing about the concept is its spirit: that a decision be made based on its impact on everyone, and in some cases, all sentient beings.

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