

## “What Philosophers Have to Say about Eating Meat”

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WeWork, a co-working and office space company, made a company policy last year not to serve or reimburse meals that include meat.

WeWork’s co-founder and chief culture officer, Miguel McKelvey, said in an email that it was the company’s attempt at reducing its carbon footprint. His moral arguments are based on the devastating environmental effects of meat consumption. Research has shown that meat and dairy production are among the worst culprits when it comes to the production of greenhouse gases and the loss of biodiversity. WeWork estimates the policy will save 445.1 million pounds of carbon dioxide emissions by 2023, 16.6 billion gallons of water and 15,507,103 animals.

Indeed, for centuries philosophers have argued against consuming animals.

### **Why Hurting Animals Is Immoral**

Ancient Greek philosophers made their arguments based on the moral status of animals themselves. Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras made the case against eating animals on grounds of their having souls like humans.

Philosopher Plato, in Book 2 of *The Republic*, thought of meat as a luxury that would lead to an unsustainable society, filled with strife and inequality, requiring more land and wars to acquire it.

Two thousand years later, in 1789, Jeremy Bentham, father of the theory of utilitarianism, pointed to the animal suffering as morally concerning and therefore implicated meat consumption. He asked:

The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being? ... The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes ...

The doctrine of utilitarianism states that actions that bring about the most good

and reduce the suffering in the world are the right ones. Utilitarians focus on reducing suffering and maximizing pleasure or happiness.

Modern-day utilitarian Peter Singer thus asks whether we are justified in considering our pleasure and pain as more important than that of animals. In being willing to subject animals to the suffering of industrial farming for meat production, he questions whether we are just being “speciesists.” Much like racists, he argues, speciesists favor the interest of their own species.

Other philosophers reject the attention to just the suffering of animals and argue that it is simply wrong to treat animals as our resources whether or not it involves suffering. Just as it would be wrong to treat humans as resources for harvesting organs, it is immoral to raise animals for meat.

Animal rights philosopher Tom Regan, for example, argued that animals are “the subject of a life,” just as humans are. What he meant was that they too—like humans—are beings who have rights, with their own preferences, wants and expectations.

Making factory farming more humane misses the point of immorality and injustice of the use of animals as resources.

### **Human Exceptionalism**

Indeed, there are those philosophers who believed that animals do not have moral status equal to humans.

Human exceptionalism is based on the premise that humans have superior abilities compared to other animals. For example, humans can have social relationships, in particular family relationships; they also have the ability to use language; they can reason and feel pain.

Sixteenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes, known for his dictum, “I think, therefore, I am,” thought that animals were not conscious, did not have minds and, consequently, did not experience pain. They were, according to Descartes, “automata,” just complex machines. Indeed, his views were later used to justify the practice of vivisection on animals for many centuries.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that it was personhood that distinguished humans from animals. For Kant, humans set their own moral rules based on reason and act upon them. This is something that animals cannot do.

### **The Moral Case against Meat**

More astute observations and scientific studies, however, have shown that animals do experience pain analogous to humans and have feelings. For example, elephants have complex emotional lives, including grieving for loved ones, and complex social and family relationships.

Animals can reason, communicate with one another, possibly use language in some cases and behave morally.

Thus, excluding animals from moral consideration and eating animals cannot be justified because they lack these characteristics.

Even Kant's idea that it is the rational autonomy of humans that makes them superior does not work. Infants, Alzheimer's patients, the developmentally disabled and some others might also be considered lacking in rational autonomy. And personhood, in any case, is not the defining criterion for being treated as an object of moral consideration. In my view, the question to be considered is whether Kant is just being a speciesist, as Singer has charged.

Finally, there are those philosophers who object to eating meat not based on whether animals have rights or whether their suffering should be included in the calculus for assessing moral actions. They focus on the virtues or vices of eating meat.

Virtue theorist Rosalind Hursthouse argues that eating meat shows one to be "greedy," "selfish," "childish." Other virtue theorists argue that the virtuous person would refrain from eating meat or too much meat out of compassion and caring for animals' welfare.

As a moral philosopher, I too believe the suffering of animals in the production of meat, particularly modern industrial meat production, cannot be morally justified.

Thus, in my view, WeWork's position has a moral basis and powerful philosophical allies.