How I changed my mind on eating meat

Tracing the path that changed a belief I once thought unshakeable

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Cutting out meat is a pretty drastic thing to do.

Looking back, I think a scattered series of events slowly backed me into it, beginning with my family's move from the Netherlands to Canada.

We had no clear plan. We flew into Montreal, toured around the country in an RV for two months, covered both the east and west, until we eventually found a place to rent in Kelowna, British Columbia.

Prior to the move, I'd spent two confused years bouncing in and out of business school in the Netherlands, awaiting the migration—my parents started the visa application process in 2010. Then one day, in May of 2014, the approval suddenly came through, and the decision was made that I should finish my degree in Canada instead.

Upon arrival, the local university, UBCO, wasn't sure what to do with my case. They took six months to review my transfer transcripts and decide, at which point they told me that I'd have to restart my degree from scratch. That meant three years vanished overnight, with the tuition sitting as debt. Tens of thousands of euros owed for something that no longer even counted, which, at nineteen, was hard to comprehend.

I'd also carried an athletic ambition across the Atlantic—competitive boxing—but it didn't fare much better. The BC medical board capped the eligible uncorrected vision limit at -3.5; mine was nearly double that, at -6.5. Add in a year of high-dose *Accutane* and my eyes were so dry that even a glancing jab would send my contacts flying.

Paired with a resume consisting of peeling tulip bulbs and selling lottery tickets, it felt like I'd stumbled into Canada already two steps behind.

Vegetarian hippies

As I was trying to get my feet under me, my older brother, a sober, rational, countryside Dutch guy, told me he'd become a vegetarian. I was stunned. In my head vegetarians were people who confused empathy with logic. Rejecting meat was like rejecting our blood.

My one grandpa was a dairy farmer, the other kept chickens. Every aunt and uncle I grew up around had chicken coops, and cows peacefully dotted the fields surrounding us. My last name—Boer—refers to our farmer ancestry, and our family lineage, as far as we can trace it back, goes from one farmer to the next, until there's us.

But my brother wasn't one to do things casually or act on trends.

I debated him a lot, and quickly came to realize how terrible my arguments for meat eating were. "Lions eat meat". "Animal protein is vital." "Chickens can't feel pain like we do." "The planet can't handle everyone eating veggies." Every time my brother would sit there, unfazed and unchallenged, taking my arguments apart with ease. Half of them collapsed instantly and the other half ended in ridiculous places I didn't want to follow.

Deep inside I knew there had to be good arguments for eating meat. Our ancestors stretch back well over a million years with flesh in their teeth,[1] and even right now, nearly ninety percent of the world eats it.[2]

So I decided to dig into the science and philosophy of meat consumption. In this new country, in debt, no school, job, or network, and in limbo about my future, I needed something—anything—that could show me that at least my eating habits were still solid ground to stand on.

A life worth living

During my search for moral arguments about meat eating, the name Peter Singer kept coming up, whom some had dubbed "the most influential living philosopher". I came across his essay contest in the *New York Times*,[3] which asked readers to put forward their best defense for eating meat.

Excited, I read the winning entry by Jay Bost,[4] who hitched his case to Aldo Leopold's land ethic:[5] he argued that cows help keep ecosystems healthy, so if we give them good lives and quick deaths, then killing them counts as stewardship rather than harm. It was a well-written piece, but I had hoped to read more on the morality of harming and killing animals itself.

As a foil to Singer, I turned to British philosopher Roger Scruton's *Animal Rights and Wrongs*, in which he defends animal farming. He argued that farms animals exist only because we eat them; if we didn't, they wouldn't be here at all, so they have us to thank for their lives. He pressed a similar covenant: raise them well, kill them cleanly, keep the farming craft, or else we'll lose both the animals and the countryside I grew up in, and with those a sliver of our humanity.[6]

I also read the philosophers who shot down animal rights head-on. Carl Cohen argued that animal rights presuppose reciprocal duties that farm animals simply can't have[7]—cows can't serve on juries—but, like Scruton, held that we do owe animals humane treatment. Raymond Frey posited a utilitarian ledger: if farm animals live "lives worth living" and are replaced once killed, the welfare balance stays positive and killing them is justified by the surplus.[8]

The through-line was blunt: farm animals exist only because we breed them; because we breed them, we owe them; owing them means good lives and quick deaths; if that covenant keeps the land alive and the moral balance in the black, then eating them isn't vandalism, but simply upkeep. A lot more reasonable than any of the half-baked arguments I'd been putting forward.

When theory meets reality

Moving from the philosophy to the animal welfare science, I was surprised by how easy it was to find studies on farm animals' living conditions, which were nearly all conducted by the meat industry itself to figure out how to improve yield and prevent losses.

A well-known example I found early on was that the industry had managed to make modern chickens grow six times as fast and three times as large as those raised a century ago.[9–11] Because of this fast growth, meat chickens could be killed at just forty-seven days—about one percent of their natural lifespan.[12] I realized my toothpaste usually lasts longer.

The numbers in which chickens were raised seemed grotesque. USDA data indicates that a total of 99.6 percent of these birds are raised on farms growing more than 100,000 a year,[13] and packed up to twenty a square meter (half a square foot per bird).[14–16]

This limited space combined with their fast growth predictably has ugly consequences.

One in seventeen chickens die before making it to slaughter,[9] largely from their bodies giving out. About a quarter end up having difficulty walking from lameness,[17–20] and half suffer from footpad dermatitis—

inflamed, blistered feet largely caused by standing in their own excrement all day.[17,21–26]

It read like a calibration of how much strain a chicken's body could tolerate before profits dipped. None of it seemed anything like the scrappy birds I grew up with, strutting around the yard like they owned the place. These chickens could barely even stand.

Cows, and to a lesser extent, pigs, seemed to fare somewhat better, though routine practices such as separating calves from their mothers or killing underperforming piglets by pounding them against concrete seemed plainly cruel.[27]

And while death is part of life and usually not particularly pleasant, I'd expected the animals' final moments to be more controlled and humane: in slaughter, pigs routinely panic when gassed with CO_2,[28] and roughly one in eleven cows is inadequately stunned before having their throats slit.[29]

The overall impression I was left with of animal welfare was bleak.

But even when hunting for a defense of meat eating from a practical angle, the arguments came up short. Yes, meat is very nutritious, and vegetarians do often show deficiencies,[30,31] but these could be addressed with dietary planning.[32] Environmentally, vegan diets weren't just feasible, but actually seemed more sustainable than those including meat.[33] If there was a place for sustainable meat consumption, like Bost argued, it would be an exceedingly tiny amount.

What finally stuck in my teeth wasn't the logic but the math. A decent death seems possible; a decent system for eighty billion deaths a year sounded like a fantasy. Lives worth living make sense in theory, but not on a production line. No one seemed to have the slightest clue how to make good lives survive logistics.

The last slice

Meanwhile, I was sneaking out of bed like a teenager hiding cigarettes, wolfing down salami before my brother woke up. He never judged, never said a word, but in his presence, I could sense my own hypocrisy.

Until one morning I stared at the salami and thought: why the hell am I still doing this?

And there it was. The click. The moment I called bullshit on myself. Eggs and dairy followed shortly after. My body felt fine.

My people didn't. Friends and family thought I'd lost my mind, gone soft, became a hippie. But I wasn't praying to crystals or weaving flowers. I just finally confronted the reality I'd been avoiding and acted on it.

Didn't matter if I kept quiet about it either. Go out and order the veggie option and you'd always get the confused stare: "You vegetarian?" That's the catch-22. Say no, you're two-faced. Say yes, and you're dragged into a moral debate you didn't ask for. Some heard me; most got defensive or quickly changed the subject.

I figured if I had to redo a degree from scratch, I'd build it to make sense of this universal practice that we seem so fierce to defend, yet barely understand. Philosophy to probe the ethics and sharpen the logic, politics to analyze how laws and public sentiment enabled it, and economics to follow the feeding frenzy.

I stress-tested every argument I could find, quickly noticing that none of the loudest political voices that young guys like me were supposed to listen to at the time—Ben Shapiro, Dave Rubin, Jordan Peterson—even touched animal suffering.

Peterson was the most confusing. He constantly rhapsodized about lobsters, how their nervous systems mirror ours, how pain and fear shape their hierarchies. Built his entire worldview on the axiom that we should "alleviate unnecessary suffering".[34] But when the obvious conclusion followed—that if animals are so much like us, their suffering is too—he ignored it.

The reality of suffering

We like to think of human suffering as some sacred province: bereavement, heartbreak, the existential sorrows of consciousness. And yes, some of those might be ours alone. But strip away the poetry and self-pity and we're standing on the same ground as animals. Fear. Panic. Pain. Exhaustion. These are shared among us all.

And it isn't guesswork. I wrote my master's thesis at LSE under the supervision of Jonathan Birch, who's developed structured criteria to assess a being's ability to feel pain.[35] And that evidence is clear as day: the animals we eat do.[36]

So, if alleviating unnecessary suffering is the axiom, the guiding principle in life, as Peterson insists and I agree with, I think the first question should be: where in our lives do we cause most of it?

The average American eats twenty-eight land animals a year, up from merely three a century ago.[37–40] Ninety-five percent of them are chickens, while we eat less than half a pig and a tenth of a cow.

The *Welfare Footprint Institute* puts chickens' suffering plainly: on average, a meat chicken spends more than half of its life in pain. In addition to the thousands upon thousands of hours of hurtful and downright disabling pain from lameness, infections, and strain on the bodies of these twenty-eight birds we each eat, their deaths can be excruciating—ascites suffocating the lungs; throats cut; or—if stunning fails—being scalded alive—adding up to an estimated 15 minutes of excruciating agony.[41,42]

Essentially, for every one hour we're alive, we're causing three hours of pain and suffering in theirs. Nothing else I can think of, no habit or vice, carries that much torment on such a regular basis. And we sign off on it for nothing more noble than nuggets.

So this became my goal: to understand why people don't consider farm animal suffering—just like I once didn't. To understand the science of pain. To figure out where change comes from. And how to talk about it without just enraging people.

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