

# When the obvious becomes problematic

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The ethics of turning animals into  
meat

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- Ethics
- Meat as an ethical issue
- What to do or who to be?



What's  
the  
plan?



Ethics



## Fish In A Blender

Museum Director Peter Meyer poses with an installation by Chilean-born Danish artist Marco Evaristti of blenders containing live fish at Trapholt Art Museum in Kolding, Denmark, Feb. 11. The display invited visitors to blend the fish if they wish, and in 2000 somebody did. Meyer was charged with animal cruelty, but was acquitted May 19 after a court ruled that the fish were killed "instantly" and "humanely."

**CREDIT:** *AP*





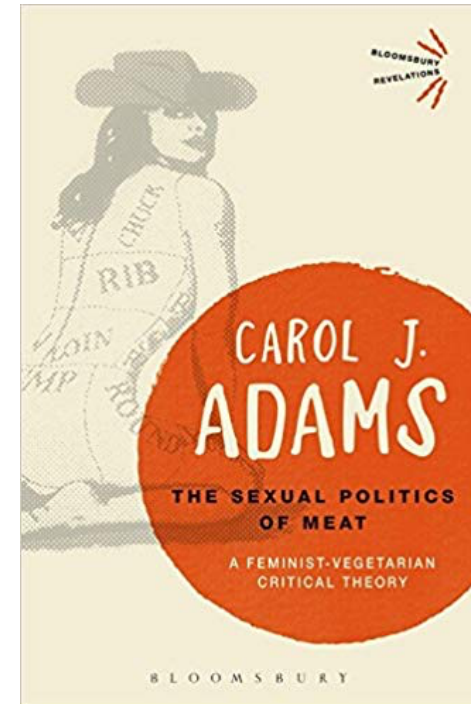
- In this very basic sense ethics is coming up with reflected value-based answers to the question: What *ought* we to do of all the things that we *can* do?
  - This is not so controversial when faced with new opportunities – although we may differ in our evaluation of them
  - It typically becomes more controversial when we reconsider established practices

- Discussing the ethics of animal production can easily become a heated affair – on both sides
  - Meat is portrayed as everything from a nutritional necessity and integrated part of human culture to a cruel, unnecessary luxury that desensitise humans to the suffering of members of a more-than-human community
- Ethics is trying to unfold the underlying values and evaluate the arguments
- This will not necessarily make us agree, but at least become wiser about why we disagree



# Meat as an ethical issue

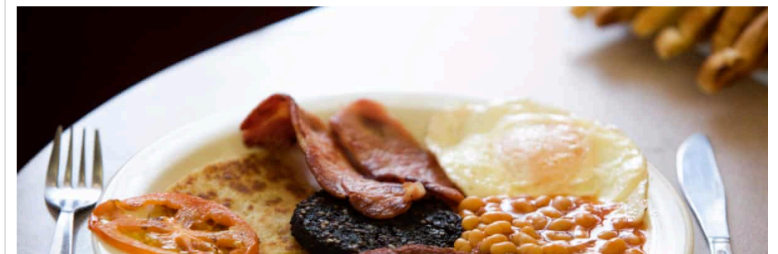
- For something to be an ethical issue it has to involve state of minds, actions or consequences that at least by some are evaluated as right or wrong / good or bad
- Here I will focus on only two aspects of animal production
  - Indirect consequences to humans and nature
  - Direct consequences to production animals



1990

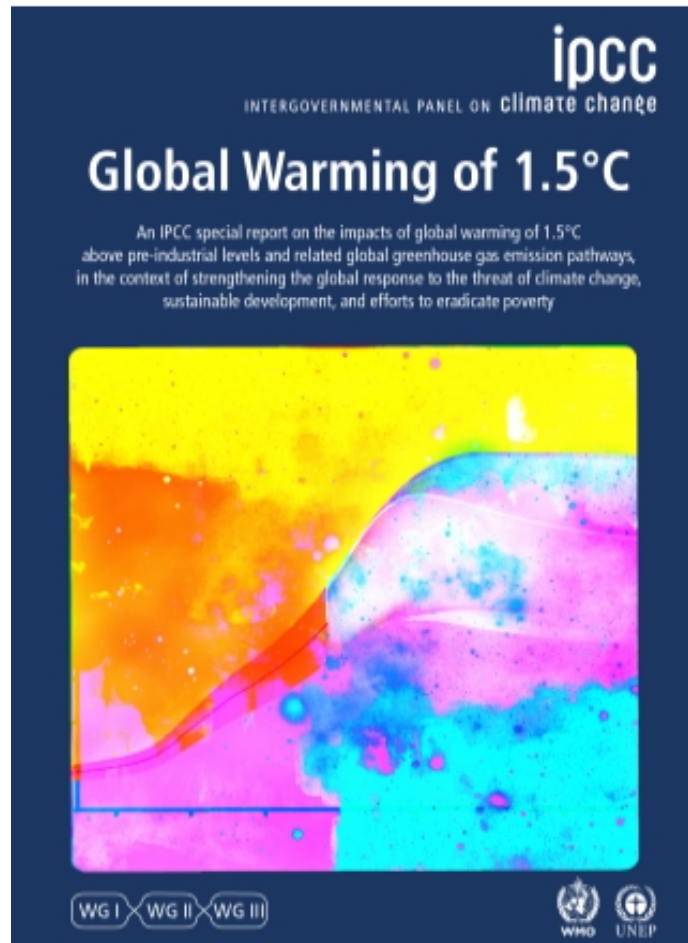
## Even moderate intake of red meat raises cancer risk, study finds

People more or less keeping to NHS guidelines at higher risk than those who eat little



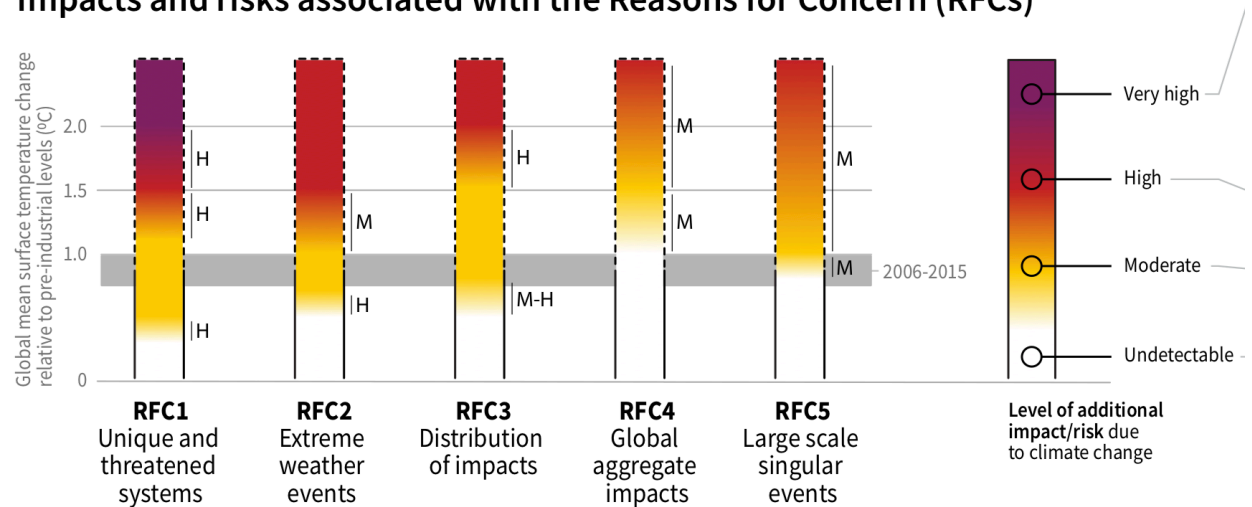
Indirect consequences to  
humans and nature





Five Reasons For Concern (RFCs) illustrate the impacts and risks of different levels of global warming for people, economies and ecosystems across sectors and regions.

### Impacts and risks associated with the Reasons for Concern (RFCs)





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## UN Report: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'



Current global response insufficient;  
 'Transformative changes' needed to restore and protect nature;  
 Opposition from vested interests can be overcome for public good  
 Most comprehensive assessment of its kind;  
 1 000 000 species threatened with extinction

### THE 17 GOALS



- Scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change (Cook et al., 2013, 2016)
- Poses severe risks to humans and ecosystems (IPCC, 2014, 2018)
- The Paris Agreement, 2015, require nations to “Hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” (UN, 2015)
  - 50% reduction in 2030
  - 80-95% in 2050 (net-zero)

# Sustainable Proteins? Values Related to Insects in Food Systems

© Springer International Publishing AG, part of Springer Nature 2018  
A. Halloran et al. (eds.), *Edible Insects in Sustainable Food Systems*,

Christian Gamborg, Helena Röcklinsberg, and Mickey Gjerris

On top of these challenges comes the growing acknowledgement that current food production systems, especially animal production systems, are at odds with the idea of a sustainable food production (Röös et al. 2016). Conventional livestock production such as cattle affects its surroundings substantially (Gamborg and Gjerris 2012; Ilea 2009). About 2/3 of all arable land is already used for animal production which has been shown to contribute to deforestation, changes in savannas, drainage of wetlands, and desertification (Norris et al. 2010). In general, current livestock production is a cause of environmental degradation in many cases (Steinfeld et al. 2013). Furthermore, the livestock sector is a significant contributor to GHG emissions that creates climate change that subsequently will create further challenges to food production as mentioned above. The contribution of the livestock sector to anthropogenic GHG emissions is estimated as ranging from 14.5%

- 14.5% of emissions come from livestock sector, and within this category cattle contribute 61%:
  - beef production 41%
  - dairy cattle 20%
  - (Gerber et al. 2013)
- Large potential to reduce GHG emissions through dietary change
  - vegan or vegetarian diet: 20% - 85%
  - substitution of ruminant meat by monogastric meat (pig or poultry): 20% - 35%
  - healthy diet (low on ruminant meat): up to 35%
  - (Hallström et al. 2015)



# Ethical aspects of life cycle assessments of diets

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**Table 1**

Previous environmental life cycle assessments of dietary habits.

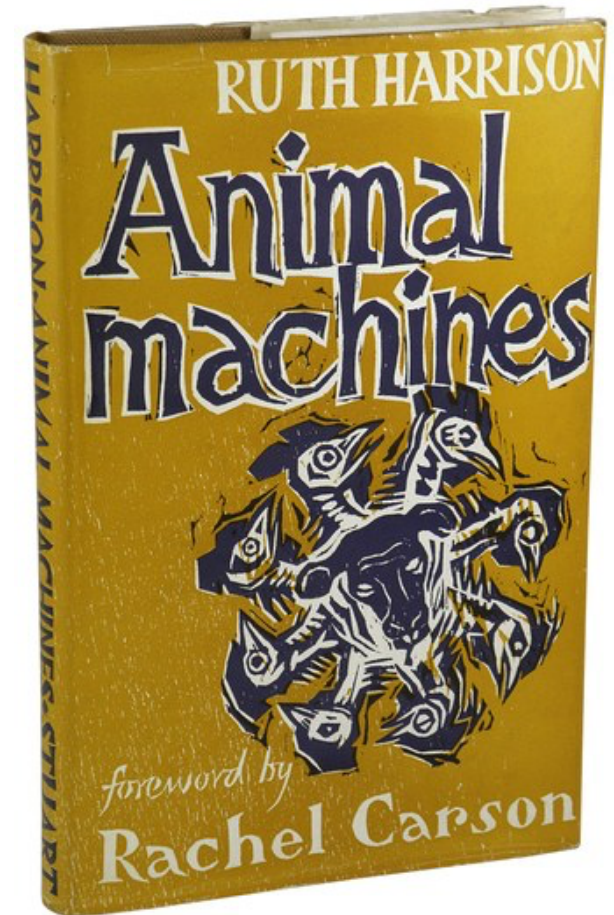
Reference	Country	Impacts included				GHG reduction (% change relative to omnivorous diet)	Other comments
		Non-toxic	Toxic	H <sub>2</sub> O use	Land use		
Heller and Keoleian (2014)	United States	X				Vegetarian: 33%	
Saxe (2014)	Denmark	X		X	X	Vegan: 53%	
						New Nordic Diet: 30%	– Land occupation reduction with reduced meat diet
						w/reduced transport: 35%	– Organic content of diet raised particulate matter and land occupation impacts
						w/organics: 32%	
Scarborough et al. (2014)	United Kingdom	X				Medium meat: 21%	– Comprehensive diet survey used
						Low meat: 35%	
						Pescatarian: 46%	
						Vegetarian: 47%	
						Vegan: 60%	
van Dooren et al. (2014)	Netherlands	X			X	Vegetarian: 21%	
						Vegan: 37%	
Meier and Christen (2013)	Germany	X		X	X	Vegetarian: 25%	– Water use inversely proportional to meat intake
						Vegan: 50%	
Berners-Lee et al. (2012)	United Kingdom	X				Vegetarian: 22%	
						Vegan: 36%	
Roy et al. (2012)	Japan	X				Not applicable	
Saxe et al. (2012)	Denmark	X				New Nordic Diet: 6%	– Select local, organic and meat consumption performed equal to vegetarian
						w/optimization: 27%	
						Vegetarian: 27%	
Macdiarmid et al. (2012)	United Kingdom	X				Reduced meat: 36%	– Unrealistic sustainable diet achieved 90% reduction in GHGs
Tukker et al. (2011)	Europe	X	X			Reduced red meat: 8%	
						Mediterranean: 5%	
Baroni et al. (2007)	Italy	X	X	X	X	Vegetarian: 74%	– Ubiquitous superior performance across all impact categories with reduced meat
						w/organic: 87%	
						Vegan: 90%	
						w/organic: 97%	
Wallén et al. (2004)	Sweden	X				Reduced meat: 5%	

- Direct consequences to production animals

- Discussions about animals welfare rest on assumptions
  - Disease/death
    - What can be measured
  - Happiness/pain
    - What the animal experiences
  - Natural behaviuor
    - Also when suffering is not involved



- Because of the different paradigms there is no consensus on the welfare of the animals in e.g. large scale production systems (factory farming)
  - Described as anything from a living hell to a 4-star hotel
  - But it seems fair to say that in many instances the welfare of the animals is not optimal



- Especially when economic concerns meet welfare concerns
  - Separation of cow and calf, castration of piglets, ulcers in sows, foot burns in poultry production etc.
  - Lack of access to outside environment (environmental context)
  - It is worth noting that organic production systems carry their welfare issues as well
    - Egg layers in enriched cages vs. free range production

Free range is a con. There's no such thing as an ethical egg

*Chas Newkey-Burden*

Slapping 'free range' on a box of eggs simply hides the catalogue of routine horrors that are allowed under this reassuring banner

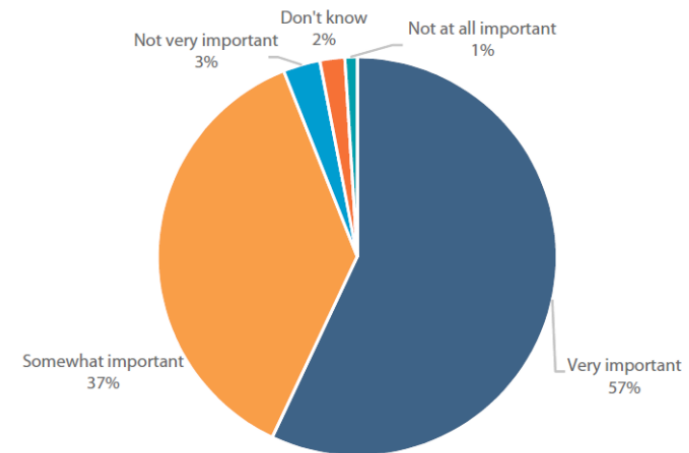


search ▾ The Guardian International

- Do the animals care?
  - Mammals, birds, fish seen as sentient beings
  - Their lives matters to them in the sense that they can fare better or worse
  - "There is someone in there"
- Should we care about "others" that are not human?
  - Disregarding pain and suffering based on species is making a difference between two situations based on an ethically irrelevant fact
    - Speciecism

**Figure 1: Public attitude to animal welfare**

In your opinion, how important is it to protect the welfare of animals?



Source: [Eurobarometer 442](#), European Commission, March 2016.

- Taken together the indirect and direct consequences of animal production makes it hard to deny that this is an ethical issue
  - However integrated part of one's culture or social life meat eating is, there is no way around entering the ethical discussion – if one wants to be part of the ethical community
  - We have responsibility in our diverse roles
    - Consumers
    - Producers
    - Marketing services
    - Researchers
    - Etc.
  - But we also have responsibility as citizens
    - We are part of the process that shapes our societies




What to do or  
who to be?

- If you agree that meat is an ethical issue, different ethical perspectives provide different answers on what to do
  - **Contractarian ethics**
    - Animals are not rational and therefore not members of the ethical community
    - Carry on!
  - **Utilitarian ethics**
    - Maximize welfare across sentient beings
    - Begin calculating!
  - **Animal rights ethics**
    - Sentient beings (subject-of-a-life) have the right to freedom and not being killed
    - Stop all animal production!
- Although very different in their conclusions they ask the same question: What to do?

- Virtue ethics do not attempt to give direct action guidance
  - Maximize welfare (U) / Always treat the other as a goal in herself (D)
    - Either unflexible or too general
  - Virtue ethics aims at developing an understanding of what the good life is (flourishing), what virtues will bring it forth and the inclination to incarnate the virtues in everyday life
    - Being kind instead of acting kind



- What virtues should we incarnate to live a flourishing life with human and non-human animals?
  - Who should we be – or become?
    - *Rational sentient beings that express temperance, respectfulness, and compassion towards other sentient beings*
    - *Temperance: Self-restraint. Abstain from obtaining trivial goals if the costs for others are too high*
    - *Respectfulness: Allow others to live their lives in accordance with their nature, desires and wishes as long as it does not harm others*
    - *Compassion: Be sensitive to the suffering of others. Alleviate it, remove or share it when possible*

- 
- When applying this ethical perspective on animal production and the direct and indirect consequences that I have spoken about, there are no absolute answers
    - How to express temperance, respectfulness and compassion can only be decided in the situation
    - It does, however, seem that most animal production that aim to fulfill a desire for animal products in geographical areas where a plant-based diet is readily available, falls outside the scope of living a flourishing life

- My ethical evaluation of "meat" is obviously dependent on both a certain interpretation of
  - What ethics is
  - What science tells us
  - What animal welfare is
  - What a good life in a more-than-human community is?
- There are thus many ways of criticizing it
- There are no objective ethical truths, but they are not only mere subjective expressions either
- There is only our attempts to express to each other what we find important and where that should lead us
- I hope this talk have inspired you to express your own ideas