

## Encounters with Animals: Production, Consumption, and Education

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Food has tenuous eligibility as a subject in Cartesian-dominated modern philosophy. However, food was a hot topic for pre-modern philosophers, and postmodern attention to the educational philosophy of food has increased greatly in the past decade. Bradley Rowe's essay provides a rich and nuanced analysis that educates us about the ethics of eating and our encounters with animals.

The stated purpose of this essay is "making visible the process of animals-becoming-meat." I like the creativity of this project, especially its attention to subtleties of argument and its refusal to impose a normative ideology. I also appreciate that the project strives to replace torpid thoughtlessness with awakened sensibilities. Some language in the essay is appropriately provocative, for example "a living, bellowing steer turns into a succulent steak." The essay is a pleasure to read and an educative contribution to educational philosophy debates.

Because I appreciate the ethical project of this essay, I would like to make two general observations about how the argument is constructed. In the process, I will suggest frameworks that would shift the ethical implications of the argument somewhat, but still fully support the project.

### AVOID THE MIND/BODY SPLIT

The essay positions *physical* consumption as unique, and distinct from *mental* consumption: "[S]tudents consume messages and advertisements ... in schools, but [unlike food] the television program does not literally become part of their physicality because students do not literally eat the program." The problem with positioning food as a unique encounter is that it instantiates a Cartesian mind/body split, which runs counter to the Deweyan approach that frames most of the rest of the essay. In order to sustain the Deweyan approach, it would probably be more effective to regard physical consumption as *similar* to mental consumption, not as unique. That is, when we see eating as similar to reading or listening, then we can imagine all of these encounters as consumption practices that contribute to who we are. Eating, listening, reading, drinking, perceiving, and imagining are all bases for experiential encounters that serve to educate us. By taking the position that eating is similar to studying, no mind/body split is enacted, and the overall argument of the essay is still supported.

### SEPARATE THE ETHICS OF PRODUCTION FROM THE ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

As I read it, the essay uses a Marxian commodification framework of critique, which connects the ethics of consumption with the conditions of production: "consumption begins with production, and there is still a bountiful landscape in the indispensable production and labor practices that make consumption possible." For example, the author says he is "inspired by those humans who ... actually kill the

animals they eat and do so with great intentionality, respect, and mindfulness.” In this segment of the argument, the essay advocates that meat production should “attempt to reduce the amount of pain and suffering the animals experience.”

When we connect production issues with consumption issues, the ethical relationships are understood within a Marxian economic framework in which consumption is complicit with exploitation when the goods we consume are produced under conditions of inhumane treatment. In an example of Nike gym shoes, the ethical problem arises because those shoes are produced in sweatshops where the modes of production are inhumane, and when we buy Nikes, we support sweatshop modes of production.

However, I see a problem with this production-consumption framework when we generalize from shoes to animals. I think everyone will agree that shoes are not sentient beings, and there is nothing intrinsically morally problematic about wearing shoes. The issue with Nike is not that our shoes are being mistreated as we walk around in them. The argument linking the ethics of consumption with the conditions of production is appropriate when we are talking about non-living things, but if we use the same argument for living things, then we have not recognized that animals are different from shoes in their inherent worth. In an argument that is primarily concerned about the ethical treatment of animals, the conditions of production — how animals are treated in life and death — should be an ethical issue *regardless of whether* those animals will be consumed. Similarly, because animals are not shoes, meat consumption — how we encounter animals as food in our lives — should be an ethical issue *regardless of how* brutally or humanely those animals have been treated in life and death.

In a project that is focused on educating us about the animals we eat, it is important to separate the ethics of production from the ethics of consumption because if we combine production and consumption, then we make an instrumental argument — not an ethical argument — about animals. When we connect production to consumption for analyzing animal encounters, the argument backfires because in this framework, animals are equivalent to non-living things. To clarify my point, I will use an analogy that highlights the ethical implications of the production-consumption argument in the case of animals.

A large portion of the essay argues that consuming meat in industrialized societies is an ethical problem because animals are mass-produced into meat under brutal conditions that are morally reprehensible. In my view, that argument is structurally parallel to the argument that human trafficking is an ethical problem because it puts a burden on police departments and law enforcement.

That formulation does not adequately support the project of the essay because it fails to recognize that meat consumption (and, by extension, human trafficking) are independently problematic, regardless of the production (or resource) factors. If we do not separate the ethics of consumption from the conditions of production, the lives of the animals are treated as incidental — collateral damage, as it were. If we use the conditions of production as the basis for determining the ethics of

consumption, the argument fails to respect the lives of animals, which I see as a crucial aspect of Rowe's project.

The Marxian production-consumption framework, which is intended to oppose exploitation, functions instead to reproduce commodification when it is extended from shoes to animals. In an argument about meat eating that connects the ethics of consumption with the conditions of production, animals are positioned as morally equivalent to gym shoes, and I do not think that implication fairly represents the ethical project advocated in this essay. Rather, if the ethical aim is to honor the lives of animals, then the argument needs to stipulate two separate ethical issues: (1) the conditions of production (animals into meat), and (2) the ethics of consumption (meat as food).

Even if the conditions of production are as humane as possible, those conditions do not tell us anything about the ethics of consumption when it comes to encounters with animals. Morally justifiable modes of production do not imply that our modes of consumption will reflect a "more conscientious relationship with those who die." In other words, if I am served a meal of humanely butchered meat — is this an oxymoron? — I can still eat it in a callous and thoughtless manner. Conversely, if I am served a meal of slaughterhouse-produced, feedlot meat, I can still eat it "with gratitude, slowly and attentively," which is the mode of consumption advocated in this essay.

In order to examine the ethics of consumption in a way that honors the lives of animals, the essay would need to ask different questions. For example:

- What if I accidentally kill a deer with my car while I am driving? Should I eat it? Does it matter how I eat it? How do we think about the ethics of that encounter? Is catching a fish in an unbaited net ethically similar to killing a deer accidentally?
- If an animal dies of natural causes, does that affect the ethics of consumption?
- What if I unknowingly eat meat? To what extent does intentionality — or chance — affect the ethics of consumption?
- What if I visit a slaughterhouse, and then intentionally and deliberately consume the meat from the animal whose murder I have just witnessed? What if I undergo this experience in order to educate myself more viscerally about what it means to consume animals, and in the process I raise my ethical awareness and mindfulness? What does that imply about an ethical and educational encounter with animals?

The argument in this essay would support the ethical project more effectively if not mind and body, but production and consumption were separated. To see both mental consumption and food consumption as similar educational encounters, and to examine the ethics of consumption particular to living beings (not analogous to gym shoes) would educate us to be conscientious not only about the modes of production, but also about our practices of consumption. This would then cultivate in us a mindful and a serious regard for animals as beings, as advocated in this essay.