

**Why Is Eating Meat So Emotionally and Ethically Challenging?**  
**From Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions**  
**February 2022**

*'The Meat Paradox' explores the psychological forces shaping our diets.*

The food we choose to consume—who and what we choose to eat—is a hot topic given the serious ethical questions that arise and the global environmental damage for which industrial farming is clearly responsible. Discussions about "Should we eat animals?" and the [cognitive dissonance](#) associated with the choices we make have moved from the ivory tower into the homes of people worldwide. This is why I was keenly interested in Rob Percival's new [book](#) *The Meat Paradox: Eating, Empathy, and the Future of Meat*, an excellent follow-up to Roanne van Voorst's [discussion](#) of *Once Upon a Time We Ate Animals: The Future of Food*.

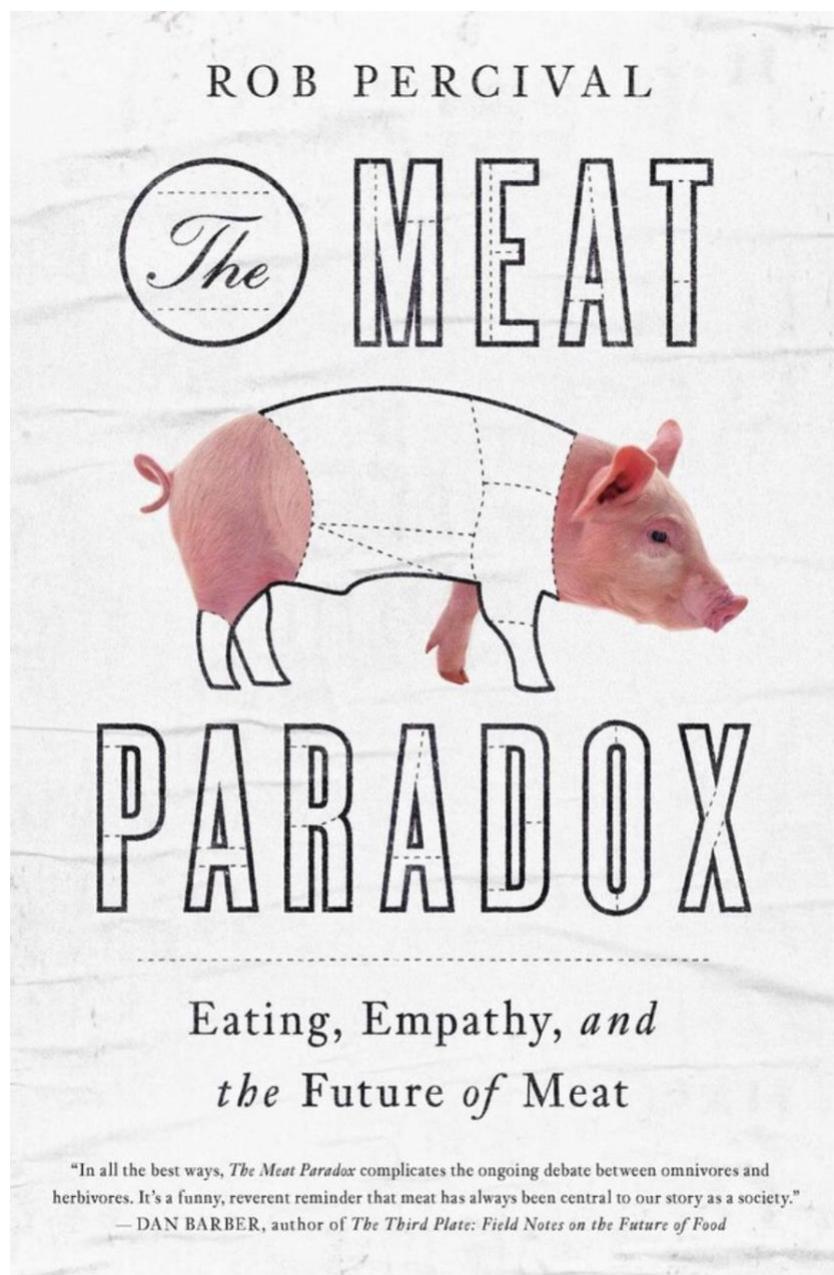
Rob is an expert in the [politics](#) of meat. Here's what he had to say about the psychological forces behind our meal plans.<sup>1,2</sup>

**What does the title of your book *The Meat Paradox* refer to?**

The term was coined by Steve Loughnan, Brock Bastian and Nick Haslam in a 2010 paper published in the journal [Appetite](#). It refers to the apparent contradiction between people's enjoyment of meat and their concern for animal welfare. We like eating animal foods, but we dislike the harm caused to animals. Or stated as a question: Given that we dislike causing harm to animals, why do we consume so much meat, mostly from industrial farming systems, which cause so much harm?

*The Meat Paradox* explores some of the research associated with this question, looking at the psychological and emotional forces shaping our diets, and the coping strategies that we commonly employ to navigate the tension.

But the book also approaches the matter from a novel, evolutionary angle, asking a related question. Given that we evolved consuming animals—and we certainly did, even if the prevalence and significance of our ancestral carnivory are still being debated—how, why, and when did we begin to feel conflicted by our omnivory? At what point in our evolution did we begin to sympathise with the animals we consumed? After all, is this not peculiar? The lion does not mourn the gazelle. The wolf offers no reparations to the caribou, at least none we can recognise. But we might. What happened to us?



**So do you think that this evolutionary perspective sheds light on the way we eat today?**

Yes. I think we are less ‘modern’ than we often assume. Or, to flip that thought on its head, we have been wholly ‘modern’ for tens of thousands of years. The questions we are grappling with today—Should we eat animals? Which animals and how often? How should we relate to these animals? How do we manage the emotional and ethical dissonance associated with killing? — are old questions. We’ve been grappling with them for a profoundly long time, and while our modern predicament is, in some ways, rather unique, we’re not so different from people living in wildly different times and cultures. I think there is something we might learn from these peoples.

The book looks, for example, at the rites and rituals of meat in certain contemporary indigenous hunting societies. It suggests that there are striking similarities, as well as important differences, between the

narratives and rituals that pertain to meat in these societies, and those which arise in our own. For all our differences, we are confronted with the same question: What does it mean to kill and consume quasi-similar beings? In our society, as in many others, omnivory poses profound challenges, which we respond to in complex ways.

Let me give you a more concrete example. In many Amazonian societies, it's recognised that eating animals is more morally problematic than eating plants, for animals are 'persons' (more or less akin to human persons). Some tribes within the Tukano collective respond to this challenge by means of 'food shamanism', whereby certain chants and invocations transform the meat on one's platter into (it is said) fruits and vegetables. The Tukano chant over their meal, expelling the 'personhood' of the animal from its flesh, eliciting a transformation from animal to plant. So compelling is the effect, that many Tukano describe themselves as 'vegetarian' even though they regularly consume the flesh of large mammals. This is just a simple example (the Tukano's relationship with meat is far more complex, and I cannot speak for them), but there are, I think, evident parallels in our society. Many of us attest to be vegetarian or 'flexitarian', even when we eat lots of meat. Researchers have identified processes of 'dissociation' and 'detachment', which help mask the animal origins of our food, albeit in a less deliberate manner than the Tukano. We are not entirely different, and in studying the similarities and divergences there is much we might learn.

### **What prompted you to write this book?**

I'm a campaigner working for a UK organisation that advocates for more sustainable and humane food and farming. This means talking about meat—a lot—and for several years I've been embroiled in the meat debate. It's all become so furiously polarised and divisive—vegans vs. farmers, omnivores vs. animal activists. I began to wonder whether there was any way of resolving the schism. Why is meat such an emotive and divisive topic?

### **How does your book differ from others that are concerned with the meat question?**

It differs in an important sense. While exponents of 'ethical omnivory' (Michael Pollan, for example) have argued for sustainable and higher welfare animal farming, and animal rights advocates (various folk from Jonathan Safran Foer to Carol J. Adams, for example) have argued the ethical case for vegetarianism and veganism, *The Meat Paradox* both coheres with and contradicts both sides of the divide. It tries to pry the debate more widely open. It climbs under the psychological skin of both camps, showing our relationship with meat to be more complex, contradictory and consequential than has previously been told.

It also ventures into some unexpected and fascinating territory, taking in flying saucer cults, Palaeolithic cave art, psychedelics, and the end of the world.

### **Are you hopeful that as people learn more about "meat" they will change their meal plans?**

This really needs to happen. Whether you see a vegan future or one with more 'ethical' animal farming, our diets will need to radically change. *The Meat Paradox* doesn't propose a concrete dietary solution, but it might help illuminate the tensions involved in making the decision.

Ultimately, I hope the book will spark a conversation. I'd love to hear from readers what they think, even if they disagree.

## References

In conversation with Rob Percival.

1) [Rob Percival](#) is Head of Policy at the Soil Association, Britain's leading food and farming charitable organization. He has been shortlisted for the Guardian's International Development Journalism Prize as well as the Thompson Reuters Food Sustainability Media Award.

2) In a report titled "[Animals, Food, and Technology \(AFT\) Survey: 2020 Update](#)" we learn, "a majority of people, 71.5%, reported feeling some discomfort with the animal farming industry, and 91.7% of people think animals have roughly the same capacity to experience pain as humans. 48.5% consider animal farming to be one of the most important social issues in the world today." More than 50% favor banning factory farming.

Bekoff, Marc. [Will the Future of Food Be a World Without Meat?](#)

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Oh, I know animals suffer, but I love my steak": The self-serving resolution of the "meat paradox."](#)

\_\_\_\_\_. [Hooked on Meat: Evolution, Psychology, and Dissonance.](#)

\_\_\_\_\_. [The Effects of Food on Ecosystems and Biodiversity.](#)

Gradidge, Sarah and Magdalena Zawisza. [The meat paradox: how your brain wrestles with the ethics of eating animals.](#) *The Conversation*, February 11, 2022.

[The Meat Paradox.](#) Spreaker.

Venus, Leigh. [What Would Happen if the U.S. Banned Factory Farming?](#) Sentient Media, February 14, 2022. (This is a very detailed report on factory farming and people's attitudes about it.)