

Case 11 ♦ Pet Owners Who Eat Meat

Early in 2013 a genetic analysis of hamburger meat in the UK revealed that what consumers thought was beef was actually horsemeat. The public response to the horsemeat scandal was quite strong and included a 44% reduction in the purchase of frozen hamburgers.¹ The scandal eventually spread to Sweden and, by extension, propelled worries about the ingredients in Ikea meatballs in the United States.

Food fraud (substituting less expensive for more expensive ingredients) is common. However, the use of horsemeat evoked an especially visceral reaction — people seemed revolted, disgusted even, at the thought of consuming horsemeat. Some the concerns may be religiously inspired: horsemeat is not kosher and is questionable under halal standards. But most affected consumers neither keep kosher nor halal. Michael Dorf, a legal scholar, argues “[t]hey’re not grossed out about eating horses; they feel bad for the horses. Or if they are at all grossed out, they’re grossed out *because* of their moral revulsion, in the same way that moral revulsion at cannibalism or (in our culture) eating dogs, would trigger a disgust response.”²

Many of us have pets whom we love and treat like family members. It is obvious to us that our pets experience physical pain as well as pleasure, much like humans. Indeed, many of us would cringe at the thought of eating a pet. And yet, most pet owners eat meat. Some critics argue that if we accept that our pets are sentient beings, it would be wrong to eat them. But there is no difference in terms of sentience between companion animals and “food” animals. This suggests that there is an inconsistency underlying our common distinctions between animals we care about and animals we use.

Others maintain that, just as we are morally justified in treating our friends or family members with preference, pets are ethically distinguishable precisely because we care about them. Of course, there is a difference between caring for an individual and caring about an entire species. Likewise, there is a difference between caring about an individual and refraining from harming one.

Case from the 2013 Regional Ethics Bowl. Copyright, Association for Practical and Professional Ethics.

<http://appeonline.com/ethics-bowl/regional-ethics-bowl/>

¹ George Hook, “Horse and Pig DNA Found in Some Supermarket Burgers,” The Irish Independent, January 15, 2013
<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/horse-and-pig-dna-found-in-some-supermarket-burgers-28958916.html>

² Mike Dorf, “A Vegan Perspective on the Horsemeat Scandal,” Dorf on Law, February 25, 2013,
<http://www.dorfonlaw.org/2013/02/a-vegan-perspective-on-horsemeat-scandal.html>