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*The Vegan Society - The Expert Series 2020 (Jan):*

### **Dreaming of a Vegan Christmas?**

Kristof Dhont (University of Kent) & Gordon Hodson (Brock University)

*In this first edition of the Expert Series for 2020, RAC member, [Dr Kristof Dhont](#) (University of Kent) and [Dr Gordon Hodson](#) (Brock University) look back over the last 12 months to a year that saw veganism go mainstream.*

As we have entered 2020, we can look back at a year where veganism broke into the mainstream. In 2019, all major chain restaurants added vegan dishes to their menus, the availability of vegan products in supermarkets has exponentially grown and well-known brands made headlines when launching vegan alternatives to their popular meals. Veganism is here to stay.

At the same time, now that the period of Thanksgiving, Christmas celebrations, and New Year festivities is winding down, we can also look back at several weeks of overconsumption and of family dinners where meat dishes were centre stage. A habit we repeat joyfully year after year. For many it is unthinkable to celebrate Christmas or Thanksgiving without first stuffing a turkey with herbs, onions, or pork, and they would not consider it a proper New Year's Eve meal if the roast beef or grilled lobster were missing from the banquet. Paradoxically, the end of year period is the time where we donate generously to charity while we eat animals in generous portions.

Animal agriculture is responsible for the suffering of the largest number of individuals inflicted by humans, with more than 1 billion land animals killed yearly in the UK alone, and well over nine billion land animals in the USA (see [animalclock.org](#)). Yet people (pre)tend to be oblivious about the suffering of animals both when choosing a charity to support and when munching turkey, beef, or lamb chops.<sup>1, 2</sup>

Ironically, we spend fortunes on our dogs and cats, spoiling them with treats and toys, preparing them an extra portion of the Christmas dinner, and dressing them up with reindeer hats and costumes. We deeply care about our furry friends at home and consider them as full family members. We refer to our companion animals as case examples to prove how much we love animals. And while simultaneously professing to love animals, we continue exploiting animals to feed, to clothe, and to entertain ourselves.

Claiming to care for animals while nonetheless harming animals arguably represents one of the most unsettling and pressing contradictions in human behavior. What can explain this conflict and ambivalence in our attitudes and behaviors towards animals? Why do we love and exploit animals? This question has long puzzled social and behavioral scientists and animal rights advocates alike, yet has recently received increased research attention. Our new book [Why We Love and Exploit Animals: Bridging Insights from Academia and Advocacy](#) addresses this question from a variety of perspectives, synthesizing scientific findings from leading scholars and providing insights gleaned from those on the front lines of animal advocacy. Here, we highlight some of the key insights from our own discipline—psychological science.

Our contradictory relationships with animals is deeply psychological. From an early age we have learned to live with the dissonance of simultaneously loving and exploiting animals despite feeling the psychological tension. Indeed, we are remarkably flexible in our moral thinking about animals to cope strategically with the experienced discomfort, in ways that facilitate continuing morally problematic behaviours such as eating meat. That is, rather than stopping the exploitation of animals and going vegan, we engage in a number of psychological strategies that makes eating and exploiting animals appear morally acceptable and therefore easier to justify.<sup>2, 3</sup>

One such strategy involves staying wilfully ignorant about the harm done to animals while consuming or buying animal products. We psychologically disconnect the meat (or other animal products) from the animal source thereby avoiding the psychological tension people may experience when eating or buying meat. Our meat-eating culture and the meat business greatly help with creating the impression that no animals were harmed or involved in the fabrication of animal products.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup> For instance, we dissociate the meat from its animal origins through linguistic muddling by giving calves, cows, and pigs the product labels veal, beef, and pork once they are slaughtered. Furthermore, supermarkets and advertisements present animals' flesh in ways that make the animal itself "invisible." Indeed, meat

is often highly processed or comes in small pieces, removing any animal likeness. In fact, studies have demonstrated that reminding people of the animal-meat association, for instance by depicting a meat dish (e.g. lamb chops or beef steak) alongside a picture of the animal (a lamb or a cow) in visual advertisements, induces distress and disgust at the thought of eating the meat, which in turn reduces people's willingness to consume meat.<sup>5,7</sup> Clearly, distorting the link between meat and the animal where it comes from helps consumers to suppress any moral concern with eating animals and to sustain meat consumption habits.

Also when the meat-animal association cannot be avoided, we are still psychologically well-equipped to deflect any feelings of discomfort. We engage in a variety of rationalization strategies to justify eating meat and to feel morally fine with this despite the suffering animal. Inspired by the work of Melanie Joy, Jared Piazza and his colleagues conducted a series of studies and identified that the four most prevalent justifications to defend meat consumption are the beliefs that eating meat is *natural* ("It is only natural to eat meat."), *necessary* ("It is necessary to eat meat in order to be healthy"), *normal* ("Most people I know eat meat"), and *nice* ("Meat is delicious" or "Meals without meat would just be bland and boring").<sup>8, 9,10</sup> By endorsing these justifying beliefs, people convince themselves that eating animals is morally okay thereby minimizing feelings of discomfort and encouraging eating more meat.

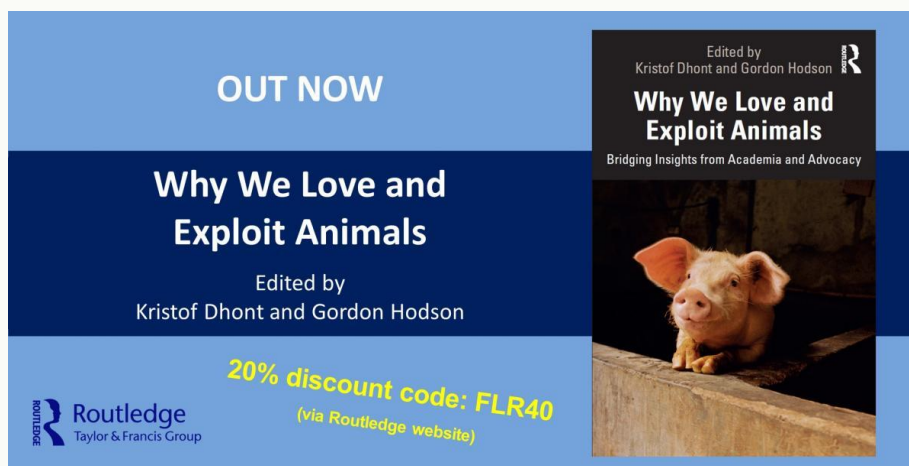
Another commonly used justification strategy to reduce dissonance involves denying animals' ability to suffer or devaluing other morally relevant qualities (intellectual and emotional abilities). From the moment an animal is considered a food animal, or when people are being reminded that an animal will end up being slaughtered for food, people start denying the animal's cognitive capacities and the capacity to experience sensations. In doing so, animals are being pushed out of people's circles of moral concern, making it seem more acceptable to exploit, kill, and eat them.<sup>11,12</sup> Lowering the moral status of farmed animals also creates a substantial moral divide between the animals we eat and the animals we love. In one of our recent studies we found that the vast majority of the respondents (> 80%) felt morally obliged to show concern for the welfare and interests of companion animals (e.g., cats, dogs, and horses), yet only half of the respondents felt morally obliged to show concern for farmed animals (e.g., chickens, pigs, cows).<sup>13, 14</sup> People's judgments about the need to care about animals and to treat them well are thus directly connected to the type of relationships they have with the animals, and whether or not the animal is typically exploited or eaten.

Taken together, people have a rich repertoire of psychological tricks and justifying beliefs at their disposal to deal with the psychological and moral tension between their appetite for meat and their love for animals. As long as people are reluctant to change their meat eating behaviour they need these tricks and meat-eating justifications to be able to maintain a positive self-image. People want to be able to look at themselves in the mirror and tell themselves that they are morally good, not responsible for causing unnecessary harm to others.

Moreover, a final important point to highlight is that the idea of giving up meat and abandoning practices of animal exploitation also entails giving up a part of one's most deeply valued cultural traditions. Changes such as replacing the meaty Christmas and Thanksgiving meals with vegan substitutes poses a fundamental ideological challenge, especially to those who strongly endorse traditional values and customs and are motivated to protect them. Indeed, in our research we found that traditionally-minded people—those endorsing conservative ideologies—tend to feel more threatened by the rise of vegetarianism and veganism.<sup>15, 16</sup> In fact, for these people, veganism does not only represent a threat to cherished family and national traditions but also to their sense of entitlement to exploit animals however they see fit. In response to such perceived threat, they actively push back against veganism by lashing out at vegans and consuming more meat.<sup>16, 17</sup> For these reasons, advocating for veganism on Christmas or Thanksgiving will often be met with resentment.

Luckily, the vegan business is booming and companies are now selling meat alternatives that look and taste like real meat.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the largest bakery chain in the UK wants to introduce vegan versions of all their top-selling products, following the successful launch of their vegan sausage rolls which resulted in exceptional profit gains. More and more people are also incorporating vegan substitutes in their traditional dishes. Therefore, providing vegan alternatives that cannot be distinguished from real meat is a game changer and might soften the pushback against veganism. One thing we know for sure is that the exponential growth of the vegan economy will continue in 2020 and we anticipate a gradual shift towards a plant-based culture. Dare we say that we can now start dreaming of a vegan Christmas?

*Eager to read and learn more on this and related topics? Our book is now available [here](#).*



We will also be hosting a conference titled **Animal Advocacy: Insights from the Social Sciences** from 24-26 June 2020 on the Canterbury Campus of the University of Kent. The Animal Advocacy Conference brings together researchers from different fields in the social and behavioral sciences, and animal activists and advocates from around the world. More info is available [here](#).

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