

# eating meat

an ethical consideration

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## Why are you eating meat? 1

At first glance, this question sounds far-fetched and abstruse: Humans eat meat – *always* have. Parents, grandparents, great-grandparents - all ate animals. That's tradition, it's always been like that. In general, humans are omnivores, i.e. they eat everything – and as such, hunting, slaughtering and eating meat are completely natural actions.

### Nature, tradition and food

Only by consuming animal proteins was it possible for humans to survive in nature thousands of years ago and develop into what they are today. With the development of their cerebrum, humans acquired the ability to be conscious, reflect and reason, and thus created the prerequisites for today's civilization.

With consciousness and civilization, man has created manners and laws that cannot be derived from nature or evolution. So he has developed rules of behavior and laws that prevent him from killing each other, that no longer allow everything to those who are physically superior and that make contracts between individuals possible. Parallel to consciousness, an "ethics" gradually emerged.

"Ethics" means that the human being, aware of his own existence - and the existence of other individuals – imposes rules that establish a kind of "minimum humanity" and containment of the suffering caused by humans themselves. These rules are the basis of our coexistence.

"Ethical" reasons are why we no longer have slavery in today's civilization, although this was common practice for most of human history. Despite this long tradition, which used to be "quite natural", today no one thinks seriously about slave ownership anymore.

If we think in ethical terms, then "tradition" cannot be an argument.

Even in the Middle Ages, it was common for people – i.e. the normal farmer – not to be able to read and write. It was just like that back then, and has been for a long time. It was tradition. Nevertheless, no one thinks of demanding this again today. Because a lot has changed, and "reading and writing" is one of the indispensable cultural techniques today.

If we think in ethical categories, then even "that's how nature is" can't be an argument.

Ethics is characterized precisely by the fact that ethics defines rules of conduct – whether formally in writing or informally unconsciously – that cannot be derived from nature and natural events. "Eating and being eaten" in nature is *not* a model for ethics.

The argument that "meat is necessary for health" also has shaky foundations.

Eating meat is no longer necessary for survival - as it was perhaps once before: Today in the 21st century we humans do not necessarily need animal protein. On the contrary: there are enough plants and processes to produce high-quality protein cheaply and tasty. From a nutritional point of view, meat production even has major disadvantages: If we were to use the biomass that we need to rear and care for cattle or pigs directly for food, we could feed many more people with it.

## Arguments for eating meat

So when we approach the question, "Why do you eat meat?" with thought and ethics, we see:

1. Eating meat has always been common.
2. Eating meat is natural for humans.
3. Eating meat is necessary for human nutrition.

We realize that these propositions (1), (2) and (3) are *not* satisfactory arguments.

We are faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, we are committed to our ethics in everything we do. Because as thinking beings and as rulers of nature, it is clear that we humans have to compare our actions with our ethics. On the other hand, the question "Why do we eat meat" cannot be answered spontaneously taking into account ethical criteria.

## An ethical question

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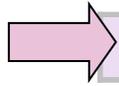
Then how can we answer the question "Why do you eat meat?" From a purely ethical point of view, as we have found, this question is not so easy to answer.

I came across this question by chance: If we leave out the ecological and economic aspects, i.e. if we assume that the animals are kept in an ideal manner appropriate to their species, and if we also leave out the argument "tradition", then we come to the purely ethical question:



Are we humans allowed to kill animals for our purely culinary satisfaction?

So we ask the question in such a way that only we humans and our relationships with the creatures we eat are relevant. Logically speaking, this abstract question is an instructive challenge.



An "ethical question" is a question in which the areas of economy and practicality are hidden.

If, for example, we improve the hygiene of the keeping of animals for slaughter, for example through better ventilation and better removal of excrement, and if we do this because the yield of animals for slaughter is simply higher and the profit increases as a result, then we are doing it from scratch economic reasons, *not* ethical reasons.

For example, if a government decided to stop meat production and animal slaughter altogether in order to increase overall food output, the government would do so for purely economic reasons. The decision would have *nothing* to do with ethics.

In order to approach the abstract-ethical question, I propose a thought experiment, which I will briefly describe in the next chapter.

## The thought experiment

Let's imagine that an alien species from a planet a few light years away visits us here on Earth. That may seem utopian, and it is not at all important whether such a visit by extraterrestrials is even possible or not.

Because it's a thought experiment!

So let's engage in this mind game and imagine that these "aliens" capture us humans and then eat them.

We would be shocked and would ask: "Why are you eating us?" What would the aliens say then? Possible answers would be:



1. We only eat you because you taste so good!
2. Because you humans do not belong to our (highly developed) species. That's why we're allowed to do that.
3. Because you humans have no (real) consciousness! In our view, the difference between your consciousness and that of any other mammal is minimal.
4. Because we kill you *smartly* and *without suffering*. That's a lot better than slowly wasting away in old age. So thank us!

Just as we are "superior" to the animals - in spirit and in our power over them - so now these extraterrestrials are superior to us - in spirit and in their power.

If we ourselves – who are equipped with awareness, thinking and the ability to reflect – have developed an ethics over time that make our coexistence and our civilization possible in the first place, then we have to admit that such ethics only make sense if they applies to everyone. I.e. an ethic that only applies to kings and the rulers would not be an ethic. Ethics is something "universal"! So something that applies to every conscious being.

The extraterrestrials must – like us humans - also be equipped with at least consciousness, intelligence, and the ability to reflect, otherwise they would never have been able to overcome the light years that their home planet is away from us. They too must have created a culture and civilization – and they must also have at least some basic, rudimentary ethics. Otherwise they could not have created such a civilization.

So because we can assume they have ethics, we ask them the four questions above. These are, of course, the same questions we need to ask *ourselves* about the animals we eat. This is exactly the crux of the thought experiment.

So we humans ask the extraterrestrials: „Why do you want to eat us ?“

The aliens will give us one of the four answers – in the green box above. We'll now go through these four answers and see what they mean.

Suppose the extraterrestrial species would answer:

## 1. ... because you taste so good 4

Well, if the aliens said that, we'd be appalled, but we couldn't do anything about it. There's no point in arguing that we're helplessly at their mercy. We would then have to admit that these "highly developed" beings probably have no ethics after all.



But if that's our own answer to why we, in turn, eat animals, then we have to admit to ourselves that we probably don't have any ethics. And those of us who really have no ethics will not mind such an admission.

I hear a lot of people yell, "Why do you need ethics? ... Look at society, the bankers, the locusts, the rulers ... – there are no ethics!"

But most people would probably say, "We have ethics, sure. But that doesn't apply to animals." This leads us to the second possible answer the aliens could give us:

## 2. ... because you are not of our species 5

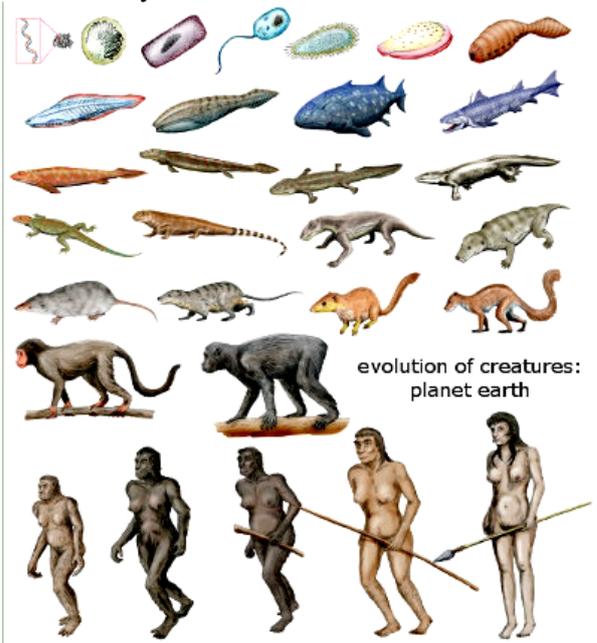
If the aliens give that answer, well then, we're in bad shape, too: we're clearly not of their species. They draw the line between what they kill and what they are allowed to eat using the "biological species" or "species definition." Their ethical rules regarding the exercise of existential power would also be tied to this species boundary.



If that is also our own answer to why we eat animals, then it is quite consistent: We are saying: ethics - i.e. fair treatment, respect for others, equal rights, etc. - we only allow those of our kind, but *not* the animals.

My survey shows that this way of thinking is "mainstream", that is, that most people think like this.

History teaches us that humans like to draw species boundaries arbitrarily. So we can observe in dealing with Native Americans and in dealing with colony dwellers in the past centuries that these people were often assigned to a different "species" and were treated accordingly.



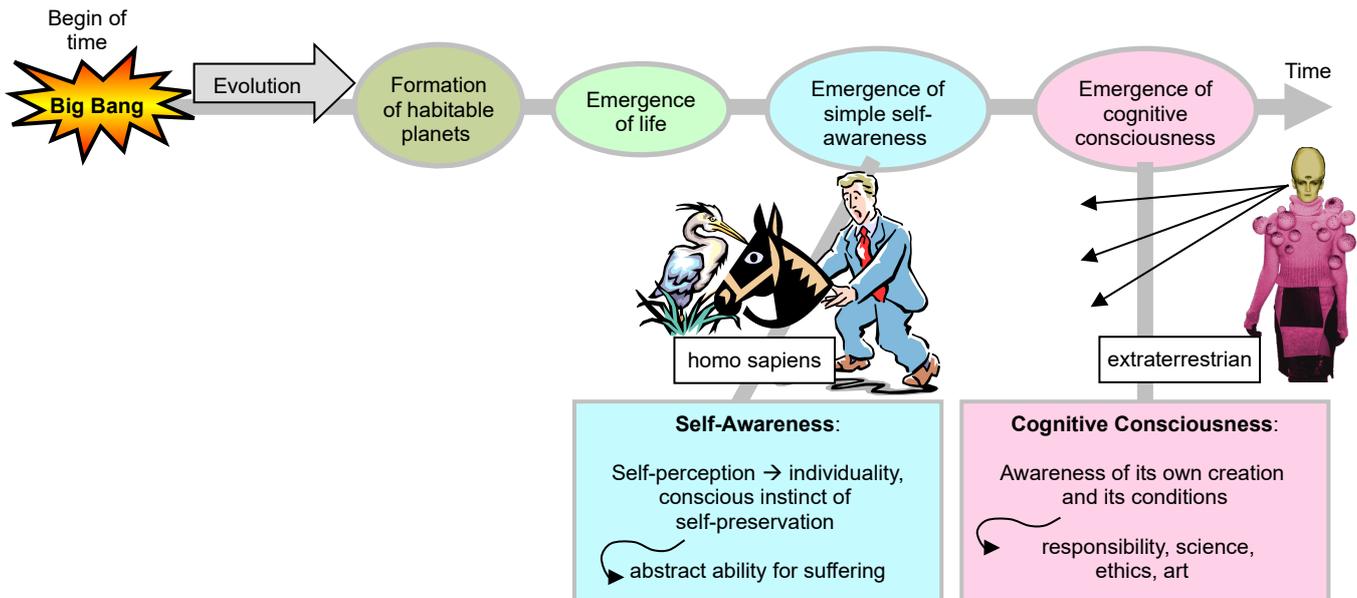
Based on the thinking of most people, the extraterrestrial intelligences can rightly identify us as "foreign species" and eat us with relish, just as we eat animals.

But the aliens could also give this answer:

### 3. ... because you do not have a consciousness comparable to ours

Here it gets more difficult. Because this answer implies an ethical principle that says: "We only eat those creatures that have no consciousness comparable to ours".

The extraterrestrials are now telling us: "You have no consciousness comparable to ours." To put it bluntly, this means: "You don't have any cognitive consciousness at all! You are not even aware of yourself! It is true that you live here in the universe, you live in the course of time as biological, evolutionary beings – but you are not even aware of that."



The figure roughly shows the course of evolution: The universe started with the "Big Bang", and over the course of the last 14 billion years galaxies, stars and solar systems were formed. And some of these solar systems have "habitable planets", i.e. planets on which life could form. Life actually formed on some of these planets, and even higher life on a few.

Many birds and higher mammals have developed a "simple self-awareness" – see blue bubble. The extraterrestrials that have visited us are much more advanced and have "cognitive consciousness".

The extraterrestrials, of course, know the course of evolution, and they will place us in the blue bubble. Birds and higher mammals are also classified in this category.

The extraterrestrials would say to us: "You are not even aware of yourselves! You live here in the universe, you live in the course of time as biological beings created by evolution – but you are not even aware of that!"

And they would go on: "And therefore you do not have the quality of 'cognitive awareness' in the sense of being a comprehending, understanding, enriching and kind being. You show absolutely no responsibility and no ethics. Therefore, without remorse and without any harm to anyone, we can eat you."

When researching Homo sapiens, the extraterrestrials will select any representative human being – for example in Germany, China, Africa or America. They will not specifically study people from universities or research institutes because they are **not** representative of the people.

With the "representative human specimens" the extraterrestrials look at what **type of consciousness** they have. They then see that this "homo sapiens" has a primitive self-consciousness. One that every mammal has. However, they note that the "representative human specimens" have no cognitive consciousness at all.

Of course that's a hit! But honestly, aren't the aliens right about that? Because we don't even know what the universe is made of: we don't know what "black matter" is. And actually, almost every person sizzles in his everyday clutter like a woodlice in the cracks in the wall, always eagerly trying to climb a rung higher up the hierarchy ladder, as formerly specified by evolution within the tribe or clan, vying for recognition and status. To speak of real consciousness would be pure heresy!

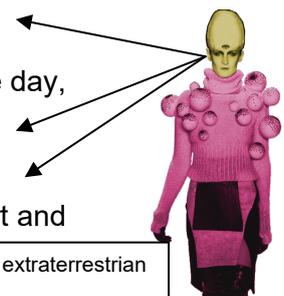
The extraterrestrial intelligences inevitably determine that Homo Sapiens has no "cognitive consciousness" and therefore do not categorize Homo Sapiens as "particularly worthy of protection". They categorize Homo Sapiens as a normally developed mammal instead.

So the extraterrestrials will find humans in their **limited everyday world**, driven by their everyday needs. They won't notice a big difference to mammals, which just vegetate "in their everyday world". They may find the homo sapiens "cute" just as we find a rabbit or the poodle "cute".

At the biochemical level, the aliens will find that human DNA is 98% identical to that of primates – that is, chimpanzees, great apes, orangutans. And it's still about 95% identical to the DNAs of the other, larger mammals.

From the point of view of the aliens, only relatively underdeveloped animals with a simple self-awareness and little ability to think walk around on earth. Man belongs to these animals and vegetates just like these animals. Therefore, all these animals are of course gladly included in the menu of the aliens.

How could we face these aliens? We would have to make every effort to convince them that we are thinking and feeling beings, not just living by the day, but living in a history; creatures who live in a time-conscious and sustainable manner and plan far ahead. We would have to make them understand that death hurts us a lot. And we would have to show them that – at least some specimens of homo sapiens – practice science and art and respect general ethical criteria.



extraterrestrial



If the "lack of consciousness" argument is our own answer to why we eat animals, then would we have to show that animals do not have an ego-consciousness like ours, have no instinct of self-preservation, and consequently have no fear of death? Is that so?

There is no clear, experimental definition of **consciousness** in science; there is only the Turing test, which narrowly refers to "human consciousness".

If we move away from humans, and look at everything from a detached position like the aliens, then "consciousness" is a broad realm: There is primitive self-awareness that all mammals and birds possess. A higher consciousness is the "**cognitive consciousness**" which includes self-knowledge, responsibility, art and ethics.

**„Consciousness“ or „feel and suffer“?**

We have a hunch: something is wrong with this answer! Is it really the consciousness, which is the decision criterion for "being eaten"?

When we run around with the dog "Bello" and see how the dog is full of joie de vivre, how he sometimes withdraws anxiously, how he sometimes jumps around happily, then doubts arise: Would we then dog Bello – if we lusted after it, meat to eat – just slaughter and eat? Would we slaughter and then eat the rabbit that little daughter plays with every day and shows us its various whims and moods? What about the meowing, sometimes upset, sometimes cheerful house cat?

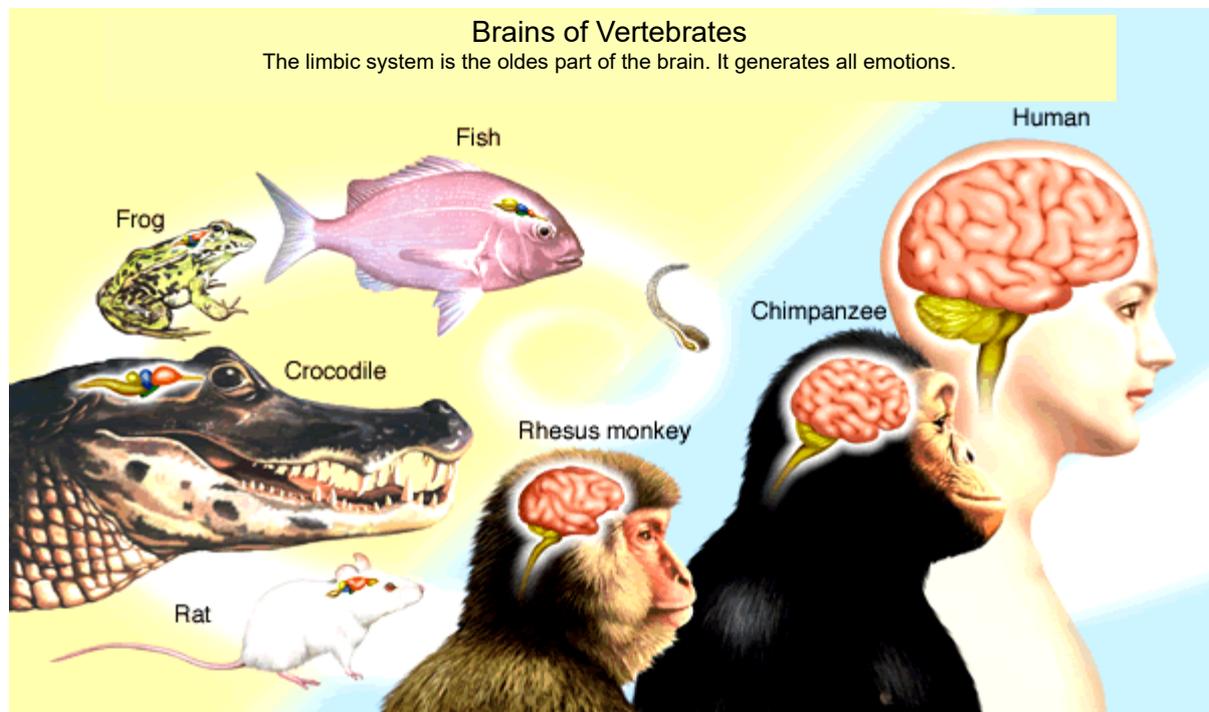
So could it be that not "awareness" but the ability to *feel* and *suffer* is the decisive criterion?

That would be plausible: we ourselves are endowed with the ability to experience pleasure and pain. And for us, death is associated with a feeling of pain and suffering.

There is an implicit ethical principle in every human civilization that criminalizes the killing of one's own kind: Murder is forbidden. Torture and inflicting physical suffering are also not allowed in higher civil societies.



It would therefore be ethically plausible to also use this ethical principle to protect all living beings that, like us, are capable of feeling pain and suffering. Because they all have very similar brain areas as we humans that are responsible for emotions:



To put it simply, one can say that "the limbic system" is the brain area that generates feelings. The limbic system is responsible for simple feelings like fear and pain. Even reptiles have a brain that has the same basic structure as that of humans and that also has a sophisticated limbic system similar to that of humans.

**Sentient animals**

So if we logically attest Bello the dog "feeling" and "suffering," then we must concede "feeling" and "suffering" to all mammals, because all mammals, in terms of the structure of their limbic system in the areas that realize "feel" and "suffer", are very similar. This area of the brain is almost identical in all mammals.

In this sense, all mammals are "like us" and subject to our ethics. By that I really mean *all* mammals and not just the pets that are close to us personally.

→ The **Bambi effect** says that we find the animals we know and love – dogs, cats, rabbits, fawns – possibly with big, round eyes – so "cute" that we would definitely not kill and eat them. This effect is based on the biological baby scheme and is, so to speak, a "trick" of evolution that ensures that we deal "well" with the offspring.

In an ethics that has a universal claim, the Bambi effect has no place. The other mammals, which may not be as pretty to look at as our stuffed rabbit, are as respectable creatures as our stuffed rabbit or kitty cat. Because they all have a similarly complex feeling for feelings, suffering and death. Pigs, cows and hippopotamus are just as sensitive creatures as our dog "Bello" or the house cat.

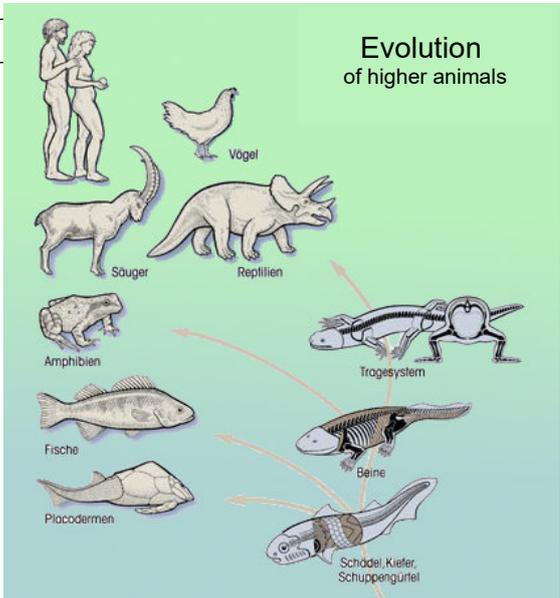
→ How can it be that in the slaughterhouses the problem of the death stress of the cattle to be slaughtered is still not under control? The cattle sense that the end is near and develop such a fear of death that so much adrenaline is released that the quality of the meat suffers. The slaughterhouses are trying to fix this problem, but the elegant solution has not yet been found.

This phenomenon of "fear of death" shows how much the animals suffer, although death itself is actually "painless". The limbic system that manages the fear of existence and death is very similar in cattle to that in humans. The reaction of cattle to impending death is the same as that of humans.

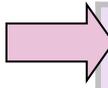
**Draw the line ...**

So if "feeling" and "suffering" are our ethical criteria, then we must ascribe these qualities to all mammals, not just dogs and cats. And we must also allow all reptiles, amphibians and birds. The problem arises as to where we draw the line: which animals can "feel" and "suffer" and which cannot?

It may be practical to analyze the biological complexity of the nervous system. A nervous system that only reacts reflexively, such as that of an amoeba or that of an insect, is not able to realize system states that we would classify as "feeling" or "suffering".



So we can say: All higher living beings, which are clearly able to "feel and suffer" like ourselves, must also be treated according to our own ethical maxims. We must not kill these creatures to eat them. This includes all mammals, reptiles, amphibians and birds. This certainly does not include insects and invertebrates.

 Sometimes I hear the objection: Plants are also complex beings! We shouldn't be eating them either!  
 Of course that's not the case. Plants are complex beings, but the plants on our planet do not have a nervous system that is so complex that it enables them to "feel and suffer". They have no brain at all. So we can eat them with a clear conscience.

If the extraterrestrials also call this ethical standard their own, which is quite plausible, then we humans would have nothing to fear. Anyway, at least the aliens wouldn't eat us.

But for our part, can we really accept this ethical rule? With the resulting consequences?

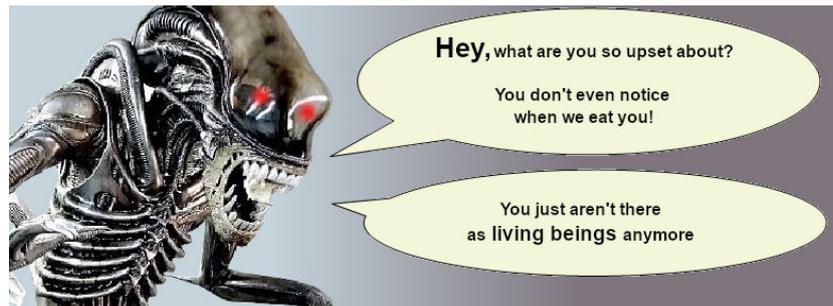
What if the aliens answered:

## 4. ... because we kill you without you having to suffer

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This alien answer is actually just a subtle modification of answer (3). It says: "You have so little consciousness and you live so little embedded in history that you don't mind suddenly "not being there anymore". If we can realize this "no longer there" for you without any suffering, then we won't harm you at all."

The same applies here as for answer (3): We would have to make it clear to the aliens that we are not just living right now, but on a timeline on which we are planning, hoping, etc. We

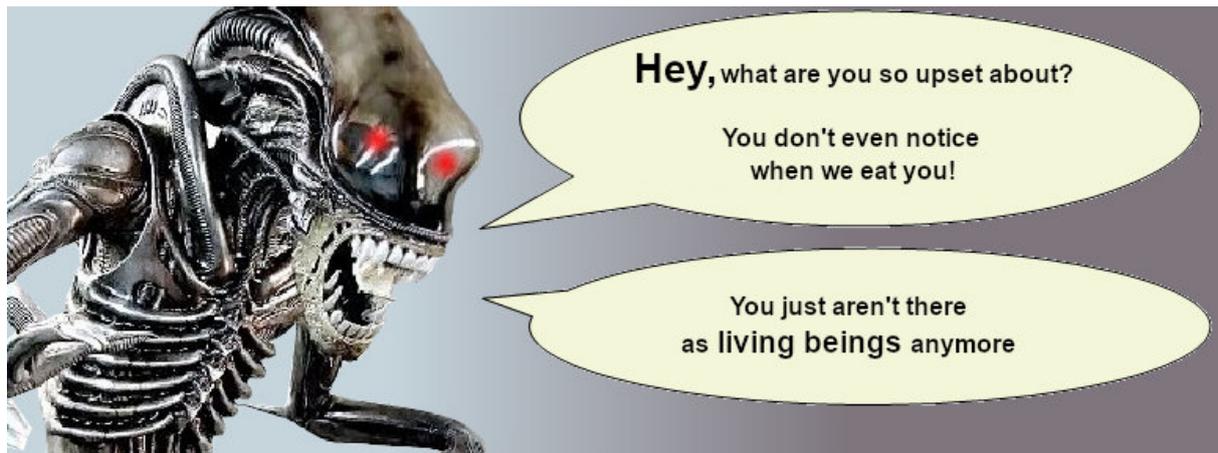


We show our calendar, pictures from the past, etc. All we do this so that they will see that we are still suffering. Even if there were no physical suffering, we would still not accept our death. So our death would still be associated with infinite suffering, namely the suffering of death.

 Could the aliens understand that?

If we ourselves announce this answer to our own meat consumption as a justification, then this answer seems to be plausible: We ourselves also assume the ideal case, and in this ideal case the animals in the slaughterhouses are killed in such a way that they *do not suffer*, yes that they *don't really notice anything*. They just don't exist as living beings after they're killed.

In the same way, the aliens are now appeasing us:



### Strange:

We wouldn't agree with that alien response, would we? Does the fact that we do not suffer physically after death comfort us?



Could it be that the higher animals disagree with such an answer on our part as well?

For the higher animals also plan, hope and fear along a line of time. The squirrel sets up a provision store for the winter, the animal mothers plan ahead when raising their little ones, friendships – we know this – even last for years, in the case of many bird species a lifetime. Some animal species consciously adapt their actions to natural processes, such as summer-winter, hunting opportunities, etc. They have a "time consciousness". We cannot deny that higher mammals and birds have a "sense of time" and "planning".

Some animals react reflexively to temperature signals or seasonal signals. These genetically determined actions mostly run automatically and mechanically and are therefore of course not a sign of time consciousness.

By a "**time-conscious being**" we mean a being who not only knows the "here and now", but who is aware that it lived yesterday, met friends, and makes targeted preparations for tomorrow. It is an animal which is aware about a tomorrow.

Therefore, the justification "You don't even notice that" does not apply. What will the horse mother think if her foal is killed for food? She will notice the next day that her foal is no longer there – and will not be reassured for a long time.

How does an elephant react when a member of the clan is suddenly no longer there? Elephants are known for their complex social structures. They have established certain rituals and defined certain "sacred" places.

What does the cow "Berta" have to say about the fact that her longtime friend, the cow "Else", was taken to the slaughterhouse today and won't be coming back? Why has "Berta" been so nervous since then?

Can we just kill the dog "Bello" when he "doesn't physically realize it" but would long for his companions the next day if he were alive?

The justification of "killing without pain" is an ethically perfidious "cheating by". We are taking the life away from another being who is very similar to us in terms of "feeling" and "being".

## Last not least ...

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No matter how we twist it, the extraterrestrians have every right to eat us if they refer to our own (actually non-existent) ethics.

But let's get back to us humans from the thought experiment: We can also make these ethical considerations without extraterrestrials by looking at our dealings with species that are closely related to us – the higher mammals. Even if the consequences of these ethical considerations are unpleasant in our culture or even cause inner dissonance, they are important. Important to ourselves and our integrity.

There are many other dissonances and problems besides the "why do I eat meat" – dissonance. There are contradictions that one has to live with. In any case, it is better to be aware of these contradictions and to live with them instead of ignoring or repressing them and thus becoming more and more blunted.

The question "why do I eat meat" is such a contradiction that we live with at the moment. It's not about dictating something to anyone with a raised finger. But it is about everyone being aware of themselves and their actions.