

An economic model of the meat paradox

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Abstract

The *meat paradox* arises from the tension between two motives: *i*) we like to eat meat, but *ii*) we do not like to hurt animals. According to cognitive dissonance theory, this tension generates a psychic cost. There exist essentially two ways to reduce this psychic cost, either by reducing meat consumption (e.g., by becoming a vegetarian), or by engaging in self-deception about animal suffering. In this paper, we propose a model of this behavioral phenomenon, and we examine its economic implications. In particular, we show that the consumer becomes more realistic about animal suffering when the price of meat increases. This leads to a “crowding in” effect: the negative price effect is reinforced by psychological effects. Also, we show that an equilibrium with collective denial and one with collective realism may coexist, and that the collective realism equilibrium is always better for human welfare. We finally present a survey study ($N = 3000$) which finds partial support to our basic theoretical prediction that there is a positive association between meat consumption and underestimation of farm animals’ suffering. Keywords: meat paradox, cognitive dissonance, moral dilemma, self-deception

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