

SPECIAL ISSUE

# No Face, but Plants Like Life Too

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Several years ago, after having to drive for too long behind a truck full of stinking, squealing pigs being delivered for slaughter, I gave up eating meat. I'd been harboring a growing distaste for the ugliness that can be industrial agriculture, but the real issue was a long-suppressed sympathy for its — or really, my — victims. Even screaming, reeking pigs, or maybe especially screaming, reeking pigs, can evoke stark pity as they tumble along in a truck to their deaths.



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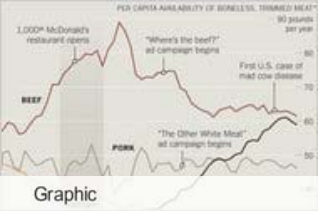
If you think about it, and it's much simpler not to, it can be hard to justify other beings suffering pain, fear and death so that we can enjoy their flesh. In particular, given our many connections to animals, not least of all the fact that we are ourselves animals, it can give a person pause to realize that our most frequent contact with these kin might just be the devouring of them.

My entry into what seemed the moral high ground, though, was surprisingly unpleasant. I felt embattled not only by a bizarrely intense lust for chicken but nightmares in which I would be eating a gorgeous, rare steak — I could distinctly taste the savory drippings — from which I awoke in a panic, until I realized that I had been carnivorous only in my imagination.

Temptations and trials were everywhere. The most surprising turned out to be the realization that I couldn't actually explain to myself or anyone else why killing an animal was any worse than killing the many plants I was now eating.

Surely, I'd thought, science can defend the obvious, that slaughterhouse carnage is wrong in a way that harvesting a field of lettuces or, say, mowing the lawn is not. But instead, it began to seem that formulating a truly rational rationale for not eating animals, at least while consuming

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all sorts of other organisms, was difficult, maybe even impossible.

Before you hit “send” on your hate mail, let me say this. Different people have different reasons for the choices they make about what to kill or have killed for them to eat. Perhaps there isn’t any choice more personal or less subject to rationality or the judgment of others. It’s just that as far as I was concerned, if eating a tofu dog was as much a crime against life as eating bratwurst, then pass the bratwurst, please.

So what really are the differences between animals and plants? There are plenty. The cells of plants, and not animals, for example, harbor chloroplasts, tiny green organelles that can turn the energy of light into sugar. Almost none of these differences, however, seem to matter to any of us trying to figure out what to eat.

The differences that do seem to matter are things like the fact that plants don’t have nerves or brains. They cannot, we therefore conclude, feel pain. In other words, the differences that matter are those that prove that plants do not suffer as we do. Here the lack of a face on plants becomes important, too, faces being requisite to humans as proof not only that one is dealing with an actual individual being, but that it is an individual capable of suffering.

Animals, on the other hand — and not just close evolutionary relations like chimps and gorillas, but species further afield, mammals like cows and pigs — can experience what pretty much anyone would agree is pain and suffering. If attacked, these animals will look agonized, scream, struggle and run as fast as they can. Obviously, if we don’t kill any of these animals to eat them, all that suffering is avoided.

Meanwhile, whether you pluck a leaf or slice a trunk, a plant neither grimaces nor cries out. Plants don’t seem to mind being killed, at least as far as we can see. But that may be exactly the difficulty.

Unlike a lowing, running cow, a plant’s reactions to attack are much harder for us to detect. But just like a chicken running around without its head, the body of a corn plant torn from the soil or sliced into pieces struggles to save itself, just as vigorously and just as uselessly, if much less obviously to the human ear and eye.

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