



A Wicked Fairy in the Woods - how would People alter their Animal Product Consumption if they were affected by the Consequences of their Choices?

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Abstract

The ambivalence of human-animal-relationships culminates in our eating habits; most people disapprove of factory farming, but most animal products that are consumed come from factory farming. While psychology and sociology offer several theoretical explanations for this phenomenon our study presents an experimental approach: an attempt to challenge people's attitude by confronting them with the animals' perspective of the consumption process. We confronted our participants with a fictional scenario that could result in them being turned into an animal. In the scenario, a wicked fairy forces them to choose a ticket. Depending on their choice of ticket they have equal chances of becoming a human being with a certain consumption behaviour (meat eater, organic eater, vegetarian, vegan) or, correspondingly, becoming a certain kind of animal (factory farmed meat animal, organically farmed meat animal, animal for dairy/egg production, free living animal). Our results indicate a strong discrepancy between people's actual consumption habits (mostly regular meat eaters) and their choices in the experiment (strong preferences for the organic or vegan life style). The data reveal a broad spectrum of explanations for people's decisions in the experiment. We investigated the influence of four different factors on the participant's choices in addition to reasons they gave as open-ended answers. Correspondingly, different coping strategies to overcome the tension (cognitive dissonance) between real-life consumption choices and attitudes towards nonhuman animals could be detected. Furthermore, many participants indicated a lack of knowledge concerning living conditions in farming but also concerning capacities and properties of nonhuman animals.

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Introduction

The ambivalence of human-animal-relationships culminates in our eating habits; most people disapprove of factory farming, but most meat, eggs, and milk as well as processed foods made from these comes from factory farming. In what Joy calls a “carnistic” society (Joy 2003) it is perfectly possible to live life without constantly regretting actions and choices regarding consumption behaviour while also actively contributing to a system one judges to be morally not acceptable. Much has been written about the “psychology and sociology of meat” (Bratanova et al. 2011; Gutjahr 2013; Hayley et al. 2015; Loughnan et al. 2010; MacDiarmid et al. 2016; Piazza et al. 2015; Veilleux 2014) and most aspects are similar for other animal products. Due to the way meat, egg and dairy production are institutionalised in western societies, consumers are “numb” (Joy 2003) to many well-known aspects of the production process, nutritional and environmental consequences and most of all the living (and dying) conditions of farmed animals. Vegetarianism and veganism – despite huge media attention – are rare exceptions to the common omnivorous life style (Leahy et al. 2010).

The objective of this study was to challenge people in our “carnistic” society by posing questions that yield answers and decisions which are usually not part of the consumption process: would their consumption behaviour change if they had to face the consequences of their choice of life style?

Based on the methodology of experimental philosophy, we challenged 126 participants with a fictional scenario that could result in them being turned into an animal via an online survey. In the scenario, a wicked fairy forces them to choose a ticket. Depending on their choice of ticket they have equal chances of becoming a human being with a certain consumption behaviour or becoming a certain kind of animal:

- ticket A: meat eating human or nonhuman animal in industrial farming;
- ticket B: vegetarian human or nonhuman animal used for egg and dairy production;
- ticket C: organic animal products eater or nonhuman animal in organic farming;
- ticket D: vegan human or free living nonhuman animal.

Our hypotheses were:

- Most participants would not choose their current lifestyle if they had to potentially face the consequences for animals of that lifestyle.
- Vegetarianism, veganism and organic farming would be much more popular if people had to experience the consequences of their consumption behaviour for the animals
- Our participants’ ideas about organic farming, dairy and egg production and free-living animals might be based on prejudices/idealizations.

Further research questions were:

- What kind of compromise (if any) concerning life style could the participants live with?

- Are there differences between participants who already live vegetarian, vegan, on organic food and regular meat eaters?
- What are the main factors influencing the participants' decisions?

We intended to investigate open-ended and multiple-choice answers combined as a spectrum of reasons for the participants' decision.

Animal Welfare

The quality of animal welfare can be judged differently, based on personal attitudes and values. Structural decisions, such as keeping cows in tie-stalls and sows in farrowing pens, can be compatible with basic animal welfare aspects in the view of one person but not compatible with another person's attitude. There are, however, basic assumptions on animal welfare that should be shared to be able to meaningfully claim some circumstance or measure as not in line with animal welfare. Here, we refer to the five freedoms, stated by the UK Animal Welfare Council and supported by further animal welfare organisations, as a baseline:

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst

- by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.

2. Freedom from Discomfort

- by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease

- by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour

- by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.

5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

- by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering. (<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121010012427/http://www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm>, accessed 10.05.2019).

In Germany, animal welfare organisations discovered numerous cases of animal farming (conventional and organic) in recent years that violated several of these basic freedoms (e.g. Animal Rights Watch, <http://www.biowahrheit.de/index.htm>; https://rp-online.de/leben/ratgeber/verbraucher/tv-doku-enttarnt-bio-tierhaltung_aid-9174383). The contrast between expectations and reality of conditions in – organic and conventional – farming is therefore an assumption underlying our hypotheses regarding the participants' ideas about (particularly organic) farming.

Methods

The ethics committee for Basel (formerly “Ethikkommission Beider Basel,” now “Ethikkommission Nordwest- und Zentralschweiz”) was informed about the research project and gave their approval.

Thought Experiments in Experimental Philosophy

Thought experiments like the Gettier cases in epistemology (Gettier 1963) or the Trolley Problem in ethics (Thomson 1985) have a long tradition. However, the way they have been used most of the time is mainly for illustration purposes. The audience is asked to follow an argument with the help of a fictional example, which facilitates and supports the explanation.

In contrast, experimental philosophers use the thought experiments to actually collect empirical data. Fictional scenarios are presented, and people are asked to decide between different options or to judge the situations either morally (“Was this behaviour morally wrong?”) or relating to a certain concept (“Did the person act intentionally?”). The analysis of the decisions makes it possible to spotlight people’s (moral) definitions, intuitions or reasoning – depending on the specifics of the scenario. Furthermore, inconsistencies in people’s concepts can indirectly be pointed out to them and increase her ethical awareness.

In that sense, it was the intention for this project to address questions regarding the ethical dimension of consumption choices with thought experiments. Experimental philosophy aims at bridging the gap between what is frequently called “common sense”, “intuitive” or “common beliefs” of “ordinary people” in philosophical papers and actual folk intuitions concerning statements or phenomena (Knobe and Nichols 2007). Especially when dealing with action-relevant concepts – like in ethics – it is highly relevant what people feel or think is right or wrong and how their moral judgements are motivated. Instead of merely questioning people about their opinions, attitudes and concepts, experimental philosophy challenges people’s intuitions. Potential intuitions are triggered by scenarios that are often deprived of the context of everyday moral decisions to exclude many influential factors (e.g. knowledge about laws, personal relationships, prejudices etc.).

To conduct the thought experiment, we designed a vignette (see below) describing a fictional scenario that was pilot-tested among colleagues and friends. Wording was adapted according to their feedback. During the adaptation process we supported the text with illustrations that were reported as helpful for understanding the scenario (see appendix). The vignette was presented to 126 participants via an online survey. Participants were asked to decide at the end of the scenario and then asked to name factors that influenced their decision.

Recruitment

126 participants were recruited in February 2016 via the online platform “clickworker.com”. Inclusion criteria were age (between 18 and 99) and country (Switzerland, Germany, and Austria).

Based on the recommended wage per hour¹ (8,50 €) and the average time participants needed in pilot testing (about 2 min), the participants should have been paid at least 0.28 € for their participation. We decided to pay 0.40€ to also cover those participants who might take

¹ The payment was recommended by the clickworker guidelines: http://www.clickworker.com/pdf/de_survey.pdf, access: 11.03.2016

longer to read or write. Survey Monkey was used as an online tool to provide the survey. The vignette text (translated from the German original, see appendix) is as follows:

Vignette

The scenario was described as follows:

>> During your walk through a wood you encounter a fairy who offers you a deal. In her fairy lottery hat she has tickets with four different letters on them (A, B, C, D). You have to decide on one ticket, open it and read what it says. Afterwards you will immediately be transformed into the creature that is written on the ticket and have to live as this creature for the rest of your life. The fairy explains the different tickets (A, B, C, D):

On half of the A-Tickets it says “omnivorous human being” and on the other half it says “non-human animal in factory farming”.

On half of the B-Tickets it says “vegetarian human being” and on the other half it says “non-human animal used for the production of dairy products or eggs”.

On half of the C-Tickets it says “human who eats only organic animal products” and on the other half “organically raised farm animal”.

On half of the D-Tickets it says “vegan human being” and on the other half “free-living nonhuman animal”.

If you decide not to take a ticket, the fairy will immediately transform you into a nonhuman animal:

- 1.) Into an animal in factory farming if you are a omnivorous
- 2.) Into an animal used for the production of dairy products or eggs if you are a vegetarian
- 3.) Into an animal raised in organic farming if you only consume organic animal products
- 4.) Into a free-living animal if you are a vegan.

Would you take a ticket? And which?

Have you lived as a [depending on the ticket chosen: meat eater, vegetarian, organic eater, vegan] before?

Why did you decide that way? <<

In addition to the open-ended question asking for reasons for people’s choices, we offered a list of factors that could have influenced their decision, four of which will be further investigated in this article.

>> Which of the following factors were influential for your choice (no or multiple answers possible)?

- 1.) The perspective of living as a nonhuman animal
- 2.) I considered the best possible outcome for me
- 3.) I thought that I must be willing to live as a nonhuman animal of a certain type if I consume the corresponding animal products
- 4.) My current eating habits
- 5.) The way I want to live in the future as a human being
- 6.) I considered the worst possible outcome for me
- 7.) I thought about fairness <<

The list is not exhaustive, which is why the participants first had the opportunity to express their reasons in their own words. The factors we offered are targeted at particular aspects we wanted to explore:

1.) “The perspective of living as a nonhuman animal”

If people focused on their potential future life as an animal, their choice should tend towards a life they consider (for example) free from constant physical or mental suffering; one that is comparatively long or even pleasant. One important aspect here is the participant’s attitude towards animal experience in general. If, for example, she holds the view that nonhuman animals are not capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, she might not consider these aspects relevant to her decision. Another influential aspect is the participant’s knowledge about the living conditions of farmed and free animals. If he is convinced that animals in organic farming live a pleasant life, he is more likely to choose that ticket than someone who believes that life as an animal in organic farming is full of pain and stress. We did not directly ask about those background assumptions but looked at the open-ended answers to find out about them.

2.) “I thought that I must be willing to live as a nonhuman animal of a certain type if I consume the corresponding animal products”

This second factor represents the merely rational dimension to the first factor, which included an empathetic aspect. It can be used in addition to the first factor: A participant thinks that he should be willing to live as an animal in factory farming if he wanted to consume e.g. meat from factory farming. He thought about his life as an animal in factory farming, judged it to be too unpleasant and therefore picked a different ticket; or as an alternative to the first factor: A participant did not further think about her potential life as a nonhuman animal because she knew that she wanted to eat e.g. factory farmed meat (fourth factor) and that she must therefore be willing to live as an animal in factory farming.

3.) “My current eating habits”

The majority of participants probably thought about their current eating habits when choosing a ticket (see factor 2.). However, our question is: Who indicates that their choice was driven by this factor (those who do not want to give up their consumption behaviour but also those who consider their current behaviour adequate and the consequences bearable)?

4.) “The way I want to live in the future as a human being”

This factor can be an incentive for several choices: Those who want to stick to their current life (and are even willing to ignore the 50% chance that it might change completely if they end up as a very different being) are different from those who are planning to change their life – be it after reading the scenario or for multiple other reasons people can have to change their diet or life style, as veganism and vegetarianism are becoming more and more popularised – and therefore pick a ticket that does not reflect their current life style.

The experiment was supported by illustrations (see Appendix Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6). Demographic data were collected regarding age, gender, and lifestyle (meat eater, vegetarian, organic eater, vegan, other).

The categories “mixed (contains meat)”, “vegetarian”, “organic eater”, “vegan” and “other” were not further specified. On the one hand, they are common labels for eating habits, but on the other hand, their definition is vague. People might call themselves vegetarians if they eat meat only once a month, if they do not eat other meat than fish, if they avoid meat for health reasons but do not exclude it completely etc. We only reacted to that ambiguity if we found contradictions in a participant’s declarations (if someone e.g. said she was a meat eater and a vegetarian, see results section). Otherwise, we consider identification with one of the categories as sufficient for being included in that category.

For the category “organic” we took account of the fact that there is a range of definitions and labels in our participant’s home countries and that the consumers’ understanding of “organic” is highly dependent on their knowledge and preferences. If necessary, participants had the opportunity to specify their definitions in the open-ended answers and in the column “other”.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed with Excel (Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2010) and SPSS (Version 23).

For the statistical analysis, Fisher’s Exact Test was used to investigate the relationship between the choice of a ticket and the judgment that a certain factor was influential for the ticket choice because the expected frequency per cell for the small group of vegetarian ticket choosers was too small for a Chi-Square Test. If the p value ($p < 0.05$) indicates significance, we consider the choice as dependent on that factor; if we find that one particular group judged that factor to be influential for their decision it suggests that the aspect actually led to their ticket choice.

Results & Analysis

Demographics

Before looking at the results regarding the research questions the group of participants will briefly be characterised: The gender ratio was balanced (53.6% male, 46.4% female). The mean age was 36.5 years (Std. Dev. = 12.6), the range between 18 years and 79 years.

To specify their eating habits, participants could choose between “mixed (contains meat)”, “vegetarian”, “vegan”, “organic” and “other” which could further be specified in a text box. Multiple answers were possible (because a participant could have chosen, for example, to eat only organic vegetarian food). Most participants (79%) were meat eaters (“mixed”), 9% were vegetarians, 6% vegans and another 6% chose “organic” without further explication whether they were meat eaters, vegetarians or vegans (see Fig. 1). Of the meat eaters, 14% additionally indicated they ate “organic”. When we refer to “organic eaters” we include all participants who indicated that they ate organic.

These numbers are corrected for inconsistencies: If someone chose “meat eater” and “vegetarian” she was classified as a meat eater. If someone chose “vegetarian” and “vegan”

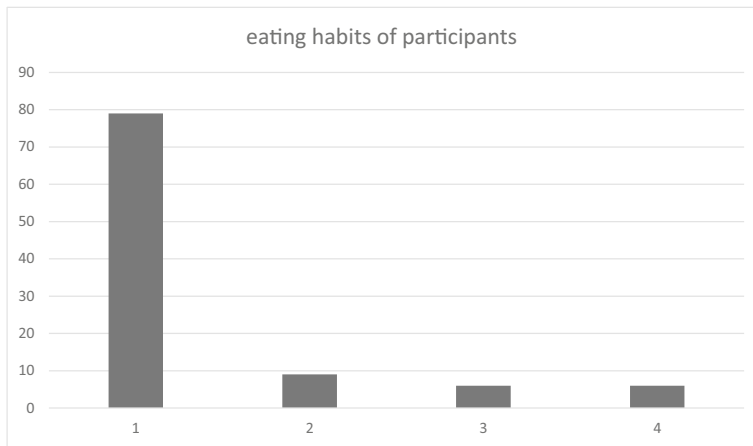


Fig. 1 Eating habits of the participants in percent. 1: meat eaters; 2: vegetarians; 3: vegans; 4: other

he was classified as vegan (A vegan diet is also vegetarian but for further analysis two separate categories were needed.). One person indicated he was “flexitarian”. Although this term can be understood in different ways we assumed that it included occasional meat consumption and the person was classified as a meat eater. Most likely the person would otherwise have indicated that he restricted his nutrition to vegetarian, vegan or organic products.

Choice of Tickets

The tickets that were chosen most frequently were the “organic” and “vegan” tickets (37% and 40%). About 12% chose the industrial farming ticket, 7% chose the vegetarian ticket and 4% chose not to take a ticket at all.

Eating Habits and Ticket Choice

Although the numbers of groups of non-meat eaters are too low for a chi-square test, there are some clear indications that the choice of ticket is dependent on the person’s eating habits:

1. Only meat eaters chose the industrial animal farming ticket.
2. Organic eaters chose mostly the organic ticket (81%).
3. Vegetarians chose mostly the vegan ticket. (83%)
4. Vegans chose mostly the vegan ticket (83%).

Looking at the dependency from a different angle, the former eating habits are not consistent with the ticket choice in 3 of 4 cases:

1. All industrial animal farming choosers have lived as meat eaters before.
2. 11% of the vegetarian ticket choosers have lived as vegetarians before.
3. 16% of the vegan ticket choosers have lived as vegans before.
4. 28% of the organic ticket choosers have lived as organic eaters before.
5. The small group of those who did not choose a ticket consists of: 20% vegan, 20% vegetarian and 60% meat eaters.

A chi square test shows that there is indeed a significant ($p < 0.000$) dependency between the consistency of ticket choice and eating habits (e.g. being a vegetarian and choosing the vegetarian ticket) and the choice of the factor “current eating habits” as influential for the decision.

Reasons for Ticket Choice

For questions regarding the factors that influenced the participants’ ticket choice, we excluded those who chose not to take a ticket ($n = 5$).

In addition to the quantitative results – the ticket choice and the selection of influential factors from a list – we provide an exemplary overview of the open-ended answers regarding the reasons for the participants’ ticket choice and their ideas about their potential lives as animals. In contrast to the multiple-choice answers, the participants had the chance to express their personal view directly, individually and in their own words. Therefore, we identified a number of interesting connections and tensions between these reasons and our quantitative results, as well as some apparent contradictions.

Ticket A

Almost all participants who chose ticket A gave their current life style (meat eater) as a reason and/or emphasized how much they like to eat meat (“I don’t want to imagine living without meat”, “because I love meat” etc.). In contrast to that, the majority of this group did not indicate that the factor “future life as human being” was important to them (7%). About 20% mentioned their potential future as animals in the open-ended answers.

On the one hand, this group could therefore be summarized as meat eaters who consider mainly their current lives and preferences as humans in the fairy’s lottery and risk the chance but mostly ignore the circumstances of their potential lives as animals. This is also reflected in the fact that only one participant in this group indicated from the list of factors that “the perspective of living as an animal” was influential for her ticket choice, but at the same time almost all (87%) picked the factor “my current eating habits” as influential. Fisher’s Exact test indicates a dependency between ticket choice and the choice of the factor “my current eating habit” as influential ($p < 0.001$) which means that the decision pattern of the participants who marked this factor as influential is indeed different from those participants who did not pick this factor. Also, in the group of Ticket A-choosers most descriptions of their potential life as an animal were negative (“short”, “uncomfortable”, “being killed/eaten”).

On the other hand, there is some truth or consequence in this attitude: If I love eating meat regularly, I know I must take the risk of becoming an animal in certain living conditions in this scenario – I just don’t want to reason/talk about it. Accordingly, 40% of these participants picked the factor “I thought I should be willing to live as a certain kind of animal if I want to consume corresponding animal products” as influential.

Ticket B

Most of these (few) participants indicated that they chose this ticket because it is consistent with their current or a possible future life style. From the list of factors, 67% picked “my current eating habits” as important factor and 33% “my future life as human being”, which

mirrors the open-ended answers. In contrast to that, 8 of 9 participants claimed that they had not lived as vegetarians before when asked about their current eating habits.

In the fictional scenario, they seem to accept the risk of being turned into an animal used for dairy or egg production in order to be able to consume vegetarian animal products as a human, but no one mentioned the choice being a compromise. It was rather judged as “the best alternative” or a decision that had already been made before (“I tend to become vegetarian”, “I’d like to change my nutrition to vegetarian in the future” etc).

The ideas about their lives as animals varied: Participants said things like “short, painful and without a mother” (in regard to the egg/milk production), “unhappy” or even imagined their life as an animal as cruel, but they also said things like “calm” and “species-appropriate”. One gave a response that was presumably meant to be funny: He said “I would lay an egg every day and on Sundays, sometimes, two”.² This could be an indication that the participant was not quite aware how much egg-laying hens suffer in a conventional laying hen factory.

The overall impression regarding a decision for ticket B is that vegetarianism is an acceptable option for some people who are willing to reconsider their habits, while their associations with the life of egg and dairy production animals are ambivalent. Despite the equal chances of becoming a human or nonhuman animal, the main focus of these participants is therefore also on their potential future situation as a human and not as a nonhuman animal.

Ticket C

Compared to the first two groups, the pattern of reasons is very different here. More than half of the participants (55%) mentioned their future life as an animal or at least referred to keeping animals in a species-appropriate way (“balanced for human and animal”, “Animals should in my opinion be raised organically and with more respect for their natural needs”, “I want to become an animal who is allowed to live organically”). Additionally, 20% of Ticket C choosers picked the factor “the perspective of living as a nonhuman animal” from the provided factor list as influential. Fisher’s Exact test supported the dependency between ticket choice and the choice of this factor ($p = 0.04$). The underlying argument “I would want to live that kind of life as nonhuman animal which is why I chose my ticket/life style as a human being” is also in line with the choice of the factor “willingness to live as a certain kind of animal if I want to consume certain animal products” from the factor list (chosen by 33% of ticket C-choosers).

Furthermore, the solution was considered a compromise by several participants (“because it is a compromise between a broad range of groceries and sustainable, animal-friendly upbringing”, “because both variants (human [...], animal [...]) seem acceptable to me”). Some participants additionally mentioned worries that a vegetarian or vegan life style would not be natural or healthy (“I am of the opinion that human beings are not created for a strict vegetarian or vegan nutrition”). Another, again more human-centred perspective could be found in answers like “that corresponds my way of life/personality”, “feels best for me”, “I feel comfortable with it”, “I support organic production” etc. The comparatively large percentage of ticket C-choosers who chose “my future life as human being” as influential (38%)

² There is a well-known German song by the Comedian Harmonists called “Ich wollt’ ich wär ein Huhn” (I wish I was a hen) from which our participant quotes the line “Ich legte täglich nur ein Ei und sonntags auch mal zwei.” (I would just lay one egg a day and on Sundays, sometimes, two). In the ludicrous song, the first-person narrator describes his wish to live the simple but happy life as a hen having nothing to do and nothing to worry about.

corresponds the idea that this lifestyle represents a compromise they could live with as humans and as nonhuman animals (influence of the factor indicated by Fisher's exact test; $p = 0.038$).

Some participants offered explanations regarding why they did not choose a different ticket. Besides mentioning the same reason as ticket A choosers (not wanting to live without meat) or B (not wanting to live without other animal products) they mentioned reasons that count against becoming a free living animal: "of all mentioned animals the animal farmed organically seems to live the most pleasant life", "a free animal (e.g. mouse) would constantly be exposed to dangers. An animal living in captivity which is kept according to species-specific needs would not have these dangers.", etc. The aspect is also considered by ticket D-choosers and will be picked up in the discussion session.

The answers regarding how participants would imagine their life as an animal were more optimistic here. Several persons mentioned "species-appropriate animal housing/nutrition" or described their life as "pleasant", "uncomplicated", "nice" or "without torture". However, an answer that came up multiple times was that they would not be (completely) free as animals and that their life would be dominated by humans. Again, some participants also said that they would prefer a life as an animal in organic farming to a life in the wilderness, because the former would provide more safety, better food resources and less stress.

We discuss later in this paper the extent to which their idea about living conditions of organically farmed animals is realistic.

Ticket D

Those who had already adopted a vegan life style before called it "reasonable" and kept referring to their current habits. Accordingly, the factor "current eating habits" was chosen by 20% of Ticket D choosers (influence of the factor supported by Fisher's exact test; $p < 0.001$). A comparatively low number (12%) of ticket D-choosers opted for "willingness to live as a certain kind of animal if I want to consume certain animal products" as an influential factor. On the one hand, animal suffering in (factory) farming is a common argument used by vegan animal liberation activists which makes this factor a potentially important argument for choosing ticket D. On the other hand, this factor could be understood as not applicable to veganism as the consumption of animal products is excluded in a vegan life style. While this factor represents a more rational dimension (it is a logical consequence of eating meat that there are animals raised and slaughtered for meat and I should be OK with that) the factor "the perspective to live as an animal" covers a more empathetic aspect (how would I feel as nonhuman animal). This factor was chosen as influential by 40% of ticket D choosers (influence of the factor indicated by Fisher's exact test; $p = 0.04$).

Further arguments were justice and freedom for animals. Accordingly, many imagined their potential lives as animals as free, close to nature and happy/peaceful. This could explain why so many participants who had not lived as vegans before opted for ticket D: they assume that as nonhuman animals they would prefer a life in freedom over the other options. However, the downside of a free life was mentioned frequently, too: "in danger/fear of being eaten by other animals", "would have to take care of myself", "boring", "cruel", "simple". This depiction of a free life as something unpleasant, harsh and dangerous is remarkable and will be picked up in the discussion section.

It is also striking that about 20% of participants who chose a vegan ticket thought about their "future life as human being" (influence of the factor indicated by Fisher's exact test; $p =$

0.038) given that a vegan diet seems to be the most restrictive. Those 20% include both groups: individuals who had lived as vegans before but also omnivores.

However, the choice of ticket D could equally be grounded in reasoning about the least bad rather than the best possible outcome. If participants judged being turned into a nonhuman animal as generally negative and being human as overall positive, the challenging modification of becoming a vegan human or an animal (perceived as negative) in freedom (positive, though constricted by threats) could still add up to a positive outcome compared to an existence as an animal (negative) that additionally has to live in captivity (also negative).³

No Ticket

The five participants who decided not to take a ticket present a heterogeneous group: 3 open-ended answers suggest that the participants did not understand the question/task because they answered that they did not want to become an animal (which is exactly what happens if they do not take a ticket) or already lived a vegan lifestyle. One person said she decided it “according to instinct” and one person said she could not decide. As the latter is the only meaningful argument for not taking a ticket this group was excluded from statistical analysis regarding ticket choice.

Discussion

Before discussing the presented results with regard to our hypotheses we focus on a finding that was not part of our research questions:

Denial of Animal Properties/Capacities

An unexpected topic in the open-ended answers was the participant’s assumptions regarding properties of nonhuman animals. Independently of their ticket choice participants expressed statements like: “animals don’t have consciousness”, “many animals don’t have a concept of past and future. They live in the moment.”, “Because I don’t have a cerebrum, just instincts, my thoughts as an animal won’t mean anything to me.”, “animals cannot think”, “[I imagine my life as an animal as] driven by instincts and without a will” etc.

The idea that an unconscious or a purely instinct-driven life seems unattractive at first glance leads to several follow-up questions that would be worth investigating:

- 1) If they assume that they do not remember their former human life, why would it matter that they live “unconsciously”? Do objective criteria for a preferable life include conscious experience?
- 2) Could our participants’ reluctance be linked to the general problem of subjective experience? (One participant directly referred to Nagel’s (1974) famous “What is it like to be a bat?”) We cannot tell what it would be like to experience the world in a way that is

³ Whether the calculation is that simple or could be modified by additional factors could be tested in a separate thought experiment. What if e.g. the animals’ species was known? The image used in this thought experiment suggests a mouse which is an animal of prey. Many participants thought about a dangerous life in fear. If the image had been e.g. a fox, a snail or a sprout the participants’ associations might have been different.

profoundly different from the human spectrum of possible experiences. Being so strange to us and so hard to imagine, it might intuitively be less attractive.

- 3) Does the belief that animals live without meaningful subjective experience explain why some participants did not express preference for a pleasant life as an animal over an unpleasant one?

A marginal number of participants criticized the experiment: in contrast to the first three tickets, we did not give any information on the kind of animal that they would be turned into if they became a free living animal (see footnote 4 on the effect of different species here). However, the statements regarding animal properties were made for the first three tickets, too. It is obvious that animals that are used for meat, egg and dairy production – in our society – are vertebrates⁴ and mostly mammals (except for some fish and bird species). There is no doubt that all these animals

- 1.) Are at least capable of feeling pleasure and pain (Gentle 1992; Segner 2012)
- 2.) Are therefore able to suffer from e.g. pain, social distress or fear
- 3.) Are adapted to certain environments that are not reflected by the circumstances of modern factory farming

Even if we cannot know exactly what it would feel like to be a caged hen or a cow whose calf was taken away we have strong evidence that it would mean suffering of some sort. It is possible that our participants were unaware of the living conditions of most farm animals. They might as well agree that despite being sentient farm animals do not suffer from living conditions on farms or at least not on organic farms. It is also possible, however, that they were in denial of facts that might make them adapt their behaviour to their beliefs. This phenomenon of cognitive bias will be discussed below (see discussion).

Discussion of the Hypotheses

- 1) Most people would not choose their current live style if they had to face the consequences. What compromise concerning their life style people could live with?

Answers suggested that most people would not choose their current life style if they had to live with the consequences. Vegetarianism, veganism or organic farming would be much more popular. A small number of participants indicated that they were already in the process of changing their eating habits, while another minority admitted that they are not willing to change their habits and therefore take the risks and consequences. However, the majority implied that they would (only) be willing to change if they were – potentially – forced to bear the consequences as nonhuman animals. Together with the second hypothesis (People's ideas about organic farming, dairy and egg production and free living animals might be based on prejudices/idealizations), this illustrates the predominant ambivalent relationship to nonhuman

⁴ It is highly unlikely that those participants quoted above all thought of lobsters, oysters and snails when thinking about their „meat consumption“. Our focus on the groups of animals that are most commonly “used” in farming was supported by the images of pigs and chicken that illustrated the thought experiment, see attachment.

animals in our society. Although the media in our participants' countries regularly report about living conditions on farms that clearly violate the five freedoms, many people are unwilling or unable to change their consumption choices despite having a generally positive and caring attitude towards nonhuman animals (Bratanova et al. 2011; Gutjahr 2013; Piazza et al. 2015; Veilleux 2014).

II) People's ideas about organic farming, dairy and egg production and free living animals might be based on prejudices/idealizations. Will there be certain patterns of justifications and reason(ing)s?

The open-ended answers present a diverse field regarding knowledge and judgement of living conditions for farmed animals. While one group (G1) described the prospect of a miserable life including dependency, suffering and an early/cruel death, a second group (G2) thought of a safe, satisfied and "species-appropriate" life, and a third group (G3) created the image of a non-sentient, unconscious existence without caring much about circumstances.

These groups can be assigned to two different coping strategies: G1 is perfectly aware of and does not deny the circumstances of (conventional and organic) farming. In everyday life their attitude could be described as "not caring about the fate of farmed animals". In the thought experiment, their attitude is characterised by optimism about being lucky (the gambler's fallacy) and remaining as a human being. Depending on the degree to which they are risk takers or willing to make a compromise they choose ticket A, B or C.

G2 and G3 are both in denial of the violations of the five freedoms that regularly occur in (organic and conventional) farming. While G2 can either be described as naïve (if they are actually convinced by their descriptions), guided by exceptional experiences (they only know about actual farms that do not violate the 5 freedoms), or modifying their true beliefs (i.e. that most farm animals do not have a pleasant life) in order to be able to continue with their favoured life style/habits, G3 attributes properties to nonhuman animals that make moral concerns for their well-being irrelevant. These phenomena can be explained in terms of Festinger's (1962) concept of cognitive dissonance: If there is a tension between several of a person's opinions, beliefs or actions she will feel psychic discomfort and try to lower the tension. She has the options of

- changing her beliefs to make her actions justifiable,
- changing her actions so they are consistent with her beliefs,
- denying those beliefs that create the inconsistency.

Literature suggests that all three alternatives (change of behaviour, change of attitude and denial of facts) can result from and are used to cope with cognitive dissonance due to the ambivalent relationship many people have with nonhuman animals (Bratanova et al. 2011; Berndsen and van der Pligt 2004, 2005; Loughnan et al. 2010; Piazza et al. 2015; Rothgerber 2014a, b; Joy 2003; Veilleux).

We observed all three patterns in our participants, too, although in some cases it is unclear whether they really changed their beliefs or are in denial. For example, are they incorrectly informed about the living conditions of many farmed animals (due to a confirmation bias in

their choice of information) and therefore convinced that the animals live a comfortable and satisfying life, or have they been confronted with the facts and deny that they apply to the products they consume (“I know where the meat/eggs/milk I buy come from and I am convinced that living conditions are fine there”)? Psychic numbing might contribute to this process of denial (Joy 2003): The way animal products are produced, advertised, distributed and consumed in our society makes it easy to avoid looking into the uncomfortable details. If this explanation applies to our participants, too, it is remarkable that “numbness” still holds for the 60% who actually risked living a life as a farmed animal. They are so used to not-thinking or not-caring about the fates of farmed animals that they still refuse to consider the consequences for animals when their life might actually and directly be affected by the circumstances. Additionally, the justification “I cannot imagine what life as a nonhuman animal would be like” seems to work as an absolution for some participants.

On the other hand, given the overall low consistency between the participants’ current eating habits and their ticket choice, we found clear indications of willingness to engage in behavioural changes. The fact that many opted for the risk of becoming an animal raised on an organic farm – although we did not specify the living (or slaughtering) conditions - and the open-ended answers that describe a pleasant life as an organically farmed animal suggest that here, indeed, these participants have a very positively connoted idea of organic farming.

The ideas of free-living animals varied. The frequent depiction of a free life as something unpleasant, harsh and dangerous is remarkable. Some participants’ answers can be read as a value judgment favouring comfort and safety over freedom: While the uncertainties of a life in freedom are perceived as unattractive, the perspective of living in a predictable environment with shelter, regular feeding and protection from predation is perceived as a better option, even if it means being used and killed in the end. While from a human perspective, freedom usually has an intrinsic value, it can be debated to which extent freedom is valued by nonhuman animals. On the one hand, animal liberation activists treat animal liberty as intrinsically valuable and see a strong analogy between human and animal freedom (e.g. <http://www.tierbefreiung-frankfurt.org/aktionen/teilnahme-ezb-zaunspaziergang/zaunspaziergang-27-04-pic3/index.html>). On the other hand, it can be questioned that freedom is a good in itself for nonhuman animals. Instead, it is suggested that it is of instrumental value to them (e.g. by Cochrane (2009)). From that point of view, it might be preferable for some animals to live in human captivity, as explained, compared to the downside of a life in freedom.

III) Will there be differences between people who already live vegetarian, vegan, on organic food and regular meat eaters?

We found that the (overall very small) number of vegans and organic eaters were quite consistent in their choices in real life and in the experiment. A potential explanation is the behavioural change they have most likely undergone (only very few people are born and raised as vegans or exclusively with organic animal products) to cope with the psychic discomfort they felt about their former beliefs and behaviour regarding nonhuman animals.

A second – again small – group whose ticket choice was consistent with their actual life style were those who chose the “industrial animal farming” ticket. They emphasised the meaning of (regular) meat for their lives and risked the consequences for their potential lives as nonhuman animals. However, the by far larger proportion of regular meat eaters and also most of the vegetarians chose differently and preferred the “organic” or “vegan” ticket.

A line could therefore be drawn between those who already made up their mind in everyday life and have found a justification that withstands the challenges of our thought experiment and those who feel a strong psychic discomfort when their cognitive dissonance is pointed out to them. That line, however, cannot clearly be drawn between the groups listed in III).

IV) What are the main factors (from our list of potential factors) influencing people's decision?

Four factors were presented in the experiment:

- 1.) The perspective of living as a nonhuman animal
- 2.) The willingness to live as a certain kind of animal if I want to consume certain animal products
- 3.) The future life as a human being
- 4.) The current eating habits

Three of these were each judged as important by ca. one quarter of the participants. Their current eating habits were picked as influential factor by 40%. However, the factors had different meanings for the different ticket groups. While for those who chose the "industrial farming" ticket thinking about their willingness to live as a certain kind of animal if they wanted to consume certain animal products was very influential, as was their current eating habits; the other two larger groups ("organic" and "vegan" ticket) picked the first and third factor more frequently.

Our statistical analysis suggests that the factors did indeed influence our participants' ticket choices because there were significant differences between the four groups of ticket choosers regarding the factors they judged as influential.

In order to test if the factors are as influential as the participants indicated a follow-up study could aim at focusing participants' attention on certain factors to influence their decision-making. If, for example, consideration of the factor "my future life as a nonhuman animal" often led to choosing the vegan ticket, it might be possible to convince people to take a vegan ticket. The living conditions of the animals could be emphasised in more detail and the question regarding the ticket choice could be directed towards that aspect of the decision (e.g. "Which risk of living as a nonhuman animal would you take?"). As this factor represents the more empathetic aspect of the decision process the use of illustrations support the manipulation of participants' choices. However, it is also possible that the manipulation does not work that way. As our statistical results do not show the direction of dependency it is also possible that those participants who took the "vegan ticket" (for some other reason) were also those who thought about their life as animals more often. The underlying psychological traits might not have been revealed by our study.

Furthermore, it cannot be concluded from our data whether this factor is influential for the participants' life style decisions outside the experiment. Nevertheless, the results could be interesting for animal liberation activism when developing tools for effecting behavioural changes among non-vegans.

In contrast, the factor "my current eating habits" is a hint towards another potential starting point for changing a participant's decisions. If it was possible to change to a vegetarian/organic/vegan life style without fundamentally changing what participants consider their "current eating habits" a change towards a different choice might no longer seem too difficult

for them. The growing market for fake animal products, the increasing availability of organic alternatives and more frequent use of labels and information on food packages are indicators that stepwise changes of habits are more and more facilitated.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Appendix

German version of the scenario:

„Während eines Waldspaziergangs treffen Sie auf eine fiese Fee, die Ihnen ein Angebot macht. In ihrem Feenhut befinden sich Tickets mit vier verschiedenen Buchstaben (A, B, C, D). Sie müssen sich für ein Ticket entscheiden, es öffnen und die Aufschrift lesen. Daraufhin werden Sie sich sofort in das Wesen verwandeln, das auf dem Ticket beschrieben ist. Von nun an werden Sie als dieses Wesen weiterleben. Die Fee erklärt ihnen die unterschiedlichen Tickets (A, B, C, D):

Auf der Hälfte der A-Tickets steht „Fleisch essender Mensch“ und auf der anderen Hälfte „Tier in konventioneller Tierhaltung“.

Auf der Hälfte der B-Tickets steht „vegetarisch lebender Mensch“ und auf der anderen Hälfte „Tier, das zur Milch- oder Eiproduktion gehalten wird“.

Auf der Hälfte der C-Tickets steht „Mensch, der nur ökologisch erzeugte Tierprodukte isst“ und auf der anderen Hälfte „Tier in ökologischer Tierhaltung“.

Auf der Hälfte der D-Tickets steht „vegan lebender Mensch“ und auf der anderen Hälfte „frei lebendes Tier“.

Wenn Sie sich entscheiden, gar kein Ticket zu ziehen, wird die fiese Fee Sie augenblicklich in ein Tier verwandeln und zwar:

- in ein Tier in Massentierhaltung, wenn Sie zur Zeit ein Fleisch essender Mensch sind.
- in ein Tier, das zur Milch- und Eiproduktion gehalten wird, wenn Sie Vegetarier*in sind.
- in ein Tier in ökologischer Haltung, wenn Sie zur Zeit nur ökologisch erzeugte Tierprodukte konsumieren.

- in ein frei lebendes Tier, wenn Sie Veganer*in sind.

Würden Sie ein Ticket ziehen? Und wenn ja, welches?

Warum haben Sie sich für dieses Ticket entschieden?

Welche der folgenden Faktoren waren ausschlaggebend für Ihre Entscheidung (keine Nennung oder Mehrfachnennungen möglich)?

- die Perspektive, als Tier zu leben
- Ich habe auf den bestmöglichen Ausgang für mich geschaut.
Ich habe darüber nachgedacht, dass ich bereit sein muss, als Tier eines bestimmten Typs zu leben, wenn ich entsprechende Tierprodukte konsumiere..
- meine derzeitigen Essgewohnheiten
- die Art, wie ich in Zukunft als Mensch leben möchte.
- Ich habe auf den schlechtestmöglichen Ausgang für mich geschaut.
- Ich habe über Fairness nachgedacht.”

Illustrations:

Fig. 2 Fairy, image 1

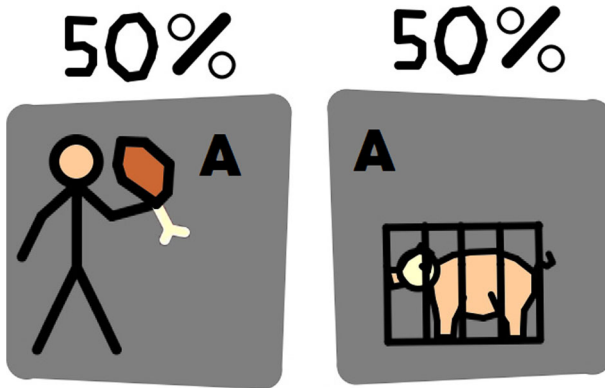


Fig. 3 Fairy, image 2

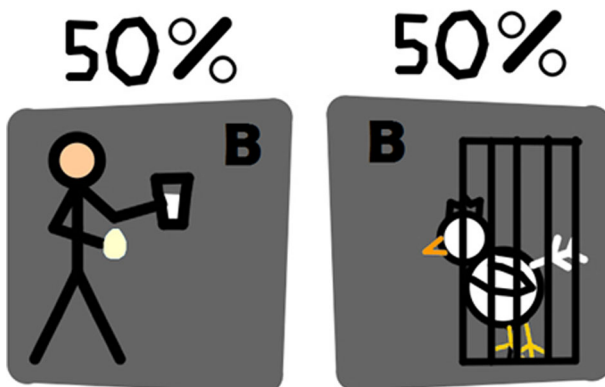


Fig. 4 Fairy, image 3

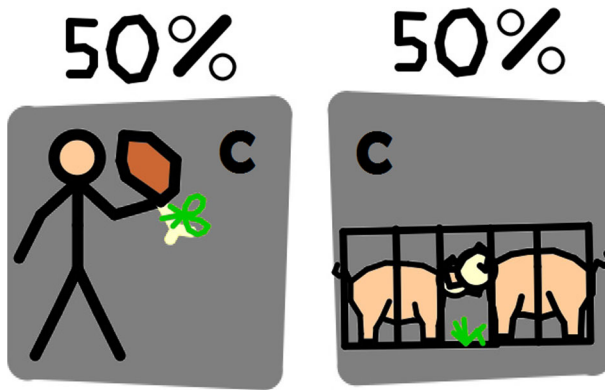


Fig. 5 Fairy, image 4

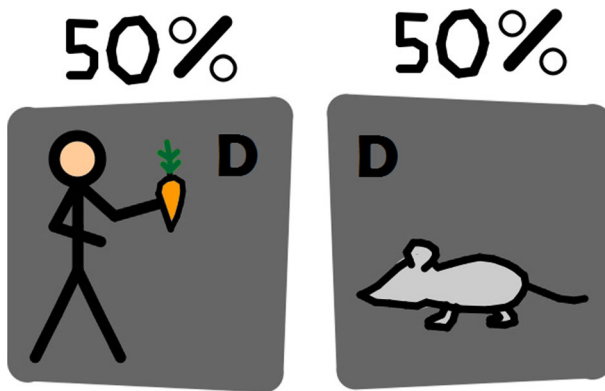


Fig. 6 Fairy, image 5

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