

The Meat Paradox by Rob Percival review – is meat murder?

A discomfiting study of the food chain interrogates our complicated attitude to eating animals.



If you've ever sighed "Ahhh" at a flock of young lambs and then gone off to gnaw on some of their shanks for your lunch, you're a living example of the meat paradox. Animals elicit empathy and we don't wish them harm. But the vast majority of us still kill and eat them, or at least kill their male young and take their milk.

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Rob Percival, head of policy at the Soil Association, sets out to unpack this paradox in a discomfiting book that delves into our complicated relationship with meat. Percival takes as his cue a 2016 paper by the psychologists Brock Bastian and Steve Loughnan that focuses on the dissonance this love/eat relationship creates.

Human beings are not short of strategies to deal with it. Farmers imagine an implicit contract in which we look after animals and they in return give us their corpses. The North American Cree tell themselves that the reindeer give themselves to the hunter out of generosity.

For most consumers the most effective tactic is simply not to think about it. This is especially useful if the animals you eat are reared in intensive factory farms. You really don't want to be thinking of a sow who can't even turn in her crate when tucking into a bacon sandwich. "It's not that we eat lots of industrially farmed meat because we are ignorant of what really happens," says Percival, "rather we are wilfully ignorant because we eat lots of meat."

He challenges many of the claims made by those who think they can escape the paradox by simply avoiding meat and dairy. He picks apart the idea that a natural human diet is vegan. For the past 1.8m years – since the time of Homo erectus – meat has formed an important part of our diets, and until recently we just couldn't have got the iron, zinc, vitamin B12 and fatty acids we needed without it.

However, Percival is not always so rational. At one point he announces that “there is a word for what we do to these animals, those that we consume. Murder.” A whole chapter on “murder” follows, yet he never provides an argument for why this is the right word to use for animal slaughter.

He doesn't seriously consider the possibility that there is no irresolvable paradox after all, just an uncomfortable tension, as there always is in the interdependence of life and death. So when he meets Alex, a farmer who says, “I can rear an animal with love, and I can kill it,” he just doesn't know what to make of him.

Alex challenges Percival's claim that “the dissonance generated by the paradox is too potent to be processed”. Perhaps that's why Percival comes to no clear conclusion about whether we should still be eating meat today. Still, his provocative book presents a challenge that most haven't even begun to confront – and few are ready to meet.

Source : [The Guardian](#)