

# How should Christians treat animals?

When I mention my concerns over animals to evangelical Christian acquaintances, and especially when I tell them I am a vegan, I am often confronted with unease, or even hostility. The general consensus among fellow-churchgoers appears to be that God put animals on Earth for our convenience, and we can therefore use them as we like for our own ends. Though some will add a proviso that we should not cause them any physical pain, there is no serious consideration given to the view that the life and wellbeing of animals should be a part of our



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moral area of concern.

Oliver Barclay explains this view in more formal theological terms in his critique of animal rights. Barclay starts off with the doctrine that humans are different in kind from animals through being made in the image of God (Gen 1:36-7). He then concludes that the nature of this difference is such that we have no more special duty to animals than we have to the rest of creation. Providing we do not allow animals to suffer needlessly, animals, like plants, rivers or any other part of God’s creation, can be harvested for our use.<sup>1</sup>

This understanding of what it means to be made in God’s image has not gone unchallenged. Some

theologians have interpreted our image relationship in terms of serving God in helping the non-human creation. While they would therefore agree that humans are different in kind from animals, the nature of this difference is not one that allows any form of exploitative relationship with animals<sup>2</sup>. In the view of Andrew Linzey for example, our relationship with animals should be one of *noblesse oblige*.<sup>3</sup>

Such an interpretation is not inconsistent with a biblical view on creation, but it is yet to make much headway in the Christian marketplace of ideas. The secular “animal liberationist” ideas that the differences between human and non-human animals is one of degree rather than kind<sup>4</sup> is also not one that sits easily with evangelical Christians.

Rather than using Christian or secular arguments as a way of expanding our view of stewardship or the “rights” of animals, I have therefore chosen to accept two traditional evangelical assumptions claiming a unique place of human beings in creation, namely:

- That the difference in kind between humans and animals is

related to our ability to show spiritual, as well as natural, awareness, and to form a spiritual relationship with God.

- That this difference is such that God will allow us to place our own interests above those of non-human animals.

I will argue that even if we accept the above assumptions, it does not follow logically that animals have only the same inherent value as the rest of creation, or that the only interest we need to take into account is that the animal does not suffer.

## **The moral status of animals**

It is generally believed that animals are distinct from the rest of non-human creation, in that they are capable of feeling pain. It is their capacity for feeling pain that has historically formed the basis for the ethical imperative that they must not be made to suffer. In recent times, it has become apparent that animals can feel pleasure as well as pain. The basis of inferring these feelings is the argument from analogy. Animals behave in similar ways to a human under a circumstance in which we would infer pain or pleasure in the human subject. Animals also have a nervous

system and physiological responses to painful or pleasurable stimuli that are very similar to humans. If we are willing to infer consciousness in humans other than ourselves, then it is logically inconsistent not to conclude that animals have the same modes of awareness.<sup>5</sup>

There are also theological grounds for accepting that animal life contains an excess of pleasure over pain. God is good, and the apostle Paul tells us that present sufferings are “not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18 NIV). If God made animals with the capability of feeling pain, then it should be apparent that a loving God would compensate with a capacity for pleasure in greater abundance. There is also biblical evidence that God cares for the lives of animals,

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often grouping animals together with humans,<sup>6</sup> and that before sin entered the world God did not build in a dependence or desire for animal flesh in either human or non-human animals (Gen 1:29).

If we can accept that animals can feel pleasure then it is not necessary to infer a spiritual dimension to their lives to know that God has presented them with one extra gift common to God and to humans but not to non-sentient beings. Ending of the life of an animal cuts short this gift of God, and therefore harms it in a real way.

However, just as animals differ from humans in cognitive ability, so too do animals differ from each other. A spider and a pig differ strongly in terms of awareness and emotional range, so it makes little sense to lump them together when deciding on their moral worth.

Arthropods and possibly fish appear to learn solely through operant conditioning, with no genuine sense of the future. For these animals, it may be sufficient merely to think of them as receptacles for pain and pleasure. Killing an animal of this type may be acceptable if the animal leads a happy life, is killed painlessly, and is replaced by another happy animal.<sup>7</sup>

Mammals, birds, reptiles, cephalopods (octopus and squid) and possibly fish do however show more complex behaviour patterns. Studies of animal behaviour demonstrate that mammals, birds and reptiles know what they want, know how to get it, and are capable of testing hypotheses to determine the best way of obtaining food rewards<sup>8</sup>. These higher animals also show attributes comparable to those found in humans such as number and linguistic sense,<sup>9</sup> as well as emotional states such as joy, grief, love, compassion and playfulness<sup>10</sup>. Crows are capable of knowing what others can see, and furthermore they can use this knowledge to deceive their companions<sup>11</sup>. Genuine disinterested altruism has been reported in chimpanzees and other mammals<sup>12</sup>.

Many consider that this extra complexity requires us to consider all the interests of vertebrates and cephalopods, and indeed all these animals are protected under the Animal Welfare Act (2000) in New Zealand. For these animals, ending their lives harms them *as individuals*, and does not just diminish the amount of happiness in the world.<sup>13</sup> Again, the view that at least some animals have unique individual personalities is part of folk psychology and considered as indisputable common sense. Few people who have ever lived with a cat or dog would accept that the death of a loved companion can be substituted with a new animal of the same species.

This is not to say that common sense beliefs are always right; some beliefs that appear quite reasonable such as the sun going round the Earth have later been proved to be wrong. It is for this reason that some

scientists distrust common sense views on animal consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Common sense views should however be taken seriously, and are generally accepted as a kind of “default”, especially when it is backed up by more rigorous scientific observations and studies.

The Christian tradition bases the moral status of humans on their being made in the image of God and therefore having a special relationship with the Creator, not on awareness alone. This accounts for the special protection many Christians give to the unborn, the severely mentally ill, and the comatose, whose awareness may be minimal or non-existent.<sup>15</sup> In the case of humans, the belief in the intrinsic value of human life and its spiritual dimension may take precedence even over the desires of its owners, which is why some Christians take a strong view on euthanasia<sup>16</sup> and condemn suicide.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, it is the presence of awareness in humans which is seen to provide evidence for the special relationship our species enjoys with God. Thomas Aquinas for example claims rationality for humans alone, and dismisses concern for animals on the basis that they are “irrational”.<sup>18</sup> Such a belief has permeated western culture to the extent that it is only in the last couple of centuries that our relationship to animals as rational beings is taken seriously<sup>19</sup>. It is now becoming apparent in both the secular and Christian tradition that animals are far from “Brute beasts that have no understanding”. If human awareness is seen as proof of our special relationship with God, it is inconsistent not to concede that higher animals such as the ones we eat every day also deserve special consideration.

If animals lack a spiritual dimension, such consideration need not extend to preserving the life of an animal against its own interest. This means that involuntary euthanasia is an appropriate and loving response to an animal suffering from severe pain from which it cannot recover.<sup>20</sup> A Christian who worships a sentient, self-aware God with

beliefs, desires and emotions does however need to take into consideration seriously the individual interests of animals who share these features. This necessitates the Church taking a stand on forms of ritualised animal abuse common to modern society that clearly act against the interests of animals. The most pervasive of these is the use of their flesh, milk and eggs for food. Since this is also behaviour that is most easily modified at an individual or church level, I have described the practices of intensive (“factory”) farming below in more detail.

### Factory farming

A recent estimate is that 10 billion land animals – almost twice the human population – are raised and slaughtered each year in the United States alone.<sup>21</sup> No other usage of animals compares in terms of its wide acceptance. Christians often excuse the practice on the basis of its widespread use in the Bible. For example, God specifically gave permission for Noah and his descendants to eat animals (Gen 9:3); there are the numerous accounts of sacrifice in the Old Testament; Jesus himself saw no problem in killing the fatted calf for the return of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-31), and God gave permission for Peter to “kill and eat” a number of different clean and unclean beasts (Acts 10:13).

However, simply because flesh-eating was not condemned in biblical times, does not mean that it is excusable in modern western society. During biblical times, and indeed until quite recently in western societies, it was widely regarded that flesh was necessary for human health, and it may indeed still be so in some areas. In some cultures where the land is too poor to grow vegetables or where a large majority of food is still produced through hunting and gathering, flesh may still be a necessity. Furthermore, to traditional societies the hunting of animals for food was

(and still is) part of the balance of nature. Top predators such as *Homo sapiens* kept the prey numbers in balance, and prevented overpopulation and worse suffering of the prey species through starvation.

Very few people would advocate complete abstinence from eating animals when our survival depends on it, and certainly the higher status of humans as bearers of God’s image would allow the life of a human to take priority under these conditions. However, the situation in modern western society is very different. Firstly, we now know that flesh and other animal products are not essential for a healthy life,<sup>22</sup> and in fact it is excesses of animal products that are causing an epidemic of obesity and its related problems in New Zealand and the rest of the western world.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, flesh-eating is no

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longer an ecologically appropriate activity. Unlike traditional hunter-gatherers, modern westerners do not keep down herbivore numbers through hunting; we artificially increase the numbers by farming them. Clearance of wildlife habitats for farming and other uses is a major factor in species loss,<sup>24</sup> and the extra land needed for arable agriculture is a factor in the unbalanced distribution of land, and therefore survival chances of the poor in low income countries.<sup>25</sup> Animal agriculture is a major cause of global warming<sup>26</sup> and stream pollution,<sup>27</sup> and according to a recent report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, meat and dairy production is a major contributor to global warming and soil degradation.<sup>28</sup> There are therefore human welfare and ecological issues associated with flesh eating as well as animal ones.

Even if we restrict our duties to animals to the avoidance of suffering, it is apparent that the degree

of suffering experienced by animals in the modern factory farm is incomparably greater than that suffered in the free-range farming practised in biblical times.

Pigs in western societies for example are routinely kept in narrow stalls for their entire lives, where they are unable to perform any of their normal functions or even to turn around. This narrow confinement leads not only to debilitating physical illnesses caused through lack of exercise and cramped conditions,<sup>29</sup> but also to severe psychological trauma leading to stereotyped behaviour<sup>30</sup> indicative of insanity.<sup>31</sup>

Layer hens are similarly confined, several to a cage, in an area that provides each hen with less space than an A4 sheet of paper. This severe confinement leads to a number of physical illnesses and

deformities, including weakening and fracturing of bones.<sup>32</sup> When layer hens are handled prior to slaughter, the

general weakening of their bones means that up to 30% of hens suffer from broken bones when being handled before slaughter.<sup>33</sup> To prevent cannibalism and feather pecking, hens have their beaks trimmed when they are a day old, an operation which results in extreme acute and long-term pain.<sup>34</sup> But the worst form of deprivation must be the inability for hens to display any of the natural behaviour they enjoy, including dust bathing, foraging, nesting, or even flapping their wings<sup>35</sup>.

The conditions in which broiler chickens are confined are arguably even worse. Broiler chickens have been selectively bred to grow so fast that their heart and legs cannot cope with the weight of their bodies. As a result, it has been estimated that around 26% of broilers are in chronic pain from lameness as they approach slaughter<sup>36</sup>. The magnitude and severity of broiler production has led animal welfare scientist John Webster to conclude

that this constitutes “the single most severe, systematic example of man’s inhumanity to another sentient animal”<sup>37</sup>. In New Zealand, a recent study revealed that up to 40% of heavier broilers suffered from the same degree of lameness as their European counterparts<sup>38</sup>.

Even animals traditionally raised in pasture do not have a pain free existence. In Australia and New Zealand for

example, some sheep breeds are subjected to a highly traumatic operation whereby large cuts are made in their buttocks with no anaesthetic applied. Sheep also have their tails docked, another

operation that can cause short and long term pain.<sup>39</sup> Sheep, cattle, and pigs are castrated early in their life, and physiological and behavioural studies have confirmed the common sense view that such operations are extremely painful.<sup>40</sup> Cattle also have their horns removed to prevent them goring other cattle, and the amount of anaesthetic provided is often inadequate to prevent pain.<sup>41</sup>

The final journey to the slaughterhouse is fraught with stress, with animals travelling by truck and ship for days in extreme climactic conditions.<sup>42</sup> The time the animal spends in the slaughterhouse itself is also likely to be traumatic and painful. Modern slaughterhouse workers have to keep to hectic production line schedules, so the potential for painful accidents to the animals (and human workers) is extremely high.<sup>43</sup> In her undercover exposé in the United States, Gail Eisnitz documents stories of animals being scalded alive, deliberately tortured by staff, and struck repeatedly by stressed, underpaid workers continually missing the kill.<sup>44</sup> The ACC levy figures for New Zealand also reveal that slaughterhouse worker is an extremely dangerous profession, with the levies higher than those for shearing,

construction, or aerial topdressing. It is wishful thinking (or extreme anti-Americanism) to assume that New Zealand slaughterhouses run under the same industrial conditions, and exposing the human workers to such danger will be any more humane to the non-humans than they are in the United States.

Dairy products are not directly derived from killing animals, but

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surplus bobby calves are sent to the slaughterhouse, and the dairy cow follows them once her milk runs out. Other questionable animal welfare practices also apply to the modern New Zealand dairy industry. Firstly, dairy cows are not exempt from operations such as dehorning or tail docking. The continuous demand to increase milk production also takes its toll on the dairy cow. This punishing work rate invariably takes its toll in disorders such as lameness and mastitis. Dairy calves are separated from their mothers soon after they are born, and this is also emotionally stressful to both animals.<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to compare the biblical injunction not to separate a cow from her calves for at least a week (Lev 22:27), with modern dairy farms where the separation can take place after a matter of days.

In New Zealand, the use of animals for food is intimately tied up with vivisection in laboratories. New Zealand is almost unique in that the majority of painful animal experiments are not conducted to help alleviate human pain and distress, but to improve productivity in farm animals<sup>46</sup>

Anyone seriously advocating that animals should not be made to suffer would therefore be well advised to avoid not only pork,

chicken, turkey, veal, feedlot cattle, and battery eggs, but to extend the ban to most other forms of meat, as well as to dairy products. I have also confined my discussion to practices endemic in New Zealand. However, some imported meats such as white veal and *pate de foie gras* involve even worse cruelties and deprivations to the ones mentioned.

Some flesh products, such as free range pork and slow growing organic chicken from small scale farmers may be produced with little or no animal cruelty, but if we take seriously the status of animals as individuals, then even the use of

these products becomes problematic. Even if we accept that humans are more valuable than animals, and that our needs must take priority over theirs, it does not follow logically that *any* human need, no matter how trivial, must always take priority over *any* animal need, no matter how vital. It therefore behoves us to drastically reduce the quantity of animal products consumed, and to take more particular care in sourcing them.

### **Conclusion**

Animals may not be created as images of God in such a clear manner as humans, but nevertheless do possess many of the attributes of their Creator. It is therefore inconsistent not to provide them with at least some of the rights accorded to *Homo sapiens* in the Christian tradition. If taken seriously, this requires a radical rethink about the way we treat animals, and will necessitate some lifestyle changes among Christians.

One common objection to including animals in our circle of moral concern is that human concerns must come first, and churches have limited resources to provide to worthwhile causes. It would therefore be unreasonable to expect churches to add animal liberation groups or animal shelters

to the list of causes they support. However, for churches, as for any group willing to take animals seriously, the first priority is that we stop exploiting them. And this does not require any extra outlay in scarce resources. On the contrary, the money saved in buying flesh could be used better to support worthwhile causes.<sup>47</sup>

Ending animal exploitation

means that members of the Church will need to refrain from various actions that they may have taken for granted. Given the suffering inherent in the system of pork, chicken, and battery egg production, as a bare minimum, churches need to reconsider the necessity for holding sausage sizzles and “fun” (for the children) trips to fast food restaurants.

If the lives of animals as individuals are to mean anything, then animal products should be totally avoided at church events, with the possible exception of free range eggs, shell fish, humanely killed fish and crustaceans,<sup>48</sup> and dairy products sourced from cruelty-free suppliers. However this would probably alienate many members of the congregation, and if adopted in a wholesale fashion may do more harm than good. A more gradual change could therefore be in order. It should be possible for example to avoid the products derived from the worst excesses of factory farming (pig meat, chicken and battery “caged” eggs), and to ensure that vegetarian and vegan options are available for those with moral objections to eating animal products. It has also been my experience that if nutritious and appealing vegetarian and vegan options are presented at functions, then even hard core carnivores are inclined to take them in preference to their usual fare, and even exclaim that they did not realise vegan food tasted so good. Providing a variety of food options could therefore be more conducive to opening hearts and minds than a

blanket prohibition.

Unfortunately, the church has made little progress in making these concessions to its vegetarian and vegan members. An article in a popular Christian magazine lamented the fact that churches in the United States not only are unwilling to stop serving flesh at church events, but that they show more reluctance than the general

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society to accommodate those who have chosen an alternative diet. Vegetarian and vegan options are common at secular pot-luck events, but not at their Christian counterparts.<sup>49</sup> I can confirm that the same attitude prevails in New Zealand churches. One churchgoer objected to this criticism pointing out that salads are always available at church barbecues. But this proves my point. A salad is no more a complete meal for a vegan than it is for an omnivore, and treating them as if they have fewer nutritional requirements than the general population shows a lack of understanding, and indeed could be construed as discriminatory. Neglect, hostility or indifference towards those with a different view to the mainstream is certainly not appropriate, given the general biblical exhortation to accommodate to those whose expression of faith is different from our own (see 1 Cor 8).

If churches took the lead in abstaining from most animal products, this would send a strong message to the rest of society and in itself would achieve a great deal for animals. The realisation that animals should form part of our moral concern also has ramifications in other areas that have not been discussed, such as vivisection and genetic modification of animals. In some ways, the present lack of

concern for animals is an historical anomaly among the Christian community. In the past, Christians have played a major part in the animal liberation movement,<sup>50</sup> and theological arguments for a better treatment of animals largely preceded scientific ones.<sup>51</sup>

One reason for the present lack of concern may be that the animal liberation movement has largely

been co-opted by Darwinian materialists, and with it has come hostility towards the Christian view of humans having a special place in the universe.<sup>52</sup> An indifference to animals may be

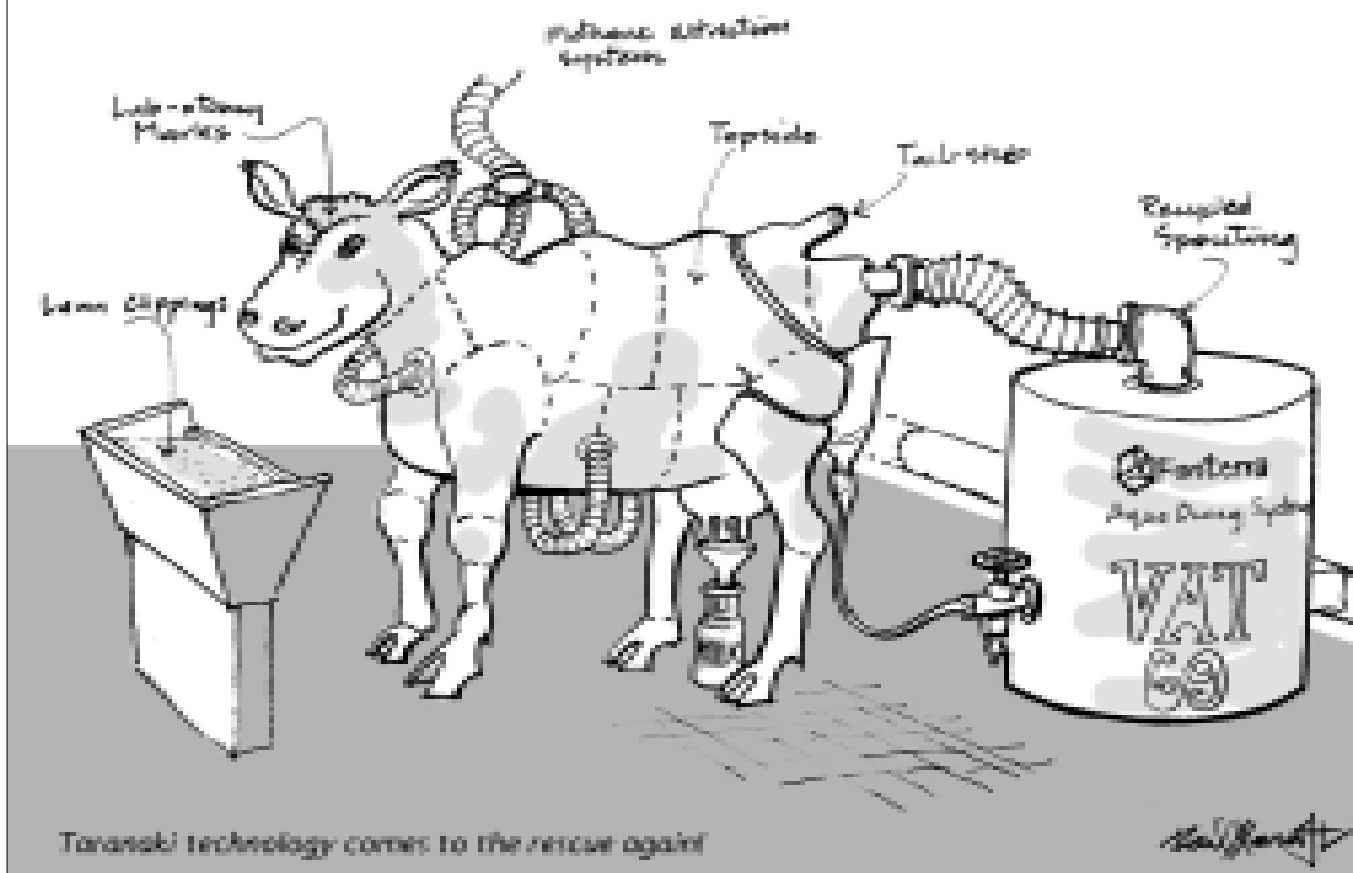
a defensive reaction to what Christians perceive as a threat from the secular side.

However, as I have tried to show, concern for animals is quite compatible with traditional evangelical assumptions of the special place of humans. As another Christian commentator has said, there is no danger that showing compassion to animals will knock humanity from its pedestal.<sup>53</sup> Christians have worked together with those holding different beliefs when campaigning for better treatment of slaves, workers, prisoners and other marginalised members of society. There is no reason why Christians and non Christians cannot similarly put their other differences to one side, while working together to make the world a better place for non-human animals.<sup>54</sup>

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Meet Herbi-vore the battery bovine ...



Taranaki technology comes to the rescue again!

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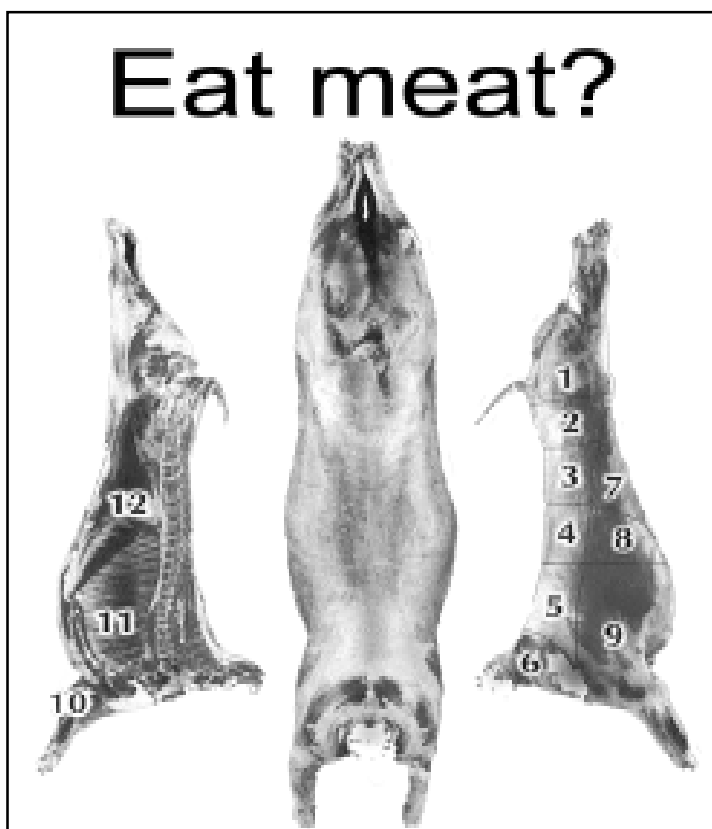
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54. I thank Dr. Richard Thornhill (West Yorkshire), David Turner (Wellington) and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on the manuscript.



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