

## SO, WE MEAT AGAIN

### Meat consumption in relation to Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory

*Arthur Bribosia and Jesler van Houdt*

**Abstract** The meat industry is being blamed for its role regarding climate change, environmental degradation as well as food insecurity in the Global-South. Additionally, the conditions in which animals are being raised and slaughtered in industrial farms are often denounced as cruel and morally unacceptable. Assuming that most meat consumers in developed countries are to a certain extent aware of the negative consequences inherent to meat consumption, how can the increasing consumption of meat be explained? In an attempt to understand what Ricard (2014) describes as a “moral schizophrenia” (p.15), this paper applies Bandura’s (1999) Moral Disengagement Theory to industrial meat production in developed countries. As a result, this paper argues that a lack of major behavioural change in meat consumption despite the increasing detrimental consequences of industrial meat production, can be applied to Bandura’s moral disengagement theory when taking a potential awareness gap into consideration.

## I Introduction

Every year, sixty billion terrestrial animals are killed for human consumption across the world (Ricard, 2014, p.14). Since 1961, the average meat consumption worldwide has increased by 20 kilograms, which sets the current average at 43 kilograms per person per year (Ritchie & Roser, n.d.). Studies show that meat consumption is higher in high income countries, with the United-States consuming 110 kilograms of meat per person per year (FAO, n.d.). Although meat consumption is growing exponentially in developing countries, developed countries remain the biggest meat consumers.

The meat industry is being blamed for its role regarding climate change, environmental degradation as well as food insecurity in the Global-South. Additionally, the conditions in which animals are being raised and slaughtered in industrial farms are often denounced as cruel and morally unacceptable. Assuming that most meat consumers in developed countries are to a certain extent aware of the negative consequences inherent to meat consumption, how can the increasing consumption of meat be explained? In an attempt to understand what Ricard (2014) describes as a “moral schizophrenia” (p.15), this paper examines the extent to which Albert Bandura’s (1999) Moral Disengagement Theory can explain the consumption of industrially produced meat in developed countries. This theory, which serves to explain why “normal people are able to engage in unethical behaviour without apparent guilt or self-censure” (Detert, Sweitzer & Treviño, 2008, p.374), has already been used by scholars in the context of meat consumption. However, unlike the existing literature on the subject, which only focused on single elements of meat consumption, this essay seeks to apply all eight stages as described by Bandura to the different sides of industrial meat production. Thereby, it analyses the extent to which Bandura’s theory can be applied to meat consumption in developed countries, taking a psychological, sociological and philosophical approach. By examining the applicability of the theory from these different perspectives, we seek to determine whether moral disengagement can explain the lack of major behavioral change in the consumption of meat.

As a result, this paper argues that a lack of major behavioural change in meat consumption despite the increasing detrimental consequences of industrial meat production, can be applied to Bandura’s moral disengagement theory when taking a potential awareness gap into consideration. This conclusion is based on the finding that many meat consumers distance themselves from the immorality of meat consumption through different psychological methods, among which being ‘euphemistic labelling’ and ‘advantageous comparison’.

In order to provide an extensive explanation of this phenomenon, this paper will first justify the primary assumption that industrial meat consumption is unethical. Secondly, Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory will be succinctly presented before applying all eight stages of the theory to industrial meat consumption. Afterwards, the possibility of a lack of knowledge from the consumers regarding the consequences of industrial meat consumption will be evaluated. Finally, the paper will conclude by confirming the applicability of Bandura's theory to industrial meat consumption.

## 2 Why is eating meat unethical?

The moral disengagement theory used in this essay seeks to explain why many people are able to carry out unethical actions without a feeling of self-condemnation or remorse (Bandura, 1999). As we apply this theory to meat consumption in order to explain why people continue to consume meat, it is important to justify the central assumption of this paper that consuming meat is an unethical behaviour. This assumption is based on the humanitarian, environmental and moral consequences inherent to the current scheme of industrial farming and meat consumption in many developed countries.

Currently, 80 to 95 percent of the meat produced in Western countries comes from industrial farming (Ricard, 2014, p.113). To respond to the increasing demand for meat and remain economically competitive, the meat industry reduces the living conditions of the animals to a bare minimum (Ricard, 2014, p.115). They live in small enclosures in which they can barely move, barely see the sunlight and are mutilated to prevent them from wounding themselves or others. To avoid additional costs, mutilations such as the burning of the beak of chickens and the removal of canines and tails of pigs are done without any anaesthesia. Moreover, for the same economic reason, injured animals are neither cured nor euthanized (Ricard, 2014, p.115).

Additionally, the meat industry is one of the biggest contributors to climate change as livestock is the source of 65 percent of the global nitrous oxide emissions, which is 265 times more pernicious than carbon dioxide (Steinfeld, 2006, p.114). Additionally, the industry contributes to nearly 91% of the destruction of the Amazon rainforest as well as to the devastation of ecosystems because of their demand for crops and land. Furthermore, industrial farming for meat consumption requires one third of global freshwater resources (Cowspiracy, n.d.).

Once aware that industrial meat production puts around sixty billion animals (Ricard, 2014, p. 14) through suffering and discomfort every year, and that indus-

trial meat production is one of the main contributors to climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and freshwater use (Steinfeld, 2006), it would be hard to defend it as ethically acceptable. A potential response to these facts could be that the consumers are not responsible for the way meat is being produced. However, since consumers create the market (Case & Fair, 1989, p. 72-73) through their demands for large quantities of meat at a cheap price, they do have an influence on the way the food market develops.

### 3 Banduras Moral Disengagement Theory

In 1999, a professor in the department of psychology of Stanford University, Albert Bandura, published an elaboration on his social cognitive theory of 1989 in the *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, introducing the moral disengagement theory. This theory analyses the different methods that are used by humans to morally distance themselves from the negative consequences of immoral acts. A prerequisite for the moral disengagement theory is the assumption that people generally formulate societal norms, and judge their actions based on these. Therefore, activities that are considered 'good' and 'moral' are carried out, as performing these actions gives the doer "satisfaction and a sense of self-worth" (Bandura, 2007, p.9). Accordingly, people abstain from deeds that are considered immoral, as doing so would lead to self-denunciation. In the case of moral disengagement, this system does not apply, however, and people are able to perform immoral tasks without self-condemnation. As explained by Bandura (2007) himself: "Disengagement of moral self-sanctions enables people to pursue detrimental practices freed from the restraint of self-censure" (p.8).

Moral disengagement is applied when people find themselves in the ambivalent situation of performing an action that benefits them but does not coincide with their personal moral standards. The result is a "gradual disengagement of self-censure" (Bandura, 1999, p.203), summarised in three levels. In the first level, which Bandura (1999) summarized as "Detrimental Practices" (p.194), individuals avoid self-censuring for their immoral acts by regarding those acts as either being moral or having a worthy purpose (moral justification). Additionally, the acts are seen as not being as immoral as other acts that have been or are executed by others (exonerative/ advantageous comparison) or by disguising the immorality by using positive, vague synonyms (euphemistic labelling). The second level generally concedes the immorality of the specific action, but minimises, ignores or even misconstrues its negative consequences (Bandura, 1999). Other methods are the displacement or the diffusion of responsibility for the action. For the former, the respon-

sibility is frequently considered to be that of authorities and decision makers that commanded the immoral act, and are thereby the agent of it. The latter can be achieved by dividing the labour into small, in itself not unethical activities, or by group decision making, because of which one only bears a fraction of the responsibility. In the third level, the focus shifts from the consequences of actions to the victims and enunciators of the problem and its immorality, whereby both are dehumanised and blamed. This is oftentimes linked to a sense of superiority and anonymity, which is enforced through “bureaucratisation, automation, urbanisation, and high geographical mobility” (Bandura, 1999, p.200).

## **4 Bandura’s theory applied to industrial meat consumption**

### **4.1 Moral Justification**

In the context of meat consumption, different aspects such as culture and politics provide moral justifications. Firstly, the consumption of meat can be justified as being part of our traditions and cultural identity. The famous statement by then president of the United States George H.W. Bush that “the American way of life is not negotiable” (Harris, 2008, p.968) appears exemplary for the common understanding that tradition is of the greatest importance (Bailey, Froggat, & Wellesley, 2014) and cannot be expected to be reduced or given up. Indeed, what would be an American Thanksgiving without turkey? Hence, tradition and culture are seen as the priority, justifying the continuous consumption of meat (Ricard, 2014, p.168). Moreover, on a political level, many governments and leading non-governmental organizations do not openly consider a strong reduction of meat consumption as the solution to contemporary environmental crises. Reasons for this are a concern about public hatred, possibly leading to a loss of support, resulting in a loss of votes in upcoming elections for government parties or funding cuts for NGOs (Bailey et al., 2014). Through this reasoning, publicly denying or minimizing the negative consequences of meat consumption can be seen as facilitating re-elections and receiving funding.

### **4.2 Advantageous comparison**

Many meat consumers have a sense of superiority over farm animals. This means that they, when comparing the animal’s suffering to their own benefit (the pleasure of eating meat), regard their benefit as being more important. Correspondingly, this superiority justifies any immoral activities done to farm animals, as they contribute to the final moral activity of enhancing the consumer’s quality of life. This phenomenon is called speciesism, and positively corre-

lates with moral disengagement (Piazza et al., 2015). Speciesism is the favouritism of one species (mostly humans) over another. This is usually used in the context of animal exploitation and mistreatment (Gruen, 2017). Studies show that meat consumers are more likely to have Speciesist beliefs than vegetarians and vegans (Piazza et al., 2015). Therefore, one might conclude, that Speciesism is one method of advantageous comparison, as farm animals are not seen as worthy, 'human' animals (a way in which pets are generally seen), but as objects, which may be abused without it being immoral (Les, 2011).

### **4.3 Euphemistic labelling**

Linguistic strategies, such as the use of positive or vague synonyms, are very commonly utilized to disguise the reality hiding behind meat consumption. According to Ricard (2014), few meat consumers in developed countries are willing and able to deal with the reality of meat production, including the raising, killing and processing of an animal. As a response to this disgust, the discourse of meat consumption is modified so that it dissociates the product of consumption from the living animal (Heinz & Lee, 1998). An example would be that the different labels used to account for the quality of life of farm animals give the wrong idea to the consumer because of their vagueness and a confusing choice of words (Gillespie, 2011). As labels seek to reassure meat consumers that are concerned about the treatment of animals in industrial farms, labels such as 'Free Range' convey the idea of a happy animal, thereby reassuring the consumer's conscience (Gillespie, 2011). However, the truth behind these labels does not correspond to the consumer's idea of their meaning. For example, the label 'Free Range' only has regulations for poultry and implies that there is a door leading to outside. In reality, the door is rarely open and the birds are not encouraged to go outside (Gillespie, 2011).

Another example is the way farm animals are called in order to emphasize their purpose to men and overlook their identity as living beings. Names such as slaughter lambs, dairy calves, and breeding cattle portray animals in terms of the use to which humans will put them, thereby reinforcing the idea that this is the purpose of the animal. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, in some cases, the animals we eat are given another name when processed: 'pig' becomes 'pork' and 'cow' becomes 'beef' (Gillespie, 2011).

### **4.4 Minimising, ignoring and misconstruing consequences**

In second level of psychological moral disengagement, as defined by Bandura (1999), individuals morally distance themselves from the unethical action by either minimising, ignoring or misconstruing its consequences. In relation to

meat consumption, this is being done by both the supplier and the consumers. It is described by Gillespie (2011) as the following: “There is a kind of “silent collusion” between the producers and the consumers. While producers conduct the process of slaughter under cover of concealment, consumers for their part cultivate standard forms of ignorance” (p. 117).

This ‘ignorance’ is the outcome of many factors, including, among others, the secrecy that surrounds meat production as well as the denial by many meat consumers that animals have a conscience and high mental capacities. The former is achieved by a stronger focus by meat vendors on tradition (Heinz & Lee, 1998) rather than the production and slaughtering process. This lack of focus on the slaughtering process leads to an absence of this aspect of meat production in packaging and other consumer-related marketing strategies, through which a clear differentiation between the animal and the final product is being made (Heinz & Lee, 1998). This results in a misconception and disregard of the actual consequences of meat consumption. For the latter, a recent study that reviewed the extent to which people attributed mental capacities to cows and sheep (domestic animals used for food production) and non-food animals, showed that meat consumers are more likely to deny mentality to animals when confronted with the knowledge that these will be used for food purposes (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012).

#### **4.5 Displacement and diffusion of responsibility**

Another method discovered by Bandura (1999) is ‘displacement of responsibility’. In this stage, consumers view their immoral action (eating meat) as being the result of external forces, mainly that of higher authorities. This results in a general disbelief in the power of individual action. Predominantly, there is a lacking belief that consumer action can effectively decrease the detrimental consequences of meat consumption, being both animal suffering and environmental consequences (Heinrich-Böll Foundation, 2014). This disbelief additionally results in government’s mitigation strategies focussing less on behavioural change, reinforcing individuals’ moral disengagement (Bailey et al., 2014). Consumers easily feel powerless to change the current situation, and therefore not responsible for its consequences.

A third aspect worthy of being taken into consideration is that many people consider the responsibility to improve living and slaughtering procedures to lie with the slaughterhouses themselves, as they are the institution directly involved in the slaughtering process, and not the people. This sentiment is illustrated by an environmentalist blogger, who wrote a post on “how slaughterhouses are polluting the planet” (Farr, 2017), thereby directly shifting the blame away from the

consumer. These methods are closely linked to the sixth method of the moral disengagement theory, which is ‘diffusion of responsibility’. This can be achieved through several mechanisms, one of them being division of labour (Bandura, 1999). This strategy is actively utilised in the meat industry, where farms and slaughterhouses are “sometimes hundreds of miles apart” (Gillespie, 2011). Therefore, the ancient procedure of raising, killing and consuming or selling an animal yourself gets subdivided into multiple different sub-actions, dividing the breeding, transport, slaughtering, and selling. This division of labour enforces the disengagement of the consumers, as they are not directly a part of any of these processes.

#### **4.6 Dehumanization**

When talking about animals, it might seem contradictory to apply meat consumption to the dehumanization stage. However, through the lens of philosophy and Christianity, this process of dehumanization can very clearly be linked to animal exploitation and consumption. Philosophy and Christianity have, for more than 2000 years, spread the idea that animals are inferiors meant to be exploited in order to serve humanity (Serpell, 1986). This anthropocentric view places one species (men) above all others and as a result justifies the exploitation and killing of other species. Furthermore, in contemporary Western philosophy, the idea was that animals were unable to feel, including the feeling of pain. In fact, Descartes described animals as machines, Kant explained that animals were not conscious of themselves, and Spinoza concluded that there are no good reasons not to use animals for our own interest (Ricard, 2014, p26-33).

Therefore, both Christianity and Western philosophy conveyed and promoted a vision of animals as being inferior to men, thereby giving mankind permission to use other species for their own good (Serpell, 1986). One could argue that the influence of religion on Western societies has decreased and that the Bible condemns animal cruelty as well (Ricard, 2014, p. 40). Additionally, philosophical theories were disproved by science, which proved that animals are conscious and are able to feel. However, Christianity and Western philosophy can still be seen as important foundations of contemporary values (Western culture, n.d.). Therefore, Christian and philosophical perceptions of meat and meat consumption should not be undervalued when regarding moral disengagement within meat consumption.

#### **4.7 Attribution of blame**

Human nature is repeatedly blamed for many meat consumer’s desire to eat meat. From a historical perspective, hunting for and eating meat has been in our

nature since the beginning of mankind. In fact, it has even influenced human-kind's development, with the specialisation of tools evolving alongside a growing importance of meat in the human diet (Stanford, 1999, p. 6). As this example shows, meat consumption is seen as inherent to human kind, therefore justifying continuous consumption.

However, vegetarians and vegans are proof that meat consumption is a choice rather than a natural need. Through this constant reminder, they break the cycle of moral disengagement. Therefore, they are perceived as threatening by many meat consumers, because of which vegetarians and vegans become the target of disdain (Rothgerber, 2014). This phenomenon is illustrated in a study by the sociologists Cole and Morgan (2011) analysing the depiction of people with a vegan diet in British media. It found that 75% of the media portrayed vegans in a negative light, ridiculing the individuals and their choices. These results could be seen as a means to reassure meat consumers of the morality of their choices, by ridiculing those of vegans. Therefore, the utilisation of human nature as well as the contempt of other dietary choices confirm that the last stage of Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory is applicable to meat consumption as well.

## 5 Criticism

Through the application of Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory to industrial meat consumption, using different disciplines within social sciences, the aim was to provide an explanation as to why, being aware of the detrimental consequences inherent to industrial meat production, has there been no major behavioural change in developed countries. Although the application of the theory to meat consumption provided an effective explanation to the current consumer behaviour in developed countries, a significant limitation needs to be addressed before concluding this research.

In order for there to be moral disengagement as defined and elaborated above, the person needs to be aware of the consequences behind meat consumption. If meat consumers were to be completely unaware of the moral, environmental and humanitarian implications, it would be difficult to qualify this behaviour as morally disengaged. Even though a complete ignorance from meat consumers is unlikely, an international study in 2014 discovered that many meat consumers are not aware of the impact of industrial meat production on the environment (Increased Fears About Environment, but Little Change in Consumer Behavior, According to New National Geographic/GlobeScan Study, 2014). As Figure 1 illustrates, there is a public knowledge gap about the drivers of climate change

and their contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, which are the cause of global warming. The study reveals that only a small percentage of people consider the meat industry to considerably influence climate change.

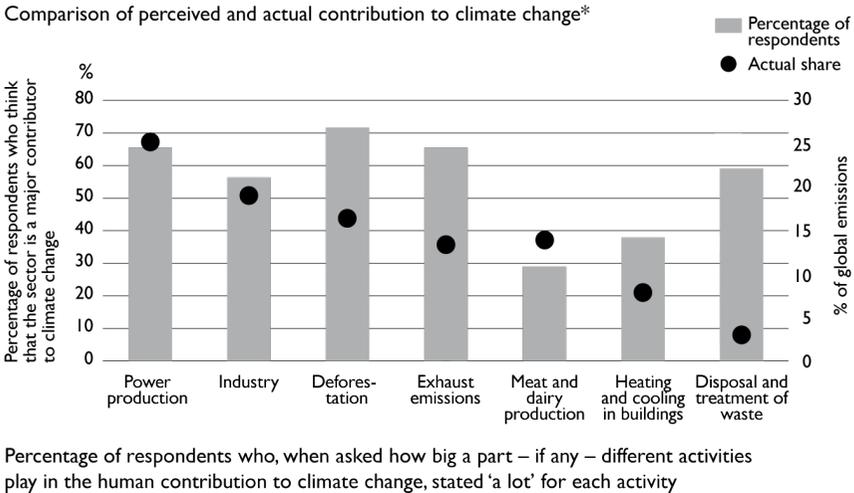


Figure 1 \*Contrast between actual and believed contribution of different sectors to climate change (percentage of subjects who considered the activity to influence climate change ‘a lot’) (Bailey et al., 2014).

This study shows, that a potential awareness gap needs to be taken into consideration when applying Bandura’s (1999) moral disengagement theory to industrial meat consumption, as there can be no moral disengagement without a minimum of awareness.

Meat consumers might not be fully aware of the environmental impact of industrial meat production, the living conditions in industrial farms, the killing process in slaughterhouses as well as of the economic consequences of crop production for livestock on the global south. However, they are aware of the general immorality of contemporary meat production systems. This general awareness can be seen in the consumers’ tendency to remain as distant from the meat production process as possible, in their unwillingness to kill an animal themselves as well as in their outraged reaction when hearing about living conditions and slaughter process in the meat industry (Ricard, 2014).

## 6 Conclusion

This paper analysed the question of why there has not been a major behavioural change in meat consumption as a result of its increasingly detrimental consequences. In order to answer this, it applied Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement theory to consumers of industrially produced meat. As the eight different stages of moral disengagement have been analysed and applied to meat consumption, this paper found that moral disengagement is present and strongly influential in the meat consumption dilemma, both on an individual, cultural and supply level. The analysis illustrated that meat consumers are often morally disengaged from meat, and thereby distance themselves from the immorality of the meat industry. As a result, they continue to consume meat even though they are aware of its environmental, humanitarian, and moral implications.

On the individual level, methods such as the displacement of responsibility to governments and slaughterhouses as well as undermining level of consciousness of animals, and the perception of vegetarians as being threatening, contribute to moral disengagement. All aforementioned methods contribute to the meat eaters' distancing from the negative consequences of consuming meat by passively blaming others for these and minimising their focus on and knowledge about these results. On the cultural level, the argument of meat being a part of culture as well as the position of meat and animal products in the English language contribute to moral disengagement. Finally, the supply chain strongly focused on widening the gap between the production and consumption of meat, thereby actively distancing meat from animals (Ricard, 2014). It should be acknowledged, however, that due to the last part as mentioned before - the active separation of the image of meat with animals by the industries - as well as a lack of focus by governments and non-governmental organisations on environmental issues related to meat consumption, an awareness gap is additionally partly responsible for the continuous meat consumption, with consumers being unaware of its big environmental implications. As there has to be an understanding of the immorality of one's actions in order for one to be able to morally disengage from these, it could be argued that the moral disengagement theory does not entirely apply to meat consumption. Nevertheless, these factors can be considered negligible compared to other forms of moral disengagement, which show an active disengagement of most meat consumers with animal suffering and slaughter.

Therefore, this paper concludes that a lack of major behavioural change in meat consumption, despite the increasing detrimental consequences of industrial meat production, can be applied to Bandura's moral disengagement theory and could be explained when considering a potential awareness gap. This find-

ing opens the debate on how to reduce this disengagement of meat consumers with the source of the product, following the assumption that a decrease of moral disengagement leads to greater societal activism against inhumane condition in slaughter houses as well as a reduced meat consumption among the consumers.

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