

Wool and Leather

Xi is a vegetarian because she believes that eating meat causes animals to suffer and die unnecessarily, and she believes that is wrong. However, she is not sure how she feels about the morality of purchasing clothing that involves animal products, such as wool and leather. In particular, Xi wonders whether it would be hypocritical to be a vegetarian for moral reasons while continuing to purchase wool and leather products.

Xi has noticed that some vegetarians continue to purchase wool and leather products. Some of them argue that this is different from eating meat, since shearing sheep does not necessarily kill or harm them. And leather, while it must be obtained from dead animals, can be obtained from animals that die from natural causes. But Xi knows that others argue that buying wool and leather is morally wrong for precisely the same reasons eating meat is—that it causes the unnecessary suffering and death of animals. For example, leather is often obtained from the same livestock that is raised for meat. And while wool production does not necessarily kill or harm sheep, she has heard that sheep bred for wool production sometimes produce so much wool that they die from heat exhaustion or develop infections in the folds of their skin. Xi worries that if the production of wool and leather is inhumane in the same ways as meat production, she will have to give those products up too.

Xi has considered only buying wool and leather products from local farmers and artisans who vouch for the humane conditions in which their animals are raised, in order to avoid supporting inhumane practices. However, she would never buy meat from these farmers, in part because she knows that raising livestock—even grass-fed, humanely raised livestock—is also bad for the environment. But she's not sure to what extent the same is true of wool and leather. Well-made wool and leather products seem to last a long time, whereas meat is gone as soon as it is eaten. On the other hand, Xi worries that if wool and leather are coming from the very same animals that are being killed for meat, then she is contributing to the same system that she was trying to avoid by giving up meat.

Xi enjoyed eating meat, but she became a vegetarian because she didn't want to contribute to the unnecessary suffering and death of animals. She enjoys wearing wool and leather products, too. She thinks they are better quality and more fashionable than synthetic products, so she is reluctant to give them up. But now she wonders if that is exactly what she must do.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do humans have a moral responsibility to consider the impact on non-human animals when making consumer decisions? If so, how much weight should we give these considerations? If not, why not?
2. Are wool and leather similar morally speaking? Or are there relevant differences between them? What about between wool or leather and fur?
3. Is there a morally relevant difference between leather that comes from pigs and cows, and leather that comes from kangaroos or alligators? What about leather that comes from dogs and cats? Or secondhand leather or wool purchased from thrift stores?

