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Reasonable Humans and Animals: An Argument for Vegetarianism

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“It is easy for us to criticize the prejudices of our grandfathers, from which our fathers freed themselves. It is more difficult to distance ourselves from our own views, so that we can dispassionately search for prejudices among the beliefs and values we hold.”

- Peter Singer

“It's a matter of taking the side of the weak against the strong, something the best people have always done.”

- Harriet Beecher Stowe

In my experience of teaching philosophy, ethics and logic courses, I have found that no topic brings out the rational and emotional best and worst in people than ethical questions about the treatment of animals. This is not surprising since, unlike questions about social policy, generally about what *other people* should do, moral questions about animals are *personal*. As philosopher Peter Singer has observed, “For most human beings, especially in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with non-human animals is at mealtimes: we eat

them.”¹ For most of us, then, *our own* daily behaviors and choices are challenged when we reflect on the reasons given to think that change is needed in our treatment of, and attitudes toward, animals. That the issue is personal presents unique challenges, and great opportunities, for intellectual and moral progress.

Here I present some of the reasons given for and against taking animals seriously and reflect on the role of reason in our lives. I examine the common assumption *that there is nothing wrong with harming animals – causing them pain, suffering, and an early death – so they might be eaten*. We will see if moral “common sense” in this area can survive critical scrutiny. Our method, useful for better understanding all ethical debates, is to identify unambiguous and precise moral conclusions and make all the reasons in favor of the conclusion explicit, leaving no assumption unstated.

Harms and Reasons

Why is the treatment of animals a moral issue? Plutarch suggested an answer nearly two thousand years ago when he reflected on the killing of animals for food:

But for the sake of some little mouthful of flesh we deprive a soul of the sun and light, and of that proportion of life and time it had been born into the world to enjoy.²

¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 3rd Ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), p. 95.

² Quoted in Jonathan Balcombe’s *Pleasurable Kingdom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 218.

The simple answer is that animals are *harmed* by the practices required to bring them to our plates, and harms need rational defense. Chickens, pigs, cows, and other animals are conscious, can feel pleasure and pain, and their lives can go better or worse, from their own point of view. Raising and killing them is *bad for them*: they experience pain, suffering, deprivation, boredom and an early death. *Everything* is taken from them so that they might be eaten. And this is true regardless of the conditions they are raised in.

Let us consider the common view that, even though it's true that animals are harmed (indeed *greatly* harmed) by the practices required for meat eating, *these practices are morally permissible* nevertheless. We will see that common arguments for this perspective all have premises that are either false or in need of serious defense. The methods used in responding to these arguments will prove useful for addressing further arguments and objections beyond those discussed here.

Defending Tradition

One of the first things said is that it's not wrong to harm animals for food because it's a "tradition": it's something we do, and have done, for a long time. True, for many people, eating animals *is* a tradition. But not all traditions are good or right: the important question is always whether an aspect of a tradition can be supported by good moral reasons or not. Also, for many people, eating animals is *not* a tradition: for thousands of years there have been people who extend their compassion to animals, and many other people who were raised eating animals start new traditions when they see that consistency and moral reasoning demands change.

Second, some people say that it's "natural" to raise and kill animals to eat them, so it's right. But the meaning of "natural" is extremely obscure: people can mean very different things when they use the term. Whatever meaning one uses, however, it's very hard to see how modern, industrial methods of factory farming, transport and slaughter are at all "natural." It's not even clear how an individual's raising and killing, say, a pig or a chicken in her backyard would be "natural" either.

But the relationship between what's "natural," in *any* sense of the term, and what's morally right does not help this argument. Selfishness and cruelty are often quite "natural," but they are not right or good. Walking on one's hands is a quite "unnatural" way to transport oneself, but it's usually not wrong to do so. Some "natural" behaviors *are* right, but many are deeply wrong, and advocates of this argument forget that simple point. Whether something is "natural" or not is irrelevant to its morality.

Third, some people insist that it's *nutritionally necessary* to eat meat, milk and eggs and, therefore, it's right that animals are raised and killed to be eaten. But this argument ignores common sense and disrespects medical science. If it were true that we *have* to eat meat and other animal products, then there would be no people who abstain from doing so because they would all be dead. But there are such people, alive and well, and medical science supplements common observations with evidence to show that they are often healthier than omnivores. Consider the position statement of the leading authority on nutrition in North America based on their seventeen-page review of the recent nutrition research:

It is the position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. . . Well-planned vegan and other types of vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence. . . A vegetarian, including vegan, diet can meet current recommendations for all of these nutrients. . . Vegetarian diets offer a number of nutritional benefits, including lower levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein as well as higher levels of carbohydrates, fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate, and antioxidants such as vitamins C and E and phytochemicals. Vegetarians have been reported to have lower body mass indices than nonvegetarians, as well as lower rates of death from ischemic heart disease; vegetarians also show lower blood cholesterol levels; lower blood pressure; and lower rates of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and prostate and colon cancer.³

So this defense of eating animals is either ignorant of, or disrespectful towards, the huge (and growing) body of research that shows the health benefits from eating a diet based on vegetables, legumes, fruits and whole grains, and ignores the growing literature detailing the variety of harms for humans that can result from the production and consumption of animal products.⁴ This argument thus has a false empirical premise: it is not supported by science and medical research.

³ “Position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada: Vegetarian Diets,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 2003;103:748-765. At http://www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/advocacy_933_ENU_HTML.htm.

⁴ Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002) vividly portrays the harms done to (immigrant) workers in slaughterhouses, as does Gail Eisnitz’s *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus 1997).

A pattern is emerging, and we can use it to make a point about how to critically respond to reasoning given in ethics. There are two useful critical ways to respond to moral arguments: an “Oh yeah?” response, and a “So what?” response.⁵ The former “Oh yeah?” response denies the truth of the premise and the latter “So what?” response denies the truth of the (often unstated) assumption needed to validly reach the conclusion. We can see these helpful responses in action by considering more arguments in favor of harming animals.

A fourth argument is based in the claim that “meat tastes good” or that it is pleasurable to eat it. But *so what?* Just because something causes pleasure doesn’t make it right. We do not think that pleasures *automatically* justify harming humans: *if* things are different in the animal case, we need reasons to see why this would be so. And, besides, there are many other pleasure-producing cuisines (often they are ethnic) to choose from that aren’t based on animal products anyway.

A fifth argument is based on someone’s claiming that he or she “just couldn’t give up meat or dairy products or eggs.” *Oh yeah?* Since so many other people have given these up, or never ate them in the first place, this claim is likely disingenuous. And since this person probably hasn’t even tried changing his or her diet for moral reasons, he or she likely lacks the evidence needed to confidently make that judgment.

Sixth, people claim that animals eat other animals, so it’s right for us to do. *Oh yeah?* Only *some* animals eat other animals, and these are not chickens, pigs or cows. And *so what?* Many animals

⁵ The “Oh yeah?” and “So what?” method analysis originates in Nicholas Sturgeon’s “What Difference Does it Make Whether Moral Realism is True?” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement 24, 1986, pp. 115-142.

do lots of things that we wouldn't want to do, and should not do (e.g., eat their own excrement and, sometimes, their young), so why should we imitate animals in only some ways, but not others? A *principled* response is needed for this argument to have any force.

Sometimes people say that we *are* animals, thinking that this justifies our killing and eating animals. But it does not: just because we *are* animals does not mean that it's morally right for us to do *all* the other things that other animals do; above we saw many things that (some) animals do that would be wrong for us to do. And if we are animals, we are unique animals with the ability to reason about the morality of our actions, in light of their consequences for others. Should not we use this reason to do what reduces harms to animals and ourselves?

Seventh, people say eating meat is "convenient." *Oh yeah?* Many meat-based dishes are *inconvenient* to prepare, and plant-based dishes are usually *as convenient* as eating meat anyway. It's just a matter of choosing something else from the same menu or same grocery store. But since doing the right thing *sometimes* requires our being inconvenienced in minor (and sometimes major) ways, *so what?*

Eighth, it is sometimes said that we have a *right* to treat animals these ways, and that animals have *no rights* to not be treated these ways. That might be true, but reasonable people want *reasons* for why they should think that. First, they will want to know what "right" is under consideration. Suppose it's *the right to not be caused to suffer and die for someone else's pleasure*. Is it because animals don't do math problems, write novels or make moral decisions

that they don't have this right? If so, since babies and many other humans don't (and, for some, can't) do these things, this view about moral rights denies them rights also.

Is it because animals are not *biologically human* that they lack the right to not be harmed for others? Interestingly, nearly all philosophers who have considered these issues reject this kind of theory: on their views, the fact that we are biologically human has little to do with what we are owed, morally. This hypothesis is confirmed, in part, by each of us asking us what it is *about* ourselves that, e.g., *makes it* such that it would be wrong to cause us pain and kill us. For most people, the obvious explanation is that this would hurt greatly, we would suffer enormously and our early deaths would prevent us from experiencing all the good things we (hopefully) would have experienced. It's not because of some genes we have or where we are on some chart in a biology book that explains our moral status; rather, it is a matter of our vulnerability to physical and/or psychological harm.

But since many animals are also vulnerable to such harms, these animals seem to be due the respect due to, at least, *comparably-minded* humans. Since this respect requires not raising and killing these humans for the mere *pleasures* of eating them, rational consistency requires the same treatment for chickens, cows, pigs and other animals who often have far richer mental lives than many humans.

Farming Facts

These are just a few of the more common arguments given in defense of raising and killing animals for food. The fact that they are all quite weak suggests that people's resistance to change regarding these issues might be based on non-rational influences, not critical thinking and unbiased inquiry. But the fact that a strong defense of the *status quo* is lacking does not give us yet enough positive reason to think that animals are treated wrongly. To see these reasons, we must consider in brief detail how animals are harmed so that they might be served on our plates.

The treatment of animals in farms and slaughterhouses has been well documented by *all* major print and television media.⁶ On *both* "factory" *and* the few remaining "family" farms, baby animals are castrated, branded, ear and tail-docked, and teeth are pulled, all without (costly) anesthesia. "Veal" calves, the male by-products of the dairy industry, spend their entire life individually chain at the neck and confined to narrow stalls too narrow for them to turn around in. "Broiler" chickens, due to selective breeding and growth-promoting drugs, are killed at forty five days. Such fast growth causes chickens to suffer from a number of chronic health problems, including leg disorders and heart disease. "Layer" hens live a year or more in cages the size of a filing drawer, seven or more per cage, after which they routinely are starved for two weeks ("force molted") to encourage another laying cycle. Female hogs are housed for four or five years in individual barred enclosures ("gestation stalls") barely wider than their bodies, where they are forced to birth litter after litter. Until the recent "Mad Cow" scare, beef and dairy cattle too weak to stand ("downers") were dragged or pushed to their slaughter.⁷

⁶ For reviews of this media coverage, see, among many other sources, *Dawn Animal World News Watch* (www.DawnWatch.com) and *Vegan Outreach's* E-newsletter (www.veganoutreach.org/enewsletter).

⁷ The claims in this paragraph are from a newspaper piece by Tom Regan called "The Myth of 'Humane' Treatment," widely reposted on the internet. For additional sources of information, see Regan's *Empty Cages*:

Many people would describe the treatment of animals in slaughterhouses as simply brutal: the title of a 2001 *Washington Post* entitled “The Die Piece by Piece: In Overtaxed Plants, Humane Treatment of Cattle is Often a Battle Lost,” is suggestive of standard operating procedures in American slaughterhouses; more recent stories reveal similar inhumane conditions.⁸ A 2004 *New York Times* story documented workers at a chicken slaughterhouse stomping on chickens, kicking them, and violently slamming them against floors and walls.⁹ Those attentive to the news media see stories like this all too often.

One hopes that this treatment is not routine, but there are is good reason to be skeptical of claims that it is not. After all, there are no laws protecting farmed animals, since they are explicitly excluded from the Animal Welfare Act. The Act says that, “the term ‘animal’ ... excludes horses not used for research purposes and other farm animals, such as, but not limited to, livestock or poultry, used or intended for food.”¹⁰

Reasonable Ethics

Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, 3rd Edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), as well as the investigative films produced by Compassionate Consumers (WegmansCruelty.com), Compassion Over Killing (COK.net), Farm Sanctuary (FarmSanctuary.org), the Humane Society of the United States (www.HSUS.org), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETATV.com), and other sources. Animal use industries generally do not produce films showing the details of their practices: for rare exceptions, however, see “Veal Farm Tour” (<http://www.vealfarm.com/veal-farm-tour/>) and the *Fur Commission*’s “Excellence Through Humane Care,” “What Can I Say?” and “Chow Time” (<http://www.furcommission.com/video>). For a list of animal-use industry web pages, see the references in Regan’s *Empty Cages*.

⁸ Joby Warrick, “‘They Die Piece by Piece’; In Overtaxed Plants, Humane Treatment of Cattle Is Often a Battle Lost,” *The Washington Post* 10 Apr. 2001.

⁹ Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “KFC Supplier Accused of Animal Cruelty,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2004.

¹⁰ Tom Regan, *Empty Cages*, p. 159.

So should we think that the harmful treatment of animals in farms and slaughterhouses is wrong and should not be supported? This conclusion follows only when *moral principles* are conjoined with facts about animal agribusiness and, perhaps, the fact that we do not need to eat animal products to survive and thrive.

Fortunately, complex moral thinking is not needed to find plausible principles to apply to this case. The simple, but powerful, “common sense” principle that *we should avoid inflicting and supporting needless harm* is all that is needed, and is supported by a wide range of theoretical perspectives – secular and religious – in ethics (in fact, nearly all of them). These theories urge that we should promote goodness and lessen badness or evil, respect *all* beings who are conscious and sentient (not just those who are “rational”), treat others as we would like to be treated, and otherwise promoting caring, compassionate, sympathetic, sensitive and fair attitudes and behavior. All of these theories condemn the practices of contemporary animal agribusiness.

This is true of both secular and religious moral points of view. About Christianity, It is very doubtful that Jesus – who advocated compassion, love and mercy – would support the needless killing of animals for pleasure. Christian theologians and philosophers have carefully engaged these issues and have argued that theology, the Bible and critical thinking about God’s will likely supports such compassion.¹¹ For those who insist that God supports killing animals for the pleasure of eating them, we need to ask them, first, how they might know that and, second, what

¹¹ For a defense of animals from a Christian philosophical perspective, see Matthew Halteman’s *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation* (Washington, DC: Humane Society Press, 2008), at http://www.hsus.org/web-files/PDF/religion/ar-halteman_book_lowres2.pdf . Also see The Christian Vegetarian Association (www.ChristianVeg.com) for an overview of this literature.

reasons God would have for advocating eating animals, especially since it is often nutritional harmful for humans.

Perspectives that deny that we should avoid inflicting needless harm typically degenerate into infantile “might-makes-right” moral theories or they falsely imply that it’s *only because* “rational agents” care about non-rational beings (humans and animals) that it’s be wrong to harm these beings. This latter thought is mistaken because it’s wrong to harm these beings *because they can be harmed*, not because harming them would upset us.

Thus, it seems that reasonable humans (all of whom have to eat and *can easily* choose animal-free foods; they cannot claim they are “too busy” to refrain from eating animals or that there are “more important things” to do, so they therefore *must* eat animals) should broaden their *serious* moral concern to include conscious, sentient beings who are not human: reasonable people should not eat animals, since this is what the best moral reasons support.

One final response to arguments for vegetarianism is a response common to many arguments about issues that challenge how we live our lives: “People are going to *believe* whatever they want to believe, and people are going to *do* whatever they want to do.” It’s important to realize that this response is lamentable: it’s an evasion of the issues, since it does not engage the arguments. For this issue, it’s an attempt to avoid rational engagement with uncomfortable questions about the lives and deaths of, each years, tens of billions of conscious, feeling beings.

Those who are committed to the value of reason in guiding our beliefs, attitudes, and even our feelings should discourage this response, and promote reasonableness in *all* things, not just a select few, personally-convenient, topics. They should do this also because this response is false: people sometimes *do* change their beliefs and behaviors, and on the basis of good reasons. This is true about many issues, and confronting ethical issues about animals can often help us better see this for, and in, ourselves.

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

- Martin Luther King Jr.