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Does the Bible Endorse Moral Vegetarianism?

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“I Give You Everything”

On a cursory reading, the Bible seems anything but a vegetarian manifesto. From its outset, human beings enjoy a status that animals lack, as God creates us, but not them, in his image and grants us “dominion” (Genesis 1:28) over them. Later, after the Great Flood, God reaffirms our privileged position, and expressly permits meat-eating, telling Noah and his sons, “The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything” (Genesis 9:2-3). To be sure, in due course, God qualifies the permission to eat meat, distinguishing clean from unclean animals and commanding his chosen people to abstain from the latter (Leviticus 11). Yet he declines to enforce a vegetarian diet. Again and again, biblical characters raise and eat animals, without incurring God’s wrath.

Perhaps the Bible’s most famous story that refers to flesh-eating is the feeding of the multitude (Luke 9:12-17; cf. Matthew 15:32-39, Mark 6:30-44, John 6:1-14). When Jesus instructs his disciples to feed a hungry throng of five thousand, the twelve men are at a loss, because they have only five loaves of bread and two fish, not nearly enough to satisfy a crowd so large. To solve the problem, Jesus divides the bread and fish and asks the disciples to distribute the pieces. Miraculously, everyone eats to contentment, with enough left over to fill twelve baskets! Rich in meaning, the feeding of the multitude is primarily a story about Jesus, reassuring readers that he is popular (thousands flock to hear his teachings) as well as divine (only a divine being can perform miracles). But, in addition, the story seems to imply that nothing is wrong with feasting on flesh. For, if something were wrong with it, the Son of God would have wrought a different miracle, such as transforming sand into grain and stones into fruit and vegetables. No wonder hundreds of millions of Christians enjoy fish—not to mention burgers, bologna, and Buffalo wings—with never a twinge of guilt.

How should moral vegetarians, especially those who are Christian, respond to all of this? Should they confess that the Bible sanctions meat-eating? Should they contend that a vegetarian diet is morally best in spite of what the Bible says? Should they argue that the

Bible is not always a reliable moral guide, that its attitude toward animals in particular is a moral blunder? Reluctant to swallow such a bitter pill, some Christian moral vegetarians might opt for a different approach, urging—despite appearances to the contrary—that most Christians misread the Bible, that, when properly interpreted, the Bible supports moral vegetarianism. This essay examines one attempt to interpret the Bible along these lines. The interpretation is ingenious. Probably it is the best moral vegetarians can find. Nevertheless, it is insufficient—the form of moral vegetarianism that it recommends is too mild to effect meaningful change in the dietary choices Christians make. Consequently, even on its most charitable interpretation, the Bible does not bring animals tidings of great joy. Moral vegetarians should face facts and admit this.

“They Will Not Hurt or Destroy”

The attempt to reconcile the Bible with moral vegetarianism proceeds as follows.

It is true that God grants us dominion over animals. However, the word “dominion” is ambiguous, having one meaning when we say that lions have dominion over their prey, but another when we say that parents have dominion over their children. In its first sense, the word signifies an arbitrary, amoral power over something, a license to do with that thing as one pleases. In its second sense, it implies stewardship, a responsibility to care for something. If the dominion over animals that God bestows on us at our creation were of the first sort, we would be allowed to do to animals as we wish, including eating them. Clearly, though, this is not what God intends, for, immediately after granting us dominion over animals, he informs us that we are to eat plants: “I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food” (Genesis 1:29). God, then, must want our relationship with animals to be one of stewardship. This is one respect in which we are created in God’s image. Just as God cares for us, so we are to care for animals.

But why would God forbid meat-eating at the Creation, only to permit it after the Flood? At its creation, the world is a utopia, the first human beings dwelling in the Garden of Eden, obeying God, and living in harmony with the rest of creation. During this time, vegetarianism prevails. The utopia, however, comes to an end when Adam and Eve turn away from God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All humankind becomes corrupt, so much so that, at length, God regrets that he made us and floods the earth, destroying all living things except Noah, Noah’s family, and the animals Noah takes aboard his ark. Only at this point does God allow an omnivorous diet. He does so not because such a diet is ideal, but because, recognizing our fallen condition, recognizing the difficulty we have resisting temptation, including the temptation to eat meat, he in his infinite mercy wishes to lighten our burden. This concession to our fallen nature explains why God expresses no anger when he witnesses biblical characters consuming meat. It likewise explains why Jesus is willing to give five thousand people a meal consisting of bread and fish.

Despite the permission to eat meat, the ideal diet remains vegetarian. For this reason, God looks forward to the eventual restoration of the vegetarian utopia:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
 The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
 They will not hurt or destroy
 on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
 as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9)

God has a plan for human beings and animals alike, none to hurt, destroy, or eat any other. Since helping God carry out his plans is better than waiting for him to do the work himself, God would be pleased if we abandon our carnivorous habits now. Although vegetarianism, as God indicates to Noah and his sons, is no longer obligatory, it is still morally best.

Morally Best

Because the Bible was written and edited over a period of many centuries by a medley of people whose agendas sometimes conflicted, we might wonder whether the Bible is as unified in its ethical stance on animals as the interpretation just outlined suggests. Possibly, some of the Bible's contributors were less friendly to animals than were others. Conceivably, some were downright hostile. Nonetheless, let us assume for the sake of argument that our interpretation is correct—entirely correct. From this assumption, may we infer that the Bible squares with moral vegetarianism? A brief characterization of moral vegetarianism will at this point be useful.

Like any other vegetarians, moral vegetarians restrict their intake of animal foods, the more fastidious abjuring all animal products, while the less discriminating enjoy eggs and dairy products, or—if semi-vegetarians count as vegetarians—even some meat. What distinguishes moral vegetarians is not their diet, but the reasons they have for their diet. Non-moral vegetarians adopt their diet for such reasons as that it is the healthiest, or the cheapest, or the most savory, or that it is a custom rooted in their family or culture. Moral vegetarians, too, sometimes resort to these reasons, but, in contrast with their non-moral counterparts, they also allege that a vegetarian diet is morally best. Frequently, their moral concerns about eating animals spill over into moral concerns about other uses of animals, so that many of them, for example, choose not to wear leather or fur.

To say that something is morally best, however, is to hold either of two positions: that it is obligatory (within the call of duty) or that it is supererogatory (above and beyond the call of duty). Accordingly, we might agree with Jesus that loving our enemies and turning

the other cheek are morally best, yet question whether these things are our duty or whether, requiring a saintly character, they go beyond the call of duty. Similarly, accepting that a vegetarian diet is morally best, we might believe either that it is an obligation, no matter how powerfully we may crave a steak, or that, while suitable for a saint, it is too much to ask of ordinary folk. Hence, we have two kinds of moral vegetarianism, which we may call *obligatory* and *supererogatory* vegetarianism.

God's Mistake

In many respects, the Bible, on the interpretation under consideration, upholds moral vegetarianism. Eden is truly a vegetarian utopia. Eating from “every plant yielding seed” and “every tree with seed in its fruit” (Genesis 1:29), Adam and Eve are strict vegans, never touching meat, not even poultry or fish, and never tasting eggs or dairy products. Indeed, if they eat only the seeds and fruit and not the plants and trees, they are fruitarians, killing neither animals nor plants. Furthermore, like many moral vegetarians, Adam and Eve wear no leather or fur. Instead, they go naked—that is, until they eat the illicit fruit, upon which they clothe themselves first with fig leaves and then with the “garments of skins” (Genesis 3:21) that God fashions for them. Consequently, before the original sin, Adam and Eve fulfill their divinely given role as stewards, caring for animals as God cares for us. Since Eden represents the ideal, caring for animals rather than eating them or wearing their skins must be morally best.

This leaves the distinction between obligatory and supererogatory vegetarianism. As we are interpreting it, the Bible advocates the first under one set of circumstances and the second under another. When human beings live in an Eden-like paradise, without sin, doing God's bidding, vegetarianism is obligatory. But when we turn away from God, when sin permeates our nature, vegetarianism is supererogatory. For an enormously long time now, nearly all of human history, we have lived under the latter circumstances. Thus, in all but the most exceptional circumstances, the Bible recommends supererogatory vegetarianism.

However, as moral vegetarians should be the first to point out, this recommendation is untenable. If anything, the Bible has gotten it backwards: while utopian Eden might get away with supererogatory vegetarianism, after the Fall obligatory vegetarianism is preferable. God should not have permitted Noah and his sons to eat meat. That was a mistake.

The Eleventh Commandment

Imagine that God, with pity in his heart, comes to us, saying, “I understand how hard it is for you, in your fallen state, to live up to rigorous ethical standards. I wish to ease your burden. Therefore, merciful God that I am, I hereby permit you to violate the Ten Commandments. Mind you, adhering to them is still morally best. If you do, I will be pleased. But, if you murder, steal, or bear false witness against your neighbor, I will in no way punish you, and neither should your laws or customs punish you.” How should we respond to this supposed act of kindness? Should we acknowledge that the Ten

Commandments are no longer obligatory but now supererogatory? Would not the consequences of doing so be intolerable? If we knew that we could get away with murder (literally!), would not more of us—a great deal more—commit murder? Likewise, would not more of us—a great deal more—steal, dishonor our parents, commit adultery, covet our neighbor’s house, and so on? Perhaps in utopian Eden, where Adam and Eve do whatever pleases God whether it is obligatory or not, God could afford to proclaim the Ten Commandments supererogatory. But, in our fallen condition, the case is otherwise. While our fallen condition might explain our wickedness, it hardly excuses it.

Presumably, God recognizes this, and that is why Moses receives the Ten Commandments in their obligatory form. So why is vegetarianism not also obligatory? If we are more likely to obey the Ten Commandments when they are obligatory, would we not, by parity of reasoning, be more likely to give up meat if vegetarianism were obligatory? Would we not more likely develop an abiding respect for animals, not only eschewing their meat but also refusing to wear their skins and furs, dissect them in high school biology classes, test household products on them, hunt and fish them for sport, fight them in bullrings, make them jump through hoops at circuses, hogtie them at rodeos, cage them in zoos, et cetera, et cetera? If our fallen condition does not excuse murder or other violations of the Ten Commandments, why would it excuse the killing of animals for food, along with many other killings of and harms to animals? Does God not blatantly contradict himself when, despite our fallen condition, he pronounces the Ten Commandments obligatory but, because of our fallen condition, he declares vegetarianism supererogatory? Although supererogatory vegetarianism, like a supererogatory Ten Commandments, might be harmless in utopian Eden, would God not be wise, after the first transgression, to issue an obligatory Eleventh Commandment: “You shall not eat meat”?

“Are You Not of More Value than They?”

Unconvinced, we might reply that “You shall not murder” and the rest of the Ten Commandments are importantly different from “You shall not eat meat.” Specifically, whereas the Ten Commandments govern behavior toward human beings (and in some cases God), “You shall not eat meat” governs behavior toward animals. This difference is important, we might argue, because, although animals have value, they do not have as much value as we. So the Bible indicates. On the one hand, when God creates animals, he sees that what he creates is “good” (Genesis 1:25), and when he later floods the earth with forty days and forty nights of rain, he makes sure that Noah takes aboard his ark a male and female of every species of animal, “to keep them alive” (Genesis 6:20). Clearly, God has regard for animals. But, on the other hand, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26). With these words, Jesus exhorts his listeners not to worry about tomorrow, for, just as God takes care of the birds, so he will take care of us—all the more, since we are more valuable. Because of our higher value, then, we have greater obligations to human beings than to animals. This, we might conclude, is the reason that the Ten Commandments are obligatory but vegetarianism is not.

This reply, though, leaves several key questions unanswered. For example, in what sense do we have greater value than animals? How much greater is our value? What is the evidence for our greater value? Do all human beings have greater value than all animals, or do some animals have greater value than some human beings? Clearing up these matters is a daunting philosophical challenge, but luckily we need not meet this challenge here. For, no matter how we answer these questions, the reply is unavailable to those who interpret the Bible as we are interpreting it. Indeed, the reply is unavailable for at least two reasons.

The first reason is this. According to our interpretation, although vegetarianism is no longer obligatory, it was obligatory before the Fall. In contrast, the reply draws no distinction between the present and the past, asserting only that vegetarianism is not obligatory, and doing so on the grounds that human beings are of more value than animals. To harmonize the reply with our interpretation, we would need to introduce into the reply a distinction between the present and the past. In particular, we would have to argue that vegetarianism is no longer obligatory because human beings *at present* are of more value than animals, and we would have to argue that vegetarianism was obligatory before the Fall because *back then* human beings were not of more value than animals. Yet, even when thus modified, the reply is inadequate. For one thing, it still does not fully harmonize with our interpretation. From the standpoint of our interpretation, the reason vegetarianism is no longer obligatory is that, in our fallen state, we have difficulty resisting temptation. The reason is not, as the modified reply holds, that human beings at present are of more value than animals. For another thing, the modified reply makes the odd suggestion that at some point in the past—presumably at the time of the Fall—the value of human beings relative to animals increased. What could account for this mysterious increase? Could the original sin, the turning of human beings away from God, have brought about such an increase? If anything, would not the original sin have decreased the value of human beings? If the original sin did not increase the value of human beings relative to animals, what did?

Second, our interpretation maintains that vegetarianism is at present supererogatory, but the reply does not. An action or practice is supererogatory only if it imposes a significant burden on those who perform the action or engage in the practice. Without the burden, the action or practice cannot go beyond the call of duty, and hence cannot be supererogatory. Thus, if being a Good Samaritan—that is, going out of the way to assist a fellow human being in need—is supererogatory, it is because Good Samaritans go out of their way. It is not because those in need have limited value. In exactly the same way, if being a vegetarian is at present supererogatory, it is because at present vegetarians are onerously burdened (perhaps having difficulty resisting temptation), not because animals have limited value. Since the reply claims only that animals have limited value, saying nothing about an onerous burden, it provides no basis for the conclusion that vegetarianism is supererogatory at present.

An Onerous Burden?

But, we might persist, “You shall not murder” and the rest of the Ten Commandments are still importantly different from “You shall not eat meat.” The difference, we might now admit, is not that the Ten Commandments govern behavior toward human beings, whereas “You shall not eat meat” governs behavior toward animals. Instead, the crucial difference is that “You shall not eat meat,” if enforced, would burden us in a way that the Ten Commandments do not. Obligatory vegetarianism would be burdensome because it would put our health at risk, especially if, like Adam and Eve, we subsist on vegan or fruitarian fare. Men would be burdened because they need extra protein to sustain their muscle mass; women would be burdened because they need extra calcium to prevent osteoporosis. Women also lose iron during menstruation, and, when they are pregnant or lactating, their nutritional needs increase significantly. Children, too, as well as the elderly, the sick, and the poor, have special nutritional requirements that meat can help satisfy. For these reasons, we might hold that obligatory vegetarianism should be rejected—no matter what value animals have. In contrast, since the Ten Commandments pose no comparable health risks, and are in no other way too onerous a burden for us to bear, they should remain obligatory.

However, if obligatory vegetarianism would raise health concerns after the Fall, would it not equally raise health concerns before the Fall? If concern for human health justifies the permission to eat meat after the Fall, would it not equally justify permission to eat meat before the Fall? Why, then, did God forbid meat-eating before the Fall? To these questions, we might imagine that we have a satisfactory reply: at the time of the Fall, human physiology changed. That is to say, initially, God endowed Adam and Eve with bodies that enabled them to live on a vegan or fruitarian diet without adverse health effects, but, when Adam and Eve committed the first sin, God modified the human body, so that today a vegan or fruitarian diet could harm us. How well does the Bible accord with this view? Well enough, we might think. After discovering Eve’s transgression, God informed her, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing” (Genesis 3:16). Presumably, to carry out this punishment, God altered Eve’s reproductive physiology. But, if God altered human reproductive physiology, he might have altered human digestive physiology as well. The Bible points to this possibility when it suggests that, before the Fall, not only were Adam and Eve vegetarians, but so were animals (Genesis 1:30), including, apparently, such animals as lions and tigers. Since the lions and tigers currently inhabiting the globe cannot survive on a vegetarian diet, their physiology must differ from that of the lions and tigers living before the Fall. It seems, therefore, that the Fall led God to change the digestive physiology of lions and tigers, and, if it did that, it might have led God to change human digestive physiology, too.

Yet, even if we embrace these speculations, serious objections remain. In the first place, granting that God changed human digestive physiology, we should question whether he changed it to the extent that obligatory vegetarianism would be an unacceptable burden. Can we not take a number of steps to reduce the health risks of obligatory vegetarianism? For instance, rather than follow Adam and Eve by becoming vegans or fruitarians, we might turn to a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet, reaping the nutritional benefits of eggs and dairy products. Alternatively, or in addition, if we need extra protein, calcium, iron, or other nutrients, we might take the appropriate supplements. Further, those who lack

knowledge of the nutritional values of vegetarian foods could be given the knowledge, while those who lack access to nutritious vegetarian foods could be given the access.

But even more decisive than this first objection is a second one. Granting that God changed human digestive physiology, and granting that he changed it to the extent that obligatory vegetarianism would be an unacceptable burden, we should question why God did so, and why after all these years he still does nothing to make obligatory vegetarianism less of a burden. Since God is omnipotent, he must at the time of the Fall have had the power to maintain human digestive physiology as it originally was, and he must now have the power to reduce, and even eliminate, whatever health risks obligatory vegetarianism would impose on us. If he created the universe in all of its complexity, from the tiniest subatomic particle to the vastest galactic cluster, from the humble single-celled amoeba to the mighty dinosaur and the still mightier human being, surely he could create plants that satisfy all of our nutritional needs, or give us bodies that, like those of Adam and Eve before the Fall, need less protein, calcium, iron, and other nutrients. Moreover, since God is all-good as well as all-powerful, he not only could do this but would do it—for, on the interpretation of the Bible we have been examining, a vegetarian diet is morally best. Why should animals pay the price for a sin that human beings committed, when God could easily prevent it? Obligatory vegetarianism need not, nor should it, be a burden at all.

To this objection, we might reply that God permits meat-eating not as a concession to our fallen nature but as a punishment of animals. After all, it was an animal—the serpent—that instigated the first sin. But this line of reasoning will not do, since it contradicts the Bible as we are interpreting it. According to our interpretation, the permission to eat meat is a concession to our fallen nature, not a punishment of animals. Besides, if God were punishing animals for their role in the first sin, why did he wait until after the Flood to permit meat-eating?

Wishful Thinking

Recognizing that a vegetarian diet is morally best, the Bible, as we have been interpreting it, is more sympathetic to animals than are most Christians, who usually do not pause to question the ethics of their eating habits. Animal advocates might take this to be good news. If they can show Christians that the interpretation we have been discussing is correct, attitudes toward animals—they might dare to hope—would improve. Perhaps, with a deeper respect for animals, many or most Christians would turn their backs on factory farming, seeking more humane methods of animal husbandry. Maybe they would even emulate Adam and Eve as they lived in utopian Eden, abandoning meat and other animal products altogether and declining to wear leather or fur. What a wonderful vision this is! Unfortunately, it is overly optimistic. We must never underestimate the human propensity, when given an inch, to take a mile. Since, even on its most favorable interpretation, the Bible falls short of advocating obligatory vegetarianism, since it permits meat-eating, it gives Christians their inch. In fact, permitting exploitative uses of animals in addition to meat-eating—for example, leather-wearing (Genesis 3:21)—it gives Christians much more than an inch. As such, Christians will have little motivation,

given their fallen nature, to change their diet—unless they can be convinced that the Bible’s moral views on animals are mistaken. The Bible will almost certainly never spark a vegetarian revolution within the Christian community. To suppose otherwise is to engage in wishful thinking.