

## LEGACY

There was only a jigsaw puzzle of dry  
ground;  
A shroud of unfinished power lines  
dangling in silence.  
Shadow cows wandered  
over broken fence pieces,  
prodding memories of grass.  
I asked a hungry man,  
Where is the beautiful land I came to see?  
This is her legacy,  
he told me sadly.  
The legend you seek is dead.  
She was once virgin bride to the world.  
Her dowry was a sea of zebra.  
Her wildebeest thundered  
like a summer storm.  
She was jungle, mountain, and river.  
Long ago her body throbbed  
with blood and breath.  
She was warm and alive.  
We called her Africa.

Kathleen Malley

## Reply to Weir: Unnecessary Fear, Nutrition, and Vegetarianism

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Professor Weir contends that “the vegetarian argument from unnecessary pain fails” because:

- (1) “the Empirical Argument from Nutrition equivocat[es] regarding what is meant by ‘vegetarian,’ ‘adequate for human nutrition,’ and ‘unnecessary for nutrition.’”
- (2) “animals can be raised humanely and killed mercifully,” and
- (3) “the *prima facie* obligation not to inflict pain is overridden by the nutritional risk of vegetarianism (especially veganism).”

Weir fails to establish any of these points as compelling criticisms of a moral obligation to become vegetarians. We shall discuss each of his arguments in turn.

### The Empirical Argument from Nutrition

Weir begins his attack on the proposition that “a vegetarian diet is adequate for human nutrition” by claiming that attempting to justify it by referring to “the large numbers of vegetarians who are ‘hale and thriving’” “obviously is an inductive hasty generalization, [because] the empirical fact that some vegetarians are healthy does not prove that all humans—or even most humans—will be healthy on a vegetarian diet.” However, far from being obvious, this charge of fallacious reasoning is false.



## DISCUSSION

An inductive generalization is hasty when the sample upon which the generalization is based is too small. Now, recent estimates place the number of vegetarians in the United States at around 10 million, with a similar number in the United Kingdom. There are many more millions of vegetarians around the world. This is not a small sample. Additionally, these millions of vegetarians come from both sexes, all stages of life, and a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. They are a diverse as well as a large sample.

But are these people healthy? Books advocating vegetarianism cite numerous, recent, scientific studies indicating they are. Common sensically, it is difficult to believe that tens of millions of people would voluntarily continue with a diet they found adversely affected their health. But that is what vegetarians who have the option of eating meat are doing and have been doing for many years, even generations. Indeed, my experience has been that the majority of American vegetarians are "health vegetarians" rather than "ethical vegetarians;" that is, most American vegetarians are vegetarians because they find that diet to be healthier for them. Consequently, although no inductive generalization could "prove," in some conclusive, deductive sense, that every person would find a vegetarian diet healthy, the generalization from the number of health vegetarians to the conclusion that "a vegetarian diet is adequate for human nutrition" is a reliable one. The considerable amount of empirical evidence for that generalization puts a considerable burden of proof on those, like Weir, who wish to deny the adequacy of a vegetarian diet. That burden is not met by his fallacious charge of fallacious reasoning.

Weir's substantive effort to shoulder this burden is his contention that that proposition is ambiguous about what "vegetarian" covers and what "adequate" means. His concern with "vegetarian" is that this term is used to refer to both those who merely avoid eating meat and those who eat neither meat nor other animal products. The importance of this distinction for Weir lies in the possibility of obtaining nutrients necessary for human health from eggs and dairy products. So, the possible ambiguity of "vegetarianism" is really a secondary matter; it is basically the requirements of an "adequate" diet that concern him.

Weir claims that "the vegetarian diet is so risky that no one should impose it on another person." The

vegetarian diet is risky, he argues, because of the following "facts:"

"Vitamin B-12 is an essential nutrient and naturally occurs only in animal products,"

"only 5-10 percent of the iron in vegetables is absorbed during digestion,"

"infants and preschool children need animal protein,"

"vegan diets are also especially susceptible to deficiencies in calcium, riboflavin, Vitamin A, and Vitamin D," and

different people and people at different periods of their lives have increased need of these nutrients.

Incredibly, after presenting this litany of dangers, Weir totally undermines his argument about the risks of vegetarianism by conceding that "supplements can make virtually any diet 'adequate.'" So, all these fearsome "facts" about the risks of a vegetarian diet can be overcome by popping an occasional vitamin pill. Would that all the risks of life could be so easily conquered!

Nonetheless, let us spend a moment on some of Weir's specific "facts." In the same paragraph where he says that Vitamin B-12 "naturally occurs only in animal products," Weir acknowledges that vegans, who eat no animal products, can get B-12 from "tempeh or miso (soy) fermented with the *Klebsiella* bacteria" or "yeast grown on media rich in B-12," as well as from vitamin pills and "fortified" foods. Since B-12 can be readily obtained in a variety of ways, even without supplements and even by vegans, how does our need for B-12 put vegetarians of either sort at risk? The reassuring truth of the matter is that we need only small quantities of this vitamin, that it can be obtained readily and inexpensively from plant sources, and that the surest and easiest way of doing this is via a so-called "dietary supplement." One such supplement, picked at random, contains 833% of the recommended daily allowance of B-12 in one little pill. So, one pill a week, and the "facts" about B-12 which frighten Weir are irrelevant.

As to the iron issue, the relevant fact is not what percentage of available iron is absorbed but whether the individual obtains the iron he needs. According to John Robbins, in *Diet for a New America* (Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Publishing, 1987), "long-term studies show no iron deficiencies arising from lacto-ovo or pure vegetarian diets" (p. 300). Apparently absorbing 5-10%

of the iron available in vegetables is all we need. So, once again, where's the risk from vegetarianism of either sort?

Again, Weir contends that "susceptible to osteoporosis, all vegan women must carefully monitor their calcium intake since they consume no dairy products." However, according to the August 1, 1986, issue of *Science*, there is a "large body of evidence indicating no relationship between calcium intake and bone density." Apparently, it is low levels of estrogen, not of calcium, that are the source of osteoporosis. Furthermore, according to Neal Barnard, M. D., "studies now show that high levels of protein—particularly animal protein—drain calcium from the body" (*The Animals' Agenda*, November, 1989, p. 7). He also notes that broccoli, kale, spinach, almonds, sunflower seeds, and other green vegetables and fruits are good sources of calcium, while "milk is probably the poorest choice for a calcium supplement." Thus, far from showing vegetarians, including vegans, at risk, the facts about osteoporosis indicate that it is meat-eaters who are most at risk to this disease.

Weir does not elaborate on why "infants and preschool children need animal protein," and that statement looks more like a conclusion than a statement of fact. At the recent World Vegetarian Day celebration at Stanford University, Dr. Michael Klaper, a pediatrician and author of *Pregnancy, Children and the Vegan Diet* (Umatilla, FL: Gentle World, 1988), asserted that "there is nothing found exclusively in animal products that is essential for children's health and growth." Apparently, this practicing pediatrician has not encountered Weir's "facts." Also, Dr. Klaper's presentation suggested that vegan parents do not need to pay closer attention to their children's diets than do meat-eating parents to ensure that their children receive all needed nutrients.

Weir asserts without citing studies that "vegan infants and children are usually malnourished, underweight, and neurologically underdeveloped." Might this be a hasty generalization? Even if statistically true, might there be socio-economic and educational reasons for this sad condition that have nothing to do with the adequacy of vegetable protein for children? For example, it's doubtless true that impoverished "infants and children are malnourished, underweight, and neurologically underdeveloped," and it may be that a considerable number of vegans in third world countries are impoverished. Once again, it is doubtful that Weir has facts here, and he fails to provide

an argument showing the relevance of whatever it is he does have to his claim that vegetarianism is risky.

Thus, Weir's "facts" about nutrition are dubious and do not entail that a vegetarian diet of either sort is risky. Nor does his analysis entail what Weir ought (logically) to be trying to prove but never mentions: that a vegetarian diet is *more* risky than a meat-eating diet. After all, if a meat-eating diet is more risky than a vegetarian diet, then Weir's argument based on the risks of vegetarianism is irrelevant in yet another way.

Perhaps Weir does not undertake this comparative analysis because he is afraid of what it would show. Judging from the massive size of the vitamin industry and its advertisements, which do not even suggest that it is only or primarily vegetarians who should be buying these products, meat-eaters must feel a great need to supplement their diets. Also, vegetarian diets reduce many kinds of health risk, such as trichinosis, salmonella, and mercury poisoning, various kinds of cancer, osteoporosis, arteriosclerosis, and other conditions associated with saturated fats and cholesterol, which are more prevalent in meat than vegetables. The United States Department of Agriculture spends a lot of money on inspecting meat for health hazards, and a lot of questions have recently been raised about the adequacy of those inspections. Vegetarians do not have to fear all those hazards meat inspectors are supposed to be guarding against, nor do they have to fear that these inspectors are not doing their job. Thus, an unbiased review of the risks actually run by vegetarians vs. those actually run by meat-eaters—rather than a one-sided listing of risks supposedly, possibly run by vegetarians—might well leave the vegetarians far ahead on Weir's risk criterion for choosing or imposing a diet.

Turning to Weir's charges of ambiguity concerning an "adequate" diet, he legitimately points out that nutritional needs vary, so that what is adequate for one group of people may not be so for another. However, other than his totally unsubstantiated claim that children need animal protein, his "facts" do not indicate that there are people who cannot, based on their physiological needs, obtain adequate nutrients from vegetable products. Consequently, whatever ambiguity may be involved here is irrelevant to the substantive issue of an obligation not to exploit animals for food.

In addition to that ambiguity, Weir seems to be bothered by the idea of relying on dietary "supplements," i. e., pills and liquids consumed just to insure adequate

nutrition. The phrase "dietary supplement" suggests that a diet should be defined without reference to these products. However, advocates of vegetarianism, such as John Robbins, do not hesitate to recommend that these products be included as a part of one's diet to insure that we get all the nutrients we need. So there is an ambiguity here. Also, the need to "supplement" a diet may suggest that the diet itself is inadequate.

Morally, these issues are trivial. People who do not eat meat or who avoid eating animal products altogether can obtain all needed nutrients without supplements, and this is true whether they are young or old, male or female, pregnant or not, and so forth. The supplementary pills or liquids simply make it easier and more certain that this is accomplished. These supplements would raise a significant, compromising issue for a vegetarian diet if they always involved animal products, but Weir does not suggest this—and for good reason, for there are non-animal produced supplements.

Since they are trivial matters, we can easily answer Weir's concerns about ambiguity regarding "vegetarianism" and "adequacy" by saying that the question is: Can a diet that contains no meat or even animal products at all provide all the nutrients needed for robust human health, and is this the case for women as well as men, the young as well as the old, those who are pregnant as well as those who are not, and so forth? Thus defining a vegetarian diet by what it excludes leaves open the possibility that it includes "supplements." And if including "supplements" *in* the diet offends anyone's conceptual sensitivities, just call them "dietary enhancers" rather than supplements. The substantive point is that the answer to that question is "Yes" in both the meat-free and vegan cases and for young and old, male and female, etc. The evidence for that answer is the tens of millions of young and old, male and female, etc., healthy vegetarians and the many scientific studies of them that confirm their health.

A final word on Weir's comments concerning nutrition: he may well have a hidden agenda here. Weir frequently raises environmental concerns, uses the word "natural" repeatedly (as in his "fact" about B-12), asserts several times that we are omnivores "by nature," seems offended by the idea of being dependent on technology (e. g., vitamin pills) for nutrients, and sees "plastic meals" at the bottom of the slippery slope of vegetarianism. So, perhaps his opposition to vegetarianism really lies in his feeling that is unnatural and

a threat to the rural way of life he prefers. Weir acknowledges that he has lived on a family farm and waxes idyllic about the possibilities of such farming.

Of course, that Weir likes to think of himself as a steak chewer rather than a vitamin swallower does not count for much when the question is whether we have a moral obligation to stop exploiting animals for food. Furthermore, Weir may well be mistaken about what humans are "by nature." According to the president of the Medical Students Association at Stanford University, who is a vegetarian, our dentition, facial structure, and digestive tracts do not closely resemble those of natural omnivores, such as bears. Rather, our physiology suggests that we are herbivores by nature. Perhaps meat and other animal products were the easy, secure dietary supplements of our herbivorous ancestors, supplements on which they came to place ever greater reliance as they developed the unnatural technologies of domestication and ranching.

If Weir wants to tackle a substantive issue of ambiguity in moral philosophy, he should question, rather than uncritically use, the term "natural." For example, even if it is "natural" for us (humans) to exercise our vastly superior power to exploit and kill animals for a compact source of nutrients, does that make it right? I should think not, for the fact that it is "natural" for males of our species to exploit females does not make that right. However, Weir's uncritical, repeated reliance on the term "natural" suggests that what (he thinks) is "natural" for humans is right.

Again, to say that we are something "by nature" suggests that it is not a matter of choice. But it is people who choose to be vegetarians. So, even if we were omnivores "by nature," that could not entail that we cannot choose to be otherwise. Furthermore, one of the things Weir cites as making humans especially worthy is our autonomy. It would seem that his idea of human "nature" is a very convenient one: it excuses our exploiting animals as inevitable but does not interfere with our congratulating ourselves on being superior to animals because we are autonomous.

Again, Weir, like many environmentalists, seems to view doing what's "natural" as returning to a simpler, non-technological, rural way of life. But if biology has taught us anything for the past century and a half, it is that change is what nature is all about. What we, like all creatures, are "by nature" is in a process of evolution. Consequently, appeals to what we are "by nature" cannot entail that we must or even ought to remain as

we are or return to what we were. As Sartre would say, such inferences are exercises in bad faith.

Finally, some of the environmental concerns raised by Weir are bogus. For example, in the United States and United Kingdom we already produce more eggs, dairy products, and plant protein than we can consume or sell abroad for food. Also, most of the plant protein we raise is currently fed to cattle. So, it is far from obvious that turning to these resources to replace nutrients presently obtained from meat would threaten environmental havoc. Weir's legitimate environmental concerns indicate only that implementing world-wide vegetarianism would have to incorporate environmental protection caveats and socio-economic reforms. That this is so does not show that we are not obligated to become vegetarians; it shows only that fulfilling that obligation may be more complicated than some people may have thought.

Thus, it is Weir's "reasons" for doubting the adequacy of a vegetarian diet that are anemic and in need of supplements before they can provide adequate fare for an impartial mind. However, in this case the evidence indicates that supplements do not exist. The evidence indicates that the claim that "a vegetarian diet is adequate for human nutrition" is neither false nor substantively ambiguous.

### The Empirical Argument from Pain

Weir contends that "a pleasure-pain calculus taken by itself would *require* that we eat meat." However, the basic thrust of his discussion seems to be to discredit hedonistic utilitarianism altogether. For example, he argues that a hedonistic calculus may entail "a duty to bring about the extinction of the human species" and contends that even "the mere plausibility" of this conclusion "is a *reductio ad absurdum* for the hedonistic utilitarian argument."

The points Weir makes in this part of his paper have been made many times before, from Leslie Stephens' "If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all" to R. G. Frey's elaborate catalog of the Armageddon consequences of vegetarianism in *Rights, Killing and Suffering* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). They have also been refuted many times before; for example, I have discussed questions about the utility of exploiting animals at length in Chapters 6, 10, and 11 of *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). Consequently, I will restrict my comments here to the following.

First, Weir totally undermines his argument for the utility of exploiting animals by admitting that if people would maintain animals in good condition and not slaughter them for food, such a world would be hedonistically superior to animal-exploiting worlds. He goes on to say, however, that we should not consider such a world, because humans are not unselfish enough to maintain it. This restriction is unjustified. When running moral thought experiments, we are entitled to consider altruistic options. Especially where utilitarian hedonistic calculations provide the test, we are entitled to envisage worlds in which humans act on the basis of utilitarian, hedonistic calculations. Such worlds can at least define guiding ideal obligations for our real world of less than perfect, utilitarian altruism. It follows that Weir's analysis of possible worlds fails to show that hedonistic, utilitarian calculations require exploiting animals.

Second, Weir insists on being tough-minded about the suffering that would be imposed on animals by massive dependence on eggs and dairy products for nutrients. But his talk of animals being "raised humanely and killed mercifully" for massive dependence on meat for nutrients goes beyond a romanticized view of traditional farming to a see-no-evil refusal to acknowledge the massive animal suffering involved in the production of massive amounts of meat to feed billions of humans. Weir's idyllic vision extends even to "tax breaks and legislation [which will] help insure that lands near cities will be reserved for small farms." I hesitate to startle a sweet dreamer, but the lands near cities have already been developed into suburbs. And in northern California, I am sure, agribusiness interests in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys are no more ready to turn over their land to family farmers than millions and millions of urban- and suburbanites are ready to spend additional hours and hours on the roads forsaking supermarkets to shop at family farms.

Weir also tough-mindedly emphasizes the environmental dangers of increased egg and dairy production. Somehow, he overlooks well-known environmental benefits of eliminating meat production. For example, billions of acres of rain forests and other native lands have been and are continuing to be destroyed to make way for pastures to graze cattle and fields to raise grain to feed to cattle. World-wide vegetarianism would put an end to this pattern of destruction and could even lead to the return of many native eco-systems, since we will need less vegetable

protein if we eat it ourselves, rather than feeding it to animals and then eating them. Thus, Weir's discussion of the environmental effects of vegetarianism continues the one-sided pattern of argument begun with his discussion of dietary risks.

Third, Weir suggests that the only remedy for the inadequacy of hedonistic utilitarianism as a moral philosophy is to postulate a non-hedonistic, "intrinsic" value possessed by humans and human-like animals. However, this is not the only way of coping with that inadequacy (if it exists). For example, the following maxim from William James points to another way: "Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sake, to be satisfied? If not, prove why not."

Weir begins, as so many moral philosophers have and still do, with the hierarchical presumption that one has to have some special value in order to be worthy of not being exploited. James, like other modern moral philosophers who insist on the fundamental importance of principles of equality, challenges that aristocratic presumption. In effect, James is contending that from the moral point of view one does not have to be of special value to be worthy of having one's interests satisfied. The advance of egalitarianism and the retreat of feudalism during the modern era favor James' egalitarian emphasis over Weir's aristocratic presumption. "Is he worthy of fair treatment?" seems to many modern ears a very strange question, indeed.

Thus, Weir's one-sided thought experiments fail to discredit the proposition that "a meat diet causes unnecessary pain," and his suggestion that only an anthropocentric, aristocratic postulation of value can overcome the (supposed) inadequacies of hedonistic utilitarianism is mistaken; rejecting aristocratic presumptions in favor of egalitarianism can also overcome those (supposed) inadequacies.

### The Moral Argument from Unnecessary Pain

According to Weir, the Principle of Unnecessary Pain states that "pain can be inflicted only in cases of genuine conflict and only in order to prevent an unavoidable worse evil." (How one prevents the unavoidable, I do not know. Perhaps Weir intended to say "otherwise unavoidable.") Weir does not object to this principle but contends that it does not prohibit killing animals for food, because "nutrition and health are surely significant and legitimate overriding moral

conflicts; no autonomous person can reasonably be coerced to put their health at risk...As a matter of fact, the pain inflicted is *not unnecessary*."

Although Weir believes that he has a third, moral objection to the vegetarian argument here, this objection basically just repeats his empirical contention that vegetarianism is risky. We have already discredited that contention.

Weir's one moral claim here is that people cannot reasonably be coerced into putting their health at risk. That "coerced" is purple prose, of course; the issue is whether people can reasonably be *obligated* to put their health at risk. There is a considerable consensus that they can be. For example, Socrates believed he was under an obligation to serve in the army, thereby putting his health at risk. He even believed himself to be obligated to remain faithful to his philosophical convictions, even though this put his health more than at risk. Many other patriots have shared at least Socrates' belief that citizens can reasonably be obligated (even forced) to put their health at risk in the defense of their community. "Death before dishonor" is another, not uncommon, moral slogan covering a variety of situations in which obligations are recognized which will put people's health at risk.

So, it is not obvious that we cannot have an obligation which might put our health at risk. Consequently, even if a vegetarian diet were riskier than a meat-eating diet, it would not follow that we are not obligated by the principle of unnecessary pain to be vegetarians. Contrary to what Weir apparently believes, there is no guarantee that a moral life will be a safe and easy one; convictions can require courage.

### Conclusion

Since Weir's critique of the unnecessary pain argument for vegetarianism focuses on questions of nutrition, the basic response to his defense of meat-eating is that his fears about the risks being run by vegetarians are unfounded. Consequently, we are not tragically condemned by nutritional dependency on meat to continue exploiting animals for food. If Weir does sincerely "wish things were otherwise" than he has made them out to be, then he can be of good cheer: they are otherwise, and paying a little, nutritionally-informed attention to his diet or even just swallowing a vitamin pill now and then can easily and reliably keep him safe from the bogies which, apparently, have heretofore frightened him away from an ethical diet.