Response

Jack Weir

Regrettably, space permits only a very brief response. Many technical nutritional questions are beyond my expertise; I am a philosopher, not a biochemist, physiologist, or dietician. Like Prof. Sapontzis, I have had to rely upon authorities, but mine have differed significantly with his. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that science eventually will resolve the nutritional questions, despite the multifaceted complexity of human biochemistry and dietary lifestyles. I do not dispute the claim that many people can do well on a vegetarian diet. My argument is that nutritional factors—our biology—*plus* sociocultural factors make the vegetarian diet nonobligatory. My recommendation was that the inquiry focus upon what is routinely and regularly available to fulfill one's nutritional needs within one's ecosocial environment.

Prof. Sapontzis says that my claim regarding infants and preschool children is "totally unsubstantiated," and he presents arguments from authorities against it. In what I felt was already a long paper, I was trying to concentrate on the philosophical issues and be as brief as possible regarding the scientific nutritional "facts." My authorities were cited in Note #10. Since space neither then nor now permits me to repeat the arguments and evidence, perhaps the following quotations will suffice.

Jane Brody's Nutrition Book: "Despite the foregoing evidence that adults can live healthfully on a strict vegetarian diet, *infants and very young children need animal sources of protein to grow properly...* In recent years there have been several reports in the medical literature describing children suffering from rickets (vitamin D deficiency), vitamin B₁₂

deficiency, or severe protein-calorie malnutrition because their parents fed them no animal food other than breast milk... Studies of vegan infants and young children are alarming."¹ [*Italics in the original.*]

The New Laurel's Kitchen: "...we prefer to recommend against a vegan diet for children and pregnant women."²

Dietician Jean C. Burge: "An adult can be adequately nourished on a vegan, lacto, or lacto-ovo vegetarian diet. A strict adherence to a vegan diet among pregnant or lactating mothers presents certain risks. Marginal supplies of calcium, iron, zinc, riboflavin, niacin, and vitamin D provided by the vegan diet and absence of vitamin B₁₂ entirely may result in nutritional deficiencies seen in the mother and infant. Protein may also be limited, both in quantity and quality, by the vegan diet. B₁₂ deficiency in infants born of mothers following a vegan diet have [sic] been reported."³

The bibliography in the anthology edited by John J. B. Anderson—cited in Note #10—lists at least twenty-six articles raising concerns about infants, preschool children, and lactating mothers. John Robbins' *Diet for a New America*, an authority that Prof. Sapontzis cites with approval, gives the reason why an infant presents special problems: "the immaturity of its digestive system."⁴

Prof. Sapontzis argues that Proposition 1.10 is not a hasty generalization and that "this charge of fallacious reasoning is false." A problem in general with all informal fallacies, including hasty generalization, is that they are imprecise. At issue is not merely the size of the sample, which seems to be Prof. Sapontzis' concern, but also whether the sample, however large, is skewed. Consequently, it is doubtful whether the "tens of millions" in Prof. Sapontzis' loose sample are representative. How many take supplements? How many use eggs and milk products? How many regularly eat fish (as do many "vegetarians"—including many Hindus and Buddhists—and as many "vegetarian" cookbooks propose)? A study of a group of Boston "vegetarians" found that some occasionally ate beef and pork, but most regularly consumed fish, poultry, eggs

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and milk.⁵ Such skewing of the sample is not surprising since, as Prof. Sapontzis notes, many vegetarians adopt the diet for health reasons and not for moral reasons. The Anderson anthology has three studies, each using the latest scientific and diagnostic technology, of three self-consciously vegetarian and nutritionally informed American communities (young adults in Boston, Trappist monks, and preschool children on "The Farm"—a religious commune in Tennessee), and all three were found to be nutritionally deficient.⁶

Prof. Sapontzis seems to believe that *all* humans can be "adequately" nourished on a vegetarian diet. He implies this when he asserts that my list of "facts" "...do not indicate that there are people who cannot, based on their physiological needs, obtain adequate nutrients from vegetable products." However, Robbins' *Diet for a New America* seems to agree with me:

First off, assessing the health consequences of any diet, we must not forget the principle of biochemical individuality. We have different concentrations of gastric juices, our stomachs are shaped and function differently; we metabolize our food according to patterns which are unique to each of us; our digestive processes are as individualized as snowflakes. So, when someone tells me he or she feels better as a meat-eater, I take that seriously...the range of protein needs among people may vary as much as fourfold.⁷

To repeat my conclusion: Proposition 1.10 is either ambiguous or false. Based upon the evidence presented, the vegetarian claim of adequacy needs to be appropriately qualified (from 1.10 to 1.10e) if the claim is *not* to be a hasty generalization.

Prof. Sapontzis' point concerning dietary risk is well-taken. Which diet is *more* risky? This is certainly of prudential concern. But the risks actually run by *both* need to be assessed: Vegetables also have to be inspected and are produced, preserved, and marketed by chemicals—pesticides, herbicides, preservatives, cosmetic stains, polishes, sprays, and so on. How many of these are harmful? Are they less harmful and degenerative than those used with meat? Again, these are questions for the scientist. Prudentially, all that is required is that we clean up both industries, not what we abstain from consumption. Morally, we need another argument or at least additional argument.

Prof. Sapontzis correctly asks what moral use we can make of "natural" claims. Inconsistently, he rebukes me for using the concept but then uses it himself in at least three ways: (1) the claim that the human gastrointestinal tract is not omnivorous but herbivorous, (2) the endorsement of William James' notion that natural conative urges are good, and (3) the claim that ranching and domestication are "unnatural" technologies. Our mutual concerns here are that appeals to nature not be *ad hoc* and question-begging and that the so-called is/ought fallacy (or naturalistic fallacy) be avoided. Clearly and precisely, I stated what I meant by "natural": what is routinely and regularly available within the particular ecosocial environment. I explained that this involves a holistic network of interlocking ecological, physiological, psychological, economic, and sociocultural factors. And I gave examples from Scandinavia and West Texas. If space permitted, I would defend, as I have done elsewhere, an appropriately qualified naturalistic and holistic ethic.⁸

Conative desires resulted from natural selection, and, being suspicious of blind arguments from "nature" and in spite of the authority of William James, I can see no reason why every raw "interest" ought to be respected. Further clarification and argument are needed: What is an "interest"? Are all interests of "equal" value? Why? What kinds of entities have interests? What is the relationship between the value so ascribed and the normative action allegedly entailed? In other words, what is needed is a thorough ethical theory. In general, I hold that all beings should be treated with appropriate kindness, compassion, and respect. The acute problem, however, is with *wicked* conative urges and *conflicts* of conative urges. Again, if space permitted, I would defend, as I have done elsewhere, a criterion of psychological complexity as a basis for adjudicating legitimate and (otherwise) unavoidable conflicts.⁹

Prof. Sapontzis proposes that, like Socrates, we should be willing to put "death before dishonor." I think I'm probably more willing than most to suffer for my moral beliefs, but I'm concerned that we do not die, as I believe Socrates did, because we believe in a mistaken ideology or an unsound argument. It is no virtue to take unreasonable risks. Prof. Sapontzis and I are both concerned about "whether people can reasonably be *obligated* to put their health at risk." But I am also concerned about autonomy. It seems to me that it is coercive for persons in relevant positions of responsibility and power over others (such as parents,

government officials, dieticians, and authors) to put others' health at risk by not providing them with full, unbiased information and fair access to necessary nutrition. Such coercion can result from education, indoctrination, marketing, and socioeconomic control. Perhaps my statement appears "purple" to Prof. Sapontzis because he does not take the risks of vegetarianism as seriously as I do. In my judgment, the current evidence indicates that at least some people may need meat or animal products.

Finally, I would like to note that I do not like to think of myself as a steak-chewer. I have taken vitamin pills—as many as seven per day under a physician's orders. I have (meticulously) monitored my diet. I have read numerous books on vegetarian diet and nutrition. And I have suffered more than a little for my moral convictions about animals. Nevertheless, my concern in the paper is with the argument—with conceptual distinctions, rational deliberation, and standards of evidence. These stand or fall independent of my personal virtues or fears.

Notes

¹ Jane Brody, *Jane Brody's Nutrition Book* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 448.

² Laurel Robertson, Carol Flinders, and Brian Ruppenthal, *The New Laurel's Kitchen* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1986), pp. 416-17.

³ Jean C. Burge, "Vegetarian Infant Nutrition," in *Nutrition and Vegetarianism: Proceedings of Public Health Nutrition Update May 1981, Chapel Hill*, ed. John J. B. Anderson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Health Sciences Consortium, 1982), p. 218.

⁴ John Robbins, *Diet for a New America* (Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Publishing, 1987), p. 186.

⁵ James G. Bergen and Phyllis T. Brown, "Studies of Nutrient Status of Vegetarians in the United States: Young Boston Adults," in Anderson, pp. 91-102.

⁶ Bergen and Brown; Barbara F. Harland and Michael Peterson, "Nutritional Status of Lacto-Ovo Vegetarian Trappist Monks," in Anderson, pp. 69-79; and Kathleen R. Stitt, "Selected Anthropometric Measurements and Average Dietary intakes of a Group of Preschool Children Following a Vegetarian Diet," in Anderson, pp. 80-90.

⁷ Robbins, pp. 163, 174.

⁸ See my "Kantian Wholism: Toward a Critical Environmental Ethic," *Southwest Philosophical Studies* 11 (Spring 1989): 1-12; and my "Kant and Leopold: Toward a Postmodern Environmental Ethic," forthcoming in *Contemporary Philosophy* 13 (1990). See also Holmes Rolston, III, "Treating Animals Naturally," *Between the Species* 5 (Summer 1989): 131-137.

⁹ See my "Moral Status: Criteria, Values, and Action," *Contemporary Philosophy* 11 (September 1987): 7-10; and my "Species Extinction and the Concho Water Snake," *Contemporary Philosophy* 12 (January 1989): 1-9. See also Donald VanDeVeer, "Interspecific Justice," *Inquiry* 22 (Summer 1979): 55-70.

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