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# Reply: Feminism and Utilitarian Arguments for Vegetarianism: A Note on Alex Wellington's "Feminist Positions on Vegetarianism"

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Alex Wellington has provided an invaluable survey of feminist arguments for and against vegetarianism. My utilitarian defense of vegetarianism was intended to preclude neither rights-based nor feminist justifications. Its goal, rather, was to show that the least controversial ground for vegetarianism—one that extends moral concern to nonhumans on the basis of their ability to suffer and feel pleasure—is sufficient to respond to two well-known defenses of meat eating.

Whereas most of the feminist philosophers whom Wellington discusses reach similar conclusions to those of my utilitarian argument, or else disagree because they reject traditional utilitarian or rights-based frameworks, one of them—Kathryn Paxton George—raises an objection that is directly relevant to my utilitarian case. George argues that certain biological facts about women and ecological and economic realities about the poor and people who live in some developing countries would make the demand that they become vegetarians unfairly burdensome. If George has her empirical data right, then, as Wellington correctly observes, utilitarian advocates of vegetarianism may have to carve out wide exceptions to the demand that we all become vegetarians. Women who lack the resources to



## DISCUSSION

compensate for the nutritional deficit that would allegedly result from giving up meat and people, especially those in developing countries, who cannot find affordable nonmeat sources of protein would be excused if vegetarianism would cause them more suffering than is currently inflicted on the nonhuman animals that they eat.

However, contrary to Wellington's claim that such limitations on the argument for vegetarianism would be "somewhat arbitrary," they are perfectly compatible with a utilitarian approach. The most famous utilitarian vegetarian of all, Peter Singer, concedes that his argument may not apply to Eskimos, whose only available source of protein is meat.<sup>1</sup> A consistent utilitarian must take into account all relevant consequences, and, while it may make the morality of meat eating more complex, it is not at all arbitrary to recognize crucial differences between men and women and between industrialized and developing countries. The fact that utilitarianism avoids blanket moral judgments that ignore vital distinctions between different cases is one of its great advantages as a moral theory.

A similar response applies to George's concern that the utilitarian argument for vegetarianism would brand women and inhabitants of developing countries as a "moral underclass" of people who are unable to fulfill the duty to be vegetarian. The key point is that utilitarianism would impose no such duty in the first place on any people for whom vegetarianism would be unduly burdensome, in that their sacrifices in refraining from eating meat would be greater than the harm currently caused by their meat eating. Hence neither women, poor people, nor inhabitants of developing countries would be condemned to being unable to fulfill their moral duties, and the charge that the utilitarian argument for vegetarianism serves only "the most privileged class of humans" is unfounded.

So, even if George's empirical claims are supported by the evidence, they do not undermine the utilitarian case for vegetarianism. A utilitarian can consistently relativize the duty to refrain from eating meat to those on whom it would not impose an unfair burden.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd. Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 62.

