

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
*Duty and the Beast:
Should We Eat Meat in the
Name of Animal Rights?*

by Andy Lamey

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No way of life can be entirely free from inflicting harm on others. The Vegan Society characterizes veganism as seeking to exclude all exploitation of animals “as far as is possible and practicable.” Yet the dietary implications of this precept are not as straightforward as many assume. In *Duty and the Beast*, Andy Lamey confronts arguments for what he calls *new omnivorism* – recent arguments that profess to undermine the moral injunction against eating meat that is so prominent in the animal protection (animal rights) movement. Instead of rejecting animal protection as such, the new critics claim that in the pursuit of this objective the consumption of some meat is permissible or even obligatory.

Very sensibly, Lamey defines the vegan diet in terms of a commitment to reducing harm to animals rather than as a dogmatic set of dietary prohibitions. To do the contrary, it seems to me, runs the risk of turning veganism into a cult of purity instead of a rationally defensible, empirically based means to a just end. The question that runs through this book is whether the vegan commitment always requires abstaining from meat.

In the course of his wide-ranging study, Lamey tackles the issue of death as a harm to animals and delves into “burger veganism,” the doctrine of double effect, Temple Grandin’s “humane” slaughter, the cognition of chickens, “logic of the larder” arguments (that meat-eating benefits animals by bringing them into existence), alleged plant consciousness, and *in vitro* (lab) meat. I will touch on only some of these matters here.

Lamey considers the harm that death is for persons (self-conscious individuals, who are moral agents and have a conception of themselves as existing through time) versus the harm it is for the – hypothetically – merely sentient (who are simply con-

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scious and with the ability to experience pleasure and pain). He argues for a “time-relative interest” account of the wrongness of killing. Because they lack the quality of future goods that persons have in prospect and because psychologically they are only weakly related to their future selves, the death of a merely sentient being is not nearly as bad as that of a person. Indeed, Lamey judges that the harm done by killing a merely sentient animal is less than that done by killing a late-term human fetus. Still, he maintains, even this lesser harm would seldom be justifiable in terms of providing food, since people normally have alternative sources of nourishment.

But are most birds and mammals merely sentient? And can we impartially judge the value of their lives? Not only do we have a very imperfect grasp of animal minds in all their variety, but our natural anthropocentric bias makes it very difficult to know whether it is really better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. After examining evidence about the cognition of chickens, an animal frequently viewed as particularly dim-witted, Lamey concludes that they possess a form of primitive self-consciousness that includes some sense of existing through time. This means they have a fairly strong interest in not being killed, one that cannot be overridden by the relatively trivial pleasure humans derive from eating them.

The cornerstone of what Lamey labels “burger veganism” is an article by Steven L. Davis (2003). Davis quotes Tom Regan as saying: “Whenever we find ourselves in a situation where all the options at hand will produce some harm to those who are innocent, we must choose that option that will result in the least total sum of harm” – which Regan calls the “minimize harm principle.” Based on a couple of empirical studies, Davis argues that, because of the large numbers of field animals

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killed in the production of crops, a commitment to this principle may require us to reject abstention from meat in favour of an omnivorous diet that includes grass-fed herbivores raised in “pasture-forage” systems. Hence “burger veganism.”

In fact, Davis badly misreads Regan. Although Regan defends the “harm principle” (that we have a direct *prima facie* duty not to harm individuals who have an experiential welfare), he only mentions the “minimize harm principle” in order immediately to reject it (Regan 1983: 302). Interpreted as a calculation of aggregate welfare, it is incompatible with Regan’s own view, which insists on respecting the rights of individual subjects-of-a-life. Instead, for situations where we cannot avoid harming some innocents, Regan formulates the *miniride* (minimize overriding) and worse-off principles. Even so, it may still be the case, as Davis contends, that an all-plant diet typically results in more animal deaths than some particular kind of omnivorous diet does.

As Lamey notes, Gaverick Matheny (2003) has found a large hole in Davis’s arithmetic. Davis has failed to take into account that much less land is required to feed a given number of people on an all-plant diet. When this mistake is rectified, says Matheny, a plant diet is seen to result in significantly fewer animal deaths. For his part, Lamey finds that Davis has greatly overestimated the number of mice killed directly by harvesters; it turns out that most mice mortality results from predation by other animals after crop harvesting. Lamey also notes a faulty assumption in the calculation underlying Michael Archer’s (2011) burger-vegan claim about the number of mice poisoned by farmers during mouse plagues in Australia.

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Lamey makes the point that studies show wide variation in the effects of harvesting practices on different wild animal species, so that it is difficult to generalize about mortality rates. For example, some studies show that changes in particular populations in cultivated areas are the result of migration in and out of these areas and not the result of higher mortality in cultivated areas.

As Lamey and Bob Fischer (2018) have stressed, the moral import of empirical evidence about animal deaths in plant agriculture, difficult as such evidence is to come by, depends on answers to questions that are largely philosophical. Are we morally responsible for the death of a mouse killed by an owl after a harvester has removed the crop from a field? What if the mouse would not have existed in the first place if not for the shelter for mice provided by the crop? Is the short life of the average wild mouse on balance positive or negative in terms of experiences, and how does that affect our assessment of how harmful its death is? Should we factor in the benefit to the owl of feasting on the mouse? Do some animals count more than others because of their greater cognitive capacities? Do insects count at all? Do we have an obligation to police the natural world in order to minimize suffering?

One crucial philosophical issue arises from the fact that many of the deaths of wild animals in crop production are unintended, even if foreseen. Davis counts these deaths as morally equivalent to the intended deaths of farmed animals. Lamey devotes a chapter (“The Dinner of Double Effect”) to arguing for what he calls an animal-friendly version of the doctrine of double effect. If persuasive, this doctrine further undermines the burger-vegan position.

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All this does not factor in the human and environmental costs of animal agriculture, including the spread of disease, the toll on slaughterhouse workers, water pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change. A long list of zoonotic outbreaks, including pandemics, is linked to animal agriculture or the exploitation of wildlife.

Most of us have heard the refrain “Plants have feelings too” used as a provocative response to vegetarians/vegans. If true, the practical import for a commitment to reducing the harm we do might be profound. The fact that plants are highly sensitive to their environments and respond to them in remarkably complex ways has previously led some philosophers to argue that plants have intrinsic value and merit our moral concern. For instance, Paul Taylor (1986) ascribes equal worth to all living organisms on the basis that each is a “teleological center of life” – a unified system of goal-oriented activities – whether or not it is conscious. But, he says, the fact that animals can suffer and plants cannot means it is less wrong to kill a plant to satisfy our needs than to kill a sentient animal. By contrast, the new field of so-called “plant neurobiology” often involves more radical claims: that plants think, that they display intelligence and are sentient – e.g., Mancuso and Viola (2015).

Lamey examines the key concepts and the evidence. He concludes that “plant thinkers” have provided no good reason to believe that plants experience the world subjectively, in a manner that would qualify as sentience in the language of animal protection. Even the possession of some rudimentary form of consciousness by plants would not raise them to the same moral status as sentient animals. Further, any obligation to minimize harm to plants for their own sakes would tell against raising animals for meat, given the amount of land cleared for animal

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agriculture and since each farmed animal consumes, injures, and/or kills many plants.

Lamey does not oppose all meat consumption. The concept of “meat”, he argues, can properly encompass flesh replacements that are not carved directly from the bodies of animals. He defends *in vitro*, or lab, meat against protectionist critics who contend that the consumption of *in vitro* meat furthers the ideology that animals are edible or who contend that such consumption exhibits an inappropriate attitude of irreverence toward the bodies of animals.

New omnivorism poses a series of challenges to the animal protection movement as traditionally understood. While they may have originated in good faith (e.g., via investigation into the numbers of field animals killed in crop production or into the complex responses of plants to their environments), these challenges can be wielded less scrupulously by others for ideological purposes. As such, new omnivorism presents a task for animal protectionists on both fronts: to engage seriously with the serious arguments, in the interest of better understanding, and to combat the latest apologies for animal exploitation.

It is said that Persian carpets contain intentional flaws to acknowledge that only the works of God can be perfect. Who knew that the august Cambridge University Press would display so much religious zeal – this book contains a surprising number of typos. But they do not detract from the insightful arguments woven by the author. A commitment to the core idea of veganism raises numerous philosophical, scientific, and practical issues; Andrew Lamey does a fine job of addressing many of them.

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