CrossMark

IS EATING MEAT ETHICAL?

Thom Brooks

Eating meat can be ethical, but only when it does not violate rights. This requires that the ways in which meat is produced and prepared for human consumption satisfies certain standards. While many current practices may fall short of this standard, this does not justify the position that eating meat cannot be ethical under any circumstances and there should be no principled objection to its possibility.

Eating meat can be ethical, but only when it does not violate rights. This is a position of *principle* that claims eating meat can be ethically justified that may not be satisfied by our current *practices*. It is important that we distinguish our ethical objections to eating meat based on principle from our practices. This helps reveal that many standard arguments for rejecting eating meat are weaker than their supporters realise. Arguing that eating meat is unethical because animals are mistreated does not require we reject eating meat in principle. Instead, it demands that our practices change so that any mistreatment ends. Eating meat can involve mistreatment and so be unethical, but this is not a principled argument against eating meat under any circumstances if we revise our practices.

Animals may unnecessarily suffer from birth to slaughter. Some political communities permit unacceptable conditions for animals to grow and breed. Animal slaughter may also be inhumane. While there may be disagreement about which conditions for animals cannot be justified, few argue that animals cannot be mistreated no matter the circumstances. Accepting standards of animal welfare does not rule out using animals in food production. Or at least not without further argument.

doi:10.1017/S1477175617000161 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2017
Think 47, Vol. 16 (Autumn 2017)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These issues raise questions about the practice of how animals are reared and prepared for human consumption only. Our response must be to improve our practices to avoid ethical problems, if this is possible. We should require improved conditions for all animals to enter the human food chain where suffering is avoided. Likewise, we must insist upon higher standards to best ensure painless slaughter.

Opponents of meat eating might claim that the practices cannot be satisfactorily reformed because it cannot be ethical to eat meat in the first place. Consider the following example. All animals eventually die. Suppose Ted is hungry and comes across a duck that has died from natural causes. Is it ethical for him to eat it? Yes. The duck has not suffered from any maltreatment or inhumane slaughter. Ted has not raised the duck to be eaten, but instead only eats what has already died. He does not violate any rights belonging to the duck or others in eating it. One conclusion is that it is ethical for him to eat the duck. Ted has not caused the duck any suffering during its life or its death. Nor is it clear that anyone is left worst off when Peter eats the duck.

One critical response might say that Ted may be justified ethically to eat the duck, but we are not. The argument might go like this: we don't let animals roam free until their natural death and then prepare them for human consumption. So the example with Ted is different from our circumstances and therefore cannot justify our eating meat for the same reasons. But note that this criticism again is about the ethics of *food production* and not the ethics of *eating meat*. In short, it is in fact an argument about our *practices* and not our *principles*. If it is ethical to eat meat where the animal has lived a life free from unnecessary suffering until its natural death, then eating meat may be ethical, but it will depend upon our particular practices.

We must insist that our practices do not violate rights. It is clear that animals possess some measure of rights and this has become a consensus view. Few now argue that it

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is purely a matter of indifference how animals are reared and slaughtered. A central concern must be on reducing, if not eliminating, unnecessary suffering. But not all suffering is a rights violation. Paul may suffer from heartbreak upon hearing about Mary's death, but she need not have violated his rights. It is essential that the protection of animal rights includes a clear commitment to our avoiding causing unnecessary suffering to animals from cradle to grave. It is also essential that human rights are respected, too. If eating meat were only possible through depriving rights to others, then it would be unacceptable. But this is not the case. The production of meat for human consumption need not violate the rights of animals and humans. Where no rights are violated, then eating meat can be ethical.

An important question arises here concerning whether preparing animals for food production *necessarily* violates their rights. Debates about whether eating meat is ethical often focus – sometimes exclusively – on how meat is prepared for human consumption. We may broadly agree that animals cannot be mistreated and made to suffer, but should we accept that animal rights include a right against being killed for food? This is controversial and many disagree about how it should be answered. However, the possibility that eating meat can be justified remains, no matter which side we take.

Suppose Heather owns a farm used primarily to raise chicken for local supermarkets. Is this unethical *in principle* under any circumstances? Reasonable people disagree about whether her food production must permit chicken to be 'free range' or not to warrant ethical justification. This matter raises important issues, but there is a more fundamental concern we should consider first.

Imagine Heather raises chickens on her farm and only prepares them for local supermarkets after they have died naturally – and that her chickens live longer than they would if in the wild. Such meat production is illegal because the chickens would require testing to confirm its safety and this would add to the costs of bringing them to market. Plus, it is often commented that the meat of older

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

animals is generally tougher and less enjoyable than the meat of younger animals. But suppose the chickens are safe for human consumption in this example of naturally dead meat production. Should we object to eating meat in such cases?

We should not. The reason for this is that rights have not been violated for either humans or animals. If the meat is safe for humans to consume as presupposed here, then meat-eating individuals are not harmed health-wise. Nor is anyone engaged in animal slaughter and so persons opposed to such killing should find it more difficult to object to it. It is controversial to claim animals have rights and which rights they might have. If they do possess rights, then they are not violated either, as the chickens are not killed and are able to live longer than they might otherwise if remaining in the wild. So the example of naturally dead meat production is an illustration of ethically justified meat consumption. But what about other examples?

Now consider the case where Heather allows her chickens to live longer than they would in the wild and only slaughters them when they show clear signs of suffering before their imminent deaths. The animals still live longer than they would otherwise, but they are killed. Some will disagree about the ethics of this case, but it is unclear that a respect for any rights the animals possess requires us to knowingly, foreseeably and avoidably permit them to endure suffering.

It is crucial to note that in both of these examples the killing of animals is not justified to produce meat for food production. The first example involves no killing at all and we only prepare animals for food production after they have died of natural causes. The second example involves only killing animals under specific circumstances, but the threshold of ethical justification is animal welfare alone. Both are illustrations that show how eating meat need not always be unethical as it can be justified. This is the case because in each example no rights are violated – of either individuals or animals. This holds for all types of animals that are raised normally for food production and so not involving

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

endangered species, as this would raise new concerns that will not be considered here.

While I have argued that eating meat can be ethical, I have not considered all types of food production such as killing animals at a younger age and the various ways in which animals are killed in slaughterhouses. But this is unnecessary for my purposes. If there are *additional* examples where the preparation of animals for human consumption can be ethical, then they must satisfy the condition argued here: that no rights are violated for either humans or animals. This claim raises many questions, not least about which rights each may possess. But if I am correct, my examples above illustrate that eating meat can be ethical, even if we accepted the view that animals possess rights, and even if we shared concerns that it may be unethical to kill animals specifically for food production.

These examples are not meant to exhaust all possible causes of ethical meat eating, but rather to make clear that it can be ethical. This argument does not require us to accept that animals were designed for human consumption, that we can benefit from eating meat or even that we should eat meat. In fact, my argument for the ethics of eating meat may be consistent with some forms of vegetarianism. This is because it is not inconsistent to argue that eating meat can be justified ethically and so be acceptable, but no existing practices satisfy this moral standard – so eating meat can be ethical in theory, but it is not in practice and so we should instead choose vegetarianism.

Eating meat may be ethical because it need not violate rights. This conclusion may require many changes to how we produce and prepare meat for human consumption to ensure it is ethical. While many of our practices may not be ethical, this is no argument for the position that eating meat cannot be ethical.

Tom Brooks is Dean of Durham Law School, Durham University.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175617000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press