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IS IT WRONG TO EAT ANIMALS?*

By Loren Lomasky

> The day may come when the rest of animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny . . . A full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even [a] month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, Can they *talk*? But, Can they *suffer*? —Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

For most people on this planet eating meat is a pleasure. Increasingly, however, it is becoming a guilty pleasure.[1] Against the enjoyments of biting into a juicy hamburger, savoring smoky barbecue, or snacking on kung pao chicken must be set burdens inflicted on the raw materials that go into these food products: living, breathing, sensing organisms. Hundreds of millions of chickens, steers, pigs, sheep, fish and other animals are killed each year in order to satisfy Americans' taste for meat. On a global basis the total is much multiplied. Even "humane" slaughter involves some measure of distress to beasts up and down the evolutionary chain, and the conditions under which they are raised often add to the costs they bear. How to cumulate that suffering is an unsolved problem of comparative psychics, but it can hardly be denied that these millions of episodes of pain and death constitute a morally considerable datum.[2] The question

* Versions of this essay were presented to numerous audiences, including audiences at the University of Arizona, Australian National University, University of Connecticut, National University of Singapore. Each occasion afforded me vigorous discussion and meaty ideas—pardon the expression—to chew on. An anonymous (vegetarian) referee for this journal provided me a report that was a full-fledged response article in its own right. Here I have been able only to touch lightly on some of the points raised therein; I hope eventually to see that report in print so I can respond with the full attention it merits. Among the dozens, if not hundreds, of people who have talked with me about the ethics of eating meat, I owe special debts to Nicole Bailey, Rob Bass, Linda Gosnell, and David Schmidtz. [Editors' note: Michael Gill, who is the author of the accompanying response piece, was the reviewer to whom Lomasky refers here.]

[1] The original spur to writing this essay was provided by two students—I'm sorry, but I cannot recall your names—who on separate occasions, told me "I know it's wrong for me to eat meat, but I like it too much to give it up." Is this something I should have known? Not unless it is true. What follows is an investigation of that proposition.

[2] Descartes notoriously denies that nonhuman animals possess states of conscious awareness, including pleasure and pain sensations. Contemporary meat eaters would not do well to base the propriety of their culinary practices on this improbable piece of Cartesian metaphysics.

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may well be asked: Is it not shamefully self-indulgent to set against this toll to nonhuman animals the pleasures of dining on flesh?

Except perhaps for children being force-fed their dinner, meat eating is indeed an indulgence. Whether or not it is a shameful one demands inspection. Section I argues that dining should not be understood merely as an occasion for taking in necessary nutrients but rather as normatively rich. Culinary practices are a not inconsiderable component of living well. Section II extends the discussion to the role of meat within dining and contends that there is strong presumptive evidence that it is a major enhancement, one that makes good lives go better. Section III is the heart of the essay—the main course, if you will. It confronts the problem of other minds, specifically animal minds that are very different from our own. Given radical ignorance about what it is like to be a cow or pig or chicken, assessing the magnitude of harm done to those brought to our dinner tables may seem to be a matter of unverifiable guesswork. I argue that even if the problem is insoluble it can be circumvented. The upshot is that eating meat contributes to a very great good for human beings without impermissibly impinging on animal well-being. Section IV takes on objections to that argument for meat eating, and V briefly sets out and responds to alternative condemnations of meat eating. Section VI provides a conclusion.

I. Setting the Table

Certain human practices are such that in their absence, life is significantly diminished. Creating and listening to music is one such practice; enjoyment of the visual arts is another. Each is grounded in a sensory capacity requisite for survival, but each transcends that base. Whether or not those who listen to Beethoven's music live longer or reproduce more successfully than those who do not, its consumption makes good lives better. So too do afternoons spent taking in the treasures of the Louvre. It would be useful to have at hand a full account of the variety of human aesthetic experiences and how they contribute to living well, but that is not available. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to assemble some fairly uncontroversial features of intrinsically valuable appreciative experiences. First, they are grounded in one or more of the senses but their value extends beyond the accuracy with which they represent items in the world. Not all of these experiences purport to supply information about some external object; and even with regard to those that do, the aesthetic object itself is that which is of primary normative significance. We esteem, for example, Cézanne's depiction on canvas of the bowl of fruit, not the items that supplied his model. A corollary is that even when some perceptual experience is instrumentally valuable—e.g., music that has charms to soothe the savage breast—its value is not reducible to such further consequences. Second, although valued aesthetic experiences can take as their object some untransformed natural object—an exquisite sunset; Niagara Falls—those that are artifac-

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tual incorporate deliberate transformation of natural materials for the sake of communicating some idea or emotion. As such they are *expressive,* and expressivity is central to the values of creation and production. Third, capacity to communicate is itself artifactual, deriving from conventions and traditions that suffuse individual creations with meaningfulness. Sounds that signify in one way to an experienced listener of Chinese operas may present themselves as bizarre, unpleasant noise to someone at home in a different musical tradition. Fourth and related, aesthetic objects are typically embedded within other practices that are not themselves primarily oriented toward aesthetic experience. For example, the significance of a hymn sung during a religious service is not to be understood as a function of the prettiness of its melody and how well the verses scan. In virtue of what quilts are and how they are used, a patchwork quilt occupies a different aesthetic niche than would an exact painted representation. Fifth, aesthetic objects differ markedly in their quality: from trivial, worthless, or less-than-worthless to profound and ennobling. No one's life would be diminished if elevator muzak had never been created—no one except the owners and employees of the Muzak Company—but millions of people are enriched by contact with the creative products of Beethoven, the Beatles, and Hank Williams. Sixth, you may dispute the previous sentence. Perhaps you take extra rides in elevators so that you can hear more of the music (or "music") played therein. Or perhaps you rolled your eyes at the encomium to one or more of those three previously cited musicians. This is to say that aesthetic judgments are *disputable.* Indeed, it is by discussing and arguing with each other about what constitutes excellence in a particular domain that we hone our own appreciations and come to what we ourselves acknowledge to be fuller and richer understandings of our experiences. *De gustibus non est disputandum* may be a wise maxim, but not if it is interpreted as holding that aesthetic appreciation is nothing more than untutored subjective opinion. Rather, it is more sensibly construed as a reminder that valuational judgments are not simply expressions of raw taste—even when they are, literally, about how things taste.

These observations are not demonstrative but should suffice to render plausible the proposition that the pleasures of civilized food consumption extend far beyond those enjoyed by our cave-dwelling ancestors. We do not merely eat, we *dine,* and the various practices of dining that have emerged throughout the world enrich human lives to an extent comparable to that afforded by other fine and applied arts. Of course that is not the case for all persons, but neither are we all equal in our capacity to appreciate various musical experiences.[3] The claim, rather, is that the

[3] People who hear me sing inquire on occasion, "Have you been tone deaf all your life or is this a recent affliction?" A deficient ability to reap experiential riches from music does not, however, render one unable to appreciate the fact that there are such riches to be drawn. Those who for whatever reason cannot be much bothered with food ought similarly to be

features that render the arts valuable are similarly present in dining. It is worth reminding ourselves of what those features include.

To an extent greater, perhaps, than with any other cultural form, dining engages all the senses. To eat is, of course, to *taste* and to *smell*, but presentation is a crucial factor in elevating a good dish into realms of excellence. It is not a category mistake to say of a dish that it *looks delicious*. The importance of sight within dining can be rendered vivid by having a meal entirely in the dark and recording the experiential deficit associated with not being able to see what one eats. (On the other hand, eating hospital food with one's eyes closed may speed one's recovery.) Another significant aspect of the dining experience is the *feel* of food in the mouth. If that which is supposed to be crisp turns out instead to be flabby or the steak that should be tender demands extended chewing, the experience is flawed. Compared with these other senses, the importance of sound to the internal aspects of eating is minor. (The auditory feedback from biting into a fine apple does impact the experience, but it comes in well behind the apple's taste, smell, look, and feel.) But because dining is best enjoyed within a context of conversation with others, *talking about food* is more than an accidental add-on. And even when the subject of conversation is not the food being consumed, the act of eating together provides a setting within which communication is lubricated.

Second, although some good eating involves neither deliberation nor preparation—taking a perfectly ripe peach out of a bowl and biting into it—often those meals that we most appreciate and remember incorporate artful construction both within a course and across dishes. The salad is likely to be more successful if it mixes flavors, textures, and colors; strong-flavored dishes are alternated with subtle ones, and so on. A cook in thinking how to perfect an item will aim for thematic consistency but also a balance among opposing flavors. That cooking is a craft is obvious; that dining too is a craft involving techniques of discrimination and comparative assessment is also true if less obvious. Our distant ancestors are not to be faulted for surviving on whatever bits they were fortunate enough to hunt and gather,[4] but it is our good fortune that we are able to enhance our lives by not taking a path of least resistance with regard to what we put in our mouths.

Third, appreciation of many foods demands habituation and consequent understanding. Americans of one or two generations back would have been appalled at the prospect of eating raw fish; the current prolif-

able to understand that their condition constitutes a genuine disability, not an epistemically authoritative peak from which to pronounce judgment.

[4] In fairness to primitive human beings, to them belongs credit for the single greatest leap forward in the practice of eating: learning to cook their food. Richard Wrangham in *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2010) argues that cooking afforded homo sapiens an enormous evolutionary advantage over their primate kin. That it also afforded them an enormous culinary advantage may be only an accidental add-on. If so, it is a truly serendipitous one.

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eration of sushi outlets indicates that a cultural bridge has been successfully crossed. Whether it extends to the enjoyment of sea cucumber may be another matter. For outsiders, *curry* is an exotic flavor for which they either do or do not care, but for participants in a culinary tradition it is a wide genre of dishes that vary interestingly one from another along several taste dimensions. Insofar as one is able to discern patterns and likenesses, ability to appreciate (and to criticize) is enhanced.

Fourth, although sometimes mealtime is only that, at other times it is more. Portentous occasions are often accompanied by a meal: for example, Christmas or Easter dinner. The connection can be even closer. The Jewish Passover meal, known as the *Seder,* is simultaneously culinary and liturgical. Thanksgiving dinner in its pure form is also a mix of feasting and reflective consideration of benefactions enjoyed. The significance of the occasion is not a function of the excellence of the cuisine, although fine feasting helps.[5] For numerous other events, eating's form follows function. Candles and cake can be lovingly included both in a romantic dinner and a child's birthday party, but their roles on the two occasions differ markedly. Eating can also signify via *absence,* such as on the fast days of Ramadan and Yom Kippur. How and what we eat is not separable from how we play, worship, conduct business, mourn the dead, take delight in our loved ones, commemorate, console, and give expression to others and even to ourselves of who we are. Dining practices are rich not only in calories but also in meaning.

Fifth, some meals are eminently forgettable while others are ethereal. Except perhaps within the lives of food critics and dedicated gastronomes, the former predominate. That is not a regrettable thing. Peak moments are, definitionally, rare, and their value is in part a function of that rareness. To peg an experience as being *among the very best* of its kind that you have ever enjoyed—whether it is an experience of a painting, concert, hike, or meal—is to attach a high level of normative significance to it. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the peaks are as high as they are because they tower over the valleys. If, however, those valleys stretch on as endlessly as the Kansas prairies, unrelieved by anything other than

[5] Turkey is the star performer at most American Thanksgiving dinners and enjoys celebrity status at many English Christmas dinners. Almost never is it prepared with complete success. That has less to do with deficiencies on the part of the cook than the nature of the bird. A roasting regimen adequate to cook the dark meat thoroughly will leave the white meat dry and unappealing. If all that mattered were culinary excellence, then the bird would be cut up and its disparate parts roasted separately. But eating well is not reducible to the sense of taste, and the turkey's mass and solidity convey to the assembled diners a celebration-appropriate sense of security and good fortune. The symbolism helps explain why tradition decrees that non-detached-turkey-parts are brought from the oven to be admired, carved, and then presented to diners.

Vegetarians advocate as substitution for the traditional bird a non-animal-based soy-and-wheat product dubbed *tofurkey.* On the one hand, it cooks more evenly than does turkey. On the other hand, once cooked it is only marginally worth eating and even less successful as a symbol of plenty.

yet another damned prairie, lives become stultified. (I mean no disrespect to Kansans, but they may find their spirits buoyed by an occasional trek to the seacoast or the Rockies.) To eat reasonably well all the time is a condition to be desired, but punctuation with episodes of *fine dining* makes a decent life better. It is important to note that the excellence of a meal is not reducible to the quality of the foods that comprise it. Other factors such as the ambience, company, and occasion contribute importantly to the experience. Just as listening at home to the recording of a world-class orchestra may be a less memorable musical experience than attending a concert by the home town ensemble, so too can solitary dining on excellent fare be phenomenologically inferior to good-but-not-great food shared with worthy companions on a meaningful occasion.

Sixth, that is in part because food and wine are meant to be *talked over* and *talked about.* Dishes and vintages are products of human creativity and are analyzable in terms of the intentions of the producers and the perceptions of the consumers. Sometimes we are puzzled about why we do not like a particular item as much as we expected we would, and then the matter is clarified by someone pointing out a discordant note. On other occasions enjoyment is enhanced when we are helped to identify and appreciate the various flavors that have combined to generate the unique but difficult-to-categorize sensations we are now experiencing. Food and drink are hospitable to endless debates: What wine would go better with this fish? Should this have been sauteed in olive oil rather than butter? Do the chilis overwhelm the prawns or enliven them? Is salad better served after the main course rather than before? Is *nouvelle cuisine* a welcome break from the (over)rich sauces of classic French cooking or is it a lamentable gastronomic dumbing-down? These discussions should not be understood as confused people opposing their respective preferences in a meaningless joust of subjectivity. Culinary judgments are not roundabout ways of declaring "I like it!" Rather, a qualified interlocutor will possess *reasons* for the judgment advanced. Because there exist cogent reasons to the contrary, the debate may not in principle be resolvable. This is not a misfortune. As with music and the various arts, conversation interminable can be a deepening of experience. I do not wish to overplay this point. Culinary objects do not enjoy the publicity and permanence of literary creations, paintings or musical types (as opposed to tokens), and therefore the discussions they engender are apt to be similarly evanescent. That does not necessarily make them inferior, but it does make them different. All that I maintain here is that the pleasures of the table are genuinely *civilized pleasures,* and that they are properly to be understood as important components of living well.

Does it follow that not to dine well is not to live well? In a word, no. There are many avenues along which people can forge lives of value to themselves and to others. Not all of these are compossible. Disciplined athletes, musicians, even philosophers have to forgo various goods for

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the sake of focusing on those to which they have dedicated themselves. Personal projects carry opportunity costs, and these can be well worth paying. Or not. We pity the miser who forgoes all else to put another zero on the bottom line of his wealth. Once St. Augustine achieved his conversion experience he determined that attachments to the pleasures of the table, to music, and to other secular diversions were to be shunned in order to offer full obeisance to God.[6] Was he correct in so judging? It is not necessary to hazard an answer here because in deliberately eschewing these items Augustine implicitly concedes that they are indeed very considerable goods, albeit not the highest good. Although the gastronome's menu differs dramatically from that of the Bishop of Hippo, both implicitly affirm a similar appraisal of the delightfulness of a fine meal.

II. And What About Meat?

Some people almost never give a thought to what they eat so long as it is the same as they have always had. For them food and drink satisfy nutritive needs and provide unreflective pleasures but nothing more. All else equal, their lives are thereby rendered inferior. As noted above, however, all else may not be equal. I possess vanishingly little insight into what the life of a supermodel is like, but I would not reject out of hand the proposition that for some individuals it is extraordinarily fulfilling even though it requires them to eat only marginally better than a rabbit grazing in the field. Wrestlers striving to meet weight confront a similar tradeoff, and if astronauts' finest beverage is Tang, they too sacrifice for their calling. Other constraints are financial and geographic: three star Michelin restaurants are exclusive, pricey, and not on every neighborhood block. Eating well, then, is neither costless nor effortless. It is, however, more accessible than many other valuable personal pursuits. Commensurability with other ends is usually not a major problem, because whatever else one does one must also eat, and a little bit of effort will often be all that is required to improve both the nutritional and the aesthetic aspects of food intake. To those for whom even this is blocked, compassion is due, but that is equally the case for other important dimensions of the human good. There is much more that could and should be said about the place of culinary activities within a flourishing life, but I am going to take the preceding discussion as having made a strong presumptive case that dining well is an important (albeit neither necessary nor sufficient) component of good human lives.

Is the quality of dining diminished by the exclusion of meat (or, more drastically, exclusion of all animal products)? If not, then vegetarianism/veganism avoids whatever moral onus attaches to meat consumption

[6] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk X.

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while forgoing no important human good. To the many people who take great pleasure in eating meat, abstainers respond that the habits of the carnivore[7] are learned behavior that can be unlearned without any appreciable gastronomic loss. If that is correct, then one side of the gains-to-the-eater/loss-to-the-eaten balance sheet becomes irrelevant and the moral status of meat eating is reducible simply to concern for the interests of the animals.

Some people believe that there neither is nor can be any more to the appraisal of value than subjective preference. Considerations of the relative merits of pushpin and poetry are quite beside the point; all that matters is how much pleasure each affords. But even on a purely hedonic rendering of value, it is not only the *actual* pleasure of an activity that is relevant but the extent of the pleasure that *would be* secured if the activity were pursued with full zest, skill, and appreciation. Some pleasures come naturally, but others need to be cultivated. Is it worth the investment to take up golfing, playing the flute, rock climbing, reading classical Greek—and, for that matter, poetry and pushpin? These questions are to be appraised from the perspective of the initiate, not the tyro. One problem with simply asking experts, though, is that they constitute a biased sample. Those who have excelled in climbing sheer rock cliff faces are apt to depart from the statistical norm with regard to the means through which they are able to derive satisfaction. Only if they can put themselves into the position of those who do not possess their own peculiar gifts and dispositions will they be able to give useful advice.

J. S. Mill contends in *Utilitarianism* that the competent judge concerning which of two pleasurable activities is to be preferred can only be the person who has adequately experienced both.[8] The test is not definitive because these qualified judges may disagree and because some activities—smoking crack, listening to talk radio—degrade one's capacity to appreciate other and better modes of life. Nonetheless, the competent judges test is a generally useful epistemic tool. In *On Liberty,* however, Mill passionately decries the "ape-like faculty" of imitation and implores individuals to find and forge their own good. It seems pretty clear that taking a poll of one's fellows and acting as the majority deems best is to fail dismally with regard to individuality. How to synthesize these two different themes from the two different books is not obvious, but presumably Mill means to claim that we are obliged to learn as best we can from

[7] On one definition, a *carnivore* is a creature that subsists entirely or primarily on animals. Strictly speaking, human beings are more precisely characterized as *omnivores.* But because it would be tedious to speak of "the meat-eating component of an omnivorous human diet," I shall take the term to refer to all acts of eating animals.

[8] "On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final." J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism,* Bk 2.

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those whose entry into the world has preceded our own, but then we are to adjust this data in the service of our own particular projects and powers.

Aristotle's norm for judgment is similar. In attempting to ascertain the correct answer to any question, he advises, we should begin by looking to the views of the *many* and the *wise* (with the latter carrying more weight).[9] That is the beginning of the inquiry, not its end because new learning is possible, and thus both the many and the wise are subject to correction. Also, the "many" may turn out to be an unrepresentative few, and those proclaimed to be wise may be nothing more than charlatans and pretenders. Nonetheless, their verdicts, especially when they are in accord, carry significant presumptive weight.

Applying either Mill's competent judges test or Aristotle's many-and-the-wise test, the inescapable conclusion is that meat makes for better dining. Let the many in this case be the world's citizens in their several billions. All across the globe the same phenomenon is observed: as incomes increase so does the amount of meat in people's diets.[10] Only when a very high level of affluence is achieved such as that enjoyed in the United States and other OECD countries do people in any numbers cut back on or eliminate meat consumption. Across cultures, diets differ almost as much as languages do, but a preference for eating animals is nearly universal. The many, so defined, also seem to qualify as Millian competent judges. They have previously subsisted on staple-heavy diets but then are rendered able to add greater proportions of fruit, vegetables, and meat to their diets. They do not look back. Rice is not enough. Significantly, neither is rice enhanced with a variety of vegetables. Although meat costs more than nutrition substitutes, people want it. The magnitude of their culinary verdict is not to be denied.

Another way of parsing "competent judge" or identifying the wise is to turn to a culture's specialists in cuisine: those whose immersion in a food tradition affords them skills to serve as chefs, train apprentices, write cookbooks, appraise raw ingredients, and so on. When we look at the world's great cuisines we discover that almost without exception they not only include meat but also feature it as a focal point of fine meals. In France as in India, China as in Italy, meat is sovereign. This is, of course, not to maintain that the other components of these cuisines are given short shrift. To overcook the asparagus is lamentable, and if the hollandaise that covers it begins to separate, the meal has been irreparably blighted. From soup to nuts (or, as the case may be, samosas to gulab

[9] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.4.

[10] See, for example, Mark Rosegrant *et al*, "2020 Global Food Outlook: Trends, Alternatives, Choices," (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2001) at http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pubs/fpr/fpr30.pdf. See also, Danielle Nierenberg, "Meat Production and Consumption Continues to Grow," (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 2009) at http://vitalsigns.worldwatch.org/vs-trend/meat-production-and-consumption-continues-grow.

jamun), each dish has its own excellence to be either achieved or squandered. Pro-meat does not imply anti-vegetable![11]

It might be objected that some important cultures omit meat from their cuisines. Significant Hindu and Buddhist populations refrain from eating meat. Jains carry the proscription of killing animals to a further extreme. Other cultures that are not strictly vegetarian nonetheless restrict meat eating. Jews and Muslims disallow pork; Christianity throughout its history has employed various restrictions on Lenten and Friday meals. Opponents of meat can interpret these strictures as embodying a kind of culinary *Realpolitik.* Although demands by the masses for meat are too great entirely to be resisted, enlightened authorities endeavor to impose constraints because they assign negative value to meat consumption.

The objection gets matters backwards. Restrictions on meat consumption do not represent a devaluation but rather an acknowledgment of worth. Precisely because dining on flesh is so favored, its sacrifice amounts to genuine commitment. There is something elevating about a vow to forgo meat consumption, even if for only one day each week. To renounce Brussels sprouts instead is bathetic. However one chooses to interpret biblical accounts of laying animal sacrifices before Yahweh, they convey believers' conviction that they are thereby offering something splendid to their god. That so many religions advance constraints on which animals are to be eaten and how the permissible ones are to be slaughtered and prepared conveys a recognition of meat eating as being among the very important components of how human beings can live well.

Does it follow that individuals owe a duty to themselves to dine on meat? The easy answer is no, because there are no duties to the self. It would be distracting to pursue the premise undergirding that easy answer, so I reformulate the question: Do individuals who abstain from eating meat thereby lead (significantly) inferior lives? The answer, I believe, is that frequently they indeed do. If, for example, some refrain out of misplaced diffidence from eating animals, then they are the victims of their own affective states. Perhaps it is too late for them to do anything about childhood habituation or early trauma consequent on watching *Bambi.*[12] Then even if at some level they accept the proposition that they are doing less well for themselves at the table than their meat-eating peers do, they must carry on as best they can. More likely is that habituation (or moral indoctrination) has led them to be unwilling to question whether they may be missing out on some appreciable good.

[11] Nor does pro-vegetable mean anti-meat. That is why it is semantically deplorable that so many recent books conveying instructions for the preparation of vegetable dishes contain the word "vegetarian" in their titles. Do these authors really want to convey the idea that the recipes offered are suitable only for those who have voluntarily taken a vow of culinary abnegation?

[12] I have, in another context, spoken of the reluctance to envisage the process of meat production as the *veal of ignorance.*

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For other individuals, however, abstaining from meat makes their lives go better. They understand that many people derive considerable pleasure from dining on boeuf bourguignon or twice-cooked pork and that they might readily do so as well, but they forgo meat for the sake of some other end, perhaps a spiritual one. To harm no sensate being is not an ideal for everyone, but for a select few it is the lodestone of their lives. Achievement requires sacrifice, and theirs is considerable, but the resultant payoff can reasonably be seen as worth the cost. An appropriate comparison is to a vow of celibacy. Sexuality in human relationships is a great good, perhaps a transcendent one. It does not follow that a person who vows to lead a celibate life has thereby made an error in axiological arithmetic. This is because some conceptions of living well are incompatible with sexual partnership. Augustine, for example, judges that such incompatibility characterizes the particular Christian commitment he undertakes. It is not inconceivable that he has gotten this wrong, although how that error might be ascertained either by Augustine himself or some observer is epistemically challenging.[13] Neither, though, is it inconceivable that he has gotten this profoundly right. If so, he has lived a life of very great value despite—indeed, partially because—he has chosen to forgo an important human good.

Let us concede that Augustine or the spiritually minded vegetarian has chosen well for himself. It is vital nonetheless to keep in mind: *Nothing follows with regard to whether others should follow in their path.* What is personally prescriptive does not thereby become generalizable. Augustine has the good sense not to condemn marriage on the grounds that his own life is enhanced by perpetual bachelorhood. Not all Christians will live as he does, and that is a very good thing.[14] A suitably modest spiritual vegetarian will display equivalent forbearance. That living on lentils and rice is partially constitutive of one person's good does not falsify the proposition that barbecued brisket is genuinely fulfilling (and filling!) for another. Therefore, the question posed by the title of this essay is not answered in the negative by the existence of vegetarians who live well. Rather, that answer would follow only if (1) (nearly) all meat eaters thereby lead inferior lives; or (2) eating meat wrongs some other creatures. I take

[13] If the God of the New Testament does not exist, does it follow that Augustine's Christian commitment is erroneous? In one respect, certainly yes; it rests on false beliefs. Presumably that falsity casts shadows on correlative practices such as celibacy. Whether a mode of life that crucially rests on subscription to a falsehood is thereby fatally tarnished is a further question. Don Quixote's impossible dream proves, indeed, to be impossible, but does that disvalue all his efforts on its behalf? Perhaps if he had believed more accurately he would have performed less well. And even if Augustine's theological and philosophical arguments are judged to be unsound, don't they possess an intellectual heft that validates his chosen mode of life? These questions about the relationship between truth and value stand in need of further investigation.

[14] Of course Augustine's tolerance does not extend to the choice between Christianity and Manichaeism!

it to be well-established by the discussion of this section and the preceding one that (1) does not obtain. I now turn to (2).

III. The Case on Behalf of Animals

For every pork chop eaten, some pig has died. More precisely, some pig has been killed. If pigs and other animals possess interests, then these are set back by being slaughtered as food for human beings. Nor is their killing painless. From these plain facts it does not follow forthwith that the killing of animals for food is morally condemnable, but it does mean that there are reasons counting against the moral acceptability of meat consumption. Harms visited on animals constitute the most compelling reasons for rejecting their consumption as food. There are independent objections to meat consumption, and Section V briefly takes up what some of these may be, but the crux of the case for moral vegetarianism is based on arguing that *harms* done to animals are also *wrongs* done to them.[15]

Let it be conceded that a one-way trip to the slaughterhouse constitutes a harm to the animal killed. Let it also be conceded that dining on the meat that results from the trip constitutes a good for the diner. One way to approach the alleged moral wrongness of killing animals for food is to ask which is the greater in magnitude: harm to the animal or benefit to its eater? Put in this way, the question looks to be insoluble. Interpersonal utility comparisons are tricky enough when performed between human beings, but when implemented interspecies the quandaries are redoubled. You know what it is like to be you, and the epistemic jump to what it is like to be your boss, your child, your neighbor, or some peasant on the other side of the world is feasible so long as exactitude is not required. It is a whole different matter to ask: What is it like to be a chicken, a pig, a trout? Answers are, at best, guesswork. We can attempt to analogize by observing behavior, noting physiological commonalities and differences, or marking off positions on an evolutionary ladder, but inferences drawn therefrom are speculation without prospect of confirmation. The evidence from one's own experience of pain offers support to the inference that when a pig is cut it too feels pain. Extending the inference to chickens, fish, and oysters becomes increasingly perilous the further one proceeds. And even in the easiest case, appraisals are rough. When a pig is cut by a knife, is the intensity of its pain similar to that of a man being cut? (And is that question coherent?) Do these beasts harbor vivid memories of

[15] Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009) remains the best known and, I believe, most eloquent statement of this case. A hefty bibliography would be required to list the many screeds that have been published over the preceding three decades on behalf of moral vegetarianism. It is beyond the scope of this essay to respond specifically to the various strands of the argument for the moral wrongness of killing animals for food, but if the argument of this section is correct, most are disarmed.

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previous pains that generate apprehensions of pain that might ensue? More broadly, is there an integration of experience such that current sensations are conceived as episodes in the life of a continuing self? Are unpleasant episodes experienced not only as brute negative sensations but also as the perhaps temporary, perhaps long-term deprivation of some good? Is there any sense in which the animal has a conception of what it is to die and therefore experiences aversion based on a presentiment of its own death? In short, from the perspective of the animal itself, just how bad is some bad? All of these queries are stumbling blocks. They become yet higher and more forbidding as we move on from estimations for pigs and cattle to inquiries across other species and genuses. Is there any realistic hope that whatever results might be derived represent the inner lives of animals with tolerable fidelity? If not, can there be a sensible way to incorporate into our moral reasoning data concerning the weal and woe of animals?

Let it be granted that animal utility is terra incognita. Nonetheless, its boundaries are specifiable: the felt goodness or badness of animal experience is perched somewhere between our own phenomenology and that of a Cartesian organic machine. Across that range anatomical and evolutionary commonalities can be employed to establish an ordinal ranking across species. With a high degree of confidence we will maintain that pigs are closer to the human end than are crabs, although we cannot specify how close. Ordinal ranking is less useful than measures of cardinality, but even for comparisons between human beings cardinal utilities are attainable only very roughly if at all. Nonetheless, we have some confidence in issuing judgments such as "Mary's migraine headache is much worse for her than is John's stubbed toe for him." These comparisons are far from precise, but they afford guidance concerning who is to receive an analgesic when the drug is in limited supply. Comparisons that involve animals will be rougher still, but they may incorporate sufficient content on which to ground moral judgments.

These considerations lead in two directions concerning the status of meat eating. First, they suggest that eating some animals is on morally safer ground than eating others. Oysters are low-risk, while dining on primates or dolphins is dubious. The answer that suggests itself to the question posed in the title is, "For some cases very likely no, but for others, yes." This is not as tidy as a one word response, but it does answer to intuitions that some creatures are more considerable than others. That is why a number of people who casually identify themselves as *vegetarians* will, when queried, admit to eating fish and other seafood. ("Pescatarian" is emerging as the term of choice for this way of establishing boundaries for an acceptable diet.) One complication to this mixed position is the absence of a bright line between those animals that may be innocently eaten and those that may not. How high up the chain can one go before the moral risk becomes too great?

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The second direction provides a response. The most justified response to uncertainty, it affirms, is to err on the side of caution. If there is any doubt at all as to whether fish suffer when caught and killed, they are best kept off the menu. This version of a precautionary principle itself admits of degrees. The vegetarian is bearing less moral risk than the pescatarian but more than the vegan. How much risk is too much risk can be debated among the opponents of meat eating, but this response like the previous one tries to ground constraints on eating flesh on our profound uncertainty concerning the phenomenology of animal experience. All proponents of precautionary principles no matter how minimal or maximal will presumably unite on the prescription that warm-blooded vertebrates are not morally suitable fare. Beyond that, there will be disagreement.

There are two respects in which the preceding case against eating animals is lacking. First, it addresses only the *moral costs* of meat eating, ignoring the *benefits.* If broccoli could substitute for beef without any loss of experiential excellence, then only the weal and woe of animals would need consideration. But it cannot. The argument of Sections I and II is that culinary experience in general and animal consumption in particular afford human beings goods comparable qualitatively and quantitatively to those held forth by the arts. Lives of many people would be significantly impaired were they to forgo carnivorous consumption. Therefore, the costs borne by animals have to be argued sufficiently great to outweigh in the moral balance the enjoyments derived by meat eaters. An argument that is not comparative falls short.

Second, the case for abstention is insufficiently comparative in another way. It is a *static* argument. The proposition advanced by the moral vegetarian is that to be killed more or less painfully is bad for the animal that is slaughtered. Cartesians aside, that is undeniable. However, that does not address the *dynamic question* of whether for the representative pig the practice of pork eating is a net bad. The crucial point is that the domesticated food animal *would not have been brought into existence* were it not for the intention of raising it to maturity so as to slaughter and butcher it. In a world in which all human beings are vegetarians it would not bear the pain of undergoing the knife, but neither would it have enjoyed whatever pleasures ornament a porcine life. This is not to maintain that, all else equal, being killed is apt to be a good for the animal. Rather, the crucial point is that all else is not equal. The alternatives to be contrasted are not millions of pigs living to ripe old ages as they contentedly wander around the sty versus having their lives cut short so as to be processed into chops and bacon. Except in some Disney movie, the former is never going to obtain. Instead, the contrast relevant to the argument for moral vegetarianism is that between *some life* and *no life.* If the value of being alive reckoned from the creature's own perspective outweighs the badness of that life's

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concluding chapter, then meat eating dynamically appraised is a net good for it.[16]

The move from static to dynamic analysis does not eliminate, but largely neutralizes, the problem of other (animal) minds. It is reasonable to assume that whatever the proportion is between the experiential quality of pigs, chicken, and fish on the one hand and human experience on the other hand, that proportion will be roughly the same with regard to both pleasures and pains. So if it is a keen loss to a pig in its prime to go under the ax, then its prior enjoyments should also be estimated as being quite valuable to it. For a fish, both sides of the balance are correspondingly diminished. Vegetarian precautionary principles go wrong because in avoiding the infliction of animal bads they inadvertently quash animal goods.

If the argument for abstaining from meat fails because it is grounded on an unduly static normative arithmetic, it thereby finds itself in plentiful company. Many policies that recommend themselves on a static view founder when tested dynamically. Consider rent control, the stabilizing of rents so that (relatively wealthy) landlords are unable to extract greater amounts from (relatively poor) tenants. On egalitarian conceptions of distributive justice, the policy is endorsed. It would seem that only those who hold to archaic theories about freedom of contract and property rights should object.[17] The conclusion is premature, as both purely theoretical dynamic analysis and the history of decaying cities reveal. Once rents are controlled, landlords have less incentive to keep up their properties because the return to investment in maintenance is nil. Potential builders will be loath to put up new dwellings that will then be subject to partial confiscation by political office holders acting on behalf of their constituents. Current tenants who are beneficiaries of rent control laws will be reluctant to leave their underpriced dwellings in response to changes in their circumstances. The result of the combination of these motivational factors is that would-be renters are unable to move into apartments never built or not vacated. Rent control is, then, a seriously negative-sum game that enjoys undue popularity because of a failure to move from static to dynamic analysis.[18] Other serious policy failures attributable to taking a static approach when a dynamic one is needed include inflating the currency, agricultural price supports, and Prohibition (either of alcohol or other disfavored chemicals).[19]

[16] A similar comparative appraisal can be conducted with regard to human lives (although presumably it does not include a strong likelihood of being eaten!). Nearly all of us will say that we are net beneficiaries from the circumstance of being born. An ingenious and challenging argument to the contrary is offered by David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[17] For the record, I locate myself among the archaic.

[18] Another basis for popularity is one-time gains to current tenants and to the politicians they reward with their votes.

[19] The literature on these policies is enormous. Useful and accessible introductions are Amy Finkelstein, "Static and Dynamic Effects of Health Policy: Evidence from the Vaccine

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Even employing dynamic analysis, there is no decisive proof that practices of meat eating are in the long-term interest of the eaten. Perhaps the most supportable claim is that some kinds of animals come out very much ahead in virtue of being raised for food, others less so if at all, and some are harmed not only at the point of being killed but more or less throughout their lives. Likely members of the first group are sheep, goats, and steers that for most of their lives graze freely. Their central nervous systems are enough like ours to render it likely that they are capable of experiencing both significant pleasures and pains. Salmon, whether wild or farmed, may be too limited in their experiential capacities to accrue either significant positives or negatives. For other animals, the balance will depend on how they are raised and then slaughtered. For example, many observers believe that there is a morally significant difference in the lives of free range versus factory-farmed chickens.[20]

It is not for philosophers to offer fine judgments concerning the relative merits of different technologies of raising livestock—at least it is not for this philosopher to do so. The aim instead is to reconceive the debate about eating animals, suggesting in the process that moral vegetarianism typically misunderstands the issues at stake and thereby arrives at a significantly mistaken moral balance. The central contention of this section is that because the appropriate mode of analysis is dynamic rather than static, it is plausible to suppose that the animals that end up on our tables enjoy net gains in virtue of our culinary proclivities. My hunch is that these gains are considerable, but hunches carry limited weight and mine, perhaps, more limited than most. To be cautious, let's call it a toss-up whether animals on balance win or lose out. If so, then the case for eating animals is overwhelmingly positive. Despite the obliviousness of abstemious or dyspeptic people, dining is, or can be, a momentously

Industry," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119, no. 2 (2004): 527–64. Available at http://qje.oxfordjournals.org/content/119/2/527.full.pdf; Ricardo Pucella and Vicky Weissman, "Reasoning about Dynamic Policies" in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Foundations of Software Science and Computational Structure,* ed. Igor Walukiewicz (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2004), 453–67. Available at http://www.cs.cornell.edu/people/vickyw/papers-talks/FOSSACS04/fossacs118.pdf.

[20] Many people, including the anonymous referee for this journal, have expressed to me their great repugnance toward *factory-farming* while being more or less accepting of traditional farming practices. The term seems to be used for any practice of capital-intensive, economically efficient, high-quantity production of agricultural products. The specific techniques of so-called factory-farming for chickens are significantly different from those for pork, for lamb, veal, and so on. Is some factory-farming unduly brutal and morally corrupt? Undoubtedly. Is much consistent with good-on-balance animal lives. In a word, yes. Why then, do so many people categorically reject ill-defined factory-farming? I can think of two explanations. First, one may imaginatively put oneself in the position of the cooped-up bird or the steer waiting to be stunned and slaughtered and respond with a shudder. Such emotional responses are understandable, but I do not believe that they carry much epistemic weight. Second, disturbing videos of meat-packing operations are typically secreted out and made public by groups that are stridently anti-meat. It can, I believe, be safely assumed that the items they release for general viewing are those that most strongly support their own agenda and are not representative of the full range of industry practices.

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significant aspect of human life. Eating well is not a transient pleasure like scratching an itch—not that itch relief is irrelevant to doing well! Rather, many of the riches that make a good life better are either the direct product of eating or accompany and enhance meaningful experiences of sociality and celebration conducted at the table. It is odd that a contemporary civilization that has moved a considerable distance away from the asceticism of monkish practices has not more decisively pronounced on the excellences of meat-featuring gastronomy. Or perhaps the civilization has, just not within the precincts of applied moral philosophy.

IV. Objections

I know from the experience of having presented these ideas in various forums that some individuals take violent exception to this line of thinking. I grant it possible that, despite my best efforts, this is because of the shoddy quality of the argumentation. I believe, though, that the vehemence of opposition is due more to seeing a principled, non-guilty endorsement of carnivorous practices as casting into disrepute one's own commitments of a religious or quasi-religious character. This section is not likely to assuage inflamed sensibilities, but perhaps it can avert some philosophical misunderstandings.

Objection 1. Aren't you simply saying, "If you like eating meat, then do it!"

This is an oversimplification. A more accurate statement of my argument would be, "If you like eating meat, and if the practice of meat eating does not diminish the welfare of animals, then do it." Even spelled out with the second clause attached, however, this is an inaccurate rendering of the argument. I am maintaining not only that many people do as a matter of fact take pleasure in eating meat, but that this is a pleasure which, in its full manifestation, importantly enriches lives. Some people enjoy cracking their knuckles. I have no principled objection to knuckle cracking, but I doubt that lives in which knuckles go uncracked are worse for it. Meat eating is different. It bears comparison to attending operas or hiking through virgin forests. These are practices we wish our children or our friends to take up because it is likely to make their lives go better. The goodness of these activities is *objective.*

Some philosophers (and almost all economists) reject ascriptions of objective goodness. Their normative universe is comprised only of preference, and preferences one and all are subjective. I believe that claim to be at bottom incoherent, but this is not the occasion to pick up that cudgel. For the sake of argument, I am willing to address value subjectivists on grounds of what people *do in fact* prefer and what they *would prefer* if they were to have certain specified experiences and be afforded choices among the alternatives that would then be available.

This is not a satisfactory way to understand the value of viewing Caravaggios or listening to Mozart sonatas, and it is not a satisfactory way to understand why duck confit ought to be eaten, but it suffices to categorize the eating of animals as a *recommendable* pleasure, even if not one to be *prized*.

Objection 2. Following this reasoning, aren't bear baiting, dog fighting, or hunting game also morally acceptable?

See above. I acknowledge that many people find vicious exploitations of animals pleasurable, but it has not been claimed in these pages that whatever happens to give someone pleasure is thereby rendered morally innocuous, let alone commendable. In general, taking pleasure from the pain of some other creature is unworthy and debases rather than enhances the life of one who does so. I claim no expertise in any of the three activities cited in this objection, but I am inclined to reject the first two and suspend judgment concerning the third. It is with considerably greater confidence that I judge meat-based gastronomy to be objectively superior to any of these. I acknowledge that the problem posed by this objection is more vexing for the committed value subjectivist.[21]

Objection 3. On this account it would be morally acceptable to raise animals for subsequent sadistic enjoyment just so long as they are first afforded a life of sufficient pleasantness to outweigh the suffering that will then be inflicted on them.

This incorporates a mistake similar to that of the preceding objection. If some practice is to the benefit of both human beings and animals, then it passes moral muster. Cruelty is not a benefit either to the perpetrator or the victim. Nietzscheans might demur, and if so then the argument with them must be pursued on grounds external to those of this essay. Because animals are morally considerable, cruelty to them may properly be condemned and even barred through legislation. People do not thereby lose some experiences that render their lives richer.

It might be objected that killing animals who have heretofore led decent lives constitutes cruelty in that it is deliberately to make things go worse for them. It is true that being slaughtered is a bad deliberately imposed on animals, but the creatures despatched in an abattoir are not killed *in order* to inflict pain on them and worsen the overall

[21] Hedonistic utilitarians are sometimes confronted with the following kind of objection: "Suppose that hundreds of sadists are afforded great pleasure by watching a person being hideously tortured, and the sum of the pleasures of the many outweighs the pain to the one. Would recreational torture not be the right thing to do on your utilitarian account?" Even if the hedonistic utilitarian can wriggle out of this particular objection, it does underscore the normative promiscuity of the position.

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quality of their lives. Rather, that is how they are transformed into meat. Any slaughtering practice that incorporates manifest gratuitous cruelty should be rejected.

Objection 4. Are you saying that it is morally acceptable to force feed ducks and geese to produce foie gras or to remove a calf from its mother when very young and restrict its diet at the cost of its being rendered anemic so as to produce soft, milky white veal? Just so long as it tastes good, does anything go?

This essay neither endorses nor decries foie gras or veal production. However it does indicate what sorts of information are relevant to a determination. (i) To what extent do foie gras and veal contribute to gastronomic achievement? (ii) For the duck or goose or calf being so raised, what is its life like? If the culinary roles of foie gras and veal are minimal while the lives of the animals are miserable, then these kinds of food production are properly decried. If foie gras and veal are luminaries within menus and the lives of the animals are at least minimally worth living despite the impositions placed on them, then the production of foie gras and veal deserve support. Determination is more difficult when the answers to (i) and (ii) point in opposing directions.

As a philosopher, I have nothing further to say in answer to the question. As a diner, however, I am prepared to maintain that both foie gras and veal rank high among the excellences of Western gastronomic art. To begin a meal with seared foie gras and then follow it a course or two later with expertly prepared veal picatta is to feast at a level difficult to equal and almost impossible to surpass. I am not persuaded that treatment of the animals that go into their production cannot be conducted in a humane and thoughtful manner, although I concede that it is in my interest to think so. I also concede that with these animals and others, some producers are heedless of even basic decencies. I therefore present as a hypothesis subject to falsification that both foie gras and veal occupy a gastronomically and morally proper place on the menu.[22]

Readers are encouraged to excise the preceding paragraph if they take the author's lack of appropriate qualifications to be disqualifying.

Objection 5. Suppose that newborn babies were delicious. Doesn't your argument imply that it would be acceptable to eat them?

With all due respect to Jonathan Swift, babies are not on the menu. Human beings are *rights-holders,* and nonhuman animals are not. People may not be sacrificed to the greater good of others, while animals may. Nor may the rightful liberties of human beings be encroached even for

[22] It should be kept in mind that the alternative for male calves to being raised for veal is usually immediate slaughter.

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their own good. That is why culling a herd to avoid starvation or euthanizing a dog that is in pain are acceptable, while people may not be culled or put out of their misery, at least not without their consent. Some believe that animals do indeed possess rights; they will quite properly find the preceding argument unsound.[23] Others maintain that no rights other than the positive rights proclaimed by law exist. They may find the argument mostly agreeable, but the intrinsic wrongness of eating babies will give them pause.

Objection 6. According to your argument, meat eating is to the benefit of the animals that are eaten. Does it follow that vegetarianism is morally sub-par and that even someone to whom eating animals doesn't appeal ought to add meat to her diet?

The morality of conferring benefits and avoiding harms ranges over too broad and tricky a field to admit of more than a cursory response here. If one believes, as I do, that there do not exist any duties to the self, then someone who refrains from some activity that would afford her considerable enjoyment has not thereby impermissibly wronged herself. She can be criticized as improvident or deficient in sensibility but not deficient with regard to duty.

Nor is there a general duty to provide benefits to others, and even less plausible is a duty to bring individuals into existence in order that they then secure the various benefits that will attach to their lives. Thus, neither from the perspective of the agent herself nor that of the animals affected is there a duty to eat meat.

The issue is not so clear-cut for utilitarians, especially those who emphasize the moral standing of animals. If the right action on any occasion is the one that produces the most overall utility, and if the choice between A and B is neutral with regard to parties other than the agent herself, then there is a utilitarian reason to choose the one that is likely to enhance her own utility It is hard to see why on utilitarian grounds this would not only be a reason but a *decisive moral reason.* Suppose that A is eating meat, B is vegetarianism, and choosing A will tend to generate more overall utility for persons and animals than choosing B.[24] Then for the utilitarian proponent of animal well-being it becomes hard to avoid the conclusion that vegetarianism is a moral error. As difficult as it may be for him, Peter Singer ought to gird his loins and add prime Australian lamb to his diet!

[23] For an argument to the contrary see Loren Lomasky, *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[24] I say "tend to" because the effect of one person's choice on the production of food animals is minuscule. The argument works for act utilitarians, but it is more compelling within a rule utilitarian context.

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V. Other Arguments Against Eating Animals

Most arguments against eating animals are based on concern for the well-being of animals. Because using animals for food wrongs them, these arguments maintain, we should not eat them. It is against this line of argument that the preceding discussion has been formulated. It is not unusual, though, for moral vegetarians to throw in other reasons to condemn meat eating. This essay does not aim to take up and weigh every objection to meat eating that can be devised. However, by briefly sketching a few objections and responses, the nature of the meat eating that is advocated in this essay may be clarified.

A. The argument from world hunger

This argument begins with the observation that many people live on incomes that barely afford them subsistence. Eating meat is hardly a priority for someone whose chief concern is whether he will be able to fill his rice bowl. Yet meat does affect the availability of rice and other staples because it is produced by inefficiently filtering grains through cattle rather than providing these grains directly to human beings. Hunger would be lessened, proponents of the argument from world hunger maintain, if people ate more plant products and less meat.

This objection fails because it rests on a static rather than dynamic analysis. The vast stores of grain that are produced in the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil, and Europe would not exist but for the market in feed for livestock. The problem of hunger in the world is not best understood as too few calories to go around but too little income in the hands of the world's poorest for them to purchase an adequate diet.

A side point is that much animal grazing is not competitive with human use. Insofar as cattle feed on grass, they are ingesting a nutrient that people are unable to process—unable, that is, except indirectly as meat. The land on which sheep and steers graze may be unsuitable for planting crops that human beings can eat. To an even greater extent this is the case for goats, celebrated for their cheeses but underappreciated in the United States for the excellent meat they provide.

B. The argument from distributive justice

It is unconscionable, some maintain, that in the wealthy quarters of the world people dine on filet mignon while elsewhere a billion people barely subsist with incomes lower than the United Nations' standard of $1.25 per day as a basic poverty floor.

Again, this mislocates the difficulty. No one is poor *because* rich people dine well, even extravagantly well. Rather, they are poor because their efforts do not afford them adequate incomes. This inadequacy is due only

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in very small part to inadequate generosity or deliberate predation on the part of citizens of the wealthy countries and in very great measure to inferior domestic institutions and predatory political elites.[25] To the extent that meat consumption in the wealthy parts of the world has any effect at all on the incomes of the poor, it is apt to be positive. That is because agriculture represents a greater proportion of the economy of poor countries than rich ones, and to the extent that the demand for agricultural products is increased, the poor have an opportunity to do better. Of course that opportunity can be squandered because of production inefficiencies or because rich countries deploy protectionist barriers.

C. The ecological argument

Farm animals, it is claimed, are a scourge to the earth. They eat up ground cover, emit methane gas that warms the atmosphere, and they leave noxious pools of waste that sicken anyone who passes by.

This is not so much an argument against raising animals for future consumption as it is against inefficient pricing of externalities. It has nowhere been advocated in these pages that producers of meat are to take a free ride on the general population. For the record, my position is precisely the opposite. If those who reap the benefits also bear the costs, then incentives for economically efficient modes of production will come to the fore. For example, there will be an incentive to transform animal wastes into useful manure rather than leave it to seep into rivers. Markets in which property rights are clearly specified and actors are afforded the freedom to contract so as to increase their profits reduce inefficiencies. Because in many jurisdictions the food industry holds considerable political sway, farmers have been allowed to impose costs on the general public. Nothing in this essay should be taken as maintaining that meat production cannot be beneficially reformed. The specific nature of these reforms is not something for either philosophers or environnmentalists to decree from on high, but rather for markets with internalized externalities to generate over time.

D. The argument from health

Meat kills. Cholesterol from steak dinners clogs arteries, and excess calories spread diabetes and other diseases of affluence. People who eschew meat enjoy improved health and live longer.

There is no doubt that excessive consumption of meat is injurious to health. It is also true that nearly every human good taken to excess is injurious. (This may be a tautologous consequence of the meaning of

[25] I discuss this at greater length in "Liberalism Beyond Borders," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 24, no. 1 (2007): 206–233.

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"excess.") Much of the world's great literature and drama from *Iliad* and *Anna Karenina* to *The Blue Angel* and *Gone with the Wind* spotlights the tragic consequences of passion that has burst its proper bounds. Religious devotion can elevate human beings, but when it degenerates into ungoverned enthusiasm it oppresses and kills. Love of country taken to excess turns into patriotic gore; alcohol enlivens the soul but, in excess, corrodes the liver. Even love of wisdom can be excessive, as underscored in the tale of Faust. An assertion that meat eating is a major human good should not be understood as implying that more consumption of meat is always better than less. Sometimes more is just more.

The claim that a meat diet is unhealthy is probably no better grounded than the claim that a meatless diet is unhealthy. Vegetarians are apt to encounter difficulties in securing adequate intake of protein, but for most the challenge is not insuperable. Similarly, meat consumption in moderation is not an impossible dream despite temptations to the contrary.[26]

E. The argument from effect on human character

It is claimed that those who eat animals are thereby rendered insensitive to the weal and woe of their fellow creatures. For them the cruelty of killing animals becomes business as usual. That it will seep over into relations with other human beings is likely.

When this charge is lodged by vegetarians, it can come dangerously close to a public proclamation, "See how compassionate I am and be likewise!" For all of us there lurk dangers of being desensitized to matters of genuine moral concern. Perhaps the foremost danger that besets the moral vegetarian is excessive self-satisfaction. To pursue this line further is to risk a related danger, indulgence in unfriendly ad hominems.

VI. Conclusion

Perhaps the oddest feature of the debate about the moral status of eating animals is that it is so often carried on in disregard of the value of culinary experience in general and the excellences of meat consumption in particular. This essay has argued that gastronomy and its attendant experiences are to be judged among the peak goods that human beings are able to enjoy. We are embodied beings, and so we eat. We do not, however, do so merely in order to secure adequate nutritional sustenance for survival, but in order to thrive. Episodes of dining from Plato's *Symposium* to Jesus' Last Supper to the most recent really wonderful meal you

[26] Every so often one sees on television an interview with a grinning centenarian from some obscure Central Asian country who attributes his longevity to daily work in the fields and a diet of nothing richer than goat milk. It is the sort of encomium that leads one to question the value of an extended old age.

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shared with your loved ones have enriched the lives of participants—and not them alone. Dining is good, and dining on meat is better. Animals are exploited by being made agricultural commodities, but that exploitation is not necessarily bad for them. Because we prize them, they do better than if we did not, although what we prize them for is primarily their savor and not their well-being. It is not out of the beneficence of the diner that cows, pigs, and chickens come to be, but from the diner's self-love. Carving into a standing rib roast is not an act of moral heroism, but it is to our great good fortune that non-heroes too can live surpassingly well.

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