

The Case for Vegetarianism

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Introduction

In this paper, I demonstrate that there are sound consequentialist and deontological arguments against meat consumption. I argue that sentient beings have moral standing and that it is therefore morally unjustifiable for humans to kill them unnecessarily. I reject the argument that killing animals is part of our nature and therefore cannot be morally wrong, on the grounds that humans are uniquely rational and moral animals. As such, we have a responsibility to make moral decisions that may conflict with our instincts or desires. I argue that, unlike other omnivores, humans have the capacity and the luxury to reject meat consumption, so it is morally wrong for us to eat animals.

A Consequentialist Argument

In his essay "All Animals are Equal," Peter Singer argues that we must extend our circle of moral concern to include all sentient creatures. Our current tendency to consider only humans in our moral calculations is prejudice, what Singer calls *speciesism*. Our society distinguishes humans from other animals based on our intelligence and rationality. Though we are, to our knowledge, as a species more intelligent than all other species, this capacity is arbitrary in determining moral standing. Singer highlights that some humans are not as intelligent as many other nonhuman creatures, yet we afford such humans the same moral consideration as all other humans. These humans are worthy of moral consideration not because they are human. They are worthy of moral consideration because they are sentient beings that experience suffering. They feel pleasures and pain, joy and grief, satisfaction and frustration. The same is true of the animals we consume as food. The marginal pleasure a human gains from eating a piece of meat is negligible compared to the pain and suffering

inflicted upon the animal. This is especially true considering the abuses of industrial meat production. From a consequentialist perspective, eating meat produces far greater pain than pleasure. Therefore, it is morally wrong for humans to unnecessarily eat animals, just as it is morally wrong for humans to unnecessarily eat other humans.

A Deontological Argument

Tom Regan's essay, "The Case for Animal Rights," make a deontological argument for animal rights. Whereas the consequentialist argument relies on the aggregate pain and pleasure created in meat production and consumption, Regan argues that the ends do not justify the means. Instead, he argues that individuals have inherent value. This value is independent of a creature's usefulness to humans. Each of us is "a conscious creature having an individual welfare," and each of us is equally deserving of respect (Regan, 6). There is no basis, Regan argues, for giving animals any less value than we give to humans. His reasoning is similar to Singer's in this respect: intelligence, he argues, is an arbitrary and unjust faculty for determining value. Many humans fail this standard. The sole justification for considering only humans in our moral calculations is blatant *speciesism*. Regan concludes that we must treat animals as more than just a resource (instrumental value) and grant them the rights of inherently valuable individuals. Therefore, it is morally wrong to kill and consume animals unnecessarily, just as it is wrong to kill and consume humans unnecessarily.

Rejection of a Counter-Argument

A reasonable objection to my conclusion is that humans are simply one animal of many. We are a part of nature, and we have instincts and desires like any other animal. If it is not morally wrong for an omnivore such as a bear to eat meat, then it cannot be morally wrong for a human to eat meat. Meat not essential in either case but is often preferred to plant-based foods. This argument is unsatisfactory for two reasons:

- (1) *Humans have the capacity to be governed by normative values.* Unlike other animals, humans are rational and moral creatures. Far from being governed solely by our

instincts, we regularly hold ourselves to a higher moral standard. For example, most humans practice monogamy, despite the instinct to mate with multiple partners. We do so because we believe it is the morally right thing to do, difficult though it may be. Christine Korsgaard argues in her essay "Facing the Animal You See in the Mirror" that, contrary to defying nature, it is our human nature to create normative standards and values by which we lead our lives. We have the unique capacity of self-consciousness. This enables us to take responsibility for our decisions and to overcome our instincts when it is morally necessary to do so. As I have demonstrated above, killing and consuming another sentient being, though instinctive, is morally wrong. As rational and moral creatures, we must hold ourselves to the higher standard of vegetarianism.

(2) *Humans do not require meat for survival.* Omnivores such as bears rely on meat to supplement their diets when plant-based foods are scarce or insufficient to meet their survival needs. If a bear is starving and hunts down a fish, it is not necessarily wrong for the bear to eat it. Similarly, if a person is starving and is presented with animal flesh, it is not necessarily wrong for him or her to consume it just as it was not necessarily morally wrong for members of the Donner party to eat their companions. These are cases in which survival depends on the consumption of a sentient creature. If we assume meat consumption is not essential for human survival, as is the case for the majority of Americans but is not the case for bears, it is morally unjustifiable to eat animals. In the consequentialist view (Singer), it is acceptable to cause pain to an animal if the pleasure gained by the human is greater (e.g. if humans have greater capacity for pleasure and pain, then killing an animal for one's survival creates net pleasure). Therefore, consuming an animal for survival is morally justifiable. In the deontological view (Regan), it is fundamentally wrong to cause the suffering of another creature, to treat it as a resource and not as an individual with inherent worth. Therefore, even in the case of

survival, it is wrong to kill and consume another creature. Both views maintain that it is wrong to eat animals simply for pleasure.

Concluding Remarks

I have shown that there are sound arguments from both consequentialist and deontological perspectives against meat consumption. Sentient creatures are individuals deserving of moral consideration. Whether we simply enter them into our moral calculus, as Singer would suggest, or accept that in all cases it is wrong to cause them suffering, we find that unnecessary meat consumption is morally unjustifiable. Humans are a part of nature, but we also have a human nature, which implores us to ask moral questions and to lead our lives according to the answers.