

## VEGETARIANISM AND ITS MORAL IMPLICATIONS\*

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The term vegetarianism is used to describe a diet that excludes the flesh of animals, has a long, complex history. Many of the world religions and philosophies have praised it as the ideal diet, but vegetarians have also been condemned and killed for their refusal to eat meat. The term vegetarianism was in fact coined in 1847 by the founders of the vegetarian society of Great Britain. Thus vegetarianism involves a question about the quality of human life and about the way in which humans should treat non-human animals. The choice to eat or not to eat flesh foods has typically reflected deeply ingrained philosophical and religious beliefs. Among these the foremost has been the idea of human kinship with the nonhuman world. While the underlying motives for vegetarianism differ widely throughout different cultures and historical periods, certain themes predominate. These include: the idea of transmigration of souls, compassion for nonhuman animals, asceticism, purification of the body and soul, health benefits, the dehumanizing effects of meat-eating, environmental considerations, and the unnaturalness of eating flesh foods. Some of the additional underlying themes include the association of meat with class, caste, and gender.

Vegetarianism has two major philosophical roots in the ancient world, Jainism in the East and Pythagoreanism in the West. Both schools of thought arose in the sixth century BCE at approximately the same time, and scholars continue to speculate on the cross-fertilization of ideas between the East and West. The Jainas' notion of *ahimsā* refers to the desire not to cause injury to other living beings and the concomitant idea of compassion for all living beings. Jainas argue that all life goes through a series of incarnations, with the highest incarnation belonging to humans who have attained enlightenment or *nirvāna*. By eating flesh foods humans attract negative *karma* to their soul (*jīva*), and impede their chances of attaining enlightenment. Vegetarianism condemns the practice of animal sacrifice, intimately connected to meat-eating in the ancient world. Buddhism also contains the ideas of *ahimsā*, transmigration of souls and compassion for animals. Buddhism helped to spread vegetarianism throughout Asia, and influenced the development of a strong

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vegetarian tradition in Hinduism. Pythagoras is regarded as the greatest influence on vegetarian thought in the Western world. According to Porphyry, it was not necessary to kill animals to curb the problem of animal overpopulation, since nature would find a balance by itself. From an environmental perspective, we can see that livestock are one of the most serious causes of environmental harm, and livestock production and meat eating are odds with sustainable development. On the contrary, plant agriculture and vegetarian diets are sustainable, environmentally pleasant practices. That's why it is logically beneficial to boycott livestock by adopting a vegetarian diet.

### **Why be a Vegetarian?**

One may ask: why do we adopt vegetarianism? To respond, a vegetarian would not be willing to kill an animal for his gain, but this does not really explain the reason for becoming a vegetarian. Morality is something to be aspired after, rather than as a fundamentally selfish tool that keeps society functioning. Justification for eating meat means of disregard morality or moral behaviour towards animals. Actually animal cruelty is a terrible thing; millions of animals are being abused. If we have health, religious, spiritual, or simple dietary preference concerns, then we should consider the moral implications of what happens to our livestock.

From a moral perspective, vegetarianism may be understood as the view that due to some moral principles, one ought not to eat certain edible animals and animal products. Say for example suppose someone marooned on a desert island inhabited by edible birds, and suppose there is no edible plant life on the island and that person has a gun. In this situation, for the non-vegetarian the choice is easy, but not for the vegetarians. They can choose the path of non-vegetarians, because a bird's life is less valuable than one's own. But suppose that instead of birds the island is inhabited by some humans. Then is it morally permissible to eat humans? A vegetarian holding a moderate position might argue that it is *prima facie* wrong to kill an animal for food but there are certain human rights that is the right to life, can override this *prima facie* wrong. On this view there are cases in which it would not be right to kill a human being but it would be right to kill an animal. But still there is an important question for the moderate is, on what plausible moral principle can the distinction between animals and human beings be made? If we go through the utilitarian perspective, we find that both Singer and Regan appealed to the moral consideration

for animals. Tom Regan suggested respecting animals as being with inherent value equal to our own,<sup>1</sup> and Singer tried to reduce the pain and suffering of animals<sup>2</sup>. Both contend that we are wronging those animals, whom we breed into existence, make to suffer, and slaughter.

**Peter singer's Argument:**

Singer argues that the interest of every sentient being that is affected by an action ought to be taken into account and give the same weight as like interests of any other sentient beings. He thought that sentient beings have a serious interest is not being made to suffer. So, for him practices which inflict suffering on sentient beings without good reason are morally wrong. Therefore, we ought neither to participate in, nor perpetuate morally wrong practices. Actually, Singer's utilitarian contention is that through vegetarianism, decrease in the demand for factory farmed meat will reduce animal suffering.

**Tom Regan's Argument:**

Regan thought that all beings with inherent value have equal inherent value, and a right to be treated respectfully. All moral agents have a duty to respect the rights of all such beings. Regan granted that, utilitarianism pre-supposes the principle of "equality of interests". The principle of equality of interests merely makes it explicit that because the principle of utility is the sole basis of morality, no other principle will limit the application of the principle of utility, or affect the way in which it operates. Regan claims that utilitarianism does not provide adequate grounds for the obligation to be a vegetarian. Rather he thought that an ethical theory based on rights does provide adequate grounds for the obligation to be a vegetarian. Actually he thought that the commitment to vegetarianism is so strong that he will be prepared to abandon any ethical theory which is unable to produce the judgment that it is wrong to eat animals.

**Why is Vegetarianism a Moral Issue?**

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<sup>1</sup> "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.5, No.2 (October 1975) 181-214 and *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley ; University of California Press, 1983)

<sup>2</sup> *Animal Liberation* (New York; Avon Books, revised edition 1990 ) and *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993)

Some philosophers think that the aim of moral theory is to systematize our common moral intuitions. As in the scientific theories the scientist matches the observed data, similarly in the ethical theories the moral philosophers match the data of moral convictions. When we apply utilitarianism to the issue of how should we treat animals, one vital point comes out immediately. Utilitarianism in its classical form aims at minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure. Many non-human animals experience pain and pleasure; therefore they are morally significant entities. They have moral standing. In this respect, they are like humans and unlike rocks. The principle of utility in utilitarianism attributes animal moral standing and ascribes to their interest equal weight with the like interest of humans. This principle of utility also lies in the consequences of denying animals of equal moral standing.

Humans do not need meat for a healthy diet, sentient beings have a serious interest for not to be suffered. Thus humans have only a trivial interest in meat. Therefore, we ought neither to participate in morally wrong practices. Historically many moral philosophers have either denied animals moral standing altogether or discounts their interests because they are not human. For example –Moore, and recently John Rawls has denied animals a place in his theory of justice, arguing that we owe justice only to those who have the concept of justice. If someone abstains from eating meat because of test or financial status, then there is no moral or philosophical question to be raised, but when a vegetarian attempts to persuade others that they should adopt vegetarian diet then it requires philosophical attention. A vegetarian might argue a number of ways morally to the rearing and killing of animals for the human table. The vegetarian in this sense does not merely require us to change or justify our eating habits, but to consider our attitude and behaviours towards members of other species.

There are two approaches a vegetarian might take in arguing that rearing and killing animals for food is morally offensive. He might argue that eating animals is morally bad, because of the pain inflicted on animals in killing them to be eaten, or he could object to the killing itself. Thus vegetarians need to be tolerant if they want to convert others into vegetarians. We need to preserve them either as respected fellow-workers or simply as companions in the joy of life and friendship.

In many societies controversy and debate have arisen over the ethics of eating animals. Robert Nozick and Peter Singer have recently advocated not eating meat on moral grounds<sup>1</sup>. Eating animal flesh may generate different types of moral questions. If we accept that animals have rights, then killing animals for food is morally wrong. An animal that is raised for food, is being used by others rather than being respected for itself. In philosophical term, it is being treated as a means to human ends not as an end-in-itself.

When one asks “what is morality”, the answer is that moral behaviour means acting in a way which is fair to all. This means we need to extend the same rules to all. Also we need not harm others simply because of our own gain. We can see that some people who are omnivorous don’t usually claim that animals aren’t morally important. In fact they focus on our relationship with those animals which are usually consumed for food. They argue that right kind of relationship with animals is necessary for, or at least contributes to a meaningful life. The relationship involves caring for the animals, seeing they are well-treated during their lives. Thus to be a vegetarian on moral ground is to show respect and caring for nonhumans entities. Non-human animals are living beings seeking life and freedom, and avoiding harm and danger. In every ‘livestock system’, no matter how high the welfare standards are supposed to be, non-human animals will suffer. The Five Freedoms, frequently used to measure welfare, will never be met completely. They include the freedom:

- from hunger, thirst and malnutrition;
- from pain, injury and disease;
- from discomfort;
- from fear and distress;
- to express natural behaviour.

#### **Is vegetarianism an emotional issue?**

One may ask if an individual stops eating meat, does it reduce the number of animals killed by other means at all. In many societies controversy and debate have been raised over the ethics of eating animals. Our attitude towards animals suggests that we have taken the role of “creator”, “protector”, and preserving nature for our own purpose. So ugliness in persons, in deeds, in life, in surrounding nature- this is

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York, basic books 1947) p.p-35-42,  
2. Singer p.”*Animal Liberation* New York Review of Books, April-5 1973, p.p-24 idem, *Animal Liberation* (New York review of books 1975).

our worst foe. We no longer want to hear the bleating of sheep, the bellowing of bullocks, as when they are cutting to pieces in slaughter house.

A vegetarian might ask, what is the moral difference between killing a micro-organism and an animal. Some vegetarians argue that there is a difference between the two. We must avoid killing an animal because without taking meat one may live. And if some microorganisms killed in the same process, this is unfortunate but necessary for human life. Vegetarians who eat only vegetables, fruits, and nuts do not completely remove all micro-organisms from their food even with repeated cleaning. Vegetarians may attempt to justify the eating of microorganisms in a different way. They may think that since micro-organisms can't feel pain, they can eat them without scruples. They also think that we do not need meat in order to live but in order to digestive working of the body killing and eating micro-organism is necessary for human life.

A vegetarian might ask, how would someone feel if he is slaughtered and eaten? Lot of animals are killed for food, but why shouldn't we? If we accept that animals have rights, then killing animals for food is morally wrong. According to Gandhi, a selfish basis would not serve the purpose of taking a man higher and higher along the paths of evolution. What is required, the answer is an altruistic purpose. According to him; man is more than meat<sup>1</sup>. It is the spirit of man with which we are much concerned. Therefore vegetarians need to have the moral basis that a man was not born a carnivorous animal, but born to live on the fruits and herbs that the earth grows. For him the basis of vegetarianism is not physical, but moral. Also for him, if someone says us that we will die if we dont take beef, tea or mutton even on medical advice, then we would prefer to die. That is the basis of Gandhi's vegetarianism. Even sometimes meat eaters shows a selfish refusal to share with starving human beings food that could have been made available to them, and thereby shows disregard for the principle of distributive justice. We can cite an example here to focus more, as given by John Harris. Suppose that tomorrow a group of beings from another planet were to land on earth, beings who considered themselves as superior

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<sup>1</sup> The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism By Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi *Speech delivered by Gandhi at a Social Meeting organised by the London Vegetarian Society, 20 November 1931*

from us as we feel ourselves to other animals. In this context, would they have the right to treat us as we treat animals for breed, and food?<sup>1</sup> We may think that it is morally permissible for us to eat non-human animals but wrong for superior aliens to eat us. Most of us think that aliens are persons but animals are probably non- person. And if personhood is the ground for the right to life then it is morally permissible for us to kill and eat animals. But it is wrong for the aliens to kill and eat us, even though they kill us painlessly.

Another argument may be raised from the question of speciecism. If we ask that what is the justification for eating plants but not animals? Vegetarians may reply that animals are sentient creatures, they feel pain and have other feelings but no plant is sentient, no plant can see, hear or feel.<sup>2</sup> Some recent discoveries on plants give us some pause on this. Thus, if we know that plants feel pain then our killing them would, or at least should take a humane form. Some may argue that human beings are more valuable because of their intelligence but why does higher intelligence mean that one species is more valuable than other species? There are other species besides us that have high intelligence that is chimpanzees and dolphins. Then why should our moral attitude be towards eating members of these species?

In a way of conclusion it is argued that the killing and eating of meat indirectly tends to brutalize people. Eating meat influences people to be less kind and more violent to other people. On the contrary, not eating meat tends to make people kinder and less violent. But there is no logical connection between eating meat and being insensitive to the inhumane treatment of animals or humans rather a psychological one. For example the most well known person Hitler was a vegetarian. The Vegetarian News Digest argued that, “there is no information that indicates Hitler eliminated flesh food for humanitarian reasons”<sup>3</sup>. Hitler did not eat meat is irrelevant to this argument. Here we are only concerned with whether or not eating meat tends to make people less brutal. However, at present we have no logical reason to accept. Peter R. Cheeke once wrote that, “if most urban meat-eaters were to visit an industrial broiler house, to see how the birds are raised, harvested and “processed”,

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, p.110

<sup>2</sup> John Harris, “killing for food” in *Animals, Men, and Morals*, edited by Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, and John Harris (New York: Taplinger press, 1971) p.108

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Carson p.134

in a poultry processing plant, perhaps many of them would swear off eating chickens and perhaps meat”.

Thus a necessary condition for being a person is to have the capacity of realizing a context or situation of himself. There are some animals which are very intelligent such as dolphins and chimpanzees that have such kind of concept and also it is true that some adult human beings do not have such concepts. In this sense some animals and human beings may not have the right to life although most human beings and animals do have such a right. So from the view of rights, it can be said that many animals probably have no right to life, but all of them have a right not to have pain inflicted on them. People often point to some food item and ask, can you eat this? Our answer always will be “sure, we can eat what we want”. So, whenever we decide what kind of vegetarian we want to be, we should always think about what we want to include or avoid in the table.

Now, there is no doubt that the actual treatment of animals used for food is immoral and should be changed. So, if someone wants to change the present practice of treating animals used for food, the best means is to stop eating meat. This seems to be one of Singer’s basic arguments. Becoming a vegetarian is not merely a symbolic gesture.....Becoming a vegetarian is the most practical and effective step one can take towards ending both the killing of non-human animals and the infliction of suffering upon them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Singer ,*Animal Liberation* p.173



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