The Case for a Morality of Radical Caution

Robert Jensen works through his underlying rationale for making moral judgments, as on meat-eating and abortion.

Photo by Jeffery DelViscio

Robert Jensen *posted May 17, 2012*

Though my politics are radical, my approach to vexing moral questions is cautious; I try to be aware not only of my limits but of human limits to understand ourselves in a complex world.

That's why I call myself a radically cautious vegetarian. Here's how it worked out:

I grew up in a typical meat-eating household in the 1960 and '70s, where vegetarianism was something to be mocked, not explored.

In my early 20s, I started to ponder the question, and at the age of 26 I ate my last piece of animal flesh, a lobster at a waterfront restaurant in Washington, DC. My soon-to-be brother-in-law, a relatively affluent lawyer, was buying, and I ordered something expensive. As I ate it, I realized it would be the last time. Like many people who grew up eating off large platters of meat at the family dinner table, I had always said, "I could never be a vegetarian." But then I was.

But I didn't become an animal-rights advocate, and I don't proselytize on the subject. I don't cook meat for others, but when people bring meat dishes to a potluck I help serve it and don't hesitate to pull the leftover meat off chicken bones when I clean up. I don't use chicken stock at home, but I don't quiz waiters at restaurants about whether there is chicken stock in the soup broth. Some of my best friends eat meat. I don't.

When I first decided to stop eating meat, I hadn't worked out a complete philosophy on the matter but just knew it felt wrong to me. As in much of life, I have been making it up as I go along. Here's how that came together:

We struggle with countless moral questions within the human family for which we don't have definitive answers, and that's at least as true of our struggle with the moral status of non-human animals. We recognize them as creatures like us in some ways and deserving of recognition, which is why most of us are repulsed by gratuitous cruelty toward animals. But no one really believes the quip, "A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy," suggesting the equality of all life (or, at least, all mammalian life). To test that: If there were a rat, a pig, a dog, and a human child in the road facing an oncoming truck and you could save only one, which would you chose?

This argument for vegetarianism doesn't demand that I pretend to

Animals are sentient creatures that feel pain, but non-humans animals are not us. Within the moral framework I use (Western, rights-based thinking, but influenced by other traditions), it's not clear what we can say about the moral

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status of animals with any certainty. It's not just that I don't have a definitive answer, but that I don't see how a definitive answer is possible; those who claim to really know for sure are kidding themselves.

But we can know this: The vast majority of humans can survive without eating animals. While there may be some people with specific dietary needs, most of us can get by without animal flesh. Not only can we get by, we can flourish —vegetarian cooking can be healthy and invigorating. We can cook nutritious and delicious meals without meat, and some of us do it every day.

So, in the absence of a clear conception of the moral status of animals, and the presence of clear evidence that eating animals is not necessary to human flourishing, the cautious position is to stop eating animals until we have a better understanding of how to answer the moral question.

(A footnote: I do eat dairy products, in part because I have serious food allergies and it would be difficult for me to go vegan and remain healthy. Some would argue there is no way to get adequate nutrition from a vegan diet. That debate goes on.)

This argument for vegetarianism doesn't demand that I pretend to know what I don't know. It doesn't require me to suggest that the cosmology embedded in my Western moral perspective automatically trumps other systems, such as those of various indigenous peoples who see the question within a different cosmology. I am not making definitive claims, but rather am offering what strikes me as an appropriately cautious approach to a complex problem.

Much as we aren't clear on

But even recognizing complexity isn't simple. One of the first times I made this argument to a friend, he asked:

the moral status of animals, we struggle with the moral status of a fetus.

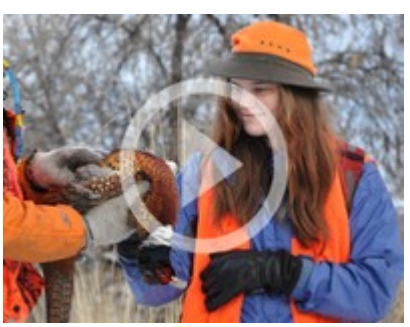
"You support abortion rights, but couldn't the same approach argue for a ban on abortions?"

It's a useful question for testing my analysis. Here's how I puzzle through that one:

Much as we aren't clear on the moral status of animals, we struggle with the moral status of a fetus. How do we understand a developing human? At what point is a fetus a person? We shouldn't pretend there are simple answers to those questions.

So, would the same conclusion hold? In the absence of a clear understanding of the moral status of a fetus, is it best to be cautious and outlaw abortion?

The difference is in the context. Most humans can get along fine without eating animals, but the struggle for gender justice requires that women have a right and access to abortion. One of the defining features of patriarchy is that women often do not control the conditions under which they are subject to sexual intrusion by men. In patriarchy, women do not always control their own fertility, and so abortion rights are crucial to the struggle for women's liberation.



What's the Harm in Hunting?
It's an expression of our most fundamental relationship with nature, but can you really be moral and be a hunter, too? Our intern headed into the wild to find out.

So, our concern for human flourishing tips the scales the other way; creating a world safe for women requires we not restrict

women's right to choose. In the absence of a clear conception of the moral status of a fetus, and the presence of clear evidence of women's subordination to men and the role of sexual intrusion in that subordination, the cautious position is to allow women to choose to abort a pregnancy.

If we were to create a society with true gender justice, in which women have control over their own fertility, then our balancing of the scales could change. In such a society, no doubt we would come to see other aspects of the question and have to muddle through them. But we don't live in that society today and can't predict how we would resolve the issue in that society.

Based on this analysis, I encourage others to consider giving up the practice of eating animals, and I support abortion rights. Those are my best judgments about the moral status of animals and fetuses, factoring in the relevant evidence about the patterns in the world that effect the decisions.

I am confident enough to act on these judgments, but I am not arrogant about those judgments. I have a close friend who grew up on a farm and lived among animals he both cared for and killed for food, and he continues to eat animals (though not in large quantities, and not meat bought in stores). I listen carefully to his explanation of why he eats animals, just as I listen carefully to friends who oppose abortion as part of the "seamless garment" approach to a commitment to life, which includes organizing against war, poverty, and capital punishment.

In complex moral questions, we almost always know less than we wish we could know. History counsels that we remain radical in our pursuit of justice and sustainability, committed to creating a better world. But we also should exercise caution, aware not just of what we know but what we don't, and possibly can't, know.

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Robert Jensen wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Robert, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, is author of several books. His latest is All My Bones Shake: Seeking a Progressive Path to the Prophetic Voice. He is co-producer of the new documentary Abe Osheroff: One Foot in the Grave, the Other Still Dancing. Contact information and articles can be found here.

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