

PHILOSOPHY 105

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ETHICAL OMNIVORISM

POLLAN ON BEING AN ETHICAL OMNIVORE

if humans no longer need to eat meat to survive, then what exactly are we putting on the human side of the scale to outweigh the interests of the animal? (OD, 312)

- Is there a case to be made for ethical consumption of meat that acknowledges the moral significance of animal suffering?

DEFENSE 1: EATING ANIMALS IS PART OF OUR (CULTURAL) IDENTITY

it seems to me [the vegetarian] has lost something along the way, something I'm not prepared to dismiss as trivial. Healthy and virtuous as I may feel these days, I also feel alienated from traditions I value: cultural traditions like the Thanksgiving turkey, or even franks at the ballpark, and family traditions like my mother's beef brisket at Passover. These ritual meals link us to our history along multiple lines —family, religion, landscape, nation, and, if you want to go back much further, biology. For although humans no longer need meat in order to survive...we have been meat eaters for most of our time on earth. This fact of evolutionary history is reflected in [our physiology]. (OD, 314)

REPLIES

- The evolutionary basis of meat-eating is morally irrelevant
- The fact that we have cultural practices in which meat eating is a central component does not justify meat-eating, unless the practices as a whole are justified

DEFENSE 2: IT IS SUFFERING NOT PAIN THAT MATTERS

human pain differs from animal pain by an order of magnitude. This qualitative difference is largely the result of our possession of language and, by virtue of language, our ability to have thoughts about thoughts and to imagine what is not...we can draw a distinction between pain, which a great many animals obviously experience, and suffering, which depends on a degree of self-consciousness only a handful of animals appear to command. Suffering in this view is not just lots of pain but pain amplified by distinctly human emotions such as regret, self-pity, shame, humiliation, and dread. (OD, 316)

REPLIES

- While it might be true that a *certain kind* of suffering requires language, it isn't obvious that *suffering* as such does
- Cognitively unsophisticated creatures might actually suffer *more*, since they cannot understand the purpose of many pain-inducing activities
- Even allowing the distinction, industrial farming practices clearly generate prolonged pain that clearly goes against the interests of the animals produced by it

DEFENSE 3: DOMESTICATION & ANIMAL "FORMS OF LIFE"

We can take Pollan to be arguing that since domestic animals have evolved to be what they now are through their symbiotic relationship with humans, their "characteristic form of life"—a phrase Pollan borrows from Aristotle—is one lived in domestication with humans, and that means—for chickens, pigs, cows, and sheep—a life on a farm or ranch. This is their nature, and the Good Life for them is one in which they can live, in accordance with their nature, on the Good Farm, until they are killed and eaten. The killing and eating is unavoidable, for without it neither farms, nor the animals on them, would exist at all. (Singer, 250)

REPLIES

- Why think that bringing an animal into existence is a benefit to that animal?
 - Could it be true that it would be better for an animal never to have lived at all?

SINGER'S OBJECTION

- Animals consumed for food live lives that are shorter than they would otherwise naturally be, so it is wrong to kill them, even if their lives are "happy"

cattle, like all the animals we eat, died while still very young. They might have lived several more years before meeting one of these other forms of death, years in which they matured, experienced sexual intercourse, and, if they were females, cared for their children. We humans, after all, are prepared to pass up many rapid and humane forms of death in order to live a few more years, even if we are then likely to die of a disease that causes us to suffer before we die.

SCRUTON'S RESPONSE

- Dying before the terminus of one's natural life-span is only bad for a creature capable of appreciating the goodness of future achievements. Non-human animals are not capable of being fulfilled or harmed by achievement or lack thereof.
 - Is there a problem for this response raised by "marginal" cases?

DEFENSE 4: EVEN VEGANS KILL ANIMALS IN FOOD PRODUCTION

The grain that the vegan eats is harvested with a combine that shreds field mice, while the farmer's tractor wheel crushes woodchucks in their burrows and his pesticides drop songbirds from the sky; after harvest whatever animals that would eat our crops we exterminate. Killing animals is probably unavoidable no matter what we choose to eat...If our goal is to kill as few animals as possible people should probably try to eat the largest possible animal that can live on the least cultivated land: grass-finished steaks for everyone. (OD, 326)

REPLIES

- Reducing demand for meat by vegan & vegetarian practices means fewer factory farms and thus less overall pain/suffering
- More calories can be grown in vegetation on a single acre than can be farmed for meat

