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WR 13300

Professor Clauss

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Eating Animals

Situation: Having been a vegetarian for the past several months, I am writing a speech to my Writing and Rhetoric classmates about the reasons to adopt a meatless diet. I am passionate about this lifestyle because of both the injustices that occur in the meat industry and the positive effect vegetarianism has on personal wellbeing. My classmates' knowledge of and stances on this subject cover a broad spectrum – some may be aware of the environmental and health benefits, while others may be unfamiliar with the specifics of the diet. I want to inform my classmates about the motives for going meatless and, ultimately, convince them to alter their eating habits and eliminate meat from their diets.

Good afternoon! I thank each one of you for being here for our last Writing and Rhetoric class together; it's hard to believe this semester is over already. We've experienced so much over the past four months – from awkward introductions at Domerfest to celebrating a victory after every home football game – and we have learned to navigate both Notre Dame's campus and college life. Many of us have developed an allegiance to not only our dorms, but also a dining hall. Whether your loyalties lie with North or South, however, you have surely noticed the glossy advertisements that line center of the tables. Often times, I disregard these tiny fliers – it's easy to become conditioned to their presence, ignoring their reminders and announcements of upcoming events. However, there's one initiative advertised weekly that *is* worth investigating: the "Meatless Monday" campaign. For the past three years, Notre Dame Food Services have offered extra meatless options on Mondays in both dining halls. This movement – which is supported by the Notre Dame Office of Sustainability and the Humane Society of the United States – strives to inform students about the meat industry's small- and large-scale effects while encouraging meal choices that do not include primary animal products (Wenzel). I am a strong

proponent of this campaign, as have been practicing a vegetarian diet since early June of 2015. For my entire life prior to this summer, though, I was an avid meat-eater. I didn't understand the reasoning behind vegetarianism, and often wondered, *"Why would anyone give up meat? It's tasty and healthy, right?"* This may be the mindset many of you hold now, so I would like to share some of the information that changed my opinions. Most people believe meat is a necessary component of a well-rounded diet; however, alongside the moral considerations of eating animals, a decreased consumption of meat can have a positive impact on one's personal health and the wellbeing of the environment.

A Brief Description

Before delving into these topics, it is important that I give a brief description of the relevance of the vegetarian diet. There are several different understandings about what it means to be a vegetarian; the most common (and the definition I'll use here) entails abstinence from all kinds of meat that qualify as animal flesh. This includes everything from beef to poultry and from pork to seafood. Another label for this is "lacto-ovo-vegetarianism" – lacto meaning the individual consumes dairy, ovo meaning the individual consumes eggs. Essentially, this type of vegetarian will eat products derived from animals, just not the animals themselves. Individuals who also abstain from the by-products are known as vegans ("Vegetarianism"). Both of these categories comprise a small portion of the population in the United States, but the numbers are growing as the meatless lifestyle gains popularity. According to a poll run by Harris Interactive, a mere 0.5% of Americans identified as vegan in 2008, while about 3.2% claimed to be vegetarian. In 2012, a similar poll found that these numbers had grown to 2% and 5% respectively. Comparable statistics can be calculated in the majority of countries around the world, with the exception of India. There, about 35% of the population practices the Hindu

custom of abstinence from meat (“Should”). Perhaps the most well known figure from this group is Mohandas Gandhi, who observed a meatless diet as part of his nonviolent lifestyle. In Europe, vegetarianism grew in popularity during the Renaissance period; artist Leonardo da Vinci was among those who made the switch. There were also several ancient Greeks who chose not to consume animals on the basis of moral principles (“Vegetarianism”). For example, philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras was a particularly strong advocate for meatless diets. Some other famous vegetarians may come as a surprise to you, since they are not known for their eating habits. These individuals include Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Rosa Parks, (and more recently) Ellen DeGeneres, Paul McCartney, Russell Brand, and former president Bill Clinton (“Should”). Although vegetarianism is discussed less frequently in modern culture, this is confirmation that the lifestyle is still relevant and practiced.

The Ethics of Eating Animals

Many of the individuals I just mentioned adopted a meatless diet due to the ethical concerns of eating animals – concerns that are warranted, yet often overlooked. Several of the celebrities are members of PETA – People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, an organization that advocates for animal rights. Following the logic of author Peter Singer, PETA strives to achieve equal *consideration* for animals, as opposed to equal treatment. Animals are undeniably different than humans; they do not share our capacity for high-level thinking, but they can still suffer and experience pain. Therefore, PETA argues that humans should think of animals as sentient beings and realize that we are not entitled to use them however we please – including as a main course on our dinner plates (“Why”). Recently, there has also been discussion about humans’ perception of different animals. Why does the idea of eating dog make us cringe, but the thought of filet mignon make our mouths water? In her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs,*

and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism, Melanie Joy explains that this phenomenon is due to the schemas, or frameworks of beliefs, that have been forming in our minds since birth. In America, most people categorize dogs as “pets” and cows as “food” – this allows us to rationalize the consumption of most meat. Joy also argues that schema change based on where and how one is raised; she uses the example that, “a Hindu might have the same response to beef as an American Catholic would to dog meat” (14). However, an animal is an animal, is it not? Are pigs really *that* different than dogs? Not particularly; in fact, research has been done showing that pigs are the smartest of all domestic animals (dogs included) and can score better on a cognition test than a three-year-old human child (“If”). This fact is shocking to many people, and serves as evidence that the topic of animal mistreatment is not discussed frequently enough.

A large part of this wrongful treatment occurs within the factory farms and slaughterhouses themselves. Paul McCartney once said, “If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian,” (*Food*). This statement certainly applies to factory farms, too. Factory farms, which have become very popular due to their economic efficiency, are essentially giant warehouses where animals are born, raised, and stored until the time comes for their slaughter. However, the conditions in these buildings are *atrocious* – filth is omnipresent, and animals are forced to live in overcrowded spaces that are by no means conducive to their wellbeing. Some animals are kept in cages hardly bigger than themselves; others, such as baby cows, are tied up until they are sent to be killed. The cruelty that occurs in the factory farms is outrageous, too – tails, horns, and beaks are often removed from the livestock without the use of painkillers (“Should”). All animals (especially the pigs, which can fear and feel pain like a human child) undoubtedly suffer immensely under these conditions. Slaughterhouses are even

worse, yet the general public has little knowledge of the horrors that occur behind the cement walls. In an experiment aiming to expose the inhumaneness of the meat industry, author Peter Singer contacted 87 companies and asked to install webcams in their factories. Unsurprisingly, 73 of those contacted refused to cooperate; the fourteen that did agree were small, organic producers without much to hide (Singer). Over the past few decades, there has been legislation passed – such as the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act – attempting to decrease the suffering of the animals; however, it is incredible easy for slaughterhouses to ignore these laws. Additionally, poultry are excluded entirely from the HMSA; there are no regulations for the treatment of birds (“Should”). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for chicken and turkeys to be strung up by their feet *before* having their throats sliced open (Singer). While watching the documentary film *Food, Inc.*, I was sickened by images of the animals as they were herded towards the machines to be killed. Even on occasions when the “stun gun” misfired, the conscious creatures were sent to their death. The audible squealing of terrified pigs chilled me to the bone; in that moment, it seemed clear that the animals could sense the danger of their situation. The mass execution of pigs, cows, and poultry – which, in a way, resembles the Holocaust – would be immediately condemned if it were humans (or even dogs) being slaughtered. The mistreatment is the same regardless of the creature experiencing the pain, yet the opaqueness of factory farms and slaughterhouses has allowed this abuse to perpetuate.

Environmental Repercussions

In addition to alleviating a bit of the meat industry’s inhumaneness, adopting a vegetarian diet has a positive effect on the environment. For example, reducing meat consumption conserves a surprising amount of water. In the production of one pound of beef, between 1,800 and 2,500 gallons of water are used; in other words, it takes about 2,000 Dasani-sized water

bottles to produce one 5-oz burger (Wenzel). Shocking, right? However, it takes about 10% as much water to produce one pound of tofu, and less to grow an equivalent amount of vegetables (“Should”). Even eliminating one burger per week would decrease your environmental footprint by nearly 130,000 gallons of water every year – in five years, this would be enough water to fill an entire Olympic size swimming pool (Hoefs). Vegetarian diets also contribute to a decreased emission of greenhouse gases, a direct result of fewer animals being raised for slaughter. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has estimated that livestock in the meat industry create about 18% of the world’s greenhouse gases – this is the largest contributor to global warming, passing even the transportation sector (“Should”). If the production of one hamburger equates to traveling 20 miles in a car, then driving from Notre Dame to Disney World has the same effect on the atmosphere as eating one hamburger every week for a year (“Notre”). Finally, abstaining from meat could – in theory – help to eradicate world hunger. Caring for livestock requires a lot of food; cows kept in factory farms don’t have access to grassy pastures, so they must be fed grain just like the other livestock. The food given to these animals could instead be shared with the 925 million hungry humans in our own country and around the world (“Should”). The science behind energy consumption supports this claim, too: when one organism eats another, only about 10% of the energy present gets transferred into the body of the consumer; the other 90% is lost. It makes sense, then, that eating an animal (who ate plants) is less energy efficient than eating the plants directly (“The”). Therefore, switching to a plant-based diet would result in the presence of more food in the world, fewer animals to feed, and a healthier environment to live in.

Personal Benefits

On top of a healthier environment, switching to a vegetarian diet has immense benefits for your personal health. The documentary *Forks Over Knives* discusses in detail a research project known as The China Study – a comprehensive collection of data gathered over the course of 20 years that clearly links the consumption of animal-based foods to increased rates of cancer and disease. Though meatless diets used to be harshly criticized by experts, they are now lauded by organizations such as the World Health Organization and the American Dietetic Association for the health benefits they provide (“Vegetarianism”). Since red meat contains high concentrations of saturated fat and is linked to cardiovascular issues, scientists have concluded that vegetarian diets greatly reduce the likelihood of an individual developing heart disease. Former President Bill Clinton provides a great example of the positive impact of vegetarianism; after he had his second heart surgery in 2010, Clinton eliminated all animal products from his diet. He later reported immense improvements in his overall health. Additionally, studies completed by both Harvard and the World Cancer Research Fund have concluded that consuming red meat and other animal proteins several times a week increases the risk of developing cancer exponentially; switching to a vegetarian diet can decrease the likelihood of cancer development by 40%. A healthy weight and greater longevity are two more benefits that can be attained through healthy choices made on a plant-based diet (“Should”). Personally, I have noticed a dramatic improvement in my energy levels since eliminating meat from my diet. Rather than feeling lethargic after a meal of roast beef, I’ll consume a spinach-based salad and feel energized. My body is certainly much happier when I nourish it with these healthier foods. It took my taste buds a little while to adjust to the new diet, but I believe that I have developed a much greater appreciation for natural flavor since eliminating meat. The transition to a meatless

diet is likely a challenge for anyone who tries it, but the abundance of health-based evidence certainly proves that it's worth the struggle.

Refutations

Now, of course, there are some people who believe vegetarian diets are either irrational or unnecessary. One of the most popular questions they ask (sometimes with a smug look on their face) is, "If you don't eat meat, where do you get your protein?" While it is true that meat provides a plethora of all twenty amino acids, the American Dietetic Association has confirmed that every amino acid can also be obtained from foods such as nuts, beans, and legumes; these are staples in a balanced vegetarian diet. Another common concern is the adequate consumption of vitamin B-12 – the only nutrient that cannot be attained without consuming animal products. Though this vitamin is found in dairy and eggs, one research study discovered that about two in three vegetarians were B-12 deficient ("Should"). Attempting to consume a sufficient amount of this nutrient does require a conscious effort, but I have found it to be a minor bother in the grand scheme of things. One definite drawback to this diet, however, is the availability of vegetarian options. In the dining halls (on days that aren't Monday), options are rather restricted. The same thing happens in restaurants, although many chains have begun offering more meatless options in recent years. Some dining locations, like Panera, charge full price for regular dishes ordered without the meat – I once ordered a small Chicken Strawberry Poppyseed salad without the chicken, and it still cost me about eight dollars. This is sort of a pain, but again- the benefits outweigh the inconveniences. Many of the counterarguments to the vegetarian diet are merited; however, the decision about which side is makes a stronger case ultimately lies with the individual.

Call to Action

After hearing the facts and becoming a bit more educated on this topic, I hope each of you will take some time to reflect on your eating habits. Is it a possibility for you to cut down on your meat consumption? Keep in mind – this is not an all-or-nothing choice. Even abstaining from one hamburger a week can have a significant impact over time. Still, it's possible that some of you may continue to wonder, “*What difference does the diet of one person make?*” I cannot give you a true answer to this question, but I *can* emphasize that change starts with the individual. If everyone had the mindset that “I will never make a difference,” a difference would never be made. Actions do add up; even tiny droplets of water can fill an empty pool, if given enough time. I urge you to start small – maybe by trying to go “Meatless [on] Monday” every week – and observe how the alteration affects your life. Finally, should you want to learn more about this important and global issue, I highly recommend the documentary *Food, Inc.* Perhaps a viewing of this over Christmas vacation will provide you with an even better understanding of the subject. Thank you all for your time and attention; I wish each of you a safe trip home and a happy holiday season!

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