

moralcompassion

animal rights & veganism

Essay no° five: Meat consumption from a moral, ethical and philosophical point of view.

THE ETHICS OF EATING LIVES



A slaughterhouse worker "processing" cattle for human meat consumption.¹

Human society has a long history of invented distinctions which have artificially been drawn between race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other perceived boundaries. Over the years, these perceptions and hierarchical structures have proven to be unjust, exploitative, and most of all, arbitrary. Granted, all of these segregations have been built within human species, yet they all show the same characteristics. Whether the system is called racism, separation of the classes, separation of the sexes or homophobia, they all state that the concerned target is less worthy because of its membership of another group than our own and that therefore its oppression is justified. Foreign races, women, lower classes, religious people, the LGBT people² and many more have all been oppressed solely because of their otherness in comparison to the oppressors. At some point, all of them have been seen as non-feeling, mere objects and there were almost no restrictions as how to treat or make use of them. It is astonishing how long it took humanity to acknowledge that once oppressed groups are sentient – able to feel pain and pleasure – in the exact same way as we are. Though no man for example can ever fully prove that women have the ability to feel pain and happiness just like they do, we have fortunately come to a point in history where we no longer seek to prove this; it has become common sense. Similarly, although white people can never scientifically show evidence that black people have the same emotions like they do, human society dedicatedly believes that they do have the same emotional life along with other races. Even though the experience of pain and other feelings are subjective, we just

¹ Quartz, <http://qz.com/178787/forget-hot-pockets-how-did-the-us-government-miss-8-7-million-pounds-of-diseased-and-unsound-beef-in-the-first-place/>, last access on 20.05.2015.

² Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

know that black people, women or homosexuals are every bit as sentient as we are, regardless of skin colour, gender or the difference in sexuality.

Slavery has been enabled by racism, the belief system that ones own race is superior to others and that those others can therefore be mistreated and systematically abused. Slaveholders and their defenders argued that slavery had existed throughout history and that it was the natural state of mankind. Our ancestors in many different civilizations, even long before its heyday, had practiced slavery, a fact that the defenders often used to support their actions. The argument that slaves were better treated than elsewhere and that they were taken care of, even after they had reached the end of their working lives, was often heard in the southern parts of the U.S., for example. Slave breeding was a common act which aimed at improving the skills and quality of slaves. Forced pregnancies lead to slave children, which meant an increase in supply and could thus replace old, useless or worn out slaves inexpensively. Women who tended to give birth to more than one child per pregnancy and consequently produced more than others were favored. Through breeding, the slaveholders could avoid buying new slaves or fill labor shortages. Religious arguments were also widespread, so too the belief that Africans must be animals on two feet. This assumption is based on the biblical belief that all humans on our earth stem from the eight white persons who were on Noah's ark, yet black people are here with us today. Consequently, the deduction seemed to be that "the black has no soul to be saved"³. The author Millard Erickson comments: "Here we have the ultimate justification for [...] discrimination and even slavery: blacks are not humans; consequently, they do not have the rights which humans have."⁴

The debate of *women's suffrage* involved many supporters who went to great lengths to justify their beliefs. A particularly peculiar justification was that once women were given the right to vote and became involved in politics, they would stop marrying, stop having children and that as a result, the human race would die out. Another argument often used was that women and men simply have separate spheres; men were naturally seen as superior to women.

In Ancient Greece, education was withheld from women and they were married to adult men as soon as they were sexually mature, as though they were mere property. Women did not have the right to buy, own or sell land and could not leave the house without a supervising person.⁵

Not too long ago and in many parts of the world even today, *LGBT people* are being oppressed, simply because their sexuality differs from heterosexual's. Not only do they face psychological dejection when born into a society that condemns their naturally felt sexuality, but often physical assault too, which can in some cases lead to murder. At work they might have to bear the constant threat of victimization and discrimination. All too often, lesbian mothers are systematically denied the custody of their children and in schools, young people who open up about their sexual orientations, are bullied and socially excluded.

All the above-mentioned justifications surely seem ludicrous and silly to us nowadays, but they were taken very seriously by a wide section of society.

³ Millard J. Erickson – Christian Theology, Baker Book House Company, Seventh Printing, 1990, page 543.

⁴ Same as footnote no^o three.

⁵ Unfortunately, women are still systematically oppressed in many parts of the world. The example above, however, should illustrate a situation that has since changed dramatically.

However, most countries have abolished slavery and many have made enormous progress concerning the women's rights-issue and the LGBT's-rights issue. Black people that were once subject to oppression are now accepted as citizens with the same rights as everybody else. Women that were once refused the right to vote, are now politically equal to men and are in some cases heads of state. With time, more and more states enable marriage-equality and thus create a society where LGBT people are accepted and can live free of prejudice. All of these simplified examples show that we, as a species, seem to have finally understood that sentience, respect and ultimately compassion do not depend on external characteristics and that they do not need to be proven in order to exist. And what's more important: we live by the realizations of the consequences of these awakenings, we have put them into practice.

Why is it then, that we still do not properly put those moral realizations into practice for all beings concerned? Why should the arguments, based on the facts of sentience and emotion be less valid when someone has fur instead of skin? Or if someone has feathers instead of hair? How is the line between nonhuman animals and human animals any less arbitrary than the one we drew between blacks and whites? "To mark this boundary [the boundary of concern for the interests of others] by some other characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner. Why not choose some other characteristic, like skin color?"⁶

*"Virtually every atrocity in the history of human kind was enabled by a populace that turned away from a reality that seemed too painful to face, while virtually every revolution for peace and justice has been made possible by a group of people who chose to bear witness and demanded that other bear witness as well. The goal of all justice movements is to activate collective witnessing so that social practices reflect social values."*⁷

Animals, especially the ones we abuse for consumption, are all sentient beings. There are many scientific proofs that shatter the perception that animals are mere meat-machines, soulless, numb objects, as they are often portrayed by meat-proponents. The Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness states that "[...] neural circuits supporting behavioral / electrophysiological states of attentiveness, sleep and decision making appear to have arisen in evolution as early as the invertebrate radiation, being evident in insects and cephalopod mollusks (e.g., octopus)"⁸ and finally concludes that "the absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates."⁹

The pretext 'Human kind has always eaten meat' very much follows the same logic that allegedly justified racism, as shown above. This idea, however, cannot count as a justification for the continuation of meat consumption, because - needless to say - actions that have

⁶ Peter Singer – Animal Liberation, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1975, p. 9.

⁷ Melanie Joy – Why we love dogs, eat pigs and wear cows, Conari Press, 2010, p. 139.

⁸ The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, written by Philip Low, published on 7.7.2012, available on <http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf>.

⁹ Same as footnote no^eeight.

always been done, are therefore not automatically rendered just. We have a long history of rape and murder, yet we oppose to those actions today. Again following the paths of racists and slaveholders, we might hear that some animals are better treated than others, that they have been given a little more space so that they actually could turn around or have had the possibility to go to a space to move about in. Regardless of the number of illusory, conscience-reassuring but false arguments we might come across, they can never change the facts. Meat always stems from an animal that once was alive and has then been killed for the consumers eating preferences only. When it comes to meat, the right of these sentient beings is being harmed as soon as we inflict pain on them solely for our purpose. When meat is no longer a necessity, it has become a choice. Anybody who eats meat is actively placing his appetite above the interest of the animals and above their very lives.

Just like slaveholders did, we breed animals, we shape their bodies to facilitate our exploitation of them. We impregnate them and steal their offspring, which we then eat. Psychologically, we have to degrade them to senseless machines in order to still function as humans next to this limitless horror. We reduce them to less than they are, the word “animal” itself is perceived as an insult. We do not have the decency to correctly name what we eat, we have to talk around it by using terms such as “pork” or “beef”. Slaughterhouse workers tend even more towards these euphemisms, as they refer to chickens as “broilers”, to pigs as “rashers” and to cows as “udders”.

Just as the membership of a race, gender, class or sexual orientation is of no importance when it comes to basic rights, neither does the membership of a particular species matter. The term speciesism has been established following the terms racism or sexism. Speciesism describes the discrimination based on species, just like racism describes the discrimination based on race. In other words, it is the belief that another species can be oppressed, abused and exploited solely *because* of their species. In virtually all cases, animal species are the victims of human speciesists, never vice versa. Generally, speciesists attach more value to humans than to animals not because of different qualities or capabilities but because of biased prejudices.

Speciesists often cynically ask whether – according to animal rights activist’s views – animals should be seen as equals to human beings. But animals do not need all the same rights that we humans do. The right to vote would be useless to them, because they do not have the desire to vote. The concept of *preference utilitarianism*, mostly coined by Peter Singer, suggests that animals deserve the same rights as humans where they have the same preferences or the same interests. Virtually all sentient beings have the strong desire to live, they avoid pain and do not want to be hurt. Furthermore, they feel emotions such as happiness, sadness, they grieve and are aware of their environment and their companion animals.¹⁰ This results, or rather should result, in them having the same rights for exactly these aspects: the right not to be hurt, the right to live freely and the right not to be held as property. In his own words, Singer argues that “the extension of the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way, or grant exactly the same rights to both groups. Whether we should do so will depend on the nature of the members of the two groups. The basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical *treatment*, it requires equal consideration.”¹¹

¹⁰ Again, see The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, written by Philip Low, published on 7.7.2012.

¹¹ Peter Singer – Animal Liberation, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1975, p. 2.

If we take this system into consideration it is quickly shown that animal's needs are not met at all. In fact, they are by far the most oppressed and mistreated group of all time on our planet. The Jewish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer is quite famous for his statement that for the animals "all people are Nazis" and thus for them, life "is an eternal Treblinka"¹². All animals used for food are oppressed, mistreated and ultimately killed. We use their lives, we take their lives and we eat their lives only because we believe ourselves to be superior. But the superiority is an illusion when it comes to basic needs and emotions. They can and do suffer when harm is being inflicted on them.

The discussion of all these issues on a philosophical level can be summed up by the word *ethics*. Animal ethics focus on the relationship between human animals and nonhuman animals and how one interacts with the other. However, there are some major problems when it comes to animal ethics.

Too often, animal ethics only discuss *aspects* of a practice without actually questioning essential basic conditions. They push fundamental questions aside and accept the legitimacy of purpose as appropriate standard. Unethical practices are often correctly recognized as such, but ethics fail to bring out the practice's abolition. Instead, they seek to improve or rather adjust the system in which they place animals in a way that requires minimal improvement in real welfare and gives the impression of meeting consumer's demands for ethically produced meat. This is where meaningless labels like "cruelty-free" come from. Animal welfare is a real barrier to profit, from a business point of view. It is cheaper to produce animals in masses and let some die before slaughter age than to care for them adequately.

Violent ideologies depend upon promoting fiction as fact and discouraging or even prohibiting any critical thinking or action that threatens to dismantle this system. A good example might be the defamation trial in Amarillo, Texas in 1996. A group of beef producers sued Oprah Winfrey for over \$10 million for slandering beef in one of her shows. The program discussed mad cow disease and featured warnings which showed that American cattle are likely to find ground-up members of their own species in their feed – those who had died from BSE. Clearly, the disease could thus be found in the meat Americans eat, which prompted Winfrey to declare "It has stopped me cold from eating another burger! I'm stopped!"¹³

Her mistake was not that she had brought into light the more than dubious procedures of cattle business. Anyone can easily access those details if desired. What the group of beef producers did not like was her influence, the sheer number of people following her broadcasts. In other words, she simply reached too many people.

It is in this context that the so called "Ag-gag" laws have been put in place in the U.S., which forbid undercover filming or photography of agricultural activities. While supporters might claim they serve to protect agricultural industries from negative images, they are mainly used to keep activists from exposing the abusive and horrific truths that take place in today's agricultural businesses. They make it almost impossible to prove mistreatment of animals used in agriculture, since they prohibit and outlaw the pieces of evidence themselves. These precautions strongly suggest that there is something worth hiding. In fact, it *is* well hidden. It is striking, how easily one can spend a lifetime of meat consumption without once entering a place where it is processed.

¹² http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/14444.Isaac_Bashevis_Singer, last access on 20.05.2015.

¹³ http://www.mcspotlight.org/media/press/oprah_15apr96.html, last access on 20.05.2015.

“Because mass witnessing is the single greatest threat to carnism [the belief system that conditions us to eat some animals and not others], the entire system is organized around preventing this process. Indeed, the sole purpose of carnistic defenses is to block witnessing.”¹⁴

Chances are that we have been fed meat products during our childhood, based on our parent’s habits. The decision has often been made and the meat-based diet habit has been accepted even before a child is on its way. One could ask: “Is it really ever a decision? Do carnists even consider raising their children without meat and *then* decide that they prefer feeding them corpses?” In fact, it is a pattern that continues until it is thoroughly questioned. Most of us are born into a system that we become accustomed to without knowing it. It is the reason why we see the consumption of the few animal-species our ancestors have consumed as normal, the way it has always been and consequently we never ask ourselves, why we do so. Obviously, this does not justify our actions in any way. In contrast, it should push us to act according to our own values and should lead us away from passiveness towards activeness. In that sense, rethinking the grounds for our actions is a necessary liberation. Arriving at this level of consciousness, we have the possibility to make new choices and to adjust or alter old habits that we falsely think of as beliefs.

“Most people who eat meat have no idea that they’re behaving in accordance with the tenets of a system that has defined many of their values, preferences, and behaviours. [...] And by carving out the path of least resistance, norms obscure alternative paths and make it seem as if there is no other way to be; [...] meat eating is considered a given, not a choice.”¹⁵

I have recently been involved in a discussion about animal rights and the goal of activists to shift towards a world where animals are respected and not killed for any human purpose. We were talking about nations and the many different opinions that exist within them. My interlocutor explained to me that a state needs to be seen as a whole. Though many groups of people with many different views on life that they want to realize all coexist in the nation’s philosophy, the country is not capable to take them all into account. There may be a group whose goal it is to abolish all freeways and who demands a speed limit of 20 miles per hour in the whole country. There may be another group whose idea it is to ask the state for subsidies in order to build more parks and thus make cities greener. And there may be animal rights activists, who demand the closure of slaughterhouses, the ending of livestock breeding and finally the abolition of meat-consumption. Now, my friend asks me, what would happen to a state if it took all demands into consideration and helped with realizing every single one of them? If every idea of every group could ultimately sell itself and be put into action, the state would be torn apart quite quickly.

In that sense, my interlocutor wanted to demonstrate that certain ideas can neither be absorbed nor realized, even if they may be justified and beneficial. I logically agreed, because I recognized the problem that would occur if every inhabitant of a country could freely change the law according to his values. The big difference between animal rights activist’s demands and all the demands of other opinions however is, that there is a third party involved. This fact makes animal rights activist’s demands by far more important in comparison to other demands that one might have. Animal oppression is the cause for our

¹⁴ Melanie Joy – Why we love dogs, eat pigs and wear cows, Conari Press, 2010, p. 139.

¹⁵ Melanie Joy – Why we love dogs, eat pigs and wear cows, Conari Press, 2010, p. 106.

demands and animal's inability to ask for them themselves is the reason why it is us human beings who must fight for them. Animal right's advocates do not have *the opinion* that animal abuse must end, but they are the ones that have acknowledged this truth. This example might help understand why animal right's demands cannot be shrugged off as if it were a phase that some people go through. Consequentially follows the promotion of a meat-free diet, as meat consumption represents the main contribution to the injustices that animals face.

Animal ethics are not only theoretical thought processes, but applied practices. The things we learn from them must have consequences in our daily lives. Meat consumption is not possible without taking lives and whether we have the right to do so does not solely depend on our perceptions. All sentient beings involved have rights, most importantly the basic right to live. Humans thus have rights too, but their rights end where those of the others begin. Meat consumption strongly violates those rights as it always takes lives. We have seen the numerous similarities of previous historical oppressions on the one hand and today's topical oppression of animals on the other hand. It is of extreme importance to understand that animals are just as sentient as human beings and thus as every previously repressed group, an ethical fact which indisputably prohibits their slaughter for consumption. Meat products are no longer a necessity for the great majority of our planet's population and thus have become a choice. We have this choice every time we act, especially as consumers and costumers. Our actions are powerful, given the fact that demand determines availability. Since we have that opportunity, it is our duty to choose the most ethical, rightful and compassionate way there is, which clearly is not to eat meat.