



Vegetarianism: Moral issues

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Abstract

Human eating habits are widely distinguished between Vegetarianism and Non-Vegetarianism, where former presumes themselves to be holding no moral risk toward nature and animals as they do not eat animal meats. However, if we examine it closely and thoroughly, every eating habits hold some or other moral risk. My paper is an attempt to unfold different arguments made in support and against the moral concern of Vegetarianism. Although it is impalpable to answer 'What is morally good to eat?', our discourse helps to bring forth different arguments to understand the moral concern of our eating habits.

Keywords: vegetarianism, non-vegetarianism, moral issues

Introduction

The basic law of survival for living beings is interdependence. Humans, animals, plants and other living beings all are dependent upon each other for their basic nutrition and food. Human beings require health and nutrition to sustain their lives for which they depend upon plants and animals. Nutrition intakes are divided into three forms: Veganism, Vegetarianism, and Non-Vegetarianism. As far as moral issues related to animals are concerned; Vegetarians presume to be holding no moral risk. At one end, Non-Vegetarianism includes eating animal meats and therefore demands that animals be killed, either directly while buying meat from the butcher or indirectly by demanding and ordering meat or fish dishes in food outlets. On the other extreme, Veganism even excludes eating of products that are derived from animals such as eggs, honey, milk, and dairy products in addition to not eating meat and fish. Whereas Vegetarianism includes plants, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables with animal by-products like milk and dairy products except meats.

This paper is basically an attempt to unfold different arguments in support of and against the moral concern of Vegetarianism. According to some scholars, Vegetarian diet is considerably healthier providing a good amount of nutrient intakes, rich intake of calcium, iron, vitamin and minerals. Also, Vegetarianism is being supported on many moral grounds. Some support it as a spiritual and religious way of life, some do it on the basis of the horror of pain inflicted on animals by eating their meats, unnatural rearing in factory farms and massive abuse. Different theories were developed by different philosophers to support animal's life and thereby to persuade others to be vegetarian. However, arguments also came up against Vegetarianism on many different grounds either from Non-Vegetarianism or from Veganism. And thus, it leaves the quest of "What is morally good to eat?" impalpable to answer.

Moral Arguments Supporting Vegetarianism

Many a scholar argued that it is possible to minimize and

cause fewer harms to animals by adopting Vegetarian diet. Inevitably, Vegetarians cause lesser harm to animals than Non-Vegetarians. By abstaining from eating meats of animals, Vegetarianism extends the morality to non-human animals. Vegetarianism is a better way of living in the sense that it would not be supporting any slaughterhouses or torture of animals in any way. Also, all the required nutrients for human survival are provided by plants and trees. Likewise, there are different ethical arguments in support of vegetarianism.

Consequentialism

Consequentialism holds that acts are morally right or wrong in accordance with their consequences. According to this theory, 'the end justifies the mean'. It accepts the utilitarian principle which includes that an action is right if its consequences minimize the pain and maximize the pleasure. As a Utilitarian ^[1], Peter Singer supports vegetarianism in order to minimize the pain in form of cruelty and killing of animals for food and maximize the pleasure with overall goodness in the world. Following up the utilitarian principle, Singer focuses on the moral equality of animals. This equality is the equal consideration of interests.

According to Dale Jamieson ^[2], for Singer, Moral Considerability is not just confined to human beings but to all sentient beings. Thus the interest of all sentient being should be given equal consideration. The fundamental interest of all the sentient being is in favor of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Killing and inflicting pain on animals for food ignores the suffering of animals and does not give equal consideration to their interests. Singer, thus, condemn the meat eating or non-vegetarian diet by saying, "If we are prepared to take the life of another being merely in order to satisfy our taste for a particular type of food, then that being is no more than a

¹ The Utilitarian Principle was developed by J.S. Mill (1806-1873) holds an act to be morally good if it aims at minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure.

² Jamieson, Dale; *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*; Cambridge, New York; Cambridge University Press; 2008; Page no. 114

means to an end" [3].

Singer admits the shortfall that even if one person becoming vegetarian won't lessen the exploitation and killing of animals in a factory farm, but he says, "Utilitarianism judges actions by their likely consequences..." [4] So, even if one animal has been saved because of one person going vegetarian, it is a morally good act. He goes on to admit that the most feasible and effective step toward ending the killing and suffering of animals is to choose to be vegetarian. He adheres, "...for those concerned to change the situation of animals in our society, vegetarianism is of real practical importance [5]."

Kantianism

According to Immanuel Kant, the moral goodness is not focused on the consequences of an action, but rather on the action itself. It implies that an action itself has to have the quality to be recognized as morally right or wrong. According to this theory, there is a categorical imperative which decides an action to be morally right based on three laws, i.e., the law of universality, law of humanity and law of autonomy. Tom Regan, being a deontologist follows the theory of Kant. According to Regan, everything that is 'subject to life' has an inherent value. He supports vegetarianism on the basis of natural and equal 'right to life' for every being. He contends that animals have an equal right to life as humans and thus killing and inflicting pain on them for food violates this right. "Raising and killing animals for food uses them as a means to human gratification, it does not treat them respectfully as ends in themselves" [6]. Hence, Tom Regan while defending the right to life for animals proclaimed that vegetarian diet should be followed by abstaining completely from eating animals.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is wherein the behavior and character of the agent decide an action to be morally good or bad. A virtuous agent is one who would carry out the morally good acts and would not be involved in morally bad acts. According to this theory, a virtuous person is 'generous', 'kind' and 'compassionate', also who would not partake in any process which treats animals cruelly and inflicts pain on them. Killing animals for the little pleasure of taste to human beings is morally wrong action. Accordingly, a virtuous person would follow the vegetarian diet and be generous and compassionate toward every being.

Deep Ecology

Deep ecology focuses on asking the deeper question about ecology. It talks about "...our relationships to one another, to future generation, and to the web of life of which we are part" [7]. According to Michael Allen Fox, Vegetarianism in a way provokes us to consider ourselves as a part of nature and to

relate to everything in nature. This enhances our perspective toward the ecological sustainability. Vegetarianism is not just a diet plan but a way of life which helps us to reconnect our relationship with nature and its other constituents. He alleged that "Vegetarianism is liberating in the sense that it frees us from the exploitation of animals and nature..." [8] In a way Michael Allen Fox with his writings pushing us towards the deep ecology while illuminating vegetarianism as healthy and planetary diet.

Ecofeminism

"Ecofeminism posits that the domination of nature is linked to the domination of women and that both dominations must be eradicated." [9] This theory argues that ecofeminist value is one of the best ways to help animals. The notion put forth by one feminist that "Animals, the earth, and women have all been objectified and treated in the same way." [10] They have been used as an object of benefit in patriarchal and dominator system. Ecofeminism while supporting Vegetarianism brings the strategy of resistance against classist, racist, sexist and spiciest views. The exploitation of nature, animals, and women should be stopped because they all have some rights. But Ecofeminism is not just rights-based philosophy; rather it's about one's relationship that brings forth the identity as an individual and not as an instrument. Killing animals to eat is to treat them as an instrument and thus glorifies the dominance and power. Ecofeminism's response is to seek to eliminate this subordination of animals and thereby support following the vegetarian diet as ethically good action.

Religious View

Different religions responded differently in support or against meat eating. The exploitative attitude of humans toward nature and animals is the basic problem. According to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, killing animals for food is ethically wrong. One should hold compassion not just toward one's own being but for all living beings. And thus exploiting others for one's pleasure is the religious view. Also, according to Indian tradition, Vegetarianism is considered as traditional value, whereas eating meat is regarded as modern value. The Vegetarian diets have been followed by some ethnic groups because that brings moral and spiritual goodness in the people, also it "...entitle oneself for salvation" [11]. Moreover, eating meat is not economically possible for every person.

Other Arguments

Meat consumption contributes to famine and depletes the earth's natural resources, whereas Vegetarian diet can help in alleviating world hunger. As per the research was done by Cornell University, "...the grain used to feed US livestock

³ Singer, Peter; "Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism"; *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265002>), Accessed on 17-12-2016 10:51 UTC; 1980; pp. 325-337

⁴ Ibid. Pp.336

⁵ Ibid. Pp.336

⁶ Eating animals; BBC Mobile site, Accessed on 24-12-2016; www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/animals/using/eating_1.shtml

⁷ Capra, Fritjof; *The Web of Life*; Berkeley, Random House Publishers; 1996; Page no. 8

⁸ Allen Fox, Michael; "Vegetarianism and Planetary Health"; *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4033898>); Accessed on 17-12-2016 10:51 UTC; 2000; pp.163-174

⁹ Adams, Carol J.; "Eco feminism and the Eating of Animals"; *JSTOR*, (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810037>); Accessed on 17-12-2016 10:46 UTC; 1991; pp. 125-145

¹⁰ Ibid. pp.127

¹¹ Khare,R.S.; "A Case of Anomalous Values in Indian Civilization: Meat-Eating Among the Kanya-Kubja Brahmans of Katyayan Gotra"; *JSTOR*(<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2051325>); 1966; Accessed on 17-12-2016; Page-239

alone could feed 800 million people" [12] Also, Vegetarian diet supports healthy weight and reduces the chance of cancer by 40% in comparison to the Non-vegetarian diet. Moreover, Non-vegetarian diet increases air pollution through factory farming when livestock creates the greater amount of methane gas which is a greater contributor to greenhouse gases. Thus, following Vegetarian diet is also helpful from the environmental point of view.

Arguments Questioning Vegetarianism

All above views support vegetarianism with different notions but the underlying idea of all is to protect animals from exploitation and killing. Vegetarians presume themselves out of the frame of moral objection to the rearing, exploitation, and killing of animals. Refraining from eating meat is considered as totally free from moral risk. However, according to Jamieson, "The moral question about our treatment of animals are not 'all or nothing', but rather concern the nature, extent, and character of the harms and action involved." [13] (pp. 139) As far as someone willingly refrains from eating meat or fish because of taste or personal economy, no moral question arises. However, when someone argues in favor of vegetarianism in order to end pain and suffering of animals for food or persuade others to follow the same, then moral attention is required.

Jamieson says there is a doubtless reason to argue that infliction of pain and killing of animals for food is wrong. He believes that if exploiting animals in order to kill and eat them is wrong, exploiting animals in any way for whatsoever reason is also wrong. Vegetarians defend the consumption of animal's by-products but at the same time oppose eating meat or fish. This leaves vegetarians position ambiguous. Thereby, two classes can be made on the moral ground for vegetarians. As Philip E. Devine puts it, "Vegetarians on strictly moral grounds fall into two classes: those who object to the infliction of suffering on animals; and those who object to killing them [14]."

Although people who object to the killing of animals can defend their position with the vegetarian diet, however people who object to the infliction of suffering on animals are still under question. Undoubtedly, vegetarian diet includes milk, dairy products, and other animal by-products, which are also now products from the factory. There remains no difference in raising the animals in the factory either for milk or for meat. Cows have been turned into milk machines. In order to provide a large amount of milk, cows are being unnaturally reared and thus suffering is unavoidable. Other than having vague evidence of infliction of pain, vegetarianism has different problems as well.

Ecological Problem

It is true that vegetarian diet requires even larger amount of land use. Firstly, it uses land in order to produce grains, fruits,

vegetables, oils, etc. and also including milk and dairy products requires farming which is another big example of land use. For milk and other dairy products, animals need to be fed grains and for that large-scale agriculture is required. For large-scale agriculture, a huge amount of fertilizers is used. Fertilizers containing nitrous oxide has been the major greenhouse gas which highly influences the ecology. This raises the question that 'Are animal lovers nature haters?'

Moreover, non-killing of animals would lead to an excessive number of animals which would create an ecological imbalance. As the biological cycle maintains a balance in nature, an excessive amount of anything would lead to some ecological problem.

Objection by Vegans

According to Jamieson's book, Vegans objected to the production of dairy industry which treats and humiliates animals equally bad as the factory farms for the meat industry. As the animals in dairy industry live longer than the animals in the meat industry, they suffer pain for a longer period of time. And after they become no longer productive for dairy products or milk, they are sent to slaughter house and eventually face the same fortune as the animals in factory farms. Thus, vegetarians are also under the moral objection of the implication of pain and ultimately killing of animals.

Objection by Non-Vegetarians

There have been objections not just from Vegans, but also from Non-vegetarians. Non-vegetarians might object Vegetarians on the ground of eating plants and trees which provide us with the oxygen to sustain our lives. Eating animals can help in maintaining the balance of the ecosystem and it's not unethical because animals will die anyway by being killed by predators which might inflict as much suffering to animals as we presume it to be in slaughter-house. Also, there were arguments like "Modern Slaughter techniques minimize the suffering of animals." [15] Thereby, it is permissible to raise and slaughter animals for food as it also reduces the infliction of pain to animals. Moreover, Non-vegetarian diets are rich in saturated fats which help the sportspersons with body-building and promote athletics and sports activities.

Killing of Small Animals

As Jamieson discussed in his book, "*Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*", land used in the production of grains or large-scale agriculture harm animals in the field. Small animals such as rabbit, chipmunk, mice and birds who destroy the grains are been treated as pests and thus killed or harmed to protect the grains by using pesticides. Although such a way of harming or killing are considered as unintentional, but they do equal harm. This raises the question that 'Are the life of big animals are more valuable than small animals?' But if hurting and killing an animal is wrong, it should cover every animal under it. Thus it becomes an inadequate proclaim by the vegetarians who adheres that they are vegetarians because they do not want to hurt animals.

Even vegans have been brought under question in regard to

¹² The Leading Source For Pros & Cons of Controversial Issues; (<http://vegetarian.procon.org/>), Accessed on 20-12-2016

¹³ Jamieson, Dale; *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*; Cambridge, New York; Cambridge University Press; 2008; Page no. 139

¹⁴ Devine, Philip E.; "The Moral basis of Vegetarianism", *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3749877>); Accessed on 17-12-2016 10:44 UTC; Oct., 1978; pp. 481-505

¹⁵ The Leading Source For Pros & Cons of Controversial Issues; (<http://vegetarian.procon.org/>), Accessed on 20-12-2016

the question of killing small animals for the production of grains, fruits, vegetables, etc.

Principle of Autonomy

The principle of autonomy means the autonomy to decide by oneself what one wants to do. In the case of eating food, one holds the autonomy to decide what he/she will eat/want to eat against persuaded to not to eat meat or fish. The right to decide or to eat what one want, including non-vegetarian diet, is a liberty every citizen is provided with, which must be defended. Being omnivore is in human nature and has also been adapted in culture to eat animals. Thus, imposing or persuading others to follow the vegetarian diet is a conflict over one's autonomy. Sometimes "...vegetarians are seen as violating others' rights to their own pleasure." [16] Hence it requires moral attention.

Conclusion

As we all know and also discussed by Jamieson, "...in a Darwinian world, there is no such thing as a (morally) free lunch, and everyone to some extent is involved in harming animals in some way or another in order to survive." [17] So, there is no way we can escape the interdependency between humans and animals in the area of food. And in order to do so, animals do get hurt and killed, intentionally as well as unintentionally. Nevertheless, causing unnecessary and intentional harm is more offensive.

I believe there is no particular diet or nutrition which can end or stop the exploitation of animals, but to some extent, it is possible to minimize and cause less harm to animals. Inevitably, vegetarians cause less harm to animals than non-vegetarians. However, it is hard to unwind moral objections from any kind of nutrition diet, more specifically from the Vegetarian diet. Despite being a Vegetarian, these objections on Vegetarian diets left me puzzled to choose and argue for any kind of diet. This issue of moral objection to Vegetarians is one of the most controversial issues with numbers of pros and cons. Thus, I, without taking either of sides for Vegetarian diet, leave this quest on you to decide which diet is practically feasible and ethically acceptable.

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¹⁷ Jamieson, Dale; *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*; Cambridge, New York; Cambridge University Press; 2008; Page no. 139