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Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism

The better sort here pretend to the utmost compassion for animals of every kind: to hear them speak, a stranger would be apt to imagine they could hardly hurt the gnat that stung them. They seem so tender, and so full of pity, that one would take them for the harmless friends of the whole creation, the protectors of the meanest insect or reptile that was privileged with existence. And yet (would you believe it?) I have seen the very men who have thus boasted of their tenderness, at the same time devour the flesh of six different animals tossed up in a fricassee. Strange contrariety of conduct! *they pity and they eat the objects of their compassion!*

Oliver Goldsmith,
Citizen of the World

I am a utilitarian. I am also a vegetarian. I am a vegetarian because I am a utilitarian. I believe that applying the principle of utility to our present situation—especially the methods now used to rear animals for food and the variety of food available to us—leads to the conclusion that we ought to be vegetarian.

With this Tom Regan disagrees.¹ Utilitarianism does not, he claims, provide adequate grounds for the obligation to be a vegetarian. This is the negative side of his essay, and it is a point with which several other critics of *Animal Liberation* agree.² The positive side of Regan's

1. "Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism and Animal Rights," above, pp. 305-324.

2. See Michael Martin, "A Moral Critique of Vegetarianism," *Reason Papers*, no. 3 (Fall 1976): 13-43; Philip Devine, "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism," *Philosophy* 53, no. 206 (October 1978): 481-505; Leslie Pickering Francis and Richard Norman, "Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others," *Philosophy* 53, no. 206 (October 1978): 507-527; Aubrey Townsend, "Radical Vegetarians," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 1 (March 1979): 85-93; Peter Wenz, "Act-Utilitarianism and Animal Liberation," *The Personalist* 60, no. 4 (October

argument, with which most of these critics would not agree, is that an ethical theory based on rights does provide adequate grounds for the obligation to be a vegetarian. I shall defend myself against the charge that utilitarianism does not support vegetarianism, but I shall not consider the alternative argument involving rights. Regan admits that he has presented only a sketch of an argument which he hopes to be able to develop more fully on another occasion. To criticize his argument would therefore be premature. I shall, however, begin with a word about methodology in ethics which may suffice to explain my attitude to Regan's suggestion that to defend vegetarianism I should drop utilitarianism and take up a rights-based theory.

I

Some philosophers think that the aim of moral theory is to systematize our common moral intuitions. As scientific theories must match the observed data, they say, so must ethical theories match the data of our settled moral convictions. I have elsewhere argued against the inbuilt conservatism of this approach to ethics, an approach which is liable to take relics of our cultural history as the touchstone of morality.³ These arguments need not be rehearsed here, for Regan does not defend the view that a sound ethical theory must match our moral intuitions. What does seem to be implicit in Regan's article, however, is the view that a sound moral theory must lead to the belief that it is wrong to kill and eat animals. Certainly he recommends abandoning utilitarianism in favor of a rights-based theory without having made a single point against utilitarianism, except for his argument that utilitarianism does not support vegetarianism. Unless the animal liberation movement has made much faster progress than I dare to hope, this is a curious inversion of the strategy of testing ethical theories by the degree to which they match our common moral convictions. Nor is the

1979): 423-428; and R. G. Frey in a forthcoming book, *The Ethics of Eating Meat*.

3. "Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium," *The Monist* 58, no. 3 (July 1974), especially pp. 515-517.

inverted strategy any sounder a method of testing ethical theories than the original.

Perhaps this is unfair to Regan. Perhaps his suggestion that utilitarianism should be abandoned because it does not lead to vegetarianism is not directed to utilitarians at large, but to me personally. Perhaps he thinks that in my case, at least, the commitment to vegetarianism is so strong that I will be prepared to abandon any ethical theory which is unable to produce the judgment that it is wrong to eat animals. If so, this is a misjudgment which comes, I would guess, from neglecting the importance of correct methodology in ethics. It would be just as wrong for me to reject utilitarianism because I cannot deduce vegetarianism from it as it was for Whewell to reject utilitarianism because it might make it our duty to sacrifice the happiness of men in order to increase the pleasure of pigs or geese.⁴ Our moral convictions are not reliable data for testing ethical theories. We should work from sound theories to practical judgments, not from our judgments to our theories.

Regan's account of my published views on the basis of my vegetarianism is accurate. My very sparing talk of "rights" in *Animal Liberation* occurs mostly in the context of *ad hominem* arguments. Elsewhere when I talk of rights, I do it, as I have said, as a concession to popular rhetoric. (*Animal Liberation* was not written primarily for philosophers.) Vegetarianism is, for me, a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Whether we ought to be vegetarians depends on a lot of facts about the situation in which we find ourselves.

Some writers find this strange. They think of vegetarians as moral absolutists, who will stick to their belief in the immorality of eating meat no matter what. Thus Cora Diamond writes: ". . . one curious feature of the Peter Singer sort of argument . . . is that your Peter Singer vegetarian should be perfectly happy to eat the unfortunate lamb that has just been hit by a car."⁵ Why is this curious? It is only

4. See the quotation from Whewell's *Lectures* in John Stuart Mill's essay "Whewell on Moral Philosophy." The relevant section is reprinted in Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds., *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), pp. 131-132.

5. "Eating Meat and Eating People," *Philosophy*, 53, no. 206 (October 1978): 471-472.

curious on the assumption that vegetarians must think it *always* wrong to eat meat. No doubt some vegetarians are moral absolutists, just as there are absolute pacifists, absolute antiabortionists and absolutist truth-tellers who would never tell a lie. I reject all these forms of moral absolutism.

Regan suggests that by basing the case for vegetarianism on animals' rights I "could dispense with the need to investigate systematically the probable consequences of changing our eating habits" (p. 318). This suggestion strikes me as quite wrong-headed, rather like telling the President that by basing his case on the moral principle that it is always legitimate to resist aggression, he can dispense with the need to investigate systematically the probable consequences of a nuclear response to Soviet military initiatives. In contrast to Regan, I think we should always try to find out as much as possible about the probable consequences of our actions. Without this information, our decisions about what we ought to do should be subject to revision in the light of more complete information.

II

To turn from methodology to the substantive issue: what are the implications of utilitarianism for our treatment of animals?

When we apply utilitarianism to the issue of how we should treat animals, one vital point stands out immediately. Utilitarianism, in its classical form, aims at minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure. Many nonhuman animals can experience pain and pleasure. (Perhaps some simpler forms of animal life cannot, but I shall leave this qualification aside.) Therefore they are morally significant entities. They have moral standing. In this respect they are like humans and unlike rocks.

This is a simple point, so obvious that we may forget its importance. Regan's difficulty in interpreting my "principle of equality" may stem from his underestimate of the importance of this point, and his consequent vain search for some additional utilitarian principle of equality which I might hold. The only principle of equality I hold is the principle that the interests of every being affected by an action are to

be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being—what Regan calls the “equality of interests” principle. As Regan grants, utilitarianism presupposes this principle. The principle of equality of interests merely makes it explicit that, because the principle of utility is the sole basis of morality, no other principle will limit the application of the principle of utility, or affect the way in which it operates. I do not hold any “equality of treatment” principle, except insofar as giving weight to the interests of a being is a form of “treatment.” As I said in *Animal Liberation*: “The basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical *treatment*; it requires equal *consideration*.”⁶

The importance of the fact that the principle of utility gives animals moral standing, and gives their interests equal weight with the like interests of humans, lies in the consequences of denying animals this equal moral standing—and historically, most moral philosophers have either denied animals moral standing altogether, or discounted their interests because they are not human. Thus Aristotle thought that all animals exist for the sake of man. Aquinas took over this attitude, adding that we do not even owe charity to animals. Kant said that we have no direct duties to animals. Whewell, as we have seen, thought it so obvious that animals do not count equally that he regarded the contrary implication as a damning objection to utilitarianism. More recently John Rawls has denied animals a place in his theory of justice, arguing that we owe justice only to those who have the concept of justice (except that we owe it to infant humans).⁷

So utilitarians can do much to revise moral theory in favor of animals, merely by defending the claim that no being should have its interests disregarded or discounted merely because it is not human. Moreover it needs to be emphasized that this really *is* the utilitarian position, for there is a widespread misconception that utilitarianism values everything by its utility for human beings. Thus opponents of whaling criticize the “utilitarian” attitudes of whalers, who see whales

6. *Animal Liberation* (New York: A New York Review Book, 1975), p. 2, the italics in original. Further page references in the text are to this edition.

7. For references see *Animal Liberation*, chap. 5. Rawls' discussion is in Section 77 of *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

as so much oil, meat, and ambergris. This may seem no more than a popular, non-philosophical use of the term “utilitarian”; but as distinguished a philosopher as Stuart Hampshire has similarly mischaracterized utilitarianism as a theory which “places men at the very center of the universe, with their states of feeling as the source of all value in the world.”⁸

So utilitarianism, correctly understood, stands in sharp contrast to other widely held ethical theories in respect of the standing it gives to animals. We must now ask if this difference between utilitarianism and other ethical theories leads to an equally sharp contrast in the practices which can be justified on these theories.

III

It would be a remarkable coincidence if our current practices, many of which are based on giving little or no consideration to the interests of nonhumans, should happen to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, even when the pleasures and pains of animals are fully taken into account.⁹ Nor is this what Regan or my other critics claim. Almost unanimously, they acknowledge that controls over the use of animals in experiments should be tightened, and that intensive farming methods inflict unnecessary distress on chickens, pigs, and veal calves. Thus the disagreement between us is not over whether current practices are, judged by utilitarian standards, ideal. We are agreed that they are not. The question is whether the utilitarian condemnation of

8. “Morality and Pessimism” in S. Hampshire, ed., *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 2. Hampshire’s persistence in this mischaracterization is odd, for in an exchange of letters published in *The New York Review of Books*, 20 September 1973, he appeared to concede that utilitarianism takes all sentient beings into account and hence cannot be described as anthropocentric.

9. In *Animal Liberation* I give several examples of the attitudes to animals implicit—and often explicit—in factory farming; here is another example from a recent New South Wales Department of Agriculture brochure on the housing of pigs: “A piggery must be imagined as being similar to a factory with raw goods (breeding stock and feed) going in one end and the finished article (pork and bacon) coming out the other.”

these practices carries with it the implication that we should switch to a vegetarian diet.

There are three ways in which a utilitarian condemnation of the treatment of farm animals might fall short of entailing that we should switch to a vegetarian diet. Firstly, if the objection is not to all raising and killing of animals for food, but only to particular methods of raising and killing them, it would seem that we can avoid the necessity of vegetarianism by restricting our diet to the flesh of animals not reared or killed by methods involving suffering. Secondly, one might argue that, bad as factory farming is, the consequences of abolishing it are not clearly better than the consequences of continuing it. And thirdly, those who admit that it would be better if factory farming were abolished may deny that there is any utilitarian connection between this conclusion and the obligation to avoid consuming the products of factory farms.

The first of these three attempts to deny the moral necessity for vegetarianism—the argument that it is not wrong to eat animals that have had a pleasant life and then been killed humanely—raises profound questions about the value of life and the legitimacy of regarding a new generation of happy animals as replacements for those that were eaten. I have recently discussed these issues in other places, so I shall only touch upon them now. While I accept that in particular circumstances there may be no direct utilitarian objection to the use of some kinds of animals for food, these are not the circumstances of those of us who must rely on the usual commercial sources of meat.¹⁰ Moreover, even in the absence of direct utilitarian objections to eating animals who have lived happily and died painlessly, there is an indirect objection. In *Animal Liberation* (p. 172) I put it this way:

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 means to our end.

10. See "Killing Humans and Killing Animals," *Inquiry*, vol. 22 (Summer 1979): 145-156; "Animals and the Value of Life," in Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death* (New York: Random House, 1980): 218-259; and *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), chap. 5.

This sentence led Leslie Pickering Francis and Richard Norman to claim that when the going gets rough I fall back on a Kantian kind of objection to the use of animals as means.¹¹ Had they quoted the next two sentences as well, they might have seen that my point is still utilitarian, though it takes a longer perspective:

In time we will come to regard pigs, cattle, and chickens as things for us to use, no matter how strong our compassion may be; and when we find that to continue to obtain supplies of the bodies of these animals at a price we are able to pay it is necessary to change their living conditions a little, we will be unlikely to regard these changes too critically. The factory farm is nothing more than the application of technology to the idea that animals are means to our ends.

This is a “slippery slope” argument: no matter how humane our original intentions, as long as we continue to eat animals there is a danger of our sliding back into the methods of treating animals in use today. I confess that in other contexts—the debate over euthanasia, for instance—I have been critical of slippery slope arguments. It is a matter of judgment in each case whether the risk of sliding is real or imaginary. I may have been insufficiently critical of my own use of the argument, but I have not become a Kantian.

IV

The second way of arguing that utilitarianism does not lead to vegetarianism is the one pressed by Regan. It is, he says, an enormously complicated question whether the undoubted suffering caused animals by the present system is enough to outweigh both the pleasures people get from eating animals and the disruption that abolishing factory farming would cause to the lives of those dependent on raising animals for food. Perhaps it is, Regan says, but I have not even begun to show this.

It is true that the question is complicated and I have not done all the calculations involved. But I have begun. The first step was to show

11. “Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others,” p. 517.

how much suffering modern farming methods inflict on animals. This was the object of the long third chapter of *Animal Liberation*, my account of what Regan calls—and agrees really are—the “gruesome details” of factory farming.

The second step was to show that a vegetarian diet does not involve great sacrifices, not in our health, nor in our capacity to feed the growing world population, nor in the pleasures of the palate. This was the object of the fourth chapter, and of the appendix on cooking. On the matter of the pleasures of taste, Regan takes me to task for describing these pleasures as “trivial.” I still think that the pleasures of taste—which are not the same as the pleasures of eating—are relatively trivial by comparison with the interests of, say, a pig in being able to move freely, mingle with other animals, and generally avoid the boredom and confinement of factory farm life. But what I should emphasize is not the unimportance of the pleasures of taste, so much as the unimportance of the difference in pleasure between eating animal flesh and eating vegetarian food. If animal flesh were uniformly delicious and vegetarian food uniformly awful, the case for vegetarianism would admittedly be weaker. Philip Devine was right to guess that “perhaps the recipes and so on which Singer appends to his book are not merely helps to virtuous and happy living, but essential parts of his argument.”¹²

The third step in the calculations would be to consider the loss of utility to people involved in raising animals likely to result from our all becoming vegetarians. This I have not done, largely because I assumed that any such loss of utility would in the long run be outweighed by the benefits to both animals and humans. I say “animals and humans” because while Regan is right to say that any utilitarian should include this loss of utility in the calculations, if we are to look at the question objectively we should include incidental gains as well as incidental losses. In *Animal Liberation* I made the point—which many others with no special concern for animals have also made—that a reduction in the amount of animal flesh consumed by Westerners would release enormous amounts of grain, soybeans and other high-quality plant foods, now being fed to animals, for hungry and malnourished

12. “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism,” p. 491.

humans who cannot afford to pay the prices paid for these crops by factory farmers. The gain in utility from this alone could far outweigh the losses to animal producers. Next we add in the possible reduction a vegetarian diet would bring in human suffering from heart disease and cancer of the stomach and colon. Finally, there would be environmental benefits from ending factory farming, which is energy intensive and leads to problems in disposing of the huge quantities of animal wastes which it concentrates on one site.¹³

Suppose we leave these benefits aside, and focus only on the benefits to animals and losses to animal producers. It still seems that if the choice is between perpetuating or abolishing factory farming, the principle of utility tells us to abolish factory farming. While this will certainly have costs for many people, the costs will occur once only. There is no reason to believe that working on a factory farm is a particularly enjoyable way of making a living; visiting one strongly suggests the reverse. It is the disruption of a settled life and occupation that causes the loss of utility. Now either factory farming will eventually cease—in which case the costs of the transition are merely postponed—or animals will go on suffering in factory farms forever. Compare the indefinite prolongation of animal suffering with the once-only costs of a transition, and I think that as long as we give the interests of animals equal consideration with similar human interests, the answer is clear.

It might be said that the best solution would be neither the perpetuation of factory farming nor its sudden abolition, but a gradual phasing out which would allow the industry to be wound down in an orderly fashion. But this is likely to happen in any case. I have no illusions about seeing vegetarianism sweep America overnight. If the vegetarian movement succeeds at all, it will succeed gradually enough for factory farming to be phased out over many years. On utilitarian grounds, this is what we want.

V

The utilitarian vegetarian is on strong ground in arguing that factory farming and the other cruelties involved in large-scale commercial

13. For further details on these issues, see James Mason and Peter Singer, *Animal Factories* (New York: Crown, 1980).

animal production should end. The final problem is to establish the link between this goal and the obligation to become a vegetarian. In *Animal Liberation* I tried two different ways of forging this link. One was along the lines of George Bernard Shaw's remark that he will be followed to his grave by a herd of animals of assorted species, all grateful for having been spared from slaughter by his vegetarian diet. In defense of the serious idea behind this light-hearted image, I asserted that because becoming a vegetarian reduces the overall demand for animal flesh, an individual could assume that it lowered the profitability of the animal industry, and thus reduced the number of animals factory farmers would breed. Trenchant criticism of this claim by Michael Martin, Philip Devine, R. G. Frey and Peter Wenz, has convinced me that I misstated this argument. The loss of one consumer from the millions who buy animal flesh makes so small a difference that it is impossible to say that it affects the number of animals reared and killed. As Wenz puts it: "There are thresholds beneath which an alteration in demand has absolutely no effect on price, profit and production."

Fair enough; but this still implies that a large number of consumers rejecting animal flesh must make a difference. Perhaps for every 10,000 vegetarians there is one fewer 20,000 bird chicken unit than there would otherwise be. Perhaps not: this is merely an example and I have no idea what the true figure would be; but there must be some point at which the number of vegetarians makes a difference to the size of the poultry industry. There must be a series of thresholds, hidden by the market system of distribution, which determine how many factory farms will be in existence. In this case one more person becoming a vegetarian will make no difference at all, unless that individual, added to the others who are already vegetarians, reduces demand below the threshold level at which a new factory farm would have started up (or an existing one would have remained in production, if the industry is declining).

Looking at one's own decision to be a vegetarian, it may seem frustrating that one cannot be sure that one has saved even a single animal from a miserable life on a factory farm; but from a utilitarian perspective it really makes no difference whether each vegetarian is personally responsible for saving ten chickens a year from this fate, or

one vegetarian in 10,000 makes the difference that will save 100,000 birds. Utilitarianism judges actions by their likely consequences, and so it ranks the certainty of saving ten chickens equally with the 1 in 10,000 chance of saving 100,000. As long as I have no idea whether or not my own decision to go vegetarian is the decision that takes the demand for chickens below the threshold, the strength of this reason for being a vegetarian is unaffected.¹⁴

The second way I tried to link vegetarianism and the goal of ending the exploitation of animals was by describing becoming a vegetarian as “the most practical and effective step” we can take toward ending the exploitation of animals (*Animal Liberation*, p. 173). This claim too, may have been incautiously worded. (Had I been writing primarily for philosophers, I would have been more careful.) Some people, skilled at publicity and lobbying, may do more to end the exploitation of animals by political campaigning than by ceasing to eat animal flesh. *Merely* becoming a vegetarian, without doing anything else to change our treatment of animals, may have no effect at all. But I do not advocate this passive form of vegetarianism.

I advocate vegetarianism as something which “underpins, makes consistent, and gives meaning to all our other activities on behalf of animals” (*Animal Liberation*, p. 171). I remain convinced that for those concerned to change the situation of animals in our society, vegetarianism is of real practical importance. It provides an irrefutable answer to the oft-repeated claim that we need factory farms to feed our growing population. It allows the animal welfare campaigner to defeat *ad hominem* attacks, for instance: ‘How can you object to killing seals when you eat pigs and calves?’ By eliminating one’s personal involvement in the production of animals for food, it makes it easier to take a detached view of the animal industry, and to avoid compromising the interests of the animals with one’s own interest as a consumer of animals. Calling on the public not to buy the produce of factory farms can be an important part of a campaign against factory farming. It

14. Bart Gruzalski comes to a similar conclusion though by a slightly different route in his unpublished paper, “The Case Against Raising and Killing Animals for Food.” I am grateful to Gruzalski for having given me a copy of this paper and for having discussed the issue with me.

holds out a threatening prospect to farmers—one which is beginning to be noticed in farming magazines—and it enables those who support the campaign against factory farming to make a personal commitment which goes beyond signing petitions and writing letters to their elected representatives. One cannot convincingly ask others to do this if one does not do it oneself. (Unless one eats animal flesh in secret—which hardly seems worth the hypocrisy and risk of discovery involved.)

Finally, becoming a vegetarian is a way of attesting to the depth and sincerity of one's belief in the wrongness of what we are doing to animals. Perhaps in a society of sophisticated philosophers there would be no need to attest to one's sincerity in this way, because sophisticated philosophers would understand that one can sincerely oppose the exploitation of animals in factory farms while continuing to buy and enjoy the product of these very farms. But to most of the members of our society this would mean, as it seemed to Oliver Goldsmith's fictitious Chinese traveler, a "strange contrariety of conduct."