

NOTES ON MYLAN ENGEL, JR.'S *THE IMMORALITY OF EATING MEAT*

The following notes come from an article by Mylan Engel, Jr., "The Immorality of Eating Meat," *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature*, Louis P. Pojman, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 856-889

I wholeheartedly encourage you to read the entire article! [Assuming that you are pretty familiar with animal factory farm conditions, I have left out the gory details of the amounts and kinds of suffering that the different animals undergo in being raised and processed for eating, but these details are summed up very well by Engel in Section 2, from pp. 861-867.]

Engel does not base his argument for vegetarianism either on Singer's utilitarian argument, or Regan's deontological rights-based approach. Why? Because philosophers have replied to these arguments by claiming that utilitarianism is a flawed theory, or that animals do not have rights, so, since the argument for vegetarianism is based on either utilitarianism or on the notion that animals have rights, there is no compelling reason to be a vegetarian. He then puts his thesis as follows:

My aim is to block this spurious reply by providing an argument for the immorality of eating meat which does not rest on any particular ethical approach. Rather, it rests on beliefs which you already hold (857).

Engel claims that you hold the following beliefs:

- (p1) Other things being equal, a world with less pain and suffering is better than a world with more pain and suffering.
- (p2) A world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering.
- (p3) Unnecessary cruelty is wrong and prima facie should not be supported or encouraged.
- (p4) We ought to take steps to make the world a better place.
- (p4') We ought to do what we reasonably can to avoid making the world a worse place.
- (p5) A morally good person will take steps to make this world a better place and even stronger steps to avoid making the world a worse place.
- (p6) Even a minimally decent person would take steps to reduce the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world, *if s/he could do so with very little effort*.
- (p7) I am a morally good person.
- (p8) I am at least a minimally decent person.
- (p9) I am the sort of person who certainly would take steps to help reduce the amount of pain and suffering in the world, *if I could do so with very little effort*.
- (p10) Many nonhuman animals (certainly all vertebrates) are capable of feeling pain.
- (p11) It is morally wrong to cause an animal unnecessary pain or suffering.
- (p12) It is morally wrong and despicable to treat animals inhumanely for *no good reason*.

- (p13) We ought to euthanize untreatably injured, suffering animals to put them out of their misery whenever feasible.
- (p14) Other things being equal, it is worse to kill a conscious sentient animal than it is to kill plant.
- (p15) We have a duty to help preserve the environment for future generations (at least for future human generations).
- (p16) One ought to minimize one's contribution toward environmental degradation, *especially in those ways requiring minimal effort on one's part.* (pp. 888-889)

He adds, "While you do not have to believe all of (p1) – (p16) for my argument to succeed, the more of these propositions you believe, the greater your commitment to the immorality of eating meat" (867-868).

Engel says that "According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, 36.3 million cattle, 1.58 million veal calves, 92.0 million pigs, 3.91 million sheep and lamb, 22.0 million ducks, 290.2 million turkeys, and 7,903.5 million chickens were slaughtered in 1997. In sum, 8.35 billion animals are raised and slaughtered annually (not counting horses, goats, rabbits, emu, other poultry, or fish)" plus "921.4 million animals who suffer lingering deaths from disease, malnutrition, injury, or suffocation." This comes to "over 25 million animals per day (roughly 293 animals per second) are killed as a result of the good animal industry. ... no other human activity results in more pain, suffering, frustration, and death than factory farming and animal agribusiness" (p. 866-867).

Engel then argues that "... you must admit the fact that" (f1) **Virtually all commercial animal agriculture, especially factory farming, causes animals intense pain and suffering and, thus, greatly increases the amount of pain and suffering in the world.** (f1) and (p1) together entail that, other things being equal, the world would be better without animal agriculture and factory farms. It is also a fact that: (f2) **In modern societies the consumption of meat is in no way necessary for human survival, and so, the pain and suffering which results from meat production is entirely unnecessary, as are all the cruel practices inherent in animal agriculture**" (p. 868; my font color changes).

Engel argues against hunting by claiming that: "Every year in the United States alone, hunters kill 175 million animals, and for every animal killed, two are seriously wounded and left to die a slow agonizing death ...; and for every deer killed by crossbow, twenty-one arrows are shot since crossbow hunters rarely hit a vital organ. ...all of the pain and suffering inflicted on them is *unnecessary* since no one in a modern agriculturally advanced society *needs* to eat any kind of meat, wild or domesticated" (p. 869n40).

Engel argues, "animal agriculture is an extremely wasteful, inefficient, environmentally devastating means of food production. ... consider five examples:

1. **[Animal agriculture is not energy efficient.]** It takes an average of 28 kilocalories of fossil fuel to produce 1 kcal of animal protein, compared with an average of 3.3 kcal of fossil energy to produce 1 kcal of grain protein, making animal production on average more than eight times less energy efficient than grain production (p. 870).

2. **Animal production is extremely inefficient in its water usage, compared to vegetable and grain production.** Producing 1 kilogram of animal protein requires around **100 times** more water than producing 1 kg of plant protein. Hence, agricultural water usage, which currently accounts for 87 percent of the world’s freshwater consumption, could be drastically reduced by a shift toward an entirely plant-based agriculture.
3. **Animal agriculture is also extremely nutrient inefficient.** By cycling grain through livestock to produce animal protein, we lose 90 percent of that grain’s protein, 96 percent of its calories, 100 percent of its carbohydrates, and 100 percent of its fiber (p. 871).
4. **Another negative byproduct of the livestock industry is soil erosion.** Much of arable land in the United States is devoted to feed crop production. Eighty percent of the corn and 95 percent of the oats grown in the United States are fed to livestock, and the excessive cultivation of our farmlands needed to produce these crops is responsible for the loss of 7 billion tons of topsoil each year. The United States is losing soil at a rate thirteen times faster than the rate of soil formation (p. 871-872).
5. **Animal agriculture creates enormous amounts of hazardous waste in the form of excrement.** U.S. livestock produce 250,000 pounds of excrement *per second*, resulting in *1 billion tons* of unrecycled waste per year. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office’s Report to the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, animal-waste runoff from feedlots and rangeland is a significant factor in water quality, affecting about 72 percent of impaired rivers and streams, 56 percent of impaired lake acres, and 43 percent of impaired estuary miles. ... agriculture ranked as the number one cause of impaired rivers and streams and lakes. The upshot is this: animal agriculture is far and away the most resource-intensive, inefficient, environmentally harmful, and ecologically unsound means of human food production, and consequently, one of the easiest direct actions one can take to help protect the environment and preserve resources for future generations, requiring minimal effort, is to stop eating meat” (p. 872; my font color changes).

Engel then considers objections:

OBJ1: “Perhaps Meat Consumption is Necessary for Optimal Nutrition”

Engel responds: “If meat consumption were *necessary* for humans to flourish, my argument would be seriously compromised, so let us examine the evidence. First, consider the counterexamples. Since world-class athletic competition is one of the most grueling and physically strenuous activities in which humans can engage, one would not expect there to be any highly successful vegetarian athletes or vegetarian world record holders, *if* meat consumption were necessary for humans to thrive and flourish. However, the list of world-class vegetarian athletes is quite long and includes Dave Scott (six-time winner of Hawaii’s Ironman Triathlon), Sixto Linares (world record holder for the 24-hour triathlon), Edwin Moses (400 meter hurdler undefeated in international competition for eight straight years), Paavo Nurmi (twenty world records and nine Olympic medals), Andreas Cahling (1980 Mr. International title in body building), and Ridgely Abele (U.S. Karate Association World Champion), to name a few, which strongly suggests that eating meat is *not* necessary for humans to flourish. Second, consider the diseases associated with the consumption of meat and animal products – heart

disease, cancer, stroke, osteoporosis, diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, and obesity – as documented in numerous highly regarded studies” (pp. 873-874).

Engel then cites four such studies to support his second claim:

- (1) The Loma Linda study, where, of 24,000 people, lacto-ovo vegetarian men had a 61% lower coronary heart disease mortality rate.
- (2) In the ongoing Framington heart study, Dr. William Castelli, director of the study for 15 years, claims that the most heart-healthy diet is a *pure* vegetarian diet, “the vegetarian societies of the world have the best diet. Within our own country, they outlive the rest of us by at least seven years, and they have only 10 or 15 percent of our heart attack rate ... they also aren’t prey to other degenerative diseases, such as diabetes, strokes, etc., that slow us down and make us chronically ill.
- (3) In the Cornell-Oxford-China Health Project, the data collected (from the diet, lifestyle, and disease patterns of 6500 families from 65 counties in Mainland China and Taiwan) have led its director, Dr. T. Colin Campbell, to conclude that 80-90 percent of all cancers can be controlled or prevented by a low-fat (10-15 percent fat) vegetarian diet. Lastly,
- (4) In the Dean Ornish study, it was demonstrated that *advanced* coronary artery disease could be *reversed* through a combination of stress reduction and an extremely low-fat vegetarian diet (10% fat). (p. 873-875).

He summarizes: “These and countless other studies have led the American Dietetic Association, the leading nutritional organization in the country, to assert: ‘Scientific data suggest positive relationships between a vegetarian diet and reduced risk for several chronic degenerative diseases and conditions, including obesity, coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and some types of cancer. ... *It is the position of The American Dietetic Association (ADA) that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, are nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases*’.” (See www.eatright.org/adap1197.html for the ADA’s whole article) (p. 876) Engel concludes this section as follows: “One cannot reject [that the pain and suffering which inevitably result from meat production are entirely unnecessary] on the grounds that eating meat is necessary for human flourishing, because it isn’t. On the contrary, it is *detrimental* to human health and well-being” (pp. 876-877).

OBJ2: “A Utilitarian Gambit: Perhaps Human Gustatory Pleasure Outweighs Animal Suffering”

Engel replies FIRST, that we don’t really believe that human pleasure always outweighs animal suffering. “You do not believe that the pleasure ... thugs get from burning a cat alive morally justifies their disregarding the cat’s interest in avoiding suffering. You do not believe that the pleasure a sadistic Satanist gets out of slowly torturing a fully conscious dog by skinning and eating it alive (even if he gets immense gustatory pleasure from doing so) outweighs the dog’s interest in avoiding such suffering” (p. 877) “You simply do not believe that trivial human pleasures outweigh the most significant interests of nonhuman animals” (p. 878).

“Second, in assessing whether a carnivore’s pleasure in eating meat outweighs the pain of the animal that became that meat, it is a mistake to compare the pleasure had by eating meat with

the frustration of eating nothing at all. Rather, ... one must compare the pleasure one would get from eating meat with the pleasure one would get from eating something else.” The minimal difference in pleasure between meat and the vegetarian option hardly justifies the “prolonged and excruciating pain of castration, branding, dehorning, tail docking, etc.” (p. 878)

“Third, animals aren’t the only beings who suffer as a result of the meat industry. Billions of *humans* suffer as well, including the 1.3 billion people worldwide who suffer from chronic hunger; the millions of carnivores themselves who are suffering from heart disease, cancer stroke, osteoporosis, and obesity; and these carnivores’ children who are well on their way to a shortened lifetime of debilitating disease as a result of being fed a meat-based diet by their parents.” (p. 878). So even if you only cared about human suffering, “consistency with your other beliefs would still require you to stop eating meat” (p. 879).

OBJ3: “Perhaps Plants Feel Pain”

Engel replies: “*Perhaps*, but *you* don’t believe they do. You walk on grass, mow your lawn, and trim your hedges without any concern that you might be causing plants pain. But you would never walk on your dog or trim your dog’s legs, because you are certain that doing so would cause your dog terrible pain” (p. 879). Also, I would add that Engel could have argued that because of (p14), it is a matter of degree, and since you want to minimize suffering, even if plants do feel pain, it is better to cause pain to plants than to animals, where the suffering is much more obvious.

OBJ4: “The Supreme Dietitian”

Engel asserts: “People often attempt to justify their carnivorous habits by claiming that God intends us to eat meat, citing their preferred religious text as evidence of God’s will. This “justification” is particularly puzzling since all major religions teach compassion for all living creatures. Islam advocates kindness to animals; the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation encourages equal respect for all animals; and the First Precept of Buddhist ethical conduct is not to harm sentient beings. Both Judaism and Christianity accept the Old Testament, which states: ‘And God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food’” (Genesis 1:29). So why think that God intends us to eat meat? Finding writings in these text which contradict the teachings mentioned here won’t resolve the matter, since if these texts’ teachings are self-contradictory, then we are left with no clear guidance as to what God intends us to eat.” (pp. 879-880).

Fortunately, we can bypass this unpromising hermeneutical project altogether. There is a much more compelling refutation of the “God intends us to eat meat” defense. If God intends us to eat meat, then God is either ignorant, irrational, or malevolent. If God doesn’t know that eating meat causes heart attacks, cancer, strokes, etc., then he is ignorant about nutrition. If God knows that eating meat is harmful to our health but intends us to do it anyway, then he is either malevolent and wants bad things to happen to us, or is irrational since, despite wanting us to be healthy, he intends us to eat a diet detrimental to our health. Since, by definition, God is neither ignorant nor irrational nor malevolent, it is incoherent to believe that God intends us to eat meat” (p. 880).

OBJ5: “The ‘Free Range’ Fantasy”

Engel, supposing that he has convinced you that eating meat from factory farming is immoral due to its causing pain, considers the objection:

“You’ve yet to show that my beliefs commit me to the immorality of eating humanely raised animals. What’s wrong with eating ‘free range’ animals which are raised humanely and killed painlessly? How do my beliefs commit me to the immorality of eating them?” (p. 880) My response to such a critic is fourfold: First, in admitting that eating factory farm-raised meat is morally wrong, you have just admitted that it is immoral to eat over 90 percent of the meat you eat. Second, the terms ‘free range’ and ‘free roaming’ are not indicative of humane animal husbandry practices. According to the labeling division of the USDA, ‘a free range bird is one that has access to the outdoors,’ no matter how small the outdoor pen. The term ‘free roaming’ just means birds which have not been raised in cages, even though they are permanently confined in a warehouse. Thus, uncaged broiler chickens with the industry-recommended seven-tenths of a square foot of floor space can legally be sold as ‘free roaming’ birds. Moreover, the painful mutilations [that are done to factory farm birds] are also routinely performed in both ‘free range’ and nonintensive farms. Plus, even if the ‘free range’ animals had it good while they were on the farm, there are no humane livestock transportation companies and no humane slaughterhouses. The only way to be sure that the animal you are eating was raised humanely and killed painlessly is to raise and kill her yourself. Third, even if you had the time, space, and will to raise and kill your own ‘dinner,’ you would still be jeopardizing your own health and the health of your loved ones, as well as wasting resources which could be better spent helping to alleviate human hunger and malnutrition. Even ‘happy cows’ require 12.9 pounds of grain to produce a pound of meat. Fourth and most important, you already believe (p14), that other things being equal, it is worse to kill a conscious sentient creature than it is to kill a plant. An example of Andrew Tardiff’s will illustrate the point. Suppose we could perform a human-benefiting experiment on either a dog or a plant with equally reliable and equally valuable results, but that the experiment will inevitably result in the death of the test subject. Anyone who accepts (p14) will surely admit that we ought to perform the experiment on the plant” (p. 881).

He summarizes his replies: “You already believe that, when other things are equal, it is worse to kill a conscious sentient animal than it is to kill a plant. But in the case of food, other things are not equal. Since a plant-based diet is more nutritious and human health-promoting than a meat-based diet, (p14) commits you to the view that it is worse to kill conscious sentient animals for food than it is to kill plants for food, even if those animals have been raised humanely” (p. 882).

OBJ6: What if I just give up one of these beliefs [(p1) – (p16)]?

Engel says, “After all, as a philosopher [assuming we all love wisdom and want to know the best way in which to live], you are interested in more than mere consistency; you are interested in truth. Consequently, you will not reject just any belief(s) you think most likely to be false. Now, presumably, you already think your belief system is for the most part reasonable, or you would

have already made significant changes in it. So, you will want to reject as few beliefs as possible. Since (p1) – (p16) are rife with implications, rejecting several of these propositions would force you to reject countless other beliefs on pain of incoherence, whereas accepting [the conclusion of becoming a vegetarian] would require minimal belief revision on your part” (883).