EIGHT ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF EATING MEAT AND OBJECTIONS THERETO

Most of the following eight arguments came from a Contemporary Moral Issues class that I taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Fall of 1995. I asked the students to give me their best arguments in favor of eating meat, and these are the results. I have also shown this list to others, and they have been unable either to support the arguments any better or to come up with another, better argument. If anything, they have criticized these arguments for being invalid (i.e., the conclusion does not follow from the premises, even if one assumes the premises to be true) or unsound (i.e., invalid, or at least one premise is not true). I wanted to object to all of the arguments that people presented just in case people might think they are good arguments. I would like to thank the UW students in general, Sylvia Rodee, and Kerry Leibowitz for their input and comments.

1. THE BIBLE ARGUMENT:

"The Bible says we shall have dominion over the animals and I take that to mean that we can eat meat and use animals however we want. Therefore, we can eat meat."

Objection 1: If one wants to take what the Bible says to support one's position, one will have to believe that a wife must submit to her husband, homosexuals are immoral, one must not eat cloven-hoofed animals, rebellious sons must be taken to the center of town and stoned to death, etc. One cannot pick and choose between points in the Bible without being unfair and arbitrary. If there are any points or even one point in the Bible with which one does not agree, one has to be able to justify why that one point should not be accepted but that every other point should. What that justification will amount to is to be some other argument for eating meat that is not in the Bible (see the other arguments below, e.g.). Because people do tend to pick and choose what parts of the Bible they like and dislike, it may show that people have their own ideas of right and wrong regardless of what the Bible says. It also might show that most people think that the Bible is fallible.

Objection 2: What is intended by "Man shall have dominion over the animals" (paraphrased from Genesis 1:26) is subject to interpretation. Maybe what is intended is not, "Do whatever you want to the animals, like torturing, eating, bestiality," etc., but, "Since I made humans with more reason than the rest of the animals on earth, it will be up to you to see that they are well cared for - do not harm (or kill) them unless it is necessary. "; So someone who likes this argument needs to tell me why we should interpret the argument in the former way rather than the latter. (See Objection 4 below.) It would seem that parents would have dominion over their children; but this does not imply that we can torture and kill them in order to eat them, right?

Objection 3: For anyone who does not believe that every word of the Bible is true, it is not convincing. Why are all of the other Holy Books such as the Qur'an, Rig-Veda, Dhammapada, Taoist texts, Book of Mormon, etc., wrong?

Objection 4: First, it would seem that God wants us to eat only vegetables: In Genesis 1:29, God says to Adam and Eve, "I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which [sic] is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat."; It says that man shall have dominion over the animals, but it does not say there that we shall have them for food, as it does of fruits and vegetables. (It is true that the Old Testament does have laws for meat-eating after this Genesis passage, but then we have an inconsistency to address.) Second, there are Biblical passages which actually say that we should care for animals: For example, we should help an ass get up if it falls down (Exodus 23:5), you must rest on the seventh day so that your ox and ass can rest too (Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:14), you must leave a mother bird and her eggs alone - you may take her brood, but you must leave the mother bird...
alone (Deuteronomy 22:6-7) the just man takes care of his beast (Proverbs 12:10), if you have livestock, look after them, if they are dependable, keep them (Sirach 7) Therefore, it is very unclear just what a defender of eating meat can glean from the Bible. Also, in the LDS Doctrine and Covenants, it says, "Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly; And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine" (Sect. 89.12-13). This text suggests that meat be eaten sparingly, but ONLY in winter, cold, or famine. This was written when there were no other options available, and certainly does not seem to apply to warm climates such as Arizona, California, etc. But even in Vermont, non-meat alternatives are available aplenty, so would this text not pretty much ban meat-eating in about 99% of North America?

Objection 5: See also Mylan Engel Jr.'s response.

2. THE TRADITION ARGUMENT:

"I've been brought up eating meat and never questioned it. Our culture accepts eating meat as well. Therefore, I should be able to eat meat."

Objection 1: The fact that one has been raised to eat meat is more of an explanation of why the meat-eating started, but cannot, by itself, justify the claim that eating meat is ethically good. What if one were raised to hit people on the heads with hammers anytime the desire arose? To use more real examples: "My culture states that people of color are inferior." And, "My culture states that women should be submissive and stay at home." These statements reflect the predominant opinion in the United States in the first instance as recently as two generations ago, and in the second instance, as recent as one generation ago. Are we to accept them as "proper" in perpetuity?

Objection 2: This argument commits the fallacy of argumentum ad antiquitatem, or "appeal to tradition". That is, one cannot argue that some action is correct merely because that is the way we have always done it. (For this point, I credit and thank Kelly Turk.)

Objection 3: Against the cultural reason, everything a culture accepts may not be ethically good, e.g., slavery, boiling in oil, drawing and quartering, etc. It may even be argued that one who has never questioned their tradition (like eating meat) is not immoral, or is amoral (though I have doubts about whether this kind of argument would work). However, once one questions whether or not one should eat meat (as anyone who has ever asked me why I do not eat meat has done), and sees that they have no sound and valid reason to continue their current behavior, this seems immoral.

Objection 4: This argument allows us to eat humans: All that is required is that one is raised in a cannibalistic tradition.

3. THE TASTE ARGUMENT:

"I love the way meat tastes. I will not deprive myself of this pleasant sensation. Therefore, I should be able to eat meat."

Objection 1: This argument allows us to eat humans: That is, it leaves open the possibility that a person can say, "I love the way human meat tastes. There's nothing that tastes quite like a human!" This principle (something's tasting good) is not something that one would want to be true in general and is something that does not justify the current treatment of animals - this principle could be an argument to eat anything and treat the being/thing (i.e., eatee) as badly as you like.
Objection 2: Think about what it would sound like to argue as follows: "I like the way it sounds, when someone asks you why you're hitting infants on the head with a hammer. There's nothing quite like that sound, and I really like it (and maybe add tradition in here), so I don't see why I should give it up." Or, "I just like the way it smells when I put human flesh to flames!" Or, "I just like to see human flesh burning!" One who makes this argument leaves open the possibility that any sensation that brings pleasure (whether or not that sensation has been cultivated from tradition) is something that it's OK to enjoy, no matter what it takes, costs, entails to enjoy it! "My life is more pleasant with slaves."

Objection 3: Taste probably is linked with or caused by tradition: Imagine never having eaten meat before, at 21, and having a meat eater say to you, "Go ahead, have some dead roasted cow on a bun - it's great!" Therefore, this argument might need to justify or usually goes hand in hand with the Tradition argument. (See also my objections to the Tradition argument.)

Objection 4: If this argument can justify current practices of raising and killing non-human animals for food, then it justifies raising humans in the same way.

4. THE TEETH ARGUMENT:

"Our teeth are made for eating meat. All animals that have teeth like ours eat meat. So we should be able to eat meat."

Objection 1: Just because our anatomy is able to do something does not imply that we should do that thing, or that it is morally acceptable to do that thing. Biologically, I am able to spit. But it is not usually considered morally acceptable to spit in other peoples' faces, other things being equal (it especially does not follow just from the fact that I am able to spit). Hitting or torturing people is another example.

Objection 2: Our teeth are not really made to eat meat. We cannot, for example, walk up to a cow and start gnawing. Contrast plants. Even ignore the hide - we cannot eat the meat without cooking and making it as soft as plants too. Moreover, we would acquire lots of diseases if we were to eat uncooked meats. [There is a theory that ancient humans used to have a very large appendix in order to process raw meat, but it has evolved to be so small as to be useless, and therefore we are not as equipped to eat raw meat.]

Objection 3: Though we may have similar teeth as some carnivores, there remains one major difference between non-human animals and us (See the Darwinian/Machiavellian Argument and Objections below).

Objection 4: This argument allows us to eat humans. If it follows from the biological fact that my teeth can eat meat, then this argument does not give us any moral reason to not eat humans.

Objection 5: If this argument can justify current practices of raising and killing non-human animals for food, then it justifies raising humans in the same way.

5. THE NUTRITION ARGUMENT:

1 See this website, this one, and this one, I would like to thank Jim Eyler for making me aware of this point.
"We need the protein that is provided in meat. Therefore, we should be able to eat meat."

**Objection 1:** This argument allows us to eat humans. What if I want to get my protein from human flesh? What if alien beings need their protein - should we need to willingly submit to being their protein source? This argument does not give us any moral reason to not eat humans. Again, if this argument can justify current practices of raising and killing non-human animals for food, then it justifies raising humans in the same way.

**Objection 2:** Protein is necessary, but getting protein from cattle, pigs, chickens and fish (let alone dairy products and eggs) is not necessary. Why kill these animals if it is not necessary? The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine recently called for a New Four Food Groups (whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and legumes), and states, "These four food groups provide the good nutrition you need. There is no need for animal-derived products in the diet, and you're better off without them. Be sure to include a reliable source of vitamin B12, such as any common multiple vitamin or fortified foods" (my emphasis). Moreover, watch the documentary movie, "Forks Over Knives": Physicians have actually run trials and treated people for diabetes, high blood pressure, and did cancer studies with animals, and found out that a diet of meat and dairy is unhealthy, and the best diet is whole food plant-based, fruits, and vegetables. Their diet has actually reversed cancers (into remission or no trace of it), significantly reduced cholesterol, sugars, high blood pressure, and patients have stopped taking any medications for diabetes (insulin), high blood pressure, and so on after being on the diet. One must rebut these experts in order to maintain this argument.

**Objection 3:** It is not difficult (at the very least, not in North America and Europe) to obtain protein from other sources (than those mentioned in Objection 2 above). It may be inconvenient for some, but it is not difficult.

6. THE DARWINIAN/MACHIAVELLIAN ARGUMENT:

"The process of evolution has placed humans, the stronger, in a position to be able to use the weaker (non-human animals) for our eating and other pleasures. Other animals besides us eat meat—are they immoral? E.g., if the lion eats the zebra, that is not morally wrong. So its a natural instinct we have to eat meat. Therefore, we should be able to eat meat."

**Objection 1:** If the stronger are always able to use the weaker however they please simply because they are more powerful, then we are in trouble (in my opinion). This argument justifies child abuse, killing and/or putting infants, the senile, comatose, etc. in nasty conditions, etc., and suggests no principle that we can use to limit their pain and/or death(s). This is an "anything goes" principle, which definitely should be questioned. How, for example, can we limit this "do anything" principle to only include non-humans?

**Objection 2:** As for the "other animals eat meat" point: Other animals are acting solely because of natural instincts, and in the wild, must kill what they're killing in order to stay alive. They are unable to reflect on what they are doing. We are not in a situation where (1) we can only act from natural instincts (admittedly we do have some instincts), and (2) it is necessary to eat non-human animals. We should question this "animal instinct" in ourselves. Non-human animals, in my opinion, cannot question their actions as humans can. This feature makes us different.

**Objection 3:** If beings from another planet are stronger than us or have evolved beyond us in some way, then, according to this argument, we should have no moral problem with their wanting to eat us, how they would treat us, whether they would raise us to kill and eat us, etc. This, at least to me, is an uncomfortable notion.
7. THE A-MORAL BEINGS ARGUMENT:

Non-human animals are a-moral beings. "Non-human animals cannot question their actions like humans can, and this is what makes humans special. If beings cannot question how they live, then they have no intrinsic worth or rights. Therefore, we should be able to eat meat."

Objection 1: Non-human animals are not the only beings who cannot question how they live/act: fetuses, infants, comatose, senile, or severely mentally disabled persons cannot as well. How can we still, on this argument, reasonably claim that these beings have intrinsic worth or rights? Note that if one responds, "because they have value to other humans," one can reply with questions such as, "What about human beings that no one cares about, or humans that want to die because their life is not or cannot be meaningful anymore (euthanasia)?"

Objection 2: If other humans do care about how animals are treated, what then? For example, what about pets that people care about, and what about vegetarian humans who are concerned about non-human animals - doesn't this concern give these animals moral worth (though not necessarily rights) on this response?

Objection 3: It is ironic that one would argue that humans are moral beings and can question what they do, and argue from there that we have a good reason to treat non-human animals poorly and kill them because they lack this power. From objections to the Darwinian/Machiavellian Argument, I believe that this power is exactly what makes us unique and is what makes us have a greater, and not a lesser, responsibility to other beings.

Objection 4: Non-human animals are moral beings, from the standpoint that they can suffer. One does not even have to argue that non-human animals (or even human animals) have any rights at all (contrary to those such as Rush Limbaugh who apparently thinks that every vegetarian argument is based on the notion that non-human animals have rights) - one just needs the facts that we cause them to suffer in the process, and that this suffering is not necessary.

8. THE INTELLIGENCE/RATIONALITY ARGUMENT:

"Humans are more intelligent and more rational than non-humans. These characteristics give us the right or opportunity to be able to use non-humans for food. Therefore, we should be able to eat meat."

Objection 1: There are unintelligent, irrational humans - how can we exclude these beings from poor treatment/death without being arbitrary?

Objection 2: If we are more intelligent and rational than non-human animals, then (1) we have more of a burden to behave rightly (with The A-moral Argument (7), we're "moral" beings), and (2) having the capacity for rationality comes to having good reasons to do something, not having (m)any reasons against doing something, and acting on those things for which there are good reasons to do or not to do. We are more bound by these characteristics to act rightly than non-humans are. Unfortunately (from the meat-eater's perspective), we're burdened with rationality and intelligence, whereas lions are not, and can, to my knowledge, eat without questioning.
AFTERWORD (BONUS STUFF): MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS FOR SOMEONE WHO ARGUES FOR VEGETARIANISM:

1. **What about population control of animals used for meat, after vegetarianism?** If we didn't eat a lot of meat, we'd have way too many cows and pigs, so do not we need to control the population? **REPLY:** Yes, but we're able to sterilize and control the population. We made the population, so there's no need to make more pigs if we're not going to eat them; or, put it this way: if we do not eat them, they will not be produced for us.

2. **Argument for deer hunting: Isn't it humane to control overpopulation and/or starving of the deer?** Suppose that it's established that killing an animal for food was immoral. Would it not be equally immoral to stand by and allow animals to overpopulate and starve? This is an argument that is used to justify deer hunting. **REPLY:** There are other questions that have to be asked and answered here:

   1) Who put these animals into this condition?

   2) What should be done about the overpopulation? And

   3) Does this defeat the arguments that we shouldn't eat meat, in general?

   **Answer to (1):** There are lots of deer because we killed their predators. To now say, "Other animals are not killing them fast enough and they're overpopulated, so we should be able to kill them" seems ironic, if not strange (especially given that there are other options). Also, because of the way in which we farm and raise steer to eat, we need many more fields than we would if we were vegetarians. What's the connection? Apparently deer like to mate and breed in areas next to fields - the beds are nicer. If we converted to vegetarianism, there would be more woods, and fewer boundaries between the fields for the deer to multiply, so we'd have fewer deer anyway. This leads to the:

   **Answer to (2):** Obviously, hunting does not always lead to less suffering of the deer. Missed shots or arrows partially in them cause suffering and perhaps slow death. If our main concern is suffering (which I HIGHLY doubt), we should make it a law to shoot them with tranquilizing guns first, and then blow them away on the spot! But wait, there are other options: (a) We could look into other farming techniques and change the amount and kind of field edges there are (again, this would happen if more people were vegetarians), which would naturally lead to fewer dear; (b) We could look into introducing more predators into nature that, through natural instincts, would start to take care of the problem on their own by thinning out the weaker deer; (c) We could sterilize some deer; (d) We could round up the deer and keep them in large fenced in areas where we could control their population that way. These are options I've thought of on my own in about an hour. Imagine if we talk to people who deal with and care about deer for a living? Should we appeal to tradition in order to defend hunting? I'd have the same kinds of replies you see above to Argument 2. Don't forget that in all this "care" for the poor starving deer by hunting them (tee hee), humans die in hunting as well.

   **Answer to (3):** The arguments not to raise animals for meat do not seem to be affected at all by the hunting argument. Supply will meet demand in the steer/pigs/chickens, etc. case, and the demand has been questioned . . .

3. **What about fish, clams, lobster, etc.:** Is it immoral to eat these animals as well? **REPLY:** This is a question of degree, just as if someone were to say, "If it's moral to give one dollar to a charity, then why not two; if two, why not three, etc. until you argue that you must give everything to charity. To argue that you owe nothing to world hunger because you cannot decide between one dollar and everything is certainly ridiculous! It's up to us to decide whether or not to forgo seafood and draw the line at animals and plants.
One other thing to consider: I am aware of studies that have been done with lobsters where it seems pretty obvious that they're not excited about being put into boiling water.

4. **What's the difference between killing plants and killing animals?** **REPLY:** It is much more obvious that animals suffer more than plants, so on the "matter of degree" scale, plants lose. One can pretty easily argue that it's a matter of reducing the most suffering, even if plants do suffer.

5. **What's a good argument in favor of vegetarianism?** Reply: I have read arguments that are based on (1) claims that animals have rights (Tom Regan) and (2) utilitarianism, weighing the suffering and pain caused to the animals versus the amount of pleasure created for humans, which concludes that the amount of nonhuman animal suffering exceeds the pleasure of humans (Singer). I think the argument for animal rights is weak, because I'm not convinced that even people have rights if we do in fact have rights, which rights do we have and how do we know that we have those rights, how far do those rights extend, do nonhuman animals have rights, do ecosystems have rights, and how do we know these things, etc.? Singer's argument is much better, but even better than that is Mylan Engel Jr.'s argument, which I have notes on and which you can read by clicking here.

6. **What about all the animals that are killed in order to grow and produce plants?** Stephen Davis, on this website, makes the following objection. What Regan, an animal rights advocate who argues for veganism, does not address is the number of animals (e.g., rabbits, mice, pheasants, snakes) that are inadvertently killed during crop production and harvest. Davis claims, "Millions of animals die every year to provide products used in vegan diets." So the vegan position is inconsistent.

**REPLY1:** Davis is arguing against Regan's view of animals, that they have rights, and I'm not committed to arguing that animals or anyone has a right to anything; so, in short, it may be a good argument against someone who holds Regan's view that all animals have rights. However, since I don't have this position, it isn't strictly necessary that I address this objection. Nonetheless, see REPLY2 where I will do so anyway.

**REPLY2:** First, my argument related to animals is that we should not unnecessarily cause suffering or killing to animals (or plants, for that matter). So, the fact that rabbits, mice, etc. die during the growing and reaping of grains CAN be argued to be necessary, since we must at this point either eat animals and/or plants, and as far as we know we're causing much less suffering of plants by eating them than we do by slaughtering cows, pigs, etc., we contribute much less to climate change on a plant-based diet, and it is healthier to eat a plant-based diet. Second, I'd argue that Davis' argument may be a good argument for farmers needing to be very careful when they operate. For example, maybe they should put mice, rabbit, etc. repellent chemicals around the field edges, etc. Third and lastly, this could also imply that if we can ever do without plants and can eat totally synthetic food that will harm neither plants or animals, then we are morally required to eat the synthetic food.

**One last brief note on how this issue relates to animal experimentation:** If it is possible for the anti-animal rights, anti-vegetarian contingent to argue that there is some important dissimilarity between nonhuman animals and humans (e.g., they can't feel pain or pleasure and we can, or their biological systems are radically different from ours), then we should not be experimenting on them, since the idea of experimentation is to find out how drugs/treatments work on nonhuman animals' suffering (and their bodily systems) in order to decrease the suffering of humans with similar disorders. Moreover, there are problems with translating animal research to humans (here, here, and here), because of the significant differences between them.

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