



Research Article

THE MORAL BASIS OF VEGETARIANISM

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled ‘The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism’ explores vegetarianism as a philosophy and not as a dietary preference determined by consideration of health or lifestyle. In this regard, vegetarian outlook requires clarity of terms and full examination of a broad range of philosophical issues associated with it. The paper begins with clarifying the meaning of the term ‘vegetarian’ or a ‘vegetarian diet’ which is ambiguous in terms of food inclusions and exclusions. Some loose and general descriptions of the term ‘vegetarian’ make it a matter of personal taste and preference. But through the arguments of Carol J. Adams and R.G. Frey, vegetarianism can be presented as the conscious and deliberate boycott of meat under all circumstances. However, when the diet of non-vegetarians undergoes a change to the extent that they refuse to consume meat as well as animal derivatives the case in question need not always be a moral one. In this sense moral vegetarianism has been contrasted with non-moral vegetarianism. It will be argued that the boycott of meat on moral grounds is not necessarily trying to rid us of our liking for meat, but instead reinforces the claim that eating meat is ethically wrong. The paper concludes by discussing that our consumption practices are acts for which we are morally accountable. So it is important to think consciously about consumption practices in order to make way for vegetarianism as a sustainable way of life.

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INTRODUCTION

Meaning of Vegetarianism

The term ‘vegetarianism’ is said to represent ‘dietary preference, belief, or mind-set dictated by considerations of health or lifestyle’. This paper intends to explore the meaning of the term ‘vegetarianism’ and ‘moral vegetarianism’ as more than a dietary choice and also aims to discuss whether vegetarianism can be made morally obligatory.

This section begins with what constitutes a vegetarian diet. In this section I shall indicate that the term ‘vegetarian’ is ambiguous in terms of food inclusions and exclusions. The various foundations of vegetarianism or bases of vegetarian commitment can only be understood by distinguishing between the types of vegetarianism that exist today.

Technically speaking ‘a vegetarian is a person who eats no flesh, or more popularly any entity that has a face’. Here the spirit of the term ‘vegetarian’ is not the practice of consuming vegetables; but avoiding the consumption of the flesh of sentient beings and more strictly refraining from using animal derivatives like eggs, milk and dairy products. However, the

matter is more complicated. There is a growing trend towards broadening the definition of vegetarianism. That is to say the types or categories of vegetarianism that exist today cover a varied set of dietary practices; to the extent that those who include small amounts of fish and/or chicken in their diet are also categorized as a vegetarian.

It can be noted that defining vegetarianism is not an easy task as it covers a varied set of dietary practices-- on the one hand those who lean towards vegetarianism actually consume the flesh of animals occasionally; and on the other hand the fruitarians, raw foodists, and vegans contend that they are the ‘true and fully consistent vegetarians in terms of their dietary consumption’. Further sub-categories such as lacto-vegetarians, ovo-vegetarians, and lacto-ovo vegetarians who eat no flesh, but confine themselves to animal derivatives are also slightly lenient forms of vegetarianism. These categorizations indicate that being a vegetarian for many individuals refers to ‘the consistent, but not constant rejection of food items derived from animals’ including flesh. So, vegetarianism is often complex in terms of food inclusions and exclusions.

Another challenge related to the definition of vegetarian is that there are some ‘self-confessed’ vegetarians and vegans who define their meat eating experience as a ‘momentary lapse’ in their otherwise flawless identity as a vegetarian. Also another interesting factor is that some people take it for

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granted that fish at least was a part of the 'vegetarian repertoire'. For these people only red meat, if avoided, accounts for a vegetarian meal. Notably for such people, meat is considered to be the most significant and highly prized food item. It is the core ingredient around which meals are arranged. Time and again, in different contexts, periods of history, cultures and social groups, meat is supreme.

Julia Twigg in this context argued that there is a form of 'hierarchy of foods' that exists. At the top of the hierarchy, we find 'red meat' because 'the status and meaning of meat is quintessentially found in red meat'; lower in status are the 'bloodless meats' like chicken and fish; below these are the animal products like cheese and eggs; further lower than it are the vegetables considered in 'the dominant scheme as insufficient for the formation of a meal and merely ancillary'. So for such people, a shift toward vegetarianism means refraining primarily from red meat.

Evidently, from the above given analysis, it can be said that the meaning of the term 'vegetarian' lacks a definitive characteristic as it is used with a great deal of variation. On the one hand, fruitarians, raw foodists, and vegans are classified as 'vegetarians' and on the other hand, those who consume the flesh of sentient beings like fish and chicken are also considered to be 'vegetarians'. Certainly, being a vegetarian requires that an individual chooses to abstain from flesh, including red meat or else the term becomes self-contradictory. The widening of the meaning of the term 'vegetarian' results in the lack of precision and accuracy in its meaning. This method of generalizing the word 'vegetarian' in a way, that it means an objection to only red meat has not gone well with some critics. Carol J. Adams particularly opposes loose descriptions of the vegetarian dietary practices in her celebrated work titled: *Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-vegetarian Critical Theory*, and says:

What is literally transpiring in the widening of the meaning of vegetarianism is the weakening of the concept of vegetarianism by including within it some living creatures that were killed to become food. Ethical vegetarianism complains their radical protest is being eviscerated. People who eat fishmeat and chickenmeat are not vegetarians; they are omnivores who do not eat red meat. Allowing those who are not vegetarians to call themselves vegetarians dismembers the word from its meaning and its history.

According to Adams, the constant battle for broadening the meaning of the term has completely corrupted the word itself. The inclusion of chicken and/or fish meat in what constitutes a vegetarian diet has completely diluted the essence of the term. The certain set of 'restrictions' that were associated with the word have been altered according to the convenience of the meat eaters who claim themselves to be vegetarians.

Another interpretation of the term 'vegetarianism' is explored by R. G. Frey in his work titled: *In Rights, Killing and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*. He states that:

Vegetarianism consists in boycotting or abstaining from meat and represents a conscious choice or deliberate policy with respect to one's diet, which is something quite different from say, increasingly forgoing meat because it is too costly.

In speaking of a 'conscious choice' or 'deliberate policy', Frey does not necessarily mean that becoming a vegetarian cannot be a gradual process, but once one has settled upon vegetarianism one would consciously and deliberately boycott meat under all circumstances. He is also in agreement with Carol J. Adams that vegans are stricter and fully consistent form of vegetarianism. In his analysis of the term, there is hardly any scope for 'momentary lapses'. So, once decided, vegetarianism as a practice should be faithfully pursued.

To sum up this section, about the meaning of the term 'vegetarian', it can be said that 'individuals negotiate their dietary preferences inside the larger representational structure of vegetarianism'. Knowing what compromises a vegetarian diet is not a simple task. Many individuals seemingly negotiate the meaning of the term in ways that make the particular character of being a vegetarian difficult to understand. But it is important for a vegetarian to at least abstain from meat (even chicken and fish), under all circumstances and also not defend their occasional meat eating experiences as a matter of momentary lapse. This is because any kind of meat comes from muscles which in turn are a part of a previously alive living being. Whether it is chicken meat or fish meat, both involve the act of killing. However, the question of what makes killing wrong is complex as well. It has been said that killing is perhaps one of the most serious harm that can be caused to an animal by a moral agent. This is because it defeats an animal's 'welfare interests' in life, health and bodily integrity which are likely the only kind of interests that animals have. So the act of killing adversely affects the interests of animals. But philosophers maintain that the above principle of 'not to kill' can only be applied to human beings and not to non-human animals because animals do not suffer.

The classification of chicken meat and fish meat as a form of vegetarianism should not be accepted, as it cannot be denied that these creatures too represent the death of the previously alive sentient being. The three key features that create the 'hierarchy of meat', which considers only 'red meat' to be quintessentially meat is based on: the origin of the species, the appearance of blood and the redness of meat. The 'hierarchy of meat' is significant to understand how soon a semi-vegetarian or 'reduced meat eater' strikes that meat off his/her list. The meat eaters can progress towards vegetarianism gradually by first abstaining from beef, then lamb, pork, poultry and finally fish to call themselves 'vegetarians'. But once attained, they ought not eat any kind of meat occasionally and call themselves vegetarians. So, it can be said that the real meaning of the term 'vegetarian' ought not to be altered by including in it not only semi-vegetarians but also occasional meat eating as a matter of momentary lapses.

My aim is to provide a moral basis of vegetarianism alone, even if pursued with leniency (that is involving animal derivatives, but not chicken and fish) by giving animals moral status. So the defining characteristic of the term vegetarian should be the conscious and deliberate choice not to eat animals or in other words the removal of a food involving the act of killing from one's diet. One faces an ethical dilemma when we acknowledge that life on the planet in the form of non-human animals has value irrespective of its value to us. This brings us to the next obvious question in this regard: whether a vegetarian diet should be regarded as only a matter of personal taste or preference?

The Difference between Moral and Non-Moral Vegetarianism

This section attempts to draw out the reasons why people remove meat from their diet? According to R.G. Frey there are numerous reasons why an individual abstains from eating meat, but this is fundamentally nothing to do with the view that 'eating meat is wrong'. In order to understand Frey's claim, it is important to differentiate between moral and non-moral forms of adopting vegetarianism. It may be useful for the purpose of contrast to first examine them individually. Let us first begin with evaluating vegetarianism as a non-moral position. A patient being treated for ulcers avoids meat as a part of his treatment; someone who happens to live in an area where little meat is available is compelled by scarcity to forgo it; young children of vegetarians too who do not eat meat are not moral vegetarians because they have not 'chosen or decided anything with respect to their diet, as they eat what they are fed'; also some may not consume meat because it is too expensive.

Further, our experiential states, emotions and rational thought processes often contribute towards adopting vegetarianism as a way of life. This can be understood with the help of commonly known examples like the sense of revulsion one experiences upon visiting or learning about events that take place in slaughterhouses, or upon seeing food animals kept under abominable conditions.

Another interesting phenomenon related to this issue has been discussed by Paul R. Amato and Sonia A. Partridge, who explain this as follows: 'some people have disturbing images of living animals, perhaps even of pets, while eating meat; others simply make personally meaningful connections, while eating meat, seeing meat being prepared, or viewing animal parts on display for sale'. They call this 'meat eating insights' which is usually generated by particular events.

The above, discussed non-moral grounds for vegetarianism do not seem to bring about a 'wholesale change in our diet'. The 'meat insight experiences', emotions and experiential states obviously try to explain why certain people have become vegetarians and therefore, contribute towards the genesis and construction of arguments for vegetarianism; but they certainly lack universal appeal.

In the context of moral vegetarianism, there is a range of ethical values that leads one to eliminate animal flesh and even animal derivatives from one's diet. It is simply a position which regards the eating of animal flesh to be unacceptable because it violates one or more general ethical principles.

In this regard, I wish to briefly discuss the following six principles on the basis of which moral vegetarianism can be understood:

1. The 'principle of unjustified suffering' states that 'it is wrong to cause suffering to an animal without sufficient reason'. According to this principle the reasons for eating animals are not sufficiently strong to justify the suffering inflicted on animals and hence, killing animals for food is wrong.
2. The second view is related to the 'principle of equality'. This view holds that the interests of all sentient beings ought to be treated equally and that

killing animals for food is incompatible with giving equal treatment. The moral significance of this view is that it does not give higher status to human beings compared to animals. So causing suffering to an animal is justified only if it would also be justified to cause equivalent suffering to a (severely mentally retarded) human.

3. The third argument from rights attempts to establish that animals have rights and that using them for food violates those rights. A rights view holds that there is some characteristic of animals that is important enough to establish that they are the kinds of beings that can have rights.
4. The fourth argument couched in terms of human welfare can be briefly understood in the following manner. It is argued that beef cattle and hogs are 'protein factories in reserve'. In order to produce 'one pound of beef, cattle eat approximately sixteen pounds of grain'; and similarly in order to produce 'six pounds of pork or ham, hogs eat approximately six pounds of grain'. It is estimated that the amount of grain fed to cattle and hogs is 'enough to feed every human being with more than a cup of cooked grain every day for a year'. So, meat should not be consumed in order to utilize the grains for the hungry and starving people of the world.
5. The fifth argument from environmental harm condemns the eating of meat because the commercial meat industry greatly contributes to environmental damage which is bad. It is based on the assumption that ecosystems have inherent value independent of human valuing.
6. The last argument talks about elevating the status of animals by eliminating meat from our diet by linking the animals' oppression and women's oppression. This form of vegetarianism 'makes covert associations overt by explaining how our patriarchal culture authorizes the eating of animals and this is to identify the cross-mapping between feminism and vegetarianism'.

So broadly speaking, on the basis of above analysis, the central moral ground upon which individuals abstain from meat is on the one hand, human welfare and on the other hand, animal welfare. The former moral ground for vegetarianism enhances general human welfare, for instance, the feeding of the starving poor; and the latter improves animal welfare by either providing rights or moral status or not inflicting pain and suffering to non-human animals as done in the factory farms.

Now, with this background, I attempt to draw a distinction between moral and non-moral vegetarianism:

1. Non-moral vegetarianism is simply a matter of individual preference. There are individuals who are reasonably intelligent, caring, and not insensitive or thoughtless, but who still do not more frequently and readily become vegetarians as a response to 'meat insight experiences'. This is because none of the examples discussed above as forms of non-moral vegetarianism independently are compelling enough to make vegetarianism as a morally obligatory choice. The moral vegetarianism on the other hand can not only be a matter of individual preference alone, but also involves social and moral components.

2. Moral vegetarianism is probably the best means of persuading and convincing people to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle. That is to say that a moral case can change our diet with more certainty as compared to the non-moral case because of the 'conviction that eating meat is wrong'.
3. Moral vegetarianism enables an individual to think consciously about consumption practices and thus makes vegetarianism a sustainable way of life. Non-moral vegetarianism may or may not sustain vegetarianism as a way of life and hence may have a temporary influence in the life of the individual.
4. Moral vegetarianism transforms the way one sees our relationship as well as responsibilities towards animals as well as the environment, by providing it with a moral status; unlike the non-moral vegetarianism which is strictly based on individual emotions, experiences and preferences.

This section has attempted to address the question whether vegetarian diet should be regarded as a matter of personal choice alone. It has been examined here, why individuals reject meat both morally and non-morally.

It has been argued that it is difficult to understand the real meaning of the term vegetarian. The different types of vegetarianism discussed above leads to the conclusion that the meaning of the term 'vegetarian' lacks a definitive characteristic. However, philosophers like Adams and Frey argue against these variations of the term 'vegetarian'. The matter becomes even more complicated when we try to understand the meaning of 'moral vegetarianism'. A comprehensive way of understanding the meaning of moral vegetarianism is by drawing out the difference between moral and non-moral vegetarianism. Thus, it can be concluded that moral vegetarianism excludes any kind of meat from the diet because consuming meat is morally wrong.

Notes

Michael Allen Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), xix.

Jen Wrye, 'Vegetarianism and Dietary Choice', in *Food and Philosophy*, Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe, eds., (U.K.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 48.

Paul R. Amato and Sonia A. Partridge in their work *The New Vegetarians* present an interesting way of sorting through the types of vegetarians that exist today. *The New Vegetarians: Promoting Health and Protecting Life*, (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1989). As cited in Michael Allen Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 55.

Ibid. 56

Jen Wrye, 'Vegetarianism and Dietary Choice', in *Food and Philosophy*, 50.

These lapses can occur due to several factors: for some people it was the desire not to appear impolite and cause embarrassment to the host when given meat at a social occasion; sometimes the smell of the meat being cooked evoked a desire to experience its taste; for few the lapses happened because of something they fancied. Anna Willets pointed out these factors in her paper title based on a research conducted in South-East London. In 'Meat eating and

Vegetarianism in South-East London', in *Food, Health and Identity*, ed., Pat Caplan, (Oxon: Routledge, 1997), 111-17.

As recorded by Anna Willets, for one woman, 'a totally vegetarian meal included tuna fish while another said that she was planning to cook fish pie at Christmas rather than turkey as the entire family was vegetarian'. In 'Meat eating and Vegetarianism in South-East London', in *Food, Health and Identity*, ed., Pat Caplan, (Oxon: Routledge, 1997), 116.

Ibid. 117

To the extent that 'higher the income bracket, the greater the portion of animal products in the diet within most nations today'. As discussed by anthropologist, Nick Fiddes, 'Food=Meat' in *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 13

Julia Twigg, 'Vegetarianism and the Meaning of Meat', in *The Sociology of Food and Eating: Essays on Sociological Significance of Food*, (Hamshire: Grover, 1983).

Ibid.

Ibid.

Jen Wrye, 'Vegetarianism and Dietary Choice', in *Food and Philosophy*, 50. 45.

Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-vegetarian Critical Theory*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 10th edn, 2000), 90.

R.G.Frey, *In Rights Killing and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, (England: Basil Blackwell Publishers limited, 1983), 6.

According to Frey, several people avoid consuming meat in their houses, but when invited into other's home would do so, rather than cause their host social embarrassment are not vegetarians at all; Frey condemns this as a 'form of hypocrisy'. He further adds: 'condemnation can appear somewhat harsh on such wayward vegetarians, who might instead be seen as in a situation of conflicting values, which they resolve in favor of not causing embarrassment'. But as rightly pointed out by him, this clash between different values that is, on one hand not offending the sentiments of the host, and on the other hand not distressing one's own self by disrupting the status of being a vegetarian can be resolved differently. So, once decided, vegetarianism as a practice should be faithfully pursued. R.G. Frey, Ibid. 7

Jen Wrye, 'Vegetarianism and Dietary Choice', in *Food and Philosophy*, 45.

Jordan Curnutt, 'A New Argument for Vegetarianism', in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 157, viewed 25 July 2013, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9833.1997.tb00393.x/pdf>.

I am using 'hierarchy of meat' and 'hierarchy of food' as synonyms.

Michael Dikeman, Carrick Devines, *Encyclopedia of Meat Science*, (London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2004)

R.G.Frey, *In Rights Killing and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, 7.

Another comprehensive account of non-moral vegetarianism has been provided by R.G. Frey. Ibid. 6-7.

Ibid.

Michael Allen Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism*, 56-60.

Ibid. 56

Paul R. Amato and Sonia A. Patridge, as cited in Michael Allen Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism*, 56.

Ibid., p. 10.

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (London: Pimlico, 1998).

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd edn. (London: Pimlico, 1998), 15-20.

Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights, The Case for Animal Rights*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, rpt, 2004).

Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet*, 12th edn., (USA: The Random House Publishing Group, 1991).

Peter S. Wenz, 'An Ecological Argument for Vegetarianism', in *Ethical Vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer*, eds., Kerry S. Walters and Lisa Portmess, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 189-201.

Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-vegetarian Critical Theory*, 10th ed. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2010), *preface*.

Here social component can be the relationship between our individual preferences and social responsibility where individuals reject food items according to a specified set of criteria like the source of food. The moral component for example can be the moral status of animals, the fact that inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering to them for food is ethically wrong.

R.G.Frey, *In Rights Killing and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, 15.

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