

Tracie Harrison

Intro to Environmental Ethics Course: PHIL 2300

Professor Dr. Jane Drexler

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Do I HAVE TO go vegetarian (morally)?

Western attitudes to animals welfare has been one of dominate versus stewardship. In the past it was assumed that animals were to be used for human purposes and we were justified in disregarding their interest as they were unfeeling, unthinking, non-rational, non-conscious being. The prevailing thought is you must belong to the human race to have rights, as humans are rational creatures who have the ability of free will. Through a review of western philosophers we will look at what criteria are used to determine if animals belong in a human moral circle. We will also look at the shift in Western theory from domination of nature to one of balance with nature and the natural order. Michael Pollan's theory is there is a co-evaluation between humans and nature instead of dominance over nature; where consumption of an animal is allowed if the animal lives a pleasurable life and doesn't suffer pain. I believe we should act in a sustainable way treating animals with respect. I will show the animal rights philosophies lead us to morally eliminate meat from our diets. I also believe a co-existent approach can honor past philosophy and expand current ones, improving the eco system and return the balance of nature, allowing those who choose to consume meat a rational way to do so.

In regards to the treatment of animals Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) Deontology philosophy, does not account for the animals themselves, but how humans treat animals as it can have a spill-over effect in how humans treat other humans. Kant argued that beings whose existence depend on nature and not will, beings that are non-rational can only have a relative value and become just things as opposed to rational

beings as people. Humanity is the capacity to reason and the capacity of will, “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” (Kant, p.96). Since Kant viewed non rational beings as things, they are eliminated from his “Categorical Imperative Formula”.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) theorized a dualism of the mind was separate from the body, as the mind is the consciousness the body is only an object that cannot impose its’ will thus it is the mechanism lead by the mind. Descartes uses this theory to describe the value of animals by arguing animals lack thought and act with natural impulse in a mechanically fashion. As animals are unable to communicate with humans anything beyond these basic impulses, they are incapable of rational thought. Descartes defends his theory is not cruel to animals, but helpful to men. “Thus my opinion is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to men-since it absolves them from the suspicion crime when they eat or kill animals. “Descartes argues animals are not due consideration and are just objects without a soul. This convenient western theory absolves humans to treat animals like objects or a means to an end to be used or consumed as humans see fit. (Descartes p.16-17)

A shift in the perception of human co-existing with nature to human mastering or domination nature comes at a time of industrial and modernization in the sixteenth an seventeenth centuries. Some philosopher such as Aldo Leopold, (1887-1948) begin to see gaps with in this prevailing western philosophies regarding man’s relationship and connection to the land, arguing a needing for new holistic approach to ethics. Leopold purposed we live in a biotic community where humans, plants and animals are independent on each other. “This interdependence between the complex structure of the land and its smooth functioning as an energy unit is one of its basic attributes.” (Leopold p.216)This requires an obligation to consider the rights of all within the community and balance of nature.

Paul Taylor (1959, -)advocates a respect for nature denying that humans are superior, after all some animals have superior characteristics that humans lack. “Whether moral or non-moral standards are being

applied, then all judgment of peoples merits finally depend on human values.” Taylor asks why humans judge value on human traits as a criterion for moral consideration and a sign of superiority over non humans. Since animals do not have morals they therefore should not be judged using this concept. Taylor further argues that inherent worth also should not be used to rationalize human superiority over animals, addressing inherent worth in a class system as no longer valid in today’s societies and is “...incompatible with our notion of human equality.”(Taylor p.81) Taylor rejects the idea that humans are superior as they possess a soul where animals do not. Why should a soul add to the value of something as a soul is immaterial, only humans would place intrinsic value on a soul, animals would not need a soul so it would have no value to an animal.

So the question of what “evaluates non humans into the human moral circle, if the criteria we use as a guide as Taylor points out is inadequate than where do we go from there.

Peter Singer theory address the rights of animals is their commonality with human to feel pleasure and pain. It is not through reasoning, or language and the ability to communicate that brings animals into a humans moral circle it is our equal interest in avoiding pain and suffering. Throwing away the ingrained thought of equality as a description of ones will, the ability to communicate, have a soul or rational thought as the guide and realize equality is a moral ideal were animals are not excluded. (p.106) If we consider animals to be unequal to us humans, only seeing them as meat or a commodity, and ignore the interests of animals just because they are animals, and not a member of our own species then that is what Singer called speciesist. Singer points out this view as species-selfishness, a type of racism towards non-human beings to justify humans sacrificing the interest of animals to our own interest. Granted animals are different from humans due to characteristics, but that doesn’t mean they can’t feel pain, or have a language within their own species. Animals are able to communicate with each other, they have families in packs that protect their young; all of these are similar to human traits. Singer further states, “where animals and humans have similar interest, those interests are to be counted equally, with no automatic discount just because one of the being is not human.”(Peter Singer, pp. 1-10)

Michael Pollan's theory is a co-evaluation between humans and nature instead of dominance over nature. Pollan believes we should act in a sustainable way treating animals with respect, allowing us to be meat eaters at the same time. I believe this is a view that a wider majority of humans can accept. Knowing where our food is coming from instead of being disconnected from it. Even with the movement of animal rights during the civil right era Pollan states " we are inflicting more suffering on more animals that at any time in history,....We tolerate this disconnect because the life of the pig has moved out of view...expect for our pets, real animals—animals living and dying –no longer figure in our everyday lives." (Pollan, article, An Animals Place) Pollan is saying what is immoral is how we treat these animals in the process. Factory Farming is a growing problem and disconnect of seeing eye to eye the animal we mean to consume. Seeing in its eyes as Pollan notes, "a glimpse something unmistakably familiar..., it seems we either look away or become vegetarians." as this suffering is not because of a medical need for the benefit of humans, but of want and desire for meat to consume for our taste buds.

The treatment of the animal is the question Pollan begins to investigate. CAFO, (Confined Animal Feeding Operations) the mass holding of animals in confined space, where animals are treated with chemicals to stimulate un-natural growth, such as huge chicken breast, antibiotics given to cows to prevent diseases due to overcrowding. Living conditions for these animals are crowded together indoors or confinement pin no sunlight, fresh air or room to move all in the name of capitalism, a protein production unit. These farms are the most cruel and in my opinion, most sickening, US industry imaginable. The main benefit of factory farming is that it efficiently produces a mass amount of food at a relatively low cost. Some argue that this is needed to sustain the world's growing population. Although factory farmed food is generally regarded as an inexpensive commodity, factory farming causes harmful, toxic pollution to soil. These farms produce too much manure for the soil to break down; they pollute water sources, and contaminate soil with fertilizer as well as steroids and antibiotics from the animals waste.

While I don't believe individuals have to go vegetarian as this is a personal choice, I do believe we have a moral obligation to treat animals with respect. Herein lies the unearthing of a sustainable farming practice, of going back to how nature intended. Joel Salatin's Polyface Farm is an example used by Pollan to show a different approach to the capitalization of factory farming. The idea is a balance of designed to allow animals to do what animals do best, to regulate the farm through rotation of animals that feed off the land, from their manure to fertilize the land to regrow the grasses they will later consume. Pollan defends animal domestication as evolutionary and a mutualism between species, not an exploitation of animals. He feels animals treated with dignity and respect, such as Polyface Farms, is experiencing the pleasure of just being and to all appearances did not suffer. (Pollan part 2) If Singer's defense of animal right and the obligation to vegetarian, is in the fact they can experience pleasure and pain then this arrangement should be amicable. However even with the beautiful system of nature working in harmony the animals must still die and the humans in the exchange of providing safety in domestication will consume this animal. Pollan and Salatin believe if we are to become vegetarians we would be relying more on imported goods as regions do not all grow the same foods in the same cycles, thus we would be more dependent on the chemicals and fossil fuels used to produce the food, thus contributing to environment ruin.

If planning to eat meat, it should be done in the most humane way with respect for the animal. I cannot say it is morally acceptable to be a meat eater, in fact in this I have discovered I believe it is morally wrong to kill and eat an animal. If you believe it is morally wrong to wear fur or have leather goods, then I cannot reason why it is acceptable to eat their meat. Singer is correct in his theory that pleasure and pain obligates us to view animals with rights, such as a right to life it is what links us together. The only reason we have placed animals separate from humans is to rationalize one group deserving greater consideration just because they belong to the human species. To bring this to another light is the treatment of pigs, a proven intelligent and social beings, are raised to be consumed, whereas the treatment of a dog as a household pet to be adored, grouping even animals differently. (Peta) Pollan's view while I feel is the

best alternative to a vegetarian diet and a rebalance of nature, does not morally release us from killing of animals.” If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering.”(Singer p.107-108) If we can argue equality as a moral idea, how do we justify the killing of an animal for human consumption?

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