

Abstract submission to Winthrop University Food Conference

WHY I AM NOT A VEGETARIAN (487 words)

This is a paper about why I am not convinced by the moral arguments generally offered by vegetarians. This point helps indicate what the paper is not about. Many people choose vegetarianism for religious reasons, but I have nothing to say about religious motivations here. If you believe a god commands you to refrain from eating flesh, then perhaps you had better be a vegetarian. Also, many people choose to follow vegetarian diets for health benefits, or avoiding health risks. Here again, I have nothing to say about such pragmatic views. One might become a vegetarian for religious reasons, for alleged health reasons, to comply with social customs, etc. But no one should become a vegetarian because they have heard or read a sound ethical argument demonstrating that meat-eating is morally wrong. I shall briefly canvass the most common philosophical justifications for vegetarianism, and show you how each argument fails.

Utilitarian arguments fail because they will never secure a universal moral prohibition on meat-eating. Moreover, arguments based on speciesism will undermine the vegetarian argument, for even vegetarians are kingdomists. Finally, utilitarians will incompletely justify the vital question of what morally relevant features distinguish members of the various groups.

Arguments based on conceptions of “inherent value” – like deontic or rights-based views – fail because the criteria on which attributions of inherent value are based seem to be designed to guarantee that only humans and some animals meet them from the start, which ultimately raises either the specter of kingdomism or the fallacy of circular reasoning. Alternatively, criteria of inherent value are often built on other more basic criteria, such as reasoning, which likewise fail to secure vegetarianism.

Could avoiding cruelty guarantee animals enough rights to support vegetarianism? It would seem not, for (just as in utilitarianism) we ought to be capable of raising domesticated animals for food without cruelty, *per se*. Or perhaps a virtue-based ethics that includes cruelty as a vice would work? This too seems to fail for even if we have a non-biased method for determining virtues and vices, and even if we assume that cruelty is a vice, virtue ethics still does nothing more than condemn our current method of raising animals. Thus even arguments based on cruelty fail to provide a universal moral prohibition on meat-eating.

Still, things may not be lost for the would-be moral vegetarian. In the end, we may be able to begin developing a moral defense of vegetarianism based on moral sentiments. If you feel

disagreeable when you see animals being slaughtered, then your moral sentiments suggest you disapprove of eating meat. However, unless we can also argue that the moral sentiments in question are (or ought to be) universalized, we will only defend a limited hypothetical prohibition on meat-eating. Like the other failures cataloged today, this will not provide a widespread moral condemnation of meat-eating that can be applied to others.