

Food for Thought: The Debate over Eating Meat*
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Are animals our domestic companions, fellow citizens of the ecosystems we inhabit, mobile meals and resources for us, or some combination thereof? This well chosen collection of essays written by recognized scholars addresses many of the intriguing aspects concerning the controversy over meat consumption. These aspects include not only eating meat, but also hunting animals, breeding, feeding, killing, and shredding them for our use, buying meat, the economics of the meat industry, the understanding of predation and food webs in ecology, and the significance of animals for issues about nutrition, gender, wealth, and cultural autonomy.

Sapontzis's introduction is excellent—lucid, concise, direct, and engaging; it clearly explains the book's contents, which divide into seven sections. In the first section Daniel Dombrowski offers a skillful overview of the history of vegetarianism that is meticulously researched, clear, and insightful. Beginning with the ancient thinkers Pythagoras and Empedocles, Dombrowski describes both the philosophical arguments that have been advanced for vegetarianism and critics' replies to those arguments through the medieval and modern periods. He rightly notes that the contemporary debate regarding philosophical vegetarianism has been profoundly shaped by the historical figures he identifies--figures who have rejected or embraced the anthropocentrism entrenched in Western thought.¹

Section Two contains three anthropological-medical essays comparing meat with vegetarian diets. I found Randall Collura's essay to be the most circumspect of this trio, as it has some fascinating tidbits. For example, he explains that animals *must* change what they eat over large periods of time as species evolve, including the mammalian predecessors of human beings. Collura also suggests that the contemporary macrobiotic and whole food vegetarian diets could be considered very similar to Neolithic diets of unrefined foods that contain far less meat and sugar. For those trained in the health sciences, this section will hold particular interest.

The heart of the book is Section Three, with eight essays on the recent philosophical debate over the moral status of animals and whether vegetarianism is obligatory. The late James Rachels lays out the basic argument for vegetarianism succinctly: (1) It is wrong to cause pain unless there is a good enough reason; (2) The business of modern meat-production causes animals terrible suffering; (3) It seems obvious that our enjoyment of meat is not a good reason to justify the amount of suffering forced upon the animals; (4) Therefore, we should stop eating the products of modern meat-production and restrict our diet to vegetarian meals. Roger Scruton makes a curious, elaborate, and ultimately inconsistent stab at sanctifying the British family's ritual of piously forking down the Sunday roast. Evelyn Pluhar is rather dogmatic and strident in tone, yet she too makes perceptive points in arguing for animals' right not to be eaten. The most powerful move is probably the Argument from Marginal Cases: human infants and mentally disabled individuals have no greater cognitive or affective capacities than many nonhuman animals, yet we don't breed and kill those 'marginal' human cases to satisfy our taste for meat. Peter Singer, R. G. Frey, and Bart Gruzalski each grapple with utilitarian arguments for and against moral vegetarianism. Drawing his inspiration and, to some extent, guidance from Porphyry's ancient classic *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, S. R. L. Clark astutely reflects on dietary and sexual purity, decency, and the texture of a life focused on virtues. Clark's essay is both richer philosophically and more scholarly than Frey and Gruzalski's sometimes clever, sometimes myopic speculations over likely consequences of boycotting meat. God's oracle to Isaiah of the panther lying down with the kid (Isaiah 11:6 ff.), Clark explains, supports the eschatological view that vegetarianism anticipates the Kingdom of God. This eschatological defense is echoed by Linzey (188) and Berkman (202–205). Carl Cohen argues against Tom Regan's rights view from the traditional anthropocentric conviction that all and only human beings have moral status. Cohen dismisses the Argument from Marginal Cases by simply insisting that humans are of such a *kind* that rights pertain to them as humans; human lives remain essentially moral (162). Such a response fails to engage with the Argument from Marginal Cases at all and is plainly the *kind* of speciesism Singer and others since him decry as akin to sexism and racism.

Cohen's enlisting of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine to buttress his traditional stance links well with essays on vegetarianism from Jewish, broadly Christian, specifically Catholic, Islamic, East Asian, and Native American traditions in Section Four. Tom Regan grants that no one, unambiguous message on the moral status of nonhuman animals exists in the Bible, yet he reads Genesis 1:29 as an undeniable vegan prescription. Andrew Linzey thinks the strongest argument for vegetarianism takes seriously the notion that the life of an animal belongs to God, rather than to human beings. To my mind it's more plausible to think that the life of each animal belongs to that animal itself. Yet Linzey presents the Christian argument for vegetarianism: "since animals belong to God, have value to God, and live for God, then their needless destruction is sinful. In short: animals have some right to their life, all circumstances being

equal” (193). But how, we may ask, could animals have some right to their lives if their lives, on Linzey’s view, belong not to *them* but to God? John Berkman discusses a meatless diet as it relates to spiritual health and purity, asceticism, and as the key response to the primal vice of gluttony. He notes that early Christians believed meat-eating produced excessive phlegm, excrement, belching, vomiting, and semen. Richard Foltz grants that the norm of meat-eating has been little questioned by Muslims despite various reasons they have for vegetarianism. James Gaffney surveys nonviolence as a common basis for vegetarianism in later Vedic Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and especially Jainism. In contrast, Confucius is portrayed as an angler and bow-hunter who gave his fish and game a sportsmanlike “fair chance” (232). Rod Preece’s analysis delves beyond the appearance of respect Amerindians display to the animals they slaughter to reveal some problematic ambivalence and an element of self-deception.

In Section Five feminist authors explore meat, patriarchy, and the exploitation of nature and animals with respect to race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic class. Kathryn George argues that the Regan-Singer arguments for ethical vegetarianism assume a male norm that results in ageism, sexism, and classism. She reasons that if it is a greater burden for women, infants, children, adolescents, the elderly, and people who live outside Western societies to adopt meatless diets, then the worth of these people is degraded, and *therefore* no one is morally required to eat as a vegetarian. This last inference doesn’t follow, since it fails to show why Western males between the ages of, say, sixteen and sixty would not be obligated on the grounds Regan and Singer advance. Moreover, George seems to assume that discharging the same moral obligation must be equally burdensome for all to whom it applies. But consider: If Smith and Jones each borrow \$1,000, but Smith—a single, fifty-five year old parent of three children—loses his minimum wage job, while the investments of the unmarried, twenty-six year old Jones, who has no dependents, net her \$70,000 of after-tax income, does Smith have less of an obligation to repay his loan than Jones does? It seems not. The age, sex, class, and affluence of Smith and Jones just aren’t relevant. Deane Curtin’s essay, which conceives of the commitment to vegetarianism as a situated, contextualized feminist response, more persuasively addresses the worries raised by George. Like Curtin, Lori Gruen advocates contextual vegetarianism, but she does so by contending that the bonds we develop with nonhumans in our lives augment our empathetic awareness. Section Six contains four essays debating how to understand predation, environmental ethics, and animal protection. Of these, Frederick Ferré’s piece contributes the least. The final section contains a pair of essays that wrestle with clashing cultural practices of food acquisition in ecosystems. The guide to further reading limits itself to book-length treatments, but on this principle of inclusion, it offers a respectable set of resources.

Gruen fairly summarizes the anti-meat arguments: “When billions of animals are still being born to be slaughtered, when the environment is being destroyed by

agribusiness, when maldistribution of food leads to the starvation of thousands of children around the world, when the activities of the rich and powerful cause untold suffering to marginalized peoples and animals, one may sensibly be pragmatic. There are many reasons to think hard about what one is contributing to when purchasing the products of modern factory farming and many reasons to stop eating animals” (290). This collection is a fine entrée for all readers of this journal, since the debate over meat must by now figure into every thinking person’s diet.

[1] A reference could be added to Dombrowski’s discussion of contemporary ecoholism. *The Animal Rights/Environmental Ethics Debate: The Environmental Perspective*, Eugene C. Hargrove, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.