Eating meat

Twenty Two

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When I was a child, I ate whatever food my mother served me. My only concern was whether I liked it; I was incurious about what it was or where it came from. I lived in the American South. When I was 12, my family moved to a rural area and I was given a shotgun. Over the next four years, until I resolved to stop, I killed as many game birds as I could. I would decapitate, pluck, and gut those I killed, and give the little parcels of flesh to my mother to cook for the family. When I shot a dove, duck, or quail, it would usually be dead when it plummeted to earth with a thud. But occasionally it would still be alive, perhaps having suffered only a broken wing, and would flap and flutter across the ground in a futile effort to evade me. I assume there must have been instances in which one or two pellets hit a bird that was nevertheless able to continue to fly and thus escaped me, though perhaps only to die later from the wound I had inflicted.

When I reflect on this, it is scarcely credible to me that I took pleasure in sending metal pellets ripping through the bodies of sentient beings going harmlessly about their own lives. Yet this was a morally less bad way of obtaining meat than that which is usual for the vast majority of meat eaters. The birds I ate had lived their lives in the wild and, with rare exceptions, suffered only briefly, if at all.

Most of the meat consumed in economically developed societies is from animals raised in factory farms. In these 'farms', the animals are tightly packed into filthy, stifling, indoor spaces, and thus suffer more or less continuous physical and psychological torment throughout their entire lives. When they reach full size, pumped with antibiotics because of the unsanitary conditions in which they are kept, they suffer a final period of panic and terror as they are mass-slaughtered, often in mechanized, assembly-line fashion.

Still, factory farming and hunting both inflict suffering and premature death on beings capable of having lives worth living. Neither the infliction of suffering nor the killing of a conscious being is morally neutral; both require moral justification. It should, indeed, be impossible for anyone who has suffered physically or psychologically to believe that such an experience could ever not matter at all, even when the victim is only a lower animal such as a chicken. Suffering is always intrinsically bad (though *pain* is not; a masochist may enjoy pain rather than suffer from it).

But it is possible that, while the suffering of an animal matters, it matters less than the equivalent suffering of a person. The suffering of a person may, for example, prevent that person from engaging in activities of greater value than any that an animal is capable of. And suffering can have psychological effects throughout the subsequent life of a person that are more damaging than any such effects could be in the shorter and psychologically more rudimentary life of an animal. It also seems that there are depths or intensities of psychological suffering to which persons are vulnerable but to which the simpler minds of animals are immune.

There are also, however, reasons why the suffering of an animal might be morally *worse* than the equivalent suffering

of a person. Many people believe that persons can deserve to suffer (for example, as punishment for a crime), whereas few believe that animals can. (If an animal could deserve to suffer, it would have to be a morally responsible agent, and as such would be a morally higher kind of being than it is assumed to be.) If these beliefs are correct, the suffering of an animal is morally worse than the equivalent *deserved* suffering of a person. The suffering of a person can, moreover, sometimes be compensated for by a deepened understanding of life – an effect that cannot occur in most animals.

Most of these considerations, however, concern the possible *consequences* of suffering and, as such, do not affect the badness of suffering itself. The one exception is desert. *Deserved* suffering – if there is such a thing – may be extremely bad *for* the sufferer and yet not be *morally* bad at all. Some philosophers believe that something analogous is true of animal suffering. They believe that, although an animal cannot deserve to suffer, its suffering may nevertheless matter less *morally* because the animal itself matters less, or has a lower moral status.

It must be shown, however, that animals in fact have a lower moral status than we have. And this requires that we identify what it is that supposedly distinguishes us from animals and grounds our higher moral status. I have sometimes asked a class of students on what basis they think that we have a higher status, or matter more, than animals. Almost invariably, they cite certain psychological capacities, such as self-consciousness, rationality, free will, or the ability to distinguish right from wrong. I then point out that these claims are true and plausible if 'we' refers to people like those of us in the classroom but not if it includes young children. They then realize that they should have said, for example, 'self-consciousness *or* the *potential* to develop it'. I then point out that even this leaves

out profoundly demented adults and adult human beings who from the beginning of their existence have lacked the potential to develop the relevant capacities. Demented adults can perhaps be accommodated by claiming that higher moral status can be grounded in the possession, *potential* possession, or *past* possession of the relevant capacities. But if the basis of our higher status is some function of psychological capacity, congenitally severely cognitively impaired human adults seem to be excluded. Yet no student of mine has been willing to accept that the suffering of these human beings matters less.

No one, in my view, has succeeded in identifying a morally significant intrinsic difference between these human beings and *all* nonhuman animals. We may, of course, be *related* to these human beings in morally significant ways, but only *intrinsic* properties – features of an individual itself and not its relations to others – affect moral status. If there is no relevant difference in intrinsic properties, and if the suffering of these human beings does not matter less, then the suffering of animals, or at least those animals with psychological capacities comparable to those of these human beings, also does not matter less.

But suppose that I am mistaken and the suffering of animals does matter less. It nevertheless remains true that their suffering matters and that causing it requires justification and is subject to certain moral constraints. Even the infliction of suffering on blameworthy *wrongdoers* is governed by moral constraints. Suppose, for example, that you are fighting in a just war and a particularly malevolent soldier on the unjust side is attempting to kill you. You can incapacitate him in either of two ways. One would cause him only a minor injury; the other would be more disabling and cause him great suffering. Both morality and the law require that you inflict only

the minor injury, even if that would be more burdensome to you – because, for example, the more disabling option would render him more manageable as a prisoner of war.

This constraint is called the *requirement of necessity*: one must choose the least harmful means of achieving one's end, even when that would be somewhat more burdensome than a more harmful alternative. This requirement, which has been virtually universally accepted for centuries, is most often invoked in discussions of self-defence and war, but it applies to all acts of harming. It therefore implies not only that it is wrong to cause unnecessary harm in defending oneself from an aggressor, but also that it is wrong to eat meat from factory farms when one could obtain comparable pleasure and nutrition from foods produced without causing animals to suffer.[1] And it is well established that a vegetarian or, with some minor supplementation, vegan diet can provide all that is necessary for optimal human health.

Some people will say that they simply cannot get the same pleasure from plant foods that they get from meat. I suspect that in most cases this is a result of insufficient experience. I have known hundreds of vegetarians and vegans but only a few have thought, after months or years without eating meat, that their pleasure in food had been diminished.

But suppose it is true that in general you cannot get as much pleasure from a meal without meat. Even if that means that your eating meat satisfies the necessity requirement, there is still another requirement that you must satisfy: *proportionality*, which forbids acts that cause bad effects that are excessive in relation to their good effects. In a just war, for example, an attack that is necessary to save the life of one innocent civilian but would kill two other civilians as a side effect is ruled out as disproportionate.

Like the requirement of necessity, the requirement of proportionality applies to all acts that cause suffering or harm, including harm to animals. One pig can provide meat for about 100 meals. It could thus, on 100 occasions, provide you with the difference in pleasure between a meal with meat and a meal without meat. Yet for you to have those increases in enjoyment, a factory farmed pig must live in misery for between six and 12 months. Even if its suffering matters less because it has a lower moral status, it is hard to believe that the infliction of so much suffering could be proportionate in relation to your 100 momentary increases in minor pleasures. To make this vivid, ask yourself whether the *difference in pleasure* you would get from one brief meal with meat rather than one without it could offset or outweigh the suffering a pig endures over several days of stressful confinement (roughly 1/100th of its life).

It seems that eating meat from factory farmed animals is usually unnecessary for whatever benefits one gets, and that the suffering that factory farming inflicts is disproportionate in relation to those benefits. But factory farming is, of course, not the only way of producing meat. Animals intended for consumption can be raised without cramming them into densely packed, airless indoor spaces, hacking off their beaks or tails (to prevent the injuries that animals maddened by such conditions become prone to inflict on one another), and stuffing them with foods that are unnatural for them. Indeed, during most of the time since animal agriculture began, animals were raised in relatively open spaces in which they could be at least moderately content. Even now, humane rearing is practiced on a small scale in various countries.

We can use the term *humane omnivorism* to refer to the practice of eating meat only from animals that have been raised

without being caused to suffer, and killed with as little pain and fear as possible. Although it does not involve the infliction of suffering, this practice standardly involves killing the animals when they reach full size, about 1/10th of the way through their natural life span. And killing, like inflicting suffering, requires moral justification. Again, if enhanced enjoyment by meat eaters can justify the killing, it must be proportionate. In this case, proportionality weighs the difference in pleasure for meat eaters against the future pleasures of which an animal is deprived by being killed.

Returning briefly to factory farming, one might claim that the killing of factory farmed animals is not morally objectionable because instead of depriving them of pleasure, it spares them further misery. But that claim parallels the obviously false claim that the Nazis' gassing of concentration camp prisoners was permissible euthanasia because the prisoners' continued lives in the camps would not have been worth living. What this shows is that we must compare death with what individuals' lives would be like if we were to treat them permissibly.

Those who believe that an animal's suffering matters less because the animal has a lower moral status presumably believe that its pleasure matters less as well (though recall that they must explain why the suffering and pleasure of human beings with psychological capacities comparable to those of an animal do *not* matter less). Many people also think that killing animals is easier to justify than causing them to suffer. It is, however, hard to see why this should be so. After all, killing a person need not cause her to suffer, but merely deprives her of good things her life would otherwise have contained. But killing a person is no less serious morally than causing her to suffer.

Consider, then, whether the increase in enjoyment that some people get from eating meat can justify the killing of

animals raised humanely. Suppose a pig has lived contentedly for a year. It is now as large as it can get, so allowing it to live longer is economically wasteful. Killing it would provide each of 100 people with enhanced pleasure for one meal. Those benefits must be weighed against the pleasure the pig would be deprived of in losing the remaining five years of its natural life span.

Pigs, too, enjoy eating. (Recall which animal we compare a person to when he is bolting his feed with relish.) And they enjoy companionship with other pigs, as well as solitary pleasures such as lying in the sun. Pigs also concentrate on their eating, whereas we are normally distracted by conversation or, increasingly, electronic screens and are often only partially aware of what we are eating. Thus, even if the moral significance of a pig's pleasure is heavily discounted for lower moral status, it is implausible to suppose that 100 instances of the enhancement of mild human pleasure for a brief period – a total period of well under 100 hours – could matter more than, or outweigh, all the pleasures that a pig could have over five *years*. The killing required by humane omnivorism is therefore disproportionate in relation to the benefits the practice offers.

There are other problems with humane omnivorism. Factory farms evolved through efforts to increase the profits from producing meat by reducing the costs. The costs of humane rearing are much greater, so the cost to consumers must be correspondingly higher, as well. If humane rearing were to replace factory farming, meat would become a luxury regularly available only to the rich. Although this would greatly benefit the health of the poor, it would still be inegalitarian. Another problem is that, in part because it would produce far fewer animals, humane rearing would be less bad for the

environment than factory farming, which is a major cause of climate change. But it would still be significantly worse than purely plant-based agriculture.

There is, however, one interesting argument in favour of humane omnivorism. Consider the generations of animals raised and killed on a farm that practices humane rearing. These animals have lives that are worth living, though short. And they would never have existed had this farm not existed for the purpose of producing meat. (Animals born on other farms, including factory farms, would be *different* animals.) These animals, in other words, owe their good lives to the practice of humane omnivorism. Although they are harmed by being killed prematurely, the practice of humane omnivorism is overall not bad for them, and is perhaps even good for them.

This argument raises deep issues that there is no space to discuss here.[2] But it faces one obvious objection. There is a chronic shortage of donor organs for transplantation. Suppose that we could create embryos in vitro that would be genetically programmed to be congenitally severely cognitively impaired, with psychological capacities no higher than those of an animal. These individuals could be given contented lives until their organs could be used to save the lives of several people with psychological capacities in the normal range. At that point, they would be painlessly killed. If their lives would be worth living, overall the practice would not be bad for them and might even be good for them. Yet intuitively, this would not be morally acceptable. This suggests that humane omnivorism is not morally acceptable either.

The arguments I have advanced here challenge the moral permissibility of most people's eating practices. But they are of wider relevance. They raise questions, for example, about

the permissibility of experimentation on animals. It is worth saying, however, that at least some experiments that kill animals or cause them to suffer are substantially more likely to be both necessary and proportionate than eating meat is. This is because the results of these experiments, particularly in the advancement of medicine, could prevent great harms, or provide great benefits, to many people.

My claims have other implications. Even if animal suffering does not matter as much as the equivalent suffering of persons, it still matters very much. And it is ubiquitous. Animals greatly outnumber human beings and their lives in the natural world are everywhere precarious. They suffer from disease, starvation, dehydration, predation, parasites, adverse weather, and other threats to their lives and well-being. If suffering and death are bad for animals when we cause them, they are also bad when they derive from other sources. While our moral reason not to inflict these harms is arguably stronger than our reason to prevent them, we ought not to be indifferent to the great suffering that many billions of animals endure every day. When our science becomes sufficiently advanced to enable us to ameliorate their suffering without doing more harm than good, it will become our duty to do that.

NOTES

1 See Rae Langton and Richard Holton, 'Animals and Alternatives', *The Philosopher's Magazine* 81 (2018): 14–15.
2 For a more thorough discussion, see Jeff McMahan, 'Eating Animals the Nice Way', *Daedalus* 137 (2008): 66–76.