

Is Vegetarianism an Antinatalism ?

The more vegetarians there are, the fewer animals are bred, born, fattened up, and transported to the slaughterhouse. What, then, would happen if all human beings became vegetarians? Certain breeds of animal, such as the domestic pig, would die out. All this being the case, it is possible to make the following reproach to vegetarians:

It is only in appearance that you are “for animals”. In reality, you are against them, since you are preventing, millions of times over, animals from ever coming into being. Your behaviour is immoral since it can lead to the extinction of whole breeds and species of animal! We carnivores, on the other hand, through our demand for meat, ensure that many more animals see the light of day than would be the case without us. We are for life; you, however, are unavowed antinatalists, since you bring it about that many animals come never to be born or even conceived.

In order to discuss this question properly, we need to take a few steps back. People become vegetarians for a whole range of different reasons. Some simply do not like meat. Others believe that it is better for their own health to do without meat or animal products. In other words, if “aesthetic” or “culinary” vegetarians, or people who become vegetarians for the sake of their health, choose to eat no meat, they do so for selfish or at least self-interested reasons. The majority of vegetarians, however, are surely people who choose to forgo the consumption of meat for ethical reasons.

Ethical vegetarians are not primarily concerned about themselves. Their concern is rather with animals (including, from an ecological point of view, also human beings) as beings capable of pain and suffering. The reason why they cease consuming meat or were already raised by their parents as non-meat-eaters is because it is a known fact that purchases of meat are actions that generate pain and suffering. Each purchase of a meat product goes to keep the cruel mechanism of the breeding, fattening-up, transport, slaughter and death of animals turning relentlessly over. The value premise behind ethical vegetarianism consists in recognizing that all those actions are to be forgone which have as their consequence the pain and suffering of animals. If animals were not beings capable of suffering, the consumption of meat might indeed remain an aesthetic problem, but it would not be an ethical one.

People, however, who choose to adopt a vegetarian or a vegan diet with a view to reducing the amount of animal suffering in the world or to ensuring that such suffering never occurs in the first place need to be prepared to respond not only to Question No. 1 but also to Question No. 2 below, namely:

Question No. 1: If all human beings were to adopt the same mode of nourishment as yourself, then certain breeds of animal, such as the domestic pig, would, in the medium term, die out. Is this really something that you want?

Question No. 2: If it is your wish that the number of animals suffering pain should be as few as possible, should it not also be your wish that there should no longer exist any animals even capable of suffering pain? Would it not, then, be best, in your view, if all those animal species were to die out whose members are susceptible of feeling pain?

These two questions do indeed comprehensively sum up the value premises of the ethical vegetarian, the intention behind doing so being to trap said ethical vegetarian in a *reductio ad absurdum*. In such situations debates can often fall far short of being objective. Let us try, then, to keep a cool head and begin by conceding that both questions are entirely legitimate. The person who acts ethically is someone who, instead of acting now this way and now that way depending just on their mood or whim, is able to render account of and for their own action inasmuch as they act on the basis of some overarching principle which they find to be argumentationally convincing. Should the overarching principle in this case run: “Act, so far

as possible, in such a way that the suffering of animals in the world be reduced to a minimum”, then this principle – assuming it to be indeed a principle – must lay claim to validity even beyond the context of diet and nutrition. But instead of feeling that they have been manoeuvred here into a *reductio ad absurdum*, the ethical vegetarian rather can and must reply, with perfect equanimity, as follows:

Reply No. 1: Provided that the dying-out of the animal species in question occur in as painless a way as possible, then I can only welcome and approve of it.

Reply No. 2: I am indeed very much in favour of the dying-out of all those species of animal that are capable of pain and suffering. The fact is that billions of animals suffer not only from the nutritional habits of a large part of mankind but also from being the prey of other animal predators, who regularly kill and injure them. Innumerable animals also suffer from parasites, from various forms of sickness, and from hunger and thirst. Indeed, even the lives of the predators within the animal kingdom is no bed of roses.

If the decisive thing for ethical vegetarianism is the principle that there should be the minimum possible number of animals suffering pain, then it should not matter in the least whether the pain in question is caused by human beings, by other animals, by parasites, or by one or another form of sickness. Although many predatory animals make a strong impression of beauty on us human beings, the emotion they evoke in their prey is rather one of panic. On these latter they inflict the most terrible pain and injury. As is well-known, not every hunting of one animal by another is a clear and clean success and many predators, such as hyenas, are known sometimes not to kill their prey before feeding on them but rather to eat them alive. If human beings wish there to be magnificent tigers and lions on whom we can gaze in aesthetic admiration, it follows that we must also wish that they nourish themselves in a manner appropriate to their species – a wish that hardly bodes well for the animals they prey on.

In fact, the value premise forming the basis of ethical vegetarianism – namely, that there should be as little animal suffering as possible – leads directly to antinatalism. It could hardly be less appropriate, then, to try to make of antinatalism a *reductio ad absurdum* of vegetarianism. Antinatalism is a moral theory which urges us to decide and to act, in every given situation, in such a way that beings capable of suffering come into being in the smallest possible number and, ideally, not at all. Ethical vegetarianism and antinatalism share, in fact, one and the same value-basis. They are, in terms of their moral logic, closely mutually related and, across all boundaries of species, directly convertible into one another. Let us imagine an antinatalist who is also a consumer of meat. If one were to reproach such an antinatalist with contributing, through his or her behaviour, to generation after generation of animals’ being bred and born into existences filled with suffering, he or she would most likely be unable to offer a convincing counter-argument. He or she would have to concede that their antinatalism left something to be desired in the way of logical consistency. Conversely, vegetarians need to realize that they can only claim to be fully and consistently embracing their own ethical principle (namely, that there should be as few suffering animals as possible) if they also embrace antinatalism – that is to say, if they subscribe also to the proposition that one must always act in such a manner that as few a number as possible of animals capable of suffering (regardless of whether these be farm animals or animals living in the wild, herbivores or carnivores) should enter into existence at all.

That, in terms of the two doctrines’ fundamental moral logics, antinatalism is inherent in vegetarianism becomes even clearer if we consider a criticism that has, for some years now, been one of those most frequently levelled against strict vegetarians. The attempt is made to

demoralize vegans, for example, with the argument that their diet is in fact not at all so “free of violence” as vegans themselves always declare it to be. Even the grains and cereals which form the basis of a vegan diet (so runs this argument) must be cultivated, namely in a manner involving the ploughing up of the ground on which these grains and cereals are grown. Such ploughing, however, inevitably results in the death not only of countless small invertebrate animals but also of many highly-developed mammals, such as field mice. This is indeed an indisputable fact. Quite as indisputable as the fact that the vegan in question was never asked (and could never possibly have been asked) whether they wished to come into existence. It was their parents that brought about this existence. Once in the world, the individual in question is obliged to nourish themselves in one way or another (short of becoming a “suicidal vegetarian” and starving themselves to death). Such an individual can, however, by adopting a purely vegan diet, attempt to minimize the “track of suffering” that they leave in the world or, in other words (by analogy with the environmentally conscious person’s striving to reduce their “ecological footprint”) attempt to reduce to an absolute minimum the “footprint” that they leave in terms of quantities of creaturely pain. And if this individual, following the moral theory of antinatalism, remains without offspring, he or she makes thereby perhaps the greatest contribution to the wellbeing of the environment, of animals, and of already existing human beings that a single person possibly can make – considering the resources demanded to sustain the existences of additional human beings, especially those born into industrialized societies.

What is more, there has existed for thousands of years already a model in cultural reality for the combination of vegetarianism and antinatalism that I have discussed above: namely, the essentially antinatalistically-oriented (and therefore necessarily small) community of Indian Jains. The founder of this religious community, Mahavira, was a contemporary of the Buddha. Jains live according to the principle of absolute “non-injury” (*ahimsa*) – i.e. they tend to live (in contrast to many Buddhists and Hindus) as strict vegetarians. Many Jains eat nothing but fruit that has fallen, without any human intervention, from trees. To produce such nourishment no plough has ever had to be applied to the earth.

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