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Author(s): David Clough

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Why do some people eat meat?

David Clough, Professor of Theological Ethics, University of Chester

“Why do some people eat meat, daddy?” asked Rebecca, with all the directness of a vegetarian five year old, as I was saying goodnight to her. I thought quickly. “Well, perhaps they think that other animals do, like lions.” The reply was immediate: “But lions need to eat meat: we don’t”. I had to concede the point, and, retrospectively I wonder on other grounds at my reasoning: in what sense could the behaviour of animals serve as moral justification for human actions? This was clearly an invalid argument for killing animals to eat them, and long after Rebecca had gone to sleep happy at having won her point, I mused over other possibilities. In this article I present the most plausible I have come across, with the aim of assessing whether meat eating can be morally justified. In my view, none are sufficient to justify killing animals for food where adequate alternative sources of nutrition are available.

Before considering potential answers to Rebecca’s question, however, I must address the preliminary issue of whether any justification for meat eating is required at all. Do animals matter? If the lives and deaths of animals are of no account, there is no need for any moral justification for eating them: the practice is morally irrelevant, just as a preference for vanilla ice cream over chocolate is morally irrelevant.

This position, however, is hard to sustain. There is a consensus that all vertebrates and probably many invertebrates are capable of experiencing pain,

¹ and there is no reason to believe that they do not suffer as a result.² While a substantial moral framework is necessary to establish the claim that causing suffering to another creature without a morally sufficient reason is illegitimate, this view commands a widespread consensus. Christians have good reason to believe that causing animal suffering without justification is immoral: all creation is pronounced good by God (Gen. 1); the Mosaic Law provides for the welfare of animals, for example by forbidding the muzzling of an ox while it is treading out the grain (Dt. 25.4); God's words to Job speak of an intimate concern for non-human creation (Job 38.39–39.30); Jesus teaches that not one sparrow is forgotten by God (Lk. 12.6), and Paul writes of the whole creation groaning with labour pains alongside the church as it awaits liberation (Rom. 8.22).³

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Some may agree that causing suffering without justification is illegitimate, but hold that painless killing of animals does not require a moral justification. To show that killing is problematic whether or not suffering is inflicted, an example from Douglas Adams' The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is helpful. Adams narrates the story of the destruction of the entire planet earth by a Vogon constructor fleet in order to clear the way for an inter-galactic bypass.⁴ Fortunately, the means used are humane: the planet and its inhabitants are vaporised instantaneously. Clearly, if suffering is the only criterion for moral censure, this attack on earth is morally unproblematic. If we take the view that there is a moral problem with the destruction

of a planet by these means, however, we must be committed to the view that respect for life incorporates not merely ensuring that it does not suffer unnecessarily, but that its interests—minimally, in this case, its interest in continued existence—are respected. Many animals consumed by human beings suffer considerably before being killed;⁵ this argument goes further to show that justifying reasons are necessary even in the ideal case of an animal who undergoes no additional suffering, such as a wild deer killed immediately by a rifle shot.

Animals do matter—by which I mean that we need a sufficient justifying reason to cause them unnecessary suffering, or to kill them. Note the modest character of this claim: I am not arguing that there are no morally sufficient reasons to kill animals for food—indeed, as noted below, I think that there are circumstances in which there are such reasons. My point here is that a choice to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal or to kill it is a morally significant action, which therefore requires a morally sufficient justifying reason. The remainder of this essay is a search for such a reason.

1. People matter more than animals

I believe this statement to be true on the grounds of the distinctive nature of human beings in relation to other animals, which has a clear intuitive and biblical basis. It is intuitive to care more about the welfare of an ant than that of a bacterium, more for a bird than an ant, more for a dog than a bird, and more for a person than a dog.

Whether we justify this intuition on the basis of intelligence, capacity for suffering, complexity of social relationships, or otherwise, the alternative of equal regard for all creatures is a moral absurdity.⁶ In biblical terms, human beings are identified uniquely as made in the image of God with a particular role and responsibility (Gen. 1.27–9).

While Jesus affirms that God watches over every sparrow, he also states that ‘you are worth

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more than many sparrows' (Mt. 10:31 || Luke 12:7). If we were to discover an alien race as advanced, or more advanced, than ourselves, we would have to rethink this hierarchy, but it seems clear that in terms of intelligence, social and cultural complexity, and ability to manipulate the environment, human beings are without peer in the known universe and therefore worthy of a different degree of respect.

To acknowledge that people matter more than animals, however, is not the same as believing this to be a morally sufficient reason for killing animals or causing them unnecessary suffering. It only justifies such actions if there is an irreconcilable conflict between the interests of human beings and other animals. If a hippo is about to attack a person, for example, and the only way to prevent the attack is to injure or kill it, then the argument that people matter more than animals is a sufficient reason to justify a pre-emptive attack on the hippo. More generally, if killing animals for food were necessary to human survival, this reason would again be sufficient. In the past, it was probably the case that nutrition from animal sources was necessary for human survival and development: anthropological studies suggest that the expansion of the brain size of homo sapiens was dependent on the rich sources of protein found only from animal sources.⁷ Certain human communities even now are dependent on killing animals for their continued existence: this is arguably the case, for example, for Inuit communities which are heavily dependent on fish, seals, caribou and other mammals in their diet.⁸ For the vast majority of the world population today, however, a nutritionally adequate diet is available that does not rely on killing animals, so we are not forced to choose between animal and human welfare. In fact, not eating animals is

likely to be better for people too, both on the grounds of individual health and global food provision.⁹

To acknowledge that people matter more than animals, then, is not an argument for killing animals for food: if their lives do matter, and we do not need to eat them, we must find another justifying reason.

2. Perfect harmony in our relationship to animals is unattainable

Sometimes killing animals for food is defended on the grounds that beyond this point it is hard to find a morally consistent position. There is some merit in this argument. For example, milk and beef production are interrelated, so eating meat but not dairy products is not a completely consistent option. Similarly, if in some cases medical experimentation on animals is justified—and in rare cases I believe it is¹⁰—then approving of this may seem at odds with a rejection of meat eating. I think it is simply

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and clearly the case that we cannot find a position of absolute moral purity in our relationship to the rest of the animal world. If we stop eating dairy products, and abandon all animal experiments, we would still be consuming resources that would enable other animals to live in our place if we were absent. In a theological context, we could identify this inescapable competition with a fallen creation at odds with itself: outside Eden, perfect harmony between God's creatures is no longer a possibility.

While we must give up on the aspiration to have completely clean hands in relation to the animal world, however, this is not a good argument for not doing what we can to avoid unnecessary animal suffering and death. Moral perfection must not

become the enemy of moral responsibility. Just as we would not refuse food to a starving person on the grounds that we do not have enough food to help all those who are starving, so we cannot kill and mistreat animals on the grounds that perfect harmony in our relations with them is unattainable.

3. The Bible justifies meat eating

After the flood, God gives Noah and his sons a new permission. In the creation narrative, human beings are only given plants for food (Gen. 1.29), now they are allowed to eat ‘every moving thing that lives’ (Gen. 9.3).¹¹ The taste for meat is clearly quickly acquired: after the Exodus the Israelites tire of eating the manna God provides and cry out for meat. They are given by God a multitude of quails—though they are struck down for their ingratitude ‘while the meat was still between their teeth’ (Num. 11.33). The explicit permission to eat meat is repeated in Deuteronomy: when the Israelites say ‘I am going to eat some meat’ God’s reply is that they may eat it whenever they want (Dt. 12.20). In the New Testament, the position seems unchanged: while there is no record of Jesus eating meat, he helps the disciples catch fish, eats fish with them (Luke 5.1–11, 24.42–3; John 21.1–11) and gives fish to the crowds to eat (Mt. 15.29–37 & ||). Peter receives a vision of all kinds of animals and birds and is told to ‘kill and eat’ (Acts 10.9–16); Paul asserts that no food is unclean and identifies those who eat only vegetables as being weak in faith (Rom. 14.2, 14).

There are three reasons why I do not consider this array of texts decisive in justifying killing animals for food. The first is that our situation is different in an important respect from that of the journeying Israelites or the inhabitants of first century Palestine. I have noted above that it is justifiable to kill animals for food where there are not nutritionally adequate alternatives: almost certainly this would have been

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true for those journeying in the desert or living on the shores of the Sea of Galilee; it is not for most people today.

The second reason we should not quickly reach a conclusion on the basis of these texts is that moral awareness develops over time. The discussion of the position of slaves and women in the Bible is the clearest example of this. We have come to realise—as the authors of these texts did not—that the wider biblical account of what it means to be human is at odds with keeping slaves and with treating women as less than equal to men.¹² Paul's perspective on the eating of animals, therefore, could be limited by the time and place in which he was living in the same way as I would suggest some of his thinking about the role of women in the church is so limited. Obviously, we cannot make the same argument in relation to the personal example of Jesus Christ. Yet the incarnation was God's self-limitation: a choice to work within a creaturely framework of time and place. It is arguable that in first century Palestine Jesus had to be male, rather than female, in order to be received as a teacher, whereas the same would not be true today; similarly, it may be that at that time he had to choose an exclusively male leadership team whereas today he would not.¹³ Christians are called to be followers of Christ, but not slavish imitators: we are called to take up our crosses (Mt. 16.28 & ||) but not to be crucified for the redemption of the world; we are called to have faith, but not to turn water into wine.¹⁴ It may be that Jesus Christ chose only male leaders and ate fish, but that we should appoint women and men on the basis of their calling, and should not kill animals unnecessarily.

The third reason I do not consider the biblical texts cited to be a decisive justification for eating meat is that, just as in the cases of slaves and women, they are in tension with a wider biblical perspective that recognises killing to be problematic. We have already noted that the creation narrative allows only plants for food: the permission to eat meat appears as a second best option, a concession by God after the Fall and the flood. This sense is strengthened by the prophetic vision of a time when all killing will end, when the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the cow and the bear, the child and the viper, will live in peace, and no harm will be done on God's holy mountain (Is. 11.6–9). In Romans, Paul shares this vision of a time when the whole of creation will be freed from its bondage to rejoice in the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8.20). Killing animals for food had no place in God's original plan for creation, and will have no place when creation is freed from its bonds. In the meantime, the Bible recognises that it is sometimes appropriate, but wherever it can be avoided, it can be seen in this wider

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biblical context as a small and humble witness to the inbreaking of God's reign of peace.

4. Animals taste good

I judge this to be a major reason operative in the decisions people make to eat meat: among the many sources of nutrition available, like the Israelites, people prefer to include meat in their diet. To give up eating animals is a significant sacrifice: it is the denial of a source of considerable pleasure. I do not wish to understate the force of this point—though I would want to affirm that joyful feasting remains a possibility

without animals on the menu. I do wish to claim, however, that if the lives and welfare of animals matter, as I argued above, then human pleasure in consuming them is an insufficient moral justification for inflicting on them unnecessary suffering and premature death. To live a morally authentic life requires denying ourselves very many pleasures we would enjoy if the interests of others were of no account: not eating animals is just one example.

5. Nature, tradition, economics and habit

Meat eating is a longstanding human practice: I have already dated the beginning of the practice to very early in human history both in biblical and archaeological terms. Meat may well have been essential to human evolution, and our digestive system has developed to derive nutrition from it. This biological reality has a cultural dimension: we are deeply immersed in the rituals of meat eating; ‘Christmas isn’t Christmas without a turkey’, is one example. The scale of our consumption of meat means this cultural fact is also an economic one: the meat industry generates significant income for the national economy and is a sizable employer in the UK and elsewhere, and any major shift away from meat eating would have consequences for many livelihoods.

For human beings to switch to an exclusively vegetarian diet, therefore, would be an evolutionary and cultural novelty with an economic cost. I do not underestimate the scale of the change required, but, as in the individual case of dietary preference just mentioned, I do not consider that arguments simply from the combined momentum of biology, tradition, income generation, or employment can finally morally outweigh the interests of animals. If a practice is morally objectionable, such secondary considerations cannot finally be decisive: some evolutionary traits—such as abandoning the weak and reproductively unfit—some traditions—such as bear

baiting—some means of income generation—such as elephant poaching—and some kinds of employment

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—such as lion taming in the circus ring—must be judged illegitimate whatever their other benefits.

Tradition and culture find a place in individual lives, and I do not underestimate the difficulty of changing dietary habits in a context where meat eating has such a strong cultural meaning. In the end, however, we are capable of effecting changes even in our mostly deeply ingrained habits: certainly, we cannot use the past as a legitimate reason for not addressing moral issues in the present.

6. It's for their own good

In my view, none of the above reasons succeed in providing a justifying reason for killing animals for food on the basis of the interests of humans. The final reason I will consider takes a different tack: that eating animals is justifiable simply in relation to their own interests. If we did not eat meat, there would not be so many animals, according to this argument. There would be no cows living in the fields, no sheep grazing the hills, no chickens pecking around yards. Surely the lives animals live, prematurely shortened as they are, are better than no lives at all? In comparison with wild animals, their lot is a happy one: plentiful provision of food, protection from predators and veterinary care.¹⁵

There are two important responses to make to this argument. The first is that very many of the animals raised for human consumption in this country and worldwide live in conditions that it is hard to construe as preferable to no life at all:

battery hens, stalled and crated pigs, and lengthy inhumane journeys to slaughter are the most glaring examples, but not the only ones. If keeping animals to kill for food is to be construed as a benefit to them, the lives they live must be lives worth living; for most people, eating only animals raised in this way would be to become practically vegetarian given the current state of farm animal welfare standards.

The second response to this argument is a broader one: is it the case that we are only prepared to make room for animals of material benefit to us? Nature reserves and conservation efforts speak of a recognition that we have a responsibility to nurture animal life irrespective of whether we have a direct economic interest in it.

Undoubtedly, if there were a further widespread shift away from meat eating, there would be fewer farmed animals, but we could decide to find a continued place for these animals we have lived alongside for so long, and devoting fewer resources to raising animals for meat could also mean we could devote more space to populations of wild animals. The claim that we must kill and eat animals,

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because otherwise we are not prepared to tolerate them at all, is to claim that we are incapable of making morally responsible decisions.

In this article I have examined six potential justifications for eating animals. Once my initial point is conceded—that the lives and welfare of animals matter—my judgement is that the reasons I have identified, taken individually or collectively, do not constitute a morally sufficient justification for killing animals for food. All those seeking to act responsibly in relation to other animals should choose a diet that

depends as little as possible on their suffering and premature death. In a theological perspective, renouncing the unnecessary killing of our fellow creatures becomes a small sign of the present and future reality of God's just and peaceful reign.¹⁶

¹ P. Hawkins, 'Recognizing and Assessing Pain, Suffering and Distress in Laboratory Animals: A Survey of Current Practice in the UK with Recommendations'. Laboratory Animals 36:4 (2002), p. 378–395, 379.

² Philosophers have denied the validity of ascribing suffering to animals on a variety of grounds: for a survey, see Angus Taylor, Magpies, Monkeys and Morals: What Philosophers Say About Animal Liberation, Peterborough, Ont., Broadview, 1999. Descartes believed that animals do not possess minds; Wittgenstein considered that language was a necessary condition of suffering. As Singer notes, however, we have about as much evidence that other animals suffer, as we have that other human beings do (Peter Singer, Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man's Inhumanity to Animals, London, Cape, 1990).

³ We may note in passing that John Wesley was clear that Romans 8 should be interpreted in this way: 'Away with vulgar prejudices, and let the plain word of God take place. [Animals] "shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into glorious liberty", — even a measure, according as they are capable, — of "the liberty of the children of God"' ('The Great Deliverance', in The Works of John Wesley (CD-ROM Edition), edited by Thomas Jackson, Franklin, TN, Providence House, 1995, vol. 6, Sermon 60, section III.2, p. 249).

⁴ Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, New York, Harmony Books, 1980. Interestingly for our present purposes, Adams also explains that the earth was designed as an experiment on humankind by mice, and that the dolphins (the second most intelligent species after the mice) eventually had to give up on repeated attempts to warn humans of their imminent fate by means of acrobatic leaps and somersaults.

⁵ The UK is among the countries with the highest standards of animal welfare for farm animals, yet the reports of the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), an independent advisory body established by the government, make clear that there are significant animal welfare issues on UK farms. Reports on the welfare of turkeys, pigs, fish, laying and broiler hens, dairy cattle and red meat animals at slaughter are available from the FAWC website (<http://www.fawc.org.uk>) and others are available on request from the Secretariat.

⁶ This is true even before we start worrying about the boundary between animals and plants, which is unclear. For a persuasive defence of thinking differently about humans and other animals in the context of a deep appreciation of dogs and their

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relationship to human beings, see 'Human Beings and Animals' in Raimond Gaita, The Philosopher's Dog, London, Routledge, 2003.

⁷ See, for example, C. L. Broadhurst *et al.*, 'Brain-Specific Lipids from Marine, Lacustrine, or Terrestrial Food Resources: Potential Impact on Early African Homo Sapiens', Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology, Part B 131:4 (2002), 653–673.

⁸ We should acknowledge, however, that there are recognised health risks in consuming animals in which pollutants are concentrated, and that there are public health recommendations for Inuit communities in Canada to eat less 'country food': see Gérard Duhaime, *et al.*, 'The Impact of Dietary Changes among the Inuit of Nunavik (Canada): A Socioeconomic Assessment of Possible Public Health Recommendations Dealing with Food Contamination', Risk Analysis 24:4, 1007–1018.

⁹ See, M. Helms, 'Food Sustainability, Food Security and the Environment', British Food Journal 106:5 (2004), 380–387.

¹⁰ I also consider, however, that most of the current medical experimentation on animals is unjustifiable, quite apart from the testing of cosmetic products.

¹¹ In this passage, God promises Noah that a reckoning will be demanded of any creature that takes human life (Gen. 9.5). One way of construing the moral responsibility for animal life I am arguing for is to extend this reckoning to all animal life: can we render an account to God for our killing of animals? Where this is necessary for human survival, I believe we can; where there are adequate nutritional alternatives, I think the account cannot be made to balance.

¹² For a recent discussion of these texts, see William J. Webb, Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis, Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 2001.

¹³ Note, however, that some have claimed that the role of female disciples of Jesus has been understated: see, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, London, SCM Press, 1983.

¹⁴ For a reflection on ethical relevance of the distance between Jesus Christ and his followers, see, Gene Outka, 'Following at a Distance: Ethics and the Identity of Jesus', in Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation, ed. Garrett Green, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987.

¹⁵ In the interesting first chapter of his meat cookbook Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall makes the case for the ethical consumption of meat on this basis: 'The critical point is that we may claim the moral authority to kill animals for food only on the basis that we are offering them a better deal in life than they would get without our help' (The River Cottage Meat Book, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2004, p. 24). While he is honest enough to recognise that we almost universally renege on this deal, he does cite with approval Stephen Budiansky's odd argument that animals are farmed by their consent (see The Covenant of the Wild, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999). I agree, however, that a very great deal would be gained if we only ate animals that had been treated as well as this.

¹⁶ For a more extensive discussion of animals in the context of Christianity that accords with my position here, see the work of Andrew Linzey, especially Christianity and the Rights of Animals, London, SPCK, 1987, and Animal Theology, London, SCM, 1994. In my ongoing work on this topic, I would be grateful for feedback on arguments for meat eating I have missed or treated inadequately. Please address comments to me at David.Clough@durham.ac.uk or St. John's College, Durham DH1 3RJ.