

Veganism as a Moral Imperative

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If it is believed that causing unnecessary harm to sentient beings is a priori wrong, veganism is a moral imperative. This idea challenges what has been ingrained in society since the beginning of time, that our consumption of animals and their bi-products is justified simply because of our desire to do so, and in turn forces moral consideration of the lives of animals in the many decisions humans make. Veganism is defined as an ethical movement or position (when referring to the individual) that tries to reduce animal suffering and harm as far as practically possible. This includes but is not limited to avoiding consuming animals and their bi-products as much as possible, and not contributing to industries that cause said harm. Most people would agree that animals or at least some species deserve some moral consideration, and this is reflected by companion animal protection laws in various countries and outcry regarding owner abuse, certain medical experiments and shelter euthanasia. However many do not extend these considerations to livestock and other animals where their use and exploitation for food or their products are so normalized. In this essay I will not be arguing for the equal moral status of non-human animals and humans, but rather equal consideration in regards to their moral status. I will argue that the harm we cause by killing animals for food is entirely unjustified in our industrialized society today by arguing contra speciesism.

The Yulin Dog Meat Festival in Guangxi, China where festival goers consume thousands of dogs causes social media outcry yearly. Petitions are shared online around June in attempt to end this tradition. Horrible pictures of dogs are spread around being kept in terrible conditions such as small wire pens, while appearing diseased and sickly. If this

occurred in western society, a citizen who kept dogs in such conditions would likely be prosecuted on the grounds of animal abuse, yet replace the dogs in those cages with chickens and instead that individual will receive a government subsidy. It is easy to take a clear stand on a secluded, far-away issue such as a dog meat festival in China or bull-fighting in Spain but this becomes much more difficult when we start to question practices or even traditions closer to home, especially those that we participate in ourselves. However these are questions that we must consider. Why has society decided that some animals are to be eaten, and others are not? We've arbitrarily categorized animals this way based on species and the most desirable companion animals. When we ask a meat eater why they wouldn't eat a dog but would eat a pig or a cow the first crutch they will go to is either intelligence, emotional contagion or personality. Almost anyone with a pet dog would never doubt the idea that they have unique personalities and are quite intelligent, yet this question comes up often with livestock and other such animals. Neuroscientist Lori Marino of Emory University has done lots of research on the diverse cognitive and behavioural abilities of many animals but there are two I would like to draw attention to. In the studies 'A Comparative Review of Cognition, Emotion, and Personality of *Sus domesticus* (pigs)' (Marino & Colin, 2015) and 'The Psychology of Cows' (Marino & Allen, 2017) it was found that pigs and cows share many cognitive capacities with other highly intelligent animals including dogs, chimpanzees, elephants, dolphins and even humans. This demonstrates that our basis for discrimination amongst companion and livestock animals doesn't actually have anything to do with emotional or cognitive ability but rather something else. Additionally, intelligence and ability to emote is not a monolith across a species. Within dogs, birds, pigs and even humans there are a wide range of cognitive and emotional abilities. A big step in changing our approach to animal rights is understanding that animals are not just mechanical beings that eat and sleep, but individuals that can form relationships, feel a wide range of emotions including

happiness, sadness and fear, and have the capacity to suffer. The reason we discriminate between companion animals and livestock has nothing to do with abilities, but convenience. Society has accepted certain animals as companions because they are cute, cuddly, and not too difficult to take care of because of their needs and size. We are more detached from livestock because they are logistically harder for most of society to connect with. I've established that our reasons for caring about the lives of some animals and not for others to be inconsistent and unjust, next let us look at the categories of species as a whole and determine whether or not species should hold any relevance in determining moral status through the lens of Peter Singer's Argument from Marginal Cases.

The Argument from Marginal Cases goes something like this: There must be a reason why certain individuals deserve moral consideration whilst others do not, and there must be a relevant characteristic or property that grants moral consideration that those we value possess and those we do not value lack. For example, if the characteristic valued is ability to have interests, braindead humans and fetuses the majority of their time in utero would not be included. Or, if the characteristic is intelligence, there may be some cases where a smarter pig is valued more than a mentally disabled pig. Now let us take an example outside the boundaries of a species. If the trait valued is ability to rationalize, a pig may be valued more than a comatose human with a slim chance of awakening. What characteristics we choose to value may be hotly debated, but whatever one chosen, it must be held consistently across the board regardless of species. One may argue that membership to a certain species is a characteristic or property, and an argument to defend this is called the Argument from Species Normality. This argument posits that "The moral status of an individual depends on what is normal for their species" (Machan, 2004). So because most humans are generally more intelligent than many animals, all members of the species homo sapien ought to be

valued more than other animals. But this argument leads to some absurd conclusions. If a chimp happens to excel in cognitive function and emotional ability past the level of most humans, is this chimp not worthy of moral consideration? Even if the defender of the Species Normality Argument accepts this, let us take it one step further. Should we be holding marginal cases to the same standard as the 'norm' of the kind? For example if a severely disabled individual or toddler with little to no moral agency kills someone, must they be held accountable in the same way as grown humans with a moral compass? Or should there be exceptions on the basis that they don't have the characteristic necessary to be treated as such. It makes more sense to hold them to the standard of the animal who cannot be held accountable because they do not have that property. There is one other thing a defender of the Species Normality Argument must do to prove the argument sound. Be able to provide a clear fundamental difference between species. If only and all members of the species homo sapien deserve moral consideration there must be a relevant characteristic or property that applies to all members of the species. This idea is known as species essentialism, which has generally been rejected by both biologists and philosophers. Traditional essentialists argue that 'kinds' "must possess definitional essences that define them in terms of necessary and sufficient, intrinsic, unchanging, ahistorical properties" (Boyd 1999: 146). Until a solid defence of this concept can be established, arguments that rely upon the lines of species are obsolete.

"If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans?" (Singer, 1975). This quote from the book *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer summarizes this question well. What gives humans the right to consume and exploit animals if we determine it is wrong to do within our own species? Nevermind the idea that arbitrary species membership should play no role in terms of the moral consideration we grant individuals. We should be

taking into account the interests of all sentient beings and minimize their ability to be harmed as far as practically possible. A rejection of speciesism does not mean that lives of all sentient beings are of equal worth. One's ability for meaningful relations, deeper cognitive thought, and moral agency may all come into play when it comes to life of death, however when addressing the question of unnecessary harm, the interests of all those with the capacity to be harmed need to be taken into account. In this case, living in an industrialized society with many resources available to us, veganism is a moral imperative.

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