

Other philosophers, however, are not as pessimistic as Rachels about the possibility of more ethical methods of meat production. Frey, for instance, insists that there are already millions of animals being “farmed but not factory-farmed,” that not all animals suffer as much as veal calves do, and that animal farming methods that cause less suffering than those used in intensive factory-farming (traditional farming methods, for example) are possible.

The Moral Argument for Vegetarianism

JAMES RACHELS

The idea that it is morally wrong to eat meat may seem faintly ridiculous. After all, eating meat is a normal, well-established part of our lives; people have always eaten meat; and many find it difficult even to conceive of what an alternative diet would be like. So it is not easy to take seriously the possibility that it might be wrong. Moreover, vegetarianism is commonly associated with Eastern religions whose tenets we do not accept and with extravagant, unfounded claims about health. A quick perusal of vegetarian literature might confirm the impression that it is all a crackpot business; tracts have titles like “Victory through Vegetables” and promise that if we will only keep to a meatless diet, we will have perfect health and be filled with wisdom. Of course we can ignore this kind of nonsense. However, there are other arguments for vegetarianism that must be taken seriously. **The most powerful argument appeals to the principle that it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering.**

The wrongness of cruelty to animals is often explained in terms of its effects on human beings. The idea seems to be that although the animals themselves are not morally important, cruelty has bad consequences for humans, and so it is wrong for that reason. In legal writing, cruelty to animals has been included among the “victimless crimes,” and the problem of justifying legal prohibitions has been viewed as comparable to justifying the prohibition of other behavior, such as prostitution or the distribution of pornography, where no one is hurt. In

1963 the distinguished legal scholar Louis Schwartz wrote that, in prohibiting the torturing of animals, “It is not the mistreated dog who is the ultimate object of concern.... Our concern is for the feelings of other human beings, a large proportion of whom, although accustomed to the slaughter of animals for food, readily identify themselves with a tortured dog or horse and respond with great sensitivity to its sufferings.”¹

Philosophers have also adopted this attitude. Kant, for example, held that we have no direct duties to nonhuman animals. “The Categorical Imperative,” the ultimate principle of morality, applies only to our dealings with people: “The practical imperative, therefore, is the following: Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”² And of other animals, Kant says: “But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as means to an end. That end is man.”³ He adds that we should not be cruel to animals only because “he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men.”⁴

Surely, this is unacceptable. Cruelty to animals ought to be opposed, not only because of the ancillary effects on humans, but also because of the direct

¹“The Moral Argument for Vegetarianism” by James Rachels in *Can Ethics Provide Answers?*, 99–107. © 1997 Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

effects on the animals themselves. Animals that are tortured suffer, just as tortured humans suffer, and that is the primary reason it is wrong. We object to torturing humans on a number of grounds, but the main one is that the victims suffer so. Insofar as nonhuman animals also suffer, we have the same reason to oppose torturing them, and it is indefensible to take the one suffering but not the other as grounds for objection.

Although cruelty to animals is wrong, it does not follow that we are never justified in inflicting pain on an animal. Sometimes we are justified in doing this, just as we are sometimes justified in inflicting pain on humans. It does follow, however, that there must be a good reason for causing the suffering, and if the suffering is great, the justifying reason must be correspondingly powerful. As an example, consider the treatment of the civet cat, a highly intelligent and sociable animal. Civet cats are trapped and placed in small cages inside darkened sheds, where fires keep the temperature up to 110 degrees Fahrenheit.⁵ They are confined in this way until they die. What justifies this extraordinary mistreatment? These animals have the misfortune to produce a substance that is useful in the manufacture of perfume. Musk, which is scraped from their genitals once a day for as long as they can survive, makes the scent of perfume last a bit longer after each application. (The heat increases their “production” of musk.) Here Kant’s rule—“Animals are merely means to an end; that end is man”—is applied with a vengeance. To promote one of the most trivial interests we have, animals are tormented for their whole lives.

It is usually easy to persuade people that this use of animals is not justified and that we have a moral duty not to support such cruelties by consuming their products. The argument is simple: Causing suffering is not justified unless there is a good reason; the production of perfume made with musk causes suffering; our enjoyment of this product is not a good enough reason to justify causing that suffering; therefore, the use of animals in this way is wrong. Once people learn the facts about musk production, they come to regard using such products as morally objectionable. They are surprised to discover, however, that an exactly analogous argument can be given in connection with the use of animals as food. Animals that are raised and slaughtered

for food also suffer, and our enjoyment of the way they taste is not a sufficient justification for mistreating them.

Most people radically underestimate the amount of suffering that is caused to animals who are raised and slaughtered for food.⁶ They believe, in a vague way, that slaughterhouses are cruel and perhaps that methods of slaughter ought to be made more humane. But after all, the visit to the slaughterhouse is a relatively brief episode in the animal’s life; and beyond that, people imagine that the animals are treated well enough. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today the production of meat is big business, and the helpless animals are treated more as machines in a factory than as living creatures.

Veal calves, for example, spend their lives in pens too small to allow them to turn around or even to lie down comfortably—exercise toughens the muscles, which reduces the quality of the meat; and besides, allowing the animals adequate living space would be prohibitively expensive. In these pens the calves cannot perform such basic actions as grooming themselves, which they naturally desire to do, because there is not room for them to twist their heads around. It is clear that the calves miss their mothers, and like human infants they want something to suck; they can be seen trying vainly to suck the sides of their stalls. In order to keep their meat pale and tasty, they are fed a liquid diet deficient in iron and roughage. Naturally, they develop cravings for these things, because they need them. The calf’s craving for iron is so strong that if it is allowed to turn around, it will lick at its own urine, although calves normally find this repugnant. The tiny stall, which prevents the animal from turning, solves this problem. The craving for roughage is especially strong since without it the animal cannot form a cud to chew. It cannot be given any straw for bedding, since the animal would be driven to eat it and that would spoil the meat. For these animals the slaughterhouse is not an unpleasant end to an otherwise contented life. As terrifying as the process of slaughter is, for them it may actually be a merciful release.

Similar stories can be told about the treatment of other animals on which we dine. In order to produce animals by the millions, it is necessary to keep them crowded together in small spaces. Chickens are commonly kept four or five to a space smaller

than a newspaper page. Unable to walk around or even stretch their wings—much less build a nest—the birds become vicious and attack one another. The problem is exacerbated because the birds are so crowded that because they are unable to move, their feet sometimes grow around the wire floors of the cages, anchoring them to the spot. An anchored bird cannot escape attack no matter how desperate it becomes. Mutilation of the animals is an efficient solution. To minimize the damage they can do to one another, poultry farmers cut off their beaks. The mutilation is painful but probably not as painful as other sorts of mutilations that are routinely practiced. Cows are castrated, not to prevent the unnatural “vices” to which overcrowded chickens are prone, but because castrated cows put on more weight and there is less danger of meat being tainted by male hormones.

In Britain an anesthetic must be used, unless the animal is very young, but in America anesthetics are not in general use. The procedure is to pin the animal down, take a knife and slit the scrotum, exposing the testicles. You then grab each testicle in turn and pull on it, breaking the cord that attaches it; on older animals it may be necessary to cut the cord.⁷

It must be emphasized that such treatment is not out of the ordinary. It is typical of the way that animals raised for food are treated, now that meat production is big business. As Peter Singer puts it, these are the sorts of things that happened to your dinner when it was still an animal.

What accounts for such cruelties? As for the meat producers, there is no reason to think they are unusually cruel people. They simply accept the common attitude expressed by Kant: “Animals are merely means to an end; that end is man.” The cruel practices are adopted not because they are cruel but because they are efficient, given that one’s only concern is to produce meat (and eggs) for humans as cheaply as possible. But clearly this use of animals is immoral if anything is. **Since we can nourish ourselves very well without eating them, our only reason for doing all this to the animals is our enjoyment of the way they taste. And this will not even come close to justifying the cruelty.**

Does this mean that we should stop eating meat? It is tempting to say: “What is objectionable

is not *eating* the animals, but only making them suffer. Perhaps we ought to protest the way they are treated and even work for better treatment of them. But it doesn’t follow that we must stop eating them.” This sounds plausible until we realize that it would be impossible to treat the animals decently and still produce meat in sufficient quantities to make it a normal part of our diets. Cruel methods are used in the meat-production industry because such methods are economical; they enable the producers to market a product that people can afford. Humanely produced chicken, beef, and pork would be so expensive that only the very rich could afford them. (Some of the cruelties might be eliminated without too much expense—the cows could be given an anesthetic before castration, for example, even though this alone would mean a slight increase in the cost of beef. But others, such as overcrowding, could not be eliminated without really prohibitive cost.) So to work for better treatment for the animals would be to work for a situation in which most of us would have to adopt a vegetarian diet.

Still, there remains the interesting theoretical question: If meat could be produced humanely, without mistreating the animals before killing them painlessly, would there be anything wrong with it? The question has only theoretical interest, because the actual choice we face in the supermarket is whether to buy the remains of animals that were not treated humanely. Still, the question has some interest, and we may take a quick look at it.

First, it is a vexing issue whether animals have a “right to life” that is violated when we kill them for trivial purposes; but we should not simply assume until it is proved otherwise that they don’t have such a right. We assume that humans have a right to life—it would be wrong to murder a normal, healthy human even if it were done painlessly—and it is hard to think of any plausible rationale for granting this right to humans that does not also apply to other animals. **Other animals live in communities, as do humans; they communicate with one another and have ongoing social relationships; killing them disrupts lives that are perhaps not as complex emotionally and intellectually as our own but that are nevertheless quite complicated. They suffer and are capable of happiness as well as fear**

and distress, as we are. So what could be the rational basis for saying that we have a right to life but that they don't? Or even more pointedly, what could be the rational basis for saying that a severely retarded human, who is inferior in every important respect to an intelligent animal, has a right to life but that the animal doesn't? Philosophers often treat such questions as "puzzles," assuming that there must be answers even if we are not clever enough to find them. But perhaps there are no acceptable answers to this question. If it seems, intuitively, that there must be some difference between us and the other animals that confers on us, but not on them, a right to life, perhaps this intuition is mistaken. At the very least, the difficulty of answering such questions should make us hesitant about asserting that it is all right to kill animals so long as we don't make them suffer, unless we are also willing to take seriously the possibility that it is all right to kill people so long as we don't make them suffer.

But let me make a more definite suggestion about this. If we want to know whether animals have a right to life, we should start by asking why humans have such a right. What is it about humans that gives them a right to life? If humans have a right to life, but plants, say, do not, then there must be some difference between them that explains why one has a right the other lacks. There must be characteristics possessed by humans but not by plants that qualify the humans for this right. Therefore, one way to approach our question is by trying to identify those characteristics. Then we can ask whether any non-human animals have those characteristics.

With respect to the characteristics that qualify one for a right to life, my suggestion is that an individual has a right to life if that individual has a life. Like many philosophical ideas, this one is more complicated than it first appears.

Having a life is different from merely being alive. The latter is a biological notion—to be alive is just to be a functioning biological organism. It is the opposite of being dead. But "a life," in the sense that concerns us here, is a notion of biography rather than of biology. "The life of Babe Ruth" will be concerned not with the biological facts of Ruth's existence—he had a heart and liver and blood and kidneys—but with facts about his history, beliefs, actions, and relationships:

He was born George Herman Ruth in Baltimore in 1895, the troubled child of a poor family. He was sent to live at St. Mary's School when he was eight; he learned baseball there and started pitching for the Red Sox at nineteen. Babe was an outstanding pitcher for six seasons before switching to the Yankee outfield and going on to become the most idolized slugger in the history of the game. He hit 60 home runs in a single season and 714 overall. He was the beer-guzzling friend of Lou Gehrig and was married to Claire. He died of cancer at age fifty-three.

These are some of the facts of his life. They are not biological facts.

Death is an evil when it puts an end not simply to being alive but to a life. Some humans, tragically, do not have lives and never will. An infant with Tay-Sachs disease will never develop beyond about six months of age, there may be some regression at that point, and it will die. Suppose such an infant contracts pneumonia; the decision might be made not to treat the pneumonia and to allow the baby to die. The decision seems justified because in the absence of any possibility of a life in the biological sense, life in the biological sense has little value. The same sort of consideration explains why it seems so pointless to maintain persons in irreversible coma. The families of such patients are quick to realize that merely being alive is unimportant. The mother of a man who died after six years in a coma told a newspaper reporter, "My son died at age 34 after having lived for 28 years."⁸ It was a melodramatic remark, and on the surface a paradoxical one—how can one die at 34 and have lived only 28 years?—yet what she meant is clear enough. The man's life was over when he entered the coma, even though he was alive for 6 years longer. The temporal boundaries of one's being alive need not be the same as the temporal boundaries of one's life.

Therefore, it is unwise to insist that any animal, human or nonhuman, has a right to life simply because it is a living being. The doctrine of the sanctity of life, interpreted as applying merely to biological life, has little to recommend it. My suggestion about the right to life is that an individual has a right to life if that individual has a life in

What about infants?

the biographical sense. By this criterion, at least some nonhuman animals would have such a right. Monkeys, to take the most obvious example, have lives that are quite complex. They are remarkably intelligent, they have families and live together in social groups, and they apparently have forward-looking and backward-looking attitudes. Their lives do not appear to be as emotionally or intellectually complex as the lives of humans; but the more we learn about them, the more impressed we are with the similarities between them and us.

Of course we do not know a great deal about the lives of the members of most other species. To make intelligent judgments about them, we need the sort of information that could be gained by observing animals in their natural homes rather than in the laboratory—although laboratory-acquired information can be helpful. When baboons, dogs, and wolves have been studied in the wild, it has been found that the lives of individual animals, carried out within pack societies, are surprisingly diverse. But we are only beginning to appreciate the richness of the animal kingdom.

In our present state of semi-ignorance about other species, the situation seems to be this. When we consider the mammals with which we are most familiar, it is reasonable to believe that they do have lives in the biographical sense. They have emotions and cares and social systems and the rest, although perhaps not in just the way that humans do. Then the further down the old phylogenetic scale we go, the less confidence we have that there is anything resembling a life. When we come to bugs, or shrimp, the animals pretty clearly lack the mental capacities necessary for a life, although they certainly are alive. Most of us already have an intuitive sense of the importance of these gradations—we think that killing a human is worse than killing a monkey, but we also think that killing a monkey is a more morally serious matter than swatting a fly. And when we come to plants, which are alive but to which the notion of a biographical life is not applicable at all, our moral qualms about killing vanish altogether. If my suggestion about the right to life is correct, these feelings have a rational basis: *insofar as we have reason to view other creatures as having lives, as we do, we have reason to view them as having a right to life, if we do.*

Finally, it is important to see the slaughter of animals for food as part of a larger pattern that characterizes our whole relationship with the non-human world. Animals are taken from their natural homes to be made objects of our entertainment in zoos, circuses, and rodeos. They are used in laboratories, not only for experiments that are themselves morally questionable, but also in testing everything from shampoo to chemical weapons. They are killed so that their heads can be used as wall decorations or their skins as ornamental clothing or rugs. Indeed, simply killing them for the fun of it is thought to be sport. This pattern of cruel exploitation flows naturally from the Kantian attitude that animals are nothing more than things to be used for our purposes. It is this whole attitude that must be opposed, and not merely its manifestation in our willingness to hurt the animals we eat. Once one rejects this attitude and no longer regards the animals as disposable at one's whim, one ceases to think it all right to kill them, even painlessly, just for a snack.

But for those of us who do not live on old-fashioned family farms, the question of whether it would be permissible to eat humanely treated, painlessly slaughtered animals is merely theoretical. The meat available to us at the supermarket was not produced by humane methods. To provide this meat, animals were abused in ways similar to the ones we have described; and millions of other animals are being treated in these ways now, with their flesh to appear soon in the markets. The practical issue is, should we support such practices by purchasing and consuming their products?

It is discouraging to realize that no animals will actually be helped simply by one person ceasing to eat meat. One consumer's behavior, by itself, cannot have a noticeable impact on an industry as vast as the meat business. However, it is important to see one's behavior in a larger context. There are already millions of vegetarians, and because they don't eat meat, there is less cruelty than there otherwise would be. *The question is whether one ought to side with that group or with the people whose practices cause the suffering.* Compare the position of someone thinking about whether to buy slaves in 1820. He might reason as follows: "The whole practice of slavery is immoral, but I cannot help any of the poor slaves by keeping clear of it. If I don't buy these

slaves, someone else will. One person's decision can't by itself have any impact on such a vast business. So I may as well own slaves like everyone else." The first thing we notice is that this fellow was too pessimistic about the possibilities of a successful movement; but beyond that, there is something else wrong with his reasoning. **If one really thinks that a social practice is immoral, that is sufficient grounds for refusing to participate in it.** In 1848 Henry David Thoreau remarked that even if someone did not want to devote himself to the abolition movement and actively oppose slavery, "it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support."⁹ In the case of slavery, this seems clear. If it seems less clear in the case of the cruel exploitation of nonhuman animals, perhaps it is because the Kantian attitude has so tenacious a hold on us.

NOTES

1. Louis B. Schwartz, "Morals Offenses and the Model Penal Code," in *Philosophy of Law*, ed. Joel Feinberg

- and Hyman Gross (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson, 1975), 156. First published in *Columbia Law Review* 63 (1963): 669–84.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 47.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper, 1963), 239.
4. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 240.
5. Muriel the Lady Dowding, "Furs and Cosmetics: Too High a Price?" in *Animals, Men, and Morals*, ed. Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, and John Harris (New York: Taplinger, 1972), 36.
6. The best account is chap. 3 of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review Books, 1975). I have drawn on Singer's work for the factual material in the following two paragraphs.
7. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 152.
8. *Miami Herald*, 26 August 1972, sec. A, p. 3.
9. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), 229–30. First published in 1848.

Moral Vegetarianism and the Argument from Pain and Suffering

R. G. FREY

This argument, championed by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* and *Practical Ethics*, by Stephen Clark in *The Moral Status of Animals*, and by many others, moves either directly or indirectly to moral vegetarianism from the pain and suffering which animals undergo in being bred, raised, and slaughtered for food. (Perhaps the most common way the argument moves from pain and suffering to moral vegetarianism indirectly is via the notion of interests. This requires that animals have interests, and one aim of my *Interests and Rights* was to deny that they do, at least in a sense that enables the argument to work.)

The argument from pain and suffering, of course, has a past; its use by Singer and others is but the most recent among several. The significance it has come to have, especially under the stimulus of *Animal Liberation*, stems from its application to intensive methods of food production, to factory or commercial farming. What Singer, amongst others, has done is to give the argument new and important life, by describing how some aspects of intensive

"Moral Vegetarianism and the Argument from Pain and Suffering" in *Rights, Killing, and Suffering* by R. G. Frey, 21–23, 27, 30–35. © 1983 Blackwell Publishers.

farming involve animal suffering and then using the argument to combat these farming practices.

I do not believe it betrays undue sensitivity to find certain practices employed on factory farms profoundly disturbing. To put no finer point on the matter, there are practices afoot on them, pre-eminently in the cases of laying hens and veal calves, of which we cannot be proud. Even if such practices are necessary to sustain the level of profits by which farmers, their families, the meat industry as a whole, and, through it, a very great many others prosper, we still do well not to be proud of having to resort to them. Some might suggest that the great pleasure human beings receive from consuming veal more than outweighs the suffering (no grain, no straw-bedding, no exercise, perpetual confinement in tiny slatted stalls, little muscle-growth, induced iron-deficiency and anemia, almost no daylight, tethered to prevent seeking iron and exercise) which these calves undergo in reaching the table. Even so, treatment such as this is not the sort of thing in which, morally, we take pride; and if it is something required in order to sustain a level or style of life to which we have become accustomed, we still do well to be disturbed that this is so.

As information about the treatment of, for example, veal calves has been more widely disseminated, more people have come to see this treatment as wrong. But this is by no means the end or even the essence of the matter for Singer; for it is central to his position—in fact, it seems the main feature of his position—that moral vegetarianism is *the means by which each of us* can move directly to eliminate the pains of food animals. Once we come to see our treatment of veal calves as wrong, vegetarianism is seen by Singer as the means by which each of us can do something about this treatment. This emerges very clearly from the central argument of *Animal Liberation*.

Animals can suffer, and since they can suffer, they have interests. In view of this fact, the moral principle of the equal consideration of interests applies to them, and this means that we are not morally justified in setting aside, ignoring, or otherwise devaluing their interests. This, however, is precisely what some factory farming practices, with their accompaniment of animal suffering, appear to involve, and the immorality which this represents

is, if anything, accentuated by the fact that we do not need meat in order to survive and to lead healthy lives.

We can, on the other hand, do something about this situation: by boycotting meat, we can draw down market forces upon the head of the factory farmer and so reduce or eliminate the suffering of food animals. When demand slackens, prices fall; when prices fall, profits diminish; and when profits diminish, the factory farmer has less capital to re-invest in food stock. (The same is true for farmers who employ traditional methods of farming.) By becoming a vegetarian, then, each of us hits directly and immediately at factory farming; for in giving up meat, we reduce the number of food animals bred and raised for market and thereby total animal suffering. Accordingly, a genuine concern for the interests of animals and so with a diminution in their suffering requires that we cease rearing animals for food and cease eating them.

The picture one carries away from Singer's book, then, is that becoming a moral vegetarian is the means by which each of us can reduce animal suffering and so help in the effort to right a wrong. Once we have identified certain farming practices as wrong, we can use vegetarianism as the tool, as the direct and immediate means for eliminating or mitigating those practices. What is more, this means is relatively painless on us, given that there are wholesome and nutritious alternatives to meat readily available.

This picture is enormously appealing and has contributed in no small measure, I think, to the impact of Singer's book. Later, in considering some aspects of the argument from pain and suffering, I shall challenge this picture of the effects of one's becoming a moral vegetarian; indeed, Singer himself, partly in response to my arguments, which he saw in earlier draft, has returned to it in his recent paper "Utilitarianism and vegetarianism" and has tried partially to redraw it, and I shall have something to say as well about these more recent remarks. Here, however, I am concerned only to make plain the contrast between this animal-based argument from pain and suffering and human-based arguments for moral vegetarianism.

....

By moral vegetarianism, then, I have in mind those cases for vegetarianism which locate the moral basis for boycotting meat in our treatment of animals in rearing and converting them into food.

Modern proponents of vegetarianism on this basis have relied principally upon three arguments to show that eating meat is wrong.

The argument from moral rights. This is the view that our present treatment of animals in converting them into food violates their moral right to life and/or freedom from unnecessary suffering. It is wrong to eat meat, then, because animals' moral rights have been violated in the course of their reaching our tables.

The argument from killing. This is the view that it is wrong to kill animals or to kill them for food, except, if at all, under conditions which few of us can pretend to be in. It is wrong to eat meat because animals have undergone the irretrievable wrong of being killed, in the course of becoming food for human consumption.

The argument from pain and suffering. This is the view, to repeat, that it is wrong to eat meat, because factory-farmed (and perhaps even some traditionally-farmed) animals have suffered a good deal and, thus, been wrongly treated, in the course of being turned into food.

.....

There is a curious feature of the arguments from moral rights, killing, and pain and suffering that I am sure many readers have noticed. It consists in the fact that, even if we were to regard the arguments as completely successful, they would by no means bar or eliminate all meat-eating. In this can be found the basis for distinguishing two very different conceptions of the status of vegetarianism.

PARTIAL AND ABSOLUTE EXCLUSIONS

When I first arrived at Oxford from Virginia, I became friendly with a mathematician from Calcutta. He was a vegetarian and abstained from all meat. Meals in college were very unpleasant for him, since they invariably featured meat dishes, and what vegetables there were were unappetizing, always the same, and—the great English gastronomic failure—overcooked. He regarded eating meat as an abomination; there were no circumstances—apart,

perhaps from direst necessity, and even this was uncertain—in which he would allow it to be right. Eating meat was simply excluded from consideration, and there was an end to it.

The arguments from moral rights, killing, and pain and suffering do not have the same absolutely dismissive effect. The reason is that the objections which they severally pose are not actually to eating animals but to the treatment animals receive in the course of being converted into food. The result is obvious: to animals which have not undergone the treatment in question, the arguments do not apply. Thus, since the argument from moral rights makes the wrongness of violating animals' moral rights crucial, it places no objection in the way of eating meat from animals whose rights have not been violated. Someone who is a vegetarian solely on the basis of this argument, then, has no reason per se to abstain from such meat, any more than someone who is a vegetarian on the basis of the argument from pain and suffering has any reason per se to abstain from eating the flesh of animals who have not been cruelly treated in being turned into food. This does not mean, of course, that these individuals will eat the meat in question, only that they must have one more shot in their lockers, if they are going to abstain on principle from this meat as well.

To my Indian friend, this situation would appear very strange indeed. For here are purported vegetarians who, prima facie, have no reason not to eat this meat. *He* does not eat meat at all; eating meat is quite excluded from consideration, whether the animal has had its rights violated or been killed or been made to suffer, or whether it has simply fallen from the heavens at one's feet or miraculously appeared in one's cooking pot. To him, it would be exceedingly peculiar to think that his vegetarianism required him to look carefully into the question of whether this chicken has had its rights violated, or had dropped dead from heart seizure, or had not suffered at some point in the past, as if one as opposed to some other answer would make it right for him to eat meat. The plain fact is that, so far as *his* vegetarianism is concerned, such questions are beside the point. Conversely, to the proponents of the three arguments, these questions are very much to the point, and their vegetarianism is conditioned by the responses given in their respective cases.

To this Indian, then, proponents of the three arguments appear more exercised by rights, killing, and suffering than by eating animals. What the arguments make out to be morally wrong is not actually eating animals but violating their alleged moral rights or killing them or making them suffer. Do none of these things, and the wrongness of eating meat vanishes. Here, then, are vegetarians of whom vegetarianism is only demanded if animals are treated one way rather than another. (In the case of the argument from pain and suffering, this result gives rise to a view which *prima facie* seems very strange. For there seems something odd indeed about a view which says in effect that when animals are (treated in such a way as to be) miserable they may not be eaten but when they are (treated in such a way as to be) happy and content they may be eaten. One's natural inclination would be to say the opposite, that when animals are contented, their lives are a benefit to them and that then, if ever, vegetarianism is demanded of us. I shall return to this point later, in connection with claims about the replaceability of animals.)

CONDITIONAL AND UNCONDITIONAL CONCEPTIONS

If we think of the position of this Indian mathematician as unconditional vegetarianism and that of the proponents of the three arguments as conditional vegetarianism, then how might we characterize the essential difference between these two conceptions of vegetarianism?

In his paper "Utilitarianism and vegetarianism," Peter Singer objects to Cora Diamond's claim¹ that his position yields the curious result that it is perfectly permissible to eat animals which are accident victims:

Why is this curious? It is only curious on the assumption that vegetarians must think it *always* wrong to eat meat. No doubt some vegetarians are moral absolutists, just as there are absolute pacifists, absolute anti-abortionists and absolute truth-tellers who would never tell a lie. I reject all these forms of moral absolutism.²

Doubtless Singer would regard unconditional vegetarians as absolutists, and doubtless there is a significant difference between my Indian friend and

Singer on this score. But the suggestion of the above passage—that some people think it always wrong to eat meat, whereas others, including Singer, think it only sometimes wrong—is not quite explicit as to the full difference between them.

If we think in terms of a distinction between unconditional and conditional vegetarianism, then the point I was making earlier can be put this way: when conditions of food animal treatment are one way rather than another, conditional vegetarianism ceases to have a ground, the result of which is, in the circumstances, to remove from conditional vegetarians their reason for abstaining from meat. When conditions are one way rather than another, vegetarianism is pointless; for the whole point of conditional vegetarianism is to improve the conditions in which animals are bred, raised, and slaughtered for food, and if conditions are already of the appropriate sort, then there is no point in adopting vegetarianism as the tactic by which to make them of that sort. Here, it seems to me, is encapsulated the essence of conditional vegetarianism: it is a tactic by means of which one hopes to improve the treatment of food animals. This is especially clear in the case of Singer, who regards vegetarianism based upon the argument from pain and suffering as the means by which to combat the pains of factory-farmed animals.

At the core of conditional vegetarianism, then, is a conception of vegetarianism as a tactic for combating the treatment or pains of food animals. But tactics are appropriate to circumstances, and a change in circumstances can, as we have seen, render one's tactics pointless. In the case of a conditional vegetarian, to persist in abstaining from meat, even when circumstances are of the desired sort, becomes a needless gesture.

Accordingly, to say merely that what separates my Indian friend from Singer is a form of absolutism, to say merely that conditional vegetarianism is limited (or applies only in respect of some animals) whereas unconditional vegetarianism is unlimited, leaves out any mention of the tactical conception of vegetarianism, which essentially defines the conditional position. This omission is of the utmost importance; for no one even remotely in sympathy with the views of my Indian friend could accept such a conception of vegetarianism. To this Indian, vegetarianism is something quite different: it represents a decision about how he will live in the world,

a decision tantamount in part to the adoption of a way of life, for a world which contains a multiplicity of creatures and things, each as much a part of the whole as he is. It represents an attempt to live in harmony with the creatures and things he finds around him and to encroach on them as little as they on the whole encroach on him. It represents an effort to see himself as part of the world, and not a world—and law—unto himself. So far as I can see, nothing could be further from a tactical conception of vegetarianism than this conception of how we shall live in a world where we are but part of the whole, of which conception vegetarianism is a constituent.

(Someone armed with such a conception of vegetarianism is very likely to find Singer's emphasis upon pain rather puzzling. For though my Indian friend is not indifferent to the pains of animals, it is not by virtue of the fact that they can feel pain that he thinks they warrant and obtain his respect. If asked whether it was because animals can feel pain that he tries to live in harmony with them, as one part of nature with another, he would, I think, view both the question and the questioner with deep puzzlement, not least because many portions of the whole of which he sees himself as a part *cannot* feel pain. In time, I believe he would come to think that only someone with a particular theory would seize upon pain in this way and elevate it or its avoidance to supreme importance in ethics.)³

I myself am as much opposed to moral absolutisms as is Singer and, I suspect, for many of the same reasons. I have used the example of this Indian mathematician simply in order to bring out the tactical conception of vegetarianism, which lies at the heart of conditional vegetarianism, especially that of Singer.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT AND COMPETING TACTICS

Apart from the fact that, as we have seen, some vegetarians reject the tactical conception of vegetarianism, this conception is exposed to counter-arguments of a specific type. If we stick with Singer as our example, then these counter-arguments stem directly from the literature on utilitarianism.

The specific type of counter-argument is this: if vegetarianism is a tactic for combating the pains of food animals, then this tactic ceases to have any point whatever, if we develop ways of breeding, raising, and slaughtering animals painlessly. In this

eventuality, we could eat all the meat we liked, and Singer would have no ground for complaint.

It will be claimed, however, that there is no meat available from animals which have not, in particular, been reared by painful methods. To this, there are three responses.

First, it is factually false; there are millions upon millions of animals presently being farmed but not factory-farmed. It is both tempting to argue and not obviously wrong to suggest that because traditional farming methods are held, even by vegetarians, to be vastly less painful than intensive ones, the argument from pain and suffering does not provide a reason for abstaining from the flesh of traditionally-farmed animals. (As we shall see, in connection with his views on killing, Singer himself appears prepared to accept this point about traditional farming.)

Second, not all intensively farmed animals suffer to anything like the degree of veal calves, or have the same methods of production used upon them. To give but a single example, in the United States, dairy cows are commercially farmed, and when their days as milk-producers come to an end, they are sent to slaughter. However, their lives are by no means as miserable as those of veal calves.

Third, if we focus solely upon factory-farmed animals, then we can see clearly to what the tactical conception of vegetarianism finally exposes Singer. For just as not eating meat is a tactic for dealing with the pains of food animals, so, too, is the package involving, among other things, maintaining and expanding traditional farming techniques, progressively eliminating painful practices in intensive farming, and funding research into and developing pain-killing drugs. As tactics, both are on all fours; one is not *per se* more morally correct than the other. Moreover, the latter tactic has two further attractions: first, it enables us not only to deal with animal pain but also to retain our present, meat-based diet intact, and second, it enables us to meet the claim that the heavy demand for meat today can only be satisfied by intensive methods of production.

In this way, vegetarianism, Singer's tactic, is confronted with competition. That is, we are confronted with different tactics for combating the pains of food animals, and the central issue between them becomes simply the degree of effectiveness in achieving this end. The determination of which of two tactics is more effective in lessening animal pain

is not a piece of theory but a matter of fact. If technological developments succeed in the encompassing way the one tactic envisages, then it may well be, on grounds of effectiveness, the preferred one, as new and better pain-killers, administered painlessly, reach more and more animals. This very real possibility cannot be eliminated a priori through any theoretical considerations. This is especially true for utilitarians such as Singer, for whom it must always remain a contingent affair whether the implementation of one policy has consequences which, in comparison with those of the implementation of another, make it the preferred or right policy. Effectiveness, then, is everything, and vegetarianism must confront and defeat (or at least not be defeated by) one after another competitor on this score; it by no means is *obviously* the most effective tactic for reducing the pains of food animals, so that all potential competitors can be ignored *ab initio*. (Later, I shall argue that the view that vegetarianism

is the most effective step one can take to reduce and eliminate food animal suffering is false.)

To my Indian friend, of course, all this squabbling over effectiveness is beside the point; for whether it is Singer or his opponent who has the more effective means for coming to grips with animal pain, eating meat remains an abomination, and that is that.

NOTES

1. Cora Diamond, "Eating meat and eating people," *Philosophy*, vol. 53, 1978, pp. 465–79.
2. Singer, "Utilitarianism and vegetarianism," pp. 327–8; italics in original.
3. It is not accidental that many of those concerned to develop an environmental ethic, especially if they have been influenced by the work of Aldo Leopold, are hostile to the use of pain to confer moral standing. See ch. 14. See also Frey, *Interests and Rights*, ch.4.

ARGUMENT 24 ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with Frey that the argument from suffering does not show that eating meat itself is immoral? Why or why not?
2. Is ethical meat production virtually impossible as Rachels says? Or is Frey right that more ethical methods are available? Explain.
3. Is Rachels' argument for vegetarianism sound? If not, where does it fail?