

But I like Meat

John Davis

I know why I am a vegan. And it seems so obvious it is the right thing to do that when I encounter someone who doesn't agree, all those argument and reasons which seem so clear in my mind somehow evaporate, leaving me stammering something along the lines of 'but eating meat and dairy is so cruel'. True, perhaps, but not the most convincing of arguments to someone who clearly doesn't think it so cruel that it is worth giving up their bacon and eggs. The following, then, are not so much answers I've given to people who question my veganism, as answers I wish I'd given, had I thought of them at the time, or had the courage.

Of course, perhaps you know them all already. In which case, all I can ask is where were you when I last had to eat a meal beside someone tucking into their roast flesh?!

You need meat and dairy to survive.

I am vegan, I am alive and healthy. Healthier than I was before I became a vegan, come to think of it.

There is nothing wrong with eating meat and dairy.

That depends on what you mean by wrong. But if, like me, your idea of what is wrong includes inflicting needless suffering on other beings, then it is wrong to eat meat and dairy.

Eating meat is natural.

Yes, in so much as many other species eat meat. They also commit rape, infanticide, and cannibalism. Just because an instinct to do something is natural doesn't automatically make it morally acceptable. Also, consider that other meat-eating animals do so because they have to in order to survive. We, on the other hand, have the luxury of not having to kill other beings in order to live.

This animal was dead before I started eating it

But you created the demand for its death. If no one ate meat, no animals would be killed and sold for their meat. You are in effect a contract killer.

But the bible gives us dominion over animals.

The bible says a lot of things. That doesn't necessarily mean they are true. And even among Christians, there is a lot of debate over what it means by dominion, which could equally be a command to care for rather than abuse and eat.

I like meat and dairy.

Well, so do I. I like the car my neighbour drives, too. But that desire isn't a particularly sound moral basis for stealing it. The fact that we desire something does not, in and of itself, give us any right to act upon that desire.

You talk about rights. Why do think animals have rights?

There is no satisfactory short answer to that one, as there are many kinds of rights, and many reasons for believing a person or being should have access to them. But, briefly, and at the most fundamental level, I believe that if a being can suffer then it should have the right not to do so. Or, to reverse the question, what right do we have to inflict suffering on another being? Also, consider that we too are animals. And if we have rights, we are forced to ask what property we possess that gives humans but not other animals rights.

People are suffering and being killed. Aren't people more important than animals?

It is true that by most standards we care to apply, humans are either more important, or as important, as animals. However, firstly, it is not a case of either helping humans or animals. A vegan diet does not cost money, or prevent money or effort being spent on easing the suffering of humans. In fact, a vegan diet requires less land and energy to support it than a non-vegan one, so a vegan diet actually helps make food, land and energy available to support humans. And secondly, even if one believes humans to be more important than other species of animals that is not to say that people are infinitely more important than other animals. If they were, there would be nothing wrong in torturing a pet for idle amusement, yet few people consider this the case. So simply because humans may be more important than animals, this does not mean we have the right to do what we want with them, to eat them or enslave them for their produce.

People will be out of a job if it wasn't for the meat and dairy industry.

If everyone stopped eating meat and dairy tomorrow, yes, many people would lose their job. But this won't happen. It will be a gradual process, with time for people to find new jobs. And if there are jobs lost, then there will be other jobs created. And of course, it is worth pointing out that simply that because someone is employed to do something, that doesn't make it right.

If it wasn't for the meat and dairy industry, there would be fewer animals in the world. Wouldn't that be a bad thing?

That depends on whether you believe that the more animals there are in the world the better, or that the better the quality of life for those animals that exist in the world the better. I believe the latter to be true. And, if you extend the concept to humans, you probably believe this too. For would you consider a future where people were forced to live ten to a room better than one in which there were fewer people but each had more room, and a better standard of living?

Ever heard of natural selection?

Yes. It is the way in which, generally within a species, those best fitted for the environment survive and pass on their genes, whilst others perish. It is not a moral guideline or framework. If it were, we would not give glasses to the short-sighted, medicine to the ill, or protect the weak.

You still kill animals, even as a vegan.

Yes. It is simply not possible to live in modern society without killing other animals, from flies on a car bonnet to animals killed to ensure a harvestable crop to eat. However, simply because we cannot live without killing any creatures, does not mean we should kill as many as we wish. If that reasoning applied, we would not do anything to improve the world since, whatever we do, it will still not be perfect. But we do act, because it is better to do something than nothing, to make some improvement rather than none. And, for the animal who doesn't die to provide us with food, that something, no matter how insignificant in the grand scheme of things, means everything.

You mention animals killed to ensure a harvestable crop. I heard that more animals are killed to protect a harvest than are killed to provide meat for my plate.

This is simply not true. The claim failed to take into account several factors, the chief being that it takes six times as much harvested crop to feed an animal for your plate to feed you, as it would if you ate the crop itself.

All right. But you still kill plants then?

Yes. As far as is known, plants are not capable of suffering. And even if they are, more plants are killed in order to feed animals which are slaughtered to feed a person on a non-vegan diet than they are if we eat them directly. Veganism is not a way of avoiding suffering. It is a way of reducing it.

I only eat animals that are killed humanely

Good for you. So it would be all right if I killed you, as long as I did so humanely?

So what if I only eat eggs and dairy from animals that do not suffer as a result?

If that is really the case, then I do not think it is wrong for you to do so. Veganism is not dogma, it is a means to an end, and the end is the reduction of suffering of animals. However, are you sure the animals do not suffer? Are they allowed to live out a natural life after they have stopped being productive? And what about the offspring they give birth to? Also, you might wish to consider what impression you give to others when you eat these eggs and dairy: are you giving them the impression that it is all right to eat eggs or dairy and, not knowing the source of your produce, to eat any eggs or dairy?

Look. It is my right to eat meat and dairy. Stop bugging me.

That depends on what you mean by right. It is certainly your legal right. Just as, a couple of hundred years ago, it was your legal right to keep slaves. That does not mean it is your moral right.

All right, if we're speaking of rights, you have no right to stop me.

I certainly have no legal right. I would argue, however, that since it is morally wrong to eat meat and dairy, I do have a moral right to try and persuade you not to do so.

But it isn't morally wrong to eat meat.

That is your opinion, but it is not mine. I hold that it is morally wrong to inflict needless suffering, and eating meat and dairy inflicts needless suffering, and I have explained why I feel this way. So if you do not agree, perhaps you might explain why you believe it to be morally acceptable?