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The Most Moral Way to Eat

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Abstract:

Since birth, children are force fed concepts regarding dietary needs and requirements. In America, the cultural norm is to eat animal products and such practices are rarely questioned. Vegetarianism and veganism are considered to be a form of counterculture, however there are many benefits of adopting vegan diet. From a utilitarian approach, people should eat a plant-based vegan diet, if at all possible, because it reduces the amount of harm, results in fewer deaths and decreases money spent. Additionally, a vegan diet increases happiness and results in the most moral way to eat. The arguments are meant to summarize veganism as the ideal moral way to eat considering animal rights, environmental effects, and health benefits. Unlike other works on the topic, this paper will outline the responsibilities of current vegans.

Introduction

Since birth, children are force fed concepts regarding dietary needs and requirements. The United States Department of Agriculture's food pyramid and MyPlate are taught in school, instructing dairy as one of the five required food groups (USDA). Commercials advocate milk consumption in order to attain adequate calcium intakes. Lean meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs are advertised as healthy protein sources needed for every meal. Society knows protein and calcium are vital to a healthy diet, so naturally the veracity of such statements is rarely questioned.

In America, the cultural norm is to eat animal products. Vegetarianism and veganism is a deviation from standard eating and is even considered a form of disordered eating in certain nutrition textbooks (Thompson). Regardless of the of the dietary norms and education system in place, it is our responsibility to educate ourselves and make the best moral decisions regarding our diets, as we would do with any other significant lifestyle choice. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2012, 5% of Americans self identified as vegetarians and 2% identified as vegans (Gallup). With such small percentages, vegetarianism and veganism is essentially a form of counterculture. However, what is the purpose of this counterculture movement?

Looking at the driving forces behind vegetarianism and veganism, plant-based vegan diet is the most moral way to eat using three arguments. The three arguments pertain to animal rights, the environment, and health effects of animal protein consumption. Although the three arguments are most effective when combined in a synergistic manner, the arguments can be taken into separate consideration. If readers

find one argument unreasonable, the other two arguments will have enough individual weight and evidence to support a plant-based vegan diet. From a utilitarian approach, people should eat a plant-based vegan diet, if at all possible, because it causes the least amount of harm and results in the least amount of deaths and money spent, and the highest amount of happiness.

It is important to note that genetically modified foods are a prevalent issue when discussing the morality of eating. However, my argument does not take this controversial matter into consideration because a plant-based vegan diet can be achieved either way, with or without genetic modification. My arguments are meant to summarize veganism as the ideal moral way to eat, and unlike other work on the topic, is meant to outline the responsibilities of current vegans and how cultural changes must be made.

Animal Rights

One of the biggest concerns to both meat-eaters and non meat-eaters alike is the mass production of animal products, which contributes to the inhumane treatment of animals. In the production of poultry, chickens are de-beaked and toe-clipped, packed tightly into sheds, and after six weeks of standing in their own manure and urine, are sent off for slaughtering. Similarly, pigs are put into small pens with their tails amputated, teeth severed, and ears slit. Males are castrated, and pregnant females are put into a metal enclosure called a gestation crate. Shortly before birth, the females are moved to farrowing crates, which are slightly bigger, but only allow them space to eat, drink, and nurse. When the females are either too old or too weak to have more piglets, they are no

longer useful to the industry, and are killed. The processes are no more humane for other mass produced animals like cattle, for instance.

Many vegetarians refuse to eat meat because of these repulsive conditions. However, even mass production of dairy and animal byproducts, like eggs and milk, promote inhumane treatment to the animals. In the egg production industry, male chicks are killed because they are unimportant and the females are kept in conditions similar to the typical confined environments. The females are still de-beaked and toe-clipped even if they are just being used for eggs. When cows are milked, mastitis, or inflammation of the mammary glands, is very common. Studies show that this painful inflammation could be caused by dirty housing, confined space and poor diets. Although animals are not killed when producing animal byproducts, they are not treated much better (Cassuto). If a vegetarian believes eating meat is immoral and wrong because the animals are treated poorly, then the same holds true for eggs and animal byproducts. Thus, these vegetarians should become vegans on moral grounds alone.

For the people that are not vegetarians, it is common for them to suggest a more humane way of killing, rather than eliminating animals from their diet. In response, it is unrealistic to do so because of the value placed on production yield and company profit. There are “free-range” livestock, but the animals are still kept in confined spaces and are treated poorly, contrary to popular belief. It is highly unlikely that the major animal production companies will have a change of heart, treat the animals better, and sacrifice lower monetary earnings. Assuming that it *was* realistic to kill animals in a more humane manner, we can take into consideration philosopher Peter Singer’s point about animal equality. He argues that all animals do not require equal treatment, but require equal

consideration. For example, animals that are incapable of voting do not have the right to do so because it is impossible. However, all animals are capable of feeling pain. The ability to feel pain, not intelligence, should be basis of animal rights.

Many people object to this argument by saying that humans are superior to animals, and therefore killing them and causing pain for food is allowable. Singer's response to this is: "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 nonhumans for the same purpose?" In other words, humans do not kill other people with low IQs, mental retardation, or other impairments, so why should animals be killed because their intelligence is measured differently than ours and potentially lower? He compares speciesism to racism and sexism. Racists believe their interest is more important than another race's. Sexists believe their interest is more important than the opposing sex. The same is true with speciesism, or the idea that certain species are more important than others. Singer suggests speciesists "allow the interests of their own species to override the greatest interests of members of other species" (Singer).

Another objection is that the food chain suggests it is natural to kill other animals for food. This is similar to this concept of speciesism. However, all animals have some role in the ecosystem regardless of their intellect. For instance, bees are required for pollination of the plants we eat. Without realizing, we benefit from animals that are typically considered unimportant and it is unfair for humans to consider certain animals "less important." Animals can speed up the spreading of different nutrients in the ecosystem, while others help decomposition. Perhaps certain animals are less important to our personal benefit, but from an ecological perspective, all animals have meaning and

it is not our place to interfere with their existence. Since humans are capable of higher critical thought, we must realize it is impractical for society to humanely kill animals. This alone should support a vegan diet. Even if we were to achieve a humane way to kill animals, speciesism is not an acceptable justification for killing because we are capable of understanding and respecting their importance as living beings, in addition to the fact that animals suffer when inflicting pain.

Environmental Effects

Production of livestock has a substantial effect on the environment. Greenhouse gases are emitted during each stage of animal production, which in turn worsens and exacerbates the global climate change. People that eat a high amount of animal products leave a gargantuan carbon footprint. The Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that 18% of all anthropogenic green house gas emissions are caused by livestock production. Studies suggest that a vegetarian or vegan diet would be the most beneficial way to help climate change and lessen its severity (Laestadius). It is generally agreed upon that it is our duty to help leave the world a better place than we started. Global climate change is a proven issue. Using these two premises, it is our moral obligation to try and stop global climate change in order to leave the world a better place for future generations. If vegetarianism and veganism are potential ways to mitigate global climate change, which studies do in fact show, it would be immoral to not change our diets.

In addition, one study shows that the replacing meat and dairy foods with plant-based foods reduces the land used for consumption (Temme). Specifically, the animal production sector accounts for 70% of all agricultural land and 30% of the land surface of the world (Marlow). From an environmental perspective, if we were to cut down or eliminate meat and dairy production, there would be much more land for natural habitats for animals and potentially national parks. From a socioeconomic perspective, we could use that land to grow crops and feed starving populations, or for schools and other beneficial things. There is a lot of evidence that non-vegetarian diets have a higher ecologic cost. Switching to a vegan diet would lower costs for both producers and consumers and the excess money could go to beneficial things ranging from charity to education.

When comparing vegan to non-vegan diets, the non-vegan diets require a higher amount of water in the production of food. The global-average water footprint for milk, eggs, chicken, pig, sheep/goat, and cows require 1,020; 3,265; 4,325; 5,988; 8,763; and 15,415 liters of water per kilogram, respectively. In contrast, sugar crops, vegetables, starchy roots, and fruits use an average of 197; 322; 387; and 962 liters of water per kilogram (Hoek). Overall, vegan diets use the least amount of water in the production of food and are thus best for water conservation, which is beneficial to the environment.

Health Effects

One study looked at Seventh-Day Adventists' diet, in which they eat a primarily vegetarian diet. The study concluded that it is possible that the Seventh-Day Adventists'

diet may influence the immune system, which is involved in cancer defense. The Seventh-Day Adventists have a lower cancer mortality rate, suggesting that the reason is a stronger immune system, rather than the lack of carcinogenic environmental factors (Phillips). Vegetarianism may help the immune system which helps fight off cancer cells.

The human body makes a certain amount of cholesterol, but the only way cholesterol can be added to the natural amount made is by consuming animal proteins. Cholesterol levels are linked to cardiovascular diseases. Eating a vegan diet eliminates all added cholesterol levels, whereas a vegetarian just eliminates a certain amount because cholesterol can still be found in milk, cheese, and eggs. A vegan diet would make it a lot more difficult for people to get heart diseases, resulting in fewer deaths and health care costs.

In a study by Dean Ornish and his colleagues, patients with coronary heart disease were either put into an intensive lifestyle change group or a “typical” care group. The intensive lifestyle change consisted of a 10% fat whole foods vegetarian diet, along with aerobic activity, stress management, and smoke cessation. After a five-year follow up, the group with intensive lifestyle change had less severe cases of coronary heart disease (Ornish). This study suggests that vegetarianism as part of certain lifestyles can benefit health. Similarly, another study conducted suggests that the proteins in a vegan diet may reduce cancer, obesity, and cardiovascular risk because of the increased glucagon activity (McCarty).

A vegan diet forbids the consumption of fish. The presence of mercury in fish has been an increasing concern for consumers, and studies suggest the high amounts of mercury may be extenuating the cardiovascular benefits of fish. In addition, mercury is

toxic, and can lead to brain and kidney damage with long-term exposure (International). Omitting fish from one's diet seems to be more beneficial than detrimental.

Mental health is another aspect to consider when dissecting the benefits of a vegan diet. Although fish have n-3 fats necessary for mental health, some studies have shown that veganism may be better for mental health than other diets. In one study, vegans reported a lower mean anxiety than that of omnivores (Beezhold).

In addition to having fewer diseases, vegetarians and vegans tend to weigh less and be in better shape. The more people that change their diets to a vegan diet, the lower overall health care costs will be. Less people will be hospitalized for cardiovascular diseases. Less money would be spent on obesity drugs, cholesterol drugs, and blood pressure drugs. Health care costs are already a huge problem in America. Becoming a vegan and promoting veganism would save lives and reduce health care costs. One again, from an economical perspective, the money saved from reduced health care costs could be used in other, hopefully moral ways. Money can be used to support philanthropies, or even promote veganism across the world. Watching consumers die from their nutritional decisions without intervention is immoral in itself.

It is important to note that my argument is that primarily plant-based, non-processed vegan diets are ideal as opposed to just vegan diets. This is because processed foods are not as healthy as plant-based foods. The healthier the vegan diet, the lower the amount of diseases, the lower the health care costs, and the higher chance of disease reversal. Thus, a plant-based vegan diet is preferable over a vegan diet consisting of solely processed foods.

The biggest concern brought up by health professionals regarding health and a vegan diet is the potential of a vitamin B12 deficiency. Vitamin B12 can only be found in animal products. Some vegans do have issues with vitamin B12 deficiencies, however they can typically be avoided if nutritional intake is monitored and multivitamin supplements are taken. Fortified soy products as well as fortified cereals offer decent amounts of B12. If health issues prohibit someone from adopting a vegan diet, or if the person has incredibly adverse effects from the diet, than it should not be expected of him or her to keep a vegan diet.

There is also a misconception that vegans have a hard time finding enough protein and calcium in their diets. The recommended daily allowance for protein is 46 grams a day for females and 56 grams a day for males. This can easily be attained by eating a balanced diet of soy products, beans, legumes, nuts, and even breads. The small amounts of protein add up and protein deficiencies are actually rare among vegans. Calcium can be attained very easily as well from replacement milk, such as almond, soy, or coconut milk. Green leafy vegetables like kale and spinach also have a decent amount of calcium, and nutritional supplement can be taken as well (CDC).

Accessibility

The most ubiquitous justification for a carnivorous lifestyle is its simplicity; grocery shopping is straightforward, eating out is non-problematic, and cultural norms are not questioned. Although consumers may acknowledge veganism as the utmost moral

way to eat, a substantial problem associated with adopting a vegan diet is lack of accessibility.

Lack of accessibility is by no means a forceful counterargument when discussing a vegan diet. Rather, the culture we live in needs to change in order to make the most moral diet, the vegan diet, more accessible and manageable. Since morals are not always analogous with one's actions, it is the responsibility of current vegans to aid in making a vegan diet more culturally acceptable and accessible. For instance, current vegans are experienced with specialized cooking could open up a vegan restaurant, ice cream store, or fast food chain. Current vegan businessmen and businesswomen could open vegan grocery stores. Personal trainers and workout specialists could recommend a vegan diet. Politicians could lobby for a change in public school lunches. Every current vegan can make a small change, which will ultimately alter society's perception and acceptance of a vegan diet.

Conclusion

These three arguments regarding animal rights, protection of the environment, and health effects of an animal-based diet create a synergistic effect supporting the idea of a plant-based vegan diet. Animal rights activist Gary Yourofsky refers to the killing of animals as the biggest holocaust massacre yet (The Best). It is unrealistic and impossible for all animals to be killed in a humane way, but even if it was it is not our place to do so. All animals have an importance to the ecosystem and we are intelligent enough and

capable to refrain from eating them. Animal production causes detrimental environmental effects and a vegan diet would lessen costs. There will be less human deaths if we stop killing animals because animal-proteins are can be unhealthy. From a utilitarian standpoint, adopting a vegan plant-based diet will maximize happiness for both humans and animals because less humans and animals will be killed. Money that would have been spent on animal production could be used to better society. Current vegans also have a responsibility to help change our culture's acceptance of a consumer revolution in order to encourage the most moral way to eat.

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