

Ethics of vegetarianism

[Science](#), [Agriculture](#)



" The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men." -Alice Walker Ethics of Vegetarianism In many societies, ethical issues regarding the consumption of meat have arisen. These ethical objections are commonly divided into two categories: opposition to the act of killing in general, and opposition to certain agricultural practices surrounding the production of meat. Reasons for objecting to the practice of killing animals for consumption may range from animal rights, to environmental ethics, to religious reasons. Some people, while not vegetarians, refuse to eat the flesh of certain animals such as cats, dogs, horses, or rabbits due to cultural taboo. Others eat only the flesh of animals that have been treated civilly before slaughter. Some meat eaters simply avoid certain meats, such as veal or foie gras. However, it is my personal opinion that the main reason one should abstain from the consumption of meat is one that concerns beneficence, fairness, and nonmaleficence. The unethical manner in which livestock is treated before slaughtering surfaces many moral issues, most of all concerning the subjection of animals to unsuitable living (and dying) conditions in order to satisfy society's addiction to meat. Ethical vegetarianism has become popular in developed countries, particularly because of the spread of factory meat industries, which has reduced the sense of husbandry that used to exist in farming. In order to feed modern society's enormous appetite for meat, animals in factory farms endure unimaginable suffering in conditions of extreme filth, crowding and confinement. The cruelty is appalling, but no less so than the environmental effects of factory farming. Meat animals are fed anywhere from five to fifteen

pounds of vegetable protein for each pound of meat they produce: an ostensibly unjust practice in a world where so many go hungry. Whereas one-sixth an acre of land can feed a vegetarian for a year, over three acres are required to provide the grain needed to raise a year's worth of meat for the average meat-eater. The toll on water resources is no better: the meat industry accounts for half of US water consumption: 2500 gallons per pound of beef, compared to 25 gallons per pound of wheat. As for the output from the farms, 1.6 million tons of livestock manure currently pollutes our drinking water. Moreover, the residues of antibiotics and synthetic hormones that are fed to livestock to encourage speedy growth are increasingly showing up in municipal water supplies. Even without considering the ethical treatment of animals, the above facts alone make it clear that it is immoral to sponsor this system by eating meat. Many believe that factory farming seeks to maximize production, when, in reality, it seeks to maximize profit. In dollar terms, it is more efficient to have a thousand cows in a high-density feedlot, eating corn on a chemically dependent 5,000-acre farm, than it is to have fifty cows grazing on twenty 250-acre family farms. Ideally, if society were to switch over completely to private farming, meat would be just as abundant but much more expensive, as it should be. Traditional societies understood that meat is a special food; they believed it was one of nature's highest gifts. Something as precious as the existence of a living thing should be more expensive than it presently is. The current prices for meat are extraordinarily low in relation to total consumer spending. Ridiculously cheap food diminishes farmers, demeans food itself, and deems less "efficient" means of production uneconomical. If food, meat in particular, were more

expensive, it would promote local farming and force us to be more conscious of how much we waste. The factory-farming system strives to produce the most meat, milk, and eggs as quickly, cheaply and in the smallest amount of space possible. Cows, calves, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, rabbits, and other animals are kept in small cages or stalls, where they are often unable to turn around. They are deprived of exercise so that all their energy goes toward producing flesh, eggs, or milk for human consumption. They are fed drugs that fatten them faster, and they are genetically manipulated to grow more rapidly and produce more milk or eggs than they would naturally. Because crowding creates an atmosphere that welcomes disease, animals in factory farms are fed and sprayed with huge amounts of pesticides and antibiotics, which remain in their bodies and are in turn passed on to the people who consume them. The march from crate to slaughtering house is often the only daylight the animals will see in their short lifespan. In order to guide the livestock in the right direction, factory farm workers will often beat, whip, and electrically shock the animals. Though some may say that animals are a lower form of life that do not deserve the same basic rights as we humans do, I beg to differ. I believe that it is every being's right to live peacefully and without suffering. I do not wish to say that killing animals for meat is wrong, I simply feel that it has been capitalized upon in a way that has somehow dislocated the association of the living animal with a juicy steak. Thus, I have addressed issues of environmental beneficence, economical fairness, and nonmaleficence towards livestock. From a utilitarian point of view, it is ethically wrong to support an industry that does more harm to our environment than good that it does for our people.

Moreover, it is unfair to small, local businesses for the factory farming industry to monopolize the meat industry. Lastly, and in my eyes most importantly, it is morally wrong to take the life of an animal, or any living thing for that matter, and not show proper respect for it. The physical and social distance from slaughterhouse to dinner table blinds us from the fear and pain the animals feel as they are led to butchery. It turns a dead animal into just “ a piece of meat. ” Such distance is a luxury our ancestors did not have: in ancient hunting and farming societies, killing was up close and personal, and it was impossible to ignore the fact that the meat being served was recently a living, breathing animal. If we as a society can somehow reconstruct the bond between life and food, I believe that many of the ethical issues we turn a blind eye to will also be resolved. Until then, however, I’ll enjoy my greens and take pride in the fact that my diet has spared one less life.