

5

**THE BASIC ARGUMENT
FOR VEGETARIANISM***James Rachels***I**

In 1973 Peter Singer, who was then a young, little-known philosopher from Australia, published an article called "Animal Liberation" in the *New York Review of Books*.¹ The title suggested that there was a parallel between our treatment of animals and the unjust treatment of blacks and women. At first, it was hard to take the comparison seriously. Many proponents of "black liberation" and "women's liberation," as those movements were then known, found the comparison insulting, and most philosophers thought the topic was hardly worth discussing. But Singer kept at it, writing more articles and a now-famous book. It is now commonly said that the modern animal-rights movement grew out of those works. Thanks to Singer, many people, including me, became convinced that a fundamental change in our attitude toward animals was necessary. The indispensable first step was becoming a vegetarian.

The argument that persuaded me to become a vegetarian was so simple that it needs only a little elaboration. It begins with the principle that it is wrong to cause pain unless there is a good enough reason. The qualification is important, because causing pain is not always wrong. My dentist causes me pain, but there's a good reason for it, and besides, I consent. My

children's doctor caused them pain when he gave them their shots, and they did not consent, but that was all right, too. However, as the principle says, causing pain is acceptable only when there is a good enough reason for it. Justification is required.

The second step in the argument is to notice that in the modern meat-production business, animals are made to suffer terribly. There is a reason for this suffering, too. We eat the meat, and it helps to nourish us. But there is a catch: we could just as easily nourish ourselves in other ways. Vegetarian meals are also good. Nonetheless, most people prefer a diet that includes meat because they like the way it tastes. The question, then, is whether our enjoyment of the way meat tastes is a good enough reason to justify the amount of suffering that the animals are made to endure. It seems obvious that it is not. Therefore, we should stop eating the products of this business. We should be vegetarians instead.

I will call this the basic argument. It has a limited application. It says nothing about animals raised on old-fashioned family farms or animals killed in hunter-gatherer societies. It addresses only the situation of people like us, in modern industrial countries. But it does point out, in a simple and compelling way, why those of us in the industrial countries should not support the meat-production business as it now exists.

When I emphasize the argument's simplicity, I mean that it does not depend on any controversial claims about health or on any religiously tinged notions of the value of life. Nor does it invoke any disputable ideas about "rights." Further claims of these kinds might strengthen the case for vegetarianism, but the basic argument does not depend on them. Nor does it rest on any contentious philosophical theory about the nature of morality. Philosophers sometimes misunderstand this when they think it is a merely utilitarian argument and that it can be refuted by refuting utilitarianism. But the basic argument is not tied to any particular theory about the nature of ethics. Instead, it appeals to a simple principle that every decent person already accepts, regardless of his or her stand on other issues. The most striking thing about the argument is that it derives such a remarkable conclusion from such a sober, conservative starting point.

The basic argument, then, is common ground for people of various moral and political persuasions. Matthew Scully is in most respects the antithesis of Peter Singer. Scully, a former speechwriter for various Republicans including President George W. Bush, recently surprised his conservative friends by writing a book, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*,² in which he detailed the cruelties of the modern factory farm—cruelties that are, in his words, "hard to contemplate."³ Scully reports:

Four companies now produce 81 percent of cows brought to market, 73 percent of sheep, half our chickens, and some 60 percent of hogs. From

these latter, the 355,000 pigs slaughtered every day in America, even the smallest of mercies have been withdrawn. In 1967 there were more than a million hog farms in the country; today there are about 114,000, all of them producing more, more, more to meet market demand. About 80 million of the 95 million hogs slaughtered each year in America, according to the National Pork Producers Council, are intensively reared in mass-confinement farms, never once in their time on earth feeling soil or sunshine. Genetically engineered by machines, inseminated by machines, monitored, herded, electrocuted, stabbed, cleaned, cut, and packaged by machines—themselves treated as machines “from birth to bacon”—these creatures, when eaten, have hardly ever been touched by human hands.⁴

Scully visited some of these automated pig farms in North Carolina, and his report is chilling. Sows have been engineered to weigh five hundred pounds each. Pigs are crowded twenty each in pens only seven-and-a-half feet square. The close confinement creates problems in managing the animals. Pigs are intelligent and social animals who normally build nests and keep them clean. They will not urinate or defecate in their nests, as they must do in the pens. They form bonds with other animals. They want to suck and chew, but in the pens, being deprived of a normal environment in which they can do these things, they begin to chew on the tails of the animals in front of them. In such close quarters, the victims cannot escape. The chewing causes infection, and sick pigs are no good. The solution is “tail docking,” a procedure recommended by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, in which the pigs’ tails are snipped (without anesthetic) by pliers. The point is to make the tails more sensitive to pain, so that the animals will make a greater effort to avoid their neighbors’ attacks. Surveying the whole setup, the operator of one such “farm” observes: “It’s science driven. We’re not raising pets.”⁵

When critics of the meat-production industry report such facts, their accounts are often dismissed as “emotional appeals.” But that is a mistake. It may be true that such descriptions engage our emotions. However, emotionalism is not the point. The point is to fill in the details of the basic argument. The basic argument says that causing pain is not justified unless there is a sufficiently good reason for it. In order to apply this principle to the case of factory farming, we need to know how much pain is involved. If only a little pain were being caused, a fairly insubstantial reason (such as our gustatory pleasure) might be sufficient. But if there is extensive suffering, that reason is not enough. Thus, these facts are a vital part of the argument, and it is necessary to keep them in mind when considering whether the argument is sound. For those of us who have no firsthand knowledge of the subject, reports by such relatively impartial observers as Matthew Scully are indispensable.

Another report recently appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*.⁶ The author, Michael Pollan, went to a great deal of trouble to find out what happens to cattle who are raised and slaughtered for beef. "Forgetting, or willed ignorance, is the preferred strategy of many beef-eaters,"⁷ he says, but Pollan wanted to see for himself the conditions in which the animals live and die. So he bought a steer—"No. 534"—at the Blair Brothers Ranch in South Dakota, and followed its progress to the slaughterhouse. No. 534 spent the first six months of his life in pastures alongside his mother. Then, having been weaned and castrated, he was shipped to Poky Feeders, a feedlot operation in Garden City, Kansas.

"A cattle feedlot," says Pollan, "is a kind of city, populated by as many as 100,000 animals. It is very much a premodern city, however—crowded, filthy and stinking, with open sewers, unpaved roads and choking air."⁸ Fecal dust floats in the air, causing irritation to the eyes and lungs. Searching for No. 534, Pollan found his animal standing in a "deep pile of manure."⁹ Dried manure caked on the animals is a problem later, in the slaughterhouse, where steps must be taken to ensure that the meat does not become contaminated. In the feedlot itself, disease would kill the animals were it not for massive doses of antibiotics.

At the Blair Brothers Ranch, No. 534 ate grass and was given corn and alfalfa hay to fatten him up. In his last six weeks at the ranch, he put on 148 pounds. After being shipped to Poky Feeders, he would never eat grass again. His diet would be mostly corn and protein supplement, "a sticky brown goop consisting of molasses and urea."¹⁰ Corn is cheap, and it produces "marbled" beef, although it is not what the animals naturally desire. In a grisly sort of forced cannibalism, the animals are also fed rendered cow parts. The animals could not live on this diet for long—it would "blow out their livers," said one of the feedlot operators. But they are slaughtered before this can happen. The diet is effective, however: the animals weigh more than 1,200 pounds when taken to the slaughterhouse.

No. 534 was slaughtered at the National Beef Plant in Liberal, Kansas, a hundred miles down the road from Poky Feeders. This is where Pollan's personal observations come to a stop. He was not allowed to watch the stunning, bleeding, and evisceration process; nor was he permitted to take pictures or talk to the employees.

Opposing cruelty should not be seen as a specifically liberal or conservative cause. Scully, the conservative Republican, emphasizes that one should oppose it "even if one does not accept [the animal rights advocates'] whole vision of the world." He makes a point of distancing himself from Peter Singer, who champions various left-wing causes. Singer is wrong about the other issues, says Scully, but he is right about the animals.¹¹

II

The basic argument seems to me obviously correct. But its very obviousness suggests a problem: if it is so simple and obvious, why doesn't everyone accept it? Why doesn't everyone who has this argument explained to them become a vegetarian? Of course, many people do, but most do not. Part of the explanation may be that it is natural for people to resist arguments that require them to do things they don't want to do. If you want to go on eating meat, you may pay no attention to arguments that say otherwise. Moreover, people generally do not respond to ethical appeals unless they see others around them also responding. If all your friends are eating meat, you are unlikely to be moved by a mere argument. It is like an appeal for money to provide vaccinations for third-world children. The argument that the vaccinations are more important than your going to a movie may be irrefutable, considered just as an argument. But when no one around you is contributing, and your friends are all going to the movie, you are likely to ignore the charitable appeal and spend the money on popcorn instead. It is easy to put the children out of mind.

All this may be true. But there is a more pressing problem about the basic argument—at least, a more pressing problem for me, as a philosopher. Many of my professional colleagues are unmoved by this argument, and I am not sure why. Those who study ethics, especially from a nonreligious point of view, often find the argument compelling. But others do not. This is puzzling because professional philosophers—those who teach in colleges and universities—study arguments dispassionately, and while they often disagree, they disagree about arguments only when the issues are tricky or obscure. But there is nothing tricky or obscure about the basic argument. Thus I would expect that, on so simple a matter, there would be widespread agreement. Instead, many philosophers shrug the argument off.

The same is true of other academics who study cognitive science, psychology, and biology. They are at least as smart as I am, if not smarter, and they are morally decent people. Yet, while I think the basic argument is compelling, many of them do not. It is not that they think the argument makes a good point, even though they are unwilling to act on it. Rather, they find the argument itself unconvincing. How can this be?

Sometimes philosophers explain that the argument is unconvincing because it contains a logical gap. We are all opposed to cruelty, they say, but it does not follow that we must become vegetarians. It only follows that we should favor less cruel methods of meat production. This objection is so feeble that it is hard to believe it explains resistance to the basic argument. It is true enough that, if you are opposed to cruelty, you should prefer that the meat-production business be made less brutal. But it is also true that,

it you are opposed to cruelty, you have reason not to participate in social practices that are brutal as they stand. As it stands, meat producers and consumers cooperate to maintain the unnecessary system of pig farms, feedlots, and slaughterhouses. Anyone who finds this system objectionable has reason not to help keep it going. The point would be quickly conceded if the victims were people. If a product—curtains, let's say—were being produced by a process that involved torturing humans, no one would dream of saying: "Of course I oppose using those methods, but that's no reason not to buy the product. After all, the curtains are very nice."

Many in the animal-rights movement believe that scientists are blinded by the need to justify their own practices. The scientists are personally committed to animal experimentation. Their careers, or the careers of their colleagues, are based on it, and they would have to stop this research if they conceded that animals have moral claims on us. Naturally they do not want to do this. Thus they are so biased in favor of current practices that they cannot see the evil in them. This explains why they cannot see the truth even in something so simple as the basic argument.

Perhaps there is something to this, but I do not want to pursue it. On the whole it is a condescending explanation that insults the scientists, cuts off communication with them, and prevents us from learning what they have to teach us. It should be noted, however, that the basic argument about vegetarianism is independent of any arguments about animal experimentation. Indeed, the case against meat eating is much stronger than the case against the use of animals in research. The researchers can at least point out that, in many instances, their work has a serious purpose that can benefit humankind. Nothing comparable can be said in defense of meat eating. Thus, even if some research using animals was justified, meat eating would still be wrong.

I believe a better explanation is in terms of the overall difference between how scientists and animal-rights advocates think about the nature of nonhumans. Defenders of animal rights tend to see the differences between humans and nonhumans as slight. They frequently emphasize how much the animals are like us, in order to argue that our ethical responsibilities to the animals are similar to our responsibilities to one another. Animals are pictured as intelligent and sociable creatures who love their children, who experience fear and delight, who sulk, play, mourn their dead, and much more. So how can it be denied that they have rights, just as we do? I have argued in this way myself, more than once.

Many scientists, however, see this as naive. They believe the differences between humans and other animals are vast—so vast, in fact, that putting humans in a separate moral category is entirely justified. Moreover, they feel they have some authority on this score. After all, the scientific study of animals is their professional concern. In light of this, how should we expect

them to react when they are confronted by belligerent amateurs who insist they know better? It is only natural that the scientists should disregard the amateurs' arguments.

A case in point is the anthropologist Jonathan Marks, who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In 1993, Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri, an Italian writer on animal issues, initiated a campaign known as "the Great Ape Project," an effort to secure basic rights for our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans.¹² The rights being demanded were life, liberty, and freedom from torture. Marks was invited to participate in a debate about these demands, and he recorded his thoughts in an engaging book, *What It Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee*.¹³ "Since their brains are closely related to our brains," Marks says, "it should come as no surprise that the apes can approach humans in their cognitive functions."¹⁴ Despite this, "Apes are often objectified by callous and cynical entrepreneurs, who neither regard them nor treat them as the sentient, emotionally complex creatures they are."¹⁵ Marks does not think this is acceptable. "Apes deserve protection," he says, "even rights."¹⁶

Reading these words, one would expect Marks to be an ally of Singer and Cavalieri. But he is not. The Great Ape Project, he thinks, is completely wrongheaded. Why? Marks's attempt at philosophical argument is unimpressive—he says the critical issues are that chimps, gorillas, and orangutans aren't human, and that in any case we are politically powerless to guarantee such rights even for humans. Of course, these arguments get us nowhere. Everyone knows the animals aren't human; the point is that they are sufficiently like humans to deserve the same basic protections. And the fact that we cannot ensure rights for humans does not mean that we should stop thinking humans ought to have them.

The underlying reason for Marks's scorn of the animal-rights ideology becomes clear when he turns to the scientific study of animal behavior. The similarities between humans and other great apes, he intimates, is only superficial: "Where clever, controlled experimentation has been possible, it has tended strongly to show that in specific ways, ape minds work quite differently from human minds."¹⁷ For support, he cites the work of the psychologist Daniel J. Povinelli, who argues that chimpanzees' conceptions of physical interactions (as, for example, when a hook is used to manipulate an object) are very different from human understanding.¹⁸ Marks does not say how this fits with his earlier assertion that "Apes deserve protection, even rights," but clearly, in his view, the latter thought trumps the former.

We find this pattern repeated again and again: The scientists concede that the animal rights advocates have a bit of a point, but then the scientists want to talk about the facts. They think we do not know nearly enough about the details of how animal minds work to justify any firm moral conclusions. Moreover, such knowledge as we do have suggests caution: the ani-

imals are more different from us than it seems. The advocates of animal rights, on the other hand, think the facts are well enough established that we can proceed without further ado to the ethical conclusions. Anyone who suggests otherwise is viewed as dragging their feet, perhaps to avoid the unpleasant truth about the injustice of our behavior toward the animals.

III

What are we to make of all this? One obvious idea is that we should take seriously what the scientists tell us about what animals are like and adjust our moral conceptions accordingly. This would be an ongoing project. It would take volumes even to begin, by considering what is currently known. But those volumes would be out of date by the time they were completed, because new discoveries are being made all the time.

However, where the basic argument is concerned, the only relevant part of this project would be what science can tell us about the capacity of animals to experience pain. Jeremy Bentham famously said, "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but *Can they suffer*?"¹⁹ To this we might add that, contrary to Jonathan Marks, it is irrelevant whether chimps have a different understanding of physical interactions. It is irrelevant, that is, if we are considering whether it is acceptable to treat them in ways that cause them pain.

This point is easily misunderstood, so it is worth elaborating just a bit. Of course, the facts about an individual are important in determining how that individual should be treated. (This is true of humans as well as non-humans.) How an animal should be treated depends on what the animal is like—its nature, its abilities, and its needs. Different creatures have different characteristics, and these must be taken into account when we frame our ethical conceptions. The scientific study of animals gives us the factual information we need. But not every fact about an individual is relevant to every form of treatment. *What facts are relevant* depends on *what sorts of treatment* we are considering. To take a simple example, whether an animal can read is relevant if we are considering whether to admit him to university classes. But the ability to read is irrelevant in deciding whether it is wrong to operate on the animal without anesthesia. Thus, if we are considering whether it is wrong to treat pigs and cattle in the ways we have described, the critical issue is not whether their minds work in various sophisticated ways. The critical issue is, as Bentham said, whether they can suffer.

What does science tell us about this? The mechanisms that enable us to feel pain are not fully understood, but we do know a good bit about them. In humans, nociceptors—neurons specialized for sensing noxious

stimuli—are connected to a central nervous system, and the resulting signals are processed in the brain. Until recently it was believed that the brain's work was divided into two distinct parts: a sensory system operating in the somatosensory cortex, resulting in our conscious experiences of pain, and an affective-motivational system associated with the frontal lobes, responsible for our behavioral reactions. Now, however, this picture has been called into question, and it may be that the best we can say is that the brain's system for processing the information from the nociceptors seems to be spread over multiple regions. At any rate, the human nociceptive system also includes endogenous opioids, or endorphins, which provide the brain with its natural pain-killing ability.

The question of which other animals feel pain is a real and important issue, not to be settled by appeals to "common sense." Only a completed scientific understanding of pain, which we do not yet have, could tell us all that we need to know. In the meantime, however, we do have a rough idea of what to look for. If we want to know whether it is reasonable to believe that a particular kind of animal is capable of feeling pain, we may ask: Are there nociceptors present? Are they connected to a central nervous system? What happens in that nervous system to the signals from the nociceptors? And are there endogenous opioids? In our present state of understanding, this sort of information, together with the obvious behavioral signs of distress, is the best evidence we can have that an animal is capable of feeling pain.

Relying on such evidence, some writers, such as Gary Varner, have tentatively suggested that the line between animals that feel pain and those who do not is (approximately) the line between vertebrates and invertebrates.²⁰ However, research constantly moves forward, and the tendency of research is to extend the number of animals that might be able to suffer, not decrease it. Nociception appears to be one of the most primitive animal systems. Nociceptors have now been identified in a remarkable number of species, including leeches and snails.

The presence of a perceptual system does not, however, settle the question of whether the organism has conscious experiences connected with its operation. We know, for example, that humans have perceptual systems that do not involve conscious experience. Recent research has shown that the human vomeronasal system, which works through receptors in the nose, responds to pheromones and affects behavior even though the person is unaware of it. (It was long believed that this system was vestigial in humans, but it turns out that it is still working.) The receptors for "vomeroolfaction" are in the nostrils, alongside the receptors for the sense of smell; yet the operation of one is accompanied by conscious experience, while the operation of the other is not.²¹ We do not know why this is so. But this suggests at least the possibility that in some species there may be

nocioceptive systems that do not involve conscious experiences. In that case, those animals might not actually feel pain, even though various indications are present. Is this true of leeches and snails? of snakes? of hummingbirds? We may have strong hunches, but we don't really know.

Clearly, then, we still have a great deal to learn about the phenomenon of pain in the animal world, and the scientists who work in this area are right to caution us against quick-and-easy opinions. The ongoing study of animal pain is a fascinating subject in itself, and it has enormous importance for ethics. But should this make us less confident of the basic argument? If the issue were our treatment of snails and leeches, perhaps it should. But pigs and cattle are another matter. There is every reason to believe they feel pain—the facts about their nervous systems, their brains, their behavior, and their evolutionary kinship to human beings, all point to the same conclusion as common sense: our treatment of them on factory farms and in the slaughterhouses is one of the world's great causes of misery. If further investigation were to prove otherwise, it would be one of the most astonishing discoveries in the history of science.

Strict vegetarians may want more than the basic argument can provide, because the basic argument does not support sweeping prohibitions. If opposition to cruelty is our motive, we will have to consider the things we eat one at a time. Of course we should not eat beef and pork produced in the ways I have described, and we ought also to avoid factory-farm poultry, eggs, and milk. But free-range eggs and humanely produced milk are all right. Eating shrimp may also turn out to be acceptable. Moreover, from this point of view, not all vegetarian issues are equally pressing: eating fish may be questionable, but it is not nearly as bad as eating beef. This means that becoming a vegetarian need not be regarded as an all-or-nothing proposition. From a practical standpoint, it makes sense to focus first on the things that cause the most misery. As Matthew Scully says, whatever one's "whole vision of the world" may be, the pig farms, feedlots, and slaughterhouses are unacceptable.²²

NOTES

1. Peter Singer, "Animal Liberation," *New York Review of Books*, April 5, 1973.
2. Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).
3. *Ibid.*, p. x.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
6. Michael Pollan, "This Steer's Life," *New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 2002, pp. 44–51, 68, 71–72, 76–77.

7. Ibid., p. 48.
8. Ibid., p. 50.
9. Ibid., p. 68.
10. Ibid., p. 50.
11. Scully, *Dominion*, pp. 326–38.
12. Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri, *The Great Ape Project: Equality and Beyond* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).
13. Jonathan Marks, *What It Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and Their Genes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
14. Ibid., p. 189.
15. Ibid., p. 185.
16. Ibid., p. 188.
17. Ibid., p. 195.
18. Daniel J. Povinelli, *Folk Physics for Apes: The Chimpanzee's Theory of How the World Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
19. Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner, 1948; originally published in 1789), p. 311.
20. Gary Varner, *In Nature's Interests? Interests, Animals Rights, and Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
21. L. Monti-Bloch, C. Jennings-White, and D. L. Berliner, "The Human Vomeronasal Organ: A Review," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 855 (1998): 373–89.
22. I have learned a great deal from Colin Allen's essay, "Animal Pain," as yet unpublished. It is the best discussion of the question of animal pain known to me.