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To Meat or Not to Meat, That is NOT the Question!

Go to the refrigerator, open it, and take out every item that contains beef. Ground beef, steaks, roasts and all the dishes prepared with beef go in the trash. Now see what remains and consider how many of our favorite American meals are centered on beef. Bill McKibben, author and environmentalist, writes of how consuming such large amounts of factory farmed beef has contributed to pollution and climate change in his article “The Only Way to Have a Cow.” While he effectively describes the environmental impacts of eating feed lot beef, he confuses the reader with an unclear thesis and fails to support his claim that it is unethical.

McKibben gives a thorough explanation of how modern beef production is a major source of methane gas and other pollutants, which many link to climate change and other environmental problems. He even lists some possibly unforeseen contributors, such as deforestation, manure filled cesspools, and the use of diesel fuel and its fumes during the transportation of corn and cattle. This works well at revealing the scope and depth of the pollution problem and engages readers who may be unaware. He adds to his point by including a UN Food and Agriculture Organization study which concluded “that a half pound of ground beef has the same effect on climate change as driving an SUV ten miles.” McKibben humorously mentions that methane belched or “eructate[d]” from cattle accounts for 18 to 51 percent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. In a related article using similar tactics, Mark Bittman

cites the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization's findings that "an estimated 30 percent of the earth's ice-free land is directly or indirectly involved in livestock production." He strategically inserts statistics to help readers visualize the size of the problem, as McKibben does to the same end. Bittman's article also concurs that "livestock production generates nearly a fifth of the world's greenhouse gases." These statistics demonstrate the sheer size and influence of meat production in the world, and clearly benefit McKibben's argument. What McKibben's article lacks is a clear purpose for presenting this information.

Throughout his article, McKibben is unclear to his audience with identifying his overall message and goal. At first it appears he will advocate for vegetarianism, but McKibben veers in a different direction and instead promotes rotational grazing as a solution (McKibben). In his introduction he identifies himself as a vegetarian but insists that he is not a moral abstainer of meat. He claims that he does "not have a cow in this fight" (McKibben). This initially feels false as the article gives the impression that he is going to champion vegetarianism. He even cites studies which measure the environmental benefits of veganism, but does not ultimately push for this in the end. He identifies the main issue as the decision "to meat or not to meat," but then abandons this question and discusses alternative sources of beef. Although he is now supporting beef consumption, sporadic attacks on meat eaters throughout the article make his intentions unclear and muddle his point. McKibben states that eating meat purely because it "tastes good" is a "pretty lame...excuse," and is "indefensible- ethically, ecologically, and otherwise." If he wants to focus his message on the people with the most power to affect change, he should resist these attacks and avoid alienating his audience. He should support the carnivores in his audience and encourage them to buy meat from farms with different practices. Instead, he even goes as far as implying all Americans are overweight by describing how we "lodge [meat] in our ever-

enlarging abdomens.” Mark Bittman avoids any such confusion in his article with his consistency and flow of ideas. He mainly focuses on the exorbitant price of producing beef and its ecological inefficiencies (Bittman). Even Bittman’s title, “Rethinking the Meat-Guzzler,” is clearer at defining the article’s purpose. Bittman lists the problems associated with our meat heavy diets, and then offers multiple solutions. He does not take a judgmental posture like McKibben, and stays focused on educating his audience. In the end however, both McKibben and Bittman miss the opportunity to appeal to their reader’s emotions by discussing the ethics of feed lots.

Modern factory farms, especially feed lots packed full of cows, do not even closely resemble the natural habitats of the animals they hold or allow their occupants to behave or eat as they naturally would. Thousands of animals confined to a small area concentrates their waste, leaving them to live in filth and disease. McKibben claims that “industrial livestock production [and slaughter] is [ethically] indefensible” but fails to discuss how. Ethicist Leslie Cannold, however, works to justify our killing of animals for food, “so long as we ensure the animals we consume have lived and died without unnecessary suffering.” In her article, Cannold questions vegan’s intentions, wondering if their decisions are based on “animal welfare or moral superiority.” McKibben decides to focus on our responsibility to the ecosystem rather than providing backing for his ethical concerns with feed lots. He leaves out any mention of the documented animal abuse at factory farms, which could have greatly strengthened his argument against them. Giving a picturesque description of the bleak living conditions at a feed lot might have conjured questions of morality with his readers. Cannold directly asks if “being vegan [is] the most ethical way to live.” She at least acknowledges that raising cattle in a different manor could solve the ethical dilemma of eating meat. McKibben, however, does not mention how

rotational grazing solves more than just the environmental problem; giving cattle freedom to move and a more natural, healthy life. Cannold uses the ideas of Peter Singer, an animal rights leader, to explain that although animals may not possess the “right to life”, we must do what we can to “stop...the unnecessary suffering of animals.” This differentiates humans from the animals we eat and morally defends carnivores, as long as certain ethical conditions are met. Cannold believes that “we have a duty to...[boycott] businesses that treat animals cruelly,” and more effectively discusses the morality and ethics of eating feed lot beef. By inadequately supporting one of his main statements, McKibben missed a chance to convince a portion of his readers that eating feed lot beef is unethical.

Supposing that McKibben’s main purpose is to educate others about the environmental detriments of feed lots, his paper is a success. He presents a layered analysis of how each element of factory farming causes pollution and identifies new problems we have caused by altering cows’ natural behaviors. He leaves no doubt that feed lots create massive amounts of pollution and greenhouse gases that may change our world drastically. His article’s main fault is that his readers might be unclear with his desires until very late in his paper. Does McKibben want us to become vegan or vegetarian, or simply avoid feed lot beef? Why does he insult carnivores and question their reasons for eating meat in general? Is his goal to convince others to support a better beef industry which allows cattle to move and graze, or does he covertly want society to be vegetarian? McKibben wants us to switch to a different method of meat production which could drastically reverse environmental damage, but does not utilize all of the tools on hand. Although McKibben is more notably a proponent for the environment, he may have strengthened his argument by appealing to his readers’ emotions. He states that feed lots are unethical, but does not elaborate further. The treatment and living conditions of the animals we

eat should have been illustrated as an emotional appeal for change. Though he surely has presented enough information to convince many people to change, others may need an extra emotional push to do so.

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