

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Common Arguments for the Moral Acceptability of Eating Meat: A Discussion for Students

ABSTRACT

This paper is a teaching tool which instructors of animal ethics may assign to students to help them evaluate those students' most frequent arguments for the moral acceptability of eating meat. Specifically, the paper examines (and finds inadequate) the arguments that eating meat is morally acceptable because it is (1) historically widespread, (2) necessary, and (3) natural. The aim of discussing these arguments is to pave the way for a more fruitful and focused discussion of the canonical texts of the animal ethics literature.

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Introduction

When most people think about whether they should eat meat or not, they tend to think of it as a question about health. This paper, however, will consider it as an issue of *morality*, and discuss whether it is morally acceptable to eat meat. Specifically, this paper evaluates the common arguments for the moral acceptability of eating meat. Where am I getting these common arguments from? Over the years I've given numerous informal and anonymous surveys to college students, asking whether they think eating meat is morally acceptable. These students who have answered these surveys don't all believe the same thing, and they don't always use identical terms or reasoning. But in any case, students express very similar ideas with surprising frequency. Specifically, most students think that eating meat is morally acceptable, and almost all of the reasons they give fall into one of three categories:

1. People have always eaten meat.
2. Eating meat is necessary.
3. Eating meat is natural.

As we will see, within each category there are different arguments, which are also expressed with surprising frequency. Indeed, these arguments are common enough that it is statistically likely that you, the person reading this paper right now, accepts at least one of these reasons.

This paper asks the question: are these *good* reasons to believe that eating meat is morally acceptable? The thesis of this paper is that the most commonly given reasons for why eating

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meat is morally acceptable are *not* good reasons – that is, they do not stand up to careful scrutiny.

A couple of clarifications are important here. First, we are asking the question of whether eating meat is morally acceptable in *normal circumstances*. In other words, the question is about whether it is morally acceptable to eat meat for the people who are likely to be reading this paper. There may be some exceptional circumstances in which it is morally acceptable to eat meat. But this doesn't tell us anything interesting or important. It is possible to come up with extreme scenarios in which virtually any action – even ones which are generally morally wrong, like lying, stealing, or even killing human beings – becomes morally acceptable.

Second, this paper is not arguing that eating meat is morally wrong. After all, even if the most commonly given arguments are inadequate, that doesn't mean there are *no* good arguments for thinking that eating meat is morally acceptable. That said, if the arguments people actually give for the moral acceptability of eating meat are bad arguments, then that's an important discovery, and they should seriously consider whether they should continue to eat meat.

Argument 1: People Have Always Eaten Meat

The first argument goes like this:

Argument 1. *Throughout history, people have always eaten meat. Cultures all around the world, and all throughout time, have made meat a staple of the common diet.*

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The problem with this argument is that just because people have done something throughout history doesn't mean it's morally acceptable. Consider a short list of things which have gone on throughout human history which aren't morally acceptable: despotism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. In the case of homophobia, consider the way gays and lesbians have been treated throughout human history. Ancient Hebraic law commands gays to be put to death. In the middle ages, gays were punished for homosexuality by castration and death by being burned alive. In the late 19th century, the poet and playwright Oscar Wilde was sent to prison for homosexual acts. Gays were among the groups targeted for extermination during the holocaust. Up until the 1970's, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental disorder. And as I write this in 2015, homosexuality is illegal in more than 70 countries worldwide.

To be clear, I am not arguing that eating meat is *morally equivalent* to racism, sexism, or homophobia. Instead, I am arguing that just because something happens throughout human history – such as homophobia – it doesn't mean it's morally acceptable. Accordingly, just because meat has been eaten throughout human history, that does not mean it is morally acceptable.

It may be objected that homophobia hasn't been *completely present* throughout human history: homosexuality was accepted in ancient Greece, Rome, and Peru, Medieval Florence, and in many countries is becoming accepted today. But eating meat hasn't been completely present throughout human history, either: the ancient Pythagoreans abstained from meat, the early medieval Manicheans, and generations of Buddhists and Hindus. So this shows that the above argument is actually wrong

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in *two* respects: (1) people *haven't* always eaten meat, and (2) even if they had, that wouldn't mean it was morally acceptable.

If this argument is unsuccessful, then why do so many people endorse it? I think it's because this argument is a short-hand for something else. I doubt that most people think that a practice occurring throughout human history *in itself* makes the practice morally acceptable. Rather, the fact that a practice occurs throughout human history is an indication of something else. Specifically, it's an indication of the other two reasons that people give: that the practice is *necessary*, or that it is *natural*. Let us now consider those reasons.

Argument 2: Eating Meat is Necessary

If someone wants to make the argument that eating meat is necessary, they have to answer the following question: what is eating meat necessary *for*? The informal surveys from students suggest three different answers.

Argument 2.1: Eating Meat is Necessary to Live

The first version of the argument goes like this:

Argument 2.1. *Eating meat is morally acceptable because it is necessary to live.*

I consider this argument because surveys show that people put it forward with some frequency. But the problem with this argument should be obvious: if eating meat was necessary to live, then vegetarians and vegans could not exist – they'd all be dead.

Obviously philosophers can come up with improbable situations in which eating meat *would* be necessary. But again, what

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we are concerned about is whether it is morally acceptable to eat meat for people who are in roughly the situation of the reader of this essay.

Argument 2.2: Eating Meat is Necessary to Get Enough Protein

Most people know that there are sources of protein aside from meat, but most people also believe that meat is in some way a better source of protein. So the second version of the argument goes like this:

Argument 2.2. *Eating meat is morally acceptable because we need meat to get enough protein.*

The problem with this argument is that it's factually inaccurate. People can get protein just as efficiently – and sometimes more efficiently – from non-animal sources. For instance, according to the USDA, non-animal sources of protein such as peanut butter and tempeh contain more protein per gram than chicken or beef. To use another example, black beans and tofu contain more protein per gram than chicken (USDA, 2015). These are just a few examples – there are, of course, many more plant-based sources of protein.

Some object that, for those with allergies to soy or other plants, eating meat *is* necessary, since such people cannot get protein from those sources without significant risk to their health. There are two responses to this objection. First, if the reader of this essay *doesn't* have such an allergy, then the objection is irrelevant to them, and so in their case this argument still fails. Second, those who do have such allergies almost never have allergies to *all* non-meat sources of protein. Indeed, if someone is allergic to so many plants so as to rule out all plant

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sources of protein, it is hard to see how they could survive at all by exclusively consuming meat.

I suspect the real reason people make this argument is not simply because they are unaware of non-animal sources of protein. Rather, people – especially Americans – tend to overestimate the amount of protein they need. The recommended amount of protein for an adult is about 50 grams per day, yet the average American adult consumes about 88 grams per day – over 170% of the recommendation (Fulgoni 2008, 1554). Moreover, when people imagine giving up meat, they imagine keeping their diet exactly as it is now, but eliminating meat. Suppose a typical meal for you is a hamburger with fries and a drink. If you take away the burger, then you probably *wouldn't* get enough protein. But that just shows that if someone is going to give up meat, they should supplement it with plant sources of protein – sources of protein which are just as good or even better than meat.

Argument 2.3: Eating Meat is Necessary for General Health

Even if it's possible to get protein from non-animal sources, and plenty of it, many people still worry that there are some *other* health problems that come from being a vegetarian. So the third version of the argument goes like this:

Argument 2.3. *Eating meat is morally acceptable because you need to eat meat in order to be healthy.*

Just like the argument about protein, this is also factually inaccurate. The best scientific studies of nutrition show that vegetarians are just as healthy as people who eat meat – and in many cases, healthier. The largest scientific study of the nutri-

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tion of vegetarians (known as the Oxford-EPIC study) studied around 25,000 vegetarians in England over a long period of time. It showed (Spencer et al. 2003, 728) that vegetarians have a lower Body Mass Index (BMI) and lower risk of high blood pressure (hypertension) than those who eat meat and fish (Appleby, Davey & Key 2002, 645). Vegetarians also have a 30% lower risk of heart disease (Crowe et al. 2013, 597) and a lower risk of cancer (Key et al. 2009, 1622) compared to meat eaters – statistics significant because heart disease and cancer are the two leading causes of death in the United States (US Department of Health and Human Services 2012, 4).

Of course, these are very specific measures of healthiness, but the same point is supported when we consider the *overall* health effects of not eating meat. A meta-analysis (Key, Appleby, and Rosell 2007, 35) of the health effects of a vegetarian diet concluded, “Overall, the data suggests that the health of Western vegetarians is good and similar to that of comparable non-vegetarians.” This is also supported by the American Dietetic Association (“Position” 2009, 1266) which states that “appropriately planned vegetarian diets... are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.”

To be clear, I am not arguing that being a vegetarian *makes* you healthier than eating meat does. I am simply arguing that, contrary to argument 2.3, eating meat is not *necessary* for being healthy. Indeed, statistics show that each of the arguments above are factually mistaken in some way. Although eating meat is widespread, it’s not because it’s necessary to live, get enough protein, or be generally healthy.

Argument 3: Eating Meat is Natural

Even if eating meat isn't necessary, there's still another reason people give for why it's morally acceptable to eat meat: eating meat is *natural*. Just as we had to ask what it meant to say that eating meat is necessary, we have to ask what it means for eating meat to be natural. The informal surveys from students again suggest three possible answers.

Argument 3.1. Non-Human Animals Eat Animals in Nature

Sometimes we use the word "natural" to refer to what non-human animals do. So perhaps when people say that eating meat is natural, they mean that non-human animals eat meat. Accordingly, the first version of the argument goes like this:

Argument 3.1. *In nature, animals eat other animals to survive: the lion eats the gazelle, the shark eats the seal, and so on. Humans are animals, too. So it's morally acceptable for us to eat other animals.*

The problem with this argument is that it assumes that if animals do something, then it's morally acceptable for human beings to do it. But there are lots of things animals do which aren't morally acceptable: eating members of their own kind; killing the weak members of their group; having sex with unwilling partners; killing human beings. There are clear examples which cast doubt on this argument:

1. Sows (female pigs) who have recently given birth, especially to their first litter, will engage in what is called "savaging." The sows act extremely aggressively to their piglets, usu-

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ally hurting, maiming, and occasionally crushing them. They then eat the dead piglets.

2. Orca whales will “play” with a seal before they eat it by repeatedly flipping it up out of the water until all of its bones have been crushed.

3. The female praying mantis, after mating (but sometimes during mating) kills the male and eats him, usually beginning by biting off his head. I hope it goes without saying that it’s wrong for a human being to kill and eat their sexual partner – regardless of what non-human animals do!

To be clear, I’m not trying to argue that *animals* act morally wrongly (which would presumably require some capacity for moral judgment which animals seem to lack). I am just pointing out that the assumption of this argument – that if animals do something, then it’s morally acceptable for human beings to do it – is incorrect. Indeed, the fact that human beings have a capacity for moral judgment that animals seem to lack should tell us that, if anything, the opposite is true: we must hold our behavior to a higher moral standard than the behavior of animals.

Argument 3.2: Humans are Natural Omnivores

Some species cannot eat meat – they do not have the biological capacity to chew, digest, or gain nutrition from meat. But humans are different: in addition to being able to eat plants, we also can also eat meat. So the second version of the argument says:

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Argument 3.2. *Eating meat is morally acceptable because humans – as a result of evolution – are naturally omnivorous.*

The factual basis of this argument is correct: humans *do* have the biological capacity to eat meat as a result of evolution. But does that show that it's morally acceptable to do so? The problem here is that the argument assumes that just because you have a natural capacity to do something, it's *morally acceptable* to do it. But this is false. For instance, most humans have, as a result of evolution, the biological capacity to jump. But that doesn't mean it's always morally acceptable to jump – for instance, you shouldn't jump on puppies, the elderly, or your neighbor's carefully manicured flowerbeds.

Of course, jumping is *sometimes* morally acceptable. But the argument here isn't that jumping is morally equivalent to eating meat. The argument is that jumping is a counterexample to the general claim: if you have the biological capacity to do something, then it's morally acceptable to do it. So even if jumping is morally acceptable sometimes, what makes it morally acceptable isn't that we have the biological capacity to do it. Likewise, even if eating meat is morally acceptable, what makes it morally acceptable isn't that we have the biological capacity to do it.

The problem with this argument is that it presupposes something like the following moral principle: *might makes right*. In other words, because you *can* do something, it's morally acceptable to do it. This, of course, is an awful moral principle, which we have good reason to think is false. As John Stuart Mill (1869/2006, 137) points out, this principle – what he calls “the law of the stronger” or “the law of force” – has been used

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to justify despotism, slavery, and the subordination of women. I say that the argument presupposes “something like” that principle because what this argument presupposes is actually slightly different: *natural* might makes right. In other words, because you can *naturally* do something, it’s morally acceptable to do it. But as we saw with the case of jumping, that’s false, too. And as Mill pointed out, even if men have evolved to be able to physically dominate women, that doesn’t mean it’s morally acceptable to do so. The lesson here is that “might makes right” is a bad moral principle, and appealing to nature – “natural might makes right” – isn’t any better.

Perhaps, though, the argument is really trying to get at something else when it mentions evolution. Evolution, after all, is about what is conducive the survival and expansion of the species. So one possibility is that if something is conducive to the expansion or survival of a species, it’s morally acceptable. But there are two problems with this. First, there are some things which are conducive to the expansion or survival of the species which *aren’t* morally acceptable: killing or sterilizing severely disabled and mentally handicapped people might be conducive to our expansion as a species, but it’s very morally wrong to do so. Second, even if the moral principle *were* true, eating meat is no longer conducive to our survival and expansion as a species. After all, to farm animals for meat, you *also* need to farm plants to feed the animals. So it’s always going to be more efficient to eat plant proteins directly – rather than farming plants, feeding those plants to animals, and then eating the animals. Because we’re able to farm vegetable-based protein far more efficiently and cheaply than meat-based protein, eating meat isn’t actually conducive to our expansion and survival as a species.

Argument 3.3. Humans are at the Top of the Food Chain

Now we come to the final version of the argument, one of the most popular.

Argument 3.3. *In all of nature there is the food chain. There is a natural hierarchy of animals, where animals higher up on the food chain eat the animals that are lower on the food chain. Because human beings are so much smarter and more technologically advanced than other species, we are at the top of the food chain. Therefore, it is morally acceptable for human beings to eat meat.*

There are two big questions to ask about this argument before evaluating it. First, what does it mean to say that humans are at the top of the food chain? And second, what moral significance is this fact supposed to have?

Being at the top of the food chain essentially amounts to this: one species is typically able to kill and eat any other species. That's what it is for a species to be higher up on the food chain compared to another. So what are we supposed to conclude from that? We might think the argument is just trying to describe how things are: because a species *can* kill and eat another species, it *does*. So as a matter of fact, humans *do* eat animals lower on the food chain. That's true, but it's not really relevant to our question: we're not just asking what humans *do*, we're asking whether it's *morally acceptable* that they do it. (After all, there are lots of things that human beings do which aren't morally acceptable.) So I take it that this argument has to do more than describe how things are. The argument has to say that it's *morally acceptable* to eat animals. So the argument has to be this: because humans are able to kill and eat any other

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animal species (humans are at the top of the food chain), it's morally acceptable to kill and eat those animals.

Now that the argument is clearer, there's an obvious objection. This version of the argument presupposes the same moral principle as the previous argument: natural might makes right. In other words, it says that because you can naturally do something, it's morally acceptable to do it. But as we've seen, this is a bad moral principle. It would imply, for instance, that it's OK to abuse and hurt people who are naturally physically weaker than you – after all, you *can* naturally hurt them.

It might be replied that “natural might makes right” is only a bad moral principle when it comes to dealing with members of our own species. It's wrong to hurt and abuse people who are naturally weaker than you because *they're of the same species as you*. So perhaps “natural might makes right” does apply when we're talking about how one species should behave toward others. But this is very implausible. Because of the natural size and strength of humans, we *can* punch, kick, maim and mutilate stray animals – but just because we can does not mean that it is morally acceptable to do so.

And that is the real problem with all of the arguments which start with the idea that eating meat is natural. They all presuppose the moral principle that just because human beings (or other animals) naturally *can* do something, it's morally acceptable for human beings to do it. These arguments are surely right that human beings are a biological species just as animals are, and we occupy different places in the ecosystem. But it's a mistake to look at how animals in the natural world live and take that to be a guidebook for how we *should* live.

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Summary of the Problems with the Arguments

I've argued that there are serious flaws in all three of the most common arguments for why it's morally acceptable to eat meat.

Argument 1 – People have always eaten meat. The problem is that just because something is historically widespread does not mean that it's morally acceptable.

Argument 2 – Eating meat is necessary. The problem is that eating meat isn't necessary to live, to get enough protein, or to be healthy.

Argument 3 – Eating meat is natural. The problem is that this assumes that natural might makes right, which is a clearly bad moral principle.

Conclusion: What Does All Of This Show?

As I said earlier, I haven't argued that eating meat is morally wrong. Even if these particular arguments I've examined are bad arguments, that doesn't mean there aren't *any* other good arguments for the view that eating meat is morally acceptable. (Though after considering this many bad arguments, one might begin to suspect that it is less and less likely that we shall find good arguments for the moral acceptability of eating meat.) In any case, this does show that the most commonly given arguments for why eating meat is morally acceptable all fail.

This is important in two ways. First, if people's actual reasons aren't very good, then they should come up with new reasons if they are to continue eating meat. Second, this shows that it's not obvious whether it's morally acceptable to eat meat. And that means people should seriously consider the possibil-

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ity that eating meat is not morally acceptable. It's hard for most people to really, truly consider that possibility. After all, it's seriously uncomfortable to ponder whether you do something every day – something that you look forward to and perhaps cherish – that is morally wrong. But living ethically requires, before all else, honest reflection.

And I think that, if most people are honest with themselves, they will find that there's been something obviously missing from this discussion. The arguments we've been discussing here really have nothing to do with the actual reasons people eat meat. It's not as if people order hamburgers because, even though they can't stand the taste, they have solemn respect for the food chain. The real reasons people eat meat are because it's convenient and it tastes good. So if we are to be honest with ourselves and ethical we must ask the following question:

Does gustatory pleasure (the pleasure that comes from good-tasting things) justify the things we do to animals, from how we raise them to how we kill them for food?

That is the real philosophical issue which bears on the question of whether eating meat is morally acceptable, and how we answer it depends on something that has been conspicuously absent from this discussion: the moral status of animals. The next logical step, then, is to consider views about the moral status of animals which help us answer the question of whether our gustatory pleasure justifies using them for animal products and meat.¹

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