

Ethical Veganism, Virtue, and Greatness of the Soul

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Abstract Many moral philosophers have criticized intensive animal farming because it can be harmful to the environment, it causes pain and misery to a large number of animals, and furthermore eating meat and animal-based products can be unhealthful. The issue of industrially farmed animals has become one of the most pressing ethical questions of our time. On the one hand, utilitarians have argued that we should become vegetarians or vegans because the practices of raising animals for food are immoral since they minimize the overall happiness. Deontologists, on the other hand, have argued that the practices of raising animals for food are immoral because animals have certain rights and we have duties toward them. Some virtue ethicists remain unconvinced of deontic and consequentialist arguments against the exploitation of animals and suggest that a virtue-based approach is better equipped to show what is immoral about raising and using animals for food, and what is virtuous about ethical veganism.

Keywords Veganism · Compassion · Fairness · Virtue ethics · Utilitarianism · Deontology

The idea of utilitarianism, roughly, is that an action is right or morally permissible if and only if its consequences produce the greatest good for the greatest number of sentient beings. The term “good” varies depending on the type of utilitarianism: e.g., for classic utilitarianism the good is happiness; for preference utilitarianism the good is preference.

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Introduction

In recent years, two important but unrelated events have occurred in ethics. One is the return of moral philosophers to an interest in virtue ethics.¹ The other is the interest in ethical veganism. I think that a virtuous approach to morality can be used in support of ethical veganism. One wonders why virtue ethicists seldom have contemplated this prospect. Apart from the already difficult task of articulating a virtue ethics, it is also difficult to defend ethical veganism in a way that is satisfactory. Some proponents of veganism suggest that we categorically abolish animal exploitation; they argue that using animals or insects as a source of food, clothing, and more, is immoral; and even that we should reject all products that have been experimented on animals—unconditionally. This position, which I call *absolute veganism*, faces the difficulty of justifying such a totalizing claim in the face, for example, of those who live in parts of the world where scarcity of plant food or other unfavorable factors leave them with no other choice but to use animals to survive. Furthermore, avoiding products obtained from animals or that have been experimented on animals is nearly impossible as almost everything has, including soya beans, even water. In addition, the very People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) state, “we would not oppose eating eggs from chickens treated as companions if the birds receive excellent care and are not purchased from hatcheries.”² The latter, however, may seem to demand too little. Many vegans (including myself) would not eat eggs—even from chickens treated as companions. Another challenging aspect of ethical veganism is that the typical arguments offered in support of veganism do not seem adequate to justify becoming or staying vegans. For example, Animalrightsabout.com writes, “Veganism is the practice of minimizing harm to all animals, which requires abstention from animal products, such as meat, fish, dairy, eggs, honey, gelatin, lanolin, wool, fur, silk, suede and leather.”³ But we should not become ethical vegans only because it may minimize harm, and I worry that “requiring abstention” from animal products may be the wrong moral attitude. The approaches to ethical veganism that I described, are vaguely based on flawed utilitarian or deontic concepts suggesting that, as a rule, we abstain from using animals or, as a utilitarian principle, we do what minimizes undesirable consequences. My argument is based on virtue. I argue that a more conducive defense of ethical veganism is to consider it an expression of virtuous character, upon reflection and observation of the lives of animals and their objective moral characteristics. I believe that conducting a virtuous life may entail practicing veganism, not as an abstention or an attempt to maximize utility, but rather as an expression of good moral character, of what Aristotle calls “greatness of the soul”.⁴

¹ This revival began with the famous G.E.M. Anscombe’s article “Modern Moral Philosophy”, *Philosophy* 33 (1958).

² “Is it OK to eat eggs from chickens I’ve raised in my backyard?” <http://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/is-it-ok-to-eat-eggs-from-chickens-ive-raised-in-my-backyard/>.

³ “What is Veganism” <http://animalrights.about.com/od/animalrights101/a/Veganism.htm>.

⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, IV. 3.

Philosophy and Veganism

A number of contemporary philosophers have discussed the importance of a virtuous character, and acquiring the virtues, over obeying moral prescriptions derived from universal principles or duty. Some have also suggested that a virtue-oriented defense of ethical veganism seems to be more appropriate than the attempts made by the various rights theorists or utilitarians.⁵ Shafer-Landau, for example, points out that the hitherto arguments about vegetarianism or veganism based on deontic or utilitarian defenses at best favor the abolition of factory farming, still “this leaves us short of a moral obligation to remain or become vegetarians”.⁶ Shafer-Landau thus suggests that perhaps we should abandon deontic and utilitarian concepts and instead focus on certain traits of character showing that the practices of using animals for food are typically callous. I say “typically” referring to what McPherson calls *modest ethical veganism*, “the view that it is typically morally wrong to use or eat products made from or by”⁷ animals such as cows, pigs, chickens, or fish, or products such as dairy and eggs. Modest ethical veganism does not deem immoral any and all circumstances in which animals or animal by-products are used. Rather, it maintains that it is immoral to use animals when equal or superior plant-based alternatives are readily available, which is the case for most affluent societies.

Rosalind Hursthouse is a proponent of a virtuous approach to the ethical treatment of nonhuman animals. She argues that starting with the question of moral status, whether animals and humans are equal in some moral respect, or whether animals have rights, is not the correct starting point. Rather, we should begin by morally questioning the attitudes that underlie the use of animals. When we do so, we often find that we act viciously. Thus, if one is committed to living a virtuous life, he or she will change his or her attitude toward the use of animals.⁸ Cheryl Abbate also entertains the idea that virtue ethics, rather than utilitarianism or duty or rights view, is the appropriate framework for developing a defense of ethical veganism. Her claim is that on the one hand, utilitarianism is overly permissive because it permits the harming of animals for trivial reasons, so long as aggregate utility is maximized. On the other hand, deontological theory is too restrictive, since the prohibition on harming nonhuman animals would make moral agents

⁵ Utilitarians and deontologists have been the dominant forces in the recent literature on ethical issues regarding animals. The literature is vast, but the most influential are the works of Peter Singer, and Tom Regan: Regan, T. (2004). *The case for animal rights* (Revised ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Singer, P. (1975). *Animal liberation: A new ethics for our treatment of animals*. New York, NY: Avon Books. Singer, P. (1993). *Practical Ethics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Singer, P. (1980). Utilitarianism and vegetarianism. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 9(4), 305–324.

⁶ Shafer-Landau, Vegetarianism, Causation and Ethical Theory, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Volume 8, Number 1, January 1994.

⁷ Tristram McPherson, Why I am a Vegan, 1.

⁸ See Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hursthouse, R. (2006). Applying virtue ethics to our treatment of other animals. In J. Welchman (Ed.), *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing. Hursthouse, R. (2011). Virtue ethics and the treatment of animals. In T. Beauchamp & R. Frey (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of animal ethics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

incapable of responding to moral tragedies that, at times, may require that some animals be harmed in order to prevent more harm.⁹ Furthermore, Brian Luke argues that the most influential arguments in favor of veganism or vegetarianism (especially those proposed by Regan and Singer) rely on conceptions of rights and preference that are flawed. Both Regan and Singer, though they propose different ethical accounts, share the idea that there is no morally relevant difference between animals and humans that could justify animal exploitation. So, Regan argues that because animals are “subjects-of-a-life” like humans, in the sense that they feel and have desires and a variety of experiences just like us, and because they can be harmed just like humans, they also have a value that should be respected. The difficulty with these types of arguments is that the symmetry they propose between human and non-human animals is questionable. In fact, it may be argued that it is an example of anthropomorphism to say that our experiences are similar to those of certain animals in a way that is relevant to morality. Michael Tooley, for example, argues that it is not immoral to kill most animals because they are not cognitively sophisticated enough to have a concept of continued existence; so, depriving them of their future is not wrong as it is to deprive a human being who is aware of and cares about his continued existence.¹⁰ Furthermore, as Carl Cohen argues, not all suffering is equal, and human suffering, and human pleasure, are much more important than animal suffering (or pleasure).¹¹ The problem with assuming such a symmetry is that since the cognitive capacities of animals are not sophisticated enough, and so their suffering, it is suggested, is not as important as human suffering, it is not wrong, for example, to kill them in ways that cause minimal suffering.¹²

Perhaps, the most telling criticism of the so-called symmetry argument is Cora Diamond’s “Eating Meat and Eating People.” Diamond writes that the symmetry is a “fundamental confusion about moral relations between people and people and between people and animals”.¹³ She points out that the analogies used in these types of arguments are not clear at all, and thus it is difficult to see how they move from considerations about human preferences to considerations of animal preferences. Diamond argues “This is a totally wrong way of beginning the discussion, because it ignores certain quite central facts—facts which, if attended to, would make it clear that rights are not what is crucial”.¹⁴ As she points out, people (typically) do not eat people, but not for the reasons given by the symmetry argument, that is, because they have preferences by virtue of being sentient and they prefer not to be eaten or because they have rights. Rather, we do not eat people because we do not regard

⁹ Abbate (2014). Virtues and animals: A minimally decent ethic for practical living in a non-ideal world. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 27(6), 909–929.

¹⁰ Tooley, M. (1972), “Abortion and Infanticide”. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2.1, 37–65.

¹¹ Cohen, C. “The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research.” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 315, 1986. 865–869.

¹² Brian Luke “Justice, Caring and Animal Liberation” published in *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, 124–148.

¹³ Diamond, 466.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 467.

them as food. And even if people wouldn't mind being eaten or they died in accidents, and human flesh were delicious and nutritious, we would still not eat them. But then, it seems that the symmetry breaks down because it suggests that we do not eat or maltreat other human beings because they have certain rights/preferences, which are granted by their being sentient. However, if the analogy holds for animals, and demands that we not eat them because doing so may deprive them of their right to equal consideration and cause them distress, then this principle should also hold for humans. Namely, eating people would turn out to be immoral because it deprives humans of their right to equal consideration and causes them distress. But this is clearly not the reason we do not eat people. Anyone who argues this way, Diamond says, "runs a risk of leaving altogether out of his discussion those fundamental features of our relationship to other human beings which are involved in our not eating them".¹⁵

As Diamond notes, we do not slaughter people for food or eat dead people even if no injustice were involved in the cause of their deaths. We do not eat amputated limbs (except in extraordinary cases)—even if the meat were good and nutritious. But it's not because we respect people's morally relevant interests or because they are bearers of interests or because we want to maximize aggregate utility. She argues that concepts like "person," "friend," and "pet" are morally rich; they encompass a number of complex sentiments and moral relations. The reason that we do not eat or enslave our friends is because of our nuanced relationship with them; similarly, the reason we do not eat companion animals is that we love them, give them a name, a place on the couch, a meal in a special bowl, and, at the end of their lives, we mourn them and often even give them a burial. People who have companion animals do not avoid harming or eating them because they are sentient creatures who have rights or preferences, but rather because they are sentimentally attached to them and, presumably, respect certain objective moral characteristics they see in them. Our complex relationships with others and our feelings toward them are aspects that the symmetry argument fails to capture.

Virtue Ethics

Considering that deontic and utilitarian arguments defending the moral obligation to become vegetarians or vegans are flawed, I shall discuss how virtue ethics can offer a more helpful approach. Virtue ethics (VE) maintains that our moral experience and our relation with others are too complex, too nuanced, and too textured to be captured and understood by a set of principles or rational calculation. When we theorize, we detach ourselves from our moral experience and our moral feelings, overlooking the importance of our relationship with others and the importance of "sympathy, empathy, and compassion as relevant ethical and epistemological sources for human treatment of nonhuman animals".¹⁶ In the Greek myth,

¹⁵ Ibid., 467.

¹⁶ Josephine Donovan "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogue" *Signs* Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter 2006), 306.

Procrustes offered his bed to guests who wanted to spend the night. If the guests were too long for the bed, Procrustes would chop off their legs; and if they were too short, he would stretch them so that they could fit. Deontology and utilitarianism have done to morality what Procrustes used to do to his guests. VE, therefore, believes that the correct way to understand and approach morality is to consider each situation and determine what the appropriate moral approach should be and which action should be carried out. Most importantly, VE recognizes that people's motives, character, and reasons for acting in certain ways are more important than any theory that claims to give moral directions. In other words, if people are just, moderate, compassionate, and overall have a benevolent disposition, *by virtue* of their characters, they will do what is right, for the right reason, at the right time, in a given circumstance.

There are important factors in morality, whether an intention is right, whether one is following the correct rule, or whether the consequences of our actions generate morally good outcomes. But these factors are not primary. What is primary for VE is whether the individual's actions are expressions of good character, through the acquisition of the moral virtues. The concept of virtue is the concept of morally admirable character traits, the possession of which makes one a good individual. A virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels as he or she should, for the right reason considering the circumstances. When we help a friend, for example, we should want to do so out of friendship and not for the sake of it or because we have ulterior motives. According to VE, if you are my friend, I help you because I like you and care about you and take pleasure in helping you, and not because I think that I have a moral duty to help you or because it turns out that my helping you will maximize overall utility. This aspect of VE is one of the main points of disagreement between VE and non-aretaic moral theories. VE regards a virtuous individual as someone who has the virtues; virtues have morally right desires built in. In Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the question of how one acquires the moral virtues, "the virtues... we acquire by having first put them into action".¹⁷ This is possible because the capacity for virtue is innate, but has to be brought to a fully developed state through practice. For example, it is by repeatedly performing generous acts that one develops the virtue of generosity; it is by repeatedly refusing to indulge one's appetite that one develops the virtue of temperance. However, not every generous or temperate act is virtuous. If I spend my entire paycheck to buy a friend a car or if I refrain from eating all together, or I eat far too much, then I am not doing what is virtuous. Consider the virtue of courage. Being courageous is not to lack fear but to act in spite of fear. But if I express my courage by robbing a bank, I am not exercising my courage in a way that is virtuous. Why? Simply because robbing a bank is an action proceeding from a vice that goes against other virtues, such as justice. According to VE, the best way to promote social cooperation and harmony is for people to acquire a good, reliable character. Rules by themselves may give guidelines, but they cannot make people good. Consequences of our actions are

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II. 1103a30.

important, but without good character we are not likely to produce greater total satisfaction that other theories try to achieve by detached theorizing.

Virtue and Veganism

In order to see in what sense ethical veganism may be an expression of virtue, it is helpful to consider some important aspects of the virtues of temperance, compassion, fairness, and also of what Aristotle calls greatness of the soul. Aristotle discusses temperance and intemperance in Book III. 10–12 of the *Ethics* in terms of bodily pleasure and pain. The intemperate person, Aristotle argues, enjoys “the smells of perfumes and cooked dishes”.¹⁸ He describes intemperance as indulging in pleasures that are “slavish or brutish”.¹⁹ With regard to eating, too much or too little, Aristotle notes, will ruin one’s health. He argues that “to eat whatever is at hand”²⁰ is a sign of intemperance. Conversely, the virtuously temperate individual, with regard to food, eats things that are conducive to health, and in moderation, “as long as they are not incompatible with health or vigour, contrary with what is noble, or beyond his means”.²¹ The temperate individual, thus, is not attracted to any kinds of foods merely because they smell good or taste good or seem pleasurable. Rather, she will eat in moderation, not to satisfy her pleasure, but to be nourished; and she will choose those foods that are healthful. From this consideration of what it is to be temperate, as it applies to healthful eating, by showing that eating animal products can be unhealthful, it seems consistent to say that consuming animal products is immoral as it is an expression of the vice of intemperance. What is important here is to consider that it is possible to thrive on a vegan diet, a diet completely devoid of animal products, and that health sciences show that consuming animal products can be dangerous for one’s health.²² Research has shown that eating meat and dairy products can cause heart disease, diabetes, obesity, atherosclerosis formation, cancer, and other health issues, and that a plant-based diet may lower, and in many cases reverse, those conditions.²³ Let us consider a few examples:

1. *Cancer*. In 2015, 22 scientists from the World Health Organization (WHO)’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) evaluated over 800 medical studies and concluded that consumption of processed meat is

¹⁸ Aristotle, III. 10, 1118a, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid. III. 10, 1128a, 25.

²⁰ Ibid. III. 10, 1118a, 15.

²¹ Ibid. III. 10, 1119a, 15.

²² See Tuso PJ, Ismail MH, Ha BP, Bartolotto C. Nutritional Update for Physicians: Plant-Based Diets. *The Permanente Journal*. 2013;17(2):61–66. doi:<https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-085>.: “Research shows that plant-based diets are cost-effective, low-risk interventions that may lower body mass index, blood pressure, HbA_{1c}, and cholesterol levels. They may also reduce the number of medications needed to treat chronic diseases and lower ischemic heart disease mortality rates. Physicians should consider recommending a plant-based diet to all their patients, especially those with high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or obesity”.

²³ Craig WJ, Mangels AR; American Dietetic Association. “Position of the American Dietetic Association: vegetarian diets.” *Am Diet Assoc*. 2009 Jul; 109(7):1266–82.

- “carcinogenic to humans,” and that consumption of red meat is “probably carcinogenic to humans.” Their conclusions were based on overwhelming evidence for positive associations between meat and colorectal cancer, as well as positive associations between processed meat consumption and stomach cancer, and between red meat consumption and pancreatic and prostate cancer. But it is not just processed meats that pose such a health risk. The study also shows a link between cancer and consumption of all kinds of animals, including “white meat,” beef, pork, etc.²⁴
2. *Heart Diseases.* In 2005, *The China Study* examined the link between meat consumption and dairy foods, and such illnesses as coronary heart disease, diabetes, breast cancer, prostate cancer, and bowel cancer. The authors concluded that people who eat a plant-based diet—a diet devoid of meats, fish, dairies, eggs, and all animal by-products—will avoid, reduce, or even reverse the development of numerous diseases.²⁵
 3. *Breast Cancer.* A 2014 Harvard study found that just one serving a day of red meat during adolescence was associated with a 22 percent higher risk of premenopausal breast cancer, and that the same red meat consumption in adulthood was associated with an overall 13 percent higher risk of breast cancer.²⁶
 4. *Obesity.* Meateaters are 3 times more likely to be obese than vegetarians, and 9 times more likely than vegans. On average, vegans are 10–20 lb lighter than meateaters. Vegan diets promote higher metabolic rates, around 16 percent faster for vegans compared with meateaters.²⁷
 5. *Life Expectancy.* According to a study published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, vegetarians may live longer than meateaters. The study concludes, “Vegetarian diets are associated with lower all-cause mortality and with some reductions in cause-specific mortality”.²⁸
 6. *Sickest Population.* It is interesting to note that the U.S., “where meat is consumed at more than three times the global average”,²⁹ is one of the sickest nations in the world,

²⁴ Carcinogenicity of consumption of red and processed meat, *The Lancet Oncology*, Volume 16, No. 16, 1599–1600, December 2015. http://www.iarc.fr/en/media-centre/pr/2015/pdfs/pr240_E.pdf.

²⁵ T. Campbell’s *The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted And the Startling Implications for Diet, Weight Loss, And Long-term Health*, BenBella Books; 1 edition (May 11, 2006).

²⁶ “Red meat consumption and breast cancer risk” <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/red-meat-consumption-and-breast-cancer-risk/>.

²⁷ Montalcini T, De Bonis D, Ferro Y. “High vegetable fats intake is associated with high resting energy expenditure in vegetarians” *Nutrients*. 2015;7:5933–5947

Fraser G, Haddad E. Hot Topic: Vegetarianism, Mortality and Metabolic Risk: The New Adventist Health Study. Report presented at: Academy of Nutrition and Dietetic (Food and Nutrition Conference) Annual Meeting; October 7, 2012; Philadelphia, PA. 2011.

²⁸ “Vegetarian Dietary Patterns and Mortality in Adventist Health Study 2” *JAMA Intern Med*. 2013;173(13):1230–1238. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.6473>.

²⁹ “Trends in meat consumption in the United States” *Public Health Nutr*. 2011 Apr; 14(4): 575–583. Published online 2010 Nov 12. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980010002077> and the Economist’s Apr. 30, 2012, article “Kings of the Carnivores” Apr 30th 2012, 15:40 By *The Economist Online*, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2012/04/daily-chart-17>.

The United States spends much more money on health care than any other country. Yet Americans die sooner and experience more illness than residents in many other countries. While the length of life has improved in the United States, other countries have gained life years even faster, and our relative standing in the world has fallen over the past half century.³⁰

The rate of obesity, heart disease, high cholesterol, and diabetes, in the U.S. has been growing exponentially.³¹ Consider the deleterious health consequences that can be caused by the consumption of animal products, we can say that an individual who has the virtue of temperance will not eat meat or other products derived from animals. Surely, one may argue that the idea of temperance is an idea of moderation, and eating animal products in moderation (perhaps) will not be as harmful. However, we have to consider, again, that eating animal products is not essential. In affluent countries such as the United States that have access to an abundance of plant-based food, meat eating is practiced out of pleasure or tradition. In such a situation, we should ask what a temperate agent would do. It seems plausible that, given the potential harm of an animal-based diet, and this diet not being essential to most people who have readily available plant foods, the temperate individual will not indulge in those types of food—not even moderately—because they are not conducive to health, and it does not require a sacrifice to eat a plant-based diet. As Aristotle points out, one should not indulge in certain bodily pleasures when one can “easily accustom oneself to resist pleasures...and the modes of accustoming oneself are quite safe”.³²

At the end of Book III of the *Ethics*, concluding the discussion of what it means for a person to be temperate and intemperate, Aristotle reminds us that the

appetitive element in a temperate person ought to be in harmony with reason; for the aim of both what is noble, and the temperate person’s appetite is for the right thing, in the right way, and at the right time, and this is what reason requires as well.³³

Ethical veganism argues that killing animals for food and other products is unnecessary when it is done by people who have an abundance of readily available plant-based alternatives; and therefore, in that case using animals is immoral. Furthermore, ethical vegans avoid eating animals because, being concerned about health, they avoid what is conducive to health issues. In this sense, ethical veganism is an expression of temperance. As I illustrated above, health sciences do not speak in favor of an animal-based diet, but rather confirm the benefits of a plant-based

³⁰ *U.S. Health in International Perspective: Shorter Lives, Poorer Health*, National Research Council (US); Institute of Medicine (US); Woolf SH, Aron L, editors. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2013.

³¹ “Obesity Information” http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/WeightManagement/Obesity/Obesity-Information_UCM_307908_Article.jsp#.WGci9bGZNE4.

³² Aristotle, III. 2, 1119a.25.

³³ 1119b.15.

diet. In light of these facts, meat eaters who have easy access to an abundance of plant-based food of equal or superior nutritional value to animal-based food are intemperate because they unnecessarily indulge in foods that are not essential or conducive to health—but in fact, as health sciences continue to show, animal-based food can have deleterious effects on our health.

Another expression of virtue that appears to be consistent with ethical veganism is the feeling of compassion. Aristotle discusses how compassion is an important moral feeling that the virtuous individual possesses and uses at the right time and for the right reason. He defines compassion as follows,

Let compassion be a sort of distress at an apparent evil, destructing or distressing, which happens to someone who doesn't deserve it, and which one might expect to happen to oneself or someone close to one and this when it appear near.³⁴

For Aristotle, compassion is the pain felt at the misfortune one believes to have befallen another when the suffering is serious rather than trivial, the belief is held that the suffering is undeserved, and the sufferer may be without fault (in the instant case, animals used as a source of food when not strictly necessary) or the deplorable consequences may outweigh the fault, affecting our sense of injustice.³⁵ Compassion is an important moral feeling connected with a good moral character that we need to have “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue.”³⁶ Since virtue involves having the right feelings and performing the right action, a compassionate individual will not only feel compassion, but also act compassionately. As Roger Crisp writes,

Someone with the virtue of compassion will act in ways characteristic of someone who feels compassion appropriately. She will offer the right kind of help in the right kind of way rather than ignoring the other's plight on the one hand, or providing the wrong sort of assistance, such as smothering the other with her concern.³⁷

Therefore, the idea of a compassionate individual is that she will perform compassionate actions in the proper way, that is, knowing what she is doing, choosing the actions appropriately for their own sake (or, for the sake of the “noble,” as Aristotle puts it), given the situation at hand, and performing them from a well-grounded disposition.³⁸

With regard to animals, then, what are the actions of a compassionate individual toward them? To be compassionate means to be concerned about others' pain, with the hope of alleviating it and that some positive good will emerge from the

³⁴ (Aristotle 1959, 2.8, 1385b 13–16)

³⁵ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1386a6–7, 1385b14, b34–1386a1, 1386b7, b10, b12, b13, 1386b14–15; and *Poetics* 1453a4, 5.

³⁶ *Ethics*, II.6, 1106b18–19; 1106b21–7.

³⁷ Crisp, “Compassion and Beyond”, 243.

³⁸ *Ethics*, II.4, 1105a.

sufferer's unfortunate situation. Since being virtuous entails performing the proper action from a well-grounded disposition, then being compassionate entails being altruistic, that is, acting in such a way as to help others who are suffering. A compassionate individual takes action to increase or maintain others' happiness. Since most animals are capable of suffering or living a pleasant life, a compassionate individual would avoid practices that cause pain to animals and also would try to maintain their happiness. Notice that this view is compatible with the thesis that animal suffering is qualitatively different from human suffering. I am not arguing that animal suffering and enjoyment and human suffering and enjoyment are qualitatively the same. My claim is that killing an animal just for the sake eating steak, for example, is callous when equally or better nutritious plant-based alternatives are readily available. A compassionate individual has empathy. Empathy "recognizes connection with an understanding of the circumstances of the other."³⁹ An empathetic individual tries to understand thoroughly the situation and circumstances of others and cares about their well-being. These 'others' may be close to us or far away, other humans or non-human animals. Empathy enables us to extend our love to victims of some natural catastrophe, for example, who may live at the other side of the world. In the case of our treatment of non-human animals, the compassionate individual has empathy for them and tries to understand what matters for them. A compassionate individual, therefore, will not merely try to alleviate the pain of an animal who, for instance, is about to be slaughtered by caressing him or by giving him a tranquillizer or by making his death as quick as possible. This would not be the full expression of compassion. Rather, a compassionate individual, who has empathy, also recognizes that animals do not only wish to avoid pain, but also wish to survive and flourish. Consequently, by definition, a compassionate person would oppose all forms of animal exploitation. But just like other virtues, compassion seems to lie between two excesses. One way, for example, an individual would be too compassionate is by putting his own well-being at risk. It would be a form of excess of compassion if one refused to wash his hands to protect germs, or if he denied food to his children to feed strangers, or allowed rats to take over his apartment. Conversely, one would *not* be compassionate enough if he deliberately killed animals for fun, or just for the sake of it; or, in the instant case, having an abundance of nutritious plant-based food, he indulged in eating products derived from the exploitation and death of animals. Ethical veganism is the idea that we should avoid using animals for food or clothing when we have equal or superior, readily available plant-based alternatives, as it is the case in many developed countries.

A typical objection is that eating meat would seem consistent with compassion as long as animals are treated with respect. However, from my evaluation of compassion, it does not appear to be the case. Many people may claim that the compassionate way to use animals for food is to allow them to live a happy life. This attitude, however, evinces a failure to be compassionate, or an incompleteness of the

³⁹ Lori Gruen, 45.

virtue of compassion. For VE, it is not sufficient to be compassionate only in some instances.⁴⁰ The very idea of compassion is not only to suffer with or share others' suffering but also to make a positive contribution to their happiness. If we truly treat animals well and are concerned about their well-being, it seems peculiar that we might do this with the intention of eventually killing them to have them as food. Using the adverb "compassionately" to modify the verb "kill" is not sufficient to make killing a compassionate act. Therefore, one may not claim to be compassionate in the complete sense of the virtue if one's actions involve acts such as killing animals merely because their cooked flesh tastes good and gives them a great deal of pleasure. One must be thoroughly and consistently compassionate toward animals. Also, one is not truly compassionate by simply refraining from directly being cruel to or directly exploiting animals. One must also not be party to the exploitation of animals; he must not purchase leather, fur, meat, or choose to remain ignorant or inactive by shrugging it off and say that he cannot do anything about it. Here I consider as a premise that for virtually all people who live in affluent societies, eating meat is a caprice rather than a strict necessity. Consequently, it is in no way compassionate to kill an animal for food or entertainment or for fun or even if it is done in a way that minimizes or avoids pain. As Stephens points out, a "compassionate person would feel moral discomfort, or even revulsion, enjoying something made possible only by the suffering of another."⁴¹ Therefore, insofar as veganism is the position according to which we should not kill animals or use their body parts and by-products when other equal or superior plant-based foods or clothing are readily available, veganism is an expression of virtue, more precisely, it is an expression of compassion.

Another aspect of virtue that enables us to see what is virtuous about veganism is what Aristotle calls the crown of the virtues, that is, greatness of the soul, which he discusses in IV.3. Greatness of the soul consists in thinking oneself worthy of great things and being concerned about honor. A great-souled individual, in other words, possesses great moral qualities, such as compassion, temperance, and a sense of justice in the sense of what is right or wrong in a given circumstance. What emerges from an analysis of what it is to be a great-souled individual is "the sort of person to do good," and "It would be quite unfitting [for a great-souled individual] to run away with his arms swinging, or to commit an injustice."⁴² The kind of picture we get of the great-souled individual is a magnanimous, and just individual who cares about others and is not afraid to help the vulnerable.

A great-souled individual must be just. Being just means to avoid actions in accordance with vice, such as committing adultery or wanton violence.⁴³ The just individual is a fair individual.⁴⁴ It might be objected that Aristotle here is talking about civic justice. But I believe his definition of the just in terms of a fair individual is broad enough to be relevant to the question of our treatment of animals. Aristotle

⁴⁰ See Hursthouse 1999, p. 14.

⁴¹ Stephens, "Five Arguments for Vegetarianism," p. 33.

⁴² Aristotle, IV.3, 1123b, 30, 1124b, 18.

⁴³ Ibid. V. 1129b, 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 1129b.

views the just and fair individual as a great-souled individual. He says, “the best is...the one who exercises [his virtue] in relation to others...” and what “tends to produce or to preserve happiness”.⁴⁵ In other words, the virtuous individual, as a great-souled individual, would be against wanton violence, exploiting people or animals. A fair individual recognizes that hurting animals intentionally is unfair. Also, a fair-minded individual acts out of justice to ensure that everyone receives what he or she deserves. Being fair means ensuring that others receive the deserved treatment. For example, it is unfair to deny certain benefits to a group of people solely on the basis of, say, their color, gender, or race. The fair individual is fair to all, regardless of their skin color, nationality, height, age, species, and so on. Also it seems plausible to say that, following this idea of fairness, it is unfair to raise and kill animals for food when plant-based foods are readily available. Eating and using animals typically causes countless animals to suffer and be killed for trivial reasons, such as taste, fashion, and amusement. In societies where plant food is readily available and abundant, using animals as a source of food is, by definition, unfair.

Virtue ethics here agrees with deontology and consequentialism about the moral importance of taking into account animal conscious experience and their capacity to suffer; but while utilitarianism argues that these two factors should be taken into account so as to maximize overall happiness or preference, and deontology regards them as the basis for duty or rights, for VE animals’ mental capacity and their capacity to feel pain or pleasure inform our virtuous character of their moral importance. That is to say, animals’ conscious experience and their capacity to have a great life, or a miserable one, give us an objective reason to be compassionate toward them and treat them with respect.

The notion that animals are conscious and feel pain is no longer a controversial one. For example, studies now show that it is not only large animals, but also “there is adequate behavioral and physiological evidence to support pain attributions to fish”.⁴⁶ As cognitive ethologists Donald Griffin points out, it is arbitrary to deny animals a level of self-awareness; most of the animals that are typically regarded as food, cows, pigs, lambs, chickens, and others, are conscious and aware of their own bodies and actions. Animal thoughts and emotions may be simple compared to humans’ in the sense that perhaps animals can think only of matters of immediate importance, so in that sense their awareness of the world is said to be not as sophisticated as that of human beings. However, Griffin argues, consciousness is not an all-or-nothing attribute. Most animals are complex enough to be able to organize and retain information about many aspects of their lives. For example, they recognize different odors to which they react in different ways, suggesting many subjective feelings and awareness.⁴⁷ If this is correct, killing such animals, merely to satisfy our taste for a certain dish, is immoral because they experience the world and killing them deprives them from their future existence and experiences. When we consider carefully the mental capacity of animals and we consider what it is to be a great-souled individual, that is, a compassionate, magnanimous, caring, and

⁴⁵ Ibid. 1129b, 18.

⁴⁶ Allen (2004) “Animal Consciousness.” *Nous* 38.4, 617–643.

⁴⁷ See *Animal Minds Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* by Donald R. Griffin.

fair individual, it seems quite unlikely to claim that a great-souled individual might treat animals with compassion (for instance in very high welfare production systems), and then decide to eventually kill them with minimal pain and suffering in order to eat them. The practice of killing animals to eat them—not out of necessity but rather for trivial reasons—is not in accordance with the actions of a great-souled individual who is compassionate, temperate, and fair. Again, considering that eating meat is not required to thrive, and considering that in well-developed societies there is an abundance of plant-based food of equal or superior nutritional value to meat, it follows that killing animals and eating them is immoral. If it is not out of necessity, then eating meat is a practice justified merely by tradition, taste, convenience, or other trivial reasons. Animals experience the world. They are individuals. Although they may not be, cognitively speaking, as sophisticated as human beings, it would seem that they want to enjoy their existence. It follows that tradition, convenience, and taste are not good reasons to use animals, even “humanely.” If we are consistently fair, we will not merely try to ameliorate the living conditions of animals with the intent to eventually turn them into food or clothes, or try to kill them with minimal pain. Rather, if we are fair, compassionate, and temperate, we will avoid exploiting them in the first place. Using their bodies, their skin, their milk, their fur, or their eggs is therefore immoral, as well. Ethical veganism argues that when plant food is readily available, using animals for food is unnecessary, unfair, cruel, and also unhealthful, and thus it is an immoral practice. Therefore, ethical veganism embodies the virtues of compassion, fairness, temperance, and what it is to be a great-souled person.

Eating Meat and the Destruction of the Environment

In addition to the charge that eating animals is callous, unfair, and unhealthful, also ethical vegans avoid animal products because raising animals for food can be harmful to the environment and, in turn, can be harmful to humans.

Raising animals for food requires massive amounts of land, food, water, and energy. It is a known fact that a staggering amount of global greenhouse-gas emission is caused by animal agriculture.⁴⁸ According to the United Nations, a global move toward a vegan diet is necessary to “save the world from the worst impacts of climate change”.⁴⁹ Growing crops to feed animals, cleaning pollution from factory farms, and satisfying animals’ thirst require an enormous amount of water. The numbers among studies vary, but to have an idea consider that a single cow can drink up to 50 gallons of water per day, and double that amount in hot

⁴⁸ Rachel Premack, “Meat is Horrible” *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/06/30/how-meat-is-destroying-the-planet-in-seven-charts/?utm_term=.fa399b2b7544.

⁴⁹ “Assessing the Environmental Impact of Consumption and Production” http://www.unep.org/resourcepanel/Portals/24102/PDFs/PriorityProductsAndMaterials_Report.pdf.

weather.⁵⁰ And according to the USGS Water Science School, “About 460 gallons for 1/4 lb of beef, or about 1750 L per 113 g” of water are required.⁵¹

Considering the great number of animals raised for food, it is not surprising that they produce enormous amounts of waste that inevitably pollute our waterways more than all other industrial sources combined. Also, pesticides, chemicals, fertilizers, hormones and antibiotics involved in animal agriculture degrade the environment and cause human health problems. Runoff from factory farms and livestock grazing pollute our rivers and lakes. The USEPA notes that bacteria and viruses are carried by the runoff and contaminate groundwater.⁵²

Furthermore, using land to grow crops to feed animals is inefficient. According to the U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification,

In India, annual grain consumption per person amounts to around 400 lb per year, while in the United States, it is 1500 lb. It is crucial to understand that of these 1500 lb, only 300 lb are directly consumed as bread, cereals or pastry. The great bulk of the rest is used for meat production. While three pounds of grain are needed to produce a one-pound gain in live weight of pigs, seven pounds are needed for a one-pound gain of a cow’s live weight.⁵³

It takes almost 20 times less land to feed someone on a plant-based (vegan) diet than it does to feed a meat-eater since the crops are consumed directly instead of being used to feed animals.

Conclusion

I have argued that a virtue-based approach is the correct moral framework to justify ethical veganism. I pointed out that deontic and consequentialist accounts are incapable of defending the conclusion that we should be or become vegans. Essentially, the reason these moral approaches fail is that they lose sight of the important issue about our treatment of animals by focusing on abstract principles such as duty or rights or maximization of utility; they also try, unpersuasively, to show a symmetry between the moral value of humans and that of animals. My focus has been to show that it is more plausible to frame a defense of ethical veganism by starting from a question of what it is to be what Aristotle calls a great-souled individual. As I have argued, this individual is compassionate, just, and temperate. Consequently, acquiring those virtues and acting from them will motivate ethical veganism. That is to say, a virtuous individual is compassionate, caring, sensitive to

⁵⁰ *Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources* Producer Question from 2016 Q. How much water do cows drink per day? (July 19, 2016).

⁵¹ “The Water Content of Things: How much water does it take to grow a hamburger?” <https://water.usgs.gov/edu/activity-watercontent.php>.

⁵² The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *National Enforcement Initiative: Preventing Animal Waste from Contaminating Surface and Ground Water*, <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/national-enforcement-initiative-preventing-animal-waste-contaminating-surface-and-ground>.

⁵³ U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification, “Which other factors lead to land degradation?” <http://newsbox.unccd.int>.

cruelty and unfairness to animals, and therefore these moral qualities will lead to ethical veganism.

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