In Defense of (Some) Meat

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Darn!


It was the brain child New York Times "Ethicist" columnist Ariel Kaminer. In introducing the contest, she correctly observed that many authors have made convincing arguments against eating animals on ethical, ecological and health grounds. The moral arguments for eating meat, however, usually boil down to (a) "It's natural", (b) "It's yummy" and (c) "It's God's will." The problem is that none of these pass an even rudimentary philosophical smell test in terms of rigor.

Kaminer challenged her meat-eating readers to develop a reasoned moral justification for the consumption of flesh. The rules were simple: entries had to be 600 words or less and focus on the issue... why it is ethical to eat meat.

The Results:

Kaminer expected to get a couple of dozen responses. Instead she received over 3,000 entries. Hence the first round of judging was outsourced and the pile of essays reduced to 29 semi-finalists. These were sent to a stellar (but unfortunately, all white male) panel of judges who opted to take the cowards' way out: they selected six finalists and have now asked the public to vote for the winner. You can read these essays and cast your vote here.

I don’t feel bad that I lost the contest. After all, I have 2,994 fellow omnivores to commiserate with. And I did enjoy the difficult challenge of trying to come up with a coherent logical argument for human carnivory. But, for what it's worth, here is my (admittedly twisted) defense of meat-eating.

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Beyond the Yuck Factor: In Defense of (Some) Meat

Hal Herzog

(599 words)
The ethics of eating animals boils down to two questions: Are there some forms of animal flesh which for moral reasons should not be consumed? And, are there categories of animals whose consumption pose few, if any, moral problems? The answer to both questions is “yes.”

Everyone would agree that some forms of carnivory are unethical, for instance, cannibalism. Here I argue that a logically coherent argument can also be made for the moral acceptability, and indeed, moral superiority of three forms of meat consumption.

My defense of meat-eating rests on the assumption that pain rather than death is the ultimate moral leveler. Thus I concede the immorality of eating sentient creatures such as cattle, pigs and chickens that live, die and suffer under the conditions of modern industrial agriculture.

But if it is unethical to eat animals that experience pain and pleasure, where can the morally sensitive omnivore turn to satisfy his or her meat lust? Here is my list.

**Category 1. Dead Animals**

Because dead animals don’t suffer, their consumption poses no moral problem. One source of ethical meat for the not-too-squeamish omnivore is fresh road kill. (I know a person who occasionally dines on flattened squirrels he scrapes off the pavement.) But this category also includes the five million unwanted cats and dogs that are euthanized annually in American animal “shelters” each year as well as the corpses of family pets who die of old age. The average Irish wolf hound lives only seven years and contains approximately 90 pounds of edible flesh. (My cat Tilly, in contrast, would only have the dressed weight of a chicken.) The deceased animal category does not, however, include wild creatures that are intentionally shot for food; many of these animals are not instantly killed but are wounded and die agonizing deaths. In my ethical scheme, hunting is a no no.

**Category 2. Animals with Rudimentary Nervous Systems**

A second category of guilt-free edible animals includes creatures sufficiently low on the phylogenetic scale they are probably incapable of experiencing significant suffering. One of the judges of this contest, Princeton’s Peter Singer, famously drew his moral line “somewhere between the shrimp and the oyster.” I have a somewhat lower bar and would allow ethical meat eaters to chow down on invertebrates such as mealworms, grubs, earthworms, mollusks (with the exception of cephalopods), jelly fish (I have eaten them—not great), ants, termites, and crickets, which, when fried, make excellent tacos.

**Category 3. Happy Animals.**

My last category of creatures that ethical omnivores can and should eat consists of happy animals. My defense of meat-eating rests on the proposition that the ethical problem with consuming flesh lies in the suffering, not the killing. Indeed, if raising and eating happy animals increases life’s pleasures for both the eaters and the eaten (who, after all, would otherwise not have been born), carnivory is actually morally preferable to vegetarianism.
This, however, means no industrial feedlots, no dank poultry grow-out houses, no animals whose genetically engineered morphology ensures a life of pain. The animals we consume should live in environments that enable them to engage in natural behaviors including play and sex. And they must be killed humanely, with no terrifying rides in open trucks to the slaughterhouse.

My pleasure-based moral calculus also implies that eating a lot of small happy creatures is ethically preferable to eating a few large happy ones. It takes about 221 chickens to generate the amount of edible flesh in one steer. That’s a lot of happy animals.

*Bon appétit!*

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1 Kathy Rudy, author of Loving Animals: Towards a New Animal Advocacy, pointed out to me that sodium pentobarbital, the sedative used to kill dogs and cats in most animal "shelters," would be harmful to people who eat euthanized pets. However, my veterinarian friend JB Mathews assured me that the levels of the drug would not harm human consumers of dog or cat flesh. He did add that it might calm them down for a few hours after dinner.