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The Naïve Argument against Moral Vegetarianism

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ABSTRACT

The naïve argument against moral vegetarianism claims that if it is wrong for us to eat meat then it is wrong for lions and tigers to do so as well. I argue that the fact that such carnivores lack higher order mental states and need meat to survive do suffice to undermine the naïve argument.

KEYWORDS

Ethics, applied ethics, vegetarianism, animal welfare, naïve argument

INTRODUCTION

The view that eating meat is wrong runs counter to common sense, if we allow that a claim is common sensical just in case it is adhered to by the vast majority of people *outside the academy*. In academic, and in particular, philosophical circles, however, the immorality of human carnivorousness seems, at times, to be the received view. Given that this flies in the face of common sense, one would hope that there are good arguments for this position and that it withstands critical scrutiny.

What I want to argue here is that this position has troubling implications, which should give the reflective vegetarian reason to pause. This argument is a version of what I shall call the 'naïve argument against moral vegetarianism'. I call it the 'naïve' argument because it is one of the most common first responses the average non-academic will give to the claim that eating meat is wrong: 'if it is not wrong for lions and tigers (and it's not) then it is not wrong for us'. This response is usually pooh-poohed by moral vegetarians who appeal to differences in the biological needs and moral capacities of humans and other carnivores.

What I want to suggest, however, is that there is more to this naïve response than meets the eye.

I. THE BASIC ARGUMENT

In this section, I want to present the basic version of the naïve argument and the central objections to it. Since it is an argument against moral vegetarianism, we will need get a little more precise about what the moral vegetarian thesis is. I want to suggest that the following is a fair formulation:

VT) Eating the meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten is morally wrong.

(An obvious corollary of this thesis is the following:

VC) Killing an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... for the purpose of using its meat as food is morally wrong.)

There are three things worth mentioning about (VT). First, reasonable vegetarians can disagree about what properties an animal has to have to be protected by this moral prohibition. Second, the ‘purpose’ clause of (VT) is meant to permit the consumption of the flesh of animals that have, for example, died of natural causes. After all, a vegetarian might believe that eating even human flesh is permissible, if the humans in question died accidentally. And third, unless a given opponent of (VT) in question is also a cannibal, she will accept a related thesis differing only in the properties that something has to have in order to be protected.

The basic version of the naïve argument can now be presented as follows:

- P1) Lions, tigers, and other carnivores eat the meat of animals with properties X, Y, Z, ... which have been killed for the purpose of being eaten.
- P2) It is not morally wrong for lions, tigers, and other carnivores to do so.
- C) Eating the meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten is **not** morally wrong.

The standard response to the ‘naïve’ argument involves granting that it is not morally wrong for lions, tigers, etc. to eat the meat in question, but, due to certain important differences between them and us, it **is** morally wrong for us to do so. Typically, vegetarians appeal to the fact that we, unlike lions and tigers, (i) know the difference between right and wrong and (ii) do not need meat in order to survive. I will consider each of these in turn to see if they are differences that make a difference.

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II. THE MORAL IGNORANCE OF LIONS

Lions, tigers and other carnivores, the vegetarian might argue, lack the cognitive capacities, as well as the moral education, to know the difference between right and wrong. And so they could not know that eating the meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... which was killed for the purpose of being eaten is morally wrong. Humans, at least healthy adults, in contrast, do have the capacity to tell right from wrong. And so they can, and ought to, know that eating such animals is wrong. Moreover, humans, unlike the carnivores we have been considering, can get themselves to refrain from eating meat on the basis of their moral judgements concerning the practice. As a result, it is wrong for us to eat meat, while it is morally permissible for lions and tigers.

This argument, however, is fallacious. The fact that lions and tigers do not know that eating meat is wrong does not show that it is not wrong for them to do so. All it shows, at best, is that they cannot be held morally accountable for eating meat. If the only relevant difference between lions and tigers on the one hand and humans on the other is that humans have the capacity to know the difference between right and wrong, then if it is wrong for humans to eat meat, it is also wrong for lions to do so. The only difference is that humans are subject to moral disapprobation for the practice.

Moreover, a case can be made for supposing that, if this is only difference between humans and other carnivores, (VT) implies that lions and tigers ought to be prevented from eating meat. Consider, by way of analogy, a child, too young to know the difference between right and wrong, attempting to slit the throat of his sleeping father. If the child succeeded in his attempt, he would have performed a morally wrong act albeit one for which he ought not to be blamed. However, despite the lack of blameworthiness for his act, we would be morally required to prevent the child from slitting his father's throat if we could. Similarly, if eating meat is wrong, we are under an obligation to prevent carnivores, when we can, from engaging in this practice, even if they are not blameworthy for doing so.

There is, however, a stronger version of this response that can be given by moral vegetarians which is not so easily handled. Someone might argue that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends not upon its outcome but upon the intentions with which it was performed, and only agents with certain capacities, say rationality, can form the relevant intentions. As a result, given that lions, tigers, and the like lack the relevant capacities, their actions (or, perhaps better, their behaviours) are neither right nor wrong. Hence, it is not wrong for them to eat meat.

The trouble with this response becomes apparent, however, when one considers why an agent with the relevant capacities ought not to intend to eat the

meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten. There seem two possible answers to this question: (i) the wrongness of performing an act with this intention is due to the moral badness of the intended result; or (ii) it is due to the fact that it involves accepting the permissibility of oneself being treated in the same way and that an agent with the relevant capacity could not accept the permissibility of being so treated. If (i) is correct, then, although it would not be, strictly speaking, morally wrong for lions and tigers to eat meat, we would still have an obligation to prevent them from doing so when we could. And if (ii) is correct, it is far from clear how one could end up with a prohibition against eating the meat of animals *which lack the relevant capacity*. After all, why would the permissibility of treating you in a certain way imply that it is permissible to treat me in that way, unless you and I are relevantly similar? And if lions and tigers lack the relevant capacity, then, presumably, pigs and cows and chickens will lack that capacity as well. And these are exactly the animals whose moral and culinary status typical moral vegetarians and moral carnivores dispute. My argument here has been far too quick, but the challenge with which I presented the moral vegetarian is clear. To resist my argument, an account must be given as to why it is wrong for an agent with the relevant capacity to perform an act with the intention of eating the meat of an animal lacking the relevant capacity, which does not presuppose that it is morally bad to eat the meat of such an animal.

III. THE LION AND THE GUNMAN

But the capacity for moral knowledge is **not** the only relevant difference between humans and other carnivores. Lions and tigers may well be biologically constituted so that they need meat in order to survive. Humans, in contrast, can do very well (and, perhaps, even better) without meat. An advocate of (VT) might argue that this difference between humans and other carnivores might be sufficient to undermine the charge that, if it is wrong for humans to eat meat, it is wrong for lions and tigers to do so as well.

But the situation of the lion can be compared fruitfully with that of an innocent person A who has a gun pointed at her head and who will be killed unless she kills someone else B. Given that one innocent person is going to die either way, the outcome in which A kills B (or in which B is killed on A's behalf) and that in which A is killed by the gunman seem morally equivalent. And so a lion faced with the option of killing and eating some animal or starving to death does not do wrong by eating meat. But the situation of a lion is importantly different from this. In order to survive, a lion has to continually kill and eat animals throughout its life. And the numbers **do** count. The outcome in which A kills B, C, D, and E is morally **worse** than that in which A is killed by the gunman, despite her innocence. Similarly, a situation in which a lion kills a number of animals

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throughout its life is morally worse than one in which the lion starves to death, if (VT) is correct.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Objection # 1: *Certain species of animals often benefit by being preyed upon by carnivores. In particular, by keeping their numbers down, carnivores prevent the suffering due to starvation that would otherwise result from overpopulation. Moreover, a species as a whole may flourish if carnivores predominantly feast upon those members whose genetic endowment makes them less able to thrive in their natural environment. And since these benefits are unlikely to be obtained except through the unfettered actions of carnivores, it is, therefore, permissible for lions and tigers and other carnivores to eat meat.*¹

Even if this argument ultimately proves to be satisfactory, there are a number of qualifications that need to be made regarding its conclusion. First, it is unlikely to provide any reason to suppose that it is permissible for domesticated carnivores, such as cats and dogs, to eat meat. And second, one could argue on similar grounds that it is permissible for humans to eat the meat of animals, such as deer, killed in well regulated hunts whose purpose is to prevent overpopulation of the species in question. But it is far from obvious that these sorts of considerations are sufficient to show that it is permissible for lions and tigers to eat meat if it is not permissible for us to do so. Consider, by way of analogy, a community of humans whose mortality rate is high due to unsanitary conditions and the spread of communicable diseases for which they have neither medicines nor vaccines. And suppose we have the power to lower the mortality rate by providing medicines and improving sanitation. Moreover, suppose that if we do so, the resultant population increase will put severe pressure on the community's food supply, yielding a situation which we would find very difficult to rectify. My question is whether or not in such circumstances it would be permissible for us to refrain from providing the community with medicines and improving the sanitary conditions. If one judges that it is not permissible for us to refrain from providing the services in question, then one will be hard pressed to appeal to the argument we have been considering in support of the permissibility of meat eating by lions and tigers.

Objection # 2: *The argument against Moral Vegetarianism presented above has certain troubling implications. In particular, it seems to imply that it is permissible for humans to engage in whatever activities in which non-human animals engage in nature. After all, if an animal, upon occasion, permissibly eats its young or steals food from its neighbours, and there is no morally significant difference between said animal and humans, then it must be permissible for humans to eat their young or steal food from their neighbours.*²

There are a number of comments I wish to make here. First, my argument was specifically tailored to the issue of killing animals for their meat and eating the meat of animals killed for said purpose. There remains room to argue that there are important differences between lions and tigers, on the one hand, and us, on the other, that make it morally permissible for them, but not us, to engage in other sorts of activities. Second, the objection gets much of its force by suggesting that if it's okay for a non-human animal to treat another non-human in a certain way, then it is okay for humans to treat *other humans* in the same way. But one could reasonably argue that whether or not a certain type of activity is permissible—for humans *or* non-human animals—depends on the properties of the victim. And there may be ways one can treat non-human animals which would be inappropriate if applied to humans. For example, most people are comfortable with the idea that while it is okay for lions and tigers to kill non-human animals for meat, it is not okay for them to kill *humans* for meat. Third, it might be argued that this sort of response does not rule out the inappropriate treatment by humans of non-human animals, such as torturing kittens and the like. But this presupposes that anything animals do at least to other non-humans is morally permissible. And one might hold that the sea lion who kills penguins for sport and not for food does something wrong.

Objection # 3: *The reason killing animals for food is morally wrong is that it involves the intentional infliction of pain upon the killed animal. The morally significant difference between lions and tigers, on the one hand, and us, on the other, is that while lions and tigers cause pain when they kill for food, they don't do so intentionally.*³

There are, once again, a number of comments I wish to make at this point. First, I take the issues of killing animals for food, on the one hand, and subjecting them to suffering while raising or killing them, on the other, to be distinct. And my argument is meant to address only the first issue. Moreover, I take it to be a plausible view that killing animals for food is morally permissible only if they have not been subjected to suffering during the process of raising and killing them. Second, strictly speaking, even if the animal is intentionally killed in a painful manner, this does not suffice for the charge of the intentional infliction of pain. One might reasonably assume (perhaps naïvely) that, typically, the pain is *foreseen* but unintended byproduct of the act of killing. Moreover, unless we assume that lions and tigers have no intentions at all, the only contrast we get is between those who intentionally kill, foreseeing the victim's pain, and those who intentionally kill, without foreseeing the victim's pain.⁴ And it is much less plausible to suppose that what makes killing animals wrong is that it involves the *foreseen* infliction of pain upon the victim.⁵ Third, I just want to kick my heels in and insist that the intention to cause pain is **not** what makes killing animals for

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food wrong. While our intentions might well (and probably do) determine our degree of responsibility for what we do, whether that responsibility brings with it blameworthiness, praiseworthiness, or desert only of morally neutral attitudes depends upon what sort of treatment of what sort of patient our actions involve.

Objection #4: *The argument in section III presupposes that lions and tigers can be regarded as having the capacity for doing right and wrong, but, arguably, this requires having certain sorts of intentions which, again arguably, lions and tigers lack. And while the arguments in section II may have shown that the lack of these intentions would not suffice by itself for the permissibility of killing animals for food, they do not show that lions and tigers **have** the relevant sorts of intentions.*⁶

Let me put my cards on the table. I have been assuming the following sort of picture of moral wrongness. There are a number of ways a patient of a certain sort can be harmed. Actions or behaviours which essentially or inevitably involve producing such harms are *ceterus paribus* morally wrong. And an agent who engages in these actions or behaviours with certain sorts of mental states is blameworthy for what s/he has done. Now the objector wants to insist that only those actions which I call 'blameworthy' are morally wrong: if an agent performs an action (or engages in behaviour) which essentially or inevitably involves producing harm *without* blameworthy mental states, the action is not morally wrong. And, so, if an agent is incapable of such mental states, then the agent is incapable of performing actions which are right or wrong. In some moods, I think this is a purely verbal issue. After all, even if such actions or behaviours are not strictly speaking wrong, they ought to be prevented because they involve the production of harm. And so the question becomes, at bottom, whether we ought to apply the label 'morally wrong' to all 'prevent-worthy' actions or only to those which are, more strongly, blameworthy. Moreover, if the objector insists on the more narrow application of the label, the 'naïve' argument can always be recast as follows:

- P1) If it's wrong (i.e., blameworthy) for humans to kill animals for food, then it's prevent-worthy for lions and tigers to kill animals for food.
- P2) It's not prevent-worthy for lions and tigers to kill animals for food.
- C) It's not wrong for humans to kill animals for food.

Once the 'naïve' argument has been recast along these lines, in order to press objection # 4, one would have to argue that lions and tigers lack the capacity to perform actions (or engage in behaviours) which are prevent-worthy, which is patently false.

Objection # 5: *The claim that a situation in which a lion kills a number of animals throughout its life is morally worse than one in which the lion starves to death, presupposes that moral badness admits of quantitative measure. But it is not clear, at least on a non-Utilitarian view, how to subject situations to a quantitative measure of their moral badness.*⁷

The following will (and will have to) suffice for present purposes. Two situations in which a single patient of the same sort has been subjected the same sort of harm by the same sort of prevent-worthy act are *ceterus paribus* equally morally bad. And a situation in which two patients of a certain kind are subjected to a certain kind of harm by a certain kind of act is *twice as bad* as a situation in which a single patient of the same kind is subjected to the same kind of harm by the same kind of act. And so on. A full ‘badness-measurement’ theory would, of course, have to compare situations in which different sorts of patients were subjected to different sorts of harms by different sorts of acts. But in order to respond to the objection at hand, I don’t need a full badness-measurement theory. After all, lions and tigers and their victims have roughly the same sorts of cognitive capacities. And the sort of harm they suffer in the circumstances under comparison – death – is the same. One might complain that the means by which the harm is brought about in the two situations differs: the lion dies as a result of starvation; its victims die as a result of violent attacks in the wild. In order to alleviate this sort of worry, I can simply change the case and compare a situation in a number of animals are shot in order to provide a captive lion with food throughout its lifetime with one in which the lion is shot to prevent a death by starvation.

V. VEGETARIANS, KILL YOUR KITTIES!

The upshot of the naïve argument is that if it is morally wrong for humans to eat the meat of certain animals, it is also wrong for lions and tigers and other carnivores to do so. And the differences in cognitive capacities and biological needs between humans and the rest in no way undermine this result. Moreover, as we have seen, if a vegetarian clings to (VT) despite these considerations, it can be easily seen that we are under an obligation to prevent these carnivores from eating meat when we can. And given the cruelty of allowing an animal to starve to death, if no alternate food source can be found for them, it seems that we are under an obligation to euthanise them. Vegetarians, kill your kitties!

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NOTES

¹ This objection comes from Mike Ridge.

² This objection is due to a referee at *Environmental Values*.

³ This objection is due to a referee at *Environmental Values*.

⁴ And the contrast between humans and non-human animals that don't kill but still eat meat of animals that were killed for food is between those that intentionally eat meat recognising that the victim suffered and those that intentionally eat without recognising this fact.

⁵ Of course, we might hold someone who foresees that her intentional action will cause pain more culpable or blameworthy than someone who does not foresee this. But, as I've suggested above, this is a separate question.

⁶ This objection is due to a referee at *Environmental Values*.

⁷ This objection is due to a referee at *Environmental Values*.