



Making Choices: Ethics and Vegetarianism

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I was seventeen and taking an elective course in Earth and Environmental Science. We were learning about farming and the food system—genetic modification, land use, organic labeling—when our teacher assigned us an article about beef.

The article explained the following process: the U.S. government subsidizes corn, so we feed it to our cows, because corn is cheap and fattens the cows up quickly. Cows are biologically designed to eat grass, so their livers are unable to process the corn. The cows' livers would actually explode if they were permitted to grow to full maturity, but we slaughter them first. This, combined with their living in close quarters and wading in their own feces, causes the cows to get ill often, so we feed them a constant stream of antibiotics, a practice that strengthens bacterial strains such as *E. coli*. Roughly 78 percent of cows raised for beef undergo this process. Similarly nauseating practices are used to raise chickens, turkeys, and pigs, 99 percent, 97 percent, and 95 percent of which, respectively, come from factory farms. Nowadays, these details are less than shocking. Movies such as *Food, Inc.* and *Super Size Me*, as well as books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Fast Food Nation* have raised consciousness, if not much action, on the topic of our food system. But, for me, it was a new story.

I had eaten meat all my life, and it had never bothered me. I fished often and, though I had never hunted, maintained that I could hunt, if the situation arose. But I sensed a deeper cruelty in the narrative of the cow than in the timeless hierarchy of the food chain. A classmate agreed to compete to see which one of us could last longer not eating meat. He managed until the end of the week. And here I am, six years later, winning by a landslide.

My knack for vegetarianism did not surprise me. I was trained since childhood to accept that not all available foods are for eating. When I was young, my family kept a kosher home. This meant that eating required effort, not only for the obvious reasons, but also because kosher meat was unavailable in our small town in New Hampshire. We coveted that circled U like addicts. Whenever a friend or family member was driving up from Boston, I would hear my mother on the phone in her auctioneer's voice, "How many can you get me? Three chickens? How about five, can you get five?" Food, especially meat, was valuable and imbued with meaning that extended beyond its flavor. As we grew older, other issues eclipsed dietary laws, and by the time I was in high school, kosher chicken was something we prepared only when my grandparents visited. I wouldn't say I consciously replaced kosher dietary laws with vegetarianism, but I can't help seeing a connection. Vegetarianism is an identity-marker, a reminder of who I am and who I aspire to be.

In my hope to be a person awake to injustice, vegetarianism is a way for me to remain conscious instead of complacent as I go through each day. Every meal requires me to take into account the limitations I have imposed upon myself and to ask others to accept them as well. I must constantly, and often uncomfortably, justify my concerns to those who eat with me or who are kind enough to cook for me, as well as to myself as I ogle a bacon cheeseburger. Again and again, I return to the issues at stake: climate change, land use, animal rights, workers' rights. I pull from my invisible knapsack an explanation tailored to the person I am addressing. As I explain my vegetarian identity to someone, I also scrutinize my own ideals and re-commit to them.

I was surprised to find how many other people my age also identify with vegetari-



anism. The *Vegetarian Times* reports that 43 percent of American vegetarians fall into the eighteen-to-thirty-four-age group. According to Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Eating Animals*, published in 2009, 18 percent of American college students are now vegetarians (as compared to 2.3 percent of the nation as a whole). A more conservative number from Bon Appétit Management Co., for the four hundred schools it serves, reports that 8 percent of college students in the 2005–2006 school year self-identified as vegetarian and fewer than 1 percent as vegan. A 2009–2010 survey by the same company showed 12 percent as vegetarian and 2 percent self-identifying as vegan.

Vegetarianism has long been intertwined with utopian hopes. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates responds to the suggestion that citizens of the ideal state should eat meat. "I see; you want not only a State, but a luxurious State," he says. "To feed all these superfluous mouths we shall need a part of our neighbors' land, and they will want a part of ours. And this is the origin of war..." Vegetarianism thrived in India and China, concomitant with millions of conversions to Hinduism and Buddhism and their doctrines of nonviolence. Henry David Thoreau took a copy of the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* with him to Walden Pond, writing on the struggle between his predatory instincts and what he saw as his moral duty to abstain from eating animals. In America, the vegetarian diet enjoyed a re-emergence as part of the counter-culture movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer argued that animals should have rights, because they have the capacity to suffer. Twenty-first-century America may be written into this narrative as the next big surge in vegetarian popularity. It is not hard to imagine why young people dominate this surge.

Members of today's older generations, especially holders of political power, appear to view climate change as something, like the deficit, that they can push off dealing with until their political or actual deaths. For our generation, impending global catastrophe on multiple fronts is a reality, one we will likely

face within our lifetimes. (As I write this, it's February in New York, and the temperature is in the high sixties.) Every year that goes by, more young people I know come to care deeply about climate change. Those who have thought about the issue often realize that eating less meat will be a key component of living sustainably on the planet. It is now widely known that the methane gas produced by farm animals is a significant contributor to global warming and that growing vegetable protein for human consumption is a much more efficient use of land. While cars, trains, planes and boats account for 13 percent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, live-stock farming generates 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's 2006 report, "Livestock's Long Shadow." Growing demand for meat causes deforestation to make way for grazing, as well as increased nitrous oxide and methane gas, greenhouse gases with an impact on global warming 296 and 23 times, respectively, of CO₂. Yet, in the United States, per-capita meat consumption is almost five pounds per week, a figure that has nearly quadrupled since 1950. By continuing on this path, we place our future in jeopardy.

Meat consumption, so dangerous to our fragile climate, is utterly unsuited to a sustainable future in myriad other ways. Over 900 million people are hungry worldwide. Yet in the United States, we feed 157 million tons of vegetarian protein—all of it suitable for human consumption—to livestock, producing only twenty-eight million tons of animal protein. Food-borne illness has been on the rise since the 1980s, especially in meat products, a fact linked to overuse of antibiotics in factory farming. Human Rights Watch calls working at a slaughterhouse "the most dangerous factory job in America," and the total lack of transparency surrounding the American food system and genetically modified organisms looms as a largely unknown threat to human health and well-being. It seems only natural to young people to urgently consider how what they eat will affect the world they live in, and it is not surprising to me that increasing numbers are giving up a food that sits at the center of a dense web of troubling consequences.



Vegetarianism has of course become trendy, as well as a trend, and in some ways Americans have never been more conscious regarding matters of health and food. Being a vegetarian is easier than ever before, with products such as quinoa, tofu, and fake meat more readily available. Restaurants, hospitals, and schools have instituted “Meatless Mondays,” creating more friendly environments for vegetarians. There is even an iPhone application called Vegetarian Scanner, which takes a photograph of ingredient lists and tells you whether the product contains meat products. The Internet can provide support and information—although often to a ridiculous extent. A seething debate, for example, recently broke out on *Slate* over whether vegans could eat oysters, as those particular mollusks apparently lack a central nervous system.

Celebrities, from Bill Clinton to Gwyneth Paltrow, promote the diet, something People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) apparently encourages by sending celebrity converts a vegetarian starter set. Yet, when I read about the opening of Stella McCartney’s newest store in Soho, where she served an all-vegetarian dinner, floated out to attendees on miniature boats, past the display of ice sculptures and the Champagne fountain, my stomach turned almost as much as it would at a pig roast. For me, this display misses the point. When the practice of vegetarianism is combined with the gratuitous consumption of the very wealthy, it loses its connection to mindfulness and becomes merely a new accessory for the wasteful.

Vegetarianism can be a form of individual resistance to an unjust society, in the tradition of Thoreau and Gandhi. But it can just as easily act as a mechanism by which we lose sight of the bigger picture, while simultaneously thinking we’re doing something

praiseworthy. Just as individuals turning off lights do not solve our larger, systemic energy use problems, individual vegetarians will not overcome the injustices of the food system if we lose track of the larger issues at stake. Each vegetarian I’ve spoken to has cited a slightly different reason for his or her actions, denying his or her kinship with other vegetarians, past and present. Many “health vegetarians,” for example, claim they have no ethical reason for their diet. Environmentalist vegetarians concerned chiefly with climate change find animal rights activists too idealistic. Vegans criticize vegetarians for their lack of commitment. But to fail to see the intersections—between health and animal rights, between environmental destruction and unsafe working conditions—is to deny any hope for a unified politics that might encourage more widespread vegetarianism as one step toward de-escalation of our growing ethical and environmental problems.

I come from a family that discusses dinner at lunch. We form our lives around food, in more ways than we realize, in many more ways than I could list here. For those of us lucky enough to have options about what we eat, those choices have meaning beyond taste and individual health. What we choose to eat is as personal and intimate as a family dinner, but simultaneously fits us into a relationship of compassionate interconnectedness not just with other species, but also with our own futures and those of our children. So many young people are turning to vegetarianism because we cannot afford to be complacent about climate change or complicit in the consumption-oriented lifestyle offered to us as default. The story of the cow I learned at age seventeen is not just the story of a suffering animal. It is a story of a web of injustices, injustices we can choose to overthrow.

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