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The Ideology of Meat-Eating

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Abstract: A network of beliefs and values (an ideology) underlies much of our behavior. While meat-eaters may not acknowledge that they have an ideology, I argue that they do by attempting to identify and deconstruct its elements. I also include numerous historical and philosophical observations about the origins of meat-eaters' ideology. Explaining and examining ideologies may encourage discussion about a particular area of life (for example, dietary choice) and stimulate change in relation to it. Both adherents to vegetarian/vegan approaches and meat-eaters who wish to become less dependent on animal food sources (for ethical and environmental reasons) can benefit from the broader understanding that such an analysis provides.

Key words: animals, anthropocentrism, diet, ideology, livestock, meat, veganism, vegetarianism

On ideology and ideologies

Generally, we all have reasons—good or bad—for what we choose and do. But behind some of our actions there is a more complex outlook, or what might be called an *ideology*. An ideology is often thought of as a set of notions tainted by values one disagrees with or finds odious: An ideology belongs to my opponent, not to me, I

might think, dismissively. (“That’s just ideology!”) There is, however, a perfectly straightforward and neutral sense in which an ideology is merely the network of beliefs and values from which people’s behavior derives.¹ A critique of ideology is still a live option within the scope of this definition, but it should be understood as a commentary upon the ideology that exists independently of the ideology itself. Meat-eaters commonly suppose that vegetarians and vegans have an ideology in some (perhaps pejorative) sense. Indeed they do have an ideology, which one may find congenial or not;² but meat-eaters often are unaware of or fail to acknowledge that they themselves have such an epistemic commitment.

What is to be gained from exposing meat-eaters’ ideology? Well, for one thing, it is of interest and relevance to debates over diets and the use of animals³ to satisfy them if we unearth its underlying rationale. In addition, it is useful to both non-meat-eaters who are committed to change, and to meat-eaters who would like to give up meat, to have the wider perspective that a deconstructive analysis of meat-eaters’ ideology can provide. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to define and explore meat-eaters’ ideology, with a view to moving beyond it for a better future on the planet.

The first thing to note is that meat-eaters are *not* carnivores in the strictest sense, as is routinely claimed.⁴ A true carnivore—for example, a jungle cat or a domesticated feline—eats *only* meat and cannot do otherwise, for evolutionary and dietary reasons. (Cats and some birds need taurine, which is only available in meat.) Human meat-eaters, on the other hand, are virtually certain to be omnivores, namely, those who tend to eat, and are able to digest, a mixture of plant and animal matter.⁵ Accordingly, this article narrows the focus of discussion by concentrating on meat-eating as the feature of interest in certain diets.

Also worth observing is that people who share an ideology may do so *roughly speaking*, meaning that they are not necessarily “purists” who subscribe to all the same tenets as others in their affiliation group.⁶ So the members of the group may exhibit in their ideological orientation what Wittgenstein calls a “family resemblance” rather than an identity relationship.⁷ Hence meat-eaters may resonate with some but not all of the ideas considered here, and it is difficult to say which are more essential or important in the overall scheme of things. However, meat-eaters would have to subscribe to at least *one* of the ideas their ideology embraces in order to share a family resemblance with one another. The reader will also perceive that these ideas are sometimes interlinked in interesting ways. For example, the idea that food animals are inferior (#3) is reinforced by seeing them as artifacts (#4) and by adhering to an anthropocentric outlook (#6).

It would require an empirical study to determine whether the list of ideological elements that follows amounts to an exhaustive representation of meat-eaters’ belief commitments. The summary provided here results from many years of studying and debating issues surrounding dietary choice, and every effort has been made to identify accurately the full range of beliefs that support meat-eaters’ endorsement of their preference.

Each component of the meat-eating ideology is first stated, and then followed by a commentary.

1. I love my meat. It’s hard, even impossible to give up meat. And anyway, why should anyone have to? It’s all a matter of taste.

Discussion 1. This is not a belief so much as a declaration of one's palate-preference and stubbornness. It therefore does not count (nor is it intended) as an argument. But what it does tell us, if seriously spoken, is that the speaker does not consider dietary preference to be open to debate or close examination, and that personal pleasure is the only thing at stake in discussions about food choices. Some people have the attitude that they can eat whatever they want, it is their right to do so, etc., and that's the end of the matter. The consequences of their diet for animals, their own health, and the environment are put aside. Judging from the expanding gourmet and restaurant market for exotic meats (including insects), there is also an attitude on the part of some that "if it moves, I can eat it." One might wish to see a greater degree of circumspection about diet and our species' impact on the ecosystems we inhabit and impinge upon, but it will not be found in these circles.

A larger issue here is an inability and/or unwillingness to see connections. What is meant by this expression? Sometimes talk of seeing connections is a way of saying that this causes that, or this leads to that, or that two or more things are jointly caused. Other times a matter of simple entailment is what we have in mind ("if X, then Y follows"). In the examination of meat-eaters' ideology, as further developed below, we will encounter examples of these types of connections that commonly go unnoticed and unacknowledged but are brought to light here (see especially #8).

2. Humans are meant to eat meat. The structure and digestive system of humans proves that evolution has made us reliant on meat.

Discussion 2. The fact that most humans are practicing omnivores seems clearly to support the view that our species has evolved to be able to process a mixed diet. (It

does not follow, of course, that what we are *able* to do is the *best* thing for us to do. See #7 below.) Some have refined the evolutionary claim to argue that human anatomy provides evidence we are built to be meat-eaters, while others have countered with anatomical evidence that we are built to be plant-eaters. This debate is inconclusive and gets us nowhere fast. But what is of special interest to the present discussion is any claim regarding the purpose of evolution. Evolution does not *intend* anything, and therefore humans are not “meant” to do anything, nor are they “designed” specifically for this or that unless one imports God into the story, which evolutionary theory explicitly does not do. Therefore, we cannot be meant to eat any particular diet.

Most philosophers agree that we cannot derive prescriptive norms directly from evolutionary evidence or any other facts about the natural world. Some would argue that this is just because we cannot deduce value-judgments from empirical observations (the “naturalistic fallacy”); but there is a more important issue here. This is that human evolution seems to be heading toward humans’ acquiring the capacity to take charge of evolution itself, to decide the sort of beings they want to become, and to select the future from among myriad possibilities. In short, what we have been as a species does not determine what we think we ought to be or how we ought to behave. Humans can decide to do what they think is right or at least what they deem as a better alternative; and it hardly needs to be said that they ought to. Therefore, if we collectively decide to give up meat, we surely can do so.

3. Animals (or at least food animals) are inferior to us. Humans are unique and therefore superior to animals. We needn’t be concerned about eating animals because they are lesser beings.

Discussion 3. As everyone knows who has examined the place of animals in the history of Western philosophy (or in Western culture more broadly), they don't rank very high in comparison to humans. Animals have been caricatured as beasts, mindless brutes, monsters, agents of the devil, and so on. Acting like an animal or in an animalistic fashion is one of the common judgmental expressions used to describe human behavior that is out of control.⁸ Christianity built upon the Aristotelian and biblical notion that humans and animals occupy separate realms of being, and reinforced this conception with the theological doctrine that only humans have immortal souls. (In contrast, Hinduism, although not a religion explicitly dedicated to vegetarianism or veganism, holds that nonhuman animals do have souls.) From the ancient Greeks, subsequent thinkers inherited the concept of a strict hierarchy of natural objects, both living and nonliving, which became known as "the great chain (or ladder) of being." This hypothetical structure of ontology was characteristic of medieval and later Neoplatonic philosophy and reverberated through evolutionary theory and other intellectual fields up until the nineteenth century and occasionally beyond. God and angels occupied the top echelons of the scheme, while stars, humans, wild animals, domesticated animals, plant life, and minerals followed in a downward arrangement of levels of perfection, worth, and natural endowments.

In Descartes' philosophy, as is well-known, animals were considered incapable of thought and feeling. Animals didn't have the capacity to suffer, or at any rate, being unintelligent and soulless, they couldn't suffer very much, if at all. Many other writers adopted a similar stance through the centuries, which helped enable and reinforce the entire industry of animal experimentation and what would now be called inhumane practices of factory farming, transport, and slaughter.

In this connection, it may also be observed that humans have spent many centuries detailing the boundaries between their own and nonhuman animal behavior and capacities. Humans were rational, animals nonrational or even irrational creatures. Only humans had sentience, language, morality, a social life, culture, an aesthetic sense, ability to deliberate and choose, self-awareness, a theory of mind,⁹ sentiments (such as love, compassion, and grief), and the ability to make and use tools. However, these supposedly essential barriers between humans and nonhumans are being rapidly eroded by ongoing research (see Further Reading). No one seriously doubts that real, profound, and important differences exist between humans and animals. But the differences mark out as many attributes that animals have and humans lack as they do the reverse. Furthermore, we are slowly coming to realize as a species that difference by itself designates neither inferiority nor superiority in any meaningful sense. This has been a central feature of the long and painfully evolving history of human ethics (toward greater inclusiveness and equality), and is likewise characteristic of the movement toward a cross-species ethical community.

In contrast to this embrace of difference, recent decades have also seen a development in the direction of recognizing equal ethical claims by humans and nonhumans, even notwithstanding their notable species-specific differences. Thus, the so-called “animal liberation” movement put forward the challenge that any sentient being (one capable of pain and suffering) deserves its interests to be given equal consideration for that reason alone. Concurrently, the “animal rights” approach redefined the notion of having a right in order to apply it to all entities that can have and/or take an interest in their own quality of life. As beings of this kind, animals possess independent value and worthwhile individual lives; and thus, their interests require to be taken into account in deliberations and actions which have an impact on

them. Other theoretical perspectives have emphasized and built ethical inclusiveness on ideas like the value of life in general, the existence of personhood within at least certain species, and the duty of care humans have toward nonhumans.¹⁰

That is the frontier of animal ethics. But there is still a strong tendency to discriminate between food animals (livestock) and other animals, including domesticated pets (companion animals). Most of those who eat meat would never consider eating a special pet, and would likely exclude all animals of that species type from their diet. The inconsistency and favoritism of this position has been commented upon frequently enough. But it nevertheless continues to hold sway and to escape examination in everyday life. An underlying assumption is that food animals are relatively stupid and unlovable; but again, research (as well as anecdotally reported personal experience) is showing this belief to be unfounded.¹¹ So it would seem to follow that at least some of the grounds cited for not eating companion animals (they can suffer; they have rights; they have dignity; they have personhood; they are not just means to our ends) also provide reasons for abstaining from the consumption of other domesticated or wild animals.

4. Food animals are artifacts. Livestock species are bred to be eaten and have no other reason to exist. Their lives have no value in themselves. So we should have no qualms about eating them.

Discussion 4. While it is true that livestock were bred only to serve as food for humans, this does not entail that an established system must continue forever, or that it is justifiable. Nor does it entail that animals' lives lack value (see above #3). A different, more invidious doctrine proposes that animals used for food are part of

culture and not of nature. On the face of it, this is an absurd dichotomy, since all living things are part of nature; so we have to dig a little deeper. The point seems to be that since livestock animals belong to species that humans have created in order to serve their own needs, wouldn't exist otherwise, and have been bred and reared for a specific purpose (being eaten), this weakens or eliminates the ethical bounds of our relationship to them. As artifacts, they can have no claim on us not to be eaten, nor any claim against us for anything beyond minimally decent care.¹²

The fact that animals have been bred for a particular purpose, however, does not change their fundamental capacities or needs, nor does it relieve humans of the obligation to treat them with decency and compassion (see #8). Furthermore, since “wilderness” is also a cultural construct, and wild animals that are favored vary from society to society, it's difficult to see how wild animals can be said to exist outside of culture.

The argument just reviewed is one of a series designed to show that animals fail to qualify for membership of the moral community, or are marginal to it.¹³ These have been used to justify many exploitative and harmful human practices involving animals, from experimentation to eating. The appeal of all such arguments is that if animals can be excommunicated from moral consideration, or if concern and caring can be minimized in their case, only the benefits to humans of our practices need be considered when we evaluate these ethically.¹⁴ But as we have already seen, the sort of easy dismissal of animals' moral status that was typical in the past no longer works in philosophy, and there are numerous strong arguments for taking animals' moral status quite seriously (see Further Reading).

Another respect in which food animals are treated as artifacts has to do with the many ways in which the reality of eating them is disguised from view. Livestock

yards and abattoirs have long since been moved from city centers to more remote industrial areas as the demand for meat has increased, on the one hand, and ethical sensibilities have developed, on the other. Advertizing that promotes meat (including poultry and seafood) consumption often features happy cartoon animals just bursting with enthusiasm over the prospect of gracing our plates. Meat is presented to us in the supermarket in sanitized cuts, wrapped in plastic film. Animals themselves are hidden behind generic labels such as “steak,” “ham,” “chops,” “burgers,” “wings,” “filets,” and the like. Carol J. Adams popularized the term “absent referent” to describe these maneuvers in which real animals are rendered invisible behind a smokescreen of euphemisms and other semiotic devices both to ease the conscience of meat-eaters and to distort and devalue what people are actually eating.¹⁵

Finally, an argument allied with the one under consideration is that food animals are replaceable. What does this mean? The belief expressed here is that, for all intents and purposes, animals of the same species are indistinguishable in most important respects and, more specifically, that their lives are fully interchangeable: The place of every animal killed for food will be filled, without any loss in value or life significance, by another such animal. Of course, it is humans who are making this judgment from *their* standpoint, being unable to adopt the animals’ own point of view; but many people—from farmers to scientists specializing in animal behavior—know that the premise of the argument is false. Animals have their individual personalities and are social beings who recognize one another, and whose loss may be grieved by relatives and conspecific group members, even sometimes by animals of other species to whom they have a special relationship.

5. Meat-eating is ecologically sound. Meat-eating fits in with the balance of nature and is therefore a sound practice.

Discussion 5. Animals eat other animals and humans also eat other animals. This is only to be expected in the scheme of things, and furthermore, as proponents of the argument say, humans are “at the top of the food chain.” In this vein Benjamin Franklin once stated, with reference to fish: “If you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you.”¹⁶ A moment’s reflection will show that the outlook expressed here is very similar to the one in which it is urged that humans are meant to eat meat (see #2).

The Franklin type of argument is flawed. As Elizabeth Telfer observes, it contains a concealed ambiguity, for it is not clear whether it asserts an entitlement claim (humans are justified in eating animals or have a right to do so) or rather a desert claim (animals deserve to be eaten by us because they eat each other). But if we aren’t entitled to do to fellow humans the bad things they do to one other, then neither are we entitled to do them to animals. As far as the desert claim goes, Telfer contends that the most it could justify is eating carnivores; but more importantly, she notes that if we consider animals as unable to make moral decisions, then they “cannot either deserve or not deserve anything.”¹⁷

Two centuries later, the Franklin approach reappears in the work of a leading environmental ethicist, who argues that the choice to eat meat can be rationalized if we “recognize and affirm the organic integrity of self and the untenability of a firm distinction between self and environment.”¹⁸ The claim here is that the (human) self is immersed in and an integral part of nature, and therefore feeds off of all that nature offers. But humans have always made choices as to what they eat and don’t eat, with

these distinctions driven by everything from preference, degree of abundance, and cost to philosophical beliefs and religious strictures. So to move from humans-as-part-of-nature to an endorsement of meat-eating seems suspicious at best and at worst, a lazy evasion of responsibility for actions that have an ethically significant impact.

A major point underlined by the emptiness of the “it’s all part of ecology” outlook, then, is that whatever may be the case with regard to nonhuman animals, humans *do* have the capacity to make moral choices, and this represents a large part of our evolutionary progress, past, present, and future, such as it is or will be. Those who endorse Franklin’s feeble thought process conveniently forget this feature of ourselves or else bury it in denial when it suits their purpose of the moment. But to do so is highly self-serving and illegitimate as an argument strategy.

6. Humans are entitled to dominate nature. The Bible says humans shall subdue and control nature,¹⁹ and many learned writers have reiterated the point. In any case, we’ve earned the right, through our own efforts, to be in charge of the natural world.

Discussion 6. At this juncture, we are led pretty directly to a consideration of anthropocentrism. The reason is that many people affirm not just humans’ greater value than that of animals (see #3) but also the special place of humans in the universe and superiority to nature as a whole. Anthropocentrism—also called dominionism, homocentrism, or human chauvinism, which is likewise the determining factor of speciesism and human-centered ethics—is a worldview that places our own species in a priority or exclusivist position in all dealings with, and thinking about, the natural world. It asserts the centrality, primacy, or superiority of humans within the scheme of things. The boldest forms of anthropocentrism maintain that the purpose of nature

in whole and in part is to serve human needs and wants. They assume, further, a greater value of human life and interests relative to those of nonhumans, or even that animals' lives have merely extrinsic value and that animals have no significant interests other than biological ones.

By long tradition, anthropocentrism has been supported by a metanarrative, such as a story about divinely ordered creation (and the idea of humans' bearing the image of God), the great chain of being (as explained earlier), the existence of an evolutionary hierarchy, or all of the foregoing. Human superiority over nature may be rationalized as the outcome of our species' development and exploitative skill, that is, as having been acquired through achievement and ingenuity. But to inject any evaluative meaning into these ideas is delusional, just as is the case with other hierarchical structures that place our species in a special relationship to the rest (at the pinnacle of creation, the center of the universe, and so on). What these approaches share in common is the perception that *Homo sapiens* represents a different order of being—one that exists *apart from nature* and not as *a part of nature*. Human experience is arguably an unavoidable reference point for members of our species. But this does not entail that all values must in the end be human-centered, or that we must continue in our thinking to place ourselves above all else, at all times, at the center of significance in the universe.

But what about human advancement? Doesn't it explain and justify anthropocentrism? To be sure, human history since the advent of agriculture and organized settlements eight to nine thousand years ago has featured the domination of nature. In recent centuries, and especially since the beginning of the industrial revolution, the momentum of domination has intensified, as the idea of nature as a resource supply has progressively taken hold. But even during the Renaissance, the

instrumentalist view of nature and animals was expressed in a loud and clear voice. Francis Bacon declared in the seventeenth-century that man's purpose is to gain power over nature in order to recover the "empire over creation" enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, but lost in the Fall.²⁰ This project description initiated and stimulated the rise of modern science to a significant extent and the intent and scope of Bacon's enterprise are still being debated by historians and philosophers. It probably suffices to say that we all inherit a tradition of thought about the natural world that is grounded in (often extreme) exploitation of the biosphere in order to enrich human life.

One obvious form of exploitation is the use of animals for food in cultures where there also exist alternative (meatless) paths to adequate nutrition. Today's industrial societies have perfected the mass killing of animals on a mind-boggling scale, with billions upon billions being processed yearly. Many of the conditions of rearing, production, slaughter, and transportation are causes of great suffering for the animals concerned, as well as of dangerous working conditions for humans. Animals reared for food are merely disposable material objects within a system that treats them in a largely indifferent manner.

Animal agriculture exists across the globe and over time. But to get a complete picture, we have to confront the additional fact that cultural and traditional institutions surrounding food are also sustained by metanarratives. Meat is status food and meat-eating is often equated with masculinity, wealth, and power. Today, in countries like China and Japan that are historically more oriented toward vegetarian diets, there is an increasing desire for meat among those who seek to identify with affluent Western countries. Meat has always had a great amount of symbolic meaning. As Colin Spencer explains, in early tribal societies, "meat which was

shared became a token of the group itself, of its identity, unity and power.... Meat still performs this very first ritual role of unifying a family and being the focal point of a feast or celebration.”²¹ Meat stands for togetherness, holiday time, comfort, and personal satisfaction, and it embodies the spirit of closeness we all value. There seems to be little wonder, then, that meat is widely considered to be the centerpiece of a “normal” diet, and that its presence on our tables is “natural” and largely taken for granted.

We must remember, however, that words like “normal” and “natural” embody value-judgments which may be contested. Beyond referring to what is statistically the norm for a given population, some people use these words to condone practices as being good, right, just, or time-honored. But many behaviors that humans individually and collectively once engaged in are now considered suspect, outmoded, and even wrong, so there is little force in harking back to past ways of doing things in defense of continuing to do the same in the present and future.

The presence of metanarratives among the justifying grounds for beliefs and practices does not by itself show that such beliefs and practices are false, morally wrong, or suspect. The only point in revealing these underlying stories is to put ourselves in direct contact with the reasons for people’s commitments in order that they can then be critically examined and perhaps superseded by conceptions that are more sound or more constructive.

7. Meat is necessary for good health. Those who eat meat are bound to be healthier than those who do not. It’s a proven fact.

Discussion 7. It must be allowed, in all fairness, that many in the US and elsewhere are actively reducing their meat consumption. “Meatless Mondays” and other rituals are not uncommon, and selective meat purchasing, phasing out red meat, eating more seafood, switching to a meat-free diet, and similar developments are widespread. Nevertheless, there stubbornly remains the idea among a majority of members of the public and many health professionals that meat (even red meat) is necessary for good health.

This is not the place to attempt a resolution of the debate over meat and good health.²² There are many good authorities who have advanced the case in favor of vegetarian and vegan diets. Arguments against vegetarian options are rarely just about health issues. A great deal of the resistance to change may appear to be about health, but other factors also have an influence. For example, meat-eating, as we have seen, is intimately involved in forming identity as a member of a group and even as a human being. Any disruption of these basic reference points may be met with resistance, displeasure, ridicule, and other reactive stances.

8. There’s such a thing as ethical meat-eating. Informing yourself about where your meat comes from and seeing that it is produced under the best of circumstances makes it ethically acceptable to eat that meat.

Discussion 8. This claim is subject to much debate at present. There seem to be two avenues to producing “ethical meat.” One is the small-scale production of livestock under carefully monitored, organic conditions, accompanied by humane slaughter. Individuals who buy into or personally practice this approach consider themselves to be responsible meat-eaters. The responsibility flows, in their opinion, from the

process just described as well as from the act of knowing about, or (even better) being able to know about and personally verify, all of the stages of production that yield the meat on one's table.²³ However, very few people are in fact in a position to apply this approach to eating, it is generally expensive to do so, and the demanding of ethical meat is never going to feed the world's billions of eaters. In any event, the bottom line is still that animals are regarded as instrumental to human needs, such that the "good life" or "happy life" they have led has the ultimate target of death in order to serve the requirements of our species.

The second kind of "ethical meat" is laboratory produced (also known as *in vitro* meat). This is an innovation that is just getting off the ground within experimental settings in different parts of the world. Animal cells are taken from live animals, cultured, and replicated in order to obtain the kinds and quality of meat cuts we are used to buying at the supermarket. Thus far, yields have been very limited and expensive in volume; but many boastful predictions assure us that it's only a matter of time before this approach will become a real contender for our consumer dollars and perhaps even a replacement for standard feedlot-raised animal products.

Is there any reason not to applaud artificially produced meat? Surely, it will reduce and perhaps eliminate entirely the amount of animal suffering caused by the food industry. Nutritional standards and quality control generally should be as good as, and likely better than, those that now prevail. It's not clear that there is any obvious ethical objection to this innovation. It will put a lot of farmers out of work and require societies to decide what to do with all of the unwanted livestock animals left behind, but so would a wholesale conversion of societies to vegetarian alternatives (see final section on "Change"). For the most part, the objections raised against laboratory-cultured meat are aesthetic—that the entire idea is distasteful and

antiseptic. But it might also be questioned why humans can't manage to give up meat, or rather, are prepared to cling to meat-eating whatever the cost or method of production.

Some authors have argued that since the production of meat depends upon the subjugation of animals, it has complex and indirect conceptual links with other forms of oppression. For example, we saw earlier (#6) that meat is status food and as such its value and restricted availability as a commodity reinforces class structures. The domination of nature associated with the production of meat connects unconsciously with the domination of women, who have been widely represented as "closer to nature" in their role as childbearers and as supposedly more emotional, less rational beings. Thus is meat-eating linked, like an underground root system, with various forms of oppression,²⁴ which throws into question in a different way the claims on behalf of the ethical omnivore.

9. Vegetarian reasoning is deficient. Vegetarians and vegans have an agenda that stems from their own unhealthy lifestyles and peculiar ways of thinking. Meat-eaters aren't doing anything wrong and so shouldn't be harassed for their habits.

Discussion 9. Some meat-eaters seem to be seriously on the defensive. They just want to be left alone to enjoy their dietary preference (after all, it's a free society, isn't it?). Vegetarians and vegans always seem to be preaching and proselytizing and holier-than-thou. And perhaps these alternative diets are just fads anyway. Maybe vegetarians and vegans are weirdos too.

There are those in every movement, to be sure, who come on too strong for their opponents to deal with. But within the meat-eaters' ideology several influential

ideas and maneuvers spring from a refusal or reluctance to look at dietary issues critically. To begin with, as is evident above, the argument we are examining contains an *ad hominem* form of rebuttal—one that attacks people who hold certain beliefs, not their beliefs or principles themselves. Beyond this, points heard frequently are that a diet including (at least some) meat is healthier (see #7); that a wholesale societal transition away from meat would be disastrous; and even that plant-based agriculture is more harmful to the land and wild animals. Vegetarians and vegans are also (though perhaps less often than in the past) singled out at social gatherings and challenged to justify their (“abnormal” or “eccentric”) dietary choices, while the meat choice (being “normal”) remains invisible and goes unexamined.

A great deal more could be said about all of these issues and there are, to be fair, areas of uncertainty in dietary knowledge. Yet there is no doubt that many individuals, past and present, have led completely healthy and self-sufficient lives as vegetarians and vegans. Much has been written to support this claim and to provide guidance for the perplexed.²⁵

Change

Alternatives to mainstream thinking and conduct always pose a threat: They appear to undermine a settled value cluster and belief-system that play a big role in defining a form of life, which in our case is a certain (dominionist) relationship to the natural world. These are not markers that can be easily overturned and for many, it takes time and struggle to work through the process of overhauling both thought and practice, if these efforts are going to succeed at all. Therefore, patience and understanding are recommended to all parties engaged in the debate over food choices.²⁶

It is impossible to know what the future will be for global food supplies. Any large-scale transformation of agriculture and the economics of food production will be enormously disruptive in terms of its impact on people, the environment, and animals themselves. And a significant increase in the world's population, as is predicted over the next few decades, presents a major problem of how to adequately feed everyone on the planet. One thing for certain is that this cannot be done in the style of the heavy reliance on meat characteristic of today's economically advanced nations. So it will be necessary to develop better and more abundant methods of producing crops. Most experts who have studied these matters also seem to agree that animal agriculture consumes more water, produces more waste, CO₂ and methane, and diverts mammoth amounts of greatly needed grain to livestock feed.²⁷ Beyond this, however, future agriculture in a warming world will need to be sustainable and innovative in order to provide food security. It's also the case that if animal agriculture in its present form (factory farming) is phased out over time—whether because of a worldwide trend toward non-meat diets or because of laboratory culturing of meat on a colossal scale—difficult decisions will have to be made about how to create new jobs and what to do about the billions of food animals that already exist. Changes of this magnitude do not take place overnight, of course, but much thought, planning, and international cooperation are required if the kinds of transitions envisioned here are to be implemented rationally and disastrous global repercussions avoided.

Change is often a good thing, especially when people feel that older ways have been outgrown or that newer ways are better or more fitting for the time they live in. Personal and cultural habits are difficult to alter, but they can be changed if we see good reasons for doing so. Thoughtful meat-eaters recognize this and quite a number

are actively engaged in limiting their meat consumption or exploring alternative vegetarian diets. Little by little, the conceptual constructs we use to label, think about, and talk about food are opening up to critical investigation and revision. Deconstructive inquiries—such as the present essay—were once quite unusual, but now appear to fall within the accepted range of approaches open to applied philosophy. But of course *deconstruction* is not an end in itself. It must be followed by *reconstruction* or a fresh new approach. So what we have accomplished here is but the first step, and the reader, if looking for a different way of thinking and acting, is encouraged to continue the journey in her or his own fashion.

Notes

¹ I stretch the meaning a little in this article to include symbolic representations.

² See Fox reference in Further Reading below.

³ “Animals,” in this essay, will be taken to mean “nonhuman animals” or just “nonhumans.”

⁴ It does not help to label meat-eaters’ ideology “carnism,” as some writers do.

⁵ Some traditional cultures like the Inuit (who eat seafood primarily or exclusively) are, for environmental reasons, as close to carnivores as it is possible for humans to be.

⁶ The same is true of vegetarians and vegans. Some may abstain from meat-eating for ethical reasons; some for health reasons; some for environmental reasons; some for a combination of reasons. See also Chelsea Whyte, “Should you go vegan?” *New Scientist*, 27 January 2018, pp. 26-31.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), secs. 66-71.

⁸ These judgments are odd, given that humans are animals too—which these epithets appear to either deny or ignore.

⁹ By this is meant the ability to detect a mental life in other beings and to appraise the meaning or intent of others’ mental states.

¹⁰ For further exploration of this topic, see Lori Gruen, “The Moral Status of Animals,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/moral-animal>.

¹¹ See, for example, Hatkoff reference in Further Reading below.

¹² An argument of this sort can be found in Holmes Rolston III, *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 79.

¹³ Interestingly, it is always animals who fail to measure up to a certain performative standard, never humans.

¹⁴ See, for example, Michael Goldman, “A Transcendental Defense of Speciesism,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 35 (2001): 59-69; Loren E. Lomasky, “Is It Wrong to Eat Animals?” *Social Philosophy and*

Policy 30 (2013): 177-200; Timothy Hsiao, “In Defense of Eating Meat,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 28 (2015): 277-91.

¹⁵ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

¹⁶ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791) (Philadelphia: Independence Hall Association, 2018), Part I, p. 18. Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/autobiography/page18.htm>.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 76.

¹⁸ J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 36. See also Dominique Lestel, *Eat This Book: A Carnivore’s Manifesto*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Genesis 1:28.

²⁰ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum, or True Suggestions for the Interpretation of Nature* (1620), ed. Joseph Devey (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1901), “Aphorisms – Book II (On the Interpretation of Nature, or the Reign of Man),” section LII, p. 290.

²¹ Colin Spencer, *The Heretic’s Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), p. 180.

²² But see, for example, Campbell-McBride reference in Further Reading below.

²³ See, for example, Barbara Kingsolver (with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver), *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

²⁴ See chap. 6 of Fox reference in Further Reading below.

²⁵ See, for example, Melina and Davis reference in Further Reading below.

²⁶ See Adams reference in Further Reading below.

²⁷ Bibi van der Zee, “Why factory farming is not just cruel—but also a threat to all life on the planet,” *The Guardian*, 4 October 2017; retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/04/factory-farming-destructive-wasteful-cruel-says-philip-lymbery-farmageddon-author>; *Wikipedia*, “Environmental impact of meat production”; retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_impact_of_meat_production.

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