

Vegetarianism and "The Other Weight Problem"

James Rachels

[from *World Hunger and Moral Obligation*, Prentice-Hall 1977]

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It is now common for newspapers and magazines to carry the ultimate indictment of gluttoned Americans: ads for weight salons or reducing schemes next to news accounts of starvation in Africa, Latin America, or elsewhere. The pictures of big-bellied children nursing on emptied breasts tell of the other "weight problem."¹

There are moral problems about what we eat, and about what we do with the food we control. In this essay I shall discuss some of these problems. One of my conclusions will be that it is morally wrong for us to eat meat. Many readers will find this implausible and even faintly ridiculous, as I once did. After all, meat eating is a normal, well-established part of our daily routines; people have always eaten meat; and many find it difficult even to conceive of what an alternate diet would be like. So it is not easy to take seriously the possibility that it might be wrong. Moreover, vegetarianism is commonly associated with Eastern religions whose tenets we do not accept, and with extravagant, unfounded claims about health. A quick perusal of vegetarian literature might confirm the impression that it is all a crackpot business: tracts have titles like "Victory Through Vegetables" and promise that if one will only keep to a meatless diet one will have perfect health and be filled with wisdom. Of course we can ignore this kind of nonsense. However, there are other arguments for vegetarianism that must be taken seriously. One such argument, which has recently enjoyed wide support, has to do with the world food shortage. I will take up that argument after a few preliminaries.

I

¹Colman McCarthy, "Would we Sacrifice to aid the Starving?" *Miami Herald*, 28 July, p. 2-L.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, about 15,000 people die of malnutrition every day--10,000 of them are children. Millions more do not die but lead miserable lives constantly on the verge of starvation. Hunger is concentrated in poor, underdeveloped countries, out of sight of the 70 million Americans who are overweight from eating too much.

Of course, there is some malnutrition in the United States--a conservative estimate is that 40 million Americans are poor enough to qualify for assistance under the Federal Food Stamp Program, although fewer than half that number are actually helped. But it is easy to misinterpret this statistic: while many of these Americans don't get enough to eat, neither are they starving. They do not suffer the extreme deprivation that reduces one's life to nothing more than a continual desperate search for food. Moreover, even the milder degree of malnutrition is an embarrassing anomaly; we are not a poor country, especially not in food. We have an abundance of rich farmland which we use with astonishing efficiency. (Although in some important ways our use of land is very inefficient. I will come to that in a moment.) The "Foodgrain Yield" of American farms is about 3,050 pounds per acre. For comparison, we may note that only Japan does significantly better, with a yield of 4,500 pounds per acre; but in Japan 87 workers per 100 acres are needed to obtain this yield, while in the United States only one worker per 100 acres is required!² If some Americans do not get enough to eat, it is not because we lack the food.

It does not require a very sophisticated argument to show that, if we have an overabundance of food while others are starving, we should not waste our surplus but make it available to those who need it. Studies indicate that the average American family throws out with the garbage about 10 percent of the food it buys.³ Of course, it

²These figures are based on studies conducted in 1969-1971. They are from James Grant, "A New Development Strategy," *Foreign Policy*, 12 (1973).

³One such study is reported in *Time*, 26 January 1976, p. 8.

would be impractical for us to try to package up our leftover beans and potatoes at the end of each meal and send them off to the poor. But it would not be impractical for us to buy somewhat less, and contribute the leftover money to agencies that would then purchase the food we did not buy and deliver it to those in need.

The argument may be put this way: First, suppose you are about to throw out a quantity of food which you are unable to use, when someone offers to take it down the street to a child who is starving. Clearly, it would be immoral for you to refuse this offer and insist that the food go into the garbage. Second, suppose it is proposed that you not buy the extra food, and instead give the money to provide for the child. Would it be any less immoral of you to refuse, and to continue to buy unneeded food to be discarded? The only important difference between the two cases is that by giving money, and not leftover food, better nourishment can be provided to the child more efficiently. Aside from some slight inconvenience--you would have to shop a bit more carefully--the change makes no difference to your interests at all. You end up with the same combination of food and money in each case. So, if it would be immoral to refuse to give the extra food to the child and insist on throwing it into the garbage, it is also immoral for us to buy and waste food when we could buy less and give the extra money for famine relief.

II

It is sometimes objected that faminerelief efforts are futile because the problems of overpopulation and underdevelopment in some parts of the world are insoluble. "Feed the starving millions," it is said, "and they will survive only to produce more starving millions. When the population in those poor, overcrowded countries has doubled, and then tripled, then there will be famine on a scale we have hardly dreamed of. What is needed in those countries is population control and the establishment of sound agricultural systems. But, unfortunately, given the religious, political, and

educational situations in those countries, and the general cultural malaise produced by generations of ignorance and grinding poverty, these objectives are impossible to attain. So we have to face the fact that transfusions of food today, no matter how massive, only postpone the inevitable starvation and probably even make it worse."

It must be conceded that, if the situation really were this hopeless, then we would have no obligation to provide relief for those who are starving. We are not obligated to take steps that would do no good. What is wrong with this argument is that it paints too gloomy a picture of the possibilities. We have no conclusive evidence that the situation is hopeless. On the contrary, there is good reason to think that the problems can be solved. In China starvation is no longer a serious problem. That huge population is now adequately fed, whereas thirty years ago hunger was common. Apparently, Chinese agriculture is now established on a sound basis. Of course, this has been accomplished by a social regimentation and a denial of individual freedom that many of us find objectionable, and, in any case, Chinese-style regimentation cannot be expected in other countries. But this does not mean that there is no hope for other countries. In countries such as India, birth control programs can help. Contrary to what is popularly believed, such programs are not foredoomed to failure. During India's third "Five Year Plan" (1961-66) the birth rate in Bombay was reduced to only 27 per 1000 population, only a bit higher than the U.S. rate of 23 per 1000.⁴ This was the best result in the country, but there were other hopeful signs as well: for example, during the same period the birth rate in a rural district of West Bengal dropped from 43 to 36 per 1000. Experts do not regard India's population problem as hopeless.

It is a disservice to the world's poor to represent the hunger problem as worse than it is; for, if the situation is made to appear hopeless, then people are liable to do nothing. Nick Eberstadt, of the Harvard Center for Population Studies, remarks that:

⁴B. L. Raina, "India," in Bernard Berelson, ed., *Family Planning and Population Programs: A Review of World Developments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 111-22.

Bangladesh is a case in point. The cameramen who photograph those living corpses for your evening consumption work hard to evoke a nation of unrecognizable monsters by the roadside. Unless you have been there, you would find it hard to imagine that the people of Bangladesh are friendly and energetic, and perhaps 95% of them get enough to get by. Or that Bangladesh has the richest cropland in the world, and that a wellguided aid program could help turn it from a famine center into one of the world's great breadbaskets. To most people in America the situation must look hopeless and our involvement, therefore, pointless. If the situation is so bad, why shouldn't we cut off our food and foreign aid to Bangladesh, and use it to save people who aren't going to die anyway?⁵

So, even if it is true that shipments of food alone will not solve the problems of famine, this does not mean that the problems cannot be solved. Short term famine relief efforts, together with longer range population control programs and assistance to improve local agriculture, could greatly reduce, if not altogether eliminate, the tragedy of starvation.

III

I have already mentioned the waste of food thrown out with the garbage. That waste, as great as it is, is small in comparison to a different sort of waste which I want to describe now.

But first let me tell a little story. In this story, someone discovers a way of processing food so as to give it a radically new texture and taste. The processed food is no more nutritious than it was unprocessed, but people like the way it tastes, and it becomes very popular--so popular, in fact, that a great industry grows up and almost everyone comes to dine on it several times a week. There is only one catch: the conversion process is extremely wasteful. Seven eighths of the food is destroyed by the process; so that in order to produce one pound

⁵ Nick Ekerstadt, "Myths of the Food Crisis," *The New York Review of Books* 19 February 1976, p. 32 Ekerstadt's article contains a good survey of the problems involved in assessing the world food situation--how bad it is, or isn't. He concludes that the situation is bad, but not at all hopeless See also various articles in Philip H. Abelson, ed., *Food Policies: Economics, Nutrition and Research* (Washington, D C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1975).

of the processed food, eight pounds of unprocessed food are needed. This means that the new kind of food is relatively expensive and only people in the richer countries can afford to eat much of it. It also means that the process raises moral questions: Can it be right for some people to waste seven eighths of their food resources, while millions of others are suffering from lack of food? If the waste of 10 percent of one's food is objectionable, the waste of 87.5 percent is more so.

In fact, we do use a process that is just this wasteful. The process works like this: First, we use our farmland to grow an enormous quantity of grain—many times the amount that we could consume, if we consumed it as grain or grain products. But we do not consume it in this form. Instead, we feed it to animals, and then we eat the animals. The process is staggeringly inefficient: we have to feed the animals eight pounds of protein in the form of grain to get back one pound in the form of meat, for a wastage of 87.5 percent. (This is the inefficient use of farmland that I referred to earlier; farmland that could be producing eight pounds of "unprocessed" food produces only one pound "processed.")

Fully one-half of all the harvested agricultural land in the United States is planted with feedcrops. We feed 78 percent of all our grain to animals. This is the highest percentage of any country in the world; the Soviet Union, for example, uses only 28 percent of its grain in this way. The "conversion ratio" for beef cattle and veal calves is an astonishing *21 to 1*--that is, we feed these animals 21 pounds of protein in the form of grain to get back 1 pound in the form of meat. Other animals process protein more efficiently, so that the average conversion ratio is "only" 8 to 1. To see what this means for a single year, we may note that in 1968 we fed 20 million tons of protein to livestock (excluding dairy cattle), in return for which we got 2 million tons of protein in meat, for a net loss of 18 million tons. This loss, in the United States alone, was equal to 90

percent of the world's estimated protein deficit.⁶

If we did not waste grain in this manner, there would clearly be enough to feed everyone in the world quite comfortably. In 1972-1973, when the world food "shortage" was supposedly becoming acute, 632 pounds of grain was produced annually for every person on earth (500 pounds is enough for adequate nourishment). This figure is actually *rising*, in spite of population growth; the comparable figure for 1960 was under 600.⁷

What reason is there to waste this incredible amount of food? Why raise and eat animals, instead of eating a portion of the grain ourselves and using the rest to relieve hunger? The meat we eat is no more nourishing than the grain the animals are fed. The only reason for preferring to eat meat is our enjoyment of its taste; but this is hardly a sufficient reason for wasting food that is desperately needed by people who are starving. It is as if one were to say to a hungry child: "I have eight times the food I need, but I can't let you have any of it, because I am going to use it all to make myself something really tasty."

This, then, is the argument for vegetarianism that I referred to at the beginning of this essay. If, in light of the world food situation, it is wrong for us to waste enormous quantities of food, then it is wrong for us to convert grain protein into meat protein as we do. And if we were to stop doing this, then most of us would have to become vegetarians of at least a qualified sort. I say "of a qualified sort" for two reasons. First, we could still eat fish. Since we do not raise fish by feeding them food that could be consumed by humans, there is no argument against eating fish comparable to this one against eating livestock. Second, there could still be a small amount of beef, pork, etc., produced without the use of feeds suitable for human consumption, and this argument

⁶ The figures in this paragraph are from Frances Moore Lappe, *Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1971), part 1. This book is an excellent primer on protein.

⁷ Eberstadt, "Myths of the Food Crisis," p. 34.

would not rule out producing and eating that meat--but this would be such a small amount that it would not be available to most of us.

This argument against meat eating will be already familiar to many readers; it has been used in numerous books and in magazine and newspaper articles.⁸ I am not certain, however, that it is an absolutely conclusive argument. For one thing, it may be that a mere *reduction* in the amount of meat we produce would release enough grain to feed the world's hungry. We are now wasting so much food in this way that it may not be necessary for us to stop wasting all of it, but only some of it; so we may be able to go on consuming a fair amount of meat without depriving anyone of food. If so, the argument from wasting food would not support vegetarianism, but only a simple decrease in our meat consumption, which is something entirely different. There is, however, another argument for vegetarianism which I think is conclusive. Unlike the argument from food wastage, this argument does not appeal to the interests of humans as grounds for opposition to meat eating. Instead, it appeals directly to the interests of the animals themselves. I now turn to that argument.

IV

The wrongness of cruelty to animals is often explained in terms of its effects on human beings. The idea seems to be that the animals' interests are not *themselves* morally important or worthy of protection, but, since cruelty to animals often has bad consequences for humans, it is wrong to make animals suffer. In legal writing, for example, cruelty to animals is included among the "victimless crimes," and the problem of justifying legal prohibitions is seen as comparable to justifying the prohibition of other behavior, such as homosexuality or the distribution of pornography, where no one (no

⁸ For example in Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* and in several of the articles anthologized in Catherine Lerza and Michael Jacobson, eds., *Food for People Not for Profit: A Sourcebook on the Food Crisis* (New York: Ballentine Books, Inc., 1975).

human) is obviously hurt. Thus, Louis Schwartz says that, in prohibiting the torturing of animals:

It is not the mistreated dog who is the ultimate object of concern . . . Our concern is for the feelings of other human beings, a large proportion of whom, although accustomed to the slaughter of animals for food, readily identify themselves with a tortured dog or horse and respond with great sensitivity to its sufferings.⁹

Philosophers also adopt this attitude. Kant, for example, held that we have no direct duties to nonhuman animals. "The Categorical Imperative," the ultimate principle of morality, applies only to our dealings with humans:

The practical imperative, therefore, is the following: Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.¹⁰

And of other animals, Kant says:

But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as means to an end. That end is man.¹¹

He adds that we should not be cruel to animals only because "He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men."¹²

Surely this is unacceptable. Cruelty to animals ought to be opposed, not only because of the ancillary effects on humans, but because of the direct effects on the animals themselves. Animals that are tortured *suffer*, just as tortured humans suffer, and *that* is the primary reason why it is wrong. We object to torturing humans on a number of grounds, but the main one is that the victims suffer so. Insofar as nonhuman animals also suffer, we have the *same* reason to oppose torturing them, and it is

⁹ Louis B. Schwartz, "Morals, Offenses and the Model Penal Code," *Columbia Law Review*, 63 (1963); reprinted in Joel Feinberg and Hyman Gross, eds., *Philosophy of Law* (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc. 1975), p. 156.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The BobbsMerrill Co., Inc., 1959), p. 47.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 239.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. Z40.

indefensible to take the one suffering but not the other as grounds for objection.

Although cruelty to animals is wrong, it does not follow that we are never justified in inflicting pain on an animal. Sometimes we are justified in doing this, just as we are sometimes justified in inflicting pain on humans. It does follow, however, that there must be a *good reason* for causing the suffering, and if the suffering is great, the justifying reason must be correspondingly powerful. As an example, consider the treatment of the civet cat, a highly intelligent and sociable animal. Civet cats are trapped and placed in small cages inside darkened sheds, where the temperature is kept up to 110° F by fires.¹³ They are confined in this way until they, finally die. What justifies this extraordinary mistreatment? These animals have the misfortune to produce a substance that is useful in the manufacture of perfume. Musk, which is scraped from their genitals once a day for as long as they can survive, makes the scent of perfume last a bit longer after each application. (The heat increases their "production" of musk.) Here Kant's rule--"Animals are merely means to an end; that end is man"--is applied with a vengeance. To promote one of the most trivial interests we have, thousands of animals are tormented for their whole lives.

It is usually easy to persuade people that this use of animals is not justified, and that we have a moral duty not to support such cruelties by consuming their products. The argument is simple: Causing suffering is not justified unless there is a good reason; the production of perfume made with musk causes considerable suffering; our enjoyment of this product is not a good enough reason to justify causing that suffering; therefore, the use of animals in this way is wrong. At least my experience has been that, once people learn the facts about musk production, they come to regard using such products as morally objectionable. They are surprised to discover, however, that an exactly analogous argument can be given in connection with the use of animals as

¹³ Muriel the Lady Dowding, "Furs and Cosmetics: Too High a Price?" in Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch and John Harris, eds., *Animals, Men and Morals* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1972). p. 36.

food. Animals that are raised and slaughtered for food also suffer, and our enjoyment of the way they taste is not a sufficient justification for mistreating them.

Most people radically underestimate the amount of suffering that is caused to animals who are raised and slaughtered for food.¹⁴ They think, in a vague way, that slaughterhouses are cruel, and perhaps even that methods of slaughter ought to be made more humane. But after all, the visit to the slaughterhouse is a relatively brief episode in the animal's life; and beyond that, people imagine that the animals are treated well enough. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today the production of meat is Big Business, and the helpless animals are treated more as machines in a factory than as living creatures.

Veal calves, for example, spend their lives in pens too small to allow them to turn around or even to lie down comfortably--exercise toughens the muscles, which reduces the "quality" of the meat, and besides, allowing the animals adequate living space would be prohibitively expensive. In these pens the calves cannot perform such basic actions as grooming themselves, which they naturally desire to do, because there is not room for them to twist their heads around. It is clear that the calves miss their mothers, and like human infants they want something to suck: they can be seen trying vainly to suck the sides of their stalls. In order to keep their meat pale and tasty, they are fed a liquid diet deficient in both iron and roughage. Naturally they develop cravings for these things, because they need them. The calf's craving for iron is so strong that, if it is allowed to turn around, it will lick at its own urine, although calves normally find this repugnant. The tiny stall, which prevents the animal from turning, solves this "problem." The craving for roughage is especially strong since without it the animal cannot form a cud to chew. It cannot be given any straw for bedding, since the animal would be driven

¹⁴ By far the best account of these cruelties is to be found in Chapter 3 of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1975). I have drawn on Singer's work for the factual material in the following two paragraphs. *Animal Liberation* should be consulted for a thorough treatment of matters to which I can refer here only sketchily.

to eat it, and that would spoil the meat. For these animals the slaughterhouse is not an unpleasant end to an otherwise contented life. As terrifying as the process of slaughter is, for them it may actually be regarded as a merciful release.

Similar stories can be told about the treatment of other animals on which we dine. In order to "produce" animals by the millions, it is necessary to keep them crowded together in small spaces. Chickens are commonly kept eight or ten to a space smaller than a newspaper page. Unable to walk around or even stretch their wings--much less build a nest--the birds become vicious and attack one another. The problem is sometimes exacerbated because the birds are so crowded that, unable to move, their feet literally grow around the wire floors of the cages, anchoring them to the spot. An "anchored" bird cannot escape attack no matter how desperate it becomes. Mutilation of the animals is an efficient solution. To minimize the damage they can do to one another, the birds' beaks are cut off. The mutilation is painful, but probably not as painful as other sorts of mutilations that are routinely practiced. Cows are castrated, not to prevent the unnatural "vices" to which overcrowded chickens are prone, but because castrated cows put on more weight, and there is less danger of meat being "tainted" by male hormones.

In Britain an anesthetic must be used, unless the animal is very young, but in America anesthetics are not in general use. The procedure is to pin the animal down, take a knife and slit the scrotum, exposing the testicles. You then grab each testicle in turn and pull on it, breaking the cord that attaches it; on older animals it may be necessary to cut the cord.¹⁵

It must be emphasized that the treatment I am describing--and I have hardly scratched the surface here--is not out of the ordinary. It is typical of the way that animals raised for food are treated, now that meat production is Big Business. As Peter Singer puts it, these are the sorts of things that happened to your dinner when it was still an animal.

What accounts for such cruelties? As for the meat producers, there is no reason

¹⁵ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 152.

to think they are unusually cruel men. They simply accept the common attitude expressed by Kant: "Animals are merely means to an end; that end is man." The cruel practices are adopted not because they are cruel but because they are efficient, given that one's only concern is to produce meat (and eggs) for humans as cheaply as possible. But clearly this use of animals is immoral if anything is. Since we can nourish ourselves very well without eating them, our *only reason* for doing all this to the animals is our enjoyment of the way they taste. And this will not even come close to justifying the cruelty.

V

Does this mean that we should stop eating meat? Such a conclusion will be hard for many people to accept. It is tempting to say: "What is objectionable is not *eating* the animals, but only making them suffer. Perhaps we ought to protest the way they are treated, and even work for better treatment of them. But it doesn't follow that we must stop eating them." This sounds plausible until you realize that it would be impossible to treat the animals decently and still produce meat in sufficient quantities to make it a normal part of our diets. As I have already remarked, cruel methods are used in the meat production industry because such methods are economical; they enable the producers to market a product that people can afford. Humanely produced chicken, beef, and pork would be so expensive that only the very rich could afford them. (*Some of the cruelties could be eliminated without too much expense--the cows could be given an anesthetic before castration, for example, even though this alone would mean a slight increase in the cost of beef. But others, such as overcrowding, could not be eliminated without really prohibitive cost.*) So to work for better treatment for the animals would be to work for a situation in which most of us would have to adopt a vegetarian diet.

Still, there remains the interesting theoretical question: If meat could be

produced humanely, without mistreating the animals prior to killing them painlessly, would there be anything wrong with it? The question is only of theoretical interest because the actual choice we face in the supermarket is whether to buy the remains of animals that are not treated humanely. Still, the question has some interest, and I want to make two comments about it.

First, it is a vexing issue whether animals have a "right to life" that is violated when we kill them for trivial purposes; but we should not simply assume until proven otherwise that they don't have such a right.¹⁶ We assume that humans have a right to life--it would be wrong to murder a normal healthy human even if it were done painlessly--and it is hard to think of any plausible rationale for granting this right to humans that does not also apply to other animals. Other animals live in communities, as do humans; they communicate with one another, and have ongoing social relationships; killing them disrupts lives that are perhaps not as complex, emotionally and intellectually, as our own, but that are nevertheless quite complicated. They suffer, and are capable of happiness as well as fear and distress, as we are. So what could be the rational basis for saying that we have a right to life, but that they don't? Or even more pointedly, what could be the rational basis for saying that a severely retarded human, who is inferior in every important respect to an intelligent animal, has a right to life but that the animal doesn't? Philosophers often treat such questions as "puzzles," assuming that there must be answers even if we are not clever enough to find them. I am suggesting that, on the contrary, there may not be any acceptable answers to these questions. If it seems, intuitively, that there must be some difference between us and the other animals which confers on us, but not them, a right to life, perhaps this intuition

¹⁶ It is controversial among philosophers whether animals have any rights at all. See various essays in Part IV of Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds, *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976). My own defense of animal rights is given in "Do Animals Have a Right to Liberty?" pp 205-223, and in "A Reply to VanDeVeer," pp 230-32.

is mistaken. At the very least, the difficulty of answering such questions should make us hesitant about asserting that it is all right to kill animals, as long as we don't make them suffer, unless we are also willing to take seriously the possibility that it is all right to kill people, so long as we don't make them suffer.

Second, it is important to see the slaughter of animals for food as part of a larger pattern that characterizes our whole relationship with the non-human world. Animals are wrenched from their natural homes to be made objects of our entertainment in zoos, circuses, and rodeos. They are used in laboratories, not only for experiments that are themselves morally questionable,¹⁷ but also in testing everything from shampoo to chemical weapons. They are killed so that their heads can be used as wall decorations, or their skins as ornamental clothing or rugs. Indeed, simply killing them for the fun of it is thought to be "sport."¹⁸ This pattern of cruel exploitation flows naturally from the Kantian attitude that animals are nothing more than things to be used for our purposes. It is this whole attitude that must be opposed, and not merely its manifestation in our willingness to hurt the animals we eat. Once one rejects this attitude, and no longer regards the animals as disposable at one's whim, one ceases to think it all right to kill them, even painlessly, just for a snack.

But now let me return to the more immediate practical issue. The meat at the supermarket was not produced by humane methods. The animals whose flesh this meat once was were abused in ways similar to the ones I have described. Millions of other animals are being treated in these ways now, and their flesh will soon appear in the markets. Should one support such practices by purchasing and consuming its products?

¹⁷ See Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Chap. 2.

¹⁸ It is sometimes said, in defense of "non-slob" hunting: "Killing for pleasure is wrong, but killing for food is all right." This won't do, since for those of us who are able to nourish ourselves without killing animals, killing them for food is a form of killing for pleasure, namely, the pleasures of the palate.

It is discouraging to realize that no animals will actually be helped simply by one person ceasing to eat meat. One consumer's behavior, by itself, cannot have a noticeable impact on an industry as vast as the meat business. However, it is important to see one's behavior in a wider context. There are already millions of vegetarians, and because they don't eat meat there *is* less cruelty than there otherwise would be. The question is whether one ought to side with that group, or with the carnivores whose practices cause the suffering. Compare the position of someone thinking about whether to buy slaves in the year 1820. He might reason as follows: "The whole practice of slavery is immoral, but I cannot help any of the poor slaves by keeping clear of it. If I don't buy these slaves, someone else will. One person's decision just can't by itself have any impact on such a vast business. So I may as well use slaves like everyone else." The first thing we notice is that this fellow was too pessimistic about the possibilities of a successful movement; but beyond that, there is something else wrong with his reasoning. If one really thinks that a social practice is immoral, that *in itself* is sufficient grounds for a refusal to participate. In 1848 Thoreau remarked that even if someone did not want to devote himself to the abolition movement, and actively oppose slavery, ". . . it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support."¹⁹ In the case of slavery, this seems clear. If it seems less clear in the case of the cruel exploitation of nonhuman animals, perhaps it is because the Kantian attitude is so deeply entrenched in us.

VI

I have considered two arguments for vegetarianism: one appealing to the interests that humans have in conserving food resources, and the other appealing directly to the interests of the animals themselves. The latter, I think, is the more

¹⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* (1848).

compelling argument, and in an important sense it is a deeper argument. Once its force is felt, any opposition to meat eating that is based only on considerations of food wastage will seem shallow in the same way that opposition to slavery is shallow if it is based only on economic considerations. Yet the second argument does in a way reinforce the first one. In this case at least, the interests of humans and nonhumans coincide. By doing what we ought to do anyway--ceasing to exploit helpless animals--we would at the same time increase the food available for hungry people.