

# Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

10.1

JUNE 2022

*Animal Ethics, Ethology, and Food Ethics*

Edited by Francesco Allegri

## STUDIES AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| Korsgaard's Duties towards Animals: Two Difficulties<br><i>Nico Müller</i>   | 9  |
| Ethology of the Freed Animal: Concept, Paradigm<br>and Implementations to the Moral Status of Non-Human Animals<br><i>Marco Celentano - Dario Martinelli</i> | 27 |
| Il dilemma etico dei <i>pet</i> : tra bestie, animali e persone<br><i>Matteo Andreozzi</i>   | 47 |
| Being There: If the Pairing of the Birdwatchers Affects the Pairing<br>of the Birds<br><i>Evangelina W. Uskoković - Theo W. Uskoković - Vuk Uskoković</i>    | 59 |

## COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

- |   |    |
|---|----|
| Vegetarianism and Veganism from a Moral Point of View<br><i>Francesco Allegri</i> | 85 |
| Author Guidelines   | 93 |



# Vegetarianism and Veganism from a Moral Point of View

Francesco Allegri

*Università degli Studi di Siena*

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2022-01-alle>

[allegri2@unisi.it](mailto:allegri2@unisi.it)

---

The topic of the morality of a vegetarian or vegan diet continues to be at the center of the debate in food ethics and animal ethics. Among the many recent publications, I like to point out a couple worthy of special mention for their brevity and clarity. The first, *Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism*, comes to us from an important moral philosopher of the last generations, Michael Huemer, author of a re-evaluation of ethical intuitionism (Huemer 2005), and who now takes on this classic theme of applied ethics (Huemer 2019). The dialogic form of his volume, which has already appeared in a shortened version in the journal *Between the Species* (Huemer 2018), makes it easily readable and particularly effective. Its contents have the approval of no less than Peter Singer, who publicizes Huemer's text, asserting in the foreword that "In the future, when people ask me why I don't eat meat, I will tell them to read this book".

But Singer himself, the leading thinker (or one of the leading thinkers) of contemporary animal ethics, has returned in our years to talk about vegan eating style, re-presenting in a small book, *Why Vegan?*, his theses on the subject, updating them to the events of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 (Singer 2020). So in the last chapter of the book, written together with Paola Cavalieri, we find a radical criticism of the China's *wet markets*, "open-air markets where animals are bought live and then slaughtered on the spot for the customers" (Singer 2020, 82). They may have been at the origin of the virus that has been plaguing the entire world for three years:

Scientists tell us that keeping different animals in close, prolonged proximity with one another and with people creates an unhealthy environment that is the probable source of the mutation that enabled COVID-19 to infect humans. More precisely, in such an environment, a coronavirus long present in some animals underwent rapid mutation [...] and ultimately

gained the ability to bind to human cell receptors, thus adapting to the human host. (Singer 2020, 83)

For this reason and for the suffering enduring by animals in such wild-life markets, many voices are rightly calling for a permanent ban on wet market, that for animals are hell on earth: “Thousands of sentient, palpitating beings endure hours of suffering and anguish before being brutally butchered” (Singer 2020, 84). Among these voices there is Martin Williams, a Hong Kong-based writer specializing in conservation and the environment, cited by Singer and Cavalieri:

As long as such markets exist, the likelihood of other new diseases emerging will remain. Surely, it is time for China to close down these markets. In one fell swoop, it would be making progress on animal rights and nature conservation, while reducing the risk of a “made in China” disease harming people worldwide. (Singer 2020, 85)

But in order to criticize wet markets, as well as intensive farming, it is not necessary to embrace the views of vegetarians or vegans. It is sufficient to accept moderate positions in defense of animals, such as that of Scruton (2000, 2004), which I dealt with in *Relations* 8 (Allegri 2020). Positions that care about the suffering of animals, but not their life, which in a painless way can be legitimately interrupted long before natural times. This does not appear to be the position of Huemer and Singer, who argue in support of a stronger defense of animals.

I believe that such stronger version of advocating for animal needs is the correct position. As I have written several times (recently in Allegri 2021), I think that the life of animals has value and therefore it is wrong not only to make them suffer, but also to shorten their life for non-euthanasia reasons. Such a conception obviously implies that intensive farming is morally unjustifiable, and any support for a practice that precludes animals the exercise of basic needs is to be questioned. But it goes further. If the life of sentient beings also has value, then, it is wrong to kill them. This at the level of food ethics implies that, regardless of the suffering experienced in intensive farming, it is problematic to eat sentient beings, a prohibition that extends, albeit with different severity (if we move, as in my case, from a gradualist perspective<sup>1</sup>), at least up to the cephalopods, configuring some form of vegetarianism or quasi-vegetarianism as morally obligatory. Are there plausible contrasting reasons to fail to this obligation? It would seem not, because a possible argument that would identify harm to our health from

---

<sup>1</sup> I examined this point in Allegri 2021.

abstaining from these foods does not appear to be cogent. In fact, it is now a well-established fact that a vegetarian diet is far from deleterious for the well-being of our body; indeed it is deeply healthy.

The question of eggs and milk (and its derivatives: butter, cheeses etc.) is more complex. Vegans emphasize how their production, and consequently their consumption, is inextricably linked not only to exploitation and suffering, but also to the *death* of animals. When we eat the Parmesan cheese or an omelette, we are not eating animals that have been killed, but something whose processing necessarily involves the killing of animals. With eggs and milk (and dairy products), on the contrary that with the production of meat, the animals from which we derive these foods do not die, but other animals connected to them lose their lives: male children. The separation of the male calf from the mother and his killing appear inseparably linked to the production of milk. In fact, for a cow to have milk, as with all mammals, it is necessary that she gives birth. Calves are born specifically so that the cow can have milk. But in case a male calf is born, not being able to become a cow, he is completely unproductive and it is not possible to maintain him for the 20-30 years of his natural life. From an economic point of view, if we want the production of milk – at least at current costs – we cannot but accept these killings. As even Scruton admits, “Calves are an unavoidable by-product of the milk industry. Male calves are useless to the industry and represent, in existing conditions, an unsustainable cost if they are not sold for slaughter” (Scruton 2000, 103). We are so placed in front of a dilemma: if we want milk production, we must accept these killings; if, on the other hand, we refuse the killing of calves, we must give up the production of milk.

Egg production presents a similar problem. Since breeders are interested in who lays eggs, and therefore to female hens, when male chicks are born from incubator factories (roughly in 50% of cases), they are completely useless for that purpose and, not being of the suitable variety to become broilers, they are killed (by gas) or thrown alive into sacks where they die from suffocation. Calves and male chicks must die in order for milk and egg production to be economically convenient. We might think that it is not the production of eggs and milk *as such* that creates the exploitation, suffering and death of animals, but the methods of industrial farming. So returning to traditional family farms we would put an end to these negative outcomes. But vegans assert that, albeit in smaller proportions, even non-intensive farms present the same problems.

It is not easy to respond convincingly to the arguments of vegans. Nor is it easy to find compromise solutions. The preceding considerations,

which recognize many ethical reasons for the vegetarian-vegan eating style, must however deal with an objection that could put the theses of proponents of a diet based on animal products back into play.

This objection to the vegetarian-vegan framework outlined above is very insidious for strong versions of animal advocacy, those that, in addition to the suffering inflicted to animals, also condemn their killing. It consists in noting that the vast majority of animals raised by humans would never have come into the world without the latter's food interest in them. Now, if compared with life in factory farms, not coming into the world appears to be a better option, in case the comparison is with traditional farms, where animals live a good life before they die, the outcome is more doubtful. Indeed, the situation seems to be reversed. The view advanced with this argument acknowledges that animals raised by humans for food reasons suffer harm from being killed (i.e. from dying early). But it points out that under certain conditions such harm is convenient for those who suffer it. These conditions clearly cannot be those of intensive farming, where the life of animals is so painful that it is preferable never to have come into the world. But if the conditions are those of family farms – perhaps further improving them and ensuring that animals are killed without suffering – things change. Animals still (equally) suffer harm in dying ahead of their natural time, but without such harm they would never have been born and thus would not have lived the good life of which instead they could enjoy. Without human breeding, therefore, animals would not be born at all (at least the vast majority). Is it better to be born, live well and then be killed (painlessly) well in advance of natural times, or not be born at all<sup>2</sup>? If not being born at all is better than living a life of hardship like that of intensive farming, it is doubtful that not being born is better than living a good life, albeit a short one, and being killed painlessly. DeGrazia sets out very well the conditions that must be met to make this way of reasoning ethically plausible:

the claim is that it is permissible to bring an animal into existence with the plain of killing her for meat, even though death will harm her, provided (1) the animal's life is likely to be worthwhile and (2) she never would have had that life except within a practice of raising and killing animals for meat. (DeGrazia 2009, 163)

---

<sup>2</sup> This argument, already available in the late nineteenth-century dispute between L. Stephen and H. Salt, can be found in recent years – I do not know how consistently with the picture he outlines elsewhere in his texts – also in Scruton (e.g. Scruton 2000, 103-104).

We could hence think of farms where animals live a good life and are then killed painlessly, suffering the harm of early death, yes, but a harm that is the *conditio sine qua non* for being able to come into the world and therefore preferable to not being born.

I have the impression that if we move from a consequentialist perspective such an argument is difficult to overcome. But although I am convinced that being born and living a good life, albeit with (largely) anticipated (but painless) death is preferable to not being born at all – and therefore I recognize that this argument of the moderate defenders of animals is not easily refuted – I have strong doubts about his cogency. Bringing individuals into the world with the aim of killing them well in advance and eating them seems to inevitably lead to a purely instrumental conception of them. Animals turn out to be mere means at our service without any value in themselves. This is incompatible at least with a Kantian deontological conception that wants to extend inherent dignity beyond the human sphere. A model of this kind, as well as in Regan's animal rights ethics, in recent times can be found, for example, in the texts of C.M. Korsgaard, who writes: "I do not think that is consistent with regarding animals as end in themselves" killing them to eat them, "if only we kept them humanely while they were alive and then killed them painlessly" (Korsgaard 2011, 110).

One can further reply – and perhaps decisively – to this objection to the vegetarian-vegan framework by re-proposing, with some variations, the scenario presented by Desmond Stewart in his story about the *Troogs* (Stewart 1976). Suppose that, in the distant future, the Troogs, extraterrestrials who are more intelligent and scientifically more advanced than we are, subdue the Earth and, finding the taste of our tissues very palatable, decide to eat us, developing herds of human beings that disproportionately increase the number of specimens of our species coming into the world. Without their great food interest in human flesh, far fewer humans would see the light of day. The Troogs, however, have their own ethics and, like today's moderate defenders of animals, they believe it is wrong to make sentient beings suffer unjustifiably. So, as long as they keep us alive, we are treated very well, with all possible regards and, in order not to make us suffer, they even keep us in the dark about the moment of our killing, a practice which, obviously, is carried out in a completely painless manner. Moving in the logic of Stephen, Scruton etc., we would have nothing to respond to a practice of this type. We certainly could not say to them: "we suffer harm from being killed, i.e. from dying in advance!". Because they would reply: "yes, but it is precisely thanks to the fact that we eat you, that you came into the world; so you cannot

complain about the treatment we subject you to”. Would we accept such an answer? It seems difficult.

Some might argue that there is a fundamental difference in the case of humans subjected to aliens compared to animals raised by humans. It would not be possible for us to live well, being aware of having to die in the short term. Our life would be full of anguish and therefore the parallel with animals does not work (the latter do not know what awaits them). Nor is it conceivable that we could be kept in the dark about our fate, because sooner or later it would reach our ears. We can then introduce a modification in the thought-experiment that makes it fully congruent with the animals’ situation. We could adjust it by assuming that the Troog ethics, in addition to prohibiting the unjustifiable suffering of all sentient beings, also prohibits the killing of self-conscious and rational beings, so they decide not to eat paradigmatic humans. They opt to purposely create non-paradigmatic humans who raise and grow to the right point and then feed on them, killing them without making them suffer and after having kept them well for the whole course of their existence. Using techniques of genetic manipulation and artificial fertilization, they give birth to enormous quantities of beings of our species with no sense of the future and the past, who are however able to experience sensations of pleasure, which they experience throughout their short life. Well, faced with such a scenario what would be our reaction? We would not say – I think – “after all it is better that they are born and live, albeit for a short time, rather than not to be born at all”. We would not accept this instrumental use of marginal humans. But then, what we do not allow to be done to members of our species, we cannot allow, unless one falls into speciesism, to be done to members of different species.

## REFERENCES

- Allegri, Francesco. 2020. “On Midgley and Scruton: Some Limits of a Too Moderate Animal Ethics”. *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 8: 137-143.
- Allegri, Francesco. 2021. “Unitarianism or Hierarchical Approach for Moral Status? A Very Subtle Difference”. *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 9: 91-107.
- DeGrazia, David. 2009. “Moral Vegetarianism from a Very Broad Basis”. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6: 143-165.
- Huemer, Michael. 2005. *Ethical Intuitionism*. Basingstoke - New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huemer, Michael. 2018. “Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism”. *Between the Species* 22: 20-135.



- Huemer, Michael. 2019. *Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism*. New York: Routledge.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 2011. "Interacting with Animals: A Kantian Account". In *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp and Raymond G. Frey, 91-118. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scruton, Roger. 2000. *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. London: Metro Books - Demos.
- Scruton, Roger. 2004. "The Conscientious Carnivore". In *Food For Thought: The Debate over Eating Meat*, edited by Steve F. Sapontzis, 81-91. Amherst (NY): Prometheus.
- Singer, Peter. 2020. *Why Vegan?* London: Penguin.
- Stewart, Desmond. 1976. "The Limits of Trooghast". In *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, edited by Tom Regan and Peter Singer, 238-245. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall.