So Animal a Human . . . , or the Moral Relevance of Being An Omnivore

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Abstract  It is argued that the question of whether or not one is required to be or become a strict vegetarian depends, not upon a rule or ideal that endorses vegetarianism on moral grounds, but rather upon whether one's own physical, biological nature is adapted to maintaining health and well-being on a vegetarian diet. Even if we accept the view that animals have rights, we still have no duty to make ourselves substantially worse off for the sake of other rights-holders. Moreover, duties to others, such as fetuses and infants, may require one to consume meat or animal products. Seven classes of individuals who are not required to be or become vegetarians are identified and their exemption is related to nutritional facts; these classes comprise most of the earth's population. The rule of vegetarianism defines a special or provisional duty rather than any general or universal rule, since its observance it based upon the biological capacities of individual humans whose genetic constitution and environment makes them suitably herbivorous. It is also argued that generalizing the vegetarian ideal as a social goal for all would be wrongful because it fails to consider the individual nutritional needs of humans at various stages of life, according to biological differences between the sexes, and because it would have the eugenic effect of limiting the adaptability of the human species. The appeal to the natural interests of omnivores will not justify any claim that humans may eat amounts of meat or animal products in excess of a reasonable safety margin since animals have rights-claims against us.

Keywords: ethics, rights, animals, vegetarianism, omnivore, genetic diversity, eugenics, naturalism, human nature, cannibalism.

Humans are omnivores. Most of us eat animal and plant flesh. It feels natural to do this, and it is traditional, too. That's part of the problem, of course, since whatever is traditional often seems "natural." Thus, it once seemed "natural" to enslave so-called lesser orders of humans and for women to confine themselves to homemak-
ing and child-raising as their "natural" place. Because of this, most contemporary philosophers note examples such as these and make short work of the appeal to nature and, instead, try to concentrate on other arguments that they hope will justify or condemn certain practices. But I will consider whether or not we could use as a moral defence the naturalness of eating meat, given that we are, in our biological natures, omnivores.

My arguments primarily attack the vegan or strict vegetarian ideal, which omits not only meat but all animal products from the diet. Where protein, vitamins, and minerals can be obtained from animal products rather than meat, this is to be preferred on moral grounds, but when milk or eggs are not available or are indigestible, then meat is to be considered the alternative. I accept, for purposes of this paper, the view that animals have rights, and that we have duties to them in virtue of their interests as living beings who can suffer and be harmed. Nevertheless, I will argue that (1) any rule requiring strict vegetarianism cannot apply to the population at large but only to particular humans in particular circumstances; (2) only a small number of people are required to become vegetarians today; and (3) adopting a vegetarian ideal as a social goal would itself be immoral.

A moral defence requires that we have some principle(s) to appeal to in justifying our choices - let us say our choice to kill (or have killed by the slaughterhouse) this particular chicken for supper. The two most important moral theories today (moral rights theory and utilitarianism) both accept the centrality of the value of life. What matters to us now is this life, the body and its preservation, the prevention of harm and death, as there is no other life. Both claim to value the equality of the interests of the individual.

So, we may take as our central ethical principle (and I am rejecting first-person egoism), that each animal has an interest in life and in not suffering pain; that, at least provisionally, we all have these interests equally; and, that it would be, in general, wrong to kill or harm another animal who is not threatening us. Moreover, we all have interests in maintaining health and vigour as these serve survival, the quality of life, and freedom from pain and suffering. These interests in life and health are tied to particular biological needs - for nutrition, clothing or covering for humans, shelter, and so forth. Now, it would seem that we eat and what we eat are very basic interests, and that, in the case of humans, the satisfaction of these interests is more important than the realization of other interests or ends humans may have, such as for education and personal growth, because adequate sustenance, nutrition and health are prerequisites for the satisfactions of other higher order ends.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that animals have rights. Here, I will grant Tom Regan's basic claims: that animals do have inherent value, that this feature gives them rights, and that they have a prima facie case against being harmed or killed (Regan, 1983: 271–3). Does this mean that you are required to become a vegetarian? Further, does it mean that we, as an enlightened society, should work to encourage all humans, on moral grounds, to become vegetarians?

With respect to the first question, the implication of moral arguments for vegetarianism is, in essence, a requirement that, rather than being an omnivore, you should