



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Benatar, David, "Why the Naive Argument against Moral Vegetarianism Really is Naive."

Environmental Values 10, no. 1, (2001): 103-112.

<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5822>

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Why the Naïve Argument against Moral Vegetarianism Really is Naïve

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ABSTRACT

When presented with the claim of the moral vegetarian that it is wrong for us to eat meat, many people respond that because it is not wrong for lions, tigers and other carnivores to kill and eat animals, it cannot be wrong for humans to do so. This response is what Peter Alward has called the naïve argument. Peter Alward has defended the naïve argument against objections. I argue that his defence fails.

KEYWORDS

Vegetarianism, naïve argument

INTRODUCTION

Moral vegetarians think that it is morally wrong for us to eat meat. A common response to this view, especially among non-philosophers, is what Peter Alward calls the naïve argument against moral vegetarianism.¹ This is the argument that because it is not wrong for carnivorous animals like lions and tigers to kill other animals for food, it cannot be wrong for humans to do so. Peter Alward argues that the naïve argument is not defeated by moral vegetarians' usual responses to it. I shall argue that his defence of the naïve argument is flawed.

PETER ALWARD'S ARGUMENT

According to Peter Alward, a fair formulation of the moral vegetarian thesis is:

VT: Eating the meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten is morally wrong.

He presents the basic version of the naïve argument as follows:²

- P1) Lions, tigers and other carnivores eat the meat of animals with properties X, Y, Z,... which have been killed for the purpose of being eaten.
- P2) It is not morally wrong for lions, tigers and other carnivores to do so.
- C) Eating the meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten is *not* morally wrong.

The conclusion of the naïve argument is the negation of VT (Peter Alward's formulation of the moral vegetarian thesis).

He notes that the usual response to the naïve argument is to accept P2 – that is, to deny that it is morally wrong for lions, tigers and other carnivores to eat the meat in question – but to claim that because of some difference between us, on the one hand, and lions and tigers, on the other, it *is* wrong for us. Two differences to which moral vegetarians usually point are that unlike us, lions and tigers (1) lack the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong; and (2) need meat in order to survive. Peter Alward argues that neither of these facts succeeds in undermining the naïve argument. I shall call these his *no moral difference arguments*.

First, he argues that the inability of lions and tigers to know that eating meat is wrong does not show that it is not wrong for them to do so. It only shows that they cannot be held culpable. He provides the analogy of a young child, too immature to yet discern the difference between right and wrong, attempting to slit the throat of his sleeping father. Were the attempt successful, says the author, the child would have done something wrong even though he cannot be blamed for it. Even if, for one reason or another, one thought that actions can only be judged wrong when they are blameworthy, one would still think that the child's attempt to slit his father's throat is what Peter Alward calls 'prevent-worthy'. He says that a revised version of the naïve argument that accommodates this thought would be:³

- P1) If it is wrong (i.e. blameworthy) for humans to kill animals for food, then it is prevent-worthy for lions and tigers to kill animals for food.
- P2) It is not prevent-worthy for lions and tigers to kill animals for food.
- C) It is not wrong for humans to kill animals for food.

Second, Peter Alward argues that the naïve argument cannot be refuted by the fact that lions and tigers, unlike us, require meat for their survival. Here he compares a lion to an 'innocent person A who has a gun pointed at her head and who will be killed unless she kills someone else B'.⁴ One might reason that it is acceptable for A to kill B if that is the only way to save her own life. But this case, says Peter Alward, is unlike that of the lion. A lion, he says, 'has to continually

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kill and eat animals throughout its life. And the numbers *do* count. The outcome in which A kills B, C, D and E is morally worse than that in which A is killed by the gunman, despite her innocence.⁵

The upshot of his arguments, Peter Alward says, is that ‘if it is wrong for humans to eat the meat of certain animals, it is also wrong for lions and tigers and other carnivores to do so’.⁶ Thus, if, contrary to the naïve argument, VT were true, then we would have an obligation to prevent carnivores from eating meat when we could prevent them from doing so. Since it would be cruel to allow an animal to starve to death, we would be under an obligation to kill them painlessly if they could not be given other food to ensure their survival. He concludes with the tongue-in-cheek injunction, ‘Vegetarians, kill your kitties!’⁷

VEGETARIANS, KILL YOUR CARNIVOROUS FRIENDS AND FAMILY?

Killing their kitties would not be all moral vegetarians would be obligated to do if there were an obligation to prevent animals from being killed and eaten. Almost all humans who eat meat can survive very well without it.⁸ However, if their carnivorous practices could not be prevented – perhaps by persuading them to desist from meat or by successfully imposing a ban on the consumption of meat – there would be an obligation to kill them too!⁹ In this way, Peter Alward’s ‘no moral difference arguments’, combined with VT, could entail an extreme (but admittedly unusual) animal liberationist conclusion. It would perhaps better be described as an extreme *herbivore*¹⁰ liberationist conclusion. It would require the killing of (human and non-human) carnivores¹¹ if that were the only effective way of preventing them from eating the meat of herbivores killed for that purpose.

Of course, Peter Alward is not himself committed to this position. The ‘no moral difference arguments’ alone do not entail this conclusion. Rather the conclusion is entailed by these arguments in conjunction with VT. It is VT that Peter Alward denies. I too reject the extreme herbivore liberationist position and its implicit prescriptions to kill kitties and other carnivores. I shall show, however, that contrary to Peter Alward’s claims and arguments, there are two related ways that a moral vegetarian might do this:

- (1) By denying that VT is the correct (or only possible) formulation of moral vegetarianism.
- (2) By rejecting the ‘no moral difference arguments’.

My arguments will reveal the shortcomings of Peter Alward’s defence of the naïve argument.

AGAINST CARICATURES OF THE MORAL VEGETARIAN THESIS

The first problem with Peter Alward's arguments is his formulation of the moral vegetarian thesis. Although VT is a formulation which some moral vegetarians might embrace, many would not. VT claims (or at least implies) that the eating of meat of an animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten is *always* wrong (i.e. in every conceivable situation). But many moral vegetarians would deny this. They would claim that while eating this meat is *ordinarily* wrong, it need not always be so. VT is a caricature of their position.

There are a number of possible reasons why a moral vegetarian may be opposed to the eating of certain animals in most circumstances, which would not entail a categorical opposition to eating the meat of those animals. Consider, for instance:

VT': Eating the meat of an animal with properties, X, Y, Z, ... that was killed for the purpose of being eaten is morally wrong if done for anything less than very weighty reasons.

If VT' were combined with the quite plausible claim that killing such animals for one's survival is a weighty reason but killing them for mere gastronomic delight is a trivial reason, one would conclude that it is almost always, but not always, wrong for humans to eat the meat of such animals. Thus some moral vegetarians might think that it is not morally wrong (even though regrettable) for snow- and ice-bound people, such as the Inuit sometimes are (or have been), to kill and eat certain animals because their very lives are at stake, while it would be wrong for the rest of us to do so. (Of course, if the Inuit could alter their position, as may now be the case, such that they could avoid dependence on animal flesh, then they would have a duty to do so and it would be wrong for them to continue to kill and eat animals.)

VT' may seem ad hoc to some, but a moment's reflection should reveal otherwise. All those who reject moral absolutism accept analogues of VT'. For instance, very many people embrace what we might call a moral humanist thesis:

HT: Killing human beings is morally wrong if done for anything less than very weighty reason.

People disagree, of course, about what constitutes sufficiently weighty reason. Some might think that killing in self-defence is justified only when one's life is threatened by an intentional aggressor. Others might also permit the killing of innocent threats – those whose continued existence threatens one's life but through no fault of theirs. Consider, for instance, the baby whose cries will alert murderous pursuers to the whereabouts of hidden potential victims. Some think that a person's having committed a murder is sufficient reason to execute him. Others disagree. Some, but not others, think that killing humans suffering

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terribly from terminal conditions is morally acceptable. Only absolutists about killing humans reject HT in favour of a principle that categorically rules out any killing of humans. Whether or not one thinks that such an absolutist view is correct, one should certainly recognise that a moral humanist could very well oppose the killing of humans for the sorts of reasons humans are usually killed – malice, intolerance, jealousy, indifference, sport, to attain property, to silence a witness, etc. – without thinking that there are never circumstances in which killing humans is morally acceptable (even if still regrettable). Now, if it is possible for somebody to have a qualified opposition to killing humans, why is it not possible for somebody to have a qualified opposition to killing and eating non-human animals? Why may somebody not think that it is morally wrong to kill animals in order to enjoy the taste of meat, but not wrong to kill them if that is necessary to save one's own life?

THE LION AND THE INUIT

Peter Alward thinks that the survival of lions and tigers cannot justify their killing and eating of animals because their survival requires not one killing but continual killing and eating of animals over their whole lifetimes. For this reason, he says, lions and tigers are unlike the case of innocent A who will be shot by a gunman unless A kills innocent B. Even if one thinks that A is justified in killing B in such a circumstance, says Peter Alward, one could not say that A is justified in killing B, C, D and E in order to preserve her life.

But is the gunman a suitable example with which to compare the lion? One reason to think that it is not is that the gunman case involves the killing of humans with properties L, M, N, ..., in addition to properties X, Y, Z, ...¹² Now a moral vegetarian categorically opposed to the killing of any animal with properties X, Y, Z, ... would (likely) be opposed without qualification to the killing of humans that had additional morally significant properties (L, M, N, ...). But a moral vegetarian who had a qualified opposition to killing and eating certain animals could think that killing human animals (with the additional morally significant properties) is still worse and requires even stronger justification. A moral vegetarian who held this view could consistently claim that A's survival cannot justify his killing a number of beings with properties L, M, N, ..., X, Y, Z, ... but A's survival can justify his killing a number of beings with properties X, Y, Z, ... More specifically, such a moral vegetarian could think that an iteration of the survival justification is acceptable when the beings killed have properties X, Y, Z, ... but not when they have properties L, M, N, ..., X, Y, Z, For these reasons, extrapolation from the gunman example to the lion case is unwarranted. A much better analogy than the gunman is that of those Inuit who are dependent on continual killing and eating of animals for their survival. As I have indicated, VT', being more nuanced than VT, could permit such people to kill and eat

animals (so long as they could not survive without doing so), while still prohibiting the rest of us from doing so.

Some might suggest that the Inuit and lions examples are also disanalogous. In the one case, the killing of many animals is necessary for the survival of a human (a being with properties L, M, N, ..., X, Y, Z, ...) whereas in the other case the killing of many animals is necessary for the survival of a non-human animal (which has the same set of morally relevant properties – X, Y, Z, ... – as its victims). I agree that to some moral vegetarians this difference might be morally significant. However, I deny that it need matter to all moral vegetarians. It could be argued that the properties of the being that is killed, not the properties of the killer, are what are relevant in determining whether iterated survival killing is justified.¹³ For those who accept this, the Inuit example is more analogous to the case of the lions. According to VT' iterated survival killing by both Inuit and lions of animals with properties X, Y, Z, ... would be permissible.

THE MORAL IGNORANCE OF LIONS

So far, I have assumed that the moral ignorance of lions is no obstacle to their doing wrong. Now I wish to question this assumption. Peter Alward considers and rejects the objection that an action, even if undesirable, cannot be labelled 'wrong' unless it is blameworthy. He says that he is sometimes inclined to view this as 'a purely verbal issue'.¹⁴ I am never inclined to view it as such. The oddity of labelling any undesirable event as 'wrong' can be seen more clearly if we consider natural events like volcano eruptions, floods or rock slides. Any of these events might be undesirable in that they bring about some deaths,¹⁵ but it would certainly be odd to term these events 'morally wrong' (unless one thought that they were quite literally 'acts of God', in which case they are not mere events but fully intentional actions). Surely it would not be *wrong* of the volcano to erupt, even if its erupting were undesirable or unfortunate. Now if a volcanic eruption is seen as undesirable but not wrong, why are the non-blameworthy actions of lions and babes not viewed similarly, given that lions and babes are no more responsible for what they do than are volcanoes?¹⁶

Peter Alward thinks that this is a mere verbal issue because even if one thinks that the lion's actions are not wrong, one should still think they are what he calls 'prevent-worthy'. In defence of this claim, he provides the analogy of the young child who attempts to slit his sleeping father's throat. Although the child cannot be blamed for this action, we should prevent him from doing it.

But is the case of the child and his sleeping father a good analogy? I think it is not. One significant difference is that the (most humane) way to prevent the lion from killing its prey is to kill the lion, whereas the way to prevent the child killing the father would simply be to remove the implement with which he would

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slit his father's throat. It is possible for somebody to think that although both deaths are unfortunate, only one – that of the father – should be prevented.¹⁷

But what, it might be asked, if *killing* the child were the only way of preventing him from killing his father? I suspect that some would think it permissible to kill the child, while others would not, and that what view one takes would depend, all things being equal, on whether one thinks that innocent threats may be killed. However, even this modified example cannot serve as a useful benchmark for a judgement about the lion. After all, somebody might think that it is acceptable to kill those who innocently threaten the lives of beings with properties L, M, N, ..., X, Y, Z, ..., but not those who threaten the lives of beings with only properties X, Y, Z,

Moreover, not everything that is undesirable or unfortunate must be prevented. Among those who reject consequentialism, this is a common view. On such a view, if the only way I can prevent 20 people from being killed is by killing one, I must not prevent the death of the 20. I do not wish to defend this view here, and Peter Alward does not offer a refutation of it. I wish only to note that if one can think this about humans, there is no reason why one should not also think it about non-human animals.

What these reflections show is that a moral vegetarian could reject P1 of the recast version of the naïve argument. That is to say, a moral vegetarian can think it is wrong for humans to kill animals for food without thinking that it is prevent-worthy for lions and tigers to kill animals for food.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that the original version of the naïve argument fails. It caricatures the view of (at least some, but perhaps most) moral vegetarians. The dependence of lions and tigers on meat for their survival is a morally relevant difference between them and us, at least if one accepts a more refined moral vegetarian thesis than VT, such as VT'. The moral ignorance of lions is also relevant and requires the abandonment of Peter Alward's original version of the naïve argument. Because P1 of the recast version of the argument can be rejected – that is to say, because a moral vegetarian could reject the claim that if it is wrong for humans to kill animals for food it must be prevent-worthy for lions and tigers to kill animals for food – this version of the argument also fails.

I have not defended such claims as: (a) VT', (b) the non-absolutist position on killing humans and animals, and (c) the non-consequentialist view that some undesirable outcomes should not be prevented. All I have sought to show is that an oversimplification of the moral vegetarian position can lead one to overlook versions of it that are congruent with views commonly held by philosophers and

others regarding inter-human morality. Because of this congruence, these versions of moral vegetarianism cannot simply be ignored.

Although it is not immoral, it is certainly unfortunate and regrettable that lions, tigers and other carnivores must kill in order to survive. For many of us, the vast amount of suffering and death that is necessary for carnivores to sustain themselves is striking evidence that the natural order could not have been designed by an omnibenevolent being (who is also omnipotent and omniscient). It would have been better had some animals not needed to feed on others. However, I have suggested some reasons why, all things considered, it might still be wrong (or at least not obligatory) to prevent predators from killing the animals they need to eat for their survival. This is not to say that there are no ways we might be required or permitted to prevent the death and suffering that carnivores bring. For instance, although killing a kitty has costs to that kitty, avoiding a kitty's coming into existence could have no costs to it. For this reason it seems to me that a stronger case can be made for vegetarians (and others) not to breed kitties than to kill them. I realise, of course, that vegetarians can disagree on the question of whether or not to breed carnivores. I do not mean to offer a definitive argument here. I intend only to show that there are different ways of preventing carnivorous killings and they do not all stand and fall together. Most importantly, we should remember one way of minimising the killing of animals that is readily within each moral agent's control, is to abandon the eating of meat. As this would not involve any of the costs that it would to lions and tigers, it should receive our primary attention.¹⁸

NOTES

¹ Alward 2000.

² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸ As far as I can tell, it is uncontroversial that humans can survive and thrive without meat, as long as they have other sources of nutrition. Clearly some people's circumstances are such that they have no alternatives to gaining their nutrition from meat. Just how common such circumstances are, is a disputed matter. I cannot settle that issue here. I suspect, however, that there are fewer such cases than many people think. More controversial than the vegetarian diet, which is my main concern in this paper, is the diet of vegans – those who abstain not only from meat, but also from animal products such as eggs and dairy. Two pairs of scientists contributed to a debate on this subject in the *Journal of Agricultural*

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and *Environmental Ethics*. The one pair concluded that ‘all known nutritional risks of vegan diets can be avoided by appropriate dietary planning that results in intakes of nutrients from foods ... that meet levels suggested in the Recommended Daily Allowances’ (Dwyer and Loew 1994). The other pair of scientists concluded that ‘vegan diets can be chosen which are appropriate for pregnant and lactating women, infants, children and adolescents’ (Mangels and Havela 1994).

⁹ That kitties cannot, but humans can, survive without meat, would not undermine the implication that vegetarians should kill those humans who could not be prevented from eating meat other than by killing them.

¹⁰ The category ‘herbivore’ may actually be too narrow. A defender of the position I have in mind might think that those that feed on animals only that lack the relevant properties (X, Y, Z, ...) should also be protected. Insectivores may be a possible category, depending on what view one takes about what properties X, Y, Z, ... are.

¹¹ I use the term ‘carnivores’ in a broad sense to refer to all those who eat meat (that is, including omnivores) rather than in the narrower sense which denotes those who eat *only* meat.

¹² If X, Y, Z, ... were thought to be properties like sentience and some cognitive function, then L, M, N, ... could be thought to be properties like higher order sapience and self-awareness.

¹³ Interestingly, Peter Alward himself, in answering an objection to his position, suggests that the properties of the victim are what count. See p. 86.

¹⁴ Alward 2000: 87.

¹⁵ Given their harmful effects, these events are prevent-*worthy* even where they are not preventable. Where the events themselves are not preventable, their effects are sometimes preventable.

¹⁶ It might be objected that Peter Alward is not committed to claiming that death-causing volcanic eruptions are wrong, because volcanic eruptions are *events* whereas Peter Alward is speaking about the deadly *actions* of lions and babes. The problem with this objection is that it assumes an oversimplified taxonomy. It may indeed be the case that lions and babes *act* (at least in some sense of that word), whereas volcanic eruptions just *happen*. However, the actions of lions and babes are not like paradigmatic human actions – to which praise and blame can be attached. The reason for this is that lions and babies are no more responsible for what they do than are volcanoes. In this relevant respect, the actions of lions and babes are like volcanic eruptions and unlike ordinary human actions. My point is that a killing can be wrong only when it is brought about by a *responsible* agent.

¹⁷ The expression ‘X is prevent-worthy’ is ambiguous. It could mean that ‘all things *being* equal, X should be prevented’ or it could mean ‘all things *considered*, X should be prevented’. I am adopting the latter interpretation because this is the interpretation required in order for the expression ‘prevent-worthy’ to do the work that must be done in Peter Alward’s argument. If, for instance, the former, weaker, interpretation were adopted, P2 of Peter Alward’s argument on p. 87 could quite easily be denied by moral vegetarians.

¹⁸ I am grateful to *Environmental Values* reviewers for their comments.

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