

Is There Moral Justification to Eat Meat?

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Humans do not have a duty to eat meat; rather, we have a duty to restore the fitness of the planet we've compromised. This duty can be fulfilled in large part by dramatically shifting away from livestock farming and meat eating, as these practices are intrinsically cruel and a significant source of environmental damage.



This article discusses and rejects the anthropocentric claim, proposed by Zangwill (2021), that we have a moral duty to eat meat. It argues that Zangwill ignores both the extensive ecological damage caused by animal agriculture, and the cruelty and suffering that it entails. Using a framework proposed in Marino and Mountain (2021), it then diagnoses Zangwill's argument as proceeding from a broader cultural phenomenon: the human attempt to cope with our existential dread of death, by denying our mammalian nature and depersonalizing other, non-human, animals. Once we reject this human exceptionalism, we will see that our moral duty is not to eat animals but to respect the intrinsic value of their lives.

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In answering the question, philosopher Nick Zangwill (2021) would say *yes*; bio-psychologist Lori Marino and co-author Michael Mountain (2021) would say *no*. Zangwill argues “that eating meat is morally good and our duty when it is part of a practice that has benefited animals” (2021: 295). Against this injunction, Marino and Mountain demonstrate that the human denial of death motivates us to distance ourselves from other animals so that we justify harms to them – harms which include raising animals as our food.

The final calculation is rather simple. *Contra* Zangwill, humans do not have a duty to eat meat; rather, we have a duty to restore the fitness of the planet we've compromised. This duty can be fulfilled in large part by dramatically shifting away from livestock farming and meat eating, as these practices are intrinsically cruel and a significant source of environmental damage.

Zangwill, the meat-eating animal

In a nutshell, Zangwill's argument is that “eating meat is morally good primarily because it benefits animals” (2021: 295). He argues this from sentientist premises: that animals are sentient beings and that their flourishing is morally valuable. Zangwill points out that if humans did not eat meat, most domesticated animals would not exist, as farmers would cease to care for or breed them. Thus, he argues, “eating meat is an essential part of a practice whereby valuable conscious lives have been and are being created” (310). Hence, he concludes, in respect to those cases where animals raised for meat have “a significant quality of life” (296) meat-eating is our moral duty. Indeed, “[e]ating meat is an act of kindness” (310).

What should we make of this argument – that the non-human life worth living is one that fills the human belly? The only way Zangwill can reach his conclusion is by ignoring the ecological context within which the practice of meat-eating currently exists. What is more, his argument treats animals as resources for humans and not as ends in themselves.

To begin with, Zangwill explicitly limits his argument to those animals which enjoy “good lives” – and admits that this may not apply to those raised on factory-farms. However, most of the world’s meat comes from the latter, so he’s creating an illusion. Meat from supposedly happy ‘free-ranged’ animals is not going to feed the already eight billion human stomachs. The corporate meat industry is driven by the profit-motive, not ethics, and factory-farmed meat is the most profitable.

Furthermore, even if we were to reduce factory-farming and produce more so-called ‘free-range’ meat, this would require more land devoted to pasture. Already, about one fifth of Earth’s biomass is livestock populating lots of land (Machovina *et al.*, 2015), so following Zangwill’s reasoning we would have to set aside yet more land as grazing space. Zangwill claims the fate of wild animals is not at issue in his argument, but deforestation in places like the Amazon (Nepstad *et al.*, 2008), to settle livestock or grow feed for them, contributes significantly to biodiversity decline and habitat loss. If the world’s population shifted to a plant-based diet, we would significantly reduce land used for agriculture to feed cattle (Ritchie, 2021) – land that could be better utilized for rewilding, carbon sequestration, reforestation and so on.

In addition, while there are many causes of the current environmental crisis, livestock production and cattle ranching are major contributors. Livestock – whether factory farmed or ‘free range’ – emit lots of greenhouse gases, with animal agriculture responsible for between 16.5 per cent and 28.1 per cent of all emissions (Twine, 2021). This is to say nothing of the silage or other supplements with which they are fattened, which in turn lead to food and water waste. This practice is not a sustainable use of land (Machovina *et al.*, 2015; Springmann *et al.*, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2020). Overall, while wild animals service the ecosphere, animals farmed as meat for the pleasure of human consumption upset Earth’s ecological equilibrium (Theurl *et al.*, 2020).

In any case, the differences between ‘factory farming’ and ‘free range’ practices are much smaller than Zangwill would seem to believe. For one thing, as Crary and Gruen (2022) point out, labels like ‘free-range’, ‘grass-fed’ *et cetera*, are mostly advertising gimmicks. And even on small farms the animals are treated and destroyed much as they are in a factory slaughterhouse (Crary and Gruen, 2022). Animal farms of all sizes produce meat for profit by rearing livestock who are electrically stunned (sometimes several times) at the point of death to have their throats slit, and then their corpses are mutilated for butchering and packaging (Gruen and Jones, 2016).

Zangwill argues that domesticated animals exist and flourish only because of the practice of eating meat, and that therefore eating meat is morally good. Would that apply to one’s children too? In other words, does his argument not also show that “we should at least sometimes kill and eat enslaved human beings if doing so were part of a practice that has benefitted them” (2021: 303)? To block this *reductio ad absurdum*, Zangwill makes a familiar move: that his argument does not apply to humans, because we are *rational*. Zangwill’s authority at this point (2021: 304) is the seventeenth-century French philosopher Descartes, who viewed animals as automatons while performing vivisections in spite of their cries of pain.

Ignoring current developments in the study of animal cognition (*e.g.* Rowlands, 2019; Andrews and Monsó, 2021), Zangwill claims animals are not as cognitively sophisticated as humans and that, therefore, we need not worry about any painful consciousness as they line up to be slaughtered, hear the wails of their fellows, see those before them succumb, and then feel the blade slit their throats or the blast of a gun bolt pierce their skulls. This unabashed anthropocentrism also means that, in assessing the ‘quality’ of animals’ lives, Zangwill does not feel the need to consider the ways in which farmed animals have been deprived of their autonomy (*cf.* Regan, 2004). But we should not follow Zangwill in parcelling out obligations and injuries based on the supposed conscious sophistication of a species – where we measure this using human conceptions of intelligence. This is simply anthropocentrism in another guise.

A diagnosis of Zangwill’s argument

Marino and Mountain (2021) argue that humans hurt animals or kill them for food to exert a self-interested sense of exceptionalism. The fraudulent idea of human exceptionalism has led to mass extinctions, ecosystem destruction and climate change spiralling out of control. But no species is exceptional in this way; rather, populations have evolved unique

adaptations to survive among others in a mutually-shared ecosystem, locally, and in a larger biome. Contrary to Zangwill, our moral obligation is to work *with* animals, since they are purveyors of clean air and water for a healthy planet.

When Westernized humans are reminded of their mortality, a common response is to deny their animal nature and claim something spiritual. In this way – as we saw above in Zangwill’s appeal to Descartes’s authority – humans come to regard, and to exploit, other creatures as mere ‘things’ so as to emphasize an invented human dominance and superiority. But as Darwin pointed out, life is not neatly arranged in a hierarchy according to some notion of the ‘great chain of being’, but instead exists along a widening plane of descent with modification. For instance, all mammals are connected by a shared limbic system governing our emotions and behaviours.

Drawing on Ernest Becker (1973), Marino and Mountain show how the human anxiety and dread of death is ameliorated when humans deny their mammalian nature and objectify other animals for their destruction. This is an example of what Becker termed ‘Terror Management Theory’, which “asserts that much of human behavior is motivated by anxiety, however unconscious, about personal mortality” (Marino and Mountain, 2021: 7). The rampant abuse of livestock, they argue, keeps human bodies at an elevated distance from their own physical mortality as they control the lives, in death, of other non-human beings. We see this death denial in the depersonalization of many animals in factory farming and any form of meat consumption; it is evident in widespread animal hunting and poaching, too. This, they go on to say, is so pervasive because cultures help promote the human-over-animal mentality from childhood – anthropodenial attitudes that are difficult to quash except for ethical vegans and some religions, like Jainism, that practice non-injury to any life form.

Using this framework, we can diagnose Zangwill’s argument for the moral goodness of meat-eating as an example of a much broader phenomenon: the neurotic denial of death syndrome. This syndrome allows us, for example, to suspend our disgust at animal slaughter and see their dead bodies simply as ‘meat’ that is to be sanitized with spices in cooking. In doing this we say: *It’s not a life; it’s a commodity, a mere instrument for human pleasure*. Indeed, we justify this killing by claiming it brings us life. (Meantime, consider the near-vegan silverback mountain gorilla who is all-powerful from eating leaves!) Terror management theory suggests, as Zangwill’s writing evinces, a way to depersonalize other living beings, much as the Nazis did with those they killed, or as trophy hunters do in the display of body parts of their game prey.

What duty do we have to animals?

The analysis above has emphasised that livestock production for meat eating seriously degrades ecosystems and depletes biodiversity. One response to this is to suggest that we should strive to dramatically reduce our meat consumption, but not eliminate it entirely. A good example of this approach is given in Machovina and colleagues (2015). Their recommendations are worth consideration – at least in the short term – for most industrial, and even some developing, societies.

First, they argue, there should be a reduction in the production of livestock meats while simultaneously allocating grains set for feeding cattle to human nutrition. There should be a conversion from meat to soy and legumes for protein. Food waste, particularly in urban centres, should be reduced. They suggest a daily intake of meat at no more than 100 grams per person, with this limit promoted by advertising campaigns. Second, animal products that harm ecosystems, for example cattle ranching and bushmeat hunting, should be replaced with more sustainable proteins. Beef can be replaced by chicken or pork, animals who require a smaller amount of land and emit less harmful gases (Boucher *et al.*, 2012). Another viable replacement would be from in-vitro lab meats. Third, animal agriculture should move away from high-polluting factory farming and become reintegrated into a polyculture that simultaneously grows a variety of plants on lands along with animals, mimicking a real ecosystem.

While certainly not without merit, these recommendations do not address the question posed in the title of this essay. Like Zangwill, they still fundamentally regard non-human animals as means to our ends, to be used as we see fit.

Zangwill’s claims might have made sense in the seventeenth century, along with Descartes’ false ideas about the feelings and intelligence of non-human creatures or his practices of animal cruelty. Now, any argument promoting meat eating is

irrational given what we know about animal sentience and sapience, the ills of meat consumption to human health, the spread of zoonotic diseases, the wastefulness of feed and water on farm animals, and the ruin of ecosystems for animal agriculture. Zangwill's perspective looks to the distant past that must be overcome as we reach to the future.

In contrast, Marino and Mountain (2021) celebrate the abundance of life on Earth and want to preserve it naturally in the wild. Their ideology implies eliminating or substantially reducing animal agriculture. I would thus argue that, as ecological citizens, we have a moral duty to make an informed choice about the origin of our proteins by not eating animal flesh, and, ultimately, rejecting all the products of animal agriculture – in other words, moving towards ethical veganism. Rather than raising animals to be cruelly and wastefully massacred as human food, they should be granted sovereignty of place in their wild habitats. In some locales we should learn to live alongside of them with equality since they ably function as ecosystem engineers sustaining forests, grasslands, wetlands, oceans and even the atmosphere (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011; Wilson, 2016; Tague, 2020). Thus, positive change to ensure Earth's future should come from cultural shifts towards ethical attitudes that value ecosystems and animals as ends in themselves.

In sum, our moral duty is not to eat animals but to respect the intrinsic value of their lives.

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