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To Be or Not to Be a Vegetarian

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As her two year old daughter clamored for another sausage, Joy couldn't help but think back to her class in the afternoon. A team of students had made presentations on vegetarianism. Joy knew from past experience that the topic would generate heated discussion. She had not anticipated the effect on her personally, however. Maybe, she thought to herself, it had to do with her new responsibilities as a college teacher and mother. Now she had the welfare of a lot more people to consider.

The year before Joy had taken a position in philosophy and religion at Evans College in rural North Carolina. The shift from graduate work in Berkeley, California, to the south had entailed a considerable readjustment. She had learned it was not easy to present new ideas on a small campus in this tradition-based culture. She ascertained this early on in an effort to get across concepts of animal rights and social justice.

Now in her second year at Evans she was teaching a course on "Environmental Philosophy and Ethics." Besides the academic goals she was pursuing, Joy also wanted her students to develop their own personal integrity by incorporating ecological sensitivity into their own lives. She decided on a requirement for a service project that would make the campus "greener" and fit into Evans' emphasis on "servant leadership" and "service learning."

Joy herself is committed to environmentalism. She and her husband, who works on campus, had purchased a house nearby so they could walk or ride their bikes to work. They recycled, tried to conserve water and energy, and contributed to environmental action groups. Joy's interest in environmental issues began when she lived in the Colorado mountains, working on ski slopes as a ski patroller in the winter and on river rapids as a whitewater raft guide in the summer. Throughout her doctoral studies she continued as a raft guide in the summers. Joy also gained more interest and awareness of environmentalism when she connected with grassroots groups working on environmental justice and racism in the Bay Area.

As for vegetarianism, Joy was not so sure. While aware of the various environmental arguments in favor of vegetarianism, she had found ways to rationalize eating meat. First, she hated to cook and didn't like many of the alternatives to meat, such as tofu. She reasoned that if she was vegetarian, she would not get all the nutrients she needs to be healthy. Second, her husband loved meat and refused to even contemplate being vegetarian. On top of this, her two year old daughter, who is a very picky eater, seems to love meat and despise vegetables. Trying to be vegetarian in a meat eating household located in the south, where the pig is supreme, is too much of a hassle! Third, Joy still waffled on the question of whether one must be a vegetarian to be environmentally sensitive.

To push herself on this issue, Joy asked her students to research some of the arguments for and against vegetarianism, make group presentations and try to convince her to be a vegetarian. The presentations scheduled for that afternoon had gone well.

The Debate

Two students, Mary and Jess, who had been in Joy's course a previous semester began the debate by making distributive justice arguments from the former course and connecting them to the social ecology perspective that they had recently studied. Mary started by saying: "As social ecologists have pointed out, environmental injustice is connected to social injustice. That is, many of our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems." Jess chimed in: "Basically, eating meat perpetuates a system that indirectly harms other human beings. 38 percent of the world's grain is fed to livestock at the same time that millions of humans die because they do not have enough grain and legumes in their diet. Also, it takes more grain to feed animals than is produced in meat – sixteen to twenty pounds of grain and soy to produce a pound of beef; six to eight pounds for a pound of pork; four pounds for a pound of turkey, and three pounds for a pound of chicken."

When Mary had taken a semester abroad in Costa Rica, she had found out that cattle grazing was the

biggest reason for cutting down rainforest. "Peasants are being pushed off the land into shanty towns around the cities, just so those of us in wealthy countries can eat McDonald's hamburgers!" Another student in the class countered: "Even if I chose not to eat hamburgers, how will that help distribute grain to those who really need it?"

Two other students presented their argument next since it piggybacked well on the destruction of rainforest. Peter, a senior and also an environmental science major, and Kirsten, who wants to work for the Forest Service after graduation, argued that Joy should be vegetarian if she takes seriously the idea of "treading lightly on the planet." Kirsten starts off by saying: "Joy, you are being hypocritical if you persuade us to be environmentally sensitive, yet you continue to eat meat. The production system that gives you ready-wrapped meat in the supermarket is environmentally destructive." She goes on to list a few examples: 1) thousands of species are destroyed through deforestation for cattle grazing; 2) livestock leads to soil compaction and erosion, the depletion of fresh water aquifers, and even global desertification; 3) animal production consumes large amounts of nonrenewable energy; and 4) animal manure is a source of pollution. Kirsten added a personal story to her last example: "I remember in 1989 when Hurricane Hugo hit in Eastern North Carolina where my family lives. You couldn't go down certain roads because of the health hazard posed from dead pigs and pig manure." Peter added to their argument by citing that livestock, such as cattle, sheep, and goats graze one-half of the planet's total land area. The cattle industry, due to its size, he pointed out, is especially responsible for ecological destruction.

Mary, who was doing her final class paper on modern industrial, agriculture stated: "Simply becoming vegetarian doesn't solve the problem of environmental destruction when most of the fruits and vegetables we eat are grown with fertilizers and pesticides that are energy dependent and pollute the environment." Peter agreed and replied that encouraging vegetarianism along with organic agricultural production is the key.

Laura, another student in class said: "Kirsten mentioned pig farming in eastern North Carolina. Tom and I argue that all factory farming is morally wrong because it inflicts suffering on the animals. We visited a poultry factory farm nearby and were horrified. The chickens were each confined to a small space and their beaks were cut off so that they wouldn't peck themselves to death!" Tom reminded the class of the articles on animal rights they had read, in particular Peter Singer's teleological argument that sentient animals should be considered in a utilitarian calculus because they can suffer and Tom Regan's deontological argument that all animals have inherent value. Peter concluded by saying: "According to Singer, factory farming is morally wrong because it inflicts suffering on animals, and according to Regan, it treats animals as resources and detracts from their welfare."

Larry, an avid deer hunter spoke up: "I agree that factory farming is morally wrong, but I don't eat meat that comes from factory farming. I hunt my own meat. I only kill animals that are overpopulating an area, such as deer; and I only kill as much as I need. Furthermore, I kill the deer quickly so that they suffer as little as possible. I think that this type of hunting is environmentally sound since the deer would destroy much of the native vegetation if there were not hunters to control their population. Plus, if there are more deer than an area can support, the deer will end up suffering more in the long run."

A religion major named Karen chimed in: "In Christian ethics one is allowed to eat meat. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul claims that we are free not only to eat meat, but to eat meat sacrificed to idols as long as it does not harm our neighbor. I also believe that humans are animals themselves and a part of the food chain. We were created by God to eat both plants and animals."

Jim, a self-avowed meat lover, also questioned vegetarianism. He said: "We need to consume the earth's resources to stay alive. Since we need to eat something, why so we make a distinction between plants and animals. Where does one draw the line and why? Many say that sentience, the capacity to experience pain, is the criterion, but doesn't this buy into a hierarchical understanding of the cosmos? Maybe plants have souls and we shouldn't be eating them either!"

Sophia, a strict vegetarian, responded to Larry: "Larry, you say you only kill as much meat as you need, but the truth is that eating meat is unhealthy. Both you and Jim don't *need* to eat meat." She went on to explain that cultures with the highest animal flesh consumption, such as the Eskimos, the Laplanders and the Greenlanders, have had the lowest life expectancy (30 years); while mainly vegetarian cultures such as the Russian Caucasians, the Yucatan Indians, and the East Indian Todas, have had some of the highest life expectancies (90 to 100 yrs). "I can speak from experience. I had high cholesterol before I became vegetarian and now it is normal. Besides all the diseases meat can contribute to, such as heart disease, cancer, and strokes, meat eaters are also subject to illnesses such as salmonella, trichinosis and who knows what else!" Sophia concluded that human teeth actually seem to be designed for the grinding of grains, vegetables, and fruits. "Humans' teeth and digestive systems are dissimilar to other omnivores, such as bears," she said.

The last argument aimed at Joy was from an ecofeminist perspective. Megan, who worked at the Women's Center on campus, claimed that there is a connection between vegetarianism and feminism. She said: "We have discovered through our ecofeminist readings we've done this semester that the oppression of women (sexism) and the oppression of nature (naturism) are linked, and this link extends to the oppression of animals (specism). The link between these and other forms of oppression is what philosopher Karren Warren calls the "logic of domination." Megan went on to give several examples of the connection. First, both Eve and the snake are blamed for the Fall in the Bible. Second, in animal-based economies where men hunt and control meat distribution, women have been oppressed; while in plant-based economies, where women gather vegetables, more egalitarian relations prevail. Third, in situations of food scarcity, men receive the meat and women don't. Fourth, in our society, drinking beer and eating steak is a manly thing – the "meat and potatoes man." Our society equates vegetarianism with emasculation or femininity. Megan concluded by saying: "Joy, I know that you consider yourself a feminist because of your work with the Women's Center. If you want to avoid being hypocritical in regards to both social and environmental justice, you really need to embrace vegetarianism. To do so would be a rejection of environmental injustice as well as human injustice, specifically in the form of patriarchal oppression."

Mark, an avowed pacifist countered: "I like meat but I try to buy only organically produced meat and I don't believe that I am sexist. In this country we are not in a situation of food scarcity and probably just as many women as men are meat-eaters. I'm not sure I agree with the connection of meat eating to patriarchal oppression."

Joy had left the class still undecided. The presentations had been impressive. She started to hand her daughter another sausage, but withdrew it and offered an apple instead. Should she do the same for herself?

Source:

Stephens, William O. "Five Arguments for Vegetarianism." In Joseph des Jardin, ed. *Environmental Ethics: Concepts, Policy, Theory*. California: Mayfield, 1999.

Class discussion in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics. 23 October, 2001. Dr. Laura Stivers. Pfeiffer University.

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Teaching Notes

Teaching Goals:

To explore personal integrity in environmental ethics.

To understand the connection between environmental destruction and meat eating.

To explore attitudes towards nature and nonhuman animals and the interconnections with attitudes towards various human animals.

To explore the differences between individual and holistic ecocentrism.

To explore how theology informs the question of whether to be vegetarian.

Characters:

Joy and family

Mary and Jess – distributive justice argument

Peter and Kirsten – environmental sustainability argument

Laura and Tom – animal rights argument

Larry – food chain argument

Sophia – health argument

Megan – ecofeminist argument

Mark

Issues:

The connection of hunger in less developed countries and overconsumption (of meat especially) in developed countries

The connection of meat eating to the destruction of rainforest, species extinction, soil erosion, desertification, and pollution

The ecological problems with factory farming

The need for two pronged campaign for vegetarianism along with organic agricultural production

The suffering of animals, especially in factory farming

Animal rights and the similarities/differences between animal rights and human rights

Animal having rights because of their ability to suffer or because they have inherent worth

Hunting as environmentally sound

Humans as animals and part of the food chain

Personal health and vegetarianism

The connection between the oppression of women, the oppression of nature, and the oppression of animals

Theological Reflections:

Genesis 1 – Humans and nature: dominion over nature, stewardship of nature or partnership with nature?

Genesis 1 – The creation and its creatures were declared to be “good” before the emergence of humans.

What does this say about the relationship between human animals and nonhuman animals?

Liberation in Scripture – How does this address the “logic of domination” implicit in sexism, naturism, and speciesism?

Justice in Scripture – How does justice fit in with animals rights and environmentalism?

Relationality in Scripture – How is all of creation interconnected? What responsibilities, both personal and corporate, does this connection bring?

Compassion in Scripture – Does the norm of compassion call for humans to be vegetarian?