

Food for thought

A no-nonsense guide to
being a vegetarian



Sadly, there's quite a bit of misleading information about being vegetarian or vegan. Facts can be exaggerated or twisted, to make an argument more persuasive. We've always taken the view that it's best to be logical and accurate about everything, which doesn't exclude this also being a heartfelt subject. We have no interest whatsoever in peddling propaganda.

What we eat is important, but it's far from a "be all and end all" consideration. One capable and thoughtful meat-eater, for example, might be doing far more for the world than ten mediocre vegetarians combined together. It's just one aspect of living an ethical life. Saying this upsets a few hothead vegetarians or vegans, but it's nevertheless true. That said, becoming a vegetarian is perhaps the easiest and most straightforward lifestyle change you can quickly make as an individual that will genuinely produce results. Farm animals are produced and slaughtered so that consumers can eat them; it's simple mathematics of supply and demand. If the demand is reduced, this translates to fewer cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens being reared and then killed; the same is true with fish netted from the seas. The difference you can make by becoming a vegetarian is tiny, because you're only one person, but it's real - and everything adds up.

There are several good reasons why someone becomes a vegetarian. We are primarily concerned with the ethical argument, although we'll also look at the health and environmental reasons.

There's still some confusion about what exactly it means to be a vegetarian. The situation isn't helped by a load of questionable options or labels such as "demi-vegetarians", "flexitarians", "pollotarians", "pescetarians", etc. A vegetarian is someone who chooses not to eat the flesh of animals including poultry, game, fish, shellfish and crustaceans, and slaughter by-products such as fish oils, gelatine, or animal rennet derived from a calf's stomach. So, simply, if a person occasionally eats fish or chicken, then they're not a vegetarian. Furthermore, most vegetarians go a step further and won't buy or use leather.

People are habitually conditioned to eat meat as youngsters. As adults, you probably like the taste of meat and eating is part of socialising. You'd probably not choose to eat a dog, yet will happily eat a pig. Yet dogs and pigs have a similar level of intelligence. In South Korea, eating dogs is not unusual. In England, eating cows is commonplace. In India, it's not acceptable as the cow is considered to be a sacred animal. What might be one person's dinner may be another's pet dog or holy cow. And do you think that bull fighting is cruel, whilst continuing to eat steak? Thinking skills, including the tackling of hypocrisy, are crucial here.

We have a nervous system; this allows us to feel pain. Animals also have a nervous system, allowing them to feel pain. Plants do not have a nervous system. It's a simple and clear-cut difference.

The traditional view of farming, with cows and sheep grazing peacefully in green pastures, is often far from today's reality. Millions of animals are intensively reared in cages, stalls, or windowless sheds - so-called "factory farming". The bottom line is money and a cost-effective production line whatever system is used. Farming is a business. That said, it is important to state that the majority of farmers care about the welfare of their animals - at least up to the point of transportation to a slaughterhouse. Farmers are good, practical, hard-working people. I can state this with great confidence having known many as friends and neighbours in several countries over the past 40 years of my life. They are often wrongly demonised by campaigning vegetarians and vegans.

I'm not going to describe how farm animals suffer. This has been repeatedly done by others and shown in documentary films. It's enough to say that the rearing of pigs and broiler chickens (i.e. those bred for meat) is of special concern, which mostly occurs intensively indoors.

Serious welfare concerns definitely begin when animals are ready to be transported to market or for slaughter. The loading process involves fear and panic. Brute force is usually required to "persuade" the animals to enter the lorry - and again during offloading on arrival at the abattoir. Conditions during transportation are cramped, lacking any semblance of comfort, and the journey might be long.

Major concerns arise with the actual slaughter process. By this point, the living animals are about to die - usually early on in their life - and they're treated as mere commodities on a conveyor belt. The process of stunning and/or killing large numbers of animals is frequently inadequate, causing considerable pain and trauma. Those who work in slaughterhouses unofficially admit that their job involves cutting corners and this has been repeatedly filmed. Worse still, the monotony of endlessly killing lots of animals can produce boredom and a sadistic attitude. Instances of workers intentionally inflicting pain on the already terrified animals definitely happens. The repeated slaughter negatively impacts those people doing it.

Chicken has become a relatively cheap and popular food. Broiler chickens are reared in overcrowded factory conditions to be ready for market as soon as possible. The birds are selectively bred to grow fast, ready for market within weeks, and the process is enhanced by growth-promoting drugs and additional lighting. As a consequence, broken bones and heart problems are common. The risk of infection and mass loss of all the birds is a constant threat; disasters happen.

Fish are one of the last wild animals to be extensively hunted across the world. Each year, millions of tonnes of fish are hauled out of the seas. It's not only the fish that suffer; nets also catch dolphins, porpoises, small whales, sharks, diving sea birds, shellfish, crabs, starfish, and many other creatures - as well as species of fish that are unwanted. Seals are commonly shot by fisherman because they eat "our" fish.

The basic issue, however, is that all of these animals are killed just because people want to eat them. I've written a lot about psychological avoidance in these essays - and it obviously applies to this current subject matter of what we eat, including the ethical considerations of animal cruelty being ignored. Asking pertinent, challenging questions and facing reality are just two of the crucial key factors for living maturely and capably.

Some might think that a diet without meat is incomplete, that we need to eat meat to be strong and healthy. This is a myth. A vegetarian diet is certainly as healthy as one containing meat. Actually, many studies suggest that vegetarians are healthier - although this might be partly due to other lifestyle factors, such as choosing not to smoke, prompted by or associated with an increased thoughtfulness. The British Medical Association stated the following in its report *Diet, Nutrition, and Health*: "Vegetarians have lower rates of obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, large bowel disorder, and cancers and gallstones. Cholesterol levels tend to be lower." It goes on to say: "A vegetarian diet provides all the nutrients required for a healthy diet."

Physiologically, humans are frugivores. This biological term means that our bodies are adapted for a diet of fruit, root vegetables, nuts, and seeds - not for eating meat (carnivore), nor eating grass (herbivore), nor everything (omnivore). Our teeth are not designed for tearing at flesh. Also, we have a very long gut - whereas meat-eating animals have an extremely short gut, enabling them to get rid of the toxic waste products of flesh as soon as possible. Therefore, a vegetarian diet is consistent with our physiology.

All you're doing by becoming a vegetarian is cutting out meat, poultry, and fish from your diet. This leaves most food items to choose from - and the list is extensive, with a huge choice and variety. Cereals, bread, rice, pasta, lentils, beans, vegetables, fruit, nuts, cheese, milk, yogurt, eggs, biscuits, chocolate, and much more are available to eat. You don't have to use any expensive "health food" shops; simply carry on shopping in supermarkets as before, which already cater for millions of vegetarians. You can make delicious meals such as lasagne, vegetable casserole, spicy bean burgers, egg and chips, pizza, cauliflower cheese, stir fries, a range of curries, soups and stews, nut roast (a Christmas special), or simpler snacks such as the ever-healthy classic of baked beans on toast.

Make sure you buy vegetarian cheese; this has an alternative to animal rennet which comes from a calf's stomach. All supermarkets stock a good choice; it will be labelled "suitable for vegetarians". When you're invited to eat with friends and family at their home, tell them in advance that you're now a vegetarian. Don't be awkward or shy. There should be no shame or embarrassment in doing the right thing. There are countless recipes for all kinds of tasty dishes. Adapting to a new - more ethical - diet might take a few weeks or months until you're familiar and comfortable with everything, but it will soon become your new normal. This can be a testing period of time for some people - especially if friends, family, and society could be more understanding - but sticking to your principles is always worth the effort. And if you're struggling by missing the taste of meat, keep reminding yourself about why you decided to make the change to a cruelty-free diet.

There are probably many "vegetarians-in-waiting" out there, reasonably thoughtful and caring people who keep eating meat just because most of those around them do the same. They might lack the trigger to question what's what and so never get around to making a change. It's the same old problem of social or psychological conditioning: monkey do what monkey see. And avoidance doesn't help the situation, as it keeps human potential frustrated and hypocrisy unchecked.

Vegetarians, collectively, can also make a difference to the environment. It's inefficient to use land for growing crops and then to feed these to animals so as to produce meat. Cows and sheep waste approximately 90% of the plant material needed to feed them. This is because they use up large amounts of energy through growing, moving about, reproducing, and so on. An estimated 70% of wheat, corn, and other grains is fed to farmed animals. Meat-eating is causing massive destruction of natural habitats. A slash-and-burn policy clears huge areas of South American rainforest, for example, to make way for cattle grazing to produce cheap beef but at a high environmental cost. A staggering 25% of the planet's land surface is used for grazing of domestic livestock.

Human overpopulation has already severely restricted much of our wildlife to national parks and other nature reserves. A vegetarian diet means that less land is needed for growing food. Land currently used for meat production could instead be set aside as more space for wildlife. Of course, any significant reduction in meat-eating will help in this way - and you don't have to become a strict vegetarian for any other reason than the core ethical considerations. Benefits to the environment should be thought of as a bonus, as the ethical argument for being vegetarian to combat cruelty is persuasive and coherent in itself.

Organic food has become fashionable with some, so it's worth clearing a few points up here. Those who promote organic livestock farming exploit the concerns of consumers by painting a rosy picture, suggesting there is no cruelty. This is untrue - as well as being insulting to the mainstream

farmers. There is little to no difference between the organic farming and conventional farming of cows and sheep. Lives are still cut short, because people like their meat tender. The major animal welfare concerns are during transportation and the slaughter process; this is true of both farming practices. The organic production of vegetables uses fertilisers made of blood, fish, and bone. By contrast, conventional farmers use inorganic fertilisers that involve no cruelty. Everything comes from planet Earth, whether it was once alive or not, and so all are actually naturally sourced. The word “natural” has been conveniently misused by advertisers to fool a dull-brained public who often have more money than sense.

I’ve been a strict vegetarian for almost 50 years at the time of writing. I fully face reality, and I’m able to think clearly and logically. I’ve long championed the need for an anti-hypocrisy test, such as “actions speak louder than words”. I’ve examined - and re-examined - the vegan argument over the decades, including talking extensively with vegan friends. Yet I remain unconvinced that there’s any need to go beyond being a strict vegetarian. Over the past 20 years or so, I’ve observed a militant tendency amongst many vegan campaigners - who often view vegetarians as limited, stupid, or even traitors to the cause. So, I have to address the question “Should vegetarians become vegans?”

A vegan is someone who - in addition to cutting out meat, poultry, fish, and the by-products of slaughter - will not eat eggs or any dairy products whatsoever. Furthermore, vegans will not eat honey or wear wool. Concerns raised by the vegan argument are no different to those considered by any experienced strict vegetarian, albeit with alternative outcomes. First, as times have changed with improved laws, the cruel battery cage hens setup is a thing of the past in the UK - but there was always the option of free-range eggs. But let’s get to the real issue of dairy production which obviously involves cows first giving birth to calves. The babies are separated from their mothers prematurely and this undeniably causes some mild short-term distress. But this isn’t remotely the same as cruelty. Birds are purposely scared away from airports to prevent aircraft from crashing - and human children often cry when separated from their mothers, often appearing to be extremely traumatised, such as on their first day at school. Away from the vegan argument, we recognise there’s an obvious difference between temporary mild distress and cruelty. However, the “problem” of male calves remains, as most will be “surplus to requirement” and they end up as part of the meat industry. Similarly, in egg production, most male chicks are once again “surplus to requirement” and so killed.

A number of genuine uses exist for the “surplus to requirement” meat, excluding the human food market. I’ve criticised zoos in the past, whilst also acknowledging that they could further improve and have a genuine educational role to play. Some zoo animals, such as tigers, are carnivores; they eat meat. Animal sanctuaries care for sick and injured creatures. Owls, for example, have to be fed (dead) day-old chicks or small rodents. Finally, many people choose to keep domesticated dogs and cats as pets - both being carnivores. Whereas a vegetarian shouldn’t rampantly consume excessive amounts of eggs and dairy produce, the “surplus” issue has nevertheless viable alternative uses which cancel out any valid concerns. Vegans do not have the monopoly of the ethical high ground.

For the past 50 years at least, vegans have claimed that all or most dairy cows suffer great misery from mastitis (inflammation of the udder). Here are the actual facts. The bacteria responsible for asymptomatic or sub-clinical mastitis can be found in between 15-20% of dairy cows. Sub-clinical mastitis is, however, very different from clinical mastitis; a cow which has bacteria producing the sub-clinical condition may never actually become ill. And the incidences of clinical mastitis have been significantly reduced since the 1960s - so what vegans say is outdated by decades, as well as misleading to the point of being plain wrong. Furthermore, most cases of clinical mastitis are considered to be mild. The on-farm reality is extremely different to the bizarre and unfair claims of campaigning vegans. In addition to a wealth of reliable research literature, I have personally

checked the record books of several dairy farmers, in the UK and South Africa (where standards are less regulated). All were totally willing to share their data. Vegans persist in still trotting out the same stale propaganda, regardless of the facts, which is unfortunate.

Being vegan is an option, of course, but it's certainly no better than being a strict vegetarian - although disagreements and differing interpretations will no doubt continue as long as thinking skills vary. However, there are a few genuine "grey areas" which are hardly ever talked or written about. There is still a limited amount of killing involved in the production of vegan/vegetarian food. Snails and slugs, for example, have to be controlled when growing crops like lettuce. Almost all of us buy food from supermarkets. Is there "guilt by association" because meat, poultry, and fish are sold alongside the carrots and pasta that we buy? I would say not; others have to take their share of responsibility within an overall system that needs to be changed.

Vegetarianism is definitely food for thought. We consider it to be an indicator of intention. It's a start. But it's "only" dealing with diet and animal cruelty. There's so much more to question, think about, and change. The current human psychology is stuck; it's dysfunctional, problematic, and semi-primitive. Psychological avoidance needs a huge spotlight shining on it to expose the stupid contradictions and gaps. Future human beings will not eat meat. Likewise, advanced extraterrestrial intelligences elsewhere in the universe will not eat meat. They won't, simply because it's unkind and unnecessary - a single negative effect of the "me, me, me" or "me, first" mentality.

Iain Scott, December 2020

<https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org>

Essays in this second short series:

Mental health: What's gone wrong?

A deeper approach to self-image

Love matters: How to build a better relationship

Psychology and the environment

Food for thought: a no-nonsense guide to being a vegetarian

Why do we work non-paid? The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of charities

Formal education: a re-think