

*A Vegetarian Philosophy**

PETER SINGER

Issues regarding eating meat were highlighted in 1997 by the longest trial in British legal history. McDonald's Corporation and McDonald's Restaurants Limited v. Steel and Morris, better known as the "McLibel" trial, ran for 515 days and heard 180 witnesses. In suing Helen Steel and David Morris, two activists involved with the London Greenpeace organization, McDonald's put on trial the way in which its fast-food products are produced, packaged, advertised, and sold, as well as their nutritional value, the environmental impact of producing them, and the treatment of the animals whose flesh and eggs are made into that food. [...]

The case provided a remarkable opportunity for weighing up evidence for and against modern agribusiness methods. The leaflet "What's Wrong with McDonald's" that provoked the defamation suit had a row of McDonald's arches along the top of each page. Two of these arches bore the words "McMurder" and "McTorture." One section below was headed "In what way are McDonald's responsible for torture and murder?" The leaflet answered the question as follows:

The menu at McDonald's is based on meat. They sell millions of burgers every day in 55 countries throughout the world. This means the constant slaughter, day by day, of animals born and bred solely to be turned into McDonalds products. Some of them-especially chickens and pigs-spend their lives in the entirely artificial conditions of huge factory farms, with no access to air or sunshine and no freedom of movement. Their deaths are bloody and barbaric.

McDonald's claimed that the leaflet meant that the company was responsible for the inhumane torture and murder of cattle, chicken, and pigs, and that this was defamatory. In considering this claim, Mr. Justice Bell based his judgment on what he took to be attitudes that were generally accepted in Britain. Thus for the epithet "McTorture" to be justified he held, it would not be enough for Steel and Morris to show that animals were under stress or suffered some pain or discomfort:

Merely containing, handling and transporting an animal may cause it stress; and taking it to slaughter certainly may do so. But I do not believe that the ordinary reasonable person believes any of these things to be cruel, provided that the necessary stress, or discomfort or even pain is kept to a reasonably acceptable level. That ordinary person may know little about the detail of farming and slaughtering methods but he must have had a certain amount of stress, discomfort or even pain acceptable and not to be criticised as cruel.

By the end of the trial, however, Mr. Justice Bell found that the stress discomfort, and pain inflicted on some animals amounted to more than this acceptable level, and hence did constitute a "cruel practice" for which McDonald's was "culpably responsible." Chickens, laying hens and sows, he said, kept in individual stalls suffered from "severe restriction of movement" which "is cruel." He also found a number of other cruel practices in the production of chickens, including the restricted diet fed to breeding birds, which leaves them permanently hungry; the injuries inflicted on chickens by catchers stuffing 600 birds an hour into crates to take them to slaughter; and the failure of the stunning apparatus to ensure that all birds are stunned before they have their throats cut. Judging by entirely conventional moral standards, Mr. Justice Bell held these practices to be cruel, and McDonald's to be culpably responsible for them.

It was not libelous to describe McDonald's as "McTorture," because the charge was substantially true. What follows from this judgment about the morality of buying and eating intensively raised chickens, pig products that come from the offspring of sows kept in stalls, or eggs laid

* SIAN GRIFFITHS & JENNIFER WALLACE (eds.), *Consuming Passions*. Manchester, 1998, pp. 66-72.

by hens kept in battery cages? Surely that, too, must be wrong?

This claim has been challenged. At a conference dinner some years ago I found myself sitting opposite a Buddhist philosopher from Thailand. As we helped ourselves to the lavish buffet, I avoided the various forms of meat being offered, but the Thai philosopher did not. When I asked him how he reconciled the dinner he had chosen with the first precept of Buddhism, which tells us to avoid harming sentient beings, he told me that in the Buddhist tradition it is wrong to eat meat only if you have reason to believe that the animal was killed specially for you. The meat he had taken, however, was not from animals killed specially for him; the animals would have died anyway, even if he were a strict vegetarian or had not been in that city at all. Hence, by eating it, he was not harming any animals.

I was unable to convince my dinner companion that this defense of meat eating was better suited to a time when a peasant family might kill an animal especially to have something to put in the begging bowl of a wandering monk than it is to our own era. The flaw in the defense is the disregard of the link between the meat I eat today and the future killing of animals. Granted, the chicken lying in the supermarket freezer today would have died even if I had never existed; but the fact that I take the chicken from the freezer, and ignore the tofu on a nearby shelf, has something to do with the number of chickens, or blocks of tofu, the supermarket will order next week and thus contributes, in a small way, to the future growth or decline of the chicken and tofu industries. That is what the laws of supply and demand are all about.

Some defenders of a variant of the ancient Buddhist line may still want to argue that one chicken fewer sold makes no perceptible difference to the chicken producers, and therefore there can be nothing wrong with buying chicken. The division of moral responsibility in a situation of this kind does raise some interesting issues, but it is a fallacy to argue that a person can do wrong only by making a perceptible harm. The Oxford philosopher Jonathan Glover has explored the implications of this refusal to accept the divisibility of responsibility in an entertaining article called "It makes no difference whether or not I do it" [Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1975].

Glover imagines that in a village, 100 people are about to eat lunch. Each has a bowl containing 100 beans. Suddenly, 100 hungry bandits swoop down on the village. Each bandit takes the contents of the bowl of one villager, eats it, and gallops off. Next week, the bandits plan to do it again, but one of their number is afflicted by doubts about whether it is right to steal from the poor. These doubts are set to rest by another of their number who proposes that each bandit, instead of eating the entire contents of the bowl of one villager, should take one bean from every villager's bowl. Since the loss of one bean cannot make a perceptible difference to any villager, no bandit will have harmed anyone. The bandits follow this plan, each taking a solitary bean from 100 bowls. The villagers are just as hungry as they were the previous week, but the bandits can all sleep well on their full stomachs, knowing that none of them has harmed anyone.

Glover's example shows the absurdity of denying that we are each responsible for a share of the harms we collectively cause, even if each of us makes no perceptible difference. McDonald's has a far bigger impact on the practices of the chicken, egg, and pig industries than any individual consumer; but McDonald's itself would be powerless if no one ate at its restaurants. Collectively, all consumers of animal products are responsible for the existence of the cruel practices involved in producing them. In the absence of special circumstances, a portion of this responsibility must be attributed to each purchaser.

Without in any way departing from a conventional moral attitude toward animals, then, we have reached the conclusion that eating intensively produced chicken, battery eggs, and some pig products is wrong. This is, of course, well short of an argument for vegetarianism. Mr. Justice Bell found "cruel practices" only in these areas of McDonald's food production. But he

did not find that McDonald's beef is "cruelty-free." He did not consider that question, because he drew a distinction between McDonald's responsibility for practices in the beef and dairy industries and those in the chicken, egg, and pig industries. McDonald's chickens, eggs, and pig products are supplied by a relatively small number of very large producers, over whose practices the corporation could quite easily have a major influence. On the other hand, McDonald's beef and dairy requirements came from a very large number of producers; and in respect of whose methods, Mr. Justice Bell held, "there was no evidence from which I could infer that [McDonald's] would have any effective influence, should it try to exert it." Whatever one may think of that view—it seems highly implausible to me—the judge, in accepting it, decided not to address the evidence presented to him of cruelty in the raising of cattle, so that no conclusions either way can be drawn.

This does not mean that the trial itself had nothing to say about animal suffering in general. McDonald's called as a witness Mr. David Walker, chief executive of one of McDonald's major United Kingdom suppliers, McKey Food Services Ltd. In cross-examination, Helen Steel asked Walker whether it was true that, "as the result of the meat industry, the suffering of animals is inevitable." Walker replied: "The answer to that must be 'yes.'"

Walker's admission raises a serious question about the ethics of the meat industry: how much suffering are we justified in inflicting on animals in order to turn them into meat, or to use their eggs or milk?

The case for vegetarianism is at its strongest when we see it as a moral protest against our use of animals as mere things, to be exploited for our convenience in whatever way makes them most cheaply available to us. Only the tiniest fraction of the tens of billions of farm animals slaughtered for food each year—the figure for the United States alone is nine billion—were treated during their lives in ways that respected their interests. Questions about the wrongness of killing in itself are not relevant to the moral issue of eating meat or eggs from factory-farmed animals, as most people in developed countries do. Even when animals are roaming freely over large areas, as sheep and cattle do in Australia, operations like hot-iron branding, castration, and dehorning are carried out without any regard for the animals' capacity to suffer. The same is true of handling and transport prior to slaughter. In the light of these facts, the issue to focus on is not whether there are some circumstances in which it could be right to eat meat, but on what we can do to avoid contributing to this immense amount of animal suffering.

The answer is to boycott all meat and eggs produced by large-scale commercial methods of animal production, and encourage others to do the same. Consideration for the interests of animals alone is enough justification for this response, but the case is further strengthened by the environmental problems that the meat industry causes. Although Mr. Justice Bell found that the allegations directed at McDonald's regarding its contribution to the destruction of rain forests were not true, the meat industry as a whole can take little comfort from that, because Bell accepted evidence that cattle-ranching, particularly in Brazil, had contributed to the clearing of vast areas of rain forest. The problem for David Morris and Helen Steel was that they did not convince the judge that the meat used by McDonald's came from these regions. So the meat industry as a whole remains culpable for the loss of rain forest and for all the consequences of that, from global warming to the deaths of indigenous people fighting to defend their way of life.

Environmentalists are increasingly recognizing that the choice of what we eat is an environmental issue. Animals raised in sheds or on feedlots eat grains or soybeans, and they use most of the food value of these products simply in order to maintain basic functions and develop unpalatable parts of the body like bones and skin. To convert eight or nine kilos of grain protein into a single kilo of animal protein wastes land, energy, and water. On a crowded planet with a growing human population, that is a luxury that we are becoming increasingly unable to afford.

Intensive animal production is a heavy user of fossil fuels and a major source of pollution of both air and water. It releases large quantities of methane and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. We are risking unpredictable changes to the climate of our planet—which means, ultimately, the lives of billions of people, not to mention the extinction of untold thousands of species of plants and animals unable to cope with changing conditions—for the sake of more hamburgers. A diet heavy in animal products, catered to by intensive animal production, is a disaster for animals, the environment, and the health of those who eat it.

A Recipe

This recipe is vegan, very simple, nutritious, and tasty. It's also eaten by hundreds of millions of people every day.

DAL

- 2 tablespoons oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 cup dry red lentils
- 3 cups water
- bay leaf
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 teaspoon medium curry powder or to taste
- 1 14-ounce can of chopped tomatoes or equivalent chopped fresh tomatoes
- 2 ounces creamed coconut or half cup coconut milk (optional)
- Juice of lemon (optional)
- Salt to taste

In a deep frying pan, heat the oil and fry the onion and garlic until translucent. Add the lentils and fry them for a minute or two, then add the water, bay leaf, cinnamon stick, and curry powder. Stir, bring to a boil, then let simmer for twenty minutes, adding a little more water from time to time if it gets dry. Add the tomatoes and simmer another ten minutes. By now the lentils should be very soft. Add the creamed coconut or coconut milk and lemon juice, if using, and salt to taste. Remove cinnamon stick and bay leaf before serving.

The final product should flow freely—add more water if it is too thick. It is usually served over rice, with some lime pickle and mango chutney. Sliced banana is another good accompaniment, and so too are pappadams.