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Philosophy 220

29 April 2016

Vegetarianism

The topic of whether one should eat meat or not has been hotly debated for years, bringing into call whether or not it is sustainable to be a vegetarian, and whether humans have the right to eat another animal or not. Yet, the more important argument lies in whether eating meat is ethical or not. Instead of the decision of becoming a vegetarian being about health issues, it lies more in a persons moral standing on the issue. Instead of asking oneself, “Is eating meat healthy?” they should instead ask, “Do animals deserve the treatment they get, just to serve human greed?” Then again, humans have been hunting and killing other animals since the dawn of time, and it is “natural”. Humans are supposed to have a diet that includes meat. Therefore, I am currently struggling with this very choice: do I become a vegetarian, or not?

Living in this day and age, it is very easy to eat meat. It is everywhere, from home cooked meals to fast food. It is extremely easy for the average person to go with the flow and continue eating meat without a second thought. Very few begin to think, “Hey, maybe this is not right. Maybe I should change what I am doing”. Part of the reasoning behind this is that many people live within their own frames of reference, as Jack Mezirow would say. A professor of Adult and Continuing Education at Teachers College Columbia, and a sociologist, Mezirow explains in his article “Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice” that frames of reference are, “. . . the structures of assumptions

through which we understand our experiences . . .” (Mezirow 268). In his article, Mezirow goes on to show that some frames of reference are very deeply rooted, and one must put in time and effort to be able to grow to see beyond the point of view they have essentially grown up and lived with. In this case, the “structures” that people deal with are the norms of eating meat and never thinking twice about it. Until my philosophy class, I was one of those people that never thought twice about it. Then, my eyes were opened to the cruelty that animals endure while being held captive before they are slaughtered purely for human consumption. It has taken a lot of in-depth thought for me to even broach the idea of becoming a vegetarian, partly because of fear. Fear that the transition will be difficult, fear that I will not fit in with my community and my family anymore, who are voracious meat lovers. This fear is a sort of “offhand self-justification” that Anthony Weston talks about in his book, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox*. The philosopher summarizes that, “It’s a kind of ethical laziness, an automatic excuse-making or defensiveness, or what we sometimes call “rationalizing”” (Weston 29). Instead of me getting the courage to make a definitive choice, I have rationalized with fear that becoming a vegetarian would be too hard, though I have seen the evidence that morally, it is an incredibly rewarding choice to make. Many people do the same as well. By self-justifying and rationalizing their decisions, they never move out of their frames of reference.

It was not until I read and understood the word “speciesism” that I began to think enough to overcome my own frames of reference. British philosopher Colin McGinn uses the word to clearly define the way that some humans treat animals: “In essence, we are refusing to take their welfare seriously simply because they belong to a different

biological species from us—*and this difference does not warrant that refusal*” (Weston 267). McGinn uses two examples to hammer the point home that, as humans, we do not treat other humans as poorly as we treat animals. We do not hunt other humans for blood sport, we do not torture other humans for scientific benefit, and we do not use other humans as a food source. So the question is, why do humans do it to animals? According to Nenah Sylver, a writer and educator, “My metabolism requires meat” (Sylver 1). She goes on to say that it is a natural process for humans to eat meat, explaining that humans and their ancestors everywhere have had meat inclusive diets:

One look at the indigenous diet of the North American Inuit (Eskimo)— a diet that largely consists of cholesterol-free, omega fatty acid-rich fish such as salmon . . . Furthermore, anthropologists who chronicle the eating habits of other aboriginal peoples report that even those on a "vegetarian" diet will frequently ingest slugs and small animals such as lizards, birds and rodents for variety and nutrition” (Sylver 1).

Even though people have eaten meat for centuries, that does not mean they need to continue to do so. There are many other options that can satisfy the humans dietary needs. Reasoning like that can be seen as a type of self-justification, and McGinn contradicts it, firmly restating his moral standing:

A life lost for a pleasant taste gained? . . . We would never accept these calculations if humans constituted the means, so why should we suddenly change our standards when we move outside the human species? Only, it

seems, because of the prejudice that declares our species sacred and other species just so much exploitable stuff” (Weston 269).

McGinn is not wrong when he states that people would not make the same decisions if it was another humans life at stake. The question he poses, “*Why should our standards change when we move outside the human species?*” is excellent, and truly makes one think. There are no reasons that standard should change, especially when there is truly no need to senselessly slaughter animals for food. According to the Mayo Clinic, “. . . a vegetarian diet can meet the needs of people of all ages, including children, teenagers, and pregnant or breast-feeding women” (Mayo 1). Even though the human species may have been eating meat for thousands of years, it is not necessarily needed if a pregnant woman can sustain herself on a vegetarian diet. This goes to show that a vegetarian lifestyle will not only sustain a mother carrying her child, it will help save countless animals from a life of torture, and eventually, a meaningless death.

A perspective that can be see as more relatable comes from Mike Rose, a research professor at University of California, Los Angeles. He deals with many students through his profession, and one thing he sees time and time again, are students failing for various reasons. One particular girl he worked with, Lucia, was struggling with her abnormal psychology class. Part of the reason she was not doing well was because she had a difficult time reading Thomas Szasz’s book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*. The reasons she struggled with the reading is not because she was not intelligent; no, Rose explains why Szasz’s work was so difficult for her to understand:

And as Lucia read and talked, it became clear to me that while she could . . . pick her way through Szasz's sophisticated prose, certain elements of his argument, particular assumptions and allusions, were foreign to her—or, more precisely, a frame of mind or tradition or set of assumptions that was represented by a single word, phrase, or allusion was either unknown to her, or clashed dramatically with frames of mind and tradition of her own" (Rose 34).

Like Lucia, many people have traditions they have followed their entire lives, and frames of mind, or perhaps frames of reference as Mezirow would refer to them as, that prevent them from seeing any other way. Because Lucia did not agree with what Szasz had to say, she did not understand it. That is how many people are when it comes to abstaining from eating meat. They do not agree with it, and therefore they do not understand it, and make no attempt to understand it. Rose and Mezirow would both agree that people in these situations are comfortable in their frames of reference, and do not want to attempt to grow and reach outside of them. There is another student that Rose writes about, and James's problem is not an uncommon one. James believed that he deserved a grade that was higher than a C-, so he saw nothing else. As Rose states, "There it was. A brand . . . I work hard, he's really saying to me. I go to class. I read the book. I write the paper. Can't you see. I'm not a C-. Don't tell me I'm a C-" (Rose 37). Though James may have saw the issue and understood why he got a C-, he excused it away and instead refused to acknowledge the problem. The same could be said with Sylver, and others like her. They see the issue at hand when it comes to eating meat,

such as the inhumane treatment that animals endure, and they excuse it away. Weston would chime in and say that both James and Sylver give perfect examples of offhand self-justification.

Whether somebody is dealing with a frame of reference they have yet to overcome, or they are justifying their own reasons for eating meat, ultimately, it is each person's individual choice. After McGinn introduced me to speciesism and what it meant, I began my journey of self-growth to travel outside of my comfort zone and my frames of reference. That journey brought me to the decision, do I become a vegetarian or not? No longer was it merely about eating meat and the health implications behind it. For me, it became very personal, and had me questioning whether or not I could allow myself to eat meat when it means that animals are suffering in the process. In a sense, I am trying to find my own way and make my own ethical decisions. According to Weston, that is finding a sense of self-possession, or having “. . . the capacity to choose for yourself who you will be and what you will do” (Weston 423). By saying this, Weston is showing that self-possession is the epitome of freedom of choice, be it the choice to eat meat, or the choice to abstain. What may be more important is something else Weston refers to just a few sentences later: response-ability. It sounds like responsibility, and it is very similar. In fact, it is:

. . . the capacity to choose one's responses, or, more specifically, the capacity to observe one's own habits of responsiveness and then to rethink them and change them as necessary” (Weston 423).

This is so important and so applicable because having response-ability forces people to look at their habits and how they respond to the choices that they make, and, as Weston said, to make changes as necessary. When it comes to eating meat, if more people looked at their habits and their responses, they may see that a change needs to be made. Mezirow would not disagree with Weston on this point; instead, he would agree and say that transformative growth is needed here as well to make any necessary changes. After coming into my own response-ability and, my own self-possession, and going through a few months of transformative growth, I have decided that I want to slowly make the transition to becoming a vegetarian. I must continuously change my frames of reference and continuously grow and expand my knowledge and viewpoints, but I know the ethical option for me here is to change my lifestyle. Starting with myself, I want to eradicate speciesism, and the first step for myself is to stop eating meat. As Ghandi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world" (Weston 466). I plan to be that change, slowly but surely.

Works Cited

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