

Notes from the U3A Philosophy Group Thursday 16th January 2014

Subject: - How far has philosophy gone towards addressing the ethical issues of vegetarianism?

Members' experiences

Members of the group had different experiences regarding vegetarianism, with most members having grown up as meat eaters. One member of the group had grown up as a vegetarian, in a culture where that was the norm. Several of the group had become vegetarian at some time in their lives, particularly when a teenage daughter had brought influence on the family. Some remained vegetarian and some now ate fish and/or chicken.

Philosophical points

The subject has two sides, the purely moral side about the injustice of eating meat and the emotional side about personal feelings

Megan Kensa points out that humans are animals and uses the phrase 'non-human animals' in an article on this subject

Richard Ryder describes "Speciesism" as "a prejudice just as irrational as sexism or racism"

Richard Dawkins compared the justifications used by meat eaters to that of those used in the justification of slavery

Richard Dawkins also said that people eat meat is because they see their idols, and genuinely moral people, eating non-human animal flesh

Roger Scruton said "pets are granted honorary status of the human community"

Andrew Linzey notes that the word often translated "dominion" in the Jewish and Christian religious texts means not despotism, but moral responsibility and stewardship

The first precept of Buddhism is to avoid harming sentient beings. Some interpret this as only being wrong to eat meat killed specially for you. Peter Singer argues that this is a fallacy.

Comments about eating meat and its connection to killing

Many believe that animals were created for humans to eat

Before agriculture eating meat was necessary for survival. Evolution changed the way we eat

The situation is different now that we breed the animals. They would be extinct if we did not.

Jungle animals kill other animals for food in a more harmful and hurtful way than humans do

If you kill animals, where do you stop?

Most people in India were vegetarians, but now some eat meat, including beef

Jains are true vegetarians and do their best to avoid even unintentional hurt to all living things

If we were to feed the world's starving, would we choose meat or vegetables?

Comments on animal treatment

We can make choices. If we eat meat, we can be responsible and eat meat from humane sources

Animals are treated as a lower form of life than humans

If we knew how animals are killed we wouldn't want to eat meat

If you want to eat meat, you should be prepared to kill the animal yourself

Most would kill for themselves, or a child, to survive

Any form of killing is cruel

Some say that the noises made by an animal at slaughter are reflex and not to do with pain

Fish are also flesh and have feelings. Even birds communicate

It has been scientifically proved that animals have consciousness

It is not clear whether animals have souls

A soul's journey should not be stopped prematurely

General points

There was discussion as to whether females are more sensitive and therefore more likely to be vegetarian. Others thought that it might be more to do with the female role in feeding the family. Some time was given to the potential health issues of changing to a vegetarian diet and the need to study nutrition.

Cannibalism, vivisection, pets, mad cow disease and fox hunting were also discussed.

Conclusion

Whilst no one changed their views as a result of the discussion, most found it interesting to discuss the subject from a different point of view. We had considered whether eating meat is a part of being human, how far we should consider the welfare of animals, whether animals are sentient beings and whether killing animals for food desensitises us towards killing in general. We had looked at our stewardship of the world's resources from a different angle.

Quotes attributed to philosophers on this subject

The first prominent modern vegetarian was the 6th Century BC Greek philosopher Pythagoras. The Pythagorean diet came to mean an avoidance of the flesh of slaughtered animals.

As long as man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower living beings he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seed of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love. – attributed to Pythagoras by Ovid

Animals share with us the privilege of having a soul. - attributed to Pythagoras by Ovid

In *The Republic*, Plato's character Socrates asserted that the ideal city was a vegetarian city on the grounds that meat was a luxury leading to decadence and war.

Plato's student Aristotle (384-322 BCE) felt the universe was for human use and that only human souls were immortal. Additionally, he argued in favour of a hierarchy of beings in which plants occupied the lowest rung of the ladder and humans the highest. In this hierarchy, Aristotle argued that women were lesser compared to men and some humans were natural slaves. As for animals Aristotle reasoned that there was no ethical obligation to animals because they were irrational.

Zeno (c. 335-c. 263 BCE), founder of the Stoics, declared animals undeserving of justice due to their inability to reason, but, unlike Aristotle, he sustained himself on a diet of bread, honey, and water. Zeno demonstrated that people have embraced a vegetarian diet for many reasons and while they may not be out of concern for animals, the vegetarian diet itself was seen as providing a wholesome way of life.

Theophrastus (c. 372-c. 287 BCE) argued that killing animals for food was wasteful and morally wrong.

Plutarch (46-c. 120 CE) adopted a vegetarian diet and wrote several essays in favour of vegetarianism as well as arguing that animals were rational and deserving of consideration. In particular, his essay *On the Eating of Flesh* is noteworthy for some arguments familiar to today's vegetarians, such as the inefficiency of the human digestive system to handle flesh or the fact that humans lack the claws and fangs necessary for to the satisfaction of a carnivorous appetite.

Plotinus (205-270 CE) He taught that all animals feel pain and pleasure, not just humans. Plotinus believed in order for humans to unite with the Supreme Reality, humans had to treat all animals with compassion. Seeking to practice what he preached, Plotinus avoided medicine made from animals. He allowed for the wearing of wool and the use of animals for farm labor, but he mandated humane treatment.

Mani (born 216 CE) formed the Manichaeans. There were two kinds of Manichaeans, the Elect Saints and the Hearers. The Elect were committed to a missionary life of poverty and celibacy. They were strict vegetarians, drank no wine, and were forbidden even to harvest or prepare food, because Mani had a revelation that it is a kind of murder to damage plants by harvesting. The sect survived because the Hearers incurred the sin of preparing food, and were released from sin by the prayers of the Elect who ate it.

It is far better to be happy than to have our bodies act as graveyards to animals. - Clement of Alexandria

Leonardo da Vinci's love of animals has been documented both in contemporary accounts as recorded in early biographies, and in his notebooks. Remarkably for the period, he even questioned the morality of eating animals when it was not necessary for health.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote four essays on the subject of vegetarianism, "A Vindication of Natural Diet" (1813), the note in Queen Mab, in a section of "A Refutation of Deism" (1814), and "On the Vegetable System of Diet", which was published posthumously in 1929

Leo Tolstoy "Flesh-eating, he found to be, "simply immoral, as it involves the performance of an act which is contrary to moral feeling – killing".