

# **The New York Times<sup>1</sup>**

**November 22, 2009**

## ***Animal, Vegetable, Miserable***

**By GARY STEINER**

LATELY more people have begun to express an interest in where the meat they eat comes from and how it was raised. Were the animals humanely treated? Did they have a good quality of life before the death that turned them into someone's dinner?

Some of these questions, which reach a fever pitch in the days leading up to Thanksgiving, pertain to the ways in which animals are treated. (Did your turkey get to live outdoors?) Others focus on the question of how eating the animals in question will affect the consumer's health and well-being. (Was it given hormones and antibiotics?)

None of these questions, however, make any consideration of whether it is wrong to kill animals for human consumption. And even when people ask this question, they almost always find a variety of resourceful answers that purport to justify the killing and consumption of animals in the name of human welfare. Strict ethical vegans, of which I am one, are customarily excoriated for equating our society's treatment of animals with mass murder. Can anyone seriously consider animal suffering even remotely comparable to human suffering? Those who answer with a resounding no typically argue in one of two ways.

Some suggest that human beings but not animals are made in God's image and hence stand in much closer proximity to the divine than any non-human animal; according to this line of thought, animals were made expressly for the sake of humans and may be used without scruple to satisfy their needs and desires. There is ample support in the Bible and in the writings of Christian thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas for this pointedly anthropocentric way of devaluing animals.

Others argue that the human capacity for abstract thought makes us capable of suffering that both qualitatively and quantitatively exceeds the suffering of any non-human animal. Philosophers like Jeremy Bentham, who is famous for having based moral status not on linguistic or rational capacities but rather on the capacity to suffer, argue that because animals are incapable of abstract thought, they are imprisoned in an eternal present, have no sense of the extended future and hence cannot be said to have an interest in continued existence.

The most penetrating and iconoclastic response to this sort of reasoning came from the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer in his story "The Letter Writer," in which he called the slaughter of animals the "eternal Treblinka."

The story depicts an encounter between a man and a mouse. The man, Herman Gombiner, contemplates his place in the cosmic scheme of things and concludes that there is an essential connection between his own existence as "a child of God" and the "holy creature" scuffling about on the floor in front of him.

Surely, he reflects, the mouse has some capacity for thought; Gombiner even thinks that the mouse has the capacity to share love and gratitude with him. Not merely a means for the satisfaction of human desires, nor a mere nuisance to be exterminated, this tiny creature possesses the same dignity that any conscious being possesses. In the face of that inherent dignity, Gombiner concludes, the human practice of delivering animals to the table in the form of food is abhorrent and inexcusable.

Many of the people who denounce the ways in which we treat animals in the course of raising them for human consumption never stop to think about this profound contradiction. Instead, they make impassioned calls for more “humanely” raised meat. Many people soothe their consciences by purchasing only free-range fowl and eggs, blissfully ignorant that “free range” has very little if any practical significance. Chickens may be labeled free-range even if they’ve never been outside or seen a speck of daylight in their entire lives. And that Thanksgiving turkey? Even if it is raised “free range,” it still lives a life of pain and confinement that ends with the butcher’s knife.

How can intelligent people who purport to be deeply concerned with animal welfare and respectful of life turn a blind eye to such practices? And how can people continue to eat meat when they become aware that nearly 53 billion land animals are slaughtered every year for human consumption? The simple answer is that most people just don’t care about the lives or fortunes of animals. If they did care, they would learn as much as possible about the ways in which our society systematically abuses animals, and they would make what is at once a very simple and a very difficult choice: to forswear the consumption of animal products of all kinds.

The easy part of this consists in seeing clearly what ethics requires and then just plain doing it. The difficult part: You just haven’t lived until you’ve tried to function as a strict vegan in a meat-crazed society.

What were once the most straightforward activities become a constant ordeal. You might think that it’s as simple as just removing meat, eggs and dairy products from your diet, but it goes a lot deeper than that.

To be a really strict vegan is to strive to avoid all animal products, and this includes materials like leather, silk and wool, as well as a panoply of cosmetics and medications. The more you dig, the more you learn about products you would never stop to think might contain or involve animal products in their production — like wine and beer (isinglass, a kind of gelatin derived from fish bladders, is often used to “fine,” or purify, these beverages), refined sugar (bone char is sometimes used to bleach it) or Band-Aids (animal products in the adhesive). Just last week I was told that those little comfort strips on most razor blades contain animal fat.

To go down this road is to stare headlong into an abyss that, to paraphrase Nietzsche, will ultimately stare back at you.

The challenges faced by a vegan don’t end with the nuts and bolts of material existence. You face quite a few social difficulties as well, perhaps the chief one being how one should feel about spending time with people who are not vegans.

Is it O.K. to eat dinner with people who are eating meat? What do you say when a dining companion says, “I’m really a vegetarian — I don’t eat red meat at home.” (I’ve heard it lots of times, always without any prompting from me.) What do you do when someone starts to grill you (so to speak) about your vegan ethics during dinner? (Wise vegans always defer until food isn’t around.) Or when someone starts to lodge accusations to the effect that you consider yourself morally superior to others, or that it is ridiculous to worry so much about animals when there is so much human suffering in the world? (Smile politely and ask them to pass the seitan.)

Let me be candid: By and large, meat-eaters are a self-righteous bunch. The number of vegans I know personally is . . . five. And I have been a vegan for almost 15 years, having been a vegetarian for almost 15 before that.

*Five.* I have lost more friends than this over arguments about animal ethics. One lapidary conclusion to be drawn here is that people take deadly seriously the prerogative to use animals as sources of satisfaction. Not only for food, but as beasts of burden, as raw materials and as sources

of captive entertainment — which is the way animals are used in zoos, circuses and the like.

These uses of animals are so institutionalized, so normalized, in our society that it is difficult to find the critical distance needed to see them as the horrors that they are: so many forms of subjection, servitude and — in the case of killing animals for human consumption and other purposes — outright murder.

People who are ethical vegans believe that differences in intelligence between human and non-human animals have no moral significance whatsoever. The fact that my cat can't appreciate Schubert's late symphonies and can't perform syllogistic logic does not mean that I am entitled to use him as an organic toy, as if I were somehow not only morally superior to him but virtually entitled to treat him as a commodity with minuscule market value.

We have been trained by a history of thinking of which we are scarcely aware to view non-human animals as resources we are entitled to employ in whatever ways we see fit in order to satisfy our needs and desires. Yes, there are animal welfare laws. But these laws have been formulated by, and are enforced by, people who proceed from the proposition that animals are fundamentally inferior to human beings. At best, these laws make living conditions for animals marginally better than they would be otherwise — right up to the point when we send them to the slaughterhouse.

Think about that when you're picking out your free-range turkey, which has absolutely nothing to be thankful for on Thanksgiving. All it ever had was a short and miserable life, thanks to us intelligent, compassionate humans.

— Gary Steiner, a professor of philosophy at Bucknell University, is the author of “Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status and Kinship.”

# The New York Times<sup>2</sup>

November 24, 2009

## *The Ethical Choices in What We Eat*

### Letters

To the Editor:

Re “Animal, Vegetable, Miserable,” by Gary Steiner (Op-Ed, Nov. 22):

Mr. Steiner might feel less lonely as an ethical vegan — he says he has just five vegan friends — if he recognized that he has allies in mere vegetarians (like me), ethical omnivores and even carnivores. Some of us agree with his outlook, but just don’t have the fortitude to make every sacrifice he makes.

In fact, a whole lot of semi-vegans can do much more for animals than the tiny number of people who are willing to give up all animal products and scrupulously read labels. Farm animals also benefit from the humane farming movement, even if the animal welfare changes it effects are not all that we should hope and work for.

If the goal is not moral perfection for ourselves, but the maximum benefit for animals, half-measures ought to be encouraged and appreciated.

Go vegan, go vegetarian, go humane or just eat less meat. It’s all good advice from the point of view of doing better by animals.

Jean Kazez Dallas, Nov. 22, 2009

The writer teaches philosophy at Southern Methodist University and is the author of the forthcoming “Animalkind: What We Owe to Animals.”

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To the Editor:

Soon after I read Gary Steiner’s article, my wife asked me to kill a spider, which I did. This made me feel guilty. Spiders are living creatures, too; perhaps I should have gently caught it and carried it outdoors?

It is hard to imagine where a line can be drawn. We kill so many living creatures when we build a house, construct a road, drive down that road or just walk on a path. How far do we go in protecting them?

When we plant and harvest crops that vegans would find acceptable to eat, many animals are killed and their habitats are destroyed.

If we all decide to consider animals as precious as humans, the only logical place for us is back in the jungle. But even then if we were to survive we would have to kill some animals in self-defense.

Alexander Mauskop New York, Nov. 22, 2009

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To the Editor:

I am an ethical vegan. Gary Steiner perfectly articulates my feelings, and particularly my frustration, as so many around me obsess about the preparation of their turkeys.

When one “goes vegan,” what seems obvious to that person is ridiculed by a large part of society. Mr. Steiner illustrates the disconnect within our culture about eating animals and the righteousness with which people will defend that disconnect.

Alice Walker once said: “The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men.”

I hope that Mr. Steiner’s essay will result in people at least stopping for a moment, before carving the birds on their tables, and giving these ideas some serious critical thought.

Chris Taylor Lawrence, Kan., Nov. 22, 2009

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To the Editor:

Gary Steiner’s case for veganism founders on the facts. First, the human digestive system has evolved to accommodate an omnivorous diet, not a purely vegetable one.

Indeed, many paleoanthropologists maintain that the evolution of the large, energy-hungry human brains depended on a transition of our ancestors’ diets to include meat.

And vegans must tread a very narrow line to avoid all sorts of deficiency diseases, while omnivores have very broad latitude in diet, as a survey of world cuisines makes evident.

Second, our food animals have co-evolved with us. Cows, domestic sheep, chickens and many others would not survive if they were not raised for human consumption, protected from malnutrition, disease and predators.

Professor Steiner is entitled to his beliefs and his tofurkey; most of the rest of us will enjoy our turkey without guilt (but with vegetable stuffing).

Lawrence S. Lerner Woodside, Calif., Nov. 22, 2009

The writer is professor emeritus at the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at California State University, Long Beach.

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To the Editor:

Gary Steiner recognizes that many of us justify eating animals because we believe we are superior to them. Mr. Steiner rightly rejects this view as morally flawed.

Humans can acceptably consume animals precisely because we are not superior to them at all. Wolves eat sheep. Tuna eat mackerel. We are animals ourselves — and are no more (or less) than the animals we consume, or than the predators that would otherwise consume them.

If we are not justified in eating mackerel ourselves, are we not also morally obligated to stop the slaughter brought on by the tuna?

Such an obligation would make us the protectors of all species, and the destroyers of every ecosystem on earth.

L. David Peters New York, Nov. 22, 2009

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To the Editor:

As a vegetarian for 18 years, I have been confronted with the same questions that Gary Steiner faces from those challenging his dietary habits. I learned an effective response long ago that has benefited both my blood pressure and friendships.

I say with a big smile: “My vegetarianism is a personal choice that I usually don’t discuss in detail. I’m happy to eat with nonvegetarians.” And then I’m quiet.

That has pleasantly ended many potentially uncomfortable exchanges. Being vegetarian, as with being a member of a political party or a religious denomination, does not bestow license to convert others to one’s own way of thinking.

On my deathbed, I’ll be happy to have lived life as a vegetarian and also (I hope) comforted by many who were not alienated through heated discussions about my dietary choices.

Lisa Dinhofer Frederick, Md., Nov. 22, 2009

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To the Editor:

I will rise to the challenge Gary Steiner presents. He's right: I don't care deeply about the suffering of animals I eat, wear or otherwise benefit from. Suffering and injustice are inherent in life, and time is short.

Moreover, I find no way to shine a moral spotlight on one corner without letting shadows fall on another. I radically limit my conscious sphere of concern (just as Mr. Steiner must).

My moral boundaries may be rational or reflexive, expansive or selfish — who can judge?

I also recognize that alleviating suffering in one area may cause pain elsewhere. My mind and spirit are continually tested by outrages, from the countless dead innocents in current wars to the limited life prospects of my son's first-grade classmates with drug dealers for parents.

Were I also to internalize the pain experienced by animals, I'd simply shut down. Whose lot could that possibly help?

Sandy Asirvatham Baltimore, Md., Nov. 22, 2009

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To the Editor:

I was shocked to read that Gary Steiner thinks his cat can't appreciate Schubert's late symphonies. It's not the feline lack of musical discernment that I found disturbing (I don't "get" Schubert's symphonies either), but rather that Mr. Steiner owns a pet.

If he wishes to make no distinction between animal and human life and rights, how does he justify keeping an animal in what amounts to captivity?

And where does he draw the line between keeping a cow for milk and keeping a cat or dog for comfort or gratification?

Alice Desaulniers Irvington, N.Y., Nov. 23, 2009

## Notes

<sup>1</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/22/opinion/22steiner.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/opinion/124vegan.html>