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# Dogs Aren't Dinner: The Flaws in an Argument for Veganism

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With the shorter days of fall, I do some of my regular ranch chores in the dark. I stride calmly through inky blackness over ground where we've recently spotted packs of coyotes and a stealthy mountain lion. Claire de Lune, our silver and black mottled Great Dane, always accompanies me, a few paces ahead and slightly off to one side. This is my nightly reminder of how dogs earned the moniker *Man's Best Friend*.

The thought of eating Claire is more than foreign to me. It's mortifying. But lately, it seems as if every time I turn around, a vegan is insisting that feasting on a pork chop is morally equivalent to eating a hunk of dog meat. It's irrational, illogical, and hypocritical, they say, to treat pigs as meals but dogs as friends.

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In a live debate I did with vegan activist Howard Lyman (about which I blogged here), he made this argument to much applause from the vegan-dense audience. In another similar debate a few weeks ago, my opponent, artist and animal rights activist Sunny Taylor, made the same point. And in *Eating Animals*, (a book that includes sections about Bill and me), Jonathan Safran Foer dedicates several pages to a conceit evidently designed to bring the reader to an "aha!" moment wherein the folly of treating pigs and dogs so differently suddenly becomes clear.

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*decisions is about much more than whether something is edible or palatable.*

Despite being pummeled with this argument at every turn, I have not yet heard a compelling case. The dog-equals-pig argument has some serious flaws. First, individuals and cultures have always made countless decisions about what things are food and what are not. The basis for these decisions is about much more than whether something is edible or palatable. Until recent years, for instance, few modern Americans had eaten dandelions, nettles, or purslane, even though each of these plants (generally considered "weeds") are not only highly nutritious, they're quite tasty.

What each of us eats is the result of multiple factors, including income, geography, climate, culture, heritage, habit, and even, to a certain extent evolution (more on that in a moment), and there's simply nothing wrong with that. Evidently, these norms are the basis for the modern Western view that eating dogs is wrong. It's no more contradictory to eat a pig but not a dog than it is to eat arugula but not purslane. When it comes to eating, we all rule some things in and other things out.

Danish chef Rene Redzepi has made something of an art of bucking this universal system. Interviewed recently by NPR, he discussed why his restaurant and cookbook explore ingredients most of us wouldn't even consider food, such as burnt hay, wood chips, and bulrushes. "We have narrowed ourselves in always using the same [few] ingredients," he explained, adding, "We have a nature and product diversity that needs to be used."

More importantly, the pig-equals-dog claim ignores the glaringly obvious issue of relationships. The human relationship with dogs is unique. For as many as 30,000 years, dogs have literally been indispensible members of the human family. Quite naturally, many humans have qualms about eating a family member.

Most of us have traveled to countries where animals that are not generally eaten in the United States were found on local menus. In France, where I lived for a year, I saw people eating frogs, pigeons, snails, and horses. Some Italians eat donkeys; South Africans eat ostrich. In West Africa, another part of the world where I spent a year, I heard of people eating primates. And in some parts of the world, most notably China, many regard dog meat as not only palatable but delicious.

In *Unmentionable Cuisine*, Calwin Schwabe reported that dog meat was once also widely eaten and valued in Hawaii. He notes that as recently as a few decades ago, many Hawaiians raised both dogs and pigs as pets and for food and were baffled by why Western visitors found only the pig suitable for consumption.

But the Hawaiian perspective seems to be unique. More commonly, dogs are part of the household while pigs are designated to the fields. Pigs have benefitted humans while dogs were fundamental to their existence. That is to say, people could get by without pigs (by eating other meat, for example), but their success—and, in many cases, their very survival—depended on dogs.

The Inuit people are a striking example. Archaeologists have determined that the relationship between humans and dogs in the Arctic has existed for at least 1,000 years, notes a United Nations report. The Inuit dogs have aided in hunting, carrying, transportation, protection, navigation, and companionship. In a recent PBS documentary on dogs, an Inuit man says simply, "Without them we would never have survived; without them we wouldn't even be here."

*This intensely close relationship between human and dog understandably creates a taboo on eating dogs, much as there is a taboo on eating fellow humans.*

Dr. James Serpell, director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at University of Pennsylvania, extends this mutual dependence across the globe. "The dog became a symbiotic partner with us," he says. "It has become like another limb, an extension of ourselves." Another expert interviewed in the PBS program says, "I don't think people realize how much having dogs around has affected the evolution of human culture and civilization."

In her book *Animals in Translation*, animal behavior expert Temple Grandin goes a step further, arguing that dogs shaped not just our culture and history but our very physical evolution. "The Aborigines have a saying: 'Dogs

make us human.' Now we know that's probably literally true," she writes. "People wouldn't have become who we are today if we hadn't co-evolved with dogs." Grandin argues that, over tens of thousands of years, humans and dogs actually evolved in particular ways because of their close relationship. The human lost much of its olfactory and aural capabilities, according to Grandin, because these were dogs' greatest strengths. Humans came to rely on the canine nose and ears.

This intensely close relationship between human and dog understandably creates a taboo on eating dogs, much as there is a taboo on eating fellow humans. *Animals that Changed the World*, a book about animal domestication, stresses that dogs have held a privileged status within human culture for thousands of years. "Within the ranks of domesticated animals there is a small group that stands in a different and closer relationship to humanity than, say, the cow or the sheep," or, one could add, the pig. From very early on, the authors note, "the familiar animals are part of the household."

So the next time someone tells you it's no more defensible to eat a pig than to eat a dog, just say, "That's nonsense," and refer them to this blog.

*Update, November 5:*

Several comments criticize this piece for failing to explicitly address *sentience* (capacity for suffering). Apparently these readers missed that the irrelevance of pigs' sentience is the whole point. I would be the last person to deny a pig's many admirable qualities. My book, *Righteous Porkchop*, extensively describes pigs' natural behaviors and expressly compares their intelligence and capacity to suffer with that of dogs. Yet none of these traits are connected to why Americans refrain from eating dogs. The real reasons are explored in this piece. Consequently, arguing that if you won't eat a dog you shouldn't eat a pig because they are equally intelligent and sentient doesn't hold water. That is the material point.



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