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By Gary L Francione, Truthout / News Analysis

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Most people will recall the matter involving former Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick and his involvement in a dog-fighting operation on some property he owned in

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Virginia. The matter was covered by the media nonstop for weeks when it first came to light in 2007 and, again, when Vick came out of prison in 2009 and signed with the Philadelphia Eagles. Vick continues to be in the news and it is clear that people are still furious with him.

Why?

The answer is simple: Because Vick did a barbaric thing; he caused dogs to suffer and die for no good reason. Vick may have enjoyed the "sport" of dog fighting, but that was not justification for what he did.

Why not?

Again, the answer is simple. Although there is a great deal of disagreement about moral issues, *no one* disagrees with the notion that it's wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering on an animal. We need a good reason to inflict suffering on an animal. We might disagree about whether necessity exists in any given situation and what constitutes a good reason, but we would all agree that enjoyment or pleasure cannot constitute necessity or serve as a good reason. This is part of our conventional moral wisdom.

The problem is that eating animals is, as a matter of moral analysis, no different from dog fighting.

We kill and eat more than 56 billion animals a year worldwide, not counting fish. No one doubts that using animals for food results in terrible suffering. So, let's apply the analysis that we all agreed was uncontroversial just a moment ago: have we got a good reason for this suffering? Is there anything that is plausibly considered as necessity involved?

The short answer is no.

We don't need to eat animals. No one maintains that it's medically necessary to eat animal foods. The conservative American Dietetic Association acknowledges that "appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases." Mainstream medical people are, with increasing frequency, pointing out that animal products are detrimental to human health. But whether or not you agree with them, there is certainly no argument maintaining that animal foods are necessary for optimal health.

There is also consensus that animal agriculture is an ecological disaster. It takes many pounds of grain and many gallons of water to produce one pound of meat. It takes a great deal more land to produce animal-derived food for one person on a continuing basis than it does to produce food for a vegan. Animal agriculture is a major cause of global warming and is responsible for water pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, and all sorts of unhappy environmental consequences. And to anticipate the objection that non-animal foods are beyond the reach of those without economic means, a diet of fruits, vegetables, grains and beans is much less costly than a diet of animal products.

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So, in the end, what's the best justification that we have for the suffering that we impose on the animals we use as food?

The answer: they taste good. We enjoy the taste of animal flesh and animal products. We find eating animal foods to be convenient. There is nothing here that remotely resembles necessity.

How is that any different from Michael Vick? The answer: it isn't. Vick liked sitting around a pit watching animals fight. The rest of us like sitting around a barbecue pit roasting the corpses of animals who have been treated just as badly as Vick's dogs.

It doesn't work to claim that Vick participated directly in the dog fighting and we just buy animal products at the store. We enjoy the results of animal suffering, but, unlike Vick, we don't enjoy the actual process of slaughtering animals. As any first-year law student will tell you, if John has an aversion to violence but wants Joe dead and hires Sally to pull the trigger, John is still guilty of murder. The fact that we pay others to produce meat and other animal products does not get us off the moral or legal hook. Although there is a psychological difference between ordering a steak for dinner and deriving pleasure from watching dogs fight, once we realize that the torture and death of the animals we eat cannot be justified by anything other than pleasure or convenience, the psychological difference can have no moral significance.

But We're a "Humane" Society, Aren't We?

So, what's wrong? Why do we continue to participate in the infliction of suffering on billions of animals when we have no good reason to do so?

A good part of the answer is that because we want to continue consuming animal products, we delude ourselves into thinking that the solution to the moral problem does not require that we stop eating animal foods - it only requires that we raise and slaughter animals in a "humane" way.

This view goes back about 200 years to when British social reformers, such as philosopher and lawyer Jeremy Bentham, made the observation that our moral obligations to animals did not depend on whether they were rational, could speak, or had other "special" mental characteristics that we regard as exclusive to humans. Rather, the only thing that mattered was that animals could suffer and no one, with the possible exception of Descartes, doubted that animals were sentient, or perceptually aware and could, indeed, suffer. Bentham argued that because animals could suffer, we had an obligation to give moral weight to that suffering.

Bentham was no doubt aware that the animals we use for food suffer a great deal. He did not, however, advocate that we stop eating animals. According to Bentham, animals are not self-aware; they do not care if we use and kill them as long as they don't suffer in the process. So, we could continue to use animals as long we treat them reasonably well and kill them in a relatively painless way.

And thus was born the animal welfare movement, the central premise of which is that it is morally acceptable for us to use animals as long as we treat them "humanely" and do not impose "unnecessary" suffering on them. This moral sentiment soon found expression in

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anti-cruelty laws on both sides of the Atlantic and, eventually, much of the world. And most of us are stuck in this 19th-century paradigm: we accept the view that it is morally acceptable to use and kill animals because they do not care that we use and kill them. But we have a moral obligation to treat animals "humanely."

There are, however, at least two serious problems with this view.

"Happy" Meat and Padded Water Boards

The first problem is practical: the view that we can accord animals "humane" treatment is a fantasy. It *cannot* work.

Animals are property. They are *things*. And the whole point of being a thing is that you don't have an inherent or intrinsic value. Animals are economic commodities; they have a market value. Animal property is, of course, different from the other things that we own in that animals are sentient and have interests in not suffering pain or other deprivations and in satisfying those interests that are peculiar to their species. But it costs money to protect animal interests. As a general matter, we spend money to protect animal interests only when it is justified as an economic matter - only when we derive an economic benefit from doing so.

Anti-cruelty laws supposedly require "humane" treatment, but these laws generally either explicitly exempt what are considered as the "normal" or "customary" practices of industry, or, if the practices are not exempt, courts interpret pain and suffering imposed pursuant to industry practices as "necessary" and "humane." That is, the law defers to industry to set the standard of "humane" care. This deference is based on the assumption that those who produce animal products - from the breeders to the farmers to the slaughterhouse operators - will not impose more harm on animals than is required to produce the particular product just as the rational owner of a car would not take a hammer to his or her car and dent it for no reason.

Animal welfare standards have actually fallen dramatically in recent decades. We are using more animals today and we are treating them worse than at any time in history. The idyllic family farm - where, by the way, there was a great deal of pain and suffering - has vanished and been replaced by intensive agriculture - "factory farms" - where cows, pigs, chicken and fish are kept in crowded conditions, subjected to severe confinement and mutilation and generally lead miserable lives from the moment they are born until the moment that they die.

There is increasing consciousness about this horrible state of affairs, but the solution proposed by most animal advocates is to increase welfare standards. Peter Singer, author of "Animal Liberation" and regarded by many as the "father of the animal rights movement," agrees with Bentham that it is morally defensible to use animals if we provide reasonably pleasant lives and relatively painless deaths for them.

Popular writers such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Michael Pollan, Sarah Palin speech writer Matthew Scully and an endless parade of celebrities, rock stars and environmentalists have joined Singer in condemning factory farming and in calling for larger cages, "free-range" conditions and what are, in the grand scheme of things, minor modifications of a most horrific process. Large animal protection organizations promote various "happy" meat and animal products labels, which supposedly guarantee that the animals whose corpses or products have the particular label were treated better.

But no one is really kidding anyone here. The most "humanely" raised animals are treated

and killed in circumstances that would constitute torture were humans involved. The standards required to get "happy" certifications require what would be analogous to padding on water boards at Guantanamo Bay; there is precious little difference between conventional battery eggs and "cage-free" eggs, where thousands of birds are, in effect, crammed into one large cage.

The bottom line is clear in that, although we can delude ourselves with myths about "happy" or "humane" animal products, welfare standards will necessarily be very low because animals are property and because it costs money to protect animal interests.

Eating People With Amnesia

The second problem with the animal welfare position is theoretical; it rests on the notion, which we would all recognize immediately as completely crazy if we were not so invested in continuing to eat animals, that animals do not care about their lives; that they don't have an interest in continuing to live, but only have an interest in not suffering.

Why did Bentham think such a silly thing 200 years ago? Why does Singer - and why do many of us - think that now?

We believe that animals occupy an "eternal present," that they don't have memories of the past or thoughts about the future because they don't plan vacations or think about what movie to see this weekend.

Any of us who have ever lived with animals surely recognize that position as factually wrong. We live with four rescued dogs and the notion that they are not self-aware and have memories and future desires is as absurd as the notion that they don't have tails. All you need to do is watch them. There is simply no way to explain their behavior without attributing some sense of self-awareness to them.

But let's not get stuck in the morass of trying to determine the nature of animal minds. Since we are the only animals who use symbolic communication, we will probably never really understand what it is like to be a bat or a chicken or a cow or any other animal. Let's assume that animals are perceptually aware and can suffer but live in an "eternal present."

So what?

There are humans who have a form of amnesia in which they have a sense of self only in the present. They have no memories and they do not think about the future. Is such a condition morally relevant? It might be. We might not want to appoint such a person as a history professor. But would we say that such a person has no interest in continuing to live and that death is not a harm to that person?

Surely not.

So, why do we say that about animals? The short answer: because we want to eat animals and we don't want to eat humans with amnesia. We tell ourselves that death is not a harm and the trick is to do it all "humanely." But we can't do it "humanely" and, in any event, death is a harm that we should not impose - however "humane" our treatment and method of execution - if we don't have a good reason.

Pleasure is not a good reason. That is why we got upset with Vick. Convenience is not a good reason. That is why we are unhappy that Romney could not have been bothered to make arrangements for Seamus to be transported properly. And that is why it's time to get beyond all the "free-range" and "happy" animal products' propaganda and see that we simply cannot justify the use of animals for food. We should care for the domesticated animals

whom we have caused to come into existence, but we should stop breeding more for human consumption.

On one hand, that's a very radical conclusion. On the other hand, it isn't radical at all; it flows from moral ideas that we all already claim to accept. What is remarkable is that a species that prides itself on its rationality has allowed the desire to eat animals and animal foods to cloud our judgment to the point where we can criticize - and even hate - Vick, or regard Romney as some sort of unfeeling moral failure.

We entertain all sorts of crazy ideas in order to justify our daily consumption of animal products and the imposition of suffering and death on animals that this requires.

But the problem is that they are just that - crazy ideas.

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EMAIL THIS STORY TO A FRIEND

GARY L. FRANCIONE

Gary L. Francione is distinguished professor of law and Nicholas deB. Katzenbach scholar of law and philosophy, Rutgers University School of Law, Newark, New Jersey. He is the author of numerous books, including "Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation," "Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?" and "The Animal Rights Debate: Abolition or Regulation?" He is the co-editor of a series, "Critical Perspectives on Animals: Theory, Culture, Science and Law," published by Columbia University Press.



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Vendolen

Basically sums up what Francione's been saying for the past couple decades. Francione is the clearest thinker with regard to the animal issue. It's hard to be presented with a clearer moral problem than this. Listen and go vegan

14 hours ago 10 Likes

Like Reply



pbeach

Some claim below that if the world became vegan thee would be more animal deaths from collateal damage. This is wrong for two reasons, firstly because we currently feed 60% of the word's grain to animals. If we stopped producing animals we would need to grow less grain and soy, not more. Secondly, accidental deaths to

animals are vastly different than intentional deaths. We know there may be fatal road accidents when we drive, but that does not mean we are able to intentionally run someone over!

Go vegan, it's better for you, better for the planet, but most importantly it's the morally right thing to do.

10 hours ago 5 Likes

Like Reply



Bartłomiej Łapiński

And millions of chickens and cows and domesticated animals will die without care. And the carcasses shall decay and smell raise to the skies - for no man or woman will be allowed to eat meat.

6 hours ago in reply to pbeach 1 Like

Like Reply



Dudalud

Wow! Die without care he says!

As if they could be receiving any less care than they currently do!

Just stop making them.

3 hours ago in reply to Bartłomiej Łapiński 1 Like

Like



tommcm2737

"As long as there are slaughter houses, there will be battlefields." Tolstoy

Killing for the pleasure of the palate is wrong. Period. There is no valid reason for any animal to be killed in order to fill the dinner plate.

17 hours ago 7 Likes

Like Reply



Bartłomiej Łapiński

Please do tell that to African villagers who starve. Go to them and take the meat from their plates.

6 hours ago in reply to tommcm2737

Like Reply



Tom Bradschett

Which meat?

3 hours ago in reply to Bartłomiej Łapiński

Like



James Thomson

The basic axiom should be that no animal can own any aspect of another animal's life. Therefore, no animal has any right to harm another animal in any way. Non-human species are exempt from prosecution because they can't know they're doing

anything wrong. And veterinarians acting out of compassion are likewise exempt, because ending incurable, untenable suffering is acting well on the sufferer's behalf. Legal ownership of an animal places responsibilities on the owner, and does not give the owner the right to use the animal in any way other than in the best interests of the animal and its physical and psychological wellbeing. Everything concerned with the human-nonhuman relationship follows from the above.

3 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply



Matthew Levine

I think you have a couple of false premises here. For one thing, you seem to be saying that it would be impossible to make any significant improvement in the living conditions of animals raised for food. Obviously whatever animal welfare laws we have now are completely ineffective, and maybe you're correct that current humane certifications are basically meaningless, but there's no reason that it would be impossible to have farms that raise animals under ideal conditions up until the point that they are slaughtered. In fact, there already are some such farms, even if it's only a small minority - small farms run by people who actually care about the comfort and happiness of their animals, even though they are eventually going to kill them. And I don't think anyone would argue that a life of comfort that ends with being killed would be preferable to a life of constant torture that ends with being killed. The market on its own will never create such conditions because it is not profitable, but it might be possible to push for legislation that would actually be effective and/or to create consumer demand for more humane products. Since regardless of any arguments we make, it is extremely unlikely that meat will be outlawed or the entire world will decide to go vegetarian anytime soon, it seems like the moral thing to do would be to try to improve conditions on the animal farms that will continue to exist. One other thing - I think there is a philosophical question, that since these animals would never exist in the first place if they were not being raised for meat, would it actually be better for them to never be born, rather than to live a happy life and then be slaughtered? As humans we all know we're going to die eventually, but I doubt many of us would choose not to have been born, if we could. With prey animals in the wild, no one diminishes the value of their lives just because they are very likely to end with being killed by a predator.

Your second mistake is in regard to humans with amnesia. No, we would not say that death is not a harm to such a person, and I doubt many people would say that death is not a harm to an animal either, but I think a psychologist would tell you that neither of them cares about whether they live or die, because if you have no concept of future, you don't care what is going to happen to you. Similarly, an enlightened person such as the Buddha lives in an eternal present, and although he certainly values his own life, he has no apprehension about or desire to avoid his death. Also, like all people naturally tend to do, you are anthropomorphizing your dogs. There is a difference between learning and behavior and the human concepts of memory and desire. All animals learn, and their behavior is determined by conditioning to create the highest probability of positive outcomes. That can make it appear to us that they have concepts of past and future, but all their behavior is explained just as well by conditioning. This is just like if a one-year-old human touched something hot and was burned, they would then try to avoid that object, and we might say they remember being burned, but in fact a one-year-old has no

long-term memory.

Finally, you state that "there is certainly no argument maintaining that animal foods are necessary for optimal health." Perhaps you have not done enough research on nutrition, because there are such arguments. They do not come from mainstream sources such as the government or big nonprofits, but these sources are always way behind the curve on medical research, especially since most of them would rather sell someone a pharmaceutical than prevent a disease. Mainstream ideas about nutrition are wrong about the causes of heart disease and most other illness, the supposed benefits of consuming dairy, grains, and soy, and the ideal balance of macro-nutrients and types of fat, so I certainly wouldn't take their word for it on eating meat. One source you might want to check out is the Weston A. Price Foundation. Price did research indicating that tribal communities that regularly consumed animal fat were much healthier than genetically similar populations that ate a modern diet. For me, the jury is still out on this subject. One thing I wonder about is whether there is any way to get enough of the omega-3 essential fatty acids EPA and DHA without consuming animals.

If meat is not, in fact, beneficial to human health, then maybe you are right that there is no moral justification for consuming it, but if it is necessary for optimum health, I don't think you can fault people for eating it any more than you would a wolf or a hawk.

15 hours ago 4 Likes

Like Reply



Juan

You're not well informed, Matthew. You should read more... and try to develop your compassion (I don't know if this can be done, since it's built during childhood).

10 hours ago in reply to Matthew Levine 3 Likes

Like Reply



Bartłomiej Lapiński

Compassion? I've met a lot of people who had compassion for animals, and almost cried when read about their abuse, and who treated other people with utmost cruelty.

Human beings are omnivores. That is, their diet naturally comprises of animal and vegetable products. It is a folly to say that everyone can easily switch to vegetarian diet. Young people that grow. Old people that are sick.

Compassion has nothing to do with basic necessities of living or elementary logic. Stop morally accusing others.

6 hours ago in reply to Juan 1 Like

Like



Tcd945

"I am in favor of animal rights as well as human rights. That is the way of a whole human being."

—Abraham Lincoln

After 40 years as a vegetarian I can attest to the fact that there is no actual need for animal products. Also there is no such thing as necessary cruelty. Luckshow makes the comment, "Tell it to the local coyote". First I am not even sure what that means. If we were coyote's we wouldn't be having this conversation.

17 hours ago 4 Likes

Like Reply



Bartłomiej Lapiński

"there is no such thing as necessary cruelty"

Our survival as a species clearly invalidates this sentence. Were it not for early hunters-gatherers, we would not develop into the successful and widespread population we have today. Abundance of food derived from both plant and animal domestication (the latter you fancy to call "exploitation") allowed for emergence of specialists - that is, philosophers, scientists, artists, doctors, politicians, you name it.

Living in a very high-tech environment all your life, I can see why you are allowed to be so naive. In Poland where I am, in the 50s and later, I believe most of the agriculture work was done with the help of animals - my grandfather even has a horse carriage up to this day. Back in the communist times, when there was not enough food, many people avoided starvation when they had families in the countryside. They ate privately raised pigs which were slaughtered for meat. That, or malnutrition of kids, I think this was an easy moral choice.

Americans and the West were historically and still are in a privileged position. You have gas at 50% of our price, for example. Salaries are much higher too than in developing countries. I personally find it a very one-sided moral problem: only thinking about animals from the position of overprivileged leaders of the world.

Just my 5 cents. World doesn't begin and end in America. And America itself is much more than United States. Just sayin'

6 hours ago in reply to Tel945

Like Reply



Nate Rose

"Our survival as a species clearly invalidates this sentence. Were it not for early hunters-gatherers, we would not develop into the successful and widespread population we have today."

...You hunter-gathered much of anything lately? Maybe if we go back to the stone age we can consider this argument, but since we live in the modern world and have access to adequate, even great nutrition without the need for any animal products, it's completely irrelevant what happened thousands of years ago.

"Abundance of food derived from both plant and animal domestication (the latter you fancy to call "exploitation") allowed for emergence of specialists - that is, philosophers, scientists, artists,

doctors, politicians, you name it."

We have that same abundance now, and none of it has to come from animals in the modern, developed world. It was useful at one point. It is now an antiquity. Slaves were entirely useful to build societies as well, but we've managed to move beyond their use and are more productive than ever.

"Living in a very high-tech environment all your life, I can see why you are allowed to be so naive. In Poland where I am, in the 50s and later, I believe most of the agriculture work was done with the help of animals - my grandfather even has a horse carriage up to this day. Back in the communist times, when there was not enough food, many people avoided starvation when they had families in the countryside. They ate privately raised pigs which were slaughtered for meat. That, or malnutrition of kids, I think this was an easy moral choice."

And you now have a much more high-tech environment where that sort of thing is no longer necessary, correct?

1 hour ago in reply to Bartłomiej Łapiński

Like



Progressive

Would someone care to explain how eating the branches, leaves, flowers, and seeds of plants is morally superior to eating the bodies and eggs of animals, keeping in mind that animals are not unique in being "aware" of (i.e. reacting to) their surroundings?

Plants also react to their environment, for example they position their leaves to collect as much sunlight as possible and they "decide" to direct their growth energy towards height rather than breadth when in a forest where there is not enough sunlight at the lower levels. The difference is of degree rather than of kind: animals generally react much *faster* than plants.

6 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply



Guest

Le me stick a hot poker into you, your pet cat and your lemon tree.

Now tell me: which two are sentient?

Explanation enough?

3 hours ago in reply to Progressive 4 Likes

Like Reply



Tom Bradschett

Is it really the same thing to inflict violence on a plant as it is to inflict violence on, say, a pig?

The plants that we commonly eat are not sentient. From what we know, they don't gather the information about their organism at a central place and can't therefore relate it to an abstract representation of their organism, i.e. a sense

of self. Thus they can't experience things.

Why would a plant organism bear the evolutionary costs to develop sentience (a brain consumes about 3 times as much energy per unit of weight as does other animal tissue) if, for lacking the ability to move around, they will only have little options to profit from it?

You're right that sentience, as any quality in living beings, is by evolutionary theory probably found in different degrees and you will find certain animals where it is most difficult to determine if they are sentient: What about sponges, jellyfish, spiders...? I really can't tell you. But to me the question of sentience appears rather straightforward, when you ask it for those animals that we most commonly eat.

And *even if* you want to stand on the position that plants can be harmed in a similar way as a cow can, **you'd still need only (roughly) a tenth of plants to produce one unit of animal "food"**.

3 hours ago in reply to Progressive 2 Likes

Like Reply



Nate Rose

The argument in the article is sentience, which I think is the wrong benchmark. To me, suffering is the morally significant benchmark. Plants aren't capable of it.

But suppose that they are! In fact, say they suffer more than anything else in the world. It would **still** be better to eat them directly than to filter them through animals, as it takes more plants to raise an animal to slaughter weight than it does to feed a human. Without animal agriculture, all forms of agriculture would be scaled down, meaning less suffering to both animals AND plants.

1 hour ago in reply to Progressive

Like Reply



AfterMe_TheDeluge

"No actual need for animal products"? Really? And what are those of us who happen to be allergic to most, if not all, vegetables supposed to eat?

Human beings are omnivores, we are supposed to eat animals AND vegetables. If you don't want to eat meat, then don't. But don't try to equate my eating of animal protein to the torture of dogs or any other animal. That's ludicrous. And using the rest of the animal that is eaten for other products reduces waste.

I have known many vegetarians and vegans and I have yet to meet one that looks healthy. Besides, if meat is so unhealthy, then why are so many vegetarian foods made to taste like meat?

15 hours ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



tommcm2737

It is clear you have not known "many." Just for the heck of it spend five minutes educating yourself and google vegetarian athletes and then tell me

those world class athletes don't look healthy.

14 hours ago in reply to AfterMe_TheDeluge 6 Likes Like Reply



Khjones1949

Great article. However, the mention of Michael Vick as being involved in a dog fighting operation is inaccurate in its modesty. Michael Vick tortured and killed dogs with his own hands and participated directly in more killings. His involvement needs to be called what it is, every time, when mentioned in the press.

17 hours ago 2 Likes Like Reply



Agyla

Sorry--you are wrong. The vitamin B12 we all need has only one source--animal protein. Even the tablets are made from animal products. Every patient who has had gastric bypass is told to eat animal based protein--because vegetable proteins are not adequate

15 hours ago 1 Like Like Reply



Fixer

Sorry. The *only* source of B12 is bacteria. You can conveniently get that through animal based foods but you can also get it without.

Any B12 in a supplement will be fully vegan whether you want it to be or not.

3 hours ago in reply to Agyla 5 Likes Like Reply



tommcm2737

There is no need for any animal to be killed so that we can get our B12 because animal protein is NOT the only source of this vitamin.

14 hours ago in reply to Agyla 7 Likes Like Reply



Bltjkjk

moron

1 hour ago in reply to Agyla Like Reply

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