Eat Meat...



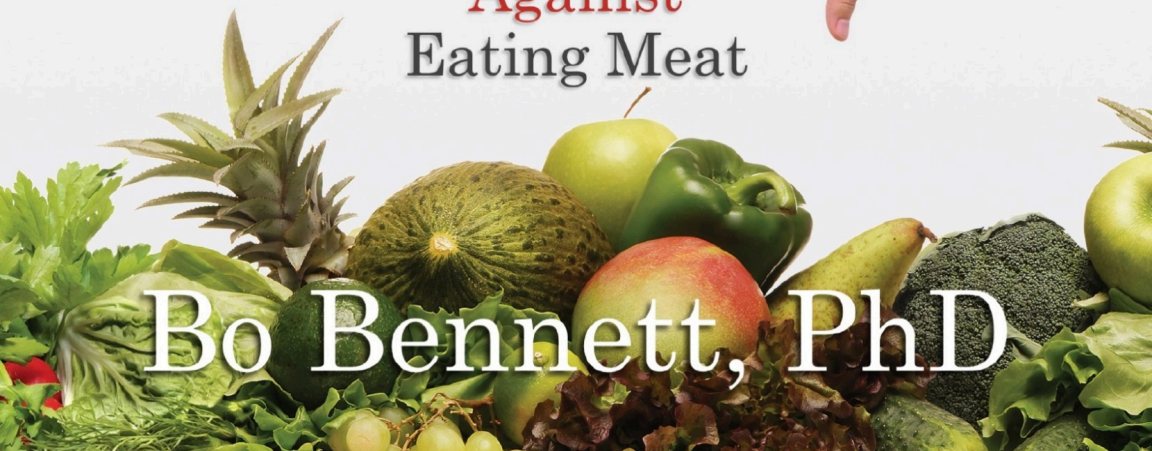
Or Don't



Considering the Moral Arguments For and Against Eating Meat







Bo Bennett, PhD

Eat Meat… or Don’t

Considering the Moral Arguments For and Against Eating Meat

by

Bo Bennett, PhD

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Dedication

I was going to dedicate this book to Jesus for making it possible for so many people to have food on their table, say “thank you, Jesus,” then show this graphic:



But my own wife didn’t get the humor, and thought I was sincerely thanking Jesus (Christ) for food, so instead I’ll just dedicate this book to all farmers.

Sentiocentrism.com

This book was written to be the start of the conversation on the morality of eating meat, not the final word. I have created the website sentiocentrism.com as a companion to this book where readers can go to ask questions, get updates, participate in the conversation, and more.

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consent”?

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About the Author

Books By Dr. Bennett

Preface

A few years ago, I was out for a walk on a backroad that cuts through some wetlands. Slowly crossing the road ahead of me was a giant snapping turtle as long as my arm. I grabbed a large stick and tried to help it quickly cross the road by gently tapping the back of its shell. A car drove toward us and stopped. The driver rolled down the window and yelled, "You should crush that thing. It eats ducks!" I responded, "I eat ducks. Should I be crushed?" The driver gave me a dirty look and drove around my new hard-shelled friend and me. Although I don't actually eat ducks, I presented the driver with an impromptu logical consistency test that uses the *reductio ad absurdum,* or a method of argumentation that attempts to reduce an argument to an absurd or unacceptable conclusion[1]. I gave a perfect response to what I felt was a horrible "argument."

More recently, I (as someone who has not completely given up meat) was presented with a similar question to the one I asked the turtle hater, one that I found difficult to answer. The question was, "what's true of the animal that if true of the human would cause you to be okay with eating humans?" The implication is that if you can't answer the question, you have a consistency problem with your moral values because you can't identify the substantive difference between animals and humans that can justify eating one and not the other. If you attempt to answer the question, you end up supporting some horrific position such as it's okay to eat humans as long as they are not very smart, can't talk, can't reason, or some other quality that can describe a disabled person. So not only are you okay with eating humans, but you prefer eating disabled people. Congratulations, you just made yourself look like an immoral idiot. In this book, I will prepare you to offer rational answers to difficult questions regarding the morality of eating meat—answers that are consistent with your other moral views.

Perhaps one of the most critical questions in law and ethics is "Why is X okay but Y not okay?" This general

question can be asked in many different ways, but what we are ultimately doing is looking for the difference(s) that make one thing legal, good, or moral and another thing illegal, bad, or immoral. Systems of morality aside, there is ubiquitous agreement that classifying things into these two general categories can be extremely challenging at times. Debates on right and wrong have been raging for millennia. The idea that an argument has been devised that can solve this historic debate should raise a large red flag for any critical thinker. The question, "what's true of the animal that if true of the human would cause you to be okay with eating humans?" did not pass my logical sniff test although at the time I did not quite understand why. I used the same type of consistency test on the argument itself by changing the subject from eating animals to something that no vegetarian (or decent human) would be okay with—having sex with young children. The question assumes that the person is okay with having sex with consenting adults:

> *What's true of the consenting adult that if true of the consenting young child would cause you to be okay with having sex with the young child?*

The implication here is that if you can't answer the question, you have the same consistency problem with your moral values because you can't identify the substantive difference between adults and young children that can justify having sex with one and not the other. If you attempt to answer the question, you end up supporting the horrific position that it's okay to have sex with young children as long as they are mature, physically developed, smart, or some other quality that can easily describe many young children today.

The consistency argument via the reductio ad absurdum is a solid application of one of the greatest tools in any rational thinker's toolbox. This tool of logic, however, can easily be transformed into a rhetorical word game rife with fallacies and deception. When these linguistic shenanigans are applied to arguments against eating meat, it is likely to result in more harm to animals than good by convincing

meat-eaters that there really are no honest reasons for not eating meat.

The fact is, there are many good reasons for not eating meat in addition to the many bad reasons. There are also many good reasons for eating meat in addition to the many bad reasons. My goal of this book is to explore these arguments, mostly from a moral perspective, and point out the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments. I will look at the arguments for reducing meat consumption rather than giving up eating meat completely as well as offer some advice to those who want to persuade others that we are eating too much meat. I will finish up by presenting a thorough summary where I share my personal views on the issue.

There are actually many solid reasons for not eating meat that may not be directly related to morality, such as reasons related to health, fitness, environment, economy, personal finances, and more. However, this book will focus on moral issues and arguments although as we will see in a bit, the effects on health, fitness, environment, economy, personal finances, and others can also have a moral impact.

I would also like to offer an apology to my non-American readers. This is a U.S. centric book in that most statistics used are based on the American population. The arguments presented, however, are country independent.

A Few Words About Me

I am neither a vegan nor a vegetarian although I haven't eaten beef or pork products in over two decades, and I currently limit my poultry and fish consumption to about two to three meals per week. I can best be described as a *flexitarian*, or someone who mostly eats a vegetarian diet but occasionally eats meat and fish. I have found the ethical arguments against eating meat convincing enough to eat the amount of animal products I currently do. No more, no less.

My PhD is in the field of social psychology with much of my work in the area of cognitive psychology, argumentation,

critical thinking, and reasoning. It is in these areas where we find the answers to the philosophical dilemmas often presented as arguments for not eating meat. Moral psychology[2] is an area of social psychology that is necessarily interdisciplinary. The empirical resources of the science of psychology combined with the conceptual resources of philosophical ethics allows us to have a much better understanding of morality than with just one or the other. In this book I draw on both disciplines.

Some think that one needs to have a PhD specifically in philosophy to intelligently discuss philosophical or logical arguments. This is not the case. Having said that, a "PhD" literally means "doctorate of philosophy." The sciences are grounded in philosophy and philosophy is a significant part of any decent PhD program.

My educational background should give you the confidence to at least read the book and consider the information I present. The information I present should be evaluated on its own merits, separate from me and my educational background.

Bad arguments for a position have no effect on the strength of the position; a bad argument is simply a reflection of the argument itself. My criticism for any arguments should not be taken as criticism for the position the arguments support.

I should also make clear, for those conspiracy-minded among us, that I have absolutely zero financial interest in either the meat or veggie industries. I am not a shill for big bad meat, dairy, or veggie. Of course, this is exactly what a shill would say.

Part I: Foundational Concepts

Some More Linguistic Shenanigans

Sadly, there is a growing movement of people who sincerely believe that the earth is flat. They present "sciencey" sounding arguments as to why they believe the earth is flat. Unless you are a physicist, mathematician, astronomer, or you have otherwise invested time understanding why the flat earther's arguments are bad, you could be bamboozled by the arguments that you cannot easily refute given your limited knowledge on the topic, your limited exposure to fallacious reasoning, and your limited experience with argumentation. **But this wouldn't make you wrong.**

Very often, it is clear that an argument is flawed because of what the conclusion supports, but it is not clear why. Consider the classic *Zeno's paradox*. One instance, as recounted by Aristotle, goes like this:

> *In a race, the quickest runner can never overtake the slowest, since the pursuer must first reach the point whence the pursued started, so that the slower must always hold a lead.*

We know that faster runners pass slower runners all the time, so something is clearly wrong. We may lack the knowledge of physics, science, mathematics, or some other specialized area of knowledge to articulate why, but this doesn't mean we are unjustified in our reasoning to think that a fast runner can pass a slow runner. And it certainly doesn't mean that we are wrong in our assertion that a runner could never be passed.

As we will see, there are some arguments for not eating meat that appear, on first blush, to make sense. However, upon closer inspection, we will see that the arguments are problematic. More important, they are not convincing to people who realize they are being bamboozled, but not sure why. This type of "gotcha" argumentation with the goal of "winning" does very little for changing minds and less for the character of the people using this style of argumentation

rather than engaging in sincere intellectual dialog with the goal of persuading.

By the way, the reason a faster runner could pass a slower runner in a race is because the distance between the two runners gets infinitely smaller while the speed at which this happens becomes infinitely faster until the point at which the two infinities cancel each other out. This is the point at which the faster runner passes the slower runner.

> *"You can't win an argument. You can't because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it."*
>
> **— Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People***

Psychology, Not Logic

Consider the following two questions:

> *What's true of animals that if true of humans would justify the treatment in question for **humans**?*
>
> *and*
>
> *What's true of humans that if true of animals would no longer justify the treatment in question for **animals**?*

The difference is not a logical one, as the logic behind the two questions is identical. In both cases, we are asking for the property or properties that justify the treatment. The difference is a psychological one. **Imagining treating a human like an animal results in a far greater emotional response than imagining treating an animal like a human.** This is a key aspect of the debate that we will cover in much greater detail throughout this book. Careful and unbiased wording of questions is a requirement in academic survey research because researchers know by making calculating changes to the wording of questions they are more likely to solicit the answer they want rather than an honest answer free from influence. As a person asking sincere questions, it is your

duty to avoid influencing the answer in your favor by using *loaded language*. As a person responding to questions, it is your responsibility to detect possible attempts at psychological influences and consider them when responding.

The "In Principle But Not in Practice" Gambit

The phrase "in principle but not in practice" is often used to hedge one's position. It is a way to claim that one's position is still right or reasonable despite being demonstrated wrong or unreasonable. Take any position with which you strongly disagree and apply the "in principle but not in practice" gambit. For example, consider the position that children who misbehave should be beaten. One can claim that "in principle" this is a good idea because negative reinforcement unequivocally influences future behavior[3], but of course, "in practice" this is a horrible idea because… (list the numerous evidence-based reasons here). The *principle* is the fundamental truth or reason, in this case, the effectiveness of negative reinforcement on behavior. The *practice* is the actions or behaviors put into place where one must consider much more than simply the principle behind the actions or behaviors such as the **total cost** of such actions or behaviors.

When evaluating arguments using the reductio ad absurdum strategy, the "in principle but not in practice" gambit is commonly employed to attempt to demonstrate that one's position, despite being reduced to an unacceptable conclusion, is still acceptable. A common example is the claim that *sentience* (a term that we will be discussing in more detail in the following sections) is what gives organisms moral value, and that without sentience it would be morally acceptable to kill them for food:

> ***Person 1:*** *So in your view, if someone is in the hospital in a vegetative state (i.e., like a vegetable), surrounded*

by loved ones, it would be morally acceptable to pull the plug, rip out your knife and fork, and dig in?

Person 2: *Well, in principle, yes. In practice, no.*

This is just another linguistic shenanigan that we could counter by pointing out that the purpose of the question is to consider the **practice** of killing animals for food, not the **principle**. Principles don't kill animals, practices do.

A larger problem with the "in principle but not in practice" gambit is with consistency. If we allow this line of reasoning as proper justification, we need to allow it everywhere even when the gambit results in more unacceptable conclusions. Consider one who claims that "human-level intelligence" is what gives organisms moral value, and that without human-level intelligence it would be morally acceptable to kill them for food:

Person 1: *So in your view, cognitively disabled people can be killed and eaten?*

Person 2: *Well, in principle, yes. In practice, no.*

In fact, if it were acceptable to use this gambit, we could just say "In principle it is immoral to eat meat but in practice, it is not," and not bother with the tough mental work needed to reconcile the principle with the practice. To use this gambit on itself, we can say that in principle this gambit can be used but in practice, it shouldn't be if we want to properly justify actions and behaviors, which we clearly do.

The Reductio Gambit

As mentioned earlier, a good reductio ad absurdum (or just "reductio") can be a fantastic philosophical exercise and a valuable tool for the critical thinker. Why is it acceptable to kill a cow for food but not a human? If you were to answer, "because a cow has much less cognitive capacity than a human," a good reductio (a way to reduce the argument to absurdity or unfavorable consequences) would be, "Then in

your view, it would be okay to kill cognitively disabled people for food." This works because:

1. **"Less cognitive capacity" is the reason given for the difference in treatment and this is the difference addressed in the reductio.**

2. **It is a fair and reasonable assumption that there is a subset of humans with the cognitive capacity of a cow.**

3. **Referring to this subset of humans as "cognitively disabled" is an accurate label.**

This is a useful thought experiment that points out the flaw in the reasoning of the person answering the question. The person should realize that "cognitive capacity" can't be the reason, or at least not the only reason, and will be forced to either revise their answer or perhaps lie and say that they would be fine killing cognitively disabled people for food. But as good as the reductio is, the reductio can also be abused.

In philosophy, there is the concept of *necessary* and *sufficient conditions*. In simple terms, a necessary condition is one that **must** take place for something to be true whereas a sufficient condition is one that **can** take place for something to be true. When we give reasons, we often give just one sufficient condition that adequately justifies the behavior. For example, why don't we like stepping in poop? Because it smells horrible and we don't want that smell lingering with us all day. This reason is good enough. It is sufficient, but it does not have to be necessary. We can also not want to step in dog poop because it will ruin our shoes, it will dirty the floors we walk on, it might make us slip and get hurt, etc., all of which can be good enough reasons on their own (sufficient). Conditions can also be cumulative in that they are neither necessary nor sufficient but taken together justify the behavior. We might not want to step in dog poop because it is embarrassing. Alone, this is not a good enough reason, but when added to other reasons make the behavior

more justifiable. When playing the reductio game, we want to list as many conditions as possible—the necessary ones, the sufficient ones, and those neither necessary nor sufficient.

With each condition we negate through a reductio, we are creating a hypothetical world more and more removed from reality to the point where it is unreasonable to suggest the behavior still applies. Consider the following reductio:

> *So if dog poop didn't smell bad, wouldn't ruin your shoes, wouldn't dirty floors we walk on, could never make you slip and get hurt, and wasn't embarrassing to step in, you would be fine with stepping in dog poop?*

You should be able to see the irony here of absurdity: the strategy that is being used to attempt to reduce the other person's position to absurdity at some point becomes absurd itself. What we understand about the behavior, stepping in dog poop, is nonsensical void of all the effects of stepping in poop. What is left is the emotional effect as a result of the mental image we form when thinking of stepping in poop, which diverts us from reason. We will see how this applies to arguments about eating meat in the coming sections.

What Does "Eating Meat" Mean?

It is essential for all of us to recognize our privileges here. For me, I am a moderately wealthy and thankfully healthy American with a Whole Foods market seven minutes away. I live in an area with hundreds of restaurants within a 10-mile radius, most of which, if not all, offer a delicious vegetarian or even a moderate tasting vegan option. For me, and hundreds of millions of people in similar situations, eating less meat is, at most an inconvenience. The outliers that include people whose food choices are limited such as those who cannot afford to eat healthy plant-based alternatives to meat, or people with little or no access to adequate plant-based food represent a paltry fraction of the total meat consumed. For the purposes of the arguments presented in this book, we will be focusing on the typical cases, not the outliers.

For our purposes, "eating meat" means eating meat from the animals commonly consumed in one's culture, raised any way (factory or otherwise). We will be discussing the differences between unrestricted consumption of factory-farmed meats versus what most would consider are more ethical ways of consuming meat such as perhaps eating small fish one catches themselves.

As for labels, out of convenience, I am going adopt a binary distinction and refer to the person who does not eat meat as the "vegetarian" (although, of course, not eating meat also applies to vegans who also don't consume any animal products such as milk, cheese, or eggs) and the person who does eat meat as the "meat-eater." I realize that "meat-eater" does tend to imply some barbaric caveman downing a wooly mammoth, but this term also applies to the mostly vegetarian who does eat meat now and then. Also out of convenience, I will refer to animals as just "animals" meaning "nonhuman animals."

The Coming "Clean Meat" Revolution

We live in a fantastic world where science and technology can solve so many of our problems. Believe it or not, the moral problem of eating meat could be one of them. What is becoming known as "clean meat" is a way to grow meat in a lab that is not part of a conscious animal. Advances are happening so quickly in this area that I hesitate to write much more about it and encourage you to visit https://cleanmeat.org for updates. Eating meat grown in a lab where no animals had to suffer or die drastically changes the moral arguments around eating meat. I am optimistic that clean meat will be one of humanity's great achievements based on the number of animal lives it will save, the amount of suffering it will prevent, the number of people it will help feed, and it's positive impact on the environment. But as of this writing, unfortunately, the technology is not close to the point where it will replace traditional factory farming. I am confident that day will come.

The Future Here and Now

A few months ago, I had my first "Impossible Burger," a 100% plant-based burger from Impossible Foods, Inc. I was impressed. From many first-hand accounts, plant-based meat products range from "pretty good" to "I can't tell the difference between this and meat." As of this writing, the newly publicly-traded company Beyond Meat is currently dominating the "faux meat" market, and there are many more startups jumping on the meat-free bandwagon. More restaurants are offering these products providing consumers with a relatively risk-free way to try these products (my wife and I shared the Impossible Burger as an appetizer). If you are more of a dine-in person, you should be able to find these products in the frozen foods section in any large grocery store.

If health is your primary concern, look closely into the ingredients of these plant-based substitutes for meat. Nutrition experts overwhelmingly agree that eating low-

quality meat products daily is not the best for your health. Many of these plant-based substitutes are highly processed and are the nutritional equivalent of low-quality meat products. Eat these foods for pleasure, not for the nutritional content.

End of the free sample

You have just read the preface and the opening of Part I of *Eat Meat... Or Don't* by Bo Bennett, PhD.

The complete ebook (EPUB and PDF) is available direct from the author at

bobennett.com/bookstore