

IS IT IMMORAL OR NOT TO KILL ANIMALS?

By Dimitrios Chaniotis

A contribution to the ongoing discussion on the morality or immorality of killing and eating animals is the aim of the paper. Do animals have the right to live? Is it moral or immoral to kill animals? Do we have to stop animals from suffering or we can conditionally accept it?

I suggest the following: 1) The "no rights" arguments cannot be adequately supported 2) It is immoral to kill animals 3) We have to stop animals from suffering.

There are arguments and counterarguments about what we should but also what we should not eat. Some people suggest that it does not really matter what someone eats as long as he or she leads a pure life. Life examples like that of Jesus or Buddha are commonly mentioned in an effort to support this view. But still, we are frequently encountered with a divergence of views within Buddhism as to whether vegetarianism is required. Buddhists in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are mostly vegetarian whereas in principal the Buddhist monastic discipline specifies certain food as forbidden for the monks. When they are abiding to a vegetarian diet, this is based on the Dharmic concept of ahimsa (non-violence). Vegetarianism is common in other Dharmic faiths such as Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism frequently enriched with variations and differentiations of the restrictions that mostly apply. In the *Bhagavadgita* we are presented with the three different types of food (sattvic, rajasic, tamasic - ch. XVII, 7-10) within which meat usually falls in the later two categories whereas the strictest forms of the completely vegetarian Jain diet is practiced by the ascetics. On the other hand, vegetarianism is not a common practice in current western Christian thought and culture. In the Bible one can find both extracts that support meat consumption and others that deter from it. In ancient Greece, the work of Plutarch, *Moralia* (ἠθικῶν) - *On the eating of flesh I and II*, emphatically supports the idea of not eating meat as an action atrocious and far from the human nature. Before him, Pythagoras in addition to being famous for his contributions to math, music, science, and philosophy, was also famous as an expert on the fate of the soul after death. He thought that the soul was immortal and went through a series of reincarnations. However the act of killing and eating animals resulted in sullyng the soul and therefore should be avoided. On this matter, the mathematician Eudoxus, describes Pythagoras not only as avoiding all meat but as even refusing to associate with butchers (Porphyry, VP 7). It is Plato himself who affirms that, above all, Pythagoras was famous for leaving behind him a way of life. Nevertheless, eating meat was a common practice in ancient times. A poetic example describing the preparation and serving of animal meat can be found in Homer's *Iliad* (rhapsody I 206-217). Nowadays in the monasteries of Athos peninsula (Macedonia-

Greece) either meat only or both meat and fish are not consumed by the monks. The rest of Christians Orthodox, during certain periods throughout the year, follow a variation of disciplines concerning food restrictions (fasting - νηστεία) that among others, meat abstention is included.

Obviously, the whole issue of eating meat (which implies the prior killing of living animals) can be examined either from a religious or from a philosophical standpoint. The religious view is a matter of faith and as such will not be further pursued here. Only from a philosophical view-point will we discuss the different arguments (or the most strong of them) that are frequently encountered relevant to the subject. More specifically we will attempt to elaborate on the morality issue of killing animals. Is it moral or not to kill animals? - this will be our core question. Our effort will assume an engagement against the supporting arguments and ideas which are in favor of killing animals for food. These kind of arguments not only have they appeared in the past but they also continue to appear in relevant discussions. Defending and at the same time promoting the specific attitudes towards animals is their aim.

Our methodology will include the presentation and a small description of arguments in favor of killing animals and then we will present counter-arguments against them.

So, starting from the first argument in discussion, this can be codified with the phrase “animals have no rights” or “the concept of rights is meaningless”. Strange as it may sound, the supporters of it, examine the existence of animals and their possible future from a very limited legal perspective. They say that the whole concept of “rights” is meaningful only within the context of a social contract forged by intelligent beings. Animals are not intelligent beings. Humans only are and therefore humans alone have this ability to agree to mutually binding contracts that specify and agree on certain rights for them or on their relationships with other legal entities. Since animals cannot participate in such human-constructed contracts describing respective relationships between them and humans, it is meaningless to speak of animal rights!

On examining this first argument we clearly see the aim. Animals do not have any innate rights because it is meaningful to speak of animal rights. Why is that? Because “rights” is a pure legal issue i.e. a pure human privilege. Simple as that! But then one could simply wonder: Why do we need a contract or a social life human environment in order to be entitled to the right of living? Some thousand years ago, were there any contracts? At that distant phase of humanity, any human being had the right to live or not? I can understand or I could logically assume, that there had been emerged a pervasive feeling of not having the right to take one’s life - or at least not having the right to take it without the excuse of a very strong reason such as own survival. And that, even from the earliest era of human pre-history. Why was that so? Well, if for someone was well established in his mind that he strived to survive, the same was in his neighbor’s mind too. So no one had the right to kill if he did not want equally to

accept the possibility of becoming his neighbor's target. Survival was the primary task in one's life. Moreover and more importantly, the above attitude or feeling as I initially called it, would have spread all-around even though no contracts or agreements between societies existed. So, if we can recognize to ourselves the right of survival without any legal context or social constraint, what prohibits us from recognizing it to other animals? Certainly law is not an issue here. We can very well recognize that animals have equal to us rights to live a free life without imprisoning ourselves behind the bars of a pure legal frame. If that was not an option, even for the simplest of our acts we would need to seek law justification - during tea-time for example, drinking tea with low fat milk and one cube of sugar inside a transparent drinking glass! Any contract or law that gives us the right to such a choice?

The second argument that is most frequently encountered deals with the morality of killing and the rejection of the concept of animals suffering. It can be codified with the phrases "If animals suffering annoys you then we can eliminate suffering before killing". Moreover "killing is not immoral since it happens all the time in nature." The supporters of the above, elaborate on these concepts in a more or less distracting way away from the real issue. They suggest that if we are in a position to eliminate the feeling of suffering from one animal's consciousness, then proceeding with killing such an animal would not by any means be morally wrong. Nowadays, this can be easily effected by anaesthetizing animals before being slaughtered. Going a step further, they give us examples from nature where animals kill other animals for food. Obviously then, animals eaten by other animals suffer. So, they say, if we care about animal suffering and we have to minimize it, then we are morally obliged to stop animal predators from killing their preys. But this, they continue, is an absurd thing to happen. If we stop lions from killing and eating zebras then we will cause great suffering to the lions. No-one can put a lion on a vegetarian diet by obliging it not to eat meat! That would be totally unnatural. So, as a conclusion, since we do not consider it wrong intrinsically for a lion to kill other animals for food, why should we think is it immoral for a man to kill an animal to feed himself or his family?

So, no suffering and no immorality here! They can both be avoided as "annoying" concepts! Well as we can see, this second argument starts by accepting that animals suffer. Then there is an effort to tackle this problem by offering a possible remedy - anesthesia of whatever kind - prior to killing. However, killing does not have to do only with the way this action is done. It is certain that avoiding animal suffering by anaesthetizing it prior to its slaughtering, is indeed better than killing it when conscious. But still, slaughtering is indeed effected! Is it moral then to slaughter an animal even when unconscious? That is the question. Imagine your dog. You would not think that it is a good thing to kill it. If you anaesthetize it first, killing your dog would be justified? Certainly not. But then, one killing supporter might say that we kill animals for eating them. We are not going to eat our dog pet!! So now, the purpose of killing comes in place. We are going to kill a living animal for what reason? For fun? For pleasure? Because that is dictated by our needs? If it is our needs that

come in play, and in our case the need for feeding ourselves or the members of our family, I feel that you could agree that we can live without eating meat. In order to gain vital proteins and amino-acids we could consume other biological products such as eggs or cheese or soya which is rich in proteins. Our organized societies can well produce enough quantities of these products. Furthermore, I would like you to reflect on two different images. The first has to do with a newly born animal, a pig or cow or chicken for example, raised from the time of its birth until slaughtered, in a very limited space so as to constantly gain weight. The second image comes with the second animal living free in nature. The first lives in a man-made prison until death comes. The second lives free until death comes either from man or from the sharp teeth of a lion, tiger or some other wild beast. Supposing now that you had only one of two available options. Either to take the place of the animal to be slaughtered without pain but only after living imprisoned for all of your life, or to die after you had lived freely, by another predator of four or two legs. What would you choose? I bet the free life and its chances of survival would be more compelling. Talking about chances, another point is worth mentioning. All free animals have good possibilities to survive. But animals that are raised so as to be slaughtered, have zero chances of survival. Imprisonment and subsequent death is their human made 100% certain fate. It is therefore awkward to compare the death caused by a lion to the death caused by the human hand when we speak of raised to die animals. No comparison is possible - even if we allege anesthesia as a moral alternative and a way out...

Returning back to the current argument, a second point is important. Do lions have an alternative? Are they obliged to kill in order to survive or not? Are men obliged to kill in order to survive? Well, perhaps when hunting was invented by the human race, man had almost zero or very limited chances of survival without it. But even centuries later or even thousands of years later, we can accept that hunting was one of the very few resorts if survival and raising children was aimed. This does not mean though that hunting is a moral thing. It could be recognized as an “obligatory” or “natural” action when a man’s life or his family’s was endangered. In that case the man, like the lion, would be obliged to become a predator in order to survive. For the vast majority of humans however, hunting nowadays is not included within the natural process for survival. It is mostly a game or sport. Do you think that it could then be considered as a moral thing to do?

Very frequently another type of argument is presented. This is codified with the term “The dilemma”. It tries to bring us in the middle of a rather conceptual puzzle. It simply states that if we see no wrong for a lion to hunt and kill a zebra for food, human-predators do no wrong in killing animals for food too.

The presented “dilemma” has in fact been answered already within the second counter-argument. It is not an actual dilemma though, since the lion can only hunt, it is in its nature. Humans have many other options. But most importantly they are humans, they can decide what is right and what is wrong.

The next argument, fourth in the row, tries to amplify on the superiority of human species as a means towards the justification of the view that animals cannot be entitled to having equal to human rights or chances on living. For the sake of the argument, often a scene, that makes the reader or the listener to reflect on his possible choice and therefore to come to a hasty conclusion, is involved. This scene could be depicted like this : You, your child and a big pet, a huge dog for example, are within a small boat. After a while you find that the boat is sinking. You conclude without doubt that it can support only two of the three passengers. Which one will you throw overboard inside the frozen waters, an action that would mean his/its certain and almost immediate death? The loss of the one will most probably save the life of the other two. Then most likely the dog will pay the price. No-one will judge as immoral the father who did so. He acted in accordance to his intuitive parental instincts so as protect his child. It would have been grossly immoral if he had kept the dog and had thrown his child overboard.

Well in that case, most probably everybody agrees that the dog has to be abandoned. However neither me nor anybody else would find himself happy either for the choice taken or for the dog's fate. As a matter of fact I would feel very badly because I could not leave the dog onboard. But you could agree that I was forced to act in this way so as to protect the life of my child. Again it must be stressed, I was obliged to take a painful decision, I was in front of a dilemma to which the life of my child was of no comparable value. So even though my initial effort would have been to rescue both, I had finally to choose between the two. However, if the boat was not sinking and I threw the dog at sea because I believed that it would be a good idea to take the picture of a drowning dog and moreover that this could not be seen as an immoral action, then I would probably be entitled for the immediate treatment of a psychotherapist. As a conclusion of our counter-argument, we can state that the effort to demonstrate the inferiority of animals with comparison to humans by utilizing such an example, is by no means adequate to justify an attitude towards killing animals. It perhaps can demonstrate that we have to make a choice between the survival of a man and the survival of an animal, in which case the former would be preferred. Another useful point: Sometimes he have to make choices between humans alone. Would anyone then be entitled to say that some humans are superior to others and therefore they only deserve to being rescued?

The fifth argument tries to establish an “inability of choice”. If such an inability exists then the whole discussion is useless, this is their argument. This inability refers to an inherent difficulty to clearly determine what kind of animals we are referring to when talking about not killing them. As it is usually put, we do eat living organisms without feeling remorse or without thinking that this is an immoral act. More specifically the supporters of killing animals for food, would ask where do we draw the line between those that we give the right to live and those that they accord no rights of living. Animals with consciousness have rights, but insects and microorganisms do not. Why not? Aren't insects and microorganisms alive? Isn't vegetation alive too?

Seemingly a difficult question at start. One could say that insects and microorganisms or pathogens, even though they are alive, they must be avoided in order not to cause diseases. But they cannot be compared to animals at least the ones that can be eaten. Still though, I would prefer to deter a mosquito from biting me than killing it beforehand. It is true however that to draw a line for the organisms to be let alive and those to be killed, sometimes is a hard task. As they put it, can we consider vegetables alive, and if yes why do we eat them? I certainly do consider vegetables alive since they can be reproduced and pass their genes to next generations inherited with the ability to evolve. They are deprived of certain attributes that characterize animals, such as motion or will but this does not make them dead matter. On the other hand, we as humans have to eat something in order to stay alive. And certainly by eating an apple we do not destroy the apple-tree! But morality or immorality on killing animals - our core posed question - considers animals as they really are, i.e. well developed complex biological entities, with consciousness, capability of communication and expression of feelings, with the inherent right to live, be reproduced and evolve but also characterized with the basic instincts of survival. No animal wishes to die, no animal welcomes the predator who kills it, no animal will stay fearless or still when the intentions of a man to kill it are deciphered. So at issue here is exactly these animals. Nothing to do with microorganisms, or viruses or even flora products which exhibit much inferior signaling relevant to human standards of existence. Their questioning can thus be easily characterized as misleading or out of context.

Coming to the sixth argument that is brought forward, the issue of the “absence of moral standards” concerning animals killing is developed. In essence it is declared that if no standards exist, we cannot focus on animal killings since their killing cannot be characterized as right or wrong. If no right or wrong is established on animal killings, their rights is out of the question. In essence this argument perplexes both the rights issue and the animal’s suffering but also emphasizes on logic in order to reach a conclusion. It usually starts with the observation that there is not currently an ultimate foundation for morality. So, without an ultimate foundation for morality, supporters of vegetarianism can call a halt to animal killings only on the grounds of compassion. The question why must we be compassionate towards animals remains in effect unanswered because it can only be replied with the “excuse” that animals can feel pain and feeling pain is bad. On the following question why should we care about animals’ pain, the only possible answer could be that animals have inalienable rights. But such an answer, they say, brings us back to the issue of recognizing rights to animals. And then, this train of thought becomes logically circular. Hence we are left with the conclusion that there are not any compelling logical reasons to treat animals with an equal right to life.

In view of this argument we can respond as follows:

First of all, murder is an immoral action. But still, do we as humans, possess an ultimate foundation for morality? Do we have a norm for every possible action? Don't we have to deeply consider and sometimes be found under the burden of hard dilemmas? Nevertheless, we are not impeded from recognizing murder as an immoral action. It is therefore not necessary when the rightness or wrongness of an action is obvious, to seek for a complete moral system in order to judge it. But still the question remains as they put it "why should we care about animals pain?" Let's see if we can find some arguments apart from accepting that animals can have the right to live even outside of a legal context or contract or even an ultimate foundation for morality.

Anyone would accept that humans are set apart from other animals for many reasons one of which is that they are sensitive to value their actions in a way which is totally absent from other animals. So humans might kill in order to survive, and in that sense they follow a natural instinct. But they also reflect on their actions. And can feel remorse if they had other options or if their actions were unnecessary or unjustifiable. Taking a step back, in the beginning of our discussion, we are talking about morality and/or immorality. But when an action can be characterized as moral? That is a difficult question. Even though various dictionaries give various definitions, we could naively say that a moral action is one with which one feels that it is for the good of others, an action that could cause internally but also externally more joy than sorrow. So we could simply ask, who feels joy when is killing an animal? Who cannot see that an action like this causes mainly pain and suffering? Either internally or externally the prevailing feeling is undoubtedly negative. On the other hand, if we consider morality as a standard or norm for doing or not doing, then under its auspices we can decide if an action must be done or must not be done. A moral action is the one that has to be done, an immoral that has to be avoided. If killing and eating animals is included in the moral list, then under no constraint or reservation animal slaughtering must occur. Keeping your dog as a pet would as a consequence be an immoral behavior. Leaving a bird alive could be a deadly sin that would condemn you to eternal spiritual suffering at hell! I think the whole matter is becoming absurd enough to pursue it further. Yes, indeed we eat animals. Yes, we keep them imprisoned for all their life so as to grow enough and then kill them. Yes, we are accustomed to the idea of not being able to live without meat. In the same manner, murders happen, or robberies or other atrocious acts. This does not mean that these actions are moral just because they do happen! Morality tells us that they should not happen at all.

If we need to elaborate more by linking to the rights issue but still outside from a legal frame, we could agree that no one would like to be treated in a way that would cause him pain or suffering or deprive him from his rights to be free or alive. Do we recognize the same treatment as justifiable for animals? Killing and eating animals supporters says no. Nevertheless, we have the power as the mightiest species on earth, to recognize (or not) that other species have these rights even though they

have not signed any contract with us. If we, as the mightiest species, deny that animals have the right not to suffer or die from our hands, we place ourselves at a position that we do not deserve. We choose to cause pain, suffering or take a life even if we admit that this is something that we would not like to sustain. Animals kill. That's all. They do not reflect on their actions. No moral issues here. They just kill to survive. No killing for pleasure or fun. But more importantly, no killing after reflection on others animal suffering or on morality of killing. We, as humans, if choose to kill even though we have the ability to reflect on morality, we choose to act as beasts despite the fact that we are mentally superior to them. Even worse, we prefer to baptize “not immoral” an action which if not immoral could only be moral. But I suspect nobody would insist that it is moral i.e. ethical obligatory, to kill. Our selfishness leads us to try to find excuses in order to continue indulging in our old habit of animal eating without any remorse. It is the same selfishness that does not allow us to see that in that way we put ourselves even below that of the beasts since we behave like them despite the fact that we can doubt on the moral grounds of doing so. And that answers the posed question “why should we care about animals pain?”. We should care if we regard ourselves as what we really are, the mentally superior species on this planet. We should care simply by not denying our mere nature which is different from that of the animals’.

Before reaching the end of this small overview, I would like to mention that arguments like the six presented above have appeared in various forms (see for example Tan, Young, Cohen) but always evolve or develop ideas around the same core concepts i.e. the non existence of animal rights or the effort to create non-existing dilemmas or emphasizing on human superiority over other creatures on earth or stressing the fact that at the end we have to eat something alive or even that is a natural law to kill in order to survive. They all try to support animals killing as a moral action whereas we presented corresponding counter-arguments that can be developed against. It is certain that this is not the unique way to tackle the issue. However I believe that we can, perhaps with the aid of the above discussion, easily accept that animals can be considered to have without any constraint innate rights to life. Furthermore, yes we can shout it loudly, animals do suffer from our actions! And our role as humans should be, not to intensify but to minimize suffering of all beings.

I understand that for some of the readers will not be possible to be convinced from our counter-arguments that proved that killing (and eating) animals cannot be baptized as a moral behavior. For some people is sometimes extremely difficult to realize that past or present habits is not always the proper course of action. So despite the fact that even the slightest hints of morality are totally unjustifiable on the current issue, the same or similar arguments are bound to hang over our heads for quite a long time, before we finally decide that it is high time to alter course and truly behave as the predominant species on earth...

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Email: dchaniotis66@hotmail.gr