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When the obvious becomes problematic – The ethics of turning animals into meat (#3)

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Introduction

To many it is simply part of human nature to hunt, produce and eat meat. Nonetheless the ideology of carnism has been under increasing criticism since the 1960'ies and especially the past 10 years have seen an increasing public awareness that eating meat might be more ethically problematic than most of us thought.

Ethics

Ethics is the attempt to figure out what we ought to do of all the things that we can do. It is making claims about what is good and what means to reach what is considered good that are acceptable. Obviously there is not one answer to those questions, but competing theories that each try to argue their case through different approaches to the phenomena of ethics.

Animal production

The public debate on animal production can be divided into two main themes: The direct consequences for the animals involved in the production and consumption of meat and the indirect consequences that impacts humans, other animals and nature as such. As animal production comes in many varieties, I will limit myself to discuss the intensive animal production developed since World War II in the industrialized world. Here questions of the welfare of the animals have played a central role since the 1970'ies. Different paradigms for animal welfare have been developed both in animal welfare science and animal ethics. Few will claim that e.g. intensive broiler chicken, pig or milk production provides the animals with an optimal welfare, but rather discuss whether the welfare provided for the animals is sufficient to be ethically acceptable. Besides welfare concerns many ethical theories claim that questions around both the integrity and death of the animals should also be seen as ethically relevant when assessing animal production.

The indirect consequences are mainly centered on the health effects of consuming animal protein and the effects on ecosystems through land-use, pollution and contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. Several studies suggests that over-consumption of animal protein, especially processed meat and red meat can have negative health effects for humans including increased risk of developing cancer. Side effects of animal production such as loss of biodiversity due to feed production, pollution of air, water and soil and greenhouse gas emissions can also lead to human health issues, but also holds risks for ecosystems, wild animals etc.

All these issues have contributed to the current situation where the production and consumption of animal protein is moving from being an unproblematic practice to an ethical discussion of whether it can be justified. In short: Is it good and right to eat meat?

Ethical considerations

As stated earlier an ethical evaluation of a certain practice can only be done based on a pre-understanding of what is good and what is right. My point of departure is based on a virtue ethical perspective and can briefly be expressed like this:

Part of living a flourishing life is to develop character traits (virtues) such as compassion, temperance and respectfulness. Thus the virtuous person will not cause harm, pain, suffering etc. to other sentient beings unless 1: It is for the benefit of the being itself or 2: It is necessary as a lesser evil.

Looking at the direct consequences of meat production and consumption for the animals involved and the indirect consequences for wildlife and humans in the shape of climate change, degradation of eco-systems etc. it seems initially that intensive animal production involving e.g. foot pad dermatitis in broiler chicken production, tail docking in pig production and separation of cow and calf short after birth in milk production is ethically problematic as the individual animal is obviously harmed by practices that cannot be understood as a case of doing something to benefit the animal itself, but rather something that happens to ensure an effective production (I here assume that it is uncontroversial to regard chickens, pigs and cows as sentient beings). Thus to argue for the ethical acceptability of the production it is necessary to show that it constitutes a lesser evil.

To the extent that meat production and consumption protects vital human interest with regard to e.g., food security and dietary needs, it is possible to evaluate it as a lesser evil. To the extent it does not, the lesser evil must be to discontinue the production as it harms vital interests of the animals to satisfy non-vital human interests which cannot be said to be an expression of the virtues of compassion, temperance and respectfulness.

The ethical discussion of animal production as seen from this ethical per-

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spective thus involves both explicating how the relevant virtues should be expressed with regard to animals and assessing the different human and animal interests involved. Based on this the conclusion is that a transition towards plant-based protein alternatives that take into account vital animal and human interests should be promoted as this seems the best way to express a virtuous character.

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