

Cutting Meat Out of Our Diets: The Personal and Global Effects

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In recent years more people have been turning to plant-based products rather than meat for nutrition. Diets have been turning vegan and vegetarian for many reasons such as personal health and animal cruelty concerns. Now that we are facing a “planet in peril” due to global warming, a new reason not to eat meat has been added to the list: the environment. The mass-production of livestock on “factory farms”—large corporations that breed livestock at rapid, cruel and unsafe rates—is ruining our air, land and water. Our bodies are also being polluted by this inferior meat with its high fat content that results from the antibiotics and hormones that factory farms inject into their livestock to speed up growth. Vegetarians and vegans are using these arguments against factory farming to relay to the public the importance of a meat-free diet. Cutting meat out of the diet can have a positive effect on the earth and the body.

Factory farmed livestock have a negative effect on the soil, water and air. Michael F. Jacobson states that “[g]razing land and crop land are the second and third largest uses of land in the United States, together accounting for just under half of Americas total acreage” (74). Livestock demands a large amount of land for grazing and food. When this land is grazed on, the quality of the land becomes poor. The dry, inadequately fed soil becomes home to unwanted weeds and flooding, making the land almost useless (78). Grazing also compacts the earth, making it difficult for the soil to take in water and nutrients, leading to erosion. However, according to Rachel Proctor, there is a procedure called “good grazing.” Proctor states that “if ranchers keep their cattle in tight herds, move them every few days and give grazed patches time, sometimes as much as a year, to recover, the cattle’s impacts will fill a valuable niche in the ecosystem” (18). Proctor suggests that the punctures in the soil made by the cattle’s feet create a place for water and seeds to collect, thus aiding in germination. The problem with this theory is that it is very difficult to monitor “good grazing” and most farmers become lazy. For example, Proctor points out that while some 10,000 have gone to workshops on holistic management led by Allan Savory, only about 25% actually practice what they learned (21). If executed properly, good grazing would be an earth friendly procedure.

Another environmental issue that concerns vegetarians and vegans is

the release of greenhouse gases through the production of animal by-products. Irrigation, fuel for farm machinery and labor all use large amounts of energy to produce animal products. According to Gideon Eshel and Pamela Martin, what people eat is in direct relation to the cars they drive with respect to greenhouse gas emissions. As Brendan Koerner states, “however close you can be to a vegan diet and further from the mean American diet, the better you are for the planet; going vegetarian has the same effect on carbon dioxide emissions as switching from a Chevrolet Suburban to a Toyota Camry”. Raising animals and livestock for human consumption releases many harmful emissions.

Water cleanliness and usage have also been affected by factory farmed livestock. Jacobson says, “it takes about 1,000 gallons of irrigated water to produce a quarter pound of animal protein” (88). The animals drink this water and use it to cool themselves off, and the farmers use it to irrigate the grains they feed to the animals. Factory farmed livestock consumes over half the fresh water available. All the water that people use brushing their teeth, cooking, and showering doesn’t add up to the water used by livestock on factory farms. Frank Rijsberman explains, “[o]n average it takes roughly 70 times more water to grow food for people than the amount people use for domestic purposes” (7). In addition to using a lot of water, maintaining a factory farm pollutes water. All of the fertilizers, drugs pesticides and manure produced usually end up in the earth’s precious waterways (Jacobson 94). Because of this, fish and other organisms in the water that are important to sustain a healthy ecosystem are killed. If more people decided to cut out animal products from their diets, we could make a lot of headway in our pursuit of a greener planet.

Although it is important to keep our planet clean, it is also equally important to keep our bodies healthy. The elimination of meat from someone’s diet can improve his or her health for a number of reasons. Vegetarians and vegans have argued against the amount of antibiotics and hormones used in the production of meat in factory farms for years. Robert Schaeffer states: “In the early 1950’s farmers discovered that new pharmaceuticals--antibiotics, hormones and steroids--could stimulate animal growth and make animal husbandry more efficient and profitable” (48). This early discovery encouraged factory farms to perfect the pharmaceutical concoctions that have been infecting meat products for decades. Not only are the drugs used harmful to the animals, they are equally harmful to the person ingesting the meat. “The danger is that heavy animal drug use may reduce the effectiveness of antibiotics in treating human disease,” says Schaeffer (49). With so much reliance on animal products, we are consuming these drugs little by little every day and hurting our ability to ward off disease. But the widely used antibiotics aren’t the only drugs affecting our bodies.

Factory farms use hormones to speed up the growth process in livestock, resulting in a fatter, lesser quality meat. Lesser quality meat is more harmful to people than meat of a higher quality. Many studies have also been done regarding the differences between the health of non-meat eaters and that of meat-eaters. According to Randall White and Erika Frank, “Those who had become vegetarians at an earlier age were at a lower risk for coronary heart disease mortality” (467). Collectively, vegetarianism greatly reduces the risk of obesity, heart diseases, cancer (including colon and breast cancer) and early mortality.

Obesity, heart disease and cancers aren't the only problems facing meat and animal by-product eaters. There is also the issue of food-borne illnesses. Jacobson states, “more than 1000 Americans die each year from a food-borne illness linked to meat, poultry, dairy, and egg products” (59). A lot of diseases that live in animals harmlessly are deadly to humans. E. coli and bird flu are a few animal derived illnesses that have been making headlines in the news recently. In 2001, a two-year-old boy died after eating a hamburger tainted with a vicious strain of the E. coli virus. The news of the cause of his death sent shock waves through the United States, a country largely made up of meat eaters (63). In 1997, a deadly strain of the bird flu infected humans in contact with poultry in Hong Kong. This outbreak affected 18 people and killed 6. Understandably, the news of food-borne illnesses made the public uneasy and threatened livestock farmers' livelihood. Though vegetarians and vegans may argue that these diseases can be avoided by staying away from animal products, some say there is still a chance of contracting these deadly diseases from eating fruits and vegetables. “Fruits and vegetables can be contaminated by tainted irrigation water, manure used as fertilizer or cross contamination from meat during transport or in the kitchen” says Jacobson (64). Some of the food-borne illnesses in meat can be killed by cooking at high temperatures, but who wants to cook a salad? The fact is that the pathogens affecting these vegetables are animal derived. If factory farms and local growers could avoid using animal by-products as plant food, then vegetables would become safe to leave uncooked.

While there is a strong argument for a meat-free diet, others think that some meat can be beneficial. “A 3-ounce piece of lean, choice round beef is a good source of protein, iron, B-complex vitamins, magnesium, and zinc” (“Is It?” 7). Though this may be true, meat also contains harmful saturated fats. Eli Roth and Sandra Streicher explain that, “[s]aturated fats raise the blood cholesterol level and in turn cause the development and progression of atherosclerosis...dairy products and any food made from animal sources are high in saturated fats” (10). Saturated fats can be easily avoided by replacing meat with non-animal derived products like legumes,

nuts, vegetables and fruits. In addition to these long-term effects of meat consumption, there are surprising short-term effects as well. Maneka Gandhi states, “Fatty foods, particularly a heavy meat diet, make one sluggish and tired” (1).

The vegan and vegetarian argument is not just about health issues or the environment; it is also about the wellbeing of the animals raised on factory farms. Chickens, hogs and cows alike are treated inhumanely in slaughterhouses, according to Gail A. Eisnitz. Eisnitz quotes a slaughterhouse worker: “Sometimes I grab it [a hog] by the ear and stick it right through the eye. I’m not just taking its eye out, I’ll go all the way to the hilt, right up through the brain, and wiggle the knife. Instant rag doll” (193). This was an employee discussing how he took out his frustration at getting kicked by still-conscious hogs when he tried to “stick” them. This issue of employees losing their tempers with animals is all too familiar. The CEOs of these poor performing slaughterhouses should mandate rules and regulations against misconduct towards the animals. But keeping an eye on every worker and making sure they do their job properly is too difficult, which leaves the corporations at fault for the mistreatment (98).

Though many corporations are setting poor precedents in the slaughtering of their livestock, others are forced into more humane killing treatments. For instance, Daniel Zwerdling reports, “McDonald’s ordered the huge beef slaughterhouses that supply its Big Macs to revamp their methods, after investigative reports revealed that many cattle become frantic during their final minutes, and that workers were even hacking up some animals that were still alive” (1). This set a standard for other major slaughterhouses to uphold. Some corporations decided to kill their chickens using a gas chamber, which is meant to be the desired, humane option of killing, but unfortunately the chicken usually has a seizure while gasping for air (1). But many companies are still using their own methods because they are unwilling to put forth the money to adapt. Zwerdling writes of an example of an unreformed slaughterhouse used for KFC chickens:

The automated line dips the chickens’ heads into an electrified bath meant to render them unconscious. Then the shackles carry them, still upside down, to a whirling blade designed to slice their necks. The birds bleed to death (at least in theory) as they move to a scalding water bath, which loosens their feathers, and workers begin to disembowel them. (3)

This account doesn’t include how the chickens get to that point. The baby chicks are “dumped” into a field where they grow for about six weeks before they are grabbed by an employee, five in each hand, and hurled into a cage. The chickens are put in small cages ten at a time, and most become so cramped they usually resort to cannibalism due to malnutrition, stress,

and close proximity to one another. A lot of times the chickens survive the electrified bath, which means they are conscious when decapitated (2). Even meat eaters find the inhumane treatment of livestock appalling. Tamar Haspel, a self-proclaimed meat lover says: “The small farmer’s message that we should care about the lives of our livestock is getting traction. As it does, it gives those of us with a concern for animals, but also a fondness for pork chops, a place to hang our hats” (1). With so much concern for the rights of animals, it is possible that more corporations and factory farms will change their inhumane killing methods.

Many people believe that the rights of animals are directly related to the rights of humans. Having a belief that animals should have rights may also encourage a compassion for men and women alike (Ryder 2). As Audre Lorde states, African-American lesbian women had to fight for equality from the patriarchal society in which they were persecuted (111). It is my contention that livestock and other animals used for human consumption are at the mercy of the same patriarchal society. Men who have a difficult time looking beyond money run the factory farms and large meat-producing corporations like KFC, McDonald’s, and Burger King.

All living things deserve rights that protect them from mistreatment and injustice. It is important for all who are interested in fighting for animal rights to join forces because as Lorde pointed out, “without community there is no liberation” (113). If those who regard animal life as equally important as human life come together and compile a plan of action, we could see animal suffering minimized drastically. Just as advocates for black lesbian women like Lorde had to fight for their right to equality, advocates for animals have to fight for animal rights. Lorde states “In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action” (112). People like Gail Eisnitz researched their “personal visions” and are helping the public become aware of the unethical situation known as animal cruelty.

The vegan and vegetarian argument is clear: remove animal products from a diet and live a healthier, more ethical, environmentally sound life. Considering all the problems factory farms, large meat corporations and slaughterhouses are causing, it is no wonder this subject has become a hot topic for debate. The meat-free eaters of the world understand it is unrealistic to expect everyone to remove animal products from their lives. But if the collective consumption could be lessened, it would make for better living conditions for humans and animals alike.

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