

## A humanist discussion of... VEGETARIANISM

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Humanists are non-religious people who live by moral principles based on **reason** and **respect** for others, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have. When deciding whether something is right or wrong, humanists **consider the evidence** and **the effects of choices** on the people concerned and the wider community.

Many humanists have moral concerns about eating meat, based on concerns about the way we treat animals, the environment, and world poverty. For these reasons, some humanists become vegetarians, while others may choose to eat less meat, or to eat only "free range" meat.

### Should we eat animals?

The debate about how we treat animals, and whether we should kill and eat them, has gone on for a long time. Some cultures see no reason to care about animals at all. Religious beliefs that humankind is special and that animals do not have souls have sometimes been used to justify appalling exploitation and cruelty. But religious statements about other species tend to depend on the more general moral values of society and to change as we learn more about animal psychology and capacity for pain. Some religious people think that God created the world and gave humans "stewardship" over it, but this is not a belief that humanists can share, and they look elsewhere for reasons for caring about animals.

Reasonable people think that **we ought to treat other people well**, that we should respect their rights and consider their welfare. **But should we also treat other animals well, and why should we?**

Humanists do not generally think that animals have rights in quite the same that people do, and have no "party line" on animal welfare, or compulsory customs or religious food taboos that would influence their attitude to eating animals. They have to think for themselves, and decide whether to extend their concern for welfare from humans to animals, and how far to take this. Though humanists tend to put the needs of human beings first if there is a conflict, they also value animals and the natural world. **A rational non-religious morality, based on observation, experience and empathy, might well include respect and affection for animals and an unwillingness to cause them suffering or to kill or eat them.**

But this does not necessarily lead to vegetarianism, as animals can be raised and slaughtered humanely (though this is not the norm at present).



Concern for **suffering** does seem to be a key issue when deciding whether to become a vegetarian or not. As Jeremy Bentham, the famous Utilitarian philosopher wrote about animals in 1789:

**"The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?"**

We do not, on the whole, think it is possible to be cruel to plants because plants do not have nervous systems which can feel physical pain, or minds which can feel psychological pain (for example, fear). But we have all seen miserable or bored animals or heard them yelp with pain - it is difficult to believe seriously that they do not have feelings, and scientists have confirmed these everyday observations by methodical research.

Humanists would prefer not to cause unnecessary suffering to sentient beings, and discussion tends to focus on what is "**unnecessary suffering**". Many people think that hunting and fishing for food or sport are cruel and unnecessary. Many people are willing to eat less meat, or no meat at all, in order to discourage what they see as the unnecessary cruelty involved in factory farming. (In Europe and the USA, 18 million pigs - intelligent animals - are kept in restrictive battery farm conditions.) Some people think that all killing of animals is wrong, whilst others argue that death cannot mean as much to animals as it does to us, and so all that matters is rearing and killing them humanely. Humanists make use of reason and compassion when thinking about these questions, and will arrive at different conclusions, often depending on specific circumstances or situations.



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## Other considerations

Concerns about the **environment** focus on the contribution of human beings and their farms to the destruction of wilderness. Raising meat uses up a lot of land and can be particularly destructive of forests and grassland. Humanists think that we should try to do as little harm as possible and choose farming practices and eating habits with this in mind.

Concerns about **poverty** and **equality** focus on the expense of raising meat. Animals use land and food that could be used to grow crops that feed people much more directly and economically. In a world where some people do not have enough to eat, perhaps eating meat is a luxury we can do without.

Responsible human beings, and that includes most humanists, do not think that we should exploit or mistreat others just because they are different from us or because we are bigger or cleverer than they are. **Is this what we are doing when we factory-farm and kill and eat animals?** Most humanists simply do not want to be the kind of person who causes suffering or who tolerates cruelty, and for many that must include animals.

### Questions to think about and discuss

- o A rabbit is born and lives its whole life in a small barren cage. Does it make any difference to your moral views on this if it is kept (a) as a pet, (b) for meat, (c) for fur, (d) for medical experiments, (e) for beauty product experiments.
- o Do you think that animals have a different response to death than humans?
- o Is eating "free range meat" an adequate response to a moral concern about the way we use land? Is eating less or no meat a better response?
- o How consistent are you in your attitudes to animals? Do you tolerate some uses of animals and not others? Do you kill wasps and flies? Do you eat factory-farmed meat or chicken? Do you know how meat gets to your table? Should we all be vegetarians?
- o Do some animals matter more than others? Do you think there should be some kind of sliding scale of concern?

*With thanks to Dr Georgia Mason of Oxford University Department of Zoology*

### Further reading

Available online at [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk) -

- Other BHA briefings: ***Thinking about ethics; Animal Welfare; Environmental Issues, Genetic Engineering, Nature***
- Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), ***What is Humanism?*** (BHA)

Peter Singer, *Animal Rights*

Mary Midgeley, *Why Animals Matter*

*Do animals feel pain?* An article by the New Scientist (25 April 1992) available online at [www.newscientist.com](http://www.newscientist.com)