

# On Ethicists and Their Diets

by David DeGrazia

**D**o ethicists have a stronger obligation than other people to maintain an ethical diet—at the very least, to avoid routine consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy products from factory farms? Although most people in the United States and many in other countries regularly consume these products, there is an overwhelmingly strong moral case that doing so is wrong. Various factors explain why most people do anyway. But ethicists are supposed to be good at examining important ethical questions. Hence my question.

Factory farming is one of the most destructive institutions in human history. In the United States alone, it raises and kills ten billion animals every year. The conditions in which these cows, pigs, chickens, and other animals live and the way they are treated in transit to and inside slaughterhouses are exceptionally cruel. (Anyone who doubts this should see video footage of factory farms and slaughterhouses.) Factory farming is also an environmental disaster, polluting local communities, spurring antibiotic resistance, and driving climate change. Meanwhile, no one really needs to eat the industry's products, especially not on a routine basis. Those who remain within the dietary mainstream—regularly supporting factory farming—are gratuitously preserving a highly unethical status quo of food production.

People unaccustomed to thinking critically about food ethics might experience cognitive dissonance in reading the previous paragraph. Ordinarily, one might think, if almost everyone engages in a practice, we may assume it is permissible. Were it not, then presumably most people would be unwilling to keep engaging in it. Moreover, if maintaining a typical carnivorous diet were unethical, wouldn't progressive politicians be leading the charge to abolish factory farming and move toward plant-based (or perhaps plant-and-seafood-based) diets? Yet Bernie isn't. Nor is "the squad." What's going on here?

Such cognitive dissonance is understandable. To reach the conclusion that mainstream diets are unethical, one must, first, grasp the extreme cruelty that factory farming involves. This understanding requires not only accessing the relevant information about the animals' living conditions but also overcoming such defense mechanisms as denial and compartmentalization that can obstruct appreciation of the relevant facts. (Those rare individuals who are totally indifferent to animal suffering but care about humanity need to appreciate that factory farming harms and threatens the future of humanity through its environmental impact.) Second, one must understand that, despite the ubiquity of the dietary practices in question, they are unnecessary—people can maintain robust health and other important in-

terests without such diets. This again requires accessing the relevant information and not deflecting it with defense mechanisms motivated by a desire to avoid having to change one's lifestyle.

Further, if one prefers to elude the inconvenient truth that factory farming and mainstream meat eating are unethical, one will find support in most religious and cultural traditions, which reflect humanity's ageless, deeply entrenched prejudice against nonhuman animals. Should we be surprised at the attribution of a nearly universal prejudice to humanity? Not at all. We know, from long experience, that people tend to be biased against those they perceive as different, those whose interests appear to conflict with those of one's in-group (in this case, humanity), and those one can dominate and exploit. Plus, human beings evolved as omnivores and therefore as animal killers. It would be astonishing if human beings did not tend to harbor anti-animal prejudices.

Upon reflection, then, cognitive dissonance at the judgment that most people have unethical diets is to be expected. But ethicists are smart, well-informed people who can understand the relevant facts, see past standard rationalizations for the status quo, and overcome their biases and defense mechanisms. After all, ethicists are good at thinking critically about ethics.

So do ethicists have a greater obligation than other people to maintain ethical diets? No, they have the same obligation as everyone else. But, unlike a lot of people, ethicists have no excuses for failing to understand dietary ethics and living accordingly.

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