

Vegetarianism Beyond Nonviolence, Rights, and Personal Health

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Abstract: Vegetarianism is argued to be the only morally justified diet since in this kind of diet nonhuman animals are regarded with respect; nonviolence against them is promoted. Those who support vegetarianism argue that humans are not morally justified in killing those nonhuman animals for the consumption and luxury of humans. On the other hand, meat-eating diet is defended by the argument that it is natural for animals to eat other animals making it inconsistent to denounce human to eat other nonhuman animals. In this paper, using the teachings and beliefs of Hinduism, the author argues that it (vegetarianism) goes beyond nonviolence against animals, respect for their rights, and for personal bodily health of humans. Vegetarianism is not only a diet to achieve a healthy body but also a way to achieve a more noble spiritual liberation.

Keywords: Vegetarianism; Hinduism; Liberation; Moral Justification; Duty

Introduction

Supporters of vegetarianism argue that nonhuman animals are not to be slaughtered and eaten since they are beings that can experience pain and suffering. They further argue that nonhuman animals have rights and that they are entitled to equal consideration. Thus, the main reason for the vegetarian diet is nonviolence against nonhuman animals and respect for their rights. On the other hand, those who argue for meat-eating diet contend that eating meat is justified since it is natural for animals to eat other animals. If it is natural for nonhuman animals to eat other species, it is inconsistent to denounce human to eat other nonhuman animals.

The purpose of this paper is to show that nonviolence against nonhuman animals, respect for their rights, and personal health are insufficient reasons to justify vegetarianism and deny meat-eating diet. It (vegetarianism) goes beyond them. Furthermore, this paper presents that in Hinduism, from which vegetarianism originates, this diet is more of a spiritual way of life by which a person is freed from the cycle of rebirth.

Beyond Nonviolence, Rights, and Health

From the point of view Hinduism, it is insufficient to use nonviolence against nonhuman animals, respect for their rights, and human's personal health as the only justification for vegetarianism. Hinduism actually requires to inflict pain and even death as long as a person's action is done out of his/her *dharma*. Death is explained in this philosophy as the death of the body only, not of the soul/*atman*. Furthermore, Hinduism acknowledges hierarchy of beings in which human beings are considered superior in terms of having the highest form of body that one can get than the nonhuman animals. With this acknowledgement, seemingly, those who contend for meat-eating diet with the reason that stronger animals have the right over the weak ones are somehow justified on the basis of natural right.

However, Hinduism teaches us that every person who has not done his/her *dharma* is bound to be imprisoned in the cycle of rebirth, known as the *samsara*. Every endeavor of a person is directed towards the liberation (*moksha*) of himself/herself from this cycle. Even in his/her diet, a person should be mindful of his/her obligation to others and to himself/herself. Thus, the ultimate goal of

vegetarianism is to achieve spiritual liberation from the suffering that is brought by the cycle of rebirth.

Hinduism on Violence and Animal Sacrifice

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna was advised by Krishna to do his duty by killing the enemies. Krishna's advice was based on the idea that when Arjuna kills an enemy it is not the enemy that he kills, it is just the body. When an enemy dies, his soul/*atman* which is immortal will then live in another body. Arjuna said "I do not wish to kill my seniors, spiritual leaders, and relatives who are ready to kill us, even for the sovereignty of the three worlds, let alone for this earthly kingdom, O Krishna." (as cited in Archie & Archie, 2004, p. 2). Krishna replied "The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead... The soul acquires another body after death.... The invisible Spirit is eternal. The visible physical body is transitory." as cited in Archie & Archie, 2004, p. 5). However, it must be noted that Arjuna is advised to kill his enemies because it is his duty/*dharama* to do so and not for pleasure and with bad intentions.

Furthermore, although Bhagavad-Gita prohibits animal sacrifices, some scriptures of Hinduism allow them. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad tells of this sacrifice: "After one year he sacrificed the horse for himself along with other animals to the Gods. That is why priests sacrifice to Prajapati, a sanctified horse, dedicated to all the Gods." (Jacobs, 2007, Book 1, Part 2, 7). In addition to animal sacrifice, a person is allowed to eat meat if the meat is a *jhatka* meat, that is, when the animal is killed by a single strike to fulfill the principle of minimal pain.

Thus, Hinduism somehow allows butchering of nonhuman animals for food as long as it is done out of duty and/or following the principle of minimal pain.

The Way to Liberation: A Defense for Vegetarianism

In Hinduism, vegetarianism is not merely a diet to sustain the needs of the body. It is a way of life to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth, not only of the human animals but also of the nonhuman animals. Bhagavad-Gita does not allow animals to be slaughtered for food because if they are killed for food and on the time that they were not supposed to die, they will be reborn to the same form, disabling them or at least delaying them from attaining self-fulfillment.

Furthermore, if the nonhuman animal form is regarded as simply another form to which the *atman* is reborn, essentially animals and humans are equal in being, having the same immortal soul and goal. It is therefore the duty of humans to be mindful of animals, not by treating them as food but by giving them the chance for self-realization. And by doing so, a person becomes virtuous and deserving of good karma.

Conclusion

Vegetarianism must not only be viewed as a diet to attain a healthy body. It must be understood in the light of its original proponent, Hinduism (and other Indian Philosophies). Hinduism may have conflicting beliefs and teachings, but it must be noted that for this philosophy every action of a human person including his/her diet is for spiritual liberation.

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