

Animal Virtue Ethics

Veganism and Virtuous Omnivorism: A Classroom Debate

1. Carlo Alvaro, “Ethical Veganism, Virtue, and Greatness of the Soul”
2. Christopher A. Bobier, “What Would the Virtuous Person Eat? The Case for Virtuous Omnivorism”

This reader presents shortened, newly typeset versions of two competing arguments in animal virtue ethics. Omission notices are editorial; the authors’ prose is otherwise transcribed from the original articles.

Ethical Veganism, Virtue, and Greatness of the Soul

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Classroom excerpt. Bracketed notices identify passages omitted from the original article; all other prose below is transcribed from the original.

Abstract

Many moral philosophers have criticized intensive animal farming because it can be harmful to the environment, it causes pain and misery to a large number of animals, and furthermore eating meat and animal-based products can be unhealthful. The issue of industrially farmed animals has become one of the most pressing ethical questions of our time. On the one hand, utilitarians have argued that we should become vegetarians or vegans because the practices of raising animals for food are immoral since they minimize the overall happiness. Deontologists, on the other hand, have argued that the practices of raising animals for food are immoral because animals have certain rights and we have duties toward them. Some virtue ethicists remain unconvinced of deontic and consequentialist arguments against the exploitation of animals and suggest that a virtue-based approach is better equipped to show what is immoral about raising and using animals for food, and what is virtuous about ethical veganism.

Keywords: Veganism, Compassion, Fairness, Virtue ethics, Utilitarianism, Deontology

Introduction

In recent years, two important but unrelated events have occurred in ethics. One is the return of moral philosophers to an interest in virtue ethics.¹ The other is the interest in ethical veganism. I think that a virtuous approach to morality can be used in support of ethical veganism. One wonders why virtue ethicists seldom have contemplated this prospect. Apart from the already difficult task of articulating a virtue ethics, it is also difficult to defend ethical veganism in a way that is satisfactory. Some proponents of veganism suggest that we categorically abolish animal exploitation; they argue that using animals or insects as a source of food, clothing, and more, is immoral; and even that we should reject all products that have been experimented on animals - unconditionally. This position, which I call absolute veganism, faces the difficulty of justifying such a totalizing claim in the face, for example, of those who live in parts of the world where scarcity of plant food or other unfavorable factors leave them with no other choice but to use animals to survive. Furthermore, avoiding products obtained from animals or that have been experimented on animals is nearly impossible as almost everything has, including soya beans, even water. In addition, the very People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) state, "we would not oppose eating eggs from chickens treated as companions if the birds receive excellent care and are not purchased from hatcheries."² The latter, however, may seem to demand too little. Many vegans (including myself) would not eat eggs - even from chickens treated as companions. Another challenging aspect of ethical veganism is that the typical arguments offered in support of veganism do not seem adequate to justify becoming or staying vegans. For example, Animalrightsabout.com writes, "Veganism is the practice of minimizing harm to all animals, which requires abstention from animal products, such as meat, fish, dairy, eggs, honey, gelatin, lanolin, wool, fur, silk, suede and leather."³ But we should not become ethical vegans only because it may minimize harm, and I worry that "requiring abstention" from animal products may be the wrong moral attitude. The approaches to ethical veganism that I described, are vaguely based on flawed utilitarian or deontic concepts suggesting that, as a rule, we abstain from using animals or, as a utilitarian principle, we do what minimizes undesirable consequences. My argument is based on virtue. I argue that a more conducive defense of ethical veganism is to consider it an expression of virtuous character, upon reflection and observation of the lives of animals and their objective moral characteristics. I believe that conducting a virtuous life may entail practicing veganism, not as an abstention or an attempt to maximize utility, but rather as an expression of good moral character, of what Aristotle calls "greatness of the soul".⁴

Virtue Ethics

Considering that deontic and utilitarian arguments defending the moral obligation to become vegetarians or vegans are flawed, I shall discuss how virtue ethics can offer a more helpful approach. Virtue ethics (VE) maintains that our moral experience and our relation with others are too complex, too nuanced, and too textured to be captured and understood by a set of principles or rational calculation. When we theorize, we detach ourselves from our moral experience and our moral feelings, overlooking the importance of our relationship with others and the importance of “sympathy, empathy, and compassion as relevant ethical and epistemological sources for human treatment of nonhuman animals”.¹⁶ In the Greek myth, Procrustes offered his bed to guests who wanted to spend the night. If the guests were too long for the bed, Procrustes would chop off their legs; and if they were too short, he would stretch them so that they could fit. Deontology and utilitarianism have done to morality what Procrustes used to do to his guests. VE, therefore, believes that the correct way to understand and approach morality is to consider each situation and determine what the appropriate moral approach should be and which action should be carried out. Most importantly, VE recognizes that people’s motives, character, and reasons for acting in certain ways are more important than any theory that claims to give moral directions. In other words, if people are just, moderate, compassionate, and overall have a benevolent disposition, by virtue of their characters, they will do what is right, for the right reason, at the right time, in a given circumstance.

There are important factors in morality, whether an intention is right, whether one is following the correct rule, or whether the consequences of our actions generate morally good outcomes. But these factors are not primary. What is primary for VE is whether the individual’s actions are expressions of good character, through the acquisition of the moral virtues. The concept of virtue is the concept of morally admirable character traits, the possession of which makes one a good individual. A virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels as he or she should, for the right reason considering the circumstances. When we help a friend, for example, we should want to do so out of friendship and not for the sake of it or because we have ulterior motives. According to VE, if you are my friend, I help you because I like you and care about you and take pleasure in helping you, and not because I think that I have a moral duty to help you or because it turns out that my helping you will maximize overall utility. This aspect of VE is one of the main points of disagreement between VE and non-aretaic moral theories. VE regards a virtuous individual as someone who has the virtues; virtues have morally right desires built in. In Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the question of how one acquires the moral virtues, “the virtues... we acquire by having first put them into action”.¹⁷ This is possible because the capacity for virtue is innate, but has to be brought to a fully developed state through practice. For example, it is by repeatedly performing generous acts that one develops the virtue of generosity; it is by repeatedly refusing to indulge one’s appetite that one develops the virtue of temperance. However, not every generous or temperate act is virtuous. If I spend my entire paycheck to buy a friend a car or if I refrain from eating all together, or I eat far too much, then I am not doing what is virtuous. Consider the virtue of courage. Being courageous is not to lack fear but to act in spite of fear. But if I express my courage by robbing a bank, I am not exercising my courage in a way that is virtuous. Why? Simply because robbing a bank is an action proceeding from a vice that goes against other

virtues, such as justice. According to VE, the best way to promote social cooperation and harmony is for people to acquire a good, reliable character. Rules by themselves may give guidelines, but they cannot make people good. Consequences of our actions are important, but without good character we are not likely to produce greater total satisfaction than other theories try to achieve by detached theorizing.

Virtue and Veganism

In order to see in what sense ethical veganism may be an expression of virtue, it is helpful to consider some important aspects of the virtues of temperance, compassion, fairness, and also of what Aristotle calls greatness of the soul. Aristotle discusses temperance and intemperance in Book III. 10-12 of the *Ethics* in terms of bodily pleasure and pain. The intemperate person, Aristotle argues, enjoys “the smells of perfumes and cooked dishes”.¹⁸ He describes intemperance as indulging in pleasures that are “slavish or brutish”.¹⁹ With regard to eating, too much or too little, Aristotle notes, will ruin one’s health. He argues that “to eat whatever is at hand”²⁰ is a sign of intemperance. Conversely, the virtuously temperate individual, with regard to food, eats things that are conducive to health, and in moderation, “as long as they are not incompatible with health or vigour, contrary with what is noble, or beyond his means”.²¹ The temperate individual, thus, is not attracted to any kinds of foods merely because they smell good or taste good or seem pleasurable. Rather, she will eat in moderation, not to satisfy her pleasure, but to be nourished; and she will choose those foods that are healthful. From this consideration of what it is to be temperate, as it applies to healthful eating, by showing that eating animal products can be unhealthful, it seems consistent to say that consuming animal products is immoral as it is an expression of the vice of intemperance. What is important here is to consider that it is possible to thrive on a vegan diet, a diet completely devoid of animal products, and that health sciences show that consuming animal products can be dangerous for one’s health.²²

[The article’s extended health-evidence discussion (original pp. 772-773) is omitted.]

Another expression of virtue that appears to be consistent with ethical veganism is the feeling of compassion. Aristotle discusses how compassion is an important moral feeling that the virtuous individual possesses and uses at the right time and for the right reason. He defines compassion as follows,

Let compassion be a sort of distress at an apparent evil, destructing or distressing, which happens to someone who doesn’t deserve it, and which one might expect to happen to oneself or someone close to one and this when it appear near.³⁴

For Aristotle, compassion is the pain felt at the misfortune one believes to have befallen another when the suffering is serious rather than trivial, the belief is held that the suffering is undeserved, and the sufferer may be without fault (in the instant case, animals used as a source of food when not strictly necessary) or the deplorable consequences may outweigh the fault, affecting our sense of injustice.³⁵ Compassion is an important moral feeling connected with a good moral character that we need to have “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue.”³⁶ Since virtue involves having the right feelings and

performing the right action, a compassionate individual will not only feel compassion, but also act compassionately. As Roger Crisp writes,

Someone with the virtue of compassion will act in ways characteristic of someone who feels compassion appropriately. She will offer the right kind of help in the right kind of way rather than ignoring the other's plight on the one hand, or providing the wrong sort of assistance, such as smothering the other with her concern.³⁷

Therefore, the idea of a compassionate individual is that she will perform compassionate actions in the proper way, that is, knowing what she is doing, choosing the actions appropriately for their own sake (or, for the sake of the "noble," as Aristotle puts it), given the situation at hand, and performing them from a well-grounded disposition.³⁸

With regard to animals, then, what are the actions of a compassionate individual toward them? To be compassionate means to be concerned about others' pain, with the hope of alleviating it and that some positive good will emerge from the sufferer's unfortunate situation. Since being virtuous entails performing the proper action from a well-grounded disposition, then being compassionate entails being altruistic, that is, acting in such a way as to help others who are suffering. A compassionate individual takes action to increase or maintain others' happiness. Since most animals are capable of suffering or living a pleasant life, a compassionate individual would avoid practices that cause pain to animals and also would try to maintain their happiness. Notice that this view is compatible with the thesis that animal suffering is qualitatively different from human suffering. I am not arguing that animal suffering and enjoyment and human suffering and enjoyment are qualitatively the same. My claim is that killing an animal just for the sake eating steak, for example, is callous when equally or better nutritious plant-based alternatives are readily available. A compassionate individual has empathy. Empathy "recognizes connection with an understanding of the circumstances of the other."³⁹ An empathetic individual tries to understand thoroughly the situation and circumstances of others and cares about their well-being. These 'others' may be close to us or far away, other humans or non-human animals. Empathy enables us to extend our love to victims of some natural catastrophe, for example, who may live at the other side of the world. In the case of our treatment of non-human animals, the compassionate individual has empathy for them and tries to understand what matters for them. A compassionate individual, therefore, will not merely try to alleviate the pain of an animal who, for instance, is about to be slaughtered by caressing him or by giving him a tranquilizer or by making his death as quick as possible. This would not be the full expression of compassion. Rather, a compassionate individual, who has empathy, also recognizes that animals do not only wish to avoid pain, but also wish to survive and flourish. Consequently, by definition, a compassionate person would oppose all forms of animal exploitation. But just like other virtues, compassion seems to lie between two excesses. One way, for example, an individual would be too compassionate is by putting his own well-being at risk. It would be a form of excess of compassion if one refused to wash his hands to protect germs, or if he denied food to his children to feed strangers, or allowed rats to take over his apartment. Conversely, one would not be compassionate enough if he deliberately killed animals for fun, or just for the sake of it; or, in the instant case, having an abundance of nutritious plant-based food, he indulged in eating products derived from the exploitation and death of animals. Ethical veganism is the idea that we should avoid using animals for food or clothing when we have

equal or superior, readily available plant-based alternatives, as it is the case in many developed countries.

A typical objection is that eating meat would seem consistent with compassion as long as animals are treated with respect. However, from my evaluation of compassion, it does not appear to be the case. Many people may claim that the compassionate way to use animals for food is to allow them to live a happy life. This attitude, however, evinces a failure to be compassionate, or an incompleteness of the virtue of compassion. For VE, it is not sufficient to be compassionate only in some instances.⁴⁰ The very idea of compassion is not only to suffer with or share others' suffering but also to make a positive contribution to their happiness. If we truly treat animals well and are concerned about their well-being, it seems peculiar that we might do this with the intention of eventually killing them to have them as food. Using the adverb "compassionately" to modify the verb "kill" is not sufficient to make killing a compassionate act. Therefore, one may not claim to be compassionate in the complete sense of the virtue if one's actions involve acts such as killing animals merely because their cooked flesh tastes good and gives them a great deal of pleasure. One must be thoroughly and consistently compassionate toward animals. Also, one is not truly compassionate by simply refraining from directly being cruel to or directly exploiting animals. One must also not be party to the exploitation of animals; he must not purchase leather, fur, meat, or choose to remain ignorant or inactive by shrugging it off and say that he cannot do anything about it. Here I consider as a premise that for virtually all people who live in affluent societies, eating meat is a caprice rather than a strict necessity. Consequently, it is in no way compassionate to kill an animal for food or entertainment or for fun or even if it is done in a way that minimizes or avoids pain. As Stephens points out, a "compassionate person would feel moral discomfort, or even revulsion, enjoying something made possible only by the suffering of another."⁴¹ Therefore, insofar as veganism is the position according to which we should not kill animals or use their body parts and by-products when other equal or superior plant-based foods or clothing are readily available, veganism is an expression of virtue, more precisely, it is an expression of compassion.

Another aspect of virtue that enables us to see what is virtuous about veganism is what Aristotle calls the crown of the virtues, that is, greatness of the soul, which he discusses in IV.³ Greatness of the soul consists in thinking oneself worthy of great things and being concerned about honor. A great-souled individual, in other words, possesses great moral qualities, such as compassion, temperance, and a sense of justice in the sense of what is right or wrong in a given circumstance. What emerges from an analysis of what it is to be a great-souled individual is "the sort of person to do good," and "It would be quite unfitting [for a great-souled individual] to run away with his arms swinging, or to commit an injustice".⁴² The kind of picture we get of the great-souled individual is a magnanimous, and just individual who cares about others and is not afraid to help the vulnerable.

A great-souled individual must be just. Being just means to avoid actions in accordance with vice, such as committing adultery or wanton violence.⁴³ The just individual is a fair individual.⁴⁴ It might be objected that Aristotle here is talking about civic justice. But I believe his definition of the just in terms of a fair individual is broad enough to be relevant to the question of our treatment of animals. Aristotle views the just and fair individual as a great-souled individual. He says, "the best is...the one who exercises [his virtue] in relation to others..." and what "tends to produce or to preserve happiness".⁴⁵ In other words, the

virtuous individual, as a great-souled individual, would be against wanton violence, exploiting people or animals. A fair individual recognizes that hurting animals intentionally is unfair. Also, a fair-minded individual acts out of justice to ensure that everyone receives what he or she deserves. Being fair means ensuring that others receive the deserved treatment. For example, it is unfair to deny certain benefits to a group of people solely on the basis of, say, their color, gender, or race. The fair individual is fair to all, regardless of their skin color, nationality, height, age, species, and so on. Also it seems plausible to say that, following this idea of fairness, it is unfair to raise and kill animals for food when plant-based foods are readily available. Eating and using animals typically causes countless animals to suffer and be killed for trivial reasons, such as taste, fashion, and amusement. In societies where plant food is readily available and abundant, using animals as a source of food is, by definition, unfair.

Virtue ethics here agrees with deontology and consequentialism about the moral importance of taking into account animal conscious experience and their capacity to suffer; but while utilitarianism argues that these two factors should be taken into account so as to maximize overall happiness or preference, and deontology regards them as the basis for duty or rights, for VE animals' mental capacity and their capacity to feel pain or pleasure inform our virtuous character of their moral importance. That is to say, animals' conscious experience and their capacity to have a great life, or a miserable one, give us an objective reason to be compassionate toward them and treat them with respect.

The notion that animals are conscious and feel pain is no longer a controversial one. For example, studies now show that it is not only large animals, but also "there is adequate behavioral and physiological evidence to support pain attributions to fish".⁴⁶ As cognitive ethologists Donald Griffin points out, it is arbitrary to deny animals a level of self-awareness; most of the animals that are typically regarded as food, cows, pigs, lambs, chickens, and others, are conscious and aware of their own bodies and actions. Animal thoughts and emotions may be simple compared to humans' in the sense that perhaps animals can think only of matters of immediate importance, so in that sense their awareness of the world is said to be not as sophisticated as that of human beings. However, Griffin argues, consciousness is not an all-or-nothing attribute. Most animals are complex enough to be able to organize and retain information about many aspects of their lives. For example, they recognize different odors to which they react in different ways, suggesting many subjective feelings and awareness.⁴⁷ If this is correct, killing such animals, merely to satisfy our taste for a certain dish, is immoral because they experience the world and killing them deprives them from their future existence and experiences. When we consider carefully the mental capacity of animals and we consider what it is to be a great-souled individual, that is, a compassionate, magnanimous, caring, and fair individual, it seems quite unlikely to claim that a great-souled individual might treat animals with compassion (for instance in very high welfare production systems), and then decide to eventually kill them with minimal pain and suffering in order to eat them. The practice of killing animals to eat them - not out of necessity but rather for trivial reasons - is not in accordance with the actions of a great-souled individual who is compassionate, temperate, and fair. Again, considering that eating meat is not required to thrive, and considering that in well-developed societies there is an abundance of plant-based food of equal or superior nutritional value to meat, it follows that killing animals and eating them is immoral. If it is not out of necessity, then eating meat is a practice justified merely by

tradition, taste, convenience, or other trivial reasons. Animals experience the world. They are individuals. Although they may not be, cognitively speaking, as sophisticated as human beings, it would seem that they want to enjoy their existence. It follows that tradition, convenience, and taste are not good reasons to use animals, even “humanely.” If we are consistently fair, we will not merely try to ameliorate the living conditions of animals with the intent to eventually turn them into food or clothes, or try to kill them with minimal pain. Rather, if we are fair, compassionate, and temperate, we will avoid exploiting them in the first place. Using their bodies, their skin, their milk, their fur, or their eggs is therefore immoral, as well. Ethical veganism argues that when plant food is readily available, using animals for food is unnecessary, unfair, cruel, and also unhealthful, and thus it is an immoral practice. Therefore, ethical veganism embodies the virtues of compassion, fairness, temperance, and what it is to be a great-souled person.

[The environmental-impact section (original pp. 778-779) is omitted.]

Conclusion

I have argued that a virtue-based approach is the correct moral framework to justify ethical veganism. I pointed out that deontic and consequentialist accounts are incapable of defending the conclusion that we should be or become vegans. Essentially, the reason these moral approaches fail is that they lose sight of the important issue about our treatment of animals by focusing on abstract principles such as duty or rights or maximization of utility; they also try, unpersuasively, to show a symmetry between the moral value of humans and that of animals. My focus has been to show that it is more plausible to frame a defense of ethical veganism by starting from a question of what it is to be what Aristotle calls a great-souled individual. As I have argued, this individual is compassionate, just, and temperate. Consequently, acquiring those virtues and acting from them will motivate ethical veganism. That is to say, a virtuous individual is compassionate, caring, sensitive to cruelty and unfairness to animals, and therefore these moral qualities will lead to ethical veganism.

Notes

- ¹ This revival began with the famous G.E.M. Anscombe's article "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy* 33 (1958).
- ² "Is it OK to eat eggs from chickens I've raised in my backyard?" <http://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/is-it-ok-to-eat-eggs-from-chickens-ive-raised-in-my-backyard/>.
- ³ "What is Veganism" <http://animalrights.about.com/od/animalrights101/a/Veganism.htm>.
- ⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, IV. 3.
- ¹⁶ Josephine Donovan "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogue" *Signs* Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter 2006), 306.
- ¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II. 1103a30.
- ¹⁸ Aristotle, III. 10, 1118a, 10.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* III. 10, 1128a, 25.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* III. 10, 1118a, 15.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* III. 10, 1119a, 15.
- ²² See Tusio PJ, Ismail MH, Ha BP, Bartolotto C. Nutritional Update for Physicians: Plant-Based Diets. *The Permanente Journal*. 2013;17(2):61-66. doi:<https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-085>. "Research shows that plant-based diets are cost-effective, low-risk interventions that may lower body mass index, blood pressure, HbA1C, and cholesterol levels. They may also reduce the number of medications needed to treat chronic diseases and lower ischemic heart disease mortality rates. Physicians should consider recommending a plant-based diet to all their patients, especially those with high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or obesity".
- ³⁴ (Aristotle 1959, 2.8, 1385b 13-16)
- ³⁵ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1386a6-7, 1385b14, b34-1386a1, 1386b7, b10, b12, b13, 1386b14-15; and *Poetics* 1453a4, 5.
- ³⁶ *Ethics*, II.6, 1106b18-19; 1106b21-7.
- ³⁷ Crisp, "Compassion and Beyond", 243.
- ³⁸ *Ethics*, II.4, 1105a.
- ³⁹ Lori Gruen, 45.
- ⁴⁰ See Hursthouse 1999, p. 14.
- ⁴¹ Stephens, "Five Arguments for Vegetarianism," p. 33.
- ⁴² Aristotle, IV.3, 1123b, 30, 1124b, 18.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.* V. 1129b, 21.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 1129b.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 1129b, 18.
- ⁴⁶ Allen (2004) "Animal Consciousness." *Nous* 38.4, 617-643.
- ⁴⁷ See *Animal Minds Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* by Donald R. Griffin.

What Would the Virtuous Person Eat? The Case for Virtuous Omnivorism

Christopher A. Bobier

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Classroom excerpt. Bracketed notices identify passages omitted from the original article; all other prose below is transcribed from the original.

Abstract

Would the virtuous person eat animals? According to some ethicists, the answer is a resounding no, at least for the virtuous person living in an affluent society. The virtuous person cares about animal suffering, and so, she will not contribute to practices that involve animal suffering when she can easily adopt a strict plant-based diet. The virtuous person is temperate, and temperance involves not indulging in unhealthy diets, which include diets that incorporate animals. Moreover, it is unjust for an animal to be killed for food when this is unnecessary. By contrast, I argue that the virtuous person in an affluent society would eat animals, at least sometimes. I explain how the very virtues thought to motivate "virtuous modest veganism" - compassion, temperance, and justice - motivate the virtuous person to consume some animals.

Keywords: Virtue, Temperance, Compassion, Justice, Animals, Veganism

Would the virtuous person eat animals? According to some virtue ethicists, the answer is a resounding no, at least for the virtuous person living in an affluent society (Halwani, 2020; Alvaro, 2017a, b, 2019; Van Dyke, 2016; Hursthouse, 2011, 2006; Nobis, 2002; Walker, 2007; Nussbaum, 2006; Shafer-Landau, 1994).¹ The case for this conclusion is compelling at first glance. The virtuous person cares about acting so as to reduce animal suffering, and so, she does not contribute to practices that promote animal suffering when she can easily adopt a strict plant-based diet. Indeed, since an alternative plant-based diet is readily available, to consume animals for no reason other than pleasure would be unjust or unfair, and the virtuous person is both just and fair. The virtuous person is also temperate, and temperance involves not indulging in unhealthy diets, including diets that incorporate animal flesh. Although these reasons do not show that the virtuous person would never, under any circumstances eat animals, they are thought to collectively show that the virtuous person who has the means and opportunity to live off of a plant-based diet would not eat animals.

In this paper, I argue that the virtuous person in an affluent society would adopt some animals in her diet, not a strict plant-based diet.² The basis for this conclusion is that it is becoming increasingly known that strict plant-based diets are not harmless to field animals, birds, and fish. The virtuous person, therefore, finds herself in a non-ideal situation, a situation in which animals will be harmed no matter what diet she adopts. Accordingly, the virtuous person will be motivated to adopt the diet that involves the least amount of harm to animals and this diet, I argue, will involve eating some animals. To be clear, the virtuous person would not be complicit in unjust practices such as factory farming. Rather, the animals she would consume are non-traditional animals, animals that lack or have much lower moral considerability (e.g., insects) or whose procurement is from outside the industrialized food production system (e.g., scavenged meat). Importantly, the temperate,

compassionate, and just person living in an affluent society would not adopt a strict plant-based diet.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section one, I explain virtue ethics and how it grounds the rightness and wrongness of actions in a person's character. In section two, I explain the argument of Carlo Alvaro for thinking that the virtues of temperance, compassion, and justice motivate the virtuous person in an affluent society to adopt a strict plant-based diet. In section three, I argue that these three virtues actually motivate the virtuous person to consume some animals. The remaining three sections respond to objections.

Virtue Ethics

According to virtue ethics, the locus of moral evaluation is the agent, not an action's conformity to a moral rule or the action's outcomes, and this is because morality is too complex to be captured by moral rules or outcomes (Annas, 2007; Hursthouse, 1999; Swanton, 2003). For instance, adherence to rules overlooks the role of emotions, feelings, the importance of our situational relation to others, as well as our reasons for acting as we do. What is most important to virtue ethics, as Carlo Alvaro explains, is "whether the individual's actions are expressions of good character, through the acquisition of the moral virtues" (2017a: 770). The virtues are morally good, praiseworthy character traits, which is to say they are strongly entrenched dispositional states that incline the person to think, reason, feel, and behave in excellent and praiseworthy ways. The virtues thus encompass the whole person, from thoughts and judgments to emotions and behaviors. They involve correct moral appraisals of and responses to the situations in which a person finds herself in. When the virtuous person performs a temperate act, for example, she acts from temperance: her cognitive appraisal correctly assesses the situation, and she feels and behaves appropriately in response. That virtues are holistic illuminates how they relate with one another. When the virtuous person finds herself in a situation in which justice calls for one action and compassion calls for another, her intellectual virtue of prudence discerns what the right response to the situation is, and she responds accordingly. There might be a conflict about what to do in a situation, but prudence fosters a kind of unity in the virtuous person's character. The virtues, qua excellent character traits responsive to right reasons, are thus foundational to living an integrated and excellent life.

The focus of virtue ethics on excellent character traits can ground an account of the rightness or wrongness of an action, and accordingly, virtue ethics can be action guiding in much the same way that rival ethical theories are. Following the work of Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), an action is right if it is the action that a virtuous person would characteristically perform in that circumstance, while an action is wrong if it is an action that the virtuous person would not characteristically perform in that circumstance. That rightness and wrongness of actions are grounded in what the virtuous person would characteristically do in a particular situation given their unique skills and abilities highlights the contextual nature of moral actions. Consider two soldiers on the battlefield, both of whom ought to exhibit the virtue of courage. What is courageous for a poorly-trained soldier might be different from what is courageous for a well-trained soldier in the same situation. This distinction is often considered to be an upshot of virtue ethics, namely, it accommodates the intuition that the application of moral rules is not always rigid. For example, that lying is wrong is a general moral rule because the virtuous person is honest, honesty being the virtue related to

disclosing and withholding information. But this is not to say the virtuous person will never lie. For if a virtuous person is hiding a battered child in her house, she might lie to the abuser about the child's whereabouts. The virtuous person sees that it is not a matter of honesty to provide truthful information to someone who intends to harm another. In this case, the virtuous person does an ordinarily wrong action, and, importantly, she does not do anything morally wrong in this extraordinary situation.

Although a lot more can be said in elaboration, what matters for present purposes is how virtue ethics bears on dietary choices. The virtuous person's characteristic actions determine or ground what is right and wrong, permissible and impermissible. This implies that, if the virtuous person in an affluent society would adopt a strict plant-based diet, then that is the morally right diet to adopt for those of us living in an affluent society. In other words, we (morally) should eat what the virtuous person in our situation would eat. Accordingly, in seeking to show that the virtuous person in an affluent society would adopt a strict plant-based diet, scholars are seeking to show the wrongness of consuming animals.

The Case for “Virtuous Modest Veganism”

With this much before us, the topic to be addressed is whether the virtuous person in an affluent society would in fact adopt a strict plant-based diet. A survey of the relevant literature reveals a focus on three virtues, all of which independently and collectively are thought to motivate the virtuous person to adopt a strict plant-based diet. Rather than examine the case for virtuous veganism as presented in a variety of places, I will limit my focus to Carlo Alvaro's article, “Ethical Veganism, Virtue, and Greatness of Soul,” for two reasons. First, he offers a clear presentation of the arguments in favor of “modest ethical veganism”, or the position that “it is immoral to use animals when equal or superior plant-based alternatives are readily available” (2017a: 767). Second, his arguments are similar to the arguments offered by others, and so there is no harm in focusing on his article.³ I will incorporate the insights of others when relevant.

The virtuous person is temperate and temperance is the virtue that regulates one's desire for bodily pleasures. Raja Halwani explains that temperance regarding food “is the proper disposition in one's desires for the pleasures of eating” (2020: 403). The temperate person enjoys bodily pleasures, including food, in the right circumstances, in the right way, and for the right reasons.⁴ A consideration of the virtue of temperance suggests, Alvaro argues, that the virtuous person would not eat animals. Because the temperate person eats for the sake of nourishment, not pleasure alone, she will avoid foods that are unhealthy, and since she knows that consuming animals is not conducive to health, the temperate person will not consume animals (2017a: 771). The temperate person would consume animals in moderation if she could not sustain herself on a plant-based diet. It is thus important to remember that the virtuous person in an affluent society has access to plant-based foods, and so, it is unnecessary for her to eat animals, even in moderation. Consequently, since adopting a strict plant-based diet does not require an immense sacrifice on the part of the virtuous person - indeed, a vegan diet can be both delicious and cost effective - and since a plant-based diet is more conducive to health, the temperate person “will not indulge in those types of food - not even moderately” (2017a: 773).

The virtuous agent is not only temperate, of course. She is also just and compassionate, along with all of the other virtues, and there is an internal harmony among her virtues. Justice is the virtue that regards doing what is right or equitable. The virtuous agent who recognizes that meat is unnecessary for living a healthy life and that animals are harmed in meat-production will appreciate that killing animals for food is unjust and unfair, as Alvaro explains: “In societies where plant food is readily available and abundant, using animals as a source of food is, by definition, unfair” (2017a: 777). Since people in affluent societies have an abundance of readily available plant alternatives, the reason why they continue to eat animals is because of convenience, taste, or pleasure. The virtuous agent recognizes that these reasons do not justify the harm animal experience in food-production, including death on more humane farms, and therefore, Alvaro argues, the virtuous person recognizes that “using animals is immoral” (2017a: 773).⁵ Because the virtuous person is both just and fair, she will not adopt a diet that includes animals but rather adopt a strict plant-based diet.

Finally, the virtuous person is compassionate and compassion for another requires, among other things, acting to benefit the other. Compassion does not just involve feeling anguish or pain at the misfortune of another; it involves acting to help the other in the right kind of way and in the right amount (Crisp, 2008). Because the virtuous person is compassionate, she is not indifferent to the treatment of animals and their suffering but actively seeks to promote animal well-being. The virtuous agent not only refrains from needlessly harming animals, she also respects their interests and promotes their flourishing, as Alvaro explains:

A compassionate individual, therefore, will not merely try to alleviate the pain of an animal who, for instance, is about to be slaughtered... This would not be the full expression of compassion. Rather, a compassionate individual, who has empathy, also recognizes that animals do not only wish to avoid pain, but also wish to survive and flourish. Consequently, by definition, a compassionate person would oppose all forms of animal exploitation (2017a: 775).

Pretty clearly, compassion towards animals is at odds with factory farming given what we know about conditions on factory farms.⁶ Compassion is also at odds with more humane forms of farming. To enjoy something that is made possible by the death of another seems antithetical to compassion toward that other, especially when that death is not necessary. Consequently, Alvaro concludes, “it is in no way compassionate to kill an animal for food” (2017a: 776).

In sum, the virtuous person is temperate, just, and compassionate, and Alvaro thinks it is evident that “acquiring those virtues and acting from them will motivate ethical veganism” (2017a: 779). The practical implication is straightforward. Since the rightness and wrongness of an action is grounded in what the virtuous person would characteristically do in that setting, and the virtuous person in an affluent society would adopt a strict plant-based diet, it follows that those of us living in affluent societies with ready access to plant-based alternatives should adopt a strict plant-based diet. To not adopt a strict plant-based diet is morally wrong.

The Virtuous New Omnivore

It is important to remind ourselves that the reasons offered above are conditional, not apodictic. They do not show that eating animals is in principle wrong, only that the virtuous person in an affluent society is not motivated to eat animals and will actively refrain from doing so. As Rosalind Hursthouse reminds us, “an action such as eating meat, which is exactly what a virtuous agent characteristically refrains from doing in many circumstances, may nevertheless be something that, in other circumstances, a virtuous agent does do” (2011: 131). She gives the examples of someone stranded in the Australian outback who needs to eat a rabbit in order to survive and of people in certain parts of the world who need to consume bush meat to survive (2011: 130-131). Proponents of virtuous modest veganism, such as Hursthouse and Alvaro, think that exceptions are rare for people living in affluent societies, and that virtuous people living in affluent societies would adopt a strict plant-based diet.

I argue that the case for virtuous modest veganism is overstated. While I agree that the virtuous person would oppose factory farming and humane farming, there are other kinds of animals available that do not violate compassion, justice, or temperance. When we consider that plant agriculture harms animals, the argument can be made that to care for animals sometimes requires consuming some of them. Here is the argument formalized:

1. NON-IDEAL WORLD THESIS: A strict plant-based diet involves animal harm.
2. ANIMAL CARE THESIS: The virtuous person cares about animals and seeks to minimize animal harm.
3. FREE MEAT THESIS: Incorporating free animal products in one’s diet will minimize the number of animals harmed in food production.
4. PAIN FREE ANIMAL THESIS: Incorporating animals that do not experience pain - and so cannot be harmed - in one’s diet will minimize the number of animals harmed in food production.
5. Thus, the virtuous person would consume free meat and pain free animals.

Before I discuss the motivation for accepting each premise, it is important to clarify in advance that the conclusion defended here is not that the virtuous person would consume meat from traditional sources, e.g., meat from factory farming or trawling. The position defended here is that the virtuous person would be a “new omnivore”, the name given by Andy Lamey to the position that “endorses animal protection as philosophy but goes on to defend eating animals” (2019: 1). New omnivorism is a broad position, loosely connected around the claim that minimizing animal harm in our non-ideal world sometimes requires eating certain animals. New omnivores disagree about what animals should be eaten, but all agree that some should be eaten in order to minimize animal suffering. The claim of this paper is that the virtuous person living in an affluent society would adopt some animals in her diet from a position of compassion, justice, and temperance. Although I do not claim to prescribe a particular diet in this paper, I do describe two kinds of animal protein the virtuous person would be motivated to consume.

[Bobier’s extended empirical defense of premises 1-5 (original pp. 7-12) is omitted.]

Compassionate Eating?

With the case for virtuous new omnivorism before us, I turn to objections, specifically objections based on compassion, temperance, and respect. My goal in the remaining sections is to show that these objections are not damning to the position of this paper and thereby do not show that virtuous modest veganism is the right diet. The first objection, grounded in compassion, is that it seems wrong to think that compassion for animals should lead us to eat them when we do not have to. To have compassion on a creature is to care about that creature, and this minimally involves not eating it. After all, it seems peculiar to hold that eating an animal can be a compassionate act toward that animal.

Although this point about compassion is plausible at first glance, two things can be said in response. First, it will be recalled that we live in a non-ideal world, a world that involves plenty of animal harm. When it comes to diet, the virtuous person finds herself in a non-ideal, tragic situation: animals die in the production of a strict plant-based diet, and so there is no harmless diet available to her. Hursthouse explains that the virtuous person in such a non-ideal situation “may well do something that in different circumstances would fall under the prohibition of a vice-rule” (Hursthouse, 2011: 127). She gives the example of the virtuous person wringing the neck of a wounded bird. This is an action the virtuous person otherwise avoids. However, in certain situations, say a situation in which a bird is injured with no hope of recovery, this is precisely the action that is called for. This action appears callous to others but it is a compassionate action. Another example would be euthanizing shelter animals to prevent greater animal suffering. Cheryl Abbate argues that compassion can motivate a person to euthanize shelter animals since not doing so will lead to overpopulation and greater amounts of animal suffering: “An uncompassionate person is one who would maintain that millions of animals should endure a painful life in the name of a negative duty to not kill or cause harm to beings with inherent worth” (2014: 926). Similarly, in an ideal world where plant agriculture does not involve animal harm, the virtuous person would adopt a strict plant-based diet. But we do not live in an ideal world, and so, the virtuous person is motivated to adopt the diet that results in the least amount of animal harm, which is a diet that involves some animals. This might appear callous to observers, but it need not be callous in these circumstances, circumstances in which we currently find ourselves in.

Second, the compassionate person, as Alvaro reminds us, “is concerned about the well-being of all living things” (2017b: 23). However, when the well-being of plants conflicts with the well-being of animals, he argues that it “is more compassionate to use them [plants] than to exploit animals who exhibit a higher degree of sentience and conscious experience of the world” (2017b: 23). The virtuous person would not hesitate to walk over flowers to help a dog in need, nor would she hesitate to eat plants to reduce factory farm animal suffering. Alvaro’s point applies to insects and bivalves because, as was argued above, it seems pretty clear that field animals, birds, and fish have “a higher degrees of sentience and conscious experience of the world” than insects and bivalves. At the very least, we are more unsure of the sentience of insects and bivalves than we are of the sentience of birds, field animals, and fish. Since field animals, birds, and fish - not to mention insects - die in industrialized plant agriculture, it is more compassionate to eat insects or bivalves, even free meat, than to adopt a strict plant-based diet, a diet that the virtuous person knows involves more intentional and unintentional harm to animals. The virtuous person would judge that it is preferable, given

her non-ideal situation, to consume plants along with the kinds of animal protein described above.

[The ‘Compassionate donation?’ subsection (original pp. 14-15) is omitted.]

Animals as Non-food Fellow Creatures?

It might be objected that temperance will discourage the consumption of animals for a reason other than health. Halwani reminds us that the temperate person refrains from eating the wrong kinds of food: “the temperate person would not enjoy eating the wrong things - that the experience of the activity is unenjoyable” (2020: 407). It might be argued that meat in general, not just factory farmed meat, is the wrong kind of food to consume. In order to defend this claim, Halwani explains that the case needs to be made that consuming animals is off limits for similar reasons that consuming deceased humans is off limits. He explains:

What we need then is a conception of animals as... non-food fellow creatures, similar in this respect to how human beings see each other. The conception would have to embody ideas such as animals’ having their own lives to lead, perhaps even as (secular) ‘miracles of creation’ (2020: 414).

Halwani observes that if animals are viewed as off-bounds, non-food, then “all meat would be off the table for the temperate person” (2020: 414). On this position, there is a profound difference between the virtuous person’s perception of animals and non-virtuous person’s perception. For the temperate person, to consume animals would be distasteful and unbecoming, akin to consuming a fellow human being (Deckers, 2009: 591-592; Engel, 2016: 19; Diamond, 1978).

Halwani does not expand on his notion of animals as “non-food fellow creatures.” He leaves this position open for others to develop and is clear that whether this view “is viable remains to be seen” (2020: 416). While it is difficult to assess this admittedly underdeveloped position, I offer a few worries. First, a plausible account of what makes for a “non-food fellow creature” will be grounded in psychological similarities such as sentience, similarities that certainly appear to be lacking in insects and bivalves. Halwani references Regan’s “subjects of life” view as an example of how we might come to view animals as non-food fellow creatures (414, fn 43). Given the vast difference between nonhuman primates, say, and insects and bivalves, it will be difficult to make this account apply to insects and bivalves. Second, the notion of “non-food fellow creature” is, in an important sense, dependent on relational, social factors. Part of the reason why Americans eat pigs but not dogs has to do with the role of pets in family dynamics: pets are often seen as “family members” while non-pets are not. Similarly, different cultures have different food norms and views of animals, so what counts as non-food fellow creatures is not the same across cultures. Both of these considerations reveal situational nuance for the virtuous person. Halwani himself gives the example of a temperate person visiting another culture in which eating meat is appropriate. In this case, he muses but remains skeptical that the virtuous person would eat meat from a consideration of respect for the other culture (416, fn 52). Finally, and most importantly, this line of argument - if successfully developed - shows only that the virtuous person would not consume animals, extenuating circumstances aside. I accept this: in an ideal world, a world in which animals are not harmed in plant agriculture, the virtuous person in an affluent society is motivated to adopt a strict plant-based diet. But recall two things. First, virtue ethics is

situational in nature. The virtuous person abandoned on an island, who would otherwise not eat fish, will eat fish to survive. A person who otherwise would never consider eating a deceased human may do so in dire circumstances. Second, the argument of this paper is that we do not live in an ideal world, a world in which the virtuous person can adopt a harmless diet. Accordingly, with these two points in mind, the virtuous person is motivated to help animals and this will lead her to adopt some animals in her diet. Halwani himself admits that, if a person has plausible reasons that justify “the humane killing of an animal...for gustatory pleasure, then perhaps people who desire humanely sourced meat can be temperate” (2020: 417). The argument of this paper is much more modest than this. The argument here is that the virtuous person has reason to incorporate some animals and animal flesh for non-gustatory reasons, reasons grounded in a compassion for animals. Importantly, Halwani’s admission that a person with good reasons can temperately eat animals reveals the difficulty of showing that all consumption of animals is intemperate.

Conclusion

How different is the diet envisioned above from the virtuous modest vegan diet defended by various ethicists? Well, the conclusion defended in this paper is that the virtuous person living in an affluent society will not adopt a strict plant-based diet when there are free or pain-free animals available to consume, and there are no alternative actions that promise to lower overall animal suffering even more. Since bivalves, insects, and, to a lesser extent, scavenged meat are available in various affluent societies, not to mention cultured meat in the near future, the virtuous person may find herself eating animals from a place of compassion, justice, and even temperance. Recall that this paper does not seek to present an exhaustive list of the possible kinds of animals the virtuous person may eat. This remains an open question, one worthy of further exploration. No doubt this conclusion is contentious, so I welcome further dialogue.

Notes

- ¹ I am aware of only a few virtue-based defenses of eating animals. Beth Haile (2013) argues that a thrifty, temperate, and responsible person would consume meat and this practice would “be incorporated into a life directed toward the good” (2013: 87). Lars Ursin argues that “virtuous eating of meat is possible” so long as animals are respected and the agent consumes a modest amount. (2016: 144). Roger Scruton (2006) argues for compassionate carnivorousism. I disagree with their position, as will be clear in Sect. 3 below. List (1998) and (2013) and Jensen (2001) offer a virtue ethics-based defense of hunting.
- ² I focus on eating animal flesh in this paper, as this is the primary focus of my interlocutors. The position of this paper can be extended to animal products (e.g., milk and eggs).
- ³ Halwani (2020) offers a different line of reasoning based on temperance. I address his argument in Sect. 6.
- ⁴ I agree with Halwani’s exposition of temperance according to which the temperate person does eat for pleasure (2020: 406; see Hursthouse 2011: 129-131). Alvaro thinks the temperate person eats only for health (2017a).
- ⁵ This echoes Stuart Rachels, who writes: “We eat the meat, and it helps to nourish us. But there is a catch: we could just as easily nourish ourselves in other ways. Vegetarian meals are also good. Nonetheless, most people prefer a diet that includes meat because they like the way it tastes, the question, then, is whether our enjoyment of the way meat tastes is a good enough reason to justify the amount of suffering that the animals are made to endure. It seems obvious that it is not.” (2011: 261).
- ⁶ The harms associated with factory farming are well documented. See DeGrazia (2009), Halteman (2011), and Rossi and Garner (2014), among many others.