The Inconsistent Vegetarian

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Abstract
Vegetarians are often charged with inconsistency. They are told that, if they refrain from meat consumption, they should also refrain from the consumption of all animal products. The central question this paper addresses is whether the requirement of consistency means that vegetarians should become vegans. It is argued that if a vegetarian is motivated by arguments that focus on animals, she is indeed inconsistent and should become a vegan.

Keywords
animal death, animal suffering, consistency, moral patients, veganism, vegetarianism

Introduction
Nonhuman animals play an important role in our everyday lives. They are inherently connected to our society in many different ways—not only are they our friends and companions; they make possible all kinds of other things for us human animals, too. For instance, they provide us with materials for our clothing; they contribute to human health because they are used in different kinds of medical experiments; they form an important, if not the most important, part of our diet. Even though nonhuman animals are so important to us in so many ways, we often fail to treat them with the respect they deserve. Or perhaps I should say: because nonhuman animals are so important to us in so many ways, we often fail to treat them with the respect they deserve; the fact that nonhuman animals often are considered to be important, or even indispensable, resources for a variety of consumer products reduces them—contradictory enough—to entities that are in no need of respect. They are reduced to products or resources that exist for the benefit of human animals and that can be used at human will. In other words, nonhuman animals who are considered to be products or resources are often not thought of as beings who deserve moral consideration. The fact that nonhuman animals are often
used without moral consideration is quite disturbing, since it is difficult—not to say impossible—to point out what the morally relevant difference is between those who are now thought of as being morally considerable—human beings—and those who are often left out of the moral domain. Nevertheless, in ever-increasing numbers, people are starting to consider nonhuman animals as beings that deserve to be treated with respect. This awareness is revealed, for example, in the animal rights movements that are currently active. The arousal of our consciousness concerning our treatment of nonhuman animals is also revealed in other developments, such as vegetarianism. People often turn to a vegetarian diet because of the way nonhuman animals are treated in the meat industry. This is a positive development, but vegetarians are often charged with inconsistency, which many people readily point out—especially the meat-eaters, who are unwilling to be convinced by vegetarian arguments. Vegetarians, for instance, are told that if they refuse to eat meat they should not wear leather shoes. That is, if a person refuses to use one product that derives from nonhuman animals, she should refuse all other animal products, too. The question, of course, is whether this is a correct assumption: is it the case that vegetarians are inconsistent if they do not refrain from using animal products other than meat? Or, to formulate the main question of this paper: are vegetarians inconsistent, and should they become vegans instead?

In order to answer this question, I will first clarify both concepts—vegetarianism and veganism. Next I will examine the different motives of people who choose to become vegetarians. I will then scrutinize the concept of consistency. To conclude, I will test the vegetarian motives, and the rules extracted from these motives, for their consistency to see whether or not vegetarians should become vegans.

**Defining Vegetarianism**

Vegetarianism is a dietary choice that expresses itself in behavior, not in beliefs; that is, in distinguishing vegetarians from nonvegetarians one has to focus on dietary habits only. That is not to say that there are no differences among vegetarians in their motives for choosing a vegetarian diet, or that there are no differences in beliefs concerning vegetarianism. Quite the contrary: there are huge differences. There are principled vegetarians, who are morally motivated to abstain from meat, and there are nonprincipled vegetarians, who are motivated by other than moral reasons.

Nonetheless, to be called a vegetarian, one has to display a certain behavior with respect to one’s dietary choices. The minimum requirement for calling
yourself a vegetarian—for the purposes of this discussion—is that you do not eat meat, fish, and crustaceans. Many vegetarians, however, still consume other animal products such as honey, eggs, and dairy products, not to mention the “hidden” animal products: gelatin and coagulants, for instance. So, on the one hand there are vegetarians who do not eat any meat, but who include other animal products in their diet; these vegetarians are called ovo-lacto vegetarians. On the other hand, there are vegans. People who choose to live in accordance with vegan principles do not use any animal products at all: they abstain from meat, dairy products, eggs, and honey. “Hidden” animal products are banned from a vegan diet, too. In addition to abstaining from edible animal products, vegans do not use other materials that derive from animals, such as wool, leather, and silk. While abstinence from all animal products—edible or not—reflects the “true” meaning of veganism, for simplicity’s sake, the focus of this paper is on the dietary implications of vegan principles.

Besides ovo-lacto vegetarianism and veganism, other forms of vegetarianism can be distinguished. Ovo-vegetarians, for example, abstain from meat and dairy products but include eggs in their diet, while lacto-vegetarians do not consume meat and eggs but still use dairy products. The focus of this paper, however, is on ovo-lacto vegetarians and vegans; these two subgroups seem to form the two ends of the vegetarian continuum as it relates to refraining from animal products. The ovo-lacto vegetarian practices the most uncomplicated form of vegetarianism, whereas veganism seems to demand much more commitment and reflection on one’s daily food. For ease of argument, from now on I shall refer to ovo-lacto vegetarians and ovo-lacto vegetarianism simply as vegetarians and vegetarianism. When referring to the vegan variant and the people who adhere to vegan dietary principles, I refer simply to veganism and vegans.

Motives for Vegetarianism
Different people have different motives for becoming vegetarians. There is a great deal of diversity of motive. Broadly speaking, however, two different categories of motives can be distinguished: moral and nonmoral motives. Moral motives are here taken to refer to guidelines for individuals as well as groups of people. Such motives are concerned with doing the right thing and how to avoid doing the wrong thing. The right stance toward the other plays an important role in these considerations and motives; morality is not just about achieving one’s own personal goals; rather, it relates to external demands, directed at the other (see, for example, Frankena, 1963, p. 6). Nonmoral
motives can count as guidelines, too, but they are based on such things as judicial rules or religious prescriptions, which derive from no moral source per se.⁷ Within these two categories it is possible to distinguish between many different motives for being a vegetarian. For instance, one may choose a vegetarian diet out of concern for the environment (Stephens, 2003, p. 202; Fox, 1999, pp. 84-88; Singer, 1995, pp. 166-169); one may be motivated by the argument from sexual politics (Stephens, 2003, p. 202; Fiddes, 1991, ch. 10; Adams, 1990, ch. 1-2); one may be motivated by the argument from distributive justice (Stephens, 2003, p. 202; Fox, 1999, pp. 95-100; Singer, 1995, pp. 164-165, 169); one can believe it is better for one’s health to be a vegetarian (Fox, 1999, pp. 66-67; Frey, 1983, pp. 10-14); one can simply become a vegetarian out of distaste for meat (Frey, 1983, p. 7).

Despite the quantity and diversity of the motives for vegetarianism, many of them are not considered here, simply because, in the light of the question underlying this paper, consistency is not at issue in certain motives. For instance, consider the nonmoral argument from religious conviction (Fox, 2003, pp. 238-241; Fuchs, 2003, pp. 224-226); if vegetarianism is prescribed by your religion and veganism is not, and you are a vegetarian because you live by the rules of your religion, it is beside the point to ask whether this vegetarian should become a vegan just to be consistent. Similarly, the question of consistency is irrelevant if one considers the vegetarian who refrains from meat because she does not like it.

The motives that are interesting in the light of the consistency issue are the moral motives concerned with animals, which we call animal-focused motives.⁸ We can distinguish three different arguments.

The first motive to be addressed is one of the most common and well-known moral arguments given by vegetarians to elucidate their dietary choice: the argument based on animal pain and suffering (Degrazia, 2003, pp. 177-183; Singer, 1995, pp. 159-164). This argument states that much pain and suffering is experienced by animals who are reared for meat. In the meat industry the production process is made as efficient as possible because profit is important. Costs (money, time, etc.) are kept as low as possible. Profitability means it is better to have more animals in a barn, since the more animals kept in a barn, the less each individual animal will cost you. This, however, decreases the animals’ freedom of movement. Profit is thus made at the animals’ expense: they get less space than they need. This restriction of their freedom of movement causes stress, since in these cramped conditions they are not able to exercise their “natural” behavior. Pigs, for example, are social animals who need a challenge. They get bored if there is nothing to do other than lie down, sleep, and eat in their own private crates. They will soon start biting each other’s
tails through the bars of the crates (DeGrazia, 2003, pp. 177-178). This behavior is discouraged by cutting off the pigs’ tails.9

This is only one example of how animals are placed under conditions that cause stress and stressful behavior. The animals are mutilated to put an end to their stressful behavior—which should count as an indicator of animal-unfriendly conditions. The display of their stress and unhappiness—tail biting, if we are talking about pigs—does not lead to their being released from the unpleasant conditions. In fact, the display of stress and unhappiness actually causes more pain to the animals. By becoming a vegetarian, a person who is concerned with animal pain and suffering chooses not to contribute to, or encourage, such practices. These vegetarians are thus motivated by the harm and suffering animals have to endure during their lives.

Other people choose to be vegetarians not so much out of concern for the pain and suffering during the animals’ lives, but because of the unnecessary death that is inherently connected to the meat industry. Animals who are raised for food are killed before their time. They are deprived of the goods they would have enjoyed or valued in their lives. It is the impossibility that the animal can ever again experience the things she has once valued that makes killing such an abominable act (Kaldewaij, 2008, p. 60). Vegetarians who are motivated by the argument based on unnecessary death consider the animals’ death as the most important reason for ceasing to contribute to the meat industry.10

The third and final relevant argument for vegetarianism partly overlaps with the argument from killing. This is the argument from moral rights, advocated by Tom Regan. People who are motivated by this argument not only recognize humans as moral beings; they recognize animals as moral beings, too. Whereas most humans are considered to be moral agents, however, animals are regarded as moral patients. The difference between moral agents and moral patients is that moral agents cannot only be harmed; they can also do what is right or wrong. Moral patients, on the other hand can only be wronged; they cannot do what is right or wrong (Regan, 2004, pp. 151-153). In other words, moral agents have the ability to abide by impartial moral principles and to determine what ought to be done, morally, in a given situation. It is precisely this capacity to make moral judgments that moral patients lack. Despite this difference, there is also an important similarity between moral patients and moral agents: according to those who support the moral rights view, moral patients have inherent value. They do not have this inherent value to a greater or to a lesser extent than moral agents; all beings who have inherent value have it equally. Inherent value does not come in degrees: a being either has it or not (Regan, 2004, pp. 240-241).
Because moral patients also have inherent value, they have the same right to respectful treatment as moral agents. Moreover, they have an equal right to respectful treatment (Regan, 2004, p. 279).

There are two aspects to the wrong of raising animals and turning them into hamburgers: first, as hinted at before, the untimely death of animals, which is undeniably part of the food industry, is considered to be the ultimate harm done to animals, no matter how painlessly and “humanely” the killing is done (Regan, 2004, pp. 99-103). Killing an animal before it is her time to go, before there are no more possibilities for satisfaction in her life, is disrespectful toward her. An animal should be treated with respect; that is, her inherent value should be respected, and thus she should not be killed if there are no reasons other than that it is in her interest to die. Killing an animal for food is not to respect her right to welfare and life, and hence one devalues her (Regan, 2004, pp. 330-349).

Second, the way an animal is treated during her life is a matter of concern for the rights-motivated vegetarian. The problem is that animals are regarded as “renewable resources” or “replaceable products.” An animal who is used to produce meat is valued for her ability to produce this particular product. The animal has an instrumental value in this case. Instrumental value is itself not a problem. We use our general practitioner for instrumental reasons, too, and morally we do not mind doing so. This is because, while we value her instrumentally, at the same time we regard her as a moral being with inherent value. The inherent value of a being is important, because it compels us to regard this being as irreplaceable, one of a kind.

The particular problem with industries that raise animals for their products is that they devalue animals: the animals are valuable for their instrumental value only and are considered to be renewable resources, not irreplaceable individuals with a value of their own (Regan, 2004, p. 345). Moreover, as described above, the animals often do not have the facilities to behave in a way that responds to their natural needs. Imposing restrictions of such a kind on them is not to respect them for who they are. Viewing them as renewable resources that cannot respond to their own natural needs is a failure to acknowledge their inherent value; it is to deny that they possess a value of their own (Regan, 2004, p. 345).

The Concept of Consistency

Before we can examine the consistency of vegetarians motivated by animal-focused arguments, we first have to expand on this concept. Although the
meaning of “consistency” would seem quite clear, there is more to it than one
might think. One can distinguish three variants within the broader concept
of consistency: consistency in a narrow sense, correspondence, and coherence
(Musschenga, 2002, p. 3).

A person is consistent in the narrow sense if she holds the same judgments
and shows the same conduct in similar situations at different times. Take, for
instance, a vegetarian who believes that it is wrong to kill animals for food,
but at other times she believes there is nothing wrong with killing animals for
food. Because her judgments vary at different moments in time, she is being
inconsistent in the narrow sense. Thus consistency in the narrow sense is
about the internal relationship between judgments (or between instances of
behavior) at different moments in time.

The second concept, correspondence, refers to the relation between con-
duct, thoughts, and utterances. First, there is the relation between observable
conduct and expressions and what a person really thinks and feels. For exam-
ple, a person eats factory-farmed meat, but at the same time feels guilty,
because she thinks animals suffer a great deal on factory farms. The relation
between what this person feels, thinks, and does is noncorresponding. Sec-
ond, we have the relation between what people say and actually do. Declaring
that you believe we should respect animals as they are but at the same
time buying factory-farmed drumsticks—while knowing that conditions are
terrible for these meat chickens—is noncorresponding, because you are sup-
porting an industry that does not respect meat chickens as they are, which is
diametrically opposed to what you claim to believe. Thus, correspondence
has to do with acting in accordance with your beliefs.

The third and final concept is coherence. Coherence has to do with the fit
between rules or judgments. If judgments or beliefs differ, there must be a
relevant difference between them; judgments must hang together. If there is
no relevant difference between certain judgments but they differ anyway, then
they are incoherent. An example of incoherence is the person who does not
eat meat that comes from black and white cows but who still eats meat from
red and white cows, only because of the difference in color of the coat. If it
does not have any influence on the taste, price, preparation method, etc. of
the meat, then color is not a relevant difference, and the judgments are thus
incoherent. So the difference in judgments has in some sense to be “reason-
able”; others must be able to understand why the different judgments are jux-
RAPosed.

This third concept is the most interesting for the purposes of this paper.
To understand why, consider that vegetarians hold the same beliefs, pass the
same judgments, and behave the same way at different moments in time.
Therefore they are consistent in the narrow sense. Moreover, vegetarians are convinced of their own beliefs and thus do as they say and behave in accordance with their beliefs and feelings. They thus act correspondingly. It is doubtful, though, whether the rules and judgments they live by are coherent. Do the rules extracted from their motives for vegetarianism hang together? Does the combination of rules make sense? Do the rules cohere? Our focus here is thus on consistency as coherence.

Coherence and the Animal-Focused Motives

Animal Pain and Suffering

Let’s consider the vegetarian who does not eat meat out of concern for animal pain and suffering. As I have set out above, much pain and suffering accompanies the meat industry. Pain and suffering are not reserved for the meat industry only, however. It can be assumed that we are all familiar with the harsh conditions imposed on laying hens in battery cages, which are still not banned in the EU. Debeaking chickens—which is done to discourage excessive pecking, caused by the restriction of freedom of movement—is also practiced in battery cages. Moreover, the chickens can barely stand on the wire in battery cages, not to mention the impossibility of scratching or taking a sand bath.

A dairy cow, too, experiences suffering, not only because her freedom of movement has been restricted, but owing to other stressful aspects of her life. A dairy cow must become pregnant and deliver calves before she will give milk. If a cow’s body is not preparing to nurse a calf, then milk production will decrease. It will not drop to zero, but she will give far too little milk to meet production standards. So she needs a calf every year to keep milk production up. This obviously costs a lot of energy. What contributes most to the suffering, however, is that the calf is separated from her mother immediately after she is born (that is, after a few hours). This causes both cow and calf stress, since neither the cow’s instinct to be a mother nor the calf’s instinct to be with, and be protected by, her mother can be met. In this case, it is mostly mental anguish that causes stress. It cannot be denied that a cow suffers from such kinds of actions (Kemmerer, 2006, pp. 460-461).

Although the animals in these examples cannot reflect on their emotions and feelings, they all suffer when they experience stress, physical pain, or mental anguish. The examples, furthermore, make clear that pain and suffer-
ing are not exclusive to the meat industry. Although in some cases the suffering is less obvious in the dairy and egg industry, these industries, too, are engaged in causing pain and suffering to animals every day.

The conclusion concerning the coherence of the rules and judgments of the vegetarian who is motivated by animal pain and suffering is thus quite evident; there is an obvious discrepancy between the rules this vegetarian sets for herself. Her motive for being a vegetarian is that she rejects animal pain and suffering; the rules based on this motive are that she does not eat any meat, but she still consumes other animal products. Yet, when it comes to animal pain and suffering there is no relevant difference between meat and other animal products. Therefore, the person who has this motive and chooses to be a vegetarian but does not turn to veganism, is incoherent in her rule-following behavior.

The step to veganism, however, is a huge step for most vegetarians. Perhaps there is a way to “escape” the vegan consequence for vegetarians who are concerned with animals. Consider organic farming. This method differs in many respects from the regular method, but it still provides us with animal products. Organic farming is a way of raising animals that takes into account and responds to the animals’ nature. It relies on natural cycles and balance. Animals are given time to grow at a natural rate. Organic farming signifies, among other things, that animals have more space; that they can keep their beaks, tails, and teeth; that young animals can stay longer with their mothers; that prophylactic antibiotics and other medicines are not allowed; that hormone use—to stimulate growth, for instance—is prohibited; that animals can spend more time outside. All this allows us to conclude that animals reared on an organic farm will suffer far less and experience less pain than animals on regular farms, where rules of efficiency predominate.

Thus, by consuming organic animal products, one does not contribute to a system in which profits are made at the animals’ expense; animals are spared the pain and suffering inherent in factory farms. This would seem to suggest that vegetarians who are concerned with animal pain and suffering can avoid the charge of inconsistency by consuming organic dairy products and eggs. Yet this is not the case, for people who consume organic animal products but abstain from organic meat are incoherent in another sense. If these people are motivated by the argument from animal pain and suffering, and they want to avoid contributing to a system in which pain and suffering is inherent by using organic animal products, then why do they not use organic meat, too? There is, all in all, no relevant difference between the organic meat industry and the organic dairy industry when it comes to pain and suffering. Thus
there is no relevant difference between the rules “I do not eat meat” and “I do consume other animal products.” Therefore, vegetarians who consume organic animal products live according to incoherent rules, too.

The Argument against Unnecessary Death

It is quite obvious that killing is involved in the meat industry: meat is a killed animal. This is not as evident in the egg industry, for instance. At first sight, this industry would even seem to be free of slaughtering. Unnecessary death, however, is involved in this industry, too, but now indirectly. True, one does not have to kill animals directly to receive eggs, but laying hens do not live forever. Every now and then, new, fresh hens are needed to replace those who are worn out. In order to get new laying hens, eggs have to be hatched. About half the chicks are male, though. They are not useful for the egg industry because they are cockerels. They are of no use for the meat industry either, because they are of the wrong breed; they are the offspring of laying hens and not meat chickens. So the vast majority are completely useless to the industry; these abundant male chicks end up in grinders and are killed horrifically.

Unnecessary death is an indirect consequence of the dairy industry, too. As I mentioned earlier, calves are needed to keep milk production going, but half the calves are bulls. Most, if not all, of them are not useful for the dairy industry, and they are therefore fattened up and used for the meat industry; that is, they are slaughtered. Killing is thus involved in the dairy industry, too.

These examples show that it is an illusion to think that killing takes place only in the meat industry. Slaughtering is an indirect part of the production of many other animal products. In the system as it is today, with its efficiency goals and financial focus, killing is in fact an inevitable part of the operation, keeping the production process going. The conclusion concerning our vegetarian who does not turn to the vegan dietary principles is not hard to reach: if one holds to unnecessary death as a motive for not eating meat, it is not possible to live according to coherent rules if one does not choose a diet based on vegan principles.

For vegetarians who are motivated by this argument, the consumption of organic animal products is no solution, either. Obviously, organic animals are killed, too. The lives of organic animals are definitely of greater quality than the lives of factory-farmed animals. Even the process before slaughtering in organic farming is often more respectful of the animals’ nature, but the act of
slaughter itself is an inherent part of the organic industry, too. By consuming organic animal products, then, these vegetarians do not escape the accusation of incoherence.

**Animals and Moral Rights**

We are left with one animal-focused motive, which is the argument from moral rights. Vegetarians motivated by the argument from moral rights view animals as moral beings with inherent value and a right to respectful treatment. If a vegetarian with this motive does not choose to be a vegan, is she then being inconsistent?

Rights-motivated vegetarians are concerned with two things. First of all, they regard the premature death of animals as a violation of the animals’ inherent value. Second, the view of animals as renewable resources is a reason for such a vegetarian to refrain from eating meat. The dairy and egg industries, however, resemble the meat industry in many ways. As was discussed earlier, the killing that is considered a violation of the animals’ inherent value is not connected exclusively to the meat industry; it also plays an important part in the dairy and egg industries. For this reason, the rights-motivated vegetarian can already be judged to live according to incoherent rules if she does not turn to veganism. This inconsistency can only be affirmed, however, if we consider the second concern of the moral rights principle, for it is not only in the meat industry that animals are not valued as individuals; it is characteristic of the egg and dairy industry, too. The problem of the disrespectful treatment of animals as renewable resources is to be found in all three industries; animals are seen as products, not individuals with rights. Thus, it is not only in the meat industry that animal rights and the inherent value of animals are not respected; the same holds for the other industries, too. Therefore, a vegetarian who is motivated by a belief in the inherent value of animals as moral beings should become a vegan in order to live by coherent rules.

Organic farming will not help rights-motivated vegetarians to avoid incoherence, either. Even though animal lives are respected to a much greater extent in the organic system than in the regular one, this does not imply that they are regarded as individual moral beings with rights that should be individually respected; animals are still seen as replaceable things. Moreover, it was shown above that killing is still involved in the organic system. If one wants to use animal products for consumption, it is almost—if not completely—impossible to do so without killing animals. This suggests that the rights-motivated vegetarian cannot live by coherent rules by choosing to consume
organic animal products. These vegetarians, too, are therefore judged as being inconsistent if they do not turn to veganism.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

At first sight it would seem that I have provided those who argue against vegetarianism with ammunition to shoot down vegetarian principles; it turns out that the conclusion regarding the vegetarian's consistency is that vegetarians who are motivated by animal-focused motives are indeed inconsistent and ought to become vegans. Turning to organically farmed animal products does not help these vegetarians, even though for some vegetarians this seems to provide an “escape” from veganism. Vegetarians who are motivated by animal pain and suffering but nevertheless consume organic dairy products and eggs are inconsistent because they do not eat any organic meat; and vegetarians who do not consume organically farmed animal products are inconsistent because they do not turn to veganism. Nor does organic farming help those vegetarians who are motivated by the argument from unnecessary death and the rights-motivated vegetarians. It was shown that to be coherent they ought to live by vegan principles, since killing is involved in all industries that employ animals. Consuming organic animal products is not going to change anything, since killing is involved in organic farming, too. Thus, all vegetarians who are motivated by animal-focused arguments live by incoherent rules if they do not turn to veganism.

The vegetarian’s inconsistency appears to be negative propaganda, but an important question has been neglected; this is the question of the value of consistency. This is not the place to discuss that question extensively, but it cannot be disregarded entirely. How meaningful is it, then, to act according to coherent rules? And what is the value of particular moral principles in comparison to inconsistency? With regard to all those people who are very consistent in their dietary habits, consuming factory-farmed meat, it can be said that they are very consistent in maintaining the horrific conditions under which many animals suffer every day, simply by consuming meat from factory farms. On the other hand, we have the vegetarian who is concerned with animal suffering or killing and who does not become a vegan. Yes, she is inconsistent. She would become a vegan were she to live by coherent rules. Comparing these two situations, however, we can say that it is far better to be inconsistent but live by moral principles concerned with the well-being of our fellow travelers, than to be consistent and have no motivation to let this compassion toward other species guide our dietary choices.

Yet consistency is important; it is intrinsically valuable. Consistency provides us with a basis for evaluating the logical relationship between a person’s
behavior and beliefs; this gives us a point of reference when assessing situations related to this person. Consistency, in a way, makes life a little easier. Now, consider the person who shoots—very consistently—every third person she meets. Although she is being consistent, this is not the kind of behavior that is approved of solely because a person is consistent. The example makes it clear that consistency, although intrinsically valuable, is not an absolute value. That is, whether we consider consistency to be valuable depends in part on the particular behavior or rule added to it. Thus consistency can be looked at as follows: it enters into a reciprocal relationship with the rule or behavior to which it is connected. It strengthens—to a greater or lesser extent—the value of the behavior with which it is engaged; at the same time, the value of consistency is affected by the specific behavior. Consistency can thus be considered as a foundation on which other principles rely and which gives them additional weight. In turn, the value of consistency does rely in part on the contents of the principles and rules that are connected to it.¹⁴

For vegetarians these thoughts on consistency suggest the following: although the inconsistent vegetarian is to be praised more than the consistent carnivore, the value of consistency is such—due to the moral rules to which it is connected in this case—that being an inconsistent vegetarian is not a sufficiently strong position. Choosing a diet that does not contain any meat is a small step in the right direction, yet if one truly wants to minimize the harm done to animals, if one wants to avoid the unnecessary death of animals and if one wants to respect and value animals for who or what they are, then vegetarianism is not enough. In Western countries people have a choice when it comes to their diet. They do not consume animal products out of bare necessity—that is, for reasons of subsistence—but simply because they find it enjoyable to do so. Moreover, people in Western countries are in such a position that they can choose a diet that does not contain any animal products without harming their own health.¹⁵ The fact that vegetarianism as a dietary choice still harms so many animals, and that it is neither for reasons of survival nor for reasons of health that one chooses such a diet, make it an unethical choice not to turn to veganism (Kemmerer, 2006, pp. 458-468). Vegetarians should thus strive for consistency and adopt veganism as their new dietary choice.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Frederike Kaldewaij for her useful comments. I owe special thanks to Martin van Hees for his insights, time, and critical view.

2. As it is beyond the scope of this paper, I will not enter the discussion on why it is not only human beings but nonhuman animals, too, who deserve moral consideration. Two well-known arguments on the inclusion of nonhuman animals in the moral domain are to be found

3. Although I regard the distinction between “nonhuman animal” and “human animal” as the proper one, from this point on I refer simply to “animals” and “humans,” for the sake of simplicity.

4. This is a contested statement: some believe that motives do play a role in distinguishing between vegetarians and nonvegetarians and that therefore not every person who does not consume meat can rightly be called a vegetarian. This, however, is not the line of thought adopted here; in order to distinguish vegetarians from nonvegetarians (persons who do not consume meat from persons who do consume meat), dietary habits are sufficient requirements.

5. This distinction will be further elaborated in the section entitled “Motives for Vegetarianism.”

6. What can be considered “meat” is not always clear. There are definitely borderline cases when defining “meat,” such as the organs and the crest of chickens. I do not discuss what is to be counted as meat and what is not, however, since it is hardly important for the argument to know exactly where the line can be drawn.

7. This does not suggest that judicial rules and religious prescriptions cannot overlap with moral rules; it says they are based on different points of departure.

8. Even though there are other moral motives that are interesting in the light of consistency (such as the redistribution argument), their discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

9. I confine myself to only one example of animal pain and suffering in the meat industry, due to space limitations, yet many more can be given; for instance, the high rate of growth of meat chicks, the debeaking of chickens, the restriction of the animals’ freedom of movement, etc.

10. Although some vegetarians turn to a vegetarian diet because they are against the unnecessary death of animals, Tzachi Zamir (2004) offers the argument that killing animals for food does not necessarily lead to moral vegetarianism; he argues that one cannot prove that the killing of animals for the pleasure of eating their meat is wrong.

11. Ultimate harm is not the same as the worst harm. Regan calls it “ultimate harm” because untimely death forecloses all possibilities for satisfaction, and it is the ultimate loss—the loss of life itself.

12. It has been agreed that battery cages would be banned from the EU from 2012. It is very likely, however, that this agreement will not be fulfilled.

13. Not only does it have an enormous impact on your diet, because of the common and manifold use of animal products in varying types of food, it probably affects your social life, too; people will not as readily invite you to dinner because of the perceived difficulty of preparing a vegan meal and, moreover, they will be hesitant to consume your vegan creations. Furthermore, eating out will be much more problematic.


15. There is still some discussion over the healthiness of a vegan diet. See, for instance, Key, Appleby, and Rosell (2006); George (1994); and Varner (1994).

References


