

DAN C. SHAHAR



# WHY IT'S OK TO EAT MEAT



“This is a *fantastic* volume. Shahar offers an accessible, compelling, and compact defense of the permissibility of eating meat—it’s perfect for the classroom. At the same time, he’s written a book that’s full of material that pushes this important conversation forward. (His discussion of the Stag Hunt alone is worth the sticker price.) Whoever you are and whatever you make of his conclusions, Shahar’s arguments are worth careful consideration.”

— Bob Fischer, Texas State University

“Anyone asking themselves whether they should become a vegetarian will find this book to be an invaluable resource. For the difficult to balance criteria of accessibility and comprehensiveness, *Why It’s OK to Eat Meat* is unsurpassed. To Shahar’s credit, the issues are given such a balanced treatment that some readers will surely reach the opposite conclusion to the one expressed in the title.”

— Paul B. Thompson, Michigan State University

“In the course of presenting state-of-the-art arguments that it’s OK to eat meat, Shahar succeeds in getting us to focus on the bigger picture. What actions and attitudes actually help us advance justice and wellbeing? Which are just virtue-signaling sideshows? Vegetarians and meat-eaters alike owe it to us all to take these challenging questions seriously.”

— Mark Budolfson, Rutgers University



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# Why It's OK to Eat Meat

Vegetarians have argued at great length that meat-eating is wrong. Even so, the vast majority of people continue to eat meat, and even most vegetarians eventually give up on their diets. Does this prove these people must be morally corrupt?

In *Why It's OK to Eat Meat*, Dan C. Shahar argues the answer is no: it's entirely possible to be an ethical person while continuing to eat meat—and not just the “fancy” offerings from the farmers’ market but also the regular meat we find at most supermarkets and restaurants. Shahar’s examination forcefully echoes vegetarians’ concerns about the meat industry’s impacts on animals, workers, the environment, and public health. However, he shows that the most influential ethical arguments for avoiding meat on the basis of these considerations are ultimately unpersuasive. Instead of insisting we all become vegetarians, Shahar argues each of us has broad latitude to choose which of the world’s problems to tackle, in what ways, and to what extents, and hence people can decline to take up this particular form of activism without doing anything wrong.

**Dan C. Shahar** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy—Research at the University of New Orleans and a member of the Urban Entrepreneurship and Policy Institute. He is the winner of the International Society for Environmental Ethics’ 2020 Holmes Rolston III Early Career Essay Prize for Environmental Philosophy and co-editor (with David Schmidtz) of the latest edition of *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works* (2018).

## Why It's OK: The Ethics and Aesthetics of How We Live

Philosophers often build cogent arguments for unpopular positions. Recent examples include cases against marriage and pregnancy, for treating animals as our equals, and dismissing some popular art as aesthetically inferior. What philosophers have done less often is to offer compelling arguments for widespread and established human behavior, like getting married, having children, eating animals, and going to the movies. But if one role for philosophy is to help us reflect on our lives and build sound justifications for our beliefs and actions, it seems odd that philosophers would neglect arguments for the lifestyles most people—including many philosophers—actually lead. Unfortunately, philosophers' inattention to normalcy has meant that the ways of life that define our modern societies have gone largely without defense, even as whole literatures have emerged to condemn them.

Why It's OK: The Ethics and Aesthetics of How We Live seeks to remedy that. It's a series of books that provides accessible, sound, and often new and creative arguments for widespread ethical and aesthetic values. Made up of short volumes that assume no previous knowledge of philosophy from the reader, the series recognizes that philosophy is just as important for understanding what we already believe as it is for criticizing the status quo. The series isn't meant to make us complacent about what we value; rather, it helps and challenges us to think more deeply about the values that give our daily lives meaning.

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DAN C. SHAHAR

# **Why It's OK** to Eat Meat

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# One

If you traveled back in time a few hundred years, what would people be eating? For the most part, the answer is: whatever they had. For almost all of human history, people weren't picky about their food. They couldn't afford to be. Culinary options were limited, and people ate what was available in order to survive.

Today, things are different. People in developed nations (i.e., virtually everyone reading this book) often attend closely to how food tastes, how healthy it is, how it was prepared, and where its ingredients came from, among many other factors. Unlike our ancestors (and unlike many people around the world today), we can choose what we eat, and that freedom has made it possible to be selective about what we put in our mouths.

Examining our diets often turns up unpleasant truths. Much of the food we eat is bad for us. Much of it is produced in ways that negatively impact the environment. Many of the people who work in the food sector are treated and paid badly. Particularly significantly for this book, most of the animals we eat are raised in poor conditions.

Problems like these pervade our food system, but they especially afflict the meat industry. Obviously, animal welfare issues fall distinctly into its lap. But the industry's activities also raise serious concerns about worker mistreatment,



environmental degradation, and public health endangerment, among many other things.

As awareness of these problems has spread, so too has a conviction that it's not just *unwise* to eat meat (e.g., for reasons of good health or frugality) but *morally wrong*. Globally, millions of people now describe themselves as “ethical vegetarians.” The movement has grown substantially in recent decades, with many more people abstaining from meat today than was true when our parents and grandparents were raised.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this book is to examine these moral concerns about eating meat. As the title suggests, I'll be arguing vegetarians are mistaken in their conviction that meat-eating is morally wrong. It's OK to eat meat, even when it's produced in the objectionable ways that are common today. Moreover, it's possible to do these things while still being a person of integrity, principle, and public spirit—and while condemning the processes through which meat is brought to our restaurants, supermarkets, and dinner tables.

In case it needs to be said: I will *not* be arguing that eating meat automatically makes you a person of virtue, integrity, and public spirit. Most meat-eaters undoubtedly have a variety of grounds for re-examining their lives. (Don't we all?) I also won't claim it's inherently misguided to abstain from meat. If you're inclined to avoid it, you'll find no objections to that choice from me. As I'll discuss in greater depth below, eating meat is neither necessary nor sufficient for a life well lived. This book only claims that eating meat is morally OK and thus *compatible* with an ethical life—just like countless other permissible actions such as buying a house, working in retail, and wearing a sweater when it's cold outside.

Before launching in, let me make a brief note about terminology. Morally-motivated critics of meat-eating go by many

names that reflect subtle differences in what they believe. For example, “vegetarians” commonly eat eggs and dairy products, but “vegans” do not. “Ostrovegans” eat bivalves like oysters and mussels on the premise that their nervous systems are too simple to make them conscious. “Freegans” don’t buy animal products but will eat them if others have thrown them away.<sup>2</sup>

These camps disagree with one another about how we ought to eat, but they all share a common belief we must not eat meat “in the regular way.” To eat meat “in the regular way,” I take it, is to do so whenever one feels like it, without necessarily paying close attention to the details of how the meat was produced. A person who eats meat “in the regular way” will feel no hesitation ordering it at a restaurant, for example, if the relevant menu item sounds tasty. Likewise, a person who eats meat “in the regular way” will readily buy it at the grocery store to cook at home—and not just the “fancy” meat from the ultra-conscientious producers, but also the mainstream stuff filling most of the space on the shelves.

Since I’ll be arguing it is OK to eat meat “in the regular way,” the differences between the various anti-meat outlooks are inessential for our discussion. For the sake of simplicity, I’ll use the word “vegetarian” as an umbrella term for my interlocutors. My position in what follows is simple: vegetarians in all their stripes are mistaken when they deny it’s morally OK to eat meat.

## IN SEARCH OF GOOD ARGUMENTS

As a sociological matter, it might appear my side of the debate has long held the upper hand. Despite the millions practicing vegetarianism worldwide, the vast majority of people continue to eat meat. Indeed, global meat consumption has been

steadily on the rise.<sup>3</sup> Even most people who experiment with vegetarianism eventually go back to meat, many after just a few months. In the United States, for example, the Humane Research Council found in 2014 that 12.1% of Americans have been vegetarians at one point (including vegans), with only 1.9% currently practicing vegetarianism and 10.2% claiming to have done so in the past—a reversion rate of about 84%.<sup>4</sup>

Yet vegetarians can offer numerous explanations for these facts that have little to do with the ethical merits of meat-eating. As I've already said, many around the world are too poor to be choosy about food. Among those who can afford more discretion, some aren't aware of the moral objections to eating meat. Others are familiar with the objections but simply don't care. Many people are convinced it's OK to eat meat only because they embrace silly, easily refutable arguments. Some believe it's wrong but lack the willpower to follow through on this conviction. By appealing to explanations like these, vegetarians can plausibly argue that even though most people in fact eat meat, this doesn't prove meat-eaters have persuasive arguments to defend what they do.<sup>5</sup>

We can raise further doubts by considering some common arguments for why eating meat is OK. Many meat-eaters justify their actions by appealing to meat's deliciousness or its role in sustaining our health. Some fixate on the "naturalness" of meat-eating, while others point to religious texts as providing authoritative guidance on the subject. For better or worse, all of these arguments are unconvincing. Let's examine them in turn.

## ENJOYABLE?

It would be no use denying the deliciousness of meat. In the eyes of some meat-eaters, this is enough to prove it's OK to

eat it. But although this sort of consideration may explain why people enjoy eating meat, it's not very useful for showing the moral acceptability of doing so. We know from other areas of life that morality regularly condemns actions with the potential to produce pleasure. It would be nice to have others' belongings, for example, but that doesn't justify theft. It would be nice to have people do stuff for you, but that doesn't justify slavery. We find across many domains that pleasantness doesn't always equal moral permissibility. Meat's deliciousness doesn't prove, then, that it's morally OK to eat it.

One response might be that meat-eating isn't just pleasant: it's essential for happiness. The unique flavors and textures of meat might be so peerless among foods that a life without them would be stunted and flat.<sup>6</sup> If giving up meat would close off the possibility of true happiness, that would provide a stronger case for meat-eating than the mere observation that meat tastes good.<sup>7</sup>

There are two problems with this reply, however. First, it simply seems false that vegetarians cannot be happy. Many plant-based foods are delicious, and the world's culinary traditions offer countless opportunities for fulfilling meatless experiences.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, vegetarians who play their cards right can plausibly draw even more pleasure from their diets than many meat-eaters do. Insofar as they believe they're doing what's right, vegetarians also get a bonus of feeling good about themselves when they sit down for a meal.<sup>9</sup> Empirically speaking, psychological studies of the reported wellbeing of vegetarians and meat-eaters tend to find little meaningful difference between the two groups.<sup>10</sup>

However, a second problem with this line of argument is that even if eating meat *were* necessary for happiness, this could hardly vindicate doing it "in the regular way." The instances

of meat-eating that significantly impact our lives are few and far between. When I order pork instead of tofu in my restaurant stir-fry, this choice has no important ramifications for the overall quality of my life. Nor does my happiness depend on whether I roll my homemade burrito with chicken or beans. Especially when one considers the many uninteresting and even disgusting meat dishes one encounters as an omnivore, it seems clear happiness would be possible while cutting the majority of meat from our diets. At most, appealing to meat's unique culinary importance could justify eating it only on special occasions—and plausibly not even then.

It's worth noting in this connection that many meat-eaters find it difficult to consider becoming vegetarian because this would mean giving up on things like Thanksgiving turkey (in the United States) or a special meal prepared by a family member. Vegetarians tend to believe these experiences are worth sacrificing to maintain a meat-free diet.<sup>11</sup> But even if giving up these specific food items were too much to ask, this would hardly undermine the case for giving up meat at other times. Thus, even if we accepted its dubious premise, this kind of argument would be a poor fit for defending meat-eating “in the regular way.”

## HEALTHY?

Another common argument for eating meat is that it's necessary for health. Meat is an important dietary source of protein and micronutrients like iron, vitamin A, and vitamin B12. In fact, vitamin B12—which, among other things, is essential for building red blood cells and DNA—is found in no commonly eaten foods besides animal products. On the basis of considerations like these, some people claim eating meat is required for health.<sup>12</sup>

Although no one would dispute the importance of staying healthy, this argument runs into the same two problems as the previous one. First, the argument's central claim appears false: medical professionals broadly agree it's possible to maintain a healthy diet while avoiding meat and other animal products.<sup>13</sup> Vegetarians need to ensure they eat certain foods to get the nutrients they need, but it's widely accepted this can be done. Even vitamin B12 turns out to be produced by particular algae, so vegetarians can obtain it easily from supplements that conform to their dietary principles.

Second, even if we did need meat to be healthy, this certainly wouldn't vindicate the vast majority of actual meat-eating. Especially in developed nations, most meat-eaters consume far more meat than is required for their health. In fact, *overconsumption* of meat is linked to major public health problems such as heart disease and obesity.<sup>14</sup> For the typical meat-eater, appealing to health thus cannot justify more than a small fraction of their consumption. Once again, we find that anyone hoping to defend meat-eating "in the regular way" will need a different kind of argument.

Notice a pattern that's beginning to emerge. When meat-eaters argue we have to eat meat to be happy, healthy, or whatever, the idea is that meat-eating is somehow *necessary*—without it, people can't flourish. All arguments of this form face the same two obstacles. On the one hand, it simply seems false that meat is necessary in any important sense. Whether or not one finds vegetarianism appealing, it goes too far to claim such a diet is incompatible with human welfare. But even if eating meat really were necessary, it's implausible this necessity would extend to eating meat "in the regular way." Maybe there are some cases in which we really do *have* to eat meat. But almost none of our actual meat-eating falls into this category.<sup>15</sup>

We shouldn't be surprised to find that arguments of the form "But I have to do it!" are unconvincing. Usually, when people resort to this type of argument, it's because they're doing something bad—and usually, they're lying. For those who hope to provide a satisfying defense of meat-eating, it's best to avoid arguments with this form. If eating meat is a morally dubious act that can only be justified by its necessity, the debate has already been lost.

### NATURAL?

Some defenses of eating meat avoid appeals to necessity. These arguments claim meat-eating isn't objectionable in the first place, so it's OK even when we don't strictly *have* to do it. This is a more promising strategy, but even many arguments of this type are unconvincing.

One example is the claim that eating meat is OK because it's "natural."<sup>16</sup> This line of reasoning may be supported in a variety of ways. For instance, it can be argued that humans have been eating meat for our whole history as a species. Certain features of our biology—for example, our canine teeth—seem especially suited to this task. Moreover, meat-eating is not a distinctively human activity: primates have been doing it since long before humans evolved, and many other animals eat meat as well. Not only is meat-eating a normal feature of animal life on earth, but it plays an essential role in the functioning of natural ecosystems. Meat-eating is thus a thoroughly natural phenomenon: it's natural for humans, and it's natural more broadly as well.

We should be careful not to interpret this argument as just another appeal to necessity. The claim is not that if we stopped eating meat, it would invite ecological collapse,

species extinctions, or some other environmental calamity.<sup>17</sup> (If that were the argument, it would run into the same problems as above. Ecological functioning doesn't typically require humans to eat meat. But even if it did, this wouldn't justify the farming practices that produce most of our actual meat—not least because these practices often harm the environment.) The sort of argument I have in mind here is more fundamental. It holds that eating meat is natural, and there can be no reasonable objection to activities that are natural in this way.

One problem with this kind of argument is that many “natural” things should be avoided or stopped.<sup>18</sup> For example, it's “natural” for people to murder one another in a struggle for power and resources: humans have been doing this for as long as they've existed,<sup>19</sup> and other animals do it as well. Throughout history, people skeptical of morality have reminded us that the natural order allows the strong to do as they wish, whether that involves theft, slavery, murder, etc.<sup>20</sup> Yet, observations like these hardly reflect what's morally justifiable. If anything, morality is a system for reorienting behavior away from these sorts of “natural” behaviors toward equity and justice.

Making matters worse, meat-eating looks on its surface like many of the “natural” practices we regard as immoral. Like theft, slavery, and murder, meat-eating appears to impose massive costs on helpless individuals (most obviously animals, but also people impacted negatively by meat production) in the name of self-interest. If morality teaches us anything about “nature,” it's that we should regard behaviors bearing these characteristics with extreme suspicion.

For reasons like these, appeals to the “naturalness” of meat-eating yield an unconvincing defense. Far from proving it's OK to eat meat, such arguments virtually beg vegetarians to draw an analogy between meat-eating and other notorious