

Size Matters: Animal Size, Contributory Causation, and Ethical Vegetarianism

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Animal size is a relevant and unappreciated consideration in moral evaluations of killing animals for food, especially for utilitarians, who must weigh the gustatory satisfaction of eating meat—the quantity of which varies greatly throughout the animal kingdom—against animal suffering in utilitarian calculations. I argue that animal size can drastically alter not only the extent but even the valence of such calculations. Then I show how the business ethics literature on vegetarianism is deficient for not taking animal size into account. Last, I argue that market conditions are also relevant in moral assessments of vegetarianism.

KEY WORDS: vegetarianism, utilitarianism, animal size, consumer ethics, contributory causation

“Eat the Whales!” proclaimed demonstrators from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) from atop their soapboxes outside the July 23, 2001, meeting of the International Whaling Commission in Norway. At the meeting, representatives from Iceland, Norway, and Japan proposed revoking the international ban on whaling and restarting commercial whaling with or without international support. Whale advocates schooled together to protest the event. Somewhat surprisingly, PETA, one of the most prominent animal rights organizations, counterprotested to point out the contradiction: Nearly all the pro-whale protesters ate meat. PETA argued that they would cause less suffering if they ditched chicken nuggets and haddock fillets in favor of “whale whoppers.” As PETA coordinator Bruce Friedrich put it, “We’re obviously in favour of saving whales, but if you’re not a vegetarian, face the facts: you are responsible for far more suffering and deaths than one Japanese or Norwegian whaler” (Bunting, 2001). Although one may disagree with PETA’s tactics here, philosophers of animal ethics and vegetarianism could do worse than take notice of PETA’s wailing because contrary to popular opinion, size matters.

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