

Reconsidering the utilitarian link between veganism and antinatalism

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To the Editor

I recently argued that ethical vegans should be antinatalists and thus not have children [1]. Louis Austin-Eames makes a compelling case against my view and claims that ethical reasons for veganism do not warrant antinatalism [2]. In this short reply, I reconsider some of my views.

In my article, which was published in a collection of papers on controversial arguments in bioethics [3], I considered two plausible arguments for ethical veganism (the consequentialist argument and the right-based argument) and argued that the same arguments also lead to antinatalism – a view that says it is immoral to have children. The right-based argument was previously challenged by Bülow [4], and I responded to it [5], so I will now focus on the consequentialist, or the utilitarian argument.

The main claim of Austin-Eames is that I am comparing wrong things. He points out that the utilitarian arguments for veganism and antinatalism (as I framed them) do not consider the net utility of veganism and antinatalism. Austin-Eames argues that while factory farming likely results in a net disutility, the same cannot be said for having children. This implies that, on utilitarian grounds, it is not morally wrong to have children, even though supporting factory farming by eating animals is morally wrong. Why, does not having children cause net disutility? Well, because one should take into account the wellbeing of the prospective child and parents if the child were to be born. So, it could well be the case that the prospective child and the prospective parents both experience sufficient wellbeing to outweigh the suffering – however, animals in factory farms likely do not experience sufficient wellbeing to outweigh their suffering.

The above reasoning is not implausible. However, I want to make two remarks. First, if one could to increase the well-being of animals in factory farms so much that their wellbeing would outweigh their suffering, I doubt many vegans would accept such practices. If this assumption is correct, then these vegans would either adhere to veganism for non-utilitarian reasons (such as rights-based reasons), or their moral justification for veganism might align with negative utilitarianism. Very roughly, negative utilitarianism says that one should be more focused on preventing bad things from happening, such as preventing pain and suffering, than causing good things to happen, such as generating well-being and pleasure. If preventing suffering is prioritized over ensuring pleasure, then vegans who adhere to negative utilitarianism may also advocate antinatalism, as preventing potential suffering would outweigh the pursuit of pleasure for the child or parents.

Second, many societies are ardently pro-natalist. If one could bypass those many pro-natalist biases that affect people's judgment on their well-being and happiness, it could well be that people would eventually see procreation as the tragedy it is. Here, I raise just one example: pregnancy. Many people see pregnancy as a state that deserves celebration and joy, and which is seen as natural part of being a woman. However, if one could set aside one's pro-natalist biases, pregnancy would be revealed as a discomforting, painful, dangerous, and even life-threatening condition [6] – a condition for which celebration would hardly seem appropriate but rather sexist and discriminatory.

Since ethics is inherently practical, I encourage all vegans to consider whether their reasoning behind veganism also might warrant antinatalism, i.e., whether they are sympathetic to negative utilitarianism. Of course, it would be nice if non-vegans would contemplate different ethical reasonings too, including the ethics of procreation. But I am afraid that in pro-natalist societies, where unpleasant, painful, and lethal conditions are seen as natural simply because they lead to the creation of new sentient lives, few understand that having children needs ethical justification. And if one fails to see the immorality in eating animals, one will likely disregard the ethical examination of procreation too – even though adopting antinatalism would eventually solve all problems, including ethical problems related to factory-farming [7].

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