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Should vegans have children? Examining the links between animal ethics and antinatalism

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Abstract

Ethical vegans and vegetarians believe that it is seriously immoral to bring into existence animals whose lives would be miserable. In this paper, I will discuss whether such a belief also leads to the conclusion that it is seriously immoral to bring human beings into existence. I will argue that vegans should abstain from having children since they believe that unnecessary suffering should be avoided. After all, humans will suffer in life, and having children is not necessary for a good life. Thus vegans, and probably vegetarians as well, should not have children. I will consider several objections against this controversial claim, show why the objections fail and conclude that it would be best for ethical vegans to abstain from procreation.

Introduction

Moral vegans believe that we should not eat animals or animal-based products, such as eggs or milk, because producing them causes unnecessary suffering to animals. Eating meat or animal-based products is not necessary. It is morally wrong. Likewise, we should not wear fur or leather, or use animals in any other ways that cause them unnecessary suffering. Antinatalists believe that having children is morally wrong for similar reasons. Their argument in its most basic form is: All human life contains suffering and having children is not necessary, so it is immoral to have children. While not all vegans think that unnecessary suffering is the only reason for thinking that eating or using animal-based products is morally wrong, the tenet is so central to all vegan thinking, that logically, vegans should also be antinatalists. Vegans should not have children for the same reasons they believe we should not consume or use animal products. Once they have been aware of this conclusion, vegans should stop having children.

I will start by exploring the arguments behind ethical veganism. I will then proceed to show how the same arguments apply to antinatalism. After showing that there is a link between

moral veganism and antinatalism, I will consider several objections against the arguments I have presented. I will conclude that the counter-arguments presented are not convincing.

In this paper, I will not take sides on whether vegans are right in that we should not eat animals or whether antinatalists are right in that we should not procreate. Here I am only interested in examining the links between these two moral views. On a personal level, I find both veganism and antinatalism compelling, although I am not entirely sure whether it is wrong to have children or whether it is wrong to eat animals. So, while I think both views are plausible, I am not sure that they are correct.

I am not sure if antinatalism is correct, because I am not fully confident that existence is always bad. However, I am confident that nonexistence cannot be bad, so it cannot be wrong not to have children. Thus, like I have argued elsewhere, abstaining from procreation seems to be the morally safe option, because one cannot wrong someone who does not exist [1].

When it comes to animal ethics, I think – as others have argued [2] – that if animals matter morally, we should be much more concerned with wild animal suffering than we currently are. If all animal suffering matters, it seems that the world is a very bad place. Even without humans and their inhumane practices, most animals suffer in the wild. In a way, I hope that many animal ethicists are wrong, because if they are right, then the world is full of suffering that matters, which would be very bad indeed.

I am not the first to wonder whether vegans should also be antinatalists. In a short blog post in German in 2014, titled “Ist der Vegetarismus ein Antinatalismus?“, author Karim Akerma investigated the possible links between animal ethics and antinatalism [3]. And in 2018 the *Marie Claire*, a digital magazine, published an article, “This Extreme Sect of Vegans Thinks Your Baby Will Destroy the Planet“, in which Virginia Pelley interviewed a few vegans who are also antinatalists [4]. However, I am not aware of any academic articles arguing that antinatalism should logically follow from ethical veganism. My purpose with this article is to fill that gap in the literature.

Arguments for animal ethics

All animal ethicists believe that animals matter, but they do not agree on *why* they matter. Contemporary utilitarians, like Peter Singer, suggest – following Jeremy Bentham (p. 283) who said “The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” [5] – that since non-human animals can suffer, there is no morally justifiable way to exclude them from our moral considerations. According to Singer, any being that has an interest in not to suffer deserves to have that interest taken into account, and that non-human animals who act to avoid pain can safely be assumed to have just such an interest. The fact that non-human animals belong to a different species should have no moral relevance. Species, just like biological sex or race is morally irrelevant [6-7].

Empirical studies support Singer’s claims about animal suffering. There is a wide range of evidence that shows that many animals (possibly all vertebrates) can suffer and feel pain [6]. The centuries’ old philosophical view, often assigned to Rene Descartes [7], that animals cannot feel pain has largely been refuted, although the question of whether animals can feel *morally relevant* pain has recently been challenged [8].

What then is wrong with our treatment of animals according to utilitarianism? Consider factory farming, the most common method used to convert animal bodies into cheap food in industrialized societies today. The conditions in which these animals are raised and sometimes the methods of their slaughter too, cause vast amounts of suffering [9]. Given that animals suffer under such conditions, and assuming that suffering is not in their interests, the practice of factory farming is immoral – unless abolishing such practice were to cause even greater suffering or a greater amount of interest-frustration. It is very unlikely that eradicating factory farming would cause greater suffering to humans than what is endured by the animals involved.

Singer and other utilitarians are not making unreasonable claims when they argue that, on balance, the suffering and interest-frustration that animals experience in modern-day meat production is greater than the suffering that humans would endure if they had to abstain from eating meat. While Singer has his critics and some have even defended the claims that factory farming is not cruel to animals [10], many agree with him. As Matti Häyry (p. 355) says: “Industrial animal farming, including fur farming, is wrong. It frustrates the basic need satisfaction of sentient nonhuman beings for the sake of the less basic need satisfaction of human meat-eaters, egg eaters, milk drinkers, and fur clothes users.” [11] So, on utilitarian grounds, factory farming is seriously immoral because it causes enormous amounts of unnecessary suffering.¹

Here is one way to frame a utilitarian argument against factory farming.

P1: If factory farming causes greater suffering and interest-frustration on non-human animals than what humans would experience if they had to abstain from eating meat, then factory farming is immoral.

P2: Factory farming causes greater suffering and interest-frustration on non-human animals than what humans would experience if they had to abstain from eating meat.

C: Factory farming is immoral.

This argument is perhaps a bit naïve, but my aim is not to consider whether it is sound. The focus is simply on the relation between the argument and a similar argument for antinatalism. I believe many vegans are sympathetic to the above argument and find it plausible. For instance, an American animal rights organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), writes on their website that animals used for food endure constant fear and torment, and that farmed animals frequently suffer from starvation, dehydration, parasitic infections, diseases, and debilitating injuries [12]. Further, PETA’s slogan states “Animals are not ours to experiment on, eat, wear, use for entertainment, or abuse in any other way” [12]. While all PETA supporters might not be vegans, it seems clear that their view is in line with ethical veganism.

Later on, I will show how similar argumentation from unnecessary suffering will also lead to antinatalism. But before going there, I will briefly study the rights-based arguments for animal ethics.

¹ One might ask what unnecessary suffering means here. Unnecesssary suffering refers to suffering that we could easily live without inflicting on anyone. For instance, if the only way to save your life is to cause you to suffer, then the suffering is *not* unnecessary.

Some vegans believe that utilitarian considerations are not the reasons why animals matter. For them, ethics is not about the consequences of our actions, but about rights. Factory farming is wrong because it violates the rights of farm animals, not so much because it causes them suffering [13].

Why does factory farming violate the animals' rights? Tom Regan (p. 243) explains that individuals are subjects-of-a-life if they have beliefs and desires; perception, memory, and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference- and welfare-interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychophysical identity over time; and individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them, logically independently of their utility for others and logically independently of their being the object of anyone else's interests. Regan holds that non-human animals satisfy the above conditions [13].

According to Regan's view, an individual who possesses a moral right, may not be sacrificed *even if* the consequences of doing so are appealing, because those who satisfy the subject-of-a-life criterion themselves have inherent value and are not to be viewed or treated as mere receptacles.

Here is one possible way to frame a rights-based argument against factory farming. Again, I am not considering whether the argument is sound, but I think at least some vegans would find it compelling.

P1: It is immoral to treat individuals who are subjects-of-a-life as mere means.

P2: Non-human animals are subjects-of-a-life.

P3: Factory farming treats non-human animals as mere means.

C: Factory farming is immoral.

In sum, according to the rights-based argument, factory farming is immoral because it treats those who are subjects-of-a-life as mere means, thus violating their rights.

In the above, I sketched two main arguments that lead to ethical veganism: utilitarian and rights-based. They do not cover all possible reasons for veganism, but most ethical vegans (excluding those who are vegans for purely environmental reasons) would find either one or both compelling. Next, I will show how these arguments are linked to antinatalism.

Arguments for antinatalism

Antinatalism is a philosophical view that assigns a negative value to birth or, more precisely, coming into existence. Proponents of antinatalism claim that bringing someone into existence always harms and/or wrongs the person, thus implying that procreation is immoral.

Antinatalism is most commonly associated with South African philosopher David Benatar [14], although somewhat similar positions have been argued for by Peter Wessel Zapffe [15], Arthur Schopenhauer, Matti Häyry [16-17], Stuart Rachels [18] and, more recently, Blake Hereth and Anthony Ferrucci [19].

A utilitarian argument for antinatalism could be formulated as follows.

P1: If having children causes greater suffering and interest-frustration on the prospective child than what prospective parents would experience if they had to abstain from having children, then having children is immoral.

P2: Having children causes greater suffering and interest-frustration on the prospective child than what prospective parents would experience if they had to abstain from having children.

C: Having children is immoral.

This formulation deviates slightly from the arguments presented by the aforementioned antinatalists. For instance, Schopenhauer and Zappfe's views are based on their general pessimism. Benatar's argument is based on the asymmetry between pain and pleasure, and specifically on his view that the absence of pain is good even if it is not enjoyed by anyone, while the absence of pleasure is only bad when there is a particular person for whom it is bad. Häyry thinks that having children is risky because the result can be a terrible life and that avoiding risks is rational. Rachels argues we should use our resources to benefit existing people rather than to create new needy people, and Hereth and Ferrucci argue that procreators are responsible for unjust harms that befall their children.

I would claim that vegans who accept the utilitarian argument for animal ethics should also accept the utilitarian argument for antinatalism as presented above. P1 is based on simple utilitarian reasoning and P2 states that any given child is expected to suffer more over the course of a full life than their parents would suffer if they spent the latter three-quarters of their lives childless. As before, both premises seem plausible and are based on harm reduction. Utilitarian arguments for animal ethics and antinatalism appear to go hand in hand.

What about the rights-based argument for animal ethics? Consider the following argument.

P1: It is immoral to treat individuals who are subjects-of-a-life as mere means.

P2: Children are subjects-of-a-life.

P3: Having children uses children as mere means.

C: Having children is immoral.

The first premise is from the rights-based argument for animal ethics and the second premise seems obviously true. The third premise seems at least plausible, given that the main reason for having children for many prospective parents is: "I want children." Again, there are objections against this reasoning. Let me now turn to them.

Objections and the replies

For the rest of the paper, I will consider some objections one might have against my arguments. I will respond to the objections one by one and conclude that none of them is entirely convincing.

First objection: Human lives are enjoyable and contain much that is good, while the lives of factory-farmed animals are all bad

Someone might argue against my position by claiming that normal human life contains much more good and pleasure than, say, a pig's life in a factory farm and that pigs' lives contain

much more pain and suffering than normal human lives do. Thus, they could say that it is permissible to bring children into existence, but not pigs, because humans enjoy their life while factory-farmed animals do not.

Reply

Normal human lives contain less pleasure and more pain than people usually acknowledge. Many things that we find the most pleasurable last only a short period of time (such as sex, a good meal, or a deep conversation), while many painful things last long periods of time (such as illness, sorrow, loneliness, or depression). The amount of good in human life, as compared to that of a pig, might not be that much greater after all.

J.S. Mill famously said that it is better to be an unhappy human than a happy pig [20]. I do not deny that human life contains more good (and higher goods) than the life of a factory-farmed pig. However, human life also contains pains that pigs do not have. Consider, for instance, the agonies we go through over relationships or the existential suffering caused by not knowing the purpose of our lives.

Suppose we could increase the pleasures of the pig's life living at the factory farm. What if, instead of keeping the pig in a small cage without any pleasures for its whole life, he could spend half of his life frolicking in a field with other pigs? It would certainly be an improvement to the pig's predicament. But would it make it morally permissible to bring such pigs into existence? While some people might think so, I doubt a moral vegan would. A vegan might say that even if the pleasures of the pig at a factory farm could be increased, which would be a good thing, the moral problem of suffering would remain. In the end, it is not about lack of pleasures as much as it is about the unnecessary suffering.

Arguably, by parity of reasoning, even if human life contains much that is good (like many people think), it is an insufficient reason to bring someone into existence as their life also contains much that is painful. For this reason, this objection is not convincing.

Second objection: Having children is necessary (for a good human life), but factory farming is not

One could argue that even if the cases of human reproduction and creating factory-farmed animals were sufficiently analogous regarding pains and pleasures, they are different when it comes to their necessity. Factory farming is not necessary for a good life, while having children is. According to this line of thinking, it is permissible to do things that are necessary for a good life even though they can cause suffering to others.

Based on utilitarian grounds, people might say, for instance, that the pleasure they get from having children are so significant that they outweigh the pains the future child will suffer in life.

Further, one could argue that while vegan food offers an alternative to animal-based foods, there is no real alternative to procreation. Having and raising children is a unique experience that is very relevant to good life. Consequently, since having children is necessary for a good life, the suffering it causes is not unnecessary, but indeed necessary, and therefore we should reject the arguments for antinatalism but not for animal ethics.

Reply

There are two possible responses. One could either argue that eating factory-farmed meat *is* necessary for a good human life, or that having children is *not* necessary for a good human life. If either response is successful, the objection lacks force.

I would expect that many ardent meat-eaters would say that eating meat is necessary for a good life. It could well be claimed that no vegan burger can offer the same pleasures as a proper beef burger; thus, eating meat is necessary for a good life. If this were the case, the objection would fail.

However, I think a more plausible response would be that having children is not necessary for a good life. In fact, broad surveys have found that adults without children have a higher life satisfaction than those with them [21-22]. A possible explanation for this finding is that children increase the amount and variety of stressors that parents are exposed to – including demands on time and energy, sleep deprivation, work-life balance disturbances, and financial burdens [23]. Even putting aside these studies, there are many childless people who demonstrably live good and meaningful lives. Having children, then, is not necessary for a good life. If this is the case, the objection fails.

But while some or even most people can live a good life without having children, an ethical vegan might say: "Yes, but *I* cannot. I want a child so badly that my life would be miserable without one, even more miserable than the life of my child once born."

Suppose you could somehow know for certain that you would live a miserable life without children. Would that justify you bringing people into existence? I doubt it. First of all, you could adopt a child instead. If you truly want to have a family and to raise someone, then surely you could achieve these goals by adopting a child who already exists and needs a family. Granted that adoption presents unique practical and bureaucratic problems that are not present in procreation [24], but, arguably, those would still be a small price to pay for avoiding unnecessary suffering.

Second, based on utilitarian calculations, it is plausible that your child, once grown up, feels the same as you do. She might feel that it is necessary for her to have a child to live a good life, and that her misery of not having children is bigger than any misery her child would ever experience in her life. But here is the catch: she *also* feels the pains and discomforts that everyone else feels in their lives. So, if you do not have children, you will have the misery of not having children; but if you have children, your child will have the same misery of not having children, plus all other miseries human life inevitably contains. So, on purely utilitarian grounds, it is better for you *not* to have children than to have them and pass on the problem to the next generation. Because of this, the objection is not that convincing.

Third objection: But what if I just want to have (biological) children?

One could object by claiming that not having children may be ethical, but these are not the reasons why many people have children: emotional urges are. People have children because they *want* to have children, not because having children is a rational or a moral thing to do (which it is not).

Reply

What if I just *want* to eat meat? Should I eat meat then? No, because I should strive towards acting in a way that is ethical. I should do what is right. The fact that people have children because they want to have children does not mean they *should* have children for that reason. Morality, at least utilitarian morality, is and should be demanding. For instance, if our resources maximize utility through charitable contributions rather than spending them on ourselves, we are morally required to do so [25]. This is what utilitarian morality requires of us.

Fourth objection: What if I allow myself to have children in exchange for not eating animals?

Another objector could suggest making a moral trade with oneself [26]. Suppose one promises not to eat animals for the rest of her life, thereby contributing to moral good in exchange for allowing herself to have children. Someone sympathetic to utilitarianism might accept this solution if the alternative is, arguably, a morally worse choice: not to have children and eating (a lot of) meat.

Reply

First, even if this objection is successful against the utilitarian argument, there is still the rights-based argument. Second, we may ask whether we are allowed to make similar trades when it comes to meat-eating. For instance, suppose one realizes that having children is immoral. Can one eat meat if one promises to abstain from procreation? I doubt that many antinatalist vegans would think such a deal is acceptable. However, someone might be willing to accept this and bite the bullet. If that is the case, then some of those who think suffering matters might be allowed to eat meat in exchange of having children and vice versa, depending on what they themselves think is important for their life. Then again, last, but not least; if having children is wrong and eating meat is wrong, there is nothing ethical in the trade-off. You are not being ethical by choosing between two evils that have nothing to do with one another and that you can both avoid. In this case, the only morally acceptable choice would be to do neither.

Fifth objection: Suffering or rights do not matter; animals just are not the kind of beings we are supposed to eat

One might point out that some ethical vegans do not base their arguments on suffering or on animal rights, but rather on the claim that animals simply are not the sort of beings we should eat. This is a straightforward deontological argument: no matter the consequences, there simply are things that we should not do (like eat animals). If that is the case, there seems to be no link between animal ethics and the ethics of human procreation.²

Reply

Cora Diamond famously argued that humans simply are not the sort of beings who we should eat [27]. Likewise, someone might think that animals – regardless of whether they suffer or have rights – are simply beings (or things) that should not be eaten. If there are people holding such a view, my argument does respond to their reasoning. Be that as it may; I would assume

² I thank Matti Häyry for pressing me on this.

that they are a small minority among ethical vegans. At least based on the rhetoric of animal rights activists, suffering is what matters.

Consider a case where an ethical vegan is trying to convert a meat-eater to veganism. If the vegan says to the meat-eater that you simply should not eat animals, the meat-eater probably asks why not. A convincing answer should say something more than animals just are things that we should not eat. A more convincing answer would be that animals suffer and animal suffering matters morally. If the meat-eater is convinced, and converts to veganism, perhaps in the future, she will come to think that animals, after all, are simply beings who should not be eaten. But the underlying justification for this is still likely to be that animals suffer and animal suffering matters morally.

If I am right, this objection does not save most ethical vegans from the implication that it is immoral to have children, because there still is the link that we should not cause suffering when it is not absolutely necessary to do so.

Some concluding remarks

In this paper, I have argued that ethical veganism and antinatalism share the core assumption that pain and suffering is bad and should be avoided. From this, I have argued that ethical veganism and antinatalism go hand-in-hand and that therefore, ethical vegans should not have children. If they make an exception to the rule and allow themselves to have children because they think it is necessary for a good life, they should probably allow similar excuses to meat-eaters who think eating meat is necessary for a good life. Of course, there might be ways to work oneself out from this conclusion and I just have not figured it out yet. After all, people have been able to find all sorts of justifications for cruel treatment of animals, among other things [28]. However, until proven otherwise, I think it is best if ethical vegans abstain from having children.

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