

John Lawrence Hill. *The Case for Vegetarianism: Philosophy for a Small Planet*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. xviii, 199 pages.

Hill explains that this book “is written both for nonphilosophers and for students of philosophy. It is intended to say something both about philosophy, particularly applied moral philosophy, and about the argument for vegetarianism” (p. xiv). Since vegetarianism is an important topic in applied ethics, I had high expectations of this work. However, although the writing is commendably clear, and despite the fact that it is to be welcomed as the first *book* to bring together and discuss at some length four different arguments for adopting a vegetarian diet, this book is disappointing both by philosophical and scholarly standards. While the claim on the back cover that this book is “more comprehensive and more philosophical than previous books on the subject” is arguably true, it is equally true that it is not, in fact, the most comprehensive and philosophically rigorous case for vegetarianism that can be made.

In the brief introduction Hill advances three reasons for thinking that the case against eating meat is “abundantly more compelling” than the case against animal experimentation (p. xii). He also reports the diverse demography among and plurality of motives of vegetarians, and he offers a tidy overview of the book. In chapter one Hill traces “The Traditional Roots of Modern Moral Philosophy and the Case for Vegetarianism” by briefly explaining the conflict between moral subjectivism and moral objectivism, summarizing virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and Kantian deontology, and stressing the importance of employing the Rawlsian process of reflective equilibrium to establish a coherent balance among our intuitions, arguments, and moral theories. This chapter provides a nice explanation of how Hill uses both utilitarian and deontological arguments to advance his case for vegetarianism, and for this reason it is especially useful to students who lack an understanding of moral theory. Yet Hill neglects to use the conceptual tools supplied by virtue ethics to bring together his four different arguments for vegetarianism into a cumulative and theoretically *unified* case for vegetarianism. Had he done so, his summary of virtue ethics in chapter one would have been put to much more effective use.

In chapter two Hill lays out the argument from the rights and interests of animals from utilitarian, Rawlsian contractarian, and deontological perspectives. There is little original contribution in this chapter, however, since, in constructing his *pro* arguments, Hill borrows from Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Laurence Pringle, Bart Gruzalski, Jeremy Rifkin, Rosemary Rodd, and John Robbins, while taking into account the objections raised by Michael Allen Fox and Jan Narveson.

The argument from personal health is presented in the third chapter. Hill sketches the history of natural law arguments from Aristotle’s concept of *telos*, through Aquinas, to the secularization of natural law theory in the enlightenment in order to observe that “modern anthropological discoveries have

established that our evolutionary precursors were undoubtedly omnivores” (p. 73). On the other hand, Hill remarks that human anatomical features such as the teeth, jaws, lack of claws, saliva, intestines, method of drinking, and sweating through the skin resemble those of herbivores, not carnivores. Hill concludes that because a vegetarian diet provides the best holistic physical, psychological, and spiritual health, it is indeed the most “natural” diet, that is, it “optimally serves the function of the human organism” (p. 76).

Hill’s version of the argument from global ecology occupies chapter four. Six distinct ways eating meat contributes to the displacement or destruction of animal species are detailed. First, the animals that are eaten are obviously killed. Second, while hunting certain species other species may be inadvertently harmed, e.g. whales and dolphins in the course of tuna fishing. Third, as more land is used for cattle grazing and feed crop production, other animals are displaced from their natural habitats. Fourth, cattle grazing destroys the riparian habitats of still other animals. Fifth, livestock production accelerates deforestation and thus the forest habitats of many other animal species. Sixth, “the meat culture engenders an *attitude* toward other animals—an attitude that says we can do as we wish with other animals, whether that means killing them or making them our pets” (p. 116).

In chapter five he argues that wide-scale adoption of a vegetarian diet drives down grain prices for the world’s poor, and that as the meat market dwindles impoverished countries will return to producing plant food, much of which will feed their hungry. More controversial is Hill’s contention that vegetarianism can additionally have beneficial psychological effects on the problem of the maldistribution of food and wealth underlying many social problems.

In chapter six Hill raises and responds to a few objections to vegetarianism. In chapter seven Hill addresses the cultural relativist’s challenge that the majority in our culture do not view meat eating as morally impermissible by arguing that “a transition to vegetarianism would be a mark of moral progress insofar as it represents an overcoming of social convention in the name of the interests of other animals” (p. 184).

The sloppiness of much of Hill’s scholarship is evident early in the book when he claims that Socrates is “reported to have been a vegetarian” (p. xiv) without citing *whose* report he relies on, and then claiming that Aristotle had “similar dietary predilections” (p. xiv) without offering any evidence for this claim. On the heels of these unsupported speculations, Hill misleadingly asserts that the Roman philosopher Seneca was a vegetarian (p. xiv). He cites Paul Amato and Sonia Partridge, *The New Vegetarians: Promoting Health and Protecting Life* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989) as his source, but what Amato and Partridge actually report is that Seneca “expounded the cause of vegetarianism” (*The New Vegetarians*, p. 3), which is true. Seneca clearly explains in his 108th letter that he began to abstain from animal food after hearing his teacher Sotion tell the reasons Pythagoras, and later Sextius, had for giving up

meat. However, Seneca goes on to explain that a year later he *abandoned* vegetarianism at the request of his father because at the time some foreign cults were inaugurated with which abstinence from certain kinds of animal food were associated (*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 108.22). Thus, the full truth is that Seneca was an ex-vegetarian, a fact which Hill misses entirely.

Ignorance of ancient history and philosophy is a conspicuous deficiency of this book. For example, Hill asserts that “for Aristotle, virtue and happiness are each necessary for the other” (p. 7). This summary is hardly an adequate gloss of the relationship between virtue and happiness in Aristotle’s eudaimonist theory. Hill falls victim to a common misspelling of the title of Aristotle’s major ethical work, *Ethica Nicomachea*, by mistakenly inserting an *h* before the *o*. But his ignorance of Aristotelian ethics is most pronounced when he claims that for Aristotle, “In all matters, virtue represents the middle path between the extremes” (p. 11). Aristotle clearly explains that some virtues, specifically the intellectual virtues of *sophia* (philosophical wisdom) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom), do not admit of a mean, or “middle path” as Hill calls it, because there is no such thing as too much wisdom.

His discussion of the status of animals in the Christian tradition is horrendously inaccurate. Hill contends that “a strong case can be made for the claim that the first Christians observed a vegetarian diet” (p. 33). He then proceeds to quote a passage from Ecclesiastes 3:19 while citing as his source the close of Exodus! What is worse, his next claim is that a quotation from Genesis 1:30 strongly suggests “that animals have souls and that vegetarianism is part of the faith” (p. 34). Yet what is actually said is that God proclaimed that to every (nonhuman) animal, He has given plants to eat; Hill fails to realize that this pronouncement does not mean that God wills that *humans* be vegetarians, only that animals should be herbivores. Hill proceeds to cite Pliny as an early Christian theologian, whom Steven Rosen, in *Food for the Spirit: Vegetarianism and the World Religions* (San Diego: Bala/Entourage Books, 1990), “reported” to have been a vegetarian. Pliny was, in fact, a pagan, not a Christian. But this error is a minor matter compared with Hill’s bold assertion that Christ advocated vegetarianism and that early Christians interpreted Christ’s teaching to require vegetarianism (p. 34); that no evidence is presented for either of these claims again undermines the credibility of Hill’s historical claims.

Hill’s ignorance of the history of vegetarianism, and specifically the philosophical arguments that have been advanced for it, certainly detracts from the philosophical adequacy of the case for vegetarianism he constructs. For example, in the section entitled “From Christian Eschatology to the Gaia Hypothesis: Extroverting Our Ethics” in chapter four, Hill states that “Christian dualism, as it developed under the influence of Augustine and the neo-Platonic church fathers, contrasts the immortal soul with the decaying and dying body, and the spiritual domain with the material world, including the

natural world” (p. 123). Sadly Hill is unaware that the non-Christian neo-Platonist Porphyry, Plotinus’ editor, authored an extremely important treatise, *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, in which numerous arguments detailing the spiritual advantages of abstaining from meat are presented. Despite mentioning that the Greek philosopher Pythagoras was a staunch vegetarian (p. xiv), Hill’s ignorance of the history of philosophical vegetarianism is evident in the remark that down through history eating animals is a practice that has ‘scarcely been questioned” (p. 178).

Hill’s neglect of important sources of arguments for vegetarianism is not, however, limited to ancient authors. He omits entirely the feminist argument from sexual politics advanced by Carol J. Adams. Instead of devoting to Adams’s argument the full chapter it deserves, Hill has one sentence: “The psychology of meat eating has permeated the fabric of our political history and our culture and shaped what one author has called “the sexual politics of meat eating” (p. 179). Because much more remains to be said about Adams’s book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990), Hill’s treatment fails to be comprehensive on this score alone.

Another notable fault is Hill’s feeble reply to the argument that animal rights activists have a duty to prevent predators from killing their prey. Hill insists that animals have a negative right not to be killed by humans, but not a positive right to be rescued by us from their predators (p. 160). This reply, however, is inconsistent with his reasoning in chapter five, where he *rejects* the argument that we have no positive duty to save starving human beings, but only a negative duty not to kill them. Again Hill’s account suffers from a lack of familiarity with the philosophical literature on this subject, in this case the excellent discussion in the chapter “Saving the Rabbit from the Fox,” in S. F. Sapontzis, *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

Because the four main arguments for vegetarianism presented by Hill are not original to him, it is fair to ask what original contribution this book makes. The answer is that his presentation of these arguments is done in a clear and readable way, and so this book recommends itself to nonphilosophers curious about reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet. Nevertheless, Hill cannot be credited with being the first to bring together, examine, and evaluate various arguments for vegetarianism in one integrated discussion; see “Five Arguments for Vegetarianism,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 25–39.

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