

## TOPIC GUIDE: VEGETARIANISM

## "WE SHOULD NOT EAT MEAT"

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## INTRODUCTION

Vegetarianism as a moral stance has its roots in some of the world's oldest belief systems, including religious and philosophical ideas from ancient India and Greece. Today, despite being minority views, vegetarianism and veganism have become increasingly popular lifestyle choices in the developed world. An estimated five per cent of the UK public identifies as vegetarian [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and the proportion identifying as vegan has more than trebled in the past decade [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Yet at the same time, meat consumption is at record levels and growing fastest in developed countries [Ref: [Atlantic](#)].

In response, there have been widespread calls to reduce meat consumption in the interests of public health and environmental protection. Campaigns such as [Meat Free Monday](#) and [National Vegetarian Week](#) have used the power of social media to change cultural attitudes towards the eating of animals. An increasing number of Britons now identify as 'flexitarians': 'eating predominantly, but not strictly, vegetarian' [Ref: [Independent](#)]. In light of these trends, is there still a clear case for 'strict' vegetarianism? In the UK, many politicians [Ref: [Independent](#)] and commentators [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] seem to think so and have called for government action to encourage a mass shift towards vegetarianism. This echoes developments abroad: the Danish ethics council have advised their government to tax red meat, while China has produced nutritional guidelines recommending their meat consumption be halved by 2050 [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. However, others have questioned whether the endorsement of vegetarianism by public bodies such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) reduces what is essentially a political and moral matter to a technical question [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Evidence of the net health and environmental benefits of vegetarianism is contested [Ref: [BBC](#)] and key reports have made clear that what is required is a switch to 'plant-based diets' containing less meat, not none at all [Ref: [Oxford Martin School](#)]. So, do we have a clear moral responsibility to go vegetarian?

*For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.*

## DEBATE IN CONTEXT

*This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.*

### GIVE UP MEAT AND SAVE THE PLANET?

Cited by under-25s as their leading reason for giving up meat [Ref: [Independent](#)], the environmental impact of livestock farming features prominently in pro-veggie campaigns. Vegetarian activists accuse the meat industry of harming the environment in a number of ways. Methane produced by ruminant animals like cattle, sheep and goats adds to the stock of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which is a contributor to climate change. Moreover, deforestation occurs so that crops can be grown to feed livestock, a process that requires more land space per calorie than the growth of crops for human consumption [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The FAO estimated that the meat industry emits 18 per cent of all greenhouse gases, more than the entire transport sector combined [Ref: [Scientific American](#)]. In the words of the environment writer George Monbiot, 'farming animals is as unsustainable as mining coal' [Ref: [Monbiot](#)]. Many also argue that with a growing world population, feeding crops to animals rather than directly

But critics take issue with calculations of the environmental impact, pointing out that measures of start-to-end emissions underestimate technological improvements that could be made to farming practices in the developing world [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. It has been argued that livestock play a crucial role in preserving the natural environment by maintaining the topsoil; desertification in the Sahara, for example, may have been worsened by encouraging farmers to switch from livestock to arable farming [Ref: [BBC World Service](#)]. Ecologist and author Simon Fairlie argues that 'livestock provide the biodiversity that trees on their own cannot provide' and provide food from land unsuitable for arable farming [Ref: [Permaculture](#)]. In addition, many environmental arguments for reducing meat consumption are far from supportive of giving up meat altogether [Ref: [Quartz](#)].

### THE MORALITY OF MEAT

A second set of arguments concern the moral status of animals vis a vis humans: what moral rights, if any, do animals possess, and what moral duties do we have towards them? At one end of this spectrum, the philosopher Peter Singer argues that meat consumption is immoral because many animals being consumed are sentient beings and we have a moral duty not to cause preventable harm to them [Ref: [BBC](#)]. On this argument, even if consumers in more developed countries are freer to abstain from meat than those in less developed countries, we all have a moral duty to strive for a meat-free world. Many animal welfare advocates believe they are expanding the circle of human empathy, their cause comparable in this sense to the ending of slavery and racism. Evolutionary biologist Steven Pinker believes that 'in the future, people may well look back on the rearing of animals for slaughter as barbaric' [Ref: [Times](#)]. Indeed, the term 'speciesism', which describes the belief that a human life is intrinsically more valuable than that of a non-human animal, carries connotations not dissimilar to sexism or racism. At the same time, evolutionary biology is increasingly questioning the uniqueness of distinctive human capacities - self-awareness, altruism, intuitions about justice - which have long been considered grounds for our superior moral status [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Nevertheless a loss of cultural confidence in human exceptionalism could be used to support either side of the meat-eating debate. For the philosopher Julian Baggini, 'even if all lives do have some value, it does not follow that all are equally valuable, or that all have value worth caring about' [Ref: [Times Literary Supplement](#)]. For those such as Dr. Richard Ryder, a shared capacity for suffering implies something closer to moral parity than the 'merciless exploitation' we observe in factory farming: 'we can treat different species differently, but we should always treat equal suffering equally' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However some commentators fear that the more we elide categorical distinctions between humans and animals, the further we erode a reasonable case for any moral duty

of care owed by the former towards the latter. According to Damon Linker, the animal rights movement 'either reduces us to the level of animals or attempts to raise them up to ours.' Instead, he argues, 'we should treat animals decently not because they're just like human beings but rather because they're not' [Ref: [The Week](#)]. To critics, the surge in support for veganism, and the dubious science sometimes cited in its favour, suggests it may simply be a passing moral fad adopted for the purposes of 'virtue signalling' [Ref: [BBC](#)]. As the columnist (and vegetarian) Patrick West observes, veganism 'easily becomes an ideology, underpinned by the ideals of purification, cleansing and asceticism' [Ref: [spiked](#)]. With humanity still facing age-old problems of war, poverty and disease, are vegetarianism and veganism untimely distractions?

## IMPACTS ON HUMAN HEALTH

The putative health benefits of a vegetarian diet have long been debated. In light of new public health pressures, they have received renewed attention. Reported benefits of going vegetarian include a reduced risk of obesity and specific cancers, and mitigated impacts of type 2 diabetes and Parkinson's disease [Ref: [Atlantic](#)]. Most commentators agree, however, that it is difficult to establish a clear link between a person's consumption or non-consumption of meat, and their health [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. More importantly, suggestions that public bodies promote vegetarianism using policy 'nudges' [Ref: [Washington Post](#)] - making vegetarian options the default in school canteens, for instance - raise philosophical questions about how to balance freedom of choice with social welfare [Ref: [LSE](#)]. Aside from effects on consumers, the meat industry stands accused of harming the mental and physical wellbeing of its producers [Ref: [OpenDemocracy](#)]. Mass-scale factory farming depends on efficiently functioning slaughterhouses, which have been described as loud, intense, and 'violent' working environments [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Some have speculated as to whether slaughterhouses help to normalise violence and objectification amongst humans [Ref: [OpenDemocracy](#)]. Phil Lempert, however, believes such accounts provide an argument for better-informed consumers at most, and are unrepresentative of the meat industry as a whole [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. A key feature of this debate therefore concerns the extent to which undesirable features of the production of meat are inseparable from the act of consuming it.

## ESSENTIAL READING

*It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.*

## FOR

**Goodbye - and good riddance - to livestock farming** [↗](#)

George Monbiot *Guardian* 4 October 2017

**The economic case for worldwide vegetarianism** [↗](#)

Lauren Cassani Davis *Atlantic* 28 May 2017

**Meat is horrible** [↗](#)

Rachel Premack *Washington Post* 3 July 2016

**We all need to stop eating meat now - and this is why** [↗](#)

Alex Proud *Telegraph* 27 July 2015

**The unhealthy meat market** [↗](#)

Nicholas Kristof *New York Times* 12 March 2014

## AGAINST

**Stop telling me not to eat meat: We should all be flexitarians** [↗](#)

Toby Moses *Guardian* 12 October 2016

**Give thanks for meat** [↗](#)

Jay Bost *New York Times* 3 May 2012

**A case for eating meat** [↗](#)

Daniel Klein *Huffington Post* 20 March 2012

**Simon Fairlie: How eating meat can save the planet** [↗](#)

Tara Kelly *TIME* 12 October 2010

**Why I've got a beef with going vegetarian** [↗](#)

James Panton *spiked* 11 September 2008

## IN DEPTH

**An Oxford philosopher's moral crisis can help us learn to question our instincts** [↗](#)

Olivia Goldhill *Quartz* 15 October 2017

**Why factory farming is not just cruel - but also a threat to all life on the planet** [↗](#)

Bibi van der Zee *Guardian* 4 October 2017

**More equal than others** [↗](#)

Julian Baggini *Times Literary Supplement* 20 July 2016

**Are vegetarianism and veganism about not harming animals or feeling morally superior?** [↗](#)

Leslie Cannold *Guardian* 2 May 2016

**Is a vegetarian diet really better for the environment?** [↗](#)

Peter Whoriskey *Washington Post* 18 December 2015

**Livestock - Climate change's forgotten sector: Global public opinion on meat and dairy consumption** [↗](#)

Rob Bailey, Antony Froggatt and Laura Wellesley *Chatham House* 3 December 2014

## KEY TERMS

*Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.*

**Animal rights** [↗](#)

BBC

**Speciesism** [↗](#)

BBC

**Vegetarianism** [↗](#)

Peter Singer

## BACKGROUNDERS

*Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.*

**Becoming a vegetarian** [↗](#)

Harvard Health Publishing 4 December 2017

**Why I became a vegan - and why you should too** [↗](#)

Ray Monk *New Statesman* 1 November 2017

**Is universal veganism the only way to stop climate change?** [↗](#)

Leo Barasi *Prospect* 11 September 2017

**Seven reasons why you should stop eating meat immediately** [↗](#)

Olivia Petter *Independent* 10 August 2017

**Is a vegetarian diet really more environmentally friendly than eating meat?** [↗](#)

Wayne Martindale *The Conversation* 26 January 2017

**The rise of veganism in politics** [↗](#)

Manès Weisskircher *OpenDemocracy* 1 November 2016

**What would happen if the world suddenly went vegetarian?** [↗](#)

Rachel Nuwer *BBC Future* 27 September 2016

**Why doesn't everyone go vegetarian?** [↗](#)

Jared Piazza *Independent* 5 May 2016

**The profound planetary consequences of eating less meat** [↗](#)

Chris Mooney *Washington Post* 21 March 2016

**Sorry vegans: Here's how meat-eating made us human** [↗](#)

Jeffrey Kluger *TIME* 9 March 2016

**I stopped eating animals because of human rights** [↗](#)

Andy West *OpenDemocracy* 15 February 2016

**Going vegetarian halves CO2 emissions from your food** [↗](#)

Michael Slezak *New Scientist* 26 June 2014

**What if everyone in the world became a vegetarian?** [↗](#)

LV Anderson *Slate* 1 May 2014

**Scientist: Don't blame cows for climate change** [↗](#)

Paul Armstrong *CNN* 24 March 2010

**Shattering the meat myth: Humans are natural vegetarians** [↗](#)

Kathy Freston *Huffington Post* 12 July 2009

**Livestock's Long Shadow** [↗](#)

UN Food and Agriculture Organization 2006

## ORGANISATIONS

*Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.*

**Meat Free Mondays** [↗](#)

**The Vegetarian Society** [↗](#)

## IN THE NEWS

*Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.*

**Vegetarians more likely to show signs of depression, finds study** [↗](#)

Alex Matthews-King *Independent* 3 November 2017

**Argentina's vegan Mondays** [↗](#)

*The Economist* 19 October 2017

**Vast animal-fed crops to satisfy our meat needs are destroying our planet** [↗](#)

Rebecca Smithers *Guardian* 5 October 2017

**Can eating grass-fed meat help tackle climate change?** [↗](#)

India Bourke *New Statesman* 4 October 2017

**How to provide a protein-rich diet to a growing population**

*The Economist* 31 August 2017

**Are Germans leading a vegan revolution?** [↗](#)

Meera Senthilingham *CNN* 31 July 2017

**Forest Green Rovers - the club where meat is off the menu and the pitch is fed seaweed** [🔗](#)

George Caulkin *The Times* 28 July 2017

**Climate change campaigners welcome China's plan to halve meat consumption** [🔗](#)

Neil Connor *Telegraph* 21 June 2016

**Number of vegans in Britain rises by 360% in ten years** [🔗](#)

Sue Quinn *Telegraph* 18 May 2016

**FAO yields to meat industry pressure on climate change** [🔗](#)

Robert Goodland *New York Times* 11 July 2012

## AUDIO/VISUAL

**Veganism and animal rights** [🔗](#)

*BBC Moral Maze* 5 August 2017

**Farmer Simon Fairlie on meat and climate change** [🔗](#)

*BBC News* 17 July 2017

**Should we all be vegetarians?** [🔗](#)

The Evidence *BBC World Service* 19 April 2017

**Let them eat meat: There is nothing wrong with rearing and killing animals for human consumption** [🔗](#)

*Intelligence Squared* 31 October 2016

**Food economics: What if the world went vegan?** [🔗](#)

Counting the Cost *Al Jazeera* 3 March 2016

**Philosopher Peter Singer on objections to vegetarianism** [🔗](#)

Practical Ethics **YouTube**

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