

IF WE SHOULD NOT EAT MEAT ON GROUNDS OF CLIMATE CHANGE, SHOULD WE HAVE CHILDREN?

Adrian Brockless

The aim of this article is not to make any arguments that oppose veganism or having children or, in any way, to denigrate those who make them. Rather, the intention is twofold: (1) To attack the inconsistency of those who make arguments for veganism in relation to climate change and the natural world, but who omit to make arguments against having children and the problem of rapidly increasing global population on the same grounds. (2) To attack a form of sanctimony which manifests itself in inconsistent applications of such arguments and which exploits genuine and very serious problems in ways that aim to bring power to their advocates by inducing a sense of shame in their victims. In this way, such moralists try to strengthen the legitimacy of their own preferences – preferences that often run into conflict with other concerns based on the same arguments.

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Preamble

My aim here is not to make any arguments that oppose veganism or having children or, in any way, to denigrate those who make them. Rather, my intention is twofold: (1) To attack the inconsistency of those who make arguments for veganism in relation to climate change and the natural world, but who omit to make arguments against having children and the problem of rapidly increasing global population, or air travel on the same grounds. (2) To attack a form of sanctimony (otherwise termed moralism) which

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manifests itself in inconsistent applications of such arguments and which exploits genuine and very serious problems in ways that aim to bring power to their advocates by inducing a sense of shame in their victims. In this way, such moralists try to strengthen the legitimacy of their own preferences – preferences that often run into conflict with other concerns based on the same arguments. For example, a vegan who shames people for eating meat on grounds of climate change and, at the same time, flies to exotic locations for their holidays and argues that everyone has the right to have children.

I

Recently, there has been a surge in arguments made for veganism based on the remedial impact that excluding any kind of animal products from our diets may have on the causes of anthropogenic climate change. A number of articles to this effect (or similar) have appeared across the various forms of news media, many of them written by eminent scientists and philosophers. And although they do not suggest that veganism is a pattern of behaviour that should be adopted, the Foresight report *The Future of Food and Farming: Challenges and Choices for Global Sustainability*¹ produced by the UK government and the UN commissioned *Fifth National Report to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity: United Kingdom*² identify rafts of problems to be addressed if we are to mitigate – at least to some extent – the effects of food shortages, anthropogenic climate change, and rapidly diminishing biodiversity (among a number of other things); they include soil erosion, over-grazing, the draining of aquifers, air-travel, and the eradication of large areas of forest (mostly rain forest) in order to grow crops to produce bio-fuels. Fundamental though these problems are – the urgency with which we need to address them is without question – there is no mention anywhere of the impact that

the increasing population of *Homo sapiens* is having on the planet.

The more popular articles have tended in the direction of identifying our omnivorous nature, fossil fuels and plastics as the major problems, with less emphasis given to air travel.

In a recent article in the *Financial Times*, for example, the philosopher Ray Monk began by saying that it had been a headline in *The Guardian* ('Vast animal-feed crops to satisfy our meat needs are destroying the planet') that had started him on the road to veganism.³ He goes on to detail a number of the statistics mentioned in the article – among them the fact that more than 2 kg of soya is required to produce 1 kg of chicken and more than 10 kg is required to produce 1 kg of beef, and that the demand for food in the UK is responsible for an estimated loss of 33% of animal species worldwide.

These are alarming statistics, as is the fact that aviation is a substantial contributor to the causes of climate change (among them our CO₂ emissions). Since 1990, CO₂ emissions from international aviation have increased by over 80% and studies show that – per mile/per passenger – flight is much worse than using trains and cars.⁴ Overall, the average annual personal allowance of CO₂ needs to be cut to just over 1.2 tonnes if it is to be climate neutral (in Britain, the average annual personal carbon footprint is currently about 7.1 tonnes); one return flight from London to New York emits around 1.2 tonnes of CO₂ per person. Yet, although it is the case that global food production is responsible for the emission of more greenhouse gases than aviation, shipping and travel by car, Monk gives these but a cursory mention and, since the publication of his article, has continued to utilize air travel.⁵ I suppose the justification for this apparent inconsistency is that one should consider one's actions in proportion to the damage done. That said, Monk still talks about guilt by association, claiming that he is now able to 'read about how animals are treated in farmhouses and slaughterhouses'⁶ because he is

vegan. This is important since it places him in a moral relation with his actions (as it does anyone who considers their actions or those of others in terms of (and in the light of) guilt by association).

Interestingly, however, although the global population has increased from approximately 3 billion people in 1961 to 7 billion in 2011 (and is continuing to grow at the rate of 8 million per week), little mention is made of this fact in such articles, or the impact that population growth has on the problems identified above (Monk does not mention it at all). And yet the one thing that all of the damaging activities have in common is that they are proportionally related to increasing human populations; indeed it is our numbers that are, ultimately, responsible for the problems we face as identified in the two reports cited above. (Although the population increase in the UK is slowing, it is still projected that there will be a population of 72.9 million by 2041.⁷)

As Sir David Attenborough points out in his 2011 RSA President's Lecture, it seems quite obvious that every individual on the planet needs space – space for a home, space to grow food, space to site airfields, roads and much more besides.⁸ In the end, there cannot be more people than can be fed, and even if the entire world became vegan overnight, this would only provide a finite breathing space. It is a simple case of mathematics – if you have four children as opposed to two, then demand for food will be higher; the more food that is required, the more space that is needed and this, ultimately, will result in extinctions, and corrupt the food-chain (irrespective of whether or not one eats meat). Thus, if we are to be shamed for not being vegan or, at least, placed in a moral light where we are accused of being guilty by association on grounds that our habits are destroying the planet, then why is choosing to have children not treated as being morally equivalent or, indeed, worse than choosing to eat meat (given that the population cannot grow indefinitely)? And yet we consistently fail to think of the population of *Homo sapiens* – the underlying cause of many of the environmental issues we

face – as responsible for the problems we are trying to solve by almost any other means. Moreover, there is no doubt that every additional person – regardless of their dietary habits – will need to use carbon; they will also – as an extra person in the world – be another potential victim of climate change. Citizens of richer countries tend to use more carbon than those of poorer ones.

II

In a recent article in *The Guardian* ('Huge reduction in meat-eating "essential" to avoid climate breakdown') reporting on a new study that appeared in the journal *Nature*,⁹ the academic Marco Springmann is quoted as saying:

I think we can do it, but we really need much more proactive governments to provide the right framework. People can make a personal difference by changing their diet, but also by knocking on the doors of their politicians and saying we need better environmental regulations – that is also very important. Do not let politicians off the hook.¹⁰

In the same article, Professor Peter Smith of the University of Aberdeen said:

We know food choices are very personal, and that behaviour change can be difficult to encourage, but the evidence is now unequivocal – we need to change our diets if we are to have a sustainable future. The fact that it will also make us healthier makes it a no-brainer.

Elsewhere, the philosopher Rupert Read painted a gloomy picture of what he considers to be the reality of our current situation – we are, he thinks, on the verge of witnessing the collapse of civilizations across the globe.¹¹ He blames

human activity for this, claiming that our parents have failed us, our teachers have failed us, our politicians have failed us and that his generation as a whole falls into the class of failing succeeding generations. In the post-talk question-and-answer session, Read acknowledges that the UK cannot feed itself; it is also true – although Read does not mention it – that England is the most densely populated country in Europe.

However, while as a collective we seem willing to countenance investigations into people's dietary habits and requests to change them, we seem reluctant to countenance similar investigations and requests for changes in relation to the procreative behaviour of human beings.

Indeed, saying things like, 'you shouldn't have children' will get you into trouble very quickly, but some vegan campaigners are quite happy to consider you a moral pariah if you do not acquiesce to their demands to abstain from consuming all products with animal origins ('you shouldn't consume any animal-based products'). Why is this? There seems to be an inconsistency here between the argument for veganism based on environmental grounds and the argument for not having children based on environmental grounds. Why are such arguments pursued so vigorously in the one area, but not in the other?

Those like Rupert Read who talk about the behaviour of his (and older) generations failing succeeding generations seem to suggest that there is at least some cause for shame here; if that is so, and if we are to be consistent, we should feel ashamed not only of our omnivorous natures, uses of fossil fuels and the like, but also of population growth which is fuelled by the general encouragement we give to those who want children, alongside the congratulations we offer to those who have them. Given how he characterizes the seriousness of the situation, and despite his self-flagellation, it is remarkable that there is no mention of arguments against having children.

By way of defending this apparently inconsistent position, it has been pointed out that more people having children

would not have the same effect on the climate if our infrastructure and modes of operating were structured differently – in essence, this means adopting meat-free diets, abandoning fossil fuels, radically cutting or eliminating air travel and so on. Moreover, the gravity of the decision not to eat meat (or abstain from using animal products altogether) is not analogous to the decision not to have children – it must be remembered, this argument continues, that a child is a human being, not something to be assessed merely in terms of environmental impact. Ultimately, it is the fact that a child is a human being that means we should not question the right of someone who wants children to have them, whereas going vegan does not involve anything more than denying oneself what might amount to one's favourite food (say, steak and chips). Put another way, the argument 'I want x therefore I should be morally permitted to have x' should be assessed differently according to whether or not x refers to having children or abstaining from consuming animal-based products.

There are three important points to be made in response to this argument.

The first is that while measures such as adopting veganism, abandoning air travel and so on can buy some breathing space, they cannot solve the problems they are designed to address if the number of people continues to rise. Kenneth Boulding – an environmental adviser to President J. F. Kennedy – famously remarked that, 'Anyone who believes in indefinite growth in anything physical, on a physically finite planet, is either mad or an economist.' In the end, the planet can only feed a finite number of people; and, irrespective of whether or not everyone adopts veganism, it will remain the case, as stated earlier, that everyone needs space for a home, space to grow food, space to site transport networks and much more besides; every additional person is a potential extra victim of climate change and the other problems to which such human activities give rise.

The second is that deciding to have meat for dinner is not the same kind of thing as deciding to have a child; it has less of an impact than deciding to have a child.

The third is that, unless we are going to blame our forbears for what they did in their ignorance, we are not talking about assessing children who are already alive, but about not having children. As such, the child's humanity does not enter into the equation because it does not exist. Thus, the argument of 'I want to have children therefore I should be morally permitted to have them' is no different from 'I want to eat meat, therefore I should be morally permitted to eat it' since, in both cases, it is the desires of the subject that are under consideration.

As I said at the start, nothing of what I have said should be taken as either an argument for or against veganism, or for or against having children. Rather, I have been highlighting the inconsistency in relation to those who vociferously argue for veganism on grounds of our moral responsibility to our children, the future of humanity and planet earth, but who say little or nothing (or even the opposite) about the argument for not having children based on the same grounds. Put another way: some people moralize about not eating meat on environmental grounds and the imminent catastrophe it will cause, but few of them moralize about not having children for the same reasons (even though such reasons are even more relevant in relation to our pro-creative activities). I have been comparing arguments here.

Ultimately, if we are to shame people for wanting to consume animal products on the grounds that such consumption causes further human suffering alongside detrimental effects on other creatures (as a result of both climate change and other factors such as soil erosion and monocultures), then we should be consistent and apply it to all forms of human activity with the same or similar consequences such as wanting to have children – at least, we should if we want to put a concern for all over and above our own preferences.

Adrian Brockless has taught at the University of London, the University of Hertfordshire and Sutton Grammar School. He now runs his own series of adult education classes in philosophy and teaches at Glyn School. a.brockless@gmail.com

Notes

¹ Foresight, *The Future of Food and Farming: Challenges and Choices for Global Sustainability. Final Project Report* (London: The Government Office for Science, 2011).

² *Fifth National Report to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity: United Kingdom* (Peterborough: JNCC, 2014).

³ R. Monk, 'Philosopher Ray Monk: why I went vegan', *Financial Times*, <<https://www.ft.com/content/df4a8600-bb9f-11e8-8274-55b72926558f>> [accessed 17 December 2018].

⁴ IPCC Reports Aviation, <<https://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/sres/aviation/126.htm>> [accessed 21 November 2018].

⁵ Source: @Raymodraco Twitter feed.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Office for National Statistics (ONS): *National Population Projections: 2016-Based Statistical Bulletin*, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2016basedstatisticalbulletin>> [accessed 17 December 2018].

⁸ D. Attenborough, *2011 RSA President's Lecture: People and Planet*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sP291B7SCw>> [accessed 17 December 2018].

⁹ D. Carrington, 'Huge reduction in meat-eating 'essential' to avoid climate breakdown', *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown>> [accessed 17 December 2018].

¹⁰ D. Carrington, 'Huge reduction in meat-eating 'essential' to avoid climate breakdown', *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown>> [accessed 17 December 2018].

¹¹ R. Read, *Shed a Light: This Civilisation is Finished: So What is To Be Done?* (2018) [podcast], <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzCxFPzdOOY>> [accessed 17 December 2018].