

Culture and meat-eating: A critique of anthropocentrism in animal ethics

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Despite theoretical diversity, the field of animal ethics often filters animal suffering through human-centred frameworks that obscure urgent ethical questions raised by the global meat industry. Well-meaning efforts to respect cultural difference result in a multi-layered ethical filter that systematically deprioritizes animal life, uses appeals to culture to justify and excuse systemic harms to animals, and shifts responsibility for those harms away from individuals. To address this, animal ethics needs to reorient itself towards listening – remaining open to uncomfortable claims, including critiques of meat consumption and its relation to culture, rather than filtering them out under the guise of cultural respect.

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The field of animal ethics is diverse, featuring a range of narratives and theoretical frameworks. Yet, despite this diversity, there is a mainstream embrace of a human-centred perspective, even if it is accompanied by sympathy and theoretical nuance. This often stems from well-intentioned efforts within academic discourse to balance competing ethical priorities – in particular, to protect or prioritize marginalized human voices.

Critiques of the meat industry, for example, often subordinate the moral status of animals to considerations of ‘cultural complexity’. As a result, those in the field rarely call for the non-use of animal products, and an end to the large-scale, systematic killing of animals as an overriding moral imperative, even when this is clearly what they would like to see happen. The result has been that laudable attempts to honour genuine cultural differences have obscured the urgent ethical questions posed by the systematic exploitation of animals.

In what follows I argue that the field of animal ethics is shaped by a persistent tendency to speak for other human groups, and that this practice

acts as a filtering mechanism that deprioritizes animal existence. In attempting to protect or prioritize human voices, ethical discourse often sidesteps or downplays the suffering of animals. Scholars may avoid critiques of culturally embedded practices such as meat consumption, for fear of appearing culturally insensitive, elitist, or exclusionary. The result is a tacit consensus: we should not “threaten the meat industry nor the diets of the majority of the population” (Singer, 2002).

The act of speaking for others, while often motivated by considerations of justice and solidarity, reinforces a framework in which human-centred concerns dominate, and animal interests are filtered out as secondary or inconvenient. This filtering mechanism makes use of at least four discursive techniques, which I will call ‘*What about?*’ as *evasion*, *Better others*, *Selective cultural defence of harm* and *Distancing responsibility through identity and cultural silence*. I will argue that although each of these ‘layers’ of the filter represent ostensibly legitimate ethical concerns, they are given too much weight in the mainstream discourse of animal ethics.

The filters

‘What about?’ as evasion

When concerns about animal suffering or the meat industry are raised within animal ethics, scholars often divert the conversation by bringing up questions like: What about the homeless? What about women? What about this-or-that specific cultural tradition? Whatever the underlying intentions, the raising of such questions functions discursively as a strategy to reassert human priorities and defer ethical engagement with nonhuman lives (*cf.* Adams, 1990; 2003). Claire Jean Kim shares a personal example: when she expressed interest in animal issues, her father questioned her priorities, asking why she was not focused instead on North Korean refugees. His reasoning, she notes, was rooted in the belief that “the claim of blood, people, and nation takes priority over other claims” (2022: 197).

Another similar way of surreptitiously reasserting the priority of human concerns is to ask *Why?* – a question often intertwined with cultural justifications. For instance, when Psyche Williams-Forsen was conducting research on African American foodways, she was frequently asked, “Why chicken?” – a question implying that some cultural topics are off-limits for critique, particularly when they involve identity-affirming practices (2006: 18). In the context of animal ethics, scholars often treat culture as a monolithic and inviolable category, prioritizing its preservation over critical examination. Celebrations of cultural identity, particularly by others, such as elevating Soul Food or Asian cuisine to a pedestal, may appear progressive or inclusive. But often they function to uphold the dominant anthropocentric order, preserving the legitimacy of meat consumption under the guise of cultural respect, while subtly insulating the meat industry from criticism.

As Williams-Forsen argues, African American filmmakers like George Tillman are frequently expected to represent their communities through safe and celebratory tropes – such as Soul Food rituals or strong matriarchs –

rather than engage with more disruptive or ethically complex narratives. Similarly, Sayadabdi (2019) observes how Iranian diasporic food discourse is shaped by idealized memories and adapted to Western tastes to gain cultural and identity legitimacy.

Western and most non-Western cultures have long upheld the belief that animals are morally inferior to humans, justifying their exploitation and contributing to resistance against animal ethics. In this way, the relationship between human and other-than-human beings remains shaped by a human-centred narrative, which typically treats culture as innocent without acknowledging the gradual and compulsory institutional norms that shape it, and “without examining the subcultural contexts that exist within the larger culture” (Kheel, 2004: 9). Even when framed as empowerment, such representations risk reinforcing the very structures they appear to challenge. They become part of a larger filtering system that pushes animal ethics to the margins by re-centring human identity, pride and cultural preservation as primary concerns.

Better others

Another way in which systemic cruelty to animals is filtered out of academic discourse is by morally privileging the views or practices of certain human groups – ‘better others’ – and treating criticism of those views or practices as cultural insensitivity, a continuation of past injustices, imperialism, racism and so on. These better others are often those who were (and perhaps still are) invaded, colonized and marginalized, but are now cherished. Those who were deprived due to their geographical, racial, economic or political position are now regarded as better others – even the best others – in their treatment of animals. But who considers them ‘better others’? Those who once did not even consider them human. And the irony is that this is itself an act of decontextualization: when it comes to the meat industry, uncritically praising past practices can, all too easily, be co-opted. ‘Better othering’ can be seen as a form of compensation, or even restitution – but too often, in this field, it is at the expense of non-human animals.

The terms that are often used to signal good faith and the intention to express a plurality of understandings of others (and speaking for them) – such as ‘the Global South’, ‘Indigenous communities’, ‘the Middle East’, and so on – cannot help much unless we stop using them to prioritize human beings over other beings. For example, as Kalland (2013) notes, Indigenous knowledge is frequently romanticized and aggrandized by non-Indigenous academics, NGOs, media and the public as a superior alternative to scientific knowledge, especially in addressing questions of resource management.

As an example of this filter, veganism has been critiqued as the promotion of a culturally narrow or culturally insensitive perspective – Western, urban and rooted in a philosophically naive and oppressive human–nature dualism (*cf.* Plumwood, 2004). Curtin (2004) thus argues for a ‘contextual’ moral vegetarianism, on the grounds that the vegan alternative would be culturally insensitive. Similarly, Van Dyke (2015) expresses concern that veganism risks

becoming a rigid moral ideal – extreme in nature – and instead advocates for a virtue-based, contextual ethics of eating, where choices depend on individual circumstances and aim to balance justice to self and others. One of her key criticisms is that veganism can become a form of ‘moral policing’ that ignores the ‘cultural complexity’ of our relationship with animals.

But these critiques of veganism rest on an unquestioned anthropocentrism, in which human concerns always override the ethical significance of animal life. And, it must be asked, do people *really* experience ‘cultural marginalization’ or ‘discrimination’ when they encounter someone vegan? This seems implausible, and the result of an excessively theoretical attitude. Furthermore, in a world that is slaughtering more animals than ever – with global meat production reaching 371 million tonnes (carcass weight equivalent) in 2023 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024) – it is hard to understand how describing veganism as ‘culturally narrow’ can be seen as a weighty and justified critique.

Selective cultural defence of harm

The ‘better others’ filter is a discursive technique for insulating certain views or practices from critique, by suggesting that the critique is a form of cultural oppression, insensitivity or marginalization. The anthropocentrism that underpins this filter can be made clear when we consider how *selectively* it is applied.

Consider two examples, one imaginary and one all too real. First, imagine a society in which eating human infants is a longstanding cultural tradition. If outsiders were to criticize this practice and were met with accusations of cultural insensitivity, most people would reject the defence outright. The reason is simple: the moral status of human babies is seen as so absolute that no appeal to cultural tradition could override it. Now consider a second example: domestic violence against women. This is sometimes justified through appeals to custom, hardship or religion. Yet despite these rationales, such violence is broadly condemned. We do not excuse it as a matter of tradition, even when it occurs under difficult circumstances. In both examples, the harm is clear, and the victims are recognized as moral subjects, so cultural defences fail to carry ethical weight.

Compare this with how ethical discourse addresses meat consumption. The killing of nonhuman animals is practiced across virtually every culture, and this widespread familiarity grants it a kind of immunity from critique. When animal suffering is questioned, objections are frequently dismissed as culturally insensitive or ideologically rigid. This reveals a troubling double standard: cultural sensitivity is invoked selectively, often shielding human practices when the victims are nonhuman and less able to resist or be heard. This suggests that many who reject human hierarchies do so not purely out of moral belief, but because they understand the consequences – dominated groups eventually resist, leading to instability. In other words, abandoning these hierarchies often reflects a strategic balance of power as much as an ethical insight. But animals do not resist or destabilize the system in the same way. As a result, we normalize the hierarchy, encroaching upon them without fear of consequence.

4. Distancing responsibility through identity and cultural silence

The flip side of claiming that a critique of anthropocentric cultural practices is culturally oppressive, is to claim that an ecocentric or non-anthropocentric practice is a *luxury* – a choice available only to the affluent and the privileged. This filter frames, for example, veganism or the avoidance of animal products as luxuries only available to those with the freedom to change their lifestyle and ethical outlooks, and unavailable to the marginalized. In a phrase – they are choices only genuinely available to the ‘white, able-bodied male’.

The use of this filter permits a kind of moral distancing. For instance, I, as a woman who is not white, might unconsciously exclude myself from complicity in systems of animal oppression and cruelty by assuming that such terms apply only to the white, able-bodied male. This can create a convenient oblivion that prevents me from recognizing my own responsibilities in perpetuating systemic issues. People like me (that is, anyone not in the white, able-bodied male category) might tap into the idea that we are somehow outside or exempt from these systems. But why not acknowledge the reality of other configurations of privilege? For instance: ‘Middle Eastern, able-bodied male’, ‘Middle Eastern, able-bodied female’, or ‘person of colour, able-bodied male’. Initially, these terms may feel shocking, but they compel us to confront broader truths about privilege and complicity.

What is often overlooked is that privilege does not only mean dominance or power in a broad sense – there is also the privilege of not being criticized. Those of us who do not belong to dominant groups may still benefit from an implicit cultural exemption: our practices are less likely to be questioned for fear of appearing insensitive or oppressive. This can create a space where harmful norms – especially those involving animals – are shielded from critique under the banner of protecting cultural identity. In this way, relative marginalization becomes a kind of ethical immunity, allowing us to avoid the discomfort of self-examination while still participating in larger systems of harm.

As uncomfortable as it can sometimes be, we need to be clear that past practices are not beyond criticism, nor do they necessarily retain their original meaning today. Consider this expression of the Indigenous North American concept of the ‘Honourable Harvesting’ in deer hunting (quoted in Kimmerer [2013: 186]):

I know he’s the one, and so does he. There’s a kind of nod exchanged. That’s why I only carry one shot. I wait for the one. He gave himself to me. That’s what I was taught: take only what is given, and then treat it with respect.

The logic expressed in the remark “He gave himself to me” may appear respectful and reciprocal, but it ultimately reinforces a human-centred narrative that justifies domination – albeit in a softer, spiritualized form. By imagining that the animal ‘consents’ to be killed, the human assumes the authority to interpret the animal’s actions and to assign meaning to them. Even when framed in terms of restraint and reverence, this logic maintains a hierarchical relationship in which the human takes and the animal is available

to be taken. The animal's life is still treated as a resource, and the act of killing is morally rehabilitated through narrative rather than questioned outright.

Furthermore, the idea that Indigenous or traditional practices, such as Andean animism, can be understood as uncontaminated by colonialism and ethically distinct from Western systems, requires critical scrutiny, as these practices are often co-shaped by colonial and capitalist histories (Bentancor, 2017). Nor should we ignore the moral hypocrisy of praising the practice of 'using the whole animal' when it occurs in Indigenous hunting practices, while turning a blind eye to the fact that the very same practice is central to the capitalist logic of industrialized meat production (*cf.* Amir, 2020). What appears as cultural resistance may in fact reproduce the same anthropocentric and capitalist structures it claims to resist.

I now turn to examples of cultural silence. Across the world, lower meat consumption in many regions is often due to economic and religio-political obstacles, rather than to secular ethical commitments. For example, in Bhutan religious nationalism projects Buddhist non-violence by banning animal slaughter within its borders while relying heavily on imported meat, thereby shifting moral responsibility elsewhere (Miyamoto *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, in Iran, meat prices fluctuate with economic instability, and *per capita* consumption is often low not because of ethical reflection, but because of economic hardship (Koocheki *et al.*, 2016). If it were not for these economic barriers, many people would likely consume more meat, as eating more meat is widely perceived as a sign of greater welfare.

What complicates this further is that in countries like Iran, there exists no substantial philosophical, ethical or cultural tradition that systematically engages with animal rights or veganism. Hence, most Iranians – whether academics or members of the general public – are never meaningfully exposed to these conversations. This creates a deep ethical silence, where harm persists but is neither named nor questioned. As a result, people often overlook their own role in the meat industry and the harm it produces. In such contexts, ethical invisibility becomes a kind of silent moral license among the people of a country with a shared culture. This pattern reflects a cultural consensus – silent, yet deeply embedded, and this pattern is not just limited to Iran.

Pushing back

In the academic field of animal ethics, criticism of meat eating typically takes the form of nuanced, theoretically rich and professionally polished argumentation. Such complex work can have intellectual value, yet its very richness can sometimes obscure ethical clarity, turning urgent moral issues into abstract exercises in complexity. In particular, frameworks like intersectionality and interdisciplinarity have opened space for layered and context-sensitive reasoning, but they can also lead to a form of ethical detachment, where action is continually deferred in favour of ever-deeper analysis.

Contextual, culturally-sensitive ethics should not become a tool for deferring responsibility, but rather a call to listen more carefully – to actual voices, in actual places. It becomes problematic when it functions not as a genuine call to

attentive listening, but as a sophisticated theoretical framework that ultimately legitimizes the foundational narratives normalizing animal exploitation. In such cases, it results in speaking for others rather than listening to them. To ‘listen’ in this context means to remain open to ethical claims that may be uncomfortable, disruptive or outside dominant frameworks, including those that challenge widely accepted practices like meat consumption. It involves not immediately dismissing such claims as culturally insensitive or ideologically extreme but instead taking them seriously as part of an ongoing moral conversation, especially when they come from individuals or groups outside the cultural majority.

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