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Rhetoric and Meat

Eating meat has been a part of normal human activity for thousands of years. Pre-historic hunters and gatherers lived off the stuff, and meat can be often found on most every dinner table in the country. But what has been taken for granted throughout history, that meat comprises a respectable meal, is coming under attack by many groups. The new industrialized meat industry, evolving out of Chicago's meat packing facilities in the mid 19th century, is changing the face of the food. As the debate over the morality and ethics of eating meat grows, an observer must take into account the interests of both sides. Advertising among the beef industry conflicts with the publications of animal rights organizations and the teachings of various religions with dietary restrictions. In this essay, I will analyze the language that the differing sides employ to make their argument more convincing to the general population.

Even though philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, Benjamin Franklin, Mohatma Gandhi, and Leo Tolstoy all tackled the ethics of meat-eating, the practice of vegetarianism has never been as popular as it is today. A 2003 Harris Poll found that 4 to 10 percent of the country's consumers call themselves vegetarians, with 2.8 percent saying they never ate meat, poultry, or fish/seafood. Of that 2.8 percent, a majority said they also never ate dairy products, eggs, or honey. The reason that rates are so much higher at present than they likely were at any point in history is the increasing social activism and awareness of the new practices of the meat industry. In fact, rates of vegetarianism are growing to the extent that the meat industry is actively working to prevent the spread of information about its practices; Michael Pollan in *Omnivore's Dilemma* was denied journalistic access to seeing cows slaughtered, writing that "the meat industry understands that the more people know about what happens on the kill floor the less meat they're likely to eat" (304). Thus the battle becomes one of information: thinkers such as Peter Singer and animal rights groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) fervently displaying the issues with human practices with animals and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and others

working to counter the claims. It is a battle being fought out through web sites, books, articles, and in academia that is yet to be concluded.

Naturally, the group with the most appealing arguments must be, by necessity, the group seeking to change the status quo. If their arguments do not hold up, then the present will continue into the future with no modification to its practices. Thus PETA presents their most gripping evidence for the ethical failures of Confined Animal Feed Operations (CAFOs) both online and in documents. One publication in particular, the Meet Your Meat video narrated by actor/activist Alec Baldwin for PETA, is especially gripping. Words cannot contain the same message that a picture can, and moving video proves to be even more captivating. The video displays the practices of the meat industry, as it seeks to maximize profit at the expense of humane treatment of animals. To many, the idea of fighting animal rights seems a bit single-focused. Surely there are more important things to be worrying about in this world. But seeing live animals strung up by their feet and carried through a packing plant, to have their throats slit and their entrails dripping onto the blood-splattered stainless-steel floor changes that perception. The video works because of the rhetoric employed within it. Besides the persuasive nature of the video medium, the calm voice narrating the video encourages the viewer to feel enough emotion for the two of them. Letting the images speak for themselves is the rhetorical strategy that the video employs, seeking to appeal to viewers who do not naturally sympathize to PETA's cause. Politically charged spoken content is much more likely to skew a neutral party's opinion of the group than is strong imagery alone.

Working to combat this type of media are the publications of groups such as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. Seeing that the rates of vegetarianism among teen girls is rising, evidenced by a 2003 study from market researchers at Teenage Research Unlimited showing that one in four teens now considers vegetarianism 'cool,' proponents of meat must make an attempt to prevent losing these customers and eating into profits. Thus sites such as pork4kids.com and cool-2b-real.com are created by marketing corporations interested in swaying kids away from the evils of vegetarianism. By targeting the younger generation most likely to become vegetarian, the companies are working to maintain their business model, preventing it from becoming obsolete.

Bright colors and large flashy words contribute to, as Time Magazine described the site, “a cross between a Barbie fan page and a Taco Bell ad (beef-filled tacos and gigantic hamburgers dot the screen)” (1). The message the sites hope to send is that eating meat is a normal thing to do, and that consumers should disregard the messages sent by animal rights groups. While present, the sites are narrowly targeted and of limited real-world use.

PETA tries to frame the debate into one of morality against solely the fanciful whims of taste, arguing that we are losing a lot for little gained, while the NCBA hopes to convince the consumer to overlook these issues and just keep buying meat. Simply browsing to the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s home page, a websurfer is greeted with a close up of a tasty-looking slab of beef and shown links to various farmers’ innovative plans for environmentally stable, humane cattle operations. Also included are numerous fact sheets. At many of these sites, there are headers to the web page that show animals in a large, wide-open spaces. They argue that the picture that animal rights groups present is not representative of the true nature of the beef industry. Through personal experience on my grandfather’s small cattle farm, I have seen alternative methods to the CAFO approach lambasted by PETA. Neither side makes it clear which method of meat production is truly more prevalent: CAFOs or pasture-fed cattle.

As in many debates, the issue need not be separated into two opposing sides with no middle ground. The main argument against eating meat is the inhumane manner in which the animals are raised, slaughtered, and end up on the dinner plate. As Pollan concludes in his chapter on the ethics of eating animals, transparency in the industry is the real issue. There is confusion about what actually occurs behind the closed walls of the slaughterhouses, and a more transparent approach to the process would both moderate the inhumanity of killing animals there and reduce objections that consumers have for meat, aiming to please both sides of the debate. In this ideal world, there would be no need for the rhetorical strategies that obfuscate the issue, as its transparency would eliminate their necessity.

Works Cited

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