

Andrew F. Smith. *A Critique of the Moral Defense of Vegetarianism.* Palgrave Macmillan 2016. 178 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 978-1-137-55488-8); \$24.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 978-1-349-71708-8).

Andrew F. Smith's goal in his book, *A Critique of the Moral Defense of Vegetarianism*, is best summarized in the following statement: 'Let us bid farewell to the case for vegetarianism. Let us permit it to vanish. This case has outlived whatever usefulness it once may have had. It no longer works, if it ever did' (98). While Smith argues for an impressive number of psychological, ecological, scientific, and philosophical theses in this work, the central claim that we ought to reject ethical vegetarianism is supported by three distinct arguments.

The first is a detailed critique of the so-called 'sentientist argument' (12) for vegetarianism. This familiar argument is the type put forward by Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and other prominent proponents of ethical vegetarianism. It begins with the observation that humans are deserving of a certain degree of moral consideration only because they are the subjects of certain kinds of sensory experiences, such as 'interests, preferences, and cares associated with avoiding pain, fear, and anxiety' (12). The sentientist argument then continues by pointing out that if these are the morally relevant features that require extending a specific moral status to an entity, then we must expand our ethical circle to include *all* sentient beings, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish.

Smith's critique begins with the observation that, according to the sentientist, plants 'are not subjects of these experiences' (12), so, 'it is morally permissible for moral agents to kill and eat them' (12). The first chapter of this book revolves around the claim that the best available understanding of plant physiology and behavior suggests evidence of plant sensation, pain, self-awareness, intelligence, learning, and intentionality. The evidence surveyed is thought-provoking, and Smith does an excellent job of painting a picture of how one could come to accept the claim that many philosophers have been too quick to dismiss plant sentience.

Nonetheless, one cannot help but observe that Smith's assessment of plant capacities sometimes requires fairly significant speculative leaps. One example is when he says that a specific plant 'decides how many coils to make' (26). More examples can be seen in the following:

Once established at the new location, keystone species then call to them soil bacteria, mycelia, and the plants that constituted their previous archipelago... This capacity of keystone species to "teach" their plant communities how to act was widely recognized by indigenous and folk taxonomies (28).

The language of 'deciding', 'calling to', or 'teaching' is contestable in all of these cases, as it seems very unlikely that plants qualify as the kinds of organisms that can decide, call out to, or teach anything, even if they have some form of sentience. To his credit, Smith recognizes this speculative leap (28-29), but ends the discussion with the unsatisfying statement that he sees 'no reason to reject' it (29).

The second argument against moral vegetarianism involves the rejection of the broad ethical perspective that underpins the sentientist argument, namely, the tendency to begin our ethical

investigations by listing a number of human traits that are ethically relevant, then looking to find those traits in the nonhuman world. This approach to ethics is problematic insofar as it assumes ‘the “strong” form of anthropomorphism, the attribution of human meaning onto other-than-human traits and behaviors’ (56).

As an alternative to this strong anthropomorphism, Smith urges us to accept an animistic worldview. Note that, for Smith, animism is not the oft-derided claim that ‘spirits inhabit... things like rocks, rivers, and mountains’ (52). Rather, we should see animism as ‘the recognition of personhood in a range of human and other-than-human persons’ (54). Rather than simply including animals in our ethical circle and treating everything that does not closely resemble us as an acceptable object of use, we should recognize that personhood extends well beyond the boundary laid down by the sentientist. Such an animistic view does not approach questions related to the ethics of eating from the traditional perspective of drawing a line between appropriate and inappropriate objects of use, but rather recommends a ‘sacred eating’ (46) perspective which sees other organisms as prey without problematically elevating ourselves over them. This understanding models the act of eating another as a type of ‘gift exchange’ (47), as it sees all plants, animals, and (importantly) humans as being the same kind of thing. It allows for the possibility that all of these things ‘can be ontologized as edible’ (46).

The main ethical obligation that follows from the acceptance of this animism is a recognition of the primacy of the landbase (61). Each landbase ‘is a function of the ecosystem of which it is part’ (61), and different ecosystems will support different types of eating. In some cases, a landbase might be best respected by eating a vegetarian diet, but very often it will not. Animism therefore suggests that there is nothing problematic with killing animals as long as doing so is ‘responsible to the health and well-being of the coinhabitants of our landbase so far as colliding agendas permit’ (63).

While Smith provides an interesting account of how we might develop a plausible form of animism that sees personhood as independent from quintessentially human traits, this view has some troubling implications that Smith overlooks. If we accept that killing animals is ethically acceptable when doing so is conducive to the health and well-being of the landbase, then we must ask what, if anything, is stopping one human from killing another human for food. As long as hunting humans for food is a responsible way of caring for the landbase (which it arguably is, as even Smith acknowledges the harmful impact of our overpopulation (63)), and the kill is performed in line with the tenets of sacred eating (the loss of the prey-human is felt and acknowledged by the predator-human, and the prey-human is thanked for his/her sacrifice), then it seems that Smith’s animism would have a hard time finding fault with this action. In other words, it is difficult to see how Smith’s animism could not be evoked as a critique of the moral arguments against cannibalism.

If we wish to maintain the intuition that there is something ethically wrong with killing humans for food when other options are available to us (as I think we should), then we must see this as a strike against Smith’s animism and a point in favor of sentientism, which can at least explain why there is something distinctively wrong with killing humans for food.

This line of concern for Smith’s view brings us to his third argument against moral vegetarianism. The first premise of this argument is that ‘eating is a transitive property’ (71), meaning that anything that eats one type of entity is also eating everything that entity has eaten (‘our food is who

our food eats' (72)). The second premise is the arguably accurate scientific claim that plants eat animals: 'plants acquire their nutrients from the soil, which is composed, among other things, of decayed plant and animal remains. Yes, plants feed on animals' (72). The conclusion that clearly follows from these two premises is that 'even those of us who might otherwise believe that we subsist solely on a plant-based diet actually eat animal remains as well' (72). Thus, vegetarianism is technically impossible, as 'vegetarians eat animals as well as plants' (86).

The consequence of these considerations is meant to be that there is no meaningful distinction between being a vegetarian and being an omnivore—these concepts are based on an untenable account of what it means to eat only a certain ontological class of person. Thus, the moral defense of vegetarianism is based on the false assumption that a meaningful form of vegetarianism is even possible.

But, once again, it is difficult to see how Smith would want to deal with some of the implications of this argumentative approach. Let us imagine that, rather than ethically criticizing another for eating the flesh of a cow, I told another human that it was wrong for them to hunt and kill other humans for food. Now, imagine that this person responded to me in the following way:

All plants, which in turn feed animals that are used for food, consume nutrients from the soil, and some of those nutrients are the result of the decomposition of human bodies and the addition of human waste. Thus, eating anything involves eating humans.

Should we be persuaded by this argument, and thus accept that there is nothing distinctively morally wrong with killing humans for food? While this cannot be adequately answered in a review such as this, it is a very revealing question. Specifically, it reveals that Smith's critique of the moral defense of vegetarianism either fails to establish the permissibility of omnivorism, or it amounts to a shockingly successful defense of cannibalism.

Despite these potential difficulties, anyone who is interested in animal ethics, food ethics, or environmental philosophy would certainly find value in Smith's detailed and meticulously argued book.

Patrick Clipsham, Winona State University