

Good Eating, by Stephen H. Webb

reviewed by [Bernard E. Rollin](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

During the past three decades, moral concern about how animals are treated has proliferated in Western societies. The leaders of the animal rights movement have been philosophers, among whom there is little agreement as to the movement's rational foundations. Peter Singer, often considered the father of animal rights, is in fact a utilitarian for whom "rights" are conceptually suspect. Tom Regan is a rights theorist; Steve Sapontzis bases animal ethics in common moral intuitions.

Though divided as to the underpinnings of animal ethics, such thinkers are united in attempting to mitigate the staggering amount of pain and suffering modern society inflicts on animals. The major source of this suffering is confinement agriculture. Animals used in research number in the millions; animals produced for food under conditions which fail to meet their biological and psychological needs are counted in the billions.

With a few notable exceptions, theologians and clergy have been slow to engage animal issues. Stephen H. Webb's timely discussion of vegetarianism in *Good Eating*, published as the debut volume in the Christian Practice of Everyday Life series, is a welcome stimulus to Christian reflection on current animal treatment. It should provoke much debate and perhaps more than a few sermons arousing people from their dogmatic slumber about animal exploitation.

The Bible, Webb reminds us, begins with a prelapsarian peaceable kingdom, and history moves toward a time when we can recapture that harmony, a time when violence no longer rules and "the lion shall lie down with the lamb." Contrary to the standard interpretation of man's "dominion" over animals, meaning absolute despotic control, Webb makes clear that what the Bible intends is stewardship, husbandry and something like parental care, rather than savage or heedless "harvesting." Since we humans did not create animals, we are not morally free to dispose of them as we see fit. Adam and Eve were vegetarian before the fall. Even when imperfect humans are permitted by God to eat meat, this permission is constrained by ritual and ethical precepts, and allowed by God with reluctance as a

concession to human nature as it is, not as it ought to be. Vegetarianism is a way for Christians to participate in the actualization of God's plan for the world.

Most philosophers will find much to criticize in Webb's theological argument for vegetarianism and therefore, by implication, for moral concern over animal treatment as a whole. A particularly legitimate target for criticism is Webb's cavalier and superficial dismissal of rational ethical arguments for animal rights. But we must remember that Webb's purpose is not philosophical ethics but theology, and his aim is not logic-chopping but, rather, getting the community of Christians to take animal treatment seriously.

One of the biggest flaws in the animal movement is fratricidal warfare growing out of strong self-righteousness. Rather than uniting in support of common causes, many of the movement's camps spend their time attacking each other as morally impure. ("You take medicines? Those are tested on animals!" "You eat eggs? How can you?") I once acerbically remarked that the best way for animal exploiters to protect themselves is to fund animal advocacy groups, since they spend most of their time battling each other. It is thus pointless to fault Webb for not being what he does not attempt to be. Rather let us celebrate the many conceptual nuggets that even philosophers can find in this book. Webb's typology of moral vegetarians is a superb piece of moral psychology, as is his provocative "categorical imperative"--treat every animal the way you would wish to see your dog treated.

Since many people will not change their dietary habits even to preserve their own health, it is unlikely that many will read or be changed by this book. It is a pity that Webb did not more fully discuss the reform of animal agriculture by returning it to the biblical ideal of husbandry, stewardship and symbiosis exemplified in the 23rd Psalm. People who do not become vegetarians can still demand and support agricultural systems that meet animal needs and natures. Webb is aware of this possibility, but tends to mention it only in passing. As Erasmus Darwin recognized when he described Unitarianism as a "feather bed to catch falling Christians," many of us cannot always attain the moral (or theological) high ground immediately, but require intermediate possibilities between what is currently actual and what is ideal.