Is It Wrong to Eat Some Animals But Not Others?

I just concluded an interesting conversation with someone who I assume is a vegan for ethical reasons. I'm not going to lump all ethical vegans together with this person, but I thought the conversation was instructive on the concept of "wrong." Here is the conversation in full, edited for presentation, by first name only, which was sparked by the image on the right.

Paul: I think many humans ignore the suffering caused to animals because they enjoy meat. They block it out mentally. It's still wrong to cause suffering.

Skyler: Why is that "wrong"?

Paul: If you need me to explain why causing pain to living beings and slaughtering them is wrong then that's very concerning. Because, it's causing a living being to suffer agony and death just to provide meat for humans who could eat meat substitutes instead. We're supposed to be intelligent beings capable of empathy.

Skyler: That doesn't really answer the question. Why is causing a living being to suffer to provide meat wrong?

Paul: Because causing suffering leads to a lack of empathy, and when people no longer feel empathy or compassion, there's a disrespect for others.

How can we achieve peace on earth if humans are so callous that they disregard the rights of other living beings? A dog seems more attractive than a cow, but that doesn't mean we should treat one differently than the other.

If humans had empathy for all living beings on this planet then I doubt we'd have more wars. It's down to a lack of empathy that humans keep butchering one another and the other beings in this world.

Skyler: What I'm reading is that you think that humans eating meat leads to human on human violence, and hence human suffering in the world, which such a state of affairs bothers you in a serious way? Is that an accurate interpretation?

Paul: Yes, if we treat other living beings on this planet brutally, then is it any wonder we treat each other badly?

Skyler: Would it be accurate to say that you consider "wrong" whatever it may be that bothers you, then?

Paul: Yes, but it bothers the animals also as they're the ones going through this. It is selfish of humans to inflict pain. No wonder the world is still at war when humans lack empathy.

Skyler: Do you recognize that what bothers people varies from individual to individual?

Paul: Of course, which is why we still have insensitive heartless people in the world.

Skyler: Alright, then. Would you agree that eating meat is not objectively wrong, but only wrong in your opinion?

Paul: You could say, in that case, killing a human is fine, as that's down to opinion.

Skyler: Isn't it?

Paul: Depends on the person and their morals. Besides, whether opinion or not, it's still physically painful for a living being to be put to the slaughter. This is a fact.

Skyler: Yes, that is a fact. I'm glad that we agree that whether or not causing pain is "wrong" is just a matter of opinion.

Paul: Indeed.

I must give credit where credit is due. You don't usually get very far on the Internet when engaging someone with the Socratic method. Paul kept the conversation going when others have claimed "pedantry!" or that they don't have time to answer my questions.

As for the content, I like the admission that what is "wrong" is a matter of opinion. It's quite alright to consider anything wrong, but it's also alright if others disagree with you. At the end of the day, what are you willing to do about the injustice that you see, and how does that affect me and my kin?

As long as you remain peaceful and nonviolent, you may consider "wrong" anything you damn well please. When your actions rise to the level of aggression and violence, we have a problem.

My other takeaway was that there does not seem to me any logical inconsistency in considering it "wrong" to hurt a dog while at the same time considering it perfectly alright to hurt what ultimately becomes our food. Those are each a matter of opinion, not facts, and as dogs do not equal cows, there is no logical inconsistency.

Some animals (and plants) I eat. Others I do not. And many bugs I smash with my windshield. So what? I am not trying to build or maintain society with animals or bugs.

Therefore, I personally have no ethical qualms about doing so.