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**Consequentialism, Collective Action, and Causal Impotence**

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**Abstract:** This paper offers some refinements to a particular objection to act consequentialism, the “causal impotence” objection. According to proponents of the objection, when we find circumstances in which severe, unnecessary harms result entirely from voluntary acts, it seems as if we should be able to indict at least one act among those acts, but act consequentialism appears to lack the resources to offer this indictment. Our aim is to show is that the most promising response on behalf of act consequentialism, the threshold argument, cannot offer a fully general prescription about what to do in cases of collective action.

**Keywords:** animal ethics; bioethics; collective action; consequentialism; ethics; causal impotence

**1. Introduction**

It often appears as if a harm has occurred as a result of how people have acted, but that no *particular* person is responsible for having brought about the harm. For instance, billions of nonhuman animals suffer as a result of numerous individual purchases of intensively farmed meat, but no particular purchase appears to be the cause of those harms. The topic of intensive farming has, of course, generated considerable philosophical debate within discussions about moral vegetarianism and about the nature of moral status (Singer 1980; Nobis 2002; Regan 2004; Singer 2009; Welchman 2006; Kagan 2011; McPherson 2014). In this paper, we use this topic as a case study for examining the strength of the claim that act consequentialism can be reconciled with collective action.

According to *act consequentialism*, the permissibility of an act is based entirely in terms of the goodness of its consequences. Act consequentialists, some have argued, are not able to condemn individual purchases of intensively farmed meat. According to the objection, often called the *causal impotence*objection (Shafer-Landau 1994; Norcross 2004; Harris and Galvin 2012; Chignell et al. 2015), each individual purchase of intensively farmed meat is causally inefficacious with respect to the harm of intensive farming. Considered individually, each purchase is negligible in effect. Yet, because the harm of intensive farming is profound, unnecessary, and entirely the result of voluntary acts, any plausible moral theory should be able to find *someone* to blame for it. But, we will argue, act consequentialism does not have the resources to enable any moral indictment of the harm.

The paper proceeds through the philosophical dialectic as follows. In section 2, we will give the preliminaries necessary to understand the causal impotence objection. In section 3, we will discuss several proposals that act consequentialists have offered as responses to that objection, the *expected value* proposal. In section 4, we develop a more sophisticated model for assessing a particular argument given by proponents of the expected value proposal, the *threshold* argument. In the end, we conclude, the threshold argument cannot save act consequentialism because it cannot generate categorical prescriptions about what to do in cases of collective action.

**2. Preliminaries**

Act consequentialism is often interpreted in roughly the following way:

AC1**:** An act is morally wrong if and only if it fails to bring about an outcome that is optimal with respect to its feasible alternatives.

It may seem as if there could be acts that are suboptimal yet not wrong. If I intentionally deny to a stranger a kindness that would have been costless to me, I could have done better, but perhaps I have not done *wrong*. Act consequentialism denies this possibility.

The theory has two basic commitments. One commitment relates to its “consequentialism” component: act consequentialism must provide a criterion for evaluating the goodness of the possible *outcomes,* understood in terms ofthe consequences of what we do. Its other basic commitment relates to its “act” component: it must at least allow for the possibility of a criterion for evaluating the goodness of possible *acts*, for the purposes of characterizing moral blameworthiness. If the theory could not evaluate acts, it could only lament the sub-optimality of the outcomes it condemns, unable to distinguish between circumstances involving moral failure and circumstances that are merely regrettable (such as those involving natural disasters). It could not tell individual actors how they should have acted; it can only tell the universe as a whole how it could have been better realized.

The two basic commitments of act consequentialism must be satisfied in a particular order. Which outcomes are *optimal* must be determined independently of and prior to any determination of the goodness of acts, because which acts are *optimific* are (by definition) those acts that bring about optimal outcomes. Moral theories that do not respect this ordering of tasks cannot be regarded as consequentialist, because they deny that the goodness of acts is a function of their consequences.

Act consequentialists have typically understood *acts* to be particular instances of intentional behavior that are performed by individual persons, which can be associated with outcomes in a one-to-one correspondence. Under these assumptions, there is no need to consider how the task of evaluating outcomes and the task of evaluating acts might be related, or even consider the distinction between the two at all. Act consequentialists can simply define optimality how they choose, and then direct each person to act optimifically (that is, to act so as to realize the optimal outcome). We are left with little apparent reason to examine the methodology of the theory any further. In collective action cases, however, the actions of individualsdonot neatly correspond to outcomes. In those cases, which outcomes obtain is itself a function of how *everyone* behaves. Much of our ordinary moral deliberation involves considering “what we together do” (Parfit 1986, 67-86; Parfit n.d.), but AC1 is unable conceptualize collective action.

We may, of course, revise AC1 as

AC2**:** A *set of acts* is wrong if and only if it fails to bring about an outcome that is optimal with respect to its feasible alternatives.

AC2 is not satisfied unless the outcome resulting from *the set* of everyone’s actsis optimal. But the move from AC1 to AC2 only trades one problem for another. Unlike AC1, AC2 cannot meaningfully direct each individual to act “optimifically,” because which individual’s acts are optimific may depend on how others will act. When this sort of dependence is present, what is required to evaluate the goodness of acts is not a single prescription of a set of individual acts, but multiple, coordinated prescriptions of individual acts.

There is a structural similarity between the problem that collective action poses for act consequentialism and the problem that prisoner’s dilemmas pose for egoistic theories of rationality. With respect to both problems, if all parties each behave in a way that is individually optimific, the collective result is globally sub-optimal. The prisoner’s dilemma is, however, less problematic to rational egoism than the collective action problem is to act consequentialism; while rational egoism does not carry any essential commitment to the achievement of global optimality, act consequentialism does. But the same sort of cases can also be given to illustrate their nature.

Consider the case of Jack and Jill, who can each choose to perform one of two possible acts: to either kill a nonhuman animal, or to refrain from killing it. For now, we will say that neither has any evidence about the other’s dispositions or motivations. If either Jack or Jill kills the animal, this causes a harm of value *h,* and also provides the benefit of a meaty meal of value *m* to either. If either refrain, he or she (or both) instead enjoys the benefit of a vegan meal, of value *v*. We will assume the values to be ordered as *h* < 0 < *v* < *m*. In other words, the harm done to the animal has negative value, each of the two benefits has positive value, and the meaty meal is strictly better than the vegan meal. We will also assume that 2(*m* – *v*) < |*h*|: we will assume that the disvalue of the harm done to the animal *outweighs* the marginal benefit of the meaty meal over the vegan meal.

The four relevant individual acts (Jack’s killing and refraining, and Jill’s killing and refraining) can be paired into four of what we will call *act combinations*: (kill, kill), (refrain, kill), (kill, refrain), and (refrain, refrain). Each of those four act combinations is associated with each of the outcomes that, respectively, Jack and Jill together realize. Matrix representation of this situation is given by the following two tables:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Jill** | | |  |  | **Jill** | | |
| **Jack** |  | kill | refrain |  | **Jack** |  | kill | refrain |
| kill | *m, m* | *m, v* |  | kill | *h + 2m* | *h + v + m* |
| refrain | *v, m* | *v, v* |  | refrain | *h + v + m* | *2v* |
| ***individual payoffs*** | | | |  | ***collective payoffs*** | | | |

The case’s possible outcomes—*2v*, *h + v + m*, and *h* + 2*m—*are defined and ranked by their overall payoffs. Given that *h* < 0 < *v* < *m*, and 2(*m* – *v*) < -*h*, it follows that *h + v + m* < *h* + 2*m* < 2*v*. So, best overall if they both refrain, but second-best if they both kill.

We can now ask how act consequentialism can satisfy its two evaluative tasks with respect to this case. The theory is clearly committed to endorsing the outcome defined by payoff 2*v*, because that outcome is optimal. But how can act consequentialism satisfy its other evaluative task? Which *acts* would it prescribe to Jack and Jill?

We may simply assume that Jack will kill the animal, because this aligns with his personal incentives. Externalities aside, it is better for him if he does it. If we assume that Jack does, the case can be represented from Jill’s perspective in a reduced form:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Jill** | | |  |  | **Jill** | | |
| **Jack** |  | kill | refrain |  | **Jack** |  | kill | refrain |
| kill | *m* | *v* |  | kill | *h + 2m* | *h + v + m* |
| ***Jill’s payoffs*** | | | |  | ***collective payoffs*** | | | |

The theory appears to hold that, independent of the value of *h*, since *v* < *m*, on the assumption that Jack will kill the animal, Jill has best individual reason *and* best overall reason to also kill the animal. Because Jill is incapable of preventing the harm, she will produce the best outcome by also choosing to kill. She is *causally impotent*.

We did not have any special reason to make the simplifying assumption that Jack will kill the animal. We may just as well assume that Jack will instead *refrain* from killing the animal. On this alternative assumption, the case reduces differently:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Jill** | | |  |  | **Jill** | | |
| **Jack** |  | kill | refrain |  | **Jack** |  | kill | refrain |
| refrain | *m* | *v* |  | refrain | *h + v + m* | *2v* |
| ***Jill’s payoffs*** | | | |  | ***collective payoffs*** | | | |

Act consequentialism now delivers the desired result. Since *h + v + m* < 2*v,* Jillnowhas best act consequentialist reason to refrain from killing the animal (but still individual reason to kill). So, these assumptions about Jack's agency not only allow act consequentialism to deliver a result, they also determine which result it delivers.

For the purposes of moral theory, it is most important to recognize the *strategic* differences between the Jack and Jill case and large-scale collective action cases. As the Jack and Jill case illustrates, it is important to remember that there is nothing that Jack *will* do before he does it, and thus, that we are not entitled to make simplifying assumptions about his behavior. But cases of genuine collective harm—such as the case of intensive farming—are not quite like this, at least from the player’s perspective. Real collective harms are more closely represented by an *n*-person generalization of the Jack and Jill case, and one in which we might assume that everyone has some kind of individual incentive to “defect”[[1]](#footnote-1) toward causing the relevant collective harm. So understood, it is plausible to think that there *is*,in a way, something that the group will do before it does it, and thus, that Jill *effectively* faces the following circumstances:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Jill** | | |  |  | **Jill** | | |
| **other people** |  | defect | refrain |  | **other people** |  | defect | refrain |
| defect | *m* | *v* |  | defect | *h + 2m* | *h + v + m* |
| ***Jill’s payoffs*** | | | |  | ***collective payoffs*** | | | |

In this case, she *does* have best act consequentialist reason to defect.

So, the causal impotence problem is a serious threat to act consequentialism, because that problem appears to show that the theory cannot define (or even enable the development of) a decision procedure that is consistent with the theory’s own evaluative metric.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the two next sections, we discuss the responses that the act consequentialist can give, and we explain why these responses aren’t of any help.

**3. Responses to the Causal Impotence Problem**

To maintain high generality, we have said little about what counts as act consequentialism. However, some apparent ways of rescuing the theory are nonstarters on act consequentialist grounds. For example, a proposal that suggests some sort of Kantian universalizability test as a criterion for evaluating acts is a nonstarter for our purposes. Such a theory will sometimes prescribe acts that bring about sub-optimal outcomes. Similarly, *rule consequentialism* will not work: if our criterion for action is to follow rules which, when generally adopted, would lead to optimal outcomes, this may well deliver the result that everyone has best reason to refrain from causing collective harms. However, it would also sometimes require us to act in ways that bring about sub-optimal outcomes. So, the Kantian and rule consequentialist proposals can solve the causal impotence problem only by abandoning act consequentialism itself.

Another sort of proposal to the causal impotence problem involves aggregating all the agents under the umbrella of a single “group agent,” and then blaming the group agent. In the Jack and Jill case, for instance, neither Jack’s nor Jill’s individually refraining from killing makes a difference to the total amount of harm. This was because how Jack and Jill each act constrains which outcomes the other can realize. But this is not true of the group {Jack, Jill}. {Jack, Jill} cannot act in such a way as to rule out for itself any of the outcomes, and its act of (refrain, refrain) would make all the difference in the world. Even if an individual person’s act of defecting cannot be condemned, the act combinations comprising all (or the critical number of) acts of defection can be, because we might suppose that act combinations can be proper objects of act-based moral evaluation, and that group agents can be to blame. Call this the *group agency proposal* (Hudson 1993; Killoren and Williams 2012; Pettit and List 2013). So, while no agent within the group has reason to individually act in a certain way, each may be thought of as having act consequentialist reason to act so as to cause their group to act differently.

The group agency proposal does not help act consequentialists avoid the casual impotence problem, at least in the case of intensively farmed meat. Whatever the overall merits of the proposal, there is not actually a group agent involved in this case. We can easily imagine {Jack, Jill}’s deliberative process, and the relevant “independently discernable representations and goals” (Pettit 2003) it has. The process is that of two agents deciding whether to do what is personally best for them at the cost of causing a serious negative externality. There appears to be genuine collective rationality, and perhaps even a *group mind*.

The group of intensively farmed meat eaters is not like {Jack, Jill}. Indeed, we should not have automatically expected to find one. In general, there is not a group agent associated with every formally groupable of actors: there are infinitely many “groupable” sets of agents that do not have the internal structure of a unified agent. The group *people who are currently riding on a bus with a prime number of passengers*, for example, is so decentralized and disunified that it is implausible to describe it as having cohesive intentions, beliefs, or desires. There is certainly no group mind in sight. Furthermore, the group agent proposals do not solve the problem when it comes to guiding the actions of individuals. Those who invoke the group agent proposal (e.g., Killoren and Williams 2012) shift the blame from individuals to groups, and thus they absolve individual agents of any wrongdoing.[[3]](#footnote-3) But this only reiterates the problem. Understanding the wrongness of group acts still leaves individuals without a decision procedure that is consistent with act consequentialism’s evaluative metric.

Another sort of response to the causal impotence problem appeals to expected value. As we have seen, if we illicitly assume that Jack *will* kill, it is difficult for act consequentialists to condemn Jill's killing, since her doing so is optimific. But it may still be that, in a different sense, Jill’s acting to kill is still worthy of condemnation. Though they do not know anything about each other’s dispositions or motivations, it may be rational for each of them to assign certain credences to how the other will act. If refraining would have the greatest *expected* value, then each of them might have best act consequentialist reason to refrain. Call this the *expected value proposal*.

In the literature on moral vegetarianism, proponents of the expected value proposal who wish to condemn the purchase and consumption of intensively farmed meat frequently deploy the following response, often called the *threshold argument* (Chignell 2016; Kagan 2011; Nefsky 2016; Norcross 2004, 2012; Matheny 2002; Almeida and Bernstein 2000). The argument is as follows:

* 1. For some (large) number *n* and some time period *t*, *n* persons’ refraining from purchasing intensively farmed meat over *t* would cause a significant reduction in the total amount of harm suffered by nonhuman animals.
  2. If such a reduction is possible, then it is possible that refraining makes a significant difference.
  3. If it is possible that refraining makes such a difference, then *not* refraining fails to maximize expected value.
  4. Therefore, one has best act consequentialist reason to act to refrain from purchasing intensively farmed meat.

Premise 1 is plausible, at least in principle. In the face of some finite reduction in consumer demand, the intensively farmed meat industry could not endogenously sustain its current levels of production and would eventually be forced by economic considerations to reduce that production. This would, in turn, prevent a large number of animals from being bred, intensively farmed, and slaughtered. Premise 2 is also plausible. If such a reduction requires *n* people to refrain over *t*, then if someone’s refraining is the *n*thinstance of refraining over that period of time, then her acting to refrain might be thought to make a significant difference (Kagan 2011). In any case, we will leave aside criticisms of premises 1 and 2 in favor of assessing the plausibility of premise 3.[[4]](#footnote-4) We will examine two cases, inspired by a fanciful thought experiment from Alastair Norcross (2004).

Imagine that the taste of chocolate is greatly enhanced by the chemical “cocoamone,” but that cocoamone can be produced *only* by torturing puppies. Unaware of this, Jill goes to the Guilty Ghirardelli Company for their famous “Chocolate Mousse á la Bama,” and is dismayed to learn that the dish contains cocoamone, and thus, requires puppy torture. When she asks the manager for details about the process, he tells her that after 10 orders of Chocolate Mousse á la Bama have been placed, he goes into the back, tortures, and slaughters a puppy, and harvests 10 orders’ worth of cocoamone. In light of this information, Jill weighs the expected value between, on the one hand, buying the mousse and, on the other hand, refraining from buying the mousse and instead buying a (cocoamone-free) vegan chocolate bar.

So, Jill can either *buy* the mousse, thereby enjoying a benefit of value *m,* or *refrain* from buying the mousse and instead buy the vegan chocolate bar instead, thereby enjoying a benefit of value *v*. We will understand the torture and slaughter of one puppy to be a harm of value *h*. And we will again assume the three values to be ordered as *h* < 0 < *v* < *m*. In other words, the puppy torture has negative value, each of the two benefits has positive value, and the mousse is strictly better than the vegan meal. Finally, we will also assume *m* - *v* < |*h*|, to represent the fact that the disvalue of the puppy torture outweighs the marginal benefit of the mousse over the vegan chocolate bar.

Suppose that there are four relevant states of affairs. They are:

*S*1: Jill buys the mousse, and the purchase makes a (negative) difference

*S*2: Jill buys the mousse, but the purchase makes *no* difference

*S*3: Jill *refrains* from buying the mousse, and this makes a (positive) difference

*S*4: Jill refrains from buying the mousse, but this makes no difference.

We will call Cr(*x*) Jill’s *credence function*, which delivers the probability she would rationally assign to each state of affairs obtaining. We will call V(*x*) be her *value function*, which, for each possible state of affairs, delivers the value of each of that state of affairsobtaining. Jill’s expected values of buying and of refraining are given, respectively, by

EU*buy*: [Cr(*S*1) • V(*S*1)] + [Cr(*S*2) • V(*S*2)]

EU*refrain*: Cr(*S*3) • V(*S*3) + Cr(*S*4) • V(*S*4).

We will let Cr(*S*1) + Cr(*S*2) = Cr(*S*3) + Cr(*S*4) = 1. We will understand the *values* of the four states of affairs as follows:

V(*S*1): *h + m*

V(*S*2): *m*

V(*S*3): *v*

V(*S*4): *v*

If we calculate the expected values of buying and refraining, we find:

EU*buy* = (*h* • Cr(*S*1)) *+ m*

EU*refrain* = *v*

Premise 3 of the threshold argument is true in general, then, only if (*h* • Cr(*S*1)) *+ m < v* is also true in general. Therefore, the threshold argument holds only if |*h|* • Cr(*S*1) > *m - v*. According to the above specification of the case, the probability that Jill’s buying the mousse is the 10th purchase (which would, in turn, trigger the torture and slaughter of a puppy) is 0.1, and so, Cr(*S*1) = 0.1. Finally, we may normalize the resulting 0.1|*h|* > *m - v* to find the inequality |*h|* >10(*m – v*). The left-hand side represents the disvalue of the puppy’s suffering; the right-hand side represents the *marginal* value of the mousse, its value over the value of the vegan chocolate bar. In summary, the inequality holds that the disvalue of the puppy torture outweighs 10 times the marginal benefit of the mousse.

It is difficult to know how seriously to take this comparison. To whatever extent the Guilty Ghirardelli case is representative of the decisions faced by those considering eating intensively farmed meat, our examination here could be plausibly thought to weigh against eating that meat. The marginal value of ten servings of mousse, even if that mousse is *profoundly* more delicious than the vegan chocolate bar, probably does not outweigh the disvalue of the prolonged torture and slaughter of an animal that can suffer. Thus, the expected value calculus yields the result that Jill should buy the vegan bar instead of the mousse.

But it is not clear that this case really *is* representative of such decisions. It is not obvious how to develop a model that actually does represent such decisions, but this case resembles the decision faced by someone playing Russian roulette with a torture device aimed at a puppy, where the odds are nine-to-one againstthe harm occurring and the payoff is a free upgrade from a vegan chocolate bar to the mousse. Of course, what underlies the force of the threshold argument is the conviction among its proponents that the probabilities are just trivial details (Norcross 2012, 386). The loss of marginal benefit, according to this line of reasoning, is almost always negligible in comparison to the disvalue of the opposing harms even when those harms are attenuated by small or infinitesimal probabilities.

But the details *do* matter. Imagine that, disappointed with the Guilty Ghirardelli Company, Jill starts looking for “ethical” sources for Chocolate Mousse á la Bama and is delighted to discover the Guiltless Godiva Company. They produce and serve the very same chocolate mousse but are much more efficient at extracting cocoamone than the Guilty Ghirardelli Company. The manager of the Guiltless Godiva Company boasts that he needs to torture a puppy only after 100,000 orders of Mousse á la Bama have been placed. Jill adjusts her credence accordingly: now, she must compare the disvalue of the torture and slaughter of one puppy to 100,000 times the marginal benefit of the Mousse á la Bama. The 100,000 figure was chosen to be evocative: an average American automobile driver has around 1-100,000 odds of killing someone in a car accident *in the next month*. And in the case of a single purchase from the Guiltless Godiva Company, the odds in favor of the harm occurring are slightly lower than the odds in favor of one causing serious harm in the process of doing something one may do quite casually, many times a week. Requiring Jill to refrain from purchasing Mousse á la Bama from the Guiltless Godiva Company, then, amounts to insisting on a form of risk aversion we do not typically hold ourselves to.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Norcross insists that we really must consider small risks and weigh the benefits against them. But anyone who considers the demandingness of this sort of risk aversion should feel compelled to stop going to out to eat entirely. Most long-term vegetarians have probably had the experience of a restaurant mistakenly delivering to them a meat entrée. Total risk aversion may compel even more than merely avoiding non-vegan restaurants: there is a remote possibility that one’s favorite vegan restaurant is secretly cooking things in chicken broth (Almeida and Bernstein 2000). The same, of course, goes for products at the grocery store. The only way to completely eliminate the risk of eating animal products is to consume only what one has grown. This is surely overly demanding, but if we take small chances as seriously as Norcross wants and we also think the devastating harms associated with intensive farming of animals might meaningfully issue from an individual purchase, it is the sort of risk aversion we must accept.

Simplified cases of the above sort have become the currency of discussion on the threshold argument.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, they actually contribute very little toward generating an assessment of the decisions that people in these situations *actually* face. We certainly have no “intuitive” sense of which of the Guiltless Godiva and Guilty Ghirardelli cases more closely represents those decisions, and we do not believe anyone else does either. What we need to examine is a more sophisticated model (or so it appears).

The reliance on toy examples undermines the case against the threshold argument as much as the case for it. Without looking at a more realistic model of the likelihood that one’s purchase will make a difference, act-consequentialist proponents of threshold arguments cannot justify a categorical prescription of moral vegetarianism. But the same is true for the critics of the argument.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is too hasty to declare that the threshold argument never yields an expected utility calculation in favor of abstaining. It is entirely possible in some cases that our purchase might make a difference and that the expected utility of eating meat is less than the expected utility of abstaining. In the following section, we aim to highlight this point by providing a more detailed model than the simplified cases that are usually invoked.

**4. A New and Improved (But Still Bad) Threshold Argument**

Act consequentialists have not adequately come to terms with the empirical complexities raised by the threshold argument. In this section, we will develop a better model for assessing the claims of that argument. Our model is still highly unsophisticated, but even given its limited resources, it helps show that expected value considerations do not ground the sorts of moral claims act consequentialists believe those considerations do. Although the expected value calculus might sometimes deliver the result that individuals should abstain from eating meat, it cannot issue *categorical* prescriptions about becoming a vegetarian or vegan. As is always the case for consequentialists, what is right depends on certain things, but in some cases, what it depends on is arbitrary in the extreme.

Suppose that Jack eats a burger at In-N-Out for lunch every Friday, but is considering whether he should, for moral reasons, stop doing so. To answer this, we must consider the effects that this shift in his consumer behavior would have. We need to make three assumptions, for the purposes of tractability. We will assume:

* 1. In-N-Out is insensitive to large-scale exogenous economic phenomena, such as supply or demand shocks, technological improvements, long-term changes in consumer taste.
  2. In-N-Out is wholly vertically integrated and they own and slaughter their livestock in-house.

The expected value of Jack’s becoming a vegan can be modeled using publicly-available information about animal agriculture. An average steer yields 570 lbs. of usable beef (Neibergs and Nelson 2009), and, since an In-N-Out burger is 2 oz., each steer yields 4,560 burgers. We have assumed away any waste generated from farm to factory, but we will incorporate a coefficient *w* (0 < *w* < 1) in the model, to represent the total economic effect of production inefficiencies (such as production waste, misinformation, or irrational production procedures). Because of the effect of waste, we represent the yield of an average steer as 4,560*w* burgers (which, to be clear, is *less* than 4,560). We’ll let *c* be the number of In-N-Out’s daily customers. Finally, we will assume:

* + 1. The number of In-N-Out’s daily customers *c* and the amount of production waste *w* it generates are unrelated.

So, given its production inefficiencies, the number of steers In-N-Out must slaughter to provide burgers for itscustomers each day is given by the (likely fractional) number . But since In-N-Out can only slaughter steers in integer quantities, their demand for steers is *not* given by that number. Rather, their demand is found by passing through what’s typically called a “ceiling” function, ⌈*x*⌉, which rounds up to the next integer. (For instance, if In-N-Out has 10,000,000 customers per day and that the waste coefficient is .9, In-N-Out would have to slaughter ⌈⌉ = ⌈⌉ ≈ ⌈2,436.647⌉ = 2,437 steers to meet their production demands.) For Jack (or any other particular customer) can make a difference by abstaining only if that particular abstention changes In-N-Out’s demand for steers; that is, if ⌈⌉ > ⌈⌉.

Absent any other information, Jack has no reason to believe *c* to be any number in particular. Surely, he understands it to be a very large number (and certainly it is.) But, in any case, it turns out that the value of *c* is more or less irrelevant to expected value. For any plausible value of *c*, Jack’s rational credence that he will make a difference is given by , which does not depend on *c*. Assessing the situation in terms of expected value as in section 3, then, expected value considerations favor Jack’s abstaining only if the disvalue of a steer’s slaughter outweighs 4,560*w* times the marginal value of the burger.

It is worth noticing that this result probably lies between the Guilty Ghirardelli and Guiltless Godiva results in terms of its “degree” of causal impotence. This gives us an opportunity to reemphasize that the problem with those two cases was *not* that they underestimated the extent to which a given consumer might be causally efficacious. Rather, our complaint was that they provided no serious estimation at all. Another insight of the model is that, with respect to expected value considerations, *what kind of meat* In-N-Out is selling matters dramatically more than any other factor.

For instance, if In-N-Out sold chicken sandwiches instead of burgers, our model would deliver a strikingly different moral assessment of the situation. Since In-N-Out sells burgers, Jack’s probability of making a difference in any given instance is . So even if Jack eats a burger every single Friday for the next thirty years, he is still highly unlikely to *ever* make a difference to a single steer. Given the certainty of pleasure that Jack would receive from his weekly burger (or even, say, a monthly burger), it is difficult to see how the expected value proposal can justify the claim that Jack should refrain. But suppose that In-N-Out were to sell chicken sandwiches. One chicken, on average, only contains enough meat to feed 2 or 3 people for a single meal, and so we might estimate Jack’s probability of making a difference in any given instance as . If Jack were to refrain in *this* case, it would result in an animal’s life being saved approximately *every other week*. So, if act consequentialists are serious about expected value, they must strongly endorse shifting consumption from a company like Chik-Fil-A to a company like In-N-Out. By the lights of act consequentialism, this is of overriding moral significance.

It might appear that something has gone wrong with the execution of the model here. And indeed, given the *categorical* way act consequentialists are sometimes inclined to discuss this topic, it would be strange for them to assign overriding moral significance to physical size differences*.* But this is exactly what the expected value proposal holds. The proposal’s defenders may argue that such results are to be expected of an idealized model, and so do not impugn their use of the proposal to validate their claims. But when we relax the idealizations, the implications of the model become even more idiosyncratic.

Suppose, for instance, that technological improvements in growth hormone therapy raise the average yield of usable beef per steer from 570 to 600 lbs. The average steer now yields 4,800*w* number of burgers, rather than 4,560*w* burgers, so In-N-Out needs to slaughter ⌈⌉ number of steers. One person’s abstention, then, makes a difference only if ⌈⌉ > ⌈⌉, the probability of which is . So all else equal, since the probability that one’s abstention would make a difference has *fallen,* a development of that sort would actually *soften* the condemnation given by the expected value proposal.

What this model illustrates is a basic point, one that does not really require all of these mathematical resources. The point is that there is very little to say about what maximizes expected value that validly generalizes to the level of abstraction of ordinary moral discourse. It should not be surprising that, by the lights of expected value, fluky contingent factors could wind up being of overriding moral significance. This is not an artifact of the model that a superior model would explain away. On the contrary, this is something the model gets right. What act consequentialism recommends is ultimately contingent in nature, and a more realistic model is likely to bring this capriciousness into even sharper relief. Methodologically, the bottom line is that we are unable to assess individual acts in such a way as to allow blame to be apportioned in terms of one’s contribution to a collective harm. We do not understand these harms, and so, we do not understand who stands to blame for them.

**5. Conclusion**

Perhaps what all of this shows is that the legitimate target of act consequentialists should be the production firms themselves. Certainly, anyone with an interest in reducing suffering should be focused on reforming industrial practices of firms that are *not* causally impotent, and on reducing the influence of agricultural lobbying, which helps preserve the collective nature of the relevant harms. And we may have some of these obligations as a result of our membership in certain groups. Through this reasoning, perhaps we could even motivate an argument for *joining* such groups. In any case, one’s group-based advocacy does not necessarily relate to one’s individual consumption habits, and so, endorsing reformist advocacy practices does not truly rehabilitate the threshold argument.

When it comes to the real-world question of whether threshold considerations compel *individuals* to refrain from purchasing intensively farmed meat, the threshold argument for refraining amounts to the claim that the expected value of *one’s* refraining always (or almost always) outweighs the expected value of *one’s* buying meat. As we have seen, that claim cannot be substantiated. There may very well be some circumstances in which purchasing meat or abstaining makes a difference, but such circumstances are not common enough to issue a general moral prescription that everyone should abstain from eating meat. Expected value considerations hold that, in many cases, the right thing to do is to be an opportunistic carnivore. If Jack’s purchase will not affect the number of cows that are bred and slaughtered, and if he will enjoy the burger more than the vegan alternative, then act consequentialism permits (perhaps even obliges) him to purchase the burger. So, if we want more categorical recommendations than this, we must move beyond act consequentialism to find them.

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1. See Parfit 2011, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although consequentialists have long believed that AC is a criterion of moral rightness and not a decision procedure (see e.g., Bales 1971), the problem, as we see it, is that in cases of collective action act consequentialism makes it impossible to generate decision procedure that is consistent with its ultimate aim. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Killoren and Williams argue that “the group agent is guilty of violating a moral obligation” but “none of the individual agents violate any of their moral obligations” (295). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Feldman and Chartier criticize the claim that failing to maximize expected value automatically makes one’s act subjectively wrong. See Chartier 2006 and Feldman 2006. We assume for the sake of argument that there is a close tie between subjective wrongness, blameworthiness, and expected value. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Harris and Galvin make the same point about the excessive risk aversion required by Norcross’s threshold argument (Harris and Galvin 2012, 378). At the end of this section and in the section that follows, we explain how our objection differs slightly from theirs. Our aim is to show that threshold reasoning cannot yield categorical prescriptions in either direction. Although the threshold argument fails to justify moral vegetarianism in all cases, the causal impotence argument similarly fails to justify eating meat in all cases. At first, this may seem in line with their conclusion when they say that the act utilitarian “should adopt the it-depends position—eat factory-farmed meat when and only when the morally relevant consequences of doing so are better than all (for the maximizers) or at least enough (for the satisficers) of one’s alternatives” (2012, 379). In spite of this tentative conclusion, however, they go on to claim that it is almost always permissible to eat factory-farmed meat. They suggest that we are usually presented with cases where the risks associated with eating meat “are often so close to zero as to render them irrelevant (or at least of infinitesimal significance) on act-utilitarian grounds” (*ibid*). In the model we provide in section 4, we aim to show that the expected utility calculations do not always direct us to the same decision. The most that can be said is that “it depends.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Much of the literature on this problem revolves around discussion of such hypothetical scenarios, and many of them stem from Parfit’s influential treatment of the topic in *Reasons and Persons*, ch. 3; cf. Kagan 2011 and Nefsky 2016. At first glance, it might look like the threshold argument is most similar to Parfit’s discussion of imperceptible harms and benefits (the “harmless torturers” and “drops of water cases”), but there is an important difference. As Julia Nefsky points out, cases like the one we are discussing involve a rigid threshold that must be triggered (Nefsky 2016, 371). In Parfit’s “harmless torturer” and “drops of water” cases, the actions always “make a difference on the underlying dimension” but there is no rigid threshold (*ibid*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There have been many critics who use the causal impotence objection in order to claim that act consequentialism always (or almost always) fails to justify a particular decision to abstain. See, for example, Shafer-Landau 2012, Chignell 2015, and Harris and Galvin 2012. Chignell suggests that we could improve our chances of making a difference by looking at a pattern of behavior over 50 years rather than evaluating the odds of making a difference with a single purchase. But most of the critics agree that the odds of making a difference with a single purchase are typically low enough to justify opportunistic carnivorism. We believe that such a prescription cannot be made at this level of generality. In the next section, we argue that the details vary from case to case and even from animal to animal. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)