

Why you shouldn't serve meat at your next catered event

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Abstract: Much has been written about the ethics of eating meat. Far less has been said about the ethics of *servicing* meat. In this paper I argue that we often shouldn't serve meat, even if it is morally permissible for individuals to purchase and eat meat. Historically, the ethical conversation surrounding meat has been limited to individual diets, meat producers, and government actors. I argue that if we stop the conversation there, then the urgent moral problems associated with industrial animal agriculture will go unsolved. Instead, we must *also* consider the important but overlooked role that midsize institutions play in addressing major collective problems. I focus mostly on the harms that industrial animal agriculture inflicts on humans, animals, and the environment, but the discussion bears on other global issues like climate change. Institutional choices are an underexplored avenue for driving social change—their power and influence outstrip individual actions, and they can shape behavior in modest ways that promote social goods. Here I highlight the paradigmatic case of catered events and suggest three ways that institutional actors can reduce meat consumption and shape cultural attitudes surrounding meat: large impact decisions, subtly shaping incentives, and consolidating burdens.

Keywords: meat, vegetarianism, veganism, animal ethics, environmental ethics, institutions, animal agriculture, food ethics.

1 Introduction

Much has been written about the ethics of eating meat.¹ Far less has been said about the ethics of *servicing* meat. I believe that these two issues can come apart, and my aim is to convince readers that in many cases we ought not serve meat, even if it is morally permissible for individuals to purchase and eat meat. Most writings on the ethics of meat center on personal dietary choices. I hope to expand the discussion to include our institutional and organizational behavior. Institutional choices are an underexplored avenue for driving social change—their power and influence outstrip individual actions, and they can shape behavior in modest ways that promote social goods. By changing our institutional orientation toward meat, we could reduce our collective emissions, limit our collective support for an industry that depends on cruelty, and likely save ourselves a fair amount of money along the way.² Most importantly, we can do all of this without asking any individual organization members to consciously change their dietary lifestyle.

The core claim of this paper is that people with certain kinds of institutional power should leverage their influence to decrease meat consumption and thereby shift cultural attitudes surrounding meat. Choosing not to serve meat at catered events is

¹ For some influential arguments for ethical vegetarianism see Singer (2009, 2023), Reagan (1983), Diamond (1978), Norcross (2004), and DeGrazia (2009).

² See Springmann et al. (2021) for evidence that vegan and vegetarian diets are cheaper on average in wealthy countries.

the most clear-cut example of these ideas in practice. If I am right, event organizers charged with using institutional money to order food should not purchase meat, *even if they themselves eat meat*. Though the implications of this idea are far-reaching, for the sake of brevity I focus mostly on the paradigmatic case of catering choices.

To motivate the view, I begin in §2 with a puzzle about how to address collective action problems, specifically those involved with industrial animal agriculture. Given that meat production involves serious moral problems, we have strong reasons to work to reform our farming practices. In §2.1, I survey the most obvious reform strategies and find that each is either infeasible or ruled out by widely held philosophical commitments. Those who take these to be the only options risk the unacceptable conclusion that we should give up on social change. Luckily, they are not the only options. In section §3, I propose that institutions have a critical role to play in reforming our food practices and suggest three ways that individuals using their institutional power can promote social change. They can do this by making large-impact decisions, subtly shaping incentives, and diminishing burdens by consolidating them (§§3.1-3.3). Along the way, I address objections (§3.3.1 and §4.1.1) and argue that even if readers do not think they are obligated to address this problem, they should not impede those who do try to make a difference (§4.1.2).

I hope this paper will serve not just as an intellectual exercise but as a call to action. Theoretical knowledge in normative ethics is only useful if it finds its way into practice, and I urge readers to implement the ideas presented here in their own lives and organizations. Most of my audience work in philosophy, politics, and economics departments that hold catered events. Some of those people will find themselves in a position to make catering decisions, while the rest can propose a department policy or promote informal norms regarding catering choices. The immediate practical conclusion to draw from this essay is that you and your organization should stop serving meat. Your department should stop serving meat.

2 A Puzzle about the Badness of Industrial Animal Agriculture

There are two caveats I want to note about my use of the word “meat” before I start. First, the arguments that follow apply to all kinds of animal products, especially eggs and dairy. Even so, I often use the terms “meat” and “animal products” interchangeably, as well as the words “vegetarian” and “vegan.” I chose not to belabor the differences between these views because serving vegan meals is sometimes more logistically difficult than serving vegetarian meals—it is simply easier to get event organizers and meat-eaters on board with a mix of vegetarian and vegan catering, even if the arguments imply something stronger. I hope these ideas will be put into practice, so I want to offer a proposal that is easy to implement. If readers find this unsatisfying, I encourage them to replace instances of the word “meat” with “animal products” and “vegetarian” with “vegan.” Second, my discussion here focuses on the products of industrial animal agriculture, or “factory-farmed” animal products. For the sake of brevity, I cannot argue here against the products of so-called “family farms,” though they are mostly irrelevant to this discussion since animal products in the developed world overwhelmingly come from industrial agriculture. With that out of the way, we can begin.

Factory farming is undeniably bad. Each year, tens of billions of sentient land animals are forced to endure what can only be described as torturous conditions.³ They are subject to extreme confinement that frustrates most of their natural behaviors, they endure routine unanesthetized mutilations that can result in lifelong pain, and they face distressing, often painful slaughter well before their lives would naturally conclude. These are just a few of their plights. If we consider fish, who also experience painful deaths and extreme discomfort when farmed or harvested, the number of animals killed every year for human consumption balloons to 1-3 *trillion*.⁴

Factory farming is also bad for people. To start, there are serious public health risks associated with animal agriculture.⁵ Intense confinement of large numbers of animals results in higher rates of disease transmission, which increases the likelihood of new and more infectious zoonotic diseases and puts us at risk for future pandemics. Farmers frequently overuse preventative antibiotics, which causes bacteria to evolve resistance to the drugs designed to kill them. This makes it more difficult and costly to treat infections in humans as our medicines become less potent. In addition to public health risks, industrial agriculture is bad for the employees, who perform grueling work in dangerous conditions for low pay, and for rural communities, which experience job loss and poverty as the industry concentrates and family farms disappear.⁶

If that weren't enough, animal agriculture is a blight on the environment.⁷ It accounts for a large percentage of global emissions, including most of the methane released into the atmosphere.⁸ It is resource intensive, especially when compared to horticulture, and a significant portion of the world's arable land, grain, and fresh water are consumed by animal farming.⁹ It is also by far the leading cause of deforestation.¹⁰ These practices are entirely unsustainable.

I will refer to these issues collectively as “the problem of factory farming.” I know of no moral philosophers who seriously defend current farming practices, and the problem of factory farming is widely acknowledged, even by those who defend the moral permissibility of meat-eating. It is common for those defending meat to begin their paper or book by explicitly mentioning the problems involved with animal agriculture and emphasizing that they do not endorse the meat industry as it currently exists.¹¹ For these reasons, I take the claim that factory farming is morally bad to be

³ Evidence for this claim is plentiful, but the undercover farm footage compiled in Delforce (2018) is a good place to start. Singer (2009, 2023) also offers extensive discussion, often citing materials produced by the animal industries themselves.

⁴ See Mood & Brooke (2019) and Mood (2010) for estimates.

⁵ See the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (2009) and Anomaly (2015).

⁶ See PCIFAP (2009)

⁷ See Horrigan et al. (2002) for a general survey of the environmental dangers of intensive agriculture, especially meat production.

⁸ See O'Mara (2011).

⁹ See Mekonnen & Hoekstra (2012) and Horrigan et al. (2002).

¹⁰ See Bodo et al. (2021).

¹¹ For a litany of examples see recent volumes like *Why it's OK to Eat Meat*, which has an entire chapter dedicated to the wrongs of factory farming, *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating*, in which several authors offer these caveats, and *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat* which explicitly notes in the introduction that no contributor defends contemporary farming practices.

an uncontroversial one.¹² There is a consensus among those who have studied these ethical questions that our collective farming practices must be radically reformed. The scholarly debates that follow revolve around how *we as individuals* ought to behave in light of what we know about factory farming.

2.1 Three Potential Strategies to Tackle the Issue

A significant portion of the food we eat and the products we consume comes from animals. Globally, over 90% of farmed animals are living in factory farms, and in the United States, the country I am writing from, the number is as high as 99%.^{13 14} As we have seen, the problems associated with animal agriculture are grave and urgent. In what follows, I assume that we collectively ought to do something to address these issues. By “we,” here, I mean at a minimum those of us whose consumption is deeply entangled with these industries—we who subsidize them through our taxes and benefit from their products (though I don’t rule out the possibility that others are also required to help). I also assume that the problem of factory farming can be solved, or at least mitigated; there is some course of action available to us that would lessen the amount of animal suffering and environmental damage caused by industrial animal agriculture.¹⁵

In this section, I aim to show that there is a tension between some commonly held views about the problem of factory farming. First is an implicit way of framing the issue; most of the public conversation around animal agriculture is limited to three candidate solutions that seem most promising: (i) changing our personal consumption habits, (ii) pressuring identifiable perpetrators to reform their practices, and (iii) government intervention. Furthermore, most people, including many philosophers, are not willing to accept (i). I admit that my own view is that the case against (i) is weak; however, given how many arguments there are against vegetarianism, it is worthwhile to see where the ideas lead us if we assume that (i) is not required. So, I grant for the sake of the paper that most individuals are not morally required to change their diets in response to the problems involved with the meat industry. If (i)-(iii) exhaust the possibilities for social change on this issue, and we assume (i) is not required, then we are left with options (ii) and (iii). But it is also common to think that (ii) and (iii) are not currently workable given the reality of the industry and the present state of government. In this section, I offer some reasons for thinking this pessimism is warranted.

Not all of these widely-held views can be correct—either we ought to pursue one or more of these three solutions, or we must reject the framing that limits the conversation to consumers, producers, and governments. Assuming we ought to do

¹² At least, it is uncontroversial among moral philosophers and laypeople who think that animals matter morally or that climate change is worth addressing. Those who work in agribusiness will disagree, but that is to be expected.

¹³ Based on an estimate by The Sentience Institute using data from the United States Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency (Anthis, 2019).

¹⁴ Industrial animal agriculture is a global problem, but some of the sources I engage with are specific to the United States because that is the economic and political context in which I find myself. Farming statistics, laws, and political discourse will inevitably vary from country to country, but the points I make here can easily be adapted to other wealthy, industrialized countries, or wherever industrial animal agriculture thrives.

¹⁵ I remain neutral on exactly how much change is required of us, but I suspect an adequate solution will require a significant overhaul of global food production.

something, accepting all of these views would threaten us with the unacceptable conclusion that we are required to solve the problem, but that each candidate solution is ruled out.¹⁶ My suggestion will be to reject the framing.

2.1.1 Changes in Individual Consumption

The first and most obvious potential response to the problem of factory farming is that we could all stop purchasing and consuming animal products, or at least work to reduce our meat consumption. If demand for meat were to plummet, the industry would shrink as producers went out of business and the costs to the environment, humans, and nonhuman animals would lessen. However, many have argued that a moral requirement to abstain from meat does not follow from the badness of factory farming.

Usually, philosophers emphasize that it is difficult to show that *individuals* have a *specific moral obligation* to abstain from purchasing meat. Some argue that animals do not have moral status, so we do not have any obligations toward them. This is typically part of a Kantian framework that identifies human reason as the sole source of value.¹⁷ If animals are mere things, then we may not have any duty to refrain from farming them, killing them, or eating their flesh (though industrial animal agriculture may still be ruled out for its human and environmental costs).

Others are persuaded by what is sometimes called the *causal inefficacy objection*, which claims that individual abstention from animal products is inefficacious—the connection between the individual shopper and the farms producing animals for slaughter is too tenuous, and my choice not to buy a chicken from the grocery store probably won't affect the amount of meat that the grocery store orders, let alone how much is sent to the distributor from the slaughterhouse.¹⁸ I discuss this objection in §3.3.1.

Another class of objections appeals to what we might call a “no ethical consumption under capitalism” principle: We live in a complicated globalized world, and even the simplest commodities have complex supply chains. Since almost every industry can trace part of its production process to problematic practices like animal abuse, child labor, or slavery, an obligation to abstain from meat because it involves supporting an immoral industry would generalize too broadly and implicate nearly all economic activity.¹⁹

There are compelling responses to each of these objections to ethical vegetarianism, but I will not discuss them here.²⁰ My main goal is not to argue that individuals are morally obligated to abstain from meat or factory-farmed animal products, and my thesis is consistent with the view that we don't have such an

¹⁶ Note that one can accept my conclusions while also arguing that at least one of the three candidate solutions I've identified is required. I do not want to imply that looking for institutional solutions commits us to abandoning the other strategies.

¹⁷ Hsiao (2015) defends a particularly strong version of this view.

¹⁸ Budolfson (2015, 2019) and Shahar (2021) offer the most recent iteration of this objection, though plenty of others argue similarly. For responses to this objection, see Barrett & Raskoff (2023) and Driver (2015).

¹⁹ See Mills (2019) and Warfield (2015).

²⁰ For an account of Kantian ethics that includes obligations to nonhuman animals, see Korsgaard (2018). For the standard response to the inefficacy objection see Kagan (2011), though it also appears in Norcross (2004). McMullen & Halteman (2019) rebut arguments that purport to show that the case for vegetarianism implicates all economic activity.

obligation. Since many people are convinced by one or more of these objections, for the purposes of this essay I will assume that we are not required to change our own diets. However, since this is the most obvious strategy, ruling it out does put pressure on us to find another solution.

2.1.2 Perpetrators Should Stop

A second potential solution would be to look to meat producers themselves to change their practices. If the corporate giants responsible for these moral atrocities would just *cut it out*, then we would be much better off. Unfortunately, this seems more like wishful thinking than a real attempt at reform. There are powerful forces keeping the meat industry from changing its behavior, the most important being market pressure. The intensive farming practices we see today were born from relentless urge to cut costs and increase efficiency. If competition drove the meat industry to develop its current inhumane methods, it will also be a formidable barrier to revising those methods without outside intervention. Even if a powerful meat mogul suddenly grew a conscience, market pressure would make it nearly impossible for him to implement more humane conditions on a large scale.

Farming animals in any kind of humane manner is expensive and inefficient. Giving animals room to turn around or spread their limbs requires more space and decreased stocking density. Giving them access to the sun or the outdoors similarly requires more land and space. Anesthetics cost money and take time to administer. Ensuring that animals are fully stunned before slaughter requires slowing down the production line.²¹ If a single company were to implement these or other changes, it would increase their production costs and put them at a competitive disadvantage. One only needs to look at how much more “humanely produced” meat costs to understand that large scale improvements to animal welfare would be economic suicide for an individual producer.²² When I checked my local grocery store, “regular” ground beef cost \$4.49/lb., whereas beef labeled “ethically sourced” cost \$8.49/lb. (roughly \$9.90/kg versus \$18.72/kg).

Consumers are sensitive to the price of meat and dairy.²³ As things currently stand, humanely produced meat is a luxury, and most customers aren’t interested in or can’t afford these products. If Tyson decided to overhaul its operations, treating its animals as humanely as possible and inflating its prices as a result, buyers would simply switch to JBS Foods products. Producers are responding to what consumers buy, and consumers currently prefer cheap meat.

2.1.3 Government Intervention

The final obvious strategy to address the problem of factory farming is to consider government intervention. We could pass laws that ban many current farming

²¹ Improper stunning during the breakneck pace of production means that many animals are fully conscious when they are exsanguinated, dismembered, or tossed into boiling water.

²² I use scare quotes because this label can mean very different things to different organizations. Some certifying organizations will label meager improvements on typical factory farming practices “humane,” while others are much more stringent. Some companies try to cash in on the branding that “humane” offers without making substantial changes to animal welfare. For discussion, see Scott-Reid (2021).

²³ See Andreyeva et al. (2010). The price elasticity of demand of these products is high, meaning that as prices increase, there will be a corresponding decrease in demand. For example, if beef prices increase by 1%, it is expected that demand for beef will fall by 0.75%.

techniques and regulate the environmental impact of agriculture. While this is an important and necessary part of the solution, large scale political change is not very likely in the short term. There are a few reasons for this. First, given the arguments in the previous section, these measures would increase the cost of animal products, which would be unpopular given our current cultural attitudes toward meat. As it stands, vegetarianism is a minority practice, and a politically charged one at that. If our representatives were to propose major reforms, outrage-mongers would seize on this culture war kindling to decry how the liberals want to take hamburgers away from hard-working Americans.²⁴ At least in the United States, we are not culturally prepared to take these steps.

Second, any group pushing for reform will face a powerful meat lobby and a political system that has been captured by industry and prioritizes moneyed interests over popular policy demands.²⁵ Agribusiness is one of the largest sources of money in politics in the US.²⁶ Organizations trying to make political progress on this front find themselves facing well-funded and well-organized opposition. Here are just some of the ways that the meat industry exerts its enormous influence: Seeking exemptions to animal cruelty laws and ensuring the laws on the books are rarely enforced, or that punishments for violations are so minor that they are not a deterrent;²⁷ attempting to criminalize cultured meat;²⁸ pushing for laws that prohibit any meat substitute from including the word “meat” on the packaging and in advertising;²⁹ funding sympathetic academic research and controlling how it is communicated;³⁰ and pushing unpopular “ag gag” laws that try to stop whistleblowers from photographing or recording animal abuse in farms.³¹ These are formidable obstacles to bringing about even modest reform, let alone the sweeping changes that would be required to build an ethical and sustainable food system.

Lastly, overcoming these challenges requires a strength of political will that is simply not available right now. Most advocates for government intervention are vegans and vegetarians who make up a relatively small portion of the population. For legislators to consider drastic changes, we would need a significant uptick in animal rights activism and a large grassroots movement. Many people would need to become involved by donating, engaging in consciousness-raising efforts and protests, and loudly promoting animal welfare and sustainability. This kind of political engagement seems especially unlikely if most people remain committed to not changing their diet. Though it is not necessarily contradictory, it would be odd for someone to join a mass

²⁴ These are real talking points in US politics (BBC, 2019).

²⁵ For an account of the many ways that animal industries shape government policy for their own benefit, see Simon (2013).

²⁶ See OpenSecrets’ lobbying profile for the agricultural sector. Agribusiness outspends even the defense industries, spending over \$177 million on lobbying in 2023 (though not all of that is tied to animal products) (OpenSecrets, n.d.).

²⁷ See Simon (2013).

²⁸ See Temple-West & Savage (2024)

²⁹ See, for example, the United States Cattlemen’s Association’s publicity regarding the issue (US Cattlemen’s Association, n.d.) or their official petitions submitted to the US Department of Agriculture (Food Safety and Inspection Service, n.d.). For a summary of what these laws aim to do, see Sullivan (2018).

³⁰ See Tabuchi (2022).

³¹ See Shea (2014).

political movement for animal rights while remaining committed to eating factory-farmed meat.

3 The Solution: Institutional Influence

We began with a problem that needs to be solved and three candidate solutions. It does not look like we can count on industry leaders or governments to solve the problem, at least in the short term. If we remain steadfast in our belief that we are not required to change our diets, the puzzle is in full force. Each potential solution is either infeasible or not morally required. This gives the contradictory result that we ought to solve the problem, but we are not required to solve the problem. To avoid this unsavory outcome, it may seem like we have to give up on our initial assumption that we ought to do something about the problem of factory farming or concede that social change is impossible.

Luckily, these conclusions are avoidable because the three options outlined above are not the only ways to promote social progress. I want to suggest that our mid-level institutions are the locus of change that we are looking for—especially if we reject individual lifestyle changes and large-scale systemic overhaul is impracticable. Institutions come in all shapes and sizes, and they offer us a flexible, intermediate plane for intervention between individual consumption and governments. They are uniquely poised to effect change in ways that individuals alone cannot, and they can do so without the cumbersome restrictions that curtail governments. In the following sections (§§3.1-3.3), I highlight three ways that we can leverage our institutional positions to effect change. Though there are interesting philosophical questions about collective agency and institutional actors, I set these issues aside and instead focus on individual agents and how they act *through* their institutions.

3.1 Shaping Incentives

The first way that someone can use their institutional influence to affect social change is by shaping the incentive structures in their organization. Through small changes in policy, we can subtly steer the behavior of other members and participants in innocuous ways that aren't possible through interpersonal interactions. This idea is not new. Institutions already do this when it comes to addressing other kinds of collective action problems, like climate change. Consider, for example, how a company might make a surprisingly large impact on individual consumption by changing their paper towel dispensers out for electric hand dryers or for dispensers that let paper out more slowly. Institutional decisions can shape food choices, too. In my university's dining hall, there is a booth for a local Greek restaurant where students can use their meal plan to buy food. The default meal plan option is a falafel pita, which is vegetarian (vegan if you opt for tahini sauce over tzatziki). Students can order meat, but it is slightly less convenient because it comes with a minor charge on top of the meal swipe. I am not sure why the restaurant has this policy—it could be for animal welfare or environmental reasons, or simply to save the restaurant money. Whatever the reason, the result is that people order less meat.

Consider now the choice not to include meat options at catered events. By regularly showing how easy and tasty eating meatless meals can be, organizations that normalize plant-based eating can influence members to reduce their own meat

consumption both at work and at home. They can do this in a few ways. First, it is a lot easier to abstain when everyone else around you is abstaining, too. I know this from experience since there are several vegans in my department. Second, it is significantly easier to choose a meatless meal when there are several delicious veggie options available. When there is only one unappetizing vegan choice among a plethora of meats, omnivores will probably go for the latter. Third, serving a variety of plant-based dishes will introduce people to new food options that they did not know about. Many typical American and European meals center around meat, with vegetables, fruits, and grains as optional garnishes. For this reason, many people cannot even imagine what they might eat other than meat. Part of the long-term project of reducing meat consumption involves showing people how many other options are available, and meat-free catered events are a great way to do this. Lastly, some of the major reasons that vegetarians end up violating or abandoning their diet is due to lack of social support and the difficulty involved with maintaining their diet in a world that is materially unaccommodating.³² By helping to create spaces where it is easy to go meatless, both because the food is provided and because there is no social pressure to eat meat, institutions promote ethical consumption habits that may influence other areas of their members' lives.

3.2 Minimized Burden

I do not deny that committing to a vegan lifestyle requires some sacrifices. It might mean forgoing familiar meals, modifying cultural practices, learning to cook new cuisines, and paying more attention to food labels. Luckily, an institution committing to meatless catering does not impose any of these burdens on its members. Eating an occasional plant-based meal planned, purchased, and prepared by someone else imposes none of the costs involved with a personal commitment to veganism. Attendees are not asked to read the ingredients to see if they contain meat. They are not asked to learn a new recipe. They are not asked to restrict their choices to only those menu items with a little green “v” next to them. In fact, they are not asked to reflect on their food choices *at all*. Those attending a meat-free catered event do exactly what they do at any other catered event: each person picks from among the different options the food that looks best to them, whether that be the tastiest, healthiest, most nutrient-dense, etc. Again, they do not need to plan, buy, or cook the meal. This is about as minimally burdensome as it gets. The case is even stronger when we consider that most people don't attend catered events very often. Even on university campuses, where events with free food abound, most people attend these functions at most a few times a month. Asking people to unthinkingly eat vegetables instead of meat a few times a month is not a big ask.

To the extent that forgoing meat is burdensome, what I am proposing removes that burden by replacing a difficult decision for participants with an easy decision for organizers. While it might be psychologically difficult for 100 people to choose to order a meat-free meal on three different occasions, it is easy for a planner to order 300 meatless meals with one phone call. For those who find the idea of reducing or eliminating meat from their own diet intimidating, this removal of the burden should come as a relief.

³² See Hodson & Earle (2018), Rosenfeld & Tomiyama (2019), and Herzog (2011).

3.3 Large-Impact Decisions

This final point can be illustrated through an anecdote. I first started thinking about the ideas in this paper while my partner and I were planning our wedding. At the time, though I was persuaded by arguments for ethical veganism, I still hadn't taken the plunge to completely cut meat from my diet, and my partner had been a vegetarian for over a decade. We had a large wedding with about 140 guests, and all but a small handful of them ate meat. When the time came to choose a caterer and pick the food for the event, it occurred to me that we were about to make the largest consumer choice about food that either of us had ever made. With a single decision, we could avoid purchasing more meat than it would have taken me *months* to eat given my own consumption habits. So, we decided to only serve meat-free dishes. We didn't tell anyone what we were doing—we just served the food normally. The meal was buffet-style and there were enough options that everyone could choose what they liked. As far as we could tell, many people didn't even notice the lack of meat. Nobody complained, and we got endless compliments on the food from friends and family who have eaten meat their entire lives and have likely never thought twice about it. We served delicious food that was well-received by a meat-eating crowd, and in the process, about 140 meals that would have otherwise had meat were meatless.

Usually, my only way to impact demand for meat is to personally abstain from purchasing it for my own consumption. I don't often get to make catering decisions that will affect dozens of people (hopefully, I will only get married once!). Institutions, though, frequently make large scale purchases that will affect the consumption of hundreds or thousands of people. Contrast this with typical consumers, who can only affect demand in proportion to our spending power. For all but the very wealthy, our impact will be minimal. However, white-collar workers of modest means are often given the authority to spend money *on behalf of organizations* through their bureaucratic offices. Even low-level administrative workers have limited control over large pools of resources. This opens up the possibility for large-impact decisions. The larger the institution, the larger its purchasing power and therefore the higher potential to impact aggregate demand. Catering decisions are a paradigmatic case, since catering choices are of a much larger scale than any individual meal purchase.

There is a nice degree of flexibility here. In smaller and mid-sized organizations, these kinds of bulk purchasing decisions are often made by an individual or a small group of people. When there is less red tape and fewer administrative hoops, a choice like this can be as easy as sending an email or making a phone call. The administrative burden will, admittedly, tend to increase with the size of the organizations. It would take a fair amount of coordination among bureaucrats if a multinational company with tens of thousands of employees wanted to institute a policy of plant-based catering. Even so, this seems like an attainable goal for some large organizations, especially those that have pledged to reduce their emissions. Since the potential impact of such a large organization would be orders of magnitude greater than that of smaller organizations, energy spent coordinating on such a policy would be well worth it; the total effort would still be far less than if we instead encouraged each employee to make the decision to eat meat-free meals.

Like we saw earlier, some people with institutional power already recognize this possibility and use their position to help address other collective action problems. Again, climate change is the most salient example. Those who make purchasing

decisions for their organizations often intentionally choose eco-friendly paper products, opt for compostable or reusable serving dishes in dining halls, install low-flow toilets, etc. If the secretary is charged with restocking the paper products in the building, he can choose more sustainable brands. Likewise, if the department chair oversees the annual department party, she can choose to order meatless catering.

3.3.1 Causal Inefficacy?

Discussing large-impact decisions opens the door for a familiar problem: The inefficacy objection. This is one of the most prominent charges levied against ethical vegetarianism, and a precise version of the challenge was put forward by Budolfson (2019), who shows that it is possible for an industry to be structured such that individual purchases are guaranteed not to make a difference to production. This causes problems for moral theories that evaluate acts based on actual or expected consequences. If this objection is right, then these theories would allow, or sometimes require, that we not take actions that *seem* noble but would not bring about any positive consequences—in this case, abstaining from meat. Budolfson and others speculate that the meat industry has such a structure. In other words, your decision not to purchase a chicken at the grocery store is all but guaranteed to have no effect on how many chickens are slaughtered. This is because there is slack in the supply chain at every level between grocers, distributors, and producers. Some amount of meat is wasted at each step, and this will create buffers that prevent changes in consumer behavior from affecting how much meat each of these parties produces or stocks. If critics are right, and individual consumer choices make no difference to the number of animals reared and slaughtered, then there is a good case to be made that institutional catering decisions are similarly impotent. For the inefficacy objection to hold, the threshold for how many meal purchases would be required to trigger a major change in production would need to be enormous, in the thousands or millions. Catered events would be no more helpful here than individual meal purchases. Even if they are dozens or hundreds of times more likely to be effective, these kinds of choices still won't make a difference if the number of meals that would need to be purchased to influence the meat industry is sufficiently large.

It is important to note that whether our purchasing decisions have a chance of impacting the meat industry is a difficult empirical question, and not everyone is convinced that our chance of making a difference is zero or near-zero. For example, Hedden (2020) challenges Budolfson's claim that we can know we are not near a threshold. The existence of slack and buffers in the system let us know that there *are* thresholds that will trigger changes in production, but they do not give us any knowledge of where those thresholds are. McMullen & Halteman (2019) challenge the assumptions that the size and complexity of the market will make producers insensitive to small changes in consumer behavior, and they offer some empirical considerations suggesting that a competitive industry like the meat industry will be quite sensitive to consumer spending. Like Hedden, they note that the existence of slack and buffers in the supply chain does not tell us anything about the size or location of thresholds that will affect production. Furthermore, market pressure will give each actor powerful reasons for minimizing waste to prevent losses. A final reason to be skeptical is found in the work of economists Norwood and Lusk (2011), who appeal to supply and demand elasticities to estimate the average impact of our purchases on the meat industry over the long term. They calculate, for example, that by forgoing a pound of

chicken, total chicken production is expected to decline by 0.76 lbs.³³ This is just an average, so we can't assume it will hold for any given chicken purchase. Nevertheless, this suggests that when the cumulative changes in consumption *do* add up to trigger changes in supply, the resulting effects on production will be significant over the long term.

For these reasons, I believe it is too early to conclude that the expected impact of our consumer choices on the meat industry is zero or near-zero. However, even if it turns out that our consumer choices do not directly affect the meat industry, we can still have an indirect impact by contributing to a broader social movement.³⁴ Animal rights activists, environmentalists, and many others are working to end the problem of factory farming, and we can work through our organizations to contribute to this collective effort, even if our efforts do not directly result in a reduction in animal suffering or environmental degradation. For example, by ordering plant-based catering, organizations signal to local restaurants and caterers that there is a demand for those kinds of meals. They also make animal-free food more salient to those attending their events. Making these options more prominent and accessible is an important part of addressing the problem of factory farming, even if the contribution is only indirect. By acclimating the public to plant-based foods, showing people how many options there are, and signaling demand for meat alternatives, we help lay the groundwork for future consumer purchases to influence the meat industry. Organizations can do all of this on a larger scale than individuals, and their contribution will increase in proportion to their size.

4 How Strong is the Case?

What do I seek to establish by pointing out the ways that individuals can use their institutional power to promote social change? What is required of us? In §4.1 I begin by defending the modest claim that it is *permissible* for individuals to act in the ways I describe in §3. However, I anticipate that even this weak claim will face pushback. I cannot answer every objection here, but there is a common theme that many objections share, and I try to disarm it in §4.1.1. Then, in §4.1.2 I further argue that, if I am right about the weak claim, one ought not resist or interfere with those who act permissibly. Finally, in §4.2, I suggest that we in fact have good reasons to accept a stronger claim, that we *ought* to use our institutional influence in the ways I've been describing.

4.1 The Weak Claim

I begin with a modest claim: It is *permissible* for individuals to wield their institutional power to try to address urgent collective action problems of a moral nature through

³³ See Norwood and Lusk (2011), especially chapter 8. These are the estimates they offer for how consumption/abstention from 1 lb. of each good affects expected production. Eggs: 0.91 lbs. Pork: 0.74 lbs. Veal: 0.69 lbs. Beef: 0.68 lbs. Milk: 0.56 lbs. Note that the authors are not themselves offering these data to respond to the inefficacy objection.

³⁴ Barrett & Raskoff (2023) contend that vegans collectively have a meaningful impact, even if the individual choice to go vegan does not. They aim to ground an individual obligation to go vegan in a more general duty not to free ride on an effective collective movement. We might similarly argue that our organizations ought to contribute to effective collective action.

large impact decisions, incentive-shaping, and burden-reduction (within the scope of their normal institutional responsibilities). I am not suggesting that anyone act in a way that goes against their job description, like taking the catering budget and donating it to charity instead of ordering food. Most of our professional tasks allow for a certain amount of leeway in how we complete them. When planning a catered event, organizers need to balance cost, which food options are available, any known allergies, and accommodating a variety of tastes. What I am suggesting is that it is also appropriate to consider promoting social progress alongside those other considerations. It is permissible to consider environmental impact when stocking the building with paper products. It is likewise permissible to consider environmental impact, or animal welfare, when ordering food.

4.1.1 Common Objections

I imagine that some readers are tempted to object that it should not be up to organizers to make food choices on behalf of others in the way that I am proposing. Food is a sensitive topic, and people feel very strongly about something so personally and culturally significant. It might seem like I am suggesting that organizers take away a certain freedom of choice from their attendees. However, *any* catered event will necessarily offer only a miniscule subset of millions of potential food items. There is no way to serve food that doesn't involve curating a limited set of options. The fact that organizers can only offer a limited selection doesn't yet imply any restriction of freedom or that they are controlling the choices of others.³⁵ Catering from a Mexican restaurant means that there will be no traditional Indian dishes available, but this does not mean that anybody's freedom has been curtailed in a problematic way. Likewise, offering falafel pitas rather than lamb strikes me as equally innocuous.

A successful objection would need to be more specific, and there are many potential ways of specifying what seems problematic about not serving meat in particular. Some people think it would be illiberal for their organization to act in a way that implies a verdict on a controversial matter, since people disagree about the permissibility of eating meat. Others think a decision like this would need to be made democratically. There are various ways to object, and I cannot answer all of them here. However, many objections share a common theme: Somehow or other, what I am suggesting would be an *inappropriate way to use institutional power*. There is something wrong with using one's institutional position to influence the behavior of others. This is the general worry that I will attempt to disarm.

I cannot give an overarching account of what constitutes legitimate uses of institutional power. However, I do not need to for my proposal to be reasonable. That onus falls on the objector who claims that it is wrong to use one's institutional power to influence others. Why? I am working within the framework of our institutions as they currently exist. I am not trying to defend our current cultural conception of institutional power; I am arguing about how we should behave *given* the current nature of our institutions. Once an organization reaches a certain level of complexity, responsibilities inevitably need to be delegated. Certain people are given the authority to act on behalf of others. Maybe it would be preferable if we did this democratically,

³⁵ Sometimes we cannot help but restrict the options of others by providing them with a limited set of choices. This point is stressed by Thaler & Sunstein (2009), the behavioral economists who popularized the idea of choice architecture.

or in a way that weighs each member's preferences, but for better or for worse, that is not how we do things right now. My proposal takes for granted that unelected bureaucrats sometimes make decisions in their institutional roles in ways that affect the lives of others. It would be dialectically inappropriate to object to a *specific proposal* like not serving meat by challenging the nature of institutional power generally. This would be akin to rejecting a specific piece of legislation proposed by Congress on the grounds that the electoral college is anti-democratic. It may be that the electoral college is anti-democratic, but the reasonable objector should focus their attention there, rather than on the specific law they don't like. It is not a good objection to air traffic regulations specifically to say that the government doing the regulating is illegitimate.

Objectors will instead need to make the case that meat restrictions are uniquely problematic. This is quite hard, since meat production is a perfect example of several kinds of problems, each of which we all accept as ideal candidates for institutional intervention. It is (1) a major contributor to climate change, (2) a massive threat to public health, and (3) produced in a morally abhorrent way. The first case is the strongest. The World Health Organization predicts that climate change will cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year globally between 2030 and 2050 when looking at just six causes of death.³⁶ Understandably, we celebrate workers who make sustainable choices on behalf of their organizations that help reduce emissions, curtail waste, promote composting, etc. We saw this earlier with greener paper products, swapping paper towel dispensers, and high-efficiency appliances. Since animal agriculture is one of the biggest contributors to climate change and environmental degradation, consuming less meat as an organization is one of the best ways to become more sustainable.

The second kind of problem that we are comfortable letting institutions fight on our behalf are problems related to public health. Consider the case of university tobacco bans. According to the Center for Disease Control, smoking causes approximately 480,000 deaths per year in the US, including 41,000 from the effects of secondhand smoke. Thousands of universities have responded to the health and environmental effects of smoking by banning the use of tobacco products on campus.³⁷ Most people take no issue when institutions promote public health in this way. Compare this to animal agriculture. As we saw earlier, factory farming increases the likelihood that infectious diseases like swine and bird flus develop and spread to humans. It leads to foodborne illnesses that cost the government hundreds of millions of dollars per year in healthcare spending, and it also contributes to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.³⁸ Furthermore, though there is no consensus on what constitutes the "healthiest" way to eat, there is growing evidence that vegetarian and reduced-meat diets are associated with longevity and decreased risk for chronic diseases.³⁹ To the extent that it is reasonable for institutions to promote disease prevention and healthy eating, it makes sense that they would consider not serving meat. Note that what I am proposing is less intrusive than tobacco bans—in addition to not serving or selling tobacco products on campus, universities and other

³⁶ They estimate increased mortality rates from heat, coastal flooding, diarrheal disease, malaria, dengue, and undernutrition (World Health Organization, 2014). Those are, of course, just the human deaths caused by six things. Animal agriculture causes hundreds of billions of nonhuman deaths per year.

³⁷ Wang et al. (2017).

³⁸ PCIFAP (2009).

³⁹ Leitzmann (2014), McEvoy et al. (2012).

organizations directly regulate the behavior of their members by prohibiting tobacco use. I don't propose any such regulation. I don't think it is a good idea to ban meat—I'm suggesting we don't actively distribute it.

The last kind of problem appropriate for institutional intervention is consumer goods produced in morally abhorrent ways. This is admittedly the most speculative point, but it is still worth mentioning. Supply chains are complicated, and it is hard to know how our consumer goods are produced. However, it seems reasonable that if it is obvious that a producer knowingly uses slave labor to make their products, administrators are justified in not buying those products. Even if the members largely do not care whether the organization is knowingly purchasing goods made by enslaved people, I maintain, and hope that others agree, that it is permissible for those making purchasing decisions to opt for non-slavery substitutes, even if this constitutes a minor inconvenience for others. For example, I think it would be appropriate for a secretary to only stock the printer with black and white ink if it were to come to light that all colored ink is produced by enslaved people. This is because slavery is morally abhorrent, and she does not want the organization to be complicit in that wrongdoing by benefiting from it. The sheer scale and intensity of animal suffering in factory farms is likewise morally abhorrent.⁴⁰ If we share the intuition that it is permissible for the secretary to use her institutional influence to avoid a product produced in a morally abhorrent way in the case of slavery, I think it is also permissible for her to choose not to purchase and serve meat produced in a morally abhorrent way.⁴¹

Since meat production is an instance of three archetypal problems that are the appropriate objects of institutional intervention, I conclude that it is permissible to use institutional power to decrease meat consumption.

4.1.2 What Follows from the Weak Claim?

Those trying to implement these changes will probably face resistance, even in ostensibly progressive, environmentally conscious places. The weak claim says that it is at least permissible for individuals to choose not to buy meat using the institutional money they are charged with. Since it is permissible, this suggests that we should not interfere when others try to make these changes. I haven't claimed that *everybody* needs to work directly to reform animal agriculture. There are many moral battles to fight, and we should spend our energies where we will be most useful. However, this does not give us license to try to *stop* others from promoting social progress.

We must change our collective food practices if we are to live sustainably.⁴² There is no sustainable future where we consume as many farmed animals as our society currently does. Meat consumption will have to decline across the board. The price will inevitably go up, and the amount produced will go down. I and others are working to

⁴⁰ I don't claim that causing massive amounts of animal suffering and enslaving people are morally equivalent. I only claim that they are both morally abhorrent.

⁴¹ I don't claim that this reasoning holds for *all* consumer goods produced in morally dubious ways—I limit my argument to only the most extreme cases. I take it to be clear that when the production is highly unethical, as is the case with forced labor and excessive animal torture, it is more important to resist complicity in that wrongdoing than to avoid inconveniencing others by excluding that item from their choice set. For less extreme cases, the permissibility of restricting that choice set may depend on how unethical the production process is and how inconvenient it would be to avoid the item.

⁴² See a meta-analysis by Aleksandrowicz et al. (2016) for evidence that high-income countries switching to environmentally friendly diets would drastically reduce our emissions, land use, and water use. Importantly, environmentally friendly diets involve avoiding or limiting meat and other animal products.

realize these changes. Each person may not be morally required to help, but at a minimum they should not perpetuate current practices by resisting these necessary changes. We may not personally be required to stop driving or to install a solar panel on our houses; however, we should not oppose necessary political action that would increase sustainability, like ending fossil fuel subsidies or passing regulations that limit pollution. Just as it would have been wrong to oppose the Clean Air Act, it is also wrong to oppose reasonable efforts to reform industrial animal agriculture.

For social change to be possible, *something* must change. Our collective behavior must change, and this shared adjustment will inevitably take expression in our individual behavior. A sustainable future will require lifestyle modifications from each of us—though it is still open whether those changes come by personal choice, government mandate, or institutional influence. Not changing is not an option.

4.2 A Stronger Claim

I began this paper with a puzzle about how to solve serious collective action problems that we all grant are worth addressing. I argued that it seems unlikely that we will ever improve our food system if we accept that we do not have an obligation to change our lifestyles and if systemic reform is not forthcoming. At least, progress seems impossible if these are the only options. I have striven to show that they are *not* the only options, and that progress *is* possible. Between individual consumption and systemic overhaul, we can now see that the institutional route is also available to us. However, this expanded list of options to achieve progress seems more likely to be exhaustive than the initial list. I don't deny that there may be other ways to fight for social progress, but I cannot think of them.

If we ought to do something about the problem of factory farming, we need to pick *a* strategy. In §2.1, I tried to show that many people hold a set of commitments that rule out most plausible strategies. I argued that it is unlikely that producers will change their behavior, and that there are many hurdles keeping governments from adequately intervening. It seems especially unlikely for there to be progress on these fronts if we aren't committed to changing our diets or increasing our political activism. For some of those who deny that we have an individual obligation to change our consumption behavior, the institutional route I suggest might be the only option left.

In §3 I gave several reasons for thinking it is a good idea not to serve meat, and in §4.1 I defended the permissibility of not doing so. But those who have ruled out the other strategies ought to accept a stronger claim. The stronger claim is that, other things being equal, we have an *obligation* not to serve meat through our institutions. This would be grounded in our collective obligation to solve the problem of factory farming and the fact that the institutional strategy is either one of the best or the only way to address the problem. What might such an obligation look like? Well, it would probably need to be strong, though perhaps defeasible—otherwise we would once again risk the possibility of the problem of factory farming going unsolved. The exact nature of how the obligation would need to be discharged would depend on the structure of the organization in question, but it is reasonable to think that the responsibility for discharging it would often be shared by the organization's leadership and those who oversee ordering food. I think it would follow that those who order plant-based food for their organization would be praiseworthy, and those that refuse to do so would be morally criticizable.

Though I believe it is likely that we *do* have an obligation not to serve meat, I don't claim to have conclusively established that in this section. What I've shown is that one ought to be committed to the claim that we have such an obligation if one rejects all of the other candidate solutions to the problem of factory farming, and it seems to me that many people do reject those other options. For those who don't share those commitments, I only take myself to have established the weaker claim that we often have good moral reasons not to serve meat and it is permissible not to do so. There are, of course, other ways to try to establish that we have an obligation not to serve meat. Ethical vegans will argue that it is wrong to purchase meat to serve at a catered event because it is generally wrong to purchase meat.⁴³ One could also argue that we have an obligation to pursue *all* the strategies discussed in this paper. The reason I've focused on this particular argument is because I think it is one that many omnivores ought to accept, too. Recall that even strident defenders of meat acknowledge how morally bad the problem of factory farming is. If they are genuine in their claims that these are real problems that demand solving, there is serious pressure to accept at least one of the candidate solutions on offer or develop an alternative strategy for change. I repeat: Not changing anything is not an option.

5 Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that we often shouldn't serve meat, even if it is permissible for individuals to eat meat. I did not argue for personal vegetarianism, and I reasoned from the assumption that we don't have any obligation to change our diets. Nonetheless, I do think the arguments in this paper put some pressure on those assumptions. Our institutional actions can certainly help with the problem of factory farming, but to build a truly ethical and sustainable food system we will probably need to make strides on multiple fronts, including our own diets and political activism. Luckily, by building a culture of eating and serving less meat through our organizations, we can make these seemingly onerous changes more approachable and appealing. Catering choices are an excellent first step toward a more ethical, sustainable future.

I focused on catering choices because they are an easy, illustrative example of the kinds of changes we can achieve through our institutions but that we cannot as individual actors: shaping incentives, diluting burdens, and making large-impact decisions. Of course, the strategies I outline do not only apply to catered events, and they do not only apply to the problem of factory farming. Though meat was the topic of the paper, and the problem of factory farming is especially egregious, there are other kinds of problems amenable to these strategies. Throughout the paper, I made frequent allusions to the problem of climate change; I also discussed public health crises and consumer goods produced in unethical ways. For some of these problems, what I suggest is already common sense. For others, like meat, it might not seem as obvious. This gives us even more reason to remain on the lookout for opportunities to do good through our organizations. Though addressing these pressing global issues

⁴³ Alternatively, one could deny that we have an obligation to not serve meat by arguing that we ought to pursue a different candidate instead. Or one could deny that we have any obligation to address the problem of factory farming, though I don't think such a position can be defended.

can be daunting, I hope to have shown that progress is possible and that even the most unassuming among us can make a difference in surprising ways.

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