

C3.2

*Reflection*

MEAT AND EVIL

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C3.2.P1

In a certain frame of mind, there is nothing more innocuous than a cheeseburger with friends,<sup>1</sup> more curative than a bowl of Nana Mildred's chicken soup, more inviting than Uncle Keith's slow-cooked brisket, or more celebratory than a surf-and-turf birthday brunch. In a world where meat is often a token of comfort, health, hospitality, and abundance, one can be forgiven for raising an eyebrow at the conjunction "meat and evil." Why pull meat into the orbit of harm, pestilence, ill-will, and privation?

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From another perspective, the answer is obvious: meat—the flesh of slaughtered animals taken for food—is the remnant of a feeling creature who was recently alive and whose death was premature, violent, and often gratuitous. The dreadful intuition that "meat is murder," as *Smiths* front-man Morrissey infamously puts it, is what unites children who recoil at the thought of eating Wilbur the "Wonder Pig" from *Charlotte's Web* and directors who litter the sets of horror classics like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

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<sup>1</sup> Carol J. Adams pointedly disagrees in Adams, *Burger* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

with meat-hooks, bone-saws, and dismembered animals.<sup>2</sup> In this register, meat induces that sinking feeling that animals can be harmed, that their destruction is lamentable, and that killing them is transgressive, depriving them of the good of life.

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The truth is that meat has a checkered history in the West. From its origin story in Abrahamic religion to its industrial production in today's world, meat is well-marbled with evil and its minions: sin, violence, injustice, destruction, suffering, and death. Beyond keeping company with these obtrusive forms of evil, meat's success at remaining, nevertheless, in our collective good graces illuminates some of evil's subtler shades too. We might learn something of insidiousness, self-deception, rationalization, and bad faith by exploring why the ever-strengthening consensus that habitual meat-eating is unhealthy, morally dubious, and environmentally damaging is often still no match for a philosopher's savor of cheeseburgers.<sup>3</sup>

C3.2.P4

I won't argue here for the claim that "Meat is evil," or even for the claim that "Meat-eating is generally morally wrong." I recommend the literature on these and related claims but must ignore it here.<sup>4</sup> My aim is to consider meat's fitness for a place in the western history of evil<sup>5</sup> by reflecting on its outsized roles at the bookends of this narrative: meat's primeval history in Genesis, and

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<sup>2</sup> On the horror genre's meat lust, see Erik Piepenburg, "Meat as Murder: A Guide to Horror's Favorite Dish," *New York Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/movies/meat-as-murder-a-guide-to-horrors-favorite-dish.html>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Eric Schwitzgebel, "Cheeseburger Ethics: Are Professional Ethicists Good People? According to Our Research, Not Especially. So What Is the Point of Learning Ethics?," *Aeon*, 14 July 2015, <https://aeon.co/essays/how-often-do-ethics-professors-call-their-mothers>.

C3.2.N4

<sup>4</sup> See Anne Barnhill and Tyler Doggett, "Food Ethics I: Food Production and Food Justice," and "Food Ethics II: Consumption and Obesity," *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 3 (2018); and Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, and Matthew C. Halteman, *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments About the Ethics of Eating* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Ben Bramble and Bob Fischer, *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat* (New York: Oxford, 2015).

C3.2.N5

<sup>5</sup> On the history of meat and its detractors up to the nineteenth century, see Howard Williams, *The Ethics of Diet: A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-Eating* [1883], republished with an introduction by Carol J. Adams (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

its contribution today to ethical and environmental problems of arguably apocalyptic proportions.

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## I. IN THE BEGINNING

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When Aronofsky's blockbuster *Noah* hit theaters in 2014, some religious leaders were outraged at the liberties it took with Genesis.<sup>6</sup> Noah and family are portrayed as primeval, vegan environmentalists pitted against a depraved humankind whose dominion over creation has degenerated into domineering lust for conquest, murder, and meat (which serves as a symbol of merciless self-aggrandizement at other creatures' expense in contrast to the plant-eating of Noah's filial band of animal protectors). Human profligacy is so complete that the Creator discerns a need, balanced at the mystical edge of justice and mercy, to obliterate creation and start over, but sets Noah apart for his faithfulness to the Creator's ideal of the flourishing of all creatures, charging him to make safe passage on the fabled ark for his family and a mated pair of every earthly creature.

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Artistic license notwithstanding, Aronofsky's timely appropriation of Genesis succeeds in amplifying deep dissonance between widespread misconceptions of the narrative and what the text actually says about divine intentions for the human-animal relationship and meat-eating. Aronofsky is correct, *contra* the prevailing notion that animals were created to be food for human beings, that Genesis portrays Eden as a vegan paradise. Alluring as the idea may be that God created animals as mere instruments for human use, the text is clear that God values animals as good in themselves (Gen. 1:20–25), deems them worthy of covenantal

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6 On Noah's impact among religious audiences and Aronofsky's response, see Cathleen Falsani, "The 'Terror' of Noah: How Darren Aronofsky Interprets the Bible," *The Atlantic*, March 26, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/the-terror-of-em-noah-em-how-darren-aronofsky-interprets-the-bible/359587/>.

relationship with God (Gen. 9:8), and envisions the “dominion” relationship between humankind and animals (Gen. 1:26–28) as a companion relationship (indeed, even a partnership: Gen. 2:18) with human beings set apart as guardians of creation specially made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26), but in which all creatures of “flesh” (human and animal alike) eat a plant-based diet (Gen. 1:29–30).<sup>7</sup>

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Aronofsky is thus onto something important, too, when he frames meat-eating so vividly as a feature of *fallen* human activity, reminding a world that sees meat-eating as predominantly elevating of humanity that the primeval history actually positions it as degenerate from God’s ideal. Against the backdrop of this divine vision of an all-species kinship—a state of shalom among all God’s creatures—the killing of animals for food must be conceived as a disruption of shalom. God may ultimately allow it as a concession to sin, but the allowance is tinged with the tragedy of paradise lost, as when God says to Noah upon granting permission to eat animals, “The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, and on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered” (Gen. 9:2–3). A disruption of shalom, indeed. But evil?

C3.2.P8

Cornelius Plantinga defines evil as “any spoiling of shalom” and positions sin as “culpable evil,” a subspecies of shalom-spoiling

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<sup>7</sup> Thought out of step with popular views, this narrative is a well-worn path in theology, theological ethics, and philosophical theology. See David Clough, *On Animals*, vol. 1: *Systematic Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); William Greenway, *For the Love of All Creatures: The Story of Grace in Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015); Aaron Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Charles Camosy, *For Love of Animals: Christian Ethics, Consistent Action*, (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2013); Matthew C. Halteman, “Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation,” in *Food, Ethics, and Society: An Introductory Text with Readings*, ed. Anne Barnhill, Mark Budolfson, and Tyler Doggett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 292–300; Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (New York: Crossroad, 1976); Sarah Withrow King, *Animals Are Not Ours (No, Really, They’re Not): An Evangelical Animal Liberation Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016); and Tom Regan, “Christians Are What Christians Eat,” in *Food for Thought: The Debate Over Eating Meat*, ed. Steve F. Sapontzis (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 177–185. Biblical citations are from *The Oxford Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

“for which somebody is to blame, whether as an individual or as a member of a group.”<sup>8</sup> On Plantinga’s view, the badness of sin inheres not in the breaking of arbitrary rules, but in the spoiling of some aspect of creation’s goodness that the rules seek to preserve; “God is for shalom and *therefore* against sin.”<sup>9</sup> In a fallen world, broken communities of sinful individuals inherit and then replicate the sin of their forebears, resulting in cultures where evil permeates our institutions and “whole matrices of evil appear in which various forms of wrongdoing cross-pollinate and breed.” For example, “the culture of war”

C3.2.P9 includes not only killing, its main business, but also such side businesses as espionage, counterespionage, treachery, disinformation, profiteering, prostitution, and drug abuse. “War is hell,” not only because of its violence and destruction, but also because of the physically and morally nauseating atmosphere it generates.<sup>10</sup>

C3.2.S2

## 2. TODAY

C3.2.P10 Given the impact of meat-eating on today’s world, one can’t help but wonder whether (what we might call) the “culture of meat” deserves inclusion among the “matrices of evil” that Plantinga describes.<sup>11</sup> The US Department of Agriculture estimates that Americans will eat a record 222.2 pounds of meat per person in

C3.2.N8 <sup>8</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 51.

C3.2.N9 <sup>9</sup> Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World*, 51.

C3.2.N10 <sup>10</sup> Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World*, 57.

C3.2.N11 <sup>11</sup> In choosing the phrase “culture of meat” here, I intend both to highlight a parallel with Plantinga’s discussion of the aforementioned “culture of war” and to emphasize the systemic and institutional problems associated with meat production and consumption over and against problems one might attempt to attribute to individual producers and/or consumers. As I have argued elsewhere, there are good reasons to avoid blaming farmers for problems to which almost everyone contributes. See Matthew C. Halteman, “Varieties of Harm to Animals in Industrial Farming,” *Journal of Animal Ethics* 1, no. 2 (2011): 122–131.

2018,<sup>12</sup> more than double the global average and more than twenty-five times the amount eaten by the average Bangladeshi.<sup>13</sup> To meet this demand, domestic production will eclipse 100 billion pounds this year, resulting in the killing of nearly 10 billion land animals.

C3.2.P11 In “Eating Toward Shalom,” I summarize the consequences of our food system and the eating habits that drive it as follows:

C3.2.P12 Feeding this many animals requires unsustainable amounts of oil, land, and water to grow grain—a commodity the subsidization of which causes political and economic problems for farmers around the world. Raising these animals confronts us with dangerous concentrations of ecologically threatening manure and greenhouse gasses and the risk of epidemic diseases such as bird flu. Processing this many animals at a profit means dangerous and often exploitative working conditions for a disproportionately minority workforce. And eating this many animals is strongly correlated with the rise of preventable diseases estimated to cost \$314 billion a year for interventional medicine.... The vast majority of these 10 billion creatures are bred, housed, fed, transported, and slaughtered in industrial systems that consign them to short lives of crowded, sedentary confinement and deny them many of their most basic creaturely activities and enjoyments. The degree to which we bend every aspect of their existence to our convenience and profit raises the question of whether our dominion over them has become more about playing god than serving God.<sup>14</sup>

C3.2.N12 12 Megan Durisin and Shruti Singh, “Americans Will Eat a Record Amount of Meat in 2018,” *Bloomberg*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-02/have-a-meaty-new-year-americans-will-eat-record-amount-in-2018>.

C3.2.N13 13 Oliver Smith, “Revealed: The World’s Most Vegetarian Country,” *The Telegraph*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/world-according-to-meat-consumption/>.

C3.2.N14 14 Matthew C. Halteman, “Eating Toward Shalom,” *The Banner*, March 2018, <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2018/02/eating-toward-shalom-why-food-ethics-matters-for-the-21st-century-church>. An earlier version of this paragraph appears in Matthew C. Halteman, Andrew Chignell, and Terence Cuneo, “Introduction,” *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments About the Ethics of Eating* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1-17, 1. On environmental impact, see United Nations,

- C3.2.P13      Secular food ethicists won't choose phrases like "culpable evil" or "shalom spoiling" to describe this system, but their preferred terms of disapprobation are often no less severe relative to their assumptions. In a paper offering a comprehensive critique of industrial animal agriculture that cites 155 relevant books and articles, Rossi and Garner come to a startling conclusion:
- C3.2.P14      Many critiques of industrial farm animal production [IFAP] have been offered from a common-morality, rights-based, utilitarian, virtue-based, feminist, and sustainability perspectives, and correspondingly very few defenses of IFAP appear to have been made. What defenses of IFAP can be found are often vague, non-systematic, and premised on highly problematic arguments. Furthermore, defenses tend to be made by actors with significant conflicts of interest concerning this issue, raising concerns about credibility and bias. The preceding discussion demonstrates not only that IFAP is morally indefensible, but furthermore that this conclusion is significantly overdetermined. The conclusion that IFAP is morally indefensible can be reached via multiple lines of argument touching upon multiple areas of concern.<sup>15</sup>
- C3.2.P15      In a profession where practitioners can't agree about whether tables exist (perhaps it's just particles arranged table-wise),<sup>16</sup> it is surprising to find something approaching consensus that

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Food and Agriculture Organization, "Livestock's Long Shadow," 2006, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>, and Pew Charitable Trusts, "Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America," 2008, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/04/29/putting-meat-on-the-table-industrial-farm-animal-production-in-america>. On confinement harms, see Halteman, "Varieties of Harm," 122–131. On slaughterhouse work, see Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). On health impact, see David Robinson Simon, *Meatonomics* (New York: Conari, 2013).

- C3.2.N15      15 John Rossi and Samuel A. Garner, "Industrial Farm Animal Production: A Comprehensive Moral Critique," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 2. (2014).
- C3.2.N16      16 Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

the delivery system for our collective meat habit is “morally indefensible” on multiple fronts.

C3.2.P16

Whether one gravitates to the language of evil or moral indefensibility, it seems plausible to draw a parallel here to Plantinga’s example of the “culture of war” as a badness-multiplier. Paraphrasing Plantinga, one might be tempted to venture that our contemporary “culture of meat” includes not only exploiting and killing animals, its main business, but also such side businesses as spreading disease, oppressing disenfranchised people, depleting nonrenewable resources, sullyng the environment, and hastening global climate change. “Meat is murder,” not only because of its violence and destruction but also because of the physically and morally toxic atmosphere it generates.

C3.2.S3

### 3. CONCLUSION

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I have sketched some provisional connections between *humankind’s* meat-eating and *moral* evil, but there are also intriguing links to explore concerning *nonhuman animals’* meat-eating (i.e., predation) and *natural* evil. One might think that predation is a natural evil that generates a stubborn version of the problem of evil. The basic idea is that the immense suffering and death caused by predation over hundreds of millions of years is gratuitous because it seems implausible that God could redeem the suffering of animals from their perspective in either this life or the next.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On theistic strategies for addressing the problem, see Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Marilyn McCord Adams, “Deification and Animal Pain: A Comment on Trent Dougherty’s Extended Saint-Making Theodicy” (unpublished); and Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a critique of Murray’s theistic strategy, see Mylan Engel, Jr., “Review of Michael Murray’s *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw*,” Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/nature-red-in-tooth-and-claw-theism-and-the-problem-of-animal-suffering/>.



C3.2.P18

A second timely question is what to think about *fake*-meat-eating, and in particular whether advancements in cellular agriculture promising “clean meat”—real meat grown from animal cells without harming actual animals—will dispel the moral dubiousness of meat-eating. Fischer and Ozturk, among others, are skeptical, arguing for the perhaps counter-intuitive claim that “it’s morally problematic to consume realistic fake meat products.”<sup>18</sup>

C3.2.P19

These and other provocative prospective connections between meat and evil merit consideration but suffice it to say that if *non-human animal* meat-eating and even *fake*-meat-eating are potentially problematic, then human beings with viable alternatives could do worse than to pass on cheeseburgers.

C3.2.N18

<sup>18</sup> Bob Fischer and Burkay Ozturk, “Facsimiles of Flesh,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2017): 47–49.