Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism

by Michael Huemer

Preface: This is a four-part series of dialogues (labelled Day 1, 2, 3, and 4) between two fictional philosophy students, M and V. Any resemblance to actual persons is probably not coincidental; nearly all of M's arguments are things I have heard actual people say. Here is the first part . . .

Day 1 (suffering and intelligence)

Setting: Two philosophy students, M and V, have met for lunch at their local Native Foods Cafe.[1]

M: Hey, V. I've never been to this restaurant before. Looks nice.

V: Yeah, I come here a lot. It's one of the few vegetarian restaurants in town.

M (*disappointed*): Oh.

V: Oh, what?

M: Nothing . . . So we're going to be eating sticks and leaves then.

V: No, no. I think you'll be surprised at how good the food is here.

M (*skeptical*): If you say so.

M and V order and then sit down at a table in the corner.

M: So . . . you're a vegetarian.

V: Yep. Been vegetarian for the last three years.

M: Wow. I didn't know you were such a crazy extremist.

V: (*laughs*) Some people would say that. I think it's just the reasonable position.

M: Did you know that Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian?

V: (*sigh*) Godwin's law already?[2] Yes, I know. Gandhi was also a vegetarian.

M: Well, I guess you can find both good and evil people who have done most things. So what made you give up meat?

V: I figured out that meat-eating is morally wrong.

M: So if you were stranded on a lifeboat, about to die of starvation, and there was nothing to eat except a chicken, would you eat it?

V: Of course.

M: Aha! So you don't really think meat-eating is wrong.

V: When I say something is wrong, I don't mean it's wrong in every conceivable circumstance. After all, just about anything is okay in *some* possible circumstance. I just mean that it is wrong in the typical

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[1] A popular U.S. vegetarian restaurant chain (www.nativefoods.com/).
[2] Godwin's law: As an internet discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches 1. Also applies to some non-internet discussions.

circumstances we are actually in. I don't care about hypothetical possibilities.

M: So you think it's wrong to eat meat in the circumstances we normally actually face.

V: Right.

M and V's food arrives, and they start in on two appetizing vegan meals.

M: Okay, you're right: this is better than I thought it would be. I could enjoy coming here once in a while for something different. But it still seems to me like this ethical vegetarianism of yours is an extreme view.

V: I don't think it's that extreme. Would you agree that pain and suffering are bad?

M: No, I think pain is necessary. You know, there is a rare medical condition in which people are unable to feel pain.[3] As a result, they don't notice when they injure themselves, so they're in danger of bleeding out, injuring themselves further, and so on. It's really quite bad. So you see, pain is actually good.

V: Sounds like you're just saying that given certain conditions, pain can be *instrumentally* good. You don't think it's *intrinsically* good, do you?

M: What do you mean by that?

V: Well, you're just saying pain can sometimes have good *effects*. You're not saying it's good *in itself*, are you? I mean, say you have to have a tooth drilled at the dentist's office. Do you take the anesthetic?

M: Of course. I don't want *gratuitous* pain. I only want pain when it helps me avoid injuring myself, helps me learn valuable lessons, or something like that.

V: I think we're in agreement. Considered just in itself, pain is bad. Sometimes it can produce benefits that outweigh that badness.

M: Right.

V: But if it *doesn't*, then it's just bad.

M: Of course.

V: And you wouldn't argue that it's good to go and get injured, or tortured, or something like that, so you can have the pain.

M: Obviously, that would be bad.

V: Just checking. And the same is true about *suffering*, right?

M: What's the difference between "pain" and "suffering"?

V: I take it that "suffering" is broader. Suffering would include things like the experience of being confined in a tiny cell so that you can barely move for a prolonged period of time. That might not exactly be *painful*, but it's certainly a negative experience.

M: Of course, negative experiences are bad, provided that they don't produce some benefit, like teaching you valuable lessons or enabling you to avoid injury.

V: Yes, let's take that as understood. Now, if suffering is bad, in the sense we've just described, then I suppose that *larger amounts* of suffering are worse? Like, if you have intense suffering, for a long period, that's worse than a milder, shorter suffering. Right?

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[3] Congenital analgesia.

M: Other things being equal, sure.

V: Okay. It also seems to me that it's wrong to cause a very large amount of something bad, for the sake of some minor good. Would you agree with that?

M: That sounds generally right, but I'm not sure that's *always* true . . . What if I make a great sacrifice of my own welfare, to achieve a small benefit for my kids? That wouldn't be wrong; that would be noble. Perhaps foolish, but noble anyway.

V: Okay, I overgeneralized. Let's be more specific. I think it's wrong to knowingly inflict a great deal of pain and suffering on others, just for the sake of getting relatively minor benefits for yourself. That's not some crazy extremist view, is it?

M: (*laughs*) No, it's not.

V: Okay, well, the meat industry inflicts a great deal of pain and suffering on animals, for the sake of comparatively minor benefits. It follows that the meat industry is doing something wrong.

M: What pain and suffering are you talking about?

V: For instance, chickens and pigs are regularly confined in tiny cages where they can't move for their entire lives. Cows are branded with hot irons, to produce third degree burns on their skin. People cut off pigs' tails without anesthetic. They cut off the ends of chickens' beaks, again without anesthetic. These tails and beaks are sensitive tissue, so it probably feels something like having a finger chopped off.[4]

M: Okay, that's enough. I don't want to hear any more.

V: Why not?

M: It's unpleasant, and I'm trying to eat.

V: But you don't have any problem with eating the products that come from these practices?

M: As long as I don't have to think about it or watch it, I'm okay with it.

V: Isn't that a little hypocritical? If you feel disgusted or horrified by the practices on factory farms, doesn't that suggest that you shouldn't buy their products either?

M: Not at all. There are lots of things that I wouldn't want to look at that are perfectly good and valuable services. For instance, I wouldn't want to watch someone performing surgery, because I can't stand the sight of blood. But that doesn't mean I think surgery is wrong.

V: So the negative reaction you have to animal cruelty is like the negative reaction you have to watching a surgery.

M: Exactly. It's unpleasant to look at or think about, but it's necessary to produce a greater good. In the case of the meat industry, the good of human gustatory pleasure.

V: But didn't we agree that it's wrong to inflict great pain and suffering on others, for the sake of relatively minor benefits?

M: Oh, when I agreed that it was wrong to inflict gratuitous pain and suffering, I thought we were talking about *humans*. Of course it's wrong to inflict gratuitous suffering on other humans. But animals are another matter entirely.

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[4] For more on these and many other forms of cruelty, see Stuart Rachels, "Vegetarianism," pp. 877-905 in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), section 1, available at www.jamesrachels.org/stuart/veg.pdf.

V: Why are they another matter entirely?

M: Oh, that's easy. You see, humans have *intelligence*, and nonhuman animals don't.

V: Do you mean that all animals have zero intelligence?

M: Well, they have drastically lower intelligence than humans.

V: I see.

M: Drastically.

V: And you believe it's morally okay to inflict severe pain on those who are much less intelligent, for the sake of small benefits to those who are more intelligent?

M: Right.

V: And why do you think that?

M: It just seems right to me.

V: That isn't obvious to me. Do you have any further reason to give? Something that might make it seem right to me too?

M: Nope. It's just an intuition. It's like "1+1=2" and "The shortest path between two points is a straight line." You know, self-evident.[5]

V: And you don't have any explanation for why it would be true either? Why intelligence gives one the right to torture the less intelligent?

M: No explanation. It's just a brute fact.

V: I hear that Albert Einstein was really smart. Much smarter than the rest of us, in fact.

M: Yeah, so?

V: So I'm just wondering if that means he would have been justified in torturing us, if he could have gotten some minor benefit by doing so. You know, because he was so much smarter than us.

M: No, he wasn't sufficiently smarter than us. The gap between animals and the average human is much bigger than the gap between an average human and Einstein.

V: Superintelligent aliens, then.

M: What?

V: Say a race of superintelligent aliens lands on Earth. They're way smarter than any human. So can they eat us, torture us for fun, and so on?

M: That doesn't seem right. I'm gonna say that there's a threshold level of intelligence that you have to have. If you're above the threshold, then no one gets to torture you. If you're below it – open season.

V: And what is this threshold?

M: What, you mean like, the actual IQ number?

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[5] Here, M follows the views of Bryan Caplan (http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2016/10/reply_to_huemer.html; http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2016/10/further_reply_t_1.html) and Richard Posner (https://www.utilitarian.net/singer/interviews-debates/200106--.htm).

V: Yeah.

M: Geez, I don't know.

V: Then how can you know that humans are above the threshold and animals are below?

M: Well, I don't know the *exact number*. But I know that it's pretty high. I know it's higher than the level of an animal.

V: You mean it's higher than the intelligence level of even the smartest animal in the world? Higher than that chimp that learned sign language, or the octopus in New Zealand that escaped from his aquarium recently, or the three dolphins that rescued a woman at sea in 1971 . . . ?[6]

M: Oh, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying the threshold for having moral status is above the intelligence level of cows, chickens, or pigs. Or any other animal that I like to eat.

V: I see. And how do we know that? Assuming there is such a threshold, how do you know that the threshold isn't lower?

M: Again, intuition.

V: Are you sure you're not just saying what is convenient for you, and declaring that to be intuitive?

M: Yep, I'm sure.

V: You didn't think about that very long.

M: Sorry, I'm being too cavalier. Let me think about it. (*pauses for three seconds, furrows brow*) Okay, I just introspected very carefully, and I assure you that I'm not being at all influenced by self-interest. I just have a purely intellectual intuition that none of the animals whose flesh I like to eat have any moral status.

V: This isn't obvious to me.

M: I guess you're not as morally sensitive as the rest of us are. Don't feel bad. We won't force you to eat meat if you don't want to.

V: Just to clarify, are you saying that because animals have low intelligence, their pain *isn't bad*? Or are you saying that even though their pain is bad, it's still okay to cause a lot of badness for the sake of a trivial benefit?

M: I guess I'm saying the first thing.

V: Their pain isn't bad at all?

M: Well, it's much *less bad* than human pain.

V: How much less? Like half as bad maybe?

M: Oh no, it's at least a thousand times less bad.

V: So the interests of smart humans matter a thousand times more than the interests of stupid animals?

M: Right.

V: I see. Well, even if that's true, factory farming is still wrong.

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[6] For more, see the following: On Washoe the chimp: http://www.friendsofwashoe.org/meet/washoe.html; on Inky the octopus: https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160414-inky-octopus-escapes-intelligence/; on the dolphin rescuers: http://www.care2.com/greenliving/3-stories-of-dolphin-saviors.html.

M: Why do you say that?

V: Because the harm we're causing to the animals is more than a thousand times greater than the benefit we get.

M: Whoa, how do you figure that?

V: It's the sheer numbers. Humans slaughter about 56 billion animals per year, worldwide.[7] And that's just land animals; the numbers of marine animals are much larger.

M: Wow, 56 billion. Well, there are seven and a half billion people to feed.

V: Yes. So the number of animals killed for food in one year is over 7 times the entire human population of the world.

M: So the average person on Earth eats about 7 complete land animals per year . . . Actually, that number sounds low.

V: It's higher in rich countries. For Americans, the number is 31.[8]

M: Okay, that sounds like a lot. But that's just the number of killings. You were complaining about all this pain and suffering. That doesn't tell us how much *suffering* occurs.

V: Right, we don't have statistics on the quantity of suffering, since there's no established way of measuring suffering. But almost all of the 56 billion land animals were on factory farms,[9] where the practices are – well, that stuff that you didn't want me to talk about while you're eating. If you imagine the life of a factory farm animal, it seems worse than the life of almost any human. Unless you live in a torture chamber or something.

M: You're making this sound kind of bad.

V: If animal interests and human interests were equally important, then it would be like having 56 billion people tortured and killed each year.

M: Well, that's ridiculous. Obviously, human and animal interests aren't equally important.

V: Are you sure of that? Some respected ethicists think they are.[10]

M: Well, my intuitions are better than theirs. They're probably just soft-hearted animal-lovers who are biased because of their love for animals.[11]

V: They might say that you're biased because of your self-interest.

M: Yeah, but I already refuted that, remember? I introspected, and I could tell that I wasn't biased. So it's got to be the animal-welfare people who are biased.

V: I remember. So, as you were saying, animal interests are only one thousandth as important as human interests?

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[7] http://www.animalequality.net/food.

[8] http://www.geisswerks.com/about_animals.html. Americans eat an estimated 2400 land animals per lifetime.

[9] Nil Zacharias, "It's Time to End Factory Farming," *Huffington Post*, 10/19/2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nil-zacharias/its-time-to-end-factory-f_b_1018840.html.

[10] See Peter Singer, "Equality for Animals?" in *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 55-82.

[11] Loren Lomasky entertains similar thoughts in "Is it Wrong to Eat Animals?", *Social Philosophy & Policy* 30 (2013): 177-200, at p. 186.

M: That's right.

V: Okay, so it's really only one thousandth as bad as torturing and killing 56 billion people a year? So then the meat industry is only as bad as having 56 *million* people tortured and killed per year?

M: Wait, did I say a thousand? I meant a million. Human interests are a *million* times more important than animal interests.[12]

V: Where did you get the "one million" figure from?

M: Intuition. I just thought about it, and it seemed obvious.

V: Are you sure you're not just picking numbers for convenience? Like, just saying whatever is required to justify your current practices?

M: Yep. Wait. (*pauses for three seconds*) Okay, I thought about it. I didn't notice any bias on my part.

V: Let me try a thought experiment on you. Two people have headaches, both equally severe. Assume there are no relevant effects of these headaches beyond the pain. You have one pain reliever that you can give to one of them. You can't split it.

M: Sounds like I should flip a coin.

V: Wait, there's more. One of the people is *smarter* than the other. He scored higher on the SAT, he's better at solving differential equations, he has a bigger vocabulary. True or false: you'd better give the aspirin to the smarter person, because his pain is worse, because he's smart?[13]

M: I don't see the point of this thought experiment.

V: I'm just trying to determine whether it's really intuitively obvious that one's intelligence affects how bad one's pain is.

M: Of course, in *that* case it doesn't. Remember, there is a crucial threshold level of intelligence. If you're below the threshold, then your suffering doesn't matter, or only barely matters. When you cross the threshold, your suffering suddenly matters a million times more, even for qualitatively indistinguishable suffering. But after you pass the threshold, no further increases in intelligence make any difference at all; then everyone matters equally.

V: All this sounds arbitrary. Why would all that be true?

M: No explanation is needed. These are just fundamental facts about the moral landscape.

V: And it happens that all humans are above the threshold, so all humans are equal?

M: Yes.

V: What about mentally retarded people? I once met a person who was so severely retarded that she couldn't talk.[14] Would it have been okay for me to torture her, if it would have given me some minor benefit?

M: No, that would have upset her family.

V: So it's wrong to inflict great pain on an unintelligent being, if doing so upsets some intelligent beings?

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[12] Compare Caplan, http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2016/10/further_reply_t_1.html.
[13] I owe this example to David Barnett.
[14] Profoundly retarded human beings may have difficulty, not only talking, but even eating or moving about on their own (http://psychcentral.com/encyclopedia/profound-mental-retardation-2).

M: That's right.

V: Well, factory farming really upsets *me*. Why doesn't that make it wrong?

M: Because the animals aren't yours. They belong to the farmers. So it doesn't matter if *you're* upset. You can't hurt the retarded person, because she belongs to her family, and they would be upset.

V: So only the *family* would be allowed to torture the retarded person.

M: No, they can't do it either.

V: Why not? On your view, isn't that just like farm owners torturing their animals?

M: Yeah . . . but the retarded person is a human. The animals aren't.

V: But we're trying to figure out what's so special about humans. You told me it was intelligence. So if we find a human who lacks intelligence, then it follows that that human *isn't* special. Right?

M: Well . . . they still belong to the same species as us.[15] You see, when you want to figure out how bad someone's pain is, you don't look at their *own* intelligence level. You have to look at the *average* intelligence of the *species* that they belong to. If that average is above the threshold, then their pain is really bad. If it's below the threshold, then their pain barely matters.

V: I don't see why the badness of *my* pain would depend on the intelligence of *other* people.

M: Again, this is just a basic ethical axiom. I'm sorry you have trouble apprehending all of these basic axioms.

V: So what if, in the future, a whole bunch of profoundly retarded people were born? So many that it lowered the average intelligence of the human species to below this intelligence threshold that you keep talking about. Then, on your view, it would become okay to torture me? Because I would then belong to a species with a low average IQ?

M: No. You see, there are actually two principles. One, that it's wrong to torture beings who have a high enough IQ. Two, it's wrong to torture beings who belong to a *species* whose average IQ is high enough. But it's okay to torture beings whose IQ is below the threshold *and* belong to a species whose average is also below that threshold. That's the moral principle.

V: And you're sure all this is correct?

M: Totally.

V: Even though you can't explain why these things would be true?

M: It's enough that it's obvious to me.

V: Even though it's not obvious to me.

M: You're biased.

V: Okay. How certain are you of all this?

M: A hundred percent.

V: I don't think you can be a hundred percent certain.

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[15] Here, M follows the position Richard Posner took in his debate with Peter Singer (https://www.utilitarian.net/singer/interviews-debates/200106--.htm).

M: Why not?

V: A hundred percent certainty means that nothing could ever convince you otherwise, that you can completely ignore any alleged counter-evidence. It also means that nothing is more certain than these controversial ethical claims you've made. Suppose that God came down from Heaven and told us that one of the following things is the case: either you're mistaken about animal ethics, or you're mistaken in thinking there's a table in front of you now. (*knocks on the table that M and V are sitting at*) Which would you think is more likely?

M: That's a pretty weird scenario.

V: I know, it's just a hypothetical. For the sake of argument, just imagine that that happened.

M: I would conclude that the person talking to me wasn't really God and that they were lying.

V: Just assume that it's really God and He's not lying.

M: I don't see the point of that.

V: Look, I'm just trying to get at the question: which are you more certain of: that your theory of animal ethics is correct, or that there's a table in front of you now?

M: Okay fine, I'm more sure of the table.

V: So your ethical claims aren't completely certain.

M: Fine. They're only ninety-nine percent certain.

V: So there's a one percent chance that the animal welfare advocates might be right.

M: Yeah, whatever. Only 1%.

V: Well, that's enough to make meat eating wrong.

M: What are you talking about? You're saying that if there's a 1% chance that you're right, then you're right?

V: More precisely, if there's a 1% chance that, say, Peter Singer's views of animal ethics are correct, then you're morally obligated to give up meat.

M: How can that be?

V: It's a matter of the ethics of risk. We agree that it's wrong to perform an action that has extremely bad effects on others, for the sake of minor benefits.

M: Sure.

V: But it needn't be *certain* that your action will have bad effects. An action could be wrong just because it *might* have very bad effects. For instance, it's wrong for me to shoot my gun up in the air, even if I'm not aiming at anyone.

M: Yeah, because when the bullet comes back down, it might hit someone.

V: But it's not certain that it'll hit someone.

M: No, the bullet probably won't actually hit anyone. But it's too much of a risk.

V: Agreed. So an action is wrong if there is too high a chance that it will cause something very bad, for the sake of a comparatively minor benefit.

M: Right. But not just any chance of causing a bad thing makes an action wrong. I mean, when I drive my

car, there's always a chance that I'll cause an accident and injure someone. But it's not wrong to drive the car.

V: But it *is* wrong to drive drunk.

M: Yeah.

V: Because that creates *too high* of a risk.

M: Yeah. I just don't think the "risk" that we're wronging animals is that high.

V: Would you agree that the acceptable level of risk a person may undertake depends on how bad the bad outcome would be?

M: What do you mean?

V: Say I want to keep a nuclear bomb in my basement. Every day that I keep the bomb there, let's say, there is a tiny chance that something will accidentally set off the bomb. This chance is much lower than the probability that I will kill someone in a traffic accident while driving my car. And yet, it's okay for me to drive the car, but it's not okay to keep the nuclear bomb in my basement.

M: I agree. No one should have personal nuclear bombs.

V: And that's because the harm of a nuclear bomb accident is much greater than the harm of a traffic accident. If I have a car accident, I might kill someone. But if I accidentally set off the bomb, it'll destroy the entire city. So the acceptable risk level is much lower in the case of the nuke.

M: Sounds reasonable. I would add also that you have good reasons for wanting to drive – like, you need to get to work. But I don't think you have very good reasons for wanting to have the nuclear bomb.

V: Agreed. So whether it's okay to do something that might produce a bad effect depends upon (i) how bad the effect would be, (ii) how likely it is that the bad effect would occur, and (iii) how strong of a reason you have for doing the thing.

M: Sounds right.

V: Now, if Peter Singer is right, then the meat industry is about as bad as a practice that tortured and killed 56 billion people a year would be. If there were such a practice, it would be incredibly bad.

M: Good thing Peter Singer isn't right.

V: But if there is a 1% chance that he's right, then the meat industry is about as wrong as a practice that has a 1% chance of torturing and killing 56 billion people a year. Which is about as wrong as a practice that definitely tortures and kills 560 million people a year.

M: That sounds crazy. 560 million?

V: That's 1% times 56 billion. A thing with a 1% chance of doing the equivalent of harming 56 billion people is *1% as bad* as a thing that harms 56 billion people. Which means it is as bad as harming 560 million people.

M: But it's 99% likely that such an action wouldn't harm anyone – then it would be as bad as an action that harms zero people.

V: Sorry, let me rephrase. You have reason to avoid actions that, from your point of view, *might* cause something bad. The strength of this reason is proportional to (i) the probability that the action will cause something bad, and (ii) the magnitude of the bad outcome that might occur. So, if there is a 1% chance that Peter Singer is right, then the reason we have for abolishing the meat industry is about *as strong as*

the reason that we would have for abolishing a practice that tortured and killed 560 million people a year.

M: What if I say there's no chance that Singer is right?

V: If God came down and told you that either Singer is right or this table doesn't exist . . .

M: Okay fine, there's *some* chance that Singer is right. But it's less than 1%.

V: How low? One in a thousand? Then our reason for abolishing factory farming is "only" as strong as the reason we would have to abolish a practice that torture-killed *56 million* people a year.

M: Well, maybe it's less than that. Maybe there's only a one in a million chance that he's right.

V: Do you really think so? Singer thinks that the badness of a painful experience is just a matter of how painful it is. This doesn't strike me as absurd. Your defense of meat-eating, on the other hand, requires us to accept all of the following:

1. The badness of a pain depends on intelligence, rather than just depending on what the pain feels like.
2. There is a threshold IQ at which the badness of pain suddenly goes up, rather than its increasing gradually with IQ.
3. It goes up by something like a factor of a million, rather than, say, only two or ten or a hundred.
4. After that, the badness of pain levels off, rather than continuing to increase.
5. The threshold is safely above that of any animals that are commonly used for food, but below the level of normal humans.
6. Sometimes, the badness of one's pain depends on the mean intelligence of the *species* to which one belongs, rather than just depending on one's own intelligence. But
7. It's not *just* the intelligence of the species that matters; rather, it's the larger of the individual's IQ and the average IQ of his species, that determines how bad the individual's pain is.

You don't have any explanation for why any of these things would be true, nor any argument that they are true, apart from the need to say these things to defend our current practices. You say they're grounded in intuition, yet all of them strike me as arbitrary at best, not intuitive at all. It's hard for me to see how all of this leaves us with a 99.9999% probability that you're right and Singer is wrong.

M: Argh. You're messing with my brain. I need to go home and rest it.

M and V, having finished their meal, start clearing their places.

V: Okay. Are we still on for next week?

M: Sure, I'll talk to you then.

V: Same place, same time?

M: After everything you've said, I guess I won't offer to take you out to a burger joint. Okay, we can meet here again.