

Feeding Trolls: Against Zangwill's Duty to Eat Meat

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Abstract: Zangwill (“Our Moral Duty to Eat Meat”, “If you care about animals, you should eat them”) has argued that we have a duty to eat meat. In this paper I first show that Zangwill’s essays contain two distinct conclusions: (1) a rather weak thesis that his argument is officially supposed to establish, and (2) a much stronger, advertised thesis that his argument is not officially supposed to establish, but on whose basis he gives concrete recommendations for action and launches polemic attacks on vegans, animal rights activists, and others. Consequently, I argue that Zangwill is likely culpable of some combination of epistemic failure, objectionable carnist activism, and trolling. In the second part of this paper I rebut Zangwill’s argument proper. I conclude by identifying some important issues in the vicinity concerning the suffering of wildlife and population ethics generalized to both human and non-human animals.

1 Introduction

Zangwill (2022) has recently attempted to formulate an academic version of an argument in favor of eating meat that animal welfare and rights advocates are all too familiar with. The idea is roughly this:

Animals raised and slaughtered for meat are benefitted by this practice for they have lives worth living that they otherwise would not have had (because they would not have existed). By extension, animals raised for slaughter benefit from the practice of eating their meat. From this, a duty to continue raising animals for slaughter and hence a duty to eating their meat arises.

As we will see, Zangwill’s argument is both highly polemic and unconvincing. Indeed, so much so that several contributors in the comment section of his (2021) companion piece in the popular online magazine *Aeon* suspected (perhaps ironically) his writing to be satire. In response, Zangwill has professed his serious intent there and continues to develop and present related material in the academic context. Of course, this is compatible with an argument in bad faith, and indeed I will argue below that aside from its epistemic shortcomings, Zangwill’s text exhibits characteristics of *trolling*.

Hence, I will risk violating internet wisdom not to feed the troll by engaging with and rebutting Zangwill’s argument and criticizing the manner in which it is presented. As elsewhere, some material published in philosophy is not worth engaging with. There are four reasons why I think the present case might be different:

1. The trolling-like characteristics of Zangwill’s paper are inappropriate for cooperative discourse (academic or not) and should therefore be identified and shunned.

2. The general idea behind Zangwill's argument occurs occasionally in non-academic discourse, where it is worth addressing for moral reasons.
3. Zangwill (2022) has carried his argument into the public sphere where it damages the already difficult relation between academic and public discourse.
4. There are important issues in the vicinity of Zangwill's argument that need to be studied further and should not be left to trolls.

This is the plan: In section 2, I will differentiate what I take to be the considered conclusion of Zangwill's argument from what we can call its advertised conclusion and show that the former neither justifies that we have a duty to eat meat in the sense suggested in his writings elsewhere, nor serves to excuse Zangwill's offensive remarks concerning vegans, animal rights activists, and others. I conclude that Zangwill is culpable of some combination of epistemic failure, objectionable carnist activism, and trolling. In section 3, I present Zangwill's argument proper and then rebut it. My primary objections are:

1. Zangwill ignores relevant considerations in favor of the badness of killing non-human animals.
2. Zangwill discards more (or at least equally) beneficial alternatives to raising and slaughtering animals for meat.
3. Zangwill's argument depends on a particular way of individuating practices and animal kinds use of which he has not sufficiently justified. As a consequence, analogous arguments can be given that undermine his conclusion.
4. Zangwill's attempted response to the problem that his argument likely generalizes to humans in certain situations is unconvincing and underdeveloped.

I conclude by pointing out some important issues in the vicinity of Zangwill's argument that need to be studied further.

For two recent response to Zangwill in the philosophical literature, see Kreutz (2022) and Benatar (2022).

2 Two-faced and beyond polemic: scope and tone of Zangwill's argument

As it turns out, due to several problems for his argument that Zangwill himself identifies, his official conclusion is rather weak and heavily hedged:

There is a pro tanto collective moral duty to eat meat, where this meat is the product of an ongoing practice of raising non-human animals for this purpose, and where the non-human animals raised within that practice have good lives. (Zangwill (2022: pp. 295, 307f.))

"We should eat meat where meat-eating is part of a past and ongoing practice that benefits animals. The animals we eat should have good lives, and their pleasures and happiness are part of that." (Zangwill (2021: p. 295))"

“When I speak of eating meat being justified in what follows, I shall mean only meat from animals that overall have a good life.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 296))

Moreover, Zangwill (2021: p. 296) estimates that “at least 5% of actual meat production is of [this] more benign sort”. He does not support this further, aside from claiming that “the millions of sheep in New Zealand that graze outdoors overall have good lives”. Clearly, more evidence is required here.

But notice just how weak Zangwill’s official conclusion is: Not only is it restricted to a small subset of actual meat-eating, but it could also be trumped by (just to give some examples) local considerations concerning the badness of killing non-human animals or the availability of better forms of animal-involving agriculture. According to what Zangwill himself says about the analogous case concerning humans, it could for example be trumped by a (sufficiently strong) right to live. Likewise, independent considerations could establish the impermissibility of raising and killing animals even if they have lives worth living. Finally, he simply sets aside more global or indirect considerations used to evaluate meat-eating, such as its ecological impact, and the imperatives to address climate change and to establish a sustainable food supply. The literature on all these issues is vast, wherefore I suggest the interested reader start with a look at Dogget’s (2018) SEP article on moral vegetarianism.

Looking at his heavily hedged official conclusion, it is hard to see that the *pro tanto* duty in question would really be *very strong*, as Zangwill (2022) would have it. Indeed, it is not clear that Zangwill has presented any argument concerning the strength of this duty, and hence his argument appears to amount to very little indeed: We knew all along that there are *some* *pro tanto* reasons (and hence *pro tanto* oughts) to eat meat: For example, (as Zangwill is quick to point out) to some it tastes good, and in some circumstances it is arguably permissible to kill and eat meat in order to survive. Very little seems to follow from this for our ordinary practice.¹

Now, in stark contrast to its official conclusion, Zangwill’s essays (2021; 2022) in general are not formulated modestly at all, and he often writes as if he had established a much stronger thesis. On this basis, I will now argue that Zangwill is guilty of some combination of epistemic failure, objectionable carnist activism, and trolling. For this it will be necessary to quote him at some length; if you are predominantly interested in his argument proper, feel free to skip ahead to the next section, where I offer objections to Zangwill’s argument proper (some of which amount to the result that it fails to come close to establishing the more relevant, less hedged conclusion that he would like to draw).

Consider the following quotes from the very beginning of “Our Moral Duty to Eat Meat”, a title that might itself already be considered to be overstepping:

“Eating nonhuman animal meat is not merely permissible but also good. It is what we ought to do, and it is our moral duty.

[Eating] meat is morally good primarily because it benefits animals.”Zangwill (2021)

Given a natural reading, this does not sound *pro tanto* at all. Granted, a little later, Zangwill takes the first steps towards introducing his official conclusion and states that when he (2021: p. 296) speaks of “eating meat being justified in what follows, [he] shall mean only meat from animals that overall have a good life”,

¹ I say very little, in part because some of these ideas might be used to support the idea of an in principle moral difference between humans and non-human animals, which might in turn affect actual practice: For example, some might find killing for food in order to survive permissible if the victim is a non-human animal, but not if it is human.

but now consider some passages that come after that, and which very much suggest that he is talking about animals raised and killed for meat *in general*:

“The animals we eat may incur *some* pain or suffering at the end of their lives, which is regrettable.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 398))

“[In] virtue of the ongoing mutual dependency of animals on us and of us on them, it is our duty to eat them[.]” (Zangwill (2021: p. 299))

“[We] have a duty to eat domesticated farm animals but not wild animals.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 300))

“Carnivorism has been immensely beneficial to its practitioners, both human beings and the animals they eat.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 300))

“The ongoing history of mutual benefit is the ground of the present moral duty of human beings to eat animals.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 300))

“[Farmers] should kill and eat or allow others to kill and eat the animals they have cared for because of what the past and ongoing present practice has done for animals and also human beings.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 305))

“It is just that in the case of animals, caring entails killing, unlike in the case of one’s parents.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 305))

“All currently existing domesticated animals have benefitted from the carnivorous practice, and therefore human beings have a duty to each and every animal.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 305))

“[Considered] in itself, the meat-eating practice is clearly good, very good.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 309))

Now, some of these quotes could perhaps (in an exceptionally charitable mood) be given the benefit of the doubt, but the mask definitely slips at the fourth and penultimate quote: When speaking about carnivorism, it is just too implausible that only a small beneficial sub-practice of the overall meat-eating practice is meant, and how exactly do animals who suffer utterly miserable lives in factory farms benefit from the carnivorous practice? Zangwill does not adhere to his restriction to practices in which the animals have overall good lives here, and it must be emphasized that at least in their natural readings, none of these quotes is warranted by Zangwill’s heavily hedged and restricted official conclusion.

We find similar framing and passages in Zangwill (2022), starting with its title “If you love animals, you should eat them” and the subtitle

“Not eating animals is wrong. If you care about animals, then the right thing to do is breed them, kill them and eat them”

Again, none of this is warranted by his official conclusion!

It bears emphasis that this essay was published in a popular online magazine rather than an academic journal: While this may excuse (or even mandate) a certain sloppiness, it makes clear and honest expression all the more important: For example, some readers will only read the headline, some readers will not read carefully enough to discern the hedged conclusion from the polemic generalization, and some will put trust in what they perceive to be an expert validating their preconceptions. On top of that at least immediate reach and impact may easily be higher than that of academic journals.

Moreover, Zangwill provides us with some offensive (and frankly hard to take seriously) passages concerning vegans and others who do not eat meat:

“If vegans do not continue the practice [of eating meat], they are selfish free riders, depending for their existence on their ancestors who ate meat. [Vegans] are individually bound by the same collective duty to eat meat as the rest of us.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 308))

“[A] modern vegan who elects to opt out of the beneficial practice of their meat-eating forebears does wrong. Such vegans are selfish free riders who turn their back on their responsibilities to animals in general and to the particular animals that they fail to eat.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 308))

“Some people do not eat meat. It could be that they put their own self-interest before morality. Perhaps they do not like the taste, for example, or have some irrational taboo against it, just as irrational racial prejudice leads some people not to care about certain kinds of people or to harm them. Or it could be that they do not care about the welfare of conscious animals because speciesism leads them not to value a tradition that benefits those animals, in particular, speciesism causes them to ignore animals’ pleasures and happiness. Whatever the psychological explanation, their practice is immoral. Eating meat is good, it is what we ought to do and our duty, and not to do so is bad and wrong. Where duty is in tension with self-interest, we should strive to put self-interest to one side and do our duty. Those happiness-deniers and life-deniers who have speciesist prejudices that prevent them from eating meat should strive to rid themselves of prejudice and do the right thing and eat meat.” (Zangwill (2021: p. 310))

Again, it should be clear that none of this is warranted by Zangwill’s official conclusion, not even if we understand “the practice of eating meat” to be restricted to meat that is the result of a practice within which the animals in question have good lives (let’s call this ‘the “beneficial” practice’): Setting aside the question whether it is even feasible to stop supporting (in some way or other) a society-permeating practice such as meat-eating (which is not to say that the “beneficial” practice does), as Zangwill himself points out, if there were a duty to eat meat, it would be a *collective* duty. Clearly, opting out of a practice that is a collective duty is not ipso facto objectionable, and of course, vegans are no “selfish free-riders”:

First, such opting out would not seem objectionable if the realization of the collective duty is ensured by a part of the collective (and we might add the assumption that this is not to the cost of that part of the collective) independently of what the opt-outers do. Second, the vast majority of meat-eating is not of the permissible, “beneficial” kind (at the very least, Zangwill is happy to grant this). If anything, it seems plausible that a societal shift towards increased animal welfare would (at least as long as nothing like *benevolent vegetarianism* or *caring veganism* are universally established, see below) benefit the “beneficial” meat-eating practice. Third, there may of course be overriding reasons to opt out of the practice such as animal welfare/rights advocacy, ecological concerns and the sheer difficulty of identifying products of the “beneficial” practice. While Zangwill admits elsewhere that such overriding reasons might exist, he both

downplays them there and conveniently forgets them elsewhere.

Evidently, a lot more could be said here, and none of this even touches Zangwill's argument for his official conclusion yet. As we will see, the argument fails, making the passages cited above yet more objectionable. On top of this, they do not exhaust the objectionables that make for the troll-like quality of Zangwill's essays. For example, Zangwill attempts to turn some of the criticisms meat-eaters see themselves confronted with (e.g. putting self-interest before morality, speciesism, not appropriately caring about the welfare of conscious animals) against, amongst other, vegans. The latter Zangwill (Zangwill (2021: p. 308)) further vilifies by claiming they would "turn their back on their responsibilities to animals in general". I leave rebutting this last insult as an exercise for the so inclined.

In a way, the most charitable diagnosis of Zangwill's bizarre writing is perhaps to assess him *catastrophic epistemic failure*: On top of offering a miserable argument, he may simply not realize the limits of his official conclusion. On the other hand, given that these errors are so obvious, and perhaps also given the fact that he is an established academic philosopher, one could easily be led to suspect something more sinister to be going on, such as:

- a desire to garner attention by objectionable means,
- a desire to insult, provoke, and derail,
- an interest in apologetic carnist propaganda over honest argument,
- possibly combined with a hope that the more radical theses and polemic catch on, rather than the weaker, "considered" thesis, which in turn may play the role of a fig leaf.

Conceivably, Zangwill might of course (despite appearances) have a different agenda, such as playing *advocatus diaboli*, hoax-ing, or satire. Looking at these possible motivations and additionally observing that the more "benevolent" agendas would seem to be inappropriately executed, Zangwill's writing amounts to a form of *trolling*.

Trolling is "to antagonize (others) online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content" (Merriam-Webster (2022)), sometimes combined with an "intent of provoking readers into displaying emotional responses, or manipulating others' perception. This is typically for the troll's amusement, or to achieve a specific result such as disrupting a rival's online activities or manipulating a political process" (Wikipedia (2022)).

While some forms of trolling lack an agenda beyond offending "for the lulz" (i.e. a kick, amusement or humorous pleasure), there also exists an agenda-driven kind of trolling, for example to be found in so called "alt-right trolls" and the occupation of so-called troll farms; here the intention to offend and provoke may take a secondary role (if any). Alas, Zangwill's essays on meat-eating are both offensive and appear to be agenda driven.

What makes Zangwill's apparent trolling particularly despicable is the context: Mind-boggling numbers of non-human animals are subjugated under human dominion, where they are bred, tortured, and killed by humans for human use. Likely, the majority of these (again, Zangwill is willing to concede this) lead miserable lives, but even if they had lives more or less worth living, this would not excuse the egregious harms inflicted upon them. Beyond the immediate consequences for the victims, the contributions of this practice to climate change and further ecological devastation are catastrophic (again, the interested reader can take Doggett (2018) as a starting point for further reading). While awareness rises, a majority of people

still seems to find this acceptable, necessary, or are otherwise willing to support the status quo, while vegans, animal rights advocates, climate activists, and others trying to bring about change are a minority that is already often the target of hostility.

Zangwill's *official* conclusion fails to warrant any of this, he trolingly overstates his case to the extent of not only an apology but exaltation of meat-eating in general thereby possibly having negative moral impact in the people continuing their meat-eating when otherwise they would not have (at least in that form), all the while kicking downwards by insulting and vilifying those concerned with changing the world for the better.

If that was not enough, Zangwill damages the profession and its relation to the public: The philosophical case for some form of vegetarianism (including veganism) is both multifaceted and likely as strong as anything applied ethics can hope to produce. Yet Zangwill presents to the public as a good reason why the animal-lovers among them should eat meat an idiosyncratic version of a bad argument that is already occasionally adduced by apologetics outside of academia. It is sometimes lamented that professional philosophers and the public do not engage with each other enough – at the very least, we should make sure that it does not take this form.

To conclude this section: It should be beyond doubt that both the kind of trolling and the epistemic failure considered above are highly undesirable and should be shunned both inside and outside of academia.

3 Zangwill's argument

Let us now assess Zangwill's argument proper. It goes like this:

1. He (2021: section 2) argues that causing non-human animals to exist that have overall good lives benefits them because of the hedonic states they undergo during their lives, and it is hence morally good.
2. He argues that we have a *pro tanto* duty to so benefit non-human animals by causing them to exist and have overall good lives specifically in the case of domesticated animals (as opposed to wild animals), and in particular in the case of animals that are part of the "beneficial" meat-eating practice:

"We are in ongoing symbiotic relationships with many types of animals (such as cows, sheep, and chickens), and there are long-standing practices whereby we benefit them and they benefit us. It is as if we were in a relationship of friendship with them—and that is why we should eat them! We have duties to benefit our friends in virtue of our special relationship with them; benefitting them is not merely virtuous or praiseworthy [...]. Likewise, in virtue of the ongoing mutual dependency of animals on us and of us on them, it is our duty to eat them, and this is not something merely virtuous or praiseworthy. If there turn out to be creatures on Mars that would be benefitted by our eating them, then it would be virtuous or praiseworthy to eat them, not our duty. We actually stand in an ongoing relationship of mutual dependence with many earthly species, and thus eating them is not merely virtuous or praiseworthy—we have a duty to eat them, just as we have special duties to our friends. It is true that it is not usual to eat our friends, and so, in this respect, the two situations are indeed different. I concede that. But the situations are similar in that duties arise in the context of a relationship of mutual dependence." (Zangwill (2021: p. 299))

The argument depends on a number of substantial theoretical assumptions (some of which Zangwill defends) that could be subjected to criticism, but below I will just argue the following: First, he ignores arguments concerning the badness of killing and death. Second, and perhaps most importantly, he ignores better alternatives to the meat-eating practice without justification. Third, I will attempt to engage with Zangwill's ethical framework a bit more closely and argue that his argument relies on contentious ways to individuate practices and animal kinds. As a result, it seems that the kind of argument either establishes (1) a duty to perpetuate practices of mutual beneficial symbiosis with domesticated animals including pets, and likely also wildlife, but not necessarily a duty to perpetuate the "beneficial" meat-eating practice in particular, or (2) an analogous argument establishes that we have a duty to end both the general meat-eating practice, as well as its "beneficial" subpractice. Fourth, Zangwill does not satisfactorily address the fact that his argument generalizes to humans.

Note that Zangwill stresses that his argument is not supposed to be consequentialist, but variants on its theme can of course be easily cooked up (cf. Tännsjö (2016) for an extreme specimen). While I cannot provide a detailed assessment here, the (likely) existence of better (achievable) alternatives to the meat-eating practice puts a significant burden on such attempts (cf. Doggett (2018: 2.2.4)), even granting their consequentialist frameworks.

Arguments ignored: the badness of killing and death The first omission of Zangwill's discussion is that when it comes to killing and the death of non-human animals, he apparently only considers its immediate hedonic aspect.² Now because his official conclusion is so weak, it is compatible with there being decisive reason against perpetuating the meat eating practice, notably in form of the badness (broadly conceived) of killing and death. Zangwill evidently does not think there is, but he does not argue his case.

But everyone should agree that assuming that they have a good life, *ceteris paribus* animals like those bred for their meat are being harmed or otherwise wronged by being killed, irrespective of how much suffering the killing itself inflicts (once more, Doggett (2018) is our friend. To name just some examples: Regan (1983) gives an argument from rights, Korsgaard (2011) from Kantian considerations, and McPherson (2016) from deprivation, and it could also be argued by a case from puppies and marginal cases in the style of Norcross (2004)). Crucially, although he (2021: p. 297) appears to demur, Zangwill should agree by his own lights: After all he thinks we can benefit animals by causing them to exist and lead worthwhile lives – it would be very strange indeed to claim that we do not conversely harm animals that lead such lives by causing them to stop existing (or benefit them by refraining to do so).

Presumably, Zangwill thinks that like the harm inflicted upon animals in the form of suffering, the specific harm associated with killing is also outweighed by the animals having worthwhile lives all things considered (or perhaps he would like to adopt a "replaceability" view, cf. Delon (2016)). One way to resist this argument would be to argue that the animals in question have a right to live that cannot be trumped by considerations concerning the benefit of the practice in question. Indeed, Zangwill intends to use rights to block his argument from generalizing to humans – it just turns out that he does not think that the relevant animals have these rights, see below.

In any case, if Zangwill's argument is to have any hope at all, he has to argue that there are no (perhaps: realistic enough) alternatives where relevant animals are similarly benefitted, but the specific harms or wrongings associated with being killed for meat (or other exploitative purposes) are absent. But this is made

² (Whether how things are at the end life hedonically could especially matter as it might for humans, which he denies on the basis of his belief that non-human animals lack the required cognitive sophistication.

more difficult by the fact that *ceteris paribus*, killing is associated with a non-hedonic harm or wronging of its own: Even in *meatopia*, where all animals who are killed for their meat have arbitrarily good (possibly suffering-free) lives, they are killed before their time. Hence, they are wronged or the associated harm inflicted upon them.³ In the next section we will see that Zangwill fails to provide the required argument.

Alternatives discarded: benevolent vegetarianism, caring veganism, etc. First of all, reflection on cases easily shows that if Zangwill's kind of argument had the consequence that existing (marginally) beneficial practices must be perpetuated even though (much) more beneficial practices could (realistically) be instated instead, it should be discarded as delivering false results and being inappropriately conservative. But neither does Zangwill establish that no such alternatives to his meat-eating practice exist – the only instance where he writes something that could be construed as an argument to this effect is the following:

It is a relatively uncontroversial empirical premise that if the market for meat dried up, farmers would stop caring for animals and breeding them (Scruton 2000). Of course, if human beings were radically different—perhaps if they were immaterial or immortal or could draw nutrition from the air—then our obligations to animals would be different. But so what? We are dealing with our world or a world like our world. Of course, there are various barely possible utopian visions or fantasies in which large numbers of animals somehow get cared for without being killed and eaten. However, given the world as it is, the only way for animals to benefit in large numbers is to kill and eat them. Therefore, we should kill and eat them.

While counterfactuals like the ones above can be hard to assess, setting aside the possibility that in the closest world where the market for meat has dried up, people have disappeared or collectively gone vegan, it just seems unlikely that farmers would stop breeding animals: To mention just one example, many laying hens are not slaughtered for their meat, rather they are killed for productivity reasons and their remains considered a by-product. And even if in the counterfactually closest worlds that abolish meat-eating no better practice were instated instead, this would be besides the point: We want to know how we *should* do things and what we *should* advocate for – not what happens in some counterfactually close worlds!

Zangwill seems to want to claim (without evidence) that instating meat-and-slaughter-free alternatives is, in some sense, not sufficiently realistic (indeed, he inappropriately ridicules the idea), but this contention is not to be taken seriously: First, his unqualified invocation of how “unrealistic” an alternative would be is undermined by reflection on the status of analogous claims that would have been made in the past concerning, e.g. slavery, workers' rights, and universal suffrage. Second and more importantly, humans can flourish on both a vegetarian and vegan diet (and indeed many do), and vegetarian and vegan agriculture are possible (whether conventional or not), and transformation to a less meat-heavy diet (and corresponding agriculture) already underway in some parts of the world. Indeed, we could feed more humans with less of an environmental impact on a crop-based diet and will have to at least significantly downscale our meat production to address climate change and further ecological devastation (for example, cf. Doggett (2018: 2.2.3) for pointers to the literature, Springmann (2018) and Poore and Nemecek (2018) are two important recent studies, but many more sources can given).

But to address Zangwill's argument, we need not even go into the weeds of what kind of agricultural system would be morally optimal and to what extent such a system would include (for example in certain regions or

³ See the conclusion for a possibility that I set aside here, namely *euthanasia-meatopia*, where the animals killed have arbitrarily good lives, are justifiably euthanized (the stipulation goes) towards the end of their natural lifespan, and their remains consumed.

for their manure) animals (although these are very important questions): He has simply not established what he needs to, namely that any “sufficiently realistic” agricultural system requires raising and slaughtering animals for their meat (instead of not relying on animals at all or just using their eggs or manure).

Now, while Zangwill officially says that his argument is non-consequentialist and admits that he does not know how many animals should be involved in the perpetuated meat-eating practice, in the above quote it looks like he does care about the numbers. In any case, let us strengthen our rebuttal some more (also with an eye on consequentialist variants of Zangwill’s argument) and suppose we grant him something like the following: About 5% of farmed animals are benefitted by our causing them to exist in a system in which they will eventually be slaughtered, and we have a duty to continue playing such a beneficial role. This raises the question: What exactly would playing this role entail?

First, the animals benefitted neither need to be of the same breed nor species of those that came before – Zangwill claims that he objects to speciesism, and there are changes in breeds and species involved in the meat-eating practice as well. Perhaps a natural thought might be that animals of a similar or higher capacity to have a good life are required, but while it raises interesting questions (see also the conclusion), let us put this aspect aside. Zangwill seems to want to say that the animals benefitted must be of the kind of animals involved in the “raising, slaughtering, and meat-eating”-practice in the past, but he does not argue this. In any case, the result would be unacceptable (and valuing the existence of breeds or species higher than the welfare of individuals), as a comparison with pets shows: For the sake of argument, let us assume that dogs of breeds with heritable defects and illnesses nevertheless have (marginally) good lives. Presumably, there is no pro tanto duty to further bring dogs of this breed into existence. The same would hold if the only breed of dog (the only kind of pet we might indeed assume) would be the result of cruel breeding: If pet capybaras had a better life or if we could equivalently benefit zebras, then this is what we ought to do instead.

Now, with respect to the zebras, Zangwill will likely object that while the species does not matter, history does: According to him, our symbiotic history with dogs of breeds with heritable defects that have marginally good lives generates a duty to further breed and care for these dogs, while no such history with Zebras exists. Two responses: First, see the next section for an argument that Zangwill’s argumentative schema (if workable) likely generates duties to care for wildlife. Second, the result that Zangwill wants to defend seems hard to accept: Why would we have a duty to bring into existence more almost too miserable dogs, if we could instead help bring about (by assumption) much happier zebras or octopuses? We would have a duty to bring about a situation that is, by Zangwill’s own lights, much worse than what we could alternatively bring about: The resulting theory seems to value historical relationships between species higher than the welfare of the individuals involved, and this I believe we should reject.

Next, and second, while Zangwill explicitly rejects a need to maintain or maximize the number of animals benefitted by the practice, we will *for the sake of argument* assume that it should at least be roughly maintained. But this need not involve farming and slaughtering animals for their meat: For example, what we might call *benevolent vegetarianism* and *caring veganism* would instead seem to be able to do the trick without slaughtering.⁴ By *benevolent vegetarianism*, I mean a practice that avoids inflicting the kinds of harm normally associated with vegetarian practice (for the sake of argument, I set aside here ideas according to which keeping non-human animals for their products is always harmfully exploitative or likewise immoral). Conceivably, keeping chickens for eggs and sheep for wool could be possible like this.

By *caring veganism*, I mean a practice that abolishes animal farming but continues to benevolently care for

⁴ I do not write ‘without killing’, for example because benevolently caring for non-human animals might require euthanization, and because crop farming is associated with killings that might be hard to avoid.

non-human animals. This could include benefitting wildlife by easing its suffering or ensuring that it can (continue) to lead lives worth living. It could likewise include benefitting pets and companion animals, for example by addressing the situation of stray and sheltered animals, but also by continuing to cause such animals to exist and have good lives (again, for the sake of argument, I assume that this would benefit the animals in question and that it is not always harmfully exploitative or otherwise objectionable).

Assuming that there is something objectionable about killing healthy and happy animals that would have continued to live a good life, both practices are *prima facie* superior to even *meatopia* and its slaughterings completely free of suffering. Moreover, turning the table on Zangwill, it would seem that *meatopia* is exceedingly unrealistic, and therefore, even if we were to discard the assumption about the badness of killing, both alternative practices seem to have an edge over Zangwill's vision (indeed might suspect that eliminating the parts of the meat eating practice that even Zangwill is willing to object would bring about an at least almost completely vegetarian diet for almost every human). In any case, the existence of *benevolent vegetarianism* and *caring veganism* refutes the claim that there is a *duty* to eat meat, even if they turned out not to be superior but merely on a par (for which there seems to be no reason). Finally, there seems to be no good reason to assume that alternative practices are too unrealistic to serve as both ideals and concrete goals to strive for (Zangwill surely does not provide any) and they better not be, given the ecological impact and moral catastrophe of the current overall meat-eating practice.

Now, while Zangwill insists that his argument is not consequentialist, one might consider the number of animals benefitted. Here is not the place to make detailed and well supported calculations, but let us try our own guesstimate using Zangwill's guess of 5% of animals farmed for meat to lead lives worth living and assume that this concerns land animals only. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (<https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QCL>) in 2020 there was an estimated standing number (i.e. number of animals living at any moment in time) of 40 billion mammal and bird livestock in the world. The majority of these are an estimated 33 billion chicken, followed by 1.5 billion cattle, 1.3 billion sheep, 1.2 billion ducks, 1.1 billion goats, and 950 million pigs. Note that due to the short lives of many of these animals, the number of animals slaughtered per year is much higher (pigs for instance are slaughtered after four to seven months). While not all of these animals are slaughtered for their meat, let us nevertheless for our guesstimate assume that about 2 billion (i.e. 5%) of these animals have lives that are overall good.

Now, irrespective of whether they would indeed have a moral obligation to, *could* benevolent vegetarianism and caring veganism realistically come up with these additional number of animals? Could such practices be realistically advocated for? The former first: Currently, there exist almost 8 billion laying hens (<https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QCL>). Assuming that keeping that many laying hens benevolently is possible, it would seem that increasing this population by a fourth while abolishing broiler and dual purpose chicken, as well as all other meat farming is feasible (note that at this very moment, there exist an estimated 33 billion chicken in total). Given that benevolent vegetarians will likely substitute meat and dairy products with eggs, these numbers do not seem far-fetched.

What about caring veganism? Well, the same numbers would be reached if every fourth human had one additional pet. Moreover, if wildlife is in general considered to lead lives worth living even in the absence of human intervention, then by reducing human ecological impact, caring veganism can easily lead to an increase of such numbers.⁵ Finally, adopting a vegan diet would allow for a higher total *human* animal

⁵ Or would have avoided their decline in the past: For example, billions of passenger pigeons lived in the USA before they were hunted to extinction.

population and something like it will likely be required to sustainably feed the human population projected for the near future (incidentally, the human population is projected to reach 10 billion, i.e. 2 billion more, in 2050). The evidence and literature on this abounds, cf. Springmann (2018).

While such napkin-calculations do not substitute proper investigations and would have to be amended for higher percentages of farmed animals having overall good lives (cf. section 4), these considerations are nevertheless enough to rebut Zangwill's argument. In any case, this shows that Zangwill has not sufficiently argued that beneficially maintaining sufficiently large populations of animals with overall good lives without keeping them for their meat is not feasible.

As alluded to already, consequentialist variants of Zangwill's argument exist. Notably, Tännsjö (2016) argues that factory farming is indeed morally required and that we should bring more and more (human and non-human) animals into existence. While this is not the place for a detailed assessment, let me mention just a few possible local points of contention: (1) Tännsjö's account is committed to contentious assumptions in population ethics, (2) it assumes that the animals in question do indeed have good enough lives, (3) if wildlife in general has good enough lives, then an increase in its population instead of farmed animals could be sufficient, and (4) again, benevolent vegetarianism and caring veganism (possibly combined with significant growth of the human population made possible through a largely vegan diet) exist as arguably superior options.

Different practices and different animal kinds While I consider the previous two points to be decisive objections against Zangwill's argument and have also already pointed out the rather idiosyncratic theoretical basis of his argument, let us engage with it a little bit more. It turns out that its focus on history and established practices creates a distinctive problem not shared by related consequentialist arguments: The argument depends crucially on how animal kinds and practices are individuated, but Zangwill does not argue that his is the correct individuation, even though he (2021: p. 300) realizes that there is an issue of individuation:

First, we have already seen above that animal kinds should not be individuated on the level of breeds or species, but neither will individuations like *domesticated animal* and *animals of a kind that is reared and slaughtered as part of the "beneficial" meat-eating practice* do: First, pets are domesticated animals, so we can benefit domesticated animals simply by benefitting pets. The second option would either seem to beg the question, or to amount to individuation by breed or species.

Second, practices: According to Zangwill, we can identify a practice of raising and slaughtering animals for meat in which the animals in question have lives worth living. Bracketing the empirical side of the matter, and the fact that it is doubtful that a significant number of people's meat-eating is fully part of that practice, I am willing to grant (for the sake of argument) that there is such a practice, although we might have to individuate practices very finely and allow for some gerrymandering.

Now suppose we consider either domesticated animals, or animals broadly and consider either the practice of pet-keeping or more broadly that of mutually beneficial symbiosis. It would appear that an argument like Zangwill's establishes that we have a duty to perpetuate this practice. Incidentally, depending on how broad we understand the relevant terms, far from only concerning domesticated animals, due to the interdependence of ecosystems this concerns virtually any animal capable of being benefitted that there is.

First, it therefore seems likely that contrary to what Zangwill (2021: pp. 299f.) thinks, his style of argument *does* establish duties concerning wildlife: Due to the dependence of both human and non-human animals on

functioning eco-systems and the dependence of those on human and non-human animals, there appears to be a good sense in which humans and non-human animals in general indeed are in a relationship of mutually beneficial symbiosis (or at least: were at some point in the past, given humanity's more recent ecological impact). Focusing on domesticated animals: According to Zangwill, they are like our friends, and hence we have a duty to benefit them, e.g. by breeding more and caring for them. But it appears this duty can be fulfilled by caring for *pets* – no slaughter required!

Second, consider beneficial practices that have beneficial subpractices. According to Zangwill's argument and the above analogous argument, the meat-eating practice would be a beneficial subpractice of the general practice of mutually beneficial symbiosis (involving either domesticated animals or animals in general). Now, it would be strange and curiously rigid if for any beneficial practice that we have a duty to perpetuate, we also have duties to perpetuate all of its beneficial subpractices, especially if the individuals benefitted change over time. For a toy case concerning reproduction consider this: Perhaps an argument like Zangwill's establishes that we have a duty to procreate due to its being a beneficial practice. But while we may assume that "procreating on Sabbath" is a beneficial practice too, it is unlikely that morality cares about the day on which to perform the act.

On the other hand, suppose duties *are* somehow inherited from practice to subpractice. Now, one would suspect that Zangwill would agree that in general, we have a (pro tanto) duty to end harmful practices. But then consider the current overall practice of meat-eating (as opposed to its subpractice of "beneficial" meat eating that Zangwill, at least officially, addresses) including the required breeding, raising, slaughtering, etc. of non-human animals: Zangwill is willing to admit that we have a duty to end this harmful practice. But if these duties are inherited from practice to subpractice, then thereby we also have a duty to end subpractices that in themselves may not be harmful!

Of course, others have made related points before: Even where locally morally neutral or even beneficial, raising animals for meat, slaughtering them, advertising, selling, and eating meat are part of and support a harmful practice (variantly conceptualized as human dominion over other animals, carnism, or simply the meat-eating practice) that we ought to abolish. Similar points may apply to attempts to find animals that are still fine to consume because they lack hedonic capacities, as well as eating roadkill and meat from (justifiedly) euthanized animals (be it wildlife or domesticated).

Human cannibalism, slavery, and extreme cases As Zangwill himself points out, his argument appears to generalize to raising humans for human consumption in at least possible situations. Now Zangwill wants to block the generalization by invoking special human rights that according to him the animals in question do not possess, and he promises forthcoming work on this. While his popular piece contains some hints as to the direction this may go (distinctive human rights are supposed to be grounded in human's having a capacity for "normative-self government" as a telos, but neither development of the account, nor argument are given), I suggest to postpone potential engagement until this work is published.

Let us take a quick look at what else he (2021: p. 304) says about this:

No group of human beings actually owes its existence to cannibalistic meat-eating in the way that billions of animals do owe their lives to carnivorous meat-eating practices. Therefore, we do not need to worry about the mere possibility too much, especially because it is also plausible that there are distinctive human rights in play that would protect human beings in that merely possible situation.

First, Zangwill's argument would appear to generalize to actual situations in which humans come about and have (all things considered) lives worth living not due to a cannibalistic (or, say, organ harvesting) practice, but other kinds of reprehensible social institutions and systems, slavery and dictatorships being two examples. Thus, there are plenty of analogous actual cases to evaluate Zangwill's argumentative schema with. Second, it is unclear why Zangwill seems to be so cavalier about merely possible situations: It is standard practice to evaluate moral theories using (sometimes quite far-fetched) merely possible cases. Perhaps some are too remote, but the cannibalism (and analogous) cases hardly are (cf. Doggett (2018: 2.2.2)).

These problem cases involving morally extreme situations are of considerable interest and theoretical importance, and indeed, it is not clear at all that Zangwill's potential rights-based assessment of the human cannibalism case would be correct: It may well be possible to cook up far-fetched cases in which the relevant kind of cannibalistic arrangement is a necessary condition on there being any beings having lives worth living at all, and those that are eventually killed for consumption have very good lives before indeed. At least, it does not seem inconceivable that this situation, while horrible, would be better than the alternative situation devoid of anyone having a life worth living at all.

Finally, we have to stress once more that Zangwill's argument (and its variants) can only go through if there are no (possibly suitably qualified) better alternatives: Independently of whether there are distinctive human rights, this is demonstrated both by the more remote cannibalism- and organ-harvesting cases, as well as actual cases involving reprehensible social institutions: As we likely imagine the former and as the latter indeed are, there exist better alternatives and hence no duty to perpetuate the (much) worse even though by stipulation still (marginally) beneficial practices. Perhaps Zangwill is right and for more immediate, practical concerns, we need not worry too much about remote cases in which these practices would be judged favorably – it just turns out that for his argument concerning meat-eating to go through, we would have to be in a similarly extreme situation, which we are not.

4 Conclusion

While Zangwill's essays can serve as a lesson as to how applied ethics in both academia and the public sphere should not be done, there are (as he partially points out himself) some important issues in the background of his discussion that concern population ethics generalized to both human and non-human animals, the suffering of wildlife, as well as issues concerning killing in vegetarian and vegan agriculture. Some questions that arise here are, for example:

- Do we have a duty to maintain or increase populations of (both human and non-human) animals? How, if at all, does it matter what species these animals belong to or what different capabilities they have?
- Assuming that we have some duty to improve the welfare of wildlife, what would be the role of killing in this?
- Would meat eating be defensible if the meat came exclusively from (morally justifiedly) to both human and non-human animals, the suffering of wildlife, as well as issues concerning euthanizing wildlife?
- Assuming that we have a duty to maintain or increase non-human animal populations, can and should we improve animal welfare by establishing populations of domesticated animals?

Studying these issues is undoubtedly very important and indeed already focus of a significant amount of work (once more consider Doggett (2018) as a starting point).

To recap, I have argued that Zangwill's writings in favor of a duty to eat meat exhibit some combination of epistemic failure, objectionable carnist activism, and trolling. I have rebutted his argument proper, and identified some important issues concerning the suffering of wildlife and population ethics that need to be studied further. For what it's worth, I find it highly unlikely that a convincing defense of meat eating on the basis of considerations concerning these issues should be forthcoming. Therefore, if we must feed the troll, we better make sure it's plant-based.

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