

Why I am a vegan (and you should be one too)

Tristram McPherson
Virginia Tech
dr.tristram@gmail.com

Ms. for submission to *Philosophy Comes to Dinner*
(Eds. Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, and Matthew Halteman)

Introduction

If you are like the vast majority of people, you eat, wear, and otherwise use products made from or by non-human animals (hereafter: *animals*). Like most aspects of human life, these actions have an ethical dimension: we can ask what principles ought to guide our interactions with animals, and what implications those principles have for our use of animal products. *Ethical vegans* accept a radical view of our relations to animals: they claim that it is (at least ordinarily) wrong to eat or otherwise use animal products.

Because this view demands a radical change in our lifestyles, it may initially seem implausible, or even absurd. In this paper, I show that this dismissive attitude is unwarranted. I do this by sketching a clear and compelling case for a version of the vegan view. To be precise, I defend:

Modest Ethical Veganism It is typically wrong to use animal products

This thesis is modest in two respects. First, some vegans might claim that it is wrong to use products made from or by any member of the animal kingdom. However, by *animal products*, I mean only those products made from or by

mammals, and the birds that are familiar sources of meat (chickens, turkeys, ducks, etc.).

(I very briefly discuss how far my argument can be extended to other species of animals in the final section of the paper.) Second, unlike the boldest forms of ethical veganism, my thesis claims only that it is *typically* wrong to use animal products, not that it is always wrong. (Unless explicitly noted, I use “veganism” in what follows to refer to this modest form of the view.)

One might argue for veganism in many ways.¹ For example, one might argue that one should become a vegan because it is good for your health, or because of the bad environmental effects of animal agriculture. I will discuss these ideas very briefly in §§3 and 4, but they are not central to my argument. Instead, I focus on spelling out some of the ethical consequences of the fact that the industry that provides us with animal products systematically inflicts mind-boggling quantities of suffering and death on billions of animals each year. I develop my argument in three stages. I first argue that the wrongness of inflicting suffering can be partially explained by what it is like to suffer. I

¹ Many philosophers defend views related to veganism within various systematic ethical frameworks. For utilitarianism see (Singer 1980), for broadly Rawlsian and Scanlonian contractualist approaches, see respectively (Rowlands 2002, Ch. 3) and (Talbert 2006), for a ‘rights’ view see (Regan 2004), for a Kantian approach see (Korsgaard 2004), and for virtue theory see (Hursthouse 2006). If you find one of these ethical frameworks especially compelling, you should consider reading the relevant paper from this group. My argument does not presuppose such a systematic framework; two important arguments for vegetarianism that share this feature are (Rachels 1997) and (DeGrazia 2009); this paper is especially indebted to these last papers.

argue on this basis that it is typically wrong to make animals suffer (§1). I then argue that the wrongness of killing can be partially explained by the fact that killing typically deprives the victim of a valuable future. I argue on this basis that it is typically wrong to kill animals (§2). Together with facts about the lives of animals raised for our use, these principles entail that the institutions responsible for providing most of our animal products act wrongfully on a massive scale. I argue that it is typically wrong to use such animal products because doing so constitutes a wrongful form of complicity with these institutions (§3). I conclude by discussing some of the implications and limitations of the view that follows from my argument (§4).

Before proceeding to my argument, let me clarify the nature of ethical principles, as I will be discussing them in this paper. Consider a familiar principle: *it is wrong to break your promises*. First, this principle states a typically *sufficient* (but not necessary) condition for wrongness. In this case: if an act breaks a promise, then it is typically wrong. This is compatible with there being many wrong acts that do not involve promise-breaking. Second, ethical principles are typically *defeasible*. There are two ways ordinary principles can be defeated. First, the principle can be outweighed in a given context, by important competing ethical considerations. For example, if I need to break my promise to meet you for lunch in order to save a life, it would not be wrong to do that. Second, some ethical principles can be *undercut*: ordinary conditions for their holding can be absent. For example, if I only promised you that I would paint a certain bicycle because you led me to falsely believe it was yours, I might have no reason to keep my promise once I find out that you

stole the bicycle. I will explicitly signal that the principles I defend may be defeasible in these ways by including the word ‘typically’ in their statement.

1. The wrongness of making animals suffer

I begin my central argument for veganism in this section, by considering the ethical significance of animal suffering. After briefly explaining how I understand animal suffering, I argue that reflection on why it is bad to suffer and wrong to inflict suffering supports the conclusion that it is typically wrong to make animals suffer.

There are many phenomena that might be grouped together under the heading ‘suffering,’ and humans are surely capable of suffering in ways that animals cannot. However, I take it to be clear that animals can suffer in ethically important ways.² Consider two examples of what I have in mind by ‘suffering.’ The first is intense physical pain, such as a piglet experiences when he is castrated without anesthetic. The second is intense distress, such as a cow or a sow experiences when she is separated from her young far earlier than is natural. I take it to be clear that animal suffering is ethically significant. But it may be useful to consider a vivid case to illustrate that significance. Suppose that I caught a stray dog, took him home, and then repeatedly applied electric shocks to his genitals: shocks so intense that they were just short of

² Here I set aside important debates. Should pain be distinguished from suffering? Does the latter require capacities that the former lacks? Is only the latter ethically significant? I take the best work on animal pain and suffering to strongly support the assumption made in the text. See (Allen 2004) and (Akhtar 2011, 495-501) for helpful discussion.

life-threatening. My shocking the dog in this way would be very wrong. (Notice that, this claim too is only true holding ordinary assumptions fixed. If shocking the dog were for some reason necessary to prevent hundreds of human deaths, I should shock the dog.)

I seek a plausible and general explanation for why it would be wrong to shock the dog. To begin the search, consider the possibility of accidentally smashing one of your fingers with a hammer. There are many sorts of reasons to avoid such an outcome: both the pain and the injury would be distracting and would disrupt your ability to pursue your goals; you might be ridiculed for your clumsiness; etc. These reasons do not compete with each other. Rather, *each* of them is typically a sufficient explanation of why you should avoid smashing your finger. Another plausible typically sufficient explanation of why you should avoid smashing your finger is simply that experiencing the intense throbbing pain of one's injured finger is – just by itself – bad.³

Think next about why it is wrong to *inflict* suffering on another person. Again, there are many sorts of reasons why this may be so. For example, inflicting suffering can interfere with your victim's autonomy: her power to live the life that she values, to the best of her abilities. It may also express disrespect for your victim, or some other vicious attitude or trait. However,

³ It may be that not every pain is intrinsically bad. Some pains may be essential components of valued or valuable accomplishments or experiences. Possible examples include certain athletic achievements or even masochistic sex. It is arguable that such pains are not be bad at all. Other pains may not be bad because they are imperceptibly mild. Because my claim is about the typical significance of pain and suffering, it is compatible with these possibilities.

compare two ways of disrespectfully interfering with someone's agency. On the one hand, you could repeatedly and obnoxiously distract her. On the other, you could inflict intense and prolonged pain on her. The second possible action seems worse, even holding fixed the degree of disrespect and interference. Indeed, if forced to choose between these two actions, it would be wrong to perform the second. The most natural explanation of this fact is that *the way that suffering feels* is a typically sufficient explanation of the wrongness of inflicting it.

Our imagined stray dog can also suffer. In light of this, the explanation just suggested is also a very plausible explanation of why it would be wrong to shock the stray dog: doing so would make it suffer terribly. But there is nothing special about this case. Rather, the explanation just proposed supports a general principle: *it is typically wrong to make animals suffer*. Notice that this principle and the explanation that I used to defend it are distinct: it is possible for someone to reject my explanation but accept the principle for some other reason.

Both the principle and the explanation I use to defend it are compatible with the plausible view that it is typically worse to inflict similarly severe suffering on an adult human rather than an animal. This could be explained, for example, by the significance of disrespecting or interfering with autonomous agency, which few (if any) animals possess to a significant degree.

One might object that my explanation for the wrongness of inflicting suffering on a human fails, because it ignores the explanatory role of *moral*

status. For example, it might be claimed that it is wrong to make a human suffer because of what their suffering is like, together with humans' distinctive moral status. Animals, it might be insisted, lack moral status (or have some sort of second-class moral status), and so the badness of their suffering cannot render wrongful an action that makes them suffer (see (Cohen 1986) for something like this idea).

This objection should be rejected for two reasons.⁴ The first reason is intuitive. It is very plausible that it would be wrong to shock the dog, and this objection threatens to deprive us of the most natural explanation of that wrongness. The second reason is theoretical: the notion of moral status is associated with at least two different ideas. Once these ideas are distinguished, the objection fails.

The first idea associated with moral status is that moral status is the bundle of ethical powers and protections characteristically possessed by adult humans. The second idea is that moral status grounds the directionality of duties. For example, if I have a duty to care for your treasured vase, it is a duty to you, not to the vase. By contrast, I have a duty *to my son* to care for him. So my son, but not the vase, has moral status in the directionality sense.⁵

While I owe special duties *to* my two-year-old son, he lacks many of the ethical powers and protections that are characteristic of human adults. For example, it is often wrong to paternalistically make decisions for adult

⁴ For related skepticism about the usefulness of 'moral status' talk, see (Zamir 2007, Ch. 2).

⁵ A helpful introduction to debates about moral status (Jaworska and Tannenbaum 2013) dubs these two ideas 'full moral status' and 'moral status' respectively.

humans: we should rather respect their decision-making about their own lives. By contrast, I have a moral duty to my son to be paternalistic towards him.

If this is correct, the objection from moral status fails. The two ideas associated with moral status come apart: my son possesses the second but not the first. Further, the fact that we have duties to children to refrain from making them suffer shows that the explanation of the wrongness of inflicting suffering does not require that the victim have the sort of moral status characteristic of adult humans. Does the wrongness of inflicting suffering require the second (directedness) notion of moral status? I'm not sure. Recall the dog-torturing case. Do we have a duty *to the dog* not to make it suffer horribly? I am much less sure about this question than I am that it would be wrong to torture the dog, because of how it would feel for the dog to suffer. In light of this, I conclude: either we have duties to animals not to make them suffer, or the badness of their suffering can explain the wrongness of inflicting it, even absent such directed duties.

This section has argued that it is wrong to make animals suffer. This followed from my underlying explanatory thesis: that what it is like to experience suffering constitutes a sufficient explanation of the wrongness of inflicting suffering. This explanation (perhaps amended to include reference to directedness moral status) appears plausible, and reflects the ethically significant similarities between humans and animals, without ignoring the ethically significant differences.

2. The wrongness of killing animals

In this section, I focus on the ethical significance of killing. As in the previous section, I begin by identifying a typically sufficient condition, this time for the wrongness of killing. This principle entails that it is typically wrong to kill animals. The wrongness of painlessly killing an animal is less obvious to many people than the wrongness of making it suffer. In light of this, I complement my primary argument by showing that it is difficult to coherently deny that it is wrong to kill animals while accepting the wrongness of inflicting animal suffering.

My foil in this section is the *ethical omnivore* who suggests that it is okay to use animal products that are produced without inflicting suffering.⁶ Because ethical omnivorism accepts the wrongness of inflicting suffering, it is itself a radical view, condemning most forms of contemporary animal agriculture. For example, it denounces the factory farms that provide animals with lives of nearly unmitigated suffering, and the especially egregious cruelties meted out to veal calves and the geese used to produce pâté.

The fundamental disagreement between the ethical omnivore and the modest ethical vegan concerns the ethics of painlessly killing an animal. A clear case shows that the omnivore's position is at least uncomfortable. Suppose that I caught a healthy stray kitten, took it home, and then killed it by adding a fast-acting and painless poison to its meal. I take it that this would

⁶ Compare (Pollan 2006, Ch. 17). This view has received significant critical attention. See (McMahan 2008), (DeGrazia 2009, 160-164), (Harman 2011), and (Norcross 2012) for alternatives to my reply.

be wrong. Suppose that the omnivore disagrees. The right way to adjudicate this dispute is to seek a general explanation of the wrongness of killing.

The ethics of killing is a complex and controversial matter (see McMahan 2002 for a detailed discussion of many of the complexities). However, as with the wrongness of inflicting suffering, we can identify several typically sufficient explanations for the wrongness of killing an adult human. First, killing typically interferes dramatically with the victim's autonomy. Second, nonconsensual killing is also inconsistent with appropriate *respect* for the victim's autonomy: it alters his life – by ending it – without his consent. I will assume here that animals do not have autonomous plans, and thus that killing them is not objectionable in these ways.

There is another important reason why killing a human being is wrong: killing typically deprives the victim of a valuable future.⁷ That is, killing someone deprives them of valuable experiences, activities, relationships, (etc.) that they would otherwise have had. The significance of this explanation is made especially vivid by considering cases of *life-extending killings* (Lippert-Rasmussen 2001). For example, imagine a drug that, when injected, damages one's heart such that one dies quickly and painlessly a year later. Ordinarily, my intentionally giving you such a drug would be wrongful killing. However, suppose that this drug is also the only antidote to a poison that you have just

⁷ Compare (Marquis 1989). Marquis suggests that this is the 'primary' thing that makes killing a person wrong. Because the autonomy-based considerations also strike me as important, I reject this stronger claim. For the underlying idea that the badness of one's death is constituted by that death's depriving one of a valuable future, see Nagel 1979.

accidentally ingested, which will kill you within the hour unless treated. Suppose finally that I give you the drug while you are unconscious from the poison, and sure enough, it kills you a year later. This is not a case of wrongful killing. Indeed, I am presumably ethically required to give you the drug in these circumstances, if I can. The crucial difference between this case and the ordinary case is that in the ordinary case, injecting the drug deprives you of your future, while in this case, it extends that future. The contrasting value of these possible futures provide a plausible explanation for why it is wrong to give the drug in the former case, and right to do so in the latter. This explanation entails that the fact that a killing deprives the victim of a valuable future is typically sufficient to explain why the killing is wrong.

It is plausible that the futures of animals can be objectively good (or bad) for them to have. Valuable features of animal lives are not hard to sketch. Animals seem capable of pleasures as well as pains, and it is good to have a pleasant life; pack animals have better lives if they have companions, etc. Consider a range of things that one might intentionally do to an animal: raising it in isolation, painlessly amputating a healthy limb, or rearing it on a diet lacking essential nutrients. These sorts of acts seem wrong. A natural explanation is that they are wrong because they deprive the animal of aspects of a valuable future such as companionship, the ability to function physically, and the ability to have a pleasant life.

I have just suggested that animals can have valuable futures. And I argued above that one typically sufficient explanation for the wrongness of killing is that it deprives the victim of a valuable future. Because this is a

typically sufficient condition, it applies (absent defeating conditions) to killing anything that has a valuable future. For example, it smoothly explains why it would be wrong to kill the stray kitten in the example introduced above: given that the kitten is healthy, killing it almost certainly deprives it of a valuable future. But there is nothing special about the kitten in this example. So the explanation also entails a general ethical principle: that it is typically wrong to kill animals.

The explanation that supports this principle also provides plausible guidance concerning when it would be okay to kill an animal. For it suggests that (other things being equal) it is permissible to kill an animal if its future will on balance be bad for it to have. For example, it suggests that it would be a mercy, and not wrong, to painlessly kill a cat that is suffering from an agonizing and incurable disease. This is the sort of case where we would rightly say that the animal's continued life was a fate worse than death.

As with the argument against inflicting suffering on animals, it is possible to resist my argument for the wrongness of killing animals by objecting that the explanation that I offer is incomplete. One initially plausible objection here claims that in order for an entity's death to be bad for it, that entity must value its future. With this idea in hand, it could be suggested that many animals cannot value their futures (or at least: not in as rich of a way as humans), and hence that their deaths are not bad.⁸

⁸ See (Tooley 1972) for the closely related idea that the capacity to care about one's continued existence is required for the right to life.

This objection fails because it can be wrong to deprive a person of a valuable future, even if they do not value it (compare (Marquis 1989, 195-6)). Suppose that Penelope has temporarily fallen into deep depression: she cannot see the point of anything, except perhaps of dying to end the pointlessness. However, in a few weeks this condition will lift, and she will go on to have a long, rich, and fulfilling life. In this circumstance, Penelope has a valuable future, although her depression prevents her from valuing it. Evidently, killing Penelope now would be very wrong, even if she wanted you to do so.

Nor does the value of an activity for a person depend on their eventually valuing it, or being able to value it. We are all familiar with cases of people who (sadly) never realize how good a relationship or activity is for them. And some such people may be psychologically incapable of recognizing such value due to some prejudice or trauma. This sort of blindness typically makes a person's life worse, but it need not erase the goodness for him of the underlying relationship or activity. If animals are incapable of valuing, this entails at most that they are in a situation analogous to that of such people. We can act wrongly by depriving people of such unappreciated goods: you cannot vindicate theft or discrimination by convincing the victims that they do not value what they lack. This suggests that it can be wrong to deprive a creature of goods even if they do not or cannot value them. And with this the objection collapses.

This argument for the wrongness of killing animals was independent of my case for the wrongness of making them suffer. However, it is also

difficult to coherently accept that it is wrong to make animals suffer, while denying that it is wrong to kill them. The difficulty can be dramatized by an example.

Suppose that one could make a commercially or artistically successful video that in part would require performing a painful and unnecessary medical operation on a cow. If we grant that it is typically wrong to make the cow suffer, it is implausible that the commercial or artistic merits of the video outweigh the suffering, and thereby justify performing the operation. So performing the operation here would be wrong. But suppose that performing the same painful operation on a second cow would save that cow's life. Here, performing the operation is clearly permissible – indeed, very nice – if the cow would go on to have a long and worthwhile life after the operation. This pair of cases makes it very difficult to accept that it is wrong to inflict suffering on animals, while denying that it is wrong to kill them. For preserving the life of the cow – and hence its valuable future – is enough in the second case to ethically justify inflicting otherwise wrongful suffering.

This directly refutes the strong view that animal suffering matters but animal death does not: the strong view implausibly entails that it would be wrong to perform the life-extending operation. On the remaining possible view, the valuable future of an animal does not make it wrong to kill the animal, but it can somehow justify inflicting otherwise wrongful suffering on the animal. This view is deeply puzzling: it threatens to entail, for example, that it is okay for me to perform the painful operation, and then decide to slaughter the cow.

The account I have offered in this section provides a better explanation of why the second (medically required) cow operation is permissible: in this case one inflicts *life-extending* suffering. Inflicting life-extending suffering can be permissible for the same reason as life-extending killing: because the value of an animal's future plays a uniform role in determining which ways of treating that animal are right and wrong.

In this section, I noted that killing a person or an animal typically deprives them of a valuable future. I argued that this is a typically sufficient explanation of why a killing is wrong. The upshot is that it is typically wrong to kill animals. Finally, I argued that this thesis garners additional support from cases where we inflict suffering on animals as a necessary means to provide them with better lives.

3. Complicity with animal suffering and death

The arguments of the previous two sections entail that it is typically wrong to kill or inflict suffering on animals. While crucial to my case for veganism, these arguments do not settle the issue. This is because of a central fact about contemporary life: the typical omnivore need not ever see a live cow or pig or chicken, let alone kill or inflict suffering on one. This fact forms the basis for an important objection to Modest Ethical Veganism. In this section, I develop the strongest form of this objection, and then answer it in two stages. First, I argue that the institutions responsible for producing our animal products act wrongly. Second, I argue that veganism is typically required as a response to the wrongful behavior of those institutions.

Consider a preliminary objection: by the time you order a chicken dinner, the chicken it is made from is already dead. Ordering the meal doesn't kill the chicken, and ordering a vegan burger instead won't bring the chicken back. This objection invites a very tempting reply: what matters ethically is not (just) whether you yourself actively *inflict* animal suffering or death, but whether your behavior tends to *makes a difference* to the amount of animal suffering or death. Ordering the chicken dinner – while not harming the chicken you eat – might tend to lead to another chicken being bred, made to suffer terribly, and then killed.

Your ordering the chicken dinner would tend to make a difference to the amount of animal suffering if the market for chicken were a perfectly efficient classical market in the following sense: every chicken dinner purchased increased the aggregate demand for chicken slightly; this increase in demand would slightly increase the market price for chicken, and this in turn would tend to produce a slight increase in the supply of chicken. Given how chickens are raised, increasing the supply of chicken involves increasing the amount of chicken suffering and death.

This puts me in a position to introduce a stronger version of the objection to Modest Ethical Veganism:

Inefficacy even if it is wrong to inflict animal suffering and death, it is not typically wrong to use animal products, because doing so does not tend to make any difference to the amount of animal suffering and death.

Inefficacy combines an empirical claim with an ethical thesis. The empirical claim is that using animal products does not tend to make any difference to the amount of animal suffering and death. The ethical thesis is that veganism could only be ethically required if it made such a difference.

The empirical claim could be defended by rejecting the hypothesis that the actual market for chicken is relevantly similar to a perfectly efficient market. According to the objector, Food industry supply chains are so complex, and waste and inefficiency so rampant, that my decision to buy a chicken dinner (or other animal products) tends to have no effect at all on the rate of animal suffering and death. This empirical hypothesis has been challenged.⁹ But I will not pursue that challenge here.

The idea that becoming vegan will tend to make no difference to animal welfare is discouraging, but I will argue that it does not undercut Modest Ethical Veganism. This is because the ethical thesis underlying Inefficacy should be rejected, as I now argue.

One initial reason for skepticism about this ethical thesis is that there are plausible ethical principles that require action even in cases where one

⁹ This challenge has been pressed by (Singer 1980, 335-6). Singer argues for the hypothesis that our consumption has a very small chance of making a difference to animal welfare, but if we do make a difference, that difference will be correspondingly enormous. Singer concludes that we ought to be vegetarian for that reason. (Norcross 2004, 232-3) and especially (Kagan 2011) develop Singer's idea further. See (Budolfson *ms-a*) for an important challenge to the Singer-style argument.

does not make such a difference. For example, consider the duty of *fair play* (e.g. Klosko 2004): this duty requires that one not benefit from successful cooperative institutions without making a fair contribution to them (i.e., that I not *freeride*). For example, suppose that there is a public bus in my town, which survives by charging its riders a fair price to ride. Because the bus uses the honor system, I can easily ride without paying, if I choose. Suppose finally that the cooperative benefits provided by the bus are not threatened by my failing to pay: there are enough paying riders that the bus system will persist whether or not I pay. In this case, my freeriding does not harm anyone, and yet it still seems wrong. This example only gives us reason to be suspicious of Inefficacy.¹⁰ I now argue that the suspicion is warranted: we can be required to be vegan even if doing so will make no difference to the amount of animal suffering and death.

I begin by evaluating the institutions most directly involved in raising and slaughtering animals for use in making animal products: the farms, animal factories, feedlots and slaughterhouses. To be concise, I will call these the *animal product industry*. This industry inflicts extraordinary amounts of suffering, and then very early death, to the billions of animals it raises (see

¹⁰ One important way to defend the ethical thesis underlying Inefficacy would be to appeal to an influential general ethical theory: *act-consequentialism*. This is the thesis that the rightness of an act is determined purely by the aggregate consequences of that act (in its most familiar form, how much net happiness will follow from it, compared to other options). If true, act-consequentialism would vindicate the ethical thesis underlying Inefficacy. I take act-consequentialism to be false, but I cannot argue adequately for that claim here.

Mason and Singer 1990 for a sketch of some of the literally gory details).¹¹ My argument for the wrongness of killing animals and making them suffer constitutes a strong case that the animal product industry thereby act wrongly.

As I have noted, however, the principles I defend can be defeated by sufficiently weighty competing ethical considerations. Can we find such considerations to ethically vindicate the industry that raises and slaughters animals for our use? We cannot. The most obvious good effects of this industry are the economic benefits to the industry itself, and the enjoyments and meanings that consumers take from using the resulting products. The appeal to these good effects fails for three reasons.

First, economic benefits are rarely the sort of thing that can justify otherwise wrongful acts. For example, suppose that I could make a good living torturing kittens and selling videos of the torture on the internet. The fact that it would make me money would not justify my actions.

Second, there is a vast array of enjoyable vegan food that most current omnivores could learn to enjoy: while veganism surely requires sacrificing some gustatory enjoyment, it is certainly compatible with a richer gustatory life than most omnivores currently experience. This leaves the value of the

¹¹ We often hold institutions responsible for acts. For example, U.S. law held BP responsible for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. However, some philosophers believe that only individuals can act or be morally responsible. If you believe this, feel free to read my talk of institutions with wrongful plans as shorthand for very complex facts about large collections of individuals with wrongful plans.

cultural meanings that many people attach to food as a significant positive effect. But these meanings surely cannot justify inflicting suffering and death on billions of animal every year. The third reason that the appeal to the good effects of contemporary animal agriculture fails is that such agriculture has significant negative effects on humans that must also be weighted in the balance.

Consider four points. First, it typically requires far more arable land and water to produce a calorie of meat than to produce a calorie of plant-based food.¹² Animal agriculture thus puts pressure on vulnerable cropland and water resources. Second, the economic incentives facing animal agriculture have led to increasingly industrialized farming practices. This has increased the amount of environmentally toxic byproducts generated by farming. This in turn both further damages land and water systems and directly threatens human health (Walker et. al. 2005). Third, animal agriculture is a significant contributor to the catastrophic threat of global warming.¹³ Finally, the overconsumption of animal products is a central contributor to the unhealthiness of the majority of North American diets,

¹² This is only true in the general case; for example, some land is too poor to viably grow plant crops, but can support grazing animals, so environmental consideration may support eating meat grown on such land. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see (Fairlie 2010, Ch. 3).

¹³ Estimates of the climate impact of animal agriculture range wildly, from between a twentieth and a half of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions For competing estimates of the climate effects of animal agriculture, see (Goodland and Anhang 2009), (Fairlie 2010, Ch. 13), and (United Nations Food and Agriculture Association, 2014).

which include too many calories, too much saturated fat, and too few vegetables and whole grains (Walker et. al 2005). Vegan diets tend not to have these features. It is thus arguable that the overall impact of the animal product industry on human health is very negative.¹⁴

For these reasons, it is very far from clear that the net effect of contemporary animal agriculture on humans is positive.¹⁵ It is thus implausible that these effects suffice to defeat the application of the principles I defended in the previous two sections. Because the institutions that produce our animal products are responsible for the suffering and death of many billions of animals every year, the principles I have defended thus entail that the institutions most directly responsible for animal suffering and death are thereby guilty of massive and systematic wrongdoing.

I now argue that veganism is required because consumption of animal products puts us into ethically objectionable relations to these institutions. The key idea is that one should not aim to benefit from wrongdoing.¹⁶ Let me illustrate this idea with a case. Suppose that Alice has decided to buy a house, and (having small children) desires to live in a quiet neighborhood near an

¹⁴ To be clear, current nutritional science does not find significant health differences between people with 'plant-based' omnivorous diets, and those with vegetarian or vegan diets (Dwyer 2013, 318-320). The impact of animal products on health that I identify is a function of actual, rather than ideal, patterns of omnivorous eating.

¹⁵ For arguments for vegetarianism that appeal to some of the considerations just mentioned, see (Singer 2002, 165-9) and (Rachels 2011, §3.)

¹⁶ (DeGrazia 2009, 157-9) argues for a related idea. Other philosophers (e.g. Rachels 1997) content themselves with the thought that ideas in this neighborhood are deeply plausible.

elementary school. It turns out that a certain realtor in her town consistently has the best stock of such houses on offer. There is only one catch: this realtor is a racist, who uses his business to promote the racial homogeneity of 'nice' neighborhoods. He does this by showing houses in these neighborhoods only to members of Alice's race. If there are other realtors with reasonable houses on offer, it would be wrong for Alice to work with the racist realtor. This seems true even if Alice's doing so will make no difference to the racial make-up of the relevant neighborhoods or to the realtor's profits (for example, because Alice can foresee that someone else of her race will happily make use of the realtor's services in her place).

The wrongness of working with the realtor, even in such circumstances, appears best explained as follows. The realtor has a wrongful plan: to promote racial homogeneity by selling desirable homes in a discriminatory way. By using his services to buy a home, Alice would be seeking to benefit by cooperating with that plan. And it is wrong to do that. This suggests that it is typically wrong to seek to benefit by cooperating with wrongful plans.

We can identify a more specific and more stringent principle, however. Suppose that the only local grocer sells two sorts of products: ethically produced food, and nutritional supplements that she makes by painfully extracting bone marrow and tissue from the slaves that she keeps in the basement. If refusing to buy the grocer's food would lead you to starve, it might be too demanding to insist that one not cooperate with the grocer at all. However, this does not give you *carte blanche* to buy and enjoy the

supplements. The right way to explain this is that there is a distinctively wrongful *part* of the grocer's plan: making and selling the supplements. And even if we have no acceptable way to avoid cooperating with her plan overall, we can and ought to avoid cooperating with its distinctively wrongful part.

These cases illustrate the principle that I endorse:

Anti-Complicity It is typically wrong to aim to benefit by cooperating
with the wrongful elements of others' plans

My talk of 'plans' here should not be taken to apply only to official corporate plans, or to patterns of explicit reasoning; rather it should include the pattern of goals that explain an individual's or institution's behavior. For example, suppose that NGO X's official organizational mission is to dig wells in sub-Saharan Africa, but X's executives in fact systematically use X to funnel donor funds to their Swiss bank accounts. As I am thinking about plans, NGO X's actual plan in this case centrally involves defrauding donors.

Anti-Complicity explains why it is wrong to buy supplements from the grocer, but okay to buy vegetables from her (at least if you lack other adequate sources of food). Buying the vegetables does not cooperate with the wrongful *part* of her plan. Similarly, Anti-Complicity can explain why it is okay to buy vegetables at your local grocery store, despite the fact that this store almost certainly sells animal products, and thereby has a wrongful plan. However, as in the slave-torturing grocer example, you do not typically cooperate with the

wrongful *part* of your grocery store's wrongful plan by purchasing their vegetables.

Anti-Complicity similarly explains why it is wrong to work with the racist realtor: buying a house from the realtor just is cooperating with the wrongful part of his plan. Finally, Anti-Complicity also explains why Inefficacy is false, because it does not require that your use of animal products makes a difference to the amount of animal suffering in the world. This aspect of Anti-Complicity is plausible: in the example just given, it is wrong to buy the supplements from the grocer even if doing so did not lead to more suffering for the grocer's slaves.

I take these points to show that Anti-Complicity has formidable explanatory power. One might worry that this principle is nonetheless objectionable, because it is *too demanding*. Consider for example the hypothesis that virtually every product that we need in order to live our lives is produced as part of a plan that aims to benefit from exploitative labor practices, or wrongful environmental degradation, or some other wrongful act. Given this hypothesis, it might seem that Anti-Complicity tells us that whatever we do is wrong.

There are three important points to make about this worry. First, the suggested hypothesis is boldly pessimistic, and we should not assume that it would survive careful scrutiny. Second, the hypothesis is naturally read as one in which our lives are maintained only at ethically objectionable cost to others. Our ethical obligations *should* be very demanding when applied to such cases. Compare: a slaveholder should typically free his slaves, and

compensate them for the exploitation he has inflicted on them, even if doing so requires sacrificing the things he most cares about. Third, the demandingness of Anti-Complicity should not be overstated. Like all of the principles I have defended in this paper, this principle is explicitly defeasible. This means that it is compatible with there being cases in which competing ethical considerations make cooperation with wrongful plans permissible, or even required. Consider the grocer example again: if my child had a rare medical condition that was devastating if untreated, and the condition could only be treated by using the grocer's noxiously produced supplements, it might be permissible to buy the supplements in order to treat her.

My defense of Anti-Complicity puts me in a position to complete my case for Modest Ethical Veganism. My preceding arguments entail that the institutions that make our animal products have a wrongful plan: they aim to profit financially by selling products made in a way that involves wrongful animal suffering and death. By purchasing the resulting products, you would be seeking to benefit by cooperating with this plan. Anti-Complicity entails that such cooperation is typically wrongful. And – unlike in the medical condition case just discussed – the choice to be vegan does not typically impose large morally significant costs.

4. What the argument implies

This paper has argued for

Modest Ethical Veganism It is typically wrong to use animal products

Where *animal products* means products made from or by mammals, and the birds that are familiar sources of meat (chickens, turkeys, ducks, etc.). It may be helpful to review the overall structure of my argument for this thesis:

1. It is wrong to inflict animal suffering and death, unless there are strong competing ethical considerations (§§1-2)
 2. The animal product industry systematically inflicts massive suffering and death on animals
 3. There are no competing ethical considerations that justify the animal death and suffering inflicted by the animal product industry (§3)
 4. The animal product industry systematically engages in massive wrongdoing: It has a wrongful plan (from 1-3)
 5. In the typical case, using animal products involves seeking to benefit from cooperating with the animal product industry's plan (§3)
 6. It is wrong to seek to benefit by cooperating with others' wrongful plans, absent competing ethical considerations (§3)
 7. In the typical case, there are no competing ethical considerations that justify cooperating with these institutions
-
- C. In the typical case, it is wrong to use animal products (from 4-7)

This summary of the argument may seem overly pedantic. However, it is intended to be useful. The argument makes explicit each of the claims that together support my conclusion. And the argument is *valid*: if the premises of the argument are true, then the conclusion must be true. This means that

anyone wishing to reasonably reject my conclusion must explain which premise they wish to reject, and how my argument for that premise is flawed.¹⁷

I conclude the paper by exploring the implications of this argument. In order to clarify its significance, I focus on spelling out its limitations. I first explain that I leave open how far across the animal kingdom my argument extends. I then explain the way that Modest Ethical Veganism is compatible with the possibility of ethically acceptable animal farming practices. Finally, I explore some consequences of the fact that this thesis allows for exceptions, and discuss its application to certain hard cases.

Before explaining these limitations, it is important to emphasize that they limit the implications of *this* argument. My argument does not claim to illuminate the *only* reason to be vegan. Consider just one example: as I noted in §3, the animal product industry also contributes significantly to global warming and environmental degradation more broadly. Some such contributions may constitute wrongful indifference to human and animal well-being. This in turn could underwrite a second argument that it is wrong to be complicit with this industry. Such an argument, if sound, might have interestingly different scope and limitations. So a vegan could accept my argument, but take veganism to be required for other reasons, in cases where my argument does not apply.

¹⁷ For discussion of the attempt to reject the conclusion of this sort of argument without rejecting its premises see (McPherson *forthcoming*). For related methodological discussion, see (McPherson *published online*).

Note first that my argument rests crucially on the fact that animals like cats, dogs, cows, pigs, sheep, deer, goats, rabbits, geese, ducks, turkeys and chickens can suffer.¹⁸ It is a hard question how far across the animal kingdom this capacity is distributed. The central question is: what sort of brain architecture is needed to underwrite the possibility of suffering, and how widely distributed is that architecture? If we ordered all known animals by the complexity of their nervous systems, humans would be at one end; at the other end are animals like oysters (which lack a brain) and sponges (which entirely lack a nervous system). I am certain that these latter animals cannot suffer.¹⁹

As I emphasized in the introduction, my argument thus falls short of vindicating veganism, if that is strictly understood to ban use of any animal products.²⁰ This paper does not seriously address where on that spectrum the capacity to suffer arises. For example, fish are a salient hard case. However, I will suggest that in the absence of a convincing account of the biological basis for the capacity to suffer, we should be cautious in what we are willing to eat.

¹⁸ Vegans are sometimes challenged to explain how they justify taking the life of plants. While plants can have better or worse lives, they cannot suffer. And it is implausible that their lives are ethically significant in anything like the way the life of a being that can feel is.

¹⁹ (Armstrong and Botzler 2009, Part Two) provides a helpful introduction to questions about animal capacities.

²⁰ The animal kingdom is an elegant and salient place to mark the boundary of the ethically edible, but I take ethical veganism to require a more serious vindication than this. Compare Cox 2010, which suggests that vegans ought to be able to eat oysters.

Merely *doubting* whether an animal can suffer is not an appropriate ground for privileging one's appetite over its possible suffering.

Note next that nothing in my argument rules out animal farming *per se*. It is possible to imagine farming animals in a way that does not involve shortening their lives or making them suffer. My view does not suggest any objection to using milk, wool, etc. that was produced on such farms. Again, some vegans take it to be wrong to *use* animals in any way. This is another respect in which my veganism is modest.

This limitation has little practical import, however. This is because almost all actual animal farming involves killing animals or making them suffer. The reasons lie in the interaction between biology and economics. Consider a single example among many: even the most humane dairy farm will typically produce as many male calves as female, and almost no such farm will support all of the (largely economically useless) males through their natural lives. Rather, in almost every case, they will be raised for meat. That means that almost any economically viable dairy farming operation participates in the raising of cows to be killed and eaten, a practice that I have argued in §3 is typically wrong.

This sort of point explains why I take my argument to support a vegan lifestyle, as opposed to a vegetarian lifestyle that permits use of dairy products (for example), but not animal flesh. Even in the best realistic case, using dairy products involves supporting institutions whose practices include the systematic wrongful treatment of male cattle. Using such products is thus typically wrong.

The final limitation to my argument that I want to explore is that my argument for the wrongness of eating animal products allows for exceptions. At least three sorts of exceptions are possible. First, there are possible cases (like those just mentioned above) of animal products that are made without inflicting suffering or death. Second, there are cases where the burdens of refraining from using animal products would be exceptionally high.²¹

What is the significance of this second possibility? On the one hand, my arguments do not imply that animal death or suffering is typically *as ethically significant* as human death, or similarly intense human suffering. In fact, in §§2-3 I emphasized that there are a range of factors that typically

²¹ Another possibility is that certain forms of animal agriculture might inflict suffering and death on animals, but also have good effects that outweigh the ethical significance of that suffering and death. These effects include overall animal well-being, as well as a range of other values, including agricultural sustainability, environmental sustainability, and fostering meaningful local economies. Consider a possible example. Traditional or organic farming tend to involve much less animal suffering than factory farming. Suppose (a) that such farms could only be economically viable if they involve some killing and inflicting suffering on animals, and (b) supporting such farms had a good chance of bringing about a future in which animals were overall much better off than they currently are, and the deleterious environmental effects of agriculture were mitigated. It might be argued that it is okay or even required to support such farms. I take there to be little reason to believe that supporting such farms has a significantly better chance of promoting the relevant values than being vegan does. In light of this, I consider such a possibility largely irrelevant to our ethical choices.

contribute to the wrongness of killing humans or making them suffer that are not present in most animals.

I take these considerations to suggest that the most central and pressing human interests typically take ethical priority over non-human animal welfare. For example, my conclusion is compatible with it being permissible or even required to harm or kill an animal if doing so is needed to prevent suffering or death to a human being. This may suggest that some lethal medical research using animals can be ethically justified, if we have good reason to believe that it will greatly benefit humans. (However, this weighty criterion suggests that much current medical research using animals is not justified.) Similarly, in various times and places, animal products have been an essential element of the only available adequate human diets. For example, for rural families in many parts of the world, having a cow – or even a handful of chickens – can offer crucial protection against certain forms of malnutrition. I suspect that these considerations are sufficient to justify exceptions to my argument.

My argument for Modest Ethical Veganism thus allows for exceptions. But it bears emphasis that the burdens that I take to justify exceptions to veganism must be very weighty, as those just mentioned were. Here is an imperfect but reasonable heuristic: some circumstances would warrant torturing the stray dog imagined in §2, or killing the stray kitten imagined in §3. I contend that only equally dire circumstances would warrant ordering the sirloin steak for dinner. In light of this heuristic, consider what most of us would give up by becoming vegan. First, one gives up the aesthetic pleasure

and rich meaning involved in consuming animal foods. Second, one gives up the ability to participate fully in some culinary traditions, and food-centered social occasions. This also has the potential to decrease one's social opportunities. Finally, given the marginal status of vegans in our society, one faces extra burdens of planning and inconvenience in feeding oneself. For those who are severely disadvantaged in other ways – by poverty and discrimination, for example – the additional sacrifices that veganism would require might constitute an intolerable additional burden. But for most of us, the costs of becoming vegan are far from weighty enough to justify omnivorism. After all, you wouldn't torture a dog or kill a cat for these sorts of reasons, would you?²²

Works Cited

- Akhtar, Sahar. "Animal Pain and Welfare: Can Pain Sometimes Be Worse for Them Than for Us?" *Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Eds. Tom Beauchamp and R. G. Frey. Oxford University Press, 2011. 495-518.
- Allen, Colin. "Animal Pain." *Noûs* 38.4, 2004. 617-643.

²² I am indebted for helpful comments and discussion to David Plunkett, Mark Budolfson, Andrew Chignell, Tyler Doggett, Sean Walsh, Derek Baker, Tom Dougherty, Gideon Rosen, and Katie Batterman, to audiences who gave me feedback on related work at Rhodes College, Bowling Green State University, Charles Sturt University, and Virginia Commonwealth University, and to many students who have wrestled with previous versions of this paper. I am also indebted to Liz Harman, whose talk on this topic first started me thinking systematically about it. Parts of this paper draw significantly on my *published online*.

Armstrong, Susan J. and Richard G. Botzler, Eds. *The Animal Ethics Reader* (2nd Edition). Routledge, 2008.

Budolfson, Mark. "The Inefficacy Objection and the Problem with the Singer/Norcross/Kagan Response" *Ms.* (cited as *ms-a*).

---. "The Inefficacy Objection to Deontology: From Complicity to Degree of Essentiality in the Ethics of the Marketplace." *Ms.* (cited as *ms-b*).

Cohen, Carl. "The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 315, 1986. 865-869.

Cox, Christopher. "Consider the Oyster." *Slate* April 7, 2010.

<http://www.slate.com/id/2248998/>

DeGrazia, David. "Moral Vegetarianism from a Very Broad Basis." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, 2009. 143-165.

Dwyer, J. "Vegeterian Diets" (sic). *Encyclopedia of Human Nutrition, Third Edition*, Vol. 4. Eds. Lindsay Allen, Andrew Prentice, and Benjamin Caballero. Academic Press. 316-322.

Fairlie, Simon. *Meat: A Benign Extravagance*. White River Junction, VT, Chelsea Green, 2010.

Goodland, Robert and Jeff Anhang. "Livestock and Climate Change." *Worldwatch* Nov/Dec 2009. 10-19.

Harman, Elizabeth. "The Moral Significance of Animal Pain and Animal Death." *Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Eds. Tom Beauchamp and R. G. Frey. Oxford University Press, 2011. 726-737.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. "Applying Virtue Ethics to Our Treatment of Other Animals." *The Practice of Virtue*. Jennifer Welchman Ed. Hackett, 2006. 135-154.

Jaworska, Agnieszka and Tannenbaum, Julie, "The Grounds of Moral Status", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/grounds-moral-status/>

Kagan, Shelly. "Do I Make a Difference?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 39.2 (2011). 105-141.

Klosko, George. *The Principle of Fairness and Political Obligation* New Edition. Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

Korsgaard, Christine. "Fellow Creatures." *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 25/26. G. B. Peterson Ed. University of Utah Press, 2004.

Lippert-Rasmussen, Kaspar. "Two Puzzles for Deontologists." *Journal of Ethics* 5.4, 2001. 385-410.

McMahan, Jeff, 'Eating animals the nice way,' *Daedalus* 137.1 (Winter 2008), pp. 66-76.

---. *Ethics of Killing*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

McPherson, Tristram. "A Case for Ethical Veganism." *Published online, forthcoming in print in Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

---. "A Moorean Defense of the Omnivore?" *Forthcoming in Stirring the Pot*, Eds. Robert Fischer and Ben Bramble. Oxford University Press.

Marquis, Don. "Why Abortion is Immoral." *Journal of Philosophy* 86.4, April 1989. 183-202.

Mason, Jim and Peter Singer. *Animal Factories* Revised and Updated Edition. Harmony: 1990.

Nagel, Thomas. "Death." *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1979. 1-10.

Norcross, Alasdair. "Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases." *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (Ethics), 2004. 229-245.

---. "The Significance of Death for Animals." *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*. Oxford University Press, 2002. 465-474.

Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

Rachels, James. "The Moral Argument for Vegetarianism." *Can Ethics Provide Answers? And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1997. 99-107.

Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights* 2nd Edition. University of California Press, 2004.

Rowlands, Mark. *Animals Like Us*. Verso: 2002.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation* (Paperback edition). New York: Ecco, 2002.

---. "Vegetarianism and Utilitarianism." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 9.4 (Summer 1980), 325-337.

Talbert, Matthew. "Contractualism and Our Duties to Nonhuman Animals." *Environmental Ethics* 28 (Summer 2006). 202-215.

Tooley, Michael. "Abortion and Infanticide." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2.1 (August 1972). 37-65.

United Nations Food and Agriculture Association. "The Role of Livestock in Climate Change." 2014.

<http://www.fao.org/agriculture/lead/themeso/climate/en/>

Walker, Polly, et. al. "Public health implications of meat production and consumption." *Public Health Nutrition* 8.4, 2005. 348-56.

Williams, Bernard. "A Critique of Utilitarianism." *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. J.J.C. Smart, and Bernard Williams. Cambridge University Press, 1973. 77-150.

Zamir, Tzachi. *Ethics and the Beast*. Princeton University Press, 2007.