

Biting the bullet on ethical veganism, antinatalism, and the demands of morality

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To the Editor

Allegedly, journal reviewers in philosophy recommend manuscripts for rejection primarily for three reasons. First, if the reviewer believes the author is wrong, the paper arguably warrants rejection because philosophy is about seeking truth, and false views should not be published. Second, if the reviewer believes the author is obviously right, the paper warrants rejection because the valuable space of academic journals should not be used to defend views that everyone already knows to be true. Third, if the reviewer notices that the author's position has been defended before with the same kind of argument, the paper warrants rejection because philosophers should present something new; thus, the author is forbidden from repeating the same arguments.¹

When a philosopher manages to get their paper published, two of the three reasons-for-rejection might appear in print. While those who agree with the author might give a thumbs up and move on to criticize other papers or develop their own ideas, those who believe the author is wrong might write a reply explaining where the author's reasoning fails. Sometimes those who think the author's view has already been defended might write a reply highlighting this omission in the original paper.

While Bülow [1] and Austin-Eames [2] argued that I was wrong in suggesting that ethical vegans should also be antinatalists [3], James Schultz pointed out that someone else had already considered the same question and reached a similar conclusion [4]. I am grateful to Schultz — who does not seem to reject my reasoning; in fact, I got the impression that he agrees with it — for bringing Donald W. Bruckner's article to my attention [5]. In his paper, 'Vegan's Dilemma,' Bruckner argues that one is not morally required to be vegan unless one is willing to do some serious bullet-biting — a claim similar to the one I presented in my article.

Good ideas are worth repeating. Nonetheless, I wish to examine what Bruckner said and to what extent it resembles my claims.

Bruckner writes that “[t]he practice [procreation] is unnecessary for any given individual, since there are plenty of suitable and less harmful things one can do with one's life other than raise children” [5]. I agree. This was the point I made in detail in my article. Like eating meat, having children is harmful and unnecessary for living a good and fulfilling life.

Bruckner raised other examples in his paper and claims that the harm argument for veganism

¹ These are not necessarily all the reasons reviewers should recommend rejections. Good reviewers recommend acceptance even when they disagree with the claims of the paper as long as the paper provides interesting and novel arguments which advance important discussions.

leads to other highly implausible conclusions. For instance, he argues that using air conditioning in the summer when one's health does not require it, and heating one's home and workplace above a certain level in the winter rather than wearing warmer clothes, are also massively harmful to the environment and unnecessary, and therefore morally impermissible. I agree. Heating and cooling one's home simply for comfort is something one should avoid. However, since many people cannot function well when it becomes too hot or cold and need a certain temperature to stay functional and productive, maintaining one's home at a reasonable temperature is not impermissible.

Bruckner also argues that it is wrong to have pets. I agree again. It is wrong to breed new pets into a world where existing animals already need care and protection. There is no question about the immorality of having pets to breed them. It is very immoral.

But this is not where the list ends. Bruckner makes the bold claim that a vegan proponent of the harm minimization argument for veganism, who lives a modern lifestyle (which includes, for example, air travel and drinking alcohol), is living a terribly immoral life by the standards of that argument.

While I am not convinced that having a glass of wine now and then is necessarily immoral, it is undeniable that a world without alcohol would be a much better place. Although it can be fun to get drunk occasionally, the harms of alcohol — including domestic violence, alcohol-related injuries, accidents, and premature deaths, as well as heartache, promiscuity, and divorces caused by alcohol — massively outweigh the pleasure of drinking it [6].

So, should harm-based vegans stop living altogether? Bruckner claims that even choosing a career such as professional academics is wrong, since when one is employed as an academic, one fails to engage in practices that are even less harmful (for example, working for a social services agency that provides family planning and contraception to help prevent the births of so many humans who cause so much harm).

Here, I think Bruckner is wrong. One's occupation is often a significant part of one's self-identity and an irreplaceable dimension of their flourishing — this is especially true in academia but also in other professions. Choosing a career is not as mundane a choice as whether one eats meat, travels to a conference by plane or train, or even whether one has children.

Given the current state of the academic job market, many people who work in the profession are willing to take extraordinary measures to achieve their dream job. Scholars move to other countries or continents, learn new languages, and leave behind friends and relatives to get paid (relatively little) for what they love to do. Such a person cannot be morally required to take a different job because, for them, having a job in academia is not simply a job but much more — a lifestyle that, without it, would make their lives much less valuable to them. This point can be applied to other professions as well. Consider professional athletes, musicians, or people working in healthcare, such as nurses, midwives, and medical doctors; for many, their job is much more than just a job. If this 'excuse' is accurate, there probably are not many academics who should switch careers. However, those few who should are likely the ones who were hired decades ago and who would not secure their jobs in the current job market because it is not a similar passion to them as it is for those struggling in the current job market. Academics hired decades ago *should* pursue a different profession or retire for moral reasons because someone else would likely do their job better anyway [7].

Setting academics, artists, athletics etc. aside, if one argues that most people in the world should be doing something more meaningful in their professional lives than what they currently do, this is not a difficult bullet to bite at all. There are many people whose jobs are simply

harmful to others, to other species, and to the environment, with the sole purpose of accumulating wealth and/or power for a small group of people. Many of them are acting immoral when they engage in work they should not be doing, and the world would be a much better place if such people did something else instead.

One might object by saying that surely one could have a similar excuse when it comes to eating meat or having children. While I doubt that eating meat is as important a part of one's life as having a career in academia or becoming a professional athlete is for some — for instance, people would hardly move to another continent if that were the only way to keep eating meat — I am willing to accept that, for some, having children might be a foundational part of flourishing and living a good life. However, since having children causes a vast amount of suffering, the burden of proof should be on prospective parents. The starting point should be a childfree life, and those wanting to make an exception to this lifestyle should seriously consider whether having children is so important to them that it justifies bringing new sentient beings into existence.

Schultz thus correctly suspected my answer to the vegan's dilemma: we should bite the bullet. Morality is demanding. Deal with it!

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