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## Defending the link between ethical veganism and antinatalism

Joona Räsänen

CEPDISC - School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

### To the Editor

In my paper recently published in a collection [1] of controversial arguments in this journal, I argued that the same principles that are behind ethical veganism also warrant antinatalist conclusions [2]. I thus suggested that to be consistent in their ethical reasoning, moral vegans should not have children.

William Bülow has kindly responded to my claims and offered a plausible reply, which, according to him, concludes that at least some moral vegans may resist antinatalism [3]. In this short paper, I reply to Bülow.

I argued that arguments for ethical veganism from both consequentialism and deontology warrant antinatalist conclusions. Since Bülow argued against the argument from deontology, I will focus my discussion on it. I also assume that the argument from consequentialism stands: ethical vegans who are vegans because of utilitarian reasoning should also be antinatalists. Thus, they should not have children for the same reasons they should not eat meat. Therefore, even if Bülow is right in his claims, *some* ethical vegans should not have children—a conclusion that I believe is significant. On the other hand, if Bülow is right, then *some* ethical vegans are morally allowed to have children—an important conclusion as well. So, let's consider how Bülow responded to my claims and whether my original claims can be defended.

Bülow suggested that instead of endorsing the moral principle that 'it is impermissible to use a subject-of-a-life as a mere means'—a principle that I believed warrants both an antinatalist and vegan worldview—the moral vegan might accept a more limited principle that would explain the wrongness of factory farming but exonerate prospective parents from the wrongness of having children. The principle Bülow suggests is: 'it is morally impermissible to deliberately harm a subject-of-a-life as a mere means of achieving some end.' Bülow states that 'this principle is clearly violated in the case of factory farming, as factory animals are indeed seriously harmed and ultimately killed for the sake of providing meat-eaters with meat.' However, Bülow argues that 'assuming that the prospective child will have a life worth living and that being brought into existence is not necessarily a harm (in the sense that the person being born is thereby

made worse off), it is not clear that this principle is violated by prospective parents who decide to have children, even if their main reason for having children is that they want to have a child'.

There are at least two ways to challenge Bülöw's reasoning. One could argue either that the principle does not sufficiently explain the wrongness of factory farming, thus failing to warrant a vegan conclusion, or that Bülöw's principle, too, would imply the wrongness of having children, thus reaching antinatalism.

I will begin with the former approach and highlight that according to Bülöw's principle, factory farming might not always be considered wrong. As seen, Bülöw states that 'assuming that the prospective child will have a life worth living and that being brought into existence is not necessarily a harm (in the sense that the person being born is thereby made worse off), it is not clear that this principle is violated by prospective parents who decide to have children, even if their main reason for having children is that they want to have a child.' Reformulating the principle in the context of factory farming would say that being brought into existence at a factory farm is not necessarily harmful if the lives of those animals are worth living.

Now, suppose that animals living on factory farms have a life worth living, in the sense that being brought into existence does not make them worse off. It appears that Bülöw's principle is not violated in such a case. This interpretation follows from Bülöw's own understanding of his principle: 'it is morally impermissible to deliberately harm a subject-of-a-life as a mere means of achieving some end,' where harm is understood as bringing someone into existence to a life that is worse than not being brought into existence at all. Surely, since many, if not all, current instances of factory farming involve animals experiencing significant suffering, it is reasonable to claim that their lives are not worth living.

However, would an ethical vegan accept a practice where the lives of animals living on factory farms *are* worth living? Allegedly not. A vegan would condemn it.<sup>1</sup> But why, if the lives of these animals are worth living? A vegan may provide at least two responses. First, a vegan might argue that the problem lies in the act of consuming animals, and that we should not eat animals regardless of the quality of their lives while alive. However, this response is not entirely convincing because the issue is not solely about eating the animals. This can be illustrated by the condemnation of fur farming by many ethical vegans, despite the fact that the animals raised in fur farms are not eventually consumed. The second response is more plausible. A vegan may contend that the problem with factory farming lies in the premature ending of even those lives that are (barely) worth living, through the killing of the animals. The issue, therefore, centers around the harm of death.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, many vegans condemn hunting wild animals whose lives are worth living. I suspect even more vegans would condemn the practice where humans intentionally bring such animals into existence only to be shot to death later.

But now let's consider a further case. Suppose that animals raised in factory farms would not be killed, instead, they would die from natural causes, and only then would they be consumed. If the lives of these animals were to contain more good than bad—meaning that creating them would not harm them—would the practice of bringing these animals into existence and consuming them after their natural death be morally permissible? At this point, people's intuitions may begin to diverge, but I am inclined to believe that many ethical vegans would still consider such a practice immoral. However, why would this practice be wrong if the animals are not harmed by being killed (thus their lives are not cut short) and their lives are worth living (containing more good than bad)?

Bülow's principle, which states that it is morally impermissible to deliberately harm a subject-of-a-life as a mere means of achieving some end, fails to account for the wrongness of such practices. In cases where the lives of animals raised for food are (only barely) worth living and their lives are not prematurely ended, Bülow's principle does not seem to explain the wrongness of raising animals for food. That is because these animals would not be harmed by being brought into existence if their lives are worth living and their lives are not cut short, the principle does not provide a sufficient basis to deem such practices morally impermissible.

There is another concern for ethical vegans. Many animals that are killed for food, such as various bird species, may not be considered persons from the perspective of psychological-continuity views. For instance, these animals may lack memories of the past or plans for the future, and even if they possess such mental states, they might not be aware that those memories and plans belong to themselves, thus lacking self-awareness. According to some ethical views on killing [4], if certain animals are not aware that they are living their own lives, killing them may not be considered morally wrong. If this perspective on animal consciousness and psychology is accurate, then their death would not harm these animals. It is worth noting that person-denying arguments, which support the permissibility of abortion [5], appear to align with denying the right to life of some animals who are no more person-like in psychological-continuity views than fetuses [6]. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many ethical vegans lean towards psychological-continuity views of personhood and the ethics of killing, as they often identify as pro-choice rather than pro-life.

If the argumentation above is correct, then the factory farming of animals who lack self-awareness and whose lives are (only minimally) worth living may not be morally wrong. However, I suspect that many ethical vegans are unwilling to accept this conclusion. In such a case, Bülow's principle fails to explain the beliefs held by these vegans. A stronger principle is required, perhaps one similar to the one I proposed in my article: it is impermissible to use a subject-of-a-life as a mere means. This principle would provide an explanation for the main issue in factory farming: the creation of sentient lives that are capable of and will experience suffering is morally problematic because none of those who do not exist have interests, desires, or needs to come into existence when existence necessarily leads to suffering. This problem is also present in human procreation, and recognizing it ultimately leads to an antinatalist worldview.

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