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The Ethics of Eating Meat

David Sobel
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I did not anticipate giving this talk with Donald Trump as our President-Elect. He will not at all be my central topic today, but as he is on all of our minds these days I cannot resist saying a few words on that topic. Confronting disturbing aspects of his campaign is a job for all of us, even those who find some aspects of his announced policies attractive. It is all of our jobs to make clear that we are unwilling to overlook Trump's misogynistic, racist, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic statements. Such statements have an impact and embolden sexual harassers and various hate groups and make life more dangerous for already vulnerable people. I hope we can all agree that this aspect of Trump is unacceptable and that it is our job to band together to not look the other way when Muslims, woman, immigrants, gays, or the disabled, encounter street harassment which will escalate as a result of Trump's rhetoric.

My own view is that, well beyond such concerns, Trump's election is a very dangerous moment for the US. Trump has, just to mention two examples, promised to drastically cut taxes especially on the richest Americans, making the economic inequalities in the US, already well worse than other industrialized countries, worse, and to do so in ways, such as making health care significantly less affordable to the poor, that threaten not just inequality but avoidable disease and death. And he has promised to undo recent efforts to confront climate change, threatening to adopt policies that may well push us to the tipping point that makes it inevitable that all the polar ice will melt which would raise sea levels 210 feet and displace nearly 50 percent of humanity among other scary prospects. Such large-scale policies that threaten so much harm can make us feel powerless and hopeless. Effectively resisting legitimately elected representatives requires great numbers of people and resources. We need to remember that the easiest time to influence government for those of us that are not super-rich is during elections.

But governments are not the only entities that have an impact on the world. Even if we think we do not have a partner in the government elect to make the world a better place, there are still many things we can do on our own. But a lot of these things are costly and time-consuming. I want to talk today about one import-

ant thing each person can do to make the world a better place that is neither costly nor time-consuming and does not require government co-cooperation: eating less meat.

The issue I want to focus on here is not whether eating meat can be permissible. I think there clearly are cases where eating meat is permissible—eating a deer killed in a car accident is the simplest example. The case against meat presented here hinges on how, in fact, the vast majority of animals available to us as meat have been treated. We are considering what can be said in favor of the view that the vast majority of meat available for sale in the US is morally problematic due to contingent features of how it is produced, not that eating meat is always wrong. It is no defense of the permissibility of buying and eating factory-farmed meat that other, non-factory-farmed meat, is permissible to eat. That the same behavior—e.g. eating chicken—could be permissible if the process that produced the chicken was very different is not relevant to the acceptability of eating chickens that have been treated so shabbily.

The case I am able to present here persuades me that it is not ok for typical adults to buy for themselves and eat factory-farmed meat, at least in ordinary cases where there are reasonable alternatives that are affordable, healthy, and palatable. I will argue that it would be morally better to not eat factory-farmed meat.

Broadly the main considerations that count against the permissibility of eating meat fall into the categories of 1) harm to the animals, 2) harm to the environment, and 3) harm to people.

1. Harm to the Animals

The treatment of animals raised for food has changed significantly and pastoral images of chickens roaming free on the farm are now significantly misleading. It is no accident that our images of how factory-farmed animals are dealt with are seriously out of date. We have few images available of modern factory farming practices. And this is by design. The factory farming industry intentionally conceals from the public the process of making meat these days. And they are effective at it, even passing “Ag Gag” laws that make it illegal to video the inner workings of slaughterhouses. Factory farms have fought for and won broad exception from animal cruelty laws.

If you have not investigated how modern factory farming works and you nonetheless support eating factory-farmed meat, then I think you are forced to admit that you do not really know

what you are supporting. You would then seem to have to claim either 1) that it really does not matter ethically what they do to the animals behind the curtain or 2) that industry can be counted on to treat animals humanely. And don't we all know that (1) is just not so? We all agree, I bet, that it is possible to treat animals impermissibly. But if you don't peek behind the curtain you are just trusting industry to treat the animals permissibly, while creating no economic incentive for them to do so. Indeed, there is a strong economic incentive for industry to not treat the animals better until purchasers refuse to buy meat created in this way.

I'll spend a little time detailing some cruel features of modern factory farming. But the overview is really that factory farmed animals are treated like things and so as to maximize profits and without regard for their welfare. I won't be able to give you a proper appreciation of these practices here today. I recommend that you find the videos that have been created to show such practices such as the various Meet Your Meat videos. But to give you the barest sense of how animals are treated in this process, consider that:

Cattle and pigs are castrated without anesthetic.

The process of killing chickens results in at least a million chickens per year being boiled alive.

Many chickens die of starvation because their immature legs cannot sustain their unnaturally quick growth brought on by growth hormones.

Pigs are confined in such small stalls that they can't turn around for their entire lives.

Hens have food and water withheld for weeks, called forced molting, to get them to produce additional eggs. Roughly 1 percent of such hens die of starvation or disease brought on by weakness. As there are hundreds of millions of egg laying hens, there will be millions that die of starvation or disease just as a result of this process. Hens are regularly confined in spaces so small that they cannot spread their wings for most of their life.

2. Harm to the Environment

The next of our 3 categories is "Harm to the Environment". It goes without saying that the kinds of harms to the environment I focus on here will harm human beings as well.

Perhaps the key thing to appreciate under this heading is the inefficiency of getting our calories from factory-farmed animals.

Again, while it is possible to feed animals primarily on renewable pasture in areas of the country where it rains frequently, this is not how most of our meat is in fact produced. Most are fed food that was grown on farms. While there are differences between the efficiency of different animals, on average it seems to take about 9 calories of food grown on farms to produce a calorie of factory farmed meat.¹ This is not surprising since many of the calories go to building bones and hearts and other inedible parts and others are burned up as fuel by the animal. So for every calorie of factory-farmed meat we consume, our farms must produce 9 calories of food. Obviously if we skipped the middle animal stage and ate what the farm produced directly this would be much more efficient. The process of feeding and eating factory-farmed animals is a process that loses a great deal of food, not a process of producing more food. Because of this, eating as many calories as we do from factory farmed meat means that we must farm much larger areas, must use much more water, must use much more pesticide and fertilizer, etc.

Farming uses a lot of petro-chemicals and so creating so much meat adds significantly to the amount of greenhouse gasses we produce. Additionally, cows produce a significant amount of methane, which is an especially potent greenhouse gas. The large amount of additional land needed to provide grain for animals could, if we ate less meat, instead be re-forested or turned into a nature area, which again could help with global warming. Here is the advice of the head of the United Nation's Nobel Prize-winning scientific panel on climate change. He said: "Don't eat meat, ride a bike, and be a frugal shopper—that's how you can help brake global warming,"

Additionally, the animals themselves require a tremendous amount of water and produce a problematic amount of waste.

¹ While I continue to seek a more reliable source for this particular number, all credible sources that I have found agree that current factory farming practices are significantly inefficient in making calories for human consumption. <http://michaelbluejay.com/veg/environment.html> (Cows, which start life eating in the pasture, are "fattened" on grains such as corn and given growth hormones. Studies show that "93 percent of the tissue that comprised the hamburger meat was derived from corn" and that chicken meat has an even higher percentage.). <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=that-burger-youre-eating-is-mostly-corn>

Cows poop and piss at amazing rates, partly because they are so overfed so as to get them to grow unnaturally quickly. Lagoons of manure make some small towns intolerably smelly, leach into ground water, and get sprayed on the crops in excess amounts and run off into the streams and lakes, often killing marine life. In large parts of the country there are increasingly fights between agriculture and towns for water. These fights will intensify as our water shortage becomes more severe, as it soon will. One of the most significant moves we could make to reduce our problems with insufficient water would be to eat less factory-farmed meat. It costs a lot of public money to try to clean our water of the pollutants that are created providing what the meat industry demands. (Crop subsidies are, in large part, subsidies for meat—another way the industry uses up public funds.) It is not uncommon for drinking water to have unsafe levels of phosphates and for these phosphates and other chemicals that run off from farms to threaten marine life. The phosphates also encourage the growth of algae that poison our water supply. The more we get our calories from factory-farmed animals, the more we get these sorts of problems.

Because the animals are treated so shabbily and are in such close quarters with each other, they are prone to get sick. The industry responds by feeding the animals an awful lot of antibiotics. This is an ideal way to use up the protective power of the antibiotics humans rely on since the bacteria are given greatly increased opportunities to evolve around the protection. Anti-biotic resistant variants are on the rise and will soon constitute a significant threat to human health. Putting together large amounts of sickly animals in close quarters and pumping them full of antibiotics is an excellent way to develop the super flu.

Because cows are fed large amounts of corn, rather than the ruminants that their stomachs are designed for, they tend to get sick and to have large amounts of e coli in their stomachs and in their feces. (Corn-fed cattle, which have much more fat than grass-fed cows, are widely preferred by the American public, and are what you will be served unless you go way out of your way.) It is this e coli that causes the various panics when a tainted batch of meat or spinach or whatever turns up—it is because the feces gets on the meat or because they spray excessive amounts of e coli tainted feces on the plants as fertilizer. They do this, in part, simply because they don't know what else to do with all the waste.

So getting our calories from factory-farmed meat uses up more land, water, and energy and gives us more waste, toxins, and

greenhouse gasses. And it does this while significantly reducing the amount of food we have, harming our health, and damaging our ability to protect ourselves from disease. But at least we get to torture animals in the process.

3. Harm to Humans

Our third and final category concerns harm to human health from eating meat. While many of the above environmental impacts mentioned above cause harm to humans, the sort of harm I have in mind here is due to it being directly bad for human health to eat as much meat as we do. The number 1 killer of Americans is heart disease and the main cause of heart disease is saturated fat. While you can get saturated fat in some things other than meat and animal by-products, the vast majority of the saturated fat people get comes from animals and animal by-products.

According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, an evidence-based review showed that a vegetarian diet is associated with a lower risk of death from [heart disease](#). Vegetarians appear to have lower low-density lipoprotein [cholesterol levels](#), lower [blood pressure](#) and lower rates of [hypertension](#) and [type 2 diabetes](#) than meat eaters. Vegetarians also tend to have a lower body mass index, lower overall [cancer](#) rates and lower risk of chronic disease. The American Heart Association recommends people lower their intake of red meat. The school of public health at the University of California at Berkeley recommends a “diet as close as possible to vegetarian”.

Many qualifications are in order. I have not been discussing seafood and I continue to put it aside. A lot of seafood is quite healthy. Additionally, some factory-farmed meat is healthy to eat. Most factory-farmed meat that we eat is unhealthy but that has a lot to do with which meats we choose to eat and how we prepare the meat. It is possible, although uncommon, to eat a lot of factory-farmed meat yet have a healthy diet.

Another qualification is that this consideration about harm to humans, even if accepted, might reasonably be thought not to be a moral consideration. It might be thought a person may morally permissibly destroy her own health, provided they do not harm others or cause themselves to be unable to live up to their obligations to others. While admitting that that is a reasonable view, it is not obviously true. A person might instead think we have moral duties to ourselves to, for example, eat in a way that is not too

unhealthy, while thinking that others have no right to force us to do so. In any case, even if eating to be healthy is not a moral requirement, there are good reasons to do it all the same.

Additionally, surely the above-mentioned claims that it is healthy to be a vegetarian is oversimplified. Obviously it is possible to eat meat and be very healthy and also it is possible to be a vegetarian and be unhealthy. If you eat nothing but cheese and snickers bars you will be unhealthy even though you are eating no meat. Furthermore, increasingly there are serious debates these days about what makes for a healthy diet. I am by no means an expert about these debates.

Skipping a lot of complicated details, I will just say that the most reputable sources that I can find agree that it would be healthy for the typical American to cut down the non-seafood meat in her diet.

This category, the Harm to Humans category, is the messiest, most complicated, and least persuasive. Still, I take it to be true as a broad generalization that it would be healthier to eat less meat than most Americans do and I see that as some reason to recommend that people cut their meat consumption, even if not for moral reasons.

4. Common Arguments and Replies

Here I consider and argue against some common arguments for the permissibility of eating meat. I obviously can't consider all the arguments people tend to make here or even all the variants of the arguments I consider.

4.1. It is natural to eat meat.

Reply: Everything obviously hinges on what one means by "natural". Let us try out various understandings of what "natural" might mean here and consider the force of this argument on each understanding. One thing "natural" might mean is "statistically common". We don't generally think that because most people are doing something that it must be ok. History provides a wide range of cases in which doing no worse morally than one's neighbor was not good enough. Indeed, most of the worst moral horrors have happened when acceptance of such horrors was statistically common.

Perhaps “natural” should instead be understood to be the claim that the other animals do it. Thus the thought would be that because many other animals do something, it must be ok for us to do it. But we also don’t think that what other animals do or don’t do always sets a standard that we should follow. In many mammals, the new male mate kills the existing offspring of his female mate. This policy has a good evolutionary point. Evolutionarily speaking effort spent on someone else’s offspring is wasted. Better, evolutionarily, to not waste effort on them but rather sire a new brood that is genetically related to one. But that such policies are somewhat common among other mammals or that they have good evolutionary point does not tend to make us think such policies are morally ok for us. Additionally, that other animals do not do some things, such as study mathematics or go to school also does not set a standard for what we ought not do. Animals are not subject to morality. They, like infants or some severely damaged humans, lack the mental capacities that make morality apply to us. It should not surprise us that being moral does not always involve just doing what amoral animals do.

Perhaps “natural” should instead be understood to be the claim that we evolved to do it. Thus the claim would be that because we evolved to do it, it must be ok. But evolution did not select for our factory farming. Indeed, factory farming of the sort under discussion here is a relatively new phenomenon. Recall we are not seeking a justification for it sometimes being permissible to eat meat. We are seeking a justification for eating factory-farmed meat. And so this argument would need to explain in what sense factory-farming practices are natural and not just that eating meat is natural.

4.2. If they eat us, it is ok for us to eat them. We would just be treating them the way they would treat us.

Reply: Most of the animals we eat in the greatest abundance are herbivores. Additionally, just because a baby bites a parent does not make it ok for the parent to bite the baby. We also should not attack the criminally insane who would attack us if they got the chance. Often it seems not ok to treat creatures that are not responsible for their actions, such as babies, animals, and the insane, in the way that they would treat us. Further, we may presumably not torture torturers or rape rapists. Thus it is not always ok to treat others, even responsible others, the way they would treat you. It is a common ethical mistake to rely on general

principles, such as the one that says it is ok to treat others as they would treat you, that sound plausible when we have in mind a very narrow range of cases, yet fail to notice that the general principle has a variety of implications that one cannot accept. Part of the remedy is to try to think of the full range of implications of one's principle before relying on its truth, and not just the implications of the principle one is trying to justify.

4.3. Our teeth were designed to eat meat, and it must be ok to use something for the purpose for which it was designed.

Reply: This argument ignores that what needs justification is not merely eating meat, but eating meat that has been raised by modern factory farming methods and which causes this and that environmental problem. This argument, even if it worked, would at best support the conclusion that it can be permissible to eat meat, not that eating all meat is ok. After all, the penis was in part designed so as to get sperm to an ovum. This cannot be thought to justify the claim that every attempt to use one's penis to get sperm near an ovum is thus sure to be ok. The most that this argument could reasonably be thought to justify would be that it must in some circumstances be permissible to have vaginal sex. Thus the analogous claim would be that it must in some circumstances be permissible to eat meat. But that has never been in dispute and does not help justify the thought that eating meat that has been factory farmed is ok. Again, we are seeking arguments that justify eating factory-farmed meat.

4.4. We could not thrive unless we ate meat.

Reply: Obviously false.

4.5. It is traditional to eat meat.

Reply: True but of very limited force. Many immoral practices have been traditional and that was insufficient to make them permissible practices.

4.6. Meat is tasty.

Reply: True but again of very limited force, especially when there are healthy, affordable, and palatable alternatives available that would involve less suffering and environmental problems.

4.7. The animals we eat, such as cows and pigs, would exist in much fewer numbers if we did not eat so much meat so it is in their interest that we continue to factory farm and eat them.

Reply: It is true that such animals would exist in much smaller numbers without factory farming. But it is not always a benefit to exist. It can be worse to exist than to not exist, as is shown by our hoping that our friend died instantaneously in a car crash rather than continue to suffer for an hour before death. Further, the environmental reasons offered above suggest it is not good for humans to have as many such animals around us, at least in the ways we currently make use of them.

4.8. Many humans owe their jobs to the meat industry. What would happen to them?

There would be temporary displacement. But many other immoral practices employed great numbers of people and eliminating such practices also required significant transition costs. Those transition costs could be, and in the most likely scenario where people eat less meat, would be diminished if the demand for meat slowly diminished. Such transition costs would be temporary whereas the costs of continued factory farming would not.

4.9. Animals can't really feel pain.

Reply: No better reason to believe this in the case of other animals than there is in other humans.

4.10. People should be free to eat meat if they like. No one should be permitted to force them to stop doing so.

Reply: No part of the arguments here suggested that anyone should be denied the option of eating meat or that the government may eliminate that option. All that I have so far concluded is that people morally ought to freely choose to eat less factory farmed meat. I leave it as an open question whether restrictions on such meat

production are warranted. But the above makes clear that eating meat produced in the typical way is not a self-regarding action. It has serious consequences for the environment we must all share.

4.11. It makes no difference if I order the chicken or not. Frank Purdue makes his decisions in the millions of chickens and one extra chicken is not on his radar at all.

Reply: As the chance that one's behavior makes a difference to how many chickens get ordered for the next quarter goes down, the significance of the change your action would make if it made a difference goes up. And these two variables stay correlated such that the expected number of extra chickens Frank Purdue will order for next quarter because you ate one chicken will remain at one chicken.²

4.12. God gave us dominion over the animals.

Reply: It would be a genuinely radical understanding of this Biblical claim to understand it as saying that we may do whatever we like to them. Most people interpret this thought as compatible with the claim that it is morally problematic to torture animals for fun or to have sex with them. Animals are not mere things, like rocks, with no moral status. It morally matters how we treat them. Furthermore, even if animals really did not matter at all morally, still there

² While I remain persuaded that this is a compelling argument, as does Shelly Kagan in his "Do I Make a Difference?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39, #2 (Spring, 2011): 105-141, others are unconvinced. See Julie Nefsky's "Consequentialism and the Problem of Collective Harm: A Reply to Kagan". *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39 (2011): 364–395.

are all the other problems with getting as many of our calories as we do from factory farming.

4.13. Does this mean one must be a strict vegan in order to be morally ok?

Reply: I don't think this is the most useful way to think of things. Such strictness, if publicly advocated, will seem too demanding to most and will be ignored. Better, I think, to see the upshot as being that it is morally better to cut back on how much factory farmed meat one eats. Every little bit of cutting back makes a difference. And trust me, there is other tasty stuff to eat. Vegetarian cooking has improved tremendously. Many other cultures treat meat not as the centerpiece of a meal but as a garnish to add flavor but not as the main source of calories. Such changes are really not all that difficult to make and would go a long way to making ours a better world.