

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

You Can't Buy Your Way Out of Veganism

ABSTRACT

Let's make three assumptions. First, we shouldn't support factory farms. Second, if animal-friendly agriculture lives up to its name—that is, if animals live good lives (largely free of pain, able to engage in species-specific behaviors, etc.) and are slaughtered in a way that minimizes suffering—then there is nothing intrinsically wrong with killing them for food. Third, animal-friendly agriculture does, in fact, live up to its name. Given these assumptions, it might seem difficult to criticize individuals who source their animal products from “animal-friendly” agricultural operations. However, I argue that they should drastically reduce their support for animal-friendly agriculture because it isn't scalable—i.e., if we were to switch to that form of agriculture, most people would be priced out of its products. I say that it's wrong to support a solution to a moral problem without sharing its costs.

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For better or worse, we've democratized meat-eating. Meat-eating is something that was a special occasion in most households for many years... The poor got very little animal protein. So one of the nice things about industrial meat production is it makes this human desire—because it is a widespread human desire—something that even the poor could satisfy, and if we eat meat more responsibly, you know, it is going to be less democratic. (Michael Pollan, *CBC Ideas*)

Introduction

Let's make three assumptions. First, we shouldn't support factory farms. Second, if "animal-friendly" agriculture lives up to its name—that is, if animals live good lives¹ and are slaughtered in a way that minimizes suffering—then there is nothing intrinsically wrong with killing them for food. Third, "animal-friendly" agriculture does, in fact, live up to its name.

There are, of course, good reasons to reject the second and third assumptions—hence the quotation marks around "animal-friendly," which I'll now drop.² But I'd guess that many people make all three. If we grant these assumptions, and if individuals source their animal products responsibly, is there any way to criticize their behavior?

I think so. In what follows, I contend that the relatively wealthy should eat mostly vegan even if they can afford animal-friendly animal products. The argument for this has two prem-

1 At a minimum, this means living a life that's largely free of human-inflicted pain and during which animals are able to engage in species-specific behaviors.

2 Against the second, see Regan (1987) and Adams (1990). Against the third, see Bohanec (2013) and McWilliams (2015).

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ises. First, animal-friendly agriculture isn't scalable, which is to say that if we were to switch to that form of agriculture, most people would be priced out of its products. Second, if we endorse a norm during periods of moral change, then we ought to bear the cost that most people would bear were the norm to be widely accepted, even if we can afford not to. It follows that the relatively wealthy ought to eat as most people would if the animal-friendly model were adopted.

The Empirical Premise

Let's begin with the empirical premise: if we were to switch to animal-friendly agriculture, most people would be priced out of its products. The reason to believe this claim is that it's extremely difficult to sell animal products at accessible prices without the factory farm, and this is because longer, happier animal lives are more resource-intensive than short and unpleasant ones. First, longevity and happiness take much more water and feed for much less product. This is partially because humanely-raised animals live up to twice as long as intensively-raised animals, but also because humanely-raised animals convert feed to flesh less efficiently. They haven't been bred to gain weight in the same ways (e.g., humanely-raised chickens don't have the massive breasts that you find in intensively-raised chickens, since those breasts can lead to persistent joint pain and broken limbs), and humanely-raised animals have greater freedom of movement, which means that they burn off more of the calories that they consume. Second, minimizing suffering during slaughter makes the process massively less efficient: an industrial slaughterhouse can process 2,500 cattle in an eight-hour shift; mobile slaughter units—the standard alternative for those who champion humane agriculture—can process ten. Third, small farms don't—and probably couldn't, for economic reasons—recover and sell all the byproducts that

help keep meat prices low.³ They can recover and sell some byproducts, such as offal. But others only make financial sense when huge numbers of animals are being slaughtered, such as collecting bovine fetal blood for medical labs, which use it to create cell cultures.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, animal-friendly operations require much more land than their industrial alternatives. We can appreciate this point with some back-of-the-envelope calculations about chicken feed. Chicken feed is composed of grains and various supplements, all of which have to be produced somewhere, somehow. But let's simplify by pretending that it's just made of wheat, which would actually be a boon to animal-friendly operations if it were the case. In any event, you can produce about 56 bushels of wheat on an acre. At 60 pounds per bushel, that's 3,360 pounds of chicken feed. If it takes 12 pounds of feed to bring a chicken up to slaughter weight, then one arable acre can feed 280 birds. But suppose you want to let your chickens live off the land, eating insects and native plants. You might want to do this for welfare reasons: perhaps you think that animals ought to live in an environment that's as close as possible to their natural one, allowing them to exhibit the full range of species-specific behaviors. Alternately, you might want to do this for environmental reasons. As Kemmerer (2015) argues, there are excellent reasons to devote less land to animal agriculture: e.g., the monocropping behind animal feed leads to soil degradation, fertilizers pollute nearby waterways, and extensive pesticide use is guilty of the same. Moreover, as the Ecological Society of America points out, forests are superior to agricultural operations in terms of carbon

3 See Norwood and Lusk (2011) and Ogle (2013).

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sequestration,⁴ which is an argument for reforestation where we can. In any case, if you want to let your chickens live off the land, how many will you be able to raise on an acre? Estimates vary, but I haven't been able to find anyone who claims that an acre can sustain more than 25 birds without feed—roughly 1/10 of what an acre supports on the industrial model.

Granted: I've made a number of simplifying assumptions, the numbers I've used are only rough estimates, you might not think that chickens fare best when allowed to live off the land, and there are various ways to produce feed more sustainably (though also less efficiently, and the land allocation problem remains). So the point here is not that, if we switch to animal-friendly agriculture, we'll see chicken production drop by some specific factor. Rather, the point is this. When you couple the observations about land use with the ones made earlier—about feed-to-flesh conversion ratios, slaughter rates, and recoverable byproducts—it should be clear that animal-friendly agriculture is dramatically less efficient than industrial agriculture. Hence, a switch to animal-friendly agriculture is going to significantly reduce how much product is available, which is bound to drive up its price. What's more, there's little hope that supply will eventually catch up. There are plenty of ways to increase the supply of animal products, but nearly all of them involve either welfare compromises or unacceptable environmental costs. We have battery cages, farrowing crates, and feedlots because they're efficient—not because they're good for chickens, pigs, and cows. Animal-friendly operations can't use these strategies, which means that their only choice is to use more land for either growing feed or permitting free-range grazing. And as

4 See <http://www.esa.org/esa/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/carbonsequestrationinsoils.pdf>

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the considerations above indicate, we're talking about a lot of land—far more than makes environmental sense.

At present, animal-friendly animal products cost two to three times the price of their conventional alternatives. That, of course, is still far from their real cost. Simon (2013) estimates that we should add another \$1.70 for every dollar of retail animal food sales to account for externalized health care and environmental costs of animal agriculture, as well as the substantial taxpayer subsidies that keep prices artificially low. Some of those externalized costs would be reduced if we were to adopt animal-friendly practices—the health care costs, for example, are partially due to overconsumption—so let's cut his estimate in half, adding only \$0.85 per dollar. In the US, the average price of a pound of ground beef is about \$4, and the animal-friendly stuff goes for about \$8. That means that the current real cost is nearly \$15.

I'm going to assume that, all else equal, we shouldn't allow industries to externalize costs—it isn't fair to the third parties who bear them. Still, taxpayers could continue their subsidies. Would that keep prices down?

I doubt it. First, animal-friendly farms operate on razor-thin margins because they compete with industrial products. If they were only competing with similar farms, they would probably raise their prices to provide some financial stability. Second, the factors cited above suggest that there would be a fixed ceiling on animal-friendly production—only so much will be available. Hence, there is no reason to expect supply to keep pace with population growth, which would drive prices yet higher.

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According to the US Department of Labor, the average American spends 12.6% of her income on food.⁵ Of that, roughly 4.2% is devoted to animal products. If the prices of those products were to go up by a factor of 3.75—and estimate that I take to be conservative—she would have to spend 24.15% of her total budget to maintain the same level of animal product consumption, which is nearly double what she now spends. It's highly unlikely that the average American has this much financial flexibility. Hence, she's bound to have to reduce her animal product consumption. The issue isn't whether, but by how much. Moreover, the average American couldn't simply reduce her animal product consumption by a factor of 3.75, as that would leave her missing a substantial number of calories (among other things, but let's use the simplest metric). Getting those calories would cut deeper into the funds available for animal products, and so we might estimate that the average American could afford only a tenth of the animal products that she currently enjoys. If the average American eats three meals a day, and consumes some animal product or other at every meal, then she'd go from eating animal products 21 times per week to eating them twice per week. While that would still be a far cry from strict veganism, it's pretty close relative to current patterns of consumption.

The upshot is that when you say that we ought not to support factory farms, you're calling for a food system that largely prices average consumers out of animal products. On the model you're advancing, most people will be eating vegan at least

5 See <http://www.bls.gov/cex/2014/combined/quintile.pdf>.

90% of the time—and more the poorer they are. For short, let’s say that they’ll have to eat mostly vegan.⁶

The Moral Premise

But suppose you’ve got the financial means to purchase animal-friendly products, and you regularly purchase them. Given the assumptions with which we began, it looks like your hands are clean; you aren’t complicit in the horrors of factory farming. However, you’re avoiding complicity without sharing the cost that most people would have to bear, which is eating mostly vegan.⁷ This is wrong. To be clear, the moral claim is not that a diet rich in animal-friendly products is wrong because it isn’t universalizable—i.e., not everyone could eat as you’re eating. That principle is doubly implausible: first, it implies that it’s wrong to purchase all sorts of luxury goods, vegan or otherwise (decent whiskey, artisan-made cashew “cheese,” a private college education); second, it implies that it’s wrong to eat highly unusual foods, even if inexpensive, simply because they aren’t generally available. Instead, the claim concerns our obligations during periods of moral change.

Moral judgments often involve assessments of what it’s reasonable to demand of others, of those sacrifices that are

6 Through this section, I’ve been assuming that there won’t be various technological solutions to the problems created by factory farms: e.g., we won’t begin genetically modifying animals so that they aren’t harmed by the way we raise and slaughter them; we won’t develop environmentally-sustainable industrial farms for relatively simple animals, such as oysters or shrimp, that we begin eating *en masse* instead of land animals; *in vitro* meat will remain prohibitively expensive; etc. If the assumption is mistaken, then my argument becomes a brief for *either* eating those products or eating mostly vegan.

7 Someone might object to the idea that this is a cost. By the lights of most people, though, it plainly is.

worthwhile, of how various goods should be balanced. And, of course, our sense of what's reasonable, what's worthwhile, and what matters is influenced by a host of personal and contextual factors. Moreover, moral norms impose costs on those who adhere to them. Instead of being able to take what you'd like from the grocery store, following the *Don't steal* norm means that you have to live on what you can afford—which might not be much. Finally, moral norms impose different costs on people. If I'm wealthy, then the costs of following the *Don't steal* norm are low; if you're poor, they're much higher.

Given all this, when the wealthy endorse moral norms that impose costs on others, but not on themselves, they should wonder whether they're willing to affirm them because they won't bear the costs that the norms ask others to internalize. (In the present case, the thought is something like: "Easy for me to say—I can have steak as much as I'd like!") By bearing the costs directly, the wealthy remove a potential defeater for their moral belief—namely, that they find it plausible only because of their comfortable position. This is the epistemic justification for the moral premise.

At the same time, by bearing the cost that most would bear, the wealthy signal that the moral change is worth making, that it isn't unreasonable to ask others to internalize the relevant costs too. In other words, internalizing the cost signals that mere privilege isn't what explains why the wealthy take the cost to be an acceptable one. In part, this matters because it gives the wealthy the standing to take morally progressive positions, which means that some of its value comes from what it communicates to others. It indicates respect for those of whom morality demands more. But it's also because of the way that signaling matters in addressing collective action problems.

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When we don't think that others will sacrifice, it's harder for us to sacrifice. When the wealthy bear the costs that others would bear, they remove an important barrier to building coalitions that can act on issues of moral importance. This is the signaling justification for the moral premise.

Granted, it's often easier for the wealthy to internalize costs, and so you might worry that the wealthy can't send the appropriate signal without themselves becoming poor. There is something to this thought. However, it's a contingent fact about us that we tend to be satisfied by parity with respect to action-types, not requiring parity with respect to broader life circumstances. When, for example, we recently realized that there aren't enough departmental funds for everyone to travel as much as they'd like, we were satisfied by having the funds be divided equally, even though the chair's salary means that this arrangement affects his travel plans much less than it affects the rest of us. Moreover, requiring poverty would be unreasonable; requiring a similar sacrifice isn't. This is for a Rawlsian reason: requiring poverty from the wealthy might actually make the poor worse off. Inequality is less objectionable—and perhaps not at all objectionable—when it benefits the least of these. Of course, it may be that most actual inequality doesn't benefit the least of these. That, however, is no objection to the point I'm making here, which is just that it isn't reasonable to demand equality across the board.

The wealthy might not be obliged to limit their consumption in the future; there might come a day when meat will be an ordinary luxury good. However, they've got these obligations for the foreseeable future. If there is ever a change, it will come when it's a general cultural norm that you shouldn't treat animals as they're treated in factory farms, nor should you sup-

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port those who do. At that point, we will have all judged that the cost of these norms is reasonable, and so there won't be any need for the wealthy to signal that it is. So if you think that we ought not to support factory farms, and this means that the poor will have to eat mostly vegan, then you ought to eat mostly vegan—at least until the norm is widely endorsed and most accept its costs.

The situation is akin to the one we face concerning climate change. We know that we ought to reduce our respective carbon footprints, and we know that this places a disproportionate burden on the poor. In part, this is because the wealthy can buy that reduction via carbon offsets—they don't have to sacrifice their favorite activities. Instead of swapping their Hummers for Priuses, or abstaining from joyrides on sunny Sunday afternoons, the wealthy can have those pleasures and pay others to plant trees. Granted, if the wealthy are going to hang on to their Hummers, buying carbon offsets is better than not buying them. But this is wrong: what they ought to do is share the cost that everyone else has to bear—namely, not having Hummers at all, nor taking joyrides on sunny Sunday afternoons. Likewise, you should usually abstain from animal-friendly animal products even if you can afford them.

Objections

Let's consider a few objections. First, someone might point out that not every non-wealthy person will have to give up Sunday-afternoon joyrides. Someone might make sacrifices elsewhere—perhaps taking public transportation the rest of the time, or heating to a much lower temperature during the winter, or whatever. Likewise, not every non-wealthy person will have to eat mostly vegan. Some people will be willing to adjust their lives in other ways to free up funds for meat. Still,

most will make this sacrifice. Why should the decisions of the majority determine the obligations of the wealthy?

What it's reasonable to ask of others—and your standing in a community—are inherently social phenomena. It's unreasonable to ask of others what most people think it's unreasonable to ask of others; likewise, you have standing when the relevant community grants it to you. And if most people think that it would be unreasonable to expect people to forgo fruits and vegetables to afford animal products—or live in worse housing, or to live without a car, or whatever—then it's unreasonable to ask as much, and you lack standing insofar as your view commits you to that claim. Recall: one reason to limit your animal product consumption is to signal to others that it's worth bearing the cost that the *Avoid-factory-farmed-products* norm requires. By not shouldering that burden, the wealthy signal the opposite, which is that the good the norm would do isn't worth the cost it asks us to internalize. So either the epistemic and signaling concerns aren't that important, in which case my argument is in trouble on independent grounds; or, they are important, and the objection misfires for that reason.

Second, someone might argue that the non-wealthy needn't eat mostly vegan, since they could supplement their diets with various non-objectionable sources of animal protein—e.g., insects, roadkill, food waste, etc.

There are two ways to take this objection. If the suggestion is that the non-wealthy could supplement their diets in these ways, then the reply is the same as the one I gave to the previous objection—namely, that if most people wouldn't want to supplement their diets in these ways, and would regard it as unreasonable to expect it of them, then it is, in fact, unreasonable

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to expect it of them. So, expecting such supplementation won't confirm that your expectations of others aren't based on your relatively privileged position, nor give you standing to take a progressive moral position.

If, however, the suggestion is that the wealthy could supplement their diets with insects, roadkill, and their ilk, then the point is a fair one, and the wealthy may indeed supplement in these ways.⁸ Notice, though, that this just refines my main claim—it doesn't overturn it. Strictly speaking, my main claim isn't that the wealthy should eat mostly vegan, but that they should drastically reduce their support even for animal-friendly animal products. However, since few people are going to supplement their diets in these ways, I'll continue to use the phrase "eating mostly vegan," since it best captures the practical upshot of my argument.

Third, someone might contend that if there really isn't anything wrong with animal-friendly agriculture, then the wealthy ought to support it, since that's the only way to sustain a rival to the industrial model. By buying animal-friendly products, the wealthy preserve a marginal food system in hopes that it will eventually become the dominant one.

Granted: if there is nothing wrong with animal-friendly agriculture, then it would be better if that model were to replace the current industrial standard. However, we have no obligation to keep animal-friendly agriculture afloat, whereas we do have an obligation not to support—and perhaps even to help undermine—industrial animal agriculture. By reducing their

⁸ I'm assuming, of course, that none of them are objectionable, and I take the assumption to be plausible. In defense of eating insects, see Fischer (2016); in defense of eating roadkill, see Bruckner (2015).

animal product consumption, the wealthy remove a significant barrier to collective action: namely, having the non-wealthy judge that the moral claims of the wealthy are unreasonable. Again, in that way eating mostly vegan aids collective action, providing a hard-to-fake signal that the wealthy will cooperate with the non-wealthy to end a cruel institution.⁹ For that reason, working against factory farms should take priority over aiding animal-friendly operations.

Fourth, someone might object that my argument generalizes in an odd way. If it works, then wealthy consumers shouldn't buy (say) electric cars over gas-powered ones, since others can't afford this more-moral option.

But this doesn't follow at all. If we shouldn't buy gas-powered cars, then my argument implies that the wealthy should buy electric. This is because, by so doing, they thereby bear the cost that the norm asks us to internalize (more expensive vehicles with less pick up relative to their current, gas-powered alternatives). And it's an obligation that's bolstered by the fact that increased demand for electric cars will lower their cost, making them available to average consumers. However, the same isn't true of animal products—or so I've argued.

Fifth, someone might insist that wealthier consumers don't harm average consumers, and so even if there is some unfairness here, it's a minor matter.

There are two problems with this. On the one hand, you might make the same point about people who drive Hummers. If this point doesn't excuse them, it doesn't excuse the

9 For more on the importance of hard-to-fake signals for collective action, see Lawford-Smith (2015).

relatively wealthy consumer. On the other, there's a sense in which supporting animal-friendly agriculture does harm average consumers. We're supposing that average consumers are mostly vegan de facto—they'd be happy to enjoy animal products if they could afford them, but often can't. However, anyone who buys animal-friendly products increases demand for them, and insofar as supply is limited, drives up their price. So, by supporting animal-friendly agriculture, relatively wealthy consumers make it harder for average consumers to get the products they'd like.

This might sound paradoxical, insofar as I'm arguing that those with means should eat mostly vegan. Recall, however, our assumption that there's nothing wrong with that animal-friendly agriculture. The goal here isn't to defend strict veganism; rather, it's to argue that even those with means ought to reduce their consumption of animal products significantly. They can't so easily buy themselves out of moral wrongdoing.

Finally, someone might contend that rather than eating mostly vegan, the wealthy ought to subsidize the diets of the non-wealthy, enabling them to eat more animal products.

This objection stands or falls on an empirical question. I've argued that animal-friendly animal products aren't scalable: we can only produce so much, even if we switch entirely to an animal-friendly model, and this because the ways of increasing productivity involve either welfare compromises or unacceptable environmental costs. If that's right, then an all-animal-friendly-agriculture world won't be one in which there are extra animal products to subsidize. Instead, everyone will have to scale back dramatically. Of course, I might be wrong about the empirical premise, in which case the objection is a

good one. But if I'm wrong about the empirical premise, then the objection also isn't necessary, as my argument will have failed at the first step.

Conclusion

Given the assumptions with which we began, it's tempting to think that there is nothing wrong with preserving your current level of animal product consumption: you just need to "eat responsibly." In so doing, however, you're dodging the cost that most people would have to bear were we to do away with factory farming—namely, eating mostly vegan. This is wrong. So, even if there is nothing intrinsically wrong with supporting animal-friendly agriculture, those with the means to support it usually shouldn't.

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