

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat

Ben Bramble and Bob Fischer, eds.
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Vegans who do not eat roadkill are immoral. Consider that the most common rationale for veganism is avoiding unnecessary harm to animals.¹ It is a well-known fact that animals are killed in the cultivation of plant foods such as wheat, corn and soybeans. Mice, rabbits and other field creatures are routinely run over by tractors or cut in two by harvesters. To buy commercial plant food therefore is to sustain the system responsible for these deaths. Road-killed animals, by contrast, are already dead, so the decision to consume them does not perpetuate a lethal process. A diet that consists entirely of plant food therefore will be responsible for a greater number of animal fatalities than a mostly-plant diet that also includes roadkill but no other meat.

So goes the argument of Donald Bruckner's cheeky paper, "Strict Vegetarianism is Immoral," a standout chapter of *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat*. Anyone who follows the animal ethics literature will be familiar with defences of meat eating premised on a rejection of animal rights. Bruckner's ingenious argument by contrast is premised on animals having rights. This captures something of the collection in general, which offers original moves and thought-provoking conclusions with impressive frequency.

Moral Complexities has three sections. Parts I and II respectively defend and challenge the ethics of meat-eating. Part III, New Directions, contains papers that mostly endorse meat-free diets, but address questions such as whether

¹ I take it for granted that readers of *Between The Species* are familiar with the central arguments for animal rights and so do not repeat them here. For an example of such an argument that rules out killing animals for food, even painlessly, see McMahan (2003). For a more concise statement of this view see McMahan (2008).

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veganism should be regarded as an aspiration or a lifestyle, or why vegetarianism often assumes a quasi-religious status for its practitioners, to their own detriment. The result is a collection with greater thematic unity than most anthologies that offers a cutting-edge discussion of central issues.

Defending Meat. None of the papers that defend omnivorism endorse factory farming. This reflects the current animal ethics debate, in which pro-factory farming views are increasingly a minority view. Thus Christopher Belshaw dismisses factory farming as “indefensible” in his opening defence of meat-eating (12). Belshaw instead argues that death is not bad for most animals in any way that matters. His premise is that in order for death to be bad in a relevant way, the animal in question must want to continue living, and most animals are incapable of forming such a desire.

Belshaw does not deny the controversial implications of this view for human beings incapable of desiring their own continued existence. “It is not bad, in the relevant sense, for babies to die.” (14) This is not the only counter-intuitive implication of Belshaw’s account. If an animal is incapable of wanting to go on living, he argues, then it is not capable of looking ahead to a future that contains stretches of good life as well as suffering, and concluding that the positive experience will outweigh the bad. Given this, it is better that the animal die now, so as to avoid the one thing that does matter, suffering. “Even if there are many years of good life ahead, still it is not worth an animal’s suffering a day’s agony in order for it to live that life.” (16) This view opens the door to killing animals for food insofar as they have no interest in continued existence. Painlessly killing them will not only be permissible, but in

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many cases a net good for the animals, as it will prevent future suffering.

J. Baird Callicott defends meat-eating on communitarian grounds. We are simultaneously members of multiple communities—“familial, municipal, national, global, mixed, biotic”—and the obligations they generate can come in conflict (61). Callicott argues that one such obligation we have is to the environment or biotic community as such. Strictly speaking, this includes an obligation to end industrial agriculture, in order to restore agricultural land to a wild state and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from livestock. So in Callicott’s ideal world, meat-eating would consist of occasionally consuming venison or other game. The obligation to bring this about however is collective, and “at planetary scales, the impact of one’s personal and voluntary abstinence from meat is negligible.” (62) Callicott thus invokes a version of the so-called inefficacy objection—our attempts to bring about systemic change through individual actions are futile—to deny any personal obligation to dismantle industrial agriculture. So long as the meat we eat is not factory farmed, our here-and-now obligations to animals will be met.

Callicott allows that veganism may have some symbolic value, but on his communitarian account, “hewing to one’s vegan virtue [can occur] at the cost of violating one’s social duties” (62). Callicott illustrates this with an anecdote about an academic dinner party at which the hosts, although not vegan themselves, took the trouble to cook vegan. Two vegan graduate students however “sat stolidly in front of empty plates,” explaining that they ate before they came because they had not known if the dinner would be vegan (61). On Callicott’s account they were failing to recognize an obligation to accept

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the hospitality of their hosts. “Had it not been inappropriate to do so, I would like to have insisted that the two elder-insulting graduate students take my seminar in ethical theory” (62).

Challenging Meat. Callicott’s conclusion is undermined by three anti-meat papers that follow his, each of which offers a sustained response to the inefficacy objection. Two of these papers are nicely done. Mark Budolfson grounds an obligation to avoid meat in a theory that grants weight to the degrees of essentiality of harm to an act. Harm or killing are “highly essential” to the production of meat, so we have an obligation to avoid it, whether or not our individual shopping decisions hasten modern agriculture’s demise (96). On an empirical level Budolfson notes that our individual shopping decisions can impact the finances of individual restaurants and supermarkets, surely important elements of the industrial food system. Clayton Littlejohn examines responses to ethical veganism that all appeal in one way or another to the idea that one’s individual actions have no moral significance. One such “no-difference” argument Littlejohn examines is the inefficacy objection. Among other failings, he argues, it too quickly detaches our individual obligations from our collective ones. If the food system as a whole is to be reformed, then economic consequences of our shopping decisions are not all that matters. So does the example we set for others, which can stigmatize meat-eating and help form a critical mass of plant-eaters that can effect change. Littlejohn’s essay makes sure-footed moves through notoriously difficult philosophical terrain, addressing foundational questions concerning the nature of death, harm and well-being, and contains a good bibliography on the larger philosophical debate over the inefficacy objection.

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As nice as Budolfson and Littlejohn's papers are, the standout of their section is Julia Driver's "Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity." Driver plausibly suggests that the notion that we can be complicit in the wrongdoing of others is firmly lodged in everyday morality. She explores different ways the concept of complicity might be spelt out, including though the use of a collective notion of accountability. As she puts it, "if one is a part of, a participant in, the cause of the bad outcome, then one is accountable. We don't just evaluate the actions of individuals, we also evaluate collective actions, and we can evaluate the action of an individual as part of a collective." (71) On this view someone can be accountable for a wrong even if her actions play no causal role in bringing it about. Driver gives the example of a group of people hiding a body. One of them is physically weak, so that when they all push the corpse into a river, her effort contributes nothing. Our notion of complicity should be wide enough to admit that we can be judged for the wrongs we commit with others, independent of the difference we make on an individual level.

Driver further presses the case against the inefficacy objection by noting that it is inconsistent with a rule or policy-based approach to ethics. "Even if it is true that a single act on a single occasion has no causal impact . . . a policy surely does. The policy itself introduces another reason for a person to act. Thus, that the policy is a good policy gives me a reason to act according to the policy." (74) This is significant insofar as the inefficacy objection is sometimes framed in consequentialist terms. Driver shows that rejecting the objection is consistent with rule-consequentialism. A proponent of the objection might then retreat to act-consequentialism, but this will be a big concession. Not only does it confine the relevance of the objection to act-consequentialists, the proponent of the

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objection must now take on the thankless task of defeating the many well-known objections to act-consequentialism, made famous not only by anti-consequentialists such as Bernard Williams and Samuel Scheffler, but the entire rule-consequentialist tradition.²

If Driver's discussion of the inefficacy objection is more in-depth and probing than Callicott's, it may reflect their different argumentative strategies. Driver gives the inefficacy objection sustained treatment throughout her chapter, whereas for Callicott it is but one of many subjects (at one point he describes his position as a "nuanced Humean-Darwinian-Leopoldian-Midgelyan biological paradigm of ethics," the awkward label name-checking all the sources his essay draws on). As for the anecdote about the graduate students, its relevance is unclear. A similar faux pas could be committed by a follower of any dietary code, whether it be kosher, gluten-free or Callicott's own prohibition on factory-farmed meat. In each case the problem would not be the very fact of having a code, as Callicott strangely suggests, but failing to communicate with and be sensitive to the feelings of one's host.

The remaining anti-meat papers are not centrally concerned with the inefficacy objection. Ben Bramble discusses it briefly, but the novelty of his paper is its speculation that meat-eating can be a cause of unconscious psychological costs, insofar as it seems to require that we deny any awareness of the moral wrongs done to food animals. Tristan McPherson investigates whether omnivores can appeal to a variation of G.E. Moore's reply to the skeptic. Moore famously argued that he knew he had hands, and insofar as skeptical conclusions were incompatible with this belief, so much the worse for skepticism. Similarly, a

² Smart and Williams (1973) and Scheffler (1994).

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Moorean omnivore might say that she knows it is not wrong to drink a glass of milk, and insofar as arguments for veganism are inconsistent with this belief, so much the worse for veganism. McPherson argues that the omnivore's version of the argument is much weaker than Moore's. Among other reasons, giving up the belief that we have hands would require radical revision of our epistemic paradigms. The changes required by veganism are comparatively mundane. Appealing to the knowledge that we have hands thus provides stronger evidentiary support than appealing to the permissibility of drinking milk.

McPherson's paper is tightly argued and his conclusion that Moorean omnivorism has severe problems is convincing. But no one appears to have ever made such an argument, and its lack of initial plausibility, for all the reasons McPherson catalogues, would seem an obvious explanation why. McPherson's paper thus comes across as an intellectual exercise rather than a contribution to the ongoing philosophical debate. In this way it shares something with Belshaw's otherwise well-argued paper, which does not make a sufficient case for its controversial premise that it is permissible to kill entities incapable of desiring their own future. This idea and its ramifications for the moral standing of infants require just as much argumentative support, if not more, than any claim about meat-eating.

New Directions. Co-authors Lori Gruen and Robert Jones compare two different understandings of veganism. "Identity veganism" is a way of keeping one's hands clean of animal harm. This view however overlooks that it is currently impossible to avoid all harm to animals. In an echo of Bruckner, the authors' leading example is the death of animals in crop cultivation. "Aspirational veganism" by contrast embraces harm-reduction as an ideal, viewing it as "something that one

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works at rather than something one is” (156). Gruen and Jones see this version of veganism as inseparable from other forms of ethical consumerism, such as those devoted to “protesting GMOs [genetically modified organisms], spreading the word about the devastating impact of palm oil production . . . and resist[ing] industrial capitalism” (164).

Gruen and Jones offer an interesting discussion of the culture of modern meat eating, which now includes Mobile Slaughter Units that travel to small farms to kill animals on site, as well as the twelve-week “full immersion” butchery program offered by Fleisher’s Craft Butcher in New York (Tuition: \$15,000). These schemes continue the discretionary killing of animals, but add a locavore-hipster sheen. Extended to other issues, this approach would address drone strikes by having the pilots wear skinny jeans, or help minimum-wage workers by ensuring indie rock was streaming in their workplace.

Gruen and Jones are surely correct about the drawbacks of identity veganism. Yet the fact that they do not cite anyone who defends this self-flattering view makes it seem a straw doll. They could also say more to defend their oddly exclusionary view of veganism. I’ve always seen veganism as a rough ethical equivalent of an overlapping consensus: a practice that people with many divergent political, religious and philosophical views can adopt. This view seems more appealing because it has a more inclusive conception of who can be vegan, while still allowing debates of issues beyond animal products to continue unabated. As for the issues Gruen and Jones mention, after *Moral Complexities* went to press, 107 Nobel laureates signed a letter characterizing Greenpeace’s opposition to GMOs as scientifically misinformed.³ Gruen and Jones’ assumption

³ Achenbach (2016).

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without argument that GMOs should be opposed leaves this and other briefs for GMOs untouched. Their discussion of the serious problems caused by palm oil plantations would be improved by not referring to plantations in “countries such as Borneo and Sumatra” (157). Borneo and Sumatra are islands. The former is divided between Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, while the latter is part of Indonesia.

Neil Levy offers a fascinating and highly original discussion of dietary ethics in “Vegetarianism: Toward Ideological Impurity.” Levy recounts a news story about a Hindu woman who inadvertently ate a bite of meat on an international flight. The woman became extremely upset, believing she had violated a sacred requirement. Levy suggests that he and other secular vegetarians sometimes experience their own diets in quasi-sacred terms, insofar as they too would become extremely upset at eating even a small amount of meat, viewing it as a purity violation. Levy seeks to replace this view of vegetarianism (and veganism) with one that is strict but not sacred.

Levy defends strict dietary codes by citing psychological research on how we apply behavioural rules. The research suggests that “the extent to which rules must be interpreted in order to be applied predicts their liability to encourage self-deception” (180).⁴ Telling ourselves that we are only going to eat free-range meat requires us to make ongoing judgement calls. To take one of Levy’s examples, “should I accept the waiter’s assurance that the pig was slaughtered humanely?” (180). The science suggests we have a tendency to succumb to temptation in answering such questions. A strict no-meat rule by contrast does a better job managing weakness of will and requires less cognitive labour.

⁴ See Ainslie (2001).

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As for sacredness, Levy makes a compelling case that it can actually undermine a commitment to plant-based eating. Sacred thinking tends to be all or nothing: hence the Hindu woman's belief that one mouthful of meat could undo a lifetime of vegetarianism. This thinking means that there is no difference between falling just short of a dietary ideal and rejecting it outright. Applied to the woman on the airplane, if her purity really was gone, she might as well have eaten an entire cow when she landed. But surely we do want to distinguish between not quite living up to a dietary ideal and completely abandoning it.

The final two papers, which I cannot do justice to here, are by Bob Fischer and Alexandria Plakias. In "Against Blaming the Blameworthy," Fisher makes the thought-provoking claim that although eating meat is wrong, the case for actively blaming meat eaters is weak. The average person can be blamed for many things, from failing to give enough to charity to supporting brands that exploit their workers, so we have to decide what kind of change-inducing blame to prioritize. That involving an immoral diet is low on the list. In "Beetles, Bicycles, and Breath Mints: How 'Omni' Should Omnivores Be?," Plakias offers a thoughtful discussion of how food is distinguished from non-food, a form of line-drawing over which we have more autonomy than we generally realize.

What counts as food returns us to Bruckner's argument for roadkill. When I taught his piece in a class on philosophy and the environment several students said it was their favourite reading. I can see why, given how original and fearless it is. Bruckner's claim is not that roadkill is permissible, but that it is an obligatory staple for vegans. If this is right it will have ramifications for practically every vegan. But is it right? As with

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Callicott, confidence in Bruckner's argument is undermined by other chapters of *Moral Complexities*.

One reason is suggested by Driver, who asks whether an ethical vegan could reasonably eat meat other people had already thrown out. We might think so on the familiar grounds that such a habit would have no impact on the fate of animals. Driver suggests that if meat eating is wrong in general, then it is also wrong for the vegan dumpster diver. "A system is established whereby some people habitually benefit from the misdeeds of others, allowing them to reap the benefits without the dirty hands" (76). Extended to roadside animals, if some were killed by drivers guilty of negligence (or worse) then the same problem of "bypassing norms" will also apply to consumers of roadkill (76): they will benefit from, and so be complicit in, an immoral practice.

The case for roadkill is also undermined by the rule-following problem highlighted by Levy. Whether roadkill was served by waiters or sold out of the back of trucks, people who acquired it would inevitably have to decide whether or not the meat they wanted to eat really was roadkill, risking a demand for animals deliberately killed for food.

Brucker might mitigate these problems by only requiring us to eat animals we run over ourselves. This however raises a separate problem. The rationale for eating roadkill is that it will cause fewer animal deaths than agriculture. In making this case Bruckner points out, correctly, that no one really knows how many animals are killed in crop cultivation. Nevertheless, he is untroubled by the lack of an accurate figure. Even if the number of harvester deaths turn out to be small, he figures, it

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will still be more than the number of deaths caused by eating roadkill, which must be zero.

But would a norm of eating accidentally killed animals really not cause any additional deaths? Grounds for doubt came to mind when my wife and I had to decide whether to drive or fly on a family trip. We weighed the usual pros and cons of money, time and screaming kids in the back seat. Bruckner's scheme would add a consideration in favour of driving: we might happen to hit some deer along the way. His proposal thus incentivizes people to take to the roads in hope of killing animals, thereby gaining access to the rare delicacy of their flesh. This suggests that we cannot assume zero additional animal deaths after all. We rather have two food-production schemes, agricultural and agriculture plus roadkill, both causing an unknown number of animal fatalities. This is enough to drain Bruckner's proposal of obligatory force.

Yet Bruckner's proposal remains significant, as it illustrates how the animal debate is changing. Critics once attacked, even ridiculed, the very idea of animal rights. Bruckner represents an increasingly common type of critic who does not challenge the central argument for animal justice, but rather tinkers with its implications.⁵ Bruckner's proposed diet is itself a form of veganism, ruling out as it does buying leather or fur and eating eggs or milk, let alone the vast majority of meat consumption. Where previous critics once challenged veganism outright, those of Bruckner's modern stripe want in on the debate over the precise form it should take. This may not be everything vegans hope for, but it is progress beyond doubt.

5 For other examples see Davis (2003) and Archer (2011).

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