

Harm

0.1 The argument

Fit box (5cm)

- 1)Causing unnecessary harm is bad
 - 2)Eating animals causes unnecessary harm
- Therefore eating animals is bad

Though the argument is simple enough, it is nevertheless worth clarifying some terminology. **Bad** is used in a strong sense of "we should not do what is bad". In other words bad is supposed to have moral force, if somebody accepts that something has this property they should be compelled to not take that action. Any one act may have numerous positive or negative effects but the argument can still have some meaning. The simplest way these effects can be aggregated is through additivity, if one has reason to believe these effects can be added up then one can claim the action is bad in total.

A related example is if the act of helping causes harm that is unnecessary for the consequence one wants. For instance perhaps I want to push you out of the way so that a car won't run you over, but as a consequence you lose your hat. It is true that you losing your hat is not necessary for being saved. Nevertheless we can judge a posteriori that it was necessary for the action taken.

The argument can also hold if there are cases where the actions can be positive. There may be a circumstance where the action in question is good and some circumstances where the action is bad(notice that this can only occur in a consequentialist context). In this case our argument can be revised to be only made for the cases where it is bad. Alternatively the argument can again rely on a property of additivity to claim that in total the bad that is

caused is greater than the good that is caused in the totality of cases.

Harm is a better term than the alternatives because of its generality. The argument would also work if we used the words "pain" or "suffering". However the use of alternative words might exclude the concept of "killing". Using those words would then make the argument more open to objections via empirical methods. For instance one could just point to some painless way of killing and the argument would instantly fail. On the other hand, the harm version can survive such an attack. On the other hand if one attacks a pain formulation that would probably also apply to the harm formulation. This generalization also corresponds to what most vegetarians actually believe. If a very ethical farmer showed up that filmed the painless killing of the animal, it is doubtful that many vegetarians would change their mind and eat this specific animal.

The problem of "harm" is that it may be general enough to encompass non-conscious agents, such as killing a plant or tree. The argument as presented makes reference only to animals but somebody might object: "why only animals and not plants?". In this case, the vegetarian may return to the previous standards of "suffering" or "harm". Alternatively they could commit "organicism", that is, arbitrarily discriminate between organic beings based on their categorization. However I suspect the most likely position they will take is that it is not a matter of category but a matter of degree. That is, they will agree that harming plants is bad, but not sufficiently bad given the benefits. That is, one may think that the value of plants is high but the value of humans living is higher. I believe this kind of position automatically locks you into additivity.

Note that this argument of harm

0.2 Problems

0.2.1 Necessity

The most obvious problem with the argument is the notion of necessity. What exactly is this notion? Necessity is a fairly rare word in that the common use and the philosophical use are identical: Something is necessary that must be present for a certain other thing to occur. It makes little linguistic sense to talk of necessity without linking it to something, there must be a second part to the use of the word, necessity is a constraint and there must be some objective for the constraint to work on. For instance if I want to make a cake it is necessary that I use the ingredients necessary to make the cake. The sentence "flour is

neccesary to make the flour cake" makes sense. The sentence "flour is neccesary" does not make sense. So then it is clear that vegetarians are assuming that there is some goal(cake), which can be achieved through a variety of means.

What is the "cake" of the suffering of animals? Suppose an agent is trying to get the best "taste" possible, the omega taste. If the omega taste does not require eating animals¹ then the argument works, this would be equivalent to saying "don't eat animals because there are better tastes out there". If on the other hand the "omega taste" must include animal flesh, then the argument instantly fails. That is, if I am trying to have the best taste I can, then it IS neccesary that I eat animals.

Do people eat meat because of the taste? Though I suspect many people do consiously believe they eat meat because they enjoy the taste, evolutionary reasoning actually works backwards: They like the taste because they meat. In other words, the argument should not be taken at face value, people are comfortable eating meat but the reason they eat is not because of the taste. Nevertheless taste plays an important role for habit formation of new generations. In other words agent's are not optimizing creature, they just have a set of habits, there is no sense in speaking of constraints.

Is this obvious truth, that people have habits and don't analyze their actions and simply do things, a deathblow to philosophers trying to analyze them? A philosopher may be interested in two distinct things, trying to explain the behavior of the the agents, and trying to convince the agents to change their mind.

If the goal of the philosopher is simply to explain the behavior, he is in fact indifferent to how the agent's decide, instead he is interested in studying their behavior and will simply try to re-formulate his theory to say that agents are acting AS IF they maximize their pleasure. This approach is most interesting for those who with a scientific inclination, it can be used to try and predict the behavior.

If on the other hand the philosopher is interested in changing the agents mind, then he will try to stop the agent from doing thing unconsciously. This may provoke anger or dismissable from the agent, understandably, a bit like socrates who was known for being really annoying by trying to have people articulate everything. Of course this may be a more dangerous exercise than it seems because making an agent less reliant on one habit may make them doubt their other habits. Of course philosophers may think this is a desirable state of affairs to the desirable, but they are open to Chesterton's fence criticism.

¹Note here that this is more plausible than it appears, since there are specific labs that aim to create vegetables that emulate the taste of meat

But let's play the philosophers game and assume for a moment that people are eating meat because they are maximizing some underlying variable. What is their goal if it is not taste? What else can be the optimand of people? Perhaps people are trying simply to optimize their pleasure, but that would simply result in a similar argument to the "taste" argument. Perhaps they are trying to lead a good life, in which case the vegetarian would have to appeal defining the "good life", something many vegetarians don't wish to do because it makes retaining a subjectivist position difficult. If they are willing to embrace non-subjectivist positions then they would have to fall to objective standards. Nevertheless the most likely turn of vegetarians after reflecting is to use happiness as the standard.

In other words, the vegetarians will simply try to use the utilitarian standard and attempt to convert meat-eaters to adopt this standard.