

PH1102E

Week 5

Meat

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Puppy Argument

1. You would refuse to eat dessert at Fred’s house, even if you knew that it wouldn’t discourage him from torturing puppies.
2. Factory-farmed animals are treated as badly as Fred’s puppies.
3. Therefore, you should refuse to eat factory-farmed products, even though you know that it will not discourage people from raising animals on factory farms.

Lomasky

For non-human animals, pleasure is all that matters.

So, as long as the animals living on factory farms have more pleasure than pain in their lives, their lives are worth living.

And, apart from veal calves and egg-layers, it seems reasonable to suppose that factory-farmed animals do have more pleasure than pain in their lives.

My point is that these animals wouldn’t be alive at all, if it weren’t for the fact that we planned to eat them.

So, as long as the animals that live on factory farms have lives worth living, I do nothing wrong by supporting factory farming with my meat-buying dollars.

I said that hedonism was a correct theory of value for the lives of farm animals.

But the value of a human life depends on more than pleasure and absence of pain.

It also depends on personal liberty and freedom from ignorance.

I. Eating meat: moral issues

There are many moral issues connected with eating meat. Some people argue that eating meat is wrong simply because it involves the premature death of an animal. Others argue that eating meat is wrong because it promotes farming practices that damage the environment. Others argue that eating meat is wrong because it wastes food resources that could be used to feed the starving and malnourished people of the world.

We are not going to consider these arguments today.

Instead, we are going to consider some arguments against eating a specific kind of meat -- meat from factory-farmed animals -- on the grounds that eating this kind of meat causes a large amount of suffering for the sake of a relatively small amount of enjoyment.

Factory farming is a method of raising animals for food, milk, and eggs that involves maintaining high-density populations of animals in scientifically controlled environments. It's called "factory farming," because it applies the same economic principles to farming that factory operators apply to produce large quantities of manufactured goods at low cost. Factory farming is essentially an agricultural form of mass production.

How dense *are* animal populations on a factory farm? It depends on the farm. Veal calves and egg-laying hens are packed in very tight -- so tightly that they can barely move. Industrial hog farms are crowded, but not as crowded. Chicken houses (for broilers -- i.e., chickens raised for their meat) are also crowded, but again not nearly as much as layers. And it's the same story with cattle feedlots. No matter how crowded, many animals on factory farms undoubtedly suffer (from disease, overeating, and sometimes cannibalism). The exact extent of their suffering is something we address later.

I now consider the first of two arguments against consuming factory-farmed meat, due to Alastair Norcross. I'll call it the Puppy Argument.

II. The Puppy Argument

Fred raises puppies in cages so small that the puppies can barely move, and he periodically cuts off their paws and noses with a hot knife, killing them after six months. He is doing all this in order to harvest "cocoamone" from the puppies, which Fred needs in order to be able to taste chocolate, and which there is no other way of producing except by treating puppies this way.

With this story in the background, Norcross offers the following argument:

- (1) Fred's behavior is morally impermissible.
- (2) The behavior of those who knowingly support factory farming is morally indistinguishable from Fred's behavior.
- (3) Therefore, the behavior of those who knowingly support factory farming is morally impermissible.

Norcross assumes, rightly I think, that premise (1) of this argument is beyond any reasonable doubt. Clearly, Fred's behavior is immoral. But the situation with premise (2) is not so clear. This is because it is not clear that factory farmed animals are generally treated as badly as Fred's puppies. Like the puppies, egg-laying chickens and veal calves are confined to enclosures that give them practically no freedom of motion. So there is a parallel with some factory-farmed animals here.

But what about the nose- and paw-amputations? Here, Norcross seems to be drawing an analogy with the "de-beaking" of chickens. This is the practice of removing the tip of a chicken's beak to prevent it from harming other chickens, in the event that it attacks them (as sometimes happens). (Since only the tip of the beak is removed, "de-beaking" is a somewhat misleading term.) However, it is very unlikely that the pain of de-beaking is as intense or as lasting as the pain that Fred inflicts on his puppies when he cuts off their paws and noses, and it is certain that the degree of mutilation that results from de-beaking a chicken is minimal compared to the degree of mutilation that Fred inflicts on his puppies. (A "de-beaked" chicken suffers no permanent impairment in terms of its ability to feed.)

Still, the close confinement of the puppies is enough to cause them severe and prolonged suffering, and one can only assume that veal calves -- and probably egg-laying chickens -- suffer about the same from their equally close confinement. So even though factory-farmed veal calves and laying hens are probably not *as* miserable as Fred's puppies, they are presumably still quite miserable. So the Puppy Argument does seem to establish that we should refrain from consuming factory-farmed eggs and veal. But what about other factory-farmed products? Are the animals that they come from anywhere near as miserable as Fred's puppies (even without the amputations)? To answer this question, we must raise another: How much do factory-farmed broilers, hogs, and cattle suffer?

III. The Argument from Suffering

Norcross does not state this next argument explicitly, but it is implicit throughout his article:

- (A) Eating factory-farmed meat contributes to the perpetuation of a system of agriculture that harms large numbers of animals to the point that their lives are not worth living.
- (B) If eating factory-farmed meat contributes to the perpetuation of such a system, then eating factory farmed meat is wrong.
- (C) Therefore, eating factory-farmed meat is wrong.

The second premise of this argument seems pretty uncontroversial, so let's focus on the first premise (i.e., step (A) of the argument).

There is no doubt that some factory farmed animals (FFAs) suffer greatly -- so greatly that their lives are not worth living. These unfortunate lives are not worth living, because they involve far more suffering than enjoyment, and because, for non-human animals, the only absolute goods are suffering and enjoyment. Into this "not-worth-living" category fall the lives of veal calves, and probably many, if not all, of the egg-laying hens that are confined to cages too small for them to

stretch their wings. But we have already agreed to abstain from consuming factory farmed eggs and veal, based on the Puppy Argument.

For other factory-farmed animals, however, the situation is not so clear. When it comes to factory-farmed pigs, cows, and broilers (chickens raised for eating), it may be that most of these animals do have lives that are worth living.

Does the fact that broilers live in crowded chicken houses mean that their lives are not worth living? Of course we wouldn't want to live in such crowded conditions, but we aren't chickens. Indeed, many species of wild birds freely choose to live in densely-packed crowds. Wild bovines (like bison and water buffalo) also tend to live in closely-packed herds. Wild pigs live together in looser and less permanent groups. So there is some reason to suppose that they would prefer not to live in the dense populations typical of an industrial-scale hog farm, other things being equal.

But other things are not equal. Like all wild animals, wild pigs must constantly search for food, or else go hungry and, if they cannot find enough food, starve. Factory-farmed pigs do not have to worry about food at all. Nor do they have to worry about inclement weather or other natural threats.

Now, it may be objected that even if the lives of FFAs are worth living, surely these animals would have far better lives if they were less crowded together, less tightly controlled, and more free to play, have sex, and do other things that come naturally to them. And they'd definitely be better off if we let them die natural deaths, instead of killing them while young.

This is probably true. But the fact is that these animals wouldn't be alive at all, if it weren't for the fact that we planned to eat them. It's not a choice between the animals living on factory farms and the animals frolicking around freely in the fields. It's a choice between the animals living on factory farms and the animals not living at all.

This is the main point of Loren Lomasky's limited defense of consuming factory-farmed meat. **By Lomasky's reckoning, as long as the animals that live on factory farms do have lives worth living, we do nothing wrong by supporting factory farming with our meat-buying dollars.** After all, how can it be wrong to support an industry that generates lives worth living, for the purpose of enhancing the lives of meat-eating humans?

An opponent of factory farming might resist Lomasky's reasoning. He might argue that even if factory-farmed animals' lives are, by and large, worth living, this is not enough to justify consumption of factory-farmed products.

Suppose that aliens raised human beings as livestock. These humans would not exist at all, we are to imagine, but for the fact that the aliens have cultivated them for eventual consumption. The farmed humans are not deliriously happy, but the aliens make it possible for them to lead lives worth living -- until they reach the age of 21, when the aliens butcher the humans for food. By the same logic that Lomasky uses to defend the consumption of factory-farmed meat, the aliens can defend their consumption of factory-farmed humans!

How could Lomasky reply to this? One way would be to accept that the aliens do no wrong if they really succeed in giving the humans they cultivate lives worth living. That said, it is very difficult to see how the aliens could manage this. Unlike pigs, cows, and chickens, human beings are aware of their own mortality. Knowing that you are going to die before you turn 22 has a very negative impact on one's quality of life.

Well, suppose that the aliens arrange things so that when someone turns 21, he or she is led onto a spaceship with the promise of being taken to a glorious new world -- perhaps the aliens establish a religion among their human livestock for this purpose. So no one thinks he's going to die young. Couldn't the factory-farmed humans have lives worth living then?

But Lomasky could point out that they would still be living under a gross deception. Furthermore, seeing as they all die young, relatively few of them will achieve anything great or meaningful. For these reasons and more, the human livestock do not have lives worth living, at least, not in most cases, and not on average.

If Lomasky takes this line, he sets himself against hedonism, as defended by Roger Crisp. For human beings, Lomasky will say, there is more to life than pleasure and the absence of pain. It is not just that a human being generally has more to lose than a chicken -- remember, *these* human beings would have nothing to lose, were they not destined for alien dinner tables. But humans, unlike chickens and cows, have certain rights. A human being has a right not to be used as livestock, and if he is being used as livestock, he has a right to know it. (By contrast, we couldn't inform the chickens that they were being used as livestock, even if we wanted to.)

How convincing is this reply? Not very, according to Norcross, who will respond that the only "right" that any sentient being has is not to be deprived of pleasure or subjected to pain unnecessarily, where "unnecessarily" means: other than for the purpose of increasing the total amount of pleasure in the world, or decreasing the total amount of pain.

One might try a different, and less stalematish reply to Lomasky. Suppose that there is a newly married couple who very much want to have a child, but only on condition that the child is mentally and physically disabled -- not so severely disabled that the child suffers from physical or mental pain or anxiety, but still significantly disabled. If they cannot have a disabled child, the couple does not want to have children at all. They are wealthy enough that they can afford to provide any child that they might have with everything it needs in terms of security, medical care, basic comforts, etc.

Luckily (?) for this couple, they discover a drug that the husband can take, which will have the effect of altering his sperm so as to guarantee that any child they have will have the desired disabilities. He takes the drug, and, sure enough, a disabled child is born to them.

Has the couple done something wrong? If so, then it looks as though Lomasky's defense of consuming factory-farmed products is in trouble. The disabled child has a life worth living. It would not have lived at all, were it not for its parents' desire to have a disabled child. The child's rights have not been violated: if its parents hadn't taken the drug, this child would never have existed (some other, unaltered sperm would have fertilized the egg, resulting in a completely different child). If none of this justifies the parents' actions, then it is hard to see how the fact that factory-

farmed animals have lives-worth-living that they wouldn't have had at all but for our intention to curtail them for our dining pleasure justifies us in consuming factory-farmed products.

So, if you are inclined to defend your consumption along the lines that Lomasky suggests, it seems to me that you have to accept that the parents in the example discussed above do no wrong. For my part, I can't see that they do anything wrong (although in any real-life case, one would expect that the parents would eventually come to regret their decision).

IV. "What difference do I make?"

Some argue that it is OK to eat factory-farmed meat, even if factory-farmed animals suffer so much that their lives aren't worth living. Such a person reasons as follows:

I am just a single consumer. When I eat my chicken rice, the amount of meat I consume is so small that it is negligible, by the economic standards of the chicken industry. After all, when I buy the chicken rice, or even a whole chicken at the supermarket, the meat's already there. The chicken is dead. And it's not like the chicken farmers are going to kill another one just because I eat this bird (or this plate of chicken rice).

In fact, if I quit eating chicken for the rest of my life, that would have no effect whatever on the chicken industry. I mean: it's a multi-billion dollar industry. They wouldn't notice the loss of the couple hundred dollars I spend on chicken every year. So, if I were to quit eating chicken, all I would accomplish would be to deprive myself of a considerable amount of pleasure. No animal lives would be saved by my sacrifice, and no animal suffering averted. So I'm fully within my rights to continue eating factory-farmed chicken. And the same reasoning applies to all factory-farmed products -- even veal!

Norcross gives two replies to this argument.

One is to deny that the factory-farming industry is unresponsive to any individual consumer's behavior. This argument is not entirely convincing, since it assumes, without any clear justification, that there is a trend among the consumer population of giving up factory-farmed products. (If there is no such trend, then there is practically no chance that enough people will quit eating meat to reach a threshold of abstinence that would have a noticeable impact on the meat industry's bottom line, and consequently almost no chance that my decision to abstain will be the one that brings us to that threshold.) **Still, it is true that there is at least some minuscule chance that by quitting meat, I'll cause a reduction in the population of factory-farmed animals.** Depending on how much of a reduction we're talking about, and how minuscule the chance, it *might* make sense for me to quit, if I think the relevant animals have more suffering than enjoyment. (This is analogous to the question whether it makes sense to vote: you have to balance (small) likelihood that your vote will decide the election against the possible large consequences of one versus the other candidate being elected.)

The other reply is to refer back to the Puppy Argument. Most of us would decline an invitation to have dessert at Fred's house even if we knew that our refusal would not discourage Fred from continuing to torture puppies in his basement. Likewise, if we believe that factory-farmed hens are

treated so cruelly that their lives are not worth living, then consistency demands that we refuse to consume factory-farmed eggs, even if we know that our refusal will not discourage people from raising hens on factory farms.

V. Conclusion

Discussions of the ethics of factory farming tend to lump all kinds of factory farms together. This seems to be a mistake. Some factory farmed animals undoubtedly suffer terribly -- veal calves are probably the clearest case in point. For others, it is not clear how much they suffer, if they suffer at all (or, suffer significantly more than animals living in optimal conditions). Without concrete data on how much they suffer, the debate about consuming factory-farmed produce is unlikely to reach any satisfactory resolution.

That said, consistency appears to demand that if we are going to defend our meat-eating practices (along the lines that Lomasky suggests), we must allow that certain seemingly offensive practices -- such as deliberately having disabled children, or farming humans for food -- are not, in fact, immoral.