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#### Recommended Citation

Hooley, D., & Nobis, N. (2015). A moral argument for veganism. *Philosophy comes to dinner: Arguments about the ethics of eating*, 92-108.

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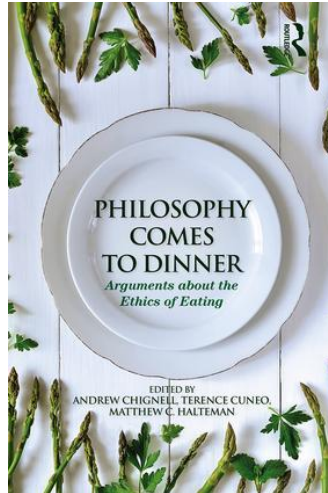


# A MORAL ARGUMENT FOR VEGANISM

By [Dan Hooley](#) (U. Toronto) and [Nathan Nobis](#) (Morehouse College)

In [\*Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments About the Ethics of Eating\*](#),

Edited by Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, Matthew C. Halteman, Routledge, 2016. ([Amazon](#))



## I. Introduction

In this essay, we argue for dietary veganism.<sup>1</sup> Our case has two steps. First, we argue that, in most circumstances, it is morally wrong to raise animals to produce meat, dairy products, most eggs (a possible exception we discuss is eggs from pet chickens) and most other animal food products. Turning animals into food, and using them for their byproducts, causes serious harms to animals that are morally unjustified: that is, the reasons given to justify causing these kinds of harms – goods or alleged goods that result from animal farming and slaughter – are inadequate to justify the bad done to animals. This is true for both conventional ‘factory farming’ methods of raising and killing animals *and* small-scale, boutique animal farming and slaughter.

Some will conclude from this argument that each individual has a moral obligation to be vegan because they are morally obligated to not support wrongdoing. Our second step supports that reasoning. It *is* often morally wrong to support those who act wrongly. So, when it is wrong to produce a particular product, it can be wrong to purchase or use that product or otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> While the focus of our essay is on our dietary obligations, we believe our arguments can be extended to ‘lifestyle veganism,’ e.g., not buying and wearing leather and not buying and using personal care products tested on animals.

encourage the product's production. We develop a plausible general moral principle concerning when consumers are obligated not to purchase or use a product. This principle justifies a moral obligation to not support the wrongful treatment of animals by purchasing or consuming animal food products. Thus, it's wrong to *not* be a vegan.

We discuss a variety of attempts to explain why these harms to animals are morally justified, that is, alleged good reasons to justify treating animals badly. Focusing on some of the most philosophically challenging justifications, we argue that none succeed: no defense points to goods that justify the serious harms done to animals, and so these harms are unjustified.

Arguments for veganism often appeal to many other considerations, such as personal and public health, environmental protection, and world hunger, but our argument does not appeal to them. Some of these concerns support steps *toward* veganism but, unlike harm-based concerns, they do not justify a moral obligation to eat a vegan diet. Concerning personal health, we accept the common view that people are not morally obligated to act, and so eat, in ways that are likely to be best, or at least very good, for their own health.<sup>2</sup> And there is no scientific reason to believe that vegan diets must be nutritionally superior to diets that include some animal products, especially if they are consumed rarely and in limited quantities.<sup>3</sup> And to adequately address environmental, public-health and human social justice problems resulting from animal agriculture, no one must eat a vegan diet: a radically fewer number of animals could be raised in far less environmentally degrading ways that don't compromise public health and the lives of the world's poor. Veganism addresses these concerns, but so do some non-vegan responses. These concerns thereby augment harm-based arguments for veganism, but do not replace them.

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<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with believing the less controversial claim that at least some people are obligated to refrain from actions that are very harmful to their health.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Messina, Registered Dietitian (and a vegan), writes: 'There is . . . a pretty good argument for eating more plants (lots more plants) and less animal food, but no one has shown that you must eat a 100 percent plant diet in order to be healthy. So to make an argument for a 100% vegan diet based on health benefits alone, we have no choice but to stretch the truth': at <http://www.theveganrd.com/2010/11/how-the-health-argument-failsveganism.html> See also Joel Fuhrman, MD (2011) *Eat to Live: The Amazing Nutrient-Rich Program for Fast and Sustained Weight Loss*, Revised Edition (Little, Brown and Company), p. 91: 'Following a strict vegetarian diet is not as important [for health] as eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables. A vegetarian whose diet is [full of processed foods] will be worse off than a person who eats a little chicken or eggs, for example, but consumes a large amount of fruits, vegetables and beans. Studies have confirmed this.'

## II. Step 1: Raising and Killing Animals for Food Step

1 in our case for veganism is this argument:

- (1) If a practice causes serious harms that are morally unjustified, then that practice is morally wrong.
- (2) The practice of raising and killing animals for food causes serious harms to animals and some human beings.
- (3) These harms are morally unjustified.
- (4) Therefore, the practice of raising and killing animals for food is wrong.

Unlike arguments for veganism that appeal to ‘equality’ for animals, animal ‘rights’ or the ‘moral status’ or ‘standing’ of animals,<sup>4</sup> this argument depends on an uncontroversial moral principle that most people already accept: it is wrong to cause serious harms that are morally unjustified.<sup>5,6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Appeals to ‘moral status’ (or ‘moral standing’) typically are either question begging or circular (e.g., ‘It is wrong to harm animals because they have a moral status such that it is wrong to harm them’) or dispensable (e.g., ‘Animals are wrong to harm *because* they have the moral status or standing of conscious, sentient beings,’ which could have

<sup>5</sup> Our argument also differs from arguments that appeal to the wrongness of causing ‘unnecessary’ harms. Claims about what’s necessary or unnecessary are *always* relative to bringing about some end. Thus, bare claims to necessity (or lack of it) *simpliciter* are always incomplete: nothing can be said to be ‘just plain necessary’ or ‘just plain unnecessary.’ Harming animals is *not necessary* for our health, but harming animals *is necessary* for people to eat meat (from animals raised for that purpose, i.e., not meat from roadkill or from animals who died naturally), and harming animals *is necessary* for some traditions, as currently practiced, to continue. So raising animals for food *is necessary* for some ends, *unnecessary* for others. Advocates of veganism who appeal to a ‘necessity’ based argument must also argue that various ends – ‘unnecessary’ *and* ‘necessary,’ relative to various ends – do not morally justify harming animals. Our argument focuses on this fundamental concern about moral justification, bypassing the distracting question of whether the harms are necessary or not, given the many ends that these harms may or may not be necessary for.

<sup>6</sup> Our premise also concerns harms that agents are aware of: they reasonably believe that they are doing harm; it would be irrational for them to believe that they are not causing harms. If someone causes harm but doesn’t realize this, some argue that the action is either not morally wrong or, at least, that the agent is not blameworthy, if the ignorance was not due to negligence. This, however, is of little importance for our paper. The harms farmed animals experience are directly caused by those involved in these industries – they aren’t, for example, accidental harms, occurring at a much later time – and the people involved are aware that they are harming animals, as evidenced by their insistence that they treat animals ‘humanly.’

We use the concept of ‘harm’ in a regular, everyday sense. To harm someone is to make them worse off in some significant way.<sup>7</sup> Harms are bad for someone, at least when the harms are considered in themselves. We focus on harms because of their explanatory power in ethics. Imagine some of the worst ways that individuals can be treated. Why are these actions wrong? What is it *about* these actions that made them wrong? One fundamental answer is that the individuals affected by the action are harmed by them, it is bad *for them* to be treated those ways.<sup>8</sup> When we add that these harms lack justification – either there was no benefit from the action, or too little of a benefit to justify the harm, or a benefit or good that otherwise does not justify the action – we conclude that the action is morally wrong. Actions that are known to cause harm, especially serious harm, need justification and, without it, are wrong.

### **Premise 1: A Moral Principle**

just been said as, ‘Animals are wrong to harm *because* they are conscious, sentient beings,’ without mentioning ‘moral status’ or ‘standing.’)

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<sup>7</sup> Although we understand harms in this comparative way, our argument can be made on other, non-comparative accounts of harm. However, we believe that any adequate account of harm must be able to recognize the serious harms to animals that we outline. These should not be disputed harms.

<sup>8</sup> Answers to the above question about what *makes* wrong actions wrong that don’t immediately appeal to harms might do so eventually. If someone says that actions like those above are wrong because, for example, they dehumanize and disrespect the victim, we might observe that dehumanization and disrespect are wrong *because* they are harmful. Victims of dehumanization and disrespect are made worse off: it is bad to be treated so. And moral rights protect individuals from harm: they often involve a right to not be harmed in some way. So, again, harm is often at or near the root of wrongdoing.

Our first premise, then, is a common-sense moral principle that nearly everyone affirms for both humans *and* some animals: common sense and law affirm that intentional cruelty to animals is wrong because it harms them, which indicates a presumption against unjustified harms. If anyone rejects the argument, then, they will have to reject other premises.

Nevertheless, the principle requires some clarification. The idea of a ‘serious’ harm is vague: how bad does a harm have to be in order to be a *serious* harm? We offer no systematic answer here, nor do we establish a clear distinction between more and less serious harms. We don’t do this because it’s not practically important since most of the harms done to animals are, unfortunately, among the worst harms an individual can experience: they are not in any ‘grey area’ of harms.

We also do not offer a complete theory on what does and would justify harms. Harms can be justified in cases of self- and other-defense, and allowing harms to yourself to avoid future harms or achieve future benefits for yourself can be permissible also. But we offer no general theory here. Instead we approach the issue on a case by case basis, arguing that actual given justifications (‘Yes, this seriously harms animals, but it’s not wrong because \_\_\_’) do not succeed.

Finally, our argument for veganism is not based on a comprehensive moral theory, such as utilitarianism, a rights-based theory, a version of contractarianism, or any other attempts to explain, in general, what it is about all wrong actions that *makes* them wrong, or what it is that unifies all moral obligations. Our main reason for this is to avoid needless controversy. Moral theories are controversial: no theory has wide acceptance and any argument based on any particular theory invites the responses, ‘I don’t accept that moral theory, so your argument won’t convince me,’ or ‘I believe that moral theory is false, so your argument is unsound.’ We avoid general moral theories but endorse a moral principle that all plausible moral theories support and our readers likely already accept: knowingly causing serious harms is wrong unless they are justified – that is, unless there are good reasons to cause them.

## **Premise 2: Harms to Animals**

Our second premise is that animals, and some human beings, are seriously harmed when animals are raised and killed for food. Animals are made worse off in various and significant ways when raised and killed to be eaten, and some humans are made worse off for doing this. Is this true?

We recommend that everyone investigate for themselves to learn about the cognitive, emotional and social capabilities of animals. Almost daily there are reports in the news about scientific discoveries about the inner lives of animals: these nearly always report that animals' minds and experiences are richer and more sophisticated than we suspected; view videos and photographs of farms and slaughterhouses; read written descriptions from many perspectives; and review the websites of animal advocacy organizations, including those with rescued farmed animals, who people should try to meet and interact with for themselves. Finally, seek sources of information produced by the animal agriculture industry. Although their sources typically offer few details about animals' lives and deaths, compare what they say and show, if anything, about the conditions of farmed animals to reports from the major news media and animal advocacy and environmental organizations.

With that in mind, we offer a brief summary of the harms farmed animals are made to experience. All these harms concern standard practices in farms and slaughterhouses: none are extraordinary or deemed cruel by the industries.

### **Harms to Animals in Treatment**

Let's begin with how animals are treated during their short lives. The vast majority of meat, dairy, and eggs produced in the United States come from animals raised on factory farms or confined animal feeding operations (CAFO's).<sup>9</sup> Here is a sample of some standard practices:<sup>10</sup>

- Egg laying hens' beaks are sliced or burnt off; they are crammed in tiny, wire cages with other birds, without the space to turn around or spread their wings. Many die as a result of their confinement, while others suffer broken bones, open cuts and sores, as well as other injuries. Once a hen has stopped laying eggs, after a year or two, she is removed

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<sup>9</sup> Approximately 99% of all farmed animals in the United States live on factory farms. Most of the farmed animals killed in the US for food are chickens, and only 0.44% of these animals are raised on 'free range' farms. See the U.S.D.A., 'The Economic Organization of U.S. Broiler Production' (2008):

[http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/205671/eib38\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/205671/eib38_1_.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Mercy for Animals' short video, *Farm to Fridge*, gives an excellent overview of many of the harms farmed animals experience, as standard practice, during their lives and in the process of being killed:

<http://www.mercyforanimals.org/farm-to-fridge.aspx>

from her cage and killed, usually by suffocation with carbon dioxide. Her body is often used in processed chicken products.

- Male chicks are useless to the egg industry since they don't lay eggs or grow big enough to be useful for their flesh. As a result, male chicks are killed, either by suffocation or being ground alive. Every year about 200 million male chicks are killed in the U.S.
- 'Broiler' chickens and turkeys (raised for meat) live indoors in crowded sheds. These animals have been bred to grow very large, very quickly. In the 1920s, a chicken took about 16 weeks to grow to be over 2 pounds, now they can reach 5 pounds in just 7 weeks.<sup>11</sup> As a result, they suffer leg disorders, chronic joint pain, and heart attacks. Injured birds often have their necks broken or are clubbed to death.
- Pigs live in crowded pens, and at a young age are castrated and have their tails cut off, all without anesthetic. Young pigs who are injured, or not growing fast enough, are killed, sometimes by being gassed, other times by being slammed to the ground. Sows are confined for the majority of their lives in metal, 'gestation crates' barely larger than their own body, where they cannot turn around. Their confinement causes severe physical and emotional distress.
- Female dairy cows are separated from their young after birth, an experience that is often emotionally distressing. Most live confined in cramped sheds on concrete floors. Young dairy cows are branded, dehorned, and have their tails cut off, all without anesthetic. When the cows are 'spent' and no longer produce as much milk, usually at a small fraction of their natural life span, they are sent to slaughter. Here, 'downed' dairy cows, who can no longer move on their own, are often kicked or shocked to be made to move to slaughter.
- Veal calves are a direct product of the dairy industry: nearly all veal calves are the male offspring of dairy cows. These animals are confined in individual crates, too narrow for them to even to turn around, where they are tethered by their neck to further restrict their movement. Living like this causes these calves significant stress, fear, and physical pain.
- Cows raised for their flesh are branded, castrated, and dehorned, all without anesthetic.

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<sup>11</sup> Humane Society of the United States, 'An HSUS Report: The Welfare of Animals in the Chicken Industry': [http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/welfare\\_broiler.pdf](http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/welfare_broiler.pdf)



Most spend the last months of their lives in crowded feed lots.

The vast majority of farmed animals raised in the U.S. live in close confinement. This results in injuries, disease, immobilization, boredom, psychological distress, and often death. These animals are also sometimes abused and injured by workers in other ways than the standard industrial practices detailed above. In addition to these *inflicted* harms, these animals are harmed by being *deprived* of many goods crucial to their well-being. By failing to provide the space and resources needed for good lives, we seriously harm them: they are denied what they need for basic, natural and social behaviors, and to live lives that are good *for them*.<sup>12</sup>

Some may ask if, despite appearances, animals are *actually* harmed in the ways we've indicated above. The answer is obvious to both common sense and a growing body of scientific research on the cognitive, emotional, and social lives of animals.<sup>13</sup> These animals are conscious, sentient, social beings. They experience pleasures and pains and a variety of complex negative and positive emotions. There are no good reasons to doubt this about the chickens, pigs, cows, and other mammals, birds, and vertebrates that humans raise and kill for food. They are harmed by these practices: their lives go very badly because of them.

While the vast majority of U.S. farmed animals are on factory farms, some live on smaller farms that provide the animals with more space and better living conditions. But these animals are also harmed in how they are treated. Many smaller farms inflict painful body mutilations (e.g., castration, dehorning, branding) on the animals, and they still face the harms that come from transport to slaughter (such as abuse in handling, severe dehydration and hunger, and suffering from crowding as well as overheating or extreme cold). And all of these animals are harmed by an untimely death.

### **The Harm of Death for Animals**

The final way *all* animals used for food are harmed is when they are killed. Farmed animals are often killed in ways that are quite painful. U.S. law mandates that cows and pigs be rendered

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<sup>12</sup> See Matt Halteman (2011), 'Varieties of Harm to Animals in Industrial Farming,' *Journal of Animal Ethics* 1 (2): 122-131; 126.

<sup>13</sup> See Jonathan Balcombe (2007), *Pleasurable Kingdom*, Palgrave Macmillan; Jonathan Balcombe (2011), *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals*, Palgrave Macmillan; Mark Bekoff (2008), *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, New World Library.

unconscious before being slaughtered, most often by using a pistol that puts a bolt through the animal's brain. However, because of the rapid pace at which animals are slaughtered, animals often have their throats slit while they are still conscious. And this law excludes birds, fish, and rabbits. Chickens and turkeys make up the vast majority of animals slaughtered in the U.S., nearly 9 billion are killed every year, and suffer particularly horrifying deaths. They are shackled upside down, paralyzed by electrified water, and then dragged across a mechanical throat-cutting blade, all while being fully conscious.<sup>14</sup> Every year millions of unlucky birds miss the blades and drown in scalding water.

A painful death is also the fate of animals like fish and other sea creatures that are often not raised for food, but captured and killed.<sup>15</sup> Commercial fishing operations cause fish and other creatures captured substantial pain prior to their death. Trapped in massive trawling nets, many fish suffer as they are dragged along the ocean floor. As they are pulled up to the surface, fish experience excruciating decompression that can rupture their swim bladders and pop out their eyes. Once on board, these fish slowly suffocate or are crushed to death. Other unfortunate fish are still conscious when their throats or bellies are cut open.

The harm of death extends beyond pain animals experience in the process of being killed. Cutting their lives short seriously harms animals because the good lives they could have experienced are taken from them. Nearly all of the animals we eat are killed at a very young age, well before they have come anywhere close to living out a natural life span. Chickens are killed at 5-7 weeks, and pigs are killed after just 6 months, when both types of animals can typically live between 8 to 12 years (and sometimes much longer). Cows raised for their meat live a little longer, usually they are killed after about 18 months, but they can normally live between 15 to 20 years.<sup>16</sup>

In cutting their lives short, we seriously harm these animals by depriving them of the possibility of enjoyable and valuable future experiences.<sup>17</sup> This is a deprivation of the most

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<sup>14</sup> Humane Society of the United States, 'The Welfare of Birds at Slaughter,' 2009:

[http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/slaughter/research/welfare\\_birds\\_slaughter.html](http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/slaughter/research/welfare_birds_slaughter.html)

<sup>15</sup> The evidence is increasingly strong that fish are conscious creatures who experience pain. See Victoria Braithwaite (2010), *Do Fish Feel Pain?* Oxford University Press and Jonathan Balcombe (2006) *Pleasurable Kingdom: Animals and the Nature of Feeling Good*. Macmillan: New York, Ch. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Mercy for Animals, *Farm to Fridge*: <http://www.mercyforanimals.org/farm-to-fridge.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> While most of the animals killed for food have lived rather miserable lives, this fact does not justify cutting their lives short. We could provide these animals with the goods needed for them to live quality lives. So the fact that we

fundamental kind. Nearly all of us would recognize this when it comes to companion animals (and ourselves!). If your neighbor painlessly killed your young, healthy and friendly dog, you would be upset because your neighbor had harmed the dog, taking away *her* life and depriving *her* of enjoyable future experiences. This is why even killing farmed animals ‘humanely’ is actually inhumane: the animals lose *everything*, all the good of their future, and are made far worse off because of it. For farmed animals, a ‘pain-free’ death isn’t a harm-free death.

### **Harms to Human Beings**

While our argument’s central concern is the serious harms farmed animals are made to experience, some human beings also are harmed when animals are raised and killed for food. Although most of these harms are pervasive across the industry, they are not essential to the practice of raising and killing animals for food. Since, in theory, many of these harms to human beings could be eliminated, our argument does not depend on them.

Some harms to human beings concern public health: e.g., air pollution from intensive animal agriculture may cause higher asthma and depression rates for those who live close by.<sup>18</sup> Animal agriculture also increases the number of harmful bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. To help prevent the spread of disease in such cramped quarters, and increase the rate at which farmed animals grow, most are fed antibiotics.<sup>19</sup> This use has reduced the efficacy of many drugs for humans and we have reason to believe it may lead to the emergence of novel ‘super bugs’ that could harm and kill many humans, potentially at pandemic levels. Factory farming is also dangerous work: workers are sometimes injured or killed by flailing animals and machinery in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants. And there is also evidence that the presence of industrial slaughterhouses in rural communities harms these communities, as they lead to an

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choose not to cannot be used to justify cutting their lives short and preventing them from having valuable and enjoyable future experiences.

<sup>18</sup> Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (2009), ‘Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America’, p. 29: <http://www.ncifap.org/images/PCIFAPFin.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> See Aysha Akhtar (2012) *Animals and Public Health: Why Treating Animals Better is Critical to Human Welfare* (Palgrave Macmillan). The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in animal agriculture accounts for 70% of total antibiotic use in the U.S. Union of Concerned Scientists (2011), ‘Hogging It!: Estimates of Antimicrobial Abuse in Livestock’. More recent estimates by the Pew Charitable trust put the figure around 80%: <http://www.pewhealth.org/other-resource/record-high-antibiotic-sales-for-meat-and-poultryproduction-85899449119>

increase in violent crimes that cannot be explained by other factors, such as population demographics, unemployment, and so forth.<sup>20</sup>

Another way that workers are often harmed is that the work they do contributes to their own attitudes of indifference and hostility towards animals, rather than the respect and care animals are owed. This is perhaps best seen on the ‘kill floor’ of many slaughterhouses, where workers take part in the killing of hundreds, and often thousands, of animals every hour.<sup>21</sup> In jobs like these, it is not at all surprising that many workers come to view the animals they kill as objects, instead of individuals, and as adversaries to accomplishing their work: this perhaps partially explains the sadistic cruelty to animals in farms and slaughterhouses so often documented by undercover videographers.<sup>22</sup> In these conditions, empathy for animals is almost out of the question. While this makes things even worse for the animals, it harms the workers too: they are worse off for doing such work, as it diminishes their ability to have concern and respect for other animals.

Our concern that workers are harmed in these ways might seem odd since we have argued that they act wrongly. Nevertheless, harms *are* harms and so merit our concern, even if they result from someone’s own wrongful choices to harm others. Charges of unjustified paternalism typically apply to cases where the harm done is *only* to the agent; this case, however, involves unjustified harms to consenting others. These harms merit our attention because the preferences of consumers – who demand cheap meat and other animal products – *depends* on workers undertaking this work, in these conditions. Many of the workers in factory farms and slaughterhouses do this low-paying, difficult, and risky work largely because they have few other options. Many are immigrants, trying to provide for their families. Cheap animal products would not be possible without individuals doing this work. That this work actually harms many workers, and their families and communities, in these ways deserves our concern.

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<sup>20</sup> See Amy Fitzgerald, Linda Kalof, and Thomas Dietz (2009), ‘Slaughterhouses and Increased Crime Rates: An Empirical Analysis of the Spillover From ‘The Jungle’ Into the Surrounding Community’, *Organization & Environment* 22 (2): 158-184.

<sup>21</sup> For a thorough, first person account of what a life of a slaughterhouse worker is like; see Timothy Pachirat (2011), *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>22</sup> See Matt Halteman (2011), ‘Varieties of Harm to Animals in Industrial Farming,’ *Journal of Animal Ethics* 1 (2): 122-131; 128.

Workers might avoid various psychological and emotional harms if they believed they weren't doing anything wrong. This would likely eliminate sources of guilt and moral unease. It is not clear whether workers could do this, and even if they could, many would still engage in work that negatively affects their attitudes towards other animals. Although this is controversial, we believe that they are harmed because of this. However, the possibility that some ways of raising and killing other animals might not engender disrespect or a lack of concern for other animals suggests that harms to humans may not be *essential* to this practice. We have argued that harms to animals are essential and unavoidable: that is why harms to animals are the basis of our argument for veganism.

### **Premise 3: These Harms Are Not Justified**

To complete Step 1 of our argument we must support the claim that these harms to animals are morally unjustified (premise 3). Why believe this? Most simply, because farmed animals are treated very, very badly, some humans are harmed as well, and *either* no good comes from this *or* no good great enough to justify the pain, suffering, frustration, deprivation, death and other harms done. To fully defend this claim we must respond to attempts to justify these harms. We do this in section IV, below.

To begin, however, we argue that common *motivations* that lead individuals to eat animal products cannot justify the harms we inflict on farmed animals. We focus first on common motivations for eating animals because most people do so out of habit and have never made an intentional choice to eat animals on the basis of informed thought and reflection. As a result, few people eat animal products because of some argument they accept. The issue just isn't on most people's 'moral radar.' If we can show that these harms are not justified by common reasons that motivate individuals to consume animal products, then a plausible, *prima facie* case is made that – in the absence of other justifications – causing these serious harms to animals is wrong.

One common motivation for eating animal products is health: many people believe that eating animal products is necessary to be healthy. If we need animal products for good health, this might justify harming animals. While common, this claim is not supported by scientific evidence. The *Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals, has an evidence-based 16-page review of this issue, with hundreds of references to the medical and nutrition literature. They state:

It is [our] position...that appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes. . . . The results of an evidence-based review showed that a vegetarian diet is associated with a lower risk of death from ischemic heart disease. Vegetarians also appear to have lower low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure, and lower rates of hypertension and type 2 diabetes than nonvegetarians. Furthermore, vegetarians tend to have a lower body mass index and lower overall cancer rates. Features of a vegetarian diet that may reduce risk of chronic disease include lower intakes of saturated fat and cholesterol and higher intakes of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, soy products, fiber, and phytochemicals.<sup>23</sup>

This review states not merely that vegan diets are healthy, but that people may be healthier on a well-planned vegan diet. Our argument does not rest on any expectations for better health, only the well-supported claim that with some effort nearly everyone will be at least as healthy on a vegan diet as they would be on an omnivorous diet, and so they are no worse off. If they're better off for being vegan, then all the better.

Another common motivation for consuming animal products is that many people find that they taste good and are pleasurable to eat, and they believe that foods without animal products generally do not taste as good or are not satisfying. So, some argue that not eating delicious meals with animal products would be a very significant loss of human pleasure and this fact justifies the harms we inflict upon animals. Indeed, a common initial reaction to arguments for veganism is, 'But meat tastes good!'

This reaction, however, fails to explain how the pleasure we get from eating animals could possibly justify the serious harms involved in raising and killing them for food. What is missing is a connection between the premise that eating animals produces pleasure, and the conclusion that it is not wrong to eat animals. Given that animals used for food are harmed in

<sup>23</sup> ‘Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets,’ *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2009; 109: 1266-1282. <http://www.eatright.org/About/Content.aspx?id=8357>

serious ways, the burden is on the objector to explain how the pleasure we get from eating animal products justifies these harms.

Clearly it is not the case that any action that produces pleasure is morally permissible. There are all sorts of actions that do, or would, produce pleasure for someone, but they are wicked and wrong actions. That an action produces pleasure never, in itself, justifies it morally. All sorts of historical and contemporary examples with human beings confirm this. That we are deprived of some pleasure never, in itself, morally justifies a harmful behavior.

Consider how we would react to similar attempts to justify harming animals when the source of pleasure is not food. Suppose someone raises and kills animals (in similar ways to what we find on factory farms) so he can paint with their blood, which he enjoys immensely. He is no sadist: he does not raise and kill animals *because* he likes seeing them suffer, nor is he pleased that many animals must be killed to get enough blood. But, alas, without any of this he would not be able to gain the pleasure he does in using their blood for art (and other methods of obtaining animal blood are just too costly or inconvenient or don’t provide enough blood at once for his artistic proclivities). So, he believes that harming animals is morally justified.

Most would think that such a person is a moral monster.<sup>23</sup> After all, he can enjoy painting without harming other animals. And even if he got significantly less pleasure from using oil or acrylic paint, so what? Clearly, humans do not have a right to do *whatever* brings them pleasure. The painter’s pleasures from using the blood of animals are trivial and insignificant compared to the harms to the animals. Arguably, the painter’s pleasures should not count for anything positive in evaluating his actions since they depend on harming animals. The same is true about raising and killing animals for someone’s pleasures in eating them. Just as the painter can paint beautiful, interesting paintings with oils or acrylics, all of us can eat foods that are *tasty*, *pleasurable to eat*, and vegan. Vegans, most of whom were once omnivores, typically agree: they report that eating vegan is pleasurable and satisfying.

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<sup>23</sup> Alastair Norcross develops a similar argument for vegetarianism by an analogy to someone who treats puppies as badly as farmed animals so that, after killing them, he might derive a hormone from their brains so that someone might experience the taste of chocolate. Norcross argues that since it would be wrong to treat puppies these ways for these purposes, then it also wrong to treat farmed animals these ways for the pleasures of eating them. See his ‘Torturing Puppies and Eating Meat,’ *Southwest Philosophy Review* 20.1 (2004): 117-123 and ‘Puppies, pigs, and people: Eating meat and marginal cases,’ *Philosophical perspectives* 18.1 (2004): 229-245.

### III. Step 2: Buying and Eating Meat, Dairy, Eggs and other Animal Products

If we can adequately support our premise (3) that the harms to animals are not morally justified, which we address in section IV, readers might think that enough has been done to reach the conclusion that each of us shouldn't purchase and consume animal products. After all, if it is wrong to raise and kill animals for food, it might be obvious that we shouldn't support these practices, and that we should all transition to a vegan diet. What else needs to be said?

We are sympathetic to this reaction. Indeed, it is a good one to have: it speaks well of someone that he or she instinctively opposes supporting wrongdoing and is open to making changes in her life. However, a complete argument for veganism must connect the wrongdoing involved in raising and killing animals for food to individuals' personal behavior. Someone might object: 'I don't raise and kill any animals myself, so why do *I* have an obligation not to buy and eat these products? These animals are already dead.' Arguments for vegetarianism or veganism that address this objection have the virtue of fully explaining why individuals have a moral obligation to not purchase and use animal products.<sup>25</sup>

We offer the following general moral principle to connect individuals' consumer behavior to the practices of the animal agriculture industry:

If a product is such that

- (a) its production causes serious and unjustified harms and so is morally wrong, (b) the product can be avoided,

<sup>25</sup> There is extensive discussion of this issue which is known as the 'causal impotence' problem for arguments for vegetarianism, including Russ Shafer-Landau, 'Vegetarianism, Causation and Ethical Theory,' *Public Affairs Quarterly* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Jan., 1994), pp. 85-100; Hud Hudson (1993). 'Collective Responsibility and Moral Vegetarianism'. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 24 (2):89-104; Nathan Nobis (2002). 'Vegetarianism and Virtue: Does Consequentialism Demand Too Little?' *Social Theory and Practice* 28 (1):135-156; Gaverick Matheny (2002). 'Expected Utility, Contributory Causation, and Vegetarianism.' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19 (3): 293-297; Alastair Norcross (2004) 'Puppies, pigs, and people: Eating meat and marginal cases,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (1): 229-245; Gary Chartier, 'Consumers, Boycotts, and Non-Human Animals,' *Buffalo Environmental Law Journal* 12 (Spring 2005): 123-94; Gary Chartier, 'On the Threshold Argument against Consumer Meat Purchases,' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37.2 (Sum. 2006): 235-51; Jeremy R. Garrett (2007). 'Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism, and Human Health: A Response to the Causal Impotence Objection' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (3):223-237; David T. Schwartz (2010) *Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age* (Rowman & Littlefield); Ben Almassi (2011). 'The Consequences of Individual Consumption: A Defence of Threshold Arguments for Vegetarianism and Consumer Ethics'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28 (4):396-41; Shelly Kagan (2011). 'Do I Make a Difference?' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 39 (2):105-141. John Richard Harris & Richard Galvin (2012).



“Pass the Cocoamone, Please’: Causal Impotence, Opportunistic Vegetarianism and Act-Utilitarianism.’ *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 15 (3):368 - 383; Alastair Norcross (2012) ‘Puppies, Pigs, and Potency: A Response to Galvin and Harris’ *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 15 (3):384-388.

- (c) avoiding the product would not seriously harm the boycotting individual,
  - (d) there are readily available alternatives to that product,
  - (e) the boycotting individual might benefit from boycotting,
  - (f) the probability that *not* purchasing or consuming the product will lessen or eliminate the wrongdoing is *equal to or greater* than the probability that purchasing or consuming the product will lessen or eliminate the wrongdoing, and
  - (g) boycotting will make that individual a member of a morally progressive group that opposes a wrongdoing,
- then individuals are obligated to not purchase or use that product.

Meat and other animal food products satisfy all these conditions. They are (a) wrongfully produced, since beyond the pain and suffering inflicted, the serious harm of death is *essential* to the practice. And animal foods (b) can be avoided with no serious harm to the boycotter: not eating meat isn’t like boycotting taxes in response to governmental wrongdoing which will result in prison or fines for the boycotter. Any claim that (c) not eating animal foods seriously harms the boycotter exaggerates any sacrifices most of us might make by not purchasing or consuming these products. There are (d) readily available vegan foods at nearly all grocery stores and markets: e.g., vegetables, fruits, beans and grains, as well as vegan convenience foods. The boycotter (e) might benefit, health-wise and in other ways; the boycotter (f) might prevent future harms to animals; and the boycotter (g) becomes part of a group opposed to wrongdoing and advocating for positive change and shows him or herself to be a compassionate, concerned, and morally engaged person.

This principle is supported both by an appeal to the consequences of our actions and our obligations not to be complicit in serious wrongdoing, either by paying someone to cause these harms or by benefitting from these harms. Following this principle is likely to have better consequences for harm reduction, compared to not following it, over the course of an individual’s life. Further, we are also obligated to not be complicit in, or benefit from, serious wrongdoing, apart from the consequences. We recognize this when thinking about our

obligations not to support slave labor, or purchase products made by the Nazis: this principle recognizes these obligations.

Given this principle, each of us is morally obligated not to support the wrongdoing of the meat industry; we are obligated to eat vegan. This is true at least for people who live in societies where their survival and basic health is consistent with a vegan diet.<sup>24</sup> We believe this is true for most people living in developed countries. However, this might not be true for some individuals living in developing countries.<sup>25</sup>

This principle does not make unreasonable demands. If an individual would be seriously harmed by avoiding a product, and if the product cannot be avoided (because it is necessary for human survival, perhaps) then that individual is not obligated to do so. This principle captures many of the obligations we have as consumers. When all of these conditions are satisfied for a product, an individual has an obligation not to purchase or consume that product. We do not claim that there are no contexts where an individual has an obligation but all of these conditions aren't met. Satisfying these conditions is *sufficient* to have a moral obligation, but meeting all of these conditions might not be *necessary* either.

#### IV. Objections and Responses: 'These Harms Are Justified *Because* . . .

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<sup>24</sup> A likely purely theoretical question is this: 'If someone would be *seriously harmed*, e.g., they would die, by not eating animal products, are they too obligated to not eat animal products?' Some responses are: (1) death from not eating animals is factually unlikely or perhaps impossible since any nutrient found in animal products is found in non-animal sources, so any such person would need nutrition counseling, not animal products; (2) even if someone did require animal products, he or she *could* consume (i) something made from 'road kill,' (ii) animals who died naturally or were euthanized for their own good, (iii) animals we have reasons to believe are not conscious (e.g., insects and some sea creatures), or (iv) the eggs of pet chickens (which we discuss below); and (3) since some argue that 'all bets are off' in lifeboat or desert island cases, since even killing and eating other humans beings could be justified in such a scenario, so would eating animals. Some animal ethicists think that if there were such a person, it would be not wrong for them to eat animals because they 'need' to: their not eating animals would be superogatory, not obligatory. While there are complications here, it is worthwhile to notice that this conflicts with insights from other areas of bioethics, namely that it is not always morally permissible for a person to acquire *whatever* they need even for their life to continue. Suppose someone genuinely *needed* to kill and eat human babies for their life to continue: would that make doing that permissible? Many would think not. For essays relevant to these issues, see Judith Thompson's 'A Defense of Abortion' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:1 (Autumn 1971): 47-66 and Jonathan Hardwig's 'Is there a Duty to Die?' *Hastings Center Report*, 27, no. 2 (1997): 34-42.

<sup>25</sup> While many individuals in developed countries have access to a variety of plant-foods, whether they would receive adequate levels of vitamin B12 (which is produced by bacteria typically found in animal foods) is unknown: there simply is no research on the health status of vegans in these areas. In developed countries people have ready access to vitamin B12 supplementation, which are important for those eating vegan diets. For individuals in developing countries who lack access to B12 supplements or fortified foods, supplementing a plant-based diet with some animal foods would be morally permissible.

Step 1 of our argument held that the practice of raising and killing animals for food is wrong. Step 2 concluded that if the principle we specified is fulfilled, an individual has an obligation to not support unjustified harms – either by paying someone to cause these harms or by benefitting from these harms – and thus, to be vegan. To complete our argument, however, we must respond to objections that attempt to justify these harms. There are *many* objections, and our limited space prevents us from discussing many commonly given justifications for eating animal products, such as:

‘Eating meat is natural,’ ‘Animals eat other animals,’ ‘Animals would eat us if they could,’ ‘We *are* animals,’ ‘Our bodies were designed to eat meat,’ ‘Animals aren’t human,’ ‘Animals aren’t people,’ ‘There is a circle of life,’ ‘Many traditions involve eating animals,’ ‘Cheese is too hard to give up,’ ‘Vegan foods just don’t taste good,’ ‘Eating vegan is too expensive,’ ‘Eating vegan would require learning new way to cook,’ ‘People would lose their jobs if people didn’t eat meat,’ ‘Too many restaurants would go out of business if people didn’t eat meat,’ ‘It’s too difficult to eat vegan,’ ‘Animals have no rights,’ ‘It’s not illegal to eat animal products,’ ‘Animals wouldn’t exist if we didn’t eat them, and they would go extinct,’ ‘Animals would overpopulate if we didn’t eat them,’ ‘We just can’t give up eating meat,’ ‘They eat cats and dogs in Asia,’ ‘What about people in areas where they can’t eat vegan?’ ‘Religions approve of eating meat,’ ‘We have a right to eat whatever we want,’ ‘Vegans are offensive,’ ‘It’s good enough to eat less meat,’ ‘Plants might be harmed too,’ and more.

We believe that these common justifications, and many more, have been adequately responded to elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Here we address some of the more philosophically challenging objections to our argument.

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the many other common objections to veganism, see Nathan Nobis’s ‘Reasonable Humans and Animals: An Argument for Vegetarianism,’ (2008) *Between the Species* Volume 18, Issue 8; Gary Francione and Anna Charlton, *Eat Like You Care: An Examination of the Morality of Eating Animals*, Exempla Press, 2013; and Sherry F. Colb, *Mind if I Order the Cheeseburger? And Other Questions People Ask Vegans*, Lantern Books, 2013. Which objections are most common, which are most influential? This article is the only empirical research on these questions we could find: Hank Rothgerber (2012) ‘Real Men Don’t Eat (Vegetable) Quiche: Masculinity and the Justification of Meat Consumption.’ (2012). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, Nov 12. No Pagination Specified.

### **‘These Harms are Justified Because Humans Are Superior’**

Some might think the harms we inflict on other animals are justified because animals matter less, morally, than human beings. ‘They are just animals,’ one often hears. We can draw on this idea and attempt to justify harming animals to eat them by claiming that human beings are intellectually ‘superior’ to animals: we are more intelligent than animals, are capable of using complex language, are self-conscious in a way many animals are not, are moral agents who are responsible for what we do, and so on. These characteristics, the argument goes, separate us from other animals, make us morally superior, and so justify our harming animals for our benefit.

This reasoning suggests the following argument:

*If an individual is not ‘intellectually superior’ then it is not wrong for humans to harm and kill that individual to eat it.*

Animals are not ‘intellectually superior.’

Therefore, it is not wrong for humans to harm and kill animals to eat them.

Notice, first, that all of us reject this argument when it comes to other human beings. The fact that one individual might be more intelligent, more rational, or more morally virtuous does not justify that individual in harming less intelligent or rational or virtuous individuals. So while this argument ‘justifies’ eating animals, the first premise also ‘justifies’ harming and eating human babies, seriously cognitively disabled human beings, and dementia patients. Any argument to justify eating animals that would also justify eating vulnerable human beings is unsound and should be rejected.

But even if *all* human beings were morally ‘superior’ to *all* animals (or no animals were ‘equal to’ humans), that does not, in itself, justify harming animals. As Tzachi Zamir points out, superiority does not justify harming the allegedly inferior.<sup>27</sup> Even if A is ‘superior’ to B, that does not justify A’s actively harming B. To illustrate this point, consider how we might react to Super Advanced Aliens who arrive on earth to raise and kill humans for food.<sup>28</sup> Even if these

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<sup>27</sup> See Tzachi Zamir (2007), *Ethics and the Beast: A Speciesist Argument for Animal Liberation*. Princeton University Press, pp. 9, 61.

<sup>28</sup> This is the topic of Michel Faber’s interesting novel, *Under the Skin*. See Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011), *Zoopolis*, Oxford University Press: New York, p. 27-28, for a similar argument framed in the context of rights.

aliens were intellectually superior to us in a variety of ways – perhaps they have powers of rationality and reasoning that far exceed our smartest computers, language abilities that put ours to shame, and moral self-control that far surpasses that of human beings – we would rightly deny that they are justified in raising and killing us for food. So even if humans are intellectually superior to other animals and on this basis matter more, morally, than other animals, this does not justify our harming other animals, especially for trivial ends. Human moral superiority might justify us doing more to *benefit* human beings, and to promote our welfare, but it does not justify actively undertaking efforts to harm other animals, especially when these harms can be easily avoided.

### **‘These Harms are Justified Because Painless Killing is Harmless Killing’**

We argued that the practice of raising and killing animals for food seriously harms animals, is not justified, and as a result is wrong. But are there exceptions to this claim? Imagine a pig or cow or chicken lives a short but good life, and then is painlessly killed. Is this morally acceptable?

Some believe a painless death does not harm other animals. They claim that death only harms beings who have an interest in continuing to live, and to have that interest that being must have an understanding of his or her self existing in the future, or goals or projects that extend into the future and that are cut off by death.<sup>29</sup> If these claims are true, it might open the door to some morally acceptable forms of animal agriculture (assuming we could find ways to consistently kill animals without causing them pain, terror, or significant distress, and that they were raised in ways that did not seriously harm them).

However, even if we accept this view about who can be harmed by death, there is evidence that farmed animals have an interest in continuing to live. Peter Singer accepts this account of who can be harmed by death, and argues that some animals (such as the great apes) have the cognitive capacities that make it *prima facie* wrong to kill them. But he also believes that there is strong evidence that many of the animals humans eat, like pigs, chickens, and maybe even fish, may have the sense of their self, existing in the future, that makes it *prima facie* wrong

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<sup>29</sup> See Peter Singer (2011), *Practical Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, Ch. 5.

to kill them, even painlessly.<sup>30</sup> Even if we accept the view that a painless death only harms beings with a sense of themselves existing in the future, some animals deserve the benefit of the doubt. There might be sufficient reasons to think death *may* harm them – and it would still be wrong to painlessly kill them to consume their flesh.

A lot will depend on what we think is the right criteria for having an interest in continued existence. If we require that an animal have an understanding of her own death, this would rule out most animals as beings who can be harmed by a painless death. There is some evidence, although it is far from conclusive, which suggest that some animals, like elephants and the great apes, may have some awareness of death and their own mortality.<sup>31</sup> And it is possible that other animals that humans use for food, like pigs and cows, might have this understanding as well. If, however, we only require that an animal has some sense of his or her self existing in the future, this seems to open the door to many more animals, including most of the animals (certainly mammals and birds, and arguably fish) that humans consume or use for food. If these animals have desires that extend hours or days in to the future, then it seems they have some sense of their self existing in the future, and as a result would be harmed by death.

More fundamentally, however, the view that only beings with a strong sense of themselves existing in the future are harmed by death is false. On this account, a painless death would not harm human babies, individuals with very severe cognitive disabilities, and older adults with severe dementia: they often don't have, or have lost, the strong sense of selfawareness that proponents of this view often suggest is needed to be harmed by a painless death. But it would be wrong to kill these individuals, even apart from the effects on others. Part of the reason is that these humans, like other animals, have interests and desires that can be satisfied only if they are alive: they have at least an indirect interest in being alive even if they lack the concepts to understand this. An individual doesn't need a strong sense of their self existing in the future to be harmed by death or to have an interest in continued existence. Thus, we have good reasons to reject the claim that animals aren't harmed by a painless death, in favor

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<sup>30</sup> See Peter Singer (2011), *Practical Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, Ch. 5, p. 101-103.

<sup>31</sup> Elephants have been shown to grieve the death of other elephants that have died, and even engage in death rituals, such as covering the dead body of family members with dirt. See Cynthia Moss, *Elephant Memories: Thirteen Years in the Life of an Elephant Family*, University of Chicago Press, 2000. And Koko, a gorilla taught American signlanguage, expressed sadness and grieved when she learned of the death of her pet cat, All Ball.

of our deprivation account articulated earlier. ‘Happy meat’ precludes future happiness for animals, harms them greatly for no good reason, and so is wrong.<sup>32</sup>

### **‘These Harms are Justified Because Animals Are Not *Seriously* Harmed’**

While some don’t deny that animals are harmed by being painlessly killed, they claim that this harm is not serious, and is much less serious than when a human being is killed. So, if we raise animals in ways that don’t harm them, or if we hunt or capture animals that have had good lives, then perhaps we are justified in doing this, since we get pleasure from eating their flesh and the harm of death is not as serious for animals. There are different reasons why an individual might think that killing an animal is not a serious harm. But the most compelling draws on two claims: first, animals are not capable of achieving the same quality or level of well-being as humans; second, the strength of animals’ psychological unity over time is much weaker than that of most human beings: e.g., animals’ capacities for memory and anticipation of the future is weaker than most human beings.<sup>33</sup>

These claims may help to explain common intuitions people have about the comparative harm of killing different beings. Most people think it would be far worse to kill an adult human being than a fish. Why is this? One explanation is that fish seem incapable of achieving or having many of the ‘higher goods’ that are components in human well-being (creativity, close friendship, long-term projects, intimate relationships, etc.). We also have reason to doubt the strength of the psychological unity between any particular fish now, and that same fish months or years later, is anywhere near the psychological unity of most human beings. The memories of a fish, it seems, do not extend as far in to the past as ours, nor do they have a strong, reflective understanding that it was themselves that existed months and years before and will exist months and years in the future.

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<sup>32</sup> Some, following Epicurus, think it makes little sense to say *anyone* is harmed by death, since the individual killed no longer exists, and as a result it is hard to see how he or she can be worse off. If this were the case, then perhaps killing animals for food might be justified, since no one is harmed. We don’t find this argument compelling. But for those who do, this does not provide any reason to think other animals are not *wronged* by being killed. If one thinks that human beings with severe cognitive disabilities or severe dementia are wronged by being killed, then there are no good reasons to deny that other animals are also wronged when they are killed.

<sup>33</sup> See Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*, Ch. 3.

Taken together, these two claims may suggest that other animals are not seriously harmed by a painless death. If the well-being they are cut off from is of a lesser quality than human beings, and if there is a much weaker psychological continuity between an animal now and that same animal in the future, then it appears they are harmed less than human beings in being killed. So, perhaps this harm is not serious, and can be justified in killing them by appealing to the pleasure and satisfaction we get from eating the flesh of animals.

We suspect that one reason some find the view that animals are not seriously harmed by death compelling is that they underestimate the cognitive capacities of other animals. If an animal's experience of the world consisted solely in one experience after another – a constant stream of unconnected experiences, like the mythical gold fish with a 3-second memory<sup>34</sup> – we might have significant doubts that a painless death would seriously harm such an animal. Without any memory connecting different experiences, and without any continuity between these experiences, we might think this sort of creature is replaceable: indeed, we might doubt that a real individual or self is snuffed out of the world when this being is killed.

This view of the inner lives of animals, however, is not supported by recent developments in the field of ethology and animal behavioral science. For the vast majority of animals humans eat, particularly mammals, birds, and fish, we have good reason to believe that this is not how these animals experience the world. These animals have shown the ability to recall events well into the past: rainbow fish, to give just one example, can remember the location of a hole in a net that they have not seen in eleven months.<sup>37</sup> Other animals recognize many other individuals with whom they live, they often exhibit preferences for which animals they spend their time with, and even develop friendships over time with other animals. There are good reasons, then, to believe that the psychological continuity of these animals is likely much stronger than the mythical goldfish.

Several other problems confront the objection that death does not seriously harm other animals. Perhaps most importantly, if we are justified in killing other animals because death is a less serious harm to them, then, at least in some circumstances, we might be justified in killing some humans (babies, individuals with severe cognitive disabilities, individuals with severe

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<sup>34</sup> See Colin Allen, 'Ethics, Law, and the Science of Fish Welfare,' (2013) *Between the Species*, 16, 1, 68-85, p.77. <sup>37</sup> See Culum Brown (2001) 'Familiarity with the test environment improves escape responses in the crimson spotted rainbowfish, *Melanotaenia duboulayi*,' *Animal Cognition* 4:109–113.



dementia). But, again, that is not an acceptable conclusion. So even if animals are harmed less by death, it does not follow that they are not seriously harmed by death.

With this, we don't think the pleasure human beings get from eating the flesh of other animals justifies killing them, *even if* death is less of a harm to them than it is to human beings. Animals, after all, also get pleasure from eating. So it is unclear why the momentary pleasures humans would get from eating the flesh of an animal should outweigh a lifetime of pleasure an individual animal experiences (both from eating and in other activities).

Further, the claim that other animals are incapable of achieving the same quality or level of well-being as human beings may only illustrate our human prejudice for our form and ways of life. Why are things like human creativity, art, novels, and intimate friendships more valuable or 'higher goods' than the goods and activities that characterize the lives of pigs, cows, or chickens? Is writing a novel, or enjoying poetry really more valuable or a higher good than rooting in the mud or soaring high above the ground? Offering a rationally compelling response to this question has proven more difficult than many philosophers might suspect.<sup>35</sup> There is no neutral ground from which we can consider whether or not we would prefer the life of a contented pig or the life of a human being: we can only consider this question from our own, human perspective. And even if we think that many of the goods which characterize paradigmatic human lives are more valuable goods than the goods that characterize the lives of other animals, it does not follow that killing these animals does not seriously harm them. After all, the goods that characterize their lives matter to them.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, given the significant objections to the claim that animals are not seriously harmed by death, we think a more cautious approach is required. We believe we have good reasons to reject the claim that death is not a serious harm to other animals. But even if one wasn't convinced of this, given the uncertainty surrounding this account of how serious a harm death is for animals, we believe we ought to err on the side of caution. As we have already seen, we have good reasons to hold that death is a harm to animals. This claim is part of common sense (since nearly all of us would affirm it with respect to our companion animals) and we recognize it for human beings who lack certain intellectual capacities. Further, we do not need to raise and kill

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<sup>35</sup> See Paulo Cavalieri, *The Animal Question*, Ch. 5.

<sup>36</sup> For an interesting discussion of these issues, see Christine Korsgaard, 'Getting Animals In View': <http://www.thepointmag.com/2012/metaphysics/getting-animals-view>

animals to survive or lead flourishing lives. Thus, given that those who think animals are not seriously harmed by death very well might be wrong, we believe we should err on the side of caution and not raise and kill animals for food, nor should we purchase meat or animal products.

### **Pet Chickens**

While we do not think we are justified in killing animals for food, we do think there are some circumstances where it is permissible to use chickens for their eggs. This is only the case for companion hens and, in rather limited circumstances, hens used for eggs on ‘hobby farms.’ If someone had hens whose needs were met, lived good lives, were protected and cared for (including access to veterinary care), and kept free from harm (in particular, they are not killed when their egg production slows or ceases), there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with consuming their eggs. These chickens are not harmed, especially since they do not seem to be at all bothered by their eggs being taken. In these situations, we believe that purchasing and consuming these eggs is morally permissible.

There are concerns about how the initial chickens are acquired, however. Since hatcheries seriously harm chickens by killing the male chicks, any acceptable adoption of chickens would have to acquire them in a way that did not contribute to the harming of other chickens. Hens rescued from factory farms, or who have been discarded or abandoned by others, seem to be ideal options. Many people also underestimate the lengths required to meet the conditions outlined above for backyard hens.<sup>37</sup> Concerning commercial, for-profit egg production, very few operations currently meet the standards outlined above. Most egg farms, including nearly all ‘organic’, ‘free range’, and ‘cage free’ operations, seriously harm chickens: among other harms, they all kill the hens when their production slows. The few places that do seem to meet our requirements are small scale operations, often animal sanctuaries that sell eggs from rescued hens.<sup>38</sup>

It is acceptable to purchase eggs from commercial operations only if we are justified in believing that the conditions of the farm meet the ideal spelled out above. This sets the bar rather

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<sup>37</sup> The Humane Society of the United States outlines some of the challenges here:

[http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/chickens/tips/adopting\\_chickens.html](http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/chickens/tips/adopting_chickens.html)

<sup>38</sup> One possible example is Black Hen Farm, in California. See their website for a description of what life is like for the chickens under their care: <http://www.blackhenfarm.com/index>

high concerning what information we must have as consumers. The motive to make a profit often has a corrosive effect on the lives and welfare of farmed animals, leading profit seekers to ‘cut corners’ in ways that harm animals. Recognizing this, we should be cautious when considering whether or not the eggs come from a place that does not harm these hens. We suspect this means that, in the vast majority of cases, we have an obligation not to purchase or consume eggs from commercial facilities.

If it can sometimes be permissible to use hens for their eggs, what about using cows for their milk? We believe dairy production is nearly always impermissible. Actions required to produce cow’s milk – like forced impregnation, the separation of mother from her calf, depriving the calf of his or her mother’s milk (so that milk can be sold for humans), and over milking – harm the cow and her offspring. And dairy cows, as female mammals, must have a calf in order to produce milk. Current practices use male calves (who don’t produce milk) for beef or veal and female calves eventually become part of the cycle of dairy production. These biological realities make morally permissible dairy production highly unlikely: to maintain a 1000-2000 pound cow for dairy production, without causing serious harms to her and her offspring, would be very difficult.

### **‘Not Eating Vegan can be Justified Because All Diets Cause Harm’**

Another justification for not eating vegan concerns the ways animals are harmed in the production of vegetables and other plant foods. For almost everyone, no matter what foods we purchase and eat, we still contribute to practices that cause *some* animals to be harmed, including being killed. Modern crop production inevitably kills some animals living in the fields: rabbits, birds, mice, and other small rodents are killed by tractors and harvesting machines, and other animals are killed by pesticides. There is likely no diet that is free from harm.

Some could appeal to these facts to argue that our arguments imply, absurdly, that each of us has an obligation to grow all our own food, or to eat a diet of only fruits, nuts, and other plants that are produced in a way that avoids harming *any* animals.<sup>39</sup> Since this is too demanding,

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<sup>39</sup> To evaluate a demand that no animals be harmed, consider a demand to that we only drive automobiles in ways that resulted in *no deaths* for humans. We *could* do this: we *could* have speed limits at, say, 5-10 miles per hour, with bubble bumpers all around the car. But we don’t do this and many deaths result. Are these deaths morally justified? If they are, then similar reason might justify the harms of some animals. If not, then changes even more demanding than veganism are morally required.

perhaps each of us is only obligated to take reasonable steps to reduce our consumption of animal products. Maybe our obligations when it comes to what we ought to purchase and eat are much less uniform than we have argued. Our own obligations might depend on our individual circumstances (where we live, how much money we have, our access to plant-based foods, etc.). Given that it can be easier to be vegan in some places, perhaps not all of us have an obligation to eat a vegan diet.

We agree that our argument would be too demanding if it lead to the conclusion that we must grow our own food and not purchase vegetables and other plant food where some field animals are killed. But our argument doesn't lead to this conclusion. What anyone is obligated to do depends on what he or she *can* do, and most people just *cannot* grow all their own food or eat such a diet: that's not realistic. We are only obligated to take *reasonable steps* to minimize harms that we contribute to with our food choices, but this is consistent with an obligation to be vegan. Unlike meat and other animal products, there are no readily available alternatives to vegetables and other plant foods grown in ways that kill some field animals. And foregoing these foods would seriously harm an individual: we all need something to eat. Thus, the claim that each of us have an obligation to grow our food and boycott plants produced in a way that leads to the death of some field animals fails to meet the conditions we outlined in Step 2, for when an individual has an obligation not to buy a product. We recognize that veganism is easier for some than others. It is more difficult to be vegan in rural Montana than in a major American city. Nevertheless, our argument does not make unreasonable demands.

A related objection here involves the claim that a vegan diet will not always result in the least harms to animals and human beings. Since modern crop production kills some field animals, perhaps eating large animals, like cows, that feed on grass would result in the least animal deaths. If one lives in a place where the cows are grass fed, perhaps eating beef would contribute the least to the death of animals, then were one to eat a vegan diet that included plant foods where field animals were killed.

There are challenging empirical and mathematical issues here, but it's worth noting, first, that this objection in no way justifies any standard diet involving factory farmed animals, since that clearly results in unjustified harms and fails to minimize the number of animals killed. Factory farmed animals are fed corn and soy: producing these crops kills field animals, and then on top of that, the animals on factory farms are killed. If this objection were sound, we would

only be justified in eating large animals in situations where our doing this would contribute the least to the death of all animals. Second, and more importantly, the data that has been marshalled in favor of these objections is not convincing. As far as we know, there is no strong empirical evidence against the claim that the vegan ideal would result in the death of the fewest animals.<sup>40</sup>

## V. Conclusions

In sum, we have argued that each of us is obligated to eat vegan. Step 1 argued that it is wrong to raise and kill animals for food since these practices cause serious harms to animals that are not justified. Step 2 connected this conclusion to our own behavior: it's wrong to support those who act wrongly, when the conditions we outlined are met. We then addressed several attempts to justify these harms and argued that they don't succeed.

But we cannot address every concern or objection, and there are many more than what we have considered here.<sup>41</sup> To evaluate other justifications for eating animal products, or objections to arguments like ours, we recommend identifying the complete pattern of reasoning and carefully trying to determine whether all the essential claims of the justification are true: if any are false, the justification fails. Finally, we recommend being on guard for the 'tyranny of taste.'<sup>42</sup> As we saw with our earlier 'blood painter' example, human beings have a tendency to privilege the pleasure we get from food over other sources. This is not surprising: food often occupies a central place in our lives and forms part of our identities and cultural traditions. But this privileged status sometimes leads people to endorse rationalizations for harming animals, and human beings, that they would reject if the source of pleasure were different. A useful corrective, then, is to consider whether or not the justification would be plausible if the source of pleasure were not food, but something else. Seeing that harms inflicted on animals for pleasure or enjoyment from other activities are not justified can help us see that the harms humans inflict on so many animals for food are not justified either.

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<sup>40</sup> For discussion, see Andy Lamey, 'Food Fight! Davis versus Regan on the Ethics of Eating Beef' (August 25, 2008). *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 331-348, Summer 2007.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the many other common objections to veganism, see the sources suggested above in note 27 by Nathan Nobis, Gary Francione and Anna Charlton and and Sherry F. Colb.

<sup>42</sup> We borrow this term from James McWilliams, who coined it for a similar, but slightly different purpose.

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