

Day 4: The vegan life, abstract theory, and moral motivation

Setting: Same place.

V: Hi, M. How have you been? Have you tried out the vegetarian life?

M: I tried it for the last week, like you insisted.

V: Well, how did it go?

M: Oh, it was miserable! You know how much I like food. Life is barely worth living without fried chicken!

V: Sorry, it's partly my fault. I could have left you with some advice on how to find yummy plant-based meals.

M: *Are* there any such things? I can't keep eating piles of broccoli and lettuce.

V: Of course there are. You seem to like the meals *here* well enough.

M: Okay, that's true, this restaurant is pretty good.

V: Most vegetarian restaurants are. They seem to put more thought into it than the average conventional restaurant.

M: Yeah, but I can't afford to keep eating out.

V: That's understandable. Fortunately, you can eat at home for a lot less if you go vegetarian, cuz vegetables are cheaper than meat. You know, I have a great carrot ginger soup that I make at home. I'll send you the recipe.⁴⁴

M: Okay, but I can't be relying on you for advice every time I want to cook a meal. Plus, I'm busy; I can't spend a whole lot of time on cooking.

V: Just type "easy vegan meals" into a search engine any time you want a new idea. You'll get plenty of great suggestions.

M: Wait, wait. Did you say *vegan*? I thought I just had to give up meat. You mean I have to give up eggs and dairy too?

V: They come from factory farms too. If you buy them, you're paying people to do factory farming.

M: But I love cheese!

V: You can get vegan cheese.

M: Vegan cheese? What the heck is that?

V: It's a product that looks and tastes like cheese, but with no animal products. Usually made from cashews.

M: I'm skeptical.

V: You remember the cheese we had at the reception on Friday after the Philosophy colloquium?

M: I remember. That stuff was good. You see, that's why I can't give up dairy.

V: That was vegan cheese.

⁴⁴ V's recipe: two pounds of baby carrots, one large ginger root (peeled and sliced), a spoonful of salt. Boil in water for a half hour, then add 3 cups of vegan milk (soy, almond, etc.), and mix all in a blender.

M: Really? Are they all that good?

V: Some are better than others. Just find the ones you like. There are vegan substitutes for most animal products.

M: But where am I going to get enough protein in my diet??

V: Beans, nuts. Also, bivalves.

M: What's a bivalve?

V: You know, clams, mussels, scallops.

M: Wait a minute. You eat clams? Clams are animals! You're no vegan. You're not even a vegetarian!

V: Bivalves have no brains.

M: So what? They're still alive, and people have to murder them to satisfy *your* appetite. You're no better than me with my chicken and hamburgers!

V: I don't think you understood any of the preceding arguments. None of the arguments were about life. After all, plants are alive too. So are bacteria; so are cancer cells.

M: So you don't think that life has intrinsic value?

V: I'm not making any claims about that. My argument was simply that it's wrong to inflict severe pain and suffering for no good reason.

M: So why do you think it's okay to inflict pain on plants and clams, you evil oppressor?

V: Um, I don't think that. What I think is that it's impossible to inflict pain on plants or clams.

M: How do you know that?

V: Pain is caused by electrical impulses from nerve endings reaching your brain. If the impulses don't reach your brain, you don't feel any pain. That's known empirically. So if you didn't even have a brain, then you couldn't feel pain at all.

M: Sure, that may be the current scientific understanding. But you can't be 100% certain of that. Maybe there's some other way to have pain, and plants and clams are having pain all the time.

V: And maybe the chair you're sitting on is in great agony. No way to prove it isn't. But we have no reason to think so, and we have to sit somewhere.

M: Okay, I don't really think plants are conscious. I was kidding with you. But I don't see why someone couldn't make an argument similar to your earlier argument from risk, to show that we can't eat plants.

V: How would that argument go?

M: You know, we're killing so many plants every year that if there's even a 1% chance that plants feel pain when they're killed, we have to stop the practice.

V: And the person making this argument would be saying that we should not eat anything?

M: Maybe – maybe we're ethically obligated to commit suicide.

V: Okay. Then here's how that argument would be different from my argument. Number one, that argument is asking us to sacrifice our lives. My argument is only asking you to give up a little pleasure at meal times. And that's because I think it's wrong to inflict suffering *for no good reason*.

M: So it's okay to hurt others in order to survive, but not to get more pleasure for yourself?

V: In general, it's much more likely to be okay. Now, here's the second difference. It is virtually certain that animals feel pain. That's clearly over 99% probable. But it is also virtually certain that plants *don't*. Since plants have no nervous systems, the probability that they feel pain is very much lower than 1%.

M: Okay, but you've been misusing that word "vegetarian." "Vegetarian" means a person who eats only plants. Clams and oysters aren't plants.

V: I don't care what word you use. You can call it schmegetarianism, compassionate eating, or whatever you want. As long as you stop patronizing animal cruelty.

M: Alright, but what about insects? Plant farming kills trillions of insects every year, mostly with pesticides. Surely we're going to have to stop killing bugs, right?

V: Shouldn't I make the same points here? One, the costs of giving up killing insects are much higher than the costs of giving up meat-eating. Two, it's much less likely that insects feel pain. Plus: number three, we aren't raising insects in horrible conditions for their whole lives before killing them, as in factory farming. And four, animal farming requires killing insects, as well as plants, *in addition* to the animals directly killed for meat. So plant farming is still better.

M: Wait, how does animal farming kill insects and plants?

V: To raise an animal, you have to feed it vegetable foods, which come from farms. The amount of food you then get out of the animal is less than the amount of food that went into raising it. So any problem with plant farming is also a problem with animal farming – in addition to all the problems with animal farms that we've already discussed.

M: What do you mean about the costs of giving up killing insects being much higher?

V: Virtually all of modern life kills insects. You can't drive a car without killing some; you can barely walk without killing them.

M: Okay, so maybe giving up all killing would be too demanding. But surely we should still give up, say, using pesticides on farms, right? Because we could buy organic foods instead.

V: If you want to argue for that, go ahead. But I think you're changing the subject. Let's first agree to give up buying factory-farmed meat. Then we can worry about more controversial cases after that.

M: But I've seen you eating conventionally-raised vegetables! Right there! (*points at V's lunch*) I bet some of those vegetables are conventional!

V: Now you're resorting to argument ad hominem. You're accusing me of being bad or hypocritical or something, instead of just focusing on the arguments.

M: Shouldn't I expect the proponents of a theory to be consistent?

V: Whether or not I personally act in the morally best way is irrelevant to the truth of the moral principles we've been discussing. Even if I'm hypocritical as you claim, that certainly wouldn't make it okay for you to keep buying meat. It's just a way to distract yourself from the moral issue about your own behavior.

M: But I don't think it's irrelevant, because I think your failure to care about insects shows that you don't really believe the moral views you've been advancing.⁴⁵

V: If I don't believe them, then why have I been eating vegan for the last three years? And why have I been telling you all these arguments? Am I just a crazy liar?

⁴⁵ Cf. Bryan Caplan, "Bugs," *Econlog*, October 3, 2016, <http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2016/10/bugs.html>.

M: Okay, you believe them on one level. But on another level, you don't *completely* believe them, because you haven't fully integrated them into your thinking and your lifestyle. If you really, fully believed that species membership doesn't matter, then you'd care more about insects.

V: So you think maybe I'm an unconscious speciesist?

M: That's a good way to put it.

V: Maybe. There are also experiments that suggest that most of us are unconscious racists.⁴⁶ But that doesn't show that these attitudes are correct or morally okay.

M: No, it doesn't show that. But one explanation for why you haven't rooted out all your speciesist prejudices is that they're actually correct.

V: I guess that's a possible explanation. But you'd have to think that unconscious biases are more reliable than conclusions of conscious reasoning. And we talked last time about the reasons why this bias is unreliable.

M: Alright, maybe your behavior doesn't give us a good reason for rejecting your philosophical arguments. But I still want to know: *should* we be a lot more careful about protecting insects?

V: If insects were sentient like cows, then I'd say sure.

M: Why don't you think insects are sentient? They've got eyes and other sense organs, so they must have sensations.

V: Three reasons. One, they don't have nociceptors –

M: What? "Nociceptors"?

V: The kind of nerve cells that sense pain. They don't have 'em. Second, they have drastically simpler central nervous systems. Like a million times simpler.

M: Maybe you only need a simple nervous system to have pain.

V: But you're going to have a hard time explaining the third point: insects don't show normal pain behavior. An insect with a crushed leg keeps applying the same force to that leg. Insects will keep eating, mating, or whatever they're doing, even when badly injured – even while another creature is eating *them*.⁴⁷

M: Okay, so there's a pretty good case that they don't feel pain. But there's still *some chance* of it, right?

V: I think you're engaging in distraction again. If you want to become a bug activist, go ahead. But first, let's agree to give up the much more clearly wrong practice of buying meat from factory farms.

M: Alright, maybe I should give up factory farm meat. What if I just buy free range meat instead?

V: Unfortunately, companies can legally call their products "free range" and still have a lot of cruelty. If you want humanely-made products, you have to look for things that are certified by an animal welfare organization. For



⁴⁶ Here, V is alluding to the literature on implicit bias; see Anthony G. Greenwald and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes," *Psychological Review* 102 (1995): 4-27.

⁴⁷ See C.H. Eisemann, W.K. Jorgensen, D.J. Merritt, M.J. Rice, B.W. Cribb, P.D. Webb, and M.P. Zalucki, "Do Insects Feel Pain? – A Biological View," *Experientia* 40 (1984): 164-7.

example, you can look for the “Certified Humane” logo.⁴⁸

M: Then it’ll be ethical to buy it?

V: Then it *might* be ethical. Buying from factory farms is clearly wrong; buying humane certified meat might be acceptable. Depends on whether you believe in animal *rights* or not.⁴⁹

M: Well, how come we haven’t been talking about that?

V: I focus on factory farming because it’s the source of nearly all animal products. I figure I should first try to dissuade people from doing the clearly terrible thing that almost everyone is doing every day (buying from factory farms), before worrying about something that a tiny minority of people are doing that’s much less bad but *might* still be unethical (buying from humane farms).

M: I see. But do *you* buy Humane Certified meat?

V: I don’t buy it because I don’t know if it is ethical. I figure that if I don’t know, I should err on the side of caution.⁵⁰

M: Why don’t you know?

V: Well, I’d have to figure out whether it’s permissible to kill animals humanely for food. For that, I’d have to figure out whether they have a right to life. And for that, I guess I’d have to first figure out what’s the basis for the right to life in general.

M: Isn’t that what we have moral philosophers for?

V: Yeah, but the moral philosophers don’t agree.

M: Professor Tooley told me that the right to life is based on one’s conception of oneself as a subject of experience continuing through time.⁵¹

V: That’s one theory. Another view is that the right to life rests on one’s being the subject of a life that matters to oneself. Or perhaps it rests on one’s having the potential for a human-like future. Or perhaps there aren’t any such things as rights in the first place.⁵²

M: Why don’t we just figure out which theory is true?

V: Easier said than done. The leading experts can’t agree, so it seems unlikely that we can settle it here. If we start on that, we’ll just argue about that forever.

M: Don’t be so pessimistic. Maybe we’re better at this than the leading experts.

V: Really? Remember that time when we started talking about the definition of knowledge?

M: Yeah, that was a great conversation.

V: A great conversation that went on for three hours. It only stopped because you had to leave.

M: Yeah. I still want to raise more objections to your last theory on that . . .

⁴⁸ See <http://certifiedhumane.org/>.

⁴⁹ For discussion, see Tom Regan, “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1975): 181-214, available at <http://tomregan.free.fr/Tom-Regan-The-Moral-Basis-of-Vegetarianism-1975.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Here, V follows the reasoning of Rachels, “Vegetarianism,” p. 894.

⁵¹ See Michael Tooley, “Abortion and Infanticide,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 37-65.

⁵² For these views, see, respectively, Tom Regan, “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism” and *The Case for Animal Rights*; Don Marquis, “Why Abortion Is Immoral,” *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 183-202; and C. L. Sheng, “A Defense of Utilitarianism Against Rights-Theory,” *Social Philosophy Today* 5 (1991): 269-99.

V: And then there was the time we started talking about free will.

M: Another great conversation.

V: That went on for five and a half hours, and we never reached any agreement.

M: Okay, so we're probably not going to deduce the correct ethical theory. But how can we know buying meat is wrong, without knowing the correct ethical theory?

V: Because the argument against meat rests on intuitive, very widely shared moral beliefs, like "it's wrong to inflict a lot of suffering for no good reason" and "it's wrong to pay people for immoral behavior." Any reasonable ethical theory is going to agree with those.

M: Okay, but all of your arguments assume that there are objective moral truths, don't they? *That's* controversial.

V: Do *all* moral arguments assume that there are objective moral truths?

M: I don't think so.

V: Then mine doesn't either.

M: Why do you say that?

V: Because I don't see how my argument differed from any ordinary moral argument. It's up to you to tell me how I presupposed objective values in a way that other moral arguments don't.

M: Maybe because you're arguing for a radical revision of our practices. On some theories, morality is just based on social practices.

V: Could that view have been used to defend slavery, back when that was the practice? Or the oppression of women? Judicial torture?

M: I guess it might.

V: Okay, if my argument against meat-eating is only as strong as the arguments against slavery and judicial torture were – if the only people who disagree with me are people who think we had no reason to give up slavery – I'm okay with that.

M: Well, maybe slavery was wrong, even though it fit with the practices of the time, because it conflicted with some deeper values held by society.

V: Like what?

M: Maybe there were deeper values of liberty and autonomy, and a consistent application of those values, without making arbitrary distinctions, required granting freedom to slaves.

V: In that case, I think factory farming is also wrong because it conflicts with deeper values of our society. Like the deeper values of compassion and "not inflicting needless suffering." That's just as plausible as the story about slavery.

M: I guess so. But so much seems uncertain in this area.

V: That's what happens when you get sidetracked by abstract theoretical discussions. Philosophers can make anything seem uncertain and confusing. Let me give you an example. Say person A is suing person B, and we're on the jury. We're supposed to decide if B wronged A in a way that demands compensation.

M: Okay.

V: It turns out that what B did was to smash A's car with a sledgehammer, causing \$2000 worth of damage.

Several witnesses saw it.

M: Sounds like an easy case. A gets \$2000.

V: Not so fast! There are a few philosophers in the jury room: a metaphysician, a political theorist, an epistemologist, and an ethicist. The metaphysician argues that B isn't responsible for his action, because there's no such thing as free will.

M: Well, I guess that would make sense . . .

V: The political theorist says that B's action was only wrong if property rights are legitimate, and property is illegitimate. The epistemologist says that we can't accept the eyewitnesses' testimony until the witnesses provide evidence that their senses are reliable. Finally, the ethicist says that there are no moral facts, so it can't be true that B did anything wrong.

M: I guess this is why they don't usually allow philosophers on the jury. Do you really think philosophers would act like that?

V: I hope not. But all the theories I just mentioned are respected positions held by some leading experts.

M: That's true, they are. But real philosophers would know better than to invoke those theories in a directly practical context.

V: My point exactly. The abstract theory only comes out when you want to derail the conversation. Now, *if* the philosophers made the arguments I just mentioned, how should we respond?

M: I guess we'd have to refute their theories?

V: Really? We're in the jury room. Before we decide who wins the case, we're first gonna have debates about free will, and property rights, and knowledge of the external world, and moral facts? And not only have debates about those things, but we have to *resolve* all of those issues, which the philosophical community has been debating for centuries or millennia?

M: Admittedly, it sounds daunting. I don't know how juries ever get anything done.

V: Of course, they don't do that. They don't have philosophical debates. And the rest of us don't do that in the rest of our lives. We agree to ignore fundamentally skeptical philosophical theories when we have to make a practical decision.

M: What do you mean "fundamentally skeptical"?

V: Well, theories that reject the validity of the domain that we're trying to reason about. Like, if we're reasoning about whether an action was wrong, we ignore the theory that there are no moral facts.

M: Okay, we do that. But maybe we *shouldn't* do that. Because it could be true that there are no moral facts.

V: But really? Say you're the judge. Would you actually, in reality, instruct the jury to first figure out whether there are moral facts, free will, and the rest?

M: I guess I wouldn't do that. I don't think they'd be very good at it.

V: Well, the question we've been discussing here is a practical question like that. Like how the jury had to decide whether to award money to the plaintiff. We have to decide whether to buy meat that's offered to us in a store or restaurant. If we get side tracked by skeptical philosophical theories, we never get the practical question answered – and we can make a simple, clear decision suddenly appear really puzzling and difficult.

M: You think being vegetarian is a simple, clear decision?

V: Basically, yes. At its heart, the question is: do I support something that causes enormous pain and suffering, for the sake of minor benefits for me? That's it. It's not "Are human lives more valuable than animal lives"? It's not "Are there objective values?" or "Are there rights?" or "What's the basis for rights?" It's just about causing great suffering for small gains.

M: Well, your arguments sound reasonable and all. But I just don't think I can give up meat, because it's too difficult, and I am weak-willed.

V: I don't think that's true.

M: I'm telling you, I'm not ready to give up meat. You think I'm lying?

V: I don't think you're lying. But people are often mistaken about why they make the choices they do. If you keep eating meat, it won't be because it was too difficult to give it up.

M: What do you mean?

V: Imagine the next time you're in a restaurant, and you're thinking of ordering a meat dish. Imagine I show up just before you order, and I offer you \$20 to order a vegetarian dish instead.

M: Twenty bucks? That would be like getting a free meal at most places, plus some extra cash.

V: Would you take it?

M: Sure.

V: So it's not really very difficult to refrain from eating meat. It can't be very hard, if just paying you \$20 gets you to do it.

M: Sure, it would be easy to forego one time. But after going for a few weeks without it, it would get harder, as I started to miss the taste. Don't you find it a terrible struggle to stay vegan?

V: No, not really.

M: You must have an iron will. Day in and day out, seeing delicious meat around you . . . ? What's your secret?

V: I don't deliberate. I don't decide, every time I eat, whether to be vegan. If I had to decide every time, I imagine that would be a hard lifestyle.

M: Well, why don't you deliberate about it? I thought about it many times over the past week!

V: I don't deliberate about whether to do things that are wrong. I decided once, three years ago, that buying meat was wrong, and I've had no reason to reopen the issue. So I don't have to struggle with any decision.

M: Oh, I bet you do some wrong things from time to time. Come on.

V: Let me rephrase. I don't deliberate about doing things that I see as *terrible*. Stealing paper clips, sure. Mugging people? No way, not even thinking about it.

M: I don't know if it's possible for me to get in that state of mind.

V: When you see an attractive person, do you have to struggle with the decision of whether to grope them or not?

M: I would never do that.

V: Or when someone pisses you off, do you have to struggle with the decision of whether to smack their face?

M: Not that either!

V: Right. You already know that you don't do things like that, so there's no deliberation and no internal struggle.

M: I just haven't been able to get in that state of mind with this issue. The past week was so hard. I'm really hankering after a steak now.

V: Here's another hypothetical. You've gone without meat for three weeks, so you're hankering after a steak. Like now, only more so. We're out to lunch with Bob, and he's got a steak on his plate. You know how he cuts his food up into bite-sized pieces? You could reach over, spear a piece with your fork, and eat it before he can stop you. Assume that this is the only way for you to get some steak. Do you do it?

M: Hm, would that be unethical, on your view? He's already ordered it . . .

V: Never mind that. I'm not asking what you *should* do. I'm asking a psychological question. Do you think you would in fact grab a piece of Bob's steak?

M: I think Bob would get mad if I did that.

V: Okay, what if he's gone for a bathroom break, so he won't even see you?

M: He might notice when he gets back.

V: He probably won't notice one piece. Even if he does, what's he gonna do?

M: Well, maybe I *would* take one then!

V: Come on. Have you ever done something like that?

M: Okay, fine, I wouldn't take it.

V: Why not?

M: I don't know, people just don't do things like that.

V: Even though you have this supposedly irresistible need for steak?

M: Maybe you're just showing the power of social conventions. I have two powerful urges, but the urge to follow conventions is so strong that I can't take the steak.

V: Okay. Let's say you ask Bob for a piece of his steak. He offers to sell it to you for \$20. Nothing wrong with that, as far as society is concerned, right?

M: It's pretty weird, but not exactly socially unacceptable.

V: You happen to have a twenty in your pocket. Do you hand it over?

M: \$20 for one bite? That's totally unreasonable. Bob can shove it.

V: What about your powerful, nearly irresistible steak urge?

M: One bite wouldn't satisfy it anyway.

V: Okay. What if he offers to sell you the whole steak for, say, \$100?

M: Um . . . that's a bit much.

V: Notice how this is different from, say, a drug addict. The drug addict would really hand over \$100 to get his fix. That's because they really have overpowering urges. You, however, do not.

M: Okay, fine. I guess it's not all *that* difficult to refrain from eating meat. I guess it's just that I'm a selfish bastard. Thanks for pointing that out.

V: I don't think that's it either. Here's another hypothetical. Say you're in the library late at night. You see a desk where another student has been studying. The student has left his stuff on the desk and gone out of the room to the bathroom. You see his wallet sitting on top of his backpack. You could grab the wallet and leave, and no one would ever catch you. Do you take it?

M: Hey, I'm no thief!

V: Good. But a real selfish bastard would take it, right?

M: I guess so. Then what are you saying explains my choices?

V: Social conformity. Stealing is disapproved in our society, and you've internalized that. Meat-eating isn't, and almost everyone around you is doing it. That's why you keep eating meat, no matter how wrong it is, but you won't steal, no matter how much it would be in your interests.

M: So it's mostly peer pressure?

V: Now you understand why I was getting all "judgy" on you earlier.

M: What, you're trying to exert peer pressure on me?

V: That's the main way morality is enforced in human societies. Others express disapproval of bad behavior, and it makes us want to avoid that behavior. If there's no disapproval, then most of us keep acting badly. That's why the people who know that a practice is wrong have to keep saying so.

M: You're making humans sound kind of weak. Like we just do whatever we see other people doing, however wrong it is.

V: Pretty much. Think about cases like Nazi Germany. Ordinary, average Germans, who never committed a crime before, found themselves helping to mass murder Jews. The natural resistance to killing was overcome, mainly by social pressure.

M: Yeah, Germans suck, don't they?

V: Not just Germans. If you lived in the American South in the 1800's, you would probably have accepted slavery as perfectly natural.

M: Yeah, you talked about that before, when you were talking about the status quo bias. But what if you've already accepted that meat-eating is wrong, but you just can't give it up?

V: That happened with slavery too. Thomas Jefferson was a big philosophical opponent of slavery, yet he was also a slave master.⁵³ If Jefferson was alive today, do you think he would still have slaves?

M: I assume not. Only a terrible person would hold slaves *today*. But what are you trying to conclude from this?

V: It's about social conformity. Jefferson "couldn't give up" his slaves, not because he had some powerful urge to be a slave master, and not even just because it would be so much against his interests (though it would have), but because other people in his society had slaves and accepted the practice – that undermined his moral motivation. If he lived today, he wouldn't dream of owning other people, because it's so uniformly disapproved.

M: It's also illegal.

V: True. But some things are illegal but socially accepted, and most people feel fine about doing those

⁵³ For Jefferson's views on slavery, see Christa Dierksheide, "Thomas Jefferson and Slavery," The Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, 2008, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-slavery>.

things. Like speeding, underage drinking, or, in certain communities, smoking weed.

M: That's assuming you're not gonna get caught. I wouldn't do any of those things in front of a cop.

V: Right. So assume that Jefferson was transported to our time, and somehow he knew he wouldn't get arrested or prosecuted for having slaves. He would still give up his slaves, once he felt the social pressure and disapproval.

M: Is all this supposed to help me give up meat?

V: Yeah. If you think that you can't do it because you have these overpowering carnivorous urges, or even that you're just utterly selfish, then it's unlikely that you'll make the effort. But once you realize that you make comparable sacrifices to your interests all the time, and it's not that difficult, then you're more likely to do it. The reason you make other sacrifices but you're not making *this* sacrifice is a really bad reason: not enough other people are pressuring you.

M: You know, you vegans are really preachy and moralistic. I'm not sure I want to be like you.

V: Well, I hope you understand now why we are so "moralistic," as you put it.

M: Because you have a character flaw that makes you take pleasure in controlling other people and feeling superior to them?

V: God, no. I *wish* I didn't have to do any of this. I wish the meat industry were ethical so I could buy their products. Or at least that everyone knew it was unethical so I wouldn't have to keep talking about it and having tensions with other people.

M: You mean being vegetarian causes other people to get mad at you?

V: Not exactly. Most people respect my dietary choices as long as I'm quiet about it. It's when I start talking about how they should stop eating meat that people get angry.

M: What do they do?

V: Sometimes they talk about how vegans are excessively moralistic or self-satisfied⁵⁴ – discounting the possibility that vegans just sincerely care about the welfare of animals. Or they sarcastically pose as broccoli rights advocates. Or they start bragging aggressively about how much they love bacon.

M: Well, when you call people immoral, you have to expect them to retaliate.

V: I wouldn't. When you meet a devout Catholic, do you start going on about how much you love abortion, and how you hope to perform a few abortions later that day?

M: Well, I'm pro-choice, but I still wouldn't do that. That would be offensive.

V: Would you tell them about how Catholics are just motivated by the desire to feel superior to others, or to tell others what to do?

M: No. I assume that Catholics motivated by their understanding of God, and what God requires of us.

V: Yet many meat-eaters refuse to accept that vegans are motivated by their understanding of what morality requires of us.

M: So why do it? Why not just keep your veganism to yourself?

V: (*sigh*) Because that would be wrong.

⁵⁴ Lomasky ("Is it Wrong to Eat Animals?", p. 199) warns of the danger of "excessive self-satisfaction" for ethical vegetarians.

M: I don't see why. You're not making them eat meat. It's not your job to ensure other people's morality. Like how you don't have to go around making sure your neighbors aren't cheating on their spouses. Each of us is only responsible for the morality of our own actions.

V: That might be true in general. But I think this issue is a special case.

M: What's special about it?

V: First, for most of the wrongs of the past – slavery, colonialism, the oppression of women – the victims could and did speak up. In the present case, the victims, the animals, will never be able to act or speak for themselves. There is no one to speak against what we humans are doing, except us. So we have to do it. If we don't, it will never stop.

M: I don't think I want to do that. It's going to be really awkward if every time I eat a meal with someone, I start telling them that they're immoral.

V: Let me give you an analogy. Remember the My Lai Massacre?

M: Some kind of massacre in Asia, right?

V: Vietnam, during the war. American soldiers massacred an entire village full of Vietnamese civilians.⁵⁵

M: That's awful.

V: Say you're one of the soldiers. Some of your colleagues are shooting villagers and dumping them in a mass grave. The villagers are all completely unarmed. They can't even plead for their lives, because they don't speak English. What do you do?

M: Well, I wouldn't shoot the villagers.

V: In fact, some soldiers declined to participate, as you suggest. But that wasn't good enough. Then the rest of the soldiers just went on killing.

M: Well, what would you suggest?

V: There's no one else there besides the soldiers and the villagers. The villagers can't do anything to stop the massacre. So it has to be on the soldiers. The ones who know that it's wrong have to try to stop it.

M: But how could I stop it?

V: I don't know. But I think, at a minimum, you should tell the other soldiers that they're committing a war crime and they have to stop.

M: I doubt that would work. They'd probably just keep doing it anyway.

V: Maybe so. But you should at least try. You shouldn't just stand by and watch because, "Oh, it's going to be socially awkward if I point out that my buddies are committing a war crime." Or because, "People are going to think I'm judgmental for objecting to murder."

M: But if I make people really uncomfortable, they're not going to stop eating meat; they'll just stop talking to me.

V: Fair point. So you need to strike a balance between staying silent in the face of a great wrong, and alienating most other people. You need to make the point that meat-eating is wrong, but in a calm and rational manner, so you don't sound crazy.

M: Speaking of crazy, don't you think some of your analogies are a little hyperbolic? Comparing meat-

⁵⁵ See History.com, "My Lai Massacre," 2009, <http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/my-lai-massacre>.

eating to being a Nazi, or a slave-master, or massacring a village of civilians? I don't claim to be a saint or anything, but I'm hardly like a Nazi just because I enjoy the occasional burger.

V: Many people feel that way. That's another reason why people keep eating meat, even after they know that it's wrong.

M: What, because we're not saints?

V: Nor do we want to be. Most people have a certain tolerance for immorality in themselves. They don't aspire to be ideal; they just want to be *not too bad*, morally speaking. So if, say, they're occasionally rude to hotel staff, that doesn't bother them.

M: Yeah, you know, I'm only human. Like, sometimes I stretch the truth a bit when I'm trying to impress a date. I'm not trying to be perfect. But I make up for it by being very nice.

V: Yeah, this isn't like that. The arguments we've been discussing don't suggest that meat-eating is a minor foible, like lying to impress your date. The arguments suggest that human meat consumption, over the course of a couple decades, likely causes more harm than all the wrongs human beings have ever committed against each other – all the war crimes, genocides, enslavement, and so on, combined.

M: Yeah, I know. 56 billion animals and all. But any given person only contributes a tiny amount to that harm.

V: True, you only contribute a tiny *percentage* of it. But that tiny percentage is still extremely harmful. If you keep eating meat, you're probably going to eat over two thousand animals in your lifetime.⁵⁶

M: Two thousand? I don't believe that.

V: Well, if you eat meat at every meal, three times a day, that's 3 times 365 – that's over 1,000 meat dishes a year, right?

M: Yeah . . .

V: The average American lives 79 years. So that's over 79,000 meat dishes in a lifetime. How many animals do you think would be needed to provide 79,000 meat dishes?

M: Okay, so it's over 2,000. But I don't eat meat at every meal.

V: Okay. What if you do it half the time? Then you only have about 40,000 meat dishes in a lifetime. It's still plausible that over 2,000 animals would have to be killed to provide that.

M: I thought your argument was all about causing suffering, not about *killing*.

V: Yeah, I'm just using the numbers killed as a proxy for the number that are subjected to extreme suffering. Subjecting *two thousand* other creatures to agony would be the worst thing you did in your life, by far.

M: Alright, but it's still not like being a Nazi.

V: No? Why not?

M: Well, everyone *knows* that killing people is wrong. Most of us don't know that eating meat is wrong.

V: The Nazis didn't know that killing Jews was wrong either. Many of them thought that it was morally

⁵⁶ Geiss ("How Many Animals Do We Eat?") estimates that Americans eat 2400 land animals per lifetime, based on the annual meat consumption in America, the national population, and the average life expectancy at birth.

right. Some talked about steeling themselves to do their duty.⁵⁷

M: Okay, but everyone *should* know that it's wrong to murder people.

V: Everyone should also know that it's wrong to inflict severe pain and suffering for trivial reasons.

M: Okay, but not everyone knows that the meat industry does that.

V: And most Nazis didn't know, when they first became Nazis, or when they helped ship people to concentration camps, that Hitler was going to order everyone in the camps to be executed.

M: Hey, are you defending Nazis now?

V: That wasn't what I was trying to do. Nevertheless, the people we think of as villains are rarely as diabolical as we imagine them. And those we think of as decent, including ourselves, are rarely as decent as we imagine them. The gap between the Nazi officer and the average American is much smaller than we think. Both are, for the most part, simply going along with what those around them are saying and doing, without thinking too hard about what is right or wrong, or trying too hard to be good or bad. One just happens to find himself in a society in which a genocide is being carried out.

M: That's pretty intense. I'm going to need to think more about all this before changing my lifestyle.

V: Fair enough. But don't put it off for too long. "The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be either good or evil."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Jonathan Bennett discusses this in "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," *Philosophy* 49 (1974): 123-34, at pp. 127-9. See also Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ Here V slightly misremembers Hannah Arendt's remark: "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good" (*The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, San Diego: Harcourt, 1978, p. 180).