

Veganism, Animal Welfare, and Causal Impotence

Samuel Kahn

Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis

Samuel Kahn is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. Books include: *A Problem-Based Introduction to Philosophy* (Kendall Hunt, 2014) and *Kant, Ought Implies Can, the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, and Happiness* (Lexington Press, 2019). Research interests include: Kant and Kantian ethics. kahnsa@iupui.edu

Abstract: Proponents of the utilitarian animal welfare argument (AWA) for veganism maintain that it is reasonable to expect that adopting a vegan diet will decrease animal suffering. In this paper I argue otherwise. I maintain that (i) there are plausible scenarios in which refraining from meat-consumption will not decrease animal suffering; (ii) the utilitarian AWA rests on a false dilemma; and (iii) there are no reasonable grounds for the expectation that adopting a vegan diet will decrease animal suffering.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I set out the utilitarian AWA in its original form. I give some background and I distinguish it from other, related arguments. In the second, I discuss the causal impotence objection, a popular objection to the utilitarian AWA. I explain how the objection works by means of a conceptual distinction between consumers and producers. In the third, I explain how proponents of the utilitarian AWA respond to this objection. In particular, I set out in some detail what I call the expected utility response. In the fourth and final section, I use the three objections noted above to explain why I do not find this response convincing.

Keywords: veganism; animal welfare; animal suffering; causal impotence objection; expected utility; animal ethics; factory farming; utilitarianism; ethics of consumption; concentrated animal feeding operations

In this paper, I am going to defend the causal impotence objection (CIO) against recent attacks. The paper has four sections. In the first, I discuss the utilitarian animal welfare argument (AWA) for veganism. In the second, I explain the CIO. In the third, I discuss recent replies to the CIO. In the fourth, I explain why I do not find these replies persuasive.

Section 1. The Utilitarian Animal Welfare Argument for Veganism

I am going to use the word ‘vegan’ to refer to the idea that one ought not to eat animals (e.g., fried chicken or steak) or animal products (e.g., milk or unfertilized eggs). There are debates about whether there are some kinds of animal products that, as a matter of definition, vegans ought to be allowed to consume (e.g., honey).¹ But these debates are unimportant for current purposes. What is important is merely to be able to distinguish broadly between vegans, pollotarians (who eat chicken but not other animals), pescatarians (who eat fish but not other animals), ovolacto-vegetarians (who eat animal products but not animals), and the like.²

There are many different kinds of reasons cited in favor of and against veganism, including personal taste, cost, environmental considerations, aesthetic ideals, and health.³ But for current purposes, I am interested only in ethical reasons and, in particular, only in the kind of ethical reasons that manifest in one specific argument for veganism: the animal welfare argument (AWA) for veganism.⁴

The AWA for veganism is an argument that has come to prominence in light of modern practices in factory farming. The practices are those found on so-called concentrated (sometimes: confined) animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and their associated slaughterhouses. The practices at large-scale dairy houses and egg farms

also have come under fire, although they seem to receive less attention than those at CAFOs and slaughterhouses, perhaps because the latter are so much more heinous.

CAFOs, which supply the majority of the meat consumed (by weight and by number of animals killed) in the USA and many other parts of the world, are notorious for their cruelty: animals are kept in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions; they have various parts of their bodies (beaks, nails, tails, reproductive parts, etc.) removed without anaesthetic; they are fed unhealthy diets (including drugs of different kinds); etc.⁵ Similar things can be said about the slaughterhouses where these animals are eventually killed: animals often are cut up alive; they are abused in various ways by sadistic or just burnt out workers; best practices include irradiation and antimicrobial chemicals to disinfect rather than remove manure; etc.⁶

The AWA builds on all of these facts to make a case for veganism. The argument may be reconstructed as follows: (1) meat consumption requires incredible suffering on the part of massive numbers of animals; (2) there are ethical grounds to avoid incredible suffering on the part of massive numbers of animals when there is an alternative that would not require such suffering; (3) veganism is such an alternative; therefore, (4) there are ethical grounds for veganism.⁷

It is important to distinguish different ways in which one might fill in the first and second premises of this argument. For example, the Kantian AWA might ask about the maxim of consuming meat produced under these conditions and then argue that, because these animals all manifest, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the species, various aspects of rationality, this maxim is impermissible, either because it is not universalizable or because it does not express the morally requisite respect for rationality.⁸ The Aristotelian AWA, by way of contrast, might ask about the character traits that would be exemplified in and cultivated by the act of consuming such meat and argue that these character traits are not conducive to human flourishing, not in the long run and perhaps also not in the here and now.⁹

The Kantian AWA and the Aristotelian AWA are important, and a comprehensive discussion of the ethical reasons for and against veganism would have to discuss them.¹⁰ But they are not important for current purposes.¹¹ They are not important for current purposes because this is not a comprehensive discussion of the

ethical reasons for and against veganism: this is a discussion of the CIO, and the CIO is not raised against either of these versions of the AWA. The CIO is raised against the utilitarian AWA for veganism, an argument which focuses on the ways in which the consumption of meat *causes* animal suffering in order to make a case for premises (1) and (2) in the argument above.

In sum: some ethical vegans argue that one ought not to consume meat at least in part because of the incredible animal suffering that such consumption brings about and the fact that there is an alternative diet available that would not cause such suffering.¹²

Section 2. The Causal Impotence Objection

To understand the CIO, we can begin by distinguishing animal producers from animal consumers.

Say that an animal producer is someone directly involved in raising animals on a CAFO or directly involved in slaughtering animals in a slaughterhouse. Thus, someone who clips beaks for a living would be a producer, as would someone whose job is to stun cows as they enter the slaughterhouse. Someone who transports the meat in a truck from the slaughterhouse to a supermarket would not count as a producer for present purposes. Neither would a shareholder in a company that owns a CAFO.

Say that an animal consumer is someone who is not a vegan. This could be an ovolacto-vegetarian (notwithstanding the fact that ovolacto-vegetarians do not literally consume animals; note the remarks in section 1 about dairy and egg farms), but the debate generally pits vegans against those who consume any and all animals and animal products with abandon. This obviously creates a problem for the debate insofar as it is predicated on a false dilemma. I shall return to this in section 4 below. But for present purposes it is worth noting that the majority of people in the world do seem to fall into the category of <animal consumer> so defined, so the argument still has quite a bit of practical force.

Now I want to make two clarificatory points about the distinction between producers and consumers. First, these two categories are not mutually exclusive: someone could be both an animal producer and an animal

consumer. But the act of producing animals is distinct from the act of consuming animals, and that is what is important for present purposes.

Second, this distinction is not exhaustive. Perhaps most obviously (and most relevantly for other debates in this problem space) it leaves out those who are indirectly involved in raising animals on a CAFO or indirectly involved in slaughtering animals in a slaughterhouse. For example, the vegan lobbyist who is commissioned to fight for less restrictive regulations governing animal slaughter and the vegan corporate owner of a CAFO would not fall into either of the categories above. This is not because the actions of these individuals in their respective professional capacities do not have a large impact on animal suffering: plainly they do. The reason for resting content with the distinction above notwithstanding such omissions is that the utilitarian AWA is aimed specifically at the act of animal *consumption*. Other arguments are made against animal production as defined above (for example, the Aristotelian AWA frequently is deployed in this context), and yet others are made against the actions of those who are indirectly involved in meat production. Those other arguments must be assessed on their own merits: the present goal is to get clear on the success of the utilitarian AWA for veganism and, in particular, the success of the CIO in blocking the utilitarian AWA for veganism. So with this distinction between producers and consumers under our belts, let me introduce the CIO now.

The CIO maintains that the utilitarian AWA for veganism fails on the grounds that consuming animals will have no effect on animal suffering. This can be broken into two parts. First, the suffering that went into the production of a given beef patty or a given chicken breast already has taken place. *Past* suffering is not going to be decreased by anything anyone does *now*, and so the incredible suffering of animals that was necessary to produce whatever someone is consuming *now* is irrelevant, at least as far as the utilitarian AWA for veganism is concerned. Call this the “sunk costs” half of the CIO. To be sure, other arguments might be made on the basis of past suffering, and some of them already have been hinted at above. But as also hinted at above, those arguments must be assessed on their own merits.

Second, proponents of the CIO point out that factory farming arose to meet demand for meat on the part of millions of consumers: not only will present animal consumption have no effect on past suffering, but also the

animal consumption of any single agent is going to have no effect on the larger animal consumption patterns in society. To make this concrete, suppose I am a pollotarian and I consume roughly 14 chicken breasts every two weeks, buying at a big box store like Walmart. Even if all else remains constant, the biweekly Walmart chicken breast orders are on an order of magnitude where 14 would not be noticed; my consumption patterns will be washed out at the first node in the demand chain rather than trickle back into 7 fewer chickens grown on a CAFO on a biweekly basis. And if the demand chain is such as to render inefficacious the non-consumption of more than 150 chickens per year, the effects are even less likely to be noticed with larger animals like pigs and cows, where my consumption on a biweekly basis most likely amounts to less than a single animal. So according to proponents of the CIO, any individual's decision to consume animals is not causally connected to future animal suffering. Call this the "overwhelming numbers" half of the CIO.¹³

From this it may be seen that, according to the CIO, animal consumption is not causally connected to the melioration of past animal suffering because that is physically impossible (past animal suffering is a sunk cost), and animal consumption is not causally connected to the melioration of future animal suffering because only large scale social movements can have an effect on that (the effects of a single individual's actions will be overwhelmed by the actions of large numbers of other people and the economic realities of supply and demand).

Now it is important not to confuse the CIO with other responses that opponents make to the utilitarian AWA for veganism. For example, the small animals objection (SAO) maintains that (a) large numbers of small animals (field mice and the like) suffer and die during plant harvesting; (b) societal switching to a vegan diet would require more plant harvesting than is required now; thus (c) societal switching to a vegan diet might result in more rather than less animal suffering and death.¹⁴ Proponents of the utilitarian AWA for veganism frequently challenge premise (b) in my reconstruction of the SAO: they point out that most of the plant harvesting now is for food for animals on CAFOs and so societal switching to a vegan diet would result in less suffering and death of small animals.¹⁵

However, the SAO is downstream from the CIO, logically speaking. That is, the SAO has to do with the actual effects, in terms of animal suffering, of large scale switching to a vegan diet whereas the CIO maintains that

any given individual's decision to switch to a vegan diet is causally impotent. In sum: some opponents of the utilitarian AWA for veganism maintain that the decision to consume meat is causally insulated from animal suffering.

Section 3. The Expected Utility Response

Various philosophers have responded to the CIO. Generally the sunk costs half of the CIO is accepted: nobody wants to challenge the idea that the decision not to consume a given piece of meat is going to initiate a causal chain that will decrease the *past* suffering that went into the production of that piece of meat. But the overwhelming numbers half of the CIO is contested: proponents of the utilitarian AWA for veganism maintain that the argument *does* give grounds for thinking that, all else being equal, the decision not to consume a given piece of meat will initiate a causal chain that will decrease *future* suffering of animals. The response can be reconstructed in two steps.

First, note that we are interested in assessing an agent rather than an action. This might seem duplicitous: any given action is going to be performed by an agent, so there does not seem to be a way to assess an action without thereby assessing an agent. But that is too fast. The idea is that the actual consequences of an action can be different from what an agent reasonably can expect the consequences of that action to be. This is especially important in utilitarianism, for utility calculations are (notoriously) difficult (something I shall pick up again in section 4 below). The point for the present context is that even if, in fact, an individual's decision not to eat a given piece of meat does *not* have an impact on future animal suffering (because any such effects are overwhelmed by large numbers of other agents), it reasonably can be expected that it will have such an effect. And because we are interested in assessing an agent rather than an action, we are interested in reasonable expectations of effects, not in actual effects.

The second step is then to make a case for the claim that, all else being equal, agents reasonably should expect that the decision to adopt a vegan diet will decrease future animal suffering.¹⁶ This can be done by introducing two new terms: “initiator” and “cm.”

Say that someone is an initiator if their actions contribute (causally) to the starting of a movement. Social movements are hard to define and harder to analyze. But there is no question but that they do begin on occasion, and they would not begin were it not for some initial individuals who see fit to move. Those individuals are the ones I have in mind when I speak of initiators.

Say that someone is a cm if their actions contribute (causally) to a social movement’s reaching a critical mass.¹⁷ Again, social movements are hard to define and harder to analyze. But there is no question but that they do succeed on occasion, and they would not succeed were it not for finally having reached some critical mass of individuals who see fit to move. Those individuals who contribute toward reaching a critical mass are the ones I have in mind when I speak of cms.

Now just as nobody wants to deny that past suffering is causally insulated from current consumption practices, so nobody (not even the proponent of the CIO) wants to deny that large scale patterns of consumption will impact the production of goods: if demand goes down, then surely so will supply, and so in a vegan society, the supply of meat will decrease and so, correspondingly, will animal suffering. Thus the proponent of the utilitarian AWA for veganism must show, contra the CIO, that individuals reasonably should expect that either they will be initiators or that they will be cms, for in either case their individual consumption decisions will have a causal impact on the supply chain and, thus, on animal suffering.

In the USA it seems implausible that anyone reasonably can expect to lay claim to the title of initiator of a vegan movement by switching to a vegan diet at this point in time. Most supermarkets these days stock vegan options. Burger King, McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Dunkin’ Donuts, and White Castle have tried out veggie burger options, rolled out with fanfare and large ad campaigns.¹⁸ Even gas station quickie marts in middle America frequently have mock meat products. The very fact that this debate is taking place in academic journals, that there are accepted moves in the debate (so well accepted that they have been given competing names and acronyms), and

that the debate is now taking place at such far remove from the initial arguments is surely sign enough that the movement is well underway.

Nonetheless opponents of the CIO contend that it is perfectly reasonable to expect that one will be a cm, and all of the facts cited in the previous paragraph attest to that. There is power in numbers, and those numbers are accumulating. Moreover, it is important to realize that the utilitarian AWA for veganism does not trade on the idea that an individual's decision to switch to a vegan diet is going to stop *all* animal suffering. The argument requires only a much more modest (and correspondingly plausible) idea: that switching to a vegan diet will stop *some* animal suffering. That is, the success conditions referred to in being a cm are not: as a result of my individual decision to adopt a vegan diet, in conjunction with the individual decisions of many others to adopt such a diet, CAFOs are going to go out of business. Rather, the success conditions are: as a result of my individual decision to adopt a vegan diet, in conjunction with the individual decisions of many others to adopt such a diet, CAFOs are going to grow fewer animals. Thus, opponents of the CIO maintain that the expected utility of switching to a vegan diet is high: the utilitarian AWA for veganism stands unimpugned because (the most important) half of the CIO, the overwhelming numbers half, does not withstand critical scrutiny.

Section 4. Why I Do Not Find the Expected Utility Reply Convincing

I do not find the expected utility response to the CIO convincing. I am going to raise three objections to it. This section is divided into three subsections, one per objection. For reasons that (I hope) will become apparent shortly, I call them the “plausible scenarios” objection, the “false dilemma” objection, and the “whence probability” objection.

Subsection 4.1. The Plausible Scenarios Objection

Opponents of the utilitarian AWA for veganism sometimes come up with logically possible scenarios in which it is very unlikely that consuming a piece of meat will have any effect on animal suffering.¹⁹ For example, suppose someone named Hiker is hiking through the desert. Hiker is hundreds of miles from civilization and has no means of communication. Further, Hiker is about to die. Knowing this, Hiker is trying to decide whether it would be ethical to eat a piece of beef jerky. In this scenario, it seems implausible that any ethical reasons *not* to eat the jerky derive from the utilitarian AWA for veganism.

Now perhaps someone will respond that there could be a situation in which Hiker's decision has a causal impact on animal suffering. For example, perhaps Hiker's decision to eat the jerky results in Hiker being more flatulent than usual, and perhaps the resulting changes in local air currents, temperatures, and pressures cause some catastrophic weather system to build up, and perhaps this catastrophic weather system wreaks havoc on a CAFO in a neighboring state. In the ensuing mayhem, the animals take charge and set up a self-governing anarcho-syndicalist commune along the lines of Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

None of this, however, touches on the expected utility response. It shows merely that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with eating meat on the utilitarian AWA for veganism, something that proponents of this argument are quick to concede. But this does light the path toward one kind of objection to the expected utility response, one that, I think, carries real weight: there are many prosaic scenarios in which expected utility does not pull toward a vegan diet, at least not using the utilitarian AWA.

For example, suppose that I am living in China for a year, teaching at another university. Suppose, further, that I eat many of my meals in the student canteen. Picture large pans of food with servers standing behind them, waiting for me to point at a pan in order to indicate my selection. I can choose a meat dish or I can choose a vegan alternative, and whatever I choose will be ladled onto a tray that is then handed over to me. Finally, suppose that I know that China, with its growing middle class, has a growing number of citizens eager to eat more meat, having been unable to eat much meat before due to economic reasons: eating meat is a sign of higher status in China (in the way that eating meat alternatives is now a sign of higher status in the west, in part on account of the perception that it takes a lot of time, planning, and money to eat a healthy vegan diet). It seems to me that the

probability that I ought to assign to my being an initiator in such a situation is somewhere in the neighborhood of 0, and similarly for the probability that I ought to assign to my being a cm. In such a scenario, the utilitarian AWA for veganism is not going to do any work.

Of course, living in China for a year while working at another university is not exactly a prosaic scenario. It is perhaps more realistic than Hiker's scenario, but for most people it will not be on the radar. But now observe the properties of this scenario that undercut the utilitarian AWA: (i) I am in a place where I can be confident that most people are not vegans and, more, where eating meat is seen as a positive aspect of the culture (I am not going to be a cm); (ii) I am in the place temporarily and there are many other people, so the impact of my decisions will not be felt immediately nor will they accumulate over time (I will have no effect on animal welfare myself directly); and (iii) socially speaking I am not in a position to be an initiator (it is unlikely my actions even will be noticed let alone understood and copied). Moreover, although I think (ii) does strengthen my case against the utilitarian AWA (the utilitarian AWA generates very little ethical reason for veganism while traveling), I think (i) and (iii) suffice to undermine the argument.

With this in mind it seems to me that the kind of scenario envisioned above is indeed quite common. Perhaps in some parts of California these descriptions do not apply. But in many parts of Texas they do, and in fact I maintain that it is at least reasonable to expect that they apply in the majority of the USA (by landmass) and to the majority of Americans (by population).

Subsection 4.2. The False Dilemma Objection

I want to return now to a point I raised in section 2 above: that this debate generally pits vegans against those who consume any and all animals and animal products with abandon and, thus, that this debate rests on a false dilemma. The problem with this is straightforward: there are many alternatives other than these two.

For example, instead of switching to a vegan diet, one might reduce the quantity (by mass) of animal one consumes, and one might ensure that what one does consume is sourced from places that grow and slaughter

under animane conditions.²⁰ Whole Foods is famous for selling animal scored from 1 to 5 on the basis of exactly these kinds of considerations; boutique butchers, farm-to-table restaurants, and co-ops frequently do the same; and other supermarkets are starting to follow suit.²¹ One of the costs of switching to reasonable expectation in the utilitarian AWA is that, regardless of the reality of the farms and slaughterhouses that supply the places gestured toward in the previous sentence, it is reasonable for the average consumer to expect not only that such animal was not produced under conditions that caused great suffering but also, correlatively, that supporting this system economically is not going to cause great suffering in the future.²²

More exotically but no less problematically for the utilitarian AWA, one might increase the quantity (by numbers) of animals one consumes by switching to an insect-based diet.²³ Visitors to a night market in Bangkok might be surprised by trays of roasted insects, and some Westerners might balk at the very idea of eating them, but they are there in abundance, and it is cheap and easy to set up an insect (read: protein) farm atop the fridge.²⁴ Even if insects are sentient, raising and slaughtering them does not come with the kinds of issues about animal welfare associated with raising and slaughtering chickens, pigs, and cows (e.g., some insects seem to like overcrowded conditions; etc.).²⁵

Now proponents of the utilitarian AWA for veganism might object at this point. In particular, they might contend that even if their argument does rest on a false dilemma and everything I have said in the previous two paragraphs is true (and so the utilitarian AWA for veganism does not support veganism but rather *not* consuming animals sourced from CAFOs and the like), my objection has missed its target and, thus, my argument fails on its own terms. That is, I have set up the dialectic as a defense of the CIO, and yet the false dilemma response seems to have nothing to do with the CIO *per se*. If I am going to be so strict regarding assessing different arguments on their own merits, I had better follow these same strictures myself, and so the false dilemma objection must be tossed out.

But I think that this objection is too quick. I concede that the false dilemma objection does not directly bolster either the sunk costs half or the overwhelming numbers half of the CIO. Nonetheless, the false dilemma objection can be understood as in support of the CIO. The false dilemma objection can be understood in this way

because the point of the objection is that the decision to adopt a vegan diet is, in itself, causally impotent. To put this another way, if the false dilemma objection works, then it is, if anything, the decision *not* to consume animals from CAFOs (and the like) that is causally efficacious in terms of animal welfare; it is precisely *not* the decision to adopt a vegan diet that is causally efficacious in terms of animal welfare, and this *does* change the dialectic significantly.

Let me try to put it in another light. As seen in section 3, one of the moves made by proponents of the utilitarian AWA, in clarifying their position, is to note that the success conditions associated with the argument are *not* putting a stop to all animal suffering that is brought about as a result of animal consumption: plainly it is not reasonable for anybody to expect that their individual decision to switch to a vegan diet is going to do *that*. Rather, the point is merely to bring about a decrease in animal suffering. I shall return to this point momentarily (in subsection 4.3), but for now what I want to say is that in the same way, the proponent of the CIO might retreat from the claim that any individual's decision to adopt a vegan diet is going to be entirely causally inefficacious in terms of animal suffering to the claim that the decision to adopt a vegan diet *rather than a diet of any other form* is going to be entirely causally inefficacious in terms of animal suffering.

Yet another way to think about the false dilemma objection is as adding to the plausible scenarios objection: over and above what was said in subsection 4.1, it is entirely plausible, modulo what was said in this subsection, that many individuals (even or perhaps especially, given the contingencies of the market, in places where they reasonably can expect to be a cm) will find themselves in situations in which consuming animal will not reasonably be expected to cause an increase in animal suffering.

Subsection 4.3. The Whence Probability Objection

The final objection I want to raise has to do with the reasonable expectation part of the claim that it is reasonable to expect that the decision to switch to a vegan diet will be causally efficacious in reducing animal suffering. The objection may be set out in two stages.

First, note that the shift in success conditions discussed in section 3 and remarked upon in subsection 4.2 (i.e., success as measured in terms of decreased animal suffering rather than in terms of CAFOs entirely ceasing to exist) is, although plausible, not entirely cost-free. That is, we now must ask (a) how much animal suffering is going to decrease and (b) how sure we can be of this decrease. If the decrease is expected to be large but the probability is small or the decrease is expected to be small even though the probability is large, the utilitarian AWA will be crippled. Thus, the shift in success conditions requires that the expected utility (from section 3) be, if not precisified in numbers, more than merely hand-waive-y. And this leads directly into the second stage of the objection, which is that there are exactly 0 plausible ways of doing this.

One way in which this second stage of the objection might be filled out is by appeal to (failed) ideas about hedons and dolors as units of measurement used to quantify animal welfare. But that is not the direction in which I want to go. Another way in which this second stage of the objection might be filled out is by appeal to debates about probability or induction and general skepticism about the objectivity and therefore meaningfulness of the former or about the ability to make predictions about the future at all. But that is also not the direction in which I want to go.

The direction I want to go has to do with a line of reasoning that was well-known in utilitarian literature about 30 years ago but that seems to have dropped out of sight today, at least in applied ethics arguments: it has to do with the nature of utilitarian calculations and the simple fact that no human is in a good position to do them. There are two related reasons for this: (i) there is no temporal limit on utility calculations, and (ii) causal networks are incredibly complicated (think chaos theory and the butterfly effect).²⁶

Now perhaps I shall be told that it does not suffice to gesture toward general skepticism regarding expected utility calculations: the burden of proof is on *me* to make a case for a scenario that disconfirms the utilitarian AWA. For my part, I do not see that this is so. But I also do not think that this is a difficult burden to meet. For example, a misanthrope might maintain that humans are nasty creatures, perhaps the nastiest in the universe; switching *en masse* to a vegan diet stands a chance at increasing the species life expectancy whereas consuming animals with abandon and feeding the system in place now only will speed us toward the close of the

anthropocene and, thereby, lessen our long term effects and allow Mother Nature to clean up after the royal mess we have made of things. If you really want to end animal suffering and if you take the long view of things, then the answer is not a vegan diet; it is tossing compassion to the wayside and engaging in nuclear and, more, biological war.

But perhaps I shall be told that the whence probability objection, like the false dilemma objection, misses its mark. That is, someone might object that, given how I have set up the dialectic, I should be defending the CIO. But the whence probability objection applies to utilitarianism in general, not to the utilitarian AWA for veganism in particular, much less to the defense of the CIO. More, it might be said that the whence probability objection, like the false dilemma objection, presupposes that the CIO fails, for it seems to concede that an individual's decision to switch to a vegan diet is not causally impotent.

But as before, I think that this is too quick. While I concede that the whence probability objection is about the probability of actual causal chains, there are at least two things that I think are worth saying at this point. First, the whence probability objection is *not* an objection to utilitarianism in general; it is triggered precisely by the expected utility response. As noted above, the whence probability objection was standard fare in discussions of utilitarianism about 30 years ago, and utilitarians developed a standard response to it: utilitarianism provides a criterion of right action rather than a decision procedure for determining when this criterion is instantiated.²⁷ In making the expected utility response, however, proponents of the utilitarian AWA for veganism seem to be erasing this distinction and, thus, owe us some sort of reply to the whence probability objection. It matters very little whether the whence probability objection has a wider scope than the utilitarian AWA for veganism; the point is that proponents of the expected utility response to the CIO have brought this objection upon themselves—and again: now they owe us an answer to it.

Second, the whence probability objection is, I think, really just another way of getting at the underlying idea of the CIO. That is, the point of the CIO is that switching to a vegan diet is not, as far as we know, going to decrease animal suffering because it is not, as far as we know, going to have any causal effect on animal welfare.

The whence probability objection gets us to exactly the same conclusion. To be sure, it gets us more. But that is hardly a problem for an opponent of the utilitarian AWA for veganism.

Conclusion

In this paper I have taken aim at one particular ethical argument for veganism, the utilitarian animal welfare argument. I began by explaining this argument and disambiguating it from others. I then reconstructed the causal impotence objection using the distinction between consumers and producers and distinguishing this objection from others, like the small animals objection. In section 3 I turned to a popular response to the causal impotence objection, the expected utility response. I explained this response by introducing a distinction between initiators and cns. In the fourth and final section of the paper I attacked the expected utility response. I leveled three objections against it: the plausible scenarios objection, the false dilemma objection, and the whence probability objection. In my view, these objections are fatal. But perhaps I shall be proved wrong in time. And as I have tried to emphasize throughout the course of this paper, even I am right about this, nothing I have said here speaks to any of the other kinds of arguments one might give for adopting a vegan diet.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Alastair Norcross. Those familiar with his work will recognize his influence throughout this paper. While I disagree with him on many fronts, his stimulating conversation, especially following a presentation at the 81st annual meeting of the Southwestern Philosophical Society, has shaped my thought in many ways.

Bibliography

Abbate, C. (2014). Virtues and Animals. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 27(6), 1-23.

Alvaro, C. (2017). Ethical Veganism, Virtue, and Greatness of the Soul. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 32(3), 487-492.

Appleby, M. (2005). Sustainable Agriculture is Humane, Humane Agriculture is Sustainable. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 18(3), 293-303.

Bakar, F. (2019). Can vegans eat honey? *Metro*. August 29. <<https://metro.co.uk/2019/08/29/can-vegans-eat-honey-10649712/>>. Accessed 2019. 11.14.

Bales, R. (1971). Act Utilitarianism. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 8(3), 257-265.

Ben, D. (2016). Utilitarianism and Animal Cruelty. *De Ethica*, 3, 5-19.

Brink, D. (1989). *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bruckner, D. (2015). "Strict Vegetarianism is Immoral." In B. Bramble & B. Fischer (Eds.), *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat* (pp. 30-47). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cain, Á. (2018). The Meat Industry is hiding a Dark Secret. *Business Insider*. January 4. <<https://www.businessinsider.com/meat-industry-sanitation-workers-2018-1>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Clarke, S. (2009). The Unjustified-Suffering Argument for Vegetarianism. In R. Younis (Ed.), *On the Ethical Life* (pp. 57-67). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

David, S. (2018). America's Horrifying New Plan for Animals. *The Guardian*. March 6. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/06/ive-seen-the-hidden-horrors-of-high-speed-slaughterhouses>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Davis, S. (2003). The least harm principle may require that humans consume a diet containing large herbivores, not a vegetarian diet. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 16(4), 387-394.

Doggett, T. (2018). Moral Vegetarianism. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/vegetarianism/>>. Accessed 2019.11.15.

Effective Altruism Foundation (2017). The Strongest Argument for Veganism. *EA Introduction*. April 11. <<https://ea-foundation.org/blog/the-strongest-argument-for-veganism/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Eisnitz, G. (2006). *Slaughterhouse*. New York: Prometheus.

Elle. (2015). "Vegan, Vegetarian, Flexitarian, Pescatarian, and Pollotarian Explained." *Republic*. June 14. <<https://wholefoodrepublic.com/vegan-vegetarian-flexitarian-pescatarian-and-pollotarian-explained/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Engber, D. (2008). The Great Vegan Honey Debate. *Slate*. July 30. <<https://slate.com/human-interest/2008/07/why-vegans-can-t-decide-whether-they-re-allowed-to-cat-honey.html>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Faruqi, S. (2016). *Project Animal Farm*. New York: Pegasus Books.

Fischer, B. (2016). Bugging the Strict Vegan. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 29(2), 255-263.

Fischer, B. (2016). You Can't Buy Your Way Out of Veganism. *Between the Species*, 19(1), 193-209.

Fischer, B. and Lamey, A. (2018). Field Deaths in Plant Agriculture. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 31(4), 409-418.

Foer, J. (2010). *Eating Animals*. New York: Back Bay Books.

Francione, G. and Charlton, A. (2013). *Eat Like You Care*. Logan: Exempla Press.

Frazier, R. (1994). Act Utilitarianism and Decision Procedures. *Utilitas*, 6(1), 43-53.

Garrett, J. (2007). Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism, and Human Health. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 24(3), 223-237.

Glover, J. (1975). It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It: I. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volumes*, 49, 171-190.

Gurian-Sherman, D. (2008). *CAFOs Uncovered*. Massachusetts: Union of Concerned Scientists.

Halteman, M. (2011). Varieties of Harm to Animals in Industrial Farming. *Journal of Animal Ethics*, 1(2), 122-131.

Hayes, D. and Hayes, G. (2015). *Cowed*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Hribar, C. (2010). *Understanding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and Their Impact on Communities*. Ohio: National Association of Local Boards of Health.

Hursthouse, R. (2011). Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals. In T. Beauchamp and R. G. Frey (Ed.s), *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (pp. 119-143). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Imhoff, D. (Ed.) (2010). *The CAFO Reader*. Massachusetts: Watershed Media.

Kahn, S. (2019). The Problem of the Kantian Line. *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 59(2), 193-217.

Ho, V. (2016). Vegetarians Rejoice, McDonald's Just Launched a Proper Veggie Burger in Singapore. *Mashable*. August 31. <<https://mashable.com/2016/08/31/mcdonalds-veggie-burger/>>. Accessed 2019.11.17.

Hooley, D. and Nobis, N. (2016). A Moral Argument for Veganism. In A. Chignell, M. Halteman, and T. Cuneo (Ed.s), *Philosophy Comes to Dinner* (pp. 92-108). New York: Routledge.

HSUS (2008). Rampant Animal Cruelty at California Slaughter Plant. The Humane Society of the United States Press Release. January 30. <<https://www.humanesociety.org/news/rampant-animal-cruelty-california-slaughter-plant>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

HSUS (2012). *The Welfare of Intensively Confined Animals in Battery Cages, Gestation Crates, and Veal Crates*. The Humane Society of the United States. July. <<https://www.humanesociety.org/sites/default/files/docs/hsus-report-animal-welfare-of-intensively-confined-animals.pdf>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

HSUS (2013). *Welfare Issues with Gestation Crates for Pregnant Sows*. The Humane Society of the United States. February. <<https://www.humanesociety.org/sites/default/files/docs/hsus-report-gestation-crates-for-pregnant-sows.pdf>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Judkis, M. (2018). Sorry, vegans. If you don't eat honey, avocados might be off-limits, too. *The Washington Post*. October 17. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/voraciously/wp/2018/10/17/sorry-vegans-if-you-dont-eat-honey-avocados-might-be-off-limits-too/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Kagan, S. (2011). Do I Make a Difference? *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 39(2), 105-141.

Kearney, H. (2019). Is Honey Vegan? *Beekeeping Like a Girl*. December 29. <<http://beekeepinglikeagirl.com/is-honey-vegan/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Kirby, D. (2011). *Animal Factory*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Korsgaard, C. (2004). *Fellow Creatures*. Tanner Lectures on Human Values, (24), 77-110.

Leadbetter, S. (2016). 7 Types of Vegetarians and Their Impact on Your Health and the Environment. *Blue & Green Tomorrow*. April 25. <<https://blueandgreentomorrow.com/environment/7-types-vegetarians-impact-health-environment/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Linnekin, B. (2017). America's Slaughterhouse Mess. *The New Food Economy*. May 2. <<https://newfoodeconomy.org/americas-slaughterhouse-mess/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Looy, H. *et al.* (2014). How then Shall we Eat? *Agriculture and Human Values*, 31, 131-141.

Marcus, E. (N.D). Animal Rights & Animal Welfare—An Introduction. *Vegan.com*. <<https://www.vegan.com/guides/animal-rights-and-animal-welfare/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Mason, J. and Singer, P. (1990). *Animal Factories*. New York: Harmony Books.

Matheny, G. (2002). Expected Utility, Contributory Causation, and Vegetarianism. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 19(3), 293-297.

Mayo Clinic Staff (2019). Vegetarian Diet. July 19. <<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/vegetarian-diet/art-20046446>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

McPherson, T. (2018). The Ethical Basis for Veganism. In A. Barnhill, M. Budolfson, and T. Doggett (Ed.s), *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics* (pp. 209-240). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mepham, B. (2013). Food Ethics. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 10(2), 249-251.

Meyers, C. (2013). Why it is Morally Good to Eat Meat. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 29, 119-126.

Nefsky, J. (2018). Consumer Choice and Collective Impact. In A. Barnhill, M. Budolfson, and T. Doggett (Ed.s), *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics* (pp. 267-286). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Norcross, A. (2004). “Puppies, Pigs, and People.” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), 229-245.

OhioHealth (2017). Vegetarian Vs. Vegan Vs. Pescatarian Vs. Flexitarian. *OhioHealthBlog*. <<https://blog.ohiohealth.com/vegetarian-vs-vegan-vs-pescatarian-vs-flexitarian/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

O'Neill, O. (1998). Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature: II. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volumes*, 72, 210-228.

Pachirat, T. (2013). *Every Twelve Seconds*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Pali-Schöll, I. *et al.* (2018). Edible Insects. *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 1-12.

Pambo, K. *et al.* (2018). Intentions to Consume Foods from Edible Insects and Prospects for Transforming the Ubiquitous Biomass into Food. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 35(4), 885-898.

Pence, G. (Ed.) (2001). *The Ethics of Food*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

Pointing, C. (2019). Is it vegan to eat honey? *Livekindly*. September 14. <<https://www.livekindly.co/can-you-call-yourself-vegan-if-you-eat-honey/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Pollan, M. (2002). Power Steer. *The New York Times Magazine*. March 31. <<https://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/power-steer/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

ProCon.org (2018). Should People Become Vegetarian? *ProCon.org*. November 20. <<https://vegetarian.procon.org>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Rainey, C. (2015). Wendy's Is Testing Out a Veggie Burger, and it Seems to Be Decent. *Grub Street*. May 5. <<http://www.grubstreet.com/2015/05/wendys-veggie-burger.html>>. Accessed 2019.11.17.

Rawlinson, M. and Ward, C. (Ed.s) (2016). *The Routledge Handbook of Food Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Sandler, R. (2014). *Food Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Schaltegger, M. (2019). Burger King's Impossible Whopper Smells and Looks Exactly Like the Beef One. *Delish*. May 12. <<https://www.delish.com/food-news/a28816817/burger-king-impossible-whopper-taste-test-review/>>. Accessed 2019.11.17

Shafer-Landau, R. (1994). Vegetarianism, Causation and Ethical Theory. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 8(1), 85-100.

Singer, P. (1975). *Animal Liberation*. New York: HarperCollins.

Singer, P. (1980). Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 9(4), 325-337.

Stull, V. *et al.* (2018). We Like Insects Here. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 35(4), 867-883.

Summer, J. (2019). Should Vegans Eat Honey. *Tenderly*. July 10. <<https://medium.com/tenderlymag/should-vegans-eat-honey-fo5887040cb9>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Sutton, R. (2018). White Castle's Impossible Slider is one of America's Best Fast-Food Burgers. *Eater*. April 20. <<https://www.eater.com/2018/4/20/17258220/white-castle-vegetarian-impossible-meatless-burger-review>>. Accessed 2019.11.17.

VeganSociety (N.D.). Definition of Veganism. *TheVeganSociety*. <<https://www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Vegetarian Nation (N.D.). 7 Types of Vegetarianism. *Vegetarian Nation*. <<https://vegetarian-nation.com/resources/common-questions/types-levels-vegetarian/>>. Accessed 2019.11.14.

Waltner-Toews, D. and Houle, K. (2017). Biophilia on the Dinner Plate. *Food Ethics*, 1(2), 157-171.

Wiener-Bronner, D. (2019). Dunkin' is Launching a Breakfast Sandwich with Beyond Meat Sausage. *CNN Business*. July 24. <<https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/24/business/dunkin-beyond-meat/index.html>>. Accessed 2019.11.17.

Wood, A. (1998). Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature: I. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volumes, 72, 189-209.

¹ See (Egbert, 2008), (Kearney, 2015), (Judkis, 2018), (Bakar, 2019), (Pointing, 2019), and (Summer, 2019).

² See (Leadbetter, 2016), (OhioHealth, 2017), (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2019), and (Vegetarian Nation, N.D.).

³ See (Pence, 2001), (Mephram, 2013), (Sandler, 2014), (Rawlinson and Ward, 2016), (ProCon.org, 2018).

⁴ See (Marcus, N.D.); it is important to distinguish this argument from arguments about animal rights (like Singer's famous 1975).

⁵ See (Mason and Singer, 1990), (Gurian-Sherman, 2008), (Faruqi, 2016), (Foer, 2010), (Francione and Charlton, 2013), (Gurian-Sherman, 2008), (Hribar, 2010), (Imhoff, 2010), (Haltzman, 2011), (HSUS, 2012), (HSUS, 2013), (Hayes and Hayes, 2015), (Imhoff, 2010), and (Kirby, 2011).

⁶ See (Pollan, 2002), (Eisnitz, 2006), (HSUS, 2008), (Pachirat, 2013), (Linnekin, 2017), (Cain, 2018), and (David, 2018).

⁷ See (Clarke, 2009).

⁸ See (O'Neill, 1998), (Wood, 1998), and (Korsgaard, 2004).

⁹ See (Shafer-Landau, 1994), (Hursthouse, 2011), (Abbate, 2014), and (Alvaro, 2017).

¹⁰ See (Doggett, 2018) and (McPherson, 2018).

¹¹ It is worth pointing out that the reason for labeling the arguments in this way is that the considerations in them are paradigmatically associated with the corresponding ethical theories; the reason for labeling the arguments in this way is *not* to convey that the arguments could be made only by proponents of the corresponding ethical theories and, indeed, that would be mistaken. A Kantian, for example, could make an argument like the Aristotelian AWA, appealing to ideas about moral character (see Kahn, 2019, section 2).

¹² The Effective Altruism Foundation says that this is the "Strongest Argument for Veganism" (Effective Altruism Foundation, 2017), and the Vegan Society lists compassion as "a key reason many choose a vegan lifestyle" (VeganSociety, N.D.).

¹³ Glover calls this the "one person makes no difference" argument (Glover, 1975).

¹⁴ See (Davis, 2003).

¹⁵ For an alternate response see (Fischer and Lamey, 2018).

¹⁶ See (Singer, 1980), (Matheny, 2002), (Norcross, 2004), (Garrett, 2007), and (Kagan, 2011).

¹⁷ Nefsky calls this "instrumental progress" (Nefsky, 2018); Garrett calls it "economic thresholds" (Garrett, 2007); others have yet other names.

¹⁸ See (Rainey, 2015), (Ho, 2016), (Sutton, 2018), (Schaltegger, 2019), and (Wiener-Bronner, 2019).

¹⁹ Ben calls this the "efficiency problem" (Ben, 2016).

²⁰ The word 'humane' seems hardly appropriate in this context, especially given our atrocious track record: (a) no nonhuman species on earth has caused as much direct suffering as humans; (b) no nonhuman species on earth has intended to cause as much direct suffering as humans; (c) no member of any nonhuman species on earth is as sadistic as the most sadistic humans; etc. All of these facts will become relevant in subsection 4.3 below.

²¹ Fischer maintains that shifting to what he calls "animal-friendly agriculture" is not a solution because (a) the price-point of such meat makes it too expensive for most and (b) "it's wrong to support a solution to a moral problem without sharing its costs" (Fischer, 2016, 1). However, I find Fischer's argument unpersuasive. First, I think that the premises of Fischer's argument are dubious. For one thing, while I grant that animal-friendly agriculture is more expensive, I am not convinced that switching to such a system would be cost-prohibitive: less meat (and perhaps less "stuff" in general) is not no meat (see also Appleby, 2005). For another, I am not convinced that the costs for a solution to a moral problem must be shared: if I owe someone money, you might be in support of me paying my debt, but that does not entail that you have a duty to bear some of the costs. Second, even if Fischer's premises are granted, they do not get him to the conclusion he wants. He has mistaken the nature of the problem: the problem is *not* <(1) to stop consuming products when (a) doing so causes animal suffering and (b) there is an alternative that does not cause animal suffering, *and* (2) to ensure everybody eats meat>; the problem is merely (1). Moreover, even if Fischer's premises are granted along with his formulation of the problem, all that would follow is that the switch to animal friendly agriculture is not a good solution *unless the costs associated with this switch are shared*.

²² See (Bruckner, 2015). But see also (Hooley and Nobis, 2016).

²³ See (Meyers, 2013), (Fischer, 2016), (Waltner-Toews and Houle, 2017), (Pambo *et al.*, 2018), and (Stull *et al.*, 2018).

²⁴ See (Looy *et al.* 2014).

²⁵ But see (Pali-Schöll *et al.*, 2018).

²⁶ (Bales, 1971).

²⁷ See (Brink, 1989) and (Frazier, 1994).