Causal Impotence and Veganism: Recent Philosophical Developments and Possible Ways Forward

1. Introduction

It’s often assumed by activists and even by many philosophers that, as soon as we come to understand that (i) animals matter morally just as humans matter morally,1 and we accept that (ii) animals are victims of extreme and unnecessary violence in modern farms and slaughterhouses2—then we’ve done nearly all of the work needed to soundly reach the conclusion that (iii) each of us morally ought to refrain from purchasing and consuming a variety of different animal products (such as meat, dairy, eggs, wool, leather, and so on). However, a number of philosophers have laid an obstacle along the path from (i) and (ii) to (iii): the so-called “causal impotence problem.” In this paper, I’ll discuss and evaluate a number of ways that philosophers have dealt with the causal impotence problem and I will discuss how the philosophical debate over the causal impotence problem might bear on the ethics of veganism.

Mark Budolfson has perhaps done more than anyone to develop the causal impotence problem. His explanation of the problem begins with a pair of grisly cases:

[I]n the first case, a dumpster diver snags a T-bone steak from the garbage and eats it; in the second case, a diner enjoys a T-bone steak at Jimmy’s You-Hack-It-Yourself Steakhouse, where customers brutally cut their steaks from the bodies of live cows, which are kept alive throughout the excruciating butchering process. (Once a cow bleeds to death, customers shift their efforts to a new live cow.) 3

Budolfson proposes, not unreasonably, that the behavior in the first case is far less ethically objectionable than that in the second case. He continues:

Conventional wisdom among consequentialist moral philosophers [such as Peter Singer] says that the effects [of purchasing animal products at a supermarket or restaurant] are more like eating at Jimmy’s [than like acquiring a steak through dumpster diving]; however, the empirical facts suggest that they may be more like dumpster diving, because it is virtually impossible for an individual’s consumption of animal products at supermarkets and restaurants to have any effect on the number of animals that suffer and the extent of that suffering, just as it is virtually impossible for an individual’s consumption of products acquired through dumpster diving to have any effect on animal welfare.

1 There are many different views about what it means for animals to matter morally. On one influential view, which is prominently defended by Tom Regan among many others, animals matter morally in the sense that they have many of the same moral rights that humans have, including the right to life. On a different and equally influential view, defended by Peter Singer among many others, animals matter morally in the sense that their interests have moral weight that should be taken into account in moral deliberation, just as human interests should be taken into account. There are other views as well. For discussion of these views, [REFER to entry elsewhere in this volume on Singer and Regan]
2 For an extremely clear overview of routine treatment of farmed animals contained in chapter 1 of Fischer 2019.
Consider also [REFER to relevant entries in this volume]
3 Budolfson 2015.
If consumers’ choices have no effect on the degree of animal suffering, as is asserted in the above paragraph, then consumers are, according to the accepted jargon, “causally impotent.” And if consumers are causally impotent in this way, then it’s unclear, at least initially, why one would hold that their choices are wrong. This is a problem because it’s paradoxical: specifically, it’s paradoxical to grant (as Budolfson and others in this literature do grant) that animal agriculture is immensely harmful to animals, while maintaining that any given individual consumer who contributes financially to animal agriculture is not causally responsible for any of that harm.

But hold on a minute. This problem only gets off the ground if we agree that individual consumption patterns have no consequences for animals. Why would anyone believe that to be true?

Some have argued that our modern food economy is simply too vast, and too complex, to be sensitive to individual consumption choices. The idea is that producers pay attention to trends in the behavior of millions or billions of consumers and are unaware of any given individual’s choices, and therefore your behavior as a single consumer makes no appreciable difference to what producers do, just as your behavior as a dumpster diver (referring to Budolfson’s example above) makes no difference to what producers do.

Budolfson offers a particular version of that line of thought. He says that “many products we consume are delivered by a massive and complex supply chain in which there is waste, inefficiency, and other forms of slack at each link,” and this slack “serves as a buffer” to absorb any effects that individual choices might have. For example, according to this line of thought, some significant amount of beef that is produced each year goes unsold and is thus discarded; so, when demand for beef increases by some small fraction of a percent, this only means that less beef goes to waste—not that more beef gets produced. So, even if your decision to purchase beef increases demand by some non-zero percentage, this only has the effect of ever-so-slightly reducing “slack,” thus reducing waste, and does not increase the number of animals raised, harmed, and killed in farms and slaughterhouses.

The causal impotence problem is, in a certain way, a larger-scale version of a problem that has faced vegans for just about as long as vegans have been around. Consider the choice whether to eat a leftover beef sandwich that would otherwise be discarded. Many philosophers who are very concerned about the welfare of animals will say that even if there’s something wrong with purchasing a beef sandwich, there’s probably nothing wrong with eating the leftover sandwich. For it seems that eating the sandwich would only prevent waste and would have no harmful effects. In fact, some philosophers, such as Bob Fischer, have argued that we morally ought to eat leftover meat. Yet those of us who count ourselves as vegans won’t do so—because veganism includes a general prohibition against consuming animal products. Thus, veganism has its own version of a causal impotence problem that arises independently of any considerations about economic complexity and “slack.” I’ll come back to this in the final section of the paper.

Given the causal impotence problem, if you want to defend the view that certain consumptive acts—e.g., the act of going into a grocery store and purchasing a pound of chicken that you know has come from a place where chickens are treated in the cruelest ways imaginable—are immoral, then you have two main options.

First strategy: Try to dissolve the causal impotence problem by showing that our consumptive behaviors do in fact make a difference. Argue that purchasing a pound of chicken

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4 See, e.g., Frey 1985.
from a grocery store, for example, can result in more harm to chickens than would otherwise occur.

Second strategy: Grant that omnivores’ consumptive behaviors do not make a difference—and go on to argue that such behaviors are immoral anyway.

I’m going to argue that the second strategy is unlikely to work (Section 2). Then (in Section 3) I’ll explain a line of reasoning that aims to dissolve the causal impotence problem, paving the way for the first strategy above. Then I’ll discuss how this reasoning bears on questions about the ethics of veganism, and I’ll lay out what I take to be some crucial issues that need to be examined in future work on this topic.

2. Complicity and Respect

In this section I’ll assume that consumers are in fact causally impotent in the ways discussed above. (This assumption will be jettisoned later.) According to this assumption, for example, purchasing a pound of chicken from the supermarket makes no difference to what happens to any chickens or other animals in the future. My purpose in this section is to explore ways that one might argue that purchasing that pound of chicken might be wrong despite such causal impotence. I’ll consider two possible approaches here. The first has to do with the relationship between the consumer and the institutions that inflict animal suffering. The second has to do with the relationship between the consumer and the animals themselves.

3.1 Complicity

The assumption that consumers are causally impotent does not, of course, entail that other agents—e.g., farmers, abattoir workers or owners, grocery store managers, restauranteurs, collective agents such as businesses and governments, etc.—are causally impotent. All should agree that farmers, for example, could treat their animals better, and could even free their animals by placing them in sanctuaries—even if the consumers who purchase those farmers’ products are powerless to affect the lives of those same animals. Given that farmers and other sorts of agents are able to make a difference for animals, it is entirely reasonable to think that they are guilty of wrongdoing (in many if not all cases) when they fail to do so. In light of these points, Tristram McPherson has argued that consumers bear certain relationships with the individuals and institutions who are guilty of wrongdoing, and that those relationships could make acts of consumption morally objectionable, even granting the assumption that consumers are causally impotent and their choices make no difference to animals.

To spell out those relationships, McPherson writes:

First, the omnivore [i.e., the omnivorous consumer] benefits from this wrongdoing: the food she chooses to consume is a product of this wrongdoing, and would not be available—or at least, it would be available only in much smaller quantities at much higher prices—absent such wrongdoing. Second, the omnivore is complicit with the wrongdoing, in the sense of cooperating with the wrongful plans of the more immediate wrongdoers [e.g., farmers, businesspeople, etc.].

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5 McPherson 2018.
The hypothesis McPherson advances is that, even assuming causal impotence of consumers, the above relationships between consumers and wrongdoing can make acts of consumption wrong.

To evaluate that hypothesis, let’s consider the first relationship: the consumer benefits from wrongdoing. Can this relationship be sufficient to establish that the consumer’s consumptive acts are wrong? I doubt it. There are excellent reasons to doubt that the mere fact that an action involves benefiting from wrongdoing can make that action wrong.

Most (perhaps all) of us owe our greatest fortunes and successes and even our existence to the occurrence of atrocities and disasters. (For example, I would not have been born if the Korean War had not occurred.) Observing this, Saul Smilansky has compellingly argued that we should “regret the history of the world that includes our existence.”

Yet this plausible claim about what we should regret doesn’t mean that we have an obligation to forego the benefits that come to us as a result of that history, given that we are unable to alter the past. After all, if benefiting from wrongdoing were in and of itself immoral, then it would be immoral to work at or attend Harvard University (which in its early days participated in use and sale of American slaves, among other wrongs) or drive a Volkswagen (given Volkswagen’s Nazi past). But that is simply implausible. We can and should regret and address (as best we can) the wrongdoing of the institutions that benefit us—yet, at the same time, it seems clear that there are certain ways that we can engage with those institutions to our benefit.

To make this point vivid, consider the following case. Robert was enslaved in the early days of Harvard University’s existence and forced to work on a construction project there. Mike is a modern-day descendent of Robert. Suppose Harvard University today decides to issue a large payment to Mike in order to recognize the injustice that was done to Mike’s ancestor Robert. If benefiting from wrongdoing were wrong, then it would be wrong for Mike to accept that payment. But it is not wrong for Mike to accept that payment. So, benefiting from wrongdoing is not in and of itself wrong. And if benefiting from wrongdoing is not in and of itself wrong, then the mere fact that consumers of animal products benefit from wrongdoing cannot by itself make their consumptive acts wrong.

Now, as McPherson clearly recognizes and emphasizes, consumers of animal products do not only benefit from wrongdoing; they’re also complicit in wrongdoing. To examine the significance of complicity, he defines complicity and offers a general principle:

Call knowingly and voluntarily fulfilling a role that needs to be fulfilled in order for a wrongful plan to work being complicit with the plan. One might suggest the following principle:

Complicity: Other things being equal, it is wrong to be complicit with others’ wrongful plans.

If (as is plausible) the institutions (farms, slaughterhouses, corporations, etc.) that produce animal products have a wrongful plan (specifically: a plan involving extreme violence against animals on a massive scale for the sake of cheap gustatory pleasure and other such trivial benefits), and if (as is also plausible) consumers are typically complicit (according to the above definition) in that plan, then it follows from Complicity that consumers are guilty of wrongdoing even given the assumption of causal impotence.

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6 Smilansky 2013.
In assessing this line of reasoning, the crucial question, of course, is whether Complicity is true. So let’s examine that question.

The idea that complicity is wrong (all else equal) is intuitively attractive when applied in certain cases. Imagine a case discussed by Peter Singer: someone volunteers to be a guard at Auschwitz in order to avoid going to the Russian Front. Once being appointed as a guard, this person commits many acts of extreme violence against innocent people. Suppose the guard knows that if he had not volunteered, someone else—someone who would have been even more brutal—would have taken his place. Then he can reasonably say that the victims of his violence are not worse off as a result of his having chosen to fill the role of their oppressor (just as, given the assumption of causal impotence, farmed animals are not worse off as a result of omnivores filling the role of consumer). Yet, for many people, it still seems wrong in such a case to volunteer to be a guard at Auschwitz, and Complicity (if true) can explain why it is wrong. The explanation furnished by Complicity is straightforward: Nazis had a wrongful plan; they needed guards in order for it to work; so, anyone who volunteers to be a Nazi guard is complicit with a wrongful plan and therefore guilty of wrongdoing. The fact that Complicity is explanatorily useful in this way is a decided advantage for it.

However, I think further reflection will reveal that mere complicity in wrongdoing is not sufficient for wrongdoing. Consider the following. It is plausible that nearly everyone in German society during the Nazi period was, on McPherson’s definition, either complicit in wrongdoing, or a victim of Nazi oppression, or both. Think about ordinary people who went about their business during this period as shopkeepers, businesspeople, teachers, researchers, clerks, janitors, and so on. These people fulfilled economic roles that needed to be fulfilled in order for the Nazis’ plans to succeed. (For these people were necessary for the functioning of the German economy, and if the German economy had ceased functioning, the Nazis could not have started a war or even held onto power.) Thus, these ordinary people were complicit in wrongdoing according to McPherson’s definition. But it seems implausible to suppose they might for that reason have been guilty of wrongdoing in simply living their lives and doing ordinary, ostensibly harmless jobs.

More broadly, Complicity is inconsistent with a general principle that many people consider to be quite attractive:

No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul: If an action does not make anyone worse off and is not a missed opportunity to benefit anyone, then it is not wrong. Complicity is inconsistent with that principle because it says that even if your action does not hurt anyone or fail to help anyone—i.e., even if your action has no victims—the action can still be wrong in virtue of complicity considerations. To bring out a problem for this, think about a

7 Singer 2015, pp. 52-3.
8 This principle will be endorsed by utilitarians such as Peter Singer [REFER to the Singer-related paper in this volume] but it is not a uniquely utilitarian principle. For example, this principle is consistent with the view that we ought to show a high degree of partiality toward our friends and family than to strangers—a decidedly non-utilitarian view. All that this principle says is that, from the moral point of view, there are no “victimless crimes.”
9 Here I am assuming that S is a victim of a given action only if S is made worse off, or deprived of a chance to have been made better off, as a result of the action. In other words, if your level of wellbeing would have been the same no matter what I’d chosen to do in a given circumstance, then you are not a victim of my choice in that circumstance. Whether this definition fits with ordinary language is a question I do not have the space to address.
civilian medical doctor in Germany during the Nazi period who devotes herself completely to serving the health of her neighbors in her community. Suppose she never hurts anyone and never fails to help anyone. Despite this she is still complicit in Nazi plans in McPherson’s sense (because she’s filling the role of medical doctor; and German society could not have functioned without medical doctors; and the Nazis could not have succeeded in their wrongful plans if German society had not functioned). But such complicity seems utterly irrelevant, precisely because her actions do not hurt anyone and because (we are supposing) she never fails to help anyone she’s in a position to help. In this case, the implication of No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul is far more plausible than the implication of Complicity.

If we accept No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul and therefore reject Complicity, then clearly we cannot rely on Complicity to explain what’s wrong with omnivorous consumption. Further, even if we reject No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul for whatever reason, the case of the medical doctor above still looks like a counterexample to Complicity, and thus undermines the use of Complicity in critiques of omnivorous consumption.

3.2 Respect

An alternative way of explaining why consuming animal products might be wrong even given the assumption of causal impotence is developed by Blake Hereth, who offers two lines of reasoning:

First, [purchasing or consuming immorally produced animal products] fails to treat moral losses as moral losses, wrongs as wrongs, and thereby fails to show minimally required respect for violated rights. Second, doing so rewards prior wrongdoing, which is likewise wrong.\(^\text{10}\)

To support the idea that failure to treat wrongs as wrongs is wrong (independently of the consequences), Hereth considers a series of cases, two of which are as follows: (1) You pay for entry to an exhibit where corpses of people are on display. The corpses are of people who were murdered for the sole purpose of using their bodies in this way, though the murders were not committed by the current owners of the exhibit, and paying for entry won’t cause more people to be murdered in the future. (2) A young woman has parents who got rich through ownership and exploitation of human slaves; she accepts her parents’ offer to pay her college tuition.

It is not clear to me that these cases support Hereth’s view. For it is not clear to me that the agents in these cases are themselves guilty of wrongdoing, given the assumption that their actions will not cause further harm to anyone.

Take the second case. In the second case, I readily grant, the daughter is required to do a number of things in relation to the victims of her parents’ slave ownership: for instance, she should speak out against her parents’ slave ownership, join in efforts to end slavery, and (if she can) help her parents’ slaves to find freedom. But it is not at all clear why she should not take her parents’ money for her college tuition, given that doing so will not causally contribute to slavery.

Further, it is unclear that using her parents’ money fails to treat the wrongs done to her parents’ slaves as wrongs. Indeed, if by going to college she is in a better position to fight against slavery in the future, then it would seem that going to college might be a way to recognize the wrongs of slavery.

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\(^{10}\) Hereth 2016, pp. 36-7
Hereth’s claim that there is an obligation to treat wrongs as wrongs strikes me as highly plausible, but it is not clear that this claim supports an obligation to avoid animal products given causal inefficacy. The obligation to treat wrongs as wrongs probably involves at least the following: (i) not acting wrongly oneself; (ii) intending to avoid acting wrongly in the future; (iii) trying to persuade others to avoid wrongdoing; (iv) speaking out against wrongdoing; (v) refraining from actions that cause others to engage in wrongdoing. If purchasing and consuming animal products really is causally inefficacious and therefore does not cause any harm or other wrongs against animals, it’s unclear why consuming animal products is inconsistent with doing all of (i)-(v).

Let’s turn now to Hereth’s second line of argument, which proceeds from the view that rewarding wrongdoing is wrong (independently of the consequences). To develop this view and its implications, Hereth provides this case:

Imagine that a community wants Sawyer dead, and hit-man Hugo is ideally suited to conduct the assassination. Huge is hired and kills Sawyer. The town’s citizens are pleased; they have what they want. The community, however, has not yet raised the funds to reimburse Hugo for his now-completed work. You overhear that countless citizens will donate tomorrow, and you know this to be true. Whether you donate or not, Hugo will be reimbursed for killing Sawyer.\footnote{Hereth 2016, p. 44}

Hereth suggests that putting money into the donation box is wrong because it involves rewarding wrongdoing. It clearly is an instance of rewarding wrongdoing. And Hereth’s claim that it is wrong to put money into the donation box in this case is plausible. Further, the fact that it is an instance of rewarding wrongdoing seems to explain why it is wrong.

On the one hand, we have (a) the intuitively attractive judgment that donating for Hugo’s reimbursement is wrong; on the other hand, we have (b) a general principle discussed earlier: No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul. These two claims, (a) and (b), are inconsistent (given the assumption that donating to Hugo’s reimbursement will neither harm anyone nor fail to benefit anyone). So, one of them has to be abandoned, even though both seem attractive.

This means that anyone who accepts No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul should reject the judgment in (a). Those who follow this path need to explain away the intuitive appeal of the judgment in (a). Here’s one way that they might do so. Ordinarily, when you reward someone for wrongdoing, this encourages further wrongdoing. Typically in such cases, rewarding wrongdoing is harmful, and thus the judgment that it is wrong is fully consistent with No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul. Given this, we are naturally suspicious of any case in which someone rewards wrongdoing, especially when there are no benefits of doing so (and there are no benefits specified in Hereth’s case). Thus, it can be proposed, the intuitive appeal of the judgment in (a) derives only from a general suspicion that is fully consistent with No Harm (or Failure to Benefit), No Foul. If that’s right, then the intuitive appeal of the judgment in (a) does not, in fact, support Hereth’s proposal that rewarding wrongdoing is in and of itself wrong even when it does not cause any harm. And then it would be reasonable to reject Hereth’s proposal, at least until further arguments in favor of it are adduced.

### 3. Veganism in a World of Causally Efficacious Consumption

\footnote{Hereth 2016, p. 44}
Recall that in the Introduction, I mentioned two ways of responding to the causal inefficacy problem. One of these was to accept causal inefficacy and try to argue that consumption of animal products is nevertheless immoral. Thus far in the discussion of this paper, this strategy has seemed to be quite difficult to pursue. We’ve considered a complicity-based version of this strategy (pursued by McPherson) and a respect-based version of this strategy (pursued by Hereth) and they have both run into serious problems. My own considered opinion is that this general strategy simply cannot succeed. I believe that if consumer behavior really is causally inefficacious in the sense that it truly makes no difference whatsoever to the lives of animals, then it cannot be wrong.

So now let’s consider the other strategy that we discussed in the Introduction. That strategy is to try to overturn causal inefficacy and show that our consumptive behaviors do in fact make a difference. In what follows, I’ll explain how we can do this and then I’ll discuss what it means for veganism.

3.1 The threshold model

The most widely discussed and influential response to the causal inefficacy problem derives from what is known as the threshold model. The threshold model is illustrated in the following vignette offered by Shelly Kagan:

[T]here are, perhaps, 25 chickens in a given crate of chickens. So the butcher looks to see when 25 chickens have been sold, so as to order 25 more. Here, then, it makes no difference to the butcher whether seven, 13, or 23 chickens have been sold. But when 25 have been sold this triggers the call to the chicken farm, and 25 more chickens are killed, and another 25 eggs are hatched to be raised and tortured.12

If you purchase a chicken from this butcher every day for a long enough period of time, you will on average trigger the birth, suffering and killing of one chicken for every purchase.

The key claim of the threshold model is that the butcher scenario is structurally analogous to meat purchasing in the real world. Specifically, the claim is that whenever we purchase meat, we take a small chance of triggering a large increase in production—and the probability of triggering such an increase is inversely proportional to the size of the triggered increase. That is, any given purchase has some small chance of being what we may call a triggering purchase—a purchase that triggers some large increase in production and (hence) causes a lot of animal suffering.

Importantly, this model accommodates uncertainty. The model is silent about how probable it is that any given purchase is a triggering purchase, and equally silent about how large the effect of any given triggering purchase will be.

If the threshold model describes consumption in the real world, then it answers the causal inefficacy problem. That’s because the threshold model implies that some of our purchases, namely triggering purchases, do indeed have victims, contrary to what the argument that generates the causal inefficacy problem implies. A consumer will typically be unable to know which of her purchases are triggering purchases but, if she purchases animal products regularly, she’ll have reason to believe that some number of her purchases are triggering purchases and

thus have victims. Moreover, the view implies that when a purchase does have victims, it has many victims, and thus does a lot of harm. On this type of view, the decision to purchase animal products is risky from a moral point of view. Similarly, given that (under normal circumstances) we have no weighty reasons to purchase meat, it is wrong to purchase meat (under normal circumstances) because doing so risks causing great harm, according to a view that I will call the market threshold view.

The market threshold view is not just a tidy story. There is good reason to believe that it is at least approximately true, as Steven McMullen (an economist) and Matthew Halteman (a philosopher) have explained. After critically examining the arguments of philosophers who have promoted the causal inefficacy problem, they conclude by endorsing the standard threshold view: “if there is some probability (1/n) that any given purchase will occur on a threshold [i.e., will be a triggering purchase], then the threshold action will trigger a reduction in production of around n units, yielding an expected impact equal to 1,” and so, for example, “there will be a close to 1-1 relationship between the purchase of a chicken and the expected impact on production.” In short, on a long enough time scale, a consumer of meat can expect to cause the existence, suffering, and death of about as many animals as she consumes, and similarly for consumers of milk, eggs, and other animal products.

Additionally, McMullen and Halteman observe that shifting consumption away from animal products can be especially beneficial due to several different additional causal roles of consumption beyond those specified in the threshold model. These include effects on supply chains (when the number of animals killed decreases, this also decreases the number of animals needed elsewhere in the supply chain, e.g., animals used for breeding purposes), network effects (consumers’ choices affect other consumers’ choices: for example, rising tofu consumption makes tofu more visible and available, thus potentially causing additional consumers to consume more tofu and less meat), and scale effects (as the market for vegan alternatives increases, economies of scale kick in, prices drop, and veganism becomes more affordable, hence more attractive).

3.2 Causal efficacy and the ‘Why be vegan?’ question

Suppose it is really the case that purchases are causally efficacious in the way that McMullen and Halteman argue. By consuming animal products, we can cause—via mechanisms of supply and demand as captured in the threshold model—an increase in the number of farmed animals who are born, suffer, and die in miserable conditions.

Many philosophers accept that this is true. And yet few philosophers are vegan. Most philosophers seem to accept an approach that Neil Sinhababu once described on his blog (edited for concision):

I divide meats into 3 categories: the Normal, the Weird, and the Fallen. Unethically farmed meats that someone else would eat if I didn’t eat them are Normal. Weird meats are those where the animals live under non-cruel conditions. Fallen meat is any kind of meat, Normal or Weird, that would go to waste if I didn’t eat it. By eating only Weird
and Fallen meat, I generate no economic demand pressures on factory farming. So that’s what I do.  

In a similar vein, Bob Fischer recently argues that if consumption of animal products can negatively affect the lives of animals via mechanisms of supply and demand, this doesn’t support the view that we ought to be vegan; it only supports the view that we ought to “eat unusually”:

You should be eating some animal products from the “animal-friendly” farm; you should be scavenging from dumpsters and department fridges; you should be pulling mussels out of their shells; and you should sample some crickets, termites, and their ilk.

The approaches described by Sinhababu and Fischer are motivated by considerations about causal effects: some ways of consuming animal products economically cause animal suffering and thus ought to be avoided; but ways of consuming animal products that do not economically cause animal suffering are acceptable. Such approaches are instances of a view that we might call market freeganism. Veganism, I believe, represents a very different approach from market freeganism.

Specifying the nature of veganism is a tricky matter. Veganism is often defined by reference to a definition provided by the Vegan Society:

Veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.

However, I believe that this definition is of almost no value in explaining what veganism is. The problem with the definition is that its key terms—exclude, practicable, possible, exploitation, cruelty—are radically underspecified. Because of this lack of specificity, nothing can be derived from the definition on its own. My distinct impression as a practicing vegan is that the role of the Vegan Society definition in vegan thought is mostly ornamental or perhaps aspirational.

I see veganism as a rule-governed movement or community (accepting a loose conception of these terms): As vegans, we have certain rules that we live by, and our submission to those rules is how we gain admission into the community. If that’s right, then in order to understand veganism, we need to understand its rules and their origins. My view—which I merely advance for consideration here, since I do not have the space to defend it—is that as vegans we get our rules directly from one another, i.e., from what may be called vegan culture as constituted by practicing vegans themselves. Thus, for example, consumption of honey is against the rules of veganism just because a rule against honey has been adopted by the community of practicing vegans.

If veganism’s rules arise from the vegan community in the way that I’ve just proposed, there is probably no general principle from which all of veganism’s rules are or can be derived. I don’t intend this as a criticism of veganism. In fact, veganism is in good company in this respect.

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16 Fischer 2019, p. 86.
17 Let’s say X economically causes Y when, via a threshold-structured supply-and-demand mechanism, X affects the behavior of producers, suppliers, or other economic agents and thus causes Y.
18 REFER to other entries in this volume that address the nature of veganism
Consider democracy. In a democratic society, laws are crafted and modified by different legislative bodies at different times. Because different legislators have different beliefs and aims, they tend to produce a messy and often inconsistent jumble of laws. The laws in a democratic society are rarely straightforwardly derivable from any single general principle. And that’s as it should be. Most people understand that governing a society messily yet democratically is better than governing a society with a rigorous, consistent, orderly set of laws that have been determined by some non-democratic (e.g., autocratic) process. Something similar, I’d like to suggest, may be true of veganism: it may be better for veganism’s rules to arise from the vegan community than for veganism’s rules to be laid down by some single authority, even if this inevitably means that the rules will be more chaotic or less rational than they could be.

These considerations raise a number of different questions. One of those questions is whether veganism’s rules can be improved by making them more consistent or more rational. It may be the case—indeed, I think it probably is the case—that veganism’s rules are suboptimal. Some of its rules may be too restrictive (e.g., one might argue that bee nervous systems are incapable of producing conscious suffering and therefore veganism’s prohibition against consumption of honey is too restrictive) and in other ways veganism may be too permissive (e.g., one might argue that consumption of palm oil ought to be against the rules of veganism, even though it is not). Veganism’s rules can evolve over time, and even vary somewhat from place to place. There may be a role for philosophers to play in that evolutionary process.

A different question—which I believe is separable from the previous question—is whether each of us as individual consumers have an obligation to abide by the rules of veganism. As I’ve mentioned, I think most philosophers think that market freeganism is all that is required of us, and that veganism represents a step beyond the call of duty. To raise a problem for that view, I want to consider an analogy with labor union activity.

Suppose the union at your workplace calls a strike to begin on Tuesday. This is, in effect, to impose a rule: Don’t work on Tuesday and don’t resume until the strike ends. Suppose you happen to know that calling this strike was the wrong call. The union should have continued negotiations. In this case, the union has imposed a suboptimal rule.

Despite this imposition, you might well be obligated to join the strike. In fact, if the union’s goals are worthwhile, I think it will typically be the case that you are obligated to join the strike. For the union derives its power from its ability to credibly threaten strikes and other similar actions, and it cannot credibly make such threats if workers do not strike when a strike is called. Such considerations may strongly support joining the strike even if you are quite sure that the strike shouldn’t have been called in the first place. Indeed, the fact that the strike shouldn’t have been called in the first place seems irrelevant to the question of what you ought to do now that the strike has in fact been called.

Veganism, I propose, is relevantly similar to a labor union. Veganism’s power derives from its ability to credibly threaten producers: We won’t buy your product unless you make it according to our rules. Such threats have power to push producers in a vegan direction if (i) the number of practicing vegans is large and (ii) vegans strictly adhere to a common, publicly available set of rules that producers can easily identify and cater to.

Given these points, violating vegan rules by (for example) eating honey can undermine the ability of veganism as a social movement to credibly threaten producers, just as crossing a picket line is prone to undermine the ability of a union to credibly threaten the employer. If so, then just as crossing a picket line may often be immoral, so too may violating veganism’s rules be immoral—even if veganism’s rules are suboptimal. For even if veganism’s rules are
suboptimal, violating its rules may still do harm by undermining veganism’s bargaining position in the marketplace. These considerations suggest that a concern with harmfulness of our choices—a concern that, as discussed above, commonly motivates philosophers to be market freegans—might be deployed to argue in favor of a strict requirement to be vegan rather than a (mere) market freegan. But a full elaboration of that line of argument is beyond the scope of this paper.

References