Omnivores Have Many Children

Abstract:
Causal responsibility for another’s existence is neither necessary nor sufficient to establish deontic parenthood; but such causal responsibility, in conjunction with other conditions, can establish deontic parenthood. Omnivores are causally responsible for farmed animals’ existence, and another condition (specified within) that combines with causal responsibility to establish deontic parenthood is also satisfied. Therefore, omnivores are deontic parents of farmed animals—and farmed animals are, in a moral sense, omnivores’ children. Deontic parents have attainment obligations: moral obligations to ensure that their children are well-off to a high minimum standard. When omnivores purchase animal products and thus cause farmed animals to come into existence, they acquire attainment obligations to those animals. Yet, because farmed animals’ well-being inevitably falls short of the relevant standard, omnivores’ attainment obligations are violated by the same purchases that give rise to those obligations in the first place. Therefore, omnivorous behavior is seriously wrong.

Introduction
Many believe that omnivorism—the practice of purchasing and consuming animal products such as meat, dairy, and eggs—is wrong. But is it egregiously wrong? Perhaps stopping at the grocery store on the way home to pick up a pound of chicken for dinner is on par with failing to return a library book. Or perhaps it’s on par with torturing an innocent child just for fun. Or perhaps it’s somewhere in between. Or perhaps it’s not wrong at all.

These questions about the magnitude of omnivorism’s wrongness haven’t received much sustained attention from philosophers. The debate over omnivorism is usually framed in terms of a simple binary: Is it wrong or not? But philosophers have views about the magnitude question, and many (though by no means all) seem to believe that omnivorism is quite seriously wrong. Alastair Norcross compares consumers of animal products to a person who tortures puppies in

1 Wrongness comes in degrees, or at least the seriousness of wrongness does. See Thomas Hurka, “More Seriously Wrong, More Importantly Right,” Journal of the American Philosophical Association 5 (2019): 41-58. When we say that one act is more seriously wrong than another, we seem to mean at least two things: that the first act is more blameworthy than the second; and that avoiding the first act ought to be prioritized over avoiding the second (such that, e.g., an akratic agent who will not refrain from both acts ought to avoid the first rather than avoid the second).
2 An extremely valuable partial defense of omnivorism is given in Bob Fischer, The Ethics of Eating Animals: Usually Bad, Sometimes Wrong, Often Permissible (Routledge, 2019). Some of my arguments in this paper are responses to Fischer’s, though I’ll be focusing most directly on a defense of omnivorism that differs from Fischer’s main line; see below.
his basement for trivial reasons. Mylan Engel suggests that eating meat is not only wrong but “despicable.” Peter Singer’s canonical definition of speciesism, which includes the use of animals as food, involves a comparison with morally abhorrent racist and sexist behaviors. Michael Huemer says that consumption of animal products is the worst thing that he’s done in his entire life.

The view that many of these philosophers seem to hold is not simply that animal agriculture as currently practiced in our society is a grave injustice. The view is that omnivorous consumers as individual agents, especially those who are (by global and historical standards) wealthy and capable of avoiding animal products without hardship, commit serious wrongs when they purchase and consume animal products.

This harsh view of omnivorism is milder than it first appears if it is combined with two caveats. First, the view is centrally about the deontic status of omnivorous actions; it’s not about omnivores themselves or their character, at least not directly. Second, the view doesn’t say that everyone apart from consumers is off the moral hook. In addition to omnivorous consumers, many others—including farmers, businesspeople, lawmakers, collective agents such as governments or societies, and so on—may be committing serious wrongs as well.

With those two caveats in place, I am comfortable taking the side of those who believe that omnivorism is seriously wrong. But there is at least one defense of omnivorism that I find chillingly promising. This is a line of defense that makes use of the fact that farmed animals would not exist if we did not farm them. Abelard Podgorski has recently given a sophisticated version of that defense. I’ll consider and attack a version closely related to Podgorski’s, and this will provide the basis for my own argument for the view that omnivorous behavior is typically seriously wrong. I’ll argue as follows.

One individual is a deontic parent of another if the first individual’s moral obligations to the second are characteristically parental. Causal responsibility for another’s existence is neither necessary nor sufficient to establish deontic parenthood; but such causal responsibility, in conjunction with other conditions (specified below), can establish deontic parenthood. I argue

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3 Granted, Norcross’s published versions of scalar utilitarianism (see Norcross 2006) wouldn’t allow him to count any actions at all as wrong. But few philosophers and ordinary people accept such views; and the new contextualist views that Norcross is currently developing will allow him to count actions as right or wrong.


6 Michael Huemer, Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism (Routledge, 2019).
that omnivores are causally responsible for farmed animals’ existence, and I argue that another condition that combines with causal responsibility to establish deontic parenthood is also satisfied. Therefore, I argue, omnivores are deontic parents of farmed animals—and farmed animals are, in a moral sense, omnivores’ children.⁷

Deontic parents have weighty *attainment obligations* to their children, i.e., moral obligations to ensure that their children are well-off to a high minimum standard. So, when omnivores purchase animal products and thus cause farmed animals to come into existence, they acquire weighty attainment obligations to those animals. Yet, because farmed animals will inevitably not be well-off to the relevant standard, omnivores’ attainment obligations are violated by the very same purchasing decisions that give rise to those obligations in the first place. And this in turn means that omnivorous behavior is seriously wrong—even if such behavior leads to the existence of farmed animals whose lives are worth living.

Although my argument proceeds from certain intuitive and widely (though by no means universally) accepted ideas about the moral significance of relationships, it contains many steps likely to be controversial. I introduce the notion of a *stillborn obligation*—an obligation that is acquired and violated all at once. I argue that stillborn obligations do not violate the “ought implies can” principle. I sketch a response to the non-identity problem. I make contributions to the debate about the nature of parenthood. And I introduce an argument for the view that we use others for our own purposes in far more cases than has traditionally been thought. In these ways, I hope to make some useful contributions not only to debates in animal ethics but also to a number of other areas in philosophical ethics.

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⁷ Here it is important to consider the views that Clare Palmer develops in Animal Ethics in Context (Columbia, 2010). Palmer observes that humans have domesticated animals over the course of many generations, modifying them genetically, leaving them unable to fend for themselves in a wild state. We, collectively, have created a huge class of vulnerable and dependent beings, and this is “parallel” to choosing to have a child (p. 94). Palmer’s work on this topic provides support for the view that humanity (or some sizeable fraction of it) has a collective obligation to protect domesticated animals. But humanity’s collective responsibility for animals’ domestication has no direct implication for the obligations of individual human beings (and whether there are any implications at all will depend on the relation between collectives and individuals). By contrast, I am locating the parental status of human beings in the causal responsibility of individual consumers, which allows my arguments to have direct implications for the deontic status of individual consumers’ actions.
1 The threshold model

Before I can get into the main topics that I want to discuss in this paper, I need to provide a very rough sketch of the causal connections between consumers and farmed animals. For this purpose, let’s consider Shelly Kagan’s often-cited example of a butcher who sells chickens:

[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 7, 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.8

When you purchase chicken from the butcher in Kagan’s imagined scenario, if you do not know how many chickens the butcher will sell that day, then you have a one in 25 chance of causing 25 chickens to be born, raised, and tortured. So, most of the time, when you visit the butcher, you have no effect at all (causing no chickens to be born); but every once in a while, you have a large effect (causing 25 chickens to be born).

In the real world, things are far more complex than Kagan’s simple example. But a standard model says that real-world economic activity in all of its complexity still has the same general structure, such that each purchase has a relatively small chance of triggering a relatively large increase in production; and the chance of triggering the increase is inversely proportional to the size of the possible increase, such that the average effect of purchasing a pound of meat or milk or eggs or whatever is approximately (not precisely) that an additional pound is produced.9

On this model, it is true that any given purchase probably does not have any effect. But it is possible to be unlucky: a lifelong vegan who experiences a single lapse at McDonald’s could, in that single act, trigger a large increase in meat, dairy, or egg production. In any case, for most consumers, the model says that morally significant effects of purchasing animal products occur

9 In Dialogues on Ethical Vegetarianism, Huemer gives these figures: Purchasing a pound of an animal product triggers, on average, an increase of production by 0.68 pounds (for beef), 0.76 pounds (for chicken), 0.74 pounds (for pork), 0.56 pounds (for milk), 0.69 pounds (for veal), and 0.91 pounds (for eggs). These figures are based on calculations done in Bailey Norwood and Jayson Lusk, Compassion by the Pound: The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare (Oxford, 2011).
over the course of an extended period of habitual consumption, rather than at each and every meal.

I agree with many philosophers, such as Russ Shafer-Landau and Bob Fischer, who have argued that if the threshold model is false and it turns out that consumers have no effect on the number of animals raised and killed, then it will be very difficult to show that omnivorism is seriously wrong. Mark Budolfson has been the most prominent of several recent critics of the threshold model. But the criticisms that have been published by Budolfson and others tend to depend on false or unsupported empirical assumptions, or to be conceptually flawed, as Steven McMullen and Matthew Halteman have explained.

This is not to say that falling demand for animal products will always be good for farmed animals. For instance, Bob Fischer has written about a harrowing possibility: As the vegan movement grows and demand for animal products drops, this might induce belt-tightening measures in the agricultural sector that negatively affect farmed animal welfare. Of course, this can only occur in cases where discoverable improvements in efficiency are not implemented until revenues begin to fall, which won’t often be the case if farmers are (to some degree of approximation) narrowly rational profit-seekers. But whether the phenomenon described by Fischer is rare or common, it successfully illustrates that the consequences of our consumer behavior can be counterintuitive and hard to know in detail. Be that as it may, it appears that our best evidence supports the view that the general shape of the economic relationship between consumption and production is captured by the standard threshold model.

On the threshold model, when purchasing animal products has morally significant effects, those effects are complex in an important way. In one fell swoop, the purchaser causes at least

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12 Many philosophers have argued that even if consumers have no effect on the number of animals raised and killed, omnivorism is still wrong to some degree. One of the more interesting such arguments is given by Blake Hereth, “Animals and Causal Impotence: A Deontological View,” Between the Species 19 (2016). However, I do not think the considerations adduced in such arguments can provide strong support for the view that omnivorism is seriously wrong.
15 Fischer, The Ethics of Eating Animals.
one animal’s entire life to occur: the animal is brought into existence, lives life as a farmed animal (for a while), and then is killed.

Those who want to argue that consumption of animals is wrong often emphasize that consumers are causally responsible for killing and other forms of extreme violence. And that’s true, according to the threshold model. But what’s often left out is that consumers are also causally responsible for the existence of the victims of such violence, and therefore are also causally responsible for everything that happens in the victims’ lives—all of the good and all of the bad. If a farmed chicken ever experiences a moment of joy, some consumer somewhere can claim causal responsibility for that moment of joy—just as surely as that consumer must also admit causal responsibility for all of the suffering and violence that the chicken endures at other moments.

This is important because even if it is obvious that it is wrong to kill animals or wrong to inflict extreme forms of violence on them, it may still not be obvious that it is wrong to launch an animal into a life that will be marred by violence and will finally end in being killed.

Here’s an analogy to illustrate the point. In one case, a person in a lawless, post-apocalyptic future society decides to have a child, knowing that her child will likely be a victim of deadly violence. In another case, a person in that same society never has children but inflicts deadly violence on other people. Even if we think it is obvious that the second person’s behavior is morally wrong, it may not be obvious that the first person’s behavior is morally wrong. And the consumer of animal products may seem more like the first person than the second.

2 The Worth Living Principle
Consider the following Podgorski-inspired principle:
Worth Living Principle: All else equal,\textsuperscript{16} it is not seriously wrong to cause someone to exist who is then abused by someone else, provided that (i) her life is worth living, and (ii) there was no alternative act that would have caused her to exist with a better life.\textsuperscript{17}

As we’ve seen, omnivorous consumers cause future individuals to be born, live as farmed animals, and be killed. According to the Worth Living Principle, producing this complex effect is (all else equal) not seriously wrong if the created individual’s life will be worth living. That’s because condition (ii) is guaranteed to be met in the case of the omnivorous consumer: the consumer has no way of giving the created individual a better life (because the consumer typically has no access to the farms where animals live).

An upshot of the Worth Living Principle is that farming may be objectionable in ways that consumption of animal products is not.\textsuperscript{18} Even when farmed animals have lives worth living, farmers are often able to make their animals’ lives better (i.e., (ii) is not satisfied for farmers), and since they are able to do this, it can be maintained that they have morally weighty obligations to do this (and therefore it is seriously wrong for them to fail to do so). Consumers, by contrast, can more easily defend their actions in terms of the Worth Living Principle because of their inability to help the farmed animals whose existence they cause.

If the Worth Living Principle is true, then in order to argue that omnivorism is seriously wrong, we need to argue that omnivorism causes individuals whose lives are not worth living to come into existence. But, as I’ll explain in a moment, it’s very hard to know whether farmed animals’ lives are worth living. Thus, the Worth Living Principle makes it difficult or impossible to make a compelling case for the view that omnivorism is seriously wrong.

\textsuperscript{16} I intend this clause to exclude considerations having to do with third parties. Thus, for example, the Worth Living Principle allows that causing farmed animals to exist might be seriously wrong in virtue of harmful ecological or environmental consequences for wild animals or humans, even if those farmed animals’ lives are worth living. For the purpose of my investigation in this paper, I want to set aside ecological and environmental considerations and all other considerations having to do with individuals other than omnivorous consumers and the farmed animals whom omnivorous consumers consume.

\textsuperscript{17} This resembles a principle suggested by Abelard Podgorski, “The Diner’s Defense: Producers, Consumers, and the Benefits of Existence,” \textit{Australasian Journal of Philosophy} (2019). However, I do not know whether Podgorski would accept this principle. Podgorski’s claim is that it is not wrong for harm-based reasons to cause someone to exist who is then abused by someone else provided that conditions (i) and (ii) are met (“The Diner’s Defense,” p. 9). Podgorski further suggests that harm-based reasons are stronger than other sorts of reasons, and that actions that are wrong for other sorts of reasons are not “as wrong” as actions that are wrong for harm-based reasons (“The Diner’s Defense,” p. 12). These remarks perhaps suggest a principle in the neighborhood of the Worth Living Principle, but they certainly do not commit Podgorski to the Worth Living Principle.

There are three main barriers to knowledge about whether farmed animals’ lives are worth living. First, there are conceptual difficulties. There are many different incompatible conceptions of ‘life worth living’ circulating in the philosophical literature. If we want to determine whether farmed animals’ lives are worth living, we first need to settle on and defend a conception of ‘life worth living’—not an easy job.

Second, we lack detailed knowledge about animals’ inner lives. Christopher Belshaw speculates that many animals’ lives are boring and unenjoyable even when the animals are treated well. If Belshaw is right, then even mild forms of animal abuse or other adversities might be sufficient to tip animals’ hedonic balance into negative territory, which could make their lives not worth living (on hedonistic accounts of ‘life worth living’). Alternatively, some writers speculate that animals’ positive emotions are more intensely felt than human equivalents. If they’re right, then even animals who are severely abused might nevertheless have lives worth living.

Third, consumers lack detailed knowledge about the fates of the particular animals who come into existence as a consequence of their purchasing decisions. Consumer behavior can have unpredictable effects in distant markets, and farmed animals are treated worse in some locations than others due to variations in laws, regulations, and customs. Further, even within a given farm, different individuals have very different lives, some dramatically worse than others. For these reasons, even if it is assumed that purchasing a given pound of chicken on a given occasion will cause (say) 25 farmed chickens to come into existence, it’s typically not possible to know what precisely will happen to those chickens.

Given these uncertainties, it will be very difficult to establish that this or that given form of omnivorous behavior brings individuals whose lives are not worth living into existence. Even chickens used for meat, who are among the most horribly treated farmed animals, might have

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19 For a valuable taxonomy of conceptions of ‘life worth living’ (along with an argument for eliminating the concept entirely) see Roberto Fumagalli, “‘Eliminating ‘Life Worth Living.’” Philosophical Studies 175 (2017): 769-792.
22 There is an organization called One Step for Animals whose sole purpose is to persuade people to stop eating chicken and to eat literally anything else instead. Their mission reflects the view, widely held among animal advocates, that the situation for chickens in modern farming is extraordinarily dire and is quite a lot worse than the situation for certain other groups of farmed animals, such as beef cattle, who in many cases are allowed to have relatively free, natural, and peaceful (albeit shortened) lives. (Unfortunately, the number of chickens raised and
lives worth living. These uncertainties mean that if we accept the Worth Living Principle then it will be difficult to persuasively argue that omnivorism is seriously wrong (barring considerations about third parties: see note 16). So, given that I want to maintain that omnivorism is seriously wrong, I need an argument against the Worth Living Principle.

3 The Worth Living Principle is false

Consider the following case, which I’ll call the Experiment Case. You’re a scientist planning an experiment. Your first step will be to bring children (human ones) into existence via an artificial womb. Once born, the children will be subjected to many painful experiments and deprived of many opportunities for happiness. The children will never thrive or flourish. But their basic needs will be met for as long as they are alive, and they’ll be given some diversions and playtime. After a few short years of life, these children will be killed so that their bodies can be used in the final, critical stage of your research project. Suppose that, all told, their lives will be just barely worth living (according to whatever criterion of ‘life worth living’ turns out to be best).

You’ll submit the grant application, and you’ll press the button on the artificial womb, but other scientists will do the rest—all the painful experiments and killings. Once the project is set in motion, you won’t be able to stop or alter any of it because the project will be overseen by a government official from the grant office who will enforce that it gets done according to plan. And if the project as described is not set in motion, then the children in question will never be brought into existence at all.

It seems obvious to me that it is seriously wrong to go forward with the project and to activate the artificial womb in the Experiment Case. The Worth Living Principle implies the opposite (because both conditions of the principle are satisfied). So, I want to reject the Worth Living Principle.

However, if it is seriously wrong to activate the artificial womb, this is (at least initially) mysterious. If the children will have lives worth living, and if the scientist is unable to give them better lives, why would it be wrong at all, much less seriously wrong, to bring them into

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killed per year is much larger than the number of cattle killed per year: 50 billion worldwide vs. less than one billion, according to many conservative estimates.)
existence? Some possible responses to this challenge are non-starters.23 If I can’t come up with a plausible response to this challenge, then I can’t rightly insist that what seems obvious to me is really true.

Consider the relationship between the scientist and the children whom the scientist brings into existence. If the scientist goes forward with the experiment, he becomes something like a parent to the children. Perhaps he literally is their parent. True, the way in which the scientist brings the children into existence is unusual—an artificial womb is used. But this seems to mean only that the scientist is an unusual parent or is parent-like in an unusual way.

In virtue of this relationship, I will argue, the scientist acquires a weighty obligation (which I presume is pro tanto, hence overridable—though not in this case overridden) to see to it that the children are well-off to a certain standard. This standard exceeds whatever is minimally required to make a life barely worth living; and this standard will not be met if the children are harmed and killed as required by the experimental protocol. But the scientist also simultaneously violates that obligation—because, as specified in the case, once the project is in motion, there is no way for the scientist to stop the children from being harmed and killed. Thus, in a single action, the scientist both acquires and violates an obligation to look after the children that he brings into the world. The obligation is, as I’ll say, stillborn—and that is why the scientist’s action is seriously wrong, according to the diagnosis of the Experiment Case that I’m now offering for consideration.

According to a widely held view that I call relationism, relationships directly affect the content of our moral obligations. Simon Keller gives a useful statement of this type of view:

We do not do special things for our friends and family members just because we feel like it. … If you did not treat your own friends and family differently from how you treat

23 I’ll mention three possibilities that I consider to be non-starters. First, David Benatar has argued for an extreme anti-natalism according to which it is almost always seriously wrong to bring someone into existence; see his Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence (Oxford, 2008). Few can accept such an extreme view and Benatar’s argument for the view is widely seen as unsound. Second, one could argue that activating the artificial womb is seriously wrong because (1) it results in others—specifically, the other scientists—doing wrong and (2) it is in general wrong to perform actions that lead to others doing wrong. But this won’t work because (2) is subject to many counterexamples: for example, it is not wrong to open a convenience store in a crime-ridden neighborhood even though this will inevitably lead to others wrongfully shoplifting. Third, one could argue that activating the artificial womb is seriously wrong because it shows some sort of disrespect to the children who emerge from the womb. This won’t work because disrespect on its own is often not seriously wrong and often not wrong at all—e.g., making fun of someone is disrespectful but not seriously wrong, especially not if it causes little or no harm.
strangers, then there would be something wrong with you. When you rush off to be with your parents [after they’ve experienced a tragedy], you will probably take yourself to be doing something you ought to do. Even if you do not especially feel like going to comfort your parents…you might go anyway, because you think you should. They are your parents, after all.24

My diagnosis of the Experiment Case requires relationism. I do not hope to persuade anti-relationists.25 All of my efforts will be aimed at the many philosophers and ordinary people who accept some form of relationism.

Among relationists, there’s no consensus about which relationships have the power to affect the content of our obligations. But a list given by W.D. Ross (“of promise to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman”26) is generally seen as a good starting point. And relationists usually agree that if any relationships affect moral obligations, parent-child relationships can do so.

There’s also no consensus among relationists about the specific ways in which relationships affect moral obligations, but it is not uncommonly thought that certain kinds of relationships can generate what I’ll call attainment obligations: obligations to ensure attainment of a certain minimum level of well-being.27 (Attainment obligations are to be distinguished from obligations of simple partiality.28) And there is perhaps no relationship more clearly associated with attainment obligations than the parent-child relationship.

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25 A valuable recent statement of anti-relationism is given in Roger Crisp, “Against Partiality” (unpublished manuscript, 2018).
28 An obligation of simple partiality is an obligation to show partiality to an individual by assigning extra weight to that individual’s interests (typically, by a multiplicative factor) whenever deliberatively weighing their interests against others’ interests. Attainment obligations are not like that. The view that parents have attainment obligations to their children is consistent with the possibility that, as long as parents provide *well enough* for their children, they can permissibly pursue other goals (e.g., personal projects, altruism to strangers, etc.) rather than provide further yet
My diagnosis of the Experiment Case is at home within that fairly traditional view—the view that parent-child relationships can sometimes generate attainment obligations. According to my diagnosis, upon activating the artificial womb the scientist acquires attainment obligations to the children, and the scientist’s parental relationship with the children explains why those obligations arise. This is a way in which my diagnosis is philosophically conservative.

In the next couple of sections, I’ll discuss two objections to my diagnosis. The first objection is that, because my diagnosis posits stillborn obligations, it violates the “ought implies can” principle and therefore cannot be true. The second objection is that, even if typical parent-child relationships can generate attainment obligations, the scientist’s specific relationship with the children is either not a genuine parent-child relationship or, even if it is, it is inadequate to generate attainment obligations. After I do these things, I’ll briefly discuss the non-identity problem and its connection with the views I’m developing here. And then I’ll explain what all of this has to do with omnivorism.

4 Stillborn obligations do not violate “ought implies can”

Here is a version of the “ought implies can” principle:

OIC: An agent at any given time has an obligation to do only what the agent at that time can (i.e., has the ability and opportunity to) do.29

To explain why stillborn obligations are consistent with OIC, consider again my diagnosis of the Experiment Case. Before the scientist activates the artificial womb, he has no attainment obligations to the children (so far as my diagnosis is concerned). So, at that time, OIC is fully respected. Upon activating the artificial womb, the scientist simultaneously acquires and violates an attainment obligation. But as soon as one violates an obligation, one no longer has that obligation. (For example, once I’ve broken my promise to you, I no longer have an obligation to keep the promise—though I may have a different obligation, e.g., to make amends.) So, at that time, OIC is still fully respected. The upshot is that there is no time at which the scientist has any benefits to their children—even when the good that would come from pursuing those other goals is less than the good that would come from providing further benefits to their children.

29 This is based on the version of OIC defended by Peter Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can,” *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2007): 167-216.
obligation to do anything he cannot do; so OIC is never violated. Stillborn obligations are always like that. They always respect OIC because their acquisition and violation are simultaneous.

Perhaps that should be the end of the matter. But there might still be OIC-related qualms about stillborn obligations. The worry might be that the reasons to endorse OIC, whatever one takes those to be, also require us to deny the possibility of stillborn obligations.

To see a way of spelling out that worry, consider Peter Vranas’s argument for OIC:

P1: If an agent has an obligation to \( \varphi \), then the agent has a reason to \( \varphi \).

P2: If an agent has a reason to \( \varphi \), then \( \varphi \)-ing is a potential action of the agent.

P3: If \( \varphi \)-ing is a potential action of an agent, then the agent can \( \varphi \).

These three premises entail OIC. Stillborn obligations are fully consistent with each of these premises. But suppose we make a slight tweak to the first premise, as follows:

P1*: If an agent acquires an obligation to \( \varphi \), then the agent has a reason to \( \varphi \).

If we make this tweak, and combine P1* with P2 and P3, then we have an argument against stillborn obligations. Therefore, if the reasons to endorse P1 end up also providing support for P1*, then those who accept Vranas’s argument for OIC should also reject stillborn obligations.

Many philosophers endorse P1 because they endorse moral rationalism: they hold that the fact that you have an obligation to do something is a reason to do it. Moral rationalism straightforwardly entails P1. But moral rationalism is consistent with the negation of P1* and does not, as far as I can see, provide good motivation to accept P1*.

Ordinarily, when you acquire an obligation, then you will have that obligation for some duration of time thereafter. Specifically, you have the obligation until the time at which the obligation is either satisfied or violated. In those ordinary cases, the rationalist will of course say that once an obligation to \( \varphi \) is acquired, then the agent has a reason to \( \varphi \). But in the special case

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31 This is because P1*, P2, and P3 imply this principle: If an agent acquires an obligation to \( \varphi \), then the agent can \( \varphi \). And stillborn obligations violate that principle.
where an obligation to $\phi$ is \textit{acquired} but simultaneously \textit{violated} and therefore never \textit{possessed}, I see no reason why the moral rationalist shouldn’t allow that the agent never has any reason to $\phi$; for an obligation that is never possessed seems unable to provide reasons.

Some might endorse P1 because they believe that we are morally obligated to $\phi$ if and only if and because we have most reason to $\phi$. This \textit{most-reasons view} straightforwardly entails P1. But this view is, again, consistent with the denial of P1*, simply because the most-reasons view is about the obligations that we \textit{have} and P1* is about the obligations that we \textit{acquire}.

Some philosophers, including those who accept the most-reasons view, hold the more general view that obligations emerge from reasons (perhaps in conjunction with other things, such as moral laws). Call this the \textit{reasons emergence view}. This view implies that there cannot be any obligation for an agent to acquire unless the obligation somehow emerges from reasons. This view straightforwardly entails P1.

We can accept the picture given by the reasons emergence view while also endorsing stillborn obligations. To see this, consider the following possibility. In the Experiment Case, prior to activating the artificial womb, the scientist has some reason to make sure that any children he brings into existence will be looked after to a high minimum standard. This is a disjunctive reason: it is a reason to \textit{either} bring the children into existence and make sure they will be looked after, \textit{or} to refrain from bringing them into existence. We may hypothesize that this reason (perhaps in interaction with moral laws and/or other reasons) makes it the case that, upon activating the artificial womb, the scientist acquires (and, of course, simultaneously violates) an obligation to look after the children. This is just one possible way among many possible ways to reconcile the acquisition of stillborn obligations in cases like the Experiment Case with the reasons emergence view.

Broadly, I do not know of any good rationale for OIC that provides good reason to deny the possibility of stillborn obligations. However, it also bears mentioning that not everyone who is attracted to views in the neighborhood of those I’m developing here will be interested in affirming OIC.

Consider Lisa Tessman’s views. In developing her theory of impossible moral requirements, Tessman argues that there are certain capabilities to which everyone is entitled, and that in cases where due to misfortune or injustice someone is unable to reach a certain threshold level of these capabilities, “there is a moral requirement to repair past damage so that
people can reach the threshold in every capability, and … this moral requirement is impossible to fulfill—not just at present, but permanently.” Here Tessman posits an obligation that agents continue to have to already-existing individuals even when the obligation cannot possibly be fulfilled, and so Tessman is committed to rejecting OIC. And indeed, rejecting OIC is a major part of her project.

So, even if I were committed to rejecting OIC in my diagnosis of the Experiment Case, there would be at least some philosophers who would see no problem in this. However, I think it is best not to have to violate OIC; OIC is very attractive to many philosophers and ordinary people. And I can get away with this. Because the stillborn obligations that I’m positing are acquired and violated in the same creative action, they needn’t violate OIC.

5 Deontic parenthood

Let us say that I am your deontic parent if my relationship with you is of the type that can generate what we may call parental obligations—that is, obligations characteristic of parents, such as certain sorts of weighty attainment obligations. I want to argue that the scientist in the Experiment Case is a deontic parent to the children who come into existence when he activates the artificial womb.

The most natural way to argue for that view is to appeal to some general theory of deontic parenthood. In this vein, let’s say that A becomes B’s causal parent when and only when B comes into existence as a result of A’s engaging in an activity that A knows will initiate (positively cause) a process that has a high risk of resulting in B’s existence. Consider the following theory: A is B’s deontic parent if and only if A is B’s causal parent. This theory directly implies that the scientist becomes the children’s deontic parent when he activates the artificial womb.

It would be convenient for me if that theory were true. Unfortunately, this theory is subject to counterexamples. Consider the case of a prison warden who arranges a conjugal visit for one of the prisoners, and a child is born as a result. The warden is a causal parent of that child. However, intuitively, the warden does not have parental obligations to the child; the warden is not a deontic parent of the child. Also, consider the case of adoption. Intuitively,

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adoptive parents are deontic parents, but adoptive parents are not causal parents. These cases suggest that causal parenthood is neither necessary nor sufficient for deontic parenthood.

One way to react to these counterexamples is to conclude that causal parenthood has nothing at all to do with deontic parenthood. But that’s going overboard. Consider the following case of an absent father. He is in a relationship with a woman for a while; she becomes pregnant; he abruptly leaves town before the child is born and is never seen again. Years later, the child has become a teenage boy. If the boy is asked to explain why that man in particular out of all the people in the world is his (deontic) parent, the boy can reasonably include the man’s causal parenthood in that explanation.

So, a puzzle: causal parenthood is neither necessary nor sufficient for deontic parenthood; nevertheless, causal parenthood can in some cases help to explain why deontic parenthood obtains. Here’s an available solution to this puzzle: deontic parenthood arises from a combination of relationships. Causal parenthood alone does not result in deontic parenthood. But when causal parenthood is combined with certain other relationships, then it can give rise to deontic parenthood. Further, although causal parenthood can be an important ingredient in deontic parenthood, it is not a necessary ingredient. It can be substituted with different relationships to give rise to deontic parenthood. Call this the combination theory of parenthood. A version of this theory has been proposed by Jeffrey Blustein.

The combination theory handles the cases we have discussed. The combination theorist can say that the warden is not the deontic parent of her prisoner’s child because the warden has no significant relationships with the child other than causal parenthood, and because causal parenthood is not by itself sufficient to give rise to deontic parenthood.

Adoptive parents are not causal parents of their children, but according to the combination theory, that’s not an impediment to their being deontic parents. For, according to the combination theory, there are combinations of relationships that do not include causal parenthood that can nevertheless give rise to deontic parenthood. Thus, the combination theory

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34 People often assert this without argument, so I assume it is a widely shared intuition. See, e.g., Joseph Millum, “How Do We Acquire Parental Rights?” Social Theory and Practice 36 (2010): 112-132. Note that the claim is not that adoptive parents are parents in every sense; there may be a sense of ‘parent’ that implies a genetic relationship, for example.

has the resources to explain how adoptive parents can become deontic parents without being causal parents.

The absent father is a causal parent to his teenage son, but that isn’t all he is to him. The absent father has other relationships with the boy as well—he is the former partner of the boy’s mother, and he is genetically related to the boy in a certain way, and so on. The combination theory can allow that some of these further relationships, in combination with causal parenthood, can be sufficient to give rise to deontic parenthood. Thus, the combination theory has the ability to explain why the absent father is a deontic father and why the absent father’s causal parenthood is part of the explanation why he has the status of deontic father.

In view of the ability of the combination theory to handle these and other cases, the combination theory is plausible enough to endorse, at least until some serious problem for the theory is identified (and I know of no such problem). Now I’d like to make some specific proposals about the combinations that can give rise to deontic parenthood.

Consider the following case:

Savior Sibling: Louise and Marty decide to have a child. They want to do this because they want to give life to someone for the sake of that someone. Thus Rupert is born. Sadly, Rupert needs a kidney transplant. Louise and Marty are told that the only way to save Rupert’s life is to have another child and transplant one of that child’s kidneys into Rupert. For that reason, Louise and Marty have a second child, Marsha, and arrange the transplant.36

Intuitively, Louise and Marty are deontic parents of both Rupert and Marsha. In Rupert’s case, I suggest, this is because of two relationships: first, Louise and Marty are Rupert’s causal parents; and second, they have intentionally given life to Rupert for Rupert’s sake. In Marsha’s case, I suggest, Louise and Marty are deontic parents because of a somewhat different combination of relationships: first, as with Rupert, Louise and Marty are Marsha’s causal parents; and second, in bringing Marsha into existence they use her (for the purpose of saving Rupert’s life).

36 For a representative discussion in the bioethics literature on savior siblings, see S. Sheldon and S. Wilkinson, “Should Selecting Saviour Siblings Be Banned?” Journal of Medical Ethics 30 (2004): 533-537. Clare Palmer considers the case of savior siblings in a similar context, though for a different purpose; see Animal Ethics in Context, p. 94.
These points suggest that there are two different relationship-combinations that can give rise to deontic parenthood. First, there is the *lifegiver’s pathway* to deontic parenthood: If (i) A is B’s causal parent and (ii) A has given life to B for B’s sake, then A is B’s deontic parent. And second, there is the *user’s pathway* to deontic parenthood: If (i) A is B’s causal parent and (ii) in bringing B into existence A uses B, then A is B’s deontic parent.

These considerations support the view that the scientist in the Experiment Case is the deontic parent of the children who come out of the artificial womb. For the scientist has both a causal parenthood relationship with those children, and a use relationship with them (the scientist uses the children to further his scientific pursuits). The scientist has taken the user’s pathway to deontic parenthood, just as Louise and Marty have done with Marsha.

6 Interlude: the non-identity problem

In the present section I will very briefly explain how the ideas I’ve developed here might apply to the non-identity problem. Nothing in this section is essential for my main argument, so this section can be skipped if desired. I’m discussing this only because the non-identity problem almost always gets mentioned when I present the argument of this paper to my fellow philosophers.

David Boonin usefully presents the non-identity problem in the form of an argument concerning a person named Wilma, who has to choose whether to have a child named Pebbles now, or to wait two months, taking a pill once a day, and then have a child named Rocks. If Pebbles is brought into existence, she will be born with a serious disability; if Rocks is brought into existence, she will not have that disability and so will be better off than Pebbles. The argument goes like this:

P1: Wilma’s act of conceiving now rather than taking a pill once a day for two months before conceiving does not make Pebbles worse off than she would otherwise have been.
P2: If A’s act harms B, then A’s act makes B worse off than B would otherwise have been.
P3: Wilma’s act of conceiving now rather than taking a pill once a day for two months before conceiving does not harm anyone other than Pebbles.
P4: If an act does not harm anyone, then the act does not wrong anyone.
P5: If an act does not wrong anyone, then the act is not morally wrong.
C: Wilma’s act of conceiving Pebbles is not morally wrong.37

The Non-Identity Problem is this: P1-P5 look plausible, but they entail C, and C looks implausible.

Boonin argues at great length that we cannot make a good case against any of the premises, so we should just accept C, counterintuitive though it is. However, as Boonin recognizes,38 the argument works (if it works at all) even if we suppose that Pebbles’s life would be barely worth living. In fact, I believe the situation is even worse than Boonin lets on. I believe that P1-P5 above imply that it would not be wrong for Wilma to conceive Pebbles even if it is the case that Pebbles’s life will be pure hell and not worth living. After all, if Pebbles would not exist otherwise, then the act of creating Pebbles does not make her worse off than she would otherwise have been.39 So, P1 still holds even if Pebbles’s life will be pure hell. And the remaining premises will hold as well. So, despite Boonin’s sanguinity about C, I think we definitely need to avoid C and attack at least one of the premises.

My arguments thus far can explain why P4 is false (even if P2 is true). Counterexamples to P4 can be found in cases where someone becomes a deontic parent via either the lifegiver’s pathway or the user’s pathway. In such cases, if the resulting child will not be well-off to a high standard, the parent violates a weighty attainment obligation to that individual; and this means the parent wrongs the child, even in some cases where bringing the child into existence does harm the child because the child’s life is worth living. I believe that this response is likely to avoid many of the problems facing the various other objections to P4 that Boonin considers in Chapter 5 of his book, but I do not have the space to discuss this.

7 Omnivores’ use of future farmed animals
I’ve argued that there is a user’s pathway to deontic parenthood: If (i) A is B’s causal parent and (ii) in bringing B into existence A uses B, then A is B’s deontic parent. In the present section I’m

39 As many have observed, one isn’t better off or worse off than one would be if one had never existed—just as one isn’t taller or shorter than one would be if one had never existed.
going to argue that omnivores’ relationship with future farmed animals meets the second condition: omnivores use the animals whose existence they cause.

It is not strange to think that if I purchase and eat a dead cow’s body, then I am thereby using *that* cow—the one whose body I am eating. I am using that cow(‘s body) for enjoyment and sustenance. But it *is* strange to think that in such a case I might be using a future cow who will come into existence as a result of my purchasing decision. Nevertheless, that’s precisely what I want to argue.

To begin, consider the following case:

**Human Garbage Can:** You’re waiting at a bus stop. You want to dispose of a sandwich wrapper. There are no garbage cans around. You do not want to have to carry the greasy wrapper with you onto the bus. Nor do you want to throw the wrapper on the ground (because you don’t want to be a litterbug). So, you turn to a person standing next to you and forcibly shove the sandwich wrapper down his throat.

In this case, you use someone: you use the person standing next to you. You use him as a receptacle for your waste.

There are certain evident similarities between Human Garbage Can and the Switch trolley case (five on the main track; one on the side track; the agent can save the five only by throwing the switch and redirecting the trolley toward the one, thus killing the one). In both cases, there is something unwanted (a sandwich wrapper; a speeding runaway trolley) that the agent directs toward a victim in order to avoid a state of affairs (holding onto a greasy wrapper; allowing five to die) that the agent regards as undesirable or bad, with the consequence that the object penetrates the victim’s body to the detriment of the victim. In view of the similarities between the cases, I’d like to suggest that in Switch as in Human Garbage Can, the victim is used.

This suggestion is unconventional.40 It is usually assumed that in Switch, the agent does *not* use the victim. And this, many philosophers think, is an important difference between Switch and Push (five on the main track; the agent can save the five only by pushing the large man into the way of the trolley, thus killing him).

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Those who want to maintain that use occurs in Push but not in Switch will want to undermine the analogy between Switch and Human Garbage Can. The most straightforward way to do this is to identify some relevant difference between the cases that could explain why use occurs in Human Garbage Can but does not occur in Switch. But it is unclear what that relevant difference might be.

First, one might observe that in Human Garbage Can, the unwanted object (the sandwich wrapper) is put wholly into the victim’s body, whereas in Switch, the unwanted object (the trolley) merely collides with the victim’s body, penetrating the victim’s body but not being put entirely into the victim’s body. But it is hard to how this difference can do the work needed for an objection to the analogy.

Consider:

Bad Roommate: You have a large can full of garbage. To get rid of the garbage, you turn the can over onto your sleeping roommate. The garbage ends up being strewn all over his body and all around him on his bed and on the floor.

In this case, you don’t use your roommate as a receptacle, because you aren’t deliberately and neatly putting your garbage into him. Nevertheless, it seems fully correct to say that you use him. Specifically, you use him as a dumping ground, rather than as a receptacle, for your waste.

Here is a general principle:

Dumping Ground Principle: An agent uses a victim as a dumping ground if the agent (i) directs an unwanted object toward the victim (ii) in order to be rid of or to dispose of the object (iii) with the knowledge that the object will contact or penetrate the victim’s body.

If the Dumping Ground Principle is true, then the agent in Switch who redirects the trolley uses the victim as a dumping ground for the runaway trolley. If we say this, then it becomes unclear how considerations about use can provide for any morally relevant difference between Switch and Push. This is contrary to many philosophers’ views. But it’s not all that revolutionary. The suggestion here does not mean that there isn’t any morally relevant difference between Switch and Push; it only means that the difference does not lie in use considerations.
To be sure, it is presumably the case that the agent in Switch uses the victim in a *different* way than does the agent in Push. Specifically, when the agent in Push pushes the large man into the way of the trolley, the agent uses the large man as a trolley-stopper, in the same way that one might use an inanimate object like a sandbag or a heavy log for the same purpose. By contrast, the agent in Switch, according to the present view, does not use the victim as a trolley-stopper; instead, the agent uses the victim as a dumping ground, in the same way that one might use an inanimate object like an empty parking lot or an unoccupied field for the same purpose. But it is not clear why anybody would believe that there is a morally important difference between these two forms of use—use as a trolley-stopper, on the one hand, and use as a dumping ground, on the other.

These considerations suggest that it is quite a lot easier to use others, and harder to avoid using others, than is commonly thought. But these considerations do not mean that use is completely ubiquitous. Consider cases involving failing to save. Suppose I gamble my fortune away rather than donate it to a charity that would use the money to save some particular child’s life. Nothing in my arguments thus far implies that the child is thereby used. Another case: Suppose I dump toxic waste into a river. As far as I know, the whole area is uninhabited, but it turns out that a hermit lives downstream. The hermit dies from exposure to the poisoned water. None of the arguments I’ve given imply that the hermit is thereby used. These cases illustrate that although I am arguing that use is much more widespread than many people think, I can still say that many harmful actions are not forms of use.

Now I want to consider a different case:

Hitman: Henry, a vicious gangster, is on a date with Karen. To impress Karen, Henry approaches a hitman and orders him to kill someone. He makes sure to have the conversation in Karen’s earshot. “Just pick someone to kill—I don’t care who it is,” Henry says. Henry pays the hitman, and off the hitman goes to kill someone. Karen is duly impressed.

When Henry orders the killing, does Henry use the person who ends up being killed by the hitman? Some might give the following simple argument for a “no” answer. If Henry were using the victim by ordering the killing, then Henry’s achieving his goal (to impress Karen) would
have to be dependent (causally or counterfactually or in some relevant way) on the victim’s actually being killed. But no such dependence obtains. Suppose that, after Henry orders the hitman to kill someone, the hitman takes the money, boards a flight to Tahiti, and is never seen again. This would not frustrate Henry’s goal of impressing Karen. In fact, Henry might be happy with that outcome—it would mean that he is able to achieve his goal without causing anyone’s death. Thus, Henry’s achieving his goal is not dependent on the victim’s actually being killed and so Henry does not use the victim by ordering the killing.

The link between dependence and use posited in the foregoing argument is widely endorsed among philosophers. But that’s a mistake, I believe. Such dependence is missing in Bad Roommate: If the agent were to turn the trash can over and then somehow none of it landed on his sleeping roommate, the agent’s goal (to get rid of the garbage) would still be achieved. Nevertheless Bad Roommate involves use, I’ve argued. Such dependence is also missing in Switch (and this is often mentioned as an explanation of why use is missing in Switch). Nevertheless, I’ve argued, Switch is analogous with Bad Roommate and involves use.

Hitman is analogous with Switch. Ordering the killing is like throwing the switch: the agent knowingly causes someone’s death in order to achieve some ostensibly unrelated goal (saving the five; impressing Karen). There are differences, of course. In Hitman, the agent’s goal is trivial whereas in Switch the goal is important. In Hitman, another agent (namely, the hitman) is involved in the causal chain leading to the victim’s death, whereas in Switch, no one other than the agent at the switch is involved in causing the victim’s death. But these differences do not seem capable of explaining why use occurs in one case but not the other. So I claim that if Switch involves use, so does Hitman.

With all of these points in mind, let’s turn back to omnivorism. An omnivore hands over money to a cashier in a grocery store, knowing that doing this carries an appreciable risk of causing future farmed animals to come into existence, live as farmed animals, and be killed. In exchange, the omnivore gets a pound of chicken for dinner. I want to maintain that this case involves use if Hitman involves use.

Here are some differences between Hitman and the case of the omnivore that I think are obviously irrelevant (i.e., these differences cannot explain why use occurs in one case but not the other). (1) Unlike Henry in Hitman, the omnivore is not trying to impress a date; rather, the omnivore is trying to get meat that she wants for dinner. (2) In the case of the omnivore, the
victims (the future farmed animals) are brought into existence and then killed; they aren’t already-existing people who are killed, as in Hitman. (3) In the case of the omnivore, the victims are at the end of a very long causal chain involving many agents (grocery store managers, truck drivers, distributors, farmers, etc.), as against a short causal chain involving just one hitman. (4) In the case of the omnivore, the probability that any single transaction will have a victim is low (see §1) whereas in Hitman we may imagine it is high (although the probability is not specified in the above description of the case). The reader can test whether these differences make a difference by imagining variations of Hitman that equalize for these differences. Broadly, I do not know of any differences between the case of the omnivore and Hitman that seem capable of explaining why use occurs in Hitman but does not occur in the case of the omnivore.

The structure of the argument that I have been assembling in this section is something like this:

1 Use occurs in Human Garbage Can and Bad Roommate.
2 If use occurs in Human Garbage Can and Bad Roommate, then use occurs in Switch.
3 If use occurs in Switch, then use occurs in Hitman.
4 If use occurs in Hitman, then use occurs in the case of the omnivore.

Although at various points in this argument it has been useful to consider general claims about the nature of use, my argument does not require or involve any general theory of use. The argument is analogical: each step in the argument depends on relevant similarities (and a lack of relevant differences) between pairs of cases.

8 Omnivorism is seriously wrong

Through their purchasing decisions, omnivores cause future farmed animals to come into existence, live as farmed animals, and then be killed (see §1). Because of this, many people—including many of the philosophers mentioned above, in the Introduction—are attracted to the view that omnivorous consumption is seriously wrong. However, the Worth Living Principle
(repeated here in a footnote for ease of reference\textsuperscript{41}) considered in §2 is a barrier to such an argument. This principle if accepted makes it very difficult to argue that omnivorism is seriously wrong, because it is clear that (ii) obtains in the case of omnivorism (omnivorous consumers cannot improve the lives of the animals whose existence they cause) and because—as argued in §2—it is very difficult to show that (i) does not obtain in the case of omnivorism.

I suggested in §3 that the Experiment Case looks like a counterexample to the Worth Living Principle. It seems to be seriously wrong for the scientist to activate the artificial womb, even if the resulting children’s lives will be worth living and even if the scientist has no way of giving those children a better life.

To explain this judgment, I’ve proposed that the scientist is the children’s deontic parent and therefore, upon activating the artificial womb, the scientist acquires weighty attainment obligations to those children—obligations to ensure that their well-being reaches a reasonable minimum standard. And the scientist simultaneously violates those obligations—the obligations are stillborn. The children are thus wronged, and this wrong is serious because the children’s level of well-being is dramatically lower than any reasonable minimum standard.

I argued in §4 that stillborn obligations do not violate OIC, which I hope will answer some the main concerns that readers may have about the possibility of stillborn obligations.

To explain how the scientist is the children’s deontic parent, I proposed in §5 that there is a user’s pathway to deontic parenthood: If (i) A is B’s causal parent and (ii) in bringing B into existence A uses B, then A is B’s deontic parent. The scientist takes that pathway—he is the children’s causal parent and, in bringing them into existence, he uses them—and so the scientist is the children’s deontic parent.

I want to argue that omnivores, too, take the user’s pathway and therefore omnivores are deontic parents of farmed animals who come into existence as a result of their purchasing decisions. One half of that argument was made in §1, where I argued that omnivores cause farmed animals to exist; this makes them causal parents of farmed animals (see definition of causal parenthood in §5). The other half is given in §7, where I argue that omnivores, in purchasing animal products, use future farmed animals whose existence they cause.

\textsuperscript{41} The Worth Living Principle: All else equal, it is not seriously wrong to cause someone to exist who is then abused by someone else, provided that (i) her life is worth living, and (ii) there was no alternative act that would have caused her to exist with a better life.
If omnivores are deontic parents of farmed animals who come into existence as a result of their purchasing decisions, then they acquire weighty attainment obligations to those animals (see §3). Such obligations require that the parents ensure that their children are well-off to some high standard.

Here’s a question I haven’t yet addressed: What precisely is the minimum standard of well-being that parents are obligated to ensure for their children? That’s unclear as a general matter, not just in the cases I’ve discussed in this paper. Most parents know they have to make sure their children’s lives are good enough, but it’s normally difficult to pinpoint precisely how good is good enough. Part of the difficulty is that different standards are appropriate for different children, because different children have different levels of capacity for happiness and other forms of well-being. Also, parental relationships differ in deontically relevant ways from case to case. An absent father’s relationship with his distant child may have different deontic implications than a present and loving mother’s relationship with the child who lives under her roof. Finding out how to do right by one’s children will involve attending carefully to those children as particular individuals as well as attending to facts about one’s particular relationship with them.

Given that animals are very different from humans and have very different interests, it’s hard to say what the right standard of treatment will be in the case where a non-human animal is—morally speaking—one’s progeny. Obviously, one is not obligated to take one’s non-human children to school, sign them up for piano lessons, or read bedtime stories to them, even if one might be obligated to do these types of things for human children.

But whatever the appropriate standard is, it seems that it will inevitably not be met for the vast majority of farmed animals. Farmed animals are confined for life in cramped cages or crowded barns, mired in their own excrement, separated from their biological parents and offspring, deprived of opportunities to develop normally and flourish, confined in unnatural ways that prevent them from forming normal bonds with others of their species, routinely mutilated without anesthetic, summarily culled when they are seen to be underweight or deformed, deprived of veterinary treatment for painful injuries and illnesses, brutally killed at a young
These harms and deprivations are normal in animal agriculture. When our purchasing decisions cause animals to come into existence, it is highly likely that those animals will be treated in these ways. And when the animals are treated in these ways, their well-being falls far short of any reasonable minimal standard that might be required by parental obligations. Thus, we have an argument for the view that omnivores not only acquire but also violate weighty parental attainment obligations when they purchase animal products. This obligation is pro tanto and thus in principle overridable but is not overridden. That’s why omnivorism is seriously wrong, according to the view I’m advancing here.

9 A few objections

One way of objecting to my position is to argue that animals are not the sorts of beings who could possibly be our children. A farmer who grows bananas is causally responsible for those bananas’ existence and uses those bananas, but it is absurd to say that the farmer is in any moral sense the parent of those bananas or has any attainment obligations to the bananas. Perhaps farmed animals are relevantly similar to those bananas.

It is true that animals are not human children. However, as everyone knows, animals are childlike: intelligent, sensitive, curious, innocent, fragile, powerless, and so on. I see no principled reason why chickens and pigs and cows cannot count—morally but not biologically, of course—as the children of human beings in some cases where humans bring those animals into existence. Obviously, the thought that farmed animals can be humans’ children is counterintuitive; but some counterintuitive judgments are true.

42 For an excellent overview of routine treatment of animals on farms, written by a philosopher who believes that it is often permissible for us to purchase and consume animal products, see Bob Fischer, The Ethics of Eating Animals, chapter 2.
43 They are not overridden because there are almost no considerations in favor of consuming animal products. Omnivores consume animal products for reasons of “taste, tradition, and convenience,” as activists very often like to say. See related discussion below.
44 One way of trying to generate intuitive support for the view that animals can in principle be children of humans is to consider the role that human farmers play in the sexual life of farmed animals. Female farmed animals are routinely inseminated by human beings using seminal fluid taken from non-human males. I for one do not find it absurd to think that a farmer who engages in such sexual activity can thereby become a parent of the resulting offspring. (Compare this with a case considered often in the parenthood literature: you take sperm from a (human) man without his knowledge and deliberately inseminate a (human) woman with it. In this case it is not very strange to think you are a parent of the resulting child.) I think this type of case shows at least that the idea that humans can be deontic parents of animals is not intrinsically absurd. Of course, it may nevertheless be that it is absurd to imagine that consumers are deontic parents of farmed animals; but if so, it’s not because of the species difference.
Another objection can be raised by thinking about exploitation cases. Certain employment arrangements are exploitative even though they leave the exploited individuals better off than they would be otherwise. For example, in many cases, sweatshop workers are happy to have their jobs (because all of their alternatives are worse) even though their wages are exploitative and their employer keeps the lion’s share of the value produced by the employees’ work. Do sweatshop employers wrong their employees by hiring them into these exploitative jobs?

(I) On the one hand, many sweatshop critics seem to hold that employers are obligated to ensure that their employees are paid well enough—i.e., in my terms, employers have attainment obligations to employees. And the critics also maintain, quite reasonably, that sweatshop employees are not, in fact, paid well enough. This would furnish a straightforward explanation of why sweatshop employers wrong their employees.

(II) On the other hand, as libertarians (and others) argue, in many real-world cases, (i) the sweatshop employees are made better off by their jobs, and (ii) the employers have no way to make them still better off (because shareholders and other stakeholders will prevent them from paying employees more than market wage, among other reasons). And given (i) and (ii), one might reasonably think that the employees have no grounds for complaint against their employers and cannot be wronged by their exploitative arrangement.

If (as I believe to be the case) employers have attainment obligations to their employees as claimed in (I), such obligations could nevertheless be overridden by the employees’ interest in being employed and being made better off than they would be otherwise. So, the claims in (i) and (ii) above may be sufficient to establish that employees often have no all-things-considered obligation to refrain from exploiting their workers—in which case it would be arguable that the employees are not wronged. So, I grant, (II) could provide a defense of at least some sweatshop employment practices.

One might think that an analogous defense of omnivorism can be offered. If that were so, I’d be in trouble. But that is not so. In the sweatshop case, the employees are already-existing; that is why it is possible that they can be made better off by being exploited. By contrast, in the case of the omnivore, the relevant individuals—the animals—are brought into existence as a consequence of the agent’s choices. Given this, they are not made better off by the

45 Podgorski considers related points in “The Diner’s Defense.”
agent’s choices (since they would not exist at all if the agent were to refrain—see note 39). So, considerations about making the animals better off cannot override omnivores’ stillborn attainment obligations. A defense of omnivorism analogous with (II) is not available.46

My arguments imply that parental relationships, and attendant parental obligations, are far more widespread than is usually believed. Is this an exciting new philosophical discovery? Or is it a fatally implausible consequence of my view?

If my opponents want to argue for the second of these possibilities, they ought to look for cases that have the following features. First, an agent A performs an action that makes the agent a causal parent of an individual B. Second, assuming the views about use that I developed in §7, A uses B in the course of bringing B into existence. Third, B’s level of well-being is low (though perhaps B’s life is marginally worth living). Fourth, the agent has no reasons for the action that are strong enough to override a hypothesized parental attainment obligation to the individual. And fifth, the action in question is obviously not seriously wrong. A case that has all of these features would show that my argument in this paper does indeed commit me to unacceptably implausible consequences and thus needs to be adjusted or abandoned. I do not know of any cases that have all of these features.

46 Another possibility (suggested to me by [redacted for blind review, personal correspondence]): First, although bringing animals into existence doesn’t make them better off, it is non-comparatively good for them to be brought into existence as long as their lives are worth living. Second, as long as an action’s consequences are non-comparatively good for us and no alternative action that would be even more non-comparatively good for us is available, we have no complaint against the agent who performed the action and therefore we are not wronged by the action. A main problem for this line is that it directly implies that the scientist in the Experiment Case does not wrong the children who emerge from the artificial womb. Note that the implication is not merely that my preferred explanation of that verdict is false; the implication is instead that the verdict itself is false. This is a serious problem if (as I suspect) most of those who consider the Experiment Case will find it highly intuitive that the scientist wrongs the children in activating the artificial womb.