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CONSCIENTIOUS OMNIVORISM

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Is it morally permissible for people like us—denizens of the affluent Western world—to purchase or eat meat? Conscientious omnivores believe so, provided that the meat is not factory farmed (or otherwise produced by treating animals cruelly). Moral vegetarians take a more hard-line approach, maintaining that people like us in our circumstances ought not to purchase or eat meat at all because doing so would be wrong. I find myself conflicted about which of these positions to accept. I believe that, at the very least, we should be conscientious omnivores. But I am unsure whether, having accepted conscientious omnivorism, there are principled reasons not to take the further step of embracing moral vegetarianism full stop. My project in this chapter is to explore this issue.[1]

I should warn you that my discussion does not aim to be ethically neutral, as I will be working with a broadly deontological view of what makes acts right. According to this view, when an act is right, it is not because it brings about the best consequences or maximizes value. Rather, ordinarily, when an act is right, it is determined by the rights and obligations that agents have against one another, which they possess in virtue of the worth that they have. I will work with this position not only because doing so will help to focus our discussion, but also because it seems to me true.

A Standard Deontological Argument

Most of us believe that the Native Americans who lived in the United States one hundred fifty years ago did nothing wrong when they killed animals for food. Given their conditions, they needed to do so to survive and flourish. But it is different for us. We occupy conditions in which food is ordinarily plentiful and

there is no need to hunt. Although meat is typically both easily available and affordable, most of us can lead extremely healthy and satisfying lives without eating animals at all.

Many philosophers believe that, since we occupy conditions such as these, we ought to be moral vegetarians. A prominent type of argument for this conclusion, due in its essentials to Tom Regan, rests on two concepts: *being the subject of a life* and *having a basic welfare right*. Let's take a moment to unpack these concepts.[2]

A subject of a life is a creature that can flourish or fail to flourish, has strong interests in its own flourishing, and can be aware of its own flourishing or failure to flourish.[3] For present purposes, think of flourishing along broadly Aristotelian lines: Beings flourish inasmuch as they, to some sufficient degree, use and enjoy the use of their senses, have and enjoy having adequate health, have and enjoy having bonds of kinship or friendship, engage and enjoy engaging in play, and so forth. Thus understood, rocks, plants, insects, and mollusks cannot be the subjects of a life. Animals of many kinds, however, are. In ordinary conditions, both human and nonhuman animals, such as chickens, sheep, cows, and pigs, are keenly interested in using their senses, establishing and maintaining bonds of kinship, and engaging in play. (By saying this, I do not mean to elide important differences between animals of these kinds. For immediate purposes, however, these differences will not matter.) Human and nonhuman animals have at least this much in common.

It is because (in part) subjects of a life can engage in activities such as establishing, maintaining, and enjoying bonds of kinship that they have noninstrumental or inherent worth. This worth matters morally, for it is in virtue of possessing such worth that we can wrong subjects of a life. It is because a dog possesses worth of this sort, for example, that I can wrong it by intentionally crippling it. When we wrong the subject of a life, it is entitled to better treatment.[4] That, however, is more or less a different way of saying that subjects of a life have rights of various sorts, such as what I've called the basic welfare rights. At a first approximation, let's say that if an agent A has a basic welfare right against an agent B, then B morally ought not intentionally to frustrate or destroy A's flourishing by doing such things as preventing it from using its senses, destroying its capacity to form bonds of kinship, maiming its body so it cannot engage in movement or play, and so forth.

Later in our discussion, I will have more to say about these rights. For now, let me make several preliminary points about them. First, these rights are *defeasible*; they can be trumped by other countervailing moral considerations. For example, you might have a basic welfare right against me that I not maim or kill you. But if you attack me, then (all else being equal) it is morally permissible for me to maim or kill you in self-defense. Second, the basic welfare rights are *kind relative*. They are rights that a thing has against only those agents that are of such a kind that they can recognize them. If ordinary farm animals such as cows have the basic welfare rights, for example, then they do not have them against other animals such as coyotes but only against creatures like us. For, unlike coyotes, we are the sorts of beings that can recognize and honor these rights. Finally, many of these rights are *context dependent*. If I am a child, I may have a right against my parents that they provide me with adequate water and food; were I to die of thirst, they would have wronged me. But in a season of terrible drought, I have no such right. There is no water that they can provide me. If this is so, rights are ordinarily indexed to situations. The right that a child has against his parents is the right to provide him with food and water in conditions in which water is available.

Having made these observations about subjects of a life and rights, we are now in a position to formulate:

The Standard Deontological Argument

(1) If something is a subject of a life, then it has the basic welfare rights.
(2) Farm animals are the subjects of a life.
(3) So, farm animals have the basic welfare rights.
(4) In conditions such as ours, purchasing or eating the meat of farm animals violates their basic welfare rights.
(5) We ought not to violate the basic welfare rights of others.
(6) So, in conditions such as ours, we ought not to purchase or eat the meat of farm animals.

Let me offer both a comment about and a criticism of this argument. The comment is that this argument has some intuitive pull. After all, if a creature is such that it can flourish and its own flourishing matters to it, then that creates a strong moral reason not to do such things as maim or kill it. Still—and this is the criticism—the argument is not persuasive. The fundamental problem is that premise (4) appears to be false. When we purchase or eat meat, the animal whose meat we've purchased or eaten is dead. And we cannot violate the basic welfare rights of the dead. In saying this, I do not wish to deny that the dead have rights. Perhaps, for example, if you were intentionally to bad-mouth your dead grandmother at her funeral, you would wrong her. Even so, you would not violate her basic welfare rights, since she has none.

It is natural to wonder whether the Standard Deontological Argument can be repaired. Surely—it might be said—by purchasing or buying meat we can support or be complicit in activities, such as the slaughtering of animals, which violate the basic welfare rights of these animals. And, all else being equal, we ought not to do this. As will become evident in a moment, I believe that there is something to this thought. But I also believe that it is difficult to formulate a satisfactory argument for moral vegetarianism that relies on it, at least if we understand "supporting" and "being complicit" in terms of *causally supporting* an institution by, say, enabling it to stay afloat. In their chapters in this volume, Mark Bryant

Budolfson and Ted Warfield explain why. If Budolfson, Warfield, and I are right about this, then it is worth exploring different reasons for why it might be wrong to eat or purchase meat. That is my concern in the next section.

Cruelty and Symbolic Value

Call a person who purchases or uses some good a *consumer* of that good (by a "good," I mean a commodity). The argument I wish to present in this section relies on an abstract ethical principle that I will call:

> **The Support Principle**: Suppose an essentially cruel practice provides some good G. All else being equal, one morally ought not to support that practice by being a consumer of G if an alternative to G is readily available, which is comparable in cost and quality and is not the product of an essentially cruel practice, since being a consumer of G has considerable symbolic disvalue.

The Support Principle introduces the ideas of an essentially cruel practice and that of symbolic disvalue. Let me try to give you a better feel for these ideas and how they relate to one another by sketching an imaginary scenario.

Imagine that ESPN and the US government strike a deal: To reduce the population in the nation's overcrowded prisons and to provide entertainment for the ordinary person, ESPN will—for a modest fee—televise events in which prisoners fight to the death employing a variety of techniques, including those used by the ancient gladiators. At first, this arrangement proves highly controversial, since (among other things) these prisoners are coerced into fighting. But people see immediately the arrangement's impressive benefits. The population of prisons is in fact reduced dramatically. Moreover, the televised events generate huge amounts of money, which allows the government to slash taxes and reduce poverty. With time, the televised killings become wildly popular, at least among a certain segment of the population. Of course they are not the only type of game shown on ESPN. The network still televises games of baseball, basketball, football, hockey, and soccer on a regular basis.

There are, I believe, two things to say about this arrangement between ESPN and the government. First, it is morally beyond the pale. In conditions such as ours, there is no way in which manipulating human beings to kill each other for the viewing pleasure of others could be morally justified. Like forced slavery or waterboarding, gladiatorial killing is an essentially cruel practice.

The second thing to say is that because these new games are an essentially cruel practice, you have strong moral reason not to pay for or watch them. Admittedly, in your more sober moments, you might realize that, given their momentum and popularity, there is probably little that you can do to stop these games. If you and your friends neither pay for nor watch them, this will probably have little effect. Indeed, if you were to watch these events, you wouldn't thereby violate the basic welfare rights of those who are killed in them, for by merely watching these games, you wouldn't be depriving these prisoners of their right not to be maimed or killed for sport.

Even so, you have strong moral reason not to be a consumer of these games. Why is that? The answer, it seems to me, is that the moral life is about not only how to act well, but also how to *live* well. And to live well is to be for the good and against what is evil. Being for the good, however, is not simply a matter of producing or protecting what is good. Sometimes it is to engage in actions whose primary value is symbolic in which we *stand for* the good. While I have no definition of what it is to stand for the good by engaging in actions that have symbolic value (or refusing to engage in actions that have symbolic disvalue), we can readily recognize examples of the phenomenon. For example, sometimes being for the good consists in refusing to engage in actions that have symbolic disvalue, such as bowing to a cruel emperor. In other cases, it consists in actively engaging in actions that have symbolic value, such as holding vigil in remembrance of the dead. Indeed, in situations in which we are more or less helpless to change what is evil—either because that evil is so pervasive or because we must answer to other demands—engaging in activities of these sorts is often the best we can do. Since we often do find ourselves in such situations, awareness of the symbolic dimensions of our everyday activity is an important way in which we can be for the good.[5]

In principle, there are many types of actions that can have symbolic value or disvalue. Being a consumer of goods of certain types, I assume, is among them. Paying to watch ESPN's gladiatorial games is, for example, an action that has considerable symbolic disvalue, while protesting them is one that has considerable symbolic value. The former is a way of symbolically supporting or being for a practice that is cruel, while the latter is a way of standing against it. To which I should add that symbolic value or disvalue can attach to actions even when we fail to recognize it. Even if I pay no attention whatsoever to the moral dimensions of the gladiatorial games, being solely concerned with their economic aspects, being a consumer of them has considerable symbolic disvalue. Moreover, even if I deeply dislike a given practice that is essentially cruel, but continue to consume the goods it produces, my actions can have symbolic disvalue. If this is right, the symbolic disvalue of my being a consumer of a good needn't walk in lockstep with the attitudes I have toward being a consumer of that good.

There is much more to say about the notions of an essentially cruel practice and symbolic value. For the purposes of our discussion, I am going to assume that we have a satisfactory understanding of them, since we can identify instances of each, such as those offered in the examples above. The point I am interested in making is that the Support Principle yields the verdict that, all else being equal, you ought not to be a consumer of ESPN's gladiatorial games. Not only does being a consumer of the games have considerable symbolic disvalue, you also

have alternatives available. You can, for example, watch a game of football or a wrestling match if you especially enjoy watching sports during your free time.

An Improved Argument

Let us now turn from sporting events to animals (by which I mean nonhuman animals). In doing so, I am going to help myself to a broadly empirical assumption for which I am not going to argue in any detail, which is that factory farming is an essentially cruel practice. This last claim has been widely argued for, so I will limit myself simply to quoting from a pamphlet recently published by the Humane Society that details its characteristics:

> How, then, are the billions of animals raised and slaughtered annually in industrial agriculture generally treated? Before their lives even begin, bioengineering often stacks the deck against them by putting optimum market value ahead of their bodily integrity. Because a higher ratio of meat to bone than occurs in nature is economically advantageous, animals are engineered to have more body mass than their skeletal structures and organ systems can feasibly support, leaving them vulnerable to increased risk of broken bones, chronic respiratory difficulty, and organ failure. Once born, these animals are debeaked, tail-docked, dehorned, branded, and castrated without anesthetic. They live predominantly indoors in crowded conditions that deny them the ability to exercise their most basic instincts, including maintaining hygiene, caring for their young, establishing natural social orders, or even having full range of movement, much less the freedom to graze or forage for food in a natural setting. To optimize weight gain, they are given heavily supplemented grain feed that their bodies are not equipped to digest, often resulting in perpetual discomfort and unnatural obesity for the duration of their lives.
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> For transport to slaughter, they are packed into trucks where overcrowding and exposure to extreme weather conditions usually claim some of them en route. Upon arrival at the slaughterhouse, the animals too sick to move of their own volition are deposited onto "downer piles" where they may remain for hours or even days before they die. Those fit for slaughter are then routed to the killing floor, where, depending on their species, they may be shackled upside down by the legs or channeled into metal "knocking chutes" that restrict their ability to resist their captors. There, surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells of their fellow creatures dying, they are killed, perhaps by "captive bolt" to the brainstem, perhaps by a blade to the throat. Due to the speed at which these processes are carried out and the varying levels of skill among the workers, it is not uncommon for animals to survive their attempted slaughter, only to meet their fate farther down the processing line. Fully conscious chickens, for example, may be scalded to death in defeathering tanks, while cows and pigs may be dismembered alive.[6]

As I say, this is only a very brief description of the practice of factory farming. Much more graphic and detailed descriptions are available. Still, the description offered is enough for us to formulate the following argument for conscientious omnivorism:

An Improved Deontological Argument

(1) Factory farming is an essentially cruel practice.
(2) By being a consumer of factory farmed meat one thereby supports, if only symbolically, an essentially cruel practice. All else being equal, such support has considerable symbolic disvalue.
(3) **The Support Principle**: Suppose an essentially cruel practice provides some good G. All else being equal, one morally ought not to support that practice by being a consumer of G if an alternative to G is readily available, which is comparable in cost and quality and is not the product of an essentially cruel practice, since being a consumer of G has considerable symbolic disvalue.
(4) There are readily available alternatives to the meat produced by factory farms, which are comparable in cost and quality and not the product of an essentially cruel practice.
(5) So, all else being equal, one ought to be (at least) a conscientious omnivore.

I think this is a good argument. Look at its premises. Premise (1) seems true, as the empirical evidence in its favor is difficult to dispute. Premise (2) also looks true. Given the nature of factory farming, being a consumer of factory farmed meat appears to have considerable symbolic disvalue. The meat is, as it were, a relic of creatures that have been deeply wronged by the treatment they received. Of course this itself does not imply that you ought not to be a consumer of such meat. If the Support Principle is true, it implies this only when there are viable alternatives. However, most of us have available alternatives that are comparable in cost and quality to factory farmed meat, which are not the products of essentially cruel practices. One could consume only "family farmed" meat, for example—meat that is produced by small farms in which animals live good if shorter than normal lives.[7] Or one could be vegetarian or vegan, eating primarily (or only) plant-based foods. (I will return to the question of the sense in which dairy and plant-based foods are comparable in quality to meat in the next section.)

If this is so, premises (1), (2), and (4) of the improved argument look plausible. The real issue, then, is whether we should accept the Support Principle. While not beyond controversy, the Support Principle has at least the following going for it. For one thing, it seems to yield the right result in a large array of cases

for the right reasons. Suppose you are wondering whether to be a consumer of the ESPN gladiatorial games. The Support Principle tells you that, all else being equal, you should not be if there are viable alternatives. This seems like the correct verdict. Or suppose you are wondering whether to be a consumer of blue jeans that are produced in Central American sweatshops. The Support Principle tells you that, all else being equal, you should not if there are viable alternatives. This also seems like the correct verdict. Or suppose you are wondering whether to be a consumer of avant-garde art that is composed of the body parts of slaughtered Sudanese refugees. The Support Principle tells you that, all else being equal, you should not if there are viable available alternatives. This also seems true. The Support Principle yields these correct results, moreover, without committing itself to controversial claims that being a consumer of these goods would somehow causally contribute to or enable the survival of the practices that produce these goods. Whether or not being a consumer of these goods has these consequences, the Support Principle instructs us to avoid being a consumer of them—all else being equal, of course.

What is more, the Support Principle is not overly demanding, an expression of an overly idealistic ethical code. It allows that there might be cases in which being a consumer of a good has considerable symbolic disvalue but there are reasons that permit consuming it nonetheless. For example, suppose that failing to be a consumer of such a good would (in some very difficult-to-imagine way) probably trigger the collapse of our economic system. The Support Principle is compatible with there being sufficient reason to be a consumer of that good.

These seem like welcome implications of the Support Principle. Still, one might harbor the suspicion that the Support Principle is without teeth, permitting all manner of ethically suspect actions. Here is one way to articulate this suspicion: Imagine that you have accepted an invitation to a barbeque with full knowledge that it will be a factory farmed meat-fest, with no alternatives available. You either eat the sausage, chicken, and beef served or go hungry. Since you have excellent reasons not to go hungry, you enjoy a full meat-laden meal. The Support Principle, it seems, allows you to be a consumer in such a case, which seems overly permissive.

The concern is ungrounded. The reason is that the Support Principle simply articulates a sufficient condition for when we ought not to be a consumer of a good. It tells us that, all else being equal, if being a consumer of a good has considerable symbolic disvalue and there are viable alternatives available, then one ought not to be a consumer of that good. It has no implications whatsoever for cases in which an action has considerable symbolic disvalue but there are no viable alternatives. In those sorts of cases, we will have to appeal to other ethical principles. In the case of the barbeque, for example, we might appeal to a principle that requires one, in the formation of one's plans, to be reasonably conscientious about the empirical and ethical dimensions of situations that one is likely to face when enacting them. Let me hasten to add that there might be other cases to which the

Support Principle applies that are extraordinarily difficult to assess morally. These cases might be such that acting in a certain way has both considerable symbolic value and disvalue. That there are such cases, however, does not impugn the Support Principle. It might be that the best we can expect of most moral principles is that they yield discernible ethical verdicts in only a wide range of cases.

Going a Step Further

I have argued for two main claims. The first is that a standard type of deontological argument for moral vegetarianism fails. The second is that there is a good argument for conscientious omnivorism that hinges on the concept of symbolic value. This last argument might, however, raise as many questions as it answers. For one might suspect that conscientious omnivorism is an unstable position, the reason being that, if the argument offered in the last section were sound, it is difficult to see why we wouldn't also have decisive reason to accept moral vegetarianism full stop.

To see why, suppose it is true that being a consumer of factory farmed meat has considerable symbolic disvalue. If it does, then it also seems true that being a consumer of family farmed meat has considerable symbolic disvalue. This meat is, after all, the product of a practice dedicated to raising animals for the purpose of killing them for food. It is what we might call an essentially *life-depriving* practice, one that systematically frustrates the flourishing of animals by killing them. (By "a life-depriving practice," I mean a practice that deprives only *subjects of a life* of their lives.) Raising an animal humanely for the purpose of (and actually) killing it, admittedly, is not nearly as bad as treating it cruelly and then killing it. Even so, inflicting death on the subject of a life is typically a considerable evil in the life of the creature on which it is inflicted. There have to be strong enough reasons, it would appear, to justify it.

Let's see if we can articulate this concern more precisely by formulating an argument for moral vegetarianism that is parallel to the one offered for conscientious omnivorism. This parallel argument hinges on a close relative to the Support Principle, which we can call:

> **The Modified Support Principle**: Suppose an essentially life-depriving practice provides some good G. All else being equal, one morally ought not to support that practice by being a consumer of G if an alternative to G is readily available, which is comparable in cost and quality and is not the product of an essentially life-depriving (or cruel) practice, since being a consumer of G has considerable symbolic disvalue.[8]

When explaining why its counterpart, the Support Principle, is plausible, I appealed to a scenario involving gladiatorial practices, noting that they are essentially cruel. Let me try to articulate why the Modified Support Principle seems

plausible by returning to themes that we discussed earlier when considering the Standard Deontological Argument.

Recall that that argument appealed to a pair of concepts. We said, first, that something is a subject of a life if and only if it is a creature of such a kind that it can flourish or fail to flourish, has strong interests in its own flourishing, and can be aware of its own flourishing or failure to flourish. It is (in part) because subjects of a life have capacities of this sort that they have worth. This worth is of such a kind, we saw, that it renders subjects of a life the sort of thing that we can wrong. Or to employ the other key concept introduced earlier, having worth of this sort implies that subjects of a life have the basic welfare rights. Earlier I offered a provisional characterization of the basic welfare rights. I said that if A has a basic welfare right against an agent B, then B morally ought not intentionally to frustrate or destroy A's flourishing by doing such things as preventing it from using its senses, destroying its capacity to form bonds of kinship, maiming its body so it cannot engage in movement or play, and so forth. It will be helpful, however, if we go beyond this abstract characterization to identify more specific examples of these rights. When we do so, we can see that the basic welfare rights include the right not to be treated cruelly and the right not to be killed just for kicks.

We are now better situated to see why being a conscientious omnivore might not be enough. The way to do so is by formulating what I shall call:

A More Stringent Deontological Argument

(1) Family farming is an essentially life-depriving practice.
(2) By being a consumer of family farmed meat one thereby supports, if only symbolically, an essentially life-depriving practice. All else being equal, such support has considerable symbolic disvalue.
(3) **The Modified Support Principle**: Suppose an essentially life-depriving practice provides some good G. All else being equal, one morally ought not to support that practice by being a consumer of G if an alternative to G is readily available, which is comparable in cost and quality and is not the product of an essentially life-depriving (or cruel) practice, since being a consumer of G has considerable symbolic disvalue.
(4) There are readily available alternatives to the meat produced by family farms, which are comparable in cost and quality and not the product of an essentially life-depriving (or cruel) practice.
(5) So, all else being equal, one ought to be (at least) a moral vegetarian.

Let's take a closer look at this argument. Premise (1) is certainly true. Family farming, no less than factory farming, is essentially a life-depriving practice; its primary aim is to raise animals for the purpose of eating them. Premise (2) also looks plausible. While it is true that by being a consumer of family farmed meat one does not thereby violate the basic welfare rights of the animals that

are slaughtered, one does nevertheless lend symbolic support to a practice that raises and slaughters these animals. Moreover, this support does appear to have considerable symbolic disvalue. For, like factory farming, family farming seems to wrong the animals that are slaughtered.

Perhaps the best way to make this last point is to recall the sorts of basic welfare rights that farm animals have. Although animals may not have a basic welfare right not to be killed, they do appear to have the right against us:

> not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from killing them.

But now think of why family farmed animals are slaughtered. The primary reason is that there is a demand for their meat. And that demand, it seems, is rooted primarily in the pleasure of eating it. But it is difficult to see how it could be that these animals have a right not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from killing them but lack the right:

> not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from eating them.

In short, it appears that if farm animals have the former sort of right, then they must also have the latter sort of right—at least in conditions such as ours. If so, supporting a practice that systematically violates this last right would appear to have considerable symbolic disvalue.

Granted, the mere fact that being a consumer of family farmed meat has considerable symbolic disvalue does not itself imply that we morally ought not to be consumers of it. If the Modified Support Principle is true, it implies this only when there are viable alternatives. There do, however, appear to be viable alternatives to consuming family farmed meat. Moreover, the main alternatives—which are dairy or plant-based foods—are comparable in cost and nutritional quality to family farmed meat. In fact, many would say that many types of plant-based foods are (for most of us) superior in nutritional quality.

It should be admitted that most dairy and plant-based foods lack some of the properties of meat that so many enjoy. These foods are not, for example, closely comparable in texture and taste to meat. So for premise (4) to be plausible, we must understand it broadly. "Quality" must refer to both nutritional and gustatory quality—the last being the disposition of a food to produce enjoyment when eaten. To say, then, that dairy and plant-based products are comparable in quality is not to claim that these foods produce gustatory sensations of the very same types as meat. Rather, it is to claim, first, that there are dairy and plant-based foods that are comparable in nutritional quality to meat and, second, that when eaten, produce gustatory pleasure of a type and degree comparable to that of meat; eating them is highly enjoyable. I write this with full knowledge that major changes in our food options are probably right over the horizon. The vanguard of food technologies has, apparently, produced plant-based products that are, even to

experts, indistinguishable in taste and texture from meat. If this is so, then there will soon be widely available plant-based alternatives that are very close in taste and texture to meat. If one is inclined to interpret "comparable in quality" to include gustatory qualities such as *being very close in taste and texture to meat*, then one can interpret premise (4) in such a way that, while not true now, it will be true in the near future.

We have considered premises (1), (2), and (4) of the More Stringent Deontological Argument. They all seem plausible. This leaves the Modified Support Principle, which has the following to recommend it.

For one thing, it seems to issue the correct verdicts in a large range of cases. Suppose, for example, you are deliberating about whether to buy a winter coat. One option is a fur-lined parka that is produced by a life-depriving practice. The Modified Support Principle tells you that, all else being equal, you should not purchase the parka if there is a viable alternative. This seems correct. Or suppose you are going to buy some mascara. One option is a product that is tested on animals which are killed during or after the testing process. The Modified Support Principle tells you that, all else being equal, you should not buy this product if there is a viable alternative. That also seems right. Or suppose you need to replace the tuners on your vintage guitar. One option is to buy some new ivory tuners that are similar to those that came with your guitar. The Modified Support Principle tells you that, all else being equal, you should not buy these tuners if there is a viable alternative. That also seems right.

What is more, the Modified Support Principle is not morally idealistic in the pejorative sense. It allows that there might be cases in which being a consumer of a good has considerable symbolic disvalue but there are reasons that permit consuming it nonetheless. Suppose, for example, that you need a medical remedy that can only be produced by a practice that deprives animals of their lives. The Modified Support Principle does not imply that you ought not to be a consumer of the remedy.

The challenge that conscientious omnivores face should now be clear. It is to specify why, given that being a consumer of both factory farmed and family farmed meat has considerable symbolic disvalue, it is impermissible to be a consumer of the former but not the latter. Is there a good response to this challenge?

The Conscientious Omnivore's Response

I am not sure. But let me present what seems to me the best response available to conscientious omnivores. Begin with points of agreement between conscientious omnivores, on the one hand, and moral vegetarians, on the other. Proponents of both views agree that killing family farmed animals for food has considerable disvalue. By killing these animals, after all, we typically inflict a substantial evil on them. Proponents of both positions agree, then, that there is reason not to kill these animals for food. Although it is notoriously difficult to arrive at wholesale

comparative evaluative judgments, both conscientious omnivores and moral vegetarians might also agree that it would be *better* on the whole if we did not raise and kill these animals for food, even if these animals do owe their existence to those who raise them for food. (In this sense, family farming is a *life-giving* practice.) Finally, advocates of both positions might be prepared to say that the badness of killing these animals is offset to some degree since they tend to have very good (if relatively short) lives, which they wouldn't have were they not being raised for food. To what degree this badness is offset by the fact that these animals have good lives is a good question. But proponents of both views would agree, I think, that their having lives of this sort does not neutralize the badness of killing them.

Where, then, do the two views part company? They differ in this important respect: Conscientious omnivores believe that, while we may have moral reasons not to kill these animals for food, we would not *wrong* these animals were we to kill them for food. The disvalue that attaches to the life-depriving practice of raising animals to eat them, say conscientious omnivores, is not a *rights-violating* disvalue. In this respect, family farming is crucially different from factory farming, as the disvalue that attaches to the latter is of the rights-violating sort. Why, though, is the disvalue that attaches to family farming not of a rights-violating sort? The answer, according to conscientious omnivores, is that by giving these animals good (if short) lives, we do not thereby humiliate or degrade them. Nor do we treat them with under-respect, treating them as if their lives and well-being do not matter (or have only instrumental worth).

To see how conscientious omnivores are thinking, let's begin by considering what they would say in response to the charge that family farming is a rights-violating practice. Earlier we considered an argument that family farming is a rights-depriving practice that went as follows. Suppose it is true that farm animals have the right:

> not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from killing them.

If they do, we said, it is very difficult to see how they could lack the right:

> not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from eating them.

Since everyone should admit that these animals have the former right, they should also agree that they have the latter right. And since family farming violates the latter right, it is a rights-violating practice, the support of which has considerable symbolic disvalue.

Conscientious omnivores maintain that the argument just offered distorts their view. The practice of family farming, as they see things, has a considerably more complex aim than that of providing meat that people enjoy eating. This complex aim includes, in the first place, providing animals with good lives—lives that are typically, on the whole, much better than those they would have were they to

live in the wild. Indeed, as I understand what it is to family farm, providing such lives is an essential aspect of the practice; one could not competently engage in it without having this as a goal. The aim of family farming also includes providing food that sustains and nourishes us, which is (for many) very pleasurable to eat. This food, in turn, sustains a variety of rich social practices that many value a great deal, including those of animal husbandry, cookery, holiday celebrations, and shared meals. Finally, these farms represent an attempt to provide a viable alternative to factory farms, which treat farm animals with considerable cruelty. In this respect, the activity of family farming has symbolic value.

Once we see this, we can see that the agreement between conscientious omnivores and moral vegetarians is more extensive than we initially supposed. Advocates of both views agree not only that there is reason not to kill animals, but also that farm animals have many rights, including the rights:

> not to be treated with cruelty;
> not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from killing them;

And:

> not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from eating them.

For, proponents of these views maintain, to violate these rights would be to treat animals as if their lives and well-being do not matter.

Conscientious omnivores face the charge that family farming is a rights-violating practice. So far, we have explored how conscientious omnivores might respond to this charge. It remains to be seen, however, why these people believe that raising animals for food on family farms does not treat them with under-respect. How would we determinate that? According to conscientious omnivores, the way to do so is to identify a right such that by violating it, those who engage in family farming would treat their animals with under-respect, thereby wronging them. What right would that be?

It would be a right not to be killed in order to achieve the complex aim of family farming. To better understand the nature of this right, consider those conditions in which animals are given excellent lives on family farms. The question to ask is whether these animals have the right against those who provide these lives:

> not to be killed for the purpose of providing nourishing food, which provides gustatory pleasure, sustains valued social practices, and provides a viable alternative to factory farming.

For ease of reference, let us call this the *right to a full life*, since it is a right that animals have against those who care for them not to cut their lives short to

achieve the complex aim of family farming. Conscientious omnivores must deny that animals have such a right. They can, I believe, say two things in defense of this denial.

First, if animals have the right to a full life, this will not be a direct implication of their having the other basic welfare rights mentioned above, since having the basic welfare rights does not imply having the right to a full life. We cannot, for example, derive the right to a full life from an animal's rights not to be treated with cruelty or not to be killed just for the pleasure derived from eating it. To establish that animals do have the right to a full life, we will need to see a new line of argument. It might be worth adding that were animals to lack the right to a full life, they could also have considerable inherent worth, as conscientious omnivores believe. That inherent worth, in fact, could ground the basic welfare rights such as the right not to be killed just for the pleasure of the killing. But it would not obviously imply that it would be impermissible to kill animals that are family farmed for the complex end at which family farms aim.

The second thing to say is that there are reasons for doubting that animals have the right to a full life. Toward the beginning of our discussion, I mentioned that few of us believe that the Native Americans who lived in the US one hundred fifty years ago acted in a morally impermissible way by killing animals for food and clothing. They needed to if they were to survive and flourish. Imagine, however, that these people were offered the following choice (perhaps by others of their tribe): You may either continue your way of life or stop killing animals and become farmers or merchants. Since being a farmer or merchant will be fairly lucrative, you will be able to buy clothing made from not animal skins but fabrics such as cotton and wool, which will be highly functional.

If these people were to take the former option, I take it that their justification for doing so would be very similar to that offered by conscientious omnivores when asked to justify their position. By killing animals, the Native Americans would say, they thereby provide their people with nourishing and delicious food—these activities being at the center of a deeply entrenched and valued way of life. The question to ask is whether they would be wronging the animals they kill if they were to take the first option.

It is not apparent that they would. For it is not apparent that rabbits, buffalo, deer, elk, and the like have the right not to be killed for the purpose of providing nourishing food and sustaining the natives' way of life—even when an alternative way of life that does not involve this killing is available and viable. But if these animals do not have this right—conscientious omnivores will claim—then it should also be permissible both to engage in family farming and to be consumers of family farmed meat. Admittedly, it may be that both the Native Americans in our example and conscientious omnivores have strong reasons to be consumers of less meat than they might otherwise think allowable. For it may be that to be adequately nourished and to sustain the crucial elements of their ways of life, they need only consume meat in rather limited quantities. But that is as it should

be. Conscientious omnivorism does not imply that there are no good moral reasons to restrict the frequency with which one would eat family farmed meat.

The case of the natives is instructive. For if it establishes that the natives do not wrong the animals they kill, it follows that whether animals have a right to a full life does not hinge on whether killing them is necessary to survive or flourish. Nor does it hang on whether there are no alternatives to killing them for foods that are both available and viable.

I do not believe that what I have said on behalf of conscientious omnivorism vindicates the view. The answer I have offered on its behalf is controversial. Moreover, it would be helpful if the view could tell us *why* animals have the basic welfare rights but not the right to a full life. Nonetheless, I think we now have a better idea of what conscientious omnivores and moral vegetarians disagree about. Moreover, it also seems to me that what conscientious omnivores say goes some distance toward blocking the argument that we were considering; namely, if we adopt conscientious omnivorism, then we should also accept moral vegetarianism full stop. If this inference is cogent, we will need fresh reasons to accept it or reasons to believe that the attempt by conscientious omnivores to block it is flawed.

Let me close by considering a likely response to what I have said in defense of conscientious omnivorism. This response—which I call the *Twilight Zone Objection* since it is borrowed in its essentials from an episode of the TV series *The Twilight Zone*—asks us to imagine a scenario in which very intelligent and powerful aliens occupy Earth. Since they are nourished by and greatly enjoy the experience of eating human flesh, they "family farm" human beings—this practice of theirs being part of a long-standing and valued way of life that includes having done similar things to other rational beings on other planets. Under this arrangement, human beings live very good but relatively short lives, as many are slaughtered for food before the age of twenty. (Assume, for the moment, that the aliens have effective ways of eliminating the anxiety regarding being slaughtered.) Is this a morally permissible arrangement?

Well, note that the justification offered for it by the aliens is very close to that offered by conscientious omnivores for their view. This justification appeals to the fact that eating human flesh is nourishing, delicious, part of long-standing practices that the aliens value, and so forth. But if this justification fails in the case of the aliens—as most of us believe—then it should also fail in the case of conscientious omnivores. It would follow that conscientious omnivorism cannot be justified by the sorts of considerations adduced above.

The way to defuse the Twilight Zone Objection is to note that the conditions under which it is permissible for a human person to kill another human person for the purpose of eating him appear to be very narrow. Only in emergency situations in which some group will starve to death if they do not kill another human does such killing appear to be permissible. And in these conditions it may be permissible only when the person to be killed grants others the permission

to kill him. By contrast, the conditions under which it is permissible to kill nonhuman animals for food seem much wider. At the very least, they include not only emergency conditions such as that just described, but also conditions in which other viable food options are not readily available, such as the conditions occupied by the Native Americans or our agrarian ancestors. But if there is this discrepancy, then it is not permissible for the aliens to "family farm" human persons. After all, the conditions under which it is permissible to kill other human persons for food are very narrow and there is no morally relevant respect in which the aliens differ from other human persons. (The fact that they are powerful enough to subject humans to family farming is morally irrelevant.) If so, the fact that the justification that the aliens offer for killing humans resembles that offered by conscientious omnivores for killing animals is neither here nor there.

I need to emphasize that this response is not supposed to justify conscientious omnivorism. It is only supposed to defuse a type of objection to the view.[9] I should also stress that this response does not identify what it is about human persons that makes it permissible to kill them for food in only the narrowest range of conditions or what it is about animals that renders it permissible to kill them for food in a much wider set of conditions. These are very difficult questions to answer well. The response I have offered simply appeals to the fact that there is this difference between humans and the other animals. Finally, it should be stressed that even if everything I have said on behalf of conscientious omnivorism is true, it does not follow that it is morally permissible to be a consumer of family farmed meat. For even if it is true that killing animals to achieve the end of family farming does not wrong them, there might be other reasons that it is wrong, as not every wrong action is a case of wronging something. I will not, however, hazard a guess as to what those reasons might be.[10]

Notes

1. In order to keep this discussion manageable, I have chosen not to engage moral veganism, which would counsel that we not purchase or consume animal products (including dairy products) at all. It may be that the arguments I consider here would apply to these views too. In their contributions to this volume, Hooley and Nobis, and McPherson defend veganism.
2. See Tom Regan, "The Case for Animal Rights," in *In Defense of Animals*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 13–26. I have modified what Regan says to suit my purposes here.
3. It's a live question in what sense animals can have interests, desires, or the like. For present purposes, I'll assume that they can, although their character may differ in important ways from the types of interests and desires that ordinary humans have. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), discusses the issue in chapters 3 and 4.
4. Here I am unpacking the ethical framework within which Regan is operating. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), offers an elaboration and defense of this ethical framework.
5. I am drawing upon Robert M. Adams's trenchant discussion of the category of symbolic value in his *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999),

chap. 9. See also Thomas Hill, "Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (1979): 83–102.

6. Matthew C. Halteman, *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Humane Society of the United States, 2010), 29–30.
7. Two points: First, there are other alternatives to being a consumer of factory farmed meat, including being a consumer of meat that is produced by hunting. For the sake of simplicity, I will set this possibility to the side, although I will touch upon the matter later. Second, I realize that not all animals raised on small family farms are treated well. When I speak of family farmed meat, then, I will have an idealization in mind. Family farmed meat is the meat of animals that have been free to graze, form bonds of kinship, fed antibiotics only when necessary, and so forth.
8. Michael Pollan appeals to a similar principle in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
9. There are other ways to formulate *The Twilight Zone* example that appeal to the parallels not between factory farming animals and farming human persons but between factory farming animals and farming human beings that are not persons or are on the margins of personhood, such as babies and the severely disabled. Adequately addressing cases such as these, I am afraid, would plunge us into deeply contested issues beyond what I can address here. But it may be that conscientious omnivores should be most concerned about cases such as these.
10. Audiences at Calvin College, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Vermont, Wake Forest University, and the American Academy of Religion offered feedback on an ancestor of this chapter. Mark Bryant Budolfson, Andrew Chignell, Tyler Doggett, Matt Halteman, and Travis Timmerman also commented on an earlier version of this chapter. They all have my thanks.

2

MANLY MEAT AND GENDERED EATING

Correcting Imbalance and Seeking Virtue

Christina Van Dyke

Eating is a gendered act. In Western cultural mythology, men have rapacious appetites that cannot be easily satisfied; they require 'substantial' foods (like meat and potatoes) to keep up their strength and satisfy their hunger.[1] Hearty consumption demonstrates a man's virility and reinforces his masculinity. Women, on the other hand, have appetites that can easily be satisfied with low-calorie, low-fat foods (like fruits, vegetables, and diet drinks); according to popular cultural myths, they live in constant danger of weight gain and loss of attractiveness if they indulge these minimal appetites. Furthermore, while men are encouraged to indulge and take pride in their appetites—whether it be for food, sex, or power—women are taught to tightly repress their hunger, focusing instead on satisfying the appetites of others.[2]

Food is also frequently gendered.[3] Meat, in particular, is construed as 'male' food, with nonfat yogurt, meatless salads, and other 'light' fare cast as 'female.'[4] So strong is the connection of meat with men and male power, in fact, that feminist theorist Carol Adams calls meat *the* symbol of the patriarchy and argues that the struggle to overcome male oppression must include moving away from eating meat. "How [can] we overthrow patriarchal power while eating its symbol?" she asks. "Autonomous, antipatriarchal being is clearly vegetarian. To destabilize patriarchal consumption we must interrupt patriarchal meals of meat" (200).[5] Adams is hardly alone in taking this stance: Other prominent feminists such as Greta Gaard, Lori Gruen, Marti Kheel, and Catharine MacKinnon also argue that rejecting the consumption of animals and animal products is an important step in overcoming patriarchal structures and consequent environmental injustices.[6]

The ecofeminist argument for veganism is powerful. Meat consumption is a deeply gendered act that is closely tied to the systematic objectification of