

VEGETARIANISM AND THE ARGUMENT FROM UNNECESSARY PAIN

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Introduction

The vegetarian argument from unnecessary pain is derived from the moral principle that unnecessary pain is wrong. The argument is:

- 1.10 Eating meat causes the animals unnecessary pain.
- 1.20 Unnecessary pain is wrong.
- 1.30 Therefore, eating meat is wrong.

This argument is a disguised teleological argument in which the unstated end is adequate human nutrition and the means to that end is meat-eating. The argument concludes that the means to the end is unnecessary and, therefore, wrong.

Obviously the soundness of any argument using the principle of unnecessary pain depends on what is meant by "unnecessary pain." Logically: *p* is *necessary* for *q* if and only if *q* will not obtain without *p*, that is, for every case of *q*, *p* is a logical antecedent or causal factor; and, *p* is *unnecessary* for *q* if *q* will obtain without *p*, that is, for at least some cases of *q*, *p* is not a logical antecedent or causal factor. There seem to be only two possible senses in which a *means* can be "unnecessary": (a) although (logically or causally) the end will not obtain without the means (that is, the means is in this sense necessary for the end to obtain), the *end* is itself *unnecessary* and, therefore, by *modus tollens* the means is unnecessary; or (b) although the end is itself necessary, the *means* is *unnecessary* because another independent sufficient means is available. These two readings of the term result in two versions of the argument, which I label respectively the "Unnecessary End Version" and the "Unnecessary Means Version".

The Unnecessary End Version

In what sense can an end be "unnecessary"? Let us begin with an analysis of what a "necessary" end might be. There are two possibilities: (a) an end is necessary if it is intrinsically valuable as a final end, as an end worthy of being sought in and of itself without any further consequences; and (b) an end is necessary if it is a necessary intermediate (means) to a further necessary end, which further end is intrinsically valuable. I will refer to these respectively as "intrinsically necessary final ends" and "extrinsically necessary intermediate ends." An intermediate end could be both intrinsically valuable and extrinsically necessary.

From this analysis, it follows that an "unnecessary" end would be an end that is *not* necessary in either of these two senses. A final end that is *not* an "intrinsically necessary final end" could be either (a) intrinsically bad or (b) merely intrinsically nonmoral. Intrinsically bad final ends ought to be avoided and prevented, but intrinsically nonmoral final ends would not be subject to moral obligations or constraints. In either case, the end would be "intrinsically unnecessary" because it would not be intrinsically necessary. Moreover, an intermediate end that is *not* an "extrinsically necessary intermediate end" would be an intermediate end that entails either (a) an intrinsically bad final end or (b) a nonmoral final end. So, an "extrinsically unnecessary intermediate end" would be an intermediate end that entails either (a) an intrinsically bad final end or (b) an intrinsically nonmoral final end.

The Unnecessary End Version of the vegetarian argument from unnecessary pain argues that an unnecessary end entails an unnecessary means. The above analysis indicates that there are two possible arguments: (a) an unnecessary end entails by *modus tollens* an unnecessary means; or (b) a means can produce an end that is extrinsically necessary for a further end, which further end is intrinsically bad, and, therefore, by *modus tollens* both the intermediate end and its means are "unnecessary" (as in [a]). The argument in both (a) and (b) is that, because the proximate or remote end is unnecessary, the means is also unnecessary. Moreover, if the end is unnecessary, any amount of cost or expense involved in producing the end--no matter how minimal--would be *a fortiori* unnecessary. The nonnecessity of the means is completely determined by the nonnecessity of the end.

Perhaps a third form of the the Unnecessary End Version is that an end can be so costly that it is judged to be "unnecessary", that is, the disvalue of the means outweighs the value of the end.

This third meaning of "unnecessary" is unacceptable because it is self-contradictory. What is being asserted is that the means to the end is too costly and, therefore, both the end and its means are "unnecessary." Unless another less costly means is available (as in the Multiple Means Version below), the means is not in fact unnecessary because the end will not obtain without the means; rather, it is the end that is judged to be unnecessary because it is too costly. This third incoherent form of the argument is actually a "linear (single) means" utility calculus in which the value/disvalue of the (single) means is contrasted to the value/disvalue of the end.

The Unnecessary End Version of the vegetarian argument is a *modus tollens*:

- 2.10 If we eat meat, then the animals will have unnecessary pain.
- 2.20 The animals should not have unnecessary pain.
- 2.30 Therefore, we should not eat meat.

Since this is a straightforward *modus tollens*, it is valid. What is at issue is whether the premises are true. Premise 2.20 is an application of the Principle of Unnecessary Pain to animals. Throughout this paper, the Principle of Unnecessary Pain is assumed to be true. If animals can in fact experience pain, then their unnecessary pain would be bad. Premise 2.20 asserts that whatever unnecessary pain that is experienced by animals--if any--would be bad and should not be inflicted. The empirical claim that animals do in fact experience such pain is asserted by Premise 2.10, which is the conjunctive claim that: (a) animals do in fact experience pain when they are used for food, and (b) the pain they experience is unnecessary.

How do we determine whether final ends (and therefrom whether any intermediate ends) are unnecessary? Numerous qualitatively different values can enter into judgments about ends. For example, when determined solely by a pleasure/pain criterion, an unnecessary final end would be disclosed by a hedonistic utility calculus, and the valued intrinsic final end would be mental states of pleasure. The Unnecessary End Version of the vegetarian argument would be a hedonistic "linear means" utility calculus in which the value/disvalue of the means, which may include a linear progression of one or more extrinsically necessary intermediate ends, is contrasted with the value/disvalue of the final end. According to the principle of utility: if the disvalue of the means outweighs the value of the end, then the action is wrong; if the disvalue of the means equals the value of the end, then the action is permissible; and if the disvalue of the means is less than the

value of the end, the action is obligatory. In contrast, the Unnecessary Means Version of the vegetarian argument, which is considered in the next section, is a "multiple independent means" calculus in which the utility of two or more independent and sufficient means are contrasted to each other rather than to the end.

In the vegetarian argument, the end at issue is adequate human nutrition; and, the end is not unnecessary if human beings are to survive. Therefore, it seems likely that this first reading of the argument is not what vegetarians intend. In contrast to adequate nutrition, more obviously unnecessary ends are using animals for decorations (taxidermy) and entertainment (rodeos). What vegetarians probably mean by the argument is that two means to adequate nutrition are available, a meat diet and a vegetarian diet, and that the meat diet is therefore unnecessary. This latter argument is the Unnecessary Means Version considered below.

Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975) has argued for vegetarianism on classical hedonistic utilitarian grounds.¹ When the pains and pleasures of both the animals and humans are counted, using animals for food produces an imbalance of pain over pleasure; and, therefore, animals should not be used for food. Singer's argument is not the Unnecessary End argument that I have outlined above because the two arguments have different ends. In Singer's hedonistic vegetarian argument, the final end to be maximized is *pleasure*, not adequate nutrition, as in the Unnecessary End Version of the vegetarian argument.

A radical hedonist might want to argue that we always ought to maximize pleasure--even if that entails inadequate human nutrition and perhaps the demise of the human species. If pleasure is the highest intrinsic good and if animal pleasures have as much value as human pleasures (which human pleasures would include intellectual, aesthetic, moral, social, and religious pleasures), then perhaps a hedonistic calculus would entail a world populated by only animals with no humans. In such a calculus, if meat-eating causes on balance more pain than pleasure, then we should not eat meat regardless of the impact on humans. Although I think these empirical claims are false, this hedonistic utilitarian argument is not the argument that I am analyzing and I cannot pursue it further in this brief paper.

The Unnecessary Means Version

The second reading of the vegetarian argument requires a "multiple independent means" calculus in which the utilities of two or more independent and sufficient means are contrasted according

to the Principle of Unnecessary Pain. This version of the argument is:

- 3.10 Human nutritional needs can be met by either a meat diet or a vegetarian diet.
- 3.20 The meat diet causes pain to the animals.
- 3.30 The vegetarian diet causes no pain to the animals.
- 3.40 Unnecessary pain is wrong.
- 3.50 Therefore, the meat diet is wrong.

Logically: p is 'necessary' for q if and only if q will not obtain without p ; and, p is 'unnecessary' for q if q will obtain without p , that is, if there is another possible cause for q . In the vegetarian argument, the goal is adequate nutrition, and two independent means are possible, a meat diet and a vegetarian diet. The availability of the vegetarian diet makes the meat diet "unnecessary." However, in severe conditions where the vegetarian diet is not available (such as, poverty or drought), the meat diet would be circumstantially necessary. In addition, merely the availability of an alternative independent means does not make the other means *wrong*--both may be morally permissible.

At this point in the analysis, the term 'pain' needs to be added to the term 'unnecessary'. Given the availability of a balanced vegetarian diet, meat-eating is in fact "unnecessary" for adequate nutrition. But, meat-eating would be wrong according to the Principle of Unnecessary Pain *only if* the carnivorous diet does in fact also produce *pain* in the animals. In other words, for the principle of unnecessary pain to apply, there must be a conjunction of two empirically true propositions: (1) "Meat-eating is *unnecessary* for adequate nutrition," and (2) "Meat-eating causes *pain*." The former proposition is empirically true, except in severe circumstances. The second proposition, however, is ambiguous, having at least three possible meanings, to which I now turn.

First, the second conjunct could mean that, even on the most conceivably humane and pleasurable animal farm, raising and slaughtering animals for meat would cause the animals at least some pain--perhaps miniscule--even though on balance they would live heavenly lives. Since meat is not needed for nutrition, this miniscule "pain" would be "unnecessary." The obvious criticism of this first interpretation is that the pleasure of such animals would vastly outweigh the pain--for both the animals and humans. Unless animals have some status that prohibits killing them, this first interpretation fails.

Second, the conjunct could mean that, if animals are raised

and slaughtered for meat, the life of each animal in itself would have on balance more pain than pleasure *to the individual animal*. Although perhaps when human benefits are added the total balance might be positive, the animals themselves have miserable lives. They are mere means to our ends. When we do not need the meat, it would be cruel to inflict such pain on the animals merely to satisfy our taste for flesh. In comparable cases where the lives of the animals on balance will be bad for the animals, such as, stray dogs and severely diseased pets, we consider it our duty to euthanize the animals. Moreover, if we will not provide humane care to our pets, we regard it as our duty not to indulge in having the animals. The *moral* aspect of this interpretation seems to me to be unquestionably true, namely, it is our duty to prevent animals from living lives that are on balance bad for the animals; but, the *empirical* aspect of this interpretation, namely, that food animals live such lives, is questionable, especially when the animals are raised on traditional farms.

Third, the conjunct could mean that, when animals are raised and slaughtered for meat, the net calculus of combined pleasures and pains, including both animal and human pleasures and pains, is negative. This empirical claim is also questionable, as argued below.

We can conceive the question as a conflict of two worlds: W_1 is a vegetarian world, and W_2 is a carnivorous world. If we assume that in both worlds human nutritional needs are met, then what is the relevant utilitarian difference between the two worlds? W_1 has the pleasure derived from vegetarian dishes *without* the pain to animals; whereas, W_2 has the pleasures derived from meat-eating *plus* whatever pleasures the animals experience during their lifetimes *lessened* by whatever pain the animals experience.

W_1 --Animals are not raised for food:

- No relevant animal pain.
- No relevant animal pleasure.
- Human pleasure from vegetable dishes.

W_2 --Animals are raised for food:

- Animal pleasures while alive.
- Animal pains while alive.
- Animal pains during slaughtering.
- Human pleasure from vegetable dishes.
- Human pleasure from meat dishes.

In what sense can we say that one world is better or worse than the other? In W_2 , if the animals are raised humanely and

slaughtered mercifully, their lives would on balance yield more pleasure than pain. To this pleasure would then have to be added the pleasure of the meat dishes. Therefore, W_2 would have on balance more pleasure than W_1 --except when the food animals are mistreated.

In estimating the utility calculus, the pleasures of the food animals themselves must be taken into account. If the animals raised in W_2 were also raised but not slaughtered in W_1 , then the vegetarian world would surely have more pleasure. But, if we stopped eating meat, then billions of animals would simply not exist and not experience any pleasure. Most food animals could not survive in the wild, and society surely would not pay for their food and veterinary costs. An oversight of some vegetarians is to desire the healthy animal populations of W_2 without the pain of killing. Admittedly, the continued pleasurable existence of any particular animal in W_2 would make W_2 a better world, but W_2 would not exist and that animal would not exist if W_2 were not carnivorous. The utility contrast should be between W_1 and W_2 , not between different possible states of W_2 . In addition, in W_2 when the particular animal is killed and eaten, it is usually replaced by another animal that experiences pleasure until it too is killed and replaced. This is the so-called "replaceability argument."² In other words, by virtue of the fact that it is a carnivorous world, W_2 sustains a level of pleasure (reduced by the animals' pain) that on balance is probably higher than the vegetarian world. The animals would not exist and would not enjoy any life if they were not to be eaten. If the food animals in W_2 are raised humanely and killed mercifully, they benefit and we benefit.

Moreover, it seems that a pleasure-pain calculus taken by itself would *require* that we eat meat. Because W_2 results on balance in more pleasure than W_1 , we are obligated by utility considerations to eat meat. Unless animals have some status (or intrinsic value) that would prohibit their slaughter for food, we are not only free to eat meat but are obligated to do so. Of course, we should not raise animals to such an extent that feeding the animals produces a world ecological crisis or food shortage, and we should not eat meat to such an extent as to produce our own ill-health. But, a certain optimum amount of meat-eating would seem to be obligatory for utilitarians because it would raise the net level of both human and animal pleasure without significant losses due to animal pain.

Although I would not defend the following argument, it seems plausible to me to argue on hedonistic utilitarian grounds

that another world (W_3) populated only by nonhuman animals would be a better hedonistic world than either W_1 or W_2 . Without human beings converting natural habitats into cities and farmlands, sentient animals would be free to reproduce and experience large amounts of pleasure, reduced of course by the pains of predation, disease, and natural disaster. Or, perhaps the best world would be a world with huge nonhuman animal populations and only a few human shepherds and veterinarians to care for the animals. If this argument is even plausible, then utilitarians need to take seriously a duty to bring about the extinction of the human species, unless human beings have intrinsic value and capacities for nonhedonistic intrinsic goods that make them superior to nonhuman animals. If human beings are genuinely superior, then the better world would seem to be some version of W_2 where human beings would seek to maximize the populations of both their own species and other species to the extent warranted by ecological factors and genuinely qualitative living for all. The mere plausibility of W_3 is a *reductio ad absurdum* for the hedonistic utilitarian argument.

Vegetarians may still insist that there is a sense in which W_2 is not a better world than W_1 : W_2 involves killing and eating animal flesh. If this statement is a moral judgment (rather than, for example, an aesthetic one), it begs the question by assuming that animals have a status beyond mere pleasure-pain sentience that makes killing them wrong. Consider another world (W_4) where unwanted day-old human babies are painlessly killed and eaten. Will a similar "pain" argument apply? Surely some humans would derive pleasure from eating roasted baby, and W_4 would then seem to be a better world than W_2 or W_1 . But, most of us would object that the act of killing and eating humans for food makes W_4 a worse world, but our objection would not be a hedonistic one because it assumes that human beings have an intrinsic value that prohibits killing and eating them for food. The reason we do not kill and eat human beings--regardless of the pleasure produced--is because they have a superior status above that of other animals. Unless we can establish that food animals have a human-like status, or at least a status sufficiently high enough to prohibit killing and eating them, we are free to continue our carnivorous diets. Many vegetarians presume that animals have a status far above that of mere sentience.

Conclusion

In either of its versions, the vegetarian argument from unnecessary pain does not necessitate vegetarianism. The Unnecessary End Version of the argument fails because the end, namely, adequate human nutrition, is not *unnecessary* if human persons are to survive. Because in fact adequate nutrition can be obtained from vegetarian diets, the Unnecessary Means Version of the argument has an initial plausibility. Analysis of this version, however, discloses that "unnecessary *pain*" is relevant only in those cases where the pain exceeds the pleasure for both the animals and the human beings involved. When the animals are raised humanely and killed mercifully, no relevant *pain* occurs because the lives of the animals are on balance pleasurable to the animals themselves. These animals benefit by being given lives that they otherwise would not have, and we benefit by eating them. The vegetarian argument from unnecessary pain prohibits eating meat only in those cases where the pain exceeds the pleasure, such as, when intensive farming technologies or the long-term ecological side effects produce on balance more net pain than pleasure for both the animals and humans. A corollary argument from pleasure would *require* humanely raising and eating animals to the extent that abusive technology, ecological problems, and poor health do not result. The most that animal sentience in itself requires is that the animals be raised humanely and killed mercifully. Unless food animals have some higher status beyond mere sentience, vegetarianism does not follow from an argument based on the Principle of Unnecessary Pain.

Notes

¹ Singer more recently has argued for "preference" utilitarianism and against classical hedonistic utilitarianism (Peter Singer, "Animals and the Value of Life," in *Matters of Life and Death*, 2d ed., ed. Tom Regan (New York: Random, 1986), pp. 355-60, 367-71.

² See R. G. Frey, *Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 168-72.