On the Threshold Argument against Consumer Meat Purchases

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I. Introduction

It is very likely that, in most cases, uncoordinated individual consumer meat purchases will not increase the number of animals bred, reared intensively, and subsequently killed on factory farms. However, employing what I term “the threshold argument,” some consequentialist vegetarians have maintained that such purchases are still morally impermissible. In brief, the argument is as follows:

Though most meat purchases may cause no harm to animals, on rare occasions they may trigger significant increases in meat production levels, which will lead to great harm. No prospective meat purchaser can know whether her purchase will lead to great harm. But the magnitude of the harm that could be caused by a purchase leading to a significant production increase—even when reduced in view of the very low probability that such an increase would actually occur—would outweigh any benefit the purchase might yield. Thus, no one should purchase meat.

The threshold argument’s primary audience is made of people who reason in broadly consequentialist fashion. But it will be relevant to the moral deliberation of anyone who thinks consequences are morally significant. It is best understood as an argument about decision making under conditions of uncertainty. An actor in possession of perfect information would know, of course, which meat purchases would and which would not cause harm to actual animals. If she were a consequentialist, she could use this information to perform the needed utility calculations and decide confidently how to proceed. The threshold argument is designed, in effect, to persuade someone with very limited information that she should avoid purchasing meat. The argument focuses on a putatively inverse relationship between the odds that a given purchase will trigger a threshold crossing and the number of animals likely to be affected by such a crossing. It seeks to show that, in light of this relationship, the actor with perfect information, who knows that her meat purchase will result in harm to a single animal, and the actor with very imperfect information, who knows that her purchase might harm many animals or none, are in morally equivalent positions.

In the remainder of this article, I offer reasons for doubting the efficacy of this argument. I begin by explaining the context of the argument and indicating
why it might be attractive to consequentialist vegetarians. Then, I consider a range of possible criticisms of the argument. Though not all of these criticisms are on-point, I conclude that it fails to establish that consequentialists are morally obligated to avoid purchasing meat. There are very good reasons to think that animals should not be killed for food, and there may be good arguments of various sorts for not purchasing or eating flesh foods. But the threshold argument, at any rate, does not show that anyone should refrain from purchasing meat.

In Part II, I explain why the threshold argument, or something like it, has seemed to some philosophers to be crucial to a consequentialist rejection of meat purchases. I elaborate the argument, and offer a simplified example. In Part III, I consider two unsuccessful criticisms of the argument and three plausible challenges to it. I examine and reject Tom Regan’s ingenious suggestion that the argument could not ground opposition to meat purchases because accepting it could actually dispose an omnivore to purchase more, rather than less, meat. But other objections to the threshold argument seem more persuasive, I suggest. I maintain that, even if threshold crossings occur, they are likely to lead to the mistreatment and death of fewer additional animals than the argument seems to presuppose. I argue that the argument assumes a more direct relationship between production levels and consumer-purchasing levels than an awareness of relevant market complexities renders likely. I emphasize that it is almost certainly impossible to perform the needed calculations at a level of precision needed to enable the threshold argument to succeed. In Part IV, I restate my argument, concluding that the final three challenges considered in Part III provide good reason to question or reject the argument. I also note the implications of its failure for arguments about other moral questions.

II. Vanishing Consequences

In Part II, I highlight the conviction, shared by many opponents and proponents of purchasing meat, that individual meat purchases characteristically do not affect production levels. It is this shared recognition that makes the threshold argument so important for consequentialists who believe purchasing meat is wrong. I attempt here to delineate the contours of the argument and to show how it offers its consequentialist proponents a way of continuing to challenge meat purchases even while acknowledging the characteristics of the meat market to which their opponents typically point.

It is now a commonplace in moral debates about vegetarianism that the impact on the meat market of uncoordinated individual purchasing decisions by the relatively small number of people who are currently vegetarians is minimal or non-existent. A key reason for this conviction is the enormous size of the market (especially in relation to the number of people who decline to buy its products). Last year in the United States, consumption of red meat and poultry averaged 221.4 pounds per person last year, up 2.3 pounds from 2003. The largest portion of the increase was in chicken consumption.
Domestic beef production during 2004 was down from 2003, but the amount of beef available to U.S. consumers increased by 1.2 pounds per-capita due to reduced exports and large import volumes. U.S. pork production was record large in 2004, but per-capita pork consumption actually declined slightly as exports grew, keeping prices high. Poultry supplies and consumption, meanwhile, continue to increase. During 2004, per-capita broiler consumption in the United States was 84.4 pounds, up 2.6 pounds from 2003.6

“If I give up eating apples,” Raymond Frey—a critic of vegetarianism—observes, “I am most unlikely to reduce by even one apple the number grown... and I can see no reason to think there is a difference in market forces here between chickens and apples.”7 Numerous philosophers supportive of moral vegetarianism have also made the point clearly. Peter Singer agrees that “[t]he loss of one consumer from the millions who buy animal flesh makes so small a difference that it is impossible to say that it affects the number of animals reared and killed.”8 James Rachels notes “that no animals will actually be helped simply by one person[’s] ceasing to eat meat.”9 Hud Hudson concedes that “the [meat] industry is not fine-tuned enough to be affected at all by [his] becoming a vegetarian.”10

Similarly, Gaverick Matheny characterizes as “plausible” the “assumption that most meat purchases are causally inefficacious,” explaining that “a single meat purchase is too insignificant, relative to the vast number of other meat purchases, to be noticed by the manager of a factory farm.”11 Russ Shafer-Landau essentially endorses the view that “[t]he ordinary consumer of meat is so remote in the causal nexus of animal suffering, that one cannot properly attribute to any such consumer any causal, hence moral, responsibility for the admittedly wretched fates suffered by farm animals.”12 Tzachi Zamir apparently shares the belief that “personally refraining from eating animal flesh will not save a single animal...” and that “one’s own actions cannot modify outcome[s] for future animals.”13 Nathan Nobis acknowledges the reasonableness of the “‘impotence of the individual’s objection.”14 And Stephen Clark opines: “it is (I fear) unlikely that I have relieved any animal, or diminished the gross total of animal suffering (if such a total has any real existence), by not eating flesh-foods.”15

If individual meat-purchasing decisions have little or no impact on a huge market, the consequentialist may wonder whether avoiding meat purchases is morally required (assuming, of course, that no other consequences are relevant).16 Thus, some vegetarian consequentialists have retooled their arguments in response to indications that most consumer purchases might not affect the number of animals reared and killed. They have acknowledged that most individual abstainers will have no influence at all on the number of animals bred on factory farms—that, often enough, as Singer notes, “one more person[’s] becoming a vegetarian will make no difference at all.”17 However, they have argued that some acts of abstention will be enormously significant, depending on others’ meat-purchasing choices. It may make a substantial difference if an individual vegetarian, “added to the others who are already vegetarians, reduces demand below the threshold level at which a new factory farm would have started up (or an existing one would have remained in production, if the industry is declining).”18
Between thresholds, the argument implies, production may be essentially flat. But substantial jumps will occur when values do fall at thresholds, and consumers will be responsible for proportionate shares of those jumps.

I begin with a highly simplified example. Industry analysts decide that, if 1,000,000,000 pounds of chicken are purchased in a given (closed) market during one year, they will give the green light to those who wish to open an envisioned factory farm. Chris heads to TacoMax in early December and purchases a chicken burrito. Perhaps, in virtue of Chris’s purchase, TacoMax’s order to its supplier will cause total purchases in the relevant market to exceed 1,000,000,000 pounds, with the result that the projected farm will open. If the farm opens, it will breed, say, 300,000,000 chickens each year during its one hundred years of operation.

Chris obviously cannot know whether her purchase will trigger the establishment of the farm. But she can know that there is a tiny risk that it will do so, and thus lead to enormous attendant misery. Perhaps there is a 1/3,000,000,000 chance that a purchase in the given market during the relevant period will trigger the creation of the farm. Then—the argument maintains—the disutility of each purchase (of average size) will be equal to that associated with the breeding of ten chickens (the total number of chickens bred during the life of the farm, multiplied by the odds that a given purchase will trigger the establishment of the farm).

It is easy to see how the threshold argument strengthens the hand of the consequentialist vegetarian. She can grant not only that we do not know the effects of our purchasing decisions but also that we can be reasonably confident that most of them will have no effect. Even so, she will maintain that it will still be unreasonable for anyone who thinks about moral questions in consequentialist fashion to purchase meat because of the small likelihood that a meat purchase will trigger a threshold crossing. On the model outlined above, the expected disutility associated with Chris’s purchase of a chicken burrito is the disutility produced by the intensive rearing and ensuing death of ten chickens. In this case, it will be hard to see—even on any plausible account of the moral considerability of chickens—how this much disutility is outweighed by the utility to Chris of consuming the burrito. So it seems clear that Chris should not purchase the burrito. This is true even though she must reckon the odds very slender indeed that her decision to purchase chicken in any given instance will increase even infinitesimally the actual number of animals bred.

The argument assumes that actors are largely undifferentiated, substitutable consumers, that there are very large numbers of these actors, and that they are, in general, uncoordinated. It also assumes, more controversially, that there are, in fact, thresholds, that production levels do not increase or decline in relatively fine-grained fashion, but rather make leaps at key points. If there are not thresholds of the relevant sort, the argument is, obviously, in trouble. But I will assume throughout that there are, and that the other assumptions of the argument I have just delineated hold as well.
III. Possible Responses

The consequentialist who does not wish to accept the conclusion that the threshold argument commits her to not purchasing meat has several options:

(a) She could argue that accepting the market model embodied in the threshold argument could actually encourage meat-eaters to eat *more* rather than less meat.

(b) She could agree that a consumer’s individual meat purchase might trigger movement over a threshold, while denying that the number of animals actually affected by such a movement was high enough to make the possibility of triggering a threshold crossing inappropriate from a consequentialist perspective.

(c) While granting that there might be market thresholds of the needed sort, she could deny that meat production levels vary directly with consumer demand. On this basis, she could maintain that the influence of other factors substantially reduced the likelihood that consumer purchases were responsible for movements over thresholds.

(d) She could deny the *possibility* of making the needed calculations—and thus strengthen both the cumulative argument from (b) and (c) and the alternative represented by (d).

I think (a) proves unsustainable. The other potential responses I canvas are more plausible, however; (b), (c), and (d) are individually telling, and they form an especially powerful response to the argument when treated as a unit. I conclude, after a review of these responses, that the threshold argument is on shaky ground.

A. Perverse Incentives

Tom Regan has forcefully argued that the threshold argument implies that omnivores who would like meat eating to be morally permissible can achieve this goal by eating more meat. In section A, I suggest that his paradox argument, though ingenious and appealing, is unsuccessful as a rebuttal of the threshold argument.

According to Regan, should the number of vegetarians swell to such an extent that their collective impact on factory farming could, other things being equal, close this or that intensive rearing operation, the nonvegetarians, given Singer’s position, could still take steps to escape the obligatoriness of vegetarianism, as this is assessed by the impact of vegetarians on factory farming. All that nonvegetarians would need [to] do is eat more meat, thereby negating the collective effect of the vegetarians and so . . . negating the meat eater’s obligation to be vegetarian. . . . [Thus,] Singer cannot argue that what they are doing is wrong, by appeal to the impact of alternative diets on factory farming.25
Regan’s argument seems to be this. If significant numbers of people eat less meat, the result may be the closure of a factory farm (or the non-establishment of a new farm). The consequentialist will be obligated to avoid purchasing meat if doing so might tip the balance in favor of the farm’s closure (or against its establishment). If there is no realistic possibility that a purchase might lead to the closure (or non-establishment) of a factory farm, then one will have no responsibility to avoid purchasing meat. A purchase can lead to the closure (or non-establishment) of a factory farm if a threshold is being approached. If one wants it to be the case that the responsibility to avoid purchasing meat does not obtain, then one should see to it that purchasing meat does not tip the balance in favor of the farm’s closure (or non-establishment). But one can do this if one ensures that the market is sufficiently supportive of the farm that it will not close, and one can do this, in turn, by purchasing meat.

This argument fails to convince. Under conditions of uncertainty, no one will know her own location in market space. And if one does not, then one will run the uncertain risk of bringing about a substantial harm—either preventing the closure of a factory farm (if the meat market is, as it seems not to be, in decline) or causing the establishment of such a farm. Eating more meat will increase the risk, not decrease it, if the threshold argument is correct. The consequentialist will have little reason to take this risk.

Suppose Chris wants to “take steps to escape the obligatoriness of vegetarianism, as this is assessed by the impact of vegetarians on factory farming.” If she chooses to purchase more meat at a point at which doing so would tip the balance in favor of a new factory farm, she is clearly not behaving as consequentialism would recommend. Eating more meat is clearly contrary to her obligations in this case, as they are understood by consequentialism. But since Chris lacks, and cannot realistically acquire, knowledge of the relevant market variables, she must assume that it is always possible that a purchase could trigger the creation of a new factory farm, and that the expected utility of her decision is (on the threshold argument as so far elaborated) such that she should not make the purchase.

Perhaps the consequentialist somehow does have the information about the market needed to locate and affect a threshold crossing. She may know that little or no disutility will attach to some meat purchases because, while they benefit her, they will not increase the net number of animals bred. No doubt she can and should make the best of a bad situation. But the threshold argument generates no incentive for her to eat more meat than would be optimific. Doing so would not decrease her chances of being morally responsible for harms done to animals by factory farms. Indeed, if other purchasers lacked the information she did, and so could not be counted on to avoid making purchases that might trigger the establishment of a factory farm, buying more meat would increase the odds that such a farm might be established and more disutility created. If, per impossibile, all purchasers had access to all market information (and were all consequentialists), then they certainly would not purchase meat when doing so would trigger the
establishment (or prevent the closure) of a factory farm. Some people’s small or non-existent meat purchases would be needed to offset large purchases by others so the disutility of the farm’s establishment or non-closure was not created. Preventing the closure or promoting the establishment of a factory farm would, ex hypothesi, have a negative impact on net utility. And the consequentialist could not rightly act non-optimifically on the understanding that, because she had thus acted, some other action of hers, which would otherwise have been non-optimific, would then be optimific.

If the threshold argument were correct, the consequentialist omnivore who was in a position to reason as Regan envisions would have a more optimific option than eating more meat to relieve herself of liability. If she is in a position to affect a threshold crossing and if she has access to relevant market information, she could purchase meat without incurring liability were the market declining, simply by waiting to purchase meat until a threshold had been crossed and a factory farm closed. Limited abstinence on her part could trigger a farm’s closure. Once promoting a threshold crossing was no longer an issue, she could resume her meat consumption. This sort of targeted abstention seems likely to be more reasonable behavior for the consequentialist convinced by threshold argument than the increased meat consumption Regan envisions.

This rejoinder to Regan assumes that he is concerned with the behavior of meat-eaters who are themselves responsible consequentialists, since he refers to meat-eaters’ obligations to be vegetarian being negated and implies that the negation of these obligations would be a purpose for the meat-purchasing choices of the relevant meat-eaters. But perhaps Regan is concerned simply with the behavior of meat-eaters, whether they are consequentialists or not. In this case, Regan would certainly be right that, having acted non-optimifically before, and so acted in ways leading, say, to the creation of a new factory farm, meat-eaters might then lack a consequentialist obligation to avoid purchasing meat. But it is unclear how this counts as an objection from the standpoint of the consequentialist. The consequentialist must recognize that people’s obligations are shaped by circumstances over which they often have little or no control (including the ones created by their prior choices). The behavior of those who choose to purchase more meat will be wrong, on the threshold argument, unless they can be very confident that their choices will not lead to the creation or prevent the closure of a factory farm. But the consequentialist will have no reason to say that, in the unlikely event they actually have adequate information about the market, they would act wrongly when purchasing meat under other circumstances, even if those circumstances would be different had they not made previous, consequentialistically unjustifiable, purchases.

While it is an elegant response to the threshold argument, Regan’s paradox argument is not successful. Regan has not shown that acceptance of the threshold argument commits the consequentialist to the view that a responsible moral actor could defeat the obligation to avoid purchasing meat by purchasing more meat.
B. Reassessed Quantities

Though the threshold argument survives Regan’s criticism, the argument begins to seem less plausible when the number of animals likely to be affected by the consumer’s purchase is considered more carefully. In section B, I argue that the argument is much less persuasive than it originally appears to be when the number of actual animals likely to be affected by a given purchase is taken into account. This will be both because other actors will bring about much of the disutility associated with a threshold crossing, even if one occurs, and because production levels may not vary directly with the amount of time a factory farm is in operation.

In many, if not virtually all, cases, the disutility associated with a purchase triggering a threshold crossing will not be all of the disutility brought about by a newly opened factory farm (or whatever other source of dramatic increase in meat production comes into being as a result of the threshold crossing). After all, it will often be the case that the farm would have opened anyway, even if not necessarily as soon, had the relevant meat purchase occurred later. In this case, the number of animals of whose breeding, intensive rearing, and death the threshold crossing would be a but-for cause must be the difference between (1) the number of animals bred, intensively reared, and killed because of the threshold crossing, and (2) the number that would have been bred, reared, and killed had the threshold been crossed, but crossed later, as a result of a subsequent purchase.

We might imagine that each of a group of market participants, the total effect of whose decisions to purchase meat would be to trigger a threshold crossing, is gambling on not being the one whose choice will actually prompt the establishment of a new factory farm. Each might regard animals as morally considerable, but see no reason to avoid purchasing flesh foods if doing so benefited no actual animals. In this case, each might be expected to reason as the argument suggests. But if, as we must presume is actually the case, very few market participants regard the behavior of the meat industry as troubling, the picture obviously changes. Then it will be difficult or impossible for the consequentialist to regard it as even remotely likely that Chris could be responsible for all of the disutility resulting from the creation of a farm that would not have opened apart from her action. It is not reasonable for Chris to believe that her withdrawal from the market, much less her decision not to make a particular meat purchase, would prevent the opening of a factory farm, provided that she treats the participation of others in the market as given. At most, her abstention seems likely to delay the establishment of such a farm briefly.

Thus, it is implausible to assume that, absent Chris’s chicken burrito purchase, no new factory farm would open in the relevant market. Such a farm might, indeed, still open at the same time and process the same number of animals. Perhaps Chris decides not to purchase a chicken burrito at TacoMax after all. If Peter does so two hours later, the effect on TacoMax’s orders to its suppliers may be no different than if Chris had done so earlier. Peter’s will be the threshold order, as Chris’s would have been had she made it.
Alternatively, the farm could still open—but open somewhat later. Chris’s meat-free purchase might place at the end of an ordering cycle for TacoMax. Peter’s order—placed the next morning—falls in a new ordering cycle. This order would have led to a threshold crossing had it occurred a few hours earlier, but it did not because of its slightly later timing. In this case, the factory farm is still likely to get under way: It is hard to imagine that projected profit margins for the envisioned farm would be so narrow that the later order would ultimately preclude its establishment entirely—after all, per capita meat consumption continues to grow. But suppose the farm would have opened its doors three full months later had Chris not purchased her chicken burrito. The expected disutility of her purchase will be, not the disutility associated with the harm done to ten chickens, but rather 1/40 of the disutility associated with the harm done a single chicken (the expected disutility resulting from the extra three months of the farm’s operation). This alone might well still be too high a figure to render Chris’s burrito purchase justifiable. But of course we do not know that one purchase would likely affect the farm’s start-up date this much. Certainly, in any case, the expected disutility of the purchase is far less than the threshold argument seems initially to imply.

There is a further complication. So far, the model has assumed that the number of animals bred will vary directly with the amount of time the farm breeding the animals is in operation. But this is too simplistic. Production levels may not be consistent. So it may not follow that the number of animals that would have been bred for mistreatment and slaughter had the purchase not occurred will be significantly less than the number bred given its occurrence—even if the farm opens later than it otherwise would have. Consider, for instance, the possibility that the farm opens three months later than it would have had Chris purchased a chicken burrito at TacoMax in early December, its absence from the market for three months may lead to higher prices. Seeking to take advantage of these prices before the market settles in response to its arrival on the scene, the farm may produce furiously at first, meaning that more animals will be bred than would otherwise have been.27 There is, of course, no way to know, but this scenario is also, at any rate, relevant to the consequentialist’s calculations.

The model has also assumed that the disutility created by the breeding of a given number of animals will vary directly with the number of the animals bred. In reality, though, different production methods may yield more disutility than others.28 Given the difficulty of representing, much less predicting, this variable disutility, I generally ignore it here. But one could presumably argue that, during a ramp-up period, for instance, more intensive and painful rearing methods may be used, so that delaying the start-up of a factory farm might yield net disutility for the affected animals.

In short, either Chris’s burrito purchase is not a “but-for” cause of harm to any animals at all, since a later purchase would have led to the same threshold crossing as her purchase, or it is such a cause, but of a significantly reduced amount of harm than the threshold argument seems to presuppose. I see no way of choosing between these options or of assessing the relevant probabilities. In
any case, however, the fact that both of these options are more likely than the one envisioned in the original threshold argument means that this argument provides significantly less reason than might initially be thought for the consequentialist to avoid purchasing meat.

C. Market Complexities

Further reducing the correlation between consumer-purchasing levels and production levels, and thus the expected disutility of Chris’s meat purchase, may be a range of factors that intervene between consumers on the one hand and factory farms and slaughterhouses on the other. The threshold argument presupposes that production levels are determined, or at least shaped substantially, by consumer purchases. However, a more realistic understanding of the meat production market suggests that numerous other factors intervene between the purchaser and the producer, making the influence of a consumer purchase on production levels considerably more attenuated than the threshold argument assumes is the case.

What has been considered so far has been a simple model, focusing just on purchases and on one sort of threshold. The threshold argument can be read, at least, as implying that the principal reason individual meat-purchasing decisions often have no affect on production levels is simply the sheer size of the meat production market. Meat production does vary directly with meat purchasing, on the model presupposed by the argument, even if production levels make large jumps rather than increasing gradually. But producers simply do not register small changes in purchasing levels because production levels are so great. At some point, however, the model assumes, a change in purchasing levels will be just great enough for a producer to notice, and she will increase production levels.

But production is ultimately a function, not of expressed demand but of market strategy. So it is simply not the case that production levels are functionally related only to or vary directly with purchasing levels. And the scale of the market is only one of the factors that determine production levels. These may include pricing strategies, subsidies, the availability of other uses for factory farms’ products, creative marketing responses to purchasing reductions, labor costs, supply expenses, logistical expenses, legal constraints, producers’ tax strategies, the cost of borrowing, the behaviors of various markets, the alteration of farming methods to make up for profit reductions, and the state of the economy as a whole. And if multiple independent variables account for production levels, the likelihood that a consumer’s choices will affect these levels may be significantly lower than a simple model with only one independent variable might suggest. Given these variables, it may be more or less likely that a threshold crossing will occur than it would on a one-variable model. But what is almost certainly more likely is that, if a threshold crossing does occur, it will occur without regard to whether Chris purchases a chicken burrito. While there may be n meat
purchases in a given market when a transition over a threshold occurs, it will not follow that the fact that there were \( n \) purchases accounted for this transition.

Some of the relevant factors (e.g., rising production costs, production control strategies designed to keep prices high), which I have arbitrarily represented with six variables, may serve to keep production from rising in direct response to consumer demand. And some may trigger increased production—including, if they occur, threshold crossings—without direct regard to individual consumer purchases. This is especially so given that “a vast market may already have built into it capacity for excess demand compared to the past, at least if projections for the number of people coming into the market exceed [. . .] greatly projections for the number of people withdrawing from it, as is the case with the meat consumption market.”31 Producers are always motivated to produce at capacity if doing so is possible. Momentum may prompt ongoing production increases. And substantial, ongoing fluctuations in demand and supply alike will often serve to render individual consumer choices inefficacious.32 As a result, abstention would simply mean that less meat was consumed, not that animals were not bred, reared, and killed. There simply would be little or no link between individual consumers’ uncoordinated behavior and the disutility generated by the production of meat. Thus, lacking any evidence that overall production levels are less than they would have been had individual acts of abstention by vegetarians not taken place, we have no “way of estimating how many animals are saved from being reared [by vegetarians’ abstentions], since we do not yet know that any animals are saved from being reared.”33

The significance of factors other than consumer purchases serves, if not to sever, then at least to weaken the link between consumer purchases and production levels. And if the level of meat production is a function of a range of independent factors, then the expected disutility may be far lower than the original version of the argument suggested.34 The capacity of the argument as amended to support its original conclusion has been substantially reduced by the recognition of the significance of diverse market factors for the risks associated with Chris’s purchase.

D. Impossible Calculations

Perhaps the most devastating criticism that might be leveled against the threshold argument is the objection that it is simply impossible to perform the calculations required to reach the conclusion the argument’s proponents favor with the needed level of precision.

A consequentialist critic of the argument could grant that Chris’s choice might trigger movement across a threshold and that the results might be substantial. But she could deny that these possibilities could enter meaningfully into Chris’s deliberations. She could do so by emphasizing that it is impossible for Chris to perform the needed calculations.35 She could note that it is completely unclear how to do so, how to obtain the needed information, or what any of the
underlying values might be. In short, the function in accordance with which the value of the number of animals bred changes is completely unknowable. For a consumer to avoid purchasing meat on the basis of the threshold argument, it is not necessary that she know just what the expected disutility of her purchase will be. She must, however, have good reason to believe that this value is large enough to outweigh the utility of the meat consumption her purchase makes possible. Whether the odds weigh in favor of Chris’s purchase depends on at least a ballpark estimate of the expected disutility of the purchase, which it is not clear she can make. Further, the consumer has no way of identifying the relevant thresholds or of determining how best to act strategically in light of her awareness of their existence.

In addition, it may be that, for a threshold crossing to occur, an appropriate number of consumers needs to reach it within a relatively narrow temporal compass. And of course she has no way of knowing whether this is occurring, either. She can reasonably expect, by Peter Singer’s own admission, that it is probable that her choices “will make no difference at all,” and because she has no idea what the relevant thresholds might be, she can have no idea when they will, after all, make some difference. Much of the time, on standard consequentialist grounds, it may be optimific for her to purchase meat, whether she realizes this or not, but she may avoid engaging in optimific actions for fear of bringing about largely indeterminate negative consequences.

Of course, all Chris needs to know is that the expected disutility of her purchase likely outweighs the utility to her of a single meat purchase, not by how much it does so. But the revaluation of the relevant variables makes it less likely that this is the case. And if she simply has no idea of the relative magnitudes of any of the relevant variables, it will be even harder to show that her purchase is precluded on consequentialist grounds. Thus, the recognition of our inability accurately to predict consequences may provide a further reason to doubt that the threshold argument shows that consequentialists must decline to purchase meat.

The recognition that the relevant calculations are impossible makes the case for preferring actual to expected utilities stronger, as well. Here, one might say that, if the positive utility yielded by the performance of a given act is virtually certain, and equals or exceeds the utility certain to be generated by any other available act, then, even if there is a very small chance that great disutility will be generated by the act, one should perform the act. We know, arguably, that the utility yielded by a meat purchase in the market is virtually certain, and equals or exceeds the utility certain to be generated by any other available act. Therefore, one may make a meat purchase in the market during the specified period.

The utility to the consumer of her purchase remains largely beyond doubt, while the negative outcome is even more uncertain and indeterminate. The intuitive strength of a focus on actual outcomes is the sense that “a bird in the hand is worth any number in the bush,” that it would be foolish to abandon something definitely satisfying an actual preference in view of a vaguely possible harm.
sense is even stronger when it is emphasized that the relevant calculations cannot be performed.

Will intuitive estimates do here, in the absence of actual numbers? Perhaps. But the selection of numbers will seem increasingly arbitrary, whichever version of the revamped argument one considers. The ability to predict what the crucial values will be will be very difficult indeed. I think the burden falls on the proponent of the threshold argument to show that these values are likely to be such that the expected disutility of a meat purchase outweighs the utility to the purchaser under these circumstances.

IV. Conclusion

The threshold argument does not provide strong consequentialist support for the view that it is wrong to purchase meat. While not all arguments against it are persuasive, others appear to undermine it decisively.

Regan’s paradox argument, though it is nothing if not clever and elegant, fails to convince. Under realistic conditions, an omnivore who accepted the argument would not find in it any justification for purchasing increased levels of meat. Other criticisms of the threshold argument seem more telling, however. The argument seems to weight the consequences of threshold crossings excessively, given that such crossings are likely to occur whether or not occasional abstentions take place, and given that some delays in threshold crossings might lead to increases rather than decreases in production levels. And the link between an individual consumer choice and a threshold crossing may be more tenuous than it would be were consumer meat purchases the only factors relevant to determining production levels. Further, the needed calculations are impossible to perform, and intuitive estimates may not be sufficient. Even if there are, in fact, thresholds of the right sort in the meat market, something economists and scholars of marketing are inclined to doubt, their possible existence provides little basis for an argument against individual consumers’ meat purchases. Once it is clear that, even if threshold crossings do occur, their net effect will be minimal, that the link between consumer purchases and production levels is tenuous, and that the needed calculations are difficult or impossible to perform, it must also be clear that the threshold argument is on shaky ground.

The failure of the threshold argument has implications for many individual choices other than those concerned with purchasing meat. If this argument is, as I believe it is, unpersuasive, it will be rather more difficult to show that an individual’s choices are wrong simply because they contribute, perhaps unintentionally, to harms brought about collectively by a vast array of uncoordinated decisions. This conclusion will not, of course, be troubling for adherents of commonsense morality, who suppose that “long-run consequences are like ripples in the pond; they die away,” and who thus “do not accept the... postulate that each of us is responsible for ‘total’ or ‘overall’ consequences, or for maximizing total or overall net good, or anything like that.” 42 It may be good, or even obligatory,
for a consumer to choose individually to boycott the products of an industry that employs slave labor or to decide against using a high-pollution vehicle, or for a citizen to resist the urge not to vote. The decision of such a consumer or citizen might plausibly be motivated by symbolic or expressive concerns. But, given the untenability of the threshold argument, this decision cannot reasonably be shown to be required by an appeal to consequences.

The threshold argument appears unable to perform the work which some consequentialists seem to believe it can. I believe they must either articulate an alternate consequentialist basis for avoiding meat purchases, abandon the belief that purchasing meat is morally wrong, or abandon consequentialism.

Thanks to Lee Reynolds, Elias Rizkallah, Annette Bryson, Deborah K. Dunn, Roger E. Rustad, Jr., Robert Beshara, Nathan Nobis, Gaverick Matheny, Raymond Frey, Vernon Howe, John Thomas, and George Ogum, none of whom is, of course, responsible for my arguments or conclusions. I explore a range of moral arguments for vegetarianism, offering much briefer commentary on the threshold argument, in a forthcoming article in the Buffalo Environmental Law Journal. I also discuss the argument in connection with a treatment of consequentialism, vegetarianism, and the ethics of dinner invitations, currently under review by Social Theory and Practice.

Notes

1 The focus is on individual choices because individualism is a characteristic feature of act-consequentialism, to which proponents of the threshold argument have often adhered. Act-consequentialists have tended to endorse an individualistic ontology and the act-consequentialist focus on particular acts tends to make an individualistic pattern of analysis and judgment unavoidable. An ontological individualist who argued along rule-consequentialist lines might well reach different conclusions about the aptness of purchasing meat.

2 I am concerned with initiating the purchase of meat rather than with consuming meat because the typical consequentialist approach will view the person who initiates a meat purchase as sending market signals to producers that will lead to the breeding and killing of more animals. Consumption, per se, will not affect the market.

3 Some individual decisions might, of course, affect this number. If someone who regularly orders, say, one million pounds of meat decides not to do so, her decision would surely make a significant difference in the market. Thanks to Nathan Nobis for helping me see this point.


16 For purposes of this article, I will assume that a state of affairs is a consequence of a given act if it would not have occurred but for the act.


18 Ibid., italics supplied.

19 Assuming that the average purchase is of something like one-third of a pound of chicken.


21 It will also be relevant to the moral deliberation of some non-consequentialist vegetarians, with respect to some choices which, while not embodying (implicit or explicit) instructions to kill or mistreat animals, may affect the meat market. To the extent that non-consequentialist theorists regard the foreseen but unintended consequences of their choices on the meat market as morally significant, they may judge that they need to reason about those consequences in something not unlike consequentialist fashion; if so, the threshold argument may be relevant to their deliberations as well. On ways in which responsibility for (potentially) foreseen but unintended consequences might figure in non-consequentialist theories, see Charles Fried, Right and Wrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 15, 28, 42, and 156; John Finnis, “Compensuration and Practical Reason,” Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 227–32; Alan Donagan, The Theory of Morality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 46–52.
Of course, there is also quite possibly a small likelihood that failing to purchase meat will trigger a threshold crossing—if, for instance, one’s abstention exerts an effect on pricing decisions that lead ultimately to a production ramp-up. Thanks to Lee Reynolds and Nathan Nobis for insights related to this point.

That is, the potential disutility, multiplied by the likelihood of its occurrence.

This way of putting the matter assumes, for simplicity’s sake, that a vegetarian burrito Chris might purchase instead at TacoMax would be in other respects the same as the chicken burrito. If it were not, farmers responsible for the products it might contain that would not have been included in the chicken burrito might benefit from her decision not to purchase the chicken burrito. Thanks to Lee Reynolds for this point.

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In the same way, were the market expanding she could avoid purchasing meat at or near a tipping point, waiting till the danger of a new farm’s establishment had passed.


A subsidy with the effect of stabilizing or increasing production levels may be triggered precisely because consumer purchases decline; cf. Frey, *Rights*.


Frey, “Utilitarianism,” 121. Note that, “[b]ecause beef is a perishable product, we consume what we produce. If more is produced, more is consumed. If less is produced, then less is consumed. As a result, per-capita consumption is more related to available supply than demand.” Harlan Hughes, “The Role of Beef Demand,” *Beef*, February 1, 2002, from http://beef-mag.com/mag/beef_role_beef_demand/.

Thanks to Elias Rizkallah for this point.

Frey, “Utilitarianism,” 121 (italics supplied); cf. 122–23.

Using our existing, arbitrary numbers, it would be necessary to reduce the value of expected disutility to something between 1/2,500 and 1/25,000 of the value identified as likely if the farm could be expected to begin three months later than it otherwise would were Chris not to purchase her burrito. Recall that this does not mean that there would be a 1/25,000 reduction in the chance that the number of chickens bred would increase by one, but rather that there would be a 1/25,000 reduction in the chance that such an increase would not occur were Chris not to purchase her burrito. If other market factors of the kind considered here make it virtually certain that the chicken will—or will not—be bred either way, this does not seem in principle impossible.


Cf. Regan, *Case*, 225. Regan obviously intends this as, in effect, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Singer’s argument, but I cannot see why it should be understood to be one. If the purpose of vegetarianism is, as it seems to be on Singer’s view, to do something about the suffering of actual animals, then it will be morally obligatory only if it can be seen to have its intended effect.

John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 98. Finnis emphasizes that “[t]he ‘ripple in the pond’ postulate can be defended, not on an analysis of actual causal influences, but only on the basis of a theory of responsibility (i.e., a theory of practical reasonableness) which proportionalism [a category which, for Finnis, includes consequentialism] radically rejects” (99).


45 Cf. Clark, *Standing*, 100; Regan, *Case*, 231.