Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism, and Human Health: A Response to the Causal Impotence Objection

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ABSTRACT It is generally assumed that the link between utilitarianism and vegetarianism is relatively straightforward. However, a familiar objection to utility-based vegetarianism maintains that, given the massive scale of animal agribusiness, any given person is causally impotent in reducing the overall number of animals raised for food and, thus, in reducing the unfathomably high quantity of disutility engendered thereby. Utilitarians have frequently responded to this objection in two ways: first, by appealing to expected utility and economic thresholds, and, secondly, by appealing to publicity effects. In this paper, I will offer some reasons for thinking that, however far these responses go in the direction of ethical vegetarianism, both leave an important normative gap between the dietary prescription they are capable of underwriting and a ‘minimally-genuine’ vegetarian obligation. What is needed to close this gap is a utility-based reason that (1) generates an ethical prescription for minimally-genuine vegetarianism and (2) circumvents the causal impotence objection.

As I see it, there is a straightforward and auspicious reason that can perform both of the required tasks — namely, an appeal to the well-documented welfare-reducing effects of eating animal products upon human health. For, if causal impotence is to work as a global objection to utility-based vegetarianism (rather than as a more local objection to certain reasons supporting that position), then it must operate as a general thesis about the incapacity for any given individual to bring about more utility solely through her own abstention from consuming animal products. However, for almost any given individual, the decision to maintain a vegetarian diet is causally potent in at least diminishing the expected disutility for herself of poorer health and a shorter life span associated with the consumption of animal products. Thus, it follows that (1) there are plausible, if not conclusive, utilitarian grounds for minimally-genuine vegetarianism and (2) the causal impotence objection fails as a general criticism of utility-based vegetarianism.

A near platitude in applied ethics holds that the link between utilitarianism and vegetarianism is relatively straightforward. Singer has tersely articulated the regularly assumed ease of this connection as follows:

I am a utilitarian. I am also a vegetarian. I am a vegetarian because I am a utilitarian. I believe that applying the principle of utility to our present situation—especially the methods now used to rear animals for food and the variety of food available to us—leads to the conclusion that we ought to be vegetarian.¹

This short statement not only captures the supposedly immediate character of the utilitarianism/vegetarianism pairing, but also serves to explain its underlying
rationale — namely, the belief that, since eating animal flesh is unnecessary in modern, industrial settings, its practice cannot be justified in light of the staggering amounts of disutility engendered by modern forms of intensive animal agriculture. However, an important objection to this story claims that no single person’s abstinence from consuming animal products, in and of itself, can have an effect on the number of animals that actually suffer, as the market for these products is simply too large to be sensitive to such an abstinence. In light of this empirical fact, any given person seems causally impotent in reducing the overall number of animals raised for food and, thus, in reducing (1) the amount of suffering experienced by these billions of animals, (2) the amount of environmental degradation (and its effects upon human and animal welfare) engendered in the massive-scale industries of animal agribusiness, or (3) the amount of suffering experienced by the millions of undernourished humans that could be fed with the grains often used inefficiently to turn out animal products. Since the motivation for utility-based vegetarianism is widely thought to depend on an agent’s capacity to secure these types of good consequences, the causal impotence objection might lead many to conclude that there simply are no good utilitarian reasons for maintaining a vegetarian diet.

For some, a firm antecedent commitment to ethical vegetarianism conjoined with assent to the causal impotence objection might recommend a turn to a rights-based or even virtue-based version of ethical vegetarianism. However, for those compelled to have their utilitarianism and eat their tofu too, a couple of familiar responses to the causal impotence claim have been advanced. The first appeals to economic thresholds and expected utility, while the second draws on the hypocritical barriers that eating animal products would place on attempts to inspire multiple others to adopt a plant-based diet. In this paper, I will offer some reasons for thinking that, however far these responses take a utilitarian in the direction of ethical vegetarianism, both leave an important normative gap between the dietary prescription they are capable of underwriting and a ‘minimally-genuine’ vegetarian obligation. What is needed to close this gap is a utilitarian reason that (1) generates an ethical prescription for minimally-genuine vegetarianism and (2) circumvents the causal impotence objection.

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concern to utility-based vegetarianism, but would instead come to form a substantial part of its very core.

I. Preliminary Clarifications

It will be helpful to disentangle three theses regarding utilitarianism and vegetarianism prior to analyzing and evaluating the two familiar utilitarian responses to causal impotence and the alternative that I intend to defend. In doing so, I hope to distinguish the argument I will be advancing from two more ambitious arguments.

First of all, my thesis is NOT that some version or other of utilitarianism, or even consequentialism, provides the strongest or only reason for ethical vegetarianism. I will leave that very general proposition unanalyzed and unevaluated. Instead, I will simply take it as a working assumption that utility-based vegetarianism is a live and compelling account of the moral obligation that agents have to maintain a plant-based diet. Moreover, it should be noted here that, though the literature on utilitarianism and vegetarianism tends (curiously) to be ambiguous or silent on the matter, I will be assuming that the operative form of the underlying theory is act, and not rule, utilitarianism. I do this not because I think that rule utilitarianism is less conducive to underwriting a vegetarian dietary prescription (indeed, I actually believe, but cannot here defend, that it is likely more conducive), but primarily because most contemporary utilitarians endorse some version or other of act utilitarianism.

Secondly, my thesis is also NOT the slightly less general proposition that the bulk of utilitarian considerations, on balance, favours universal or collective vegetarianism (i.e. everyone or nearly everyone becoming vegetarian) over alternative patterns of eating. I am decidedly inclined to think that this is true just in considering (1) the unfathomable amounts of intense suffering, confinement, boredom, and frustration endured by billions of animals raised for food, (2) the welfare-reducing environmental degradation wrought by animal agriculture of many types, but especially modern factory farming, (3) the suffering of millions of undernourished humans, many of whom could perhaps be fed by the grains used inefficiently to supply the growing demand for meat, and (4) the higher incidences of mortality and morbidity associated with diets laden with animal products. However, one might, in the end, agree with Regan that the truth of the claim that ‘an overall utilitarian calculus clearly favors vegetarianism’ is simply epistemically inaccessible when we are trying to work literally trillions of factors into the equation. Thus, while there are reasons to be optimistic that a fully worked out utility calculus would recommend universal vegetarianism, the claim is nonetheless speculative at present and a more ambitious thesis than I wish to defend here.

The thesis I will be defending, then, is narrower than both of the aforementioned propositions, taking the form of (1) a refutation of the common claim that, ‘for any given person X, X is incapable of bringing about more utility solely through her own abstention from consuming animal products’, and (2) a directive to utilitarians who have failed to include or give significant place to an argument from human health in their arguments for utility-based vegetarianism. I shall argue that, for almost any given person X, the decision by X to maintain a vegetarian diet is causally potent in at least increasing the expected utility for X of better health and a longer life span, even if it does nothing further to promote the welfare or reduce the suffering of other
sentient beings. And, if this is true, then it follows that the causal impotence objection fails as a *global* criticism of utility-based vegetarianism. Moreover, then, even if the objection succeeds as a *local* objection against certain reasons for utility-based vegetarianism (e.g., that by being vegetarian, one can decrease the demand and thus the supply of products bound up with animal suffering), I will argue that it would still follow that, given a few plausible assumptions, utilitarians have an *all-things-considered, individualistic, utility-based* reason to be vegetarian.

Having contrasted my thesis with these more general propositions, I want to make one additional clarification before turning to examining the reasons for doubting that the causal impotence objection to utility-based vegetarianism is adequately addressed by two familiar responses registered in the philosophical literature. This clarification is simply to make more precise what I take to be meant by the expression ‘minimally-genuine vegetarianism’. While the term ‘vegetarian’ is used in ordinary discourse to refer to a wide-ranging variety of diets, I think philosophers concerned to use the term with more precision ought to do so with at least the following *necessary conditions*:12

1. Vegetarianism refers to an overall, settled, and intentional pattern of not eating animal flesh.
2. Vegetarianism requires that any consumption of animal flesh be so infrequent that it could not plausibly be thought of as characteristic of one's diet.

Besides the general philosophical goal of getting more precise with terms employed, it seems to me that one desideratum of any account of ethical vegetarianism is to avoid using the term ‘vegetarian’ so loosely that persons who eat animal flesh everyday could qualify as vegetarians — this is achieved by insisting upon a diet’s satisfying these two minimal conditions. Minimally-genuine vegetarianism, then, represents a dietary baseline that falls out of a rough conceptual analysis; ethical vegetarianism can then be seen as asserting that there are good moral reasons (e.g., reason based on utility, rights, virtue, etc.) for holding that this dietary baseline (if not one more stringent in character) is morally obligatory. Hence, the burden for utility-based vegetarianism is to demonstrate that considerations of utility make minimally-genuine vegetarianism morally mandatory for almost any given person. And it is just this burden that the causal impotence objection claims cannot be satisfied.

**II. The ‘Expected Utility and Economic Thresholds’ Response**

Perhaps the most common utilitarian response to the causal impotence objection involves appealing to the ideas of expected utility and economic thresholds.13 The idea here is that if we employ a decision procedure in which we choose to act on the basis of which of all available actions has the greatest expected utility (i.e., the utility deriving from an action’s consequences multiplied by the probability of that outcome obtaining), and if we bring that decision procedure to bear in choosing whether or not to eat animal products in a market so vast that production decisions are only altered when demand increases or decreases by a certain threshold (e.g., 10,000 animals), then we ought to opt for a vegetarian diet so long as there is even some >0 probability that my choice will make a difference one way or another (i.e., by decreasing or increasing production or expediting the decrease or increase of production). Hence, even if the
probability of my purchase being the threshold purchase is only 1 in 10,000, if the outcome would entail that 10,000 more animals are painfully raised and slaughtered, then the expected utility of my purchase is equal to the suffering and death of one animal. And, since there is almost always some chance of triggering or expediting the triggering of lots of disutility by purchasing animal products, it would seem that the expected utility of my decision to do so will almost always be negative. Thus, the response goes, I have a utilitarian obligation to maintain a vegetarian diet.14

One objection to utilitarians who rely on this response to the causal impotence problem is that their view does not actually require minimally-genuine vegetarianism, but rather abstention from products that are bound up with the pernicious consequences cited (i.e. intensive suffering, confinement, boredom, and frustration). That is, their view, in and of itself, does not give persons any reason to abstain from eating road kill or animals which they or trusted others have fairly quickly and painlessly killed (and, if need be, replaced).15

Now, it is certainly true that the main goal of a utilitarian decision procedure is to maximize utility, not to ‘be vegetarian’. As Singer points out, and despite his pithy remarks quoted at the beginning of the paper which might seem to indicate otherwise, a utilitarian requirement to be vegetarian does not fall a priori out of the more general theory, but rather depends on many facts about the actual world.16 Nonetheless, it seems, at best, a strange property of a view that is claimed to generate an obligation to be vegetarian from its main goal that it should turn out to be compatible with eating animal flesh with every meal. And, simply put, a primary appeal to expected utility and economic thresholds as an answer to the causal impotence objection appears to do just that. It fails to supply, for example, west Texans with reasons to avoid a steady diet of freshly run over armadillo flesh so bountifully available in their region.17 Moreover, it is not even clear that a primary appeal of this sort can offer reasons not to eat factory-farmed animal products on many occasions, as it seems only to straightforwardly forbid buying such products. In situations, then, where one’s consumption of animal flesh does not alter the quantity of flesh purchased (e.g. large barbecues where a huge quantity of meat is purchased without a strict headcount), simply appealing to expected utility and economic thresholds will not offer a person any good reasons to abstain from filling up on the flesh of choice. Instead, an appeal of this sort only requires that persons be careful utility-conscious consumers, which is compatible with their regular consumption of armadillos and other ‘highway fare’, as well as flesh the consumption of which will not alter the amount of flesh purchased.18 Generalized, this normative gap can be expressed as follows:

NG1 The gap between an obligation to be an economically potent vegetarian (i.e. a person who abstains from eating animals when doing so is causally efficacious in reducing the number of animals raised for food) and an obligation to be a minimally-genuine vegetarian (i.e. a person, who at the very least, maintains a diet characterized by an overall, settled, and intentional pattern of abstaining from eating animal flesh, period).19

In other words, NG1 represents the worry that, even if it were granted that the appeal to expected utility and economic thresholds partially succeeds as a rejoinder to the causal impotence objection, there would still remain a sizable lacuna in the argument if one’s intention is to support a vegetarian dietary prescription.
III. The ‘Publicity Effect’ Argument

A second common response to the causal impotence objection, and one that is often conjoined with the expected utility and economic thresholds argument, appeals to the hypocritical barriers that meat eating would place on attempts to inspire multiple others to adopt a plant-based diet.\(^{20}\) This argument is often advanced with one of two presuppositions in mind. First, it can be asserted with a prior belief that while one person’s abstention can make a difference, perhaps the biggest difference he or she can make is to recruit more vegetarians. Or, secondly, it can be put forward with the presupposition that the individual alone is genuinely impotent in effecting change via her own abstention, but, when conjoined with enough similarly-committed individuals (as might be the case with the growing percentage of vegetarians each year), her abstention does make a difference. Advanced from either presupposition, however, the main point of this argument is that one has good utilitarian reasons for being vegetarian, as it is something akin to a necessary condition, given the actual psychological structures of most persons, for creating as much dietary utility as possible via the recruitment of as many other vegetarians as possible.

While no one would doubt that, all other things being equal, one can more effectively publicize and promote vegetarianism when one is eating a veggie burger than a Big Mac, there still remains an important normative gap in this response to the causal impotence objection. It can be represented as follows:

\[\text{NG2}\quad \text{The gap between an obligation to be a public vegetarian and an obligation to be a minimally-genuine vegetarian.}\]

According to NG2, engaging the causal impotence objection with appeals to publicity effects gives one no reason to privately abstain from eating meat, so long as one is reasonably careful to avoid getting caught. Certainly, most individuals would not need the Ring of Gyges in order to regularly consume meat without that consumption being publicized. Thus, utilitarians who respond to the causal impotence charge with the publicity effect response also do not offer reasons for persons to be minimally-genuine vegetarians, but only public vegetarians.\(^{21}\)

IV. Synthesizing the Two Arguments

The normative gap between being a public vegetarian and a minimally-genuine vegetarian partly explains why one finds this argument frequently bound up with the expected utility and economic threshold argument in the literature. If one believes that her actions do have an effect on the number of animals raised for food, even in moments of privacy, then she would seem to have good utilitarian reasons to abstain both publicly and privately from eating animal products. Similarly, one might be inclined to think that the publicity effect argument shores up the weaknesses of the expected utility and economic thresholds argument (i.e. by offering a reason to not even eat road kill or the flesh of painlessly killed animals, since others might then be less persuaded that they should become vegetarians, thinking that the moral difference between eating a flattened armadillo and a cellophane wrapped chicken is next to nil). Thus, it is perhaps reasonable to be optimistic that a synthesis of the two arguments
can supply moral agents with good utilitarian reasons for being a minimally-genuine vegetarian.

However far this synthesis might take a utilitarian in the direction of morally mandating minimally-genuine vegetarianism, it does not reach the point of satisfying the plausible necessary conditions for this dietary pattern. For instance, one still does not have a reason to be a minimally-genuine vegetarian, as one does not have a reason to abstain from the private consumption of animal products that are not causally linked to economic sequences of the relevant sort for the thresholds argument (e.g. road kill, discarded animal flesh, wild game, free range animals, etc. that are carefully concealed or covertly recovered). Thus, one could privately maintain a steady diet of these sorts of animals without acting contrary to the reasons generated by the synthesis of the expected utility and economic thresholds argument and the publicity effect argument.

Generalized, this third normative gap can be rendered in the following way:

**NG3** The gap between an obligation to be a *public, economically potent* vegetarian and a *utility-based, minimally-genuine* vegetarian.

What is needed for utility-based vegetarianism of the minimally-genuine sort, then, is an argument that offers reasons to abstain from even this type of animal consumption. It is an appeal to the well-documented welfare-reducing effects of eating animal products upon human health that can plausibly fill this remaining normative gap.

**V. The Argument from Human Health**

Let’s assume that you are a utilitarian weighing the consequences of becoming vegetarian versus alternative omnivorous dietary patterns. Let’s assume further that you find the causal impotence objection fairly troubling and the two familiar responses to it (and their synthesis) unsatisfactory. Should you think that because a decision to become vegetarian is causally impotent to reduce the number of animals raised for slaughter, the amount of environmental degradation engendered thereby, or the amount of human famine that can be attributed to current patterns of food production that there remain no good *utilitarian* reasons for making just that choice? Is there no sense in which one is causally potent in bringing about better consequences by this choice than by omnivorous alternatives?

What these questions are asking, in other words, is whether, supposing causal impotence works as a local objection to threshold-based or publicity-based reasons for being vegetarian, it follows that there are no further utilitarian reasons upon which to ground an obligation to be vegetarian. Or, to put it more simply, does it follow from the assumed fact that causal impotence succeeds as *local objection* to threshold-based or publicity-based reasons for utility-based vegetarianism that it succeeds as a *global objection* to utility-based vegetarianism? Put this way, I think it should be plainly obvious that those who use causal impotence to make just this (often implicit) inference reason fallaciously. As anyone who has taken elementary logic knows, there can be more than one way to support the same conclusion (one would, of course, hope that formal training in logic is not a necessary condition for realizing this fact). If there are X number of reasons supporting conclusion C (where X > 2), then I do not falsify C simply by arguing against reasons R1 and R2 (even where it is admitted that my
arguments are decisive). It is only when I have offered defeaters to the full set of reasons supporting C (i.e. X in its entirety) that I can claim to have undermined all justification for believing C. Applying this basic insight to the issue at hand, we ought to conclude that the proposition ‘utilitarianism requires vegetarianism’ is false on the basis of the causal impotence objection only if we have good reason to believe that threshold-based reasons and publicity-based reasons constitute the only reasons supporting the proposition. However, there is at least one compelling reason remaining to support this conclusion that is unaffected and, ipso facto, not defeated by the causal impotence objection.

This reason is simply that eating animal products has a significant statistical correlation with increased mortality and morbidity risks. Put in other words, the probability that one will die sooner and suffer more prior to death increases substantially when one’s lifetime dietary pattern involves regular intakes of animal products as opposed to suitable plant-based alternatives. Most utilitarians will, of course, be sensitive to the implications of increased morbidity associated with omnivorous dietary patterns, but they should also take seriously the fact that decreased life spans entail, all things being equal, less time to work to bring about good consequences in the world.

Now, if my argument is to be compelling, I need to state three plausible assumptions underlying my conclusion and offer something in the way of evidence for its truth. I will begin with the former task.

First of all, I will be assuming throughout my argument that persons of dietary pattern X, Y, or Z will be eating roughly the same amount, variety, and quality of plant-based foods for a certain portion of their daily caloric intake. The independent variable, then, is whether a person consumes animal products OR whether one instead chooses further non-animal based foods for the rest of his or her daily caloric intake.

Secondly, I will assume that genetic factors are held constant. Since these undoubtedly will go a long way in determining any given individual’s expected lifespan and susceptibility to chronic illness and disease, I will idealize to a certain extent by assuming that for any given person of standard genetic type ‘A’, he or she has the greatest probability of lowering mortality and morbidity risks by eating a balanced vegetarian (vegan) diet than by any other type of dietary pattern.²³

Thirdly, I will assume that no argument for vegetarianism need offer reasons for every individual in the world to become vegetarian (i.e. universal vegetarianism). If, for example, someone has a very strange physical constitution or genetic makeup that genuinely required animal-based foods for survival or if someone lives in a location highly unfavourable to the variety of plants, nuts, etc. that can sustain life, then, without further details or argument, I think a moral theory need not include them in the scope of its prescriptions. There may be other examples as well. My assumption, then, is that a good test of the theory’s fit with a vegetarian dietary prescription is the extent to which reasons are supplied for the vast majority of persons living in modern, industrialized areas to at least maintain a diet meeting the two aforementioned necessary conditions of minimally-genuine vegetarianism.

With each of these assumptions in place, the claim I want to make is that, absent rarely available knowledge to the contrary, the expected utility of vegetarianism is greater than the expected utility of any other diet when evaluated in terms of the health outcomes associated with each alternative. While I do not have the time now to defend this claim at length, I will quickly (1) point out a number of the debilitating illnesses
and chronic diseases that studies have shown are strongly associated with eating animal products and (2) draw on evidence suggesting that even very small increases in consumption of this sort are associated with increased probabilities of illness and disease. What I hope to show, then, is that (1) there are good utilitarian reasons for abstaining from the private consumption of animals, even where those animals are not causally linked to the pernicious outcomes associated with modern (or even traditional) modes of animal rearing and slaughtering, and (2) these reasons can fill the normative gap between public, economically potent vegetarianism and utility-based, minimally-genuine vegetarianism.

The list of maladies and diseases associated with omnivorous dietary patterns reads like a virtual Who’s Who of leading causes of chronic illness and death in industrialized countries — heart disease, cancer, obesity, type-2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and osteoporosis, just to name a few. Moreover, as the China/Cornell/Oxford study (by most regards, the most comprehensive study ever completed examining diet, lifestyle, and disease) has revealed, ‘even small increases in the consumption of animal-based foods [are] associated with increased disease risk’. In light of these two well-supported claims, we can now offer a good utilitarian reason to maintain a diet which satisfies at least the two necessary conditions of vegetarianism set out earlier and which is not liable to the causal impotence objection. For any alternative diet in which the consumption of animal products assumes a settled place significantly raises the probability of suffering from various chronic illnesses and diseases and of dying sooner. From the perspective of expected utility, then, it is plausible, if not wholly conclusive, to treat a well-designed vegetarian diet as a moral prescription. And, since any given agent is causally potent to bring about the comparably good health outcomes associated with vegetarian diets, it follows that the causal impotence objection fails when stated as a global criticism of utility-based vegetarianism.

VI. Objections and Responses

Undoubtedly, some will want to challenge the conclusions I have drawn on the basis of worries about the health studies upon which they rely. I am, admittedly, no authority on diet and nutrition and cannot myself respond to each and every challenge of this sort. I will simply rest my case on (1) the near universal agreement amongst governmental and professional bodies (many of which face strong pressure from the agribusiness lobby to say friendly things about animal product consumption) that have asserted that carefully planned vegetarian diets can be healthy, nutritionally adequate, and reduce the risks of various chronic illnesses and diseases and (2) the fact that these same conclusions are reinforced and expanded upon by lead researchers engaged in some of the longest, most comprehensive and scientifically reputable studies of diet ever conducted.

That said, there are at least two objections I do want to consider and respond to in more length. The first is the familiar claim that perhaps the overall enjoyment that humans derive from eating animal products outweighs the disutility engendered thereby for both human and non-human animals. Or, to vary the claim slightly, perhaps something similar might be true if persons adapted their preferences in the right ways, such that they really learned to appreciate the experience of eating animal products in profound and extensive ways. Either way, the objection goes, even adding the argument
from human health into the mix might be insufficient to generate a conclusive utilitarian obligation to be vegetarian.

However, it is highly implausible to think that the net pleasure gained by eating animal products over tasty vegetarian alternatives outweighs the extra quantity and quality of life years offered by the latter dietary pattern (to say nothing of animal suffering, environmental degradation, or any implicated human famine). Consider, for example, an analogue of Mill’s competent judge test where a choice among dietary patterns must be made well in advance of any actual, individually-indexed health outcomes becoming knowable. Suppose you were choosing between two lives that are in almost every respect identical, save that in one life you have a significantly higher probability of living longer (perhaps as much as 3–6 years longer when compared against the probabilities of average American omnivores) and of avoiding chronic illness and disease prior to death (while still gaining lots of gustatory pleasure from a rich and varied vegetarian diet) and in the other life you have a significantly higher probability of dying sooner (again, perhaps as many as 3–6 years sooner) and of suffering from chronic illness and/or disease prior to death but where X amount of extra gustatory pleasure is gained over and above the aforementioned vegetarian diet. Could you honestly convince yourself that eating animals and their by-products on a regular basis could make X so large that it would outweigh all of the pleasures (not just gustatory pleasures) one would receive in the extra years of morbidity-reduced existence? Or, in a slight variant of that test, suppose you were choosing a life for a child or someone else who has not developed any special taste for animal flesh. Could any competent judge honestly prescribe the omnivorous life as utility maximizing for such a person? Even when the objection is taken as involving adaptive preferences, it seems difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. For, in light of the objective statistical data regarding health outcomes and an assumption that adaptive preferences can work in both dietary directions, it seems clearly more utility-conducive to learn to really like vegetarian foods (a process that most omnivores turned vegetarians will testify actually [and often fairly effortlessly] occurs), as one would then gain extra gustatory pleasure and a substantial amount of extra non-gustatory pleasure.

The second objection I want to consider charges the modified utilitarian case for vegetarianism with having the wrong reasons to do the right thing. Clearly, the objection states, the intense suffering, confinement, boredom, and frustration endured by animals raised for food is wrong and ought to be the focus of our moral concerns. Utility-based vegetarianism, however, now seems to treat these morally abhorrent features of food production as insufficient for generating an ethical obligation to be vegetarian, requiring that something akin to a prudential imperative be added before the case for such an obligation is secured. Thus, utilitarianism seems to either have the wrong focus or, to draw on (but modify somewhat) the familiar criticism of Bernard Williams, to have ‘one thought too many’ about this matter.

In one sense, of course, the first horn of the dilemma is correct, as it is the overall utility of an action, not simply animal suffering, that is of primary concern for utilitarians. However, something like this will be true of all general moral theories that issue a vegetarian dietary prescription. For example, the primary concern of rights-based vegetarianism is with respecting rights, not with animal suffering in and of itself. Similarly, virtue-based vegetarianism does not prescribe this dietary pattern simply on the basis of animal suffering, but rather upon the claim that the virtuous person would...
make this choice. Thus, it is unclear both (1) why one should think that animal suffering in and of itself, and not overall utility, should provide the motivation for ethical vegetarianism and (2) how utilitarianism is unique among general moral theories in having the wrong reasons to be vegetarian.

Moreover, it does not seem that a utilitarian should be worried by the ‘one thought too many’ horn of the dilemma. For surely the differences in the lives and deaths of factory-farmed pigs, on the one hand, and the lives and deaths of run over armadillos, on the other, are sufficiently different to warrant different reasons to abstain from eating their respective corpses. Merely focusing upon the suffering of animals in factory or even traditional farms will not give one reasons to abstain from eating road kill; simply put, a further argument is needed. The same is true of rights-based and virtue-based accounts of ethical vegetarianism. Since it is hard to see how I am violating the rights of an ‘experiencing subject of a life’ when I consume road kill, it follows that a genuine rights-based vegetarianism will need to offer additional ‘thoughts’ to fill the normative gap between reasons for abstaining from animal flesh that would require one to violate the rights of the animal consumed and reasons for abstaining from animal flesh simpliciter. Similarly, it is not clear why, absent something like the human health argument, we have good reasons to think that the virtuous person would abstain from eating road kill, since it is unclear why it would be more virtuous to waste available protein than to make use of it. In both cases, then, something will need to be added which fills these normative gaps. Hence, it is again uncertain both (1) why one should think it problematic for general moral theories to seek out additional reasons to fill the normative gaps in their prescriptions and (2) how utilitarianism is unique among general moral theories in doing just that.

VII. Concluding Remarks

If my argument has been sound, then two important and even surprising implications would seem to obtain.

First and foremost, the causal impotence objection to utility-based vegetarianism fails as a global objection to utility-based vegetarianism (even if it succeeds as a local objection against certain reasons thought to support this dietary pattern). For almost any given person X, the decision by X to maintain a vegetarian diet is causally potent in at least increasing the expected utility for X of better health and a longer life span, even if it does nothing further to promote the welfare or reduce the suffering of other sentient beings. Therefore, given a few plausible assumptions, it follows that utilitarians have an all-things-considered, individualistic, utility-based reason to be vegetarian.

Secondly, so-called ‘health vegetarianism’ turns out to be much more important to the utilitarian case for vegetarianism than is often recognized. At the very least, it seems to be the only utilitarian argument capable of filling the normative gap between public, economically potent vegetarianism and utility-based, minimally-genuine vegetarianism. Additionally, the argument from human health has the important advantage of clearly avoiding the causal impotence objection (whereas, many utilitarians believe, more work needs to be done before either of the familiar arguments can claim this status). And, if the argument from human health can solely defeat this important objection to utility-based vegetarianism, then surely it can only reinforce the two more
familiar responses to the problem. There is, thus, nothing for utility-based vegetarians to lose and much that they can gain by taking the argument seriously.

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Acknowledgements

For helpful comments and discussions, I am grateful to Mark Bernstein, Jason Brennan, Mylan Engel, Lawry Finsen, Lori Gruen, Bart Gruzalski, Shelly Kagan, Garret Merriam, Nathan Nobis, Alastair Norcross, Philip Robichaud, George Sher, and Peter Singer.

NOTES

2 Throughout the paper, the expression ‘animal products’ will be used broadly to refer to (1) animal flesh, (2) animal eggs, (3) animal milk, and (4) any derivatives of these (e.g. cheese).
4 Although, it might perhaps be thought that rights-based moral vegetarianism is similarly affected by assent to the causal impotence problem. For if my eating animal products in no way influences the number of animals raised for food, then it is unclear how I can be said to violate any animal’s rights by doing so. Taking the standard version of the animal rights position, for example, it would seem that a necessary condition of my wronging some being is that it be the ‘experiencing subject of a life’. In the case of eating, say, a steak, it is unclear how this condition is operative. Since, by hypothesis, my eating or not eating the steak is in no way causally connected to the wrongs that were committed against the cow whose flesh it once was (i.e. the cow’s suffering and death), as these would have happened regardless of my consuming it, a reasonable conclusion to draw is that my consuming it cannot constitute a further violation of its rights. Simply put, once an animal is dead or otherwise causally disconnected from my action, there is no ‘experiencing subject of a life’ whose rights can be violated by its products being consumed. Thus, other than in cases where one is causally connected to the rights-violation (which is exactly what is denied by the causal impotence objection), one has no rights-based reasons to abstain from eating animal products. Nathan Nobis has made a similar claim against rights-based theories. Cf. N. Nobis, ‘Vegetarianism and virtue: does consequentialism demand too little?’, Social Theory and Practice: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal of Social Philosophy, 28 (2002): 135–56.
5 What I mean by minimally-genuine vegetarianism will be explained at the end of Section I.
6 I intend this statement to be read quite stringently. If, as I shall argue, there is a normative gap between the dietary patterns recommended by these responses and a minimally-genuine vegetarian obligation, then utilitarians who defend utility-based vegetarianism would have to locate a reason which satisfies both of the stated conditions. For it would be no good to locate a utility-based reason for being a minimally-genuine vegetarian if that reason were defeated by the causal impotence objection; similarly, it would be unsatisfactory to find an additional reason that overcame the causal impotence objection but did not recommend minimally-genuine vegetarianism.
7 The terms ‘global’ and ‘local’ are intended to specify the width of a particular objection to a given position X (e.g. utility-based vegetarianism). Local objections merely aim to undercut one, but not all, of the supporting reasons for X, while global objections are put forward as challenges to X simpliciter.
10 It should be noted that Singer, for example, has responded to Regan’s charge by noting that several of the more important steps toward an approximation of the needed calculus were undertaken in his classic, Animal Liberation. Cf. Singer (1980), op. cit., pp. 332–34; and P. Singer, Animal Liberation (New York: The New York Review of Books, 1975).
11 It is indeed curious that so many utilitarians (especially those who bite the ‘demandingness’ bullet) seem often implicitly to distinguish personal health from utility in the first place. Since health will at least affect one’s own personal utility (whether that gets cashed out in terms of happiness, preference satisfaction, pleasure, etc.), and since one’s personal utility counts equally with the utility of others in moral judgments, it seems extremely relevant to utilitarian moral reasoning. Surely utilitarianism would forbid one from adversely affecting the health of another sentient being, all other things being equal; why should that not hold when applied to one’s own health?
12 I will leave aside the formidable conceptual controversy over what might be included in the set of sufficient conditions for vegetarianism. Surely maintaining a vegan diet, taken in the ordinary rigorous sense, would be sufficient. However, I see little reason to be optimistic that additional conceptual analysis of ‘vegetarianism’ will be useful in decisively settling matters further (hence, the choice here of ‘animal flesh’ the regular consumption of which almost everyone would find conceptually inconsistent with ‘vegetarianism’, rather than ‘animal products’ the regular consumption of which — at least in terms of dairy and eggs — does not seem to many people conceptually inconsistent with ‘vegetarianism’ — as evidenced by the popular expression ‘lacto-ovo-vegetarianism’). It should be noted in advance that the substantive moral argument I will defend in this paper supports a more restrictive diet than minimally-genuine vegetarianism, as it recommends a diet free of ‘animal products’ not merely ‘animal flesh’.
14 The move from actual utility to expected utility has been challenged both generally and in application to the debate over utility-based vegetarianism. For an overview of some general worries with this move, see F. Feldman (forthcoming) ‘Actual utility, the objection from impracticality, and the move to expected utility’, Philosophical Studies. R. G. Frey has specifically challenged appeals to expected utility as solutions to the causal impotence objection, by mounting empirical challenges appealing to actual utility; Cf. Frey (1983) op. cit. and Frey (2004) op. cit. Matheny has defended expected utility on the grounds that only it can help an act-utilitarian to decide what course of action to take’, as only ‘expected utility, not actual utility, can be known when making a decision’. From the perspective of expected utility, then, ‘there must be some threshold at which point a unit of meat demanded by some group of customers is perceived by the grocer and thus the butcher and ultimately the ‘farmer’. At the very most, the size of this threshold unit is the difference between the demand for no meat and the current demand for meat’. Cf. Matheny op. cit., pp. 294–95. Also, for a more general defence of expected utility, see B. Gruzalski, ‘Foreseeable consequence utilitarianism’, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 59 (1981): 163–176. For the purposes of this paper, and my treatment of this particular argument in particular, I shall simply assume that expected utility is a plausible utilitarian approach.
17 To clarify, I do not intend to suggest that utilitarians should find the consumption of road kill prima facie wrong or bad. Rather, I am claiming that, once all things are considered, if utilitarians do not include some type of negative derivative effects in their treatment of road kill cases, then their theory will lack the resources to generate an obligation to abstain from this type of consumption (and, thus, to be vegetarian in the minimally-genuine sense described earlier). As I shall argue later, the argument from human health seems to pick out the most straightforward and widespread effect of this sort (i.e. welfare-reducing health outcomes).
18 Singer has attempted to offer an indirect ‘slippery slope’ argument in these sorts of cases where there appear to be no direct utilitarian duties to abstain from eating animals. Cf. Singer (1980) op. cit., pp. 331–32. The basic idea is that if we continue to eat animals that have lived decent lives and been killed quickly and/or painlessly (including, presumably, road kill), we risk treating them as means to the end of our pleasure and, thus, might find ourselves unable to abstain from eating animals whose lives and deaths are
not characterized in these ways. However, he is forthright enough to recognize that this response is fairly tenuous at best.

19 This gap would remain even where the operative account of causation is ‘contributory’ in character (such as those discussed in Gruzalski (1989) op. cit., p. 187 and Matheny op. cit.). For, even if we accept the controversial claim that we should ‘causally attribute part of the value of the effect to each individual action’ whenever ‘a number of actions contribute equally to an effect’, it is clear that this will not apply to all cases of animal consumption (i.e. road kill cases, etc.).


21 See, though, Singer’s very brief response to this sort of worry, which essentially suggests that the private consumption of meat is hardly ‘worth the hypocrisy and risk of discovery involved’. Cf. Singer (1980) op. cit., p. 337. However, (1) one might wonder why a utilitarian should be worried about hypocrisy in and of itself, absent some story about how this would affect utility in some negative way, and (2) we are assuming that the regular consumption of meat would not require any significant risk of being caught so long as a person puts even a modest amount of forethought into their ‘strategy’ for private consumption. It might very well be true that, say, hypocrisy could engender negative psychological effects and, therefore, be welfare-reducing in a way that would underwrite an obligation for one to be a private vegetarian given a sincere occurrent desire to promote vegetarianism publicly. However, at that point, one’s personal health (albeit, psychological health) appears to be doing the utilitarian work, rather than publicity effects. At the very least, then, there would appear to be no reason, in and of itself, to privately abstain from eating animals, but only when not doing so would have detrimental derivative effects (with negative psychological health outcomes being perhaps the most straightforward, if infrequent, example). This, of course, would fit nicely with the health-based thesis I am defending in this paper. I am grateful to Mark Bernstein for fruitful discussion of this point.

22 Of course, this is not to diminish what this synthesis achieves if it is accepted — namely, it offers moral reasons for abstaining from at least 90% of the animal products available in world markets today.

23 I hope this will preempt the familiar, if entirely fallacious, inference from anecdotal evidence to a general claim about health outcomes. I am quite confident that almost everyone knows of a lifelong smoker whose daily caloric intake was mostly composed of meat and junk food who lived well past the relevant life expectancy and who incurred no unusual illnesses or diseases; or, conversely, of a health and fitness conscious vegetarian who died of a heart attack before the age of 50. However, these are undoubtedly statistical outliers, whose health outcomes are much more likely attributable to genetic factors than to anything deriving from their diets. Certainly, if we run a counterfactual with, say, the alluded-to vegetarian, we would be entirely unjustified in believing that he would have fared better if only he had added a few hamburgers into his diet along the way. Thus, when we are thinking about which diet to choose, we do much better to base our decision on what statistical evidence and dietary studies conclude about overall health outcomes for a large cross-section of genetic types than upon a few isolated cases we encounter in our personal or professional lives.


26 The caution in my expression stems from two sources: (1) an objection to my thesis which maintains that it is unclear whether the health data can support the decisive advantage of vegetarianism to what might be called ‘occasional pescatarianism’ — that is, a diet (often motivated by health claims regarding Omega-3’s and fatty fish oils) including the settled, but not excessive, pattern of consuming fish, and (2) the lack of
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clarity, generally attached to utilitarian approaches, concerning how best to analyze ‘risks’. While I simply cannot take on the second worry here, I will note that a recent major review in the British Medical Journal looking at 89 of the best studies of such claims between 2002 and 2006 and found (1) no evidence to support the attribution of special health benefits to eating fish, and (2) some evidence of health risks (though these were attributed not to any intrinsic property of fish themselves, but rather to the increasing content of toxic compounds and high levels of elements such as mercury in water supplies around the world). Cf. Hooper et al., ‘Risks and benefits of omega 3 fats for mortality, cardiovascular disease, and cancer: systematic review’, British Medical Journal, 332 (2006): 752–760.


29 By net pleasure, I simply mean the pleasure that one would gain from eating animal products over and above whatever pleasure one could gain from eating vegetarian alternatives. This is, of course, usefully contrasted with the concept of gross pleasure, which refers to the overall, non-adjusted quantity of pleasure one would gain from eating animal products. Since this distinction is often overlooked in discussions where the utility of taste is compared with the utility of some other good (e.g. animal welfare, health, etc.), it is important to insist that net pleasure be treated as the relevant concept for such comparisons.

30 To address a perhaps understandable worry raised by a reviewer, my allusion to ‘tasty vegetarian alternatives’ should not be immediately and fully equated with the best ‘meat substitutes’ for the given type of flesh, though this could sometimes, if not often, be the case. Rather, I mean more to point in the direction of the astonishingly rich variety of ethnic vegetarian dishes increasingly available in modern settings. Indeed, a common experience of many omnivore-turned-vegetarians is (what is surely surprising to more entrenched omnivores) not a feeling of a significant loss of one food tradition, but rather the excitement of becoming more creative and adventurous in one’s own private culinary pursuits, coupled with a sort of cosmopolitan encounter with a plethora of alternative food traditions (which, though not formally unavailable to the omnivore, tend to get downplayed in the habitual pursuit of the favoured flesh dishes of one’s own culture). Indeed, for many (at least in North America and western Europe), the degree to which such tradition-bound flesh dishes are pursued constitutes a genuine stumbling block to the experience of this rich variety of alternative food traditions, both because local markets tend to over cater to such demand and also because, in general, strong habits tend to stifle experimentation.

31 These numbers are taken from estimates given by Castelli; Cf. Castelli (1996) op. cit.

32 Some readers might resist the implications of this argument by attempting to draw an analogy with smoking, where many persons believe it perhaps rational and utility-conducive to prefer a shortened life of smoke-filled pleasure to a longer and healthier life of smoke-abstention. However, I suspect that persons who are inclined to think this way often do so within the framework of addiction, rather than from a more detached perspective. Again, it is plausible to think that the pleasures of smoking outweigh both the suffering that generally attaches to the habit AND all the abandoned pleasures (not just tobacco-induced pleasures) to be had in an extra several years of life? Could a utilitarian genuinely prescribe the smoker’s life for someone not already familiar with the pleasures it can offer?

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