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## Meat Eating and Moral Responsibility: Exploring the Moral Distinctions between Meat Eaters and Puppy Torturers

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**Meat Eating and Moral Responsibility:  
Exploring the Moral Distinctions between Meat Eaters and Puppy Torturers**

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**Abstract:** In his influential article on the ethics of eating animals, Alastair Norcross argues that consumers of factory raised meat and puppy torturers are equally condemnable because both knowingly cause serious harm to sentient creatures just for trivial pleasures. Against this claim, I argue that those who buy and consume factory raised meat, even those who do so knowing that they cause harm, have a partial excuse for their wrongdoings. Meat eaters act under *social duress*, which causes *volitional impairment*, and they often act from deeply ingrained habits, which causes epistemic impairment. But puppy torturers act against cultural norms and habits, consciously choosing to perform wrongful acts. Consequently, the average consumer of factory raised meat has, while puppy torturers lack, a *cultural excuse*. But although consumers of factory raised meat aren’t blameworthy, they are partially morally responsible for their harmful behavior—and for this, they should feel regret, remorse, and shame.

## 1. Introduction

As it’s widely known, industrial animal agriculture causes terrible harm to farmed animals. Animals on factory farms are mutilated without anesthetic, confined to tiny cages or overcrowded sheds for their entire lives, prevented from acting in species-normal ways, and slaughtered violently. This is just a sample of the many harms factory farmed animals endure. And we don't need to eat animals—in fact, according to the best health research, we would be healthier if we adopted a plant-based diet (American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics 2009).

But we like to eat meat, so we continue to cause terrible harm to farmed animals. Some animal ethicists, then, compare consumers of factory raised meat to puppy torturers. In his popular essay on

meat eating, Alastair Norcross (2004) argues that the behavior of “Fred,” a fictitious man who tortures puppies for pleasure, is morally on par with the behavior of those who consume factory farmed meat and that meat eaters and puppy torturers are equally *condemnable*. As he rhetorically asks, “[i]f we are prepared to *condemn* [my emphasis] Fred for torturing puppies merely to enhance his gustatory experiences, shouldn’t we similarly *condemn* [my emphasis] the millions who purchase and consume factory-raised meat?” (Norcross 2004: 231).

Norcross endorses the *Consumer-Torturer Equivalence Thesis* (C-TET), which consists of two claims:

- (1) The *behavior* of puppy torturers is morally on par with the *behavior* of consumers of factory raised meat (CFRM).
- (2) CFRM are just as *condemnable* as puppy torturers.

We certainly don’t act as though the C-TET is true. As Bob Fischer (2016: 186) observes, when it comes to *conventional* food consumption, most of us, vegans included, “are unfazed by the dietary choices of others—and when they bother us, we rarely express as much.” Yet, we do frequently and outwardly express disdain for puppy torturers. So, if CFRM are just as condemnable as Fred, why does it feel like they aren’t as malicious as puppy torturers? The answer is that, contra Norcross, CFRM aren’t as condemnable as puppy torturers; they have a *partial* excuse for their behavior—an excuse that puppy torturers lack. This excuse is what I refer to as the *cultural excuse*. As I argue, although the first claim of the C-TET may be true, the second is surely false.

## 2. Preliminary Remarks

Some argue that because the factory farming industry is too large to be sensitive to one person’s consumption choices, if you stop eating meat, you won’t prevent any harm to factory farmed animals. (Harris & Galvin 2012). And if individual consumer choices don’t make a difference, then the behavior of CFRM is relevantly different from Fred’s behavior. Because Matheny (2002) and Norcross (2004,

2008) offer convincing responses, I assume that the behavior of CFRM causes harm to farmed animals, and thus it makes a difference. Nevertheless, as I argue, the C-TET is false.

The focus of this paper is *backward*-looking responsibility. While backward responsibility refers to accountability for wrongful actions caused in the past, forward-looking responsibility refers to future-oriented obligations. Although I argue that CFRM have a partial excuse for their past behavior, this doesn't mean that they lack forward-looking duties to engage in individual or collective action to prevent harm to farmed animals. But because the issue of forward-looking responsibility is complex, I can't address it within the space constraints of this paper. I thus consider only the degrees to which puppy torturers and CFRM are responsible for their *past* behavior.

The concepts of blameworthiness and moral responsibility are relevant to questions pertaining to backward-looking responsibility, and these concepts, while often conflated, come apart. Moral responsibility comes in degrees, and only those who are *fully* responsible for their wrongful behavior, i.e., those who don't have a moral excuse, are blameworthy. Those who have a partial, but not full, excuse are, to some degree, morally responsible, but they aren't *blameworthy*. As Larry May (1992: 16 & 135) puts it, "responsibility is a wider category than blame," as some "morally faulty" behavior doesn't warrant *blame*. So, one can be morally responsible while being blameless. Essentially, the thought is that the severely accusatory notions of "blame," "blameworthy," and "blameworthiness" should be reserved only for those who are *fully* responsible for their wrongful conduct. But this doesn't mean that those who are morally responsible, but blameless, are off the hook; while they shouldn't feel moral *guilt*, they should feel "less severely accusatory" emotions such as shame, remorse, and regret (May 1992: 146).

### 3. Consequentialist Moral Responsibility

Because consequentialism plays an underlying role in Norcross's argument, I address the C-TET through a consequentialist framework. Perhaps, according to consequentialists, we should condemn CFRM only if doing so maximizes intrinsic value. After all, blaming someone is an *act*, and the act of blaming is justified only if it maximizes intrinsic value. But we must be mindful of the distinction between the *rightness of blaming* an agent and an agent *meriting blame*. To say that an agent merits blame is to say that the agent deserves blame insofar as she is at fault when she acted. To say that it's right to blame an agent is to say that one ought to blame the agent insofar as doing so will maximize optimal consequences. So, sometimes we ought to blame someone who doesn't merit blame, and sometimes we ought not to blame someone who deserves blame (Feldman 1995: 574). After all, sometimes it maximizes intrinsic value to blame those who don't merit blame, and sometimes it maximizes intrinsic value to refrain from blaming those who merit blame. This might lead some to believe that the question of whether agents have an excuse for their wrongful conduct is irrelevant to consequentialism, because whether an agent merits blame seems irrelevant to determining whether we should blame her.

Yet, the rightness of blaming and blame-merit are intimately connected. There is arguably low utility in *publicly* blaming someone who doesn't merit blame. When we publicly blame someone for their harmful conduct, we signal that the person knows better and thus isn't in need of moral guidance or education. But often agents violate moral norms because they don't know better, and are in desperate need of moral guidance and education.<sup>1</sup> And if (1) people who don't merit blame need moral education and support to prevent them from performing wrongful acts in the future, and (2) blaming

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<sup>1</sup> Relatedly, research shows that clinicians who blame patients are unlikely to offer them care, help, and a trusting environment (Pickard 2012).

people results in them not receiving moral education and support, consequentialists ought to determine whether agents merit blame before deciding whether to blame them.

Because whether an agent merits blames is a good predictor of whether blaming her will maximize intrinsic value, consequentialists have a *practical* reason to consider whether CFRM merit blame before they publicly equate them with puppy torturers. Moreover, consequentialists have *theoretical* reason to consider whether CFRM merit blame. To begin with, some say that there is a “responsibility constraint” on consequentialist normative theories; acts can be right or wrong for us only if we can be reasonably deemed responsible for them (Mason 2019). For instance, because teletransporting is physically impossible, agents can’t be responsible for failing to teletransport, and because agents can’t be responsible for failing to teletransport, teletransporting can never be the right action (Mason 2019). Essentially, consequentialism holds that “an agent ought to perform an action *of those available to her* which will have consequences at least as good as any other action available to her” (Moore 2006: 84), and since, given its physical impossibility, teletransporting is not available to us, it can never be an action we ought to perform.

Elinor Mason (2019) argues that because we aren’t responsible for some acts that we *can* physically perform, these acts, too, can’t be right for us, presumably because they, too, aren’t *really* available to us. For instance, if I am non-negligently unaware that act A would maximize intrinsic value, act A is not actually available to me, even if I can physically perform act A. Furthermore, on Mason’s view, because I can’t be responsible for failing to perform act A, act A can’t be right (and failing to perform act A can’t be wrong). This view essentially amounts to some form of *subjective consequentialism*, which is (roughly) the view that right acts are those that, given the best knowledge available to the agent, are expected to maximize intrinsic value.

While Mason argues that right acts are constrained by moral responsibility, other consequentialists might argue that (1) right acts are constrained by physical possibility, and (2) moral responsibility is constrained by right action. On this view, because teletransporting is physically impossible, teletransporting can never be the right action, and because teletransporting can never be the right action, I can never be responsible for my failure to teletransport. But the claim that moral responsibility is constrained by right action doesn't entail that right action is constrained by moral responsibility. So, although we can't be responsible for failing to perform acts that aren't right, it's possible that actions can be right even when we aren't responsible for our failure to perform them. This view essentially amounts to *objective consequentialism*, which claims that acts are right when (1) they maximize intrinsic value, and (2) we physically *can* perform them. Essentially, the idea is that any act we can physically perform is an act that is available to us, and any act that is available to us could be an act we ought to perform.

Both subjective and objective consequentialists should consider whether CFRM merit blame. For one, subjective consequentialism entails that if CFRM aren't responsible for their behavior, then CFRM don't act wrongly when they eat animals. And if puppy torturers act wrongly when they torture puppies, but CFRM don't, then the *behavior* of CFRM isn't morally on par with the *behavior* of puppy torturers, thus *both* claims of the C-TET should be rejected.

Objective consequentialists who evaluate the C-TET must also attend to the question of blame-merit, simply because drawing a distinction between the evaluation of an agent (her motivations, intentions, and beliefs), and the evaluation of the agent's act(s) is what makes objective consequentialism plausible (Moore 2006). To see why this is, consider the following: there is a tendency to assume that the claim "P does something wrong (because P doesn't maximize intrinsic value)" entails that "P should be blamed or punished" (Howard-Snyder 1997; Miller 2003). But since

we sometimes can't clearly foresee or fully control the consequences of our acts, it can't be the case that we ought to *always* be blamed or punished for failing to maximize intrinsic value when we physically could have. However, objective consequentialists can guard against this objection by saying that the evaluation of acts is independent from the evaluation of actors (Moore 2006). Because objective consequentialists employ the distinction between the rightness of acts and the responsibility of agents, they need to be able to explain what it means for an agent to be morally responsible. After all, it would be odd for consequentialists to say that there's a distinction between the evaluation of acts and the evaluation of actors if they can't even articulate what it means to judge an actor to be morally responsible. Objective consequentialists writing about the C-TET, then, ought to be concerned not only with the question "Should we blame CFRM?," but also with the question "Do CFRM *deserve* to be blamed?"

Moving forward, I argue that CFRM aren't fully responsible for their behavior, and this has implications for both objective and subjective consequentialism. Objective consequentialism entails that if CFRM have an excuse, they aren't fully responsible for their wrongful behavior, and subjective consequentialism entails that if CFRM have an excuse, then they don't act wrongly (or "as wrongly" as someone who doesn't have an excuse). Both approaches challenge the C-TET, but, for the sake of simplicity, moving forward, I assume an objective consequentialist framework.<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Excuses and Justification**

When one is accused of wrongdoing, there are two possible defenses: justification or excuse. For instance, if A kills B, one might accuse A of doing something wrong. But A might defend himself by claiming that he did nothing wrong, as he killed in self-defense, and is thus *justified* in killing B. And A

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<sup>2</sup> See Driver (2011) for a compellingly argument for the claim that objective consequentialism is more plausible than subjective consequentialism.

would be right. Killing in self-defense is the paradigm case of *justified* killing in both moral and legal theory. You do no wrong, both morally and legally speaking, when you kill a culpable and lethal threat. Indeed, killing in self-defense is categorized as *justifiable* homicide in our legal system. You need no excuse for killing such a threat. That is, you don't need to defend your defensive action by claiming that you killed the aggressor during your sleep or that you were drugged against your will. After all, to say that an act is justified is to deny that it is wrong.<sup>3</sup> But, as noted in the Model Penal Code, "to say that someone's conduct is 'excused' ordinarily connotes that the conduct is thought to be undesirable but that for some reason the actor is not [responsible] for it."

Likewise, in *moral* theory, justification and excuse are two different types of *moral* defenses for questionable conduct. When someone claims that her act is justified, she accepts responsibility for her conduct, but denies that it's wrong. To say that a person is excused, though, is to admit that the person's conduct is wrong, while denying that the person is *fully* responsible for their conduct. Valid moral excuses, then, negate or lessen moral responsibility.

In moral theory, common excuses for wrongful conduct include: (1) non-culpable ignorance, (2) necessity, (3) insanity, (4) diminished capacity, and (5) provocation.<sup>4</sup> Note that excuses are not always full or complete excuses; sometimes they are partial excuses. Moral responsibility, then, isn't an "all or nothing" concept; it come in degrees; an agent can be completely blameless, fully blameworthy, or partially responsible for wrongdoing.

In order to be fully responsible, i.e., blameworthy, for one's actions, two conditions must be met: (1) the control condition (the freedom condition), and (2) the epistemic condition (the knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> In philosophy, justified often means morally right, which is stronger than mere permissibility.

<sup>4</sup> There is debate about whether 'necessity' constitutes a justification or an excuse (Morgan 1984).

condition) (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). To be fully responsible for wrongful conduct, one must perform the act freely, and one must be sufficiently aware of what one is doing when one acts. In what follows, I argue that CFRM are partially excused insofar as they fully satisfy neither the control nor the epistemic requirements.

## 5. The Objectivist Theory of Justification

When we eat factory farmed meat, we cause terrible harm to animals, despite that eating animals isn't necessary for human health. This is *objectively* wrong, at least when plant-based alternatives are available. So, CFRM act wrongly; they do something that is objectively impermissible. But this doesn't mean that we should *condemn* them. After all, not everyone who performs impermissible acts are blameworthy. Indeed, there are often excusing conditions.

Because Norcross claims that we ought to *condemn* CFRM, he suggests that they are fully responsible for their behavior. He does, though, consider this objection: CFRM are *not aware* of what animals endure on factory farms. In response, he tweaks his conclusion: the behavior of those who purchase and consume factory raised meat *in the knowledge that the animals live lives of suffering and deprivation* is morally on par with the behavior of puppy torturers (Norcross 2004: 236). Perhaps, then, some CFRM who are unaware that factory farmed animals live lives of suffering and deprivation are excused for their behavior.<sup>5</sup>

Let's grant that CFRM are aware (or should be aware) of the terrible harm animals endure on factory farms. So, the ignorance excuse is off the table. Still, there are other possible excusing factors

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<sup>5</sup> CFM are at least partially responsible for their ignorance if they blatantly ignore the widely available and accessible information about industrial animal agriculture.

for CFRM, even those who know that the lives of farmed animals are filled with suffering and deprivation.

But, first, we must be clear on what is meant by *the average* CFRM.<sup>6</sup> I take it that the average CFRM:

(1) is not insane. So, the *insanity defense* won't work.

(2) has access to plant-based foods. So, *necessity* can't operate as a moral excuse.

(3) is a rational adult agent without mental abnormalities. So, the *diminished agency* excuse won't work.<sup>7</sup>

While CFRM can't claim insanity, necessity, or diminished agency as excuses, as I will argue, there is a *cultural excuse* available to CFRM, which involves both *volitional* and *epistemic* impairments.

## 6. Enculturation

A compelling account of the “culture defense” in legal theory is presented by Alison Renteln (2004), who insists that the courts can't understand the motives of a defendant if they don't understand the defendant's culture. She argues that people can be so strongly influenced by their culture that their behavior is, in some sense, compelled and thus, at least, partially excused. The “cultural defense” is closely linked to the concept of *enculturation*, which anthropologists define as the process by which “a person's culture shapes his worldview” in a “profound manner” (Renteln 1994, 60). The basic idea is that people often internalize cultural norms, and this has a powerful influence on their behavior. As Solomon Asch (1955: 34) puts it, “[t]he tendency to conformity in our society is so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black.”

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<sup>6</sup> From here on out, when I say “CFRM” I mean *the average* CFRM.

<sup>7</sup> Children have diminished agency, and thus are, at the very least, partially excused for eating animals.

I argue that certain kinds of enculturation involve a serious form of social threat, and this threat can, under certain conditions, amount to social duress, which in turn causes volitional impairment. Moreover, I argue that certain kinds of cultural pressure and influence impair the epistemic capacities of agents, rendering them, to some extent, unaware of the moral significance of some of their acts. Consequently, when one performs a wrong act *because of* this kind of cultural influence, one is at least *partially excused*.

### 7. The Cultural Excuse: Social Duress

To see why some forms of cultural influence amounts to social duress, consider first the legal definition of duress:

any unlawful threat or coercion used... to induce another to act [or not act] in a manner [they] otherwise would not [or would]. (Black 1990)

Because cultural influence involves an “unlawful”<sup>8</sup> threat to induce others to eat animals—an act they would not otherwise perform in alternative circumstances—this cultural influence is a form of duress. I thus argue that the wrong of eating animals can be partially excusable on grounds of *social* duress. In doing so, I challenge Fischer’s (2016: 185) claim that because “beef lobbyists [aren’t] holding guns to [their] heads,” the duress excuse is not available to CFRM. Duress comes in degrees, and one need not have a gun pointed to one’s head in order to act under duress.

Typically, for duress to count as an excuse to escape *legal* liability, the standard is similar to Fischer’s—there must be an imminent threat to life or physical well-being. I contend that while this standard may be necessary for a *full* excuse, it’s not necessary for a *partial* excuse. Consider, for instance,

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<sup>8</sup> While the legal definition of duress involves a *legal* notion of “unlawful threat,” I take the “unlawfulness” found in duress to involve an *immoral threat(s)*. So, when parents threaten to give their children time-outs if they don’t eat vegetables, this doesn’t constitute duress, insofar as such a threat doesn’t violate the moral law. Indeed, parents should instruct their children to eat vegetables.

the case of George, Jane, and Bob. George threatens to steal Jane's bike if she doesn't steal Bob's bike, so Jane steals Bob's bike. Say that Jane's bike is very special to her—her grandfather gave it to her before he passed away. Surely, Jane's behavior is more excusable than it would be if she stole Bob's bike just because she doesn't like him. This is because there's a sense in which Jane acts under duress, despite that neither her life nor physical well-being are threatened. Of course, this doesn't completely exculpate Jane. But it does, to some degree, lessen her level of moral responsibility.

When someone performs an act under duress, outside human influences make it especially difficult for the average person to refuse to perform the act in question. *Social duress*, then, refers to social and cultural pressure that induce someone, by means of a threat, to think or act in a way that they would not have otherwise. There are degrees of social duress, and thus degrees of moral responsibility. For one's actions to be partially excused due to social duress, three conditions must be met:

1. There must be widespread societal influence or pressure to do wrong—a pressure that involves a threat.
2. One does wrong *because of* the societal influence.
3. It's not reasonably easy to act otherwise.

As I will argue, each condition applies to CFRM, and thus they have a partial excuse for their behavior.

## **8. Social Duress, Volitional Impairment, and Eating Animals**

If one thing is true, it's that there's significant cultural pressure to eat animals in the United States. To begin with, only 4% of U.S. adult consumers are vegetarian and only 2% are vegan (The Vegetarian Resource Group 2019). And it's not just a coincidence that most consumers eat animals. As children, we are raised to eat animals; we are instructed to eat animals at family dinners and in the homes of friends, schools, hospitals, and so forth.

Children don't themselves make the choice to eat animals. Arguably, if they were given the choice and they fully understood the moral significance of that choice, they wouldn't choose to eat animals. In many cases, children exhibit disgust for meat when they learn about its origins (Amato & Partridge 1989; Fiddles 1991). Relatedly, when animals are presented in meat advertisements, adult consumers are less willing to eat animals (Kunst & Hohle 2016), which indicates that humans have a natural sense of compassion for animals. This is perhaps why meat labels and advertisements often "erase" the animal by referring to pig flesh as pork and cow flesh as beef (Adams 1990).

Children have a strong affinity for animals, which is evident by the fact that they frequently dream about animals (Domhoff 1996; Foulkes 1999; Melson 2005) and desire to adopt companion animals (Kidd & Kidd 1985). Children who live with companion animals say that their animal companions make them happy, they love the animals, and the animals are their best friends (Hawkins & Williams 2017). This all indicates that children who spend *quality* time with animals almost always form deep emotional attachments to them (Hawkins & Williams 2017). As Paul McCartney might put it, if slaughterhouses had glass walls, all *children* would be vegan.

But neither factory farms nor slaughterhouses have glass walls, and this is, in part, why children are unaware that when they eat, for instance, a hot dog, they are eating Babe. But once children are old enough to understand that "meat" is animal flesh, they are quickly socialized through the institutions of family, education, and mass media to define farmed animals as food, and they learn to conceptually distance "food animals" from those animals with whom they are emotionally bonded (Stewart & Cole 2009). This social pressure to eat animals follows children throughout their teenage years. Although some teens consider transitioning to veganism, they often report that social pressure and having a weak vegan network is a main reason they continue to eat animals (Worsley & Skrzypiec 1998; Larsson et al. 2003; Cherry 2015).

An animal-based diet is rarely called into question, in part, because eating animals is central to our social lives. For instance, animal flesh is typically viewed as the keystone dish at important social and familial gatherings in Western culture, including Thanksgiving, weekend BBQs, and family dinners. Eating and cooking involves opportunities for family and friends to intimately bond with one another and rejecting animal flesh is often perceived as a disruption to familial and cultural practices and traditions (Hinton 2008). Someone who rejects the “standard” diet thus risks losing their *identity* as a family member, or as an American, or as a Mexican, and so on.

Because eating is central to our social lives and meat is usually the main dish at meals, meat eating has an important non-dietary role in society; it is a social practice that promotes familial and social relationships. Some black people, for instance, are committed to preserving “soul” in their food, and some believe that the consumption of *animal-based* soul food, which dates back to slavery, enables them to connect with their culture in a historic and intimate sense (Hughes 1997; Miller 2013; Witt 1999). For many black people, what they eat carries cultural and racial meaning, insofar as their dietary choices help them construct their African-American identities, and in black communities, eating healthy is often perceived as giving up one’s cultural heritage and conforming to the dominant culture (James 2004).

In addition to being deeply influenced by familial and cultural expectations, consumers are strongly influenced by meat advertisements on TV, radio, billboards, Internet, and so forth (Bogueva & Phau 2016). As Corey Wrenn (2016) puts it, “[t]he “meat” industry has been bombarding the public with strategic advertising to increase profits for a century or more.” For instance, the meat industry has a history of using advertising and social messaging to promote the idea that animal flesh is linked to masculinity (Adams 1990; Rothgerber 2013; Sobal 2005), while vegetarianism is deemed not only feminine, but anti-masculine (Rogers 2008). Meat eating is thus a symbol of achievement, power, and

domination, which explains why vegetarians are perceived to be less masculine than meat eaters (Ruby & Heine 2011).

But meat and dairy marketing doesn't target only men; it encourages virtually every consumer to eat animal products. Milk ads, for instance, encourage women to feed their babies cow milk. Television channels directly target children with advertisements for food with high levels of fat, especially milk-related products (Arnas 2006). Relatedly, as Wrenn (2018) notes, the United States Department of Agriculture promotes misleading health requirements that center upon meat and dairy. And, until recently, doctors encouraged their patients to eat animals, despite that eating animals has a deleterious impact on human health.

Because there are such deep social influences that perpetuate and legitimate the norm of meat eating (Paisley et al. 2008), many people who attempt to become vegetarian report feeling socially unsupported (Hodson & Earle 2018), and some are even met with hostility when they publicly identify as vegetarian (MacInnis & Hodson 2017). Vegetarians report that, because of their dietary choices, they are exposed to prejudice, family pressure, and peer pressure—all of which have significant emotional and social costs. The social stigmas around vegetarianism have significant influence on consumer choices, as evident by the fact that many ex-vegetarians cite a toll on their social life as their reason for resuming meat eating (Faunalytics 2015).<sup>9</sup>

There is compelling evidence that CFRM eat animals *because of* social pressure. For one, some men report that they are interested in reducing their meat consumption, but that social pressure makes doing so difficult (Royal Geographical Society 2018). As Emma Roe puts it: “many men are interested in eating less animal flesh, they just need social permission to do so” (Royal Geographical Society

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<sup>9</sup> According to the US Humane Research Council (2014), roughly 84% of people who try vegetarianism eventually resume meat eating.

2018). Because it's widely believed that masculinity is intertwined with eating animals, men often eat animals because it makes them feel and look like "real men" (Rothgerber 2013). This social pressure to "eat like a real man" explains why men are less likely than women to stop eating animals (Graca & Calheiros 2015).

When men cave to the pressure to eat animals, this has a domino effect throughout society. For instance, Charles and Kerr (1988: 71) point out that men "exert a conservative influence over families' diets and prevent their partners from experimenting with food or introducing changes into the diet." While women may do more of the grocery shopping and cooking, they have little control over the food they buy and cook (Charles and Kerr 1988). Women often prioritize their partners' food preferences and modify their dietary behaviors to reflect these preferences (Murcott 1983; Bove et al. 2003). In fact, many women report that they would eat less meat if they lived alone (Charles & Kerr 1988).

Meat eating families, then, are barriers to vegetarianism (Lea & Worsley 2003). Teenagers who consider vegetarianism often face challenges at home, as their parents doubt that vegetarianism is nutritionally adequate (Larsson et al. 2003). Relatedly, adopting a vegetarian diet is especially challenging for black families because it seems to require a significant shift in cultural identity food politics (Carter 2016). As Christopher Carter (2016: 225) explains, black people who refuse to eat animals risk giving up their sense of "soul"—their "sense of black spirituality and identity." Because soul food is deeply connected to black identity and black spirituality, it's not uncommon for the friends and relatives of black people to be unsupportive of their dietary changes (James 2010).

This all indicates that the cultural pressure to eat animals involves a broad-based cultural *threat*. Culture threatens that men will lose their masculinity if they stop eating animals. Culture threatens teenagers that they will lose their social network if they become vegetarian. Culture threatens to tear

apart families if a family member refuses to eat animals. Culture threatens that black people will lose their sense of black spirituality and identity if they become vegetarian. And these social losses, which involve the disruption of deeply important social and familial relationships *and* the destruction of one's own sense of identity, are significant losses, despite that they are not life-threatening.

It thus isn't reasonably easy to become vegetarian. To do so requires that we transform our values and belief systems, transcend societal norms, jeopardize our social networks, give up some of our social identities, and defy familial, cultural, and religious traditions. Essentially, it requires that we assume the significant risk of losing social goods that are necessary for a decent human life. While CFRM might not have a gun held to their heads when they heap turkey flesh on their plates during Thanksgiving dinners, they certainly act under a serious cultural threat. And because CFRM act under social duress when they eat animals, they don't fully meet the "volitional requirement" of moral responsibility and thus have at least a partial excuse for their wrongdoing.

## 9. The Epistemic Condition: De Dicto Ignorance

In section IV, I granted, for the sake of argument, that the ignorance excuse is unavailable to CFRM. I did this because I wanted to show that even if they can't plead ignorance, CFRM still have a *volitional* excuse for their wrongdoing. Now, I argue that CFRM in fact have an *epistemic* excuse.

In order to be fully responsible for wrong-doing, wrong-doers must be sufficiently *aware* of what they are doing when they act. This is known as the *epistemic* condition for moral responsibility. In general, it's assumed that to be sufficiently aware, one must be *aware of certain things* and this *awareness must be of a certain kind*. One concern, then, is related to the *content* of awareness. For instance, to be fully responsible for an act, one must be aware of the act's *moral significance*.

There are two possible kinds of awareness: de re awareness and de dicto awareness. One has de dicto awareness of an act's moral significance when one believes that the act is wrong, and one has

de re awareness of an act's moral significance when one has the belief that the act has whatever features that make it wrong, *without having the further belief that the act is wrong*. Relatedly, as May (1992) compellingly argues, in order to possess the attitude of moral sensitivity, you must not only be aware that your actions affect the well-being of others. You must also have a *critical appreciation* of this. You must believe that the suffering of others is legitimate, significant, or worthy. Moral sensitivity, then, requires both *perceptiveness* and *critical appreciation*. Those who have merely de re awareness have perceptiveness, but they lack critical appreciation, and thus they lack moral sensitivity.

Although CFRM arguably have perceptiveness, insofar as they are, to some extent, aware that animals are adversely affected by meat eating, many seem to believe that animals aren't hurt in any significant way. This is because they lack the *critical appreciation* necessary to see animal suffering as legitimate or worthy of our serious moral attention. Perhaps, then, CFRM have de re, but not de dicto awareness about the moral significance of meat eating. That is, even if they are presented with a detailed description of the conditions of factory farms and are thus aware of the features of meat eating that make it wrong, they still might fail to understand that meat eating is wrong because they lack a critical appreciation of the suffering endured by farmed animals. And if full responsibility requires de dicto awareness, as Sliwa (2017) plausibly argues, then CFRM fail the awareness condition.

Norcross (2004: 236) doesn't claim that CFRM have knowledge of the general moral principle that "it's wrong to cause unnecessary suffering"; rather, he claims that CFRM know that farmed animals "live lives of suffering and deprivation." This suggests that he believes that knowledge of moral principles isn't necessary for full moral responsibility. But this approach to moral responsibility is rightly called into question, especially when it comes to acts that are deeply normalized in our society. Gideon Rosen (2003: 65), for example, compellingly argues that moral ignorance is, in general,

blameless when it comes to adopting and acting on “uncontroversial normative principles that form the framework for social life.”

Rosen (2003) points out that some culturally normalized acts are assumed to be “transparently” permissible, and often people are neither negligent nor reckless when they arrive at the incorrect “moral verdict” about culturally normalized acts, even when they know the relevant nonmoral facts, including the features of the acts that make them wrong. As Rosen (2003: 27) plausibly argues, to change such culturally ingrained beliefs requires a transformation of one’s current “moral sensibility” and the invention of a new sensibility—an arguably “monumental task.” Likewise, May (1992) argues that moral insensitivity is difficult to change when it is a result of deeply ingrained stereotypic beliefs and attitudes. Stereotypic beliefs and attitudes “demarcate” the stereotyped groups as completely distinct from those who possess the stereotypic beliefs and attitudes, and they are difficult to change because they are “resistant to counter evidence” (May 1992: 65). As May (1992: 65) explains,

Stereotypes are perpetuated by means of highly emotional language and images, which are so extreme as to break down possible communities that might be formed between those who hold the beliefs and those who are so characterized.

Changing these stereotypic attitudes, then, is no easy task; it involves consciousness raising, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and serious private resolutions (May 1992).

When the source of stereotypic beliefs and attitudes is one’s culture, they are formed in a way that is beyond our control, thus we cannot be deemed fully responsible for the fact that we have them (May 1992). This suggests that de dicto ignorance about culturally normalized acts is at least partially excusable. And this seems especially true when it comes to CFRM’s de dicto ignorance. After all, there’s a widespread assumption in Western cultures that we are “obviously” entitled to eat farmed animals, despite that terrible suffering is inherent to industrial animal agriculture. This is arguably

because the creatures who are harmed are commonly deemed “just animals.” And the belief that we are morally entitled to eat animals is taken to be self-evidently true or what Rosen would call an “undefended axiom of moral common sense” (Rosen 2003). Because of our deeply ingrained stereotypic attitudes and beliefs about farmed animals, we fail to appreciate that they are like us in a way that matters; we fail to appreciate that they can suffer *like we do*. Stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about farmed animals, as May (1992) would put it, “block” any attempt to truly understand and appreciate animal suffering; the stereotypes cause us to perceive animals to be so “different” from and inferior to humans. Arguably, the moral insensitivity of CFRM is the result of stereotypes, which, in this case, are themselves a consequence of cultural indoctrination that CFRM have faced throughout their *entire* lives.

To see the wrongness of a culturally normalized act requires more than just an understanding of the description of the act and its consequences; it requires a considerable amount of moral reflection. Although philosophers are capable of such reflection, and thus are fully responsible for eating animals, it’s not reasonable to hold the average consumer to the same standard, given their lack of training in moral reasoning and deliberation. Failing to see through the deeply entrenched and pervasive cultural ideology of speciesism is not reckless or negligent. Rather, it is, as Rosen (2003: 66) might put it, a sign of *ordinariness*.

#### **10. The Epistemic Condition: Occurrent Belief Ignorance**

Even if we grant that either (1) *de re* awareness is sufficient to satisfy the epistemic condition, or (2) CFRM have, or should have, *de dicto* awareness of the moral significance of eating animals, it still doesn’t follow that CFRM are blamable for eating animals. After all, there is a compelling argument that the epistemic condition requires the *occurrent* entertainment of morally significant beliefs (Ginet 2001; Levy 2011; Zimmerman 2017). This means that in order to be blamable for wrongdoing, the

relevant beliefs about the moral significance of the act must be *consciously* entertained at the time of wrongdoing (Zimmerman 1997). On this view, if CFRM don't consciously entertain beliefs about the consequences and moral significance of eating animals *while they eat* meat, then they are, to some degree, ignorant of the relevant considerations and thus may have at least a partial excuse for their wrongdoings.

Surely, when CFRM order hamburgers at McDonalds, they don't consciously contemplate the consequences of their purchases. This is because the force of cultural conditioning often prevents us from reflecting upon culturally normalized acts before performing them (Lumsden 2017). When it comes to eating animals, “[o]ne does not have to justify eating meat; it does not require reasons, it is just ‘what one does’ in this society” (Lumsden 2017: 230). According to recent research, dietary behaviors, including meat eating, are strongly habitualized behaviors that rarely involve a deliberative process (Schösler et al. 2014). Because habitual behaviors are often performed unintentionally, and thus outside of conscious awareness, they're quite difficult to change (Rees et al. 2018). Here's why someone might say this.

Habits develop from the repeated performance of behaviors in a “stable situational context” (Rees et al. 2018). Once habits are formed, strong mental context-action links are created, resulting in specific situational contexts triggering what now have become habitual behaviors. For instance, repeatedly ordering meat at lunch in the cafeteria causes me to develop a strong mental context-action link, i.e., a link between meat eating and the cafeteria at lunch. So, tomorrow, when I go to the cafeteria, this context-action link will be activated, which then triggers my animal eating behavior, and I will likely, without consciously reflecting upon my options, order animal flesh.

CFRM aren't consciously aware that they are eating animals when they eat meat, so, when they eat a McDonald's hamburger, they are at least partially unaware of the moral significance of their

behavior. But even if meat eating occurs outside of *conscious* awareness, it arguably occurs within what Larry May calls our *pre-reflective* awareness. When we act from habit, we act without the relevant awareness, i.e., *conscious* awareness, necessary for *full* epistemic responsibility. But because we have *partial* control over the acts we perform pre-reflectively, CFRM have enough awareness, i.e., *pre-reflective* awareness, for *partial* responsibility.

Perhaps, though, occurrent-belief theories are misguided, insofar as they seem to let wrongdoers off the hook too easily. For instance, the occurrent-belief view seems to entail that individuals can avoid moral responsibility for wrongdoing by simply avoiding thinking about the moral significance of their acts. To this, I say we can modify the occurrent-belief view such that it says that an agent isn't fully responsible for her wrongful conduct if (1) she doesn't entertain the morally relevant belief occurrently at the time of acting, (2) she doesn't intentionally avoid thinking about this belief when acting, and (3) there are no obvious expectations that she reflect upon this belief before acting.<sup>10</sup>

Often, when we act wrongly, we do so in private. For instance, an adulterer cheats on his partner behind closed doors, and he does so to avoid the negative consequences he would endure if others (including his spouse) were to find out about his transgressions. To act in secret like this, then, involves a constant reminder that one's activities are morally suspect, and thus it's quite difficult, if not impossible, for an adulterer to avoid thinking about the moral significance of his conduct before he cheats. And if, for some reason, beliefs about the moral significance of cheating aren't entertained by an adulterer before he cheats, the adulterer's ignorance is fully culpable. Given that adulterers must

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<sup>10</sup> This means that CFRM who *purposefully* avoid thinking about the wrongness of meat-eating are not excused in the occurrent belief sense.

act in secret, adulterers have good reason to suspect that their behavior is morally deviant, and thus they have good reason to stop and think about the moral significance of their behavior.

CFRM, though, don't eat hamburgers in secret. Rather, meat eating is a public act, done in the company of one's *entire* society. Because there's no obvious expectation that CFRM who visit McDonald's stop and consider the moral significance of buying a cheeseburger *and* meat eating is deeply habitualized behavior, CFRM don't intentionally avoid thinking about the moral significance of eating meat when they're at a restaurant or in the grocery store. For these reasons, CFRM aren't fully responsible for their occurrent-belief ignorance.

This all suggests that there is a relevant distinction between what Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) calls "usual" and "unusual" acts. As he puts it, "[i]f my act is unusual in the sense that most people would not act that way, that... provides a reason to pick out my act and call it a cause" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005: 297-298). I take this to mean that when a person performs an act that violates social norms, that person is the sole author of the act. When an agent decides to perform an act that society condemns, she, *on her own accord*, authentically chooses the act, and she moreover chooses to identify with that action. Yet, a person who performs a culturally normalized act may not have full ownership of the act. Because of powerful societal pressure, the culturally normalized acts we perform often aren't a consequence of our *authentic* choices. In many cases, something beyond the agent is at least partially the cause of her culturally normalized act—a cause like *social influence*.

### **11. Puppy Torturers, Volitional Impairment, and the Cultural Excuse**

While CFRM perform unjustified acts, they have a partial excuse for their wrongful behavior—an excuse that puppy torturers lack. For one, puppy torturers perform acts that are deemed reprehensible by their culture. So, it's not the case that, every time puppy torturers turn on their Pandora playlists, their music is constantly interrupted with ads that promote puppy-torturing or puppy-tortured

products. It's not the case that every time puppy torturers have dinner with friends and family, they're mocked, called weird, and emasculated if they abstain from puppy-tortured products. It's not the case that puppy torturers risk losing their familial, social, and spiritual networks if they stop torturing puppies. Quite the contrary, they risk losing important goods by continuing to torture puppies. For these reasons, the decision to torture puppies is not due to cultural pressure, let alone social duress.

Moreover, the moral insensitivity of puppy torturers isn't the result of cultural stereotypes about puppies; rather, puppy torturers are themselves the cause of their insensitivity. Puppy torturers, then, unlike CFRM, *choose* their insensitivity and thus are responsible for any de dicto ignorance they might have about the morality of puppy torturing. And because puppy-torturing acts are unusual, contrary to cultural norms, and intentionally performed in private, they are not deeply habitualized, as is meat eating. In other words, puppy torturers are consciously aware of the harm they cause when they torture puppies. Because puppy torturers, *on their own accord*, consciously decide to torture puppies, they consciously legitimize puppy torturing, and thus they, unlike CFRM, are the sole cause and author of their behavior.

## **12. The Moral of the story: Blame the Culture; Don't Blame the non-blameworthy**

While it's not justified to eat factory farmed products, CFRM, unlike puppy torturers, have at least a partial excuse for doing so and thus aren't blamable. But to say that CFRM are partially excused is not to say that cultural influence is *fully* exculpatory. Surely, CFRM are, to some degree, morally responsible for their behavior, insofar as it's within their power to resist cultural pressure, however difficult it might be. As May (1992) compellingly argues, because we can try to change the dispositions we acquire through no fault of our own, we are at least partially responsible for failing to try to change our harm-producing dispositions.

But, still, CFRM have a partial excuse, and we ought to be sensitive to this, in part, because it's, at best, unproductive, and, at worst, counterproductive to blame CFRM. For instance, telling CFRM that they're just as bad as puppy torturers may shut down thoughtful discourse about the immorality of eating animals. CFRM might spend their mental energies devising excuses or justifications for their behavior in a desperate attempt to distinguish themselves from puppy torturing. And, as discussed earlier, publicly deeming CFRM 'blamable' likely may prevent them from receiving the moral education and support they need for change. Moreover, we must acknowledge the relevant differences between puppy torturing and meat eating so that we can better understand how to effectively address both problems.

If eating animals is, in part, a result of moral insensitivity that is caused and perpetuated by stereotypic attitudes and beliefs about farmed animals, then we must work to challenge these attitudes and beliefs. Because stereotypic attitudes and beliefs involve a demarcation of farmed animals from humans, we can challenge them by emphasizing the important similarities between humans and farmed animals. For instance, both teachers and activists should screen and publicize films that capture the complex cognitive and emotional mental lives of farmed animals, in lieu of graphic films about factory farming, which don't challenge the human-farmed animal demarcation.

Moreover, if eating animals is, in part, a result of habit, we must help CFRM develop plans to break this habit. As research shows, with significant effort, we can, over time, learn to break even deeply engrained habits. Effective habit control techniques, for instance, have proved successful in combating unwanted habits (Rees et al. 2018). One such technique is a self-regulatory technique called "implementation intention," which involves deliberation about a goal, consciously forming an intention to achieve it, and making a concrete, specific plan about how to attain it. There's evidence

that by forming an implementation intention, meat eaters can reduce their meat consumption, despite the highly habitualized nature of meat eating (Rees et al. 2018).

Here's an effective habit-control activity, modeled after Rees et al.'s (2018) study, which teachers should give to their students after discussing the ethics of eating animals:

1. The teacher should ask students if they have a goal to reduce meat consumption.
2. Those who say yes should write down their goal.
3. The teacher should ask students to imagine a concrete situation (time and location) for implementing their meat reduction goal and plan what they'd eat instead of meat.
4. Students should then write down their "if then plan." For instance, "if I am in the cafeteria in the morning for breakfast, I will eat a tofu scramble instead of eggs and bacon."
5. Finally, students should be encouraged to memorize this plan.

As studies show, the intention implementation method is effective insofar as it creates an important situation-action link—a link similar to the action-link resulting from habit formation (Rees et al. 2018). For instance, by forming the implementation intention suggested in step 4, students will eventually see a link between being in the cafeteria at lunchtime and ordering the tofu scramble.

Because animal rights activists can't make use of the implementation method during normal outreach events, they must employ different tactics. Given the power of cultural pressure, it would behoove animal rights activist to make veganism a normalized part of their culture, for instance, by urging college campuses and local restaurants to offer a variety of tasty and affordable plant-based options on their food menus, such as the Impossible Burger. Moreover, because social media is a prominent cultural force and marketing normalizes what is being advertised, sharing and promoting plant-based advertisements on social media has the power to encourage consumers to shift to a vegan diet. Relatedly, we must acknowledge that some radical animal rights tactics are unlikely to help farmed animals. For instance, the "disruption" tactics of Direct Action Everywhere, which often involve

chanting “meat is murder” in restaurants and grocery stores, may paint vegans as socially deviant, making it less likely that CFRM will be inspired to become vegan.

### 13. Conclusion

Given the complex and influential political, social, and cultural webs in which we find ourselves entangled, the ways in which our ability to act freely and reflectively is often partially impaired. CFRM, too, are subject to deep cultural influences—they are socially conditioned, pressured, and threatened to consume animals, despite that doing so hurts so much. Eating animals, then, isn’t an authentic, individual choice—it’s, in part, the product of deeply ingrained social norms that are perpetuated and reinforced by our family, friends, doctors, teachers, religious leaders, and society at large. So, while it’s true that both puppy torturers and CFRM cause terrible, unnecessary harm to animals, the conditions under which they act are relevantly different. The cultural duress and moral ignorance under which CFRM act gives them at least a *partial excuse* that is unavailable to puppy torturers.

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