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Nonculpably Ignorant Meat Eaters & Epistemically Unjust Meat Producers

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In the United States (U.S.) alone, nearly 10 billion farmed animals are raised and killed for food each year, and approximately 99% of these animals are raised in factory farms, where they are mutilated without anesthetic, confined to cramped and overcrowded cages and sheds, forcibly separated at birth from their mothers, deprived of the opportunity to move freely and engage in species-specific behavior, and killed violently (Sentience Institute 2019). Given the terrible harms that billions of animals endure on U.S. factory farms each year, we must ask: why do so many people repeatedly partake in and support such a morally atrocious practice?

In a recent paper I published in *Social Epistemology*, “The Epistemology of Meat-Eating,” I advanced an epistemological theory that explains why so many people continue to eat animals, even after they encounter anti-factory farming arguments.¹ I began by assuming that our beliefs influence our moral behavior, and noted that this entails that the meat-eating behavior of moral agents is influenced by their beliefs about the morality of eating animals. Because meat-eating is seriously immoral, meat-eaters must either (1) believe that eating animals isn’t seriously immoral, or (2) believe that meat eating is seriously immoral (and thus they must be seriously immoral). I argued that most meat-eaters aren’t seriously immoral; rather, they lack the true belief that eating animals is seriously immoral.

In particular, I argued that standard meat-eaters don’t believe that eating animals is seriously immoral because either they don’t believe that meat-eating causes serious and systematic harm to farmed animals, or they believe that meat-eating causes serious and systematic harm to farmed animals, but they don’t believe that this harm is unnecessary. Perhaps, for instance, they think that it’s necessary to factory farm animals in order to feed a growing population.

In a response titled “Are Meat-Eaters Epistemically Unlucky?”, Bob Fischer presents five important objections to my epistemic theory and concludes by providing a suggestion for further thought. In what follows, I offer responses to each of Fischer’s thought-provoking objections and develop his insightful suggestion that, according to my epistemic theory, animal protectionists are victims of epistemic injustice.

The Moral Monster Hypothesis

I don’t believe that most humans are moral monsters, but I do believe that they do something seriously immoral when they eat meat.² And because I assume that most humans aren’t seriously immoral, I assume that most consumers wouldn’t knowingly and repeatedly engage in seriously immoral conduct like meat eating. This leads me to reject the possibility that standard consumers believe that meat-eating is seriously immoral. Fischer, though, worries that I might be too quick to let humanity off the moral hook. He encourages me to

¹ For the purpose of this discussion, I will discuss only meat eating, but I intend for my argument to apply to the consumption of all animal product that comes from factory farms.

² When I refer to meat eating, I refer to the consumption of animal product from conventional farms. As a sentientist, I don’t think it’s immoral to eat insentient animals.

consider the possibility that standard consumers are “moral monsters,” insofar as it might be the case that “most people are seriously immoral because they are far too willing to suppose that the status quo is probably morally tolerable, or even morally good.” Borrowing and reworking Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” concept, Fischer introduces a related concept: the banality of being seriously immoral. As he puts it:

Perhaps that banality partially consists in accepting a set of epistemic practices that make moral change much harder than it ought to be. It’s a kind of epistemic laziness that wasn’t so objectionable in an earlier era, when humanity’s history of atrocities was less widely known, but seems far more sinister now.

The thought seems to be that, in today’s world, those who participate in collective injustice aren’t just doing something evil; they moreover are evil. That is, unlike those who participated in historical cases of collective injustice, people who participate in injustices today aren’t at all excusable for doing so.

The Banality of Being Immoral

Fischer suggests that the notion of the banality of being immoral is more relevant to today’s meat eating context than is the banality of evil because we are aware of humanity’s history of atrocities. And because we have this awareness, we can’t claim nonculpable ignorance for our epistemic vices when we participate in contemporary moral atrocities. The idea seems to be that, given our awareness of past atrocities, people living today have a moral duty to “find out” about the atrocities in which we might be complicit. While epistemic ignorance regarding moral atrocities may have been excusable in the past, it is now, as Fischer puts it, “far more sinister.”

Fischer’s argument seems to be this:

- P1) If we are aware of humanity’s history of atrocities, then we are responsible for our epistemic ignorance regarding current injustices.
- P2) We are aware of humanity’s history of atrocities.
- C) We are responsible for our epistemic ignorance regarding current injustices.

Fischer’s argument would be more plausible if it looked something more like this:

- P1) If we are aware of humanity’s history of human atrocities, then we are responsible for our epistemic ignorance regarding current injustices done to humans.
- P2) We are aware of humanity’s history of human atrocities.
- C) We are responsible for our epistemic ignorance regarding current injustices done to humans.

But just because we ought to know better when it comes to injustices that are done to humans, given our widely discussed and understood history of human atrocities, this doesn’t mean we ought to know better when it comes to injustices that are done to animals.

Arguably, there is a distinction between our epistemic ignorance regarding injustices done to humans and our epistemic ignorance regarding injustices done to other animals. For one, while we learn about the horrors of human slavery and the Holocaust in history class and textbooks, neither history classes nor history textbooks teach us about our past mistreatment of animals, especially farmed animals.

Relatedly, it's easier for us to understand and accept the principle of human equality than it is for us to understand and accept the principle of farmed animal equality. After all, one major lesson we learned from history class and textbooks is that the Holocaust and human slavery are seriously wrong because all humans are equal. In general, the relevant similarities between white people and black people (and German people and Jewish people) seem much more obvious than the relevant similarities between humans and farmed animals, and this is, in part, because there is considerable emphasis on the wrongness of mistreating humans in our education system. Yet, rarely, if ever, does our educational system encourage discussions about the mistreatment of animals (current or historical).

Although in my *Social Epistemology* paper I don't focus on moral responsibility for meat eating, elsewhere (Abbate 2020*) I argue that social pressure and institutions can alter our belief-forming process to such a degree as to lessen responsibility for wrong-doing. To be responsible for meat-eating, we must meet both the epistemic and control conditions of moral responsibility. A clear implication of my epistemic theory is that standard meat consumers don't meet the epistemic condition. And it's worth noting that meat-eaters don't fully meet the control condition—an unsurprising fact, given that the control and epistemic conditions of responsibility are often intimately connected.

Meat-eating isn't a thing most members of our society just so happen to do. Elsewhere, I (Abbate 2020*) argue that meat eating is a culturally normalized act that we are pressured to perform, which is different from saying that meat eating is a merely normalized act. H.L.A. Hart's (1961) distinction between social habits and social rules is helpful here. Consumers eat meat not as a rule, but because there is a (social) rule. That is, they eat meat not from habit, but because they think they're obligated to do so, insofar as (1) they are often taught that meat eating is important for achieving some significant social good, and (2) the failure to eat meat is met with social sanctions, such as criticisms, condemnation, and harsh insults. Meat eaters, as Hart might put it, take an internal perspective when it comes to the social meat-eating rule. They accept the meat-eating rule and use it to guide their consumer-behavior. This indicates that meat-eaters satisfy neither the epistemic nor the control condition of responsibility. Because meat-eating is a social rule and not just a habit, consumers, in a sense, act under social duress, and this social duress causes them to accept, i.e., believe, that they are (socially) obligated to eat animals and that doing so is therefore morally right.

Belief and Behavior

Fischer points out that it's an empirical question of whether belief causes behavior in the meat-eating context. He goes on to propose that economic factors may best explain why consumers continue to eat animals. As he puts it:

Maybe it's the case that our society is one where most meat-eaters believe, in their heart of hearts, that eating animals is very seriously wrong, and yet people continue to eat them anyway, simply because people are either consciously or unconsciously motivated more by price, preference, and social factors than they are motivated by morality.

If consumers believe that meat-eating causes serious and systematic harm to farmed animals, but they eat meat anyway for economic reasons, it's not clear that they believe that the harm farmed animals endure is unnecessary. And if they don't believe that the harm that farmed animals endure is unnecessary, then they wouldn't believe that eating animals is seriously immoral, given that meat eating is seriously immoral only if it causes serious, unnecessary harm. After all, most people don't believe that it is seriously immoral to farm animals for food when doing so is necessary for their well-being, whether that be their health or economic security. And it's highly unlikely that people would knowingly and repeatedly engage in seriously immoral conduct to save a few pennies, when doing so isn't really necessary for economic security.

Fischer goes on to speculate that the moral behavior of people may remain the same even if the corresponding moral beliefs of community members change, so long as it's "socially acceptable to participate in that sort of hypocrisy." In support of this, he claims that many members of the "progressive community" believe that it's morally obligatory not to let distant strangers die due to preventable causes, yet rarely do these people donate to global aid organizations, despite that they believe that they could prevent deaths by giving to these organizations. Fischer wonders whether this failure to donate to charity and continued meat eating in our society is better explained by economic factors and non-judgmental community members, and not a lack of the relevant moral beliefs.

So, again, there's this question: what's the best explanation for continued meat consumption? I argued that the best explanation is that meat-eaters lack the belief that eating animals is seriously wrong. Fischer proposes that maybe it's not this; maybe consumers do believe that eating animals is seriously wrong, but they continue to do so (1) for economic reasons, and (2) because they won't be judged by members of society. I've already explained why someone who eats meat for economic reasons likely lacks the belief that eating animals is seriously wrong. Now, I'll argue that those who continue to eat meat because they won't be judged by members of society also lack this belief—or, at the very least—lack this belief when they eat meat.

Social Pressure and Permissibility

Whenever there is widespread social acceptance of some practice, whether it's failing to donate money to global charity or meat-eating, this social acceptance inevitably serves as evidence for it being permissible. So, even if you "believe" that it's seriously immoral to eat animals, if meat-eating is normalized in your society, this will weaken your credence in that belief. Perhaps this is because many people subconsciously endorse some kind of causal impotence belief; if so many people in society are engaging in a certain kind of behavior, the problem is so huge that one person's behavior (e.g., meat eating or donating money to charity) isn't going to make much of a difference.

Another thing to consider is that when an evil practice is socially normalized, it's unlikely that people occurrently entertain beliefs about the morality of it when acting, even if they dispositionally believe that the practice is seriously immoral. After all, when there aren't social "reminders" that some act X is wrong, most people don't consciously entertain the belief that X is wrong while doing X, even if they dispositionally believe that X is wrong. This, I think, better explains why many consumers don't change their meat-eating behavior (as opposed to Fischer's economic, nonjudgmental community explanation).³

To make this clear, consider Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust's (2014) research study on the moral behavior and attitudes of professional ethicists, which described a strong relationship between behavior and attitude when it comes to voting and a weak relationship between behavior and attitude when it comes to charitable donation. We can, in part, explain this difference by appealing to the notion of occurrent belief. When it nears Election Day, one's belief about the rightness of voting is occurrently entertained. After all, at this time, one cannot turn on the radio station, watch the news, or scroll through their social media newsfeed without seeing something about voting. One cannot leave one's house without seeing an "I voted sticker." One cannot really have a conversation with anyone on Election Day without being reminded of the morality of voting. Because there is significant social pressure to vote, one's belief about the morality of voting is occurrently entertained on Election Day (and the days prior).

But given the widespread societal indifference to the plight of the global poor, beliefs about the morality of making charitable donations are not occurrently entertained when consumers make unnecessary purchases. Likewise, given the widespread societal indifference to the plight of farmed animals, beliefs about the morality of meat eating are not occurrently entertained when consumers eat meat.⁴ And if this is the right explanation for continued meat eating, then meat eaters arguably still don't fully satisfy the epistemic condition of responsibility (Abbate 2020*; Zimmerman 2017).⁵

Beliefs and Evidence

³ I don't discuss this "occurrent belief" line of response in my *Social Epistemology* paper because, after some reflection, I determined that meat-eaters don't even have the relevant belief about the wrongness of eating animals to occurrently entertain.

⁴ In a recent study, Schwitzgebel (et al. 2020) found that "exposure to a philosophy article, a fifty-minute philosophy discussion section, and an optional online video concerning the ethics of eating factory farmed meat, students decreased their rates of meat purchasing from 52% to 45% of their food purchases of \$4.99 or more in campus dining locations for which receipts were available." But note that this study looked only at the purchasing behavior that occurred *two weeks* after the animal ethics "intervention." Indeed, the researchers admit that they were unable to test the hypothesis that "meat ethics" exposure has only a brief effect that later disappears.

⁵ And, of course, if this is the right explanation, we would need to have a further conversation about what tactics we might employ to encourage meat-eaters to entertain beliefs about meat-eating immediately before putting food in their mouths. This is something I consider elsewhere (Abbate 2020*).

Fischer suggests that meat-eaters choose not to investigate the ills of factory farming because they suspect that doing so would have inconvenient consequences for them, and this choice not to investigate, to some degree, determines what kind of evidence they encounter. So, according to Fischer's reasoning, if there were incentives to finding meat-eating morally objectionable, more people may be willing to investigate the ethics of meat-eating.

However, just because we have an incentive for believing that P doesn't mean that we continue to believe that P because we are ultimately motivated by the corresponding incentive. Second, there are incentives for finding meat eating to be something we ought not to do. There is, for instance, the life-saving health incentive. But, still, few people investigate the ethics of meat-eating.

Vegans and Epistemic Luck

Fischer draws a distinction between two kinds of luck: (1) luck with respect to the evidence that people acquire, and (2) luck with respect to the epistemic practices that people inherit. Those with the second kind of epistemic luck, according to Fischer, have acquired "good methods for handling evidence, to include appropriate degrees of suspicion about the norms of the culture in which we find ourselves, a sense of the appropriate degree of skepticism to have toward sources of information, and so on."

Fischer then suggests that the people with this second kind of moral luck who conveniently fail to apply their luckily acquired belief-forming methods when it comes to meat eating are more responsible than ordinary consumers, even if they lack the first kind of epistemic luck. I agree. For instance, I suspect that, given their training in moral reasoning and deliberation, most philosophers are epistemically lucky in the second sense, and thus are more responsible for eating animals than are average consumers. But, nevertheless, I hesitate to say that philosophers who eat meat are fully responsible for doing so, given that they may not fully satisfy the control condition of moral responsibility.

Changing Beliefs

In response to my argument that moral vegs* (i.e., "epistemically lucky consumers") ought to help change the average consumer's belief about the morality of eating animals, Fischer counters that there may be more effective ways to help animals. For instance, he suggests that we might accomplish more for animals by "investing in plant-based and cultured meat companies, lobbying for legal reforms, encouraging people to eat less meat for their health (which is an easier sell), and donating to effective charities."

Perhaps we should draw a distinction between three distinct kinds of activism (1) monetary activism, (2) political activism, and (3) grass-roots activism. If we have money to donate, then we are obligated to use it to aid farmed animals, perhaps by investing in plant-based and cultured meat companies. If we have political expertise, then we are obligated to lobby for political change for farmed animals.⁶ But not all consumers have money to donate, nor do

⁶ Although it's unclear if lobbying for legal reforms is an effective way to help animals, as Fischer seems to suggest. Corey Wrenn (2016), for instance, compellingly argues that animal welfare reforms, at best, do little to end animal exploitation and, at worst, normalize it.

they have the political expertise needed for effective lobbying. This means that the form of activism available to most animal advocates is grass-roots activism, which is aimed at (directly) changing individual behavior, and this is done by changing some of their beliefs.

Moreover, even those who are able to donate and/or have lobbying expertise often find themselves with opportunities to engage in conversations with individual consumers, whether it be friends family, or strangers, about the ethics of eating animals. In such situations, we are obligated to do what we can (or say what we can) to help farmed animals, as helping farmed animals is not an “either or” situation. We aren’t permitted to remain silent and abstain from helping them when we easily could just because we have previously engaged in some other form of effective activism on their behalf.

While Fischer might say that we should, in our every-day grass roots activism or consumer-conversations, encourage meat-eaters to become vegan for health reasons, this isn’t the most effective “grass-roots” route to help farmed animals. Indeed, a recent Faunalytics (2014) study shows that 84% of vegs* eventually give up their veg* diet, and the only motivation (for initially going veg*) cited by a majority (58%) of relapsed vegs* was health. This indicates that people who go vegan for ethical reasons are more likely to remain vegan in the long-term than those who go vegan for health reasons (Radnitz, Beezhold, and DiMatteo 2015). So, if we want to help animals in the long-term, we should focus on encouraging individual consumers to give up animal meat for ethical reasons, and not health reasons. And to do this, we must change their beliefs about the morality of eating animals.

Epistemic Injustice

Fischer concludes his response by suggesting that if what I argue in my paper is true, then both meat-eaters and animal protectionists may be victims of epistemic injustice. I think this is exactly right. It’s not just animals who are treated unjustly by meat corporations. While, as Fischer notes, my work reveals that consumers are victims of hermeneutical injustice, it also reveals that animal protectionists like myself are surely victims of systematic testimonial injustice, insofar as, throughout different dimensions of social activity, our words are repeatedly ignored, dismissed, or doubted because of our social identity, and this is often because those in positions of power (e.g., meat corporations) have unfairly discredited and demonized animal advocates.⁷

⁷ This testimonial injustice is *systematic* insofar as the prejudices against animal rights activists track them through different dimensions of social activity. Given that vegans and animal rights activists are often stereotyped as ridiculous, eccentrics, ascetics, faddists, sentimentalists, and hostile extremists (Cole and Morgan 2011), it’s not surprising that they are often deemed untrustworthy when it comes to discussions about science (especially welfare animal science), the law, politics, religion, and economics. Accusing animal rights activists of having a “vegan agenda” inevitably promotes a restrictive “vegan identity” that reduces animal protectionists to a malicious and insincere set of intentions that are not to be trusted in various dimensions of social activity.

Indeed, the identity prejudice against animal rights activists prevents us from, as Miranda Fricker (2019) might put it, “successfully putting knowledge into the public domain.”⁸ So, if you care about other creatures, both humans and other animals, you ought to do what you can to change the dietary beliefs of epistemically unlucky consumers. Indeed, from the moral point of view, you should do this. After all, we not only have a duty to prevent harm to defenseless animals, but we also have a duty to dismantle the unjust epistemic barriers that so many of our fellow humans face.

About the Author

Cheryl Abbate is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She’s the author of over twenty academic pieces on the ethical treatment of animals, including “Meat eating and moral responsibility (*Utilitas*, 2020), “Valuing animals as they are: Whether they feel it or not” (*European Journal of Philosophy*, 2020), and “A defense of free-roaming cats from a hedonist account of feline well-being” (*Acta Analytica*, 2019).

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⁸ Relatedly, scientist Marc Bekoff reports that he is often characterized as “anti-science” because of his pro-animal views (Bekoff and Pierce 2007, 23).

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