

Norcross Against Factory-Farming

1. The Argument By Analogy: Alastair Norcross asks us to consider the following case:

Fred and the Puppies Fred has an auto accident. He seems to recover just fine until he discovers that he can no longer enjoy the taste of chocolate. He visits a doctor who tells him that his “godiva gland” has been damaged, and he can no longer produce a hormone called “cocoamone” because of it. Cocoamone is what enables us to enjoy the taste of chocolate. He tells Fred that a recent study shows that the brains of puppies produce cocoamone when the puppies are tortured for 6 months and then brutally killed. So, Fred sets up a lab in his basement where he tortures puppies and slaughters them for cocoamone. Now, he can enjoy the taste of chocolate again.

Norcross assumes you’ll agree that Fred’s behavior is morally unacceptable. Yet, if what Fred does is seriously wrong, then it is also wrong to eat meat, or purchase nearly any animal product. For, the two behaviors are morally equivalent. After all:

- In both cases, the animals endure immense suffering and then death.
- Neither chocolate nor meat are essential to remain alive, or healthy. In fact, too much of either is very *un*-healthy.¹
- Giving up meat or cocoamone would merely mean giving up their unique delicious *taste* – or “gustatory pleasure”. This is the only benefit that you can’t get elsewhere.

We can state this formally, as the following argument by analogy:

1. What Fred does to the puppies (namely, torture and kill them in order to be able to taste chocolate) is seriously morally wrong.
2. Purchasing factory farmed-meat is morally equivalent to what Fred does.
3. Therefore, purchasing factory-farmed meat is also seriously morally wrong.

2. Objections: As with any argument by analogy, the best way to refute it is to reject the moral equivalence claim. In short, if you want to avoid Norcross’ conclusion, you must find a morally relevant difference between what Fred does and what we do when we purchase and eat meat. Let’s look at a few potential differences:

¹ There are over **1.5 billion** vegetarians and vegans in the world (some statistics [here](#)). About 5 to 10% of Americans are vegetarian or vegan (polling varies). That’s **17-34 million Americans**. This includes fully vegan [Olympic weightlifters](#), [UFC fighters](#), and marathon runners (more examples [here](#)). Even tennis legends Serena and Venus Williams are vegan (with some occasional cheese on cheat days - story [here](#)). In short, meat is not required for health. All of the necessary iron, protein, B vitamins, etc., are easily obtained from a diet of lentils, beans, nuts, dairy, and eggs. (Though note: If going fully vegan – cutting out not only meat but ALL animal products – be sure to take B12 supplements, as B12 can only be obtained from animal products.)

What is more, high meat consumption is actually linked to *negative* health outcomes, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.

(a) **Knowledge:** Fred KNOWS that the puppies are being harmed. However, most meat-eaters do not know how awful factory farms really are. This makes Fred's action much worse, morally, than purchasing meat at the grocery store.

Reply: Perhaps ignorance can excuse some immoral actions from being blameworthy. For example, if you drummed out some beats on the table and later found out that this had caused an earthquake that killed a bunch of people, we could hardly blame you. No one could reasonably foresee that such an innocent action would cause so much harm!

On the other hand, if you put on a blindfold and ear plugs and go outside to practice shooting your crossbow, and you end up injuring a bunch of people, you clearly WOULD be blameworthy. "I didn't KNOW I was hurting anyone!" would not be a good excuse – because you SHOULD have known! In this case your ignorance is clearly culpable.

Arguably, in today's society, any ignorance of the fact that meat contributes to animal suffering is *culpable* ignorance. "You should have known better," we could reasonably say to such a person. After all, the information is everywhere! A 5 second Google search quickly reveals the horrible conditions that livestock endure.

Yet, even if lack of knowledge WAS a good excuse, note that you can no longer use it. For, having read Norcross' article and studied this topic with me in class, you now DO know how much the animals suffer in factory farms.

(b) **Direct Harm:** Fred directly harms the puppies. Meanwhile, meat eaters (typically) never actually harm any animals. All they do is BUY the meat from animals that were harmed. This makes Fred's actions much worse than purchasing meat.

Reply: Imagine that Fred did not torture the puppies himself either, but got someone else to torture the puppies for him, and then purchased the cocoamone from them. Fred's behavior in this case would still be immoral, wouldn't it?

If a kid on your street set up a cocoamone stand, and you were fully aware of the brutal torture that occurred in the kid's basement in order to produce this hormone, there would still be something wrong with purchasing the product of that suffering. Right? If so, then the fact that WE do not PERSONALLY torture the animals that we eat is not morally relevant. The fact that we pay others to do the torturing FOR us makes it such that it is still wrong.

To deny this is to suggest that you can permissibly cause any horror imaginable just as long as you pay someone else to do it. In that case, it would be morally permissible to hire a hitman to murder someone, for example. But, surely that's false. (Isn't it?)

(c) **Intending Harm:** Fred INTENDS to harm the puppies as a MEANS to obtaining cocoamone. Meanwhile, the suffering that animals endure in factory farms is merely an unintended (but foreseeable) side-effect of modern farming methods. But, it is much worse, morally to INTENTIONALLY cause harm as a means to an end than it is to cause harm as a merely foreseen, but unintended SIDE-EFFECT of one's actions.

[Note: This objection is an appeal to what is known as "**The Doctrine of Double Effect**". Consider two cases:

Tactical Strike: It is late August, 2021, and the U.S. military is pulling out of Afghanistan. Large crowds are gathered around the airport in Kabul, desperately trying to leave the country. There was a suicide bombing on 8/26/2021, which killed 182 innocent people (including 13 U.S. service members), and injured 150 others. Three days later, intelligence identifies another suicide bomber who is racing to the airport to blow up more innocent people. Our military drones can take out the suicide bomber before they reach their target. However, they are driving through populated streets, and we know that our drone strike will kill 10 innocent people. We have two options: (a) Do nothing. The suicide bomber reaches the airport and kills about 200 innocent people. (b) Take out the bomber by drone. Unfortunately, 10 civilians will also die in the blast.

Is it permissible to order the strike? Most people would say yes. In fact, we DID in fact order the strike, on 8/29/2021. Everything in the case above really happened.² Now compare the above case with another one:

Murderous Interrogation: It is 8/29/2021. We have a terrorist in custody, whom we know has planted a bomb somewhere in Kabul. It is sure to kill 200 innocent people. Time is ticking. We need to find out where that bomb is located ASAP so that we can defuse it. Unfortunately, our suspect isn't talking. So, we decide to round up a bunch of our suspect's innocent friends and family members. We begin killing them one by one – wife, children, friends, neighbors – informing our suspect that we will stop only once they've given us the location of the bomb. Finally, after the deaths of 10 innocent people, our terrorist talks. We defuse the bomb, and save 200 lives. (Note: Unlike the previous case, this one isn't real.)

Is this permissible? Most people would say no. In fact, this would be considered a horrible war crime, and itself an act of terrorism (or a use of terror tactics, at least).

What's the difference? In both cases, either 10 or 200 innocent people will die.

² Unfortunately, the strike was carried out on bad intelligence, and the driver was [not actually a suicide bomber](#).

Answer: Many believe that **it is much worse, morally, to intentionally harm someone as a MEANS to an end**, than it is to cause harm in a way that is an unintended (but foreseen) side-effect of your action. (This is the "Doctrine of Double-Effect".) In the second case, you would be INTENTIONALLY harming innocent people as a MEANS to achieving your goal. By contrast, in Tactical Strike, the deaths of the 10 innocent people are not aimed at. They are not needed in order to achieve our primary goal (of stopping the suicide bomber). Their deaths are unintentional. The military term for them is "**collateral damage**". It is generally thought that causing harm in this way is easier to justify, morally.]

Reply: Even if intending harm IS worse than causing it as an unintended, foreseen side-effect, we can imagine a scenario where the puppies do NOT need to suffer in order to produce cocoamone. Imagine that the horrible conditions that the puppies endure is merely a side-effect of the fact that Fred doesn't have the time or money to care for them very well. (For example, imagine that Fred's basement is terribly small and cramped, has no ventilation, or temperature control, etc., and Fred never has time to clean it.) In that case, his actions would STILL be immoral. So, the fact that he is intentionally harming the puppies as a means to an end in the original case does not seem to be what explains the wrongness of what he does.

(d) **Causal Impotence:** If Fred stops what he is doing, the amount of puppy suffering will decrease. But, if I stop eating meat, nothing will change. There will be ZERO reduction in the amount of animal suffering. The meat industry is simply WAY too big to respond to such insignificant changes. (Consider: We slaughter over **8 billion** chickens in the U.S. each year. If you refrain from ordering that 6-pack of chicken nuggets, do you really think that this will make any difference?) For this reason, Fred's actions are immoral, but mine are not. How can my actions be morally wrong if they make no difference (i.e., cause no harm)?

Reply: Essentially, the objection is claiming, "**No harm, no foul!**" That is, (i) My actions cause no harm. And (ii) If my actions cause no harm, then they are not wrong. We can challenge BOTH of these claims.

Reply #1: Together, we CAN make a difference: Even if one person's giving up meat makes no difference, surely SOME number of people giving up meat WILL affect the industry. Right? Let's say it's 10,000 people. Well, the average American eats about 25 chickens per year. So, if 10,000 people give up eating chicken, then 250,000 fewer chickens will be slaughtered annually. Now, you can either join up with this group, or not. But if you do, then you and 9,999 other people will have collectively saved a quarter million chickens annually! And 1/10,000th of that effect (i.e., 25 chickens saved) is because of YOU! That's your **share of the total** effect.

Reply #2: It is still wrong even if it makes no difference: Imagine that you were enjoying some delicious chocolate mousse, with a small beverage of some liquid. The chocolate is so delicious, you order a second round. As the server brings it out, you ask him what's in it. The server tells you that the liquid that comes with the mousse is cocoamone, which is harvested from tortured puppies in the back of the restaurant. You protest, saying that you do not want to have the dessert, and please take it away. The server tells you that the cocoamone will just go into the garbage if you don't drink it.

So, here is a clear case where you know FOR SURE that drinking the cocoamone will have absolutely no effect whatsoever on the amount of suffering that puppies endure. Whether you drink the cocoamone or not, exactly the same amount of puppy suffering will have occurred. It truly makes no difference.

Is it morally permissible to drink the cocoamone anyway, knowing that it came from the brains of tortured puppies? Many have the intuition that it is not. After all, even if it makes no difference, it's still immoral to partake of the product of horrible suffering. If that's correct, then this is an indication that partaking of the product of suffering is immoral EVEN IF doing so has no impact, or makes no difference to the amount of suffering that actually occurs.

[Side note: Causal impotence infects many other areas too. For instance, you might think, "I am just one person. What's the point in **voting**? No election has ever been so close that it came down to one single voter. Whether I vote or not, the same outcome will occur either way. It makes no difference. Therefore, I have no reason to vote."

Or: "I am just one person. What's the point in trying to combat **climate change** by reducing my driving, flying less, eating less meat, producing less disposable waste, etc.? It won't have any effect on climate change. I have no reason to change my behavior."

The problem is that, when large numbers of people think this way – i.e., believe that their bad behavior is so insignificant that it makes no difference – then disaster usually follows. This is known as the "**Tragedy of the Commons**".]

3. Conclusion: Norcross concludes that there are no morally relevant differences between Fred's behavior and our own when we purchase meat raised in the brutal conditions of factory farms (i.e., nearly ALL meat). But, then, it is seriously morally wrong to purchase (most) meat. Nevertheless, most of us do so every day. According to Norcross, we are all acting wrongly. [*What do you think?*]

In addition to ending animal suffering, there are many other benefits to giving up meat:

- A vegetarian diet is typically **[much cheaper](#)** than a diet that includes meat.
- A vegetarian diet is **much better for the environment**. E.g., in terms of:
 - Greenhouse Gas Emissions ([source](#)) (beef is especially terrible for GHG's)
 - Land Use / Deforestation ([source](#))
 - Fresh Water Use ([source](#)) (though nuts & rice have big H₂O footprints too)
 - Water Pollution ([source](#))
- A vegetarian diet is much **better for human health**.
 - The average American eats 40% more meat than is recommended to maintain a healthy diet ([source](#))
 - Meat consumption is linked to cancer, heart disease, and diabetes ([source](#))
 - The Meat industry is in danger of rendering antibiotics useless, which will cause a rise in deaths due to antibiotic-resistant infections ([source](#))

Fun Facts

* Americans are #1 in meat consumption per capita. (USA! NUMBER ONE!) We consume about 2.5 times more meat than the average human being (i.e., 2.5 times more meat than roughly 4 billion people!). ([source](#)) On average, we eat about 1.5 times as much meat as the average citizen of the UK, twice as much meat as people in nations like China, Japan Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium, 3 times more than Turkey, 5x more than Thailand, and **22 times more** than people in India!

* The recommended amount of protein is only ~20kg/yr. ([source](#)) Given that meat is roughly 26-27% protein, this means that we'd only need to eat about 75kg of meat per year if meat was our ONLY source of protein (but keep in mind that we ALSO get protein from nuts, beans, lentils, quinoa, eggs, milk, cheese, etc.). The average American eats about 1.6 times this much meat. We are eating WAY too much protein.

Fun Facts, Continued

- * about 14.5% of all greenhouse gases come from the meat industry
- * it takes over 10 times more land and water to produce one pound of beef protein vs. one pound of vegetable protein (e.g., in beans, lentils)
- * about 70% of grain & cereals grown in the U.S. (and about 40% of all grain in the world) is fed to livestock.
- * only 3% of the protein and calories we put into a cow comes out as beef; for pigs, 9% becomes pork; while chicken is the most efficient, at 14%; [source](#); also [here](#).
- * Visit [here](#) for lots more interesting data!

[For further consideration:

*(1) **Other animal products:** In addition to meat, most of our eggs, milk, cheese, butter—and even things like leather and wool—come from factory farms. So, does Norcross's argument extend to these items too?*

*(2) **"Happy" meat:** What about products from animals that were raised happily and killed quickly and painlessly? Can Norcross's argument be extended to THESE products? Imagine that Fred only kills happy puppies for cocoamone. Would that be okay? Or consider a happy human farm where happy people are killed quickly and painlessly for their organs.*

*(3) **Labels:** How do I identify happy meat? As it turns out, labels like "cage free", "free range" and "pasture-raised" can be very misleading, as most of these animals are actually raised in factory-farms. ([source](#)) Look for "certified humane" or "USDA organic" instead.]*