ETHICS WITHOUT A NET: A CASE STUDY IN HOW TO DO PRACTICAL ETHICS WITHOUT APPEAL TO A MORAL THEORY

The traditional approach to practical ethics is to take one’s preferred moral theory, say hedonistic utilitarianism or a Kantian theory, and apply it to some controversial moral issue. Hence, the name “applied ethics”. The name itself suggests that all the important philosophical and ethical work has already been done at the theoretical and metatheoretical level and that practical ethics is just a trivial matter of reading off conclusions from such a theory. The underlying rationale for the traditional approach is the belief that grounding our moral judgments on a correct moral theory is the only way to guarantee the objectivity and correctness of those moral judgments. In short, the moral theory is supposed to serve as a safety net protecting us from subjectivism, relativism and error in our moral judgments.

The fundamental weakness of the traditional approach is two-fold: First, the moral theories that are supposed to ground our moral judgments and render them objectively justified are themselves at least as contentious as the moral judgments they’re intended to ground. Second, and more problematic from the standpoint of normative ethics whose raison d’etre is to guide conduct, one can always avoid accepting a burdensome moral judgment simply by rejecting the moral theory on which it is predicated. Perhaps nowhere has this been more obvious than in the recent debate concerning ethical vegetarianism. Most arguments for the moral obligatoriness of vegetarianism take one of two forms. Either they follow Singer’s lead and demand equal consideration for animals on utilitarian grounds,¹ or they follow Regan’s rights-based approach and insist that virtually all of the animals we routinely consume possess the same rights-conferring properties which confer rights on humans.² Most philosophers have remained unmoved by these arguments. Like most ordinary people, most philosophers take great pleasure—both gustatory and tactile—out of sinking their teeth into a hot juicy steak, chewing the flesh off a rack of barbequed ribs, and gnawing on spicy chicken wings. Such pleasures are not to be given up lightly. So, it’s not surprising that meat-loving philosophers often casually dismiss these arguments as follows:

Singer’s preference utilitarianism is irremediably flawed, as is Regan’s theory of moral rights.

Since Singer’s and Regan’s arguments for vegetarianism are predicated on flawed ethical theories, their arguments are also flawed. Until someone can provide me with a correct moral theory that entails that eating meat is wrong, I will continue to eat what I please.³

The self-serving sophistry of such a reply should be obvious. Since no ethical theory to date is immune to objection, one could fashion a similar reply to “justify” virtually any behavior. One could “justify” rape as follows: An opponent of rape might appeal to utilitarian or Kantian grounds to establish the immorality of rape. Our fictitious rape-loving philosopher could then argue that since these ethical theories are flawed, so too are the arguments against rape. Our rape proponent might then assert: “Until someone can provide me with a correct moral theory that entails that rape is wrong, I will continue to rape whomever I please.”

The speciousness of such a “justification” of rape should be transparent. No one who seriously
considered the brutality of rape could think that it is somehow justified/perm issible simply because all current ethical theories are flawed. But such specious reasoning is used to “justify” the equally brutal breeding, confining, mutilating, transporting, killing and eating of animals all the time. Seeking to block this spurious reply, I have elsewhere advanced an argument for the immorality of eating meat that is predicated not on any highly contentious moral theory, but rather on beliefs that you already hold.4 My aim in the present paper is to examine whether grounding particular moral judgments on beliefs a person already holds, with no appeal to moral theory, is a legitimate way of doing practical ethics. I shall argue (i) that grounding particular moral judgments on a person’s core moral convictions and other core nonmoral beliefs is, indeed, a legitimate way to justify moral judgments, (ii) that these moral judgments possess as much epistemic justification and have as much claim to objectivity as moral judgments grounded on particular ethical theories, and (iii) that this internalistic coheren tist method of grounding moral judgments has an important theoretical advantage over the traditional approach to practical ethics. To illustrate the approach, I’ll begin by briefly recapitulating my consistency argument for ethical vegetarianism. I will then examine whether the internalistic coheren tist approach implicit in the argument can stand up to a number of potentially fatal metatheoretical attacks.5

1. Why You Are Committed to the Immorality of Eating Meat

a. Empirical Preliminaries

My consistency argument for ethical vegetarianism begins by identifying two incontrovertible empirical facts: (f1) Virtually all commercial animal agriculture, especially factory farming, causes animals intense pain and suffering and, thus, greatly increases the amount of pain and suffering in the world; and (f2) In modern societies the consumption of meat is in no way necessary for human survival or human flourishing. In case some of you are unaware of the techniques used in modern animal agriculture, a brief description is in order.

Most farm animals in the U.S. are raised in “factory farms.” Factory farms are intensive confinement facilities where animals are forced to live in inhospitable unnatural conditions for the duration of their lives. The first step in intensive farming is early separation of mother and offspring.6 The offspring are then housed in overcrowded confinement facilities. Chickens and turkeys are warehoused in sheds containing anywhere from 10,000-100,000 birds;7 veal calves are kept in crates 22” x 54” and are chained at the neck, rendering them unable to move or turn around;8 pigs are confined in metal crates situated on concrete slatted floors with no straw or bedding;9 and beef cattle are housed in feedlots containing up to 100,000 animals.10 The inappropriate, unforgiving surfaces on which the animals must stand produce chronic foot and leg injuries.11 Since they cannot move about, they must stand in their own waste. In these cramped, unsanitary conditions, virtually all of the animals’ basic instinctual urges (e.g. to nurse, stretch, move around, groom, build nests, establish social orders) are thwarted, causing boredom,
frustration, and stress in the animals. To prevent losses from these stressful, unsanitary conditions, the animals are given a steady supply of antibiotics and growth hormones and are subjected to routine mutilations including debeaking, tail docking, branding, castration, ear tagging and clipping, teeth pulling, and toe removal, all performed without anesthesia.\textsuperscript{12}

Lives of frustration and torment finally culminate as the animals are inhumanely loaded onto trucks and shipped long distances to slaughterhouses without food or water and without adequate protection from the elements. Each year millions of animals die as a result of such handling and transportation.\textsuperscript{13} Once inside the slaughterhouse, the animals are hung upside down and are brought via conveyor to the slaughterer who slits their throats and severs their carotid arteries and jugular veins.\textsuperscript{14} In theory, animals covered by the Federal Humane Slaughter Act are to be rendered unconscious by electric current or by captive bolt pistol.\textsuperscript{15} In practice, the Act is not enforced, and consequently, in many cases and all kosher cases, the animals are fully conscious throughout the entire throat-slitting ordeal.\textsuperscript{16}

These animal rearing and slaughtering techniques are by no means rare: 97\% of all poultry are produced in 100,000+ bird operations,\textsuperscript{17} 99\% of pigs are raised in confinement systems,\textsuperscript{18} 70\% of the nation’s dairy cows are raised in confinement systems,\textsuperscript{19} all veal calves are crate-raised, and 74\% of beef cattle experience feedlot confinement before slaughter.\textsuperscript{20} Data provided by the National Agricultural Statistics Service reveals that over 25.5 million animals are killed each day as a result of the food animal industry.\textsuperscript{21} No other human activity results in more pain, suffering, frustration and death than factory farming and animal agribusiness. Fact (f\textsubscript{1}) is beyond dispute.

Regarding (f\textsubscript{2}), I’ve documented the health benefits of plant-based diets elsewhere,\textsuperscript{22} reporting the results of several well-designed, carefully-controlled studies examining the relationship between diet and disease.\textsuperscript{23} I won’t reiterate the details of those studies here. Instead, I’ll simply report the positions of three highly respected disseminators of nutritional information. According to the USDA: “Vegetarian diets are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and can meet Recommended Dietary Allowances for nutrients.”\textsuperscript{24} The American Dietetic Association and the Dietitians of Canada are the two most reputable nutritional organizations in North America. Their joint position on vegetarian diets leaves no doubt about the health benefits of plant-based diets:

> It is the position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. . . . Well-planned vegan and . . . vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Vegetarian diets offer a number of nutritional benefits, including lower levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein as well as higher levels of carbohydrates, fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate, and antioxidants such as vitamins C and E.
and phytochemicals. Vegetarians have been reported to have lower body mass indices than nonvegetarians, as well as lower rates of death from ischemic heart disease; vegetarians also show lower blood cholesterol levels; lower blood pressure; and lower rates of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and prostate and colon cancer.\textsuperscript{25}

The evidence is unequivocal: One cannot reject (f\textsubscript{2}) on the grounds that eating meat is necessary for human flourishing, because it isn’t. On the contrary, meat consumption promotes disease and is \textit{detrimental} to human health and well-being.

\textbf{b. Your Beliefs}

Like virtually all people of normal moral sensibilities, you believe the following propositions:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(p\textsubscript{1})] Other things being equal, a world with less pain and suffering is better than a world with more pain and suffering.
  \item[(p\textsubscript{2})] A world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering,\textsuperscript{26}
  \item[(p\textsubscript{3})] Unnecessary cruelty is wrong and ought not be supported or encouraged.
  \item[(p\textsubscript{4})] We ought to do what we reasonably can to avoid making the world a worse place.
\end{itemize}

You also believe:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(p\textsubscript{5})] A morally good person will take steps to make the world a better place and even stronger steps to avoid making the world a worse place.
  \item[(p\textsubscript{6})] Even a “minimally decent person”\textsuperscript{27} will take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world, \textit{when s/he can do so with little effort on her/his part}.
\end{itemize}

You also have beliefs about nonhuman animals and our obligations toward them. You believe:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(p\textsubscript{7})] Many nonhuman animals (certainly all vertebrates) are capable of feeling pain.
  \item[(p\textsubscript{8})] Other things being equal, it’s morally wrong to cause an animal pain or suffering.
  \item[(p\textsubscript{9})] It’s morally wrong and despicable to treat animals inhumanely \textit{for no good reason} [Remember Harman’s cat.\textsuperscript{28}].
\end{itemize}

\textbf{c. The Consistency Argument for Ethical Vegetarianism}

My argument for the immorality of eating meat is predicated on your beliefs (p\textsubscript{1})-(p\textsubscript{9}). While you do not have to believe all of (p\textsubscript{1})-(p\textsubscript{9}) for my argument to succeed, the more of these propositions you believe, the greater your commitment to the immorality of eating meat.\textsuperscript{29} A condensed version of the argument runs as follows: Your beliefs (p\textsubscript{7})-(p\textsubscript{9}) show that you already believe that animals are capable of experiencing intense pain and suffering. I don’t have to prove to you that \textit{unanesthetized} branding, castration, debeaking, tail docking, etc. cause animals severe pain. You already believe they do. Given the animal husbandry techniques and slaughtering practices highlighted above, anyone who accepts that animals can feel pain must acknowledge that virtually all commercial animal agriculture, \textit{especially} factory farming, \textit{greatly increases} the amount of pain and suffering in the world [(f\textsubscript{1})]. Fact (f\textsubscript{1}) and your
belief \( p_1 \) together entail that, other things being equal, the world would be better without animal agriculture and factory farms. Since it’s also a fact that in modern societies the consumption of meat is in no way necessary for human survival or human flourishing \([f_2]\), the pain and suffering that results from meat production is unnecessary, as are all the cruel practices inherent in animal agriculture. Your belief that a world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering \([p_2]\), together with \([f_2]\), entails that the world would be better if there were less animal agriculture and fewer factory farms, and better still if there were no animal agriculture and no factory farms. Moreover, your belief in \([p_3]\) commits you to the view that factory farming is wrong and ought not be supported or encouraged. When one buys factory farm-raised meat, one is supporting factory farms monetarily and thereby encouraging their unnecessary cruel practices. The only way to avoid actively supporting factory farms is to stop purchasing their products.\(^{30}\)

You can easily avoid supporting factory farms simply by refraining from eating meat and eating something else instead. For example, you can eat: veggie-burgers rather than hamburgers, pasta with marinara rather than meat sauce, bean tostadas rather than beef tacos, red beans and rice rather than Cajun chicken, grilled portabellas rather than barbecued ribs, moo shoo vegetables rather than moo shoo pork, curried vegetables rather than curried chicken, minestrone rather than chicken soup, chick pea salad rather than chicken salad, hummus-filled whole wheat pitas rather than BLTs, etc.\(^{31}\) These examples underscore the ease with which one can avoid consuming flesh, a fact which often seems to elude meat eaters.

From your beliefs \((p_1), (p_2), \text{and } (p_4)\), it follows that we ought to do what we reasonably can to avoid contributing to the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world. Since one thing we reasonably can do to avoid contributing to unnecessary suffering is stop contributing to factory farming with our purchases, it follows that we ought to stop purchasing and consuming meat.

Your other beliefs support the same conclusion. You believe: \(p_6\) Even a “minimally decent person” – one who does the minimum required by morality – would take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world, if she could do so with little effort on her/his part. As shown above, with minimal effort one can take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world just by eating something other than meat. Accordingly, given \(p_6\), you ought to refrain from eating flesh, opting for cruelty-free vegetarian fare instead. This conclusion is not derived from some esoteric moral theory. It follows from your own deeply held beliefs and moral convictions \((p_1)-(p_6)\). Consistency with your other beliefs forces you to admit that eating meat is morally wrong.

2. Metatheoretical Objections to the Metaethical Coherence Approach to Practical Ethics

Elsewhere, I’ve considered and addressed a number of objections/conjectures designed to show that \((p_1)-(p_6)\) do not entail that eating meat is morally wrong, including the perhaps human pleasure outweighs animal suffering objection, the perhaps plants feel pain objection, and the “free range” objection.\(^{32}\) Here
I’ll examine what I take to be potentially much more serious objections to the argument, objections which challenge the entire atheoretical approach with undergirds it. These metatheoretical objections call into question both the legitimacy and the normative value of trying to ground moral judgments in beliefs you already hold. They seek to show that one’s beliefs unsupplemented by a moral theory cannot ground or adequately justify particular moral judgments. If these objections succeed, then it’s simply irrelevant that your beliefs (p_1)-(p_9) entail that eating meat is immoral, and my argument fails to establish anything.

Alan Vincellette objects to the atheoretical approach implicit in my argument for ethical vegetarian on several grounds. As he sees it, moral beliefs can only be justified by appeal to moral and metaphysical theories. Vincellette is a tradionalist. Consider the following passage in which he rejects my approach in favor of traditionalism:

Engel’s argument does not make any appeal to metaethics only because it presupposes (without defending and grounding) certain basic moral principles. Now it is perfectly legitimate to presuppose certain beliefs and see what follows for a person who holds such beliefs. But this only allows us to determine what follows from our views, it does not justify them or ground them. In order to justify and ground them we need to appeal to more basic and theoretical ethical and metaphysical claims – and these might end up being quite contentious.33

Vincellette continues:

Engel’s whole argument relies on the premise that (p_1) Other things being equal, a world with less pain and suffering is better than a world with more pain and suffering. Now of course most people accept this principle. But does this mean it is true? Most people might be in error about this. We need to justify and ground this moral principle if we are going to defend our ethical beliefs as true. And I see no way to do this without appealing to more basic and fundamental ethical and metaphysical principles which may well be controversial. For example, in order to justify the claim that unnecessary pain is wrong, Engel will have to appeal to some theory like utilitarianism. But utilitarianism is not uncontroversial. For it invokes certain metaethical claims (consequentialism, non-relativism, objectivism, etc.) which are not accepted readily by all people.34

James Sauer also takes me to task for trying to dispense with moral theory:

First, moral beliefs are notoriously inconsistent. Moral theory is one way in which we sort out fallacies and inconsistence of moral belief. So we ought not, I think, dispense too cavalierly with moral theory or “meta-cognitive” concerns. In fact, if I have followed Engel’s argument at all, there lurks in the background a basic utilitarian argument. That is, his own reflection is grounded by a theoretical framework of what is morally obligatory. Engel’s paper shows that a theoretical or “meta-cognitive” stance enables us to sort through inconsistencies and problems of thought and belief.35
There are a number of objections lurking in these passages. Let us consider them separately.

**a. In through the Back Door, or the Failure to Dispense with Theory**

One of Sauer objections might be paraphrased as follows:

Engel hasn’t dispensed with moral theory. What Engel has done is offer a not too cleverly disguised utilitarian argument. After all, (p₁), (p₂), (p₃), and (p₀) are utilitarian principles. Thus, far from dispensing with moral theory, Engel is, in a less than subtle fashion, sneaking utilitarianism in through the back door.

Am I a closet utilitarian who has just been outed? Is my argument implicitly utilitarian? First, my argument is utilitarian only to the extent that your own beliefs commit you to utilitarianism. Put another way, my argument is utilitarian only to the extent that utilitarianism informs our common moral judgments. Second, the fact that we accept (p₁)-(p₀) shows that we think utilitarian considerations are morally relevant, but this does not make us utilitarians. Utilitarians maintain that individuals can be sacrificed for the common good, even for trivial increases in the common good, as long as no other alternative promises a greater balance of pleasure over pain. No member of \{ (p₁)-(p₀) \} entails that individuals can be sacrificed for trivial gains in the common good. Third, any good deontologist will accept (p₁)-(p₀). Surely, any good Kantian would admit that a world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering. True, she would also insist that some suffering is deserved and ought not be prevented, but suffering that is deserved is not unnecessary on a Kantian view. Rather, it’s necessary to bring about justice. Since (p₂) places no restrictions on the kinds of goods that can serve as outweighing justifying goods, it’s simply a mistake to regard it as a utilitarian principle. And none of the other core moral convictions to which I appeal are utilitarian principles either.

**b. The Impossibility of Dispensing with Moral Theories**

Vincellette rightly notes that just because virtually everyone believes (p₁) does not make it true. Virtually everyone might be in error with respect to (p₁). He then claims: “We need to justify and ground this moral principle if we are going to defend our ethical beliefs as true. And I see no way to do this without appealing to more basic and fundamental ethical and metaphysical principles which may well be controversial.” Several comments are in order.

First, I did not set out to prove to you that (p₁) is true. Why should I? You already believe it. We’re in agreement on that point. In fact, we’re in agreement with respect (p₁)-(p₀). My argument is only aimed at people who do believe all or nearly all of these widely-shared, commonsense convictions. It’s not incumbent upon me to prove to you propositions you already believe. I can legitimately take them as my starting point.

Second, Vincellette contends that if I am to justify (p₁), i.e. if I am to defend the truth of (p₁), I will have to appeal to more basic and fundamental ethical and metaphysical principles to do so. I, for one,
am at a loss as to what sorts of ethical and metaphysical principles are more basic and fundamental than (p1). But Vincellette suggests that I will have to appeal to some moral theory. Let’s briefly consider two such theories, hedonistic utilitarianism and ideal contract theory:

HU Act X is right for person S iff, of all the actions available to S, X maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for all those affected.

ICT Act X is right for person S iff X conforms to rules that would be agreed upon by all rational self-interested contractors in a hypothetical original position situated behind a veil of ignorance.

Both HU and ICT are highly-contentious, frequently-rejected moral theories. Surely, neither HU nor ICT is more basic or fundamental than (p1). Moreover, we’re much more confident of (p1) than we are of either HU or ICT. In fact, we’re more confident of (p1) than we are of any moral theory, and as Reid rightly notes, one cannot justify the more certain by appeal to the less certain.

Third, suppose we were to do just what Vincellette suggests and ground (p1) on some particular moral theory T. Would that guarantee (p1)’s truth? Certainly not, for T itself might be false.

Finally, as I mentioned above, my goal is not to prove or justify that (p1)-(p3) are true, for you already believe them. Rather, the aim of my atheoretical consistency argument is to epistemically justify a certain conclusion Q—where Q = Eating meat is morally wrong—by grounding Q in beliefs you already hold. The argument seeks to show that anyone who believes (p1)-(p3) must, on pain of inconsistency, also believe conclusion Q. Since epistemic justification proceeds in terms of other beliefs, it’s perfectly appropriate to identify some of your core convictions and use them to demonstrate that you are rationally committed to Q.

c. Consistency Cannot Serve as the Basis of a Normative Conclusion

Sauer also denies that consistency can ground a normative conclusion. He makes the point as follows:

I am not sure that one can develop any convincing argument for or against the moral considerability of animals based on consistency of moral belief. While everyday belief and practice might suggest that animals are morally considerable, this is not a sufficient basis to conclude that they are in fact morally considerable. So, on this issue Engel’s [argument] does not advance the discussion.36

There are two things Sauer might be claiming by denying that consistency can ground a normative conclusion. First, he might be denying that mere consistency can ground a normative conclusion, i.e., he might be denying that we can derive normative conclusions from just any consistent set of propositions. If this is what he intends, then I certainly agree. One cannot derive a normative conclusion from a consistent set of purely factual propositions, i.e., one cannot derive an “ought” from an “is.” Of course, I can’t be accused of trying to derive an “ought” from purely factual premises, because {(p1)-(p3)} contains both normative and factual premises, and it’s perfectly legitimate to derive additional normative conclusions from such a set of propositions. So, I suspect that Sauer has another worry.
If I understand him correctly, the reason Sauer thinks my atheoretical consistency argument fails to advance the issue is because he thinks that consistency of moral belief does nothing to demonstrate the objective wrongness of eating meat. The issue, as Sauer sees it, is whether or not animals are \textit{in fact} morally considerable. To understand Sauer’s objection, we must understand the difference between subjective wrongness and objective wrongness. An action $X$ is \textit{subjectively wrong} for person $S$ if, given all the information available to $S$, $S$ is justified in believing that $X$ is wrong; whereas an action $X$ is \textit{objectively wrong} for $S$ if $X$ is \textit{in fact} wrong for $S$, i.e., $X$ really is wrong for $S$ to do, regardless whether $S$ is aware of or has access to this moral fact. As Sauer sees it, the issue is \textit{not} whether we are justified in believing that eating meat is wrong (i.e. subjective wrongness), but rather whether eating meat \textit{really} is wrong (i.e. objective wrongness), and Sauer contends that mere consistency with our other beliefs can do nothing to establish the latter. Is he right, or can consistency ground normative judgments, as I contend it can? Does consistency with our other beliefs do anything to justify the belief that eating meat is \textit{objectively} wrong?

The issue is complicated by the fact that the subjective/objective distinction arises, not only in ethics, but also in epistemology. A person $S$ is \textit{subjectively justified} in believing that $p$ \iff she is justified in believing that $p$ in terms of her own internal subjective reflections, i.e. \iff, given all the information available to her, it is reasonable for her to believe that $p$. It’s a bit more difficult to define objective justification because there is no standardly accepted definition of such justification. Sometimes objective justification is defined in terms of the body of truths widely known in $S$’s community. Accordingly, $S$ is \textit{objectively justified} in believing that $p$ \iff, given all the information possessed by $S$’s community, it is reasonable for $S$ to believe that $p$. So, e.g., while Sally, who is four years old, is subjectively justified in believing that Santa Claus exists, she is not objectively justified, because it is widely known that the Santa Claus myth is just a falsehood parents tell their children. A second kind of objective justification would be justification that is ultimately grounded in an infallibilistic direct connection with the fundamental nature of reality. On this view, $S$ is \textit{objectively justified} in believing that $p$ \iff $S$ validly deduces $p$ exclusively from propositions $S$ knows to be true with apodictic certainty.\footnote{If he means that consistency cannot yield objective justification, but objective justification in what sense? If he means that consistency cannot yield objective justification, then he’s certainly correct. No amount of internal consistency with fallible beliefs can yield an apodictically certain belief that $Q$. But nothing can do that. Grounding our normative conclusions in moral theories won’t objectively justify us in accepting those moral conclusions, because the moral theories are not known with apodictic certainty. So, appealing to moral theories no more objectively justifies us in accepting particular moral judgments than appealing to consistency does.}
When it comes to epistemically justifying our moral beliefs, we’re stuck at either the subjective level or the objective, level. However, if \((p_1)-(p_9)\) are objectively correct, i.e. true, it follows that eating meat is objectively wrong. Now, presumably, anyone who believes \((p_1)-(p_9)\) believes that \((p_1)-(p_9)\) are true and hence believes that they are objectively correct (That’s just what it is to believe a proposition.). Hence, anyone who believes \((p_1)-(p_9)\) is subjectively epistemically justified in believing that eating meat is objectively morally wrong. Would grounding the judgment that eating meat is morally wrong in a particular moral theory provide any more in the way of objective justification than an appeal to \((p_1)-(p_9)\)? No. It would remain the case that we’re still only subjectively justified in accepting that moral theory on the basis of the other beliefs we hold.

The traditionalist’s strong conviction that we need to ground our moral judgments in a correct moral theory seems to be a foundationalistic holdover from our Cartesian past. Descartes sought to ground all of his nonbasic beliefs in a foundation of apodictically certain, indubitable axiomatic foundational beliefs so as to provide an objective guarantee of their truth. These axiomatic foundational beliefs were supposed to serve as a safety net shielding us from error in our judgments. Even philosophers who have rejected foundationalism as a general approach to epistemology have remained enamored with this axiomatic model of justification when it comes to moral knowledge. All we need do to guarantee the correctness of our moral judgments is identify a correct moral theory and apply it to derive the objectively correct apodictically certain moral judgment in question. Thus, like Descartes’ cogito, the correct moral theory is supposed to serve as a safety net protecting us from subjectivism, relativism, and error in our moral judgments. But infallibilism’s inevitable skeptical legacy has driven virtually all epistemologists to embrace fallibilism. With the rise of fallibilism comes the recognition and concession that there simply are no epistemological safety nets that absolutely preclude error. What is true in epistemology generally is true in moral epistemology, as well. There simply are no absolute guarantees that our beliefs are free from error. The best we can do to justify our beliefs is to show that they cohere with our other beliefs. Given the background beliefs with which we find ourselves, some propositions are more reasonable to believe than others. Given that one believes \((p_1)-(p_9)\), it is epistemically reasonable to believe that eating meat is morally wrong and epistemically unreasonable to believe otherwise.\(^{38}\)

d. The Atheoretical Consistency Approach Entails Relativism

One might object that my atheoretical consistency approach does nothing to demonstrate that the resulting moral judgment that \(Q\) is justified in any objective sense because people with different beliefs might derive quite different moral judgments, and consequently, my approach saddles me with an objectionable form of relativism. Perhaps I am saddled with some form of relativism, but my approach is no more relativistic than the traditional approach. Here’s why: The traditionalist maintains that his/her moral judgments are somehow more objectively justified because they are grounded in a moral theory. But how
do we decide whether a moral theory is correct? The received method for testing the correctness of a moral theory is the method of “reflective equilibrium” whereby theories are assessed by reference to a set of clear paradigms. What are the paradigms to which moral philosophers appeal when testing their theories? Our deeply held moral (and nonmoral) convictions. Accordingly, the method of reflective equilibrium requires that we reject or amend moral theories that conflict with moral convictions we are unwilling to abandon, and it requires us to reject or amend convictions which conflict with moral theories we are unwilling to reject or amend. The first thing to notice is that the widely accepted reflective equilibrium method is itself an appeal to coherence to justify moral theories. As a result, the traditionalist’s conclusions are as tried to an individual’s core moral convictions as are the conclusions reached using my atheoretical approach, the only difference is I recognize that I’m tying my conclusions to the reader’s own subjective beliefs, whereas the traditionalist is operating under the illusion of unadulterated objectivity.

Second, because any adequate moral theory must cohere with our deeply held moral (and nonmoral) convictions, any moral theory that conflicts with \((p_1)-(p_9)\) will automatically be rejected out of hand. The reason we reject utilitarianism is because it sanctions sacrificing individuals for trivial gains in the common good. The reason we reject contractarianism is because it implies that we have no direct duties to infants and the severely retarded. The reason we reject Kantian ethics is because it implies that we cannot sacrifice a person even if that’s the only way to save the lives of 100 million equally innocent persons. Similarly, any moral theory that entailed that unnecessary cruelty is permissible and ought to be routinely engaged in would immediately be rejected. The reason it’s epistemically legitimate to reason from \((p_1)-(p_9)\) directly, by-passing moral theory entirely, is because any adequate moral theory must be compatible with \((p_1)-(p_9)\). Since we know this in advance, it’s perfectly reasonable to start from \((p_1)-(p_9)\).

What about the charge that my approach is saddled with an objectionable form of relativism? True, in one sense, there is no escape from subjectivity. Justification is always going to proceed in terms of other things we believe. But if we’re basing our moral judgments on widely shared almost universally held core moral convictions, these moral judgments will possess a kind of intersubjective justification (possibly even objective 1 justification). Moreover, these moral judgments will have a higher degree of intersubjective justification in virtue of being based on these nearly universally shared core moral convictions than will moral judgments based on highly-contentious moral theories that many people reject.

In advocating an atheoretical approach to practical ethics, I am not denying the importance of moral theory in some sense. Identifying a moral theory can help further unify our belief structure (but while such theoretical unification may be desirable, it is not a necessary condition for our moral judgments to be justified). What I am claiming is that we do not need to start with theory. We do not need to first settle the issue of what moral theory is the correct moral theory before we can make reasonable,
completely justified judgments about particular moral issues. And it’s a good thing, because if we did
have to identify the correct moral theory first, then since every theory to date is open to objection, we
wouldn’t be justified in any of our current particular moral judgments.

3. Conclusion: A Metatheoretical Advantage of the Atheoretical Approach to Practical Ethics
We’ve just seen that there are no good metatheoretical reasons for rejecting the atheoretical coherence
approach to practical ethics. Moral conclusions derived from a person’s core moral beliefs are no less
epistemically justified than those derived from complex moral theories. Nor are they any more subjective.
Nor are they any less secure. If anything, moral judgments grounded in our core moral beliefs are more
secure and less likely to be abandoned than those grounded in contentious moral theories, for we’re much
readier to abandon our moral theories than we are to abandon our core beliefs like (p1)-(p9).

There is also an important metatheoretical consideration which makes the atheoretical approach
preferable to the traditional approach. The point of moral judgments is to guide conduct. The problem
inherent in the traditional approach to practical ethics is that when a moral theory entails a particular
moral judgment we find unpalatable, we simply dismiss the theory. However, when a person derives a
moral conclusion from her own deeply held moral convictions, that conclusion is already thoroughly
integrated into her belief structure and is thus more likely to result in behavioral guidance, which is, of
course, the whole point of practical ethics. All of this suggests that if we want to make significant
progress in practical ethics, we should start from our core moral (and nonmoral) convictions and work our
way forward. The result will be moral judgments that cohere with our most deeply held beliefs and
values. If the arguments of this essay are sound, we can do no better than that.

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1 See Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation, 2d ed. (New York: Avon Books, 1990) or his “All Animals are Equal” in
73-86.
2 See Tom Regan’s The Case for Animal Rights (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), or his “The Case
for Animals Rights” in In Defense of Animals, ed. Peter Singer (New York: Harper and Row Perennial Library,
3 To be sure, some philosophers go to great lengths to point out the weaknesses of Singer’s utilitarian approach and
Regan’s deontological approach. For example, Peter Carruthers, in his The Animals Issue (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1992), goes to great lengths to point out utilitarianism’s many counterintuitive and unacceptable
implications, and he argues that Regan’s rights-based approach lacks an adequate underlying rationale. But formally
the structure is the same: He rejects Singer’s and Regan’s conclusions because he rejects the theoretical approaches
on which they are based. Jan Narveson does so as well. See, e.g., Narveson’s “Animal Rights” in his Moral Matters
(Ontario: Broadview Press, 1993), 130-137.

5 One caveat is in order. In contrast to the traditional theoretical approach to practical ethics, I describe my approach as “atheoretical.” It is important to avoid misunderstanding here. My approach is atheoretical in the sense that the normative conclusions reached are not derived from or predicated on any particular moral theory, where by a “moral theory” I mean a theory which explains what it is about right actions that makes them right and what it is about wrong actions that makes them wrong. Examples of moral theories include classical hedonistic utilitarianism, Kantian deontological ethics, rule utilitarianism, and Rawlsian contractarianism.\(^5\) I do appeal to other sorts of theoretical considerations. For example, since we are concerned with a person’s being epistemically justified in particular moral judgments, I will employ a certain theory of or approach to epistemic justification, namely, an internalistic coherentist approach.\(^5\) Moreover, in being offered as a metatheoretical alternative to the traditional approach, my atheoretical approach could itself be viewed as a theory about how to best do practical ethics, but such a theory is not a moral theory as defined above. Let us now turn to an example of the atheoretical consistency approach to practical ethics.

6 Chickens are separated from their mothers before birth, as they are hatched in incubators and thus never encounter their mothers, veal calves are removed from their mothers within a few days, and piglets are separated from their mothers two to three weeks after birth (Jim Mason and Peter Singer, Animal Factories, 2d ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 1990), 5, 10, and 11f).


9 Humane Farming Association, “Modern Farming Is Inhumane,” 117. For further details, see Robbins’ discussion of the “Bacon Bin” in Diet for a New America, 83.

10 Robbins, Diet for a New America, 110.

11 Mason and Singer, Animal Factories, 30f; and Davis, Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs, 21 and 56f.

12 For detailed descriptions of the routine mutilations farm animals are forced to endure without anesthesia, see Mason and Singer, Animal Factories, Davis, Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs, and Robbins, Diet for a New America.

13 For example, in 1998, USDA inspectors condemned 28,500 ducks, 768,300 turkeys and 37.6 million chickens before they entered the slaughter plant, because they were either dead or severely injured upon arrival (Poultry Slaughter, National Agricultural Statistics Service [NASS], United States Department of Agriculture [USDA]
(Washington, D.C.: February 2, 1999), 2 and 4f). These ante-mortem condemnation statistics are estimates, since
NASS tracks ante-mortem condemnations in pounds, not birds, and were deduced as follows: The total weight of
ante-mortem condemnations for a given bird-type was divided by the average live weight of birds of that type. For
example, in 1998 ante-mortem chicken condemnations totaled 182,705,000 lb and the average live weight of the
chickens slaughtered was 4.86 lb. Dividing pounds condemned by average pounds per bird yields 37,593,621
chickens condemned.

14 Gail Eisnitz, Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S.

15 Chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese are not considered animals under the Act and receive no protection at all
(Robbins, Diet for a New America, 139.).

16 Ibid., 142.

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry (June 1995), 2 and 47.

18 Confinement is the norm in hog operations with 100+ head. In 2002, 99% of the total U.S. hog inventory was
housed in operations with more than 100 head. In fact, 94% of hogs were raised in facilities with 500+ head and
53% were raised in operations with 5000+ head (Livestock Operations: Final Estimates 1998-2002, NASS,
USDA. Statistical Bulletin Number 1002 [Washington, D.C.: April 2004], 1 and 36). By 2002, the number of hog farms had decreased to 67,770, with 49% of the
animals being raised in operations with 50,000+ head. (Livestock Operations: Final Estimates 1998-2002, NASS,

19 Again confinement is the norm in operations with 100+ dairy cows. According to NASS, in 2002, 70.6% of the
nation’s dairy cows were housed in operations with 100+ head (Livestock Operations: Final Estimates 1998-2002,

20 In 1997, feedlots of all sizes marketed 26.8 million (or 74%) of the 36.3 million cattle sold for commercial
slaughter, with 63% (22.8 million) of the total commercial slaughter coming from feedlots with 1000+ head
(Livestock Slaughter 1997 Slaughter, NASS, USDA [Washington, D.C.: March 1998], 1; and Cattle: Final

21 Livestock Slaughter 2004 Summary, NASS, USDA (Washington, D.C.: March 2005), 3; and Poultry Slaughter


23 William Castelli, “Lessons from the Framingham Heart Study: How to Reduce the Risk of Heart Disease,” Bottom
Line: Personal (July 1, 1994), 10 and “An Interview with William Castelli,” Good Medicine 5, no. 3 (summer


26 By “unnecessary suffering” I mean suffering that serves no greater, outweighing justifying good. If some instance of suffering is required to bring about a greater good (e.g. a painful root canal may be the only way to save a person’s tooth), then that suffering is not unnecessary. Similarly, if some instance of suffering is necessary to bring about a more just society, then that suffering is not unnecessary. Thus, in the case of (p2), no *ceteris paribus* clause is needed, since if other things are not equal such that the suffering in question is justified by an overriding justifying good which can only be achieved by allowing that suffering, then that suffering is not unnecessary.

27 By a “minimally decent person” I mean a person who does the very minimum required by morality and no more. I borrow this terminology from Judith Jarvis Thomson who distinguishes a good Samaritan from a minimally decent Samaritan. See her “A Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971), 62-65.

28 See Gilbert Harman’s *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4, where he presents the following much discussed example: “If you round the corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to conclude that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can see that it is wrong.” What is relevant about this example for our purposes is that no one considering the example seriously doubts whether a cat so treated would feel pain [Hence, no one seriously doubts (p1).] nor does anyone seriously doubt that cruelly burning a cat for no good reason is wrong [Hence, no one seriously doubts (p3) or (p4) either.].

29 If you believe (p1), (p2), (p3), and (p7), my argument will succeed.

30 For as Singer rightly notes:

The people who profit by exploiting large numbers of animals do not need our approval. They need our money. The purchase of the corpses of the animals they rear is the main support the factory farmers ask from the public. . . . They will use intensive methods as long as they can sell what they produce by these methods (Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 161f.).

31 It is worth noting that in every case just mentioned the vegetarian option is significantly more nutritious, more healthful, and much lower in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol than its meat-based counterpart. In fact, none of the
vegetarian options listed contain any cholesterol whatsoever.

32 For my refutations of these oft cited objections, see my “The Immorality of Eating Meat,” 877-882.


34 Ibid.


36 Ibid.

37 One might also embrace an ideal rational agent view of objective justification: S is objectively justified in believing that p iff an ideally rational agent apprised of all the true information possessed by S’s community would believe that p. Space considerations prevent me from considering such a view in the body of the paper. It is worth noting that it is not at all clear how we would go about determining whether a belief is objectively justified in the sense just defined for we are ideally rational agents and we aren’t privy to all the true information possessed by our community.

38 It’s important to note that we’re doing precisely the same thing whether we appeal to a moral theory or not. When we appeal to a moral theory to justify a moral judgment, we’re still appealing to one (or a set) of our beliefs to justify our moral judgments. The theory does not have foundational axiomatic status. It’s as open to revision and rejection as any other belief in the system. One mistake the traditionalists make is they operate under the illusion of objective justifiedness and under the illusion that they have found epistemological moral bedrock, when in fact there is no bedrock. Note: In claiming that there is no bedrock, I am making an epistemological claim, not a metaphysical claim. I am not denying that there are objective facts of the matter in ethics. I am only claiming that our epistemological access to those facts is fallible and filtered through the web of our beliefs.

39 As Singer aptly puts it: “an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from some theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice” [Singer, Practical Ethics, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2].

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