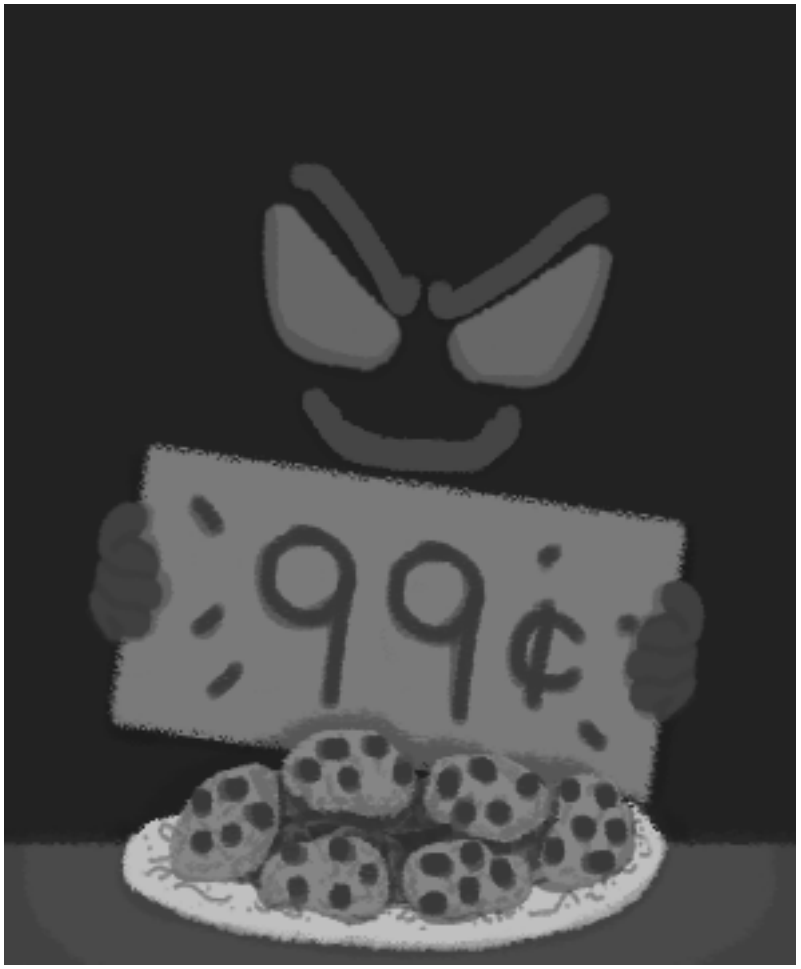
PASTRIES TO DIE FOR:
An Objection to Causal Efficacy Principles



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ABSTRACT

An objection to ethical vegetarianism is that the consumption of meat does not causally influence the production of meat. The objection relies on a principle called the Causal Efficacy Principle. The principle states that if an action does not directly cause harm, then that action is morally permissible. I provide a thought experiment as a counterexample to this principle, and then, I attempt to diagnose why the principle is false in terms of moral cooperation. Moral cooperation is when many people perform an action that individually does not prevent harm, but prevents harm when the group all performs the action.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In discussions of animal ethics and particularly in debates about eating meat, a common objection to ethical vegetarianism—the position that eating meat in most circumstances is morally wrong—is that abstaining from eating meat will not actually influence the meat industry. Not eating a chicken sandwich will not result in saving the life of a chicken, but the arguments against eating meat often focus on the horrendous treatment of non-human animals. If there is no causal connection between not eating meat and preventing this bad outcome, how could eating meat be wrong? In the literature on animal ethics, this objection has been dubbed the Causal Impotence objection.

Despite its role in animal ethics, this objection can be easily extended to most boycotts and protests. Similar objections often arise during debates about the obligation to vote, for example. If our vote does not influence the outcome of an election, how can we have an obligation to vote? I argue that the Causal Impotence objection fails because there are many instances where we obviously should boycott/protest even when our actions, on their own, cannot causally influence the outcome. Then, I offer a potential explanation, what I call the Moral Cooperation Principle, for this obligation to boycott/protest.

II. KILLER BAKERY

To demonstrate that we can have obligations to boycott even if our actions are causally impotent, consider the following thought experiment: Imagine you enter a bakery and, after talking to the staff, you learn they are all retired assassins. You are understandably unnerved, but their baked goods look phenomenal. You are about to buy some cake when they inform you that if you shop here regularly, you have the chance of being the one-thousandth customer, and for every one thousand customers, they execute a thousand innocent people. Given the knowledge that your actions contribute to this goal without being the direct cause of the event, what do you do? Consider the following principle:

> Causal Efficacy Principle: an action *X* is morally obligatory if and only if that action causes an overall good outcome, or refraining from performing action *X* would result in an overall bad outcome.

There are a variety of principles that might count as a causal efficacy principle. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's harm principle, "we should not perform acts that cause direct harm to others," could be made into a causal efficacy principle if it were rendered exclusive, meaning that this is the only way an action could be wrong.[1] If this exclusive version of the principle, or another causal inefficacy principle, is true, then you should buy the cake from the assassins. You are not morally obligated to refrain from buying the cake because that action would not cause a good outcome or prevent a bad outcome. You are unlikely to be the one-thousandth customer, and you can ask them how close they are to their goal to ensure you are not. Abstaining from buying the cake only results in the loss of your pleasure. It seems, given this principle, that your overall reasons point toward buying the cake.

But surely this is the wrong answer to the thought experiment? Something is intuitively immoral about supporting the death of innocent people for the sake of cake even though your actions can neither bring about nor prevent the murders. This case is not peculiar in this regard either. Intuitively, an abolitionist from the 1700s should not buy clothes made from cotton picked by slaves. Or consider a world where the economic facts about eating meat are exactly the same, but we are eating people burgers rather than beef burgers. Surely, purchasing meat in this world would be wrong even if your actions, on their own, could not cause a person's life to be saved. Thus, the Causal Efficacy Principle is a drastic revision of our moral intuitions.

III. EXPLANATIONS AND BOYCOTT

However, the Causal Efficacy Principle also has an advantage. It provides a clear connection between the badness of production and the wrongness of consumption. According to this principle, it is wrong to purchase some product that causes a bad outcome. If we accept that actions can be wrong even if they do not, by themselves, cause a bad outcome, then a different explanation will need to be offered to bridge the gap between production and consumption. Fortunately, there are a variety of attempts at bridging the gap between production and consumption that do not appeal to the causal efficacy principle. These are solutions that have previously been offered in literature, and I

1 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations," in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings Gardiner*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner et al. (Oxford Academic, 2010), 334, 10.1093/oso/9780195399622.003.0029.

primarily focus on a solution that is different from any of the following solutions. One potential solution is dubbed the extractivist approach. Christian Barry and David Wiens put this solution the following way: "Being an innocent beneficiary of others' wrongdoing may be sufficient to ground special duties to address the hardships suffered by the victim of the wrongdoing."[2] However, the authors note that being a beneficiary of wrongful action does not always generate special duties. They give the example of a terrorist bombing causing Bill and Susan to meet each other, and, because of their chance meeting, they later become successful business partners.[3] Bill and Susan both benefit from the wrongful action, but it does not seem that they possess any special obligations to the victims of the bombing. They may have an obligation to help the survivors, but this obligation seems to be shared by others who can help rather than being limited to the beneficiaries of the bombing.

Another potential approach is what I will call the attitudinal solution. The claim is that consumption either displays or promotes inappropriate attitudes towards production. For example, Thomas Hill considers a variety of these attitudinal solutions in his paper, writing that "the protestor's attempts to disassociate himself are not so much efforts to avoid responsibility as expressions of the high value he places on justice."[4] In the case of meat eating, a supporter of this solution might argue that eating meat would show a callous indifference to the suffering of non-human animals, or maybe it warps people's attitudes to make them more callous. However, it is not clear that consumption always signifies or is caused by an indifference to the wrongness of production. Consider the Killer Bakery example; it seems perfectly possible for a person to hate assassins and murder in general but buy the cake anyway.

IV. MORAL COOPERATION

My own solution supposes that we can be obligated to cooperate to achieve a morally relevant outcome because the collective action will achieve that outcome, even when any individual action will not achieve the outcome. The obligation to cooperate can be made more

2 Christian Barry and David Wiens, "Benefiting from Wrongdoing and Sustaining Wrongful Harm," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 13, no. 5 (2016): 2, 10.1163/17455243-4681052.

3 Barry and Wiens, "Benefiting from Wrongdoing," 3.

4 Thomas Hill, "Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (1979): 97.

visible by an analogy with prudential cooperation. Consider the famous prisoner's dilemma: Two criminals find themselves faced with the choice between confessing or not confessing to a crime they committed. If the first criminal confesses and the second criminal does not, criminal one gets no jail time and criminal two gets six years of jail time. If criminal two confesses and criminal one does not, then criminal two gets no jail time and criminal one gets six years. However, if neither confesses, they only get two years of jail time, and if they both confess, each will get four years of jail time.

In this scenario, confessing is the better option regardless of what the other criminal does. For example, consider criminal one's perspective. If criminal two chose to not confess, then if criminal one confesses, criminal one gets no jail time, but if criminal two chose to confess, then criminal one would spend six years in prison rather than four unless they too confess. The paradox is that it seems as though both criminals can be rational yet choose a sub-optimal outcome. The lesson drawn is typically that the two criminals should cooperate. The best outcome overall is where both criminals remain silent, but this cannot be achieved without cooperation. Thus, there seems to be a prudential reason in this case, even though each criminal cannot directly influence the outcome, because the jail time is determined by the decisions of both parties. My claim is that morality can have similar reasons that can even amount to obligations. Even if an agent cannot bring about a good outcome by performing some action, there are some occasions when there are moral reasons to perform an action because if multiple people perform the same action, the good outcome will occur. Consider a fundraiser for a terminally ill individual to receive life-saving treatment. Their high school, composed of five thousand individuals, is notified of the illness and the funds needed to procure life-saving treatment. If fifty thousand dollars are raised, then the person will have the funds needed to pay for the treatment and survive the illness; otherwise, they will die. Suppose that each member of the group can spare ten dollars without too much difficulty. It would seem as though each member of the group should pay ten dollars to help their schoolmate survive. We can try and generalize this intuition into the following principle:

> The Moral Cooperation Principle: when a group of individuals has an obligation to prevent some outcome *X* that is non-trivially bad overall, the individuals that compose the group have a pro tanto obligation to cooperate in a way that best helps the group achieve outcome *X*.[5]

5 A pro tanto moral obligation is one that can be overridden by extenuating factors. For example, we have a pro tanto obligation not to lie, but it is okay to lie if an axe murderer asks you where the person they want to kill is.

My principle is compatible with previous explanations offered by others about the obligation to protest, but it does have some unique advantages. There is an intuitive rationale behind this principle that captures the reasons why people protest. In addition to wanting to express the right attitudes and avoid benefiting from or participating in wrongdoing, protest usually aims to end the wrongdoing. The underlying intuition is that when there is injustice, we ought to do something about it. Far from being the exception, individual causal inefficacy is the norm during protests. Every sign holder and every person who marched in the civil rights movement did not believe that their individual act would magically end racial injustice. Real change in society usually requires the action of many individuals working together. The Moral Cooperation Principle directly draws upon the intuition that it is the outcome of collective action that, at least in part, makes protest appropriate.

There is a satisfying theoretical explanation of this intuition as well. Even skeptics about protests, when such actions are not causally efficacious, often grant that groups of people might have obligations to stop injustice. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong, who is skeptical of the individual obligation to refrain from emitting needless carbon emissions, accepts that governments ought to fight climate change.[6] However, no singular government official can end climate change. Even the president needs people to cooperate with executive orders and Congress to pass laws, so one country could not solve climate change alone.

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that we ought to stop climate change. If the individual members of government are not obligated to stop climate change, how can the government or collections of governments be obligated to stop climate change? Do abstract sets, aggregates, or people have moral obligations separate from the obligations of individuals in those sets? Aggregates themselves have neither sentience nor free will, so this suggestion is dubious at best. The rationale behind the Moral Cooperation Principle is that group obligations should be evenly and efficiently dispersed among the individuals that compose the group. If such obligations belong to the group alone, then group obligations are a mere formality. Each individual cannot do their part, on the grounds that their part alone is causally impotent, and the group obligation will not be fulfilled even though no person is to blame, only the aggregate itself. This view appears impractical. Most issues facing human societies cannot be resolved without cooperation, so it seems intuitive to suggest that morality might sometimes obligate us to cooperate. Morality is the

6 Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault," 343–44.

type of thing that should incentivize us to improve society and stop injustice, but in most instances, this requires moral cooperation. Thus, distributing group obligations in a way that can obligate individuals to do their part, even when their part alone is not causally efficacious, aligns with the actual rationale of protestors, makes better sense of group obligations, and has an intuitive plausibility.

V. POTENTIAL COUNTEREXAMPLES

I believe the moral cooperation principle can be overridden—hence my qualification that the obligation is pro tanto—but I argue that the factors that would override this moral principle do not pertain when most people eat meat. If a person is unable to perform the action without seriously hurting themselves, this would override the obligation. In the case of meat eating specifically, a person might have health conditions or live without access to sufficient nutrients from plants, in which case they would not have an obligation to abstain from eating meat. Instead of seeing this type of counterexample as a downside of my principle, I see it as a much-needed feature. Morality should be flexible enough to accommodate extenuating circumstances. Even if there are universal and absolute moral principles, such principles would consider factors such as extreme poverty. Examples like poverty, illness, or a lack of vegetarian options can justify some instances of eating meat despite this principle, but these extenuating factors do not hold when most people eat meat, especially in wealthy and industrialized nations. There are many people who can abstain from eating meat while remaining perfectly healthy. Thus, arguments in favor of ethical vegetarianism would apply to many people.

However, there may be other counterexamples that are more problematic because, sticking with the example of vegetarianism, there are other actions besides eating meat that would satisfy the criteria of my moral principle, yet are plausibly not obligatory. For example, substitute not having children for action *X*. Not only would this eventually stop all meat production, but this would also prevent other bad outcomes, such as global warming, war, racism, sexism, etc. If we all performed this action, most bad outcomes would be prevented in the future. It seems then that my moral principle would make not having children morally obligatory. One important thing to note about this action is that it would prevent most good outcomes in

the future as well. Protesting eating meat or other unethical practices usually lack this feature. Thus, not having children does not satisfy the requirement that the prevented outcome be bad overall because it prevents bad and good outcomes. However, since not eating meat would only prevent comparably minor instances of fleeting pleasure, it would still be covered by the Moral Cooperation Principle.

Another kind of counterexample might be brought against my principle. One objection against the claim that we should not eat meat is the case of paying rent to a non-vegetarian landlord. Even if you do not yourself eat meat, by paying the landlord, you may inadvertently give your landlord the money necessary for them to support the meat industry. This example generalizes. Since most people eat meat, when we purchase anything, we give money mostly to non-vegetarians, and they may spend that money on eating meat. However, neither observation can constitute a genuine counterexample to my principle. Not paying rent to non-vegetarian landlords is simply not an action that would prevent the production of meat. If we all stopped paying landlords that were not vegetarian, then everyone who was not a landlord would continue eating meat. We would simply not be cooperating to prevent a bad outcome in this example. However, if the alleged counterexample is instead that we should not purchase anything, then this counterexample also does not satisfy my requirement that abstaining from the action prevents an overall bad outcome. We would likely not survive without the ability to purchase anything at all, so the resulting outcome would prevent the meat industry only at the expense of killing most of us. Thus, our dependence on consumption in general counts as an extenuating factor that justifies the action of purchasing products, even from people who are not vegetarians. Cooperating to not consume anything would simply result in a bad outcome.

Furthermore, it may be noted that, under at least one reading of "would prevent" in my principle, abstaining from eating meat would actually not prevent the production of meat. If "would prevent" means "logically implies," then this observation is certainly correct. If people stopped eating meat, this would not logically imply that meat production would cease because it is consistent with the laws of logic that people would continue to produce meat for some other reason than to eat it. However, this is an extremely unlikely scenario. If we did not eat it, meat would be an extreme waste of energy, space, water, food, and time, not to mention it would remain bad for the environment. There is simply no realistic scenario where meat production would continue once meat consumption ceased. Thus,

by clarifying that "would prevent" does not mean "logically implies" but something closer to "would prevent in nearby possible worlds," my moral principle does indeed imply that not eating meat is morally obligatory in the majority of cases.[7]

A different objection comes from Sinnott-Armstrong. Sinnott-Armstrong considers a variety of moral principles similar to my own, such as the group principle, which states that "we have a moral obligation not to perform an action if this action makes us a member of a group whose actions together cause harm."[8] He gives a variety of objections to this and similar principles. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong attempts to provide a counterexample of talking loudly in the airport. He reasons that if such a principle were true, we would be obligated to not talk loudly in an airport because if everyone talked loudly, then people would not hear their flights being called.[9]

I deny that this is a genuine counterexample. It is built into my principle that such an obligation can be defeated, so if you have good reasons to shout in an airport, perhaps to warn someone who is about to be injured, then this obligation would be overridden. Thus, my principle would at most imply that you should not shout in an airport without good reason, and if this is considered a bullet, then I am willing to bite it. After all, I need not say that shouting in an airport is horrendously bad since the outcome being prevented is itself not terrible compared with the injustices prevented by other protests.

Moreover, we can imagine a similar case that is more analogous to cases like eating meat or emitting wasteful carbon emissions. Suppose that instead of refraining from speaking loudly in a mostly quiet airport, everyone in the airport was already shouting, and no one could hear their flight being called. What would be the rational thing to do? I think it is intuitive that you should stop shouting even if your action would not cause the airport to become quiet enough to hear. After all, everyone could reason that their own silence would not fix the problem. Then, the problem would simply never be fixed, and everyone would miss their flight. This seems obviously irrational. This suggests that the Moral Cooperation Principle might apply with more force when everyone is already contributing to a bad outcome, such as climate change or meat production.

7 Possible worlds is a framework philosophers sometimes use to talk about possibility. A possible world is just a maximal way reality could have been, so by a nearby possible world, I mean that the action would prevent the outcome in all ways reality could be that are similar to our own.

8 Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault," 340.

9 Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault," 340.

VI. CONCLUSION

Since the main justification for consuming wrongfully produced products is pleasure or convenience, my principle does imply that consuming wrongfully produced products is generally wrong. The burden is on consumers of wrongfully produced products to provide an alternative justification. While the list of extenuating circumstances I gave in the preceding section, lack of vegetarian options for example, may not be exhaustive, I covered the main relevant factors that could defeat the obligation to morally cooperate, so this will not be an easy burden to overcome. At the very least, I have shown that causal inefficacy principles are an ineffective objection to ethical vegetarianism, and the Moral Cooperation Principle is a plausible ethical principle that can feature in arguments for ethical vegetarianism.

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