

USING UTILITARIAN THEORY TO IMPROVE
OUR FOOD SYSTEMS, OUR PLANET, AND OURSELVES

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Imagine that it is grocery day in your household. You walk into the local supermarket and head to the meat and poultry area near the back of the store. Underneath fluorescent lights, sealed in plastic wrap and Styrofoam, sit hundreds of cuts of meat from different creatures. Cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, and salmon are all represented. The nearby frozen food section offers even more meals derived from animal products. Pre-packaged steak dinners, microwave safe and ready to eat within 30 minutes, are available for less than \$10. Such low prices may appear to be extraordinary bargains when one stops to consider the resources and energy it takes to raise an animal for slaughter.

The convenience and affordability of meat is certainly appreciated by Americans, who eat more meat today than ever before. According to the National Chicken Council, the per capita consumption of meat and poultry combined in the United States in 2015 was a little under 211 pounds, which is about 30 pounds higher than it was in 1965 (National Chicken Council, 2015). The growth in household meat consumption isn't much of a surprise when we look at how the prices of meat have changed over time. When we index the prices of meat in 1960 to what those prices would have been in 2012¹ it becomes readily apparent that meat today is noticeably cheaper than it was in the past² (National Chicken Council, 2012).

Unfortunately, the true (and perhaps hidden) costs of consuming meat are far more expensive and dangerous than is implied by supermarket price tags. When we consult utilitarian theory, it becomes obvious that the only ethical decision we can make in regards to our diet is to avoid the consumption of meat. Continuing to eat animals when one is knowledgeable of the consequences is not only morally erroneous, but environmentally and medically unsound.

¹ The most recent available prices supplied by the National Chicken Council was for the year 2012.

² Inflation index calculation supported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator found at http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

When we walk into the supermarket with its endless rows of countless meat products, each one of us faces a severe and important ethical challenge. Utilitarian theory is a decision-aiding framework which argues that the most just and ethical decision is the choice that results in the greatest benefit (or utility) for the greatest number of people (Kay, 1997). Therefore, this essay makes the argument that the costs of consuming meat far outweigh any of the potential benefits, and that the most ethical choice we can make when we enter the grocery store is to avoid meat and animal products as much as possible.

What food we eat, and by effect what industries we choose to support, bears consequences on our health, our society, our planet, and on the wellbeing of the animals eaten. The choice to buy a hamburger is in reality a significant moral dilemma, and the ramifications of that purchase are huge. While it may be believed that daily dietary choices are only an individual affair, there are in reality severe consequences to what we choose to take with us into the checkout line. When we choose to consume meat, those consequences far exceed any benefits.

On a personal level, the real costs of consuming meat are extraordinarily higher than one may expect. From his seminal book *The China Study*, biochemist Dr. T. Colin Campbell shows strong correlations – if not causations – between high meat consumption and heightened risks of obesity, cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other serious medical conditions (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). It is hard to argue if an early and unpleasant death is worth any perceived benefit from meat consumption. Utilitarian theory would therefore guide us to cease consumption of meat from this alone, for what meal could possibly be worth the price of disease and mortality?

One could make the counterargument that though high levels of meat consumption may be unhealthy, meat remains a necessary part of a nutritious diet. This simply is not true. It is not

only possible to eat a complete and balanced diet that is entirely plant-based, but oftentimes eating such a diet is more nutritionally efficient and far healthier than a diet based on animal-products, and a plant-based diet can even be substantially more rewarding (Campbell & Campbell, 2004; Singer, 1979). Whatever health benefits meat provides can be substituted through the proper consumption of plant-based foods relatively easily, and the potential medical advantages of eating meat, whatever they may be, becomes nullified. From this alone utilitarian theory would suggest that we cease eating meat, as the utility provided by an optional and unnecessary food group (no matter how enjoyable) cannot reasonably outweigh the associated cost of a premature death. Yet there are even more consequences of what we choose to eat that must be considered, many of which are thrown upon society to bear.

Many of the illnesses linked to meat consumption, such as obesity, cancer, and heart disease, cause significant economic concerns. In 2015, *The Fiscal Times* reported that the lifetime cost of obesity was estimated to be greater than \$90,000 per person when accounting for the loss of productivity, the drain of resources (financial and otherwise), and the healthcare costs to treat obesity and its associated illnesses (Pianin, 2015). The CDC claims that “in 2009, economic costs of cardiovascular disease and stroke were estimated at \$475.3 billion, including \$313.8 billion in direct medical expenses and \$161.5 billion in indirect costs” due to loss of productivity in life or as a result of an early death. The CDC also claims that 7 out of every 10 deaths in the U.S. are caused by chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, and that these diseases account for upwards of 75% of the \$2 trillion spent on medical care in the United States each year (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

While these medical expenses are not caused entirely or exclusively by meat consumption, it has been shown that choosing to eat high quantities of meat (or even moderate

quantities) can exceedingly increase one's risk of contracting these diseases. Legitimate scientific data indicates that high levels of meat consumption has caused the United States to suffer more from these diseases than most any other country, and numerous studies indicate that choosing to actively abstain from consuming meat can reduce or even reverse some of these illnesses (Campbell & Campbell, 2004). Therefore, choosing to avoid meat consumption not only better one's individual health, but it also benefits society as a whole through improving productivity and lessening the national healthcare costs which must be paid for by taxpayers. Utilitarian theory would direct us to reduce our consumption of meat so as to minimize these external costs which society is forced to bear. However, there are even more external costs to consuming meat beyond these medical expenses and losses of economic productivity.

The growth of the meat industry has caused irrevocable changes to our planet and has resulted in the unchecked waste of valuable resources. This kind of widespread damage negatively effects all living beings on Earth. As reported by *Time* magazine, 40% of the entire planet's land surface is already used for farming (Walsh, 2013), and the majority of the two most produced crops (corn and soy) are used to either create fuel or to feed animals (Foley, 2013). The World Wildlife Fund reports that 75% of soybeans grown are used to feed animals (World Wildlife Fund, "Soy – Facts and Data"). Thus, those farms that are not raising livestock directly are likely raising food for the livestock, or fuel to transport the livestock's food to it. "In all, livestock production accounts for 70 percent of all agricultural land and 30 percent of the land surface of the planet" (Steinfeld, Gerber, Wassenaar, Castel, Rosales, & Haan, 2006). Raising animals for consumption doesn't just use up our valuable land; animal agriculture is also responsible for the use of one-third of Earth's fresh water supply (Walsh, 2013). Choosing to eat meat supports the livestock farming industry, which eventually leads to the wasteful use of our

planet's valuable resources. Such waste has serious implications for the future of our planet's health and security.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States (FAO) has stated that animal agriculture is one of the leading causes of climate change and environmental degradation worldwide. Excessive greenhouse gas emissions are thought by the scientific community to be a major cause of climate change, and the FAO reports that, "the livestock sector is a major player [in climate change], responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions measured in CO₂ equivalents. This is a higher share than transport" (Steinfeld, et al, 2006). Animal agriculture is also a significant contributor to global water pollution and nutrient waste, as well as notable losses in global biodiversity (Steinfeld, et al, 2006).

The mass amount of resources consumed in animal agriculture has caused significant damage to our planet, and has led to an acceleration in environmental degradation. One may be asking what the actual costs of climate change are, and whether they're something to be concerned about. The US Department of Defense views climate change as a serious risk to national security, poverty, and political institutions (Department of Defense, 2015), which should legitimize climate change as a very real threat to our continual survival. In an official climate change report issued by the White House, it was estimated that the rise of global temperatures just a few degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels of 2° Celsius "could increase economic damages by approximately 0.9 percent of global output. To put this percentage in perspective, 0.9 percent of estimated 2014 U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is approximately \$150 billion. The incremental cost of an additional degree of warming beyond 3° Celsius would be even greater" (Executive Office of the President, 2014). Through eating meat, one risks making these threats to our climate and security less of a nightmare and more of a reality.

Utilitarian theory argues that these costs of meat consumption – climate change, loss of productivity, widespread disease and improper nutrition – must outweigh the benefits in order for the choice to abstain from eating meat to be ethical. One could therefore object to the arguments thus far presented by claiming that the income and livelihood provided by animal agriculture justifies the aforementioned medical, economic, and environmental costs.

Indeed, millions of people, including U.S. citizens, are employed by animal agriculture in some manner. *Time* magazine claims that animal agriculture provides income for 1.3 billion people globally (Walsh, 2013). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, in the U.S., 929,800 people were employed as farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers in 2014 and another 761,700 were employed as agricultural workers. Respective annual salaries for the two types of professions were \$68,050 and \$19,330 (Bureau of Labor Statistics citation, 2015). Admittedly, not all of these people would be employed by animal agriculture directly. However, because of the influence of the meat industry, an estimate of income provided through animal agriculture can be made using these aggregate figures³. This equates to approximately \$78 billion provided to 1.7 million people in the US who are directly involved as agricultural workers (but who may or may not be connected to animal agriculture). Realistically, this figure would probably be higher when one accounts for all the people who earn their livings through the production of machinery for livestock, through meat processing plants, through the selling and shipping of meat, and so on. Are the benefits of forgoing meat consumption worth these lost incomes? Are the consequences of eating meat justified by the livelihoods that the meat industry provides?

Approximately \$1.5 trillion is spent annually just in the United States to treat medical conditions commonly associated with the consumption of animal-based food products, and that

³Because even those farms that grow crops often sell their yields to feed animals, their incomes would also likely be reduced by a drop in the consumption of animal products.

figure doesn't even account for the astronomical costs that obesity has on society (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). These medical expenses far exceed the incomes provided by animal agriculture, but remember that the costs do not stop with healthcare. Billions, if not trillions, more dollars are at stake when we account for the costs that animal agriculture imposes on our environment, as well as the losses in economic productivity. Even if we scaled the income estimate up by billions more dollars, it still wouldn't reach the economic, environmental, and medical costs of eating meat. On this count utilitarian theory would again recommend that we cease meat consumption and transition to a plant-based diet. The benefits of consuming meat, be they in income or nutrition, are simply not equaled by the costs. However, there still remains one final consequence of animal agriculture which has yet to be mentioned, and that is the cost that must be carried by the animals themselves.

While it may be easy to disregard animals as commodities when we only interact with them as prepackaged cutlets, in reality they were once living beings. Many meat products come from mammals like us, and some are quite similar to humans on an evolutionary and biological level. In the factory farms and processing plants where these animals are raised, it is normal for livestock to live in tight quarters or feeding pens where they can't go outside or comfortably move around. Livestock frequently sit in enclosed areas where they can't escape their own fecal matter and waste, causing the "necessity" of pumping them full of unnatural drugs and feed (Pollan, 2006). Any reasonable standards would view such living conditions as cruel.

In her investigative book *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry*, Gail Eisnitz discusses how it is not unusual for animals raised for slaughter to go through meat-processing plants while still living, suffering horrific and torturous procedures such as being boiled or skinned alive. Eisnitz also discusses the

commonality of PTSD-like symptoms in the workers of industrial meat processing plants, as well as the prevalence of workplace related injuries, alcoholism, and domestic violence among those who work in animal slaughterhouses (Eisnitz, 1997). The steps which animals must go through in order for human beings to consume them are grizzly and oftentimes inhumane. If a person chooses to eat meat, then that person is actively choosing to support an industry which inflicts pain, suffering, and death upon living creatures for the purpose of fulfilling a dietary luxury.

An objector could raise the argument that humans are inherently different from animals, and that animals are less deserving of life or consideration than are people. After all, animals are not by themselves intrinsically helpful to society, and it is difficult to argue if most (if any) are self-aware. Therefore, an objector might say, we cannot compare the pain animals endure when we eat them to the way humans would feel, because we are not equal beings. Also, an objector may say that the relatively humane slaughter procedures of organic farms justifies eating meat.

It is entirely true that animals and people are completely different kinds of beings. However, as argued by the philosopher Peter Singer, we cannot just ignore animals as if they have no preferences or feelings. It is readily apparent that most of the animals that we consume are quite capable of feeling pain, and have a predisposition to avoid agony and death. By choosing to consume animals, we are considering the minor (and unnecessary) human interest of eating meat to be more important than the entire life of another living organism (Singer, 1979). As animals are indisputably living beings capable of feeling both comfort and pain, their personal preferences should be taken into account when we choose to use them as food, for our consumption of their bodies denies them that consideration and even their life.

One may also raise the argument that because animals eat each other, why shouldn't we eat them? As admitted, human beings are different than animals. For one, we are self-aware, and

we are able to conclude that eating animals is not only bad for the environment and our society, but also bad for our own health. Even though animals might eat each other, human beings are able to recognize that the practice is no longer needed for humans, and is in fact better avoided. Human beings can therefore maximize not only their own utility by avoiding the consumption of meat (an abstinence which improves health, society, and climate), but they can also maximize the personal benefits of the animals, who undoubtedly have a preference to not be eaten (Singer, 1979).

Utilitarianism leads us to conclude that abstaining from eating meat is the most moral decision from an animal rights standpoint, the most beneficial decision from a personal health standpoint, and the most pragmatic decision from an environmental and societal standpoint. By avoiding animal products we can slowly change the market and the farming industry to reduce its production of meat. This could potentially result in the reversal of land degradation and the reduction of nutrient waste. Less meat production will result in more crops with which to feed those who cannot afford food otherwise, and will ultimately lead to better health for us all. Alternatively, if we choose to continue consuming meat, our societies, economies, and planet will continue to die, and us with it.

Eating meat therefore forces an individual to make moral and economic sacrifices that amount to a price no meal is worthy of. When we weigh the costs and benefits of choosing to eat meat as opposed to choosing to abstain from meat, it becomes immediately apparent that the only ethical option is to avoid the butcher shop at all costs and head straight to the produce aisle.

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