

Consumer Ethics (2)

1. Intro

Suppose you learn that a product has been produced under morally problematic conditions. What should you do? YOU aren't causing pain to or killing animals. YOU aren't exploiting slaughterhouse workers or polluting the rivers with pesticides. So should you adjust your behavior? If so, what is the principle that you should rely on in judging what to do?

Compare:

- The NCAA exploits college students. Should we watch college basketball, attend games, etc.?
- After a party an extra plate of cold cuts is left over. It is in perfect condition. Is there any reason not to eat it?
- The electrical company in your town relies on coal to produce power. The result is terrible air pollution. Should you go without electricity?

Think through the models we have for making moral judgments:

Efficacy/Inefficacy issues? Does it really matter what an individual decides to do?

How do we calculate the expected consequences of an action? (See p. 173)

Are consequences all that matter?

2. Threshold effects and supply chains

Many have pointed out that it is very unlikely that a single individual's decision to become vegetarian (or vegan) will make a difference to the suffering and/or death of non-human animals. There is plenty of "slack" in the system to accommodate the "waste" of a few animals.

But what about threshold effects? Singer and others have argued that even if your decision is not likely to matter, there is a chance that it will matter. For example, there is "threshold" at which a meat producing enterprise will cut down the amount it produces in response to consumer demand. How do you know that your decision is the one that makes the difference? Or more plausibly, shouldn't we calculate the consequences of your decision taking into account the chances that your decision will matter?

3. Practical rationality and expected consequences

Just to get the hang of this, suppose that you are facing a decision "under conditions of uncertainty": suppose the question is whether to take an umbrella or not, on a day when the chance of rain is one half. Since the value of taking as opposed to leaving the umbrella will be different depending on whether or not it rains, we might start out by listing all the possible scenarios, and how well things work out for us in all of them. There are four:

- Take it and it rains
- Take it and it doesn't rain
- Leave it and it rains
- Leave it and it doesn't rain

How should we decide? Here's a proposal:

Practical Rationality Principle: The practically rational thing to do is the thing with the highest expected value, where the expected value (x) = the sum of the values of the various possible outcomes that x could give rise to, weighted according to their probabilities.

Should I take an umbrella along to class on a day when the chance of rain is 50%?

<i>Probability</i>	.50	.50	
Possibilities	Rain	Dry	Expected Value
Take	10	-4	3 ♥
Leave	-20	2	-9

Expected value of TAKE

= value of taking if rain \times chance of rain + value of taking if dry \times chance of dry
 = $10 \times .50 + -4 \times .50 = 3$

Expected value of LEAVE

= value of leaving if rain \times chance of rain + value of leaving if dry \times chance of dry
 = $-20 \times .50 + 2 \times .50 = -9$.

This suggests you should take the umbrella. But if the probability of rain is different, (or the values you assign to the possible outcomes) you could reach a different result. E.g., if the probability of rain is only 10%:

EV(TAKE)= $1 + 3.6 = -2.6$

EV (LEAVE)= $-2 + 1.8 = -0.2 \leftarrow$

How is this relevant in the case of, say, the decision to purchase meat? It may be a low probability that your choice will make a difference, but the outcome, if it does, may be significant. It may be, for example, that your decision occurs at a tipping point, so that along with others' choices to be vegetarian, the day comes when a slaughterhouse becomes unprofitable and so closes. The chances are low, but the good outcomes, one might think, are huge.

<i>Probability</i>	.001	.999	
Possibilities	Closes	Stays open	Expected Value
Go Veg	1,000,000	-1	~ 999
Stay Omnivore	-20	2	-9 ♥

It looks like even if there is a small chance of making a big difference, the practically rational thing to do is go vegetarian!

In the readings, however, there seems to be some doubt about whether this is the right approach by emphasizing that we know how supply chains work. E.g., Budolfson argues that “the problem with [this sort of] reasoning is that we can know enough about the supply chains...to know that threshold effects are not sufficiently likely and are not of sufficient magnitude to drive the expected effect of consumption anywhere close to the average effect....we might call that mistake the “Average Effects Fallacy.” Do you find that argument convincing?

4. Group Harm

McPherson argues that there is a further way of thinking about the wrong of meat eating, even if the expected consequences argument doesn't work. Here is the principle:

GROUP HARM: If one can avoid being part of a group that together does serious wrong, then one acts wrongly by continuing to be a member of that group. (*FES* 198)

Application to the case at hand: If omnivores, as a group, do wrong, then one acts wrongly by continuing to be an omnivore.

5. Complicity

ANTI-COMPLICITY: It is typically wrong to aim to benefit by cooperating with the wrongful elements of others' plans. (*FES* 199)

Can you think of an example that demonstrates this? Is it wrong even if your involvement in the other's plans make no difference to the harm that is caused, e.g., if the wrong is "demand-insensitive"?

6. Kantianism/Deontology

Is there a way to apply Korsgaard's Kantian argument to draw consequences for consumer ethics? All consumer ethics, or only ethics concerning vegetarianism/veganism? What about sweatshop labor? Other labor practices?

7. Virtue Ethics

Recall the discussion of social meaning (see handout from 3/6/17 on "Food and Social Meaning" and 3/8/17 on "Religion, Virtue, Food"). How do our consumer choices convey our values? What values does the purchase of meat convey? Does it really convey a disrespect for animals?

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