

The Consequences of Individual Consumption: A Defence of Threshold Arguments for Vegetarianism and Consumer Ethics

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ABSTRACT *As a moral foundation for vegetarianism and other consumer choices, act consequentialism can be appealing. When we justify our consumer and dietary choices this way, however, we face the problem that our individual actions rarely actually precipitate more just agricultural and economic practices. This threshold or individual impotence problem engaged by consequentialist vegetarians and their critics extends to morally motivated consumer decision-making more generally, anywhere a lag persists between individual moral actions taken and systemic moral progress made. Regan and others press just this point against Singer's utilitarian basis for vegetarianism; recently Chartier criticizes act-consequentialist vegetarianism by identifying many factors weakening the connection between individual meat purchases and changes in animal production. While such factors are relevant to act-consequentialist moral reasoning, I argue, they need not defeat the act-consequentialist case for vegetarianism and consumer ethics. This is shown by offering a probabilistic account of the threshold issue and discussing the positive and negative role-modelling effects of our morally motivated dietary and consumer choices.*

1. Introduction

Consider a moral problem familiar to consequentialist vegetarians, their allies, and their critics. Connie does her best to live her moral life so that her actions promote the good. She tries hard to tell which agricultural and labour practices promote happiness and reduce suffering for affected human and nonhuman animals, and tries to act in support of the better over worse practices. (Connie is not necessarily a utilitarian, but does see human and nonhuman happiness and cessation of suffering as partially constitutive of the good.) The question of how her individual choices bolster (or undermine) just (or unjust) agricultural and labour practices arises throughout her daily life, whether the choice involves eating animals conventionally raised and slaughtered, buying organic produce at farmers' markets or supermarkets, drinking fairly-traded coffee, wearing sweatshop-made clothing, and so on. In these situations her act-consequentialist reasoning (say, in buying fair-trade clothes) runs like this:

'Fair trade production promotes the good in concrete ways that reduce suffering and increase wellbeing for those involved, compared to conventional sweatshop garment production; I should support practices promoting the good; by buying fairly-traded certified clothes over conventionally-manufactured clothes, I'd be supporting the better practice; so over conventionally-manufactured shoes, I should buy these "sweat-free" shoes.'

‘Support’ can have a deontological gloss, but Connie means it in a distinctly act-consequentialist way: for a good or bad practice *X*, *supporting X* is *contributing to bring about X*. In this approach to moral decision-making, I’d suggest, Connie is not alone. Many of us find act consequentialism appealing as a moral basis for vegetarianism, fair trade, and other dietary and consumer choices. Having identified some modern agricultural and labour practices as better than others, we evaluate our individual acts as right to the extent that they contribute to undermining worse practices and bolstering better ones and wrong to the extent they bolster worse practices and undermine better ones.

But when act consequentialists justify their dietary and consumer choices in this way, they face a problem: the seemingly indisputable fact that our individual purchases rarely actually yield positive (or negative) consequences for the good (and bad) agricultural and labour practices we mean to affect. ‘There are thresholds beneath which an alteration in demand has absolutely no effect on price, profit, and production.’¹ In such circumstances, the act consequentialist case for moral vegetarianism and consumer ethics seems to collapse. This *threshold* or *individual impotence* problem is raised by Regan, rebutted by Singer, and recently recapitulated by Chartier and Garrett.² Singer characterizes his dispute with critics this way:

Thus the dispute is not over whether current practices are, judged by utilitarian standards, ideal. We are agreed that they are not. The question is whether the utilitarian condemnation of these practices carries with it the implication that we should switch to a vegetarian diet.³

Critics allege that while utilitarians and consequentialists generally may oppose conventional animal productions, their theoretical basis for opposition doesn’t warrant *individual* dietary change. Chartier is particularly thorough in identifying factors weakening the connection between our individual meat purchases and change effected in production. The threshold problem is not unique to utilitarianism, or vegetarianism, but extends to act-consequentialist arguments for individual dietary and consumer choices broadly, to any persisting lags between individual actions taken and systemic change made.

The lag between the messages intended to be sent by morally motivated individual consumer and dietary acts and messages actually received, registered, and reflected in moral progress in production is undeniable, and cannot be dismissed as morally extraneous by act consequentialists like Connie. The act-consequentialist case for vegetarianism and consumer ethics may seem devastated by real-world mitigating factors — yet I find this conclusion to be too quick. Such factors are relevant to act-consequentialist moral calculus, yet they do not completely undercut the case for vegetarianism and consumer ethics generally. This can be shown by considering a *probabilistic* account of the threshold issue, specifically by understanding the *rational subjective* conception of probability operative here. So understood, we can also appreciate how the threshold argument captures the importance of positive and negative *role-modelling* in morally motivated dietary and consumer choices, for public and private acts. Thus we find for Connie and like-minded folks a moral basis admitting of reasonable exceptions *and* carrying clear implications for many individuals’ dietary and consumer choices.

2. Counting Your Chickens

Vegetarianism, Garrett notes, is an ‘overall, settled, intentional pattern of not eating animal flesh’ [that] ‘requires that any consumption of animal flesh be so infrequent that it could not plausibly be thought characteristic of one’s diet.’⁴ So Connie’s consequentialist vegetarianism must be justified for each vegetarian act by whether that act will promote the good better than omnivorous alternatives. If she is right to embrace a settled vegetarian identity, it is because she has reason to believe for the particular actions in her life that making the vegetarian choice will promote the good better than omnivorous alternatives. My aim in this discussion of moral thresholds and contagious actions is to show why an act consequentialist can indeed have good reason to believe this, and so good reason to hold a vegetarian identity and consistently make individual consumer ethical choices.⁵

Consider this everyday moral dilemma: with friends at a taqueria, Connie must choose between chicken and vegetarian bean tacos. She finds her options comparable in expense, nutrition, and taste. Does she have good, act-consequentialist moral reason to choose beans over chicken? Assume that she has extensively researched contemporary practices in poultry production, and reflecting on chickens’ suffering and slaughterhouse labour practices, finds these practices morally wanting. (Even if she is not a utilitarian, she sees intense unnecessary suffering as contrary to the good.) She regards conventional poultry production as immoral and knows the chicken in these tacos comes from such production.⁶ Does this give her compelling moral reason to order bean tacos instead?

Here some may argue that we should focus on changing the immoral production system rather than worrying about individual dietary choices; Connie should join others working for social change where lasting progress is possible. Others may urge that poultry producers are morally blameworthy, not Connie and her lunching co-workers; they’re responsible for the chickens’ intense suffering and the labour injustices, so they have the obligation to effect change.⁷ Both arguments contain key insights: blame for agricultural and labour practices should not be placed on consumers alone but producers too, and Connie should not assume her individual dietary and consumer acts are substitutes for collective activism for systematic change. But both arguments also invite false dilemmas. Why consider *either* producers *or* consumers as responsible for unjust practices, rather than recognizing the responsibility of *both* parties for their roles in perpetuating these practices? Similarly, while individual choices are no substitute for social action, neither does the need for social action render individual choices morally irrelevant. Connie and friends need to eat and clothe themselves, after all. With each individual dietary and consumer choice, each of us has an opportunity to support or oppose unjust systematic practices.

If the butcher awaits Connie’s lunchtime taqueria choice before killing the chicken, the right act may seem obvious. Better yet, imagine that *only after* Connie orders chicken tacos does the producer actually raise and slaughter *that* chicken: here Connie’s responsibility for the chicken’s suffering and death is pretty clear. But this is not how contemporary conventional agricultural practices work for Connie, you, and me. *That* chicken in her tacos (or *those many* chickens, bits of which are in her tacos) is dead before Connie places her order; whatever her taco choice, the chicken in the taqueria’s freezer has already experienced its lot of happiness and suffering. Making the vegetarian choice now cannot affect that chicken’s wellbeing positively or negatively. This problem is not limited

to vegetarianism but extends to many other consumer choices. Imagine Connie supports organic farming over using petrochemical pesticides based on the environmental effects and fruit-pickers' health effects; each time she chooses between organic and conventionally grown pears, regardless of her purchase, both pears have been grown and picked. Consider also Connie's aforementioned stance on sweatshop garments: when she buys fairly traded over conventionally manufactured shoes, both pairs already exist. Now on some moral theories, this is not terribly morally relevant. If she were a deontologist, Connie could justify her vegetarian tacos and other dietary and consumer acts as principled refusals to participate in unjust practices.⁸ If Connie were some sort of rule consequentialist, the backward causation issue also would not be so pressing. She would look less to the specific consequences of possible actions and how those consequences would promote the good and instead to rules for dietary and consumer action that would tend to promote the good. Then the relation between her moral evaluations of systematic practices and her individual acts would be fairly clear: she should act on those moral rules that would if generally followed reform existing immoral practices.

Yet as an act consequentialist Connie's vegetarianism and other consumer ethics aren't ultimately grounded in adherence to rules or refusal of complicity with unjust practices. Connie must handle this issue differently from her virtue-ethical and rule-consequentialist vegetarian friends. She may remind herself that while *these* shoes, chicken, and pear already exist and nothing she does now can mitigate the moral harms of their production, nevertheless her actions towards these shoes, chicken, and pear can have positive and negative consequences for future production of *other* shoes, chickens and pears. Except for the rare cases where people raise, hunt, or catch the animals they eat for themselves, this holds for most folks today. When Connie chooses bean tacos, it's not for the consequences for already dead chickens but different future chickens. Reducing demand for conventionally raised animals and increasing demand for vegetarian alternatives, she reasons, may contribute to reforming agricultural practices; meanwhile contributing to demand for conventionally raised meat would further entrench immoral practices. Connie's individual choices of fair trade, organic, and such things are grounded in her act-consequentialist goal of contributing to future moral progress in systematic practices.

3. Thresholds and Complications

When act consequentialists justify their individual dietary and consumer choices by appeal to the positive and negative effects on future agricultural and labour practices, they then face the problem of individual impotence. Contemporary market forces are rarely so fine-grained as to register and reflect each dietary and consumer act with corresponding effects on production. Consider the consequences of Connie's choice of vegetarian beans over conventionally raised chicken tacos. Even if this taqueria records the small decrease in chicken demand and increase in bean demand, their bulk purchases from poultry and bean suppliers aren't fine-grained enough to show each customer's order nor are suppliers fine-grained enough to adjust their practices in response to each purchaser's requisition. Regan and others raise this problem for Singer's utilitarian vegetarianism, and it extends to act-consequentialist bases of other consumer choices. Consequentialist reasons for drinking fair-trade coffee and wearing sweat-free clothing

seem predicated on the dubious notion that markets are sufficiently fine-grained to record and respond to her acts. It's hard to deny the conclusion that any given dietary or consumer action is unlikely to precipitate any effect at the level of production. For moral theories identifying right action as that with consequences promoting the good, the moral basis for individual dietary and consumer acts threatens to collapse.

Singer responds to critics' charge of individual impotence made against utilitarian vegetarianism by appeal to the notion of *thresholds*. With the poultry industry as his example, he argues as follows:

[B]ut there must be some point at which the number of vegetarians makes a difference to the size of the poultry industry. There must be a series of thresholds, hidden by the market system of distribution, which determine how many factory farms will be in existence. In this case one more person becoming a vegetarian will make no difference at all, unless that individual, added to the others who are already vegetarians, reduces demand below the threshold level at which a new factory farm would have started.⁹

Singer realizes his diagnosis may be initially frustrating from the perspective of individual vegetarian decision-making, but reminds us that '[a]s long as I have no idea whether or not my own decision to go vegetarian is the decision that takes the demand for chickens below the threshold the strength of this reason for being a vegetarian is unaffected.'¹⁰ Here Singer speaks of crossing *negative* thresholds, specifically levels of consumer demand at which *additional* factory farms would be built, such that sufficiently many individual vegetarians prevent the threshold crossing. But this argument applies to crossing *positive* thresholds too, such that sufficiently many individual vegetarians serve to raise demand to an appreciable level at which *morally better* agricultural practices are increased, or to drop demand for conventionally raised animal products below an appreciable level at which *immoral* agricultural practices are decreased. Neither is this response to the threshold problem not limited to utilitarianism particularly but extends to act consequentialism generally.

Norcross defends a similar view on the threshold issue. One response to the impotence objection, he writes, 'is to deny it'. Norcross explains his position with reference to the US poultry industry:

Consider the case of chickens, the most cruelly treated of all animals raised for human consumption, with the possible exception of veal calves . . . Suppose that there are 250 million chicken eaters in the US, and that each one consumes, on average, 25 chickens per year . . . there must be some number of consumers, far short of 250 million, whose renunciation of chicken would cause the industry to reduce the number of chickens bred in factory farms. The industry may not be able to respond to each individual's behavior, but it must respond to the behavior of fairly large numbers.¹¹

Chartier's critique concerns the sort of threshold arguments Singer and Norcross propose to ground vegetarianism. The distance between individual meat purchases and effecting more or less humane meat production is not just about accumulated individual purchases together crossing thresholds, Chartier argues: there are myriad other factors counting against consequentialism on the threshold issue. For one, about crossing a negative threshold of increased conventional meat production, 'the disutility associated

with a purchase triggering a threshold crossing will not be *all* of the disutility brought about by a newly opened factory farm (or whatever other source of dramatic increase in meat production comes into being as a result of the threshold crossing)¹². Even if the threshold is not crossed *now* due to *this* purchase it may be crossed *soon after* due to another, in which case the net savings in animal suffering is only that attendant to the delay.

In fact, given the lag between individual purchases and changes in production, the new farm may open *at the same time*, yielding no net savings in animal suffering. Chartier imagines consequentialist vegetarian Chris, who decides against purchasing what is (unbeknownst to her) the threshold-crossing burrito at a fast-food joint, then Peter buys the threshold-crossing burrito there two hours later. This place doesn't submit orders to its suppliers hourly, so the effect on production is the same; the short delay in threshold-crossing has no effect on animal suffering. Even if Peter's purchase lands in a new ordering cycle, Chartier notes, '[i]t is hard to imagine that project profit margins for an envisioned farm would be so narrow that the later order would ultimately preclude its establishment entirely'.¹³ Furthermore, he observes, we cannot assume that the number of animals a farm raises is directly proportionate to how long the farm operates. Nor is the amount of suffering produced by one farm directly proportionate to the number of animals raised. Different production methods employed for different numbers of animals cause different amounts of suffering. Modern agricultural practices are complicated and future production is affected by a variety of factors including variable pricing, futures speculation, subsidies, and legal constraints. In sum, 'production is ultimately a function, not of expressed demand but of market strategy.'¹⁴

4. A Probabilistic Account

Chartier is right to regard these factors as relevant to the sort of act-consequentialist calculus involved in decisions of moral vegetarianism, and the point applies to other consumer ethical choices too. However, while these factors may mitigate the likelihood of effecting the desired moral outcomes from our individual dietary and consumer choices, I think they do not succeed in fully undermining the act-consequentialist case.

Let me propose a distinctly *probabilistic* approach to the threshold issue. Consider some individual consumer act (*i*) that may or may not reach some relevant threshold (*t*) which would then effect some concrete, morally positive change in production and thereby promote the good in some tangible way. So *i* = 'the individual act is performed' and *t* = 'the threshold is reached'. The probability of reaching the threshold given that this individual act is performed is $p(t|i)$; the prior probability of otherwise reaching the threshold is simply $p(t)$. We may express the act-consequentialist position by saying that the individual act should be performed, all other things being equal, just in case:

$$p(t|i) > p(t)$$

that is, if the probability the threshold is reached is increased given the performance of the act. Our operative conception of probability here is *rational subjective probability*, so $p(t|i)$ is a measure of how likely we should reasonably expect it to be given the evidence

available to us that the threshold will be reached given the act performed. Likewise $p(t)$ expresses how likely we previously reasonably expected it be that the threshold would be reached.¹⁵

Now, one might have assumed that an individual act should be performed just in case it *will* reach the desired threshold, or just in case one should reasonably expect given the available evidence that performing the act will reach the threshold. While these might be sufficient conditions for action, as necessary conditions they fail to properly account for a variety of cases. Consider, for example, our everyday prudential actions of automotive care: changing brake pads, tires, windshield wipers, etc. We do these things not because each safety precaution *will* prevent an accident, or even because we reasonably expect this. Rather, the reason for these precautions is that they increase the rational subjective probability of avoiding accidents. Turning from prudential to moral reasoning, consider any number of reckless and negligent actions. It is no moral defence of merrily tossing cinder blocks off a highway overpass to protest that many blocks don't actually cause damage or injury; the reason such actions are immoral is because they increase the rational subjective probability of damage and injury. The basic operative principle here is that an act is right on act-consequentialist grounds (all other things being equal, given the evidence available to the actor) because it makes reaching the desired outcome more likely.

Let us return to Connie's vegetarianism and consumer ethics grounded in her act-consequentialist commitments. On a probabilistic threshold account, she should order vegetarian when dining out not because she knows this will move the taqueria to buy less meat from its supplier and improve animal wellbeing, but because the available evidence suggests that this act *improves the odds* of this outcome. Similarly, if Connie should buy fair-trade coffee, it's not because she knows this purchase will improve the lives of coffee farmers, small business owners, or their employees. Often she does not know these things! But if given what she knows, so acting makes these concrete moral improvements more likely than would the alternatives, then Connie has compelling reason to act accordingly.

Let's return also to Chartier's story of Chris and the burrito. By hypothesis Chris's restraint from meat-eating ultimately has the same effect on production as would eating the burrito as the threshold will be crossed either way, either by Chris or Peter. On the probabilistic account of the threshold issue I suggest, however, we consider Chris's actions and inactions via her rational subjective probabilities. In Chartier's story, Chris has *no knowledge* that (i) this is the threshold-crossing burrito and (ii) Peter will buy it soon if she doesn't buy it now. She has no evidence of either. From her perspective, buying this burrito increases the probability of crossing a negative threshold and increasing convention meat production practices, just as buying a vegetarian burrito would increase the probability of crossing a positive threshold and effecting some moral progress in meat production. Now Chris should be aware that there are other people like Peter whose individual acts can contribute to crossing negative and positive thresholds — indeed, as an act-consequentialist, Chris is relying on such people's contributions! Chris should know too that the connection between individual acts and effects on production concerns not one threshold, but a whole ladder of them. Even if another person's act ultimately serves to cross *one* threshold relevant to production, even if Chris is somehow privy to that, she can still have reason for her own act given its part in crossing the *next* threshold.

Contrary to Chartier's assessment, consequentialists can recognize that the factors he identifies *complicate* the connection between individual dietary and consumer acts and progress in production while these factors need not *undermine* the moral rationale for vegetarianism and consumer ethics. Such factors affect the rational subjective probability that performing a particular individual act will trigger the desired threshold; but even when taken together, these factors only *reduce* the difference between the prior probability of crossing a relevant threshold and the probability of crossing it given the performance of a relevant individual act. So long as $p(t|i) > p(t)$, there remains a consequentialist basis for performing a morally motivated dietary or consumer act, all other things being equal.

5. Balancing Harms and Benefits

Of course, one might deny that all other things *are* equal. Specifically, one might complain that the discussion so far has neglected considerations of moral harms and benefits counting against the specific individual dietary and consumer choices advocated by act consequentialists. Chartier alludes to such considerations in observing, '[t]he utility to the consumer of her purchase remains largely beyond doubt, while the negative outcome is even more uncertain and indeterminate.'¹⁶

This response cannot be dismissed quickly. Crucial to the consequentialist case for vegetarianism and other consumer choices is an honest appraisal of how their disutility and moral harms generally may be overstated. (Even in *Animal Liberation*, Singer provides vegetarian recipes.¹⁷) This discussion is not just rhetorically but morally relevant to make the case that vegetarianism need not necessarily reduce one's wellbeing. Is the vegetarian diet more expensive or less nutritious than omnivorous diets? Consequentialist vegetarians strive to illustrate the viability of vegetarianism regarding expense and nutrition not only as a rhetorical move making it approachable, but also because these considerations are relevant to the act-consequentialist moral calculus.

Concerning expense and nutrition, the costs and benefits of vegetarianism vary for different folks depending on our particular circumstances and needs, so the moral calculus may be different for some people than others. The same may be true for other considerations, like cultural affiliation — though as with myths about expense and nutrition, act-consequentialist vegetarians can forcefully challenge the presumed incompatibility of vegetarian diet and cultural authenticity. So, to be clear, the probabilistic account offered here does not insist that *everybody* is moral obliged always to be vegetarian. The moral calculus may yield different results, for example, for the (relatively few) people unable to live healthy lives without animal products than for the (relatively many) people who can.¹⁸

One might be tempted to read my probabilistic account as a broad moral license for omnivorism, specifically sanctioning not just vegetarianism but eating humanely raised animal products. After all, won't buying organic grass-fed beef or cage-free eggs also increase the probability of reaching positive thresholds of moral improvement in animal agricultural practices?¹⁹ For those unable to live healthily without eating animals, a viable act-consequentialist moral position *is* more humanely raised animals. Yet this account does not justify this position for the vast majority of us, all things considered — not when the range of vegetarian diets open to us, and the direct and indirect harms to animals of

even relatively more humane modern approaches to animal husbandry and slaughter, are honestly taken into account.²⁰

Likewise, when buying coffee, produce, and garments, most modern consumers straightforwardly understand the extra financial expense of organic, fair-trade goods relative to conventional products. Meanwhile the messages sent by our choices and their tangible effects at the level of production are hard to appreciate. When making our consumer choices we rarely know that a meaningful threshold of greater good is crossed — but we can often know that making these choices increases the probability of the threshold being reached. Is this reason enough to justify the extra expense? Like the act-consequentialist case for vegetarianism, part of making the case for individual consumer ethical acts is an honest appraisal of attendant moral harms and benefits. Fair trade coffee backers, for example, argue that fair trade certification insures a guaranteed minimum price for coffee producers, and when successful, this floor reduces extreme fluctuations in prices without substantially increasing the average price.²¹

Still there may be instances where the individual consumer choice in support of better labour and agricultural practices is the more expensive choice. Here the act-consequentialist case may emphasize two key factors. First, we are reminded of the basic structure of the probabilistic threshold argument. When a positive threshold is crossed and real moral progress made, the registered effect is not simply that of the single act that reached the threshold. Rather, the effect is that produced by *all* of the acts that collectively built up to the threshold together, now finally seen. The moral value of an individual consumer action that increases the probability of crossing a positive threshold is not just a fraction of *that* action's effect being registered at the level of production, but a fraction of the greater collective effect of *all* the actions contributing to crossing the threshold finally being registered at the level of production. (Recall Norcross's threshold example of chicken-eating in the US.)

Second, we are invited to make an honest moral comparison between the financial savings or expense to us on the one hand, and on the other hand the moral harms and injustices involved in the immoral modern agricultural and economic practices we seek to change. When we succeed in coming to really appreciate the nature and moral significance of these harms, we may realize that the chance to alleviate such harms will *often* (though not *always*) give us a moral reason to act that outweighs the financial cost. To be clear, this sort of act-consequentialist account doesn't insist that everyone in all circumstances is morally obliged to perform the individual consumer act that supports morally better systemic practices; as with the case for vegetarianism, there may be exceptions for those for whom the cost of such acts would be too burdensome. Yet given an honest appraisal of the moral harms and benefits involved, the probabilistic threshold argument yields compelling moral reason for *many* of us to make those everyday individual consumer choices in support of better systemic practices.

6. Role-Modelling and Contagious Actions

So far we have considered primarily direct consequences of individual dietary and consumer acts. But there are further considerations grounding the act-consequentialist argument for vegetarianism and consumer ethics: namely, indirect consequences of our actions on others' and our own future acts. *Role-modelling* effects of our individual

dietary and consumer ethical choices may justify these choices even when the direct act-consequentialist case seems quite thin.

As illustration of how indirect effects of role-modelling can extend beyond our direct contributions to crossing moral thresholds, consider a hypothetical scenario. A consequentialist morally motivated vegetarian (let's call her Lisa) has an antagonistic, spiteful brother (let's call him Bart) who mocks and dismisses her moral choices. Bart seeks to demoralize Lisa by promising that henceforth he will buy her share of meat. So her vegetarianism has no direct effect: has her consequentialist case for vegetarianism now collapsed? Not quite. Lisa still has an indirect moral rationale for her vegetarian choices, even as her choices are being undercut. Specifically, she can still self-identify as vegetarian to those observing and inquiring, which she could not do if she were cowed into omnivorism. She may still hope to improve agricultural practices and promote animal wellbeing by *positive role-modelling*.

Role-modelling may be understood as a species of the broader phenomenon of *social contagion*.²² Here one action (or inaction) of a particular type makes another action or inaction of that type more or less likely. As before, we can model role-modelling and contagion more generally on a probabilistic account. Let us first consider what we might call *contagious actions*, such that:

$$p(i_x|i_y) > p(i_x)$$

that is, such that the probability that one agent (X) performs some individual act (i) is greater given that another agent (Y) also performs the individual act. *Positive role-modelling* works like this. Imagine cases where X is inspired by Y's example to become vegetarian, to stick to her existing vegetarianism, learn more about animal production and vegetarianism, or eat less meat or more humanely produced meat. Let's consider also what we might call *contagious inactions*, such that:

$$p(\sim i_x|\sim i_y) > p(\sim i_x)$$

that is, such that the probability that one agent (X) fails to perform some individual act (i) is greater given that another agent (Y) also fails to perform the individual act. *Negative role-modelling* works like this. Imagine cases where X is negatively inspired by Y's bad example, so X decides not to become vegetarian, or perhaps X more easily or frequently backslides from existing vegetarian commitments.

Positive and negative role-modelling (and contagious action and inaction generally) cover many cases; yet it may be useful to identify also *negatively contagious actions* (specifically, '*backfire*' role-modelling) and *negatively contagious inactions* (specifically, '*reverse*' role-modelling). In the case of negatively contagious action,

$$p(i_x|i_y) < p(i_x)$$

such that the one agent (Y) performing the action actually decreases the probability that the other agent (X) does it. Imagine those unfortunate cases in which X is so intimidated or repelled by Y's vegetarianism that X decides she cannot possibly achieve Y's high standard and so is *less* likely to try it than she otherwise would have. Consider finally negatively contagious inaction, where:

$$p(i_x | \sim i_y) > p(i_x)$$

such that the fact that one agent (Y) does *not* perform the action actually increased the probability that the other agent (X) will do it. Here imagine (odd yet familiar) cases where Y's opposition spurs X to take a spurned action more seriously *because* Y opposes. There's a kind of *reverse role-modelling* operative here.

Role-modelling is not limited to rational discourse, just as contagious action is not limited to role-modelling as it is usually understood.²³ Giving arguments and responding to objections is part of positive role-modelling, but we should not overlook how others' behaviours are influenced by our actions and not just our words. Likewise, the probabilistic account articulated here makes room for ways that one act can positive or negatively affect the likelihood of another, *even when* the actors are unaware of each other's choices. Performance of one act of a kind might make a second act of that kind more likely by 'clearing the way', for example.²⁴ Negatively contagious acts include backfire role-modelling but also cases of 'pulling up the ladder', where one person's act makes it harder for others to do the same.

Attending to the ways we influence one another's dietary and consumer choices reminds us that even when we limit attention to *uncoordinated*²⁵ individual acts, such acts may not be *independent* of each other. I do not mean to overstate how contagious dietary and consumer acts are; I cannot offer quantitative measure of role-modelling effects of vegetarianism or meat-eating.²⁶ Still, the possible consequences of our acts for others' acts are a relevant consideration for the threshold argument for vegetarianism and consumer ethics. One implication of this relevance is that act consequentialists are urged not simply to *make* vegetarian and consumer ethical choices, but when feasible, to take care to make these choices in positively contagious ways.

Garrett argues that moral thresholds fail to give compelling reason for utilitarians to refrain from eating 'flesh the consumption of which will not alter the amount of flesh purchased;' he cites 'large barbeques where a huge quantity of meat is purchased without a strict headcount'.²⁷ The idea is that whoever bought the meat did so unguided by any idea about many people may eat it and the volume of meat consumed and left over won't really affect how much meat is bought for the next barbecue. Yet even in such cases we can predict that there is *some* significant amount of meat consumed or left over that would be enough to impress the organizers: *some* threshold that will cause them to think twice when making future purchases. This threshold could be very high and no one vegetarian at the barbecue has reason to think his individual act alone will be to cross it. But our basic point from the probabilistic threshold account remains: even at a communal event like Garrett's barbecue, refraining from meat-eating increases the rational subjective probability (from the actor's perspective) of crossing a positive threshold and making a concrete difference.

What if an act-consequentialist vegetarian attending the barbecue knows that even if she refrains from meat-eating and increases the chance of reaching the threshold, there aren't enough vegetarians there to actually reach that threshold? With this concern over situations when we know there are too *few* other vegetarians comes a parallel concern over situations when we know there are so *many*: am I required to make the vegetarian choice when I know there are *so many* other vegetarians present that the relevant threshold will be reached regardless of my individual act? What reason do we have to be

vegetarian in either of these sorts of situations? Acting to increase the chances of reaching a threshold may seem truly pointless. Yet even in such situations, I argue, act-consequentialists should remember how our actions and inactions may be contagious. Making vegetarian choices in thoughtful, respectful ways may prompt others present now to be more likely to make future vegetarian choices. Making a vegetarian choice now also may prompt *oneself* to be more likely to make future vegetarian choices.

7. Contagious Actions and Private Actions

Role-modelling effects are relevant not only for acts in the presence of others, but other individual dietary and consumer acts too. Garrett argues that role-modelling may justify public but not private vegetarianism, 'so long as one is reasonably careful to avoid getting caught'.²⁸ Yet private acts may be contagious. To illustrate this potential, let us consider a hypothetical scenario. Consequentialist morally motivated vegetarian Peter orders a pizza for lunch alone one day. After he pays, and the delivery person leaves, Peter realizes the pizzeria inadvertently included an extra pepperoni pizza with his vegetarian pie. Does Peter have reason not to eat the pepperoni? The pig is dead, he has no pepperoni allergy, and he enjoys the taste. No one needs to know he ate it: so why shouldn't he?

I think Peter has three reasons to sustain morally motivated vegetarianism even in private case like this. First, a good act consequentialist like Peter should think comprehensively, creatively about his possible actions and their expected consequences. His choices are not limited to just dumping or secretly eating the pizza: he may contact the pizzeria, respectfully explain the mistake and his views, and take the opportunity for positive role-modelling rather than furtive pepperoni consumption.²⁹ He will need to carefully practice positive, rather than backfire, role-modelling! We often have the choice to perform an action in a more contagious fashion than we had initially appreciated.

Second, Peter should weigh the slim value of pepperoni consumption tonight against further consequences for his ability to affect others' actions. One benefit of maintaining his vegetarianism in private acts is that Peter can model his morally motivated dietary choices in an honest, effective way. He can positively model a dietary ethic more effectively if he follows it consistently, not sporadically. A clear policy of vegetarianism may be easier to communicate successfully than a complex vegetarian /omnivorous situational ethic easily misunderstood by onlookers as omnivorism, risking unintended reverse role-modelling.³⁰

Some might suggest Peter eat the pepperoni privately while publicly professing a simpler, more easily communicated commitment to vegetarianism. But even undiscovered lies and deceit of family, friends, and acquaintances about daily acts can fail to promote the good on various consequentialist analyses. Hedonistic utilitarians as well as act consequentialists with broader conceptions of the good may recognize the disutility in distress that perennial deception can cause the deceiver herself, which might outweigh the modest pleasures of private pepperoni. Act consequentialists also may emphasize the value of trustworthy mutual relationships between family, friends, and community members. In recognizing healthy trust relationships as part of the good, act consequentialists may act to foster trustworthiness, yet deception exploits our relational vulnerability and rots trust.³¹

Those unconcerned about deception may favour a third reason for private ethical acts regarding *one's own* future actions. My actions (and inactions) can be contagious not just

for others but also myself. Peter should weigh the superficial value of a pizza against positive and negative consequences (on the evidence available to him) for his future dietary choices. Keeping vegetarian now may make it more likely for him to consistently keep vegetarian in the future; deviating from vegetarianism now may make future deviations more likely too. This concerns Peter's psychology: a familiar point about good and bad habits that Peter may recognize as applicable to himself. Different sorts of habituation are better suited for different people, to be sure. For some, steadfast commitment to a regimen like vegetarianism is positively reinforcing; for others, an unswerving path may backfire spectacularly.³²

A dumpster-diving freegan who eats dumpstered chicken in private and has good evidence that this won't be contagious for her future actions may be unmoved by my third reason.³³ But for others of us, with other situations and psychologies, this reason may be compelling. This is another way that act consequentialism on vegetarianism and other consumer ethics has different implications for some than others. To the extent that an individual moral action (or inaction) positive or negatively affects others' or our own future actions, the details of individuals' differing capacities for constructive role-modelling become morally relevant. The probabilistic account I offer does not give a 'one size fits all' answer for all of us in all situations, for our individual dietary and consumer acts, even if we agree on the injustices of conventional agricultural and labour practices. This argument does not entail that everybody must be vegetarian, always buy organic produce, and wear only fairly-traded clothes; the ranging contingencies of our varied lives preclude that. Yet from the considerations discussed here we can nevertheless derive clear moral reasons why *many* of us should be vegetarians and consistently make consumer choices supporting better practices.

8. Conclusions

Consequentialism can provide an intuitively appealing basis for practical ethics. It can be hard to appreciate act-consequentialist arguments for vegetarianism and other individual consumer choices, however, given a discouraging realization that few of our individual acts directly affect contemporary agricultural and labour practices we seek to change. Individual impotence of our dietary and consumer acts may seem to undermine any act-consequentialist basis for such acts.

There is distance between the messages we intended to send by our morally motivated acts and messages actually received and reflected in positive change in production, which cannot be dismissed as extraneous by act consequentialists as it might by others. Yet I have urged that dismissing an act-consequentialist case for vegetarianism and consumer ethics for this reason would be premature. Framing the threshold issue in terms of rational subjective probability helps demonstrate the case for performing not just those few individual actions that actually cross positive thresholds, but also the wider array of acts that increase the probability of crossing the thresholds. Attending to our positive and negative role-modelling effects on others' actions and our own future actions also reminds us that the act-consequentialist basis extends beyond the direct consequences: a crucial consequence of my action may be its effects on mine and others' further actions. The ways in which individual dietary and consumer actions can be contagious even when uncoordinated provide a strong consequentialist reason to maintain our morally motivated actions even when the direct benefits seem sparse.³⁴

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NOTES

- 1 Peter Wenz, 'Act utilitarianism and animal liberation', *The Personalist* 60,4 (1979): 423–428.
- 2 See Wenz op. cit.; Michael Martin 'A critique of moral vegetarianism', *Reason Papers* 3 (1976): 13–43; Philip Devine, 'The moral basis of vegetarianism', *Philosophy* 53 (1978): 481–505; Tom Regan, 'Utilitarianism, vegetarianism, and animal rights', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9,4 (1980): 305–324; Peter Singer, 'Utilitarianism and vegetarianism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9,4 (1980): 325–337; Hud Hudson, 'Collective responsibility and moral vegetarianism', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 24 (1993): 89–104; Gaverick Matheny, 'Expected utility, contributory causation, and vegetarianism', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19,3 (2002): 293–297; Nathan Nobis, 'Vegetarianism and virtue', *Social Theory and Practice* 28,1 (2002): 135–156; Alastair Norcross, 'Puppies, pigs, and people', *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 229–245; Gary Chartier, 'On the threshold argument against consumer meat purchases', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37,2 (2006): 233–249; and Jeremy Garrett, 'Utilitarianism, vegetarianism, and human health: A Response to the causal impotence objection', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24,3 (2007): 223–237.
- 3 Singer 1980 op. cit., pp. 330–331.
- 4 Garrett op. cit., p. 226.
- 5 I thank Sandra Tomsons for pressing me to explain how a moral theory like act consequentialism, which evaluates the morality of individual acts individually, may ground a broad moral policy like embracing a vegetarian identity.
- 6 I have not provided a sophisticated moral condemnation of contemporary conventional agriculture here; for sake of argument I take for granted the basic accuracy of Connie's moral evaluations of other contemporary agricultural and labour practices. If the reader finds these examples contentious she is invited to substitute systematic practices she finds morally lacking and consider the act-consequentialist basis for individual acts opposing those practices.
- 7 I thank Katy Fulfer-Smith for pressing this point.
- 8 I thank Julie Brassolotto for raising the prospect of a virtue ethical basis for vegetarianism. I do not insist that act consequentialism is the *only* viable foundation for vegetarianism and consumer ethics. I have offered no such argument; my consequentialist focus should not be construed as a critique of other theories.
- 9 Singer 1980 op. cit., p. 335.
- 10 Singer 1980 op. cit., p. 336.
- 11 Norcross op. cit., pp. 232–233.
- 12 Chartier op. cit., p. 240.
- 13 Chartier op. cit., p. 241.
- 14 Chartier op. cit., p. 242.
- 15 This version of the probabilistic account is for approaching *positive* thresholds, where achieving the threshold precipitates some positive concrete change in production. We can articulate a version for approaching negative thresholds, where the act-consequentialist position holds that an individual act should *not* be performed, all other things being equal, just in case $p(t|i) > p(t)$. I thank Julia Watt for pressing me to clarify this point about negative and positive thresholds.
- 16 Chartier op. cit., p. 244.
- 17 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: A New York Review Book, 1975).
- 18 See Garrett op. cit., for a good discussion of the health benefits of a vegetarian diet.
- 19 I thank Sara Goering for pressing this point.
- 20 For critical discussion of Joel Salatin's Polyface Farms, for example, see Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Tood Purdum, 'High priest of the pasture' *New York Times Style Magazine*, Living, Spring (2005): 76–79; and Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Way We Eat* (New York: Rodale, 2006).
- 21 This claim is made by Fair Trade USA (<http://www.transfairusa.org/products-partners/coffee>), Oxfam America (<http://www.oxfam.org/en/development/ethiopia-starbucks-campaign-anatomy-win>), and Global Exchange (<http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/coffee/>). See also Ann Grodnik and Michael E. Conroy, 'Fair trade coffee in the United States: Why companies join the movement' in L. Reynolds,

- D. Murray & J. Wilkinson (eds) *Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Jacqueline DeCarlo, *Fair Trade: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).
- 22 Paul Marsden, 'Memetics and social contagion', *The Journal of Memetics* 2,1 (1998); Paul Marsden & Noah Friedkin, 'Network studies of social influence', *Sociological Methods Research* 22,1 (1993): 127–151; and Daniel J. Brass, Kenneth D. Butterfield & Bruce C. Skaggs, 'Relationships and unethical behavior: A social network perspective', *The Academy of Management Review* 23,1 (1998): 14–31. For empirical investigation of social contagion in eating behaviour, see Christian S. Crandell, 'Social contagion of binge eating', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55,4 (1988): 588–598; and Nicholas A. Christakis & H. James Fowler, 'The spread of obesity in a large social network over 32 years', *New England Journal of Medicine* 357,4 (2007): 370–379. I have not found studies of social contagion for vegetarianism and meat-eating specifically; but recent qualitative and quantitative work in psychology and sociology of vegetarianism and meat-eating indicates relationships between social environment and dietary behaviour. See, for example, Thomas Dietz, A.S. Frisch, Linda Kalof, P.C. Stern & G.A. Guagnano, 'Values and vegetarianism', *Rural Sociology* 60,3 (1995): 533–52; Linda Kalof, Thomas Dietz, P.C. Stern & G.A. Guagnano, 'Social psychological and structural influences on vegetarian belief', *Rural Sociology* 64,3 (1999): 500–511; Marcia Hill Gossard & Richard York, 'Social structural influences in meat consumption', *Human Ecology Review* 10,1 (2003); Hollis Kendall, Linda Labao & Jeff Sharp, 'Public concern with animal well-being', *Rural Sociology* 71,3 (2006): 399–428; and Danielle R. Deemer & Linda M. Labao, 'Public concern with farm-animal welfare', *Rural Sociology* 76, 2 (2011): 167–196.
- 23 Marsden 1998 op. cit.
- 24 For example, if past diner requests moved a restaurant to offer vegetarian options, those requests make vegetarian choices easier for future diners too. On the social 'incorporation' of vegetarianism, see Alan Beardsworth & Teresa Keil, 'Contemporary vegetarianism in the UK', *Appetite* 20 (1993): 229–234.
- 25 Chartier op. cit., p. 233.
- 26 I have not found empirical studies on positive or negative role-modelling effects of vegetarianism, but multiple studies do indicate that social networks positively and negatively affect commitment to vegetarianism or meat-eating. See Beardsworth & Keil 1993 op.cit.; Alan Beardsworth & Teresa Keil, 'The vegetarian option', *The Sociological Review* 40 (1992): 253–293; Nick Fiddes, 'The social aspects of meat eating', *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 53 (1994): 71–80, Dietz et al. op. cit.; Kalof et al. op. cit.; Gossard & York op. cit.; and Jennifer Jabs, Carol M. Devine & Jeffrey Sobal, 'Maintaining vegetarian diets', *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Research and Practice* 59,4 (1998a); 183–189.
- 27 Garrett op. cit., p. 227.
- 28 Garrett op. cit., p. 228.
- 29 I thank Kira Tomsons for pressing this point on role-modelling, that given the many reasons that people are vegetarian, a morally motivated vegetarian cannot assume her own reason is successfully conveyed. Yet reduced demand for conventionally raised animal products and increased demand for vegetarian alternatives may instigate incremental moral progress at the level of production, even if producers are unaware of consumers' reasons. On health and ethical vegetarians, see Jennifer Jabs, Carol M. Devine & Jeffrey Sobal, 'Model of the process of adopting vegetarian diets', *Journal of Nutrition Education* 30,4 (1998b): 196–202; and Nick Fox & Katie Ward, 'Health, effects, and the environment', *Appetite* 50, 2–3 (2008): 422–429.
- 30 Data on the comparative success in positively modelling simpler and more complicated dietary behaviours would be salient here, but I have not found such data. For qualitative research into the effects of social networks in 'managing' vegetarian identity, see Jennifer Jabs, Carol M. Devine & Jeffrey Sobal, 'Managing vegetarianism', *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 39,5 (2000): 375–394.
- 31 Some may argue that deception undermines trustworthy relationships only if the trusting person discovers it. But this response fails to appreciate the mutuality of trust. Even if the trusting one is clueless, the deceiver is aware of his exploitation of the vulnerability of the relationship. Sometimes this awareness is enough to start moving the relationship toward what Annette Baier calls morally rotten trust: see Annette Baier, 'Trust and antitrust', *Ethics* 96,2 (1986): 231–260. For more on trust and deception, see Karen Jones, 'Trust as an affective attitude', *Ethics* 107 (1996): 4–25. Some may deny that participating in trustworthy relationships of mutuality is an important part of the good; those readers sceptical about the moral harm of deception on act-consequentialist theories are urged to recognize the first and third reasons as giving sufficient warrant for private dietary and consumer acts, independent of this second reason concerning deception and role-modelling.
- 32 Consider the example of Daren Firestone, a University of Chicago law student and self-described vegetarian who allows herself a specific dietary latitude, a 'Paris exemption', according to Amanda Paulson, 'One

woman's quest to enjoy her dinner without guilt', *Christian Science Monitor* 27 October (2004): 2. According to Singer & Mason op. cit., p 283, Firestone 'believes that by allowing herself to satisfy her occasional cravings — maybe one every three months — she has been able to be faithful to her principles for many years, while other vegetarians she knows have given up the whole practice because one day they could not resist the smell of bacon frying.' This story may resonate with some readers while others have the opposite response. Reliable quantitative research on the comparable success of strict and lax regimens for vegetarianism and consumer ethics would be useful here, but as yet I have found no such research. See Jabs et al. 1998a op. cit. and Jabs et al. 2000 op. cit. for qualitative studies of respondent strategies for managing and maintaining vegetarian identity in social context.

33 On freegan dumpster-diving, see <http://freegan.info> and Singer & Mason op. cit., pp. 260–269.

34 Versions of this paper were presented at meetings of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) and the Canadian Society for the Study of Practical Ethics (CSSPE): my thanks to APPE and CSSPE conference organizers and participants for the opportunity to test and improve the arguments here. I am grateful to Karen Emmerman, Brandon Morgan-Olsen, Sara Goering, Monica Aufrecht, Jenny Partridge, Sarah Roberts-Cady, and this journal's anonymous referees for constructive criticism and commentary on the paper. Thanks most of all to Negin Almassi for her invaluable contributions throughout, especially in developing the role-modelling arguments here. Any and all errors are mine alone.