Norcross Against Factory-Farming

1. The Argument By Analogy: Alastair Norcross asks us to consider the following case:

- **Fred and the Puppies:** Fred has an auto accident. He seems to recover just fine until he discovers that he can no longer enjoy the taste of chocolate. He visits a doctor who tells him that his “godiva gland” has been damaged, and he can no longer produce a hormone called “cocoamone” because of it. Cocoamone is what enables us to enjoy the taste of chocolate. He tells Fred that a recent study shows that the brains of puppies produce cocoamone when the puppies are tortured for 6 months and then brutally killed. So, Fred sets up a lab in his basement where he tortures puppies and slaughters them for cocoamone. Now, he can enjoy the taste of chocolate again.

Norcross assumes that Fred’s behavior is appalling and morally unacceptable. He concludes that, if what Fred does is seriously wrong, then it is also wrong to eat meat, or purchase nearly any animal product. We can state this formally, as the following argument by analogy:

1. What Fred does to the puppies is seriously wrong.
2. Purchasing factory farmed meat is morally analogous to what Fred does to the puppies.
3. Therefore, purchasing factory farmed meat is also seriously wrong.

Note the following features of Fred’s case:

- Chocolate is not essential to remain alive.
- Chocolate is not essential to remain healthy.
- The animals are brutally tortured before the animal product is harvested.
- If Fred stopped torturing the puppies, all that he would have to give up is “gustatory pleasure”—that is, the pleasure of the taste buds.

But, ALL of these things are true of meat as well: Meat is not essential to remain alive. Nor is it essential to remain healthy. Vegetarians and vegans remain alive and healthy quite easily. They must make sure to find alternative sources of protein and vitamins, but these are in fact easily available to us. In fact, recent studies show that people who do NOT eat meat are actually HEALTHIER than meat-eaters.¹ Furthermore, the majority of animals today are brutally tortured and live in horrible conditions before they are slaughtered.

(3) Info at the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture): [https://fnic.nal.usda.gov/lifecycle-nutrition/vegetarian-nutrition](https://fnic.nal.usda.gov/lifecycle-nutrition/vegetarian-nutrition)
(5) The official position of the American Heart Association: [http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/Vegetarian-Diets_UCM_306032_Article.jsp](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/Vegetarian-Diets_UCM_306032_Article.jsp)
Nearly all meat available for purchase in the U.S. is factory-farmed. So, enjoying chocolate in the Fred case seems to be quite similar to what WE do when we enjoy (most) meat. It seems that (just like Fred and the chocolate) the only reason to eat meat is that it tastes good. But, does this pleasure of the taste-buds really justify the brutal torture and slaughter of innocent animals that are completely capable of pain and suffering?

**Objections:** As with any argument by analogy, the best way to refute it is to show that the two supposedly morally analogous cases are not in fact morally analogous. In short, anyone who rejects Norcross’ conclusion must find a morally relevant difference between what Fred does and what we do when we purchase and eat meat. Let’s look at a few potential differences:

**1. Knowledge:** Fred KNOWS that the puppies are being harmed. Most people do not know how awful factory farms really are. This makes Fred’s action much worse, morally, than other people purchasing meat at the grocery store.

**Reply:** That would just mean that anyone who DID know would be doing something wrong by eating meat. Further, now that you have read Norcross’ article and watched the video on factory-farming, YOU no longer have this excuse because you DO know how bad it is.

**2. Direct Harm:** Fred directly harms the puppies. People who eat animals do not actually directly harm them. They only pay for the meat and nothing more. This makes Fred’s actions much worse than purchasing meat.

**Reply:** Imagine that Fred did not torture the puppies himself either, but got someone else to torture the puppies for him. Then, Fred purchases the cocoamone from them. What Fred does in this case is still wrong. Isn’t it?

Or, imagine that a kid on your street set up a cocoamone stand, and began to sell it. If you were fully aware of the brutal torture that occurred in the kid’s basement in order to produce this hormone, there would still be something wrong with contributing to the kid’s operation by purchasing some of the product that resulted from that operation. Wouldn’t there? If so, then the fact that WE do not PERSONALLY torture the animals that we eat is not morally relevant. The fact that we pay others to do the torturing FOR us makes it such that it is still wrong.

**3. Intentions:** Fred INTENDS to harm the puppies as a MEANS to obtaining cocoamone, but the suffering that animals endure in factory farms is unintended. Rather it is a mere side-effect of modern farming methods. Many think that INTENTIONALLY harming something is much worse, morally, than when harm comes to someone as a SIDE-EFFECT (recall, for instance, the Strategic Bomber vs. Terror Bomber cases).
Reply: Even if intending harm is worse than foreseeing it, we can imagine a scenario where Fred does NOT need the puppies to suffer in order to obtain cocoamone, and his actions STILL seem wrong, even though the harm he is causing is not intentional.

For instance, imagine that torture is NOT what causes puppies to produce cocoamone. Instead, their suffering is merely the result (side-effect) of the fact that Fred's basement is terribly small and cramped, has no ventilation, or temperature control, etc., and Fred never has time to clean it. In this case, the harm that Fred causes to the puppies is not INTENDED, but is rather a merely FORESEEN side-effect of the fact that Fred is trying to save as much time and money as possible. But, this still seems morally wrong. Ask: Isn’t it still wrong for Fred to keep puppies in his basement in these horrible living conditions?

4. Causal Impotence: If Fred stops what he is doing, the puppies’ suffering will end. If anyone stops eating meat, they will not end the animal suffering. It will not affect the meat industry at all. It is too large for one person to affect it. Many people have this sentiment; something like, “I am just one person. If I stop eating meat, nothing will change. The same number of animals will be slaughtered each year. The same amount of suffering will occur. So, it is basically pointless to stop eating meat.”

General Reply: This is a result of the “Tragedy of the Commons” sort of mentality. It is the idea that, “If no one else is doing X, it will not make a difference if I do X.” For instance, this mindset might deliver the conclusion that we have no reason to vote, or no reason to not throw some trash on the ground, or no reason to try to conserve electricity, water, or gasoline (since none of these make a difference in the world on an individual basis).

For instance, you might think, “I am just one person. My vote doesn’t count for anything, since no election has ever been so close that it came down to one single voter. So, if I vote or don’t vote, nothing will change. Therefore, it’s basically pointless to vote.”

Or: “I’m just one person. If I recycle a few cans, try to take shorter showers, and use less gasoline by walking a little more often, it won’t really matter. One person can’t make a difference, so there is really no reason to conserve or recycle.”

The problem is that EVERYONE tends to think this way, and in larger numbers this sort of behavior DOES make a difference.

It is a tragedy when individual people think they are powerless to change things, because the truth is, when everyone thinks this way, nothing changes. But, together, we CAN make huge changes in the world. For instance, only about 50% of registered voters in the U.S. actually show up at the polls. Imagine how much differently elections would turn out if we ALL voted?
Similarly, imagine what a difference we could make if we ALL stopped purchasing meat that is the result of animal cruelty? We might think of the issue in one of several ways:

Reply #1: We CAN make a difference: Surely, SOME number of people refraining from purchasing meat WILL affect the industry. And, assuming that at some point that number will in fact be reached, if you refrain from purchasing meat, you will have affected the industry insofar as you contributed to that number’s being reached.

For instance, each American eats, on average, 25 chickens per year. Suppose that if 10,000 people stop eating chickens, 250,000 FEWER chickens WILL be slaughtered annually. So, if you and 9,999 others stop eating chicken, you can think yourself as having saved 25 chickens per year from brutal torture.

Reply #2: It is still wrong on PRINCIPLE: In any case, even if we know that we CANNOT make a difference, or have any causal impact on the meat industry, it might still be wrong to purchase factory-farmed meat.

To illustrate this point, Norcross tells a story: Imagine that you were enjoying some delicious chocolate mousse, with a small beverage of some liquid. The chocolate is absolutely WONDERFUL. You order a second round, and as the server brings it out, you ask him what makes the dessert so delicious. The server tells you that the liquid that comes with the mousse is cocoamone, which is harvested from tortured puppies in the back of the restaurant. (and, as in the Fred story, cocoamone makes chocolate taste absolutely delicious) You protest, saying that you do not want to have the dessert, and please take it away. The server tells you that the cocoamone will just go into the garbage if you don’t drink it.

So, here is a clear case where you know FOR SURE that drinking the cocoamone will have absolutely no effect whatsoever on the amount of suffering that puppies endure. Ask yourself: Is it morally permissible to drink the cocoamone anyway, knowing that it came from the brains of tortured puppies? If the answer is “No, it is NOT permissible”, then this is an indication that drinking cocoamone/eating factory-farmed meat may be morally wrong REGARDLESS of whether or not our actions have any causal impact on the amount of animal suffering that occurs in the world.

Conclusion: Norcross concludes that all potential morally relevant differences have been refuted. If that is the case, then it is seriously morally wrong to purchase animal products that are the result of torture and suffering (i.e., nearly ALL animal products). Yet, most of us eat factory-farmed meat, cheese, milk, etc. every day. According to Norcross, we are all acting wrongly. [What do you think?]
Note also the following:

- It takes, on average, about 4 times more fossil fuels to produce 1 calorie of meat than it does to produce 1 calorie of grain, and 50 to 200 times more water (depending on the grain).
- Livestock are a major contributor to greenhouse gases (about 14.5% of all global emissions).
- About 70% of grain/cereals grown in the U.S. are fed to livestock. For every 16 pounds of grain we feed to a cow, we get only 1 pound of beef out of it. On average, we feed 6 pounds of vegetable protein to animals to get 1 pound of meat protein. But, eating vegetable protein is only 1.4 times less efficient nutritionally than eating meat protein.
- Americans, on average, consume 3 times more meat than the average person (which is also 3 times more than the maximum recommended amount of meat intake, and 6 times more than the recommended healthy amount):

In short, not only would a reduction in meat production be good for the environment, it would be good for human beings (we could feed a LOT MORE people if we grow crops to feed the starving rather than to feed livestock, since most of the calories are lost in the conversion from vegetables to meat).