

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, or healthy.
- The animals endure immense suffering before the cocoamone is harvested.
- If Fred gave up cocoamone, the only thing he’d be giving up that he could not get elsewhere 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, or healthy. There are hundreds of millions of healthy vegetarians and vegans in the world. On a vegan diet (which is *entirely* plant-based; i.e., no meat AND no eggs, cheese, milk, butter, etc.) you can even be an [Olympic weightlifter](#), a champion [UFC fighter](#), or a [marathon runner](#). The fact is, these days, there are so many readily available alternative non-meat sources of protein, iron, B-vitamins, etc., that we simply no longer need meat to remain healthy. In fact, there is some evidence (e.g., [here](#)) to indicate that meat-eaters may actually be LESS healthy on average than non-meat eaters (who are at greater risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and obesity). So, like chocolate, the only thing that meat seems to have to offer which non-meat alternatives cannot is its unique flavor.

Furthermore, the majority of animals today are brutally tortured and live in horrible conditions before they are slaughtered. Nearly all meat available for purchase in the U.S. is factory-farmed. So, just like Fred’s chocolate, our meat comes from intense suffering.

2. 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:

(a) 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.

(b) 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.

(c) Intentions: Fred INTENDS to harm the puppies as a MEANS to obtaining cocoamone, but the suffering that animals endure in factory farms is merely an unintended side-effect of modern farming methods. But, it is much worse, morally to INTENTIONALLY cause harm as a means to an end than it is to cause harm as a merely foreseen, but unintended SIDE-EFFECT of one's actions (e.g., as in Strategic vs. Terror Bomber).

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, It is still wrong for Fred to keep puppies in his basement in these horrible living conditions—isn't it?

(d) Causal Impotence: If Fred stops what he is doing, the puppies' suffering will end, but if I stop eating meat, nothing will change. It will not affect the meat industry AT ALL. Basically, the meat industry is SO large that, whether I eat meat or not, EXACTLY the SAME number of animals will be raised in factory-farms either way. So, how can my actions be morally wrong if they make no difference? i.e., cause no harm?

Reply #1: We CAN make a difference: Surely, SOME number of people refraining from purchasing meat WILL affect the industry. Right? 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, the average American eats about 26 chickens per year. Suppose that 10,000 people CAN make a difference. If they ALL stop eating chickens, 260,000 fewer chickens will be slaughtered annually. So, if you and 9,999 others stop eating chicken, you can think yourself as having saved 26 chickens per year from immense suffering.

Reply #2: It is still wrong on PRINCIPLE: Yet, even if it turns out 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 for other reasons.

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 so delicious, you order a second round. As the server brings it out, you ask him what's in it. 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. 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.

[Side note: Causal impotence infects many other areas too. 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. What's the good in walking a little more and driving a little less? Or taking shorter showers; buying reusable items instead of disposable ones? None of it will make any difference, so there is really no reason to conserve resources."

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

The result is a "**Tragedy of the Commons**". When large numbers of people think that their bad behavior is so insignificant that it makes no difference, tragedy follows.]

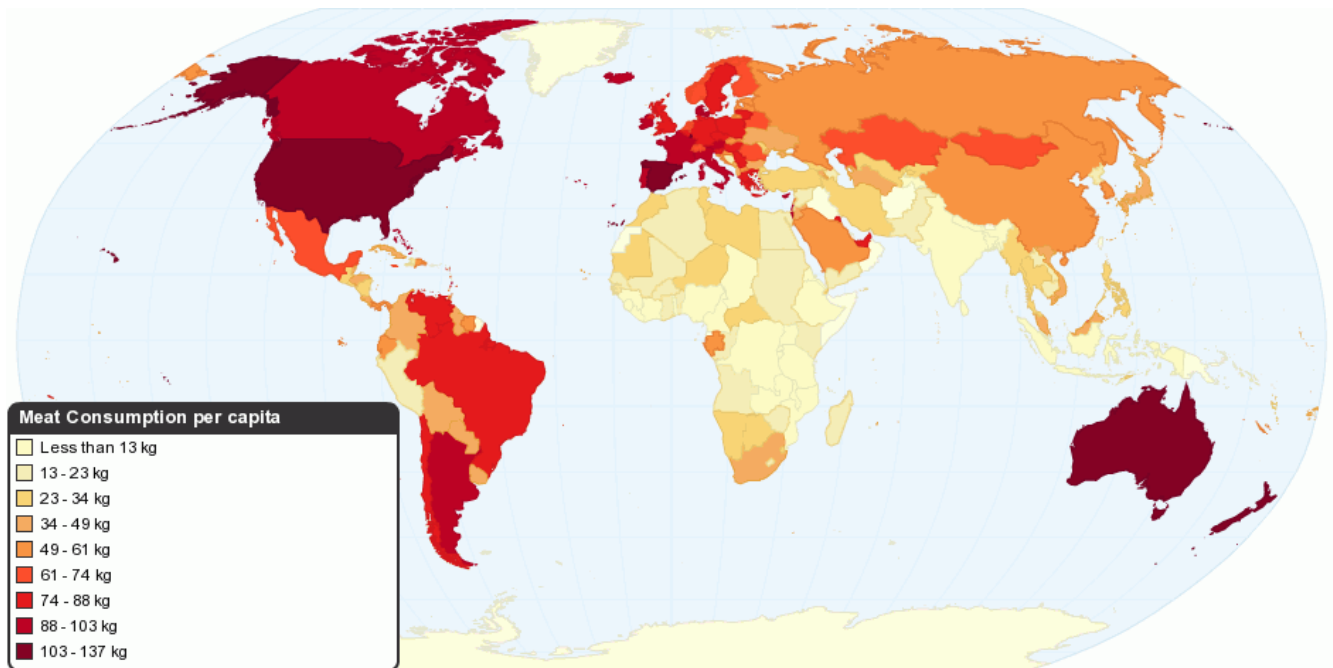
3. Conclusion: Norcross concludes that there are no morally relevant differences between Fred's behavior and our own when we purchase meat raised in the brutal conditions of factory farms (i.e., nearly ALL meat). But, then, it is seriously morally wrong to purchase (most) meat. Nevertheless, most of us do so every day. According to Norcross, we are all acting wrongly. [*What do you think?*]

Note: In addition to concerns about animal welfare, there are also the following:

- The livestock industry is a major contributor to **climate change**, responsible for about 14.5% of all greenhouse gas emissions. ([source](#))
- The livestock industry is an extremely **inefficient use of resources**, using far more water, land, and fossil fuels than other alternatives. For instance, it takes over 10 times more land and water to produce one pound of beef protein vs. one pound of vegetable protein (e.g., in beans, lentils). ([source](#); also [here](#))
- About 70% of grain & cereals grown in the U.S. are fed to livestock (and about 40% of all grain in the world). But, this is extremely inefficient. We put a LOT of calories and protein IN to the animals, but get very little OUT (specifically, only 3% of the protein and calories we put into a cow comes out as beef; for pigs, 9% becomes pork; while chicken is the most efficient, at 14%; [source](#); also [here](#)). Simply put, if we gave up meat, **we could feed billions** more than we do now.
- Finally, consider: Americans are #1 in meat consumption per capita. We consume about 3 times more meat than the average human being (i.e., 3 times more than roughly 4 billion people!). Consider this: The recommended amount of protein is only ~20kg/yr. ([source](#)) Given that meat is roughly 26-27% protein, this means that we'd only need to eat about 75kg of meat per year if meat was our ONLY source of protein (but keep in mind that we ALSO get protein from nuts, beans, lentils, quinoa, eggs, milk, cheese, etc.). The average American eats about 1.6 times this much meat.

To put things in perspective, we consume about 50% more meat than the average citizen of the UK; 2 times the average citizen of China; 3x Japan; 4x Morocco; 5x Thailand, or Turkey; 6x Peru; and 30x—THIRTY times!—as much meat as the average citizen of India. ([source](#))

In short, **Americans consume WAY more meat than we need**—far more than almost everyone else in the world, and far more than the recommended healthy amount.



Conclusion: In sum, even on a **human-centric ethic**, we'd have moral reasons to reduce our meat consumption. For, eating less meat would be good for the environment, good for our health, and would enable us to feed a lot more people while consuming fewer resources. What a deal! (Visit [here](#) for lots more interesting data!)

[Further considerations: (1) **Other animal products:** It's not just our meat. Really, most of our eggs, milk, cheese, butter—and even things like leather and wool—come from factory farms. So, does Norcross's argument extend to these items too?

(2) **Happy meat:** What about products from animals that were NOT raised in conditions where they suffered (i.e., imagine a happy animal that is killed quickly and painlessly)? Can Norcross's argument be extended to THESE products? It may help to imagine a happy HUMAN farm where happy humans are killed quickly and painlessly for their organs.

(3) **Labels:** How do I identify happy meat? As it turns out, "cage free" does not mean "not factory farmed" (in fact most "cage-free" animals ARE factory-farmed). "Free range" and "pasture-raised" labels can be misleading too. See [here](#) for more.]