

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND MORAL VEGETARIANISM

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Neglected topics in ethics are becoming increasingly difficult to find. Collective responsibility, though, if not a neglected topic, is certainly an underexplored one, and one that may well provide us with significant contributions to outstanding disputes in applied ethics. The defensibility of moral vegetarianism is one such long-standing controversy, the participants of which would benefit especially by paying some attention to theories of collective responsibility. This essay is an attempt to substantiate that claim and to offer a new type of defense for moral vegetarianism which builds upon the foundation laid by work in theories of collective responsibility.

To this end, in the first section of the present paper I briefly chart the various approaches to defending a vegetarian diet on moral grounds, finally concentrating the discussion on what I take to be the most plausible version of moral vegetarianism and on the most plausible arguments in its favor (offered by Peter Singer and Tom Regan) as well as on a significant challenge to those arguments (inspired by the work of R. G. Frey). In the second section, I set forth and develop some results in recent work on theories of collective responsibility, collective inaction, and moral taint, which provide a means of escape from the strategy of refutation employed in section I, a strategy which appears so lethal to Singer's and Regan's positions. Finally, I propose four different arguments for moral vegetarianism which are informed by the results of recent work on collective responsibility, concluding on the basis of my investigation that a respectable version of moral vegetarianism is philosophically defensible.

I

A colleague once pointed out to me that there seems to be a higher percentage of Kantian ethicists who are vegetarians than, say, Utilitarian ethicists who are vegetarians, although from a cursory reading of the primary texts and the popular expositions of these schools of thought, one would have expected just the opposite. Clearly, the reason for this oddity

cannot be assigned to a dearth of arguments offered by utilitarians on behalf of the moral appropriateness of vegetarianism. Indeed, one highly prominent moral theorist, Peter Singer, has devoted much of the last 15 to 20 years of his professional career championing the cause of vegetarianism from a utilitarian perspective.¹ But if my colleague was right and those efforts have not converted to vegetarianism enough of the adherents of the utilitarian theory even to raise them in percentage above the followers of Kant (whose views on animals were hardly something of which to boast), one suspects that there is something drastically wrong with the standard arguments.

There are, of course, many sophisticated arguments that can be advanced in favor of vegetarianism, some of which (when successful) result in nonmoral vegetarianism, and some of which (when successful) result in moral vegetarianism (i.e., abstaining from meat consumption on moral grounds).²

On the one hand, the nonmoral variety of vegetarianism can arise from reasons which have to do with simple taste preferences, or with aesthetics, or with what is in vogue, or with substantive health concerns, or with religious doctrines, or with scarcity—either of the flesh of animals or of the means with which to purchase and consume that flesh.³ On the other hand, the moral variety of vegetarianism can arise from reasons which are grounded in a concern for human welfare, or in a concern for animal welfare, or even in a concern for the ultimate welfare of the biosphere, when it is construed (in the fashionable metaphor) as a biotic community.⁴

Focusing on a discussion of moral vegetarianism of the second type just noted, i.e., one which takes the concern for animal welfare seriously, once again we have a wealth of positions to choose from in an attempt to provide an adequate defense of moral vegetarianism: As an initial step in the argument, some theorists have gone the way of ascribing moral entitlements to animals, and then have argued that our current practices of rearing animals for food are morally wrong, since they violate one or more of the moral rights these animals enjoy.⁵ Other theorists have concentrated instead on the value of life had by certain animals, both person-animals and nonperson-animals, and then have argued that killing these animals merely for the purpose of eating them is morally wrong, since it unnecessarily deprives them (or the world) of a valuable life.⁶ Perhaps most influentially, though, still other theorists have capitalized on a very powerful moral intuition, namely, that it is wrong to inflict unnecessary pain and suffering, and then have argued that our present practices of animal-food production are in gross violation of this principle.⁷ The evidence for this is simply overwhelming. One need only browse through one of the standard, descriptive pieces on the details of modern-day, intensive or factory farming, in

order to convince oneself (unforgettably) that the animals whose carcasses most often end up on our dinner tables suffer terribly throughout much of their lives, and frequently endure severe pain and anxiety during their slaughter.⁸

As just noted, however, these three approaches represent only an initial step in the case for moral vegetarianism grounded in a concern for animal welfare. Thus far, each approach gives us a reason for regarding as morally impermissible either the practice or the manner in which animals are raised and killed for food. Nevertheless, we are still in need of an argument taking us from *that* discovery to the conclusion that purchasing and consuming the products of, for example, the admittedly morally reprehensible practices of factory farming, are themselves activities which are also morally impermissible.⁹ At best, the arguments from moral rights, from the wrongness of unnecessary killing, and from the wrongness of unnecessarily inflicting pain and suffering, can establish a thesis which R. G. Frey has designated as "negative vegetarianism," i.e., the view that some of our customary practices for raising and killing the animals we consume are morally impermissible and ought to be significantly altered. However, these same arguments do nothing to establish the thesis which Frey has designated as "positive vegetarianism," i.e., the view that consuming animal products is morally impermissible.¹⁰

Accordingly, one can rightfully ask for an explanation of why the moral wrongness of one person's violating an animal's right, or of killing a creature that is the subject of a valuable life, or of causing unnecessary suffering to that being, transfers to another person's act of purchasing and consuming the animal. Not surprisingly, this question has been addressed and explanations have been offered. Tom Regan prefaces his representative solution to this problem by construing his position as something of a compromise between what we have called negative and positive vegetarianism. According to Regan, eating meat is not in itself a moral wrong (i.e., unqualified positive vegetarianism is not true), but nevertheless, given certain conditions (i.e., given the truth of negative vegetarianism), we are morally required to act *as if* meat consumption were in itself a moral wrong. "Conditional vegetarianism" is the name he then assigns to this position.¹¹ Somewhat expanded, his argument is that insofar as we consume the flesh of animals whose rights have been violated, or which have been killed or caused to suffer unnecessarily, we contribute to the demand for such products and for the methods by which they are produced, and insofar as we contribute to these demands, we are *causally implicated* in a morally abhorrent chain of events.¹² Presumably, then, it is upon the strength of this *causal* involvement that our partial responsibility for the moral wrongs that are

committed rests. Thus, one can argue, in order to remove ourselves from this system and to cease our contribution to the moral wrongs which will be perpetrated on animals, we ought to adopt a conditional vegetarianism.

A number of points can profitably be raised at this juncture: Regan's (and similar) arguments are predicated upon identifying our partial responsibility for *future* harms. After all, there is nothing that now can be done to avoid causing harm to the animal from which the fresh cuts of beef on the grocer's shelf were taken. We will return to the importance of this observation later in the paper.

Also, different stories need to be told depending upon which argument is cited for establishing the initial conclusion that some moral wrong occurred in the history of making this or that animal product. If the only argument used is from the wrongness of unnecessarily inflicting pain, then purchasing and consuming animals who were reared and slaughtered painlessly avoids Regan's "causal implication" objection. Of course, depending on one's view of their promise, one might respond by citing the additional arguments from the wrongness of killing or from moral rights in an attempt to say something about the pain-free cases still causally implicating the consumer in a future moral wrong.

Finally, and quite importantly, it is far from clear that one's *consumption* of the products in question is as relevant to causal implication as is directly *furthering* the various industries which perpetrate the moral wrongs through the purchase of such products for oneself, or through allowing their purchase by another on one's behalf, or through one's purchase of them wholly on another's behalf. If it were true that the *eating* of these animals played an essential role in the argument from causal implication, then presumably buying but not eating the flesh of animals so produced would not fall under Regan's criticism, and surely, that is not his intended consequence. In other words, thus far, even if we accepted Regan's argument, we have no *moral* reason to regard the *eating* of some portion of a factory farmed animal, which has fallen off a carelessly driven delivery truck and into our hands, never to be paid for and never to be missed during inventory, as morally impermissible.¹³

Without any exaggeration, however, it can safely be said that even if all Regan's argument demonstrated was that it is morally wrong to purchase or to allow another to purchase on one's behalf these products (whether or not the object of the purchase is consumed) and thereby to contribute to an industry which is certain (at least in the near, and not so near, future) to persist in its morally impermissible practices upon animals in the course of converting those animals into food, then we would have moral reason to change our attitudes and practices in a monumental way. Ignoring, for the

moment, the arguments from the wrongness of unnecessary killing and from moral rights, if the argument from unnecessary infliction of pain and suffering suffices to show that standard intensive farming practices are morally impermissible, and if Regan's argument from causal implication suffices to show that purchasing the products of those practices is also morally impermissible, then we should drastically modify our purchasing practices, and this would lead, in turn, to a significant revision in our eating habits.

But do those arguments work? Glancing at the literature, one will note that even Frey, one of the most stringent critics of Singer and Regan, has conceded the success of the first. He honestly acknowledges that what is wrong with modern, factory farming practices is that they unnecessarily cause pain and suffering, and he indicates that, along with Singer, he believes this to be the most powerful of the three approaches to establishing the thesis of negative vegetarianism.¹⁴ But even if we cannot move (in any plausible way) from the thesis of negative vegetarianism to the thesis of positive vegetarianism, can we use the argument from causal implication to move from the thesis of negative vegetarianism to Regan's thesis of conditional vegetarianism?

If my remarks above about the misplaced emphasis on consuming over purchasing are correct, then we are not able to establish even a conditional vegetarianism as described by Regan, since we will not be morally required to act *as if* eating meat were in itself a moral wrong. Nevertheless, given the successfulness of the defense of negative vegetarianism, we might be able to establish something closely related to Regan's thesis, namely, that we are morally required to abstain from purchasing the products which have that sordid history, on pain of being causally implicated in a similarly sordid future series of events, and to the extent that this affects our eating habits, we will (barring highly unusual circumstances such as the case of the carelessly driven delivery truck) be acting *as if* eating meat *with that sort of history* were in itself a moral wrong.

I confess to having some sympathy for the view that we have moral grounds for abstaining from purchasing and consuming animal products with that sort of history, but I also confess that I am greatly troubled by objections which can be brought against the argument from causal implication. It is worth noting that as I have reconstructed the argument, it does not simply make the claim that abstaining from purchasing and consuming animal products with that sort of history is the best *tactic* for reducing the pain and suffering of food animals, and that this is why we ought to abstain. Frey has taken advantage of the opportunity to construe Singer's position in this manner, and has spent the better part of a book compellingly arguing

that if it is a matter of a choice of tactics, then “the concerned individual” can adopt any number of other tactics designed to reduce the suffering of these animals, *without* having to resort to vegetarianism, and can prove more effective than Singer’s vegetarian-tactician in the final analysis.¹⁵

However, the present argument, for better or worse, does make the claim that purchasing and consuming the products of these morally impermissible practices causally implicates one in future moral wrongs, and that this is why we ought to abstain. It is crucial to note that the successfulness of this argument seems to depend on the plausibility of the claim that my contribution really does make a difference—that the three dollars I spend on a basket of extra-hot chicken wings *will influence the demand* for chicken wings, thereby contributing to more and more instances of the deplorable way in which those chicken wings are produced, consequently making me partially responsible for those future moral wrongs.

Now if this were the primary issue, I could immediately trundle off to my favorite restaurant, order a large basket of extra-hot chicken wings, and rest assured that my doing so no more implicated me in any future moral wrongs than did my purchasing a pitcher of beer to wash them down. I would simply need to restrict my chicken wing outings sufficiently so that my expenditure never managed to affect the demand for such products. Now, I am tempted to believe that a single outing every other week would not be noticed even by the restaurant that sells these products to me (their volume is so high), and I am fully persuaded that the industry itself is not fine-tuned enough to be affected in the least by my three-dollar, biweekly expenditure. In fact, I am persuaded that the industry itself is not fine-tuned enough to be affected at all by my becoming a strict vegetarian.¹⁶ Moreover, I fear that strict adherence to the views of the moral importance of consequences and to the relevance of pleasure and pain in determining the value of consequences might make it *mandatory* that I spend my three dollars in that fashion. After all, not a single chicken will suffer in the future as a causal consequence of my sufficiently infrequent outings, and since I do so love the taste of extra-hot chicken wings, nothing would give me more pleasure at that price.

In short, then, I think certain facts concerning the present features of the relevant industries and of the means of distributing the products of those industries take some of the shine off of the argument from causal implication. Admittedly, there is something odd about the notion that precisely because certain moral wrongs are committed on such a grand scale, my benefiting from the purchase of the products of such wrongs does not manage to causally implicate me in similar, future wrongs. If the circumstances were different, and even small, occasional contributions made a difference, then the argument could establish its conclusions. As it stands,

though, all it establishes is that one ought to abstain from purchasing and consuming products when not doing so *would* causally implicate one in further moral wrongs, and, as I have suggested, not all such purchasing and consuming the products of morally impermissible practices manages to achieve that distinction. Significantly, even a proponent of moral vegetarianism such as Singer has recognized that motivational claims about the effectiveness of one individual's becoming vegetarian must be replaced by descriptions of the effectiveness of that individual together with others who have become vegetarian.¹⁷

Unless an argument is forthcoming which is not rendered inapplicable by falling victim to the characteristics of the market (the fate of Regan's argument from causal implication), which does not stake its worth on the dubious claim of being the best tactic for combating the unenviable lot of factory farmed animals (the apparent and unsuccessful strategy Singer has employed), and which moves from the thesis of negative vegetarianism to the position that we do have moral grounds to abstain from purchasing and consuming the products of factory farmed animals, then I think that we should look for a defense of moral vegetarianism that is not centered in a concern for animal welfare.¹⁸

II

Theories of collective responsibility have had a checkered past. In an early piece, H. D. Lewis criticized the notion on conceptual grounds, cautioning his readers that the price of a theory of collective responsibility was the loss of individual accountability, if not the collapse of moral distinctions altogether.¹⁹ Joel Feinberg is among the philosophers who have countered this challenge in an attempt to show that the notion of collective responsibility does have an important role to play in our moral thinking,²⁰ and the last two decades have seen a burgeoning interest in this underdeveloped area.

In this section I propose to examine two issues which arise in the context of discussions concerning collective responsibility that may be able to provide the sort of bridge between the thesis of negative vegetarianism and conditional vegetarianism that we ended the first section in despair of finding. For reasons stated above, though, the best I believe these arguments can hope to establish is a modified version of the thesis of moral (conditional) vegetarianism. In other words, at most, they can establish a view which is closely related to Regan's conditional vegetarianism, namely, that we have *moral reason* to abstain from purchasing the products of morally impermissible practices (such as factory farming), and to the extent that this affects our

eating habits, we will (barring highly unusual circumstances such as the case of the carelessly driven delivery truck) be acting as if eating meat with that sort of history were in itself a moral wrong. Hereafter, I will refer to this thesis of modified, moral (conditional) vegetarianism as MMCV.

The first issue concerns moral responsibility in cases of the collective inactivity of loosely structured groups, and the second issue revolves around a nonstandard category of moral responsibility sometimes referred to as moral taint. These issues are related, and my discussion of each will overlap the other. I might mention at the outset, however, that whereas the first topic can be used to argue for the view that abstinence in the manner of MMCV is morally obligatory (just how successfully, remains to be seen), the second topic lends itself better to supporting the somewhat weaker view that although we do have moral reason to abstain in the manner of MMCV, it is not morally obligatory to so abstain.

Remember that the argument from causal implication failed precisely because, given the current situation, any individual who becomes vegetarian does not thereby make a contribution to preventing future moral wrongs, unless she is joined by others who perform similar actions. Only if a sizable collection of individuals became vegetarian would an impact be made on the industry. Now, there is good reason to be persuaded by the claim that when an individual could prevent some harm by acting in some available manner and fails to so act, that individual is partially morally responsible for not preventing that harm.²¹ With this in mind, consider a somewhat similar principle: when a group could prevent some harm by (collectively) acting in some available manner and fails to so act, then the members of the group are partially morally responsible for not preventing that harm.²² (In order to make the principle less controversial, for our purposes let us also assume that the harm *does* occur; i.e., let us assume that no other individual or group has prevented the harm in question.)

It is a commonplace to regard certain groups, say, corporations or governments, as being morally responsible for their actions and inactions,²³ but what is interesting in the present context is whether we may also apply this principle to random collections, or to loosely structured groups which do not have a formal structure or decision-making procedure. On the model of appropriate requirements for individual responsibility, Virginia Held has cautiously attempted to articulate conditions which need to be met before a group can be regarded as morally responsible for an action, including the requirements that the group *can* act, that it be aware of the moral nature of its action (in a certain sense), and that it could have done otherwise.²⁴ Moreover, she argues, some random groups satisfy these conditions. Other theorists working on issues in collective responsibility have followed Held

in this endeavor. Larry May, for instance, has attempted to concentrate our attention on cases of the collective *inaction* of loosely structured groups and to emphasize the significance of the requirement that the loosely structured group could have avoided the inaction in question, i.e., that moral responsibility depends upon whether or not the group could have devised a decision-making procedure enabling them to reach and execute a decision resulting in purposeful, coordinated action.²⁵

So, how might these remarks provide us with support for MMCV? Well, if enough nonvegetarian consumers of factory farmed products can be identified as the members of some loosely structured group which could prevent harms (in the form of the future suffering of factory farmed animals) by devising a decision-making procedure through which they collectively cease purchasing and consuming such products, then the failure to prevent those harms through the collective inaction of that group is something for which the members are morally responsible. Just how moral responsibility is distributed among the members is yet to be determined, but the thrust of the argument is that in this case, certain individuals, by virtue of their membership in a loosely structured group, are at least partially morally responsible for not collectively preventing certain harms by committing themselves to modified, moral (conditional) vegetarianism along with other members of that group, even though none of the individuals could have prevented the harm by acting independently.²⁶

At this stage, then, one can argue that (i) since the group *should* collectively act so as to prevent this harm (on the strength of the claim that the truth of negative vegetarianism morally requires us to do something about the plight of food animals), members of the group have reason to adopt and are morally obligated to act jointly upon the thesis of MMCV; or, alternatively, one can argue that (ii) since the collective inactivity of the group contributes to the demand for such products and for the methods by which they are produced, the members of that group are *collectively causally implicated* in a morally abhorrent chain of events, and in order to extricate themselves from that chain, once again members of the group have reason to adopt and are morally obligated to act jointly upon the thesis of MMCV.

How good are the arguments? In the case of (i), which is a relative of Singer's vegetarian-tactician argument, we can worry about a relative of Frey's strategically-minded, concerned-individual counterargument, in this case, about a strategically-minded, concerned collective. In other words, someone may grant the forcefulness of the sketch of collective responsibility just offered, but protest that a concerned collective may be able to combat the pain and suffering of food animals in an extremely effective way, without having to resort to MMCV and without having to give up its collective love

of nonvegetarian fare in order to do so. I will leave this argument to its fate with the parting comment that this protest will be harder to sustain than the protest on behalf of the concerned individual, since much of the plausibility for viewing the strategic options of the concerned individual as superior resulted from recognizing the strategic ineffectiveness of the solitary, individual's pledge to vegetarianism.

In the case of (ii), which is a relative of Regan's argument from causal implication, we are on firmer ground. We have already built into the description of our hypothetical, loosely structured group that the consequence of its collective inaction is formidable enough to causally implicate its members in the chain of events which will result in future moral wrongs perpetrated against animals, and hence, it is exempt from the problems which plagued the original argument in section I. Worries about the current version of the argument, then, quite likely will be worries either about the view it endorses concerning the moral responsibility of groups and their members who are engaged in collective inaction, or about the claim that a sufficient number of nonvegetarian consumers of factory farmed products constitutes such a group.

The second worry seems less threatening than the first; indeed, even on an austere, restrictive view of what sort of loosely structured group can put itself in a position to act collectively,²⁷ a considerable number of groups of consumers of factory farmed products still can be cited as collectives about which it is eminently reasonable to believe that they could institute a decision-making process through which their members might collectively ban factory farmed products and embrace MMCV—thereby adversely affecting the meat industry in some area or other, and consequently reducing harms. The very characteristic of our current situation which makes a single individual's choice of a vegetarian lifestyle so causally ineffective in reducing harms, namely, the vast size of the various industries and the enormous number of nonvegetarian consumers, is exactly what makes the suggestion that we have an embarrassing wealth of appropriate collectives at hand so plausible.²⁸

The first worry, though, can be legitimately motivated by noting that this theory of the moral responsibility had by members of groups engaged in collective inaction is such that some members of collectives can be held partially morally responsible for harms which they could have done nothing at all to prevent by themselves. Understandably, not everyone will be eager to embrace this result, since the principle that an agent cannot be held responsible for something independent of her individual agency has such intuitive force. However, I have now broadly sketched this theory of moral responsibility and have indicated where it is defended at some length, and

so I will leave this argument as well with the parting comment that if such a project of determining moral responsibility for collective inaction can be carried out, the new argument from collective causal implication for MMCV is more promising than ever.

I will now turn to some remarks on two aspects of one further issue which arises in examinations of collective responsibility, an issue giving rise to a line of reasoning which stands or falls independently of the success or failure of the preceding arguments. In the above discussion I suggested that if the argument from collective causal implication is successful, then the principle that "one is *never* morally responsible for the occurrence of harms which one could not have done anything to prevent" is false. It would be a mistake, though, to believe that the falsity of this principle implies the claim that there is nothing which some individual member of a particular group can do to relieve himself of his share of moral responsibility, when the other members of the group do not happen to join him in an action which they could and should collectively perform. Now, if this individual member did nothing whatsoever with respect to attempting to rectify that collective inactivity, then, given the above theory of collective responsibility, it would be true both that the individual was partially morally responsible for the occurrence of a harm and that he could have done nothing to prevent that harm through his individual actions. Yet, some theorists have argued that sincere attempts (which fail to achieve their purpose) by a member of a group striving to persuade the other members of that group to collectively change their course and act differently, may at least remove the would-be reformer from the list of members who deserve partial responsibility for any wrongs resulting from the collective inaction of the group.²⁹ In short, although it is possible for an agent to be partially responsible (due to her membership in a group) for harms which she could not have prevented through her individual actions, it does not follow that there is nothing she can do to eliminate her share of the responsibility resulting from collective inaction performed by the group to which she belongs.

Recall the two arguments that have been offered in this section and recall that each drew the conclusion that certain individuals are morally obligated *to act jointly* upon the thesis of MMCV, and that they share moral responsibility for not so acting. Given my last remarks, however, we are now in a position to investigate a very different sort of argument, an argument for the view that in those cases of joint, failed obligation we have been investigating, individuals are morally obligated *to act individually* upon the thesis of MMCV, in order to eliminate their share of the responsibility resulting from the wrongful, collective inaction of those groups to which they belong. The idea here can be expressed as follows: Jointly failing in an obligation which

requires the coordination of an agent's action with the action of others (even if the agent "does his own part"), makes that agent a suitable candidate for an ascription of partial moral responsibility for moral wrongdoing. And, although the agent cannot do anything about the occurrence of the wrong, he can and should perform some action which will exempt him from a share of the responsibility for that moral wrongdoing. In the case we have been studying, then, individually adopting and acting upon MMCV is a sufficient condition for exempting him from a share of that moral responsibility.

Is it also a necessary condition for that exemption? Even if it were only sufficient, still we *would have moral reason* to adopt this course of action, but, of course, we would have just as much moral reason to adopt any other action which could serve equally well. If, however, it is a necessary condition as well (and it seems to be, at least, a plausible candidate for this job), then our *moral reason* is strong enough to create a *moral obligation* to individually adopt and act upon MMCV.

Determining whether it is, in fact, a necessary condition would require a general analysis of such conditions, and I can only point toward the beginnings of such an analysis here. Howard McGary, for one, has written about the conditions required to adequately disassociate oneself from a group so as to avoid a share in collective responsibility for that group's collective wrongdoing, and Thomas E. Hill has written persuasively on the nature and value of similar symbolic protests as a means of disassociating oneself from moral evil.³⁰ In addition to its other merits, Hill's piece also contains a compelling defense of such a strategy for disassociating oneself from moral evil against the charge that it constitutes little more than an expression of an unsavory self-righteousness.³¹ As a cautionary measure, it is also worthwhile to note that as the risks increase regarding some manner of disassociating oneself from a group which is acting wrongly, the case for that manner of disassociation is weakened, since it may be overridden by greater moral concerns regarding potential harms. However, it should also be candidly acknowledged that individually adopting and acting upon MMCV is not (with rare exceptions) credibly subject to the charge that it is too risky a manner in which to disassociate oneself.³²

In closing, I will honor a promise issued earlier. I said that an argument utilizing some of these reflections on collective responsibility could be constructed which stands or falls independently of the preceding arguments in this section. So, suspend for the moment the previous inquiries.

Karl Jaspers has distinguished four types of guilt, including "moral guilt" (related to what one has done) and "metaphysical guilt" (related to who one is).³³ Spotlighting the significance of metaphysical guilt, Larry May has argued that this notion is related to a type of moral responsibility which,

though it does not amount to moral wrongdoing, nevertheless amounts to something worthy of our moral attention, namely, moral taint.³⁴

A by now familiar (but not precisely the same) case can be made for MMCV by recognizing the import of the ethical appeal to remove moral taint from one's character.³⁵ Remember that we have put on hold the argument that it is *morally obligatory* to perform actions which appropriately disassociate oneself from some group, membership in which would otherwise confer upon one partial responsibility for the moral wrongdoing resulting from some collective inaction or other. But quite apart from adopting and acting upon MMCV as a necessary (or, at least, sufficient) means of accomplishing *that* task, adopting and acting upon MMCV is also a candidate for being a necessary (or, at least, sufficient) means of removing the moral taint which pollutes one's character by virtue of one's membership in, say, the group of nonvegetarian, consumers of factory farmed products.

Note that the present construal of the argument does not rest upon any controversial claims about collective inaction, or about moral obligations to avoid sharing responsibility for collective moral wrongdoing, although it is clearly consistent with such claims and with the additional arguments they support. Rather, it simply makes the point that unless one chooses to disassociate oneself from groups which are contributing to moral wrongdoing through their collective inaction, then regardless of whatever other types of moral responsibility one incurs as a member of these groups, one is *also morally responsible in the sense of being morally tainted* by the moral wrongs these groups commit.³⁶

Consequently, whereas an individual has *moral reason* to adopt and act upon MMCV on the grounds that doing so will allow her to appropriately disassociate herself from some such group, since moral taint is related to metaphysical, and not moral, guilt, one can argue that eliminating moral taint is, at best, morally desirable, but not morally obligatory. Hence, it would seem that along with a recognition of metaphysical guilt and of moral responsibility in the form of moral taint comes something like a counterpart to the category of the supererogatory: actions (designed to eliminate moral taint) have more moral value than merely permissible actions, but, being optional, have less moral value than morally obligatory actions.

Once again, whether adopting and acting upon MMCV is a necessary (as well as sufficient) means for appropriately disassociating oneself from certain groups will depend upon a general theory about such disassociating-activities, some preliminary work for which has been done by McGary and Hill, as remarked above. Furthermore, just which steps are reasonable and necessary ones to take in order to distance oneself from harms caused by one's group will, of course, vary according to context. However, a general

and context-sensitive rule which may serve until more work is done in this area is the following: if I experience what Jaspers has called metaphysical guilt, or recognize in my character the presence of moral taint, I should sincerely ask myself whether I have done what I believe can be reasonably expected of me to distance myself from this harm.

When I ask myself this question with respect to those harms which are so vividly and memorably revealed by comprehensive investigations into and successful defenses of the truth of negative vegetarianism, unless I have adopted and acted upon MMCV, I think the answer should be in the negative.³⁷

Notes

- ¹In a series of books and articles, most notably including his *Animal Liberation* (New York: The New York Review, 1975), and his *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- ²There are, of course, different brands of moral vegetarianism, some of which also endorse abstinence from dairy products, and some of which permit not only the consumption of dairy products, but of certain animals, say, shrimps and oysters, as well. Little that I have to say in this paper, however, will turn on these distinctions.
- ³For an overview of nonmoral and moral grounds for vegetarianism, see chapters 2 and 3 of R. G. Frey's book *Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983): 6-24.
- ⁴For an approach emphasizing a concern for human welfare see James Rachels's article, "Vegetarianism and The Other Weight Problem," in *World Hunger and Moral Obligation*, William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977): 180-193. For an account of what is meant by the "biotic community" and how concern for this entity might lead to moral vegetarianism see J. Baird Callicott's essay, "The Search For an Environmental Ethic," in *Matters of Life and Death*, Tom Regan, ed., Second Edition (New York: Random House, 1986): 381-424.
- ⁵In the ever growing body of literature on this topic, see Tom Regan's *The Case For Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and R. G. Frey's *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) for opposing views concerning the successfulness of a rights-based approach.
- ⁶See both Peter Singer's essay, "Animals and the Value of Life," in *Matters of Life and Death* Tom Regan, ed., Second Edition (New York: Random House, 1986): 338-380, and *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989), Part V: 139-157.
- ⁷In addition to Singer's books cited in note 1, also see Stephen Clark's *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
- ⁸One excellent book in this regard both for its commentary and for its collection of photographs is Jim Mason's and Peter Singer's *Animal Factories* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1980).
- ⁹This is a leading theme in Frey's *Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*.
- ¹⁰Frey, *Rights, Killing and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, chapter 6: 36-40.
- ¹¹Regan, Tom. "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism," reprinted in *All That Dwell Therein* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982): 1-39. The distinction between conditional

and absolute vegetarianism is another boundary Frey is anxious to draw in *Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, 30-35.

¹² Regan, "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism," 24-27.

¹³ I am aware of individuals who grant this point, but who then focus on the rhetorical effects of eating meat on those who cannot, for some reason or other, grasp the finer points of the argument. But I will not pursue that strategy at this point.

¹⁴ Frey, *Rights Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, 36-38.

¹⁵ This is another leading theme in Frey's *Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics* (especially in part V), and its target is primarily Singer's position as presented in *Animal Liberation* and *Practical Ethics*.

¹⁶ For a realistic, if somewhat depressing, assessment of the difference becoming a vegetarian makes, see Frey's discussion, "The Claim of Knowledge" in *Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, 209-213.

¹⁷ In his paper, "Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 9 (1980): 325-337, Singer reverses the somewhat optimistic appraisal of the impact of a single individual's becoming vegetarian that he had offered in *Animal Liberation*.

¹⁸ This may lead us to arguments grounded in a concern for human welfare or for the welfare of the biotic community (see note 4). Although I have concentrated on the argument from the wrongness of inflicting pain and suffering, since the problems just sketched are found in the second stage of the present defense of moral (conditional) vegetarianism, it seems that the difficulties we have encountered thus far will recur even if we were to utilize the arguments from the wrongness of unnecessary killing or from moral rights.

¹⁹ Lewis, H. D. "Collective Responsibility," *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* Vol. 24, (1948).

²⁰ Feinberg, Joel. "Collective Responsibility," in his *Doing and Deserving: Essays in the Theory of Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

²¹ Of course, there may be reasons justifying some cases of inaction, for instance, reasons having to do with the potential for greater harms, but that would only show that there were overriding conditions at work excusing inaction, not that there was no moral responsibility for failing to act.

²² A relative of this principle is discussed and defended by Larry May in his "Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility," *Nous* Vol. 24 (1990): 269-278. May also treats this topic at greater length in his book entitled *Sharing Responsibility*, (Forthcoming: The University of Chicago Press).

²³ Disagreements do arise, however, regarding whether this is an indirect way of referring to the moral responsibility of the individuals acting in positions of power within those groups or whether the entity responsible is the group itself. See Cooper, David. "Collective Responsibility," *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* Vol. 43 (1968).

²⁴ Held, Virginia. "Can a Random Collection Be Responsible?," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 67 (1970): 471-481. In her article, Held provides an analysis of these somewhat counterintuitive ascriptions of properties to groups, as well as addressing the issue of identifying the action which the group either takes or fails to take, and I direct the reader to her discussion.

²⁵ May, "Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility," 276. He restricts his claim to the prevention of harms, but the same position might be adopted for ascribing moral responsibility to loosely structured groups who through their collective inaction fail to promote some good.

²⁶ One intriguing problem which arises here concerns whether the moral responsibility is to be distributed equally or whether (due to the various roles which would have been played in the loosely structured group) some bear more responsibility for the inaction than others. For a defense of the latter alternative, see May, "Collective Inaction and Shared Respon-

- sibility," 273-277. For other approaches to distributing responsibility in similar cases, see Gregory Mellema's *Individuals, Groups and Shared Moral Responsibility* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), and Michael Zimmerman's "Sharing Responsibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 22 (1985): 115-122.
- ²⁷ For a treatment of some of the difficulties in identifying random collections or loosely structured groups, see Stanley Bates's "The Responsibility of Random Collections," *Ethics* Vol. 81 (1971): 343-349.
- ²⁸ In saying this, I do not wish to minimize the very real difficulties associated with establishing identity and membership conditions for collectives, loosely structured or otherwise. That project remains to be carried out for any application of a theory of collective responsibility and is a task which I cannot here hope to address adequately. I do want to suggest, however, that owing to the sheer numbers of nonvegetarian consumers of factory farmed products, the application of this theory to the present moral issue at least encounters no special difficulties in this regard.
- ²⁹ For some versions of this position see part III of Howard McGary's "Morality and Collective Liability," *Journal of Value Inquiry* Vol. 20 (1986): 157-165, as well as Bates, "The Responsibility of Random Collections," 347-349.
- ³⁰ McGary, "Morality and Collective Liability," part III, and Hill, Thomas E. "Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 9 (1979): 83-102.
- ³¹ Hill, "Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence," 99-102. Hill's article (especially part IV) is a rich source of material for a defense of the "necessary-condition" claim, but on the basis of his discussion in part V, I take it that he would not endorse this use to which one might put his efforts.
- ³² It may be observed that unlike the first two arguments in section II, this argument for adopting and acting upon MMCV is no longer straightforwardly centered in a concern for animal welfare. Rather, here the moral grounds for MMCV consist in one's obligation to eliminate one's share of the partial responsibility for the moral wrongdoing of the collective inaction of some group to which one belongs.
- ³³ Jaspers, Karl. *The Question of German Guilt* E. B. Ashton, trans. (Ashton, N. Y.: Capricorn Books, 1947): 31-32.
- ³⁴ May, Larry. "Metaphysical Guilt and Moral Taint," in *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, Larry May and Stacey Hoffman, eds. (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991). This new anthology also contains reprints of several of the papers discussed above, including the pieces by: H. D. Lewis, 17-33; Joel Feinberg, 53-76; David Cooper, 35-46; Virginia Held, 89-100; Stanley Bates, 101-108; and Howard McGary, 77-87.
- ³⁵ It is worthwhile noting that since the type of moral responsibility in question is not essentially related to any actions one has performed, the ethical appeal to remove such taint from one's character will not be couched in the language of moral obligation.
- ³⁶ The topic of moral taint has been receiving some attention recently. For a treatment of related issues, also see Anthony Appiah's "Racism and Moral Pollution," *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 18 (1987): 185-202, reprinted in *Collective Responsibility*, May and Hoffman, eds.: 219-238.
- ³⁷ I thank Larry May and Carl Wellman for criticisms and comments on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as for the use of materials related to this project.