

Letting Others Do Wrong

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Abstract: It is sometimes, but not always, permissible to let others do wrong. This paper is about why that is so.

One of my closest friends lies inveterately. The lies are low-stakes, almost always bits of puffery about himself. When I hear him telling others these lies, I never stop him, never say, “Things didn’t *actually* happen *quite* like that.” I have never even told him I think he shouldn’t lie to people. But I do think that—he shouldn’t lie.

The seventeenth century vegetarian activist, Thomas Tryon, abhorred meat-eating, thought it barbarous, brutifying, cruel, diseased, distasteful, distemperate, dreadful, evil, gluttonous, infirm, nauseating, oppressive, unclean, and violent.¹ He married an omnivore. There is no evidence he even tried to stop her meat-eating.

This paper is about cases like these and about when and why it is permissible to let others do wrong.

1. Background

Consider a fictional case: Vegan believes it is impermissible to eat meat. However, he lets his dining partner, Omnivore, eat meat; he does not, for example, throw her beef burrito in the trash when she uses the restroom or try to confiscate her plate of bacon. To boot, Vegan doesn’t ever start up a conversation with her on the issue of whether it is permissible to eat meat. No “You shouldn’t do that” or “Do you know what it’s like for animals” or...

Assume Vegan’s conduct here is permissible. Why is it? If Vegan believes what Omnivore does is wrong, why is it permissible to let it go?

In what follows, I mostly ignore belief. I make the simplifying assumption that Vegan is in fact correct and that eating meat is wrong. This isn’t my view, but it makes things easier if we assume it is correct—if we assume that it is wrong to eat meat and so assume that it is impermissible for Omnivore to eat meat.

Yet also it might be true that it is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore eat meat,² where by “let,” all I have in mind is that Vegan is in a position to stop Omnivore but does not. You let your tiny baby crawl across the floor but don’t let Congress pass various bills even though it is true that you stop neither Congress nor the baby.

The Vegan/Omnivore case is underdescribed, but there are ways of spelling it out, I think, in which it is permissible to let Omnivore do wrong, permissible not to confiscate Omnivore’s meat, not to stop her from feeding herself, not to shout her down as she tries to

¹ The adjectives—or cognates of them—come from Tryon’s entry in Williams 2003. For discussion, see Stuart 2008.

² I also believe it might be true that it is permissible for Vegan not to start up a talk with Omnivore about eating meat. Though my focus is on preventing wrongdoing, in what follows I do sometimes look at talking about wrongdoing. Importantly, I do *not* think of speaking up about wrongdoing when one can’t stop it as a way of letting others do wrong. Such cases are sensitively discussed in Driver 2014.

order meat at a restaurant, and so on. In other words, it is permissible for him to let her do wrong.

The question I am interested in in this paper is: In cases in which it is permissible to let others do wrong, why is it permissible to do so?

I start to answer it by answering a different question: Why is it permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore eat the burrito?

I make three distinct assumptions here: First, there are cases in which it is permissible to let others do wrong. Second, I assume that *if meat-eating is wrong*, if Vegan should not eat meat, then garden-variety meat-eating cases involving Vegan and Omnivore are cases with such features. Finally, I assume that making progress on explaining why it is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore do wrong helps us to make progress on why, in general, it is permissible to let others do wrong.

Someone might object to the first assumption and insist that it is never permissible to let others do wrong.

This objection would be mistaken. Consider Alicia, readying to kick you in the shins simply because you bother her. Her kicking you in the shins is wrong. According to the objection, it is wrong for you to tolerate this; you are required to stop her. What if the only way you can stop her will trigger her fatal heart condition? In such a case, it is clear that you are permitted to let Alicia do wrong here and, in fact, are *required* to let her do wrong here. Hence, it is not true that one is always required to stop wrongdoing; one is sometimes permitted to let others do wrong.

Or consider my friend, Bob, the inveterate liar. Bob lies to his mom about trivial matters. He does wrong in doing so. All the same, it is not wrong for me to let him do it. There's no requirement to disconnect the phone before the lie comes out or to spirit his mom away before it does. Walking away is permissible. So it is sometimes permissible to let others do wrong. So the question I am interested in doesn't have a false presupposition.

The project of the paper might be objected to in another way by insisting it is *always* permissible to let wrongdoing go. When you let someone do wrong, you never do wrong yourself. So there is a question here—why is it permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore do wrong?—but it is an easy question.

This objection would also be mistaken. The Vegan/Omnivore case contrasts with the following case: Abuser abuses children. His friend, Pacifist, never stops him. In humdrum ways of filling in the details of the Vegan/Omnivore case,

It is impermissible for Omnivore to eat meat.

Yet

It is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore eat meat.

In humdrum ways of filling in the details of Pacifist/Abuser, the analog of the first claim is clearly true:

It is impermissible for Abuser to abuse.

Yet the analog of the second is false. It is false that

It is permissible for Pacifist to let Abuser abuse.

Pacifist is morally required to stop what Abuser does. So this objection, too, is misguided: It is not always permissible to let wrongdoing go. It is sometimes permissible to let it go, sometimes not. When is it permissible? Why?

The short answer is: It's complicated. There are all sorts of explanations and portions thereof. You might be permitted to let someone do wrong because Satan will bring a catastrophe upon you if you don't. You might be permitted to let someone do wrong because, well, he's your son, and it's no big deal, and how is he supposed to learn if you don't let him screw up every now and again? You might be permitted to let someone do wrong because you promised them you would stop interfering in their everyday life, even in their occasional, wrongful shoplifting of bananas. None of the Pacifist/Abuser cases I am interested in are like that. Neither are the Vegan/Omnivore cases.

Yet even in simpler cases, the story is complicated.

2. Caution

There are cases where you may let others do wrong and are genuinely unclear about whether they do wrong, and it at least seems like there is a connection between those two facts.

More precisely, in some cases, people genuinely do wrong, but it isn't clear to bystanders whether they are doing wrong and so the cautious thing to do is to let the wrongdoing happen, and this at least partly explains the permission to let others do wrong.

Here is a possible case: Cece has to give money to one of two charities. She will either give ten dollars to one or ten dollars to the other. The first charity means the world to her. It is, however, a front for some minor wrongdoing that Cece's donation will fund and that would not happen without Cece's donation. The second charity is unremarkable and you know that donations to the second charity are morally permissible. You think that first charity is a front and that donating to it is morally wrong but are not confident. Cece gives to the first. You let her. It is permissible to let her do moral wrong here, and this at least seems to be partly because it is unclear whether she does wrong and, at least partly because of that, the cautious thing to do is to let her do wrong, and it is permissible to do the cautious thing.

We can spell out the meat case in a similar way: Stipulate that Vegan is not confident that eating meat is wrong and not confident whether restricting Omnivore's autonomy is. Stipulate, too, that Vegan is quite confident that no instance of meat-eating is particularly seriously wrong and neither is any instance of stopping meat-eating. No big deal all around. It is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore do wrong here, and this at least seems to be partly because it is unclear she does wrong and, at least partly because of that, the cautious thing to do is to let her do wrong, and it is permissible to do the cautious thing.

In both cases, there is unclarity and the unclarity engenders caution and the caution seems to engender an explanation of the permission to let be.

There are powerful arguments that things are not as they seem and that caution does not engender an explanation of the permission to let others do wrong.³ But there is no need to weigh in on those arguments. For two reasons, even if caution is part of the story of why we may let others do wrong, it is not the whole story. First, in some cases, caution is no part of the explanation of why we may let others do wrong. In the lying Bob case, it is clear that he does wrong—he shouldn't lie to his mom; I am quite sure he shouldn't lie to his mom. So

³ Here is a way of thinking about things: The caution-based explanation we are considering might be elaborated to claim that bystanders should be cautious and not interfere in others' apparent wrongdoing, because they are uncertain what what is permissible and *if* others are acting morally permissibly, then a bystander's interference would be seriously morally wrong; instead, the bystander should be cautious and avoid doing what might be seriously morally wrong. Yet the idea that moral uncertainty requires this kind of caution has been challenged by, among others, Harman (2015a) and Weatherson (2019).

letting him be can't be explained by caution. Relatedly, when I talk to vegan accommodators, they do not express a lack of confidence that they're right about eating meat. So the permissibility of their letting be cannot be explained by caution. Yet, I am assuming, it is permissible.

(In other cases, if caution explains what we may do, it does so by explaining why it is *wrong* to let others do wrong. Caution can militate in favor of an interventionist policy. If you are driving with someone who is about to crush a baby-shaped, baby-sized box, the cautious thing to do is to get the driver to drive around it.⁴ In this case, caution is part of what explains why it is *wrong* to let someone keep doing what they are doing.)

Second, even when caution is part of the explanation of the permission to let others, there are other parts. The rest of the paper is about them. Henceforth, I put caution aside.

3. The Autonomy of Wrongdoers

It is an important part of the Cece and charity case that you know that intervening with Cece restricts her autonomy. If you try to stop her, she might reasonably say, "Who are you to police me?" If I try to stop Bob from lying or if Vegan throws Omnivore's beef burrito out, Bob or Omnivore might reasonably say, "Let me do what I want."

Bob, Cece, and Omnivore are autonomous agents, and their autonomy provides a powerful explanation of the permission to let them do what they want, even when what they want to do is wrong.

Autonomy might provide that explanation in various ways.⁵ In the Vegan/Omnivore case, perhaps Vegan's letting Omnivore do wrong enables Omnivore's having diverse culinary options or perhaps it enhances Omnivore's *feeling* that she has options or perhaps it enables Omnivore to engage with the right reasons for and against eating meat (the right reason not to eat meat is not that Vegan opposes meat-eating). And then, the idea goes, these facts at least partly explain why Vegan may let Omnivore do wrong.

The explanation would only be partial. When Pacifist stops Abuser from abusing, he cuts down on Abuser's parenting options, he impinges on Abuser's feeling he's free, and he might restrict Abuser's ability to engage with the reasons against abusing. There might be a genuine reason to let Abuser be here, but nevertheless Pacifist should intervene.

In other cases, we sometimes should *not* let others do wrong on the grounds of autonomy—autonomy sometimes militates against letting others do wrong. If Vegan and Omnivore are familiar philosophical types, Vegan's stopping Omnivore from ordering meat and then talking about why could facilitate Omnivore's seeing the right reasons. If Vegan is particularly socially adept or good enough at cooking or picking restaurants, he could stop Omnivore from eating meat without giving her fewer culinary options or without making her feel like she has fewer culinary options. Considerations of Omnivore's autonomy support not the permission to let be in such cases but, rather, the requirement in some cases not to intervene in particularly clumsy ways.

Finally, consider this Vegan/Omnivore case:

Vegan knows it is impermissible to eat meat. However, he lets his friend, Omnivore, eat meat even in cases where Omnivore is indifferent between the

⁴ The example derives from Fran Krause's cartoon series *Deep, Dark Fears*.

⁵ These ideas about autonomy derive from work on toleration and accommodation by Seana Shiffrin (2000 and 2004). They are somewhat closely related to ideas in Scanlon 1998 and Waldron 1981. The criticisms I develop here overlap with some of those in Bolinger 2017.

meat and vegan options. Omnivore has a wide range of culinary options: kale burritos, sweet potato burritos, potato chips, etc. Also, Omnivore is totally insensitive to intellectual pressure. Also, Omnivore will never even *consider* the issue of whether to eat meat without Vegan raising it by stopping Omnivore from eating meat here.

I assume it is permissible for Vegan to act as he acts. Yet the explanation for this can't appeal to Omnivore's autonomy since getting Omnivore to eat vegan here preserves what is worth preserving in autonomous decisions. So autonomy can't explain everything that needs explaining.

4. Fraternity with Wrongdoers

An important detail in this case is that Vegan and Omnivore are friends.

In some cases, part of the explanation why it is permissible to let others do wrong is, in part, because they are your friends or comrades and something about this relationship permits letting their wrongdoing go. These reasons help to explain why it is permissible to let others do wrong.

In the lying Bob example earlier, it's not just that Bob is an inveterate liar. He is my friend Bob the inveterate liar. He's my inveterate liar. Part of our friendship is that I support him. I take him as he is. Not doing so would undermine the friendship. I am permitted not to do so.

Before he was my friend, Bob was just my neighbor. Letting him be fosters neighborliness. Not letting him be would undermine it. I am permitted to do the former and permitted to avoid the latter.

To the idea that autonomy provides part of the explanation for why we may let others do wrong, we can add the ideas that not letting be sometimes undermines one's relationships and objectionably so and that letting be fosters valuable relationships. The permission to let be is explained by the permission to avoid undermining one's relationships or by a permission to foster them. We can apply this to our case. It might be that not letting Omnivore eat meat undermines their friendship, what Scheffler calls "fraternity," and so Vegan is allowed not to do so. Or it might be that letting Omnivore eat fosters this friendship.⁶

On these views, it's crucial to the example that Omnivore and Vegan are friends or neighbors. The view might instead be that letting Omnivore eat meat avoids undermining co-citizen relations or fosters co-citizen relations or that it avoids undermining familial relations or fosters familial relations or.... Any such way, the view continues, part of the explanation of why it is permissible to let be is that it fosters such a relation or avoids undermining it.

Again, the explanation would only be partial. Pacifist and Abuser might be friends or neighbors or family or fellow Americans. When Pacifist stops Abuser from abusing, he might genuinely undermine their relationship and might genuinely not be fostering it. There might be a genuine reason to let Abuser be here, but, nevertheless, of course Pacifist should intervene.

⁶ For some discussion of issues in the neighborhood of fraternity and letting be, see Foer 2010, Scanlon 1998, Scheffler 2010a, Shiffrin 2004, and Smith 2013.

In other cases, we sometimes should not let others do wrong on the grounds of fraternity—fraternity sometimes explains why we should *not* let others do wrong. In other cases, it explains not intervention itself but, rather, certain manners of intervention. Some ways of engaging Omnivore would screw up Vegan and Omnivore’s relationship. If Vegan, for example, repeatedly *nagged* Omnivore, this would make friendship hard. And if, assuming they are close friends, Omnivore is someone who can’t tolerate the faintest criticism, fraternity might require Vegan to shut up. Failing to do so might be treating Omnivore like a child because even the faintest complaint comes across as forceful criticism. (Other people—these people will be familiar to philosophers—are such that fraternity might require *not* shutting up. If Omnivore is a certain philosophical type, it might be a sign that Vegan does not take their friendship seriously if he failed to engage her about meat-eating.)

Finally, we can let others do wrong even when there is no issue of fraternity—fraternity is sometimes inoperative. Consider this Vegan/Omnivore case:

Vegan is Ghanaian; Omnivore is Australian. They are strangers and are destined to never see each other again. Vegan knows it is impermissible to eat meat. However, he lets Omnivore, *his neighbor on a flight*, eat meat even in cases where Omnivore is indifferent between the meat and vegan options. Omnivore has a wide range of culinary options: kale burritos, sweet potato burritos, potato chips, etc. Also, Omnivore is totally insensitive to intellectual pressure. Also, Omnivore will never even consider the issue of whether to eat meat without Vegan raising it by stopping Omnivore from eating meat here.

I assume it is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore be here. Yet the disjunction of the autonomy- and fraternity-explanations cannot explain this.

5. The Futility of Intervention

In some Vegan/Omnivore cases, talk about “letting Omnivore be” is misleading or false. It might be that there is no possibility for Vegan to stop Omnivore from eating meat, but, rather, Vegan is just in a position to *talk* with Omnivore, *annoy* Omnivore, and *postpone* Omnivore’s meat-eating, without being in a position to *stop* Omnivore from eating meat. In some cases at least, not letting an instance of meat-eating go just changes the timing of the meat-eating: Vegan and Omnivore talk. Omnivore decides to eat her burrito later than she would’ve. In such cases, even *trying* not to let Omnivore do wrong is futile. In other cases, the timing is changed and so is the number of beef burritos ordered: Throw Omnivore’s burrito in the trash and Omnivore will just eat another beef burrito, just later and in a foul mood. In such cases, Vegan really does stop Omnivore from doing some particular wrong, but the stopping is futile all the same since it produces a different, later wrong. In still other cases, the attempted stopping will entrench Omnivore’s conviction that what she does is permissible and she may go ahead with it. When Vegan is Omnivore’s obstreperous friend who tries to stop her from doing something, Omnivore sometimes does it later and more.⁷ At least part of the explanation of Vegan’s permission to let Omnivore do wrong in such cases is that not letting Omnivore eat meat is futile. It is permissible to refrain from futility.⁸

⁷ For simplicity, I lump cases of futility and counterproductivity under the heading of “futility.”

⁸ In footnote two, I said that it might be true that it is permissible for Vegan *not* to start up a talk with Omnivore about eating meat. Of course, there are cases in which it is permissible to engage in conversations. When Omnivore starts a conversation about meat, of course it is permissible for Vegan to engage. When

Autonomy-based and fraternity-based explanations of the permission to let others do wrong ascribe something lovely to Vegan and, generally, to those who let be. Another part of the story is less lovely, more cynical: Some of what justifies letting others do wrong is nothing as noble as fraternity or respect for autonomy but is, harshly, the fact that some attempts to engage are futile. Futility explains some cases.

But there are other cases. Sometimes we do succeed in stopping others from doing wrong. There are cases where Vegan will stop Omnivore from eating meat and Omnivore won't go and replace that wrongdoing later:

Vegan is Ghanaian; Omnivore is Australian. They are strangers and are destined to never see each other again. Vegan knows it is impermissible to eat meat. However, he lets Omnivore, his neighbor on a flight, eat meat even in cases where Omnivore is indifferent between the meat and vegan options. Omnivore has a wide range of culinary options: kale burritos, sweet potato burritos, potato chips, etc. Also, Omnivore is totally insensitive to intellectual pressure. Also, Omnivore will never even consider the issue of whether to eat meat without Vegan raising it by stopping Omnivore from eating meat here. *Finally, Vegan would succeed in stopping Omnivore in eating meat here and won't merely postpone that meat-eating.*

I assume it is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore be here. Yet the disjunction of the autonomy-based, fraternity-based, and futility-based ideas cannot explain this.

6. The Onerousness of Intervention

There is another unlovely explanation of the permission to let others do wrong.

In her work on autonomy and accommodation, Shiffrin notes that a policy of *not* letting others do wrong would require surveillance and scrutiny; it would lead to a policy of moral “bean-counting” (2000: 238) where we surveil and scrutinize each other, totting up all the things each of us does (and doesn't do) and stepping in when our peers step out of line (2004: 287). Such policies will be hard on the scrutinized. They will be hard, too, on the scrutinizers and the bean-counters. It'd be awful to be a bean-counter even for a short while. And there would be no short while about being a wrongdoing-stopper: If one were *in general* required to prevent others' wrongdoing, then, given the frequency with which we know people do wrong, one's life would be given over to doing so. When Vegan goes into a restaurant and there are receptive omnivores everywhere, readying for their beef burritos, he

someone initiates a conversation, they sometimes—but not always—flag that it is not futile to talk to them. They sometimes flag, too, that talking with them won't be a burden, that they will be receptive and will not make the talk difficult.

Why might Vegan's *starting up* a talk be futile? There are ways of spelling out the case so that Omnivore is well aware of the case against meat-eating and so Vegan will introduce no new information. If the issue weren't eating but, rather, some extremely complex moral issue that Omnivore knew *nothing* about but that Vegan did know something about, we might be less inclined to believe that Vegan is permitted to stay mum. But the issues in the meat-eating case are very familiar. Even the most sophisticated philosophical arguments occur—admittedly in less sophisticated form—to intro-level philosophy students.

Yet there are other ways of spelling the case out—including one discussed earlier—in which Omnivore is unaware of the issues and won't consider them unless Vegan brings them up. Even here, engaging might be futile. For it could be that even if Vegan were to introduce new information, Omnivore's behavior is not something to be changed by talk but is, as J.M. Coetzee writes, “too elementary, too elemental, to be reached by talk” (1999: 58).

may refrain from stopping at least some of them. Part of what explains this is the onerousness of doing so. *Not* letting others do wrong here is onerous over time, even if it is easy in any one instance.

Stopping others from doing wrong can be onerous in a single instance. Omnivore might traumatize Vegan if Vegan stops her from eating meat. Abuser might viciously assault Pacifist if Pacifist stops him from abusing. If so, Vegan and Pacifist may let Omnivore and Abuser do wrong and may let them do wrong at least partly because of the onerousness of failing to do so, the onerousness of intervention.

Yet there are other cases, cases where intervention is easy and cost-free:

Vegan is Ghanaian; Omnivore is Australian. They are strangers and are destined to never see each other again. Vegan knows it is impermissible to eat meat. However, he lets Omnivore, his neighbor on a flight, eat meat even in cases where Omnivore is indifferent between the meat and vegan options. Omnivore has a wide range of culinary options: kale burritos, sweet potato burritos, potato chips, etc. Also, Omnivore is totally insensitive to intellectual pressure. Also, Omnivore will never even consider the issue of whether to eat meat without Vegan raising it by stopping Omnivore from eating meat here. Vegan would succeed in stopping Omnivore in eating meat here and won't merely postpone that meat-eating. *Finally, getting Omnivore to stop will be easy.*

Even in some such cases, I think, it is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore do wrong. Yet the disjunction of the autonomy-based, fraternity-based, futility-based, and onerousness-based ideas cannot explain this. If it is permissible for Vegan to let Omnivore do wrong here, there must be more to the story of why he may.

7. Protection

Till now, we have been looking at cases in which an agent may let be, may accommodate wrongdoing, ferreting out why the agent may let be in those cases. To see the last part of the explanation, consider a case in which an agent may not let be: Vegan and Omnivore are choosing between going to McDonald's or La Tavola Marche, a restaurant where part of the experience is killing the chicken to be eaten for dinner. In this case, I think it is implausible that Vegan may stay mum. Vegan should lobby against La Tavola Marche, should press the issue. If he can stop Omnivore from going to La Tavola Marche, he should. Their going to McDonald's, by contrast, strikes me as unobjectionable—no more objectionable, at any rate, than letting Omnivore eat her beef burrito.

When Omnivore buys and eats meat in the typical case, when she eats her airline beef burrito, when she goes to McDonald's, she typically does no harm to anything. There is no victim who is being harmed by Omnivore's buying and eating a burger at McDonald's or eating an airline beef burrito. Hence, there is no victim who *Vegan* fails to protect by letting Omnivore eat meat.⁹

⁹ This claim about there being no victim at McDonald's is controversial. I do believe it, but the argument doesn't depend on it. What the argument depends on is that *if* there is a victim in the McDonald's case, then *Vegan* is situated differently with regard to that victim than with regard to the La Tavola Marche victim. The victim in the McDonald's case is such that they are going to die regardless. This is not so in the La Tavola Marche case.

Yet in some atypical cases, things are otherwise. If Vegan lets Omnivore go to La Tavola Marche and eat a chicken, he will have gone to La Tavola Marche and let Omnivore kill that chicken. In such a case, Vegan owed the chicken protection and did wrong by failing to provide it.

All this suggests the following view: Part of what explains why we may let wrongdoing be in some cases is that there is no victim of wrongdoing in those cases *or* there is such a victim but we owe that victim no protection from that particular wrongdoing.¹⁰ This explanation sits alongside the explanations from autonomy, fraternity, futility, and onerousness, and, indeed, brings out something about the first two. In cases in which there is a victim of wrongdoing and in which you let the wrongdoing be, it can seem absurd to try to explain why you may do so by pointing to the value of the your fraternity with the wrongdoer or the wrongdoer's autonomy. In some such cases, the victim might well protest: "What about me?" In other cases, though, you don't owe the victim anything and so considerations of the wrongdoer's autonomy or fraternity seem especially powerful. So, too, do those seem powerful in cases where there is no victim at all.

8. The Protection View

We are ignoring cases in which a *catastrophe* will result unless I let Bob do wrong or the wrongdoer is your young son or you promised the wrongdoer you would let them steal that banana. We are ignoring cases in which there is uncertainty. When we ignore such cases and

My controversial claim is that buying chicken at McDonald's produces no expected animal death. The less controversial claim, the one the argument depends on, is that even if it does produce expected animal death, there is nothing Vegan can do to prevent that animal death from coming about because, regardless of whether Omnivore buys meat at McDonald's, all the same animals will die regardless. It's as if there is a firing squad and a bystander has power to stop one particular shooter. The victim dies all the same. (This analogy comes from [deleted].)

For powerful arguments against the claim that there is no victim at McDonald's, see, among others, Singer 1980, Norcross 2004, and Kagan 2011. For powerful arguments for the position I endorse, see, among others, Nefsky 2011 and Budolfson 2018.

If a case of meat-eating or meat-buying does have victims, if it is thoroughly like the La Tavola Marche case, and it is because of that wrong, it is very hard for me to understand how it is permissible for a third-party to let it happen. As a bystander, how would you explain yourself to the victim? "Yes, chicken, I know it's your life here, but don't you see that stopping Omnivore from buying McNuggets would be interfering with his autonomy" or "Yes, chicken, I know your life is on the line here, but don't you see that I am friends with Omnivore? Think of my relationship with him." The victims might point out that their own freedoms are being curtailed or that they, too, are part of the moral community. They would be right about these things.

If buying McNuggets harms no animal, why is it wrong? Typically, Omnivore's buying and eating meat *do* involve symbolism (Adams 1999 and Hill 1979). Typically, when you buy and eat meat you *symbolize* your support for raising and killing animals for food. Doing so is wrong. That is one reason why it is jarring to read pieces that argue that it is permissible to buy and eat meat though wrong to produce it.

By contrast, letting others eat meat does *not* symbolically support meat-production. I think there is no deep explanation about this. It is a contingency—and a shallow contingency—about our culture, like the fact that wearing a t-shirt from a college does not signify any affiliation with it but having that college's bumper sticker on your car does. In other cultures, the facts about symbolism might be different. A friend explained to me that refusing to eat meat in India can symbolize neither solidarity with animals nor opposition to killing them but, rather, support for an objectionable caste system or support for religious discrimination against Muslims. On how this could be, see Doniger 2017.

¹⁰ This idea is suggested in Casal 2003 and Sunstein 1999. Quong 2019 uses something like it to explain the necessity condition on self-defense.

focus on simpler ones, we could end up with a view according to which it is permissible to let others do wrong because of autonomy or fraternity or futility or onerousness or protection. In this section, I defend a simpler explanation of the simpler cases, namely:

THE PROTECTION VIEW—It is wrong for Bystander to let Wrongdoer do wrong when and only when *and because* Wrongdoer’s wrongdoing has a victim *and* Bystander owes Victim protection from Wrongdoer’s wrongdoing.

It falls out of this that it is permissible to let Wrongdoer do wrong when there is no requirement to intervene.

We are trying to answer “Why is it permissible to let others do wrong?” Maybe—like “Why is it permissible to sit with your ankles crossed?”—its answer is “Why wouldn’t it be?” In cases in which you may let others do wrong, as in cases in which you may sit with your ankles crossed, the explanation of this is that there is no requirement to do otherwise. There is no puzzle here.

Likewise, in the cases we have discussed in which bystanders must intervene in wrongdoing, there is no puzzle: Pacifist has to stop Abuser to protect the child. Vegan has to stop Omnivore from going to La Tavola Marche to protect the chicken. These explanations fasten on to a victim of wrongdoing and the importance of the bystander’s protecting that victim from wrongdoing.¹¹

The argument for the Protection View is that it explains what we may do in easy cases and can be used to rightly diagnose why hard cases are hard.

It explains why Vegan may let Omnivore be in the final case above, the one in which neither autonomy, fraternity, futility, nor onerousness explains the permission to let be—there is no one to whom Vegan owes protection.

It explains why Pacifist may not let Abuser do wrong—Pacifist owes the kid protection.

It explains why I may let Bob tell trivial lies to his mom—I owe her no protection from these lies.

It explains the wrongfulness of letting certain harmful lies go and the permissibility of letting others go. Consider a case of lying about Santa. You lie to your kid about Santa and, moreover, your kid is a 6th grader and her being in the dark about Santa opens her up to ridicule. Your partner lets it happen. It makes sense for your kid to be mad at you and to be mad at your partner. It doesn’t make sense for her to be mad at, say, her *cousin* who also knows Santa isn’t real and let the lie go unchallenged. The cousin has no duty to protect your daughter from this particular wrongdoing. Your partner does. (Which, of course, is not to say that the cousin has no duty to protect your kid from *anything*. It is not even to say that the cousin has no duty to protect your kid from *some lies*. I just think the cousin owes the kid no such protection here.)

Consider the list of examples from Jeremy Waldron’s seminal work on the right to do wrong:

Someone uses all the money he has won...in a lottery to buy racehorses and champagne and refuses to donate any of it to a desperately deserving charity.

¹¹ A more comprehensive defense of the Protection View would have to work through its implications in the non-identity cases that are at the heart of the non-identity problem. The short version of the defense is that I think these cases end up being unproblematic for the Protection View, though it takes some doing to explain why this is.

An individual joins or supports an organization which he knows has racist leanings...; he canvasses support for it among a credulous electorate, and he exercises his own vote in its favor.

Somebody offers deliberately confusing, though not untrue, information about the policies of a political party to a confused and simpleminded voter in an attempt to influence his vote.

An athlete takes part in sports competition with representatives of an oppressive...state, ...this profoundly demoralizes those who are struggling for the liberalization of that state.

Antiwar activists organize a rowdy demonstration near a cenotaph service on Remembrance Day.

A man refuses to give a stranger in the street the time of day when he asks for it or coldly and rudely rebuffs attempts at conversation in a railway compartment.

Someone refuses to consider evidence that might call in question his...fundamental opinions and beliefs about the world... ((1981): 21)

Waldron's view is that if an agent goes in for an action on this list, you, a bystander, may let the agent do so. In each case, the Protection View can explain why what you do is permissible. In each case, the agent is either *not* victimizing anyone or, if he is victimizing someone, is not doing so to a victim to whom you owe any protection.

In her discussion of Waldron (and others), Renee Jorgensen Bolinger discusses a case (due to Seana Shiffrin) in which you can stop me from thinking a morally wrongful thought, a thought that I would not act on or that would not motivate me (2017: 55). If there are such thoughts and if it is permissible for you to let me think them—like Bolinger, I am unsure of both—the Protection View straightforwardly explains why—no one is victimized by them.

Now you are in the stands at a college baseball game and see a pitcher put an illegal substance on the ball. You can alert the umpire to this wrongful cheating but don't. The Protection View explains why you do no wrong here: You owe the players no protection from cheating.

If, by contrast, you are not in the stands at the baseball game but are an umpire in the game who sees the cheating, you can stop it and should, and the Protection View straightforwardly explains why.

If there can be wrongdoing without victims, the Protection View would let us let all of those wrongs happen. If your closest friend wears a deeply offensive t-shirt in secret (and you are somehow inured to it), then the Protection View implies it is permissible to let them do so. If that friend ineffectually roots for foreign dictators, this might be wrong, but, if so, the Protection View would explain why you may let it happen—there is no victim of their ineffectual rooting.¹²

Other cases are harder. I have been troubled by some of my devout Christian friends letting me be a non-believer: Surely they should stop me from getting run over by a bus, so why may they let me go to Hell? Yet it could be that they owe me protection from the bus but not from Hell. It is hard to know what to say about this case and the Protection View can be used to explain why.

Imagine that a stranger sees a parent repeatedly hitting their child to motivate them to do well on a test. Another stranger hears a parent repeatedly taunting their child to

¹² The dictator case comes from Shafer-Landau 1994.

motivate them to do well on that test. By convention, we seem not to owe it to kids to protect them from the second sort of abuse but sometimes owe it to them to protect them from the first. (The convention even makes it unclear whether the second case involves abuse, as Hacking (1991) notes.) The Protection View can be used to explain why: It is just unclear what we owe the kids in these cases.

Yet this raises the following objection: It is unclear whether we need to protect others here and that's because all it would take to settle this is *whether we may let others do wrong* and that, in turn, is what we are trying to explain. The argument runs:

- (P1) If the Protection View is true, then it is wrong for Bystander to let Wrongdoer do wrong *because* Wrongdoer's wrongdoing has a victim *and* Bystander owes Victim protection from Wrongdoer's wrongdoing.
- (P2) Bystander owes Victim protection from Wrongdoer's wrongdoing because it is wrong for Bystander to let Wrongdoer do wrong. Hence,
- (C1) If the Protection View is true, it is wrong for Bystander to let Wrongdoer do wrong in part *because* it is wrong to let Wrongdoer do wrong.
- (P3) If so, then the Protection View is unexplanatory. Hence,
- (C2) The Protection View is unexplanatory.

The argument is unsound. (P2) is false. As a way to see this, consider a modification of an example from Jeff McMahan (2009: 60-61): You can stop someone from murderously pushing ten people off a cliff or can stop ten different people from being crushed by rocks unpredictably falling off some other cliff. You cannot save both groups. In this case, you should save one group, may save either. Moreover, the reason to save the first group is the same as the reason to save the second. Yet, if so, then that reason has nothing to do with protection from wrongdoing since there is no wrongdoing with regard to the rockslide. So it isn't true that you owe the ten would-be murder victims protection from the murderer's wrongdoing because it is wrong for you to let the murderer do wrong. Hence, (P2) is false.

Or consider a tiger attack. Damon is minding his business. A tiger attacks him. If you do nothing, the tiger will eat Damon. If you raise an alarm, the tiger will run off. Of course you should intervene here, but this is not because you are required to protect Damon from the tiger's wrongdoing—the tiger does nothing wrong. Yet whatever explains why you may not let the tiger attack Damon explains why you may not let a murderer wrongfully attack Damon. Hence, (P2) is false.

These cases show that the objection to the Protection View is unsound. They also show that the “Wrong” in this paper's title, “Letting Others Do Wrong,” misleads. I have argued that what explains a requirement to stop others' wrongdoing shows up in cases in which there is no wrongdoing: There is a tiger or a cliff or... That is one upshot of the Protection View.

Another upshot: That permitting wrongdoing promotes autonomy or fraternity or that failing to do so is onerous or pointless are genuine parts of an explanation of the permission to let others to wrong, but, if the Protection View is true, they are not needed. They overdetermine the permissibility. What some of them might not superfluously do is explain *requirements* to let others do wrong. That there is no victim you need to protect does not do that. By contrast, you might be required to let Bob do wrong because of his autonomy or because of your relationship with him. (I doubt you would ever be required to let him do wrong because it'd be hard not to or because it is pointless not to.)

A third upshot: If the Protection View is correct, the size of the wrongdoing bystanders can prevent does not directly affect the permissibility of letting it happen. We all, as we read papers in journals, let other people do wrong. We let some of them do terrible wrongs. All of us, for example, are in a position where we could help the Department of Children and Families stop various forms of child abuse and neglect, could be taking care of foster children instead of reading philosophy. All of us are in a position where we are letting children starve to death. In some of these cases, we let wrongdoing happen. We may—the Protection View has an explanation about that. In other cases, we may not let people do wrongs even when those wrongs are trifling. Say that you want to punch our mutual friend. You're weak, though, and the punch won't much hurt. It will, however, be an expression of your autonomy. You *fervently* and *reflectively* want to punch our mutual friend—doing so expresses who you are. I do not think I should let you. But not because your punch would be a big deal—it wouldn't. Again, the Protection View strikes me as right about this—I owe it to our mutual friend to protect him.

A final upshot: There is something to the objection to the Protection View discussed above. We know that we sometimes do wrong—and wrong others—by failing to protect them from this or that. We know that the clearest cases in which we are required to intervene to stop wrongdoing are cases in which the wrongdoing involves harm that you should protect someone from. Yet we also know that sometimes we owe people no protection from the very same harms, that when things go badly for them we have done nothing wrong, and it is not clear why. The Protection View raises hard questions of when we owe protection to creatures and from which sorts of wrongdoing and other bad events. These are hard questions in deontological ethics, and I have not given a detailed answer to them.

9. Conclusion

Even if vegans are right that meat-eating is wrong, they are sometimes permitted to let omnivores eat meat. Bob tells lie after lie, but I am sometimes permitted to let him do so. And yet Pacifist really should stop Abuser from abusing his child. Vegan really should not let Omnivore go to La Tavola Marche.

To explain these permissions and prohibitions in the cases we have been interested in—cases without catastrophes or filial duties or various other special considerations—I have argued for

THE PROTECTION VIEW—It is wrong for Bystander to let Wrongdoer do wrong when and only when *and because* Wrongdoer's wrongdoing has a victim *and* Bystander owes Victim protection from Wrongdoer's wrongdoing.

I motivated the Protection View by suggesting that “Why is it permissible to let others do wrong?” is sometimes best answered by something like, “Why wouldn't it be?” The literature on toleration sometimes suggests there is something especially valuable about tolerating the wrongful beliefs of others, that tolerating those beliefs is itself valuable or laudable or explained by something valuable or laudable: respect or fraternity or... This is sometimes so. Relatedly, there is sometimes something valuable about letting the wrongful actions of others go. Yet I also think that sometimes there is just nothing to it. It's like letting other people cross their legs or put their head in their hands—permissible but unremarkable, the sort of thing that requires no justification.

A view that required us to stop all the wrongdoing we could would encode a view of a person as a vigilant, officious police officer, required not only to act well but to ensure that others do, too. Or perhaps it would encode a view of bystanders as morally upright, extraordinarily anxious, interventionist parents and all the rest of us as their young children. Such views are wrong: Citizens are neither moral police officers nor moral parents (and not all of us are young children). “Who do you think you are?” can be a perfectly good response to someone who is trying to stop you from doing wrong. It’s a perfectly good response for Bob the liar to make to me. It is not a good response to a cop trying to stop you from law-breaking—it is perfectly clear who the cop is and why that cop may stop you. It is not a good response to your parent when you are a young child who has been caught trying to sneak out of bed past bedtime—it is perfectly clear who the parent is and why that parent may stop you.

Would “Who do you think you are?” be a good response to God if God stopped you from doing wrong? If there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good god, that god finds itself a vegan in a restaurant with omnivores every moment of every day. And that god lets us eat and eat. Some of the explanations discussed in this paper are familiar from and relevant to the problem of evil literature. Yet this paper has been only about limited moral creatures, and our dealings with other limited moral creatures. I have left God out of it.

I have left out discussion of which attitudes we should have towards wrongdoers.¹³ I have written nothing about how the law ought to treat wrongdoers. I have written nothing about when and why it is permissible to let people act *badly* yet not wrongly¹⁴ as when you let your sister be just barely rude—again!—to your cousin. I have not said anything about what a proponent of the Protection View should say about these issues.

For the most part, I have kept mum about when and why it is permissible to *support* the wrongdoing of others and about how my topic fits in with the complicity literature.¹⁵ Thomas Tryon let his wife eat meat, but there is more to that story. While Thomas Tryon vituperatively criticized meat-eaters, he did not simply *let* his wife eat meat. He let his *wife* eat meat. He not only let her do wrong but, through love and marriage, supported that wrongdoing in various ways.

In the summer of 1994

...a cholera epidemic hit the 850,000 refugees of Goma camp in Zaire, causing more than 80,000 deaths in ten days and ravaging the camp for months. The proliferation of aid actors trying to respond to such an overwhelming emergency further strengthened the political and military power of the FAR [the genocidal group that was primarily responsible for

¹³ For discussion, see several essays in Heyd 1998. The literature on toleration concerns itself with attitudes much more than this paper has. Smith 2013, like this paper, is about something it calls “accommodation” but, to Smith, accommodation is “a practical stance” (11), a “suite of practical attitudes” (13).

¹⁴ For discussion of closely related issues, see Driver (1992) on suberogation and Harman (2015b) and (2016) on morally permissible moral mistakes.

¹⁵ As four examples, consider Julia Driver’s, Christopher Kutz’s, Chiara Lepora and Robert Goodin’s, and Tristram McPherson’s accounts. Driver (2016)’s account of complicity in wrongdoing: participating in wrongdoing by cooperating with it or making a joint contribution to a coordinated effort to do wrong (76). Kutz (2000)’s account: to intentionally participate with others in wrongdoing regardless of whether you succeed (122). Lepora and Goodin (2013)’s account: “doing something that you could and should have known, at the time you did it, might be essential for the wrongdoing of the other to occur” (170, fn. 1). McPherson (2015)’s account of complicity in wrongdoing: aiming to benefit by cooperating with others’ wrongful plans (83). Whether these notions are what I am interested in depends on whether and when letting others do wrong is a form of *cooperating with* wrongdoing or a form of *intentionally participating* in wrongdoing and so on.

between 500,000 and 1,000,000 deaths in Spring 1994]....FAR groups took leadership of the newly created refugee camps. Having done so, they set about diverting aid, using camps as military recruitment and training centers, killing opponents, and further spreading genocidal propaganda...All international aid organizations faced the same dilemma: continue working in the camp, and thereby strengthen further the power of genocidal perpetrators over the refugees; or withdraw from the camps, abandoning a population that was in extreme distress. (Lepora and Goodin 2013: 133; cf. Gourevitch 1998)

Aid organizations did not simply let FAR do wrong. They also supported that wrongdoing in various ways.

Yvon Chouinard of Patagonia makes products that he believes people should not buy. He not only lets consumers do (what he believes is) wrong but tempts them to do wrong (Paumgarten 2016). This, too, is not simply letting be.

It is hard enough to explain what is going on in highly stylized and simplistic examples. What is going on in these actual examples is harder still, and I have said nothing about how—whether—to extend the Protection View to cover them. I have said nothing about all the non-moral mistakes we let others make. Someone’s reasoning goes wrong or they act imprudently. I have not said anything about when it is permissible to let others do rational wrongs or prudential wrongs. Again, how and whether to extend the Protection View to cover such cases I have left open. It is a topic for future work.

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