WHY YOUR NEXT CATERED EVENT SHOULD NOT INCLUDE MEAT

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ABSTRACT

Zachary Ferguson: Why Your Next Catered Event Should Not Include Meat
(Under the direction of Rebecca Walker)

Much has been written about the ethics of eating meat. Far less has been said about the ethics of *serving* meat. In this paper I argue that we often shouldn't serve meat, even if it is morally permissible for individuals to purchase and eat meat. I focus on catered events to highlight the important but overlooked role that midsized institutions play in addressing collective problems, like the harms associated with industrial animal agriculture. Historically, the ethical conversation surrounding meat has been limited to individual diets, meat producers, and government actors. Institutional choices are an underexplored avenue for driving social change—their power and influence outstrip individual actions, and they can shape behavior in modest ways that promote social goods. Here I highlight three ways that institutional actors can reduce meat consumption and shape cultural attitudes surrounding meat: large impact decisions, subtly shaping incentives, and spreading burdens out over many people.

To my wife, Annie, who understood that animals deserve decent treatment long before I did.
Thank you for your patience and for accompanying me on this ethical journey.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction 1
2 A Puzzle about the Badness of Industrial Animal Agriculture 3
2.1 Three Potential Strategies to Tackle the Issue 5
2.1.1 Changes in Individual Consumption 6
2.1.2 Perpetrators Should Stop 7
2.1.3 Government Intervention 9
3 The Solution: Institutional Influence 11
3.1 Shaping Incentives 11
3.2 Shared Burden 13
3.3 Large-Impact Decisions 14
4 How Strong is the Case? 16
4.1 The Weak Claim 16
4.1.1 Common Objections 17
4.1.2 What Follows from the Weak Claim? 21
4.2 The Strong Claim 22
5 Application: Philosophy Departments 23
6 Conclusion 25
REFERENCES 27

Introduction

Much has been written about the ethics of eating meat.[1] [2] Far less has been said about the ethics of *serving* meat. I believe that these two issues can come apart, and my aim is to convince readers that in many cases we ought not serve meat, even if it is morally permissible for individuals to purchase and eat meat. Most writings on the ethics of meat center on personal dietary choices. I hope to expand the discussion to include our institutional and organizational behavior. Institutional choices are an underexplored avenue for driving social change—their power and influence outstrip individual actions, and they can shape behavior in modest ways that promote social goods. By changing our institutional orientation toward meat, we could reduce our collective emissions, limit our collective support for an industry that depends on cruelty, and likely save ourselves a fair amount of money along the way.[3] Most importantly, we can do all of this without asking any individual organization members to consciously change their dietary lifestyle.

The core claim of this paper is that people with certain kinds of institutional power should leverage their influence to decrease meat consumption and thereby shift cultural attitudes

[1] For some influential arguments for ethical vegetarianism see Singer (2009), Reagan (1983), Diamond (1978), Norcross (2004), and DeGrazia (2009).

[2] The arguments in this paper apply to all animal products, not just meat—especially eggs and dairy. Readers can feel free to replace instances of the word "meat" with "animal products" and "vegetarian" with "vegan." My focus on meat is rhetorical rather than principled. It is simply easier to get event organizers and meat-eaters on board with meatless meals rather than fully plant-based meals. Since this project is practically minded, I am willing to make a more modest suggestion if it makes positive change more likely. I also restrict my discussion to the products of industrial animal agriculture. I make no claims about the products of "family farms" here. Readers can similarly choose to read the word "meat" as "factory-farmed meat" or "factory-farmed animal products."

[3] See Springmann et al. (2021) for evidence that vegan and vegetarian diets are cheaper on average in wealthy countries.

surrounding meat. Choosing not to serve meat at catered events is the most clear-cut example of these ideas in practice. If I am right, event organizers charged with using institutional money to order food should not purchase meat, *even if they themselves eat meat*. Though the implications of this idea are far-reaching, for the sake of brevity I focus mostly on the paradigmatic case of catering choices.

To motivate the view, I begin in §2 with a puzzle about how to address collective action problems, specifically those involved with industrial animal agriculture. Given that meat production involves serious moral problems, we have strong reasons to work to reform our farming practices. How should we do that? In §2.1, I survey the most obvious candidate solutions and find that each is either infeasible or ruled out by widely held philosophical commitments. If we take these to be the only options, we face the unacceptable conclusion that we should give up on social change. Luckily, they are not the only options. In section §3, I propose that institutions have a critical role to play in reforming our food practices and suggest three ways that individuals using their institutional power can promote social change. They can do this by making large impact decisions, subtly shaping incentives, and spreading burdens out over many people (§§3.1-3.3). Along the way, I address objections (§4.1.1) and argue that even if readers do not think they are obligated to address this problem, they should not impede those who do try to make a difference (§4.1.2).

I end the paper with a call to action. Theoretical knowledge in normative ethics is useless if it does not find its way into practice, and I urge readers to implement the ideas presented here in their own lives and organizations. Most of my audience work in philosophy departments that hold catered events. Some of those people will find themselves in a position to make catering decisions, while the rest can propose a department policy or promote informal norms regarding

catering choices. In §5, I offer some reflections on how they might do that. The immediate practical conclusion to draw from this essay is that you and your organization should stop serving meat. Philosophy departments should stop serving meat.

1 A Puzzle about the Badness of Industrial Animal Agriculture

Factory farming is undeniably bad. Each year, tens of billions of sentient land animals are forced to endure what can only be described as torturous conditions.[4] They are subject to extreme confinement that frustrates most of their natural behaviors, they endure routine unanesthetized mutilations that can result in lifelong pain, and they face distressing, often painful slaughter well before their lives would naturally conclude. These are just a few of their plights. If we consider fish, who also experience painful deaths and extreme discomfort when farmed or harvested, the number of animals killed every year for human consumption balloons to 1-3 *trillion*.[5]

Factory farming is also bad for people. To start, there are serious public health risks associated with animal agriculture.[6] Intense confinement of large numbers of animals results in a higher rates of disease transmission, which increases this likelihood of new and more infectious zoonotic diseases and puts us at risk for future pandemics. Farmers frequently overuse preventative antibiotics, which causes bacteria to evolve resistance to the drugs designed to kill them. This makes it more difficult and costly to treat infections in humans as our medicines

[4] Evidence for this claim is plentiful, but undercover footage of farms collected by Mercy for Animals (n. d.) is a place to start. Singer (2009) offers extensive discussion, often citing materials produced by the industries themselves.

[5] See Mood & Brooke (2010) and Mood (2010) for estimates.

[6] See the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (2009) and Anomaly (2015).

become less potent. In addition to public health risks, industrial agriculture is bad for the employees, who perform grueling work in dangerous conditions for low pay, and for rural communities, which experience job loss and poverty as the industry concentrates and family farms disappear.[7]

If that weren't enough, animal agriculture is a blight on the environment.[8] It accounts for a large percentage of global emissions, including most of the methane released into the atmosphere.[9] It is resource intensive, especially when compared to horticulture, and a significant portion of the world's arable land, grain, and fresh water are consumed by animal farming.[10] It is also by far the leading cause of deforestation.[11] These practices are entirely unsustainable.

I will refer to these issues collectively as "the problem of factory farming." I know of no moral philosophers who seriously defend current farming practices, and the problem of factory farming is widely acknowledged, even by those who defend the moral permissibility of meat-eating. It is common for those defending meat to begin their paper or book by explicitly mentioning the problems involved with animal agriculture and emphasizing that they do not endorse the meat industry as it currently exists.[12] For these reasons, I take the claim that factory farming is morally bad to be an uncontroversial one. There is a consensus among those who have studied these ethical questions that our collective farming practices must be radically reformed.

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[7] See PCIFAP (2009)

[8] See Horrigan et al. (2002) for a general survey of the environmental dangers of intensive agriculture, especially meat production.

[9] See O'Mara (2011).

[10] See Mekonnen & Hoekstra (2012) and Horrigan et al. (2002).

[11] See Bodo et al. (2021).

[12] For a litany of examples see recent volumes like *Why it's OK to Eat Meat*, which has an entire chapter dedicated to the wrongs of factory farming, *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating*, in which several authors offer these caveats, and *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat* which explicitly notes in the introduction that no contributor defends contemporary farming practices.

The scholarly debates that follow revolve around how *we as individuals* ought to behave in light of what we know about factory farming.

1.1 Three Potential Strategies to Tackle the Issue

I take it to be trivially true that if we agree there is a massive collective problem, we ought to try to solve it. A significant portion of the food we eat and the products we consume comes from animals, and in the US, as many as 99% of farmed animals are in factory farms.[13] As we have seen, the problems associated with animal agriculture are grave and urgent. Our collective consumption is deeply intwined with these industries, so we ought to at least consider how we might address these issues.

In this section, I consider the three most promising solutions to the problem of factory farming: (i) changing our personal consumption habits, (ii) pressuring identifiable perpetrators to reform their practices, and (iii) government intervention. Most people, including many philosophers, are not willing to accept (i). I admit that my own view is that the case against (i) is weak; however, given how many arguments there are against vegetarianism, it is worthwhile to see where the ideas lead us if we assume that (i) is not required. So, I grant for the sake of the paper that most individuals are not morally required to change their diets in response to the problems involved with the meat industry. I then go on to show that both (ii) and (iii) are not currently feasible given the reality of the industry and the present state of government. If these avenues for social change are exhaustive, then we are threatened with the unacceptable conclusion that we are required to solve the problem, but each candidate solution is such that it is foreclosed to us, or we are not required to solve the problem in that way. This is our puzzle.

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[13] Based on an estimate by The Sentience Institute using data from the USDA and the EPA (Anthis, 2019).

1.1.1 Changes in Individual Consumption

The first and most obvious potential response to the problem of factory farming is that we could all stop purchasing and consuming meat, or at least work to reduce our meat consumption. If demand for animal products were to plummet, the industry would shrink as producers went out of business and the costs to the environment, humans, and nonhuman animals would lessen. We could do this by becoming vegan, participating in meatless Mondays, or enjoying the occasional plant-based meal. However, many have argued that a moral requirement to abstain from meat does not follow from the badness of factory farming.

Usually, philosophers emphasize that it is difficult to show that *individuals* have a *specific moral obligation* to abstain from purchasing meat. Some argue that animals do not have moral status, so we do not have any obligations toward them. This is typically part of a Kantian framework that identifies human reason as the sole source of value.[14] If animals are mere things, factory farming might be permissible under certain circumstances (though the human and environmental costs may complicate the picture). Others are persuaded by what is sometimes called the *causal inefficacy objection*, which claims that individual abstention from animal products is inefficacious—the connection between the individual shopper and the farms producing animals for slaughter is too tenuous, and my choice not to buy a chicken from the grocery store probably won't affect the amount of meat that the grocery store orders, let alone how much is sent to the distributor from the slaughterhouse.[15] Another class of objections appeals to what we might call a "no ethical consumption under capitalism" principle: We live in

[14] Hsiao (2015) defends a particularly strong version of this view.

[15] Budolfson (2015, 2019) and Shahar (2021) offer the most recent iteration of the objection, though plenty of others argue similarly. For a convincing rebuttal see McMullen & Halteman (2019).

a complicated globalized world, and even the simplest commodities have complex supply chains. Since almost every industry can trace part of its production process to problematic practices like animal abuse, child labor, or slavery, an obligation to abstain from meat because it involves supporting an immoral industry would generalize too broadly and implicate nearly all economic activity.[16]

There are compelling responses to each of these objections to ethical vegetarianism, but I will not discuss them here.[17] My main goal is not to argue that individuals are morally obligated to abstain from meat or factory-farmed animal products, and my thesis is consistent with the view that we don't have such an obligation. Since many people are convinced by one or more of these objections, for the purposes of this essay I will assume that we are not required to change our own diets. However, since this is the most obvious strategy, ruling it out does put pressure on us to find another solution.

1.1.2 Perpetrators Should Stop

A second potential solution would be to look to meat producers themselves to change their practices. If the corporate giants responsible for these moral atrocities would just *cut it out*, then we would be much better off. Unfortunately, this seems more like wishful thinking than a real attempt at reform. There are powerful forces keeping the meat industry from changing its behavior, the most important being market pressure. The intensive farming practices we see today were born from an unceasing desire to cut costs and increase efficiency. If competition

[16] See Mills (2019) and Warfield (2015).

[17] For an account of Kantian ethics that includes obligations to nonhuman animals, see Korsgaard (2018). For the standard response to the inefficacy objection see Kagan (2011), though it also appears in Singer (2009) and Norcross (2004). McMullen & Halteman (2019) rebut arguments that purport to show that the case for vegetarianism implicates all economic activity.

drove the meat industry to develop its current inhumane methods, it will also be a formidable barrier to revising those methods without outside intervention. Even if a powerful meat mogul suddenly grew a conscience, market pressure would make it nearly impossible for him to implement more humane conditions on a large scale.

Farming animals in any kind of humane manner is expensive and inefficient. Giving animals room to turn around or spread their limbs requires more space and decreased stocking density. Giving them access to the sun or the outdoors similarly requires more land and space. Anesthetics cost money and take time to administer. Ensuring that animals are fully stunned before slaughter requires slowing down the production line.[18] If a single company were to implement these or other changes, it would increase their production costs and put them at a competitive disadvantage. One only needs to look at how much more "humanely produced" meat[19] costs to understand that large scale improvements to animal welfare would be economic suicide for an individual producer. When I checked my local grocery store, "regular" ground beef cost $4.49/lb., whereas beef labeled "ethically sourced" cost $8.49/lb.

Consumers are sensitive to the price of meat and dairy.[20] As things currently stand, humanely produced meat is a luxury, and most customers aren't interested in or can't afford these products. If Tyson decided to overhaul its operations, treating its animals as humanely as

[18] Improper stunning during the breakneck pace of production means that many animals are fully conscious when they are exsanguinated, dismembered, or tossed into boiling water.

[19] I use scare quotes because this label can mean very different things to different organizations. Some certifying organizations will label meager improvements on typical factory farming practices "humane," while others are much more stringent. Some companies try to cash in on the branding that "humane" offers without making substantial changes to animal welfare. For discussion, see Scott-Reid (2021).

[20] See Andreyeva et al. (2010). The price elasticity of demand of these products is high, meaning that as prices increase, there will be a corresponding decrease in demand. For example, if beef prices increase by 1%, it is expected that demand for beef will fall by 0.75%.

possible and ballooning its prices as a result, buyers would simply switch to JBS Foods products. Producers are responding to what consumers buy, and consumers currently prefer cheap meat.

1.1.3 Government Intervention

The final obvious strategy to address the problem of factory farming is to consider government intervention. We could pass laws that ban many current farming techniques and regulate the environmental impact of agriculture. While this is an important and necessary part of the solution, large scale political change is not very likely in the short term. There are a few reasons for this. First, given the arguments in the previous section, these measures would increase the cost of animal products, which would be unpopular given our current cultural attitudes toward meat. As it stands, vegetarianism is a minority practice, and a politically valanced one at that. If our representatives were to propose major reforms, outrage-mongers would seize on this culture war kindling to decry how the liberals want to take hamburgers away from hard-working Americans.[21] At least in the United States, we are not culturally prepared to take these steps.

Second, any group pushing for reform will face a powerful meat lobby and a political system that has been captured by industry and prioritizes moneyed interests over popular policy demands.[22] Agribusiness is one of the largest sources of money in politics in the US.[23] Organizations trying to make political progress on this front find themselves facing well-funded

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[21] These are real talking points in US politics (BBC, 2019).

[22] For an account of the many ways that animal industries shape government policy for their own benefit, see Simon (2013).

[23] See OpenSecrets' lobbying profile for the agricultural sector. Agribusiness outspends even the defense industries, spending over $165 million on lobbying in 2022 (though not all of that is tied to animal products) (OpenSecrets, n.d.).

and well-organized opposition. Here are just some of the ways that the meat industry exerts its enormous influence: Funding sympathetic academic research and controlling how it is communicated,[24] pushing for laws that prohibit any cultured meat or meat substitute from including the word "meat" on the packaging or for advertising,[25] and pushing unpopular "ag gag" laws that try to stop whistleblowers from photographing or recording animal abuse in farms.[26] These are formidable obstacles to bringing about even modest reform, let alone the sweeping changes that would be required to build an ethical and sustainable food system.

Lastly, overcoming these challenges requires a strength of political will that is simply not available right now. Most advocates for government intervention are vegans and vegetarians who make up a relatively small portion of the population. For legislators to consider drastic changes, we would need a significant uptick in animal rights activism and a large grassroots movement. Many people would need to become involved by donating, engaging in consciousness-raising efforts and protests, and loudly promoting animal welfare and sustainability. This kind of political engagement seems especially unlikely if most people remain committed to not changing their diet. Though it is not necessarily contradictory, it would be odd for someone to join a mass political movement for animal rights while remaining committed to eating factory farmed meat.

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[24] See Tabuchi (2022).

[25] See, for example, the United States Cattlemen's Association's publicity regarding the issue (US Cattlemen's Association, n.d.) or their official petitions submitted to the US Department of Agriculture (Food Safety and Inspection Service, n.d.). For a summary of what these laws aim to do, see Sullivan (2018).

[26] See Shea (2014).

2 The Solution: Institutional Influence

We began with a problem that needs to be solved and three candidate solutions. It does not look like we can count on industry leaders or governments to solve the problem, at least in the short term. If we remain steadfast in our belief that we are not required to change our diets, the puzzle is in full force. Each potential solution is either infeasible or not required. This gives the contradictory result that we ought to solve the problem, but we are not required to solve the problem. To avoid this unsavory outcome, we might have to give up on the thought that we ought to solve the problem or concede that social change is impossible.

Luckily, these conclusions are avoidable because the three options outlined above are not the only ways to promote social progress. I want to suggest that our institutions are the locus of change that we are looking for—especially if we reject individual lifestyle changes and large-scale systemic overhaul is impracticable. Institutions come in all shapes and sizes, and they offer us a flexible, intermediate plane for intervention between individual consumption and governments. They are uniquely poised to effect change in ways that individuals alone cannot, and they can do so without the cumbersome restrictions that curtail governments. In the following sections (§§3.1-3.3), I highlight three ways that we can leverage our institutional positions to effect change. Though there are interesting philosophical questions about collective agency and institutional actors, I set these issues aside and instead focus on individual agents and how they act *through* their institutions.

2.1 Shaping Incentives

The first way that someone can use their institutional influence to affect social change is by shaping the incentive structures in their organization. Through small changes in policy, we can

subtly steer the behavior of other members and participants in innocuous ways that aren't possible through interpersonal interactions. This idea is not new. Institutions already do this when it comes to addressing other kinds of collective action problems, like climate change. Consider, for example, how a company might make a surprisingly large impact on individual consumption by changing their paper towel dispensers out for electric hand dryers or for dispensers that let paper out more slowly. Institutional decisions can shape food choices, too. In my university's dining hall, there is a booth for a local Greek restaurant where students can use their meal plan to buy food. The default meal plan option is a falafel pita, which is vegetarian. Students can order meat, but it is slightly less convenient because it comes with a minor charge on top of the meal swipe. I am not sure why the restaurant has this policy—it could be for animal welfare or environmental reasons, or simply to save the restaurant money. Whatever the reason, the result is that people order less meat.

Consider now the choice not to include meat options at catered events. By regularly showing how easy and tasty eating vegetarian can be, organizations that normalize vegetarianism can influence members to reduce their own meat consumption both at work and at home. They can do this in a few ways. First, it is a lot easier to abstain when everyone else around you is abstaining, too. I know this from experience since there are several vegans in my department. Second, it is significantly easier to choose a vegetarian meal when there are several delicious veggie options available. When there is only one unappetizing vegetarian choice among a plethora of meats, omnivores will probably go for the latter. Third, serving a variety of vegetarian dishes will introduce people to new food options that they did not know about. Many typical American and European meals center around meat, with vegetables, fruits, and grains as optional garnishes. For this reason, many people cannot even imagine what they might eat other

than meat. Part of the long-term project of reducing meat consumption involves showing people how many other options are available, and meat-free catered events are a great way to do this. Lastly, some of the major reasons that vegetarians end up violating or abandoning their diet is due to lack of social support and the difficulty involved with maintaining their diet in a world that is materially unaccommodating.[27] By helping to create spaces where it is easy to go meatless, both because the food is provided and because there is no social pressure to eat meat, institutions promote ethical consumption habits that may influence other areas of their members' lives.

2.2 Shared Burden

I do not deny that committing to a vegetarian diet requires some sacrifices. It might mean forgoing familiar meals, modifying cultural practices, learning to cook new cuisines, and paying more attention to food labels. Luckily, an institution committing to meatless catering does not impose any of these burdens on its members. Eating an occasional vegetarian meal planned, purchased, and prepared by someone else imposes none of the costs involved with a personal commitment to vegetarianism. Attendees are not asked to read the ingredients to see if they contain meat. They are not asked to learn a new recipe. They are not asked to restrict their choices to only those menu items with a little green "v" next to them. In fact, they are not asked to think about their food choices *at all*. Those attending a meat-free catered event do exactly what they do at any other catered event: each person picks from among the different options the food that looks best to them, whether that be the tastiest, healthiest, most nutrient-dense, etc. Again, they do not need to plan, buy, or cook the meal. This is about as minimally burdensome

[27] See Hodson & Earle (2018), Rosenfeld & Tomiyama (2019), and Herzog (2011).

as it gets. The case is even stronger when we consider that most people don't attend catered events very often. Even on university campuses, where events with free food abound, most people attend these functions at most a few times a month. Asking people to unthinkingly eat vegetables instead of meat a few times a month is not a big ask.

To the extent that forgoing meat is burdensome, what I am proposing dilutes that burden by spreading it out over many people. While it might be psychologically difficult for 100 people to choose to order a vegetarian meal on three different occasions, it is easy for a planner to order 300 meatless meals with one phone call. For those who find the idea of reducing or eliminating meat from their own diet intimidating, this sharing of the burden should come as a relief.

2.3 Large-Impact Decisions

This final point can be illustrated through an anecdote. I first started thinking about the ideas in this paper while my partner and I were planning our wedding. At the time, though I was persuaded by arguments for ethical vegetarianism, I still hadn't taken the plunge to completely cut meat from my diet, and my partner had been a vegetarian for over a decade. We had a large wedding with about 140 guests, and all but a small handful of them ate meat. When the time came to choose a caterer and pick the food for the event, it occurred to me that we were about to make the largest consumer choice about food that either of us had ever made. With a single decision, we could avoid purchasing more meat than it would have taken me *months* to eat given my own consumption habits. So, we decided to only serve meat-free dishes. We didn't tell anyone what we were doing—we just served the food normally. The meal was buffet-style and there were enough options that everyone could choose what they liked. As far as we could tell, many people didn't even notice the lack of meat. Nobody complained, and we got endless

compliments on the food from friends and family who have eaten meat their entire lives and have likely never thought twice about it. We served delicious food that was well-received by a meat-eating crowd, and in the process, about 140 meals that would have otherwise had meat were meatless.

Usually, my only way to impact demand for meat is to personally abstain from purchasing it for my own consumption. I don't often get to make catering decisions that will affect dozens of people (hopefully, I will only get married once!). Institutions, though, frequently make large scale purchases that will affect the consumption of hundreds or thousands of people. Contrast this with typical consumers, who can only affect demand in proportion to our spending power. For all but the very wealthy, our impact will be minimal. However, white-collar workers of modest means are often given the authority to spend money *on behalf of organizations* through their bureaucratic offices. Even low-level secretarial workers have limited control over large pools of resources. This opens up the possibility for large-impact decisions. The larger the institution, the larger its purchasing power and therefore the higher potential to impact aggregate demand. Catering decisions are a paradigmatic case, since catering choices are of a much larger scale than any individual meal purchase.

Like we saw earlier, some people with institutional power already recognize this possibility and use their position to help address other collective action problems. Again, climate change is the most salient example. Those who make purchasing decisions for their organizations often intentionally choose eco-friendly paper products, opt for compostable or reusable serving dishes in dining halls, install low-flow toilets, etc. Often, these kinds of large-scale purchasing decisions are made by an individual or a small group of people. These kinds of changes might be even easier to make for those in smaller organizations with less red tape, where an individual can

make unilateral decisions without having to jump through administrative hoops. If the secretary is charged with restocking the paper products in the building, he can choose more sustainable brands. Likewise, if the department chair oversees the annual department party, she can choose to order meatless catering.

3 How Strong is the Case?

What do I seek to establish by pointing out the ways that individuals can use their institutional power to promote social change? What is required of us? In §4.1 I begin by defending the modest claim that it is *permissible* for individuals to act in the ways I describe in §3. However, I anticipate that even this weak claim will face pushback. I cannot answer every objection here, but there is a common theme that many objections share, and I try to disarm it in §4.1.1. Then, in §4.1.2 I further argue that, if I am right about the weak claim, one ought not resist or interfere with those who act permissibly. Finally, in §4.2, I suggest that we in fact have good reasons to accept a stronger claim, that we *ought* to use our institutional influence in the ways I've been describing.

3.1 The Weak Claim

I begin with the modest claim: It is *permissible* for individuals to wield their institutional power to try to address urgent collective action problems of a moral nature through large impact decisions, incentive-shaping, and burden-sharing (within the scope of their normal institutional responsibilities). I am not suggesting that anyone act in a way that goes against their job description, like taking the catering budget and donating it to charity instead of ordering food. Most of our professional tasks allow for a certain amount of leeway in how we complete them. When planning a catered event, organizers need to balance cost, which food options are

available, any known allergies, and accommodating a variety of tastes. What I am suggesting is that it is also appropriate to consider promoting social progress alongside those other considerations. It is permissible to consider environmental impact when stocking the building with paper products. It is likewise permissible to consider environmental impact, or animal welfare, when ordering food.

3.1.1 Common Objections

I imagine that some readers are tempted to object that it should not be up to organizers to make food choices on behalf of others. Or they think it would be illiberal to try to push this niche agenda in a work setting, since people disagree about the permissibility of eating meat. Others still think that such a decision would need to be made democratically. There are many objections. What most of them have in common is the charge that, somehow or other, what I am suggesting would be an *inappropriate way to use institutional power*. There is something wrong with using one's institutional position to influence the behavior of others.

I cannot give an overarching account of what constitutes legitimate uses of institutional power here. However, I do not need to for my proposal to be reasonable. That onus falls on the objector who claims that it is wrong to use one's institutional power to influence others. Why? I am working within the framework of our institutions as they currently exist. I am not trying to defend our current cultural conception of institutional power; I am arguing about how we should behave *given* the current nature of our institutions. Once an organization reaches a certain level of complexity, responsibilities inevitably need to be delegated. Certain people are given the authority to act on behalf of others. Maybe it would be preferable if we did this democratically, or in a way that weighs each member's preferences, but for better or for worse, that is not how we do things right now. My proposal takes for granted that unelected bureaucrats sometimes

make decisions in their institutional roles in ways that affect the lives of others. It would be dialectically inappropriate to object to a *specific proposal* like not serving meat by challenging the nature of institutional power generally. This would be akin to rejecting a specific piece of legislation proposed by Congress on the grounds that the electoral college is anti-democratic. It may be that the electoral college is anti-democratic, but the reasonable objector should focus their attention there, rather than on the specific law they don't like. It is not a good objection to marijuana decriminalization specifically to say that the government decriminalizing it is illegitimate.

Objectors will instead need to make the case that meat restrictions are uniquely problematic. This is quite hard, since meat production is a perfect example of several kinds of problems, each of which we all accept as ideal candidates for institutional intervention. It is (1) a major contributor to climate change, (2) a massive threat to public health, and (3) produced in a morally abhorrent way. The first case is the strongest. The World Health Organization predicts that climate change will cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year globally between 2030 and 2050 when looking at just six causes of death.[28] Understandably, we celebrate workers who make sustainable choices on behalf of their organizations that help reduce emissions, curtail waste, promote composting, etc. We saw this earlier with greener paper products, swapping paper towel dispensers, and high-efficiency appliances. Since animal agriculture is one of the biggest contributors to climate change and environmental degradation, consuming less meat as an organization is one of the best ways to become more sustainable.

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[28] They estimate increased mortality rates from heat, coastal flooding, diarrheal disease, malaria, dengue, and undernutrition (World Health Organization, 2014). Those are, of course, just the human deaths caused by six things. Animal agriculture causes hundreds of billions of nonhuman deaths per year.

The second kind of problem that we are comfortable letting institutions fight on our behalf are problems related to public health. Consider the case of university tobacco bans. According to the Center for Disease Control, smoking causes approximately 480,000 deaths per year in the US, including 41,000 from the effects of secondhand smoke. Thousands of universities have responded to the health and environmental effects of smoking by banning the use of tobacco products on campus.[29] Most people take no issue when institutions promote public health in this way. Compare this to animal agriculture. As we saw earlier, factory farming increases the likelihood that infectious diseases like swine and bird flus develop and spread to humans. It leads to foodborne illnesses that cost the government hundreds of millions of dollars per year in healthcare spending, and it also contributes to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.[30] Furthermore, though there is no consensus on what constitutes the "healthiest" way to eat, there is growing evidence that vegetarian and reduced-meat diets are associated with longevity and decreased risk for chronic diseases.[31] To the extent that it is reasonable for institutions to promote disease prevention and healthy eating, it makes sense that they would consider not serving meat. Note that what I am proposing is less intrusive than tobacco bans—in addition to not serving or selling tobacco products on campus, universities and other organizations directly regulate the behavior of their members by prohibiting tobacco use. I don't propose any such regulation. I don't think it is a good idea to ban meat—I'm suggesting we don't actively distribute it.

[29] Wang et al. (2017).

[30] PCIFAP (2009).

[31] Leitzmann (2014), McEvoy et al. (2012).

The last kind of problem appropriate for institutional intervention is consumer goods produced in morally abhorrent ways. This is admittedly the most speculative point, but it is still worth mentioning. Supply chains are complicated, and it is hard to know how our consumer goods are produced. However, it seems reasonable that if it is obvious that a producer knowingly uses slave labor to make their products, administrators are justified in not buying those products. Even if the members largely do not care whether the organization is knowingly purchasing goods made by enslaved people, I maintain, and hope that others agree, that it is permissible for those making purchasing decisions to opt for non-slavery substitutes, even if this constitutes a minor inconvenience for others. For example, I think it would be appropriate for a secretary to only stock the printer with black and white ink if it were to come to light that all colored ink is produced by enslaved people. This is because slavery is morally abhorrent, and she does not want the organization to be complicit in that wrongdoing by benefiting from it. The sheer scale and intensity of animal suffering in factory farms is likewise morally abhorrent.[32] If we share the intuition that it is permissible for the secretary to use her institutional influence to avoid a product produced in a morally abhorrent way in the case of slavery, I think it is also permissible for her to choose not to purchase and serve meat produced in a morally abhorrent way.[33]

Since meat production is an instance of three archetypal problems that are the appropriate objects of institutional intervention, I conclude that it is permissible to use institutional power to decrease meat consumption.

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[32] I don't claim that causing massive amounts of animal suffering and enslaving people are morally equivalent. I only claim that they are both morally abhorrent.

[33] I don't claim that this reasoning holds for *all* consumer goods produced in morally dubious ways—I limit my argument to only the most extreme cases. I take it to be clear that when the production is highly unethical, as is the case with forced labor and excessive animal torture, it is more important to resist complicity in that wrongdoing than to avoid inconveniencing others by excluding that item from their choice set. For less extreme cases, the permissibility of restricting that choice set may depend on how unethical the production process is and how inconvenient it would be to avoid the item.

3.1.2 What Follows from the Weak Claim?

Those trying to implement these changes will probably face resistance, even in ostensibly progressive, environmentally conscious places. The weak claim says that it is permissible for individuals to choose not to buy meat using the institutional money they are charged with. Since it is permissible, this suggests that we should not interfere when others try to make these changes. I haven't claimed that *everybody* needs to work directly to reform animal agriculture. There are many moral battles to fight, and we should spend our energies where we will be most useful. However, this does not give us license to try to *stop* others from promoting social progress.

We must change our collective food practices if we are to live sustainably.[34] There is no sustainable future where we consume as many farmed animals as our society currently does. Meat consumption will have to decline across the board. The price will inevitably go up, and the amount produced will go down. I and others are working to realize these changes. Each person may not be morally required to help, but at a minimum they should not perpetuate current practices by resisting these necessary changes. We may not personally be required to stop driving or to install a solar panel on our houses; however, we should not oppose necessary political action that would increase sustainability, like ending fossil fuel subsidies or passing regulations that limit pollution. In the same way that it would have been wrong to oppose the Clean Air Act, it is also wrong to oppose reasonable efforts to reform industrial animal agriculture.

[34] See a meta-analysis by Aleksandrowicz et al. (2016) for evidence that high-income countries switching to environmentally friendly diets would drastically reduce our emissions, land use, and water use. Importantly, environmentally friendly diets involve avoiding or limiting meat and other animal products.

For social change to be possible, *something* must change. Our collective behavior must change, and this shared adjustment will inevitably take expression in our individual behavior. A sustainable future will require lifestyle modifications from each of us—though it is still open whether those changes come by personal choice, government mandate, or institutional influence. Not changing is not an option.

3.2 The Strong Claim

I began this paper with a puzzle about how to solve serious collective action problems that we all grant are worth addressing. I argued that it seems unlikely that we will ever improve our food system if we accept that we do not have an obligation to change our lifestyles, since systemic reform is not forthcoming. At least, progress seems impossible if these are the only options. I have striven to show that they are not, and that progress *is* possible. Between individual consumption and systemic overhaul, we can now see that the institutional route is also available to us. However, this expanded list of options to achieve progress seems more likely to be exhaustive than the initial list. I don't deny that there may be other ways to fight for social progress, but I cannot think of them. If we ought to do something about the problem of factory farming, we need to pick *a* strategy. If the institutional route I suggest is the only option left, this gives us reason to consider a stronger claim than the initial one.

Here is the strong claim: Individuals *ought* to wield their institutional power to try to address urgent collective action problems of moral nature through large impact decisions, incentive-shaping, and burden-sharing (within the scope of their normal institutional responsibilities). It is plausible that we have moral reason to seek out and create opportunities for these kinds of changes. This is especially true when, as is the case with meat production, we are facing a problem that is (1) moral, (2) urgent, (3) collective in nature, and for which (4) systemic

solutions are not forthcoming. Otherwise, we are again faced with the unacceptable possibility that we ought to solve the problem, but that we are not required to solve the problem. Recall that even strident defenders of meat acknowledge how morally bad the problem of factory farming is. If they are genuine in their claims that these are real problems that demand solving, there is serious pressure to accept my proposal or develop an alternative strategy for change. I repeat: Not changing anything is not an option.

4 Application: Philosophy Departments

The ideas I have put forward in this paper are not just an intellectual exercise. Properly understood, they present a call to action. Since most readers are likely affiliated with a philosophy department, the natural way to apply these ideas would be to stop serving meat in philosophy departments. Here I share some brief thoughts on what that might look like.

I can think of two main ways to implement these ideas: an explicit department policy regarding meat purchases or informal norms. I doubt that there is one correct answer, and the best rollout will depend on the department. A formal policy has some distinct advantages and drawbacks. Most obviously, it makes compliance more likely. If the majority of the department approves a rule, then ideally even those who oppose it would feel professionally obligated to follow that rule, even if they do so reluctantly. Secondly, some members might be more willing to sign off on a joint project like this if it is officially enshrined. Some meat-eating philosophers who agree in principle with my proposal have shared with me that they would feel more secure in the decision if they knew that others were equally bound by the same departmental rules. Like with many collective action problems, sometimes a joint resolution is the best way to bind a group to a shared commitment and discourage defectors or free riders.

An official policy does have its limitations, though. First, some members might worry that this kind of policy restricts the freedom of event organizers to run their events the way that they'd like to. I grant that in some cases it does seem problematic to regulate how certain money is spent. Individual grant money, especially when it is awarded from a source outside the university, seems like a prime example. It might likewise be objectionable to dictate how personal research funds are spent. In these cases, social pressure seems more appropriate than legislative fiat. However, there are other kinds of institutional dollars, like departmental funds or other money that comes from the university, that seem more amenable to this kind of rule. There will naturally be questions about how to best formulate the policy—a blanket prohibition on using departmental money to purchase meat might be straightforward, but unwieldy if the department takes invited speakers out to dinner, for example. I've focused on catered events in this paper because they are a clearly defined target, but I will leave the policy subtleties up to the individual departments.

If a ban sounds too strong, another option would be to consider an opt-in policy toward meat. In this scenario, the default assumption would be that catering is meatless. However, if somebody wishes to request meat, they can do so. If this sounds unfair, note that this is often the position that vegetarians find themselves in in a world where meat is considered the default (it is especially common for there to be no vegan options at these kinds of things). Even this extremely modest change can make a big difference—there is some promising empirical work showing that vegetarian nudges are effective at decreasing total meat consumption, and when asked, participants overall feel positively about being nudged.[35]

[35] Hansen et al. (2021).

I recognize that for many departments an official rule restricting the purchase of meat maybe be unpopular and therefore infeasible. The other option is to promote an informal norm of only ordering vegetarian food. If you are already sympathetic to my project, I encourage you to look for leadership roles that allow you to make these kinds of purchasing decisions, or if you are already in such a position, put the ideas into practice. Otherwise, share these ideas and your own arguments with your colleagues, especially those who order food. Emphasize how easy it would be and how it is not burdensome. Most importantly, if you purchase food for an event, *don't purchase meat!*

5 Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that we often shouldn't serve meat, even if it is permissible for individuals to eat meat. I did not argue for personal vegetarianism, and I reasoned from the assumption that we don't have any obligation to change our diets. Nonetheless, I do think the arguments in this paper put some pressure on those assumptions. Our institutional actions can certainly help with the problem of factory farming, but to build a truly ethical and sustainable food system we will probably need to make strides on multiple fronts, including our own diets and political activism. Luckily, by building a culture of eating and serving less meat through our organizations, we can make these seemingly onerous changes more approachable and appealing. Catering choices are an excellent first step toward a more ethical, sustainable future.

I focused on catering choices because they are an easy, illustrative example of the kinds of changes we can achieve through our institutions but that we cannot as individual actors: shaping incentives, diluting burdens, and making large-impact decisions. Of course, the strategies I outline do not only apply to catered events, and they do not only apply to the problem of factory

farming. Though meat was the topic of the paper, and the problem of factory farming is especially egregious, there are other kinds of problems amenable to these strategies. Throughout the paper, I made frequent allusions to the problem of climate change; I also discussed public health crises and consumer goods produced in unethical ways. For some of these problems, what I suggest is already common sense. For others, like meat, it might not seem as obvious. This gives us even more reason to remain on the lookout for opportunities to do good through our organizations. Though addressing these pressing global issues can be daunting, I hope to have shown that progress is possible and that even the most unassuming among us can make a difference in surprising ways.

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