

Nonideal Ethics and Arguments against Eating Animals

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Abstract

Arguments for veganism don't make many vegans, or even many who think they ought to be vegans, at least when they're written by philosophers. Others — such as the one by Jonathan Safran Foer — seem to do a bit better. Why? To answer this question, I sketch a theory of ordinary moral argumentation that highlights the importance of meaning-based considerations in arguing that people ought to act in ways that deviate from normal expectations for behaviour. In particular, I outline an eclectic theory, where we draw on a variety of moral frameworks and don't assume that morality is generally overriding. I suggest that meaning-based considerations help us sort through the array of reasons available to us, as well as explain why, in a particular case, what we ought to do morally is what we ought to do all things considered.

Keywords

Veganism, Jonathan Safran Foer, nonideal theory

Introduction

In the 70s and 80s, arguments for veganism began with the case for a particular moral framework, such as utilitarianism or rights theory. Then, they tried to show that the framework commits you to abstaining from animal products. The first step is less fashionable now, and it's more common to run arguments for veganism using some mid-level moral principle about which it's easier to secure agreement — e.g., the thesis that it's wrong to cause, to support those who cause, extensive and unnecessary suffering, à la DeGrazia (2009). But the basic picture is the same.

People have changed their minds about the ethics of eating animals based on these sorts of arguments. In my experience, however, that's hardly the norm. Regardless of how I teach these arguments, both belief and behaviour are largely immune to their conclusions. Granted,

‘Undergraduate not moved by argument’ won’t make the front page, and we aren’t short on psychological and social explanations for the preservation of the status quo. Still, it would be good to know whether the arguments themselves are partly responsible. If they are, then we might be able to do something to fix them.

One reason to blame the arguments is that other arguments do better. When I assign the first and last chapters of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals*, which leaves out most of the graphic details that that book contains, many students come to think that they ought to eat differently, and at least a handful make some change. We’re not talking about 100% conversion here, either doxastically or practically, but we’re talking about a significant jump relative to the alternatives. Granted again, ‘Excellent writer who isn’t a philosopher moves undergraduate’ won’t make the front page. Foer puts Singer’s prose to shame (and Regan’s, and most other philosophers); surely that explains some part of the effect. However, I don’t think that explains it all. Foer’s argument isn’t standard philosophical fare, and that difference needs to be understood. My aim here is to shed some light on what Foer does so well, and to do that, I’ll sketch a theory about ordinary moral argumentation. With some luck, that theory will also suggest how we can construct better arguments going forward.¹

Here’s the plan. I’ll begin with a quick overview of *Eating Animals*, focusing on the parts that seem to be so compelling to students. Then, I’ll try to motivate a way of thinking about ordinary moral argumentation. I think of the theory as a kind of ‘nonideal’ approach to ethics, where that term should be interpreted as it often is in the phrase ‘nonideal theory’ in political philosophy — i.e., as ‘realistic’ rather than ‘utopian’ theory. The thought, in brief, is that you have some burdens in ordinary moral argumentation that you don’t normally have in philosophical contexts: namely, explaining why some moral reasons matter more than others, as well as why, in a given situation, moral reasons matter more than nonmoral ones. (Plainly, there are interpretations of these statements where we do have these burdens in philosophical contexts; I’ll soon say more about the interpretations I have in mind.) After outlining this approach, I apply it to Foer’s book, and then try to draw some general lessons for arguing against eating animals.

Eating Animals

Eating Animals is, by and large, a journalistic exposé of contemporary animal food production, containing all the things you would expect: graphic depictions of CAFOs and slaughterhouses, musings on the arbitrariness of our attitudes toward animals, painful statistics about animal death

¹ Let me be the first to acknowledge that we need to be modest about what improved arguments will accomplish. If psychological and social forces are mostly responsible, then better arguments will make a marginal difference. But I’m a philosopher, so I can’t do much about those forces. And anyway, a marginal difference is still a huge one by philosophical standards. Also, I want to be clear that my goal as a teacher isn’t to change my students’ minds about their obligations to animals. Instead, I think my obligation is to present the best arguments available on each issue we discuss. Producing a change in beliefs isn’t the only test for argumentative quality, and insofar as it is a test, it isn’t a perfect one. Nevertheless, it can be illuminating if used cautiously.

and consumption, interviews with those who would like to change the system, despair at the scope of the problem. It begins and ends, though, with Foer's grandmother — a Holocaust survivor, Jewish matriarch, and exceptional cook. I want to focus on a line from an exchange that she has with Foer at the end of the first chapter, which Foer revisits at the end of the book. When she and her family were on the run from the Germans, they were living on scraps of food scavenged from garbage cans. They were sick, they were starving, and they worried (quite reasonably) that they were going to die. Toward the end of this horrific experience, a Russian farmer offered Foer's grandmother some meat. To many people in such circumstances, this would have been understood as a gift from God. But though desperate, she declined: his gift wasn't kosher. When his grandmother relays the story, Foer questions her decision, asking whether it wouldn't have been worth making an exception to increase the odds of her survival. Her reply: 'If nothing matters, there's nothing to save' (2009, 17).

Foer closes the book with the same line, and uses it to explain why he makes the shift away from eating animals. Crucially, this decision is not based on anything like an assessment of expected utility. As he puts it:

Rationally, factory farming is so obviously wrong, in so many ways. In all my reading and conversations, I've yet to find a credible defence of it. But food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity... Food is never simply a calculation about which diet uses the least water or causes the least suffering...

I'm not suggesting our reason should not guide us in many important ways, but simply that being human, being humane, is more than an exercise of reason. Responding to the factory farm calls for a capacity to care that dwells beyond information, and beyond the oppositions of desire and reason fact and myth, and even human and animal...

The question of eating animals is ultimately driven by our intuitions about what it means to reach an ideal we have named, perhaps incorrectly, 'being human'. (2009, 263-4)

Foer's conception of 'being human', however, is not some abstract Kantian ideal. There is no call here for perfect rationality. For Foer, changing his diet means refusing to eat his grandmother's cooking, which is heresy in his family. To redeem what would otherwise be apostasy, he has to make sense of his choice in the contexts of those relationships. The humanity to which he aspires owes its shape and character to the kind of life his grandmother lived, which is also the kind of life he wants to live for his son. That's why, at the very end, he repurposes his grandmother's remark:

Whether I sit at the global table, with my family or with my conscience, the factory farm, for me, doesn't merely appear unreasonable. To accept the factory farm feels inhuman.

To accept the factory farm — to feed the food it produces my family, to support it with my money — would make me less myself, less my grandmother's grandson, less my son's father.

This is what my grandmother meant when she said, 'If nothing matters, there's nothing to save'. (267)

I've loved this conclusion since I first read it. But when I first read it, I was inclined to deny that Foer was making an argument. It seemed to me that he was just explaining his own motivations, which are too personal to be generalized. Now, however, I'm wary of having an overly narrow conception of argumentation, so I'll set aside this response.

A natural alternative is to try to force Foer's argument into a more traditional philosophical mould. We could read him as saying that we have a pro tanto duty to be humane that, in this particular case, determines our obligations. Or we could read him as a kind of care ethicist, who sees our humanity in our relationality, and thinks that his particular relationships guide him in this direction — despite initial appearances to the contrary. Or what have you. But none of these moves strikes me as plausible. He doesn't seem to have a clearly developed picture of what he's doing, but it's plain that he wants to distinguish between moral reasons and the kind of reason that ends up being decisive for him. It's worth seeing whether we can capture that distinction, though for that, we'll need another framework.

Nonideal Ethics

Here's one that, I think, does a bit better at making sense of what Foer is doing. It has two main parts: first, moral eclecticism (about which more in a moment); second, the assumption, at least for practical purposes, that moral reasons aren't always overriding. I call this *nonideal ethics*, since the basic idea stems from Rawls's distinction between ideal and nonideal theorizing about justice: the thought is that we can map that distinction onto the moral domain, in hopes of thinking more clearly about one mode of moral argumentation. Rawls, of course, maintains that ideal theorizing about justice makes two assumptions: first, general compliance with the principles of justice; second, social conditions that are favourable to implementing and preserving a just order. I doubt that these ideas will be useful in thinking about ordinary moral reasoning. However, the point isn't that we ought to find the analogs of these assumptions in the ethical realm. Instead, the point is that it can be illuminating to consider what constitutes the ideal in moral theorizing, and then to contrast that with the approach that, in practice, tends to be operative. That is, what are the contrasts between ideal moral exchanges and the kind of deliberation in which people typically engage?

Moral Eclecticism

One important contrast concerns the thought that the ideal argument is more like a proof that p than like a political case for a particular policy. In other words, the thought is that the ideal moral argument begins with moral premises known to be true and then shows that, given those premises, some other moral conclusion follows. As a result, you can ignore alternative moral premises because you know them to be false. On the nonideal approach, you invoke a range of considerations that converge on a single course of action, and as long as someone in the conversation takes a consideration seriously, it has to be addressed. Plainly, that the latter picture is truer to much ordinary moral argumentation. We draw on a range of moral considerations to justify or condemn actions — pragmatic, consequentialist, Kantian, virtue-based, contractualist — and we don't proceed as though, for practical purposes, we need to sort out which of those reasons really counts. Rather, we are eclectic, allowing that they all count, and we ignore the obvious tensions between the theoretical perspectives they represent.

Call this *moral eclecticism*. Sam Fleischacker (2011) defends this view in great detail, which he regards as 'the right account of morality' (83). By this, he seems to mean that moral eclecticism offers the right account of what our moral obligations are — namely, those, and only those, that can be defended in this eclectic way — and thus the right account of how we know what our obligations are. But I take no stand on either point: my brand of moral eclecticism is more modest than his. I'm not advancing moral eclecticism as a theory about our obligations and/or moral epistemology. Instead, I'm offering it as a descriptive claim about how we actually argue for moral conclusions, and a normative claim to the effect that we ought to argue for them as we actually do.

I think it's obvious that the descriptive claim is true, and it's also what you would expect based on the social model of morality that's become standard among psychologists in the last 30 years. If morality is about justifying ourselves to others and regulating cooperative social groups, then you would expect people to be willing to take seriously a wide range of moral reasons (namely, all those that have any purchase among members of their community) and you would expect them to draw a distinction between moral and all things considered reasons (since moral reasons don't necessarily align perfectly with community expectations, and the latter are more important than the former). So I'm just going to take the descriptive claim for granted, and try to defend the normative one.

To see why that claim needs some defense, we should note that someone might think that the main reason to argue as we do is practical: our ideas just won't get a hearing otherwise. And insofar as there are moral reasons to argue in the ordinary way, they stem from the moral importance of the subject matter. That is, if it's morally important to convince others to abstain from eating animals, then you've got some moral reason to make arguments that will actually convince your conversation partners, even if the premises in which you need to rely are ones that, in your estimation, are clearly mistaken. However, that moral reason is always at risk of

defeat because of the risks created by entrenching (what we'll assume to be) false beliefs: it may well matter that we discourage people from eating animals, but if we do so in a way that doesn't challenge their incorrect beliefs, we leave in place ideas that may well have negative consequences elsewhere.

But I think there are a number of moral reasons to argue as we do. First, it reflects a certain measure of integrity and humility. After all, we often have to make difficult calls about which moral considerations to emphasize in given situations — calls that are the subject of much moral dispute. The hard cases are those where the stakes are high and our moral reasons suggest various responses, seen in fanciful scenarios like the ticking time bomb terrorist, as well as in altogether too real ones, where a friend asks you to lie to hide his affair. Obviously, even if we judge that our moral reasons most strongly favour one course of action, we often still feel the weight of the reasons favouring the other. And it should also be obvious that when we make a judgment about what more strongly favours what, this judgment usually doesn't satisfy our critics — including, on occasion, our internal one. I submit that we ought to be honest about that that internal ambivalence, considering whether our preferred conclusion can be defended from the perspective that we don't ultimately endorse.

Second, and as Fleischacker (2011, 100-101) points out, we can argue for an eclectic approach to moral argumentation from a range of moral perspectives. For instance, it may well be the case that utilitarianism is true, and that some people are in a position to know as much. Still, we have reason to embrace this eclectic model. Insofar as you need to convince people of various moral conclusions in order to maximize the good, you have reason to avail yourself of any and all tools available for that purpose.² Where there is serious disagreement, however, we should have modest expectations about the frequency with which we will be able to convince others of our conclusions, and so eclecticism's spotty record on the hard cases is hardly an objection. And in the easier cases, we will need to avail ourselves of all the reasons available.

You don't need to be a utilitarian to get on board: we can also give a broadly Rawlsian justification for this way of proceeding. From behind the veil of ignorance, you should recognize that you are going to disagree with others about the correct comprehensive doctrine; you know, therefore, that there is going to be disagreement when we try to coordinate our lives using moral norms. You might well then agree, from the perspective of the original position, to accept a wide range of moral reasons as legitimate considerations in justifying or condemning behavior. After all, you yourself don't know which set of reasons you will find most compelling when you step out from behind the veil, and you want your reasons to be taken seriously.

Additionally, there are virtue-theoretic reasons. It's difficult to know which moral theory is correct — if, in fact, one of them is correct. And as Rosalind Hursthouse says in a very different

² This is yet another motivation for the intuitive-level rules that are the centerpiece of two-level utilitarianism.

context, ‘the sort of wisdom that the fully virtuous person has is not supposed to be recondite; it does not call for fancy philosophical sophistication, and it does not depend upon, let alone wait upon, the discoveries of academic philosophers’ (1991, 235). If many of us achieve virtue without knowing which moral theory is correct, and if how we reason about moral matters is an important dimension of the wisdom that characterizes the virtuous, then it must be good to reason as we in fact do — namely, by drawing on a range of moral considerations.

The upshot: assuming that moral eclecticism is a plausible picture of how people actually argue about moral matters, I think we also have reason to argue eclectically, independently of whether some of us can know that a particular moral theory is true. Admittedly, moral eclecticism leaves us with the problem I mentioned earlier — namely, justifying the decision, both to ourselves and to others, to prioritize some considerations over others. (This is a problem that some traditional moral theories don’t face. The act utilitarian, for instance, evades it entirely: if we know how utility will be distributed given the various possible actions we might perform, it’s clear what we ought to do.) I’ll return to this shortly.

The Strength of Moral Reasons

Another difference between idealistic and realistic moral argumentation is that, when doing the former, philosophers tend to argue as though one of two things is true: either morality is quite demanding (perhaps even to the point that there’s no distinction between the obligatory and the supererogatory) or moral reasons are generally overriding (which is to say that once you’ve shown that someone has a moral obligation to act in a certain way, you’ve thereby shown that she ought to act that way all things considered). Of course, philosophers often endorse both claims, but the point here is just that they often proceed as though at least one is true. Utilitarians are obviously committed to the former, as are many Kantians. And though there are people who reject the latter — Wolf (1982) and Frankfurt (2004) come to mind — it still seems to be the dominant view among ethicists of all stripes.

Ordinarily, though, we don’t tend to endorse either. We proceed as though much of our life is immune from serious moral critique — the kind that would take seriously enough to get us to change our behaviour — as we generally assess our behaviour relative to what others do, not relative to absolute standards. (Again, this is the clear upshot of decades of research in social psychology. For a nice overview, see the first half of Schwitzgebel ms.) And while there are obviously many cases where we assume that morality is overriding — cases where, for example, most people already comply, and the moral demand isn’t particularly onerous due to social support for the behaviour, and so on — you have to make the case that it’s overriding others.³ That is, there is no *general* assumption to the effect that, once you’ve shown that I have a moral

³ I think that we treat moral reasons as overriding in roughly those circumstances where we take blame to be appropriate.

obligation to act, you've therefore shown that I have an all-things-considered reason to act. Many of my students are prepared to say that they should (in the sense that they have a moral obligation to) give much more than they do to the poor. However, they also seem to think that other kinds of considerations, such as wanting something that will bring them some pleasure, are sufficient to override the force of that obligation. This isn't to say that the obligation goes away, but just to say that, in some cases, it's relatively easy to have most reason to act contrary to what morality recommends. In such circumstances, they need an argument for thinking that their moral reasons determine what they have most reason to do.

For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to focus in what follows on the issue of whether morality is overriding, but similar points to be made about how we might try to convince someone that morality is as demanding as some philosophers think. In any case, one way to close the gap between moral and all things considered reasons is to offer a general answer to the question, 'Why be moral?' Such an answer doesn't need to take the form that Kant thought was required; we needn't argue that we should be moral because the alternative would be irrational. Instead, it could be something along the lines of what Singer proposed in his 1993 book, *How Are We to Live?* There, he tried to make the case that the moral life is a particularly meaningful life, and this precisely because of his view (at that juncture⁴) about the limits of moral argumentation:

When my ability to reason shows me that the suffering of another being is very similar to my own suffering and (in an appropriate case) matters just as much to that other being as my own suffering matters to me, then my reason is showing me something that is undeniably true. I can still choose to ignore it, but then I can no longer deny that my perspective is a narrower, and more limited one, than it could be. This may not be enough to yield an objectively true ethical position. (One can always ask: what is so good about having a broader and more all-encompassing perspective?) But it is as close to an objective basis for ethics as there is to find (1993, 275).

At this point, Singer was willing to say that it isn't irrational to opt for a more parochial life. So, he argues that other ways of trying to achieve a meaningful life are inadequate, and then tries to tie living meaningfully to taking up the point of view of the universe:

The possibility of taking the point of view of the universe overcomes the problem of finding meaning in our lives, despite the ephemeral nature of human existence when measured against all the aeons of eternity. Suppose that we become involved in a project to help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food. The project is an outstanding success, and the villagers are healthier, happier, better educated, economically secure, and have fewer children. Now someone might say: 'What good have you done? In a thousand years these people will all be dead,

⁴ The current Singer would probably argue otherwise; see his (2017).

and their children and grandchildren as well, and nothing that you have done will make any difference.’ That may be true, or it may be false. The changes we make today could snowball and, over a long period of time, lead to much more far-reaching changes. Or they could come to nothing. We simply cannot tell. We should not, however, think of our efforts as wasted unless they endure forever, or even for a very long time. If we regard time as a fourth dimension, then we can think of the universe, throughout all the times at which it contains sentient life, as a four-dimensional entity. We can then make that four-dimensional world a better place by causing there to be less pointless suffering in one particular place, at one particular time, than there would otherwise have been (1993, 274).

Singer is not trying to argue that you always have most reason to do what morality recommends, nor that it would be irrational to pursue meaning in life from a more parochial perspective. Instead, he’s trying to cast a vision of what *could* make life meaningful, what we have reason to see as meaningful, and then make the case for acting ethically on that basis.

All that said, I don’t want to hold up Singer’s particular strategy as a model. Selling the point of view of the universe is as hard, if not harder, than selling the idea that we ought to give to the point of marginal utility. What’s more, if your theory about the meaningful life depends on the truth of four-dimensionalism, you shouldn’t expect too many converts. Nevertheless, I think that Singer is engaged in the right sort of project here, and in particular, that he’s wise to build his argument around teleological considerations — which is a point to which I’ll return.

What’s more, I don’t want to say, full stop, that morality isn’t demanding or that moral reasons aren’t generally overriding; I remain agnostic about the theoretical issues. Perhaps it’s the case that morality is extremely demanding, that moral reasons are generally overriding, and that people are simply wrong to think otherwise. But either way, we have cause to accept a more modest conception of moral reasons during ordinary moral argumentation. There are consequentialist, Rawlsian, virtue-based, and pragmatic considerations in favour of this approach, each parallel to the one I set out in favour of moral eclecticism. For the sake of space, though, I won’t lay them out here. In any case, the upshot is akin to the one before: in much of the business of everyday life, we work with a more modest conception of morality, and I think we have reason to argue as though that more modest conception is correct, independently of whether it is.

Combining the Two Parts

Let’s suppose that we have good reason to take an eclectic approach to moral argumentation, and likewise for adopting a more modest conception of morality. The payoff is significant, as it helps us see that we have two dialogical obligations that we might otherwise have missed. First, we

can now see ourselves as needing to diffuse the force of other moral reasons, despite the arguments we've given against them in virtue of having argued directly for a particular course of action. In other words, because we accept a variety of moral reasons as legitimate for guiding action, an argument that emphasizes some of them doesn't tell us what to do with the others. Instead, those reasons have to be addressed on independent grounds. There are, of course, a number of ways to do this. You might make the case that, despite appearances, these reasons actually support the same conclusion — that's certainly the easiest route. However, the more likely situation is that you will have to tell some story that explains why, of all our moral reasons, the one that you have emphasized are the ones we ought to emphasize.

This point seems strange because we are used to a very different model of moral deliberation. When I argue that you should not eat animals on utilitarian grounds, I proceed as though there is a sufficiently strong argument for utilitarianism that we can aside Kantian considerations that might point in a different direction. But that isn't the way we proceed in more ordinary context. Instead, we offer a utilitarian argument only to find that the Kantian considerations are still there, demanding our attention, giving us reason to pause before saying that our obligations are settled. After all, because we never settle the debate between utilitarianism and Kantianism, the utilitarian argument for acting in one way doesn't, in and of itself, give us reason to ignore the Kantian argument for acting in the opposite way. On this approach, moral theories are a bit like lenses through which we can view the issue in question. We retain the ability to switch lenses even after making our all-things-considered judgment, which means that we still face the question of why we've chosen to privilege one angle over others.

The other obligation is related to the first. In addition to explaining why one set of moral considerations deserves our allegiance, we also need to say something about why moral considerations are overriding. That is, we need to explain why, of all the reasons that bear on a particular issue — moral and nonmoral — the moral ones are the most important. In principle, of course, these obligations are independent. In practice, however, I think that they are intimately related. This is because there's a natural way to argue that some moral considerations are especially important relative to others: we appeal to the purpose of the institution within which the moral decision is being made, or the goals we have in the particular relationships that are at stake, or — most radically — those things that provide structure and meaning to a human life. In this respect, I think Singer was right: teleological considerations help us sort out which considerations matter most, and though they don't always prove to be decisive, they are among the few tools we have available for such purposes. Teleological considerations are, at the same time, particularly useful for explaining why moral considerations are particularly significant. Sometimes, it's only by thinking about what we are aiming for (in an institution, in a relationship, in life, etc.) that we can determine what does and doesn't deserve our attention.

On this picture, then, ordinary moral reasoning involves two tasks that we normally don't take up when engaged in formal moral theorizing as philosophers. First, we have to defuse competing moral reasons; second, we have to explain why, of all our reasons, the moral ones are decisive. And I submit that teleological considerations are particularly important here. They can help us select the important reasons from the unimportant ones, whether the competing reasons are all moral (as they are in the competing moral reasons case) or a mixture of moral and nonmoral reasons (as they are in the case where we are trying to determine which of our reasons is overriding). Teleological considerations have the sort of power because they are, in a sense, meta-moral. They tell us something about why it's worth caring about morality in the first place. Moral norms get their grip on us because of the projects we take up. We feel their force because we have certain aims.

We can, of course, reject this entire picture of how ordinary moral deliberation works, and we will then have a much more modest view of the role of teleological considerations. But I am not saying now, nor have I meant to imply at earlier moments in this essay, that the ultimate story about morality is one which moral norms play second fiddle to teleological considerations. This is a nonideal theory, a theory about how we actually make moral judgments, and a theory about how we should for the sorts of reasons outlined earlier. After all, I find it very hard to see how, in the business of everyday life and in the important project of reasoning with others, we can avoid the conclusion that morality doesn't have the final word. And since it doesn't, we may as well think about what seems to get purchase on us as deliberators, and argue accordingly.

Foer Revisited

With the above in mind, my take on Foer's book may not be surprising. It seems to me that his work is so compelling because he's operating as you should from the perspective of nonideal ethics. As I see it, Foer's discussion of the relationships that provide meaning and structure to his life *just is* his case that we ought to regard moral reasons as overriding with respect to the way we eat. His grandmother's refrain — and his relationship to his son — gives him sufficient reason to do what, in his view, morality already asks of him, and it's supposed to do the same for us.⁵

This claim may seem bizarre, as the rest of us aren't his grandmother's grandson, or his son's father. Why should those relationships have any force for us? But oddly enough, they do. Perhaps it's because we can see ourselves, and our relationships, in Foer and his. Or perhaps it's

⁵ This account of Foer's book is worth contrasting with the one that Crary (2016) offers. On her view, Foer's book is powerful because of the way that it '[invites] us to look upon different animals as in themselves meriting respect and attention' (261). I don't want to deny that Foer is good at helping us appreciate the lives of animals, but I don't think that he's remarkable in this respect: we aren't short on poignant, attentive descriptions of individual animals and the many ways in which they suffer at human hands. So though I agree with Crary about what Foer does well, I wouldn't single him out on that basis, and instead think we ought to attend to the features that I lay out in the main text.

because we can appreciate, on some more abstract level, the call to live in response to the disturbing information he conveys. If so, though, it's not because he's insisting that morality is generally overriding, and this behaviour is what morality demands. Rather, it's because Foer becomes a kind of exemplar, someone it seems both possible and worth it to imitate. Insofar as any of us want to be grandsons and fathers, we want to be grandsons and fathers like that. He's offering a vision of a life worth living.

Moreover, understanding Foer's work from the perspective of nonideal ethics makes it easier to dismiss the philosophical objections that we might raise. Foer thinks that there is no way to defend the factory farm, and we know he's wrong about that. There are indeed philosophical frameworks on which there is nothing wrong with factory farming: see, for example, Carruthers (1990) and Hsiao (2017). Moreover, there are plenty of philosophers who defend the view that while industrial animal food *production* is morally objectionable, *purchasing* isn't necessarily wrong: among them, Budolfson (2015) and van Dyke (2015). And, of course, there are various philosophers — many of whom ostensibly defend veganism — who think that while production and purchasing are objectionable, *eating* isn't — for instance, DeGrazia (2009) and Levy (2015). However, the lack of complete consensus doesn't really matter. The teleological considerations to which he appeals also help us see why it makes sense to discount these other ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and animals, opting to align ourselves with a particular ideal. We refuse animal products for the same reason that Foer's grandmother refused the meat was offered to her. It matters that we live lives that have a human order to them, a logic where symbols matter. We take seriously the way that our choices align us with a set of values, a community, a way of life, quite independently of whether doing so maximizes utility.

The point here isn't that teleological considerations lead us to act in ways that go beyond what morality demands of us. Rather, the idea is that there are a range of moral considerations that bear on the ethics of producing, purchasing, and consuming animal foods, and they render different verdicts in any given case. From the perspective of nonideal ethics, we have to make a judgment call on whether any of those considerations, singularly or jointly, show that we ought to act in some way. Relatedly, we need some reason to think that the 'ought' is all things considered, and not simply moral. I think that teleological considerations matter at both junctures. They can explain both why we privilege some moral reasons and discount others, and then they can explain why we privilege moral reasons over nonmoral ones. Foer's narrative offers us just such considerations, and does just this work.

This brings us back to my students. When they say things like, 'I know I shouldn't eat meat anymore, but I'm not going to stop', it's natural to think of them as lacking moral motivation. They recognize the good that they ought to do, and don't have the will to do it. Perhaps they suffer from weakness of will: they want to do the good, but can't bring themselves to do it when push comes to shove. Or perhaps they lack motivation in a different way: they don't even want to

do what they ought to do. But either way, the outcome is the same. They are convinced that they ought to act in a way that they are not going to act. Morality just doesn't move them.

If that's the right diagnosis, then there's an obvious remedy. We — or they, or someone else — ought to do whatever fosters their ability to act in accord with their beliefs. If we follow Hume, we will think we ought to cultivate their sentiments. Perhaps we should talk to those in marketing departments about creating better promotional materials for pro-vegan arguments, or we should have people produce more videos that depict the plight of farm animals, or whatever.⁶ If, by contrast, we are inclined to some other form of philosophical therapy, we might think that we ought to help students work through their inconsistent beliefs and desires in a more systematic and thoroughgoing way, eventually revealing that they do, in fact, have reason to behave as morality suggests they should, despite initial appearances to the contrary.

From the perspective of nonideal ethics, though, it's at least as plausible that they have a very different problem: they lack an account of how moral reasons fit into a life, where that account answers the question, 'Of all the reasons I have in *this situation*, why should I prioritize the moral one?' Given that morality can very well take over a life, it's inadequate to say that you ought to prioritize the moral one because you always ought to prioritize moral reasons. We aren't willing to hold one another to that standard, or even hold ourselves to that standard. Of course, given all that I've said before, it should be clear that I am not raising the demandingness objection; I'm not making a claim about the actual scope of our moral obligations. Even if the truth of the matter is that morality is exceptionally demanding, we need to think about how to argue given that most of us, most of the time, behave as though morality asks much less of us. This means that we need a much more specific story about why we ought to prioritize moral reasons that concern the way we eat. That's what nonideal ethics is about, and that's what Foer offers.

Objections

Before concluding, let me try to head off a few concerns about what I've said thus far.

The first is that even if I'm right about the contrast between standard arguments for veganism and what Foer offers, it doesn't explain what's going on in the average student. It's much more plausible that those students are irrational. Or akratic. Or immoral. Or distracted. Or perhaps they haven't had sufficient time to digest the argument, as the semester moves too quickly. Or perhaps they're invested in identities that require them to reject the conclusions of the arguments you discussed, and identities usually trump arguments. Or perhaps moral judgments are driven by System 1, not System 2, and arguments have little effect on System 1. And on and on.

⁶ This is, essentially, Rorty's (1993) view.

Granted, such hypotheses probably are better for understanding the resistance of most students to arguments to which they can't respond. However, my goal was never to explain why each and every student behaves exactly as that student acts. Instead, my goal is to explain why reading Foer seems to reach students in a way that reading Singer does not. Charitably, I'm assuming that students are rational to be moved by Foer in a way that they aren't moved by Singer — that they aren't simply responding to the beauty of the former's prose. The assumption could be wrong, which would weaken the motivation for the account that I've offered. However, as I've suggested above, it does strike me as independently plausible that there is an important distinction between the way that philosophers engage in moral argumentation (in their professional lives) and the way that we ordinarily argue about moral matters. And if so, then we have quite general reasons to consider such alternative ways of understanding what's going on when our students seem immune to philosophical argumentation.

The second concern is that the account I've offered just doesn't say enough about what's happening when students respond positively to Foer. It's clear what's happening for Foer himself: we can easily appreciate the significance of his relationship with his grandmother, which leads him to reconcile her adage with his research on factory farming. But how does any of that apply to the students, who aren't invested in the same meaning-making relationship?

At the beginning of the previous section, I made a suggestion about how the application might work — they can see Foer as an exemplar, as offering a vision of a life worth living. Plainly, though, that's just a promissory note. Can we do better?

I think so, and in so doing, we can get a bit clearer about the role that teleology is playing in moral deliberation. Recall: I claimed earlier that we are awash in moral reasons, and one of the challenges is to explain why we are prioritizing some of them over others. And, of course, if it's true that we are awash in these moral reasons, and that it's very difficult to sort through them, then there is an abiding worry that any story we tell will just be our picking and choosing moral considerations based on what's convenient for us, that although we may give our rationale in moral terms, the real rationale is self-serving. Teleological considerations can be an important bulwark against this sort of defeater. They can provide some assurance that the aims to which we are appealing are not simply our own, but those of the institution of which we're a part, or the community to which we've committed our lives, or what have you. Exemplars matter for the same reason: aligning yourself with an exemplar — where exemplars are not simply people you choose to imitate, but people who others also see as morally wise, or particularly compassionate, or whatever — is also a way of making plausible that you haven't simply chosen to prioritize some reasons over others because things will work out best for you when those reasons are prioritized. In trying to answer an inherently difficult question — 'Why live by these values rather than those?' — we have few tools to stave off the threat that we should interpret our

priorities as either irrational or self-interested. Among them, however, is aligning ourselves with others and their teleological visions.

This raises a third concern, which is that the view I'm developing leaves us with unsatisfying relativism. After all, how should we decide with whom to align ourselves? How should we decide which teleological visions ought to organize our lives? Without answers to these questions, it looks as though we are just pushing back the very questions that teleological considerations are supposed to resolve.

There are two things to say here. The first is that it's easy to overstate the severity of this problem. Consider W. D. Ross's form of deontology, according to which we have an array of prima facie duties that have to be balanced against one another and prioritized differently in different circumstances. This view provides no decision procedure for selecting the morally correct action of the available options, but it doesn't obviously seem to be worse for that. Indeed, it seems to nicely capture the complexity of moral decision-making, as well as the thought that, in certain difficult circumstances, there are no right answers. The problem facing the nonideal ethics that I'm sketching here is no worse than the problem facing Ross's view, and like that view, it identifies the various factors that make moral decision-making, and moral argumentation, so challenging.

The second point to make is that it's important to remember the scope of the project. Nonideal ethics is not ethics, full stop, and it doesn't try to resolve all the issues that we might want to resolve in the context of a full ethical theory. Instead, it tries to account for the shape of ordinary moral argumentation, fully acknowledging that the approach we take ordinarily may not be the one that we ought to take ultimately. For instance, if utilitarianism is true, then although we may have some pragmatic reasons to consider non-utilitarian arguments in various contexts, utilitarian arguments are the only ones that should ultimately be taken seriously. This isn't the kind of eclecticism that nonideal ethics takes as its starting point. Likewise, it may not be the case that there is anything to be said about why you ought to act in a particular way other than the fact that you ought to act that way. This is in stark contrast to the kind of two-tiered model that nonideal ethics proposes. We might react by saying that these are good reasons to ignore nonideal ethics, since it starts from assumptions that may well be false, and in any case, obviously deserve careful philosophical investigation. But I think this would be a mistake.

We are, as philosophers, perfectly well accustomed to making assumptions that we take to be false for the purpose of engaging in dialogue. In a sense, what I'm suggesting is that philosophers haven't been sufficiently willing to do that when it comes to ethics. Instead, we've assumed that the right way to engage non-philosophers about moral matters is to encourage them to argue as we do, making the kinds of assumptions that we tend to make about what morality is, how it operates, and what counts as having adequately defended a moral claim. And

unsurprisingly, it's not easy to get non-philosophers to play by our rules, and they often aren't convinced of the conclusions for which we take ourselves to have offered excellent arguments. In such circumstances, it seems prudent to consider a different strategy. One such strategy is based on two assumptions: first, an eclectic approach to moral reasons; second, that there's a gap between moral reasons and all things considered reasons. Those assumptions may well be false, but if they are indeed the ones that tend to structure ordinary moral argumentation, it's probably worth granting them when we want to engage a wider audience. True enough, doing so leaves us with the problem of relativism, with the worry that we are arbitrarily privileging some considerations over others. But since students are rarely convinced by our objections to relativism, often making comments such as 'Who's to say?' long after we might have thought that we'd made the case for regarding morality as objective, it isn't clear that we are actually worse off for proceeding as my nonideal model suggests we should.

Conclusion

Nothing I've said counts against engaging in the sort of moral argumentation that's common among ethicists who work in the analytic tradition. It's good to know whether a particular moral thesis supports a particular course of action, as that gives us a better sense of the degree to which our moral reasons agree on how we ought to act. That said, we should have modest expectations about the practical significance of that sort of argumentation. It isn't going to address the issue of whether we have an all-things-considered reason to act in any particular way, so it's unlikely to produce much change.

With that in mind, are there any general lessons here for developing arguments against eating animals? Let me suggest two.

First, the best arguments against eating animals may well be specific to particular communities with shared teleological convictions. If ordinary ethical argumentation works roughly the way I suggest, then all-purpose arguments are unlikely to change many minds, as we disagree extensively about matters of meaning. Instead, will have more luck developing specifically Christian arguments against eating animals, and secular humanist arguments, and social conservative arguments, and so on. I'm hardly the first to suggest that more fine-grained arguments are the most promising options available — Matt Halteman has been saying this for years (see his forthcoming for a recent example) — but since most philosophers haven't been listening (myself included), perhaps it bears repeating.

However, I don't want to be too pessimistic about the possibility of running more general arguments, ones that get some purchase regardless of people's larger convictions. We don't need a shared theory about the meaning of life to sort among our values — sometimes, fragments will do. This is part of the value of Foer's book. He appeals to fairly common values — carrying on

family traditions, honouring parents and grandparents, reworking our traditions for the next generation. There is nothing particularly partisan about these thoughts. He's tapping into basic elements of living well, and as a result, we can all feel the pull of the line he develops.

It's worth noting, however, that some of these values only come to overshadow immediate self-interest because of their connection to enlightened self-interest. Foer spends a lot of time on reasons to be worried about animal agriculture that needn't be interpreted as moral — e.g., the threat of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which matters even from the perspective of enlightened self-interest, independently of whether we give that concern a moral gloss. Such pragmatic, anthropocentric reasons to scale back production are also reasons to give extra weight to the moral considerations that favour abstaining from purchasing and consuming. After all, moral rules can help us act in line with our long-term interests. Simple and strict norms, as opposed to more complex (mere) guidelines that admit exceptions, can be much easier to follow.⁷ So the common values to which Foer appeals — such as being a decent parent — can indeed be repurposed on behalf of animals, though sometimes via a circuitous route.

The second lesson is that insofar as we want to offer better arguments against eating animals, we will probably need to think more seriously about resources that haven't received much attention in the analytic tradition. Consider Cora Diamond's (1978) work, which can also be understood as engaging in a kind of nonideal ethical project — though, of course, she doesn't pitch it that way. Among other things, Diamond uses poetry to encourage us to see animals as our fellow creatures, insisting that while rationality doesn't force us to make that perspectival shift, it's still one to consider making. She's been taken to task for this by Jeff McMahan (2005), who objects to her sentimentalism. And perhaps he's correct that, interpreted as a bit of first-order moral theorizing, Diamond doesn't offer much by way of argument. But we can think of her work differently: we can read her as engaging in a meta-moral deliberation about how to prioritize our other values, trying to provide a framework that helps us decide which values to rally around and which to disregard. If we can be moved by a vision of animals as our fellow creatures, then when we consider all the reasons available to us, we can come to feel discomfort at the thought of violence toward animals. So read, Diamond is giving us a kind of teleological consideration — the thought that to see animals as our companions in creation is a better way to be in the world. (We might read J. M. Coetzee 1999 the same way.)

As someone who works pretty happily in the analytic tradition, I find all this somewhat disappointing. I don't really want to make (what feels to me like) a vague appeal to the notion of 'our fellow creatures.' This is, at least in part, because I find it difficult to hear that appeal as a reply to, say, arguments against animals having rights.

⁷ For an excellent discussion of the moral value of simple and strict norms, see Doggett and Egan (2015).

But from the perspective of nonideal ethics, we should take a broader view of what counts as an argument against the reasons that derive from a particular moral framework. Instead of directly criticizing the framework (e.g., one in which animals don't have rights), or arguing that the particular conclusion doesn't follow from it, it's often sufficient to tell a story about how our other values fit together. If that story leaves out the reasons that derive from the contested framework, that can be enough to make it rational for us to discount them. This is what happens when good presidents cast expansive visions of our American identity, leading us to discount fears about cultural or economic loss. This is what happens when poets invite us to see other animals as fellow creatures, leading us to discount our many and obvious differences. These moves don't directly answer the reasons that count against them, but by giving us a way to understand ourselves and our values, they give us reason to set aside those countervailing reasons, robbing them of whatever strength they had.

My goal in this paper was to sketch a framework that explains a certain phenomenon: the fact that my students are moved by Foer's work in a way that they aren't moved by the work of analytic philosophers. I grant that the framework is far more powerful than is needed to explain the phenomenon; much more modest stories are available. It's generally ill-advised to have your explanation so greatly outstrip your explanandum, but I'm not trying to make the case that this explanation is the only possible one, nor the most modest one, nor anything else in the neighbourhood. I'm not trying to justify my thinking about nonideal ethics by showing that you can't understand Foer's impact without it. Instead, I've tried to suggest that there are reasons to be attracted to my approach on independent grounds, and then I've argued that it can shed some light on what Foer does so well. I hope it has.

At the same time, I've been trying to make a point about how we ought to engage in moral argumentation independently of the truths about morality. That is, suppose that utilitarianism is as true as anything can be. Still, we face a problem of how to engage in moral deliberation given that most people aren't utilitarians, can't be converted to utilitarianism, and are generally suspicious of exclusive appeals to a single system of thought. I think of this kind of deliberation as nonideal — so named not because there is a direct parallel between ideal and nonideal theory in political philosophy, but because it's a kind of realistic theory for offering the best moral arguments given the way we tend to deliberate. My claim is, in a sense, that this is the right picture of what may be, for all I know, the wrong way to operate. However, since it is the way we *do* operate, we may as well proceed accordingly.

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