

Getting to the Meat of Moral Discourse and Practice

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Research Question

How – if at all – can empirical data gathered from actual vegans and meat-eaters inform a normative claim about meat-eating?

III. Re-assess normative claim in light of situated realities

While my normative claim did not drastically change as a result of this study, the interaction between the normative and the empirical led to insights not only about meat-eating in particular, but also about the nature of moral discourse and practice. Here are 3 ways the empirical informed the normative:

1) Playing mad libs with desires: Since I am arguing that the right action is a function of the desires of humans and animals, why not go look at actual people's desires around meat-eating? The particulars matter even in this universalizable theory!

Conclusions: For the most part, people have the ability to choose whether to eat meat, and the dissatisfaction of our desires to eat meat does not pose a significant threat to our hierarchy of desires.

2) How we think moral judgment works: Insofar as conceptual claims about moral judgment, such as the rationalist claim which says that moral judgments are grounded in reason, are formed in reference to platitudes held by average, competent speakers, it will be important to know what people think a moral judgment is.

Conclusions: There is a large amount of variation in how participants took themselves to be making moral judgments, which challenges either this method of conceptual analysis or the rationalist concept of a moral judgment.

3) How moral judgment actually works: How we think we make moral judgments may be quite different from how we actually make moral judgments. Are participants guided by Kantian reasons or Humean passions in making moral judgments?

Conclusions: My results were consistent with the social intuitionist model of moral judgment, which says that people make a quick, intuitive judgment overlaid with ex post facto reasoning.

-Supported by the phenomenon of moral dumbfounding, or "when intuition finds no reason:" Ex. "Obviously I value human life [more than animal life], but I'm not sure why I do."

Summary Conclusion: These results are both philosophically interesting in that meat-eating proved a prime place to situate these larger metaethical issues as well as pragmatically valuable in terms of activism efforts because they tell us where people are "getting it wrong" (i.e. the naturalistic fallacy).

Further Reading & Photo Credits

Haidt, Jonathan, Fredrik Bjorklund, and Scott Murphy. "Moral Dumbfounding: When Intuition Finds No Reason" (2010). <http://commonsenseatheism.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Haidt-Moral-Dumbfounding-When-Intuition-Finds-No-Reason.pdf>.
Knobe, Joshua, and Nichols, Shaun. *Experimental Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Kraut, Richard. "Desire and the Human Good." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 68, no. 2 (November 1994): 39-54.
Nichols, Shaun. *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2004.
Varner, Gary. *In Nature's Interest?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Duck - <http://n-equals-one.com/blogs/page/3/Desires> - www.offthemark.com
Train tracks - www.crookedtimber.org
Cows - www.cartoonstock.com
Homer - www.photobucket.com

Background

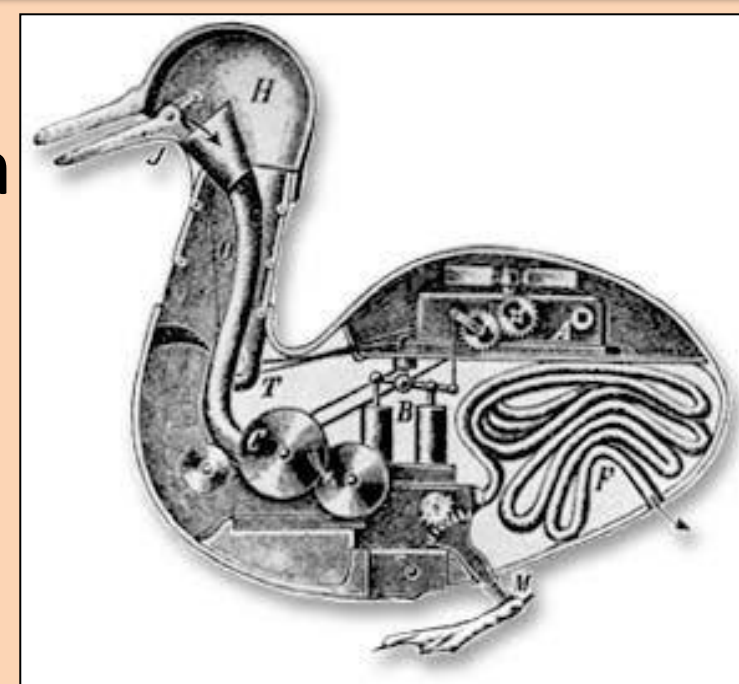
In the thirty-five years since Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* hit the shelves and catalyzed the modern animal rights movement, many have followed his lead in arguing for the moral considerability of non-human animals and the implications for our relationships to these animals. Humans are in a unique position as omnivores with a conscience—we have the biological leeway and rational ability to make a choice about meat consumption. The experts who have weighed in on this ethical choice are telling us not to eat animals, yet only about 3% of Americans have traded in their steak knives for tofu skewers. What gives?

At this stage in the game, an argument for improved treatment of animals must take it a step further than Singer to remain philosophically interesting *and* pragmatically useful. I have taken this step—normative theory in hand—into the streets of Portland, Oregon to probe into the moral psyches, rational dispositions, and implicit ethical frameworks of actual meat-eaters and vegans.

I. Develop normative claim

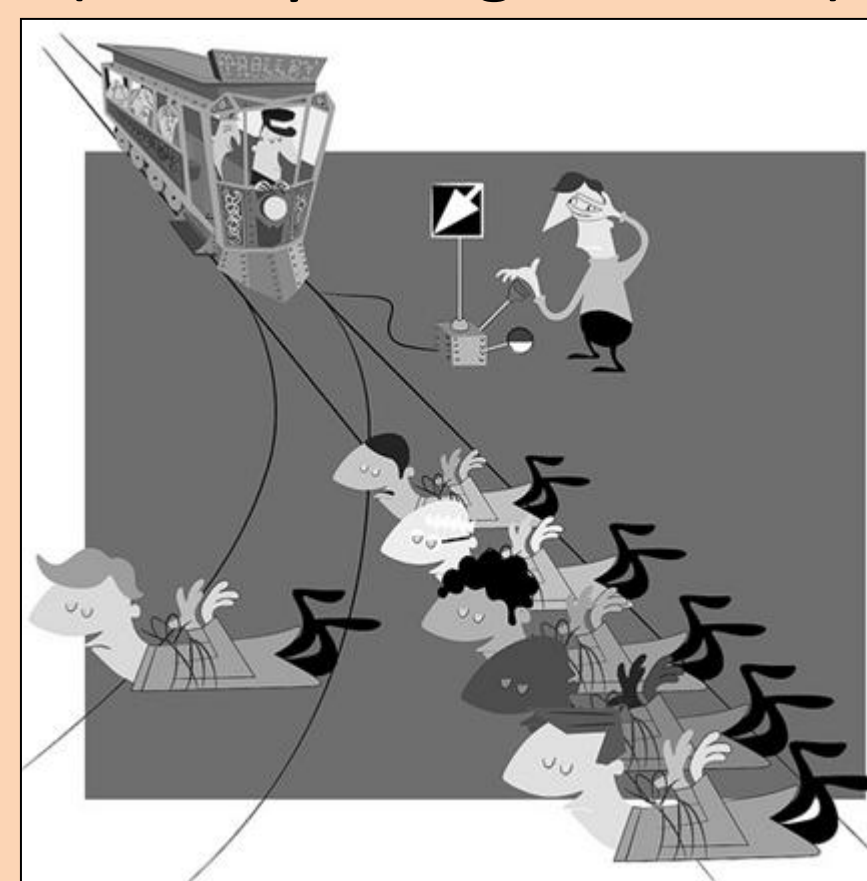
Step 1: Animals

have minds! The denial of mental lives to animals is grounded in Cartesian skepticism and the history of ethology.



Step 2: Animals have desires! This claim is supported by physiological, evolutionary, philosophical, and ethological evidence.

Step 3: desire-satisfaction (theory of value) + consequentialism (theory of right action)



An action is right to the extent that it contributes to the fulfillment of the greatest amount of desires.

Normative Conclusion: In the vast majority of cases, the desire of a human to eat meat is greatly outweighed by an animal's desires that are dissatisfied in becoming that meat. Therefore, we ought to not eat meat!

Methodology

II. Take normative claim "into the field"

Insofar as I am arguing that *most people are engaged in a morally wrong practice*, it will be interesting to know:

- What people's moral judgments around meat-eating actually are
- Why they make those moral judgments *and*
- Whether their actions comply with their moral judgments

o Recruited participants and created 4 focus groups:

- Unreflective meat-eaters
- Reflective meat-eaters
- Vegans
- Mixed (vegans + meat-eaters)

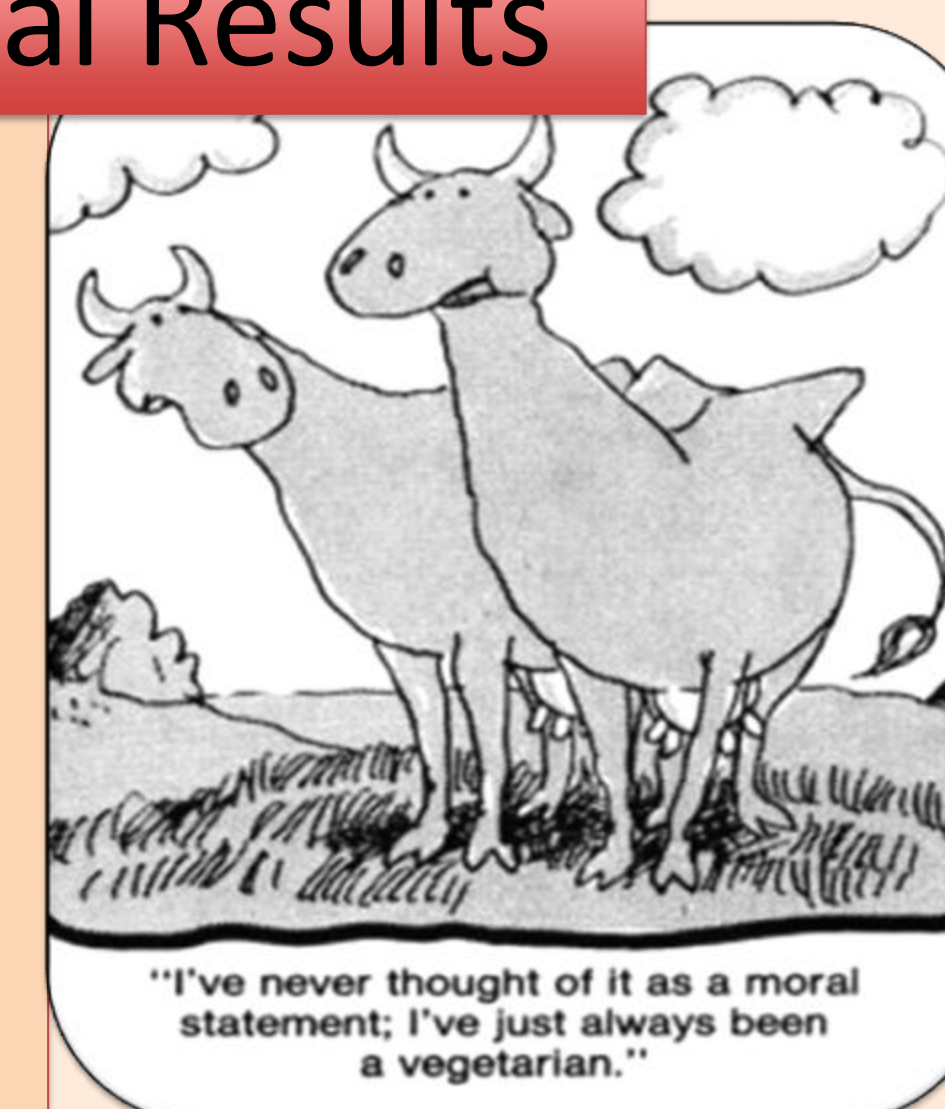
o Participated in 3 surveys and 3 sessions aimed at uncovering:

- Personal meat-consumption backgrounds
- Beliefs about ethics in general
- Beliefs about animals and their capacities
- Moral judgments around meat-consumption

Some Empirical Results

•People do not perceive the conflict between animal and human desires because **meat evades morality** by:

- Commodity fetishization of meat
- A rift between everyday life and morality
- The conflation of justificatory and explanatory reasons



•Participants relied on the **naturalistic fallacy** in justifying their meat-eating, which has dangerous consequences.

- Ex. "I believe...that humans are physiologically designed to consume meat, and therefore the consumption of meat is not a moral question."

