

PHIL 110 Discussion Sections 007/008

4.1.21 Discussion

Announcements:

- 'Letter to a Friend' assignment due a week from tomorrow: Friday, April 9th. Instructions and submission portal available on the section site (under 'Assignments' -- also accessible through the home page).
- There will be an observer in our class next week.

Collaborative review:

- What is the point of Norcross' example of Fred and the puppies?
- How does MacAskill think that our reasoning when it comes to probability is often limited and flawed?
- Why does MacAskill take the seemingly unintuitive position that we shouldn't boycott sweatshops or buy Fairtrade products?

Poll: After doing the readings for today, do you think that buying and eating factory-farmed meat is morally wrong?

Results: 55% say yes, it's wrong; 45% say it's not wrong

Informal debate!

[GROUP 1](#) (example)

GROUP 2 (links removed after the semester to protect student anonymity)

GROUP 3

GROUP 4

15 MIN BREAK

Follow-ups from the debate:

- If you answered no to the poll, are you still convinced that eating meat is not morally wrong? Why?
- If you think that buying and eating factory-farmed meat is morally wrong, but plan on still eating meat, what are your reasons (no need to share reasons of health -- these are legitimate exceptions!)?

Poll: After our debate, do you think that buying and eating factory-farmed meat is morally wrong?

Results: 95% say yes, it's wrong!

Individual activity: Think to yourself about an issue related to consumption that you think matters. It could be cruelty to animals, cruel labor practices in the fast fashion industry, the environmental impact of single-use plastic products, or something else. Why do you think this issue matters?

Small group discussion: Share the issue you thought of with your group, then consider the following questions: If you had even a small chance of making a positive impact on this issue by changing your consumption habits, do you think it would be worth it? Why or why not? How does the importance of the issue factor into your answer?

Chicken-eating scenario activity -- can we make a difference at our local grocery store?

Results: Overall, the class would consume less than the average amount of chicken, leading to less chicken ordered!

To think about at home: What about the chicken-eating scenario seems realistic? What about it seems overly simplistic?

Final thoughts/things to consider for next week: How does MacAskill show that we ought to be careful analyzing what will actually do the most good? Was there anything that was interesting/shocking/unintuitive to you? What lessons can we draw from this?

*****SPACE FOR LARGE GROUP LIVE DISCUSSION NOTES*****

The argument that eating meat is acceptable because it is how many people in our society were raised, is an explanation for the intuition but is not a justification

Not everyone can afford to have a vegetarian/vegan diet

Perhaps this is an issue within our society, a social responsibility versus individual responsibilities

If more people eat vegetarian/vegan then prices could decrease

As demand increases, accessibility increases

Kant's idea about treating living beings as means rather than ends

Eating meat from factory farms is treating those animals as means

Animals cannot consent to being eaten

But if you don't believe animals have a certain moral status then this does not matter

If we move away from eating meat, then there could be an increase in land degradation

But, it takes more crops to feed all of the livestock than it would take to feed people if we were all vegetarians

Raising animals requires more land, water and crops than it does to just grow crops

*****SPACE FOR DISCUSSION STARTER/BUILDER POSTS*****

Discussion Starter: Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People" -- (Student name removed)

Within this article, Norcross begins with a rather dark story about the mistreatment and abuse of animals. This story, about a man who lost his taste for chocolate, is a parallel that Norcross attempts to draw between the bigger argument that he is trying to convey--that factory farming is morally wrong. While the two may seem drastically different, Norcross attempts to connect them through the similar topic of animal abuse for the potential of a slight human enjoyment. He argues that the torturing of animals can be related between that of a person who does it for solely his personal gain, and people who chose to go to the store and eat factory produced meats on a daily basis. While the logical counter-argument emerges of how one person stopping eating factory farmed meats will actually affect the consumption of them as a whole, Norcross then addresses this through stating the concept of how it is theorized that by just saving 25 chickens in one year (the average number of chickens consumed by a human in the United States) could then be compounded year after year until this number can eventually become one that would actually have an impact on society. I think that Norcross's point here is an interesting one, by saying that the sooner someone finally commits to becoming against factory farming the more chickens they save is something that is intuitive, however by addressing this I think he brings up a fair point in the aspect that many people believe that their actions simply do not have an affect in the long run. This ideology however, is one that I think Norcross is trying to address. Not only does he say that the number of chickens you may be able to save compounds, but if everyone who thought that their stopping of consuming factory farmed meats actually stopped, that this could have an unprecedented impact on society. From this, I think this is an interesting philosophical ideal that could be applied to many other things within society. The first example that I can think that this could have a major impact on is the election process. If everyone that chooses not to vote on an election year were to actually go out and vote I believe that it could have an effect on the elections unlike anything we've seen before. Moving forward, Norcross then goes on to discuss how we actually determine moral reasoning between specific animals in general.

Norcross's main point in bringing this up is that he strives to illuminate what he believes to be a false sense of judgement between what animals we believe to be morally wrong to farm, and why we believe these things. He mentions how in countries like, according to him, South

Korea, it is socially acceptable to harvest dog as a delicacy to eat. He then draws the conclusion that if it is morally acceptable there to eat an animal such as a dog, however in our culture we find dogs to be that of a higher moral construct, how do we really know which case should be considered to be morally right? From this he structures his argument that, if it is wrong to torture an animal such as a dog for such a simple pleasure as to enjoy eating it, then it is wrong to support factory farming. It is wrong to support the torturing of dogs for simple pleasures. Therefore, conclude that it is wrong to factory farm.

Discussion Builder: Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People" –(Student name removed)

I think your description of the essay is extremely thorough and well thought out, (student name removed)! I agree with a lot of the description that you have included. I found Norcross's main arguments and points incredibly enticing. While I do agree that Norcross mainly argues that our behavior (of eating farm animal meat) is just as bad as Fred's behavior, in the final paragraph of the essay, Norcross concludes that "Fred's behavior is morally impermissible." In this last section, he does not directly state that he believes our behavior is morally impermissible. As you have stated, Norcross considers many interesting, different viewpoints in order to come to this conclusion. I would like to address your example of Norcross's discussion of the difference between the United States and South Korea, as I also found this particularly engaging. In the United States and Britain, the welfare of dogs and cats are more important than farm animals like chickens, cows, etc. However, this is not the case in South Korea. Within the U.S. and Britain, some may argue that dogs and cats are simply more rational than farm animals. I would like to discuss this idea further.

It would certainly make sense in the argument "it's morally okay to kill animals but not humans because humans are rational." However, there is some disputation of this claim. Norcross discusses the thought of marginal cases which states "if animals don't have moral standing, then neither do humans like infants or those mentally incapacitated." Is this claim valid? What are the arguments against marginal cases? One argument against marginal cases I found particularly compelling is that the presence or lack of a feature in any particular case is not what's important; rather, the relevant question is whether the presence or lack of the feature is normal. *Most* human beings are capable of being rational and aware. Therefore, it's the norm. However, most chickens are not rational beings (I would argue all chickens are not rational). Following this description, Norcross concludes that Fred's behavior is not morally permissible. Fred's behavior is not the norm; torturing puppies is not the average daily activity of most humans. However, eating farm animals in our diet is normal. Not only is it normal, but Cohen thinks we should actually increase our use of animals. After reading "Puppies, Pigs, and People," I am honestly torn. I see the argument on both sides and look forward to hearing what everyone has to say in class.

Discussion Builder: Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People" -- (Student name removed)

(Student name removed), you did an excellent job summarizing the Norcross essay. I had a pretty hard time digesting the contents of this piece since as an animal-products eater I felt very guilty and almost morally obligated to cut meat out of my life. What struck me the most was the part where Norcross shows us the number of chickens that people in the U.S. consume annually, and how it ends up being about 25 chickens per person. Although those numbers don't seem very high, Norcross argues that it is our obligation to stop eating farmed animal products because even a 1/10,000 chance of making a difference should be enough for us to make the change. In order to demonstrate that you provided a very good analogy with voting in elections, in which you argue that if everybody who says they are not going to vote ends up going out to vote on election day the results we'd get would be drastically different. Using that example I would like to make two assumptions to demonstrate a point: 1) it is impossible to get everybody in the U.S. to vote without there being some form of penalty for not doing so, and 2) it is also impossible to get everyone to stop eating farmed animal products, even if there was a tax for consuming them. While these two premises seem rather pessimistic, I want to draw the conclusion that going to extremes are not necessarily the only solution to the problems. Going back to the voting, if 500 people that weren't going to vote ended up voting in Ann Arbor we'd begin to see changes starting with the smaller races (Congress, local offices, etc) and even if it is not nearly enough to make a change on who we elect as president the differences that it does produce could be enough to change local policies which affect hundreds of thousands of people. That same principle is what Norcross uses when he shows us the argument against going vegetarian because as individuals we don't make a difference in such a large industry and our behavior has no impact whatsoever.

Another interesting point that I thought of as I read is that the animal products industry is not only harmful to the animals themselves but also poses a big threat to the environment. Several studies show that meat production is responsible for nearly 10% of all greenhouse gases emitted into our environment, so aside from the morality on the part of the animals I keep asking myself the question of whether or not eating meat is moral since we are harming our communal home, planet earth. Considering the environmental aspects along with Norcross' argument on morality I also find myself torn between the two sides. Earlier this year I committed myself to cut down my animal-products consumption gradually over time, hoping to one day get it off my diet fully both for environmental reasons and for health reasons, but the moral aspect of it did not really bother me until reading this, complicating the situation even further. I don't entirely know where I stand on the morality of killing animals, I find it similar to the abortion argument in which there are compelling arguments on both sides and even though I believe in legal abortions I would not endorse aborting an 8-month old fetus, so within some realms I do believe killing animals is permissible but some circumstances make it more complex. I'm excited to hear what everybody has to say about this issue since it is definitely one of the more pressing issues in our society that very often goes unnoticed, or more importantly not spoken about enough.

Discussion Starter Doing Good Better: (Student name removed)

In chapter 6, MacAskill discusses the importance of probability when deciding which actions to take. He opens with the example of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, where the probability of a natural disaster causing a meltdown was extremely low, so they assumed it would never happen and did not put safety precautions in place. Yet, it did happen, and the outcome was severe. MacAskill reminds people that probability is not the only thing one must take into account when making decisions, but also consider potential outcomes, which combined result in a decision's expected value. Statistically, the expected value is the summation of the probability of every potential outcome multiplied by its expected utility (such as monetary gain/loss). By looking at the expected value of a decision, rather than the probability of an event we find that a decision with a low probability of success but high expected utility if success, can have a great expected value that makes the risk worth it. To demonstrate this conclusion, he provided examples about voting, pursuing a career in politics and climate change. I found his example of becoming a member of parliament to be the most helpful. He indicated that everyone has a very low probability of becoming a member of parliament, there are some factors that increase your chances (graduating from Oxford in PPE), but still it is unlikely. Yet, (after using some conservative estimations) he concludes that the expected value of succeeding in making it into parliament would allow one control over 8 million pounds, which could be used for a lot of good. Similarly, just because it is unlikely for your vote to be one of the couple thousand that will decide a close election, it does not mean you should not vote because the expected value of you succeeding in getting your desired party in control is monumental.

The example of voting leads into chapter 8, in which MacAskill considers the effectiveness of individual ethical consumerism. The first aspect of ethical consumerism he considers is avoiding goods produced in sweatshops. While he acknowledges that the conditions of sweatshops are terrible, he argues that refusing to purchase items from sweatshops causes more harm than good. For starters, the jobs in the sweatshops are considered the good, desirable jobs because they typically have higher pay, and less manual labor than the rest of the jobs in the area. So, if enough people were to protest the sweatshop made goods, then the factories would go out of business putting thousands out of jobs, forcing them to find other work that has even worse conditions and pay, or turning to crime. He concludes that the best response to ending sweatshops is to not boycott their goods, but rather to work to end the extreme poverty that causes people to desire to work in the sweatshops. Similarly, MacAskill points out the inefficiency of purchasing fair-trade items. First, he argues that the extra money spent on fair-trade goods does not actually reach the poor, because only the wealthier countries can afford to meet the strict requirements (minimum wages and safety requirements) needed to get a Fairtrade label on their product. Also, the extra money does not always make it to those who actually do the labor but rather mostly to the middlemen. Finally, he mentions that the extra money that makes it past the middlemen and to the producers does not necessarily get to the

laborers, but rather to community programs that the poorest do not have access to. So, it would be better to donate the extra dollars that would be spent on fair-trade items to an efficient charity.

MacAskell continues this idea that donations are a more efficient manner of doing good than consumer behaviors, known as off-setting, in his analysis of “green living.” He mentions a series of steps people are frequently encouraged to take to reduce their carbon footprint, such as turning off electronic devices when not in use, not using plastic bags, or purchasing local foods.

However, the data has shown that these behaviors cause no significant decrease in carbon emissions (or in some cases of purchasing local food, even increases emissions). According to MacAskell, the best ways to reduce one’s carbon footprint is to reduce one’s meat consumption, or for an even more efficient solution practice offsetting. By donating to a charity (such as Cool Earth) that works to fight climate change you are able to cause a more significant reduction in carbon emissions than if you were to abstain from a behavior that will have a small impact on carbon emission reduction. For example, when you go on a road trip you could offset the carbon emissions caused by your travel by making a donation. This practice will do more good than just avoiding a road trip and not making a donation.

In contrast, MacAskell argues that offsetting is not an effective alternative to going vegetarian. He argues that because environmental offsetting is so effective, then the environmental reasons for becoming a vegetarian are weak. However, that is not to say it does not matter if one is a vegetarian or not. Rather, MacAskell points out that the most effective method for combating issues of animal welfare is going vegetarian or vegan. If you tried to offset your meat intake by making donations to animal welfare charities, the animals you personally purchased/consumed would still be harmed. This is in contrast to environmental offsetting where no one is harmed by your actions because your donation decreased the carbon emissions more than your road trip added to carbon emissions. So, MacAskell concludes that, with the exception of fighting to improve animal welfare, ethical consumerism is not the most effective way to do good, but rather one should make donations to offset their “unethical” consumer habits.

One final, concerning point MacAskell shares is the phenomena of moral licensing: after people do one good deed, they are more likely to do less good in the future. He concludes that people who fall into this moral licensing phenomena are simply doing good in order to look good. So, to counteract this dilemma, we must develop a way to frame an altruistic behavior that will not encourage moral licensing.

In reading these chapters, I was shocked to learn the ineffectiveness of fair-trade. Growing up, my parents taught me that if there was a choice between fair trade and not to always choose the fair-trade item. We would go to fair trade markets hosted by the university in my hometown or at my church to buy Christmas gifts. This contributes to the idea from the introduction of the book, that just because a behavior seems like it is doing good, does not mean it actually is. Also, more recently, I have become increasingly concerned about my clothing purchases and trying to avoid

sweatshop made items if I am able. After reading these chapters though, I did feel a small sense of relief that purchasing those items are not as bad as I initially thought. But, I had to remind myself that occasionally buying sweatshop clothes is not good by itself, instead it has to be combined with making a contribution to ending poverty. However, even with this evidence MacAskill presents, it still feels wrong to me to knowingly avoid purchasing fair trade items, or to knowingly purchase items made in a sweatshop. These are ideas I will certainly be grappling with for a while. I am curious if anyone else felt the same negative gut reaction to the idea of avoiding fair trade/no sweat items, and if so, are you convinced by MacAskill's evidence? Will you be changing any of your consumer habits? How do you think you could help prevent yourself from falling victim to moral licensing?

Discussion Builder Doing Good Better: (Student name removed)

I think the question of how to prevent ourselves from falling victim to moral licensing is really important. I know there have been times where I have said to myself "I've done enough good for the day". I'll let someone in in traffic and think I'm justified to not let the next person in. Why do I feel that one action justifies the other? There is no such thing as too much good in this world. If anything, we should strive to do as much good as possible. I think that people do genuinely want to do as much good as they can, but if others won't do it for them, why should they do it for you? It isn't really excusable, but we like to think of some kind of balance with these actions. This idea reminds me of the notion of Karma and that our actions do have moral consequences. I think understanding that doing good is good, no matter what others do to us is the best way to not get stuck in a loop of moral licensing.

Discussion Builder (*Doing Good Better*): (Student name removed)

The idea of considering both the probability of an event *and* its potential outcomes really resonates with me. I remember reading *Freakonomics* and learning about how often people fail to consider the prior probability of an outcome and only its potential magnitude. For example, it explained how we usually prioritize funding things like anti-terrorist efforts when it's really not that probable that we would have another terrorist attack anytime soon. People tend to be more afraid of things only because they consider them to be worse in magnitude, yet fail to neglect the prior probability of it occurring. Maximizing utility is simple enough of a process, but still we rarely do this in our decision making. This is a classic case of System 1 processes kicking in.

Discussion Builder for Doing Good Better: (Student name removed)

I was very impressed with (student name removed)'s thorough and insightful response to MacAskill's "Doing Good Better." Personally, I found MacAskill's thoughts on the effectiveness of individual ethical consumerism, particularly pertaining to sweatshops, to be quite thought-provoking. I must say, I can't bring myself to agree with his position. I simply

don't agree with his claims that "sweatshops benefit those in poor countries" (p. 23), and I actually find it to be an incredibly skewed point of view. Reading MacAske's arguments led me to think about the concept of cultural relativism, which we discussed earlier in this course. Yes, it may indeed be true that in developing countries, the sweatshop jobs might actually be more desirable than the alternatives. However, my ethical considerations still point me to the fact that the workers in these sweatshops are subject to incredibly inhumane conditions. MacAske himself listed the problems with these sweatshops, for example: "health and safety considerations are commonly neglected, and employers sometimes abuse their workers" (p. 22). So, to be honest, I just don't care about the fact that a Columbia University Economist believes that there should be more sweatshops. Frankly, I could not disagree more. Maybe to an *economist*, sweatshops are good. But to an *ethicist*, I simply can't agree with MacAske's position. Large corporations such as Nike are completely abusing their power in these developing countries, whether the workers chose to work there or not. That is why I could never buy a product, knowing that it was produced in a sweatshop. In most cases, the money doesn't even reach the worker anyway, it just goes right into the hands of the billionaire CEO who owns the corporation.