

Eating Fewer Animals: A Defense of Reducetarianism

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Abstract: Moral arguments against the consumption of animal products from factory farms are traditionally categorical. The conclusions require people to eliminate from their diets all animal products (veganism), all animal flesh (vegetarianism), all animals except seafood (pescetarianism), etc. An alternative “reducetarian” approach prescribes progressive reduction in one’s consumption of animal products, not categorical abstention. We articulate a much-needed moral defense of this more ecumenical approach. We start with a presumptive case in favor of reducetarianism before moving on to address three objections—that it falls short of our obligations to address such an egregious practice, is a rationalization of the status quo, and cannot fix systemic injustices in animal agriculture. We conclude that reducetarianism is a defensible approach for many people and is a promising route to moral progress on factory farming.

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1. Introduction

Modern animal agriculture inflicts serious harms on farm animals, humans, and the environment. However, it’s difficult for many people to go vegan or even just vegetarian. Meat and other animal products are not only tasty but nutrient-dense and a critical element of meaningful social events, from festivals to religious holidays. What’s more, many people lack reliable access to nutritious, plant-based food. They may live in food deserts or simply lack the culinary know-how to safely eliminate animal products without negative health consequences.

One solution to these problems has recently become more popular: *reducetarianism*. Even if you can’t entirely eliminate animal products from your diet, you should reduce as much as you can (Kateman 2016; Leenaert 2017; Singer 2023b; May & Kumar 2023). Yet this might seem a

morally inadequate response to the horrors of factory farming. In this paper, we develop a novel defense of the reducetarian approach. We begin with a presumptive case in favor by laying out the moral and psychological virtues of reducetarianism. We then defend it against three formidable objections: that it falls short of our obligations to address such an egregious practice, is a rationalization of the status quo, and cannot fix systemic injustices in animal agriculture.

2. The Harms of Factory Farms

Like many philosophers, we teach courses on modern ethical controversies – topics where there seem to be reasonable arguments on both sides. These include debates about whether society should invest heavily in biomedical technology that extends people’s lives, whether effective altruism represents the best approach to charitable giving, and whether students and professors stifle dissent on campus. Such courses also typically cover the ethics of factory farming, but this topic stands out. One side of the debate seems to have all the advantages. There are three powerful moral reasons against factory farming: gratuitous harm to farm animals, environmental degradation, and public health hazards for people.

Ethicists have focused primarily on animal welfare or rights. Factory farming inflicts intense pain, fear, and suffering on animals while they are alive (Foer 2010; Garcés 2019; Singer 2023a). Pigs, chickens, and other animals are often confined in small spaces—such as battery cages, gestation crates, and feedlots—that prevent the animals from comfortably turning around or stretching. Even “cage-free” products typically come from animals raised in large crowded warehouses with little sunlight and few opportunities to express natural instinctive behaviors, such as nesting, grazing, foraging, and mud bathing in open pastures. Offspring are separated from their mothers at an early age. Surgical procedures like castration are often performed without anesthetic. And death, when it finally comes, is often bungled and careless (Lamey 2019: 137-140).

Highly contagious diseases also regularly afflict animals living in these crowded conditions. Yet poor health matters to those in charge only if it affects the final product or the bottom line. Sick animals are typically killed, sometimes en masse to prevent further contamination. In 2022, the largest avian flu outbreak on record in the U.S. has led to the killing or “depopulating” of over 100 million chickens and turkeys, double that of the last major epidemic in 2015 (Torrella 2024). In these situations, poultry are rapidly and proactively killed through ghastly methods, such as shutting down ventilation in the chicken houses while introducing carbon dioxide gas.

Most consumers don’t acknowledge that factory farms furnish awful conditions for animals. One survey of Americans suggests that the vast majority believes they usually eat products “from animals that are treated humanely” (Anthis 2017). Yet globally an estimated 74% of land animals used for food live on factory farms (Anthis & Anthis 2019). In the United States, some 70% of cows live on factory farms, while the figure is about 99% for chickens, turkeys, and pigs (Anthis 2019). So, contra Nick Zangwill, it’s not true that a “great deal of meat is not factory farmed” (2021: 296). Perhaps for some “we” it’s true that “very many animals we eat do not live dismal lives” (296), but that represents a tiny fraction of people on the planet.

Animal suffering is probably enough to settle the ethical debate, but factory farming is harmful in several other serious ways too. Modern animal agriculture causes destruction of the environment through water and air pollution. One striking example is the Gulf “dead zone” off the

coast of Louisiana, a low-oxygen area the size of Connecticut that develops primarily along the seafloor in summer and is uninhabitable for most marine life. This dead zone, like others along some coastlines around the world, is caused in part by animal manure and chemical fertilizers that wash into waterways (EPA 2022). Animal agriculture also contributes to climate change, primarily through the greenhouse gasses released by manure and the stomachs of ruminants, such as cattle and sheep (Twine 2021). A warming planet negatively impacts both humans and the natural world through more extreme weather, crop failure, and rising sea levels that threaten coastal communities.

Factory farms are also a serious public health hazard. Water and air pollution can increase the risk of asthma, cancer, and other medical problems, especially in rural communities near manure lagoons filled with animal waste (Berger 2022). (Sometimes, as in this case, environmental degradation and public health hazards overlap.) Intense confinement also enables viruses to move from animals to humans and fosters the evolution of antibiotic-resistant bacteria as a result of overmedication (Walker et al. 2005). Many animal products are good sources of protein, energy, and essential nutrients, such as iron, zinc, and B12 (Melina et al. 2016; Rodgers & Wolf 2020). However, high levels of meat consumption typical of wealthy nations are associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some forms of cancer (Godfray et al. 2018).

Notice that these three concerns—about animal welfare, the environment, and human health—are about how factory farms operate not at the margins but as a matter of course. Over 100 billion animals are slaughtered annually for human consumption (Ritchie 2023). The scale of animal agriculture is so massive that farmers must crowd numerous animals together and produce staggering amounts of waste. Many people have seen videos of animal abuse on factory farms, where desensitized and overworked employees are found taunting, beating, or neglecting farmed animals, often against company policy. Whether or not these are rare incidents, perpetrated by a few bad apples, is orthogonal to the primary case against industrial animal agriculture. All, or nearly all, factory farms intensively confine animals, separate them from their offspring, and contribute to pollution.

That's one side of the debate. And the other side? Some claim that factory farming is at least an efficient way of feeding people. But this is simply false. The industry generates massive negative externalities (environmental, health, etc.) and is profitable only because it receives enormous government subsidies. Others argue that we benefit animals by raising them for food, because otherwise they wouldn't be alive (e.g., Lomasky 2013; Zangwill 2021). But these arguments ignore harms to the environment and public health, and they only support raising animals humanely on open pastures, not on factory farms, where their lives are not worth living.

Other defenses of factory farming are based on motivated reasoning (May and Kumar 2023). Numerous psychological experiments suggest that consumers hold beliefs about animals that help justify exploiting them for food (e.g., Loughnan et al. 2010; Bratanova et al. 2011; Piazza et al. 2015; Graça et al. 2016; Jacquet 2019; Leach et al. 2023). For example, people are liable to rationalize their animal consumption by positing that the vast majority of the animals don't really suffer (Lomasky 2013). Or they adopt speciesist attitudes that severely diminish animal interests relative to human interests, simply based on species membership. Thus, various ideas about farmed animals appear to be believed not because they are plausible but because they serve to support human preferences. We should presumably be dubious of practices that are supported by such denial and wishful thinking (McPherson 2014; Jaquet 2019; Kumar & May 2019).

3. Dietary Restrictions

Even if factory farming is morally bankrupt, does anything follow about individual dietary choices? Are consumers morally obligated to boycott factory farms? Building on existing ethical analyses (e.g., Rachels 2004; DeGrazia 2009; May & Kumar 2023), we can construct a straightforward argument that doesn't rely on controversial moral assumptions:

1. Supporting a practice that causes significant and unnecessary harm to humans, animals, and the environment is *pro tanto* wrong (that is, wrong provided it isn't overridden by other moral reasons).
2. Purchasing or consuming products from factory farms supports a practice that causes significant and unnecessary harm to humans, animals, and the environment.
3. Thus, purchasing or consuming products from factory farms is *pro tanto* wrong.

The argument has several distinctive features.

First, this argument is about supporting gratuitous harm, not directly causing it. Some ethicists argue that one person's dietary choices do not impact the farming industry because one person does not generate a sufficiently strong economic signal (e.g., Budolfson 2019; Fischer 2019). The same number of chickens will suffer on factory farms, regardless of whether you buy tofu at the grocery store instead of poultry. However, our argument doesn't turn on whether consumers causally contribute to the harm on factory farms through their purchases, only that one's consumption problematically *supports* the industry, a kind of complicity (see e.g. DeGrazia 2009; Driver 2015; Cuneo 2016). Supporting gratuitous harm is sufficient for the *pro tanto* moral conclusion.

Second, the argument targets products from factory farms. We follow many others in focusing on factory farms because they treat animals so poorly but also because they generate gratuitous levels of pollution, greenhouse gasses, and antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The argument doesn't deem it generally immoral to consume meat or other products from animals who live good lives on open pastures before being slaughtered humanely (Rachels 2004; Pollan 2006; Zangwill 2021). However, we should recognize how few animals at present are raised this way, which makes the second premise of the argument inescapable for most people most of the time.

Third, many ethicists rely on arguments like this one to conclude that one ought to boycott modern animal agriculture by becoming vegan or vegetarian (e.g., Singer 1975; Rachels 2004; DeGrazia 2009; Engel 2016). But our conclusion here is not absolute; it doesn't say that buying products from factory farms is always immoral. The moral premise states only that it's *pro tanto* wrong to support egregious harm.

The conclusion is not absolute because not all consumers are in the same situation all of the time. For many people, giving up eating meat, cheese, eggs, and other animal products requires morally relevant costs. Some people live in "food deserts" in which ethical alternatives are simply unavailable or unaffordable. Some rely on others for their meals and cannot persuade them to change their diets. Becoming a vegetarian or vegan alienates some people from their friends or

family causing serious distress (Pollan 2006: 313), especially if animal products are central to their ethnic or religious identity.

Some individuals may even need to eat some animal products to maintain good health. Many health experts agree that vegetarian and vegan diets are healthy for the average person if “well-planned” (Melina et al. 2016). But underlying health conditions or allergies can make a healthy vegan diet extremely difficult to sustain if not strictly impossible. Imagine, for example, how prohibitive a vegan diet would be for someone allergic to soy, gluten, or nuts (or all three). Even if rare, some people have attempted to give up meat but suffered serious health consequences, such as iron and B12 deficiency, which can cause irreversible nerve damage (Chalouhi et al. 2008; Rodgers & Wolf 2020: ch. 3). One study of British men found that over 50% of vegans were B12 deficient (Gilsing et al. 2010). Proper nutrition is particularly pressing for individuals with certain intestinal diseases, such as Crohn’s and celiac, that inhibit vitamin absorption (Mayo Clinic 2024) and for children. In 2022, for example, 18-month-old Ezra O’Leary died of malnutrition in Florida because he was fed only raw fruits and vegetables, and his mother received life in prison for child neglect and manslaughter (Associated Press 2022).

We don’t want to give the impression that a vegan diet is inherently dangerous. Given the inordinate amount of animal products many consumers eat, which often contain high levels of saturated fat, reducing one’s intake will typically yield health benefits. The point is that we must qualify assertions like “we can easily meet all of our nutritional needs” without eating animals (Engel 2016: 22). This is true for some “we,” but not others. It depends on the individual’s body and circumstances. For some people a healthy version of an animal-free diet can be unattainable without sacrificing other moral goods. As Kathryn Paxton George notes, ethicists have simply assumed that “we are all pretty much the same physiologically and differences among us may safely be ignored as morally irrelevant.”

4. The Case for Reducetarianism

So what ought the average consumer conclude about their dietary obligations? Enter reducetarianism. If you can’t feasibly eliminate animals from your diet – for moral reasons of accessibility, social meaning, health, or taste – you can still significantly reduce your consumption of animal products. You needn’t start by going cold turkey. You could reserve meat only for dinner or only weekends. Then maybe only once a week. Then once a month. You can still eat meat on special occasions. No need to scandalize Grandma during the holidays or always draw the ire of your friends when they invite you over for a barbeque. Once meat is a rare luxury, you might try eliminating other animal products from your diet. Replace dairy milk with oat or soy milk. Replace parmesan cheese with nutritional yeast. You might even rely on food that comes from truly humane farms, which arguably includes *some* producers of pasture-raised beef, poultry, and eggs.

Reducetarianism aims at progressively reducing one’s consumption of animal products, particularly from factory farms, as much as one reasonably can—or as much as one can without making a very large personal sacrifice. This approach is similar to, or perhaps even the same as, flexitarianism and other restrictions that nevertheless allow for some consumption of animal products (Giubilini 2017; Rosenfeld et al. 2020). However, “reduce-” is a superior label since “flex-” connotes (without entailing) that one’s reduction might be unprincipled, weak, or

opportunistic. A reducetarian who operates on the principle “Eat meat only at dinner” isn’t exactly flexible but follows a principled rule, and one that isn’t necessarily arbitrary. The evening omnivore might have specific reasons for following this rule. For example, in addition to reducing harm to animals and the environment, it’s a feasible rule for their family and is less likely to conflict with culturally-significant events (Foer 2019).

Now, given that reducetarianism says that one should reduce animal consumption as much as one reasonably can, does this mean that healthy, privileged people should go vegan or approximate a vegan diet? Not necessarily. Even if such people are unlikely to live in food deserts, they may well face other constraints, e.g., allergies or conflicting social values (e.g., family traditions). What about people free even of these constraints? Since many privileged and well-meaning people try to go vegan (or vegetarian) and fail, some are more likely to stick to a restrictive diet if their ambitions are lowered, and even more likely to achieve or approximate a vegan diet in the long-term. And yet, other privileged people can go vegan in the short-term if they try or could overcome temptation with more effort. It really depends on the person, and there is no determinate answer as to how much someone should reduce. Suffice to say, many healthy, privileged people should reduce more than they have.

The first and most obvious virtue of reducetarianism is that for many people it is psychologically more feasible than going full-on vegan or vegetarian. While only about 5% of Americans are vegetarian, almost five times as many are trying to reduce their meat consumption and 80% are willing to at least cut back a few days per week (McCarthy & DeKoster 2020; Zimmerman 2024). Such findings suggest that incremental dietary change is more practical. The point is not to eat meat only for dinner and then congratulate yourself. Rather, it’s to start with small steps instead of not trying at all or failing and then resuming a meat-oriented diet. Modest changes in the short-term, while ethically insufficient, may provide the best opportunity to fulfill your obligations in the long-term. Some reducetarians discover that they can approximate very closely to a vegan or vegetarian diet eventually, but only if they approach it slowly. Both authors of this essay are reducetarians who, in principle, allow themselves the occasional burger or plate of turkey but, in practice, have gradually lost interest and don’t bother much anymore.

It’s often easier to follow a simple rule, such as “only eat animal products on weekends.” For some people, it might even be easiest to simply abstain from eating meat ever—that is, to be a vegetarian, or at least try to be (Levy 2015). All of these dietary rules count as reducetarian provided they are driven by the aim of reducing one’s consumption of morally problematic animal products. We should even include “conscientious omnivorism,” which aims to only eat humanely raised animal products (Cuneo 2016; Pollan 2006; Harris 2023). It’s an open question whether to include “new omnivores” who advocate eating large herbivores such as cattle as a way to minimize the suffering of field animals caused by plant agriculture (for discussion and critique, see Lamey 2019). One could certainly be functionally vegan most of the time but sometimes eat vegetarian meals and occasionally fish or pasture-raised beef. Precisely because reducetarian diets come in many forms—including strict veganism—it is generally more feasible than the subset of only a single strict diet.

A second virtue of reducetarianism is the broad coalition it supports with other “impurists.” Arguments for vegetarianism can be reducetarian when they conclude that people ought to “make every reasonable effort” to abstain from eating animals (DeGrazia 2009: 148). Likewise, although the Vegan Society (2024) defines veganism as “the practice of dispensing with

all products derived wholly or partly from animals,” it often qualifies this with “as far as is possible and practicable.” Some vegans thus consider their diet to be compatible with a reductarian message (Leenaert 2017; Barrett & Raskoff 2023; Raskoff forthcoming; Schwarz forthcoming).

The goals are somewhat different. Vegans, even practical ones, seek a world that is entirely free from animal exploitation, which includes honey from the farmer’s market. The mission of the Reductarian Foundation (2024) mission is instead “to improve human health, protect the environment, and spare farm animals from cruelty by reducing societal consumption of animal products.” That mission certainly supports a coalition with vegetarians and vegans, since reductarians would welcome—if feasible—a world without the consumption of animal products. Yet the reductarian end game is also compatible with a future that includes some consumption of animals.

A third and final virtue of a reductarian approach is that it is more likely to spread because it is socially less alienating. Social change often depends on “social proof”—discovering through the example of others that some behaviors are actually more sustainable, pleasant, and valuable than one once thought (Frank 2020; May & Kumar 2023). If your friends can be reductarians, and they’re still healthy and happy, then maybe you can be a reductarian too.

Vegetarianism and veganism also spread this way, but they face two challenges. One is that upwards of 84% of people who attempt to become vegetarians or vegans fail (Faunalytics 2014), which sends a social signal that it is not pleasant or otherwise sustainable. The other challenge is that vegetarians and vegans communicate negative judgment, sometimes intentionally but also sometimes unwittingly (Minson & Monin 2012). Such judgment puts others on defense, causing them to dig in their heels and rationalize their unrestricted omnivorism. Reductarianism seems to reflect a more forgiving ethical attitude. Perhaps it’s partly a matter of messaging. Considering yourself a “reductarian” might feel less alienating and communicate less judgment toward others, even if you eat as little meat as a self-identified vegetarian who occasionally backslides. But is reductarianism too forgiving? This leads us to our first objection.

5. Absolutist Objection

Recall the devastating objections to factory farming. Factory farms mistreat and kill sentient animals, harm the environment, and damage human health. For these reasons, eating animal products from factory farms seems to be not just problematic but egregiously unethical. As Cheryl Abbate puts it, memorably, factory farming is “more like child abuse than like lying” (Abbate 2021: 2).

In light of this, it seems the correct action for most consumers is to eliminate factory farm products from their diet, not merely reduce their consumption (Rachels 2004). Arguably, this is true no matter what the causal impact of your diet. It’s wrong to attend a dog fighting match in which animals are brutalized and often die, even if the events will continue with or without your support. Analogously, if someone discovers that their favorite clothes are produced by torturing puppies or cats, the correct action is to stop buying any clothes from the brand, not merely to reduce their purchases (Norcross 2004; McPherson 2014; Engel 2016; Francione & Charlton 2017). If a friend told you that she decided to just shop at the offending store once a month instead of once a week, you would be justly horrified. At least when it comes to “essentially cruel”

practices, one ought to completely abstain from them, provided “alternatives are readily available” (Cuneo 2016: 27).

Some consumers can escape the system of animal agriculture that exploits animals. Billions of people live in populated cities with plenty of plant-based alternatives, have supportive friends who are also vegan or vegetarian, don’t have underlying health conditions that increase risks of vitamin deficiency, and aren’t allergic to nuts or gluten. If being vegan is easy and healthy for you, you may well be obligated to fully reduce. (Indeed, some affluent readers of this academic article may fall into this category.)

However, billions of people aren’t in these circumstances. Eating a vegan or vegetarian diet can be healthy for most people if “well planned,” but this isn’t merely a technical problem, as if one were designing an airplane. A well-designed plane can fly, but getting it off the ground requires access to the relevant materials, practical skills, and the time to build. For many people, executing a well-planned vegan diet requires moving out of a food desert, learning new ways of eating and cooking, becoming alienated from friends and family, and all while working multiple jobs and struggling to feed children on a shoestring budget. Meanwhile, other moral considerations compete for one’s scarce time and attention. This is especially true for individuals whose own health, or their children’s, cannot clearly be maintained while boycotting all animal products.

For these reasons, it can be defensible for some people to be involved to some degree in an egregious practice. Although you can avoid one bad clothing company, it’s not feasible to boycott them all. Compare the situation of Americans during the Civil War who opposed slavery but still wore cotton clothing produced from slave labor. As Naomi Oreskes, the historian and philosopher of science, put it in an interview with *The Nation*, Americans weren’t “hypocrites when they joined the abolition movement” – rather this just meant that “they were also part of the slave economy, and they knew it” (Stephenson 2015). Importantly, we’re not arguing that you can get out of any moral obligation when it’s difficult. Rather, assuming some version of the principle of ought-implies-can, one’s moral duties are constrained by the possibilities.

Of course, one shouldn’t then just stand idly by while participating in an unjust system. We have argued that one has a duty (albeit pro tanto) not to support practices that cause serious and significant harm. It’s not enough to just stop eating meat at dinner and reduce no further if you’re reasonably able to do more. However, there is also an obligation to contribute to the decline of such practices. Recall that vegetarian and vegan recidivism is high (Faunalytics 2014). If attempting to go completely vegetarian or vegan is likely to backfire – if you are less likely to succeed and less likely to convert family and friends – then it is a less effective strategy for reforming and ultimately eliminating harmful agricultural and eating practices.

Empirical research provides some support for this outlook. Several controlled studies suggest that appeals to eating fewer animal products, as opposed to strict vegetarianism or veganism, are generally more effective at producing dietary change (Sparkman et al. 2021; Cameron et al. 2023; Ginn & Lickel 2023). The impact of incremental change can be seen in the real world too. One large American study examined the success of Meatless Mondays at 245 food halls in hospitals, senior living facilities, government offices, and similar sites across 38 states. The report found that after a year of implementation the increase in vegetarian options on Mondays were popular enough that 30% of providers reported a decrease in their purchases of meat products, and the vast majority of providers said they would continue the program (Leidig 2012). Further research is needed, but the overall trend suggests that reducing is an effective strategy.

In our lifetimes, it's almost certain that factory farms will not completely disappear. But it is possible for the number of animals brutalized on them to stop increasing and even begin decreasing. If this is the most realistic goal in the short- and medium-term future, the focus should be on persuading people to reduce their consumption of animals. The number of people who are vegans or vegetarians seems to have plateaued in the past few decades—remaining around 5% in most countries (Reinhart 2018). Absolutist arguments seem to have hit a ceiling. It has been 50 years since Peter Singer first published *Animal Liberation*, and by his own lights his “call for a boycott of meat” has been “a dismal failure” (2023a: 179). Unfortunately, global meat consumption continues to rise (Blaustein-Rejto & Smith 2021). Millions of people around the world are vegetarians only out of necessity and poised to become frequent meat eaters once they can afford it (Leahy et al. 2010). Since there are many more meat-eaters in the world, if some of them become reductarians the amount of animal products that the public consumes can be drastically reduced – with a corresponding loss for the factory farming industry (Singer 2023b). Taking the most effective steps toward reducing the harms of factory farming favors non-absolutism. And doing what one can to change the system makes participating in it more defensible.

6. Debunking Objection

As mentioned earlier, defenses of modern animal agriculture are often self-serving justifications for the consumption of animal products. Critics might similarly attempt to debunk reductarian diets. After all, by permitting rather modest reductions in one's consumption of animal products, reductarianism doesn't require much self-sacrifice. Even if an improvement on unrestricted omnivorism, it might seem like a dubious defense for moral mediocrity (compare Schwitzgebel 2019). Reductarians might be falling prey in particular to the psychological phenomenon of moral licensing, in which morally questionable behavior is rationalized by one's other good deeds—similar to how recycling can make people feel like they're doing enough to help the environment (Blanken et al. 2015). In contrast, strict veganism might be the morally superior option that isn't debunked by self-serving justifications.

Although this objection should be taken seriously, we have two replies. First, the choice is not between strict veganism and modest reduction. Even if many people start out with meager reductions in animal consumption, reductarianism is not inherently modest. Rather, it's an ongoing attempt to improve one's dietary habits, to eat more ethically. Ultimately, rather than being a rationalization of moral mediocrity, reduction may require great sacrifice.

Second, modest reductions in animal consumption aren't easily debunked as motivated reasoning. Some people really do live in food deserts, where better options are simply unavailable. It's certainly possible to acquire enough protein and nutrients on a vegetarian and even vegan diet, but for many people it takes climbing a steep learning curve that is insurmountable for those who lack the social capital or time while working two jobs to support their family. Sometimes access to ethical alternatives is temporarily constrained. Suppose you're famished at an airport, restaurant, or event that lacks vegan options that are also compatible with your food allergies (to gluten, nuts, shellfish, stone fruits, etc.) and health problems (hypertension, diabetes, gastroesophageal reflux disease, etc.). Choosing to consume animal products in such circumstances is motivated by legitimate reasons, not wishful thinking or denial.

Even when vegan options are available, the personal costs of strict abstention from animal products are considerable. In addition to underlying health conditions, many people live in cultures that ostracize vegans or vegetarians. The filmmaker, Reagan Hodge, recalls growing up in a farming community in Georgia and being shut down upon asking any questions about animal welfare, with her aunt instructing her “to not say a single bad thing about the chickens because they were why she had a roof over her head and would eventually be able to go to college” (Garcés 2019: 78-79). Even outside farming communities, animals are so integral to many cultural dishes and traditions that failure to, say, eat Papa’s szechuan chicken or Grandma’s chilaquiles is tantamount to social death.

Moreover, some conscientious consumers are able to justify eating meat, eggs, or dairy because what they buy doesn’t come from factory farms. These products come from farms that arguably treat the animals humanely on open pastures, without resorting to feedlots or shipping animals long distances to be slaughtered by industrial facilities (Harris 2023). Some ethicists doubt that raising animals for food can be truly humane (Engel 2016: 19). However, the point is that occasionally consuming these products can be grounded in one’s concerns about human health and animal welfare—not denial about the conditions of animals on factory farms.

Perhaps some people under certain conditions have a moral obligation to be vegan or vegetarian. Animal activists might be obligated to go vegan given the commitments of their identity (Fischer 2019: ch. 9), and some parents might be obligated to expose their children to such diets (Fredericks & Fischer 2024). It just depends. Ultimately, the ethics of eating conflicts with rigid categorical pronouncements, and reducetarianism provides precisely the kind of nuance necessary for capturing the complexities.

Of course, reducetarians should be vigilant about motivated reasoning. People should not quickly assume that they can’t adopt a vegan or vegetarian diet and settle for less. They should try reducing only if eliminating really is too challenging. Reducetarianism is a progressive position: it can involve continuing to reduce one’s consumption of animal products over time to a degree compatible with other relevant moral considerations. A policy of only eating meat at dinnertime can later be reduced to only weekends, and so on. Each reduction in consumption decreases one’s support of harm to animals, the environment, and human health.

In general, such incremental moral progress is often the most durable (Kumar & Campbell 2022). A strict vegan diet might be less threatened by debunking arguments, but its constraints and learning curve can serve as a source of recidivism for many people. Again, most vegans and vegetarians eventually give up (Faunalytics 2014), and the percentage of the population trying out these diets has remained low. Reducetarianism provides a framework for embracing the strict vegans who can sustain it and the weekday vegetarians who can keep it going by occasionally eating humanely raised beef. As people master more modest reductions, the next steps become more feasible and thus less susceptible to motivated reasoning.

7. Structuralist Objection

The reducetarian approach is justified partly as a means to ending a heinous system of animal agriculture. Yet one’s own dietary choices won’t thwart a powerful system of multinational corporations propped up by federal subsidies. If becoming a vegetarian or vegan isn’t enough,

merely reducing might be even less effective. One might worry that such personal dietary choices don't matter; what matters is changing laws and institutions surrounding animal agriculture (Chignell 2016; Reese 2018; Mann & Brockopp 2019; Davies 2022). We need laws that mandate humane treatment of animals, diversion of federal subsidies from factory farms to smaller operations, charities that campaign for Meatless Mondays, and proper labeling that clearly informs consumers of how their food was produced.

The problem is familiar from debates about individual versus institutional obligations to address societal injustices, from structural racism to outsized carbon footprints. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) has argued that individuals can feel free to drive gas-guzzling cars because global warming is a structural problem that the government is responsible for addressing, much like an aging bridge in need of repair. As one environmental activist put it, we need to “stop obsessing” over our environmental sins and “fight the oil and gas industry instead” (Heglar 2019). Or consider recycling at home to address the plastics filling our oceans and bloodstreams. Tossing yogurt cups into the recycle bin barely makes a dent in plastic waste, about 90% of which ends up in a landfill anyway because it's part of a broken system (OECD 2022). Similarly, reducing one's consumption of animal products for moral reasons might fail to place responsibility where it lies: with the corporations who perpetuate the torturous conditions on factory farms.

Setting aside responsibility, structural change might also seem more effective. The Humane League has been rated highly by Animal Charity Evaluators as one of the most effective animal advocacy groups. By funneling donations towards online ads, corporate campaigns, and grassroots organizing, the organization is estimated to save between -6 and 13 farmed animals per dollar spent (Animal Charity Evaluators 2018). The range goes from negative to positive to reflect that donations could have a negative impact on animal welfare. Nevertheless, the midpoint of 3.5 animals is positive. If the average person eats 174 animals per year (Torrella 2022), then an annual donation of \$50 could perhaps offset your own consumption. You might reasonably worry that these estimates are far too generous. But then you could simply donate much more to better ensure your animal consumption is offset. Even if only 0.25 animals are saved per dollar donated, you wouldn't have to be rich to help more animals than you eat. Perhaps, then, most people should donate to such animal advocacy efforts, rather than change their diets (Davies 2022).

These concerns seem compelling, but we can't completely avoid dietary changes. Some of the very actions that charitable organizations take are meant to reduce the consumption of animal products. The Humane League, for example, carried out the large study on Meatless Mondays in food halls (Leidig 2012) and otherwise advocates for companies and municipalities to adopt such programs that influence dietary change. Often the programs encourage animal-free meals or make it more costly to opt for animal products, so consumers must still choose to reduce. Of course, one might happily donate to charities that will advocate for policies that force oneself to pay higher prices or to reduce their consumption of products from factory farms. But moving away from factory farming requires that few consumers adopt this mindset.

Ultimately, the structuralist objection presents a false dichotomy that pits individual responsibility against institutional obligations. While governments and corporations are morally responsible for the egregious harms they cause or permit, individuals are responsible for their role in fraught systems, but only to the extent that they can make change within those roles (Zheng 2018). Although most people aren't presidents of countries or companies, they do play a role in the

agriculture food system as consumers, voters, and influencers in their social networks. Even if one person's tofu purchases won't significantly reduce the number of animals suffering on factory farms, individuals do have the ability to persuade others and thereby amplify their collective action (Lawford-Smith 2015; Giubilini 2017). But abstract argument alone isn't very effective at persuading others to change their dietary habits. Often leading by example demonstrates to others that reducing is feasible, approachable, and on the rise (May & Kumar 2023). So, while individual consumers aren't responsible for executive orders, they are responsible for what they order at restaurants, purchase at grocery stores, and bring to the potluck.

Far from competing, institutional and individual change are mutually reinforcing. Individual citizens in a democracy can at least influence politicians, corporations, and their community through votes and purchases (Brownstein, Kelly, & Madva 2022; Kumar & Campbell 2022). Consider a pair of animal welfare laws passed in California and Massachusetts (Proposition 12 in 2018 and Question 3 in 2016), which curtail some of the cruelest confinement practices, such as battery cages and gestation crates, for certain animals in the food industry. These laws specifically ban the sale of eggs, pork, and veal that come from animals who don't have enough space to even turn around, lie down, or stretch. Although the minimal space requirements apply only to egg-laying hens, sows, and mothering cows—not broiler chickens or dairy cows, for example—the law is arguably a major advancement in animal welfare regulations in the United States market. Yet such measures were put directly to citizens and passed only because a majority of voters supported them. The connection to individual consumption is direct, since the price of products like eggs and bacon are likely to rise in these states. Consumers must not only take on the individual responsibility of voting with their ballots but also with their dollars by shouldering some of the costs of more humane animal husbandry. In these ways, individual and institutional changes work together.

Other forms of systemic change arise from producers themselves without regulation and yet still through consumer influence. In recent years, many people in countries around the world have seen an increase in ethical alternatives to factory farming, such as plant-based milks and burgers that mimic the real thing. And billions of dollars have been funneled into the development of cultivated meat that grows animal flesh from cells in bioreactors, making it unnecessary to house or slaughter a living, breathing chicken, pig, lamb, or cow. People in Singapore are already able to purchase such “lab meat,” and massive production facilities have been built in the United States, partly funded by Tyson Foods, the largest producer of chicken in the country (Garcés 2019: ch. 14). Consumers have also seen a rise in pasture-raised beef and eggs on grocery store shelves, which allow chickens and cattle to roam, express instinctual behaviors, and avoid intense confinement (Kateman 2022: ch. 10).

All of these developments might seem like systemic changes arising from institutional responsibilities. But these new products come to fruition only based on consumer demand—and would rapidly collapse if consumers stop buying them. Again, we see that systemic and individual changes are symbiotic, which grounds moral responsibilities among consumers, producers, and legislators alike. Indeed, producers and legislators can hardly be saddled with an obligation to change their practices if constituents won't support them. The two forms of responsibility arise in tandem.

Of course, as we've emphasized, not all consumers are in the same circumstances. Avoiding animal products can involve moral costs to one's physical health, cultural identity, and

social standing. These barriers might seem to excuse many consumers from an individual obligation to change their diet, while producers retain an institutional obligation to reform. That's perhaps true for strict vegetarianism or veganism. However, few such excuses apply to a reductarian diet, because it's more feasible to maintain and inherently more inclusive (making it liable to spread throughout social networks). Because the reductarian movement is a big tent, it affords a broader community that includes strict vegans, weekday vegetarians, those who are just starting to try plant-based burgers, and many others. The broad definition of reductarianism makes it flexible enough to fit many health conditions, socioeconomic statuses, and cultural backgrounds. And the progressive nature of the diet ensures that everyone can find their limits while industry reforms develop as well. In other words, it's harder to justify not being a reductarian than it is to justify not being a strict vegan.

Reductarianism is particularly suited to capturing the interaction between various individual and institutional responsibilities. Our role in factory farming is as voters and consumers. We thus retain responsibilities to do what we can to vote with our ballots and forks, which includes feasible changes in what we purchase and the signals we send to others to form collective action on this issue. Importantly, reductarianism's ability to build a broad coalition and to spread reinforces institutional obligations to reform agricultural practices and regulations through increased consumer and voter demand. The relationship is symbiotic because, as individuals increasingly change their diets, laws and practices change, which further signal to consumers that cultural norms are shifting, which spurs more individual change, and so on. The focus on progressive reduction facilitates the kind of positive feedback loops that have fueled many cases of moral progress in human history (Kumar & Campbell 2022).

Compare the rapid decline in anti-gay attitudes that has recently occurred in America and similar countries. Changes in individual attitudes toward gay people fueled reforms, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage. In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional, and there is some evidence that this ruling further signaled to Americans that more of their fellow citizens support marriage equality than they had thought (Tankard & Paluck 2017). This structural change then causes more people to support same-sex marriage, which supports further reforms, such as allowing gay people to serve in the military or as a pastor in one's congregation (Kumar and Campbell 2022: ch. 9). And so on.

Similar feedback loops between individual choices and systems can facilitate moral progress on factory farming. Laws requiring minimum space for animals send signals to individuals that norms are changing, which influences more people to change their minds and diets. Shifts in consumer demand fuel the development of new products, such as pasture-raised eggs, plant-based burgers, vegan mayo, and cultivated meat. The availability of feasible alternatives to factory farmed animal products changes even more people's behavior but also their moral beliefs (Leenaert 2017: 93; Kateman 2022: 174). Even more consumers gain the freedom to live up to new moral ideals. As moral ideals strengthen into convictions, more voters will support stricter regulations and more innovations in plant-based and humanely-raised food. And so on.

In general, incremental dietary changes link up well with incremental structural changes to animal agriculture. Imagine you limit your consumption of meat to evenings. Soon your government imposes a tax on meat, which slightly raises the price of your favorite burgers and bacon you look forward to for dinner. The higher price might then motivate you to reduce even further, partly for financial reasons but also moral ones since you're generally aiming to reduce

your consumption of animal products for these reasons. In contrast, the meat tax would have no effect on a strict vegetarian. We're not endorsing such taxes. We could make the same point with other structural changes too, such as Meatless Mondays in schools, stricter animal welfare laws, and reduced government subsidies for factory farms. The point is just that feasible structural changes are often incremental and these link up with reducetarianism to promote progressive feedback loops between individual and structural changes.

8. Conclusion

Modern industrial farming is a pernicious institution that's bad for animal welfare, the environment, and human health. Supporting factory farms by eating their products is therefore wrong—provided it isn't overridden by other moral reasons. And in light of various moral sacrifices required for many people to become strictly vegan and vegetarian, the right response for many people is a reducetarian approach that involves incrementally reducing the amount of factory farmed animal products in one's diet as much as one reasonably can.

We've seen that objections to reducetarianism can be deflated. An absolutist approach might be superior in ideal circumstances, but millions if not billions of people live in non-ideal, morally complex circumstances. Moreover, the attempt to be morally pure is likely to end in failure that teaches others not to bother trying. Reducing can be a rationalization of the desire to eat animal products, but not necessarily, especially if practitioners take their ultimate goal to be progressive reduction. Finally, reducetarian diets are not causally impotent, nor a way of shirking moral responsibility, given the rich interplay between psychology and structural change. We must do something to end factory farming, or even simply shrink it, and reducetarianism is a new and potent resource for moral progress on this issue.

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