UTILITARIANISM AND VEGETARIANISM RECONSIDERED

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ABSTRACT

Roger Crisp argues, in “Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism,” that utilitarians, while morally obliged to abstain from consuming meat produced by factory farming methods, have a duty to consume the meat of certain animals that are not “intensively reared.” Specifically, Crisp contends that utility will in fact be maximized by the practice of consuming the flesh of animals who have lead satisfying lives, are killed painlessly and are replaced by other animals who likewise lead satisfying lives, so long as the meat of intensively reared animals is rigorously avoided.

In this paper it is shown that Crisp’s argument fails to establish that meat-eating is obligatory for utilitarians, for it ignores the economics of other duties that a utilitarian bears qua utilitarian. If, on the contrary, these other duties are also taken into consideration, then a consistent utilitarian will normally be required, under present circumstances, to abstain from consuming even humanly produced meat.

Keywords: Roger Crisp, Vegetarianism, Animal Rights, applied ethics.

RESUMEN

Roger Crisp argumenta en “Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism,” que los utilitaristas, aunque moralmente obligados a abstenerse de consumir carne procedente de granjas de producción industrial, tienen el deber de consumir carne de ciertos animales que no se ha “producido de forma intensiva”. Específicamente, Crisp defiende que la utilidad será de hecho maximizada por medio de la práctica de consumir la carne de animales que han llevado vidas satisfechas, han sido muertos sin dolor y son reemplazados por otros animales que del mismo modo llevan vidas satisfechas, de modo que la carne de animales obtenida de modo intensivo es rigurosamente evitada.

En este artículo se muestra que los argumentos de Crisp no logran establecer que comer carne es obligatorio para los utilitaristas, porque ello ignora la

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Within the vast literature on the moral status of animals that has appeared over the last three decades, attempts to establish the properly utilitarian position on the consumption of non-human animals have generated a good deal of lively, wide-ranging debate. While some utilitarians, notably Peter Singer (1980), contend that utilitarianism entails vegetarianism, or at least some form of demi-vegetarianism, others, such as R.G. Frey (1983), have argued that it is permissible for utilitarians to continue consuming all kinds of meat, including the products of factory farms, though utilitarians—and, indeed, all who are concerned about animal welfare—ought to support reforms aimed at improved treatment for animals raised in oppressive, inhumane conditions. A third view has been defended by Roger Crisp. In his essay “Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism,” Crisp contends that utilitarians, while morally obliged to abstain from consuming meat produced by factory farming methods, have a duty to consume the meat of certain animals which are not “intensively reared.” Specifically, Crisp contends that overall utility will in fact be maximized by the practice of consuming the flesh of animals who have lead satisfying lives, are killed painlessly and are replaced by other animals who likewise lead satisfying lives, so long as the meat of intensively reared animals is rigorously avoided. Let us call this view, whose plausibility depends on the familiar “argument from replaceability,” the thesis of compulsory carnivorous.

In what follows I aim to show, using what I believe to be a new argument, that Crisp’s reasoning fails to establish that meat-eating is obligatory for utilitarians. The first part of the paper briefly reviews the main lines of Crisp’s argument. I then proceed to show, in the second

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2 Singer has also made a case for ethical vegetarianism on non-utilitarian grounds: a common assumption notwithstanding, the argument underpinning Animal Liberation does not rest on utilitarian principles.

3 For a delineation and discussion of demi-vegetarianism, see Hare 1999.

4 Although Crisp does not explicitly say so, plainly he uses the term “meat” to include poultry and fish as well as beef and pork. However, as we shall see, his view would forbid the consumption of most fish sold today.

5 For clear, brief presentations of the replacement argument, see Sartre 1987, Ch. 10, and Singer 1990, 228–230. Crisp states the basic thesis and implications of the argument on pp. 32–33 of his article (1997). The notion of “replaceability” underpins the argument that Henry Salt (1976) dubbed “the logic of the larder,” and Crisp’s essay is in essence a thorough, specifically utilitarian restatement of this argument.

6 I hasten to add that there are other arguments, e.g. Gruzinski (1989) (one aspect of which Singer [1999] echoes in responding to Hare’s defense of demi-vegetarianism [1999]), that succeed in es-
section, that even if utilitarians embraced Crisp’s conclusions, their level of meat consumption under present circumstances would likely be extremely modest, mainly on account of the high percentage of meat currently produced by factory farming methods and the fact that his view does not sanction the consumption of most fish harvested and sold today. In the final section of the paper, I attempt to show that Crisp’s case for compulsory meat-eating is in fact flawed. The thesis of compulsory carnivorism, I argue, ignores the economics of other duties and obligations that a utilitarian bears qua utilitarian. If, on the contrary, these duties and obligations are also taken into consideration, then a consistent utilitarian will normally be required, under present circumstances, to abstain from consuming even humanely produced meat.

I

According to Crisp, it is possible to distinguish five purportedly utilitarian positions on meat-eating. He characterizes these five different positions as follows:

1) Vegetarianism (V): One is morally required to abstain from meat.

2) The Compromise Permission View (CP): One is morally required to abstain from the flesh of intensively reared animals, but permitted to eat the flesh of certain non-intensively reared animals.

3) The Compromise Requirement View (CR): One is morally required both to abstain from the flesh of intensively reared animals and to eat the flesh of certain non-intensively reared animals.

4) The Raymond Frey View (RF): One is morally permitted to eat all kinds of meat, but required to campaign against intensive farming, by means such as political lobbying.

5) The Full Meat-eating Requirement View (FR): One is morally required to eat all kinds of meat. (Crisp 1997, 32)

The position that Crisp himself defends is The Compromise Requirement View (CR), a form of restricted, yet compulsory, carnivorism. An assessment of six of the basic utilitarian arguments supposed to support vegetarianism reveals, he contends, both the inconsistency or inadequacy of the other four allegedly utilitarian positions and the correctness of CR.

The six arguments that Crisp analyzes are The Argument from Killing, The Argument from Suffering, The Argument from Callousness, The Argument from Paternalism, The Argument from Starvation, and
The Argument from Future Generations. Two of these arguments, the “Callousness” and “Paternalism” arguments, in fact prove quite weak and Crisp accordingly dispenses of them in short order. The former argument involves a utilitarian variation on the familiar Kantian rationale for condemning cruelty to animals—the inhumane treatment of animals engenders inhumane treatment of humans—and is, as Crisp shows, easily refuted. As for The Argument from Paternalism, which holds that meat-eating ought to be prohibited because of its effects on individuals’ health, Crisp points out that the harms of paternalism, combined with the undesirable (i.e., disutility-producing) side-effects that would likely result from forbidding the consumption of meat, invalidate this argument as a utilitarian rationale for vegetarianism.

The Argument from Killing and the Argument from Suffering are both more familiar and more compelling as utilitarian arguments for vegetarianism. The Argument from Killing hinges on the premise that “killing sentient beings is wrong,” a premise which can be supported, according to Crisp, by three separate arguments, all of which purport to “demonstrate the wrongness” of killing on utilitarian grounds. One of these arguments, The Argument from Direct Diminution of Utility, fails, argues Crisp, because, while “killing a sentient being for food directly reduces the amount of utility in the world by removing that being from the world,” “the replacing of one being by another at a similar level of utility is, other things being equal, morally neutral” (Crisp 1997, 32). The possibility of replaceability also invalidates, according to Crisp, The Argument from Autonomy, which holds that, by depriving sentient beings of liberty and violating their autonomy, killing sentient beings is wrong on utilitarian grounds, for both liberty and autonomy yield utility. As for an Argument from Indirect Diminution of Utility, Crisp observes that it need not be the case that “killing a sentient being causes grief, anxiety, and thereby suffering in other sentient beings” (Crisp 1997, 33), for it is possible to design a system of slaughter in such a way that the animals affected are kept unaware of the death of other animals or experience no distress upon being separated from relatives. Since each of these three arguments is inapplicable “in the case of killing animals for food,” The Argument from Killing fails.

The Argument from Suffering holds that the confinement and control of animals required by meat-eating causes suffering, and so diminishes utility. Noting that the suffering caused by an action or activity can of

7 In fact, Crisp denies that animals have autonomy, so the issue is really merely about the deprivation of liberty. See Crisp 1997, 33.
8 With respect to the latter issue, Crisp points out that parent and offspring could be killed at same time; alternatively, we could prevent suffering simply “by slaughtering neither parent nor offspring at times when the offspring is young enough to experience distress at the loss or to cause the parent distress at the loss of the offspring” (1997, 34).
course be justified and condoned by utilitarians if outweighed by the utility produced, Crisp maintains that “most non-intensively reared animals lead worthwhile lives, and we enjoy eating them. The worthwhileness of their lives, and the pleasure we gain from eating them, justify the practice of rearing them, although it inevitably involves causing suffering” (Crisp 1997, 35). Moreover, it is also true that without the practice of widespread meat-eating these animals would not have existed. These considerations, Crisp believes, disqualify on utilitarian grounds both vegetarianism and the Compromise Permission View, the position that would require abstention from factory-farmed meat while permitting the consumption of humanely raised animals. At the same time, since the pleasure derived from consuming factory-farmed animals does not counterbalance the pain and suffering that these animals are forced to endure, we cannot be required to eat this meat. Hence this argument also refutes the view that holds, on utilitarian grounds, that one is “morally required to eat all kinds of meat” (the Full Meat-eating Requirement View).

Crisp’s analysis of The Argument from Suffering likewise leads to a rejection of The Raymond Frey View (“One is morally permitted to eat all kinds of meat, but required to campaign against intensive farming, by means such as political lobbying”). While the scale of meat production is such that a given individual’s dietary choices may have no impact on the “practice of intensively rearing animals” (Crisp 1997, 35), it is still the case that where thresholds concerning production and slaughter do exist and an individual’s joining a boycott of intensively reared meat may effect a great amount of good (“tipping the balance”[36])9, there is an uncontroversial utilitarian justification—expected utility—for abstaining from factory-farmed meat. Indeed, even if such thresholds do not exist, an individual’s boycott may have a direct effect on production. This will occur, for example, if one was formerly in the habit of buying a certain number of chickens at the same store each year. In addition, the fact that the “symbolic gesture” provided by vegetarianism can also have an indirect impact on factory farming through its influence on others cannot be neglected. The upshot of these considerations, then, is that The Compromise Requirement View—“One is morally required both to abstain from the flesh of intensively reared animals and to eat the flesh of certain non-intensively reared animals”—begins to appear “the most plausible utilitarian view on meat-eating” (Crisp 1997, 36).

The last two arguments that Crisp examines are also familiar. According to The Argument from Starvation, since meat-eating necessarily diverts massive quantities of proteins10 to animals and these proteins could be

9 Crisp’s reasoning in this connection is borrowed from Parfit (1984), as he himself makes clear.
10 Crisp inexplicably speaks only of “proteins,” even though the argument is usually not framed in terms of this nutrient alone (for the obvious reason that livestock feed contains things other than
used instead to nourish starving human beings, "by eating meat, we are causing the deaths of these human beings" (Crisp 1997, 37). Crisp dismisses this argument on the grounds that the basic premise derives from an erroneous, because overly simplistic, conception of economics, namely the notion that "the practices of Meat-eating use protein which would otherwise have been available for the starving" (Crisp 1997, 37). As it rests on a misconception concerning the causes of starvation, the argument ignores the only policies which would in fact truly help to alleviate this problem: "What those who are starving need is wealth, to buy food and long-term productive capacity, not our ceasing to eat meat. This would be likely to disturb the world grain-market to such an extent that very bad consequences could occur" (Crisp 1997, 38).

The final utilitarian argument for vegetarianism addressed by Crisp, The Argument from Future Generations, holds that, since adding sentient beings to the world would increase utility, and humans produce utility more efficiently than any other sentient being, "it is wrong to rear animals for food, since the protein consumed by these animals would produce more utility if used to feed extra human beings, until an optimum population is reached" (Crisp 1997, 38). As Crisp points out, this argument assumes an adherence to Total Utilitarianism. Consequently, one can advance the obvious objection that "people do not believe in the Total view, including most members of most governments" (Crisp 1997, 38). Far more important, however, it turns out that "the Total view does not support increasing population in our world" (Crisp 1997, 38). Rather, once we appreciate just how long the future extends before us we will realize that, if we wish to benefit future generations, we ought to pursue resource conservation, which in turn requires "maintaining present levels of population" (Crisp 1997, 38). Given that this final argument also fails, Crisp concludes: "The suffering endured by intensively reared animals rules out eating them. Thus, RF, FP, and FR are incorrect. The practice of rearing animals non-intensively is productive of utility. Thus,
CP is incorrect, and CR is the most plausible utilitarian view on Meat-eating” (Crisp 1997, 39).

II

Before turning to the flaws in Crisp’s argument, it is worth mentioning briefly one of the most noteworthy implications of his view. Just as other arguments asserting the permissibility of consuming humanely produced meat where the animals sacrificed for consumption are going to be “replaced” have limited applicability in the real world (a fact which has not gone unnoticed)\textsuperscript{14}, it turns out that even if utilitarians accepted Crisp’s conclusion, they would be almost certain to practice, under present circumstances, a form of demi-vegetarianism. The reason is that most of the meat available for purchase in advanced industrial societies is produced by means of factory farming. This being the case, non-intensively reared meat is both relatively scarce or difficult to procure and likely to be considerably more expensive than factory-farmed meat. Hence, the increased opportunity cost of purchasing meat—the option of buying less expensive and readily available intensively raised meat having been eliminated—will often lead utilitarians to accept vegetarian alternatives. And presumably the more consistently utilitarian the individual, the more sensitive she will be to price differences, since she will have less disposable income available to her in the first place: given the diminishing marginal utility of money, she will be devoting much of her income to the benefit of those in need. Furthermore, doubts about the provenance of the meat one is buying in some instances—i.e., when one cannot know with certainty that it is not the product of factory farming—should also act to check the amount of meat consumed. As we have seen, Crisp grants the importance of threshold considerations, and he also endorses Parfit’s views on the error of ignoring small chances\textsuperscript{15}. Yet the options for utilitarians prove still more limited, if Crisp is correct, since his

\textsuperscript{14} For discussion of the limited applicability of the replacement argument, see, e.g., Sapontzis 1987, 177-179 and Pihlar 1995, 185-189.

\textsuperscript{15} See Crisp 1997, 36. Analyzing our duties towards animals from a welfare economics perspective, Tyler Cowen observes:

There is also a case for selective vegetarianism. Although factory farms are prevalent in the United States, family farms (which typically treat animals better) account for a greater share of the market in Western Europe. Optimal policy might then involve eating meat when in Europe but not in the United States. Similarly, very fine restaurants usually order their meats from family farms, with special procedures for producing high-quality meat. A diner committed to animal welfare might have the rule of eating animal meat in fine restaurants but not at McDonald’s, which relies on factory farming and thus promulgates a lower standard of animal care (Cowan 2001, 16).

As a practical attempt to respond to the problem of uncertainty as regards the provenance of one’s meat, such a policy is not without merit (assuming Cowen’s information is accurate). It should be noted, however, that for most Americans adherence to this policy would probably imply demi-vegetarianism, given the various constraints (financial, professional, time-related, familial, etc.) that limit their frequency of travel in Europe and the possibility of routinely dining in “very fine restaurants.”
view does not sanction the consumption of most fish harvested and sold today, just as it disallows consumption of most of the animals killed by hunters. In fact, “CR requires only the consumption of artificially-reared meat. Wild animals, including fish, will not be replaced, and so should not be eaten” (Crisp 1997, 40, note 24).

However, while real-world economic considerations suggest that utilitarians will, if Crisp’s view is correct, tend to practice a form of demi-vegetarianism, The Compromise Requirement View would seem in principle to compel them in the other direction. Utilitarians not only have a duty to eat non-intensively raised meat; the more such meat that they eat, the better. Indeed, it would seem that they should strive to eat meat up to the level at which i) their consumption becomes incompatible with the generalized practice of humane animal husbandry, ii) the quantity of meat consumed starts to have an adverse impact on their health, and iii) they cease to derive pleasure from the meat that they eat16. After all, if they discharge their duty by only occasionally eating humanely produced meat, their consumption will make a barely minimal contribution to the creation of additional animals17.

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16 Crisp has indicated to me, in commenting on an earlier version of this paper, that he does not believe that CR implies that people ought to maximize their meat consumption, subject to the three constraints that I mention above. However, I remain convinced that it does, for CR clearly implies that eating more non-intensively reared meat is better than eating less, provided that these three constraints are respected.

17 One might conclude that the argument also implies that a utilitarian must eat meat even if she does not like it (for whatever reason), so long as the meat is derived from an animal that has been raised humanely, is a candidate for replacement, etc. But this would be a mistake, for the aggregate disutility deriving from the carnivores’ involuntary consumption of meat will surely surpass the utility enjoyed by the animals raised for meat. Yet what if one recast the Compromise Requirement view to hold that non-obligation is similarly to purchase meat, and not necessarily to eat it? Such a Modified Compromise Requirement View (MCR) could be formulated as follows: One is morally required both to abstain from purchasing and consuming the flesh of intensively reared animals and to purchase the flesh of certain non-intensively reared animals. For a meat-averse utilitarian, the obligation to purchase meat would no doubt be far less onerous—less distasteful, as it were—than the obligation to eat it. In fact, this modification essentially renders the obligation one of charity toward animals, and this result—the analogy to the duty of charity toward other humans—is what makes it interesting and puzzling. In the case of human-directed charity the benefactor (giver, donor, etc.) suffers disutility, which is justified by virtue of the greater utility produced for the beneficiary or beneficiaries. By the same token, it might seem that MCR would require that even meat-averse utilitarians purchase meat, the utility enjoyed by the animals brought into (a pleasant) existence outweighing the disutility deriving from the carnivorous utilitarians’ loss of income. In fact, this does not follow, for even if the utility accruing to animals outweighed the disutility experienced by the meat-averse utilitarians obliged to forego some of their income—and this seems unlikely—still more utility could be produced by channeling that income to needy humans (if not humans generally). I develop an argument along these lines in more detail in the following section, in the course of refuting Crisp’s thesis.

It is worth noting that Robert Nozick poses a similar question in his discussion of the utilitarian rationale for meat-eating in Anarchy, State, and Utopia: …because people eat animals, they raise more than would otherwise exist without this practice. To exist for a while is better than never to exist at all. So (the argument concludes) the animals are better off because we have the practice of eating them. Though this is not our object, fortunately it turns out that we really, all along, benefit them! (If tastes changed and people no longer found it enjoyable to eat animals, should those concerned with the welfare of animals steal themselves to an unpleasant task and continue eating them?)“ (Nozick 1974, 38)
III

As I have remarked above, Crisp’s argument is, despite its many virtues and apparent plausibility, ultimately flawed. The principal problem does not have to do with, say, Crisp’s treatment of replaceability, a topic that has received considerable attention in recent discussions regarding utilitarianism and vegetarianism. Rather, the basic flaw derives from an oversight that shapes Crisp’s entire approach, and consequently leads him to overlook a straightforward utilitarian rationale for vegetarianism even in situations where humanely produced meat is available. The problem is, quite simply, that in fashioning a utilitarian position on meat-eating Crisp disregards other duties and obligations—and specifically the economics of these duties and obligations—that a utilitarian will have, at least if she is consistent and so acts as a utilitarian in the other dimensions of her life as well. If, instead, we do not consider meat-eating in isolation, but rather assess a utilitarian’s obligations in this regard in light of the other duties incumbent upon a consistent utilitarian, it becomes clear that Crisp’s argument ignores a decisive trade-off, and that a utilitarian will normally be required to abstain from consuming even humanely produced meat.

Consider the following argument:

1) Humanely produced meat is more expensive than equally nutritious vegetarian alternatives.

2) In paying the additional cost to eat humanely produced meat when equally nutritious but less expensive vegetarian alternatives are available, one allocates to the production of meat money that could otherwise be used to aid people in need.

3) Human beings are the most efficient producers of utility.

4) Using money to aid people in need will generate more utility than using the same amount of money to create and sustain animals.

5) In using money to create and sustain animals rather than to aid persons in need, we divert money away from the most efficient producers of utility.

6) In diverting money away from the most efficient producers of utility, agents fail to maximize utility.

7) It is wrong not to maximize utility.

Of course, to be “concerned with the welfare of animals” is not the same as being committed to maximizing utility, so Nozick’s question poses less of a challenge to utilitarianism than might appear at first glance.

18 For example, Crisp’s elucidation of certain deficiencies in some common utilitarian arguments bearing on our duties toward animals.

19 See, for example; Phular 1996, Chapter Four and Sapiotis 1987, Chapter Ten.

20 Crisp 1997, 38.
8) Therefore, we should not purchase humanely produced meat when equally nutritious and less expensive vegetarian meals are available.

Several comments are in order. To begin with, note that the argument i) is compatible with the view that it is permissible to consume non-intensively raised meat and ii) assumes that some such meat will be available for purchase. Second, although premise four does not mention the gustatory pleasure resulting from meat-eating, I certainly do not mean to ignore it. I simply assume that premise four is true even after factoring in the utility produced by eating meat. Finally, and most important, notice how this argument differs from the argument of those (e.g., Singer, Sapontzis, and Pfluhar) who maintain that insofar as people adhere strictly to the principle of consuming only non-intensively raised meat they will be practically vegetarian, owing to the relative scarcity and prohibitive cost of such meat. That argument, one version of which is presented in section two above, holds that most people will be near vegetarians either for prudential reasons, namely financial considerations (recall my remarks concerning opportunity cost above), or out of necessity, given the scarcity of acceptable meat. Thus, far from making a normative case—let alone a utilitarian case—for vegetarianism in circumstances in which non-intensively reared meat is in fact available, these commentators limit themselves to a consideration of the practical constraints that will lead most people to become de facto demi-vegetarians. By contrast, my argument considers a utilitarian’s obligation in such circumstances. It does not consider her probable behavior or what circumstances will likely compel her to do, but rather what she is in fact required to do as a utilitarian.

Once we have framed the question in these terms it becomes clear that a utilitarian will normally be required to abstain from consuming even humanely produced meat. The reason is that, in viewing the question this way, we see that the consumption of non-intensively raised meat when equally nutritious but less expensive vegetarian alternatives are available involves a tradeoff, one that Crisp overlooks in his treatment of the various arguments concerning utilitarianism and vegetarianism. (This is what I mean in claiming that he analyzes a utilitarian’s duties regarding meat-eating without reference to her other obligations as a utilitarian.) The trade-off in question occurs in choosing how to use the monetary value of the difference between the price of non-intensively raised meat and the vegetarian alternatives. This money can be used

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21 With regard to the meat produced by factory farming, I assume that Crisp’s argument is sound and that a utilitarian must completely abstain from consuming such meat.

22 In addition to the references cited in note 13 above, see Singer 1996, 230 and the passage from Rachels 1990 cited below.
either to purchase the meat or to benefit those in need, in particular those who suffer from malnourishment. Recall that Crisp himself remarks, in the course of criticizing the simplistic economics informing The Argument from Starvation\(^2\), “What those who are starving need is wealth, to buy food and long-term productive capacity, not our ceasing to eat meat.” Yet on the assumption that we are making, namely that both non-intensively raised meat and less expensive vegetarian alternatives are both available, the choice is precisely between eating, or any rate purchasing, meat, on the one hand, and channeling that same money—the difference between the cost of the non-intensively raised meat and the vegetarian alternatives—to the “starving... to buy food and long-term productive capacity,” on the other. In other words, either one chooses to buy the (non-intensively raised) meat, which will produce utility for the consumer in the form of gustatory pleasure and for animals insofar as it leads to the creation of more of them, or one uses the money to ameliorate the condition of the malnourished and disadvantaged. If we also assume, reasonably enough, that the utility accruing to the needy humans outweighs the utility experienced by the animals combined with the utility we obtain from consuming their flesh, then it turns out that, in the circumstances that I have described, a modified version of The Argument for Starvation—modified in that it focuses on income allocation rather than grain transfers—proves compelling. The point is not that a transition to vegetarianism would make more grain, or “protein,” available, but that it would free up economic resources with which to purchase the “food and long-term productive capacity” needed by those who are malnourished. While it may not be true that “the practices of Meat-eating use protein which would otherwise have been available for the starving” (Crisp 1997, 37), it is certainly the case that these practices siphon off money “which would otherwise have been available for the starving.”

In short, the question for a utilitarian is properly posed as the question of whether or not she should purchase non-intensively reared meat when other, equally nutritious but less expensive vegetarian alternatives are also available, and not the question of whether or not she, qua utilitarian, should eat non-intensively reared meat. Aside from those occasions when others pay for our meals\(^2\), normally we must first purchase the meat that we are going to consume. That is, the purchase is normally

\(^2\)The full argument, as laid out by Crisp, runs as follows: “1. The widespread practice of Meat-eating requires the feeding of large amounts of protein to animals. 2. This protein could be used to feed those human beings who are starving. 3. By eating meat, we are causing the deaths of these human beings. 4. Causing the death of human beings is wrong. 5. Therefore, we ought to cease to eat meat” (Crisp, 1997, 37). As I point out in note 9 above, the argument is usually not framed in terms of “proteins” alone; otherwise Crisp’s statement of the argument seems completely unobjectionable.

\(^2\)To be sure, this implies that those who enjoy eating meat are required to eat (humanely produced) meat when it is offered to them at no cost to themselves, e.g., when invited to a (non-utilitarian) friend’s house for dinner. I thank Roger Crisp for pointing out to me that the interpretation of
antecedent to, and a condition of, the consumption. Accordingly, if the decisive act, as far as producing utility is concerned, is the allocation of monetary resources, and the individual’s choice whether or not to buy meat is what determines this allocation, then the stage at which this choice is made should be the focus of our attention. To hold Crisp’s position, on the other hand, is rather like maintaining that a utilitarian need not ask himself before purchasing a luxury item whether or not his money might not produce more utility if used for some other end (e.g., if donated to charity), but that, once in possession of the luxury good, he should try to determine how he might go about exploiting it to maximize aggregate utility.

To be sure, the position presented here may well strike many as excessively demanding. In the present context, however, an objection on these grounds would be beside the point, for what is at issue is the properly utilitarian position on meat-eating. That is, we are trying to determine which of the various avowedly utilitarian positions on meat-eating is in fact optimific in utilitarian terms, or most consistently utilitarian. Whether or not the duties entailed by this position prove excessively demanding is a very different question. In any event, even if this were an appropriate objection it might not be available to Crisp, inasmuch as the view that he defends proves rather demanding in its own right. Indeed, the demandingness of his Compromise Requirement View is in a sense the very quality that distinguishes this position from The Compromise Permission View—“One is morally required to abstain from the flesh of intensively reared animals, but permitted to eat the flesh of certain non-intensively reared animals.” According to Crisp, the consumption of (humanely raised) meat must be obligatory, and not merely permissible if we are to maximize utility, for it is the obligation, with the frequent meat-based meals that it entails, that guarantees that many animals will continue to be brought into existence. Moreover, since Crisp has not specified exactly what is entailed by the obligation to eat non-intensively produced meat—Should someone who likes meat

utilitarianism that I am defending does not merely permit, but actually requires, carniphiles to consume non-intensively reared meat in such circumstances.

25 It is important to bear in mind the sheer unavoidability of the decision. For practically all adults, spending at least some money on food is inevitable, and thus a decision as to how to spend it, unavoidable. Prior actions and decisions may constrain the decision-making involved (e.g., by limiting the amount of money at one’s disposal), but they can hardly exempt one from having to face this decision.

26 It bears noting that Crisp’s insistence on the obligatoriness of meat-eating, or rather certain kinds of meat-eating, makes his view a more consistently utilitarian position than either The Raymond Frey View or The Compromise Permission View, both of which depart from classical utilitarianism by stipulating that meat-eating of one form or another is permissible, rather than prohibited or obligatory. Such a verdict could be justified on classical utilitarian grounds only in those situations in which meat-eating would yield exactly the same amount of utility / disutility as abstaining from meat.
but eats it infrequently force herself to eat a lot more of it? Should those who are indifferent (but not averse) to the taste of meat be increasing their consumption? Must not carnivores substitute meat dishes for the fish and other wild animals currently a part of their diet?—it is far from obvious that his view is significantly less demanding than the position that I have defended.

In any event, even if the argument presented here succeeds, as I believe it does, in establishing a utilitarian obligation to practice vegetarianism, it is important to underscore its limited applicability. The obligation is in fact contingent upon the price of non-intensively produced meat relative to the price of vegetarian alternatives, and so crucially depends on empirical economic factors. The less the difference in price between non-intensively raised meat and the vegetarian alternatives, the weaker the justification for vegetarianism. If non-intensively raised meat is equal in price to—and certainly if less expensive than—the vegetarian alternatives, then of course the (carniphilic) utilitarian will be required to purchase the non-intensively reared meat.

Such a scenario, while not impossible, does however seem quite improbable. It is, after all, precisely in order to reduce costs that the methods of factory farming have been developed and applied on a large scale. As the late James Rachels once observed,

...it would be impossible to treat the animals humanely and still produce meat in sufficient quantities to make it a normal part of our diets. Cruel methods are used in the meat-production industry not because the producers are cruel people, but because such methods are economical; they enable the producers to market a product that people can afford. So to work for better treatment of the animals would be to work for a situation in which most of us would have to adopt a vegetarian diet, because if we were successful we could no longer afford meat (Rachels 1990, 212).

A genuine commitment to the humane treatment of animals raised for food, then, would seem to entail in practice an acceptance of less plentiful and higher-priced meat. So long as this is the case, utilitarians, far from being required to eat meat, ought to practice vegetarianism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


