

Is It Always Wrong To Consume Animal Products?

I – Trace Ingredients and Causing Harm

The IVA encourages everyone to adopt a principled, unwavering moral commitment to veganism. This moral commitment involves abstaining from consuming and using animals and animal products, period — even in very small quantities.

Some non-vegans (and even some people who self-identify as vegan) find bizarre the idea that a vegan would refuse to use a product that contains only a trace quantity of animal-based ingredients. Imagine, as one example of such a product, a bag of potato chips that contains an extremely small quantity of “natural flavors” that are partially derived from dairy. About these kinds of trace ingredients, some people think: “It doesn’t make a difference whether I consume this microscopic animal product. So why waste my energy trying to avoid it?” The vegan’s refusal to consume such products can appear practically useless, unduly puritanical, and inwards-focused.

In worrying about trace ingredients, have vegans lost sight of what’s important? We at the IVA don’t think so. In this position paper, we’re going to tell you why.

II – Exploring the Skeptical Thought

Let’s begin by looking more closely at the skeptical thought expressed above. Imagine a vegan thinking the following:

I know that billions of animals are used, harmed, and killed each year for food, clothing, and other products. And I know it’s all totally unnecessary. And I know that it would be wrong of me to be causing that harm and death when I don’t need to. I’m vegan because I want to avoid all of that, and because I want to minimize the amount of unnecessary harm in the world. But whether there’s some almost-invisible, trace quantity of some dairy derivative in this bag of chips couldn’t possibly make a difference. Shouldn’t I just be thinking about the real problems of meat, milk, cheese, and so on?

The person’s thought is motivated by a view of veganism which we can call *the harm-avoidance view*. According to the harm-avoidance view, we should generally adhere to a vegan lifestyle, because doing so is an important part of fulfilling our duty to avoid causing unnecessary harm. But from the standpoint of pure harm-avoidance, it may sometimes be acceptable to consume animal products when doing so would not cause any harm at all.

We might want to resist the conclusion that a commitment to harm-avoidance doesn’t need to involve veganism. To do this, we could try to argue that eating trace animal products always causes at least a small amount of harm, even if indirectly. The argument could take a few different forms. We might argue that eating a bag of potato chips containing dairy-based “natural flavors” will slightly increase demand for that brand of chips, which will then slightly increase demand for dairy, and so on. Or we might argue that eating the potato chips could

lead other people to believe that eating animal products is acceptable, which would then lead to their continued or increased consumption of animal products.

But these arguments strain credulity. You could consume your potato chips privately, or with people who pay no attention to your food choices. There is no reason to believe that every food decision you make influences other people's food decisions. And economists acknowledge that many individual consumer choices make no causal difference to production and supply. If you go buy a pencil at the store, it is exceptionally unlikely that this purchase is, by itself, 'noticed' by the market. Even if some consumer-level choices sometimes make a causal difference, there are certainly some that don't. There is no good reason to believe that if you buy and consume a bag of potato chips which contain small levels of dairy products, you will necessarily be causing harm to anyone, anywhere, even indirectly.

It turns out that the problem is not only with trace ingredients. There may be occasions on which a person could eat "full" animal products (like meat, dairy, eggs, and so on) without thereby causing any harm to any animals. For example, a person might buy a piece of meat from a privately owned, local grocery store which is liquidating all of its assets this afternoon and then immediately going out of business. In this situation, the store will not be ordering any more product, and they will be throwing out their remaining stock, so one's purchase could not make a difference to the market. A bit differently, a person might buy leather bags and accessories from a used clothing store without thereby contributing to the number of animals used in leather production. It isn't hard to come up with more examples like this.

It's a fact: some instances of buying and consuming animal products just don't cause any animals to be harmed or killed. Sometimes, whether one eats an animal product just doesn't make a difference.

Some so-called "vegan" groups embrace this idea, and conclude that in the relevant cases there would be nothing wrong with eating animal products. Vegan Outreach, for example, [proposes that we do not need to adopt an unwavering, principled commitment to veganism](#).

We at the IVA think very differently about veganism, and about how to interpret the information presented over the last two sections. We believe that we each have an unequivocal moral obligation to be vegan, regardless of whether our individual veganism always makes a difference.

III – A Provocative Example

Forget about veganism for the moment. Consider the following example:

An innocent person is about to be publicly executed by stoning. In a few minutes, hundreds of people will show up and together they will kill this innocent person. Whether you attend and participate makes no difference to how this man's life will end. The innocent man will be killed regardless of whether you participate. If you show up and participate (by throwing some stones), he will experience no more unjust suffering than if you had not attended. Since hundreds of people will be throwing stones at the same moment, whether you throw some stones will make no difference to whether he dies or how he dies.

Would it be wrong for you to show up and participate in the man's execution? After all, whether you participate makes absolutely no difference. He will die and suffer just the same, with or without your participation. So is it wrong to participate?

It wouldn't be odd to feel revulsion in being asked to entertain this question. A well-adjusted person will think: *"Of course it is wrong — morally abhorrent, in fact — to participate in the man's murder! Whether I would make a difference is neither here nor there!"*

It's wrong to participate in the execution. It's wrong for the very simple and obvious reason that the murder itself — the group activity of killing the man — is morally wrong. Because the activity is wrong, actively participating in the activity is wrong, even if one does not make a difference to the "success" or the continuation of the activity. There is nothing controversial in this answer. This is just moral common sense!

You can't get off the moral hook for participating in an unjust activity simply because it would have happened without you. At a bare minimum, morality requires you to abstain from attending and participating in the man's execution. And morality may demand more of you than this: it may demand that you encourage others to do the same.

IV – Why Be A Principled Vegan?: An Abolitionist Perspective

We at the IVA believe that we should reject all animal use and all avoidable consumption of animal products, for the same reason that we must abstain from participating in the horrible, unjust killing of the innocent person in the example sketched above. To be clear, our point is absolutely *not* that eating an animal product is as morally egregious as participating in a public execution. Instead, the analogy is meant to highlight a structural similarity between the cases, and to show that we cannot be excused from participating in immoral group activities simply because our contribution does not make a causal difference.

As abolitionist vegans, we reject animal use *on principle*. Even if in some particular case it seems that using an animal-derived product would not cause harm or death to any animal, we reject this as an option. Of course, we care about not causing harm; as we said above, this is an important moral goal. But we care about much more than avoiding harm. We are committed to not participating in collective acts of violence and wrongdoing, regardless of when or whether our participation would make a difference.

According to the abolitionist approach as it has been constructed and defended by Gary Francione, our collective social practice of raising, using, harming and killing animals for food and other similar purposes is immoral. We should not participate in this immorality, just as we should not participate in the killing of innocent humans. We have a shared obligation to stop treating animals as mere things—as pieces of property—and to begin treating them as fully morally relevant beings. Veganism is a moral imperative, and it must be held as the absolute moral baseline of any movement that claims to take seriously the moral worth of nonhuman animals. As Francione has put it when discussing some of the issues we are dealing with here, [veganism is a fundamental principle of justice](#).

Of course, when our actions do directly cause or contribute to the harm of another sentient being (e.g., hunting, and many instances of buying animal products) this raises additional and

significant moral problems. It goes without saying that we should not directly bring about the suffering and death of other animals without compelling moral reasons. Our point is simply that the fundamental motivation for veganism is not to minimize the amount of harm that we each do as individuals. Instead, the fundamental reason to be vegan is that we have an obligation to abstain from participating in the collective immorality of animal use.

V – Making A Difference, Individually and Collectively

We should not see the argument of the last section as an indication that abolitionists do not care whether their actions make a difference. Indeed, as Francione has argued for decades, the abolitionist approach to animal rights is focused intently on bringing an end to all uses of animals. Making a difference is tremendously important. So how can we do it? A number of points jump to mind.

First, we often have local opportunities to make differences to the lives of individual animals. For example, donating to or volunteering at well-run animal sanctuaries, and adopting rescued animals into our homes, makes an immeasurable difference for the animals whose lives we touch.

Second, when enough people act together, the market *does* take notice. By encouraging people to become vocal abolitionist vegans (who themselves encourage other people to become vocal abolitionist vegans!), we can bring about a tremendous, transformative economic, social, and moral revolution. Although our individual, consumer-level choices are not always noticed by the market, the collective choices of the growing vegan community can be remarkably powerful.

In light of this second thought — that enough people acting together does make a difference — you might wonder whether our obligation to be vegan might be based in the possibility of creating social change. Ought we to be vegan because being vegan will help us to change the world together? The answer, we believe, is both ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Yes, it is true that the abolitionist message must be spread by principled vegans, and it is true that the goal of creating a social revolution is a powerful additional reason to remain steadfast in one’s commitment to veganism. But, ‘no,’ one’s obligation to be vegan does not depend on the possibility of our creating social change together. As we see by considering the example of participating in the execution of an innocent man, your personal obligation to be vegan is based in the fact that it is wrong to participate in immoral group practices. Even if we could not change the world for the better, we would each have an obligation to be vegan. (But we do not need to be bothered by this negative thought, because we surely *can* change the world together.)

This means that our moral circumstances are a bit complex. On one hand, we each have a moral obligation to be vegan, simply because it is wrong to participate in the immoral institution of animal use and killing. On the other hand, we have strong moral reasons to talk to others about veganism—and to spread the abolitionist message—because doing so will be instrumental in bringing about the abolition of animal use.

VI – Drawing Lines and Moving Forward

Avoiding harm is important, but it is not the only thing that matters morally. Just as important as our duty to avoid causing avoidable harm is our duty to refuse to participate in immoral group practices. If we were not principled vegans — if we sometimes made exceptions for ourselves, by buying or consuming small quantities of animal products — then we would not be living up to our moral obligations.

One might find the conclusion overwhelming. After all, there are trace quantities of animal products everywhere: in our electronics, in the materials we use to build our roads, in the utensils we use to cook our (exclusively plant-based!) food, and so on. Does this mean that we cannot use computers, or travel on roadways, or cook food, because in doing so we would be participating in the system of unjust exploitation and killing? Where are we supposed to draw the lines?

There is no easy answer. It is a moral tragedy that the use and killing of animals has become an unavoidable part of how we, as a society, have chosen to live. The fact that none of us, right now, can completely remove ourselves from the system of animal use should make us morally outraged. In a world that (literally) fills itself with the consequences of the use and killing of nonhuman animals, there is no clear solution when it comes to drawing lines in our personal lives. We know that we can (and must) abstain from consuming meat, dairy, honey, eggs, food and personal care products that contain animal byproducts, and so on. But there are some manifestations of animal use that seem simply unavoidable. It's a haunting problem, and it is one that we have created for ourselves.

But while drawing firm and unchanging lines is challenging, moving forward is extremely easy. We have two pieces of advice.

First, we encourage you to act with an honest and progressive moral attitude. Being committed to the rights and worth of nonhuman animals means constantly challenging ourselves and each other to do better. When you learn about yet another place where you, and we, seem dependent on animal use, this creates an opportunity for discussion and moral progress. We should speak with each other about our options and alternatives and, when there are none, discuss the possibility of building those alternatives. And even though we cannot completely remove ourselves from the system of animal use, we can refuse to use this as an excuse or a permission to engage in avoidable forms of use.

Second, we encourage you to go out and explain to others why they should share your commitment to veganism and animal rights. This is the surest and quickest way for us to change the world, to bring about an end to institutionalized animal use, and to create moral options where today there are none.