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ON EATING ANIMALS

By Michael B. Gill

Loren Lomasky's "Is it Wrong to Eat Animals?" is a vigorous, interesting, provocative essay. It makes a strong and important argument for the morality of meat eating. I will maintain, however, that ultimately Lomasky does not succeed in making his case.

As I see it, the argument of "Is it Wrong to Eat Animals?" has two main parts. Part A is the following argument.

(1) Eating well is a significant value to humans.
(2) Eating meat is a significant part of eating well.
(3) Therefore, not eating meat is a significant value-loss.

Part B is support for the following claim:

(4) It is not clear that meat eating on balance causes any harm to animals; and if it does cause any harm to animals, it is not significant.

Steps (3) and (4) together are then taken to lead to the conclusion:

(5) It is not better to forgo the significant value of eating meat for the sake of the slight and perhaps nonexistent value that doing so would produce for animals.

Steps (3) and (4) are importantly related. If the value-loss of not eating meat is *fantastically* high, then there could be *some* value-loss to the animals and it might still not be better to forgo meat eating. By the same token, if we have pretty good reason to think that meat eating produces some value-loss for animals, then the value-gain of meat eating for humans would have to be extremely high for conclusion (5) to follow. What I will question is whether the relative strengths of (3) and (4) can establish (5).

Lomasky believes that we have to weigh the goods of eating meat against the bads of raising and killing animals for meat production, and that when we do this we will find that the goods of the former outweigh the bads of the latter. I am not objecting to the idea of weighing these goods and bads. I am objecting to what Lomasky takes the results of that weighing to be.

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I will start my discussion with Part B of the argument, then move to Part A.

I do not think a worthwhile discussion of the effects of meat eating on animals can proceed without consideration of the different ways meat-producing animals are treated. Even without going into any of the details here, we must, I think, at least acknowledge the difference to pigs, cattle, and chickens of being raised by traditional or free-range methods versus being raised on a factory farm. Lomasky's essay speculates that the harm to an animal of being slaughtered for its meat might be outweighed by the benefits the animal accrues by having lived a life at all—a life it would not have lived had farmers not raised it for its meat. I myself think this is a plausible position to consider when the animal has been raised by traditional or free-range methods—although hardly an uncontroversial one. But the *vast* majority of meat consumed by Americans comes from factory-farmed animals. And I think it is crushingly obvious that the life of a factory-farmed pig or cow is overwhelmingly full of pain and suffering. It is not just the slaughtering that is bad for the factory-farmed animals. It is the sum of their experiences. The lives they lead are not "minimally worth living." It would have been better for them if they had never been born. So while it may be the case that the value of eating free-range or traditionally farmed meat could be only moderate and it could still outweigh the on-balance harm to slaughtered free-range or traditional animals, the value-loss of not eating factory-farmed meat would have to be fantastically high in order to outweigh the on-balance harm done to factory-farmed animals.

In response to these points about the difference between treatment of animals, Lomasky says: "[T]he balance will depend on how they are raised and then slaughtered. For example, many observers believe that there is a morally significant difference in the lives of free-range versus factory-farmed chickens. It is not for philosophers to offer fine judgments concerning the relative merits of different technologies of raising livestock—at least it is not for this philosopher to do so. . . . To be cautious, let's call it a toss-up whether animals on balance win or lose out" (p. 192). I have to say that I think this is a cop-out. It is not as though the treatment of animals in factory-farms is incredibly difficult to find out about. Nor is it terribly controversial (at least not to non-Cartesians) that such treatment causes great suffering to animals with virtually no enjoyment whatsoever. To say "let's call it a toss-up whether animals on balance win or lose out" strikes me as either culpably ignorant or disingenuous.

Lomasky suggests that it is a kind of philosophical virtue not to stray into empirical matters of on-balance harm and benefit to animals (see not only his comments just quoted about factory-farming, but also his comments about bear-baiting, dog fighting, hunting, veal and foie gras). But the "expertise" needed to pass reasonable judgment on these things does not require years of study to acquire. And it seems to me that anyone who

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wishes to make strong claims about these issues has a responsibility to learn the relevant facts. Lomasky's sanguinity about his lack of expertise about an empirical matter that bears directly on his argument is jarring.

Moreover, if it is the case that such expertise is well beyond the ken of us philosophers—if Lomasky is right in holding that the confidence I manifested in my judgment about the lives of factory-farmed animals is unwarranted and that the intellectually responsible stance for us to take is that we do not yet have (nor ever can be expected to have?) enough information to pass reasonable judgment about the on-balance harm or benefit to animals of factory-farming—then it seems to me the proper response is moral caution. Suppose that the most intellectually responsible position is to acknowledge our uncertainty about whether certain practices cause on-balance suffering. Wouldn't the proper response to such uncertainty be to proceed on the assumption that those practices *do* cause on-balance suffering until we have any assurance that they do not? And if we are proceeding on the assumption that a practice causes suffering on balance, isn't the morally appropriate response not to support it? (I suppose there are issues here about whether any single individual's not eating factory-farmed meat will make any difference. Perhaps the value I personally get out of eating meat outweighs the infinitesimal chance that my not ordering the veal will ever help any animal. But that is different from the main line of Lomasky's argument.)

I suppose we could take Lomasky's main claim to be: "if we simply assume—without actually having any good reason to believe—that the on-balance effects on animals of eating meat are not bad, then it is not wrong to eat meat." But that is a much weaker claim than what I take it he wants to argue for.

Now even if the on-balance harm to animals of factory-farming is significant, that does not on its own show that Lomasky's overall argument fails. It just means that the value to humans of meat eating has to be extremely high in order for the argument to go through. That is the point I was trying to make about the relation between Parts A and B of the argument. So let me now turn to the question of how much value to humans meat eating produces—to the argument of Part A.

One way to challenge A is to make two claims, which we can call "the plasticity of human nature" and "the complexity of a human life" claims. The idea of the plasticity of human nature is that humans can come to get great and profound enjoyment out of a tremendous variety of things. The range of things that can give value to a human life is extremely wide. People can thrive or flourish by leading lives that look very different from each other. The idea of the complexity of a human life is that a thriving or flourishing human life includes a great many aspects. No one feature of a life is decisive to its value, and every feature has the value it does because of how it interacts with myriad other features. We cannot say much about the value of any isolated experience because the value it will

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have in the actual life of anyone will be greatly determined by the experience's relationship to myriad other features. (This is a kind of a particularism about the value of specific experiences in a human life.)

These two claims together—that there is a great variety of flourishing human lives, and that what makes for a flourishing human life is a very complex and contextual matter—should give us pause about making sweeping claims about the importance to human flourishing of any specific human activity. Perhaps we can say that all other things being equal, a life that includes sports, music, art, and great eating is better than one that does not. But all other things are virtually never equal (complexity), and there are so many types of sports, music, art, and eating that humans can profoundly enjoy (plasticity) that it is dubious that we can make any robust and plausible claim about the importance of any one type of the dizzyingly vast array of activities that fall in the categories of sports, music, and eating.

Let's say that a life without music is (all other things being equal) worse than a life with it. Does that mean that a life without classical Western music is worse than one without it? That a life without jazz is worse than one with it? What about Chinese opera? It seems to me that there are many musical lives of equal value that can be carved out of the musical possibilities, even if many of those lives do not have acquaintance with classical Western music, or with jazz, or with Chinese opera.

I would say the same about sports. A life with sports is (all other things being equal) better than one without it. But a valuable sporting life can focus on soccer, on tennis, on aquatic sports, on rock climbing, on spelunking, or on Chinese sports that I have never heard of. And a valuable sporting life can be lived that does not have anything to do with any one or two or twenty of the sports that other people find valuable.

So while Lomasky does a wonderful job of developing the idea that eating well is (all other things being equal) an important part of human flourishing, I question whether meat eating needs to be. Why isn't meat eating like classical Western music or soccer—something that as a matter of fact a lot of people find very valuable but also something that is no more critical to human flourishing than Chinese opera or tennis? And given that we have good reason to worry about whether meat eating causes grave harm to animals (if Part B of the paper is in any doubt), doesn't this mean that the morally safe option is to carve out for oneself from the vast array of possible flourishing human lives a life that does not involve meat eating (or at the very least does not involve the eating of factory-farmed meat)? Perhaps some people love ivory in a way that makes it something of great value to their lives. But if we can live flourishing lives without ivory, and if we have no assurance that the acquiring of ivory does not do grave harm to animals, wouldn't it be morally better to adopt one of the great many other flourishing ways of life that does not involve the acquiring of ivory?

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Now I grant that if there is no value-loss at all in pursuing a genre of enjoyable activity, then it may be the case that (all other things being equal) the more types of those activities you pursue, the better. The more types of music or sports or visual arts you can come to get great enjoyment out of, the better it will be for you. And the more types of food you can come to get great enjoyment out of, the better it will be for you. So if there were no value-loss at all to eating meat, then getting great enjoyment from eating meat would be a good thing for you. So if meat eating involved no value-loss, the pleasures of meat eating would be one more worthwhile thing to be added to a life. But if there is serious question about whether an activity involves significant value-loss, and if a completely full, rich, and flourishing life can be led without it, then that activity is something you morally ought to eschew.

As I mentioned before, Lomasky does a wonderful job of describing the profound value of good eating. But I question whether that discussion helps to establish the main claim of the paper. The way to raise this question is to separate meat eating itself from all the other aspects of good eating that Lomasky describes. The intensely social aspects of eating together can be just as present at a vegetarian meal as one that includes meat. The lively discussion of the relative merits and demerits of food preparation can be just as lively whether or not meat is present. (Think of how lively discussions can be about wines or desserts.) Vegetarian meals can be as fancy as you please, with a variety of tastes, textures, sights, and smells that can supply nearly inexhaustible topics of conversation. Some of the rituals that involve food do have to be somewhat altered in order to become vegetarian, but that does not mean the altered rituals will be any less meaningful than the originals. I have attended Passover Seders that included meat and Passover Seders that were vegetarian, and I do not think anyone involved thought the latter were in any way inferior. (The fake shank bone and the lack of brisket did not, I think, diminish our appreciation of being led out of Egypt nor reduce the group's sense of community or fun.) The point is: there is reason to doubt that the great goods of eating well that Lomasky so wonderfully describes depend on meat.

There is one more argument I want to consider, and that is the argument of competent judges. Given that competent judges prefer to eat meat, Lomasky argues, we have strong evidence that a diet that includes meat is better than a vegetarian diet. There are two sets of competent judges mentioned: the billions of people who choose to eat meat, and the culinary specialists. Let's look at these two groups separately.

Here is what I think is the problem with using the "billions." The question is whether we (those of us reading this paper) should choose a fairly affluent twenty-first century American/European life that involves meat eating or a fairly affluent twenty-first century American/European life that is vegetarian. To be a competent judge for this choice, a person has to have experienced both of these ways of life. But the billions who

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have chosen meat throughout human history have not experienced both of these ways of life. They cannot compare, from the inside, both ways of life. So the billions are not competent judges. Neither are those fairly affluent twenty-first century Americans/Europeans who have simply eaten meals that involve meat and eaten meals that have not involved meat. Rather, the people who are competent judges in this case are those fairly affluent twenty-first century Americans/Europeans who have lived for years as meat eaters and lived for years as vegetarians. And I expect that if you asked that group of people, you would not find that they all think that the vegetarian life is any worse than the meat-eating one. You would not find that virtually all of them would prefer a life with meat eating—that they think being a vegetarian is a sacrifice of any significant human good, that vegetarian lives are any less enjoyable or worthwhile. I expect that significant portions of that group of people would sincerely claim that their experience has led them to think that one can carve out of the vast array of possible flourishing human lives a particular flourishing human life that does not involve meat. And if we are really taking seriously the competent judges style of argument, shouldn't the judgment of such people be decisive?

But what about the culinary specialists who prefer to have meat as part of their diet? What a culinary specialist's choosing to eat meat shows, I think, is simply that there are many meat dishes that are delicious. There are many meat dishes that we can get great pleasure out of eating. If a person does not eat meat, there will be delicious dishes she will never eat. So if the only goal is to experience as many kinds of delicious dishes as possible, then it might make sense to eat meat. But that does not mean that a vegetarian will not eat lots and lots delicious food (as many delicious foods as a normal person could reasonably expect to eat). There are enough delicious vegetarian options in the world for her to have as delicious a diet—and as many and as meaningful social interactions related to food—as any typical meat eater. A music critic, an art connoisseur, and a professional sportsman undoubtedly have some fantastic musical, artistic, and sports experiences that the rest of us will not have, but that does not mean that one needs to have the same range of music, art, and sports experiences as they in order to have a completely fulfilling, thriving human life—nor even a life that has music, art, and sports as a very important part of it. Similarly, a culinary specialist might have a range of eating experiences others do not, but that does not mean that one needs to have the same range of culinary experiences as the specialist in order to have a completely fulfilling, thriving human life—nor even a life that has food as a very important part of it. And while I do not doubt that eating in Michelin-starred-type restaurants matters a lot to some people, it would be a bizarrely narrow view that led anyone to think that this kind of dining is as important to human flourishing as music and sports and art, or is essential to a life of good eating.

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If there were no chance that there was any moral cost at all to eating meat, then the deliciousness of meat would be a great reason to eat it. But given how easy it is for a vegetarian to flourish and be happy and to have amazingly rich culinary experiences—*and* given the very serious concerns about the welfare of factory-farmed animals—the deliciousness of meat as a practical reason is overwhelmed.

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