

Against Eating Humanely-Raised Meat: Revisiting Fred's Basement

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1. Introduction

In "Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases," Alastair Norcross uses a thought experiment he titles "Fred's Basement" to argue against the moral permissibility of consuming *factory-farmed* meat. Although his paper leaves open the possibility that consuming *humanely-raised* meat is morally permissible, I contend that his basic argumentative approach does not. To illustrate this, I modify Norcross' example in hopes of convincing readers that consuming humanely-raised meat is morally wrong.

2.1 Fred's Basement

Fred is in a car accident, which irreparably damages his godiva gland. As a result, his brain no longer secretes cocoamone, the hormone that enables individuals to enjoy the taste of chocolate. Hormone therapy is possible, but the only way for one to get cocoamone is to torture and kill puppies. Moreover, since no company has been willing to get into the puppy-torturing business, the only way for Fred to get cocoamone is for him to torture and kill puppies himself. Although Fred isn't happy about it, he does what any true chocolate lover would do. He sets up shop in his basement and gets to work.

2.2 Norcross' Argument

- (N1) Fred's behavior is morally wrong.
- (N2) Buying and eating factory-farmed meat is morally equivalent to Fred's behavior.
- (N3) Therefore, buying and eating factory-farmed meat is morally wrong.

2.3 Common Objections to (N2)

- 1. Fred's behavior *is not* necessary for being healthy, but buying and eating (factory-farmed) meat *is* necessary for being healthy.
- 2. Fred *tortures* animals, but consumers merely *buy and eat* them.
- 3. Fred *knows* that he is causing animal suffering, but consumers *don't*.
- 4. Fred tortures and kills *puppies*, but consumers support the torture and killing of farm animals.

2.4 The Middle Way

What Norcross' argument shows is that if one must choose between consuming factory-farmed meat and vegetarianism, then one must be a vegetarian, but this leaves open the possibility that it is morally permissible to eat humanely-raised meat.

3.1 Revisiting Fred's Basement

Let's assume that Fred's condition is more common than Norcross' thought experiment suggests. Accordingly, a number of companies have gotten into the cocoamone-producing business. Let's also assume that while it's possible for these companies to produce cocoamone without torturing puppies, they do so anyway (to maximize profits). Finally, let's assume that Fred knows all of this and is appalled by the behavior of these companies. But he's still a chocolate lover after all, so he decides to raise his own puppies, humanely. He designs a puppy park in his backyard with plenty of open space for his puppies to engage in their natural behaviors. He feeds them premium puppy food and provides them with excellent veterinary care. He plays with them daily and knows them by name. But when they get to be eighteen months old, he takes them into his basement and slaughters them.

What does this involve?

- 1. Stunning
 - Shooting them between the eyes with live ammunition
 - Shooting them between the eyes with a captive bolt pistol
 - Hanging them by their hind legs and then using a pully system to drag them through an electrified water-bath.
 - Lead his puppies into an air-tight chamber, closing it, and filling it with CO₂.
- 2. Exsanguination
 - Hanging them by their hind legs and then slitting their throats to let them bleed out.

3.2 Spelman's Argument

- (S1) Fred's behavior is morally wrong.
- (S2) Consuming humanely-raised meat is morally equivalent to Fred's behavior.
- (S3) Therefore, consuming humanely-raised meat is morally wrong.

4.1 Fred's behavior doesn't have health benefits. *Against (S2)*

Imagine that researchers have recently discovered that cocoamone significantly slows the spread of cancer. After learning this, Ted, who has recently been diagnosed with cancer, buys a litter of puppies and raises them for cocoamone. After taking his first few monthly doses of cocoamone, Ted finds not only that the cocoamone has slowed the spread of his cancer but also that it has enhanced his experience of chocolate. In this case, it seems morally permissible for Ted to continue raising and killing young, healthy puppies.

But it wouldn't be morally permissible for Ted to do so if there were an alternative treatment method that was equally effective and didn't involve premature killing.

4.2 Killing young, healthy puppies isn't callous. *Against (S1)*

Killing young, healthy puppies is on a par with killing in war. Even though it may seem callous from the outside, it is not.

But imagine that the chocolate producing countries in West Africa decide to stop selling cocoa beans to the United States. In response, the U.S. sends its army to invade the Ivory Coast. When the citizens of the Ivory Coast resist the U.S. invasion, U.S. generals command the troops to terrorize the country by killing innocent Ivorians. Surely this is wrong, and it seems to be on a par with Fred's behavior.

4.3 Raising puppies for cocoamone maximizes happiness. *Against (S1)*

- (U1) Fred's behavior maximizes (expected) happiness.
- (U2) If an agent's behavior maximizes (expected) happiness, then it's morally right.
- (U3) Therefore, Fred's behavior is morally right.

(U1) is false. Fred's raising puppies for cocoamone may produce more (expected) happiness than his not raising puppies for cocoamone and simply mowing his yard, but Fred could produce even more (expected) happiness by not raising puppies for cocoamone and converting his yard into natural habitat. Analogously, one's consuming humanely-raised meat may produce more (expected) happiness than one's not consuming humanely-raised meat and buying expensive substitutes, but one could produce even more (expected) happiness by not consuming humanely-raised meat, buying inexpensive substitutes, and donating the rest to animal welfare organizations.

4.4 Consuming humanely-raised meat is good for the environment. *Against (S2)*

According to Jay Bost, "The fact is that most agroecologists agree that animals are integral parts of truly sustainable agricultural systems. They are able to cycle nutrients, aid in land management and convert sun to food in ways that are nearly impossible for us to do without fossil fuel. If 'ethical' is defined as living in the most ecologically benign way, then in fairly specific circumstances, of which each eater must educate himself, eating meat is ethical, in fact NOT eating meat may be arguably unethical."¹

Imagine that Fred is engaged in a land restoration project. He plants native grasses and trees in hopes that native animals will return to the area, and they do, but they also attract rabbits, a non-native species. Although rabbits are difficult to eradicate without environmentally harmful chemicals, Fred finds that his puppies do a good job of protecting the land and are only slightly more expensive than the chemicals. To support his work, Fred sets up a small nature center and solicits funds from patrons and local businesses. Although he receives some money from these efforts, he needs more to keep his project running without resorting to using the environmentally harmful chemicals. One day, it occurs to him that if he kills his puppies once they reach maturity and sells the cocoamone from their brains, then he can raise the additional money he needs. After killing his first puppy, he extracts the cocoamone from its brain and puts it up for sale at the nature center. While visiting, you notice it and consider purchasing it from Fred. Is this morally permissible?

No. It's like fighting poverty relief by buying a stylish pair of shoes from TOMS.

¹ Jay Bost. "Sometimes It's More Ethical to Eat Meat Than Vegetables." *New York Times*. 20 April 2012. Accessed 1 July 2019.