



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Are Meat-Eaters Epistemically Unlucky?

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Fischer, Bob. 2020. "Are Meat-Eaters Epistemically Unlucky?" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (9): 10-14. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5kC>.

Thanks to the editors of the SERRC for the opportunity to comment on C. E. Abbate's excellent essay, "The Epistemology of Meat-Eating." Abbate's goal is to explain why most meat-eaters continue consuming animal products after having learned about the plight of animals in factory farms.¹ She argues that the best explanation is epistemic. In short, for most people to be willing to go vegan for moral reasons, they need to believe (1) that meat-eating causes serious, systematic, and unnecessary harm, as well as that (2) it's seriously wrong to cause serious, systematic, and unnecessary harm to farmed animals.² Unfortunately, she contends, many consumers (reasonably) don't believe the first claim, and while most would grant the second, they don't think it's relevant to our current situation: they think that the serious and systematic harms to farmed animals are *necessary*, so the second claim doesn't apply to our circumstances.

Why is this? Abbate's answer is that most people lack sufficient evidence that meat-eating causes serious, systematic, and unnecessary harm, and they have ample evidence that the serious and systematic harms to farmed animals are necessary. So, unsurprisingly, they lack the beliefs required to go vegan for moral reasons. For instance, people encounter much less information about factory farming than we might think, they are encouraged not to trust whistleblowers (the term "activist" is practically a pejorative in our culture), they are given various reasons to doubt that the worst practices are representative of the entire industry, they encounter lots of pro-farming propaganda, and they are systematically led to "dementalyze" farmed animals (that is, to downplay their cognitive capacities in ways that make it easier to justify animals' treatment). And, of course, all this happens in a context where most trustworthy people think it's fine to purchase and consume animal products, not least because they think that animal products play an essential role in a healthy diet. So, it's difficult for many people to believe that meat-eaters are collectively engaged in serious wrongdoing.

What follows? If the paper were to follow the pattern of the rest of the literature, you would expect an argument to the effect that individual consumers have an excuse for their animal product consumption, or perhaps aren't even acting wrongly. While Abbate acknowledges that someone might push in the former direction, that isn't the potential implication that she explores. Instead, she argues that "because we are morally obligated to do what we can to assist factory farmed animals, [moral vegans] should mobilize to bring about [a] 'belief-revolution'" (12). On her view, most moral vegans are epistemically lucky: they've run into the right kind and amount of evidence, and less counterevidence, than most meat-eaters. And as epistemically lucky individuals, they are well-positioned to discharge their obligation to help animals by spreading the word.

I find much of this compelling, and I should stress my fundamental appreciation for, and sympathy with, the overall project. In these comments, however, let me raise a few potential concerns, as well as invite Abbate to say more about future work in this vein.

¹ I'm going to talk about "meat-eaters" because Abbate does. However, as she would readily acknowledge, the issue has nothing to do with meat per se: almost all animal products have ugly histories.

² I'm simplifying: Abbate talks about vegetarians too, but I'm streamlining the discussion for ease of exposition.

Considering Alternative Hypotheses

First, right at the beginning of the paper, Abbate considers an alternative hypothesis to the one that she spends the paper defending: instead of saying that people lack the relevant beliefs, she notes that someone could maintain that most people are just seriously immoral, as “it is only seriously immoral people who, without any hesitation, perform acts that they deem seriously wrong” (1). However, she dismisses that hypothesis without much argument. On one level, this seems fair enough. I don’t think it’s plausible that most people (consciously, reflectively) believe that it’s seriously immoral to eat meat. So, I don’t think it’s plausible that most people are, in eating meat, performing acts that they deem to be seriously wrong. However, the “moral monster” hypothesis may deserve a bit more consideration than Abbate gives it.

We might borrow and rework an idea from Arendt: not the banality of evil, but the banality of being seriously immoral. Perhaps that banality partially consists in accepting a set of epistemic practices that make moral change much harder than it ought to be. It’s a kind of epistemic laziness that wasn’t so objectionable in an earlier era, when humanity’s history of atrocities was less widely known, but seems far more sinister now. Indeed, it seems like Abbate could be correct about everything she says *after* she dismisses the “moral monster” hypothesis, and yet still be wrong about the falsity of that hypothesis: maybe most people are seriously immoral because they are far too willing to suppose that the status quo is probably morally tolerable, or even morally good.

Belief and Behavior

Second, and continuing the theme of hypotheses that may deserve more consideration, let’s note that it’s ultimately an empirical question whether belief *causes* behavior here. While I find this hypothesis plausible, there are lots of other explanations that Abbate doesn’t rule out. For example, despite her arguments, economic factors could best explain why people don’t adopt a vegan diet. Maybe it’s the case that our society is one where most meat-eaters believe, in their heart of hearts, that eating animals is very seriously wrong, and yet people continue to eat them anyway, simply because people are either consciously or unconsciously motivated more by price, preference, and social factors than they are motivated by morality.

Who knows what people believe in their heart of hearts, so let’s set that possibility aside. However, it seems a bit more likely that we live in a society where everyone *would* believe that eating animals is very seriously wrong, while still eating them, if they thought that their peers wouldn’t think less of them for their hypocrisy. In this scenario, the absence of the relevant belief isn’t what explains why people never become vegans: it’s still the economic factors. Moreover, the absence of the relevant belief isn’t explained by the absence of evidence; instead, it explained by people’s desire to save face in front of their peers.

If we are living in this society, then it isn’t so clear what would happen to people’s behavior if we were to change their beliefs. It’s possible, anyway, that behavior might stay exactly the same, at least if it becomes socially acceptable to participate in that sort of hypocrisy. (Something like this may be happening when it comes to charitable giving. A sizable chunk of the progressive community has come to believe that it’s morally mandatory not to let distant strangers die due to preventable causes, and that they could prevent those deaths by

donating. Still, donation rates are still relatively low. This suggests that people are willing to endorse the ideal while tolerating noncompliance.) To be clear, I don't want to say that this hypothesis is more plausible than Abbate's. Still, it would be interesting to see how it might be ruled out.

Beliefs and Evidence

Third, I wonder a bit about the way Abbate frames the discussion in terms of the relationship between our beliefs and our evidence. She points out, rightly, that "we tend to believe what our evidence tells us, and we tend to lack the capacity to, at will, believe contrary to our evidence" (3). So, if meat-eaters don't have the relevant evidence, they'll tend not to have the relevant beliefs. So far, so good. But it's also true that the way we respond to evidence about moral propositions is heavily skewed by a host of seemingly-objectionable factors. For instance, it would be really inconvenient if it were to turn out that animals are systematically and seriously harmed in agricultural contexts, so I'd rather not investigate. I might have to give up things that I find tasty. I might have to realign some of my social and political affiliations. And those factors motivate me to relate differently to the available evidence than I would if the incentives were arranged so as to favor criticizing animal agriculture. This, of course, is an altogether too familiar phenomenon.

It's very easy to convince people on the political left that Donald Trump has done something morally atrocious; it's enormously difficult to convince them that he actually got something right, and vice versa for a certain segment of the political right. Are these people weighing evidence impartially? Is the issue just whether they've been exposed to the right kind and amount of evidence? Or, alternately, is it that political tribalism makes us practically immune to evidence, strongly predisposing us to believe whatever fits with our antecedently-accepted narratives? If this alternative is true in politics, and something similar applies when it comes to many moral beliefs, then Abbate might be too quick to blame the evidence, rather than tribalistic epistemic practices.

Vegans and Epistemic Luck

This is related to a fourth point (and also has some connections to the "moral monster" hypothesis discussed earlier). I find it plausible that there is some sense in which moral vegans are epistemically lucky. However, we can distinguish between two kinds of luck.

First, there is luck with respect to the evidence that people acquire: as Abbate nicely explains, she thinks she wouldn't have certain beliefs had she not had certain experiences. Second, though, there is luck with respect to the epistemic practices that people inherit: you might think that you are lucky to be someone who's acquired good methods for handling evidence, to include appropriate degrees of suspicion about the norms of the culture in which we find ourselves, a sense of the appropriate degree of skepticism to have toward sources of information, and so on.

What should we say, though, about those who have acquired good methods for handling evidence, but apply them selectively? We might think this is true of many people on the

political left: they are willing to challenge the status quo; they have the appropriate degree of skepticism about information that's been filtered through a corporation's PR department, and so on. Nevertheless, they have an enormous blind spot when it comes to animals. While these individuals might still be epistemically unlucky in the sense of not having encountered as much evidence as would be optimal, they aren't epistemically unlucky when it comes to their belief-forming methods, and so, perhaps, are more responsible for their beliefs (or their not having certain beliefs) than others.

Changing Beliefs

Fifth, Abbate writes that “because moral agents have a duty to assist farmed animals, the epistemically lucky ought to help change the meat-eating beliefs of the average consumer, as this is arguably the most effective way the epistemically lucky can discharge this duty” (13). Presumably, the claim here is just that the epistemically unlucky have a *pro tanto* duty—that is, one that could, in principle, be overridden. So I take it that Abbate is not committed to the claim that every epistemically lucky person (with respect to this issue) has an all things considered duty to persuade others that eating animals is seriously wrong. However, I'm not sure that the epistemically lucky have even a *pro tanto* duty to help change the meat-eating beliefs of the average consumer, even though I find it plausible that we have some duty to assist farmed animals. Why not? Because I'm not so sure about the other premise—namely, that promoting belief change is the most effective way that the epistemically lucky can discharge their duty to assist.

Many of us might accomplish far more for animals by investing in plant-based and cultured meat companies, lobbying for legal reforms, encouraging people to eat less meat for their health (which is an easier sell), and donating to effective charities. Of course, none of that's to say that Abbate is mistaken that it's valuable to try to change beliefs, and her practical suggestions about the best methods strike me as eminently reasonable. Still, it would be nice to have some additional argument for the specific *pro tanto* duty that she attributes to the epistemically lucky.

Animal Activists and Epistemic Injustice

Let me conclude with an invitation. Abbate argues, quite convincingly, that the farming industry works hard to undermine animal activists and animal advocacy organizations as sources of evidence. It seems to follow from this that they aren't taken as seriously as they ought to be. This led me to wonder what Abbate would say about the claim that activists and animal advocacy organizations are victims of epistemic injustice. Are these individuals and organizations being wronged in this way? More radically, and turning our attention away from activists, Abbate may also have done much of the work required to show that meat-eaters are the victims of a kind of *hermeneutical* injustice, where they've been denied the tools required to understand their complicity in a system that causes enormous harm to nonhuman animals. While I certainly don't want to suggest that meat-eaters are the primary victims here—they aren't—it would be interesting if it were to turn out that they too are being wronged.

Again: while I've been critical here, let me wrap up on a positive note. Despite the issues I've raised here, the central argument of this paper remains compelling, and Abbate's work

points the literature in intriguing new directions. I am grateful to her for her argument, and to the editors of the SERRC for the chance to engage with it.

References

Abbate, C. E. 2020. "The Epistemology of Meat-Eating." *Social Epistemology* 1-18. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2020.1771794.