

## COHERENTISM AND THE EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL BELIEFS: A CASE STUDY IN HOW TO DO PRACTICAL ETHICS WITHOUT APPEAL TO A MORAL THEORY

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper defends a coherentist approach to moral epistemology. In “The Immorality of Eating Meat” (2000), I offer a coherentist consistency argument to show that *our own beliefs* rationally commit us to the immorality of eating meat. Elsewhere, I use *our own beliefs* as premises to argue that we have positive duties to assist the poor (2004) and to argue that biomedical animal experimentation is wrong (2012). The present paper explores whether this consistency-based coherentist approach of grounding particular moral judgments on beliefs we already hold, with no appeal to moral theory, is a legitimate way of doing practical ethics. I argue (i) that grounding particular moral judgments on our core moral convictions and other core nonmoral beliefs is a legitimate way to justify moral judgments, (ii) that these moral judgments possess as much epistemic justification and have as much claim to objectivity as moral judgments grounded on particular ethical theories, and (iii) that this internalistic coherentist method of grounding moral judgments is more likely to result in behavioral guidance than traditional theory-based approaches to practical ethics. By way of illustrating the approach, I briefly recapitulate my consistency-based argument for ethical vegetarianism. I then defend the coherentist approach implicit in the argument against a number of potentially fatal metatheoretical attacks.

The traditional approach to practical ethics is to take a moral theory, say hedonistic utilitarianism or a Kantian theory, and apply it to some controversial moral issue. Hence, the name ‘applied ethics’. The name itself suggests that all the important philosophical and ethical work has already been done at the theoretical and metatheoretical level and that practical ethics is just a trivial matter of reading off conclusions from such a theory. The underlying rationale for the traditional approach is the belief that grounding our moral

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judgments on a correct moral theory is the only way to guarantee the objectivity and correctness of those moral judgments. In short, the moral theory is supposed to serve as a safety net that protects us from subjectivism, relativism, and error in our moral judgments.

The fundamental weakness of the traditional approach is twofold. First, the moral theories that are supposed to ground our moral judgments and render them objectively justified are themselves at least as contentious as the moral judgments they are intended to ground. Second, and more problematic from the standpoint of normative ethics whose *raison d'être* is to guide conduct, we can always avoid accepting a burdensome moral judgment simply by rejecting the moral theory on which it is predicated. Perhaps nowhere has this been more obvious than in the contemporary debate concerning ethical vegetarianism. Most arguments for the moral obligatoriness of vegetarianism take one of two forms: either they follow Peter Singer's lead and demand equal consideration for animals on utilitarian grounds<sup>1</sup> or they follow Tom Regan's rights-based approach and insist that virtually all of the animals we routinely consume possess the same rights-conferring properties that confer rights on humans.<sup>2</sup> Most philosophers have remained unmoved by these arguments. Like most people, many philosophers take great pleasure in sinking their teeth into a hot juicy steak, chewing the flesh off a rack of barbecued ribs, and gnawing on spicy chicken wings. Such pleasures are not to be given up lightly. So it is not surprising that meat-loving philosophers often casually dismiss these arguments in the following manner:

Singer's preference utilitarianism is irremediably flawed, as is Regan's theory of moral rights. Since Singer's and Regan's arguments for vegetarianism are predicated on flawed ethical theories, their arguments are also flawed. Until someone can provide me with a correct moral theory that entails that eating meat is wrong, I will continue to eat what I please. (Engel 2000, 857)<sup>3</sup>

A moment's reflection reveals the sophistry of such a reply. Since no ethical theory to date is immune to objection, a similar reply could be fashioned to "justify" virtually any behavior. For example, someone could attempt to "justify" rape as follows: if an opponent of rape were to appeal to utilitarian

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<sup>1</sup> See Singer 2011, 2009, and 1989.

<sup>2</sup> See Regan 2003 and 1983.

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, some philosophers go to great lengths to point out the weaknesses of Singer's utilitarian approach and Regan's deontological approach. For example, Peter Carruthers (1992) highlights utilitarianism's many counterintuitive and unacceptable implications; and he argues that Regan's rights-based approach lacks an adequate underlying rationale. But formally the structure is the same: he rejects Singer's and Regan's conclusions because he rejects the theoretical approaches on which they are based.

or Kantian grounds to establish the immorality of rape, our fictitious rape-loving philosopher could then argue that since these ethical theories are flawed, so too are the arguments against rape. Our rape proponent might then assert: “Until someone can provide me with a correct moral theory that entails that rape is wrong, I will continue to rape whomever I please.”

The speciousness of such a “justification” of rape should be transparent. No one who seriously considered the brutality of rape could think that it is somehow justified or permissible *simply because* all current ethical theories are flawed. But such specious reasoning is used to “justify” the breeding, confining, mutilating, transporting, slaughtering, and eating of animals all the time. Seeking to block this spurious reply, I have elsewhere (Engel 2000) advanced an argument for the immorality of eating meat that is not predicated on any highly contentious moral theory but, rather, rests on beliefs that we already hold.

My aim in the present paper is to examine whether grounding particular moral judgments on beliefs we already hold, with no appeal to moral theory, is a legitimate way of doing practical ethics. I shall argue (i) that grounding particular moral judgments on our core moral convictions and other core nonmoral beliefs is, indeed, a legitimate way to justify moral judgments, (ii) that these moral judgments possess at least as much epistemic justification and have at least as much claim to objectivity as moral judgments grounded on particular ethical theories, and (iii) that this internalistic coherentist method of grounding moral judgments has an important theoretical advantage over the traditional approach to practical ethics. To illustrate the approach, I will briefly recapitulate my consistency argument for ethical vegetarianism. I will then examine whether the internalistic coherentist approach implicit in the argument can stand up to a number of potentially fatal metatheoretical attacks.<sup>4</sup> Since it will be helpful at the outset to have a clear idea of the kind of coherence theory underlying my approach, I will begin with a few preliminary epistemological remarks.

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<sup>4</sup> A caveat is in order. In contrast to the traditional theoretical approach to practical ethics, I describe my approach as “atheoretical.” It is important to avoid misunderstanding here. My approach is atheoretical *only* in the sense that the normative conclusions reached are not derived from or predicated on any particular moral theory, where by a “moral theory” I mean a theory that explains what it is about right actions that makes them right and what it is about wrong actions that makes them wrong. Examples of moral theories include hedonistic utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, rule utilitarianism, and contractarianism. I do appeal to other sorts of theoretical considerations. For example, since we are concerned with a person’s being *epistemically justified* in particular moral judgments, I do employ a certain theory of epistemic justification, viz., an internalistic coherence theory. Moreover, in being offered as a metatheoretical alternative to the traditional approach, my atheoretical approach could itself be viewed as a theory about how to best do practical ethics, but such a metatheory is not a moral theory as defined above.

## 1. COHERENTIST MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY AT WORK: AN ILLUSTRATION

### 1.1 *Epistemological Preliminaries*

Coherence theories of justification are often characterized negatively as the denial of foundations theories, where a *foundations theory* is any theory of justification that maintains that there is a privileged subclass of immediately justified basic beliefs that (i) do not derive their justification from other beliefs and (ii) serve as the ultimate ground of justification for all nonbasic beliefs. In light of (ii), foundationalists maintain that a person, S, is justified in holding a nonbasic belief that *p* if and only if S's belief that *p* is based on reasoning through a linear chain of justified beliefs that ultimately originates from one or more basic beliefs. On the negative construal, then, a coherence theory is any theory of justification that denies that there is a privileged subclass of basic beliefs, insisting instead that all beliefs are on an epistemic par with one another (Pollock 1986, 20).

Characterized positively, coherence theories have traditionally been taken to be holistic doxastic theories of justification, where a *doxastic theory* is any theory of justification that maintains that the justifiability of a belief is a function exclusively of what beliefs one holds—of one's doxastic system (Pollock 1986, 19). For example, Keith Lehrer maintains that S is justified in believing that *p* if and only if *p* coheres with S's doxastic system better than any competing proposition (1974, 189–96).<sup>5</sup>

Doxastic coherence theories have been criticized on the grounds that they fail to give proper weight to the epistemic value of experience. Because they make justification a function exclusively of the *beliefs* S holds, doxastic coherence theories allow for the possibility of S's being justified in holding a belief (in light of S's other beliefs) that does not at all cohere with the experiences S is then having.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, the coherence theorist can easily circumvent this

<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, Lehrer (1974, 190) maintains that the system with which S's belief that *p* must cohere in order for S to be justified in believing that *p* is S's *corrected* doxastic system, where the corrected doxastic system is the subset of the doxastic system consisting only of statements that S believes as an impartial and disinterested truth seeker. In his more recent writings, Lehrer holds that in order for S to be justified in believing that *p*, *p* must cohere with S's *acceptance system*—the set of things S accepts for the purposes of gaining truth and avoiding error (1990, 112–15). Nothing in the present paper turns on these subtleties.

<sup>6</sup> Consider, e.g., Alvin Plantinga's Case of the Epistemically Inflexible Climber (1993, 82). Ric is climbing Guide's Wall in the Grand Tetons when a sudden burst of radiation causes his belief that he is sitting comfortably on a ledge on Guide's Wall to become permanently fixed. Once Ric is safely removed from Guide's Wall, he is taken to the Metropolitan Opera. Listening to *La Traviata*, Ric is being appeared to the same way as everyone else—he is inundated by waves of golden sound and visions of the beautiful set and costumes. Despite these experiences, he still believes that he is sitting on a ledge on Guide's Wall, and this belief coheres with all his other beliefs. Doxastic coherentism mistakenly

problem by embracing an internalistic, nondoxastic coherence theory that makes the justifiability of a belief a function exclusively of S's *internal states*, where these include not only beliefs but also perceptual states, introspective states, memorial seemings, moral experiences, and so forth. Catherine Elgin seems to hint at such a view when she notes that, according to the kind of holistic coherentism she endorses, "claims are justified only when they coalesce to constitute a tenable system of thought" (2005, 156). Since beliefs that fly in the face of perceptual experiences are unlikely to fit into a tenable system of thought, these beliefs would not be justified on Elgin's view.<sup>7</sup>

The version of coherentism implicit in my approach to practical ethics is extremely modest. In addition to being a nondoxastic theory, it leaves open the question of whether or not there are any basic beliefs. The foundationalist may be right in insisting that some beliefs are basic in the sense that (i) they are immediately justified in virtue of their being grounded in experience and (ii) their justification does not derive from other beliefs. For example, my experiencing pain seems to immediately justify me in believing that I am in pain, and my experiencing a red sensation (i.e., my being appeared to redly) seems to provide immediate *prima facie* justification for the belief that there is something red before me. Accordingly, the version of coherentism that I espouse does *not* insist that *all* beliefs derive their justification from other beliefs and, thus, leaves open the question of whether or not coherence with one's other beliefs is a necessary condition for a belief's being justified.

Where I do take issue with foundations theories is in their claim that in order for a nonbasic belief to be justified, that belief must be based on a chain of reasons that ultimately traces back to one or more basic beliefs. While it may not be difficult to trace some higher-level perceptual belief back to the various perceptually basic beliefs on which it is based, it is not at all plausible to think that all of our justified theoretical, philosophical, and moral beliefs can be traced back to such basic beliefs. Suppose Sally believes that abortion is wrong. When we look at the kinds of reasons that Sally would likely cite in support of her view, some of them are such that they are neither basic nor properly based on a basic belief. For example, Sally might insist that the fetus is a person from the point of conception forward. This belief, if justified at all,

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implies that his ledge belief is justified despite the fact that it is not appropriately responsive to his experiences.

<sup>7</sup> Elgin expressly notes that perceptual deliverances can render unjustified an otherwise highly coherent belief: "The serious challenge comes from a coherent factual account that conflicts with perceptual deliverances. If holism holds that such an account always overrides perceptual deliverances, it seems plainly unacceptable. However tightly woven an empirical account may be, we would be epistemically irresponsible to ignore recalcitrant evidence" (2005, 162).

is not justified on the basis of any basic belief but, rather, on the basis of how well it coheres with Sally's other moral and nonmoral beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike traditional coherence theories that maintain that coherence is both necessary and sufficient for justification, the modest nondoxastic version of coherentism implicit in my approach to moral epistemology maintains only that coherence is a sufficient condition for justification. On this view, S's belief is justified *if* it coheres with her beliefs and other internal states. More precisely, *modest nondoxastic coherentism* (MNC) holds:

*MNC*: If  $p$  coheres with S's beliefs and other internal states better than any proposition that competes with  $p$ , then S is justified in believing that  $p$ .<sup>9</sup>

In the moral domain, MNC entails that S is justified in holding some particular moral belief,  $M$ , *if*  $M$  coheres with S's beliefs and her other internal states better than any moral proposition that competes with  $M$ . MNC provides the underlying moral epistemology that serves as the basis for my atheoretical coherentist approach to practical ethics. That approach starts with highly coherent commonsense beliefs that S already holds and argues that these beliefs rationally commit S to—and *epistemically justify* S in—believing various particular moral beliefs, on pain of incoherence. My argument for ethical vegetarianism provides an illustration of the approach at work. I show that our already held beliefs, when combined with two indisputable facts, entail that eating meat is wrong. Given MNC, this commits us to and justifies us in believing that eating meat is wrong and that vegetarianism is morally required.

As just noted, my argument for ethical vegetarianism provides an illustration of my atheoretical coherentist approach to practical ethics. Before presenting the argument itself, a caveat is in order. Ethical arguments are often context-dependent in that they presuppose a specific audience in a certain set

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<sup>8</sup> A die-hard foundationalist might try to argue that Sally's belief is basic after all, by claiming that it is grounded in a nonperceptual *seeming*, i.e., it just *seems* to Sally that the fetus is a person from the point of conception forward, but such a response is hardly persuasive. The most plausible account of her having such a seeming is that her other moral beliefs and internal states make it seem that way to her. If the source of her seeming is coherence with the other things she believes, then it is coherence with her other beliefs—not a basic belief grounded in a seeming—that is the ultimate source of her justification.

<sup>9</sup> I am not claiming that MNC's antecedent is sufficient for S's believing that  $p$ , for S can be justified in believing a proposition that she fails to believe. Nor am I claiming that MNC's antecedent is sufficient for S to recognize that she is justified in believing that  $p$ , for she might fail to put two and two together. What is implied by MNC is that satisfaction of its antecedent rationally commits S to  $p$  and personally justifies S in believing that  $p$  whether she realizes it or not. I use 'S is justified in believing that  $p$ ' rather than 'S has justification for  $p$ ' to stress that the kind of justification that coherence provides is *personal justification*, as opposed to *doxastic justification*. For further discussion of the distinction between internalistically justified *persons* and externalistically justified *beliefs*, see Engel 1992.

of circumstances. Recognizing what that intended audience and context is, and what it is not, can prevent confusion about the scope of the ethical claim being made. My coherentist argument for ethical vegetarianism is context-dependent in precisely this way. It is not aimed at those relatively few indigenous peoples who, because of the paucity of edible vegetable matter available, must eat meat to survive. Rather, it is directed at people like us—people who live in agriculturally bountiful societies *in which a wealth of nutritionally adequate plant-based alternatives to meat are readily available*. The argument is intended to show that our beliefs rationally commit us to the view that eating meat is morally wrong for anyone who is in the circumstances in which we typically find ourselves where a plethora of plant-based alternatives are readily available and *a fortiori* that it is morally wrong for us to eat meat in these circumstances.<sup>10</sup> With this caveat in mind, let us see an example of the coherentist approach to practical ethics at work.

### 1.2 *Our Beliefs*

Like virtually all people of normal moral sensibilities, we believe the following propositions:

- (p<sub>1</sub>) Other things being equal, a world with less pain and suffering is better than a world with more pain and suffering.
- (p<sub>2</sub>) A world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering.<sup>11</sup>
- (p<sub>3</sub>) Unnecessary cruelty is wrong and ought not to be supported or encouraged. [Remember Michael Vick.<sup>12</sup>]

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<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, throughout the text my claim that “our beliefs commit us to the immorality of eating meat” should be understood as shorthand for the following more cumbersome claim: our beliefs commit us to the immorality of eating meat for anyone who is in the circumstances in which we typically find ourselves where plant-based alternatives are readily available. The argument does not show that it is wrong to dumpster dive and eat what is left of a discarded, half-eaten hamburger, nor is it intended to. What the argument is intended to show is that it is wrong to eat meat purchased from restaurants, grocery stores, and markets that have obtained their meat from inhumane factory farms (and/or inhumane family farms) and, hence, that it is wrong to eat the meat most people typically eat.

<sup>11</sup> By “unnecessary suffering” I mean suffering that serves no greater, outweighing justifying good. If some instance of suffering is required to bring about a greater good (e.g., a painful root canal may be the only way to save a tooth), then that suffering is not unnecessary. Similarly, if some instance of suffering is necessary to bring about a more just society, then that suffering is not unnecessary. Thus, in the case of (p<sub>2</sub>), no *ceteris paribus* clause is needed, since if other things are not equal such that the suffering in question is justified by an overriding justifying good that can only be achieved by allowing the suffering, then the suffering is not unnecessary.

<sup>12</sup> Recall the public outrage that erupted when professional football player Michael Vick was found guilty of sponsoring dog-fighting rings in which pit-bulls were forced to rip each other apart in brutal fights to the death. We find it morally outrageous that someone would cause

- (p<sub>4</sub>) We ought to do what we reasonably can to avoid making the world a worse place.

We also believe:

- (p<sub>5</sub>) A morally good person will take steps to make the world a better place and even stronger steps to avoid making the world a worse place.
- (p<sub>6</sub>) Even a “minimally decent person”<sup>13</sup> will take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world, *when she/he can do so with little effort on her/his part*.

We also have beliefs about nonhuman animals and our obligations toward them. We believe:

- (p<sub>7</sub>) Many nonhuman animals (certainly all vertebrates) are capable of feeling pain.
- (p<sub>8</sub>) It is wrong to cause an animal to suffer *for no good reason*.<sup>14</sup>
- (p<sub>9</sub>) It is wrong and despicable to treat animals inhumanely *for no good reason*. [Remember Harman’s cat.<sup>15</sup>]

These beliefs, when coupled with two indisputable facts, provide a compelling argument for the immorality of eating meat. I now turn to these two facts.

### 1.3 *Two Empirical Facts*

My consistency argument for ethical vegetarianism is predicated on our beliefs (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) and the following two incontrovertible empirical facts:

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these innocent dogs such harm, suffering, and death for no good reason, and we view those people who engage in such conduct as morally deficient or depraved, or both. This example illustrates that principles (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>3</sub>) are partially constitutive of the very concept of *moral wrongness*, and it confirms that no one seriously doubts (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>3</sub>).

<sup>13</sup> By a “minimally decent person” I mean a person who does the very minimum required by morality and no more. I borrow this terminology from Judith Jarvis Thomson (1971, 62–65), where she distinguishes a “good” Samaritan from a “minimally decent” Samaritan.

<sup>14</sup> Carruthers has done an admirable job of capturing this aspect of commonsense morality: “it will be useful to have a rough idea at the out-set of what our common-sense morality tells us about the status and appropriate treatment of animals. . . . Most people hold that it is wrong to cause animals unnecessary suffering. Opinions will differ as to what counts as necessary. . . . But *all will agree that gratuitous suffering—suffering caused for no good reason—is wrong*” (1992, 8).

<sup>15</sup> See Gilbert Harman’s much discussed example: “If you round the corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can *see* that it is wrong” (1977, 4). What is particularly relevant about this example for our present purposes is that no one considering the example seriously doubts whether a cat so treated would feel pain [hence, no one seriously doubts (p<sub>7</sub>)] nor does anyone seriously doubt that cruelly burning a cat for no good reason is wrong [hence, no one seriously doubts (p<sub>8</sub>) or (p<sub>9</sub>) either].



- (f<sub>1</sub>) Virtually all commercial animal agriculture, especially factory farming, causes animals intense pain and suffering and, thus, *greatly increases* the amount of pain and suffering in the world.
- (f<sub>2</sub>) In modern societies the consumption of meat is *in no way necessary* for human survival or human flourishing.

To support (f<sub>1</sub>), I offer a brief description of the techniques used in modern animal agriculture.

Most farm animals in the United States are raised in factory farms. Factory farms are intensive confinement facilities where animals are forced to live in inhospitable, unnatural conditions for the duration of their lives. The first step in intensive farming is the early separation of mother and offspring.<sup>16</sup> The offspring are then housed in overcrowded confinement facilities. Chickens and turkeys are warehoused in sheds containing anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 birds;<sup>17</sup> veal calves are kept in 22" x 54" crates and are chained at the neck, rendering them unable to move or turn around; pigs are confined in metal crates situated on concrete slatted floors with no straw or bedding; and beef cattle are housed in feedlots containing up to 100,000 animals. The inappropriate, unforgiving surfaces on which the animals must stand produce chronic foot and leg injuries. Since they cannot move about, they must stand in their own waste. In these cramped, unsanitary conditions, virtually all of the animals' basic instinctual urges (e.g., to nurse, stretch, move around, groom, build nests, establish social orders) are thwarted, causing boredom, frustration, and stress in the animals. To prevent losses from these stressful, unsanitary conditions, the animals are given a steady supply of antibiotics and growth hormones and are subjected to routine mutilations including debeaking, tail docking, branding, castration, ear tagging, ear clipping, teeth pulling, and toe removal, *all performed without anesthesia*.<sup>18</sup> *Unanesthetized* branding, dehorning, ear tagging, ear clipping, and castration are standard procedures on nonintensive family farms as well.

Lives of frustration and torment finally culminate as the animals are inhumanely loaded onto trucks and shipped long distances without food or water and without adequate protection from the elements to slaughterhouses.

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<sup>16</sup> Chickens are separated from their mothers before birth, as they are hatched in incubators and thus never encounter their mothers; veal calves are removed from their mothers within a few days; and piglets are separated from their mothers two to three weeks after birth (Mason and Singer 1990, 5, 10, and 11–12).

<sup>17</sup> These overcrowded conditions make it impossible for the birds to develop a pecking order, the lack of which generates aggression, feather pecking, and cannibalism in the birds (Davis 1996, 65–71; Singer 2009, 99–100; and Mason and Singer 1990, 7).

<sup>18</sup> For detailed descriptions of the routine mutilations farm animals are forced to endure without anesthesia, see Mason and Singer 1990, Davis 1996, and Robbins 1987.

Each year millions of animals die as a result of such handling and transportation.<sup>19</sup> Once inside the slaughterhouse, the animals are hung upside down and are brought via conveyor to the slaughterer who slits their throats and severs their carotid arteries and jugular veins. In *theory*, animals covered by the Federal Humane Slaughter Act are to be rendered unconscious by electric current or by captive bolt pistol.<sup>20</sup> In *practice*, the Act is not enforced and, consequently, in many cases and in all kosher cases, the animals are fully conscious throughout the entire throat-slitting ordeal. For some, the agony does not end there. Modern killing-line speeds are so fast that animals frequently do not have time to bleed out before reaching the skinners and leggers. As a result, those animals that were unstunned or improperly stunned often have their legs cut off and their skin removed while they are still alive.<sup>21</sup>

These animal rearing and slaughtering techniques are by no means rare: 97 percent of all poultry are produced in 100,000+ bird operations, 99 percent of pigs are raised in confinement systems, 70 percent of the nation's dairy cows are raised in confinement systems, all veal calves are crate-raised, and 74 percent of beef cattle experience feedlot confinement before slaughter.<sup>22</sup> Data provided by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reveals that over 25.5 million animals are killed each day in the United States alone as a result of the food animal industry (2005a, 3; 2005b, 2). No other human activity results in more pain, suffering, frustration, and death than factory farming and animal agribusiness.<sup>23</sup> Fact (f<sub>1</sub>) is beyond dispute.

Regarding (f<sub>2</sub>), I have documented the health benefits of plant-based diets elsewhere (Engel 2000), reporting the results of several well-designed, carefully controlled studies examining the relationship between diet and disease.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For example, in 1998, USDA inspectors condemned 28,500 ducks, 768,300 turkeys, and 37.6 million chickens before they entered the slaughter plant because they were either dead or severely injured upon arrival (National Agricultural Statistics Service 1999, 2, 4).

<sup>20</sup> Chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese are not considered animals under the Act and receive no protection at all (Robbins 1987, 139).

<sup>21</sup> Detailed documentation for every claim made in this paragraph and the preceding paragraph is provided in Engel 2000. These inhumane farming, transporting, and slaughtering practices have also been documented in the following films and undercover videos: Frederick Wiseman's *Meat* (Kine Films, Inc., 1976); Victor Schonfeld's *The Animals Film* (Slick Pics International, 1981); Humane Farming Association's *The Pig Picture* (1995); and PETA's *The Diner Video* (1996), *Pig Farm Investigation* (1999), *Meet Your Meat* (2004), and *If Slaughterhouses Had Glass Walls* (2009), the latter two of which can be viewed at <http://www.meat.org/>.

<sup>22</sup> These numbers are based on data published by the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. All NASS publications can be accessed on the web at [www.usda.gov/nass/](http://www.usda.gov/nass/). More detailed discussion is provided in Engel 2000.

<sup>23</sup> The seafood industry, strictly speaking, should be viewed as an extension of animal agribusiness since it is in the business of harvesting animals for human food consumption.

<sup>24</sup> In Engel 2000, I discuss the results of the Ornish study (Ornish et al. 1983; Ornish et al. 1990); the China-Cornell-Oxford Project (Chen et al. 1990; Campbell 1997; Campbell and Chen 1994); and the Loma Linda study (Phillips et al. 1978).

I will not reiterate the details of those studies here. Instead, I will simply report the positions of three highly respected disseminators of nutritional information. The U. S. Department of Agriculture's *Nutritional Guidelines for Americans* states unequivocally: "Vegetarian diets are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and can meet Recommended Dietary Allowances for nutrients" (1995, 6). The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a group of over 3,000 physicians committed to preventive medicine, recommends centering our diets around the *new* four food groups—whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and legumes—and recommends completely eliminating meat and dairy products, the two principal sources of fat and cholesterol in the American diet (Barnard 1993, 144–47). The American Dietetic Association and the Dietitians of Canada are the two most reputable nutritional organizations in North America. Their joint position on vegetarian diets leaves no doubt about the health benefits of plant-based diets:

It is the position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. . . . Well-planned vegan and . . . vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Vegetarian diets offer a number of nutritional benefits, including lower levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein as well as higher levels of carbohydrates, fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate, and antioxidants such as vitamins C and E and phytochemicals. Vegetarians have been reported to have lower body mass indices than nonvegetarians, as well as lower rates of death from ischemic heart disease; vegetarians also show lower blood cholesterol levels; lower blood pressure; and lower rates of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and prostate and colon cancer. (Mangels et al. 2003, 748)<sup>25</sup>

The evidence is unequivocal: we cannot reject ( $f_2$ ) on the grounds that eating meat is necessary for human flourishing, because it is not. On the contrary, meat consumption promotes a number of degenerative diseases and is *detrimental* to human health and well-being.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The U. S. Department of Agriculture and the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services concurs: "In prospective studies of adults, compared to non-vegetarian eating patterns, vegetarian-style eating patterns have been associated with improved health outcomes—lower levels of obesity, a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, and lower total mortality. Several clinical trials have documented that vegetarian eating patterns lower blood pressure" (2010, 45).

<sup>26</sup> The China-Cornell-Oxford Project is the largest epidemiological study ever conducted. It has systematically monitored the diet, lifestyle, and disease patterns of 6,500 families from 65 different counties in Mainland China and Taiwan. The information collected in this massive data set has led Dr. T. Colin Campbell, director of the study, and his associates to conclude the following: "a diet comprised of a variety of good quality plant-based foods is the healthiest" (Campbell 1997, 24); "there is no threshold of plant food richness beyond which further health benefits are not achieved" (Campbell 1997, 24); and "even small intakes of foods of animal

#### 1.4 *The Consistency Argument for Ethical Vegetarianism*

My argument for the immorality of eating meat is predicated on our beliefs (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>).<sup>27</sup> A condensed version of the argument runs as follows: our beliefs (p<sub>7</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) show that we already believe that animals are capable of experiencing intense pain and suffering. I do not have to prove that unanesthetized branding, castration, debeaking, tail docking, and such, cause animals severe pain. We already know they do. Given the animal husbandry techniques and slaughtering practices highlighted above, anyone who accepts that animals can feel pain must acknowledge that virtually all commercial animal agriculture, especially factory farming, greatly increases the amount of pain and suffering in the world [(f<sub>1</sub>)]. Fact (f<sub>1</sub>) and our belief (p<sub>1</sub>) together entail that, other things being equal, the world would be better without animal agriculture and factory farms. Since it is also a fact that in modern societies the consumption of meat is *in no way necessary* for human survival or human flourishing [(f<sub>2</sub>)], the pain and suffering that results from meat production is *unnecessary*, as are all the cruel practices inherent in animal agriculture. Our belief that a world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering [(p<sub>2</sub>)], together with (f<sub>2</sub>), entails that the world would be better if there were less animal agriculture and fewer factory farms, and better still if there were no animal agriculture and no factory farms. Moreover, our belief in (p<sub>3</sub>) commits us to the view that factory farming is wrong and should not be supported or encouraged. When we buy factory farm–raised meat, we *are* supporting factory farms monetarily and thereby encouraging their unnecessary, cruel practices. The only way to avoid actively supporting factory farms is to stop purchasing their products.<sup>28</sup>

We can easily avoid supporting factory farms simply by refraining from eating meat and eating something else instead. For example, we can eat veggie-burgers rather than hamburgers, pasta with marinara rather than meat sauce, bean tostadas rather than beef tacos, red beans and rice rather than Cajun chicken, grilled portabellas rather than barbecued ribs, moo shoo vegetables rather than moo shoo pork, curried vegetables rather than curried

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origin are associated with significant increases in plasma cholesterol concentrations, which are associated, in turn, with significant increases in chronic degenerative disease mortality rates” (Campbell and Chen 1994, 1153S).

<sup>27</sup> While one does not have to believe all of (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) for my argument to succeed, the more of these propositions one believes, the greater one’s rational commitment to the immorality of eating meat. Even if one only believes (p<sub>1</sub>), (p<sub>2</sub>), (p<sub>6</sub>), and (p<sub>7</sub>), my argument for ethical vegetarianism will succeed.

<sup>28</sup> As Singer rightly notes: “The people who profit by exploiting large numbers of animals do not need our approval. They need our money. The purchase of the corpses of the animals they rear is the main support the factory farmers ask from the public. . . . They will use intensive methods as long as they can sell what they produce by these methods” (Singer 2009, 161).

chicken, minestrone rather than chicken soup, chick pea salad rather than chicken salad, hummus-filled whole wheat pitas rather than BLTs, fruit and whole wheat toast rather than bacon and eggs, scrambled tofu vegetable frittatas rather than cheese omelets.<sup>29</sup> These examples underscore the ease with which we can avoid consuming flesh, a fact that often seems to elude meat eaters.

From beliefs (p<sub>1</sub>), (p<sub>2</sub>), and (p<sub>4</sub>), it follows that we ought to do what we reasonably can to avoid contributing to the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world. Since one thing we reasonably can do to avoid contributing to unnecessary suffering is stop contributing to factory farming and animal agriculture with our purchases, it follows that we ought to stop purchasing and consuming meat.

Our other beliefs support the same conclusion. We believe (p<sub>6</sub>): “Even a ‘minimally decent person’—who does the minimum required by morality—would take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world, *if she/he could do so with little effort on her/his part.*” As shown above, with minimal effort we can take steps to help reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world just by eating something other than meat. Accordingly, given (p<sub>6</sub>), we ought to refrain from eating flesh, opting for cruelty-free vegetarian fare instead. This conclusion is not derived from some esoteric moral theory. It follows from our own deeply held beliefs and moral convictions (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>). Consistency with our other beliefs forces us to admit that eating meat is morally wrong.

## 2. METATHEORETICAL OBJECTIONS TO THE ATHEORETICAL COHERENTIST APPROACH TO PRACTICAL ETHICS

Elsewhere, I consider and address a number of objections/conjectures designed to show that (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) do not entail that eating meat is morally wrong, including the “perhaps-human-pleasure-outweighs-animal-suffering” objection, the “perhaps-plants-feel-pain” objection, the “perhaps-God-intends-us-to-eat-meat” objection, the “impotence-of-the-individual” objection, and the “free range” objection.<sup>30</sup> Here I examine what I take to be potentially much more serious objections to the present argument, objections that challenge the

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<sup>29</sup> In every case just mentioned, the vegetarian option is significantly more nutritious, more healthful, and much lower in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol than its meat-based counterpart. In fact, none of the vegetarian options listed contain any cholesterol whatsoever.

<sup>30</sup> For my refutations of these oft-cited objections, see Engel 2000, 877–82. Also see my “The Consistency Argument for Ethical Vegetarianism” (ms). Other compelling responses to the impotence-of-the-individual objection can be found in Singer 1980, Gruzalski 1983, and Norcross 2004.

entire atheoretical consistency approach that undergirds it. These metatheoretical objections call into question both the legitimacy and the normative value of the coherentist attempt to ground moral judgments in beliefs we already hold. These objections seek to show that if our beliefs are not supplemented by a moral theory, they cannot ground or adequately justify particular moral judgments. If these objections succeed, then it is simply irrelevant that our beliefs (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) entail that eating meat is immoral, and my argument fails to establish anything.

Alan Vincellette objects to the atheoretical approach implicit in my argument for ethical vegetarianism on several grounds. As he sees it, moral beliefs can be justified only by appeal to moral and metaphysical theories. Vincellette is a traditionalist. Consider the following passage in which he rejects my approach in favor of traditionalism.

Engel's argument does not make any appeal to metaethics only because it presupposes (without defending and grounding) certain basic moral principles. Now it is perfectly legitimate to presuppose certain beliefs and see what follows for a person who holds such beliefs. But this only allows us to determine what follows from our views, it does not justify them or ground them. In order to justify and ground them we need to appeal to more basic and theoretical ethical and metaphysical claims—and these might end up being quite contentious. (1997, 3)

Vincellette continues:

Engel's whole argument relies on the premise that (p<sub>1</sub>): Other things being equal, a world with less pain and suffering is better than a world with more pain and suffering. Now of course most people accept this principle. But does this mean it is true? Most people might be in error about this. We need to justify and ground this moral principle if we are going to defend our ethical beliefs as true. And I see no way to do this without appealing to more basic and fundamental ethical and metaphysical principles which may well be controversial. For example, in order to justify the claim that unnecessary pain is wrong, Engel will have to appeal to some theory like utilitarianism. But utilitarianism is not uncontroversial, for it invokes certain metaethical claims (consequentialism, non-relativism, objectivism, etc.) which are not accepted readily by all people. (1997, 3)

James Sauer also takes me to task for trying to dispense with moral theory.

First, moral beliefs are notoriously inconsistent. Moral theory is one way in which we sort out fallacies and inconsistency of moral belief. So we ought not, I think, dispense too cavalierly with moral theory or “meta-cognitive” concerns. In fact, if I have followed Engel's argument at all, there lurks in the background a basic utilitarian argument. That is, his own reflection is grounded by a theoretical framework of what is morally obligatory. Engel's paper shows that a theoretical or “meta-cognitive” stance enables us to sort through inconsistencies and problems of thought and belief. (1997, 2)

There are a number of objections lurking in these passages. Let us consider them separately.

### 2.1 *In through the Back Door, or the Failure to Dispense with Theory*

Sauer's objection in the passage above might be paraphrased as follows:

Engel has not dispensed with moral theory. What Engel has done is offer a not-too-cleverly-disguised utilitarian argument. After all, (p<sub>1</sub>), (p<sub>2</sub>), (p<sub>3</sub>), (p<sub>8</sub>), and (p<sub>9</sub>) are utilitarian principles. Thus, far from dispensing with moral theory, Engel is, in a less than subtle fashion, sneaking utilitarianism in through the back door.

Am I a closet utilitarian who has just been outed? Is my argument implicitly utilitarian? First, my argument is utilitarian only to the extent that our own beliefs commit us to utilitarianism. Put another way, my argument is utilitarian only to the extent that utilitarianism informs our common moral judgments and midlevel moral principles. Second, the fact that we accept (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) shows that we think utilitarian considerations are morally relevant, but this does not make us utilitarians. Utilitarians maintain that individuals can be sacrificed for the common good, even for trivial increases in the common good, as long as no other alternative promises a greater balance of pleasure over pain. No member of {(p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>)} entails that individuals can be sacrificed for trivial gains in the common good. Third, any good deontologist will accept (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>). Surely, any good Kantian would admit that a world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering. True, she would also insist that some suffering is deserved and should not be prevented, but suffering that is deserved is not unnecessary on a Kantian view. Rather, it is necessary to bring about justice. Since (p<sub>2</sub>) places no restrictions on the kinds of goods that can serve as outweighing justifying goods, it is simply a mistake to regard it as a utilitarian principle. And the other core moral convictions to which I appeal are not utilitarian principles either.

### 2.2 *The Impossibility of Dispensing with Moral Theories*

Vincellette rightly notes that just because virtually everyone believes (p<sub>1</sub>) does not make it true. Virtually everyone might be in error with respect to (p<sub>1</sub>). He then claims: “We need to justify and ground this moral principle if we are going to defend our ethical beliefs as true. And I see no way to do this without appealing to more basic and fundamental ethical and metaphysical principles which may well be controversial” (1997, 3). Several comments are in order.

First, I did not set out to prove that (p<sub>1</sub>) is true. Why should I? We already believe it. We are in agreement on that point. In fact, we are in agreement

with respect to  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$ . My argument is only aimed at people who do believe all or nearly all of these widely shared commonsense convictions. It is not incumbent upon me to prove propositions we already believe. I can legitimately take them as my starting point.

Second, Vincellette contends that if I am to justify  $(p_1)$ , that is, if I am to defend the truth of  $(p_1)$ , I will have to appeal to more basic and fundamental ethical and metaphysical principles to do so. I, for one, am at a loss as to what sorts of ethical and metaphysical principles are more basic and fundamental than  $(p_1)$ . But Vincellette suggests that I will have to appeal to some moral theory. Let us briefly consider two such theories: hedonistic utilitarianism (HU) and ideal contract theory (ICT).

*HU*: Act X is right for S iff, out of all the actions available to S, X maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for all those affected.

*ICT*: Act X is right for S iff X conforms to rules that would be agreed upon by all rational self-interested contractors in a hypothetical original position situated behind a veil of ignorance.

Both HU and ICT are highly contentious, frequently rejected moral theories. Surely, neither HU nor ICT is more basic or fundamental than  $(p_1)$ . Moreover, we are much more confident of  $(p_1)$  than we are of either HU or ICT. In fact, we are more confident of  $(p_1)$  than we are of any moral theory, and as Thomas Reid rightly notes, we cannot justify the more certain by appeal to the less certain.<sup>31</sup>

Third, suppose we were to do just what Vincellette suggests and ground  $(p_1)$  on some particular moral theory, T. Would that guarantee  $(p_1)$ 's truth? Certainly not, for T itself might be false.

Finally, as I mentioned above, my goal is not to prove that  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$  are true, for we already believe them. Rather, the aim of my consistency argument is to *epistemically justify* a certain conclusion Q (where Q is “Eating meat is morally wrong”) by grounding Q in beliefs we already hold. The argument seeks to show that anyone who believes  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$  must, on pain of inconsistency, also believe Q. Since epistemic justification proceeds in terms of other beliefs, it is perfectly appropriate to identify some of our core convictions and use them to demonstrate that we are rationally committed to Q.

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<sup>31</sup> Reid criticizes Descartes's appeal to the *cogito* as evidence for his existence on the grounds that “its evidence is no clearer, nor more immediate, than that of the proposition to be proved” (Reid 1997, 17). Lehrer makes a similar point when he criticizes Russell's attempt to justify belief in the external world by appealing to the *simplicity* of the external world hypothesis on the grounds that in doing so, Russell “commits a kind of epistemic fallacy, to wit, that of justifying the more evident by appeal to the less evident” (Lehrer 1988, 121).



### 2.3 *Consistency Cannot Serve as the Basis of a Normative Conclusion*

Sauer also denies that consistency can ground a normative conclusion. He makes the point as follows:

I am not sure that one can develop any convincing argument for or against the moral considerability of animals based on *consistency* of moral belief. While everyday belief and practice might suggest that animals are morally considerable, this is not a sufficient basis to conclude that they are *in fact* morally considerable. So, on this issue Engel's [argument] does not advance the discussion. (1997, 2)

There are two things Sauer might be claiming by denying that consistency can ground a normative conclusion. First, he might be denying that *mere* consistency can ground a normative conclusion; that is, he might be denying that we can derive normative conclusions from just any consistent set of propositions. If this is what he intends, then I certainly agree. One cannot derive a normative conclusion from a consistent set of purely factual propositions, that is, one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is." Of course, I cannot be accused of trying to derive an "ought" from purely factual premises, because the set  $\{(p_1)-(p_9)\}$  contains both normative and factual premises, and it is perfectly legitimate to derive additional normative conclusions from such a set of propositions. So I suspect that Sauer has another worry.

If I understand him correctly, the reason Sauer thinks my atheoretical consistency argument fails to advance the issue is because he thinks that consistency of moral belief does nothing to demonstrate the objective wrongness of eating meat. The issue, as Sauer sees it, is whether or not animals are *in fact* morally considerable. To understand Sauer's objection, we must understand the difference between subjective wrongness and objective wrongness. Action X is *subjectively wrong* for S if, given all the information available to S, S is justified in believing that X is wrong; whereas, action X is *objectively wrong* for S if X is *in fact* wrong for S to do, regardless of whether S is aware of or has access to this moral fact. As Sauer sees it, the issue is not whether we are justified in believing that eating meat is wrong (i.e., subjective wrongness) but, rather, whether eating meat *really is* wrong (i.e., objective wrongness), and Sauer contends that mere consistency with our other beliefs can do nothing to establish the latter. Is he right, or can consistency ground normative judgments, as I contend it can? Does consistency with our other beliefs do anything to justify the belief that eating meat is objectively wrong?

The issue is complicated by the fact that the subjective–objective distinction arises, not only in ethics, but also in epistemology. A person S is *subjectively justified* in believing that *p* if and only if she is justified in believing that *p* in terms of her own internal subjective reflections, that is, if and only if, given all

the information available to her, it is reasonable for her to believe that  $p$ .<sup>32</sup> It is more difficult to define objective justification because there is no standardly accepted definition of such justification. Objective justification might be defined in terms of the body of truths widely known in S's community.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, S is *objectively*<sub>1</sub> *justified* in believing that  $p$  if and only if, given all the information widely possessed by S's community, it is reasonable for S to believe that  $p$ . So, for example, while Sally, who is four years old, is subjectively justified in believing that Santa Claus exists, she is not objectively<sub>1</sub> justified because it is widely known that the Santa Claus myth is a white lie parents tell their children and, relative to this latter information, it is not reasonable to believe that Santa Claus exists. A second kind of objective justification would be justification that is ultimately grounded in an infallibilistic direct connection with the fundamental nature of reality. On this view, S is *objectively*<sub>2</sub> *justified* in believing that  $p$  if and only if S validly deduces  $p$  exclusively from propositions S knows to be true with apodictic certainty.<sup>34</sup>

Sauer contends that consistency cannot yield objective justification, but objective justification in what sense? If he means that consistency cannot yield objective<sub>2</sub> justification, then he is certainly correct. No amount of internal consistency with fallible beliefs can yield an apodictically certain belief that Q. But nothing can do that. Grounding our normative conclusions in moral theories will not objectively<sub>2</sub> justify us in accepting those moral conclusions because the moral theories themselves are not known with apodictic certainty. So appealing to moral theories no more objectively<sub>2</sub> justifies us in accepting particular moral judgments than appealing to consistency does.

When it comes to epistemically justifying our moral beliefs, we are stuck at either the subjective level or the objective<sub>1</sub> level. However, if (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) are *objectively* correct, that is, true, it follows that eating meat is *objectively* wrong. Now, anyone who believes (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) presumably believes that (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) are true and, hence, believes that they are objectively correct. (That is just what it

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<sup>32</sup> I defend a coherentist account of subjective justification in Engel 1986. There, I also defend an account of objective justification that requires reliable production and coherence with the verifical system, where the verifical system is that proper subsystem that remains after all error has been deleted from the doxastic system.

<sup>33</sup> John Pollock (1986) goes even further and defines objective justification in terms of the set of all truths. See note 34 for the details of his proposal.

<sup>34</sup> Some philosophers embrace an “ideal rational agent” view of objective justification: S is *objectively*<sub>3</sub> *justified* in believing that  $p$  if and only if an ideally rational agent apprised of all the true relevant information possessed by S's community would believe that  $p$ . Pollock has defended roughly such an account. As he formulates it: “S is objectively justified in believing P if and only if S instantiates some argument A supporting P which is ultimately undefeated relative to the set of all truths” (1986, 189). Space considerations prevent me from considering such a view in any detail, but it is unclear how we would go about determining whether a belief is objectively<sub>3</sub> justified, for we are not ideally rational agents and we are not privy to all the *true* information possessed by our community much less to the set of all truths.

means to *believe* a proposition.) Anyone who believes  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$  is, therefore, *subjectively* epistemically justified in believing that eating meat is *objectively* morally wrong. Would grounding the judgment that eating meat is morally wrong in a particular moral theory provide any more in the way of objective epistemic justification than an appeal to  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$ ? No. It would remain the case that we would still be only subjectively justified in accepting that moral theory on the basis of the other beliefs we hold.

The traditionalists' strong conviction that we need to ground our moral judgments in a correct moral theory seems to be a foundationalistic holdover from our Cartesian past. Descartes sought to ground all of his nonbasic beliefs in a foundation of apodictically certain, indubitable, axiomatic beliefs so as to provide an objective guarantee of their truth. These axiomatic foundational beliefs were supposed to serve as a safety net that shields us from error in our judgments. Even philosophers who reject Cartesian foundationalism as a general approach to epistemology remain enamored with this axiomatic model of justification when it comes to moral knowledge. To guarantee the correctness of our moral judgments, all we have to do is identify a correct moral theory, recognize it as axiomatic, and apply it to derive the objectively correct apodictically certain moral judgment in question. Thus, like Descartes's *cogito*, the correct moral theory is supposed to serve as a safety net that protects us from subjectivism, relativism, and error in our moral judgments. But infallibilism's inevitable, skeptical legacy has driven virtually all epistemologists to embrace fallibilism. With the rise of fallibilism comes the recognition and concession that there simply are no epistemological safety nets that absolutely preclude error. What is true in epistemology generally is true in moral epistemology as well. There simply are no absolute guarantees that our beliefs are free from error. The best we can do to justify our moral beliefs is to show that they cohere with our beliefs and other internal states better than any competing beliefs. Given the background beliefs and experiences with which we find ourselves, some propositions are more reasonable to believe than others. Given that we believe  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$ , it is epistemically reasonable to believe that eating meat is morally wrong and epistemically unreasonable to believe otherwise.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that we are doing the same thing whether we appeal to a moral theory or not. When we appeal to a moral theory to justify a moral judgment, we are still appealing to one (or a set) of our beliefs to justify our moral judgments. The theory does not have foundational axiomatic status. It is as open to revision and rejection as any other belief in the system. One mistake the traditionalists make is they operate under the illusion that they have reached epistemological moral bedrock, when in fact there is no bedrock. In claiming that there is no bedrock, I am making an epistemological claim, not a metaphysical claim. I am not denying that there are objective facts of the matter in ethics. I am only claiming that our epistemological access to those facts is fallible and filtered through the web of our beliefs.

#### 2.4 *The Atheoretical Consistency Approach Entails Relativism*

It might be objected that the atheoretical consistency approach does nothing to demonstrate that the resulting moral judgment that  $Q$  is justified *in any objective sense* because people with different beliefs might derive quite different moral judgments, and that, as a result, my approach saddles me with an objectionable form of relativism. Perhaps I am saddled with some form of relativism, but my approach is no more relativistic than the traditional approach. Here is why. Traditionalists maintain that their moral judgments are somehow objectively justified because they are grounded in a moral theory. But how do we decide whether a moral theory is correct? The received method for testing the correctness of a moral theory is the method of “reflective equilibrium” whereby theories are assessed by reference to a set of intuitively clear paradigms. What are the paradigms to which moral philosophers appeal when testing their theories? Answer: They appeal to our pretheoretical moral intuitions and deeply held moral convictions. Accordingly, the method of reflective equilibrium requires that we reject or amend moral theories that conflict with moral convictions we are unwilling to abandon, and it requires us to reject or amend convictions that conflict with moral theories that we are unwilling to reject or amend. The first thing to notice is that the widely accepted reflective equilibrium method is itself an appeal to coherence to justify moral theories. As a result, the traditionalists’ conclusions are as tied to their core moral convictions as are the conclusions reached using my atheoretical approach; the only difference is that I recognize that I am tying my moral conclusions to our own subjective beliefs, whereas the traditionalist is operating under the illusion of unadulterated objectivity.

Second, because any adequate moral theory must cohere with our deeply held moral (and nonmoral) beliefs, any moral theory that conflicts with  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$  will automatically be rejected outright. The reason we reject utilitarianism is because it sanctions sacrificing individuals for trivial gains in the common good. The reason we reject contractarianism is because it implies that we have no direct duties to infants and the severely retarded. The reason we reject Kantian ethics is because it implies that we cannot sacrifice one innocent person even if that is the only way to save the lives of 100 million equally innocent persons. Similarly, any moral theory that entails that unnecessary cruelty is permissible and ought to be routinely engaged in would immediately be rejected. The reason it is epistemically legitimate to reason from  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$  directly, bypassing moral theory entirely, is because any adequate moral theory must be compatible with  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$ . Since we already know this, it is perfectly reasonable to start from  $(p_1)$ – $(p_9)$ .

What about the charge that my approach is saddled with an objectionable form of relativism? In one sense, there is no escape from subjectivity. Justification is always going to proceed in terms of other things we believe and experience. But if we are basing our particular moral judgments on widely shared—nearly universally held—core moral convictions, these moral judgments will possess a robust kind of intersubjective justification (possibly even objective<sub>1</sub> justification). Moreover, in virtue of being based on these widely shared core moral convictions, the resulting moral judgments will have a higher degree of intersubjective justification than will moral judgments based on highly contentious moral theories that many people reject.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.5 *What about Our Other Beliefs? Consistency as a Two-Edged Sword*

Elvio Baccarini has objected to my argument on the grounds that I am illegitimately looking at only a selective subset of our beliefs, to wit, (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>).<sup>37</sup> To be sure, these nine beliefs do support conclusion Q: eating meat is morally wrong. But in limiting myself to these beliefs, I have conveniently failed to consider other widely held beliefs not so supportive of my position, beliefs like:

(p<sub>10</sub>) It is morally permissible to kill and eat animals.

We could not consistently deduce conclusion Q from any argument containing (p<sub>10</sub>) as a premise.

I think Baccarini is certainly right in claiming that many people, including many philosophers, who accept (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) also accept (p<sub>10</sub>). Does the fact that (p<sub>10</sub>) is a widely held belief automatically refute my claim that consistency rationally forces the reader to admit that eating meat is immoral? I do not think it does. In pointing out that many philosophers accept (p<sub>10</sub>) while also accepting (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>), Baccarini has simply pointed out that many philosophers hold inconsistent beliefs when it comes to our treatment of and ethical obligations to animals. I agree. As I see it, one task, perhaps the principal task, facing philosophers is to point out inconsistencies in people's doxastic systems, so they can correct their doxastic systems. To be sure, we could *in principle*

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<sup>36</sup> In advocating an atheoretical approach to practical ethics, I am not denying the importance of moral theory in some sense, for identifying a plausible moral theory can help further the coherentists' goal of unifying our belief structures. What I am claiming is that we do not need to start with theory. We do not need to first settle the issue of which moral theory is *the* correct moral theory before we can make reasonable, completely justified judgments about particular moral issues. And that is a good thing because if we did have to identify *the* correct moral theory first, then since every theory to date is open to objection, we would not be justified in any of our current particular moral judgments.

<sup>37</sup> Elvio Baccarini raised this important point as an objection to my "Nonegalitarian Humane Moralism, or How to Have Your Speciesism and Eat Your Tofu Too" at the Maribor Practical Ethics Symposium, University of Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia, January 7, 2000.

reject (p<sub>1</sub>), (p<sub>2</sub>), (p<sub>3</sub>), (p<sub>8</sub>), and (p<sub>9</sub>) in order to save (p<sub>10</sub>), but it is not at all clear that this could be done *in practice*. We simply do not have that much voluntary control over our beliefs. Given the extremely powerful aversive reaction most of us have to witnessing animal suffering,<sup>38</sup> it is doubtful that we could simply will ourselves to stop believing that animal pain matters or to stop believing that unnecessary pain is an intrinsically bad state of affairs.

Second, (p<sub>10</sub>) itself does not stand alone. It is a holdover from a debunked nutritional orthodoxy:

(p<sub>11</sub>) Eating meat is necessary for human survival, human health, and human flourishing.

We now know that (p<sub>11</sub>) is simply false. Since eating meat is detrimental to human health and human flourishing, we cannot justify (p<sub>10</sub>) by appeal to (p<sub>11</sub>).

Finally, even if *in practice* we could reject all or most of (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>), it would be irrational to do so. After all, *qua* philosophers, we are interested in more than mere consistency; we are interested in *truth*. The main reason our inconsistencies bother us is because they guarantee error. Those interested in retaining truth while eliminating falsity from their doxastic systems will not reject just any belief(s) for the sake of consistency but, rather, will reject the belief(s) most likely to be false. Presumably, we already think our doxastic systems are reasonable for the most part, or we would have already made significant changes in them. So we will want to reject as few of our beliefs as possible. Since (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>) are rife with implications, rejecting several of these propositions would force us to reject countless other beliefs on pain of incoherence, whereas accepting Q and rejecting (p<sub>10</sub>) would require minimal belief revision on our part. Simply put, Q coheres with our otherwise already reasonable beliefs, whereas (p<sub>10</sub>) does not, making it more reasonable to accept Q and reject (p<sub>10</sub>) than to reject any of our other core beliefs.

### 3. CONCLUSION: A METATHEORETICAL ADVANTAGE OF THE ATHEORETICAL APPROACH TO PRACTICAL ETHICS

We have just seen that there are no good metatheoretical reasons for rejecting the coherentist consistency approach to practical ethics. Moral conclusions derived from our core moral beliefs are no less epistemically justified than those derived from complex moral theories. Nor are they any more subjective. Nor are they any less secure. If anything, moral judgments grounded in our core moral beliefs are more secure and less likely to be abandoned than

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<sup>38</sup> Thus, the belief that eating meat is wrong also coheres with the moral experiences we have when confronted with unnecessary animal suffering.

those grounded in contentious moral theories, for we are much more inclined to abandon our moral theories than we are to abandon our core beliefs like (p<sub>1</sub>)–(p<sub>9</sub>).

There is also an important metatheoretical consideration that makes the atheoretical consistency approach preferable to the traditional approach. The purpose of moral judgments is to guide conduct.<sup>39</sup> The problem inherent in the traditional approach to practical ethics is that when a moral theory entails a moral judgment that we find particularly onerous, we simply dismiss the theory. However, when we derive a moral conclusion from our own deeply held moral convictions, that conclusion is already thoroughly integrated into our belief structure and is thus more likely to result in behavioral guidance, which is, of course, the whole point of practical ethics. All of this suggests that if we want to make significant progress in practical ethics, we should start from our core moral (and nonmoral) convictions and work our way forward. The result will be moral judgments that cohere with our most deeply held beliefs and values and our most deeply felt moral experiences. When it comes to justifying our moral beliefs, we can do no better than that.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> As Singer aptly puts it: “an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from some theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice” (2011, 2).

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