

Is eating meat morally justified?

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Abstract

The majority of humans, virtually all around the world, eat meat. However, in light of various detrimental effects of the modern meat industry, meat consumption has increasingly been met with moral opposition. In this thesis I focus on one particular moral objection against eating meat, namely the adverse effects it has on the welfare of animals. Four arguments concerning this moral issue are discussed. The introduction describes Singer's utilitarian account for the equal consideration of animals and Regan's deontological approach for animal rights. However, due to some strong assumptions implicit in these arguments, many remain unconvinced by either argument. To present a better argument, I therefore focus, in the rest of the thesis, on arguments that do not rely on strong and perhaps unnecessary assumptions. The second section advances such an argument. Engel's intuitively compelling sentience-based account for the immorality of eating meat is simply predicated on *your* beliefs. Because you believe that inflicting unnecessary pain upon animals is morally wrong, and since we don't need to consume meat for our nutrition, you are forced to recognize that eating meat is immoral. The third section discusses an argument that tries to undermine Engel's account. Hsiao's defense of eating meat is a response to sentience-based approaches for the immorality of eating meat, where he argues that eating meat *is* morally justified. He finds that nonhuman animals lack moral standing, because they lack the capacity for rational agency. Since animals lack moral status it is not morally wrong for us, entities who do possess moral status, to use them as food to satisfy our nutritional interests. In the discussion I sketch two objections against Hsiao's argument. I argue that animals might not lack the capacity for rational agency and I question his more fundamental assumption that rational agency, rather than sentience, is a necessary condition for deserving moral consideration. If either of the arguments I raise is sound, then it substantially reduces the force of Hsiao's argument. Since animals deserve at least *some* moral consideration, it is *not* morally justified to eat meat.

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1. Introduction

The majority of humans, virtually all around the world, consume meat. We have done so since the early evolutionary beginnings of the human race. Besides a basic means to survival, meat acquisition and meat sharing fostered social bonds within hunter-gatherer societies (Hill, 2002; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). In particular, cooperation during the hunting of wild animals was a vital component for successful meat acquisition (Hill, 2002, p. 110). In fact, given hunter-gatherers' reliance on meat acquisition for their survival, collaboration during hunting represented one of the most time-consuming cooperative endeavours for the hunter-gatherer, which can probably be related to the extensive sharing of wild game in these societies (Hill, 2002, p. 116-122). The cooperative nature of meat acquisition and the widespread sharing of the acquired meat in hunter-gatherer societies are crucial behaviours that still have their repercussions today. Not only can these behaviours most likely explain the origins of human cooperation, they probably also helped shape human morality (Hill, 2002; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). From an evolutionary perspective, human morality can be derived from cooperation. Cooperation, at the very least, entails taking into consideration other persons' interests, if not equating their interests with your own (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013, p. 232). As such, it could even be said that cooperative meat acquisition among hunter-gatherers is one of the collaborative activities which contributed to the development of human morality.

However, meat acquisition has changed drastically since the industrial revolution. We are no longer hunter-gatherers that kill our own game, nor do we survive in small-scale agricultural communities which rear and slaughter domesticated animals. Instead, our food animals are bought at the local supermarket, neatly packaged, and, not unimportantly, already killed. Nor is our meat obtained by hunting wild animals or by small-scale animal husbandry, but it's the product of intensive livestock production. Intensive livestock production, or factory farming, is a method of animal husbandry which aims to maximize output at minimum costs. As such, livestock¹ is reared and kept in greater quantities than would be the case with less intensive forms of animal farming. Given the aim of minimizing costs, this also implies that farm animals have shorter lifespans, are confined in smaller and often unnatural enclosures and are frequently given growth hormones².

Besides its' harmful effects on the wellbeing of farm animals, intensive livestock production also perpetuates inequalities between rich and poor and is extremely damaging to the environment. Modern-day rearing of livestock requires vast amounts of natural resources, such as land, water and energy³. Vital water supplies and crop resources, which could be used to feed people, are used to feed livestock. This not only makes the meat industry an incredibly inefficient industry, but it also maintains world hunger and global poverty. Intensive meat production is furthermore responsible for a large share of total greenhouse gas emissions (Petrovic et al., 2015). The majority of this greenhouse effect from meat production is brought about by increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄) levels. Although the former also results from the burning of fossil fuels to power the ample machinery used in livestock production, the main increase in atmospheric CO₂ levels is caused by the loss of CO₂ absorbing plants: trees, bushes and grasses are lost to make place for the growing and harvesting of feed crops (Petrovic et al., 2015, p. 235-236). The latter, on the other hand, is produced by cattle itself. Growth in the stocking density of especially cows has led to significant increases in CH₄ emissions, as CH₄ is emitted by cow feces and by cows themselves, in the form of belching and passing gas, when they digest their food (Petrovic et al., 2015, p. 236).

The most important change regarding meat acquisition, however, is perhaps that it has lost its most elemental function: humans in the industrialized, Western world don't need to rely on meat consumption anymore for their survival. In fact, the amount of meat we consume at present seems to have detrimental effects on our health. In particular, processed meat intake has been associated with a higher incidence of coronary heart disease and a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes (Micha et al., 2010; Song et al., 2004). In light of these changes, meat consumption has been met with *moral* opposition. Morality "is the study of how people [moral agents] *should* act toward one another, other species, and natural systems. The fundamental expectation is that people should avoid causing unjustified harm" (Elliott, 2009, p. 1). Our meat consumption does not only adversely affect other people, but also animals and the environment. More importantly, since we don't *need* to consume meat for our nutrition, meat consumption pertains to

¹ Referring here to cattle, pigs and poultry.

² Although mostly banned in the European Union, they are used in the United States (see https://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/chemical_safety/meat_hormones_en & <https://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/SafetyHealth/ProductSafetyInformation/ucm055436.htm>).

³ See https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/cutting-back-on-meat-consumption-could-help-end-hunger-by-2030-experts_us_55f3424ee4b077ca094f27a5?guccounter=1 & <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/environment/world-hunger-population-growth-ditching-meat/>.

the idea of *unjustified* harm. This makes eating meat a moral issue. Moreover, it is relevant that we approach it as such, since morality prescribes how we should act and it can therefore influence our actual behaviour. Here, I would like to focus on one particular moral objection against eating meat, namely the adverse effects it has on the welfare of animals⁴. Two well-known philosophical accounts related to this moral issue are Peter Singer's utilitarian account for the equal consideration of animals and Tom Regan's deontological approach for animal rights. Both investigate the moral status of animals and examine the implications of the former for the treatment of animals as food.

Singer's utilitarian account for the equal consideration of animals

Singer (1974, p. 103-107) starts his argument for the equal consideration of animals by appealing to the Black Liberation and Women's Liberation movements. Historically, these groups have not been awarded the same rights and liberties as the white man. They were not seen as equal to the white man, since they were argued to be inferior in aspects such as intellectual capacity, rationality, moral ability and the like. Singer, however, argues that equality should not depend on such things as intelligence and moral capacity. He believes that differences in ability between people do not justify giving more or less consideration to the satisfaction of their wants and needs. Instead, he sees equality as a moral ideal. The principle of equality of humans does not describe an actual equality among people, after all people differ in their intellectual abilities, their physical strength and so on, but it prescribes how we should treat people: we should award them equal consideration⁵, despite their actual differences. This principle of equality thus implies that racism and sexism are wrong, since actual differences in abilities do not entitle a person to treat another person badly.

Likewise, Singer (1974, p. 107-108) argues, it would be wrong, according to the principle of equality, for a person to treat a nonhuman being badly. Specifically, if higher intelligence does not justify a person to use another person for his own ends, how can it possibly justify the exploitation of nonhuman animals by humans? Bentham was one of the first, and few, philosophers to realize that the principle of equality also applies to species other than our own. In a famous passage, Bentham argues that the right to equal consideration is based on the capacity of a being to suffer, not its' capacity to reason or talk, but its' capacity to feel pain and enjoyment. Hence, if a being suffers, the principle of equality implies that its' suffering should count equally with the like suffering of other sentient beings. There can thus be no moral justification for not taking into (equal) consideration the suffering of nonhuman animals. Most humans, however, don't take into consideration the suffering of nonhuman animals. According to Singer, this makes them speciesists. Speciesism, much like racism and sexism, violates the principle of equality, since the speciesist gives precedence to their own species' interests over the greater interests of other species.

The fact that most humans are speciesists is most clearly evident in the way we treat nonhuman animals as food. As such, we treat them solely as a means to our ends. Specifically, Singer (1974, p. 108-109) states that we view their life and welfare as inferior to our taste buds. As mentioned before, we don't need to eat meat in order to satisfy our nutritional needs. Hence, we allow our desire to have a tasty meal to override the greater interests of nonhuman animals, i.e. their interest to have a natural lifespan free from suffering. Since, in order to have our tasty meal, nonhuman animals are killed prematurely and put through tremendous suffering. I don't want to go into details here, and although the livestock industry might have become somewhat more humane since Singer's article, I think it suffices to say that livestock animals are still treated horribly⁶. Thus, in order to satisfy our very trivial interest for a tasty meal, we sacrifice the most important interests of other animals. This clearly violates the principle of equality, and as such Singer implicates that it is immoral to treat nonhuman animals as food.

Regan's deontological approach for animal rights

A different argument for the immorality of treating nonhuman animals as food can be derived from Regan's deontological approach for animal rights. Regan (1986, p. 180-185) starts his case for animal rights by exploring the moral status of animals. He rejects Singer's utilitarian approach, since utilitarianism attaches value solely to the utility a being experiences, to their enjoyment and suffering, yet no value is attached to the being itself. Utilitarianism would thus be unable to account for animal rights,

⁴ E.g., it is also conceivable to defend the immorality of eating meat from an environmental perspective by appealing to the detrimental impact meat consumption has on the environment which harms future *human* generations.

⁵ Note that equal consideration for different beings can result in different liberties and rights. Singer (1974, p. 104) gives the example of the right to abortion. It would be nonsense to speak of the right of men to have abortions, since they physically cannot have abortions. In the same way, it would be meaningless to speak of a pig's right to vote.

⁶ Especially if the recent news of severe abuse of pigs in one of the largest Belgium slaughterhouses is used as a yardstick (see <http://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/7826/animal-rights-denounces-cruelty-to-pigs-in-tielt-west-flanders-abattoir>).

since animals have no (equal) inherent value. Utilitarianism is further problematic, according to Regan, since it is an aggregative theory. Roughly, in order to decide where our moral duties lie, we should sum the consequences of an action in terms of the utilities of different beings. Should an action increase total utility, then the action should be performed. As such, utilitarianism could, theoretically, condone the killing of an individual. Yet, most people would find the act of killing an individual, even if it increases total utility, immoral: good ends do not justify evil means.

Therefore, Regan (1986, p. 185-187) starts anew. He begins by attaching inherent value to all individuals. According to Regan (1986), such value implies that “we are something more than, something different from, mere receptacles” (p. 185). Additionally, to avoid sexism and racism, he believes that we must attach *equal* inherent value to all individuals, regardless of their intelligence, race, sex and so on. Hence, all individuals possess inherent value equally, and so have an equal right to be treated with respect and not as mere means or resources for others. Treating another as a mere resource, thus without respect, is to act immorally. This is what Regan calls the rights view. As a proponent of animal rights, Regan also attaches inherent value to nonhuman animals. He believes we ought to do so, since nonhuman animals, just like humans, are the experiencing subjects of a life. As such, they are conscious creatures that can feel pain and enjoyment, and are concerned about their welfare. Moreover, he attaches equal inherent value to those who are the experiencing subjects of a life, be them human or nonhuman. To not do so, would pave the way for speciesism and lacks rational justification. Specifically, if we are willing to attach lower inherent value to nonhuman animals because they lack intellect or reason, we must do the same for humans who are likewise flawed. Yet, the mentally handicapped do not have less inherent value than mathematical masterminds. Just so, it would be irrational to sustain the view that nonhuman animals have less inherent value.

Hence, nonhuman animals and humans, as they are the experiencing subjects of a life, have equal inherent value. This implies that animals, the ones most of us daily eat, have an equal right to be treated with respect and not to be treated merely as means or resources. To not do so would be to act immorally. As such, eating animals, insofar as it treats animals as resources, is immoral. According to Regan (1986, p. 188), this represents the fundamental wrong⁷: the fact that we view animals as lacking independent value, as our resources, there for us.

The equal considerability premise

Although Singer and Regan use different moral theories, they come to the same conclusion: it is immoral to treat animals as food. Moreover, their main premises, which lead them to this conclusion, are surprisingly similar. Namely, both invoke the equal considerability premise (Engel, 2001, p. 90). According to this premise, nonhuman animals deserve just as much moral consideration as humans. As explained above, Singer comes to this premise through the principle of equality, which he finds extends to each sentient being. As such, we must attach exactly the same amount of consideration to the suffering of a nonhuman animal as to the like suffering of a human. Regan finds that each experiencing subject of a life possesses equal inherent value. Accordingly, each experiencing subject of a life, be they human or nonhuman, has an equal right to live, and hence we must give equal respect to human and nonhuman lives.

However, and unfortunately, many people are not convinced by either argument. They find fault with the underlying moral theories, much like Regan did with Singer’s utilitarianism, or they reject the equal considerability premise because they find the premise intuitively wrong or morally undesirable (Engel, 2000, p. 857; Engel, 2001, p. 90). Put differently, they simply do not believe that animals deserve the exact same amount of moral consideration as humans do. Therefore, in the rest of this thesis, I would like to focus on arguments for the (im)morality of eating meat which do not appeal to such overarching moral theories or make strong, often controversial and perhaps unnecessary, assumptions, like the equal considerability premise. In this way, I hope to eventually represent a more robust and convincing argument. Also, I would like to make clear, insofar as this wasn’t clear already, that my investigation is context-dependent: I will only consider the (im)morality of eating meat in modern, industrialized societies, where plant-based or vegetarian foods are bountiful and individuals thus do not need to rely on meat consumption in order to survive.

The rest of this thesis is ordered as follows. The next section analyses Mylan Engel’s intuitively compelling sentience-based account for the immorality of eating meat. Engel’s argument does not rely on any particular underlying moral theory or on the equal considerability premise, or on some such strong assumption. The third section analyses Timothy Hsiao’s response to such sentience-based approaches in

⁷ The fact that animals are treated horribly and suffer daily in order to end up on our plates is, of course, also wrong. But according to Regan (1986, p. 188), this doesn’t capture the fundamental wrong.

which he argues, against Engel, that eating meat is morally justified. The last section concludes and defends my own point of view on the topic.

2. Engel's sentience-based argument

Mylan Engel (2000; 2001) advances an argument for the immorality of eating meat that does not rely on Singer's utilitarianism or Regan's rights-based approach. These accounts for the immorality of eating meat rely on the so-called equal considerability premise (Engel, 2001, p. 90). That premise states that we owe sentient nonhuman animals exactly the same amount of moral consideration as we owe humans. Many people, and especially philosophers, tend to reject the equal considerability premise. Engel's argument, however, does not depend on your believing that the equal considerability premise is true, nor does it rely on any particular moral theory (Engel, 2000, p. 857). Instead, his argument is simply predicated on the beliefs you⁸ already hold. These beliefs, as we will see, commit you to the mere considerability premise: the belief that sentient nonhuman animals deserve some moral consideration, although not as much as humans (Engel, 2001, p. 91). And it is this mere considerability premise that commits you to the immorality of eating meat.

Your beliefs

Engel (2000, p. 859-861) begins his argument by explicitly stating your beliefs. First of all, you believe that pain and suffering are undesirable things. *Ceteris paribus*, you thus believe that a world with less pain and suffering would be better than a world with more pain and suffering (p₁). As such, you believe that a world with less unnecessary suffering is better than a world with more unnecessary suffering (p₂). Here, unnecessary suffering deserves some explanation. Engel defines unnecessary suffering as suffering which serves no greater purpose. It refers to suffering which is not required to establish a greater good⁹. In fact, you probably believe that unnecessary suffering is inherently bad or at the very least you believe that it constitutes a wrong. Therefore, you believe that unnecessary cruelty is wrong and should not be endorsed (p₃). If you are an altruist, you probably believe that we should take action to make the world a better place. But, if you are not a good Samaritan and reject the previous proposition, you still believe that we have the duty to do no harm. In other words, you believe that we should do what we reasonably can to prevent the world from becoming a worse place (p₄). You also believe that a morally good person (the good Samaritan) would take action to make the world a better place and would be all the more dedicated to prevent the world from becoming a worse place (p₅). You also believe that even a minimally decent person¹⁰ would take steps to help decrease the unnecessary pain and suffering in this world if the minimally decent person could do so with only having to exert minimum effort (p₆).

Of course, you also hold beliefs about yourself. You believe that you are either a morally good person (p₇) or that you are at least a minimally decent person (p₈). You also believe that you are the type of person who would absolutely take steps to help decrease the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in this world if this would only require very little effort on your part (p₉). Besides beliefs about yourself, you also hold beliefs about nonhuman animals and our duties toward them. First of all, you believe that many nonhuman animals (certainly the ones that typically end up on our plates) are able to feel pain (p₁₀). You also believe that it is morally wrong to cause any animal unnecessary pain or suffering (p₁₁) and that it is morally wrong and contemptible for humans to treat nonhuman animals cruelly for no good reason (p₁₂). Additionally, you also hold beliefs about the appropriateness of killing animals. For example, you believe that suffering animals who are untreatably ill or injured ought to be euthanized so as to put them out of their misery whenever this is possible (p₁₃). And, *ceteris paribus*, you believe that it is more scrupulous to kill a plant than it is to kill a conscious sentient nonhuman animal (p₁₄). Lastly, you believe that we should help conserve the environment for future (human) generations (p₁₅). Accordingly, you believe that we ought to minimize our contribution toward environmental degradation, particularly in ways which entail very little exertion on our part (p₁₆).

Engel's argument for the immorality of eating meat based on your beliefs

Your beliefs, as represented by the propositions p₁-p₁₆, commit you to the immorality of eating meat. Engel (2000, p. 867-870) illustrates this with the following argument, which is predicated on *your* beliefs¹¹. You already believe that nonhuman animals are able to experience pain and suffering (p₁₀-p₁₃).

⁸ Given that you are morally sound and rational (Engel, 2000, p. 859).

⁹ Such as burning a cat alive simply for your enjoyment (Engel, 2000, p. 861).

¹⁰ Engel (2000, p. 860) uses this term to refer to individuals who only do the bare minimum required by morality.

¹¹ Note that you don't need to believe all of p₁-p₁₆ to be committed to the immorality of eating meat. E.g., if you believe p₁, p₂, p₆ and p₁₀ Engel's argument will succeed (Engel, 2000, p. 867-868).

Commercial animal farming commonly entails husbandry procedures and slaughtering methods¹² which cause animals severe pain and suffering. Hence, you must acknowledge the fact that practically all animal agribusiness, and especially factory farming, causes animals severe pain and suffering and, as such, considerably increases the amount of pain and suffering in the world (f_1). Combine f_1 with your belief p_1 and then you must conclude that, *ceteris paribus*, the world would be a better place without animal agribusiness and factory farms. It is also a fact that humans in modern societies don't need to rely on meat consumption for their survival. In fact, our nutritional needs can be perfectly met by a plant-based diet. Thus, all of the pain and suffering inflicted by the meat industry is completely unnecessary, as are all of the cruel practices ingrained in animal agribusiness (f_2). Note here the implicit belief underlying f_2 , namely that your trivial pleasures, such as having your taste buds satisfied by animal flesh, are morally inferior to farm animals' greater interests, such as living a cruelty free life¹³. All of the cruel practices to which farm animals are habitually exposed are thus carried out for no good reason. And since you believe that it is morally wrong and contemptible to treat animals cruelly for no good reason (p_{12}), you are forced to admit that factory farming and virtually all forms of commercial animal farming are morally wrong and contemptible. Moreover, your belief that the world would be a better place with less unnecessary suffering (p_2) in combination with f_2 implies that the world would be a better place if there were less factory farms, and better yet if there were no animal agribusiness to speak of. Furthermore, your belief that unnecessary cruelty is wrong and ought not to be endorsed (p_3) forces you to believe that factory farming is wrong and should not be endorsed.

However, when you buy factory-farmed meat you *are* financially supporting factory farms and, as such, encouraging their unnecessary cruel practices. There is only one way to stop supporting factory farms and it is surprisingly simple: don't buy their products anymore. You can achieve this very easily, by exerting minimal effort and without neglecting any of your other obligations, namely by simply abstaining from consuming meat and substituting it with something else: replace a hamburger with a veggie burger, replace chicken with tofu and try falafel instead of shawarma. Additionally, your beliefs p_1 , p_2 and p_4 imply that you ought to do what you reasonably can to prevent contributing to the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world. Since factory farms and essentially all animal agribusiness contribute vastly to the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world, one thing you can reasonably do is to stop supporting these businesses financially by refusing to purchase their products. As such, you ought to stop buying and consuming meat.

Objections and Engel's replies

But, you might argue, there is another way to circumvent financially supporting animal cruelty which does not require your becoming vegetarian, namely by only eating humanely raised meat. Engel (2000, p. 880-882) refers to this objection as the free-range fantasy. First of all, note that more than 90% of the meat which is offered to you in supermarkets and butcher shops is factory-farmed meat, and therefore immoral for you to eat. Secondly, free-range farming or small-scale farming does not guarantee that animals are raised humanely or killed painlessly. Just because farm animals have more space to roam does not imply that their beaks are not cut or their tails are not docked. Even farmers applying more humane husbandry techniques have trouble ensuring the wellbeing of their animals¹⁴. In any case, while humanely raised animals might have a relatively good life while on the farm, there exist no humane livestock transportation companies and no humane slaughterhouses. Actually, the only way to ensure that you really are eating humanely raised and painlessly killed animals is if you yourself raise and kill the animals. Clearly, this cannot be done without considerable exertion on your part. Thirdly, and most importantly, remember your belief p_{14} : *ceteris paribus*, you believe that it is worse to kill a conscious sentient animal than it is to kill a plant. This belief forces you to acknowledge that, *ceteris paribus*, it is worse to kill a conscious sentient animal for food than it is to kill a plant for food, even if the animal was raised humanely and killed painlessly. So, given the choice of the plant-based veggie burger and the free-range hamburger, your beliefs dictate that you should pick the veggie burger.

¹² Branding, castration, debeaking and tail docking (often performed without anaesthetic), not to mention the painful slaughtering methods (such as electrical stunning using electrodes or water baths), are just a couple of these common painful practices (see <https://awionline.org/content/inhumane-practices-factory-farms>).

¹³ After all, Engel (2000, p. 877) points out that you certainly don't believe that the pleasure someone receives from burning a cat alive morally overrides that cat's interest in avoiding suffering.

¹⁴ Some farmers don't debeak their fowl or dock the tails of their pigs. Nevertheless, given that the animals have limited moving space or limited stimulation, they start pecking or biting each other out of irritation or boredom (see <http://articles.extension.org/pages/66088/feather-pecking-and-cannibalism-in-small-and-backyard-poultry-flocks> & <http://www.nadis.org.uk/bulletins/tail-biting.aspx>).

Now, the meat-lover might also object to the last argument. Specifically, what if other things were not equal: what if plants are capable of feeling pain as well¹⁵? Would it then not be more prudent to consume the free-range hamburger? Well, Engel (2000, p. 879) admits that plants might indeed feel pain. Still, *you* don't believe they do: you would not think twice about trimming your hedges, but you would never trim your cat's legs. Because Engel's argument is predicated on your beliefs, the speculation that plants might feel pain is no reason for you to continue your meat consumption. Finally, Engel raises another objection against the free-range fantasy elsewhere. In Engel (2001, p. 99), he elaborates your beliefs somewhat and states that we not only find it morally wrong to inflict pain and suffering on animals for no good reason, but that we also find it morally wrong to kill animals for no good reason. Besides having an interest in avoiding suffering, Engel argues that each conscious sentient creature has a meta-interest in continued existence. Without continued existence it would namely be impossible for the creature to satisfy its other interests, and we should therefore take this meta-interest into account. Accordingly, since your beliefs commit you to the view that purchasing and eating even humanely raised and painlessly killed meat is wrong (as this entails the killing of animals for no good reason) consistency requires you to stop eating meat.

Note that your other beliefs¹⁶ lead you to the same conclusion (Engel, 2000, p. 870). You believe that you are at least a minimally decent person (p₈), therefore you would at least take steps, which require minimum effort on your part, to help decrease the unnecessary pain and suffering in this world (p₆). As mentioned above, abstaining from meat consumption is one such step: by simply eating something else instead of meat you help reduce the amount of unnecessary pain and suffering in the world. Consequently, given your belief p₆, you ought to abstain from eating meat. Following p₉, if you act in accordance with your beliefs, you will stop eating meat. Hence, consistency forces you to acknowledge that eating meat is immoral and, as such, necessitates you to quit eating meat immediately.

The mere considerability premise

Although not explicitly mentioned, the beliefs stated can be summarized by the mere considerability premise, or more precisely, the premise "that animals deserve some minimal yet non-negligible amount of direct moral consideration" (Engel, 2001, p. 97). Because you believe that conscious sentient animals deserve some moral consideration, you believe that treating animals in certain ways is morally wrong (Engel, 2001, p. 99-107). Specifically, you believe it is morally wrong to treat animals cruelly for no good reason and to kill animals for no good reason. You also believe that the greater interests of nonhuman animals cannot be outweighed by the very trivial interests of humans, such as us satisfying our taste buds with animal flesh. The treatment to which livestock is habitually subjected, all of the unnecessary pain, suffering and premature death, is in direct contradiction with giving these animals the mere consideration due to them. In fact, it awards them no consideration at all and is thus incompatible with your beliefs. Hence, since you acknowledge the mere considerability premise, you are rationally committed to the immorality of eating meat. Accordingly, consistency with your beliefs necessitates you to quit eating meat¹⁷. There really is only one question that remains unanswered: Will you live your life in accordance with your beliefs, or will you pay these beliefs no mind?

3. Hsiao's defense of eating meat

While the philosophical literature is rife with arguments against eating meat, as partially evidenced by the previous sections, only a few serious philosophical attempts have been made to sketch a moral case for eating meat. Recently, Timothy Hsiao (2015) published his "In Defence of Eating Meat" in which he argues that it is not morally wrong to eat meat. Hsiao's argument is a response to sentience-based approaches for the immorality of eating meat, such as Engel's argument discussed in the previous section. As we will see, Hsiao (2015, p. 277-278) argues against the claim that sentience is sufficient for possessing moral status, something that all sentience-based arguments for the immorality of eating meat implicitly assume. Consequently, he finds that nonhuman animals lack moral standing. Since they lack moral standing, it is not morally wrong to kill nonhuman animals for food, even if we don't need to consume meat for our nutrition.

¹⁵ Incidentally, my father loves to bring up this argument whenever we discuss the (im)morality of eating meat.

¹⁶ Beliefs p₅ and p₇ are not explicitly mentioned here, since a morally good person would adhere to these beliefs a fortiori. Also, an argument for the immorality of eating meat can be constructed solely from p₁₅ and p₁₆ (Engel, 2000, p. 870-872). Since this is beyond the scope of the present thesis, I have not included the argument here.

¹⁷ Actually, Engel (2000, p. 883-886) points out that the argument presented in this section commits you to a vegan, plant-based diet because the dairy and egg industry is also rife with animal cruelty and premature death.

The basic sentience-based argument for the immorality of eating meat

Hsiao's defense of eating meat aims to considerably diminish the force of sentience-based arguments for the immorality of eating meat. Such sentience-based approaches are based on some widely shared intuitions, such as the belief that it is wrong to inflict unnecessary pain or to endorse practices that cause unnecessary pain. Since we don't need to consume meat for our nourishment, and since raising and killing animals for food causes them unnecessary pain, sentience-based arguments conclude that eating meat is morally wrong. Hsiao (2015, p. 278) formulates this basic sentience-based argument for the immorality of eating meat as follows. First of all, it is wrong to cause pain without a morally good reason (p_1). If it is wrong to cause unjustified pain, then it is also wrong to endorse practices which cause unjustified pain (p_2). If we can meet our nutritional needs without eating meat, then nutrition is not a morally good reason to cause nonhuman animals pain or to endorse practices which cause nonhuman animals pain (p_3). We can satisfy our nutritional needs without consuming meat (p_4). Therefore, p_3 and p_4 imply that nutrition is not a morally good reason to cause animals pain or to endorse practices which cause animals pain (p_5). Thus, p_1 , p_2 and p_5 imply that it is wrong to eat meat¹⁸. There are various ways to dispute this argument (Hsiao, 2015, p. 279). Some might challenge the fourth premise and some may object that one's individual efforts are futile in halting the practices of animal agribusiness. However, Hsiao isn't concerned with these objections. He concedes that humans don't need to consume meat to satisfy their nutritional needs and that individual actions do have an impact.

Instead, Hsiao (2015, p. 279) is concerned with discrediting the third premise. He argues that our nutritional interests, even if they do not qualify as needs since they can be satisfied without the consumption of meat, supply a morally good enough reason to endorse the raising and killing of animals for food. Here, what is understood under a morally good reason needs some clarification. Hsiao distinguishes morally good reasons from good reasons in general. Specifically, a good reason does not have to be a moral reason. Whether or not some reason qualifies as a good reason hinges on whether it adequately substantiates some course of action. If I want to obtain a good grade for my coming exam, then my wanting to obtain a good grade provides a good reason to study hard. Yet, studying hard does not necessarily constitute a moral activity, since whether or not studying hard is the right course of action depends on my goal. If the day before my coming exam I have an important rowing race, and my performance in this race is more important to me than my performance on the exam, then I might forgo studying hard in order to practice hard for the rowing race. In contrast, morally good reasons are good reasons that call upon moral facts to guide some action. The belief that eating meat is wrong since it entails unnecessary pain to animals calls upon one such reason. Implicit in this belief is the claim that sentience is a morally salient characteristic, and therefore being a sentient creature is enough to confer moral status.

Moral status and what it entails

It is this last claim that Hsiao counters: he argues that nonhuman animals lack moral standing. But, what exactly should we understand under moral standing or moral status? Well, having moral status refers to being a member of the moral community (Hsiao, 2015, p. 281-282). As a member of the moral community, just like in other communities, you hold certain rights and have certain responsibilities that are related to your flourishing as a member of the community. Still, this doesn't tell us what the moral community is nor who belong to the moral community and who don't. In general, it can be said that communities are groups of individuals that are organized around a common factor shared by all its members. According to proponents of the basic argument for the immorality of eating meat, this common factor is sentience. However, according to Hsiao (2015, p. 283-284), the connection between having sentience and having moral status is lacking, and this becomes clear when contemplating the difference between moral and non-moral badness. Intuitively, we think that sentience is sufficient for conferring moral standing, since causing pain to a sentient creature harms that creature. Yet if a virus infects my laptop, then my laptop is also harmed in the process, but intuitively most people wouldn't classify this as a moral harm. In fact, harm just entails a setback to a creature's welfare conditions and not all creatures have a welfare that is morally significant. Instead, we should wonder why we classify the harm caused by pain specifically as a moral harm. In other words, what further fact makes pain a moral welfare condition? Again, most people will be inclined to refer to intuition. However, according to Hsiao, appealing to intuition won't help us. Since even though we have a very strong intuition that pain is connected with moral badness, this intuition does not inform us whether pain is inherently morally bad or whether some further fact makes pain experiences morally bad. Hsiao argues for the latter. Perhaps the further fact that makes pain

¹⁸ Note the similarity between this basic sentience-based argument and Engel's argument as described in the previous section.

experiences morally bad is indeed sentience, since sentience implies the existence of a creature who is consciously aware of its' pain experiences. More broadly, this would imply that only welfare conditions that concern consciousness matter morally. Still, Hsiao argues that the connection between sentience and moral status is absent. Specifically, there is still a difference between a conscious subject and a moral subject. Thus, Hsiao concludes that although consciousness makes a creature's welfare more complex, consciousness alone is not enough to confer moral standing. Again, there needs to be some further fact.

Why animals lack moral status (and the mentally handicapped don't)

So, what is this further fact that Hsiao is talking about? Previously it was mentioned that the moral community is ordered around a common factor shared by all its' members. Hsiao (2015, p. 284-286) finds that this common factor is possessing the capacity for rational agency. Whether you have the capacity for rational agency or not determines whether you are a member of the moral community and thus whether you have moral standing. Morality is concerned with providing a guide to behaviour for those in the moral community with the ultimate goal of flourishing, living the good life and the lessening of evil and harm. In order to follow this guide to behaviour one needs to be able to understand and act upon this code of conduct. All of this requires the capacity for rational agency and this is something which animals clearly lack¹⁹. Hence, Hsiao finds that animals do not belong to the moral community and therefore have no moral standing. However, Hsiao's account of moral status seems to imply that also the mentally handicapped and the very young don't belong to the moral community, since they are also not capable of rational agency, something which critics often point out in defense of animals possessing moral status²⁰.

Hsiao (2015, p. 286-288) finds that the mentally handicapped and the very young do belong to the moral community and therefore possess moral standing by making a distinction between two kinds of capacities. Namely, although the mentally handicapped and the very young "lack an *immediately exercisable capacity* for rationality, they nevertheless - in virtue of being a member of a certain natural kind - possess a *root capacity* for rational agency" (Hsiao, 2015, p. 286). Hsiao argues that only this latter capacity matters for moral status. To see this, Hsiao distinguishes between a capacity and the manifestation of that capacity. A capacity can be characterized by its directedness towards some end, while the manifestation of that capacity can be understood as the realization of that end. These are distinct, just like causes and effects. In fact, a capacity may have various degrees of realization, ranging from the basic root capacity to the fully realized capacity. So, which of these grants moral status? Suppose we order the capacity for rationality using 7 stages, where the first stage corresponds to the root capacity for rationality (c_0) and the final stage corresponds to the immediately exercisable or fully realized capacity for rationality (c_6). Hsiao argues that it cannot be the final stage (c_6) that grants moral status, since persons who are sleeping lack the immediate capacity for rationality yet they clearly maintain their moral status. c_5 also cannot be the decisive stage, since being temporarily comatose does not remove one's moral status by virtue of a more basic capacity for rationality. But, which more basic capacity? c_5 is more basic compared to c_6 , but less basic compared to c_4 . Since at each stage we refer back to a more basic capacity in virtue of which we retain moral standing, it only makes sense to conclude that the most basic capacity for rationality (c_0) grants moral status. Actually, c_1 - c_6 just represent different stages of this underlying root capacity. According to Hsiao, this root capacity for rational agency is innate to a creature's species membership. Hence, possessing human nature is necessary and sufficient to confer moral status²¹.

Hsiao's argument in defense of eating meat

Hsiao thus argues that animals lack moral status. This implies that animal suffering is bad, but that it is not *morally* bad (Hsiao, 2015, p. 279-280). Animals are harmed in feeling pain, but this does not constitute a *moral* harm. In fact, only the pain experience of creatures possessing moral status is morally significant. He combines this claim with a continuation of the commonsense principle that moral interests take precedence over non-moral interests (Hsiao, 2015, p. 279). Under moral interests Hsiao understands the welfare interests of members of the moral community. These interests involve things that creatures having moral status need in order to flourish. Likewise, Hsiao states that non-moral interests are welfare interests of creatures that lack moral status. Now, the continuation goes as follows: suppose x concerns a welfare interest of a creature possessing moral status, and y is a creature lacking moral status, then it

¹⁹ Moreover, we do not hold nonhuman animals morally responsible for their actions. It would be nonsense to say that a lion committed a moral wrong in killing and eating a deer, since we cannot expect the lion to conform to the rules of morality (Hsiao, 2015, p. 285-286).

²⁰ This common objection is also known in the literature as the argument from marginal cases.

²¹ Hsiao (2015, p. 288) argues that even if he is wrong about which stage of rationality is sufficient for conferring moral standing, it does not contradict his conclusion that animals lack moral status. Namely, he argued that animals lack the capacity for rational agency altogether, while humans possess this capacity to varying degrees.

would be morally acceptable to use y to fulfil x . Hence, since Hsiao finds that animals lack moral status and welfare interests of moral creatures trump welfare interests of non-moral creatures, then humans' moral welfare interest in consuming meat is more important than the non-moral welfare interest of nonhuman animals in avoiding pain and having a natural lifespan. It is thus morally permissible to use animals as food.

More formally, Hsiao's argument is formulated as follows (Hsiao, 2015, p. 280). Moral welfare interests are categorically more important than non-moral welfare interests (p_1). Meat consumption for the sake of human nutrition is a moral welfare interest (p_2). The interest of nonhuman animals in not experiencing pain is a non-moral welfare interest (p_3). Thus, meat consumption for the sake of human nourishment takes precedence over the interests of nonhuman animals (p_4). This implies that it is morally acceptable to eat meat. Note that p_1 - p_3 prove the fallaciousness of the third premise of the basic argument for the immorality of eating meat. Moreover, implicit in p_3 is the assertion that animals lack moral status, which has been discussed at length above.

If Hsiao's arguments are sound, they substantially diminish the force of sentience-based approaches for the immorality of eating meat. Since animals lack moral status, their interests are not moral interests. Welfare interests of human beings are moral interests by virtue of us possessing moral standing. Because moral welfare interests trump non-moral welfare interests, it is not morally wrong for us to use animals to fulfil one of our welfare interests. Precisely because nutrition is one of our welfare interests, and since we can meet this interest by consuming animal flesh, then our desire to eat meat is sufficient to justify using animals for food. It is thus morally permissible to consume meat even if eating meat is not necessary to fulfil our nutritional needs. Therefore, it is not morally wrong for us to consume meat. Note however that not all occurrences of using animals for food are morally permissible. Hsiao (2015, p. 290) finds that while in principle we may use animals to satisfy a variety of our welfare interests, some occurrences of animal use for these purposes may become immoral due to externalities such as waste, inefficiency, or cruelty²². Maybe this implies that practically all current instances of using animals for food are immoral, or maybe it does not. Hsiao is not concerned with defending current practices involving the use of animals for food. Rather, his goal was to criticize the more general idea that eating meat is immoral because our nutritional desires do not represent a morally sufficiently good reason to cause animals pain or to endorse practices which cause animals pain, and for that he has indeed offered a counterargument.

4. Discussion

Four arguments for the (im)morality of eating meat have been discussed. Although Singer's utilitarian account for the equal consideration of animals and Regan's deontological approach for animal rights were both able to advance an argument for the immorality of eating meat, many people remain unconvinced by either argument. They reject their moral theories or they find fault with the equal considerability premise implicit in both arguments. Therefore, to present a better argument, we focussed on arguments for the (im)morality of eating meat that do not rely on any particular moral theory or on strong and controversial assumptions, such as the equal considerability premise. Engel advances such an argument. His intuitively compelling sentience-based account for the immorality of eating meat is simply predicated on the beliefs you already hold. Because you believe that inflicting unnecessary pain upon animals is morally wrong, and since humans don't need to consume animal flesh in order to meet their nutritional needs, you are forced to recognize that eating meat is immoral. However, although not many philosophical attempts have been made to sketch a moral case for eating meat, Hsiao attempts exactly this. His defense of eating meat is a response to sentience-based approaches for the immorality of eating meat, like Engel's, in which he argues that eating meat is morally justified. He finds that nonhuman animals lack moral standing. Since animals lack moral status it is not morally wrong for us, creatures who do possess moral status, to use them as food to satisfy our nutritional interests.

So, what to conclude from all of this: is eating animal flesh morally justified as Hsiao argues, or are we committing a moral wrong by consuming meat as Engel argues? In other words, has Hsiao been able to offer a good argument that renders unsound the sentience-based argument? In order to answer this last question, I would like to critically assess Hsiao's argument. Specifically, I want to question his claim that animals do not deserve moral consideration on two different grounds. First of all, I will evaluate his claim

²² Here Hsiao (2015, p. 289-290) means that animal cruelty is morally wrong since through harming animals humans are morally harmed. Note, however, that this does not imply that eating meat is immoral. Although whether or not something is considered cruel and thus morally harms a human differs from person to person, cruelty by definition concerns practices which inflict more harm than is necessary to achieve some end, even when that end is morally permissible. Implicit in Hsiao's analysis is that practices that are commensurate to some morally permissible end, like eating meat, are not considered cruel. Hsiao does attest that meat industry practices which harm animals excessively are, under his analysis, immoral.

that animals lack the root capacity for rational agency. Secondly, granting his claim that only humans possess the root capacity for rational agency, I would like to question his more fundamental assumption that only creatures that possess this root capacity for rational agency deserve moral consideration. Both assess the third premise of Hsiao's argument, although the first evaluates whether animals should also be granted moral status, while the latter assesses if maybe animals, even if they do not have moral status, can still have interests that matter morally.

Why animals might not lack moral status

Hsiao (2015, p. 286-288) argues that the root capacity for rational agency is the determining factor that decides whether or not a creature possesses moral status. He finds that all and only humans possess this root capacity for rational agency by virtue of their human nature, although he gives surprisingly little evidence for this very strong claim. By way of explanation as to why all animals lack this root capacity while the mentally handicapped do not he writes²³, "The very concepts of immaturity, disability and mental illness presuppose the existence of capacities whose manifestations are blocked or destroyed. Talk of such concepts presupposes a norm that individuals should be fulfilling. These norms exist only because of capacities directed toward certain end states" (Hsiao, 2015, p. 287-288). He seems to imply that because we don't talk of such concepts when animals do not confer to the human norm, all animals must be lacking this root capacity. Yet, just because animals cannot attain the end states we hold as the norm for humans, does not automatically imply that they lack the *root* capacity for rational agency. In particular, there is quite some empirical evidence which points to the contrary.

Frans de Waal is a Dutch primatologist and ethologist whose research has been primarily concerned with the origins of morality. His research promotes the idea, which originated with Darwin, that there is continuity between animals and humans even in the moral domain (de Waal, 2006a, p. 14). According to de Waal, morality relates less to rational decision-making and more to gut instincts (de Waal, 2006b). More often than not we make moral decisions instantly, without much or any deliberation. This view of morality anchored in gut instincts fits well with evolutionary theory, modern neuroscience and primate behaviour. Hence, even though de Waal does not claim that primates are moral beings, he does argue that morality is on a continuum with animal sociality. In fact, de Waal finds that certain emotional building blocks, without which human morality would be unthinkable, are found in the behaviour of our primate relatives and the behaviour of various other mammals.

Even though talk of animal emotions is still often taboo in science, de Waal argues that the tendency toward empathy is widespread in primates. For example, he has witnessed many instances of chimpanzee consolation behaviour (de Waal, 2006a, p. 34-36; de Waal, 2006b). If one chimpanzee attacks another, it is not unusual that afterwards an onlooker will embrace the victim. Such consolation typically stops the screams, cries and other signs of distress of the victim chimpanzee. A notable instance of the empathic tendency in primates that de Waal (2006a, p. 30) cites is the account of how Russian scientist Nadia Ladygina-Kohts, who raised a young chimpanzee almost a century ago, was able to make the young chimp come down from the roof of her house. Tempting the chimp with food would not work, yet when she sat down and pretended to cry as if she were in pain, the young chimp would come down immediately, with a worried look on his face, and put an arm around her. Experiments from the 1950s and 1960s, although now prohibited (with good reason), also seem to provide evidence of animals' attention to the feelings of conspecifics. Rats that had to push a lever to obtain food would stop pushing the lever if doing so would deliver an electric shock to a visible nearby rat (Church, 1959, p. 133). This inhibition ceased quickly in rats, but monkeys show a far stronger inhibition. Masserman, Wechkin and Terris found that rhesus monkeys refuse to pull a chain to obtain food if doing so would shock another rhesus monkey (as cited in de Waal, 2006a, p. 29). One monkey went hungry for five days and another for twelve days after watching another rhesus monkey receive an electric shock. These monkeys literally starved themselves to prevent inflicting pain upon a conspecific. Besides studies of animal behaviour, modern neuroscience also supports the view that morality is a product of evolution. FMRI scans of human brains show that moral dilemmas activate various areas, some of which are present in all mammals and closely related to the

²³ Earlier on he does give more information as to why animals seemingly lack "the cognitive powers required to make them moral agents" (Hsiao, 2015, p. 285). Here he writes that we do not observe any characteristics indicative of rational agency in animals, but any concrete empirical evidence for this claim is completely lacking (Hsiao, 2015, p. 285). In a footnote Hsiao (2015) even refers to evidence of "a primitive rational agency" (p. 286) in macaque monkeys, but according to Hsiao this is not indicative of genuine moral conduct. Instead, animal behaviour only mirrors moral conduct, yet Hsiao again fails to justify this claim with empirical evidence (and even if this claim was justified, it does not necessarily imply that animals lack the *root* capacity for rational agency).

emotions (Moll et al., 2008). Research even suggests that mice might feel empathy, which indicates how embedded these tendencies might be (Langford et al., 2003).

What the above suggests is that it is really not as clear as Hsiao makes it out to be that animals do not possess the root capacity for rational agency. In fact, following Hsiao's description of rational agency we might conclude that some animals do possess this capacity. Hsiao (2015, p. 285) writes that a moral subject must be capable of "knowing, understanding, deliberating, choosing and acting for the sake of the good" which entails "the further ability to know his own good and the good of others" which in turn involves "the ability to have at least partial knowledge of his nature and the nature of others like him, which requires that he possess an intellect capable of grasping the essential nature of things and abstracting it as something held in common by many". Certainly, the rhesus monkeys starving themselves seemed to act for the sake of the good. It appears they knew that if they'd pull the chain their neighbour would be suffering. This also suggests a certain kind of perspective taking or abstracting as Hsiao seems to call it. The monkeys appeared to understand the essential nature of their neighbour, namely that they could experience pain, that the electric shock would harm them and that this was contrary to their good. Of course, the good as used here is limited and clearly does not even begin to cover the scope of its meaning in human morality. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the *root* capacity that Hsiao is talking about might be present in certain animals, perhaps even in rats. It might even be the case that all mammals have this root capacity by virtue of possessing the neurological underpinnings of human morality, which would imply, following Hsiao²⁴, that all mammals possess moral status and thus deserve moral consideration.

Hsiao's missing distinction between moral agency and moral consideration

But suppose Hsiao is right in assuming that all and only humans possess the root capacity for rational agency and that possessing this root capacity grants them moral consideration. Actually, I do not believe that this proposition in itself contradicts Engel. Engel (2001, p. 91) clearly states that humans deserve more moral consideration than animals. If humans possess this root capacity for rational agency and animals don't and possessing this root capacity is somehow morally significant, then it could explain why we ought to give more moral consideration to humans than to animals. Rather, I'd like to assess Hsiao's more fundamental claim that only creatures that possess this root capacity for rational agency deserve moral consideration²⁵. In other words, what is it about this root capacity that implies that creatures lacking this capacity deserve no moral consideration at all? What is the relationship between morality and rational agency?

Hsiao (2015, p. 284-285) appears to answer this question well enough. He counters the claim of proponents of the sentience-based approach that sentience is sufficient to confer moral status. He argues that the conceptual connection between sentience and morality is lacking, since there exists a difference between a *conscious* subject and a *moral* subject. Hsiao finds that morality is concerned with providing a guide to behaviour for those in the moral community with the ultimate goal of their flourishing, of the pursuit of the good and of the lessening of evil and harm. Following this code of conduct requires the capacity for rational agency, which only humans possess. Thus, Hsiao concludes, all²⁶ and only humans deserve moral consideration. However, Hsiao never elucidates why lacking this capacity implies having interests that have no moral significance. In fact, assuming this seems contrary to the definition of morality he gave before. If morality is concerned with the pursuit of *the good* and the lessening of *evil* and *harm*, then surely we should not regard the pain and suffering of animals as *non-moral* just because they

²⁴ Later on Hsiao remarks that, "Although I am persuaded that all human beings possess moral standing, this premise is not essential to my main argument" (Hsiao, 2015, p. 288). However, if it turns out that it is not the root capacity for rational agency that confers moral standing, but some other more developed capacity for rational agency, then many people and philosophers would certainly find Hsiao's argument morally repugnant and intuitively unacceptable. This would namely imply that certain instances of cannibalism are in themselves morally permissible.

²⁵ Hsiao finds that all and only creatures that possess this root capacity possess moral status or moral standing. Hsiao also uses the terms moral being, moral subject or member of the moral community. For Hsiao moral status appears to be equivalent to moral consideration. He clearly writes that, because animals lack moral status, "They [animals] are harmed in feeling pain, but this harm is not of a *moral* kind" (Hsiao, 2015, p. 278). I also want to clarify that when I use the term moral consideration I mean *inherent* moral consideration, like Engel does and which Hsiao argues against. That is, animals deserve moral consideration because they *themselves* can be *morally* harmed. They do not deserve moral consideration only because *humans* can be morally harmed through (in itself non-moral) harm done to animals.

²⁶ All humans possess moral status, since Hsiao (2015, p. 287) has argued that it is the *root* capacity for rational agency that matters, which even the severely mentally handicapped possess by virtue of their human nature. Note that this appears to contradict his conceptual connection between moral status and rational agency (Puryear, 2016, p. 699-700). Hsiao argues that having moral status requires the capacity to follow the code of conduct that is morality. This seems to refer to a *functioning* capacity (since how else could an entity actually follow this code of conduct), something that the severely mentally handicapped lack.

lack rational agency? Yet, Hsiao does precisely this. In a later passage he writes, without giving any explanation why, that “Since morality is about the pursuit of the good, and because the good is species-specific, a moral subject must also have the further ability to know his own good and the good of others *in the moral community*” (Hsiao, 2015, p. 285). Here, he seems to suggest that moral subjects should only be *morally* concerned with the good of (other) moral subjects, effectively allowing them to regard the good of other entities as morally insignificant. He even seems to contradict himself in the next sentence by stating that a moral subject must “have at least partial knowledge of his own nature and the nature of others like him, which requires that he possess an intellect capable of grasping the essential nature of things and abstracting it as something held in common by many” (Hsiao, 2015, p. 285). This would appear to imply that a moral subject should know the essential nature of animals, thereby abstracting that they can feel pain and suffering and have an interest in continued existence, much like humans. Moral subjects should thus acknowledge that, by virtue of being *sentient* creatures, inflicting pain and suffering upon animals and drastically reducing their lifespans is contrary to morality’s goal of lessening *harm*. As such, it certainly appears that we should accord at least some moral consideration to animals’ good. In any case, it is not clear from Hsiao’s argument why we should *not* do so.

In fact, I believe Hsiao fails to make an important distinction concerning morality and what it entails. With Hsiao’s emphasis on rationality he seems to imply that only those capable of becoming moral agents are deserving of moral consideration. This becomes clear later on when he says, “If animals possessed the cognitive powers required to make them moral agents, then at least some of them would be under duties” (Hsiao, 2015, p. 285). Here Hsiao suggests that since we hold no animal morally responsible for their actions, then those who are morally responsible agents owe animals no moral consideration. Hsiao thus implies that morality concerns only those who possess the root capacity for rational agency. However, morality appears to concern at least two groups of entities, namely those entities that possess the capacity for moral agency and those that can and should not be harmed. Both deserve moral consideration, but only the first are moral agents whom we hold morally responsible for causing harm to the latter. Hsiao’s condition for having moral status seems to result from a conceptual connection between rational agency and moral agency²⁷, which makes sense if we want to identify the first group. However, he fails to specify why having the root capacity for rational agency is a *necessary* condition for membership to the latter group, i.e. for deserving moral consideration. Hsiao’s definition of morality nowhere states that moral agents should only be *morally* concerned with lessening the harm done to others who likewise possess this root capacity. If anything, the necessary condition for deserving moral consideration ought to be the capacity to be harmed. Regarding this, Hsiao (2015, p. 283) remarks that a variety of entities can be harmed, but that not all harm constitutes moral harm. So, when is harm morally relevant? I believe Hsiao answers this question himself. Harm is morally significant when it is inflicted upon “a subject who is consciously aware of his or her experience of pain” (Hsiao, 2015, p. 284). Yet, Hsiao is quick to dismiss sentience as a morally salient property, since “there is still a gap between being a psychological subject and being a moral subject” (Hsiao, 2015, p. 284). However, here Hsiao again fails to acknowledge the difference between moral agency and moral consideration. He implicitly assumes that all and only those who possess the root capacity for rational agency deserve moral consideration. But, why would inflicting pain on a sentient creature only be considered *morally* bad when the creature in question possesses the root capacity for rational agency? In both cases the creature physically feels pain. Similarly, in both cases the creature suffers. What does the root capacity for rational agency add to the suffering and pain of the creature to make it *morally* relevant? I would argue nothing. In order to be a moral agent and bear moral responsibility you indeed need the ability to reason, but to deserve moral consideration you only need the ability to feel. In any case, Hsiao fails to specify why rational agency is a *necessary* condition for deserving moral *consideration*.

Conclusion

If either of the arguments presented above is sound, then it diminishes the force of Hsiao’s argument in defense of eating meat. Specifically, both arguments mentioned here have tried to undermine Hsiao’s third premise, which states that animals’ interests do not matter morally. If animals do have the root capacity for rational agency or if it is not rational agency, but rather sentience, which grants moral consideration, then animals’ interests do have moral significance. Since the interests of animals *are* moral interests, it *is* morally wrong for us to use them as food. Since we do not need to consume meat for our nourishment, and since animals deserve, following Engel, at least *some* moral consideration, then our desire to eat meat

²⁷ Although he makes an exception for the mentally handicapped and the very young by referring to root capacities, which makes this conceptual connection somewhat dubious as mentioned earlier.

is *not* a morally good reason to use animals as food. Since animals' most important interests trump our trivial desires, it is *not* morally justified to eat meat.

On a different note

I would like to end this thesis on a somewhat different note. Regardless of whether or not you are convinced that eating meat is immoral because it inflicts unnecessary suffering on animals, I would still like to point out the importance of reducing your meat consumption. The meat industry is not only one of the largest contributors to worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, which alone will have a disastrous effect on the planet if we don't start changing our nutritional habits, but it also requires vast amounts of natural resources, such as water and land. This makes it an incredibly *inefficient* system. World hunger is still a very real problem, although we notice little of it in our food abundant societies, and this inefficient system only perpetuates the inequalities between rich and poor. With overpopulation ever on the rise, it becomes imperative that we change this inefficient system, so as to stop cultivating climate change, preserve water supplies and ensure that crucial crop resources are used to feed people and *not* livestock. Of course, the easiest and fastest way to get rid of this system is to drastically reduce our meat consumption. And the good thing is that one can help make this happen, by simply stopping one's meat intake.

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