

Moral Psychology of Possibilities

Subjects: **History & Philosophy Of Science**

Contributor: Silvia Panizza

Discussions about the ethics of buying and consuming animal products normally assume that there are two choices equally available to moral agents: to engage or not to engage in such behaviour. This paper suggests that, in some cases, the experience of those who refuse to participate in animal exploitation is not best described as a choice, but as the natural outcome of a reconfiguration of their understanding of what animals, and hence the products made out of them, are. Such reconfiguration involves not seeing animals as something to eat, wear, control, etc. In these cases, veganism is not a choice because it does not depend on opting for one of two possible courses of actions: on a certain way of thinking about other animals, the consumption of animals does not present itself as a possibility at all.

veganism

fact and value

animal ethics

moral possibility

moral imagination

moral psychology

1. Introduction

In their daily practices, many ethical vegans choose what to eat, wear, and buy among a range that is limited to the exclusion of animal products. Rather than considering and then rejecting the idea of using such products, doing so often does not occur to them as a possibility at all. In other cases, when confronted with the possibility of consuming animal products, vegans have claimed to reject it by saying that it would be impossible for them to do so. I refer to this phenomenon as 'moral impossibility'. An analysis of moral impossibility in animal ethics shows that it arises when one's conception of 'what animals are' shifts—say through encounter with other animals. It also arises when individuals learn more about animals and what happens to them in production facilities. This establishes a link between increased knowledge, understanding, and imaginative exploration on the one hand, and the exclusion of the possibility of using animals as resources on the other. Taking moral impossibility in veganism seriously has two important consequences: one is that the debate around veganism needs to shift from choice and decision, to a prior analysis of concepts and moral framing; the other is that moral psychology is no longer seen as empirical psychology plus ethical analysis, but the contents of psychological findings are understood as being influenced and framed by moral reflection.

2. Phenomenon of Moral Impossibility

One is the re-framing of the debate surrounding the use of animals as resources for human purposes. On this view, veganism does not only, and on a day-to-day basis not primarily, involve making an overt and conscious choice to

avoid animal products, where consuming them is seen as possible but rejected, but rather involves a thorough shift in perspective and worldview, in which the very concept of animal, as Cora Diamond famously suggested, involves the idea of being 'not something to eat'. If this is so, then we may have to consider altering the debate on animal use, which is no longer exhaustively captured by the model that takes it as a disagreement about different principles applied to certain shared, available facts. Rather, the debate needs to take into account the *process*, briefly sketched here, which takes some individuals to no longer see consuming animal products as a possibility, and the process by which others take it not only as a possibility, but as a default option (in this sense, we can say that eating animals is also 'not a choice'). The discussion will need to carefully analyze the way in which the relevant concepts employed by both parties (starting with 'animal', or more precisely 'lamb', 'chicken', etc.) are formed and used, which involves, to some extent, sharing the sensibility and imagination which frames those concepts. Here, we can see the role of art, for instance of literary fiction, in making available and inhabitable a particular 'vision'.

The other, broader, consequence of taking moral impossibility seriously is that it offers an understanding of the interaction between psychology and ethics that differs radically from the standard approach, which takes for granted a fact-value distinction and an 'ought implies can' principle derived from such a distinction. Veganism is precisely one of those practices that may be too morally demanding according to some readings of 'ought implies can', where what we can do is established by empirical (psychological) investigation, and the moral dimension is secondary, being both restricted by and applied to the empirical findings. In other words, on this standard view of moral psychology, what is morally possible or impossible i) is discoverable empirically, prior to moral thought; ii) it provides constraints to ethics (where ethics is considered as primarily consisting of obligations); iii) and it extends beyond what is strictly impossible to what is, currently, rather difficult to achieve for the groups studied.

Apart from the problematic move from impossibility to difficulty, the view is framed within an understanding of fact and value that takes for granted that we *know*, and can establish through empirical psychology, quite independently of ethics, what human beings are psychologically able to do, and what is too difficult for them, and that such clear knowledge has the only goal of establishing 'constraints' to ethical obligations. The role of psychology is to provide descriptive accuracy, while keeping ethics in check.

However, if what is possible for us depends on moral thinking, including moral imagination and conceptualizing, as the phenomenon of moral impossibility suggests, then psychology does not, on its own, determine the facts. Facts are not prior to moral reflection. Moral reflection shapes not only what the facts are and what they look like, but also which ones are available. The experience of rejecting animal use shows precisely this. If using animals is considered morally impossible, or unthinkable, one will not see its opposite as too demanding. One will see it as a default. I suggest that we reverse the 'ought implies can' principle into a 'can implies ought': one's moral outlook shapes the world one lives in, creates some possibilities and removes others. The bounds of human psychology, therefore, cannot be determined outside of morality. Furthermore, moral reflection, moral attention, and moral conversion are all activities that moral philosophy can encourage and shape, and they will, in turn, shape what is possible psychologically.

3. Relationship Between Ethics and Psychology

The relationship between ethics and psychology is not unidirectional, and taking it that way would limit and censor both psychology and ethics quite severely, (a) by limiting the role of ethics in human life to obligations, and its scope to what we can expect people to do, as opposed to see or think or feel, and (b) by limiting the contribution of psychology to ethics to the role of providing 'constraints' on what ethics can do, as opposed to being an open-minded and curious exploration of what human life presents, acknowledging that each 'fact' can be presented, understood, used, and made to count in different ways. This will involve, among other things, carefully constructing the empirical studies so that the questions asked do not take for granted, in our case, that the only possible moral change can occur only through choices and decisions.

I have argued that the refusal to take other living beings as resources is, for many, not a choice, because the opposite is not a choice. Even less is it a personal choice, understood as a merely subjective inclination or preference. It is living in a world where other animals are perceived as 'fellow living beings', which means living within the boundaries of what their (individual) lives require and how we are able to respond to them. Through the moral imagination, which can be used to evoke, behind the end product (meat, cheese, coat fur, etc.), the living being who is the subject of that process, it means attending to what the competing worldview refuses to attend to. Hence, this moral impossibility requires, at the same time, a broader understanding, and a broadening of possibilities in other areas (such as engaging with animals as other selves, as companions, with pity, with shared joy, etc.). In other words, in making some possibilities available, others, incompatible with them, become impossible. What veganism guided by moral impossibility does not do is ask the other side to follow either a different inclination or a moral imposition coming from the outside. It asks, instead, to look here, to look at *this*, and, as Iris Murdoch put it, to look again. As long as the debate purports to address equally available possibilities which are chosen by some and not by others, it will continue to ignore the deep aspect of veganism and of living with other animals.

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