

Objections to the Anti-Complicity Principle

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Professor Bruno Guindon's Philosophy 120W course, Moral and Legal Problems. The assignment asked students to write an argumentative philosophy essay evaluating McPherson's anti-complicity principle. The paper uses APA citation style.

This paper examines the morality of meat eating, drawing on the inefficacy objection and the anti-complicity principle. It argues that the anti-complicity principle proves too much. This is because the anti-complicity principle deems meat-eating morally permissible only under extreme circumstances. This paper then proposed a revised principle which broadens the permissibility of meat-eating. It thus complicates McPherson's argument on the permissibility of meat-eating using the revised principle.

In "How to argue for (and against) ethical veganism," McPherson presents the anti-complicity principle and uses it to argue against the inefficacy objection. The purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate McPherson's response to the inefficacy objection, focusing on the anti-complicity principle through the example of meat eating. First, I will present the inefficacy objection which argues from a utilitarian perspective that an individual's decisions to eat meat – or not – does not have an expected effect on reducing the amount of animals suffering or a positive effect for that individual. I will then present McPherson's response to the inefficacy objection where he presents the anti-complicity principle, which argues that complicity in eating meat itself counts as a wrongdoing. Then I will present my argument objecting to McPherson's anti-complicity principle and propose a revised principle. In my objection, I will argue that the anti-complicity principle proves too much because it does not 1) account for extreme situations

2) specify the degree of wrongness and 3) specify the awareness of the individual on the moral wrongness of the action.

Buldoftson presented the inefficacy objection to argue that utilitarianism does not justify vegetarianism. Buldoftson claims that an individual's choices do not have an effect on the morally wrong production decisions of factory farms. This is because the supply chain is so large that there is some “reliable amount of slack” that “serves as a buffer” (208). The buffers will absorb any effect caused by the individual resulting in no effect on the number of animals suffering. Buldoftson argues that while an “individual’s decision to consume animal products” does not significantly have an expected effect on the number of animals that suffer, an “individual’s decision to consume animal products does have a positive effect for that individual” (206). The inefficacy principle is based off utilitarianism, a philosophical principle that aims to maximize happiness. Thus an individual eating meat maximizes utility. According to the inefficacy objection, when the individual’s complicity has no impact on the overall decision or outcome of the morally wrong action, the individual’s complicity is not morally wrong.

McPherson rejects the inefficacy objection by defending the anti-complicity principle which states: “It is typically wrong to aim to benefit by cooperating with the wrongful elements of other’s plans” (22). Following this, an individual is complicit when their actions implicitly allow or support another’s morally wrong actions. McPherson believes that complicity by itself is enough to be counted as wrongdoing, even if there are no negative effects resulting from complicity. This is because when one is complicit, there is an intuition of wrongness that one feels. McPherson believes that the anti-complicity principle is able to explain the intuition of wrongness regarding complicity in a morally wrong action. Thus, following the anti-complicity principle, even when complicity has no effect on the overall decision or outcome of the morally wrong action, complicity by itself renders the action morally wrong. This rebuts the inefficacy objection that states an individual’s complicity is not morally wrong if the individual’s complicity has no impact on the outcome of the morally wrong action.

My first objection to the anti-complicity principle is that it does not take into account extreme situations. I argue that when complicity is the only option, complicity is not morally wrong but rather indecent – looked down upon but not morally wrong. Take for example a country with a dictatorship government that runs morally wrong military operations. In this case any societal participation by any individual of the general population of that country would be morally wrong.

This is because it would support the country's economy and thus support the morally wrong military operations. This means that all individuals of the general population would be complicit with the government's plans. Here, I argue that although the individuals of the general population are complicit, they are not morally wrong. This is because the individuals of the general population have no choice but to participate in society as it is necessary for their survival. They may be labelled as indecent but not morally wrong. To relate this thought experiment to meat eating, suppose a country where the general population is poor. Fast food such as burgers are cheap and convenient. The general population would choose to eat fast food over healthy meat alternatives due to their limited budget. If they did not, they would not have enough money for other necessities. Żukiewicz-Sobczak et al.(2014), published a study on the relationship between obesity and poverty which showed that poor people often buy cheap fast food, simply because they cannot afford to buy anything else. Furthermore, fast food meals are mostly comprised of burger and fried chicken. Thus in order to survive, the general population needs to eat meat. This demonstrates that the anti-complicity principle proves too much and does not account for extreme situations.

Another objection to the anti-complicity principle is that it does not specify the degree of wrongness complicity has. Take, for example, a global company that supplies other large companies with meat products. This meat the company supplies, comes from animals in factory farms that have suffered. Following the anti-complicity principle, everyone involved in the supply chain would be equally morally wrong. However, I argue that there should be different degrees of wrongness in regard to how much responsibility the individual bears in the morally wrong action. A worker employed by a restaurant that uses meat from a global company should not be considered equally morally wrong as the leader of the global company who owns the factory farms. Thus, the anti-complicity principle proves too much because it does not specify the degree of wrongness of complicity in different situations.

My final objection is that the anti-complicity principle does not specify whether the agent has to be aware that they are being complicit in a moral wrongdoing. Take for example a child who is eating meat that is produced from factory farms. The action of eating meat produced from factory farms is morally wrong. However, the child is not aware of the horrible treatment animals are subjected to in factory farms. The child may not even be aware that animals need to be killed in order for him or her to eat meat. Intuition dictates that in this case, the child is not morally wrong as he or she is not aware of the moral wrongdoing

eating meat entails. Thus, the anti-complicity principle should be improved upon and specify that the agent needs to be aware of the wrongness in order for complicity to be labelled as wrongdoing.

A possible objection to my argument would be that McPherson states that complicity is “typically wrong” (22). By using the word “typically,” McPherson attempts to make his principle beyond reproach. Although McPherson uses the word “typically” to state that the anti-complicity principle could be applied to most cases except under extreme circumstances, I believe it is too extreme and should be applied to more general cases. I argue that the principle should be more specific on when and to what degree complicity is morally wrong. A revised version of the anti-complicity principle I propose is as follows: it is wrong – but less morally wrong than the initiation of a wrongful action – for an agent to aim to benefit by consciously cooperating with the wrongful elements of other’s plans except in extreme situations. In this version, I specify that the agent needs to be aware of the wrongdoing and that the wrongdoing resulting from complicity is less than the wrongdoing of the initiator. I also specify that complicity is morally wrong unless it is the only option in extreme situations.

I have presented three objections to McPherson’s anti-complicity principle demonstrating how it proves too much and a revised version of the anti-complicity principle. First, I argue that the anti-complicity does not taking into account extreme situations where complicity is the only option available. I then argue in my second objection that the anti-complicity principle does not specify the degree of wrongness one would have when being complicit. Finally, I argue that the anti-complicity principle proves too much in not taking into account whether the agent is aware that they are complicit in a moral wrongdoing. Thus I have crafted a revised principle which takes the objections presented here into account.

References

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