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Practical Ethics Given Moral Uncertainty

Introduction

Many of those who have written on moral uncertainty have taken it to have stark implications for at some debates in practical ethics.¹ This literature has principally focused on the topics of abortion and vegetarianism. The argument runs approximately as follows. Consider, first, the following case of decision-making under empirical uncertainty.

Speeding

Julia is considering whether to speed round a blind corner. She thinks it's pretty unlikely that there's anyone crossing the road immediately around the corner, but she's not sure. If she speeds and hits someone, she will certainly severely injure them. If she goes slowly, she certainly will not injure anyone, but will get to work slightly later than she would have done had she sped (see Table 8.1).

In this situation, both expected value reasoning and common-sense recommend that Julia should not speed.

But if we agree with this in a case of purely empirical uncertainty, and we think that we should treat moral and empirical uncertainty analogously, then we should in general think that it's impermissible to eat meat.² Consider the following case.

¹ Alexander A. Guerrero, 'Don't Know, Don't Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability, and Caution'; Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*; Graham Oddie, 'Moral Uncertainty and Human Embryo Experimentation', in K. W. M. Fulford, Grant Gillett, and Janet Martin Soskice (eds), *Medicine and Moral Reasoning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 144–61; Dan Moller, 'Abortion and Moral Risk', *Philosophy*, vol. 86, no. 3 (July 2011), pp. 425–43.

² See Guerrero, 'Don't Know, Don't Kill' and Moller, 'Abortion and Moral Risk'. Sometimes this and the case against abortion are presented as a *dominance* argument, where vegetarianism, or having a child, is suggested to be certainly permissible (Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty*

Table 8.1

	Someone crossing	No-one crossing
Speed	Significant harm to another person	No harm
Go slow	Mild personal cost	Mild personal cost

Table 8.2

	Animals matter	Animals don't matter
Eat meat	Significant wrong	Permissible
Eat vegetarian	Permissible	Mild personal cost

Vegetarianism

Harry is considering whether to eat meat or a vegetarian option for dinner. He thinks it's pretty unlikely animals matter morally, but he's not sure. If he eats meat and animals do matter morally, then he commits a grave wrong. If he eats the vegetarian option, he will certainly not commit a grave wrong, though he will enjoy the meal less than he would have done had he eaten meat. (See Table 8.2.)

Here, the decision situation is analogous to the decision situation in *Speeding*. Even if Harry is highly confident in the view that animals don't matter, his credence in the view that they do matter generates a significant risk of doing something gravely wrong, outweighing the greater likelihood of missing out on a mild prudential benefit. If we thought that Julia shouldn't speed in *Speeding*, then we should think that in *Vegetarianism* the vegetarian meal is the appropriate option for Harry.

A similar argument can be made for abortion.³ Consider the following case.

and Its Consequences, ch. 2; Weatherson, 'Review of Ted Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*'). However, we think that we should be considering how to make decisions in light of all the possible reasons for action that one has. And if one believes that there is no moral reason against eating meat, whereas there is a prudential reason in favour of eating meat, then eating meat is the most all-things-considered choiceworthy option. So the 'dominance' form of the argument will almost never apply.

³ See, for example, Oddie, 'Moral Uncertainty and Human Embryo Experimentation.'

Abortion

Isobel is twenty weeks pregnant and is considering whether to have an abortion. She thinks it's pretty unlikely that twenty-week-old fetuses have a right to life, but she's not sure. If she has an abortion and twenty-week-old fetuses do have a right to life, then she commits a grave wrong. If she has the child and gives it up for adoption, she will certainly not commit a grave wrong, though she will bear considerable costs as a result of pregnancy, childbirth, and separation from her child. (See Table 8.3.)

In this case, the prudential cost to the decision-maker is higher than it is in *Speeding* or *Vegetarianism*. But the potential moral wrong, if the view that fetuses have a right to life is correct, is also much greater. So, again, it seems that even if Isobel is fairly confident in the view that fetuses have no right to life, as long as she isn't extremely confident, the risk that fetuses do have a right to life is sufficient to outweigh the significant prudential reason in favour of having the abortion. In which case, the appropriate option for Isobel is to give the child up for adoption.

If this argument works, then it is like the philosopher's stone for practical ethicists: it would mean that we could draw robust lessons for practical ethics even despite extensive disagreement among moral philosophers. As Ted Lockhart comments: 'The significance of this argument is that, if sound, it shows that much of philosophers' discussion of the morality of abortion is for practical (i.e., decision-making) purposes unnecessary.'⁴ Some philosophers endorse the implications of moral uncertainty for vegetarianism and abortion;⁵

Table 8.3

	Fetuses have a right to life	Fetuses have no right to life
Have abortion	Very gravely wrong	Permissible
Give up for adoption	Permissible	Significant personal cost

⁴ Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*, p. 52.

⁵ Moller: '[the moral uncertainty argument] does seem to suggest, however, that there is a moral reason—probably not a weak one—for most agents to avoid abortion' ('Abortion and Moral Risk', p. 443). Lockhart: 'In the vast majority of situations in which decision-makers decide whether to have abortions, not having an abortion is the *reasonable* choice of action' (*Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*, p. 52)]. Pope John Paul II: 'the mere probability that a human person is involved [in the practice of abortion] would suffice to justify an absolute clear prohibition of any intervention aimed at killing a human embryo' ('Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87, 1995, pp. 401–522).

others take them to be a *modus tollens*.⁶ But all authors so far seem to agree that taking moral uncertainty into account in one's decisions really does have these implications, does so in a rather straightforward way, and does so largely independently of the credences that one has in different moral views, as long as those credences are broadly reasonable.

In this chapter, we're going to make things more complicated, in two ways. First, we show that the *prima facie* implications of moral uncertainty for issues in practical ethics are far more wide-ranging than has been noted in the literature so far.

Second, we show how one can't straightforwardly argue from moral uncertainty to particular conclusions in practical ethics, using abortion and vegetarianism as particular examples. We argue for this on two grounds: first, because of interaction effects between moral issues; and, second, because of the variety of different possible intertheoretic comparisons that one can reasonably endorse. The conclusion we reach is that, before drawing out conclusions from moral uncertainty-based arguments, one first has to do the difficult job of figuring out what one's credences in different moral viewpoints are or ought to be. Taking moral uncertainty seriously undoubtedly has important implications for practical ethics; but coming to conclusions about what those implications are requires much more nuanced argument than has been made so far.

Let us make a caveat before we begin. For the purpose of keeping this chapter focused, we will have to put aside some of the issues that we've discussed so far. In particular, we will assume that all theories in which the decision-maker has credence are complete, interval-scale measurable and intertheoretically comparable and that the decision-maker doesn't have credences that are sufficiently small in theories that are sufficiently high stakes that 'fanaticism' becomes an issue. In a full analysis of the practical implications of moral uncertainty, all these factors would be taken into account. However, philosophers have yet to understand the practical implications of moral uncertainty even with these simplifying assumptions; the task of understanding moral uncertainty's implications for practical ethics without these simplifying assumptions will therefore have to await further work.

⁶ Weatherson: '[Implications] so striking we might fear for its refutation by a quick *modus tollens*' ('Review of Ted Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*', p. 694). Guerrero: '[Maximizing expected moral value] is not the reading that we prefer, in part because of cases like [abortion]' ('Don't Know, Don't Kill', p. 91).

I. Implications for Normative Ethics

Though the moral uncertainty literature so far has focused on vegetarianism and abortion, there are many issues in normative ethics where there appear to be clear *prima facie* implications of taking moral uncertainty into account in our decision-making, most of which have not yet been noticed.⁷ This section provides a brief overview of them.

Benevolence

Consider Peter Singer's argument in 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' that failing to donate to the developing world is as wrong, morally, as letting a child drown in front of you. If one has even a moderate credence in that view, then it seems that under moral uncertainty it's appropriate to donate a substantial proportion of one's resources to save the lives of strangers. Not-donating involves a risk of doing something as wrong as letting a child drown in front of you; whereas donating involves only the risk of needlessly incurring a moderate prudential cost. The situation therefore seems analogous to *Speeding*: for someone who is unsure about whether Singer's arguments work, it would be inappropriate not to donate.⁸

A distinct argument for the same conclusion can be gained by considering the acts/omissions distinction. Even if you are fairly confident in the moral relevance of the distinction between acts and omissions, you shouldn't be completely certain in that view. You should give some credence to the idea that it's just as wrong to let someone die as it is to intentionally kill them. In which case, you should have some credence that letting distant strangers die because of failing to donate to effective non-profits is

⁷ The implications of moral uncertainty have been discussed for abortion (Greenwell, 'Abortion and Moral Safety'; Pfeiffer, 'Abortion Policy and the Argument from Uncertainty'; Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*, ch. 3; Moller, 'Abortion and Moral Risk'), embryo destruction (Oddie, 'Moral Uncertainty and Human Embryo Experimentation'), vegetarianism (Moller, 'Abortion and Moral Risk', pp. 426, 441–3; Guerrero, 'Don't Know, Don't Kill', pp. 76–82), the ethics of killing more generally (Guerrero, 'Don't Know, Don't Kill') and duties of beneficence (Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*, ch. 5; Weatherston, 'Review of Ted Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*'). We don't know of other examples of the practical issues being discussed, so we believe that the suggested implications for partiality, egalitarianism, the suffering/happiness trade-off, theories of wellbeing, welfarism, egoism, and population ethics are novel.

⁸ A related argument is made in Tarsney, 'Rejecting Supererogationism'.

roughly as wrong as actively killing them. This gives a second argument for why considerations of moral uncertainty provide an argument for donating a substantial proportion of your resources to save the lives of strangers.

Partiality

Under moral uncertainty, one should give some extra weight to one's family's and friends' interests, even if your preferred moral view is impartial. For even if you are confident that the wellbeing of your family and friends are equally as important as the wellbeing of distant strangers, you should not be certain in that view: you should have some credence that the wellbeing of your family and friends is more important than the wellbeing of distant strangers. However, you should have almost no credence that the wellbeing of distant strangers is *more* important than the wellbeing of your family and friends. So you should therefore give the interests of your family and friends some extra weight, though not as much weight as if you were completely convinced of the partialist moral view. If you could benefit your friend or a stranger by the same amount, it's therefore more appropriate to benefit your friend over the stranger.

Prioritarianism, Equality, Utilitarianism

Under moral uncertainty, you should treat benefits to the badly-off as being more important than providing the same benefits to the well-off, even if you are fairly confident that they should be treated in the same way. The argument for this is analogous to the argument we just made about partiality. You should have some credence in the view that it's more important to give a benefit of a given size to someone who is worse-off rather than to someone who is better-off; this view is entailed by both prioritarianism and egalitarianism. In contrast, you should have almost no credence in the view that one ought to give a benefit of a given size to someone who is better-off rather than worse-off: this is not entailed by any reasonable moral position. So, under moral uncertainty, it will be appropriate to give a benefit of a given size to someone who is worse-off rather than someone who is better-off.

Alleviation of Suffering

Under moral uncertainty you should treat alleviating suffering as more morally important than increasing happiness. Again, the reasoning is analogous to our last two arguments. According to some plausible moral views, the alleviation of suffering is more important, morally, than the promotion of happiness. According to other plausible moral views (such as classical utilitarianism), the alleviation of suffering is equally as important, morally, as the promotion of happiness. But there is no reasonable moral view on which the alleviation of suffering is less important than the promotion of happiness. So, under moral uncertainty, it's appropriate to prefer to alleviate suffering rather than to promote happiness more often than the utilitarian would.

Theories of Wellbeing

Some theories of wellbeing claim that having 'objective' goods, like knowledge or appreciation of beauty, intrinsically make a person's life go better, whereas other theories, such as hedonism and preference-satisfactionism, do not place value on those goods beyond how they contribute to positive mental states or to preference-satisfaction. But no theories of wellbeing claim that possessing objective goods intrinsically makes a person's life go worse.

This means that, given uncertainty about theories of wellbeing but certainty about reason to promote wellbeing, it will be appropriate to promote people's achievement of objective goods.

Welfarism

Similarly, some views, such as utilitarianism, place value only on people's welfare. On other views, there are non-welfarist goods that have intrinsic value, such as great works of art or a well-preserved natural environment. But on no reasonable moral view are the supposed non-welfarist goods of negative intrinsic value. So, if you are unsure between welfarism and non-welfarist views, then under moral uncertainty it will be appropriate to promote non-welfarist goods.

Egoism and Altruism

On egoism, you only have reasons to improve your own welfare. On other moral views, you also have intrinsic reasons to improve the lives of others or respect their rights. But on no plausible moral views is it the case that you have intrinsic reasons to harm others, or violate their rights. So, if you are uncertain between egoism and other moral views, then it will be appropriate to promote the wellbeing of others in addition to your own wellbeing, though not to give promoting the wellbeing of others quite as much weight as you would if you were certain that you had altruistic reasons.

Population Ethics

Extending moral uncertainty to issues of population ethics has three main implications, concerning total versus critical-level views, separable versus non-separable views, and person-affecting versus non-person-affecting views.⁹

First, let us consider only separable non-person-affecting views: that is, views on which the value of adding an additional person to the population is independent of how many other people already exist, who they are, and what their wellbeing levels are. Among such views, there are two plausible theories: the *total* view, according to which the goodness of bringing a new person into existence is given by how much better or worse that person's life is than a 'neutral life', and *critical-level* views, according to which it's good to bring into existence a person if their life is above a certain level of wellbeing c , neutral if their life is at level c , and bad if their life is below c .¹⁰

Under uncertainty between the total view and critical-level views, bringing a new person into existence would have positive expected choice-worthiness if their lifetime welfare is above an 'expected' critical-level c^* , where c^* is lower than the critical-level claimed by the views in which one has credence, but greater than 0. This is because no plausible critical-level view endorses a

⁹ For a more comprehensive discussion of these different views, see Hilary Greaves and Toby Ord, 'Moral Uncertainty about Population Axiology', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2017), pp. 135–67.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Charles Blackorby, Walter Bossert and David Donaldson, *Population Issues in Social-Choice Theory, Welfare Economics and Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. The authors endorse a (positive) critical-level in order to escape the Repugnant Conclusion: that, for any (finite) population of any size and any quality of life, there is some other population of a sufficiently large number of people with lives barely worth living that is better.

negative critical-level, since such a view would imply that bringing into existence lives with negative welfare has positive value. Given that the total view is equivalent to a critical-level view with the critical-level set to zero, the critical-levels over which we are uncertain go from 0 to a positive number, and the 'expected' critical-level must fall within this range.¹¹

Second, let us consider uncertainty over separable and non-separable views. Non-separable views include the average view, according to which the goodness of a population is given by the average wellbeing of that population, and views according to which the goodness of a population is determined by both the average wellbeing of the population and the total wellbeing of the population.¹² Under uncertainty between separable views and non-separable views, one will place weight on both the average wellbeing of the population (or other 'quality' measures) and on the sum total of wellbeing that is above c^* minus the total wellbeing that is below c^* .

Finally, we turn to uncertainty between person-affecting and non-person-affecting views. According to person-affecting views, bringing a new person into existence is of neutral moral value; according to non-person-affecting views this is not the case.¹³ Note that, given our preceding discussion, if one is uncertain only over non-person-affecting views there will be just one 'neutral' wellbeing level, at which it is neither good nor bad to add some new person to the population; where this neutral level lies will depend on both the expected critical level c^* and the average wellbeing of those who already exist. Under uncertainty between person-affecting and non-person-affecting views, it is therefore almost always the case that adding some new person to the population is of either positive or negative expected choice-worthiness. If they are above the neutral level on the non-person-affecting views in which the decision-maker has credence, then there is some reason to bring them into existence, and no offsetting reason on the person-affecting views. Similarly, if they are below the neutral level on the non-person-affecting views in which the decision-maker has credence, then there is some reason to not bring them into existence, and no offsetting reason against on the person-affecting views.

¹¹ This idea is developed in Hilary Greaves and Toby Ord, 'Moral Uncertainty about Population Axiology'.

¹² See Thomas Hurka, 'Value and Population Size', *Ethics*, vol. 93, no. 3 (April 1983), pp. 496–507; Yew-Kwang Ng, 'What Should We Do about Future Generations?: Impossibility of Parfit's Theory X', *Economics & Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2 (October 1989), pp. 235–53.

¹³ See Jan Narveson, 'Moral Problems of Population', *The Monist*, vol. 57, no. 1 (January 1973).

II. Interaction Effects

As we noted at the outset, some philosophers have suggested that the implications of maximizing expected choice-worthiness are so clear on some issues in practical ethics that we can cease further work on the first-order philosophical question of which view on the issue is the correct one.¹⁴

We believe that to be a mistake. So far, commentators haven't noticed just how broad the range of different implications of moral uncertainty-based arguments are. That is obviously an oversight insofar as it means they've underestimated the importance of moral uncertainty-based reasoning. But it's also an oversight insofar as it impacts how moral uncertainty-based arguments should be applied, including in the central examples of vegetarianism and abortion. We cannot simply look at how moral uncertainty impacts on one debate in practical ethics in isolation; moral uncertainty arguments have very many implications for practical ethics, and many of those interact with one another in subtle ways.

Consider vegetarianism. Moller states that, 'avoiding meat doesn't seem to be forbidden by any view. Vegetarianism thus seems to present a genuine asymmetry in moral risk: all of the risks fall on the one side.'¹⁵ Similarly, Weatherson comments that, 'the actions that Singer recommends... are certainly morally permissible... One rarely feels a twang of moral doubt when eating tofu curry.'¹⁶

That is, the moral uncertainty argument for vegetarianism got its grip because there was supposedly no or almost no possible moral reason in favour of eating meat. Once we consider *all* the implications of moral uncertainty, however, this is no longer true.

We saw that, given moral uncertainty, it's good (in expectation) to bring into existence beings with lives that are sufficiently good (above the critical level c^*). And some types of animals raised for consumption appear to have moderately happy lives, including cows, sheep, humanely raised chickens, and pigs.¹⁷ Depending on exactly how one distributes one's credences across total views and critical-level views, one might reasonably judge that these lives are above the critical level c^* .

¹⁴ For example, Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*, p. 52.

¹⁵ Moller, 'Abortion and Moral Risk', p. 441.

¹⁶ Weatherson, 'Review of Ted Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*', p. 693.

¹⁷ An assessment of the welfare levels of various farm animals is given in F. Bailey Norwood and Jayson L. Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound: The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare*, New York: Oxford University, 2011, p. 223.

Table 8.4

	Animals matter		Animals don't matter
	Non-consequentialist view	Consequentialist view	
Eat meat	Significant wrong	Permissible	Permissible
Eat vegetarian	Permissible	Significant wrong	Mild personal cost

Importantly, when you choose to buy meat, you aren't killing animals. Instead, you are increasing demand for meat, which incentivizes farmers to raise (and then kill) additional animals. By buying and eating cows, sheep, free-range chicken, and pork, you cause fairly happy animals to come into existence that would not otherwise have lived. On some mainstream consequentialist views (such as total utilitarianism), it may therefore be wrong *not* to purchase the meat of such animals.

Our decision situation is therefore more complicated than commentators have suggested. We could represent our decision situation as in Table 8.4.

Importantly, this means we can't state that, given moral uncertainty and any reasonable set of moral credences, one ought to be vegetarian. It might be that you find the total view of population ethics very plausible, in which case eating beef and lamb might have higher expected choice-worthiness than eating vegetarian. Alternatively, you might find the total view of populations ethics very implausible, but find the idea that you shouldn't be complicit in immoral actions very plausible; in which case under moral uncertainty vegetarianism might indeed be the more appropriate course of action. It all depends on controversial conclusions about how confident you should be in different first-order moral theories.

One might respond by restricting the scope of the argument. Rather than claiming that moral uncertainty considerations lead to vegetarianism, one might instead argue that they entail simply not eating those animals (for example, factory-farmed chickens) whose lives have been so bad so as not to be worth living. In this case, the argument that eating meat is good because it brings into existence animals with happy lives would not go through; eating this meat brings into existence animals which appear to have net unhappy lives which, almost everyone would agree, is a bad thing to do. This, one might argue, is still an example where, as Lockhart suggests, philosophers' discussion is unnecessary for practical purposes.

We do think that, for almost any reasonable moral view, the implications of moral uncertainty for the ethics of eating factory-farmed chicken (and other animals with similarly bad lives) will be basically right. But it would still be an oversimplification to say, as Lockhart seems to, that we can make this argument entirely free from at least somewhat controversial assumptions about what credences one ought to have in different moral views. First, it's a question for moral philosophy (in part) what animals have lives that are and aren't worth living; it's not a wholly unreasonable view that even factory-farmed chickens have lives that are worth living. If that were true, then there would be at least one moral view according to which one ought to eat factory-farmed chicken. In order to make moral uncertainty-based arguments entail not-eating factory-farmed chicken, one must argue (at least slightly controversially) that those moral views according to which factory-farmed chickens do not have lives worth living are significantly more plausible than those moral views according to which they have lives that are worth living.

Moreover, remember that consideration of moral uncertainty seemed to show that we have strong duties of beneficence to help the global poor. Restricting your diet costs time and money, which could be used fighting poverty, saving lives in the developing world. Over the course of your life, you could probably save enough time and money to save a life in the developing world.¹⁸ This means that a more accurate representation of the decision situation looks as in Table 8.5.

Table 8.5

	Animals matter		Animals don't matter	
	Obligation to donate	No obligation to donate	Obligation to donate	No obligation to donate
Eat meat	Significant wrong	Significant wrong	Significant wrong	Permissible
Eat vegetarian	Mild wrong	Permissible	Significant wrong	Mild personal cost
Eat cheapest & donate	Permissible	Moderate wrong	Permissible	Mild personal cost

¹⁸ According to the latest estimates from GiveWell, it costs about \$3,200 to do the equivalent amount of good to saving a life in poor countries ('GiveWell Cost-Effectiveness Analysis', November 2016, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1KiWfiAGX_QZhRbC9xkzf3I8IqsXC5kkr-nwY_feVlcM). In order for the costs of a strict vegetarian diet to be greater than the cost to

Again, therefore, we can no longer argue that maximizing expected choice-worthiness would recommend eating vegetarian no matter what reasonable credences one has across moral views. Rather, what conclusion we reach depends on substantive views about (i) how plausible different moral views are, and (ii) the strengths of your obligations, if those views are correct.

Similar considerations apply to abortion. First, even though on Ordinary Morality, the decision whether to have a child is of neutral value, on some other theories this is not the case. In particular, on some moral views, it is wrong to bring into existence even a relatively happy child. On person-affecting views there is no reason in virtue of the welfare of the child to have a child; and if you believe that the world is currently overpopulated, then you would also believe that there are moral reasons against having an additional child. On critical-level views of population ethics, it's bad to bring into existence lives that aren't sufficiently happy; if the critical level is high enough, such that you thought that your future child would probably be below that level, then according to a critical-level consequentialist view you ought not to have the child. On environmentalist or strong animal welfare views it might be immoral to have a child, because of the environmental and animal welfare impact that additional people typically have. Finally, on anti-natalist views, the bads in life outweigh the goods, and it's almost always wrong to have a child.

This means, again, that we cannot present the decision of whether to have an abortion given moral uncertainty as a decision where one option involves some significant moral risk and the other involves almost no moral risk. We should have at least some credence in all the views listed in the previous paragraph; given this, in order to know what follows from consideration of moral uncertainty we need to undertake the tricky work of determining what credences we should have in those views. (Of course, we would also need to consider those views according to which it's a good thing to bring into existence a new person with a happy life, which might create an additional reason against having an abortion.)

Moreover, as with the case of vegetarianism, we must consider the issue of opportunity cost. Carrying a child to term and giving it up for adoption costs time and money (in addition, potentially, to psychological distress)

save a life, the strict vegetarian diet would only have to cost an additional \$1.53 per week over a span of forty years. One might object that a vegetarian diet is cheaper than an omnivorous diet. This may, typically, be true. However, because one loses options by being vegetarian, a vegetarian diet must be at least as costly as the diet one has if one acts on the maxim 'eat whatever's cheapest', and it seems unlikely that such a maxim would *never* involve eating meat.

that could be used to improve the lives of others. According to a pro-choice view that endorses Singerian duties of beneficence, one may be required to have an abortion in order to spend more time or money on improving the lives of others. Again, what seems appropriate under moral uncertainty is critically dependent on what exactly the decision-maker's credences across different moral theories are.

In the above examples, we have just looked at the interaction effects between vegetarianism and abortion and duties of beneficence and population ethics. But, as noted in the previous section, there are *very many* implications of taking moral uncertainty into account. The interactions between these various implications may be quite subtle; a full analysis of the implications of moral uncertainty for any particular topic in practical ethics would need to take *all* of these implications into account. Applications of moral uncertainty may thus create *more* work for those working in practical ethics, not less.

III. Intertheoretic Comparisons

Interaction effects are one way in which the alleged implications of moral uncertainty might not follow, and choice of intertheoretic comparisons is another.

Consider vegetarianism again. Let's (simplistically) suppose that on the Ordinary Morality view, the welfare of (non-human) animals has 1/10,000th the moral weight of the welfare of humans, and that on the 'all animals are equal' view, the welfare of humans and animals are of equal moral worth. When philosophers have argued from moral uncertainty to vegetarianism, they've implicitly invoked one specific way of making intertheoretic comparisons between the Ordinary Morality view and the 'animal welfare' view. But that isn't the only way of making the comparison. Here are two different ways of making the intertheoretic comparison (see Table 8.6).

Table 8.6

Option	Ordinary Morality	All-Animals- Are-Equal-1	All-Animals- Are-Equal-2
1 unit of human welfare	10,000	10,000	1
1 unit of animal welfare	1	10,000	1
0 units of welfare	0	0	0

There are in fact two natural ways of revising the Ordinary Morality view in order to make the welfare of all animals equal. On the first view, All-Animals-Are-Equal-1, the revision is that animal welfare is much more valuable than the Ordinary Morality view supposes. On the second view, All-Animals-Are-Equal-2, the revision is that human welfare is much less valuable than the Ordinary Morality view supposes.

We believe that both ways of making the intertheoretic comparison are 'permissible': they represent different theories, one may have credence in either, and the question of what credence one ought to have in the different comparisons is largely a question for first-order moral theorizing. But whether or not the moral uncertainty-based argument for vegetarianism goes through depends to a large extent on which of these two intertheoretic comparisons we invoke. If Harry (in the original example) is unsure between Ordinary Morality and All-Animals-Are-Equal-1, then it is indeed true that he risks a grave wrong by eating meat. If, however, he is unsure between Ordinary Morality and All-Animals-Are-Equal-2, then he does not risk a grave wrong by eating meat—the badness of eating meat is the same size on the All-Animals-Are-Equal-2 view as it is on the Ordinary Morality view, and it remains plausible that the prudential reason in favour of eating meat, on the Ordinary Morality view, outweighs the reasons against eating meat on both the Ordinary Morality view and the All-Animals-Are-Equal-2 view.

To illustrate, consider the following two tables. Suppose (again very simplistically) that the prudential reason is 0.01 units in favour of chicken and 0.001 in favour of vegetarian; the reason against eating animals is 1 unit against chicken, not at all against vegetarian. The Ordinary Morality view regards units of prudential reason as 10,000 times as valuable as the units of moral reason not to eat animals.

If Harry has credence in All-Animals-Are-Equal-1 then it's clear that the moral risk of eating chicken is grave and that, unless Harry's credence in All-Animals-Are-Equal-1 were tiny, it would be inappropriate to eat chicken (see Table 8.7).

In contrast, if Harry has credence in All-Animals-Are-Equal-2, then the potential moral downside of eating chicken is much smaller. Indeed, the biggest potential loss of value is to fail to eat chicken if Ordinary Morality is correct. Harry would need to have a very low credence in Ordinary Morality in order for eating vegetarian to be the appropriate option (see Table 8.8).

Because there are two distinct and seemingly natural ways of making the intertheoretic comparison, we again see that the moral uncertainty-based

Table 8.7

Option	Ordinary Morality	All-Animals-Are-Equal-1
Eat chicken	99	-9,900
Eat vegetarian	10	10
Don't eat	0	0

Table 8.8

Option	Ordinary Morality	All-Animals-Are-Equal-2
Eat chicken	99	-0.99
Eat vegetarian	10	0.001
Don't eat	0	0

Table 8.9

Option	Ordinary Morality	No-Acts/ Omissions-1	No-Acts/ Omissions-2
Kill 1 person	-1,000	-1,000	-1
Let 1 person die	-1	-1,000	-1
No change	0	0	0

argument for vegetarianism doesn't straightforwardly go through. We need to make a controversial decision about which of these two ways of making the intertheoretic comparison is correct.

A similar issue is relevant to the moral uncertainty argument against abortion. As we noted above, we cannot say that there's no serious moral downside to keeping the child, because having a child costs resources that could be used to prevent suffering and death due to extreme poverty. This argument becomes stronger when we consider the issue of intertheoretic comparisons.

Let us assume that Isobel has some credence in the view that there's no morally relevant distinction between acts and omissions. Again, there are two distinct but natural ways of doing the intertheoretic comparison. Let us suppose that Ordinary Morality regards killing as 1,000 times as bad as letting die. Columns 2 and 3 in Table 8.9 represents the two ways of normalizing the view that rejects the acts/omissions distinction.

On No-Acts/Omissions-1, letting die is far worse than Ordinary Morality supposes; it's as wrong as killing. On No-Acts/Omissions-2, killing is much less bad than Ordinary Morality supposes; it's merely as wrong as letting die.

If Isobel only has some credence in No-Acts/Omissions-2, then her credence in the idea that there is no acts/omissions distinction is not going to have a big impact on the appropriateness ordering of her options. If, in contrast, she has some credence in No-Acts/Omissions-1, then the biggest moral consideration in her decision whether to have an abortion is not the potential killing of an innocent person, but is the opportunity cost of the resources that she would spend on the child, which could be used to prevent the deaths of others.

Once again, therefore, one cannot claim that the implications of MEC follow straightforwardly whatever set of reasonable credences one has. In addition to making (potentially controversial) claims about what credences one ought to have across different moral views, in order to come to a conclusion about what moral uncertainty considerations entail in a particular case one also must often make (potentially controversial) claims about what is the correct way of making intertheoretic comparisons across the views in which the decision-maker has credence.¹⁹

Note that none of what we've said so far is an argument for the conclusion that vegetarianism or anti-abortion views *don't* follow from consideration of moral uncertainty. All we've argued is that invoking moral uncertainty alone is not sufficient to conclude that vegetarianism is appropriate or that abortion is inappropriate. Instead, one must also invoke substantive and probably controversial assumptions about what credences one ought to have across a wide array of moral views, and across different choices of intertheoretic comparisons.

Nor are we arguing that moral uncertainty does not have concrete implications for real-life decision-makers. Once a decision-maker has determined at least approximately what her credences across different theories and across different intertheoretic comparisons are, maximizing expected

¹⁹ One might claim that (i) one ought to have credence in both possible normalizations and that (ii) given this, the theory with the higher-stakes normalization will still be the primary determiner of different options' expected choice-worthiness. We find this plausible to some extent, but believe it still depends on what exactly one's credences are; if one has a very small credence in the high-stakes normalization, then one might worry that one is entering 'fanaticism' territory if one thinks that the recommendation of MEC in this instance is correct.

choice-worthiness will recommend some courses of action as appropriate and not others. We strongly suspect that the resulting recommendations will look quite different from the typical positions in debates on these issues, or from the view that one would come to if one simply followed one's favoured moral view.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've argued that the moral uncertainty-based arguments that philosophers have given in the literature for the rightness of vegetarianism and the wrongness of abortion are too simple. The precise implications of maximizing expected choice-worthiness under moral uncertainty depend on controversial assumptions about what credences one ought to have across different moral views, and about how to make intertheoretic comparisons across theories.

We do believe, however, that consideration of moral uncertainty should have major impacts for how practical ethics is conducted. Currently, a central focus of practical ethicists is on determining what the most plausible view on a given issue is, by arguing in favour of that view, or by arguing against competing views. If moral uncertainty were taken into account, then an additional vital activity for practical ethicists to engage in, before any recommendations about how to act were made, would be to consider the implications of a variety of different moral views on this issue, to argue for what credences to assign to those views and for what the most plausible intertheoretic comparisons are, and then to work out which options have highest expected choice-worthiness. Insofar as taking moral uncertainty into account offers a very new perspective on our moral decision-making, however, it would be surprising if the conclusions of this were the same as those that practical ethicists typically draw.