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Why Buy Local?

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ABSTRACT *This article critically assesses the moral arguments that speak in favour of three consumer options: buying local food, buying global (non-local) food, and buying global food while also purchasing carbon offsets to mitigate the environmental impact of food transportation. We argue that because the offsetting option allows one to provide economic benefits to the poorest food workers while also mitigating the environmental impact of food transportation it is morally superior to the alternatives.*

1. Introduction

Claims that we ought to 'buy local' are increasingly common. From food television and celebrity chefs to the news media and even agricultural extension publications, many voices are advocating for local food.[1] We are told that locavorism – the practice of buying and consuming local food products – is healthier, tastier, and safer than consuming nonlocal alternatives and that it has environmental, economic, and social benefits.[2] Popular writers, such as Michael Pollan, argue that we should 'think global, [but] buy local' and that we should, 'given the choice, buy local over organic'.[3] Although some of the reasons for buying local are prudential, buy-local advocates also present arguments that frame locavorism as a *morally* significant choice. But are there really good moral reasons to buy local?[4]

Of course, any answer to this question depends on what we mean by 'local food' and 'morally significant', as well as on the *alternative* choices we have available. Although it is a contested concept, following Hinrichs we understand 'local food' to mean foods, generally perishable, that are produced a limited number (less than 400) of 'food miles' from the point of purchase.[5] And we will construe the claim that buying this food is morally significant as the claim that it is morally *better* to purchase these food items than it is to purchase nonlocal alternatives.[6] Finally, we will narrow the scope of the question by initially focusing on three salient choices.

First, consumers could *buy local* by selecting food items that are produced 400 miles or less from the store. Alternatively, they could *buy global* by purchasing perishable food items produced more than 400 miles from the store. And finally, we want to consider an option that addresses perhaps the most pressing moral reason for locavorism in a different way: consumers could *offset* by buying globally and purchasing carbon offsets to mitigate the carbon emitted in the transport of their basket. The initial question, then, can be recast as 'is it morally better to buy local, buy global, or offset?'

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. In the next three sections, we present the considerations that speak in favour of each alternative. We argue that

choosing to offset is generally the morally best alternative, and somewhat surprisingly, values often cited in support of locavorism – worker welfare and environmental protection – actually better support the offset option. In Section 5, we consider objections to our argument. Section 6 concludes.

2. Buying Locally

Buy local advocates argue local food is healthier, tastier, and safer than nonlocal alternatives and that buying locally is better for the local economy, environment, and community. These first points about the improved quality of local food are not empirically well supported.[7] Pierre Desrochers and Hiroku Shimizu[8] offer a thorough discussion of the issue, but in what follows, we focus on the second set of considerations, which are more socially oriented and which, we think, are morally much more compelling: the environmental, community, and local economic benefits of buying local food.[9]

2.1. Environment

The first social reason for buying locally produced food is environmental. The argument is that by buying locally produced food you reduce the number of miles food must be transported between its production and consumption. Since transport and packaging generally involve the release of carbon into the atmosphere, and since carbon emissions are one of the most significant contributors to climate change, a reduction in food miles mitigates environmental damage. As Pollan puts it, 'the average fruit or vegetable on an American plate has traveled 1500 miles from the farm, and a lot of diesel fuel has been burned to get it there. Local food has much lower energy costs…. Before you buy the Prius, start shopping at your farmer's market'.[10] Buying locally, it appears, involves lower emissions and is therefore more environmentally friendly than buying globally.[11]

2.2. Economy

The second social reason for buying local is that it supports the local economy. The existence of a positive economic impact of locavorism is a straightforward prediction of economic theory. When a portion of income received by local businesses is spent on other goods and services within the community, it leads to a multiplier effect in the local economy. These theoretical predictions have been empirically confirmed. Daniel Otto and Theresa Varner estimate that farmers' markets had a positive economic impact of $31.5 million on the Iowa economy in 2004.[12] Similarly, a study of farmers' markets in West Virginia by David Hughes et al. finds that such markets contributed $1.48 million to the state's GSP.[13]

2.3. Community

The third social reason for buying local is that it provides support for the local community. While this contribution is more intangible and harder to quantify than the environmental or economic impacts of locavorism, this does not mean it is illusory. In

a survey of 30 members of a community-supported agriculture group, Steven Schnell found that many members cited the 'sense of community they get in shopping for local food, and the direct connection with the people on the farm who produce it' as a primary reason for their consumer habits.[14] Respondents argued it is 'important for people to go to the farmer, to talk to the farmers, to get to know . . . how hard they work even on those miserable days'.[15] Others explained that knowing the farmers allows them to feel a deeper connection to the natural world and to interact with people who 'want to eat better, more local food'.[16]

A related benefit, which fits somewhat between the economic and community categories concerns issues of food sovereignty,[17] which ensures 'communities [have] meaningful control over the food systems that affect them'.[18] Buying local food may both promote the self-determination necessary for food sovereignty and also protect cultural and personal identities that are tied to food.

3. Buying Globally

Sceptics of locavorism rarely argue that we should *not* buy local. Instead, they argue that the considerations cited by locavores are not as strong as they appear. The sceptical arguments generally try to show these factors do not track locality, or at least that the contribution of locality is minimal. If successful, these arguments significantly diminish the considerations that support buy-local initiatives. But they don't provide positive support for *not* buying local.

However, though they are often neglected, there *are* positive arguments that support the purchase of nonlocal food. As with some of the considerations that support locavorism, some of these 'buy global' reasons are prudential. Since certain products are only produced in limited geographic areas, gastronomic considerations can support the purchase of nonlocal foods. Similarly, limitations on nutritional variety in some localities may provide health-based reasons for buying nonlocal foods. Yet these, like the personal reasons supporting locavorism, are not straightforwardly moral reasons.

Below we revisit the categories of community, environment, and economy, focusing on the sceptical arguments that minimise these reasons to support locavorism. In this discussion, we also highlight additional factors that provide *positive* moral reasons for buying globally.

3.1. Community

Although the community benefit of locavorism is oft cited, on further reflection it is puzzling to see how these benefits reflect the *locality* of food production. Let us assume that supporting local *businesses* strengthens social ties within a community. There are two primary mechanisms by which this benefit is produced. The first is economic. When we patronise local businesses we provide financial support that stays within our community. The second is social interaction. When we interact with those in our community, we obtain a sense of belonging and can better empathise with those around us. Does buying locally produced food contribute to this second mechanism?

It is hard to see that it does. Why should community ties be strengthened more when Alice buys an onion from Bob the farmer who lives in her community than from

Carol the grocery clerk at a national supermarket who also lives locally? In other words, how does the locality of the food's *production* impact social exchange between buyer and seller? Instead of supporting locally produced food, this consideration supports *buying* food locally, rather than buying *locally* grown food.

Do community-based reasons provide positive support for buying food produced globally? Probably not. It is the possibility of repeated interactions and, in particular, high-information personal exchanges that build community ties. And these are facilitated by *being* local, or by being in frequent and close proximity, not buying locally *produced* food. Since these considerations do not track locality of food production, they favour neither local nor globally produced food.

3.2. Economy

What about locavorism's positive contribution to a community's economy? What matters more than the actual economic contribution is the opportunity cost. If local farmers were not farming, they would still, presumably, be engaging in some form of economic activity. What we should be interested in is the *added value* of local food production and consumption – how much additional economic benefit locavorism brings. From this perspective, it is not even clear that the contribution is positive, since foregone economic activities may have been highly lucrative. Relatedly, Helena de Bres notes that local food is often pricier than imported food.[19] When locavores buy the more expensive local produce, this means they have less money to spend on other local goods.

The degree of economic benefit is an empirical question that we do not intend to settle here. Rather, we want to consider a normative counterargument. Even if locavorism does provide added value for local economies, welfare considerations support purchasing *nonlocal* food in high-income countries. A significant portion of perishable food items in the United States are produced by relatively poor workers on large farms in California where the annual mean wages for crop, nursery, and greenhouse farmworkers in 2014 was $19,950, or about $9.59 per hour – well below the 2014 US poverty line for a family of four.[20] Engaging in consumer practices that support poorly paid farm workers, whether they work domestically or in low- and middle-income countries will often lead to greater overall welfare – and certainly more welfare for the poorest members of society – than buying locally will. It would be difficult to argue for the relatively strong claim that we are morally *obliged* to purchase our food in ways that support the poorest members of society, but the weaker claim that doing so is *morally better* than buying from wealthier persons is all that is needed to undermine the moral reason that buying local to support the local economy provides.[21]

One may object that just as the exploitation of sweatshop workers provides a reason to *avoid* products produced in those environments, the exploitatively low pay of these farm workers in fact supports purchasing *local* food. Yet, both objections seem misguided. If what really motivates us in these cases is a consideration for the poverty of the workers, then providing them some economic gains greater than their next best alternative is morally better than providing them with *nothing* (by buying locally), even if providing them with even higher wages would be better still.[22] We will return to this issue below. For now, we simply want to point out that considerations of economic gain can also be used to provide *positive* reasons for the 'buy global' option.

3.3. Environment

Finally, consider what is perhaps the strongest moral reason for buying locally: the environmental impact. Here too, the sceptical argument is that environmental impact simply does not track locality as closely as buy-local advocates claim.

John Hendrickson[23] finds that food transportation accounts for 11% of energy used in the US food system, while more recently Christopher Webber and H. Scott Matthews[24] find that food miles contributed 4% of the US food system's greenhouse gas emissions. The minimal contribution of food miles to greenhouse gas emissions suggests that if we want to mitigate the effect that our food habits have on the environment, focusing on food *miles* is not the most effective approach. The environmental impact of food has much more to do with how it is grown, than where.

Peter Singer and Jim Mason[25] provide ample evidence for this claim. They cite a study by Pretty and Ball[26] that found that irrigated rice in California takes 15 to 25 times the energy to grow as rice produced in Bangladesh, which is greater than the energy used to ship the rice to San Francisco. Indeed, 'taking the average car just five extra miles to visit a local farm or market will put as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as shipping 17 pounds of onions half way around the world, from New Zealand to London'.[27] Nor is it the case that local farmers are necessarily environmental farmers. Singer and Mason provide an anecdote about a local farmer who installed a hydroponic system to produce early tomatoes, and they estimate that transporting the same tomatoes from Florida would only use half of the fuel required to produce them locally.

Here again, it looks like a reason for buying locally – environmental damage – does not actually track locality. But could environmental considerations ever support shipping food and buying *globally*? Perhaps surprisingly, in some cases the answer is yes. Michael Pollan notes he was 'dismayed to discover that the grass-finished beef at Whole Foods had traveled all the way from New Zealand'.[28] The food miles, and thus carbon emissions, involved in transporting the beef are considerable. Even if emissions don't always track locality, surely they do in this case. However, note that not only are the potential emissions high, the *economic* cost of shipping from New Zealand is high as well. Why ship meat from New Zealand to New York when you could do so more affordably from, say, Nebraska? Part of the answer lies in the fact that New Zealand imports many goods. And it is more efficient both economically and environmentally, if those ships that transport goods *to* New Zealand do not return empty. So, viewed from one perspective, the carbon emissions involved in shipping beef from New Zealand are considerable. But what matters more – the *marginal* carbon emissions – are negligible. Unless we abandon all global trade, it is often more environmentally efficient to transport some foods significant distances. Thus, we *should* buy globally when the marginal environmental cost is lower than buying locally. Nevertheless, even if tracking food miles is not the most effective way to combat emissions, in some cases, all else equal, buying locally will still entail lower emissions than buying globally. Thus, emissions remain a problem for the 'buy global' approach.

4. Offsetting

We have argued so far that concerns with the community do not map onto the location of food production and so support neither locavorism nor its rival. And economic

concerns support locavorism or globalism depending on the relative normative importance of helping either those who are closest or those who are poorest. By contrast, locavorism may have a slight advantage over globalism when it comes to emissions. In this section, we defend a third option that we think dominates the others on the remaining two moral considerations. We argue that *it is morally best to buy globally and to purchase carbon offsets to mitigate the environmental impact of the food's total emissions*.

First, because it internalises the environmental externalities involved in the production and transport of the food, this option is environmentally superior to both the buy-local and buy-global options. While determining the *amount* of offsets one should purchase depends on empirical considerations, the claim that offsetting is morally superior because it mitigates these emissions does not. Second, because buying globally in high-income countries often means supporting poorer workers than those who are local, the economic contributions of the offset option (and the buy-global option) are morally superior to locavorism. Since the offset option is morally superior to both alternatives on the environmental front and is morally superior to locavorism on the economic front, we conclude that it is the morally best of the three options.

Of course, *how* one offsets matters. If the vehicle selected for offsetting does not actually deliver the promised level of emissions mitigation, then offsetting in *that* particular way does not lead to a morally superior outcome. There are a variety of approaches to offsetting, but they can generally be grouped in four categories: changes to energy use, changes to land use, the capture of greenhouse gasses, and reductions in *others'* emissions. Changes to energy use include initiatives that use carbon offset funds to support the construction of low emission forms of energy production, such as renewable energy; initiatives that reduce the cost to consumers of renewable energy (thus increasing its consumption); and projects that fund more efficient uses of energy, for example, by improving insulation in buildings. Changes to land use involve forest conservation, reforestation, and soil management projects. Greenhouse gas capture initiatives remove carbon and other greenhouse gasses from the atmosphere. Finally, carbon offset schemes accredited by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change can be used as carbon credits in emission trading schemes like the European Union Emission Trading Scheme.

5. Five Objections

The previous section outlines the positive argument for the offset option. But it does not defend it against objections. Here we consider what we take to be the five strongest. The first two objections attack the considerations that speak in favour of the offsetting option. One appeals to agent-relative reasons to deny that it is morally better to help poorer workers rather than local workers. The other denies that environmental harms can be compensated by carbon offsets.

The second two objections claim that we have not presented locavore argument in its strongest form. One argues that we omit a significant moral reason for being a locavore: locavorism disrupts the monopolistic power and corrupt practices of 'big agriculture'. The other claims that by setting aside 'merely' personal considerations and focusing on considerations we label 'social', we miss the most valuable considerations that support the locavore movement.

The final objection accepts all of our claims about global poverty and environmental concerns, but it argues that there exists an alternative 'symmetric' solution in which you buy local and donate to the global poor.

5.1. Agent-Relative Reasons

One way to object to the moral superiority of the offset option is to dismiss the claim that buying from relatively poor workers is morally superior to buying locally. You could do so by arguing that in some locales the poorest food-industry workers are *also* local workers. While true, this criticism is limited in scope. It remains the case that for most people, there are nonlocal alternatives that, when purchased, would benefit workers who are poorer than local producers.

There is another form of this objection that is both more universal and more fundamental. It argues that the economic considerations that support locavorism *trump* generalised wellbeing concerns. Just as there can be agent-relative reasons to, say, save one's own child from drowning rather than saving two other children, there can be agent-relative reasons to buy local to benefit local producers rather than nonlocal producers. There are two ways these permissions can be interpreted.

First, they may be interpreted as permissions to buy locally while admitting that doing so is less good than other alternatives. In other words, this approach leaves room for supererogatory acts by allowing agents to do less than the morally best alternative. Under this interpretation, the agent-relative-obligations objection does not undermine our argument for the offsetting option. Our claim is *not* that buying locally is *impermissible*, but rather that offsetting is morally better. Because the first interpretation accepts this claim, it does not undermine the moral superiority of the offsetting option.

The second interpretation is that these special relationships do not support a permission to do less good, but rather, they make buying local morally superior, either because they ground an *obligation* to buy from local producers, or they make it such that benefits to local producers are morally *better* than buying nonlocally. We will focus on the second, weaker claim, which still poses a threat to the superiority of the offsetting option. That is, the claim that special relationships ground agent-relative reasons that make buying locally morally better than buying globally.

But what kind of special relationships ground these agent-relative reasons? There are two candidates. First, agent-relative reasons could be supported by institutional considerations like those used in statist objections to cosmopolitanism. Second, agent-relative reasons could be supported by attachment-based considerations similar to those that support the special treatment of friends, family, and lovers.

Andrea Sangiovanni has argued certain demands of justice apply only to those within a state because of the '*reciprocity* among those who support and maintain the state's capacity to provide the basic collective goods necessary to protect us from physical attack and to maintain and reproduce a stable system of property rights and entitlements'.[29]

Now, we do not intend to take a stance in the debate about global justice between statists and cosmopolitans. However, regardless of whether Sangiovanni's considerations vindicate statism, they surely cannot support locavorism because the considerations he cites are not tied to *geographic* locality, especially one that is limited to

locavorism's 400-mile range. At best, they provide a reason to buy *domestically*.[30] Institutional considerations are too geographically dispersed to support the kinds of special relationships needed to provide agent-relative reasons for locavorism.

Archetypal attachment-based reasons include the familial relationships mentioned above that might make it morally *better* to save one's own child from drowning than to save two others. In the context of locavorism, it might be that Alice's relation to farmer Bob as friend or neighbour grounds the moral superiority of buying his produce rather than that of nonlocal producers. However, there are three problems for this source of agent-relative reasons.

The first is a 'bootstrapping problem'. In order for attachment-based reasons to give Alice a reason to buy locally, they must already be in place. Alice has attachment-based reason to buy from farmer Bob only if she already has attachments to him. For some people contemplating locavorism, these attachments are in place, but this is not true of all potential locavores. If these relations are not already in place, they cannot be what provides Alice with an agent-relative reason that makes her choice to buy local morally superior to offsetting.

The second problem concerns the strength of attachment-based considerations. Typical examples of agent-relative reasons appeal to cases that provide significant benefits (saving a life) to strongly attached persons (children, spouses). The suspicion that preferential treatment is wrongfully partisan increases when either the benefits or the attachments are weakened. Since the weight and benefits of the attachments that figure in locavorism are much lower than those that figure in other cases, the onus, we claim, is on locavores to explain why and how the attachments that could justify the practice are strong enough to override the needs of relatively poorer persons.

Finally, although they can track geographic locality, attachment-based considerations can – and increasingly do – come apart from locality. Increased mobility and globalisation means that those to whom we have attachments are often not those who are geographically closest to us. If Alice grew up in Iowa but lives in China, her attachment-based ties would seem to support – at least in some cases – buying *nonlocal* produce from Iowa, rather than local produce from China.

The kinds of reciprocal institutional considerations that ground statism are too geographically broad to ground agent-relative reasons to favour locavorism. And attachment-based considerations are sometimes not in place, often too weak, and can fail to correspond to locality. We conclude there are no convincing considerations capable of grounding agent-relative reasons that could vindicate locavorism.

5.2. Noncompensable Harms

Supposedly, sometime in the 1990s, members of Oxford's notorious Bullingdon Club hired a string quartet to play for a party and, before the night was over, they destroyed the musicians' instruments, which included a valuable Stradivarius violin.[31] The students apparently paid the violinist to compensate the loss. Although justice certainly requires such compensation, destroying a rare and expensive violin and then paying the owner the market value does not, for many reasons, undo the wrong involved in its destruction.

Similarly, you might think that you cannot wantonly emit carbon and then purchase carbon offsets to mitigate the effect of your emissions. There are many ways that

emitting carbon might be wrong and the manner and degree to which the wrong of emissions can be mitigated depends on *why* emissions are wrong.[32] Here we consider the possibility that carbon emission is intrinsically wrong, indirectly wrong, and that offsetting is not a viable solution. We address each type of argument in turn.

Could carbon emission be intrinsically morally wrong? It is difficult to think of any plausible reason why this might be so. As Michael Sandel notes, 'emitting carbon dioxide is not in itself objectionable. We all do it every time we exhale. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with putting CO2 into the air. What is wrong is doing it to excess, as part of an energy profligate way of life'.[33] Although emitting carbon dioxide is not wrong in itself, *harming* other people clearly is wrong. John Broome estimates that the average carbon emissions from a person born in 1950 and living in a rich country will wipe out more than six months of healthy human life.[34] Since the environmental impact of excess of carbon emission harms other people, it seems *excess* emissions are *indirectly* wrong.

Note, however, that if *excess* carbon emission is indirectly wrong because environmental impacts harm others, then there are two ways to prevent this wrong. First, you could emit excess carbon and find ways to stop the environmental changes that occur from harming others. Second (and more reasonably), you could ensure that you do not emit *excess* carbon. And you can do this by either limiting your carbon emissions or emitting and then removing carbon. The easiest and most effective way to do the latter is to purchase carbon offsets. So, if carbon emissions are indirectly wrong because excess emissions harm others, this wrong is avoided when you genuinely offset your carbon emissions.

If emitting and offsetting is neither intrinsically nor indirectly wrong, might it be bad in some less obvious, more indirect way? One worry about offsetting is that the price of carbon offsets is low because demand for offsets is low.[35] Widespread non-compliance means that the sacrifice individual consumers must make *now* to offset is relatively minor. And this, in turn, means that offsetting does not require very robust moral motives. As Spiekermann argues, 'the current offsetting practice rests on motivations that are very likely unstable. . .the current offsetting practice is only functional because just a small minority of people participates in it. . .it would collapse under full compliance because individuals are unlikely to pay the (much higher) full compliance market price'.[36] These considerations challenge the stability of the offset option. If everyone bought offsets, the option might become prohibitively expensive. The observation about offset prices emphasises that the rationale for the offsetting option depends, in part, on empirical considerations and that under certain perturbations of these considerations the option is no longer compelling. However, they do not amount to an objection to the offsetting option *given current economic conditions*. The fact that we ought to behave in a different way if circumstances change does not imply that we ought also to behave in that way now.

Since none of the arguments that emitting and offsetting is intrinsically or indirectly wrong succeed in undermining support for the actions, and since it is difficult to make sense of any *other* reasons that it could be wrong, we conclude that there are no significant objections to purchasing foods that emit carbon and then purchasing carbon offsets to mitigate this environmental impact.

5.3. Monopolies and Economic Concerns

Advocates for local food might be motivated by a concern with security of food supply: in particular, with not being at the mercy of monopolistic food conglomerates.[37] Economic theory straightforwardly predicts that too much market power by suppliers is detrimental to consumers. A lack of competition leads to higher prices, worse quality, and less consumer choice. Farmers too (at least, small-scale farmers) are disadvantaged when large portions of the supply chain, such as processing, distribution, and retailing, are controlled by monopolistic food conglomerates. The lack of competition means farmers face high costs for their inputs, including seeds, fertilisers, and machinery. In some cases, farmers may be forced into contracts by large-scale suppliers that constrain their ability to repair machinery or that limit what they can do with the seeds they buy.[38]

Despite their validity, as with many of the concerns of local food advocates, it is not clear that the concern with monopolies and a lack of consumer choice is tied to spatial geography in particular. A family-owned local store will still have monopolistic power if it is the only store in town. There will certainly be fewer potential food suppliers in a 400 radius from a particular location than there will be in the rest of the world. Opening up food purchasing to the entire world means more suppliers, greater competition, lower prices, better quality, and a wider variety of food. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that the longer supply chains in global food purchasing undermine food security. Economic changes (such as local stores closing) and natural disasters (such as droughts) are often geographically constrained and can devastate the supply of local food. Global supply chains, in virtue of their diversity, provide for food security by hedging against the risks of local events. Locavorism neither undermines monopolies, nor does it better protect consumers from food insecurity than a global food market. Even in the case of global pandemics, such as COVID-19, which severely disrupt global supply chains, it is not clear that a reliance on local food production alone would mitigate disruption (even if local production does provide an added layer of robustness). Rather than relying solely on local food, what is called for in such situations is a *robust* supply chain that sources food from multiple, geographically diverse suppliers.

There is a second reason to be worried about the power of multinational food corporations that impacts poor food workers rather than relatively wealthier consumers and producers. You might be sceptical about the benefits that buying globally purportedly brings to the poor, because you think that (a) in the end the poor don't get *any* welfare benefit, or because the welfare benefit they do receive is morally less valuable than possible welfare benefits to local persons. We have already considered the agent-relative reasons objection that the benefits to the poor are morally less valuable, but there is another reason you might hold this view. You might think that (b) the welfare benefit the poor receive when we buy global is part of – and sustains – an exploitative labour contract.

First consider (a). Is it possible that the poor might receive *no* benefit from the 'buy global' approach? The 'causal impotence objection' usually raised against utilitarian arguments for vegetarianism provides a reason to be sceptical about the welfare effects of buying globally.[39] In the context of the buy-global approach, the objection is that,

given the large scale of global food production, any particular individual is causally impotent in providing welfare benefits to poor food producers.

First, note that the causal impotence objection applies *both* to benefits and harms of buying globally. So, if you accept the objection, then you also should not be worried that an individual's buying globally contributes to the establishment of food monopolies, since any individual actor's causal impact is impotent. But if the objection is true and buying globally doesn't help the global poor, then, assuming locavorism *does* help local producers, welfare considerations would support locavorism.

Are individuals causally impotent to benefit the (global) producers of their food products? There are certain benefits of buying from large global producers that are nonlinear: one extra dollar of revenue will not open a new plant, cause new hires, or result in raises. But it is very hard to believe that these revenues do not aggregate in such a way that *the general* practice of doing so – even by one individual – will not result in meaningful benefits for those who work to produce the food. If enough people band together to buy globally, then the collective effect will indeed benefit global producers. Furthermore, in the context of meat consumption, Steven McMullen and Matthew Halteman have recently argued that when producers 'operate in highly competitive environments', with sophisticated supply chains that 'efficiently communicate some information about product demand' and 'consumers. . .have positive consumption spillover effects on other consumers', then 'there are good reasons to believe that single individual consumers – not just consumers in aggregate – really do make a positive difference'.[40] These three factors seem to be present beyond the context of meat production in the global food economy more generally. In the context of the locavore debate, the impotence objection is not very convincing.

A more far plausible worry is (b). Even though our purchases benefit these workers compared to the baseline of not being employed, they also contribute to their exploitation when multinational corporations pass on an unfairly low proportion of the revenue to workers in the form of wages. At issue is the moral ordering between three options: fair employment, beneficial but exploitative employment, and nonemployment. Although everyone can agree that fair employment is the best of these three alternatives, a serious debate within the literature on exploitation concerns the ranking of the next two. Many follow Joan Robinson in concluding that 'the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all'.[41] However, others such as Alan Wertheimer reject the so-called nonworseness condition, which claims that if not transacting is permissible and unfair transaction is nevertheless beneficial for the exploited, then it cannot be seriously wrong to transact unfairly.[42] This debate cannot be settled here; however, there are two points worth emphasising. First, both sides of the debate are live – thus, it is not immediately clear that the concern with exploitation tells against the offsetting option. Second, and more importantly, as Ferguson and Ostmann argue, provided that the fair transaction lies between the transactors' reservation prices, there are ways for consumers to take direct action to transform unfair and exploitative work settings into fair ones, thus mooting the unfairness worry.[43]

5.4. Personal Reasons Revisited

The fourth objection concerns both the lack of weight we place on considerations like taste, health, and food safety in the moral evaluation of locavorism and a related

concern about food sovereignty. We focus first on taste, health, and food safety. Locavores might object that these are among the strongest reasons for their support of the practice. Indeed, in Schnell's surveys of community-supported agriculture groups, 'the most common sentiments expressed' by his interviewees – the category of 'taste/freshness/nutritional content' – correspond to taste and health, and the second most common – 'organic or low input growing methods' – correspond to health and safety considerations.[44] If these factors are important to individuals' wellbeing and if welfare should be accorded weight in moral considerations, then it is inappropriate to dismiss them as *merely* personal (nonmoral) considerations.

The concern with eating organic or GMO-free food might be motivated by a concern for the impact of industrial agriculture on the environment. Fertiliser run-off leaches into waterways, creating algal blooms and suffocating aquatic life; pesticide use can destroy the ecological diversity in farm land; GMOs involve tampering with the genome of organisms and create unknown risks. Our response to consumers motivated to buy local by these types of concerns is that buying local is far too crude a heuristic for organic and GMO-free food. If an individual wants to purchase organic and GMO-free food, then there are organic and GMO-free certification and labelling schemes that the consumer can use which, while not perfect, are far more reliable means for identifying these types of foods than relying on locality as a heuristic.

Furthermore, the contribution of personal preferences to either globalism or locavorism 'wash out' since they are present on both sides of the debate. While locavores' taste for local foods gives *them* a reason to buy local, others' taste for cheaper produce gives them a reason to not. There is thus an important sense in which these personal considerations are not exportable to those not already convinced by locavorism.

Locavores might object that this response only succeeds by framing taste, health, and food safety as *subjective* preferences, but, they might argue, they are in fact *objective* considerations. That is, it is not merely locavore opinion that local food has these benefits, rather these benefits are (a) objectively present in locally grown food and (b) features that persons *ought morally* to desire. There are two ways to respond to this rebuttal.

The first is to challenge the truth of these objective claims and their correlation to geographic locality. For example, food's being grown locally is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being grown organically. The same holds for food safety, which has more to do with production conditions than food miles. It also seems highly unlikely that an argument that local food objectively tastes better can succeed.

However, a more interesting response is to simply accept the claim. Suppose that foods being grown locally is, at least, strongly *correlated* to its being safer, tastier, and healthier. It is not enough to demonstrate that these considerations provide some reasons to buy locally. If locavorism is morally better than the offsetting option, these reasons must *outweigh* the considerations that speak in favour of offsetting. That is, the differences between local and nonlocal food in terms of personal health, taste, and safety need to be significant enough to justify the denial of benefits to nonlocal food producers who are relatively impoverished. *Prima facie*, it is implausible that the important welfare benefits that would accrue to the relatively impoverished are outweighed by e.g. the perception that a locally grown tomato tastes better. The onus for establishing the claim that the personal considerations are overriding is on locavores.

We now consider the objection raised by food sovereignty advocates. The argument here is that, as the Declaration of Nyéléni states, people have rights to 'healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems'.[45] Yet, if health taste and nutrition do no track locality, then satisfying this right does not require local food. Similarly, a right to culturally appropriate food will, for diasporan communities, often require buying nonlocally produced food. For example, ackee, a staple of Jamaican cuisine, is imported to the United Kingdom by British Jamaicans. In fact, many foods that are linked to particular cultures, such as Irish potatoes (colcannon) or Italian tomatoes (pasta al pomodoro), were originally global foods. This leaves a right to ecologically sound methods of food production as the remaining food sovereignty concern. The offsetting option is designed to neutralize any additional emissions generated by the transport of nonlocal food, thus provided the purchased offsets actually offset emissions, the offsetting option is just as environmentally sustainable as buying locally.

We suspect this response still may not satisfy food-sovereignty advocates because a significant motivation for that movement is to move to more egalitarian forms of ownership of the means of food production (and distribution). Consider the American family farm: 90% of these family farms are small operations, with gross income under $350,000 (and far lower *net* incomes). Yet these small farms generate only 24% of the value of US crop production.[46] On the other hand, less than 3% of US farms are *large* family farms (with gross incomes greater than $1 million), but these enterprises generate 42% of the value of US crop production.[47] There is certainly an inegalitarian distribution of income between the families that run these farms, and food-sovereignty advocates are right to be concerned about figures like these. Yet because the large-scale farms also control large (and ever increasing) parcels of land, they are also 'local' for a significant portion of American consumers. But then it seems that the distributive concerns that at least partly motivate food-sovereignty movements give a reason to buy nonlocal, if your local producer is a *large* family farmer. Thus, though food-sovereignty concerns are important, they are again not tightly related to the locality of food production.

5.5. The Symmetric Solution

Our argument for the offsetting option proceeded as follows. We identified three dimensions of moral value in the debate about locavorism: economic, environmental, and community. We argued that with respect to strengthening social ties in a community neither globalism nor locavorism was superior. What matters ultimately for social ties is that *purchase*, not production, happens locally. When it came to the other dimensions, locavorism *may* be a better promoter of environmental values in some contexts, but globalism is a better promoter of economic welfare (for the poor). Our solution was to construct a third option – the offsetting option – which realises the economic gains of globalism while neutralising, via offsets, any possible superiority of locavorism in the environmental dimension. However, once the problem is set up in this way, it seems that there is a fourth salient option. You could instead realise the environmental gains by buying locally while also providing welfare to the poor via direct monetary donations equivalent to what they would have received had you

bought globally. Call this the donating option. Isn't the donating option at least as morally good as the offsetting option?

In order to do good in both dimensions, the donation options requires (a) the purchase of local food and (b) a donation to the poor that benefits them as much as they would have benefitted from the purchase of global food. The offset option, on the other hand, requires (c) the purchase of global food and (d) the purchase of offsets to mitigate the emissions difference between local and global food. Determining prices of (a) through (d) is an empirical matter, but the cost of both (b) and (d) are likely to be relatively low. Let us assume they are roughly equivalent. The prices of (a) and (c), on the other hand are rarely equivalent. Local food is, generally speaking, more expensive than global food.

Both the offsetting and donation options generate the same outcomes. The donating option mitigates poverty via a donation and mitigates emissions by reducing air miles. The offsetting option mitigates poverty by buying food from the poor and mitigates any extra emissions through carbon offsets. Since the amounts of emission mitigation and poverty mitigation are equalised for both options, they both do the same amount of good.

However, since \$(a)+(b) > \$(c)+(d), the donation option does this amount of good for more money. And this entails that the offsetting option does *more* good for the same amount of money. This inefficiency is not merely a matter of concern for the consumer's pocketbook. It also concerns how much good one can do with a fixed budget. What we are trying to determine is, given that you plan to spend \$x on food, what is the most good you can do for the environment and for food producers for that amount of money. Since the donation option is inefficient, the most good you can do is to select the offsetting option.

A final point of clarification: asking *how* can you best help producers and the environment with your food purchases is a different question than the more general 'what is the most overall good you can do with a fixed budget?'. We are trying to answer the first question, not the more general one. The best moral arguments for locavorism are that it is instrumental in promoting environmental and producer welfare concerns. And our point is that *given* that you care about the effects of your food purchases on producer welfare and the environment, there are better options for promoting these values than locavorism. Or, to put it another way, the best instrumental reasons for locavorism actually support the offsetting option.

6. Conclusion

As we close, we want to stress that we do not think it is impermissible to buy local produce, and, indeed, we find it enjoyable to shop at our local farmers' markets. But we have strongly criticised the rather common claim that by so doing we are engaging in behaviour that is *morally* superior to alternative options and thus warrants moral praise. Aside from lower emissions in certain contexts, the purported moral benefits of locavorism are generally unrelated to the actual locality of food production, and the belief that it *is* morally commendable can produce real moral harms when locavorism comes at the expense of the world's most vulnerable food producers.

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NOTES

1 For celebrity chef endorsements, see Greg Williams, 'Noma's Taste of Tomorrow: Creating the Future of Food', *Wired*, (2017) https://www.wired.co.uk/article/inside-noma-copenhagen. For mentions in the media, see Tony Naylor 'Hyperlocal Heroes: Meet the Chefs Growing their Own', *The Guardian*, (2018) https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/jan/25/hyperlocal-chefs-food-and-drink-restaurants-tony-naylor.
For agricultural extension advocacy, see Vern Grubinger, 'Ten Reasons to Buy Local Food', *University of Vermont Vegetable and Berry Programme*, (2010) https://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/buylocal.html.

2 Steven M. Schnell, 'Food Miles, Local Eating, and Community Supported Agriculture: Putting Local Food in its Place', *Agriculture and Human Values*, 30: (2013): 615–628 and David Cleveland, et al. 'Operationalizing Local Food: Goals, Actions, and Indicators for Alternative Food Systems', *Agriculture and Human Values*, 32, (2015): 281–297.

3 Judith Weinraub, 'Q&A with Michael Pollan: Think Global, Eat Local', *Washington Post*, (2006): https://michaelpollan.com/interviews/qa-with-michael-pollan-think-global-eat-local/.

4 Our article is focused on this question alone. We do not address the wider debate about the moral implications of different diets or how one should act to *minimise* one's impact on the environment.

5 See Clare Hinrichs, 'Fixing Food with Ideas of 'Local' and 'Place'', *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 6, (2015), pp. 759 – 764. We have adopted a fairly descriptive and ethically 'thin' definition of local, but thicker definitions exist in the literature. For example, in 'Creating Space for Sustainable Food Systems: Lessons from the Field' *Agriculture and Human Values*, 19, 2, (2002): pp. 99–106, Gail Feenstra defines the local food movement as 'a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption [are] integrated to enhance the economic, environmental, and local health of a particular place'. More generally, in 'Are Local Food and the Local Food Movement Taking Us Where We Want to Go? Or Are We Hitching Our Wagons to the Wrong Stars?' *Agriculture and Human Values*, 28, 2 (2011): 273-283, Laura B. DeLind argues that accounts of 'local' overlap with notions of regenerative food systems.

6 In her article, 'Local Food: The Moral Case' in Anne Barnhill, Mark Budolfson, and Tyler Doggett, (eds.) *Food, Ethics and Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Helena De Bres focuses on the stronger claim of whether or not we are morally required to buy local food – that is, whether locavorism is a moral obligation of some sort.

7 Furthermore, in cases where consumers buy for themselves, the reasons for buying local are self-regarding reasons. But self-regarding reasons are contingent in a way that other regarding reasons are not: *provided*

you care about health, flavour, or food safety (and assuming these values are better realised in local food), then you have a reason to buy local. But if you don't value these aspects – or you value other aspects of nonlocal food more – then these personal reasons lose their force. This is not the case with other-regarding reasons like climate change. Even if you don't care about the climate, you *should*.

8 Pierre Desrochers and Hiroku Shimizu, *The Locavore's Dilemma*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

9 We are interested in the question of whether locality (or proximity) of production is a property of food that matters morally. But, as Samantha Noll and Ian Werkheiser point out, other conceptions of local food place a greater emphasis on factors other than locality. See Samantha Noll and Ian Werkeiser, 'Food Movements: Differing Conceptions of Food, People, and Change' in Anne Barnhill, Mark Budolfson, and Tyler Doggett (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

10 Michael Pollan, 'Eat your View', *New York Times,* (2006), https://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/eat-your-view/.

11 Other environmental considerations are sometimes taken to support locavorism. One is that local food products are often GMO free and organic. However, in this case we don't need to use locality as a proxy for these kinds of foods since we can simply buy GMO free or organic directly.

12 Daniel Otto and Theresa Varner, 'Consumers, Vendors, and the Economic Importance of Iowa Farmers' Markets: An Economic Impact Survey Analysis'. *Iowa State University, Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture Report* (2005).

13 David Hughes, et al. 'Evaluating the Economic Impact of Farmers' Markets Using an Opportunity Cost Framework', *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 40, 1 (2008): 253–265.

14 Schnell 2013 op. cit., p. 622.

15 Schnell 2013 op. cit., p. 622.

16 Schnell 2013 op. cit., p. 622.

17 For overviews of food sovereignty and associated issues, see William Schanbacher, *The Politics of Food: The Global Conflict Between Food Security and Food Sovereignty*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010) and Hannah Wittman, et al., *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community* (Hallifax and Winnipeg, Fernwood, 2010).

18 Noll and Werkheiser 2018 op. cit., p. 127.

19 de Bres 2016 op. cit.

20 These income figures are from the US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 'Occupational Employment Statistics for Fishing Farming and Forestry', *United States Department of Labour* (2014). The 2014 poverty line for a family of four in the United States was $23,850 according to the 'Poverty Guidelines for the 48 Contiguous States and the District of Colombia', *United States Dept of Health and Human Services*, (2014).

21 Mark Navin, 'Local Food and International Ethics', *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 27, 3 (2014): 349-368 discusses the deontic form of this argument.

22 See Benjamin Ferguson, 'The Paradox of Exploitation', in *Erkenntnis*, 81,5 (2016): 951–972 as well as Benjamin Ferguson and Florian Ostmann, 'Sweatshops and Consumer Choices' in *Economics and Philosophy*, 34, 3 (2018): 295–315.

23 John Hendrickson, 'Energy Use in the US Food System: A Summary of Existing Research and Analysis', *Sustainable Farming*, 7, 4 (1997): 1–12.

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25 Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006).

26 Jules Pretty and Andrew Ball, 'Agricultural Influences on Carbon Emissions and Sequestration: A Review of Evidence and the Emerging Trading Options', *Centre for Environment and Society Occasional Paper, University of Essex* (2001).

27 Singer and Mason 2006 op. cit., p. 241. For more on the issue of food miles, see Paul Thompson, *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

28 Pollan 2006 op. cit.

29 Andrea Sangiovanni, 'Global Justice, Reciprocity, and the State', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 35, 1 (2007): 3–39.

30 Indeed, Sangiovani's considerations can conflict with locavorism if you live near a border, since statist considerations would support buying food produced domestically (but further afield) over purchasing local food. We thank Matteo Bonotti for this point.

31 Tom Mutch, 'Breaking the Bullingdon Club Omertà: Secret Lives of the Men Who Run Britain' *Daily Beast,* (2016), https://www.thedailybeast.com/breaking-the-bullingdon-club-omerta-secret-lives-of-the-men-who-run-britain.
32 See Keith Hyams and Tina Fawcett 'The Ethics of Carbon Offsetting' *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change,* 4, 2 (2013): 91–98 for a discussion.
33 Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, (London: Allen Lane 2012): 73.
34 John Broome, *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*. (London: W. W. Norton, 2012).
35 Kai Spiekermann, 'Buying Low, Flying High: Carbon Offsets and Partial Compliance', *Political Studies* 62, 4 (2014): 913–929.
36 Spiekermann 2014 op. cit., p. 914.
37 For a survey of such concerns, see Anne Barnhill Tyler and Dogget, 'Food Ethics I: Food Production and Food Justice', *Philosophy Compass* 13, 3 (2018): 1-13 as well as Anne Barnhill, 'Does locavorism keep it too simple?' in Andrew Chignell, Terence Cueno, And Matthew Halteman (eds.), *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments About the Ethics of Eating* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
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39 We thank Jan-Willem Wieland and Josh Milburn for bringing this objection to our attention. For discussions, see Russ Shafer-Landau, 'Vegetarianism, Causation and Ethical Theory', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 8 (1994): 85–100 as well as Jeremy Garrett, 'Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism and Human Health: A Response to the Causal Impotence Objection', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 24, 3 (2007): 223-237.
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41 Joan Robinson, *Economic Philosophy*, (Bungay: Penguin, 1962): 45.
42 Alan Wertheimer, *Exploitation,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Ferguson 2016 op. cit.
43 Ferguson and Ostmann 2018 op. cit.
44 Schnell 2013 op. cit., p. 621.
45 Declaration of Nyéléni, (2007), https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290.
46 United States Department of Agriculture, 'America's Diverse Family Farms' *Economic Research Service, Economic Information Bulletin,* 164, (2016).
47 United States Department of Agriculture 2016 op. cit.