Paul Thompson

DANNY LENNON: And with that, let me welcome to the show Professor Paul Thompson. Paul Thompson, thank you so much for joining me for this discussion. Before I jump into any of my specific questions, just for some context for people listening, how would you introduce yourself and the work that you do?

PAUL THOMPSON: Well, my training is in philosophy but I've spent most of my career and I'm getting close to the end of it, working in colleges of agriculture in the United States, first in Texas for a short time in Indiana. And then for the last 20 years almost I've been at Michigan State University and a position created by the Kellogg Foundation, which is a charitable foundation in the US, based from the cereal, the fortune of the cereal company that most people know. And so their focus is on, my primary focus is on food and agriculture and the ethical questions that come up in that domain.

DANNY LENNON: As I think I'd mentioned to you I'm trying to explore this question at least some framing it from a personal perspective of me living in the Western world with an ability to make decisions around food and having the access to certain foods. Is it immoral of me to choose to consume an omniverse diet that I have the requisite knowledge and resources not to do that if I chose to eat a vegan diet, and that's

the kind of lens to try and explore this question. Now I realize that's not a simple question probably to answer off the bat. So how would you start by deconstructing some of the elements of that question that would allow us to maybe get closer to an answer?

PAUL THOMPSON: Well, I want to start by saying that I don't want anything else that I say to imply that you should try out veganism or that someone should try it out or become a vegan and I don't have any ethical problems with that. And I think it's great that people are successful at doing that. I think there are probably good health based reasons and good animal ethics based reasons and good environmental ethics based reasons to, that would support vegan diets, choosing vegan diets for many people, and I would actually start out by kind of picking on what might seem like a hairsplitting point to many people. But it's in framing the question as would it be immoral given that I have the means to do this? And I think I want to start by just suggesting that yeah that might be, that might make a certain amount of sense in terms of how an individual is thinking about it. But it really conditions the whole notion of what's moral or immoral on having a certain amount of wealth. And I think that's actually a problematic starting point. One might have asked 200 years ago, if I have enough wealth, does that mean I should give up my slaves? Well, everybody should give up their slaves. It's an unethical practice. It doesn't really matter how wealthy you are. And I think that there are certain arguments that would suggest that veganism is a moral requirement for everyone. And I don't accept those arguments. And so I would also suggest that we really need to think about what's moral and what's immoral in ways that are a bit more neutral.

The other thing I would say is that I think that there are people who probably would have difficulty with a vegan diet irrespective of wealth. Now, your question may have let that out as well. But I do think there are some people and I'm actually one of them who have had difficulty with health issues when experimenting with the vegan diet. I don't know that there are ways to get around that. But it's difficult for people in many settings to do that. And I think that's a factor that also qualifies the sense of which it would be immoral to fail to choose a vegan diet.

DANNY LENNON: Right. Yeah. And I think probably my initial framing may have just come from a lack of correctly using those terms of moral or ethics or at least understanding clear definitions. And I think maybe some of the reasoning for trying to couch it in having certain access to resources, at least from my understanding, and maybe you can let me know if this doesn't come into some of this would be that the difference in context for me versus someone in a developing nation where we have clear cases of research showing that the inclusion of more animal based products leads to greater health outcomes because they now have more calorie dense, nutrient dense options, otherwise they wouldn't, or similarly in places that are food deserts around the world. So I'm just wondering, how does the health implications for us individually factor into a moral question or is that almost a completely separate issue that we can completely detach?

PAUL THOMPSON: Well, that's a complicated question. I mean, there are certainly things that we can at least imagine, and that where someone might do things for health reasons that would be immoral. You know, here's an extreme case, you need a kidney transplant, you kidnapped somebody and steal their kidneys, right, that's immoral. That's not an acceptable practice. So the fact that you're doing it for your health certainly doesn't just give you license to do anything that improves your health. So I think that the way that I would kind of tease this out is that let me kind of back up. I think that the force of the original question is that if there are, if you are someone who could easily and without much sacrifice, adopt a vegan diet, are there good reasons for you to do that? And I think the answer to that is probably yes. They are somewhat health rate related. Although this is not a universal claim, not everybody is in this position, and somewhat related to animals. This is the age old question, it goes back to Aristotle, should we be eating sentient creatures? And so I think those provide reasons that are compelling to many individuals, and then we've learned recently that the production of animals and industrial animal systems does produce significant burdens on the environment. So those are all good reasons to really give veganism serious consideration. But I think that people in many walks of life are going to find those reasons more or less difficult to act on. I think that for any individual, it's still reasonable for them to basically not choose to become vegan

there. The reasons may have everything to do from their personal health just to even if they're considerably well off just to the difficulty of maintaining a vegan diet, given where it is that you live, and I just spent a turn in the deep South there in the United States, and it's not, you know, if you're not somebody who's going to do most of your cooking at home, it's not going to be easy to maintain a vegan diet in that kind of a setting. And so you just run into difficulties. And I think these things fit into that part of our lives where we really need to respect that people face a lot of very different situations. And they're going to face a complicated set of challenges that are so various that we need to respect individual choices on this matter.

DANNY LENNON: Right. And especially when we think about something like food that is so inherently tied to culture and to social occasions, and to the family and local community, that it's easy to see how trying to make changes there not only are very difficult, but could also have indirect impacts on other people around us that could be seen as a negative as well.

PAUL THOMPSON: So to give you an example of that my daughter who is a vegetarian, she's not a vegan, but she's a vegetarian. She's been a vegetarian since she was about eight years old. She's now in her 30s. And she married into a Mexican-American family. And she made one compromise on doing that, which is she doesn't ask how the beans were cooked. Because the beans are often cooked with lard. They don't really understand how she can be a vegetarian. They just look at it as a kind of curiosity. But she's realized that she can still maintain a lot of her commitments and also maintain a certain amount of peace and harmony in the family just by adopting a kind of Don't Ask, Don't Tell question to with respect to the beans. She wants anything to eat anything that has recognizable pieces of meat at it, but she's softened up a little bit.

DANNY LENNON: That example actually reminds me when I was talking to Andrew Chignell about some of these ethical considerations. And he mentioned that there are these, it's like you've outlined, it's not this black and white question that there's these indirect impacts. And he had a very similar anecdote of when he goes to visit his family and if he's there, and he has a grandmother or an aunt that makes a

meatloaf that is it for him to refuse to consume that could have a very negative feeling for someone that he loves and would make them feel bad and be put out. That is something that needs to be factored into a equation, so to speak, around our ethical choices, I guess, which is maybe not immediately obvious to people.

PAUL THOMPSON: That's right. And I think that I tend to put this in terms of how easy is it for you to do this and I think that people who can do it and don't feel like they're making huge sacrifices or having to completely rearrange different inconvenient parts of their life and change their relationships with close relatives and friends and so on then that's when the considerations really I think start to weigh heavily in favor of this kind of any vegetarianism or veganism or even just what some people call the semi-vegetarianism where you just try to eat vegetarian or vegan a few days of the week.

DANNY LENNON: Some of the typical points made by those that would be advocating for veganism, particularly from a purely ethical perspective, would often cite work by Peter Singer [PH] is probably the most commonly cited person, but there are others and which kind of centers I know I am probably simplifying but centers around the idea that if there is unnecessary suffering caused to these animals by our food choices, even if it that space in our food preferences and so on, it's still a unethical thing to do because that suffering is unnecessary. Where is the delineation between that kind of perspective of viewing ethics versus other types of ethical frameworks that we can use; if that question makes some sense.

PAUL THOMPSON: So Singer's view is actually not that far from what I've just articulated. I think that Singer and I might disagree a bit on how we interpret that word necessary, but he certainly respects the idea that for some individuals the costs of a vegan or vegetarian diet might exceed the benefits and the benefits are primarily accruing to the non-humans in this case. There may be some cases where the costs are just too high and I think his view accepts that it is, as you said, focused very much on suffering. And so he's also very supportive of things that we can do that would reduce the amount of suffering. So it's possible to have a form of slaughter that's painless. If the animals are raised in good conditions, then these become lesser evils I think on Singer's view. There are other views out there which

would really see, take a much harder line with respect to the moral standing of the animals. And they might argue that animals have a kind of spirit or a term that was introduced by another philosopher Tom Regan is that they have a form of subjectivity. They care about their lives and we owe them the same kind of respect that we would owe other people. And this would really sort of draw a hard firm line that only in cases where you might think that even cannibalism would be at least forgivable, would it be morally acceptable to think about taking an animal's life? I mean Reagan is clear that if you have to choose between a human and an animal you choose to human but there really isn't any space for the kind of weighing of costs and benefits that's built into Singer's position.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah, it's interesting to see some of those different positions stacked against one another. And it's just interesting to see these various different perspectives that can all be brunched under ethics to make this issue even more complex I guess to navigate.

PAUL THOMPSON: It does get pretty complicated and there's been a tendency in the history of human civilization. I was about to say the history of philosophy. But this is something that philosophers share with everyone which has been to really see the divide is between humans and animals as if all non humans are alike. But in fact, there's probably as much difference between the chicken and the pig as there is between a human and a pig, or between a human and a chicken. So, I've really, in my work, I've really stressed the idea that we should see ourselves as one species among many. And when we start thinking about things like autonomy, or suffering, or whatever, we really need to get down to the details and try to understand what it's like to be a creature of a particular species with the particular body types and subjective experiences that are characteristic of a particular species. And in fact, I think sometimes we project a kind of human kind of experience on animals in ways that are to the detriment of the animals. So it's really, I guess, my particular line to push here is that, let's not think in terms of humans versus animals, let's try to understand the particular characteristics of each species. And in some respects, even getting down to differences that have to do with the way that an animal or a person is raised and how they acquire certain traits and characteristics over the course of their lifetime. We shouldn't forget that we can be pretty confident that all

vertebrate animals feel pain and they feel pain much the same way that we feel pain. There's some debates around that that get down to physiology. But it seems I'm willing to accept the idea that bodily injuries would be experienced much the same way even in a fish, as in a human or in any other species. Once you get down to the insects, I'm less confident, but I'm willing to go at least as far as all the vertebrates. So I think that's something that we should be mindful of with respect to the way that all animals are treated. And some of the hardest discussions I've had, at a practical level have been in terms of how to think about fish. This is a relatively new area where people who are interested in the welfare of animals are starting to look at some of the way in which fish are caught in industrial systems. So there actually is a debate to have even there. But I think kind of coming back to the differences they are significant. And the fact that we use language, which is a point that philosophers have always debated and worried about, really does, I think, have a significant impact on the way that we experience a lot of what would I guess, otherwise be called just bodily types of sensations things like pain. I think that we have complex memory systems that allow us to project into the future. We, I mean, by humans, I would not doubt that some other species have similar systems. But I doubt that they are shared across the animal kingdom in all respects. And I think that we're starting to develop some ways of thinking about these questions in a more experimental fashion, really starting to be able to assemble some evidence from observing the behavior of animals and in terms of really starting to sort out what would be really difficult for an animal and where animals can adjust. There are some ways in which pains that are bad for us that are probably worse for animals because our adaptability and our ability to abstract from a current situation and to perhaps look at a painful situation today and rationalize it in terms of some benefit tomorrow actually makes an experience less significant for us than it would be for an animal and another species were kind of very spontaneous reactions of fear would be conjoined with a painful experience. So I think all of these things are part of what really thinking more proactively in the domain of how we interact with our food animals really starts to take shape. I mean, we're getting kind of far away from the question of what should you eat. And we're starting to get into some things

that I'm personally very interested in because I do work with some groups where they're trying to reform and improve various kinds of production systems for food animals, to address some of the biggest problems we have with animal welfare. I'm not sure how far the average person wants to get into that stuff. I noticed that it's always a mistake to bring these topics up at dinnertime. Nobody wants to talk about them. My wife says I don't want to talk about them at all. I just don't want to hear about that stuff. So, but I do think that there's a lot that can be done and frankly, it's already being done to reverse some of the most problematic aspects of food animal production. If there's another concern that I have about painting anything other than veganism is immoral, is that I think that it almost reinforces the kind of clean hands phenomena that people want to wash their hands of this question of food animal production, and then they become quite uninterested in whether or not chickens need a place to lay an egg or sit on a perch and some of these more detailed questions about what really does improve the welfare of an animal in a given situation.

DANNY LENNON: And that's actually something I wanted to ask about because there's just two sides of this. There's directly on the animal welfare side, I think no one would debate that the there's a huge gap in the difference between intensive factory farming versus other methods of raising and livestock for food production. And then there's also the element around environmental impact which you can probably come to have traditional farming methods versus some that promote regenerative farming, for example, and how that might offset some of the environmental impact. So do you see the ability for something like regenerative farming where we're producing livestock and animal products from regenerative farming methods? And there's various ones of those being able to scale to the point where that can change the food production system at scale. And how much of that is a factor and can we actually offset a lot of the environmental impacts that traditional farming may have?

PAUL THOMPSON: So I would again start out by saying that I've really devoted a lot of my career to promoting the idea of regenerative agriculture, and especially to encouraging researchers to turn their attention to that much more directly than certainly they were in 1980, which is when I started this work, and I think that there is considerably greater

attention to it now than there was. And so I'm hopeful that yes, eventually we'll get there. But I don't think we're there quite yet. And we're now at a stage where, unfortunately, some of the, there are deep tensions between some of the things that we would like to see and like to promote in regenerative agriculture and some of the environmental impacts. And I'll just give you one example. There's a report from 2007 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations that gets quoted a lot called Livestock's Long Shadow. It was really, it wasn't the first shot, but it was the loudest shot in linking animal production, industrial animal production to climate change. And it was really focused on the emissions of greenhouse gas from various kinds of livestock production. And in the summary, this report gets quoted in support of vegetarianism quite plausibly, but it also gets cited in terms of supporting more traditional kinds of pastured livestock, rather than putting them in more confined kinds of settings and feeding them the animal feeds. However, when you get into the details of the report, it's actually quite clear that putting animals on pasture actually has greater emissions than a careful feed regimen that is administered under a more I guess we would call industrial setting. I think at this point, we really don't know what the total picture is. We haven't really got a clear picture of the emissions that are involved in producing that feed, how all of that factors in. But there are ways in which what I think we might intuitively think is a better welfare setting for particularly a cow actually runs contrary to some of what's being recommended in terms of reducing the environmental impact of producing beef or milk.

DANNY LENNON: That's something I've heard from some people within the kind of climate science sphere of that unfortunate kind of trade off that we're seeing between more ethical forms of farming from an animal perspective, but also, the further you go in that direction, it seems to be that you're actually increasing the environmental impact as opposed to reducing it. Maybe to leave people with this because I'm sure this is an obviously quite a hot topic. A lot of people want to try and make ethical decisions around the eat and it's probably not something they can get an easy answer to. So rather what are some things that you would get people to think through or ponder over or what direction would you give people when they're trying to make their own choices around making ethical choices around food?

PAUL THOMPSON: What I would really most hope is that people would use their food decisions, their choices about what to eat as a platform for thinking more about their relationship to the environment, this includes animals, and trying to have a better appreciation of agriculture and understanding of the role that agriculture plays. Agriculture has always been, has always had the most profound impact on the environment of any human practice. But in our contemporary society, it has become almost invisible to many people. I literally have students that don't know that a potato comes out of the ground. And I think that we really need to rebuild and recover some of the knowledge of our dependence on agriculture before we really start making hasty decisions about how to change or reform it. So again, this may run a little counter to what I was saying earlier, I think there probably some people who are, they have enough problems already. They don't need to ruminate about agriculture in their spare time. But that's what I would really hope is that you could do some shopping at a farmers market, get to know a farmer, use your diet and your food purchasing decisions as opportunities to just learn more about agriculture and start to be able to weigh some of these complicated tradeoffs a little bit more effectively.

DANNY LENNON: I think that's probably something and no one would disagree with that most people are completely disconnected from the food production system that is giving us our food and just an awareness around that at least puts us in the right position to then make ethical decisions. So with that, Paul, let me say thank you so much for the time you've given up today. It's been incredibly kind for the great information.

PAUL THOMPSON: It's been my pleasure, thank you.