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Title: An Institutional-Economic Perspective on Meat Consumption: Meat as a Bad Habit

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Abstract: The concepts of path dependence and lock-in have received growing acceptance in economics. These concepts are used to explain why certain production and technological choices (such as the importance of the combustion engine or the configuration of the typewriter keyboard) can prevail in the economy even if they are socially inferior to other options. These concepts have generally been thought of as driven by positive feedback on the supply side of the economy. However, positive feedback can also impact the consumption side of the economy. This in part will occur through the experience-dependent nature of consumption preferences. The case made here is that meat consumption has “locked in” to a dysfunctional path. The argument presented utilizes behavioral, institutional, as well as neoclassical economic approaches to justify the conclusion. Meat consumption at one time was a preferred and dense source of nutrients and had positive individual and human social utility due to the scarcity of nutrients in the pre-industrialized world. This along with its scarcity led to positive associations being made with meat. However, in the developed world, where nutrient scarcity is not an issue and with the growth of increasingly intensive methods of animal agriculture, meat has increasingly negative consequences at the individual, social, and ethical level. Negative impacts include health consequences, low production efficiency, environmental damage, disease risk, and moral considerations relating to the welfare of animals. Nevertheless, preferences for meat are maintained by historical dependence of tastes, socially established meanings of consumption choices, and institutional inertia. Meat consumption using modern “factory farming” techniques causes great suffering to animals. However not only can it no longer be described as a “necessity”, it is actually inferior in many respects to its alternatives. The forces that lead to a perpetuation of meat consumption in the current environment are related to the arbitrary path that human history has happened to take. The question then becomes what, if anything, should be done to “delock” the current path.