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Rethinking Animal Agriculture: A Principlist Approach

Miranda Eisen

In modern American society, animal product consumption is a subliminal cultural practice that goes largely unquestioned. Meat, milk, cheese and eggs are packaged neatly on supermarket shelves and advertised as healthy foods from happy farm animals – entrenching in the American psyche an understanding of animal consumption as normative and appropriate. Consumer abstinence from animal products is typically perceived as a radical, entitled, personal choice rather than an important social justice stance. But consumer participation in animal product industries raises a number of bioethical concerns like animal abuse, environmental degradation, and human exploitation that must be addressed to improve American ethical misconduct.

The bioethical question at hand is whether it is morally acceptable for Americans to utilize animals as resources for nourishment. In understanding why sustaining animal agriculture is not an ethically viable choice, Lewis Vaughn's five tenets of principlism will be employed: utility, autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence and justice. These principles are applied in varying degrees of importance depending on the bioethical issue at stake, but each one poses an important perspective for addressing morally ambiguous situations.¹ Vaughn's principle of utility alongside Peter Singer's approach of incorporating animals in the utilitarian calculus demonstrates why animals deserve moral consideration and validates this bioethical question as worthy of being asked. Once established as beings deserving of ethical concern, this paper

¹ Vaughn, Lewis. *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 9. Print.

continues that under the American valued principle of autonomy animals should be deemed entitled to the specific right of bodily autonomy. Next, the tenets of nonmaleficence and beneficence are explored in efforts to expose and critique the moral plaque of animal agriculture staining American society. Concluding the principlist approach is a brief justification for treating animals as equals within the principle of justice.

I. Utility

Steering away from Immanuel Kant's deontological notion of inherent value,² distinguished principlist thinker Professor Peter Singer analyzes the human-animal relationship through a goal-based lens of preference utilitarianism. Singer argues that desires and preferences of the agents affected in any moral situation are what hold intrinsic worth, which he defines as the impulse to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.³ In its simplest understanding, utilitarianism is a calculated pursuit of the greatest number of positive outcomes for the greatest number of "people," within which pleasure is interpreted as the ultimate good attainable in existence while suffering is interpreted as a negative outcome detracting from that ultimate good.⁴ This perspective is applied to the moral boundaries of consideration that include all humans. Infants incapable of language skills, mentally disabled individuals without higher cognitive processing, and foreigners holding different cultural values are all morally respected as such. No ethical line is drawn between types of humans because we all possess the faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain, which Singer claims is a "prerequisite for having interests at all."⁵ Thus, inanimate life is excluded completely from the conversation because bioethical

² Vaughn 38.

³ Francione, Gary. "Animal Rights Theory and Utilitarianism: Relative Normative Guidance." *Animal Legal and Historical Center*. Lewis and Clark Law School, 1997. Web. 04 Feb. 2017.

⁴ Scully, Matthew. *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2002. 21. Print.

⁵ Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1993. 57. Print.

questions only arise when interests are spoken of in a meaningful way. But animals are not inanimate life, they are endowed with the same physiological capacity for pleasure and pain as humans (also known as sentience). And under Singer's assertion that if a being can suffer then that being's interests deserve equal consideration as any other living being, we can see that animals deserve moral consideration.⁶ If sentience is the requirement for moral consideration within human-based ethical issues, then our only justification for ethically excluding animals and fostering their exploitation is genetic variation via species classification. But this rationalization aligns with the moral reasoning of discrimination based on race, sex or age, proving a completely inadequate approach to humans' treatment of animals.⁷ Since animals are sentient and thus have an interest in pursuing pleasure and avoiding suffering, inflicting pain onto farm animals for the unnecessary purpose of satisfying gastronomic cravings is not a morally acceptable rationale.

II. **Autonomy**

By accepting Singer's reasoning of including animals in the utilitarian calculus, the principle of personal autonomy logically extends to animals. Autonomy refers to a being's ability to determine their life choices for themselves,⁸ but within the lens of animal rights it is more appropriate to discuss a specific facet of this principle: *bodily* autonomy. Animals are incapable of certain independent behavior like opening a bank account or voting in an election; therefore their range of choice selection as autonomous beings is limited compared to the autonomous actions of an adult human. But at its very core, the principle of autonomy applies to all sentient lives. Just like infants, farm animals are unable to make more advanced autonomous decisions because they cannot communicate and are dependent on the aid of adult humans to survive. They

⁶ Singer 57.

⁷ Ibid 58.

⁸ Vaughn 9.

share a lack of informed consent as they cannot understand or freely consent to a moral action thrust upon them.⁹ Despite this lack of full autonomy, humans do not justify physically hurting a baby for personal desires. Consequently, animals deserve the same autonomy and consideration that we provide to infants. Amongst omnivorous proponents is the responding ideological defense that the strong moral difference between animals and infants is defined by a baby's capacity to one day become a fully functional human, which animals lack. But Peter Singer's ethical analysis precludes this kind of rationale by establishing sentience as the decisive baseline for moral treatment. Drawing the ethical line at humanity alone is an arbitrary and supercilious choice. Others claim that humans have a biological instinct to protect and preserve our own species and not others. But the animal agriculture industrial complex proves just how much humans have overcome our biological inclinations and limitations. We have cultivated a large-scale system of animal slavery which primitive humans were incapable of creating, demonstrating just how distant we are from the "natural" and "biological" side of humanity. There is also the rebuttal that although humans exclude farm animals from moral consideration, we go to extreme lengths to ensure the safety and well-being of our pets as seen in the growing prominence of pet trusts. But despite American's **disdainful** assumptions regarding animal worth, there is no moral difference between the animals we have assigned as pets versus the animals we eat as food.

The central issue of autonomy in animal agriculture is the farm animals' inability to provide consent. A cow cannot consent to the physical removal of her calf and poaching of her milk. If anything, the typical dairy cow's cries post-separation from her calf signify the objection to such actions. Adult humans can make paternalistic decisions for infants and animals alike, but their right as sentient beings to maintain control over their bodies means they deserve physical

⁹ Vaughn 9.

safety and respect. In America, this value of bodily integrity is held to a very high regard: abortion is legal and permissible without any proof of harm to the mother or child, blood donations are voluntary, circumcision is a personal family choice, vaccinations have opt-out laws, and organ donation is noncompulsory both pre- and postmortem. What one chooses to do or not to do with their body is their personal autonomous right. When extending the principle of utility to nonhuman animals, the principle of bodily autonomy applies to them as well. Agribusiness workers continue to genetically modify the bodies of cows, pigs, and chickens and subsequently pilfer their eggs, milk, offspring and lives. These offenses in conjunction with the inhumane and often lethal conditions of dairy farms, egg farms and slaughterhouses comprise wrongful violations of bodily autonomy against animals.

III. Nonmaleficence

The third tenet of principlism speaks to humans' most fundamental, internal source of ethical guidance: nonmaleficence, or refusing to engage in intentional harm. Often considered the most important principle, nonmaleficence shapes most of our institutional, lawful, and personal codes of conduct.¹⁰ But in contemporary American society, the harmful outcomes of factory farming production are substantially ignored. There are five key reasons why animal agriculture violates the principle of nonmaleficence by knowingly generating significant harm: 1) animal slavery 2) contributing to global warming 3) neglecting the basic human rights of slaughterhouse workers 4) boosting American obesity and mortality rates 5) wasting limited resources and augmenting global starvation.

These multiple levels of staggering maleficence begin with the most obvious molestation of animal agriculture: the food industry's perpetuated consumer disconnection from food

¹⁰ Vaughn 10.

production permits and reinforces a system rooted in the suffering, exploitation and commodification of sentient life. Factory farms confine animals indoors for their entire lives in areas that limit movement and the ability to engage in natural species-specific behaviors.¹¹ To produce meats like bacon, pork and ham, mother sows are kept in gestation crates, force fed antibiotics, and acquire respiratory diseases from living directly above their rotting waste.¹² On dairy farms, cows are branded with hot irons,¹³ forcibly impregnated on “rape racks,” and are subsequently separated from their young.¹⁴ In egg production, male chicks are ground up alive¹⁵ and hens have their beaks sliced off without anesthesia.¹⁶ Animal lifespans are cut increasingly short, animal bodies are genetically modified and stuffed with hormones, and animal deaths are slow and painful for the sake of production efficiency. These horrific experiences do not even include the 56 billion marine animals killed for food in the United States every year.¹⁷

To act as though these creatures do not have meaningful experiences of suffering is to neglect decades of scientific research indicating otherwise. Possessing communication skills as sophisticated as primates, chickens are cunning birds that base future decisions on past experiences.¹⁸ Cows have the most complex social structure of any domestic animal¹⁹ while pigs are quick learners and are one of the less than ten animals to pass the mirror test, signifying their

¹¹ Bramble, Ben, and Bob Fischer. *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2016. 154. Print.

¹² Estabrook, Barry. “‘Tales’ of Pig Intelligence, Factory Farming and Humane Bacon.” *NPR*. NPR, 5 May 2015. Web. 21 Nov. 2016.

¹³ Bramble and Fischer 154.

¹⁴ Colb, Sherry F. *Mind If I Order the Cheeseburger?: And Other Questions That People Ask Vegans*. New York: Lantern Books, 2013. 162. Print.

¹⁵ Jaksch, Walter. “Euthanasia of Day-Old Male Chicks in the Poultry Industry.” *Animal Studies Repository*. Humane Society of the United States, n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2016.

¹⁶ Pluhar, Evelyn B. “Meat and Morality: Alternatives to Factory Farming.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23.5 (2009). Web. 19 Nov. 2016.

¹⁷ Bramble and Fischer 154.

¹⁸ Smith,Carolynn L., and Sarah L. Zielinski. “The Startling Intelligence of the Common Chicken.” *Scientific American*, 26 Dec. 2013. Web. 02 May 2017.

¹⁹ Beaver, Bonnie V., and Donald L. Hoglund. *Efficient Livestock Handling: The Practical Application of Animal Welfare and Behavioral Science*. London: Elsevier, 2016. 28. Print.

self-awareness and recognition.²⁰ These emotionally intelligent creatures have violated no legal, moral or social rules in American society, but are constrained in torturous conditions that even our society's most dangerous felons have never experienced. Just by being born a certain species, cows, pigs, and chickens are relegated to lives of unbearable physical and psychological pain and suffering.

In addition to the tangible and heart-wrenching pain caused in animal food production, meat industry practices are also contributing heavily to climate change and the degradation of the Earth by producing menacing amounts of air, water and gas pollution.²¹ The beef, pork and poultry industries produce around 1.4 billion tons of animal waste in America which makes up 130 times the amount of waste produced by the entire human U.S. population. These wastes poison waterways and underground aquifers, posing a problematic source of environmental pollution.²² Accompanying meat and water contamination is the frightening USDA estimation that 30% of total greenhouse gas emissions originate from industrialized livestock production – more emissions than all transport on the Earth combined.²³ Clearly American animal consumption habits present harmful problems in the face of a daunting global environmental collapse.

On a more personal and comprehensible scale than animal suffering or climate change, animal product industries inflict physical and psychological hardships on American slaughterhouse workers that threaten human welfare. Meat packing is the most dangerous job in the United States with the highest rates of illness and injury of any industry.²⁴ Slaughterhouse

²⁰ Angier, Natalie. "Pigs Prove to Be Smart, if Not Vain." *The New York Times*, 09 Nov. 2009. Web. 02 May 2017.

²¹ Colb 110.

²² Bramble and Fischer 154.

²³ Hyner, Christopher. "A Leading Cause of Everything: One Industry That is Destroying Our Planet and Our Ability to Thrive on It." *Stanford Environmental Law Journal* (2015). Stanford Law School. Web. 9 Feb. 2017.

²⁴ *Safety in the Meat and Poultry Industry, While Improving, Could be Further Strengthened*. Rep. Workplace Safety and Health, United States Government Accountability Office. 2005. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.

employees are forced to work at high speeds in cold conditions with little training, repeat the same movement tens of thousands of times each shift, and stand long hours with miniscule time allocated to rest, stretch, eat and take bathroom breaks.²⁵ Such rigid work standards cause a number of physical ailments including carpal tunnel syndrome, chronic musculoskeletal repetitive stress injuries, and unsanitary lacerations,²⁶ not to mention workers falling ill because of the frequent exposure to chemicals, blood, and fecal matter that is only made worse by poor ventilation and extreme temperatures.²⁷ This mistreatment of slaughterhouse workers is commonly overlooked due to the high number unreported injuries. The pressure on slaughterhouse workers from meat production companies to remain silent about their injuries leads to workers fearing for the protection of their jobs and often illegal immigration statuses. With half of slaughterhouse workers quitting within the first 90 days of work,²⁸ the meat industry treats their employees like they are as disposable as the animals they are killing.

While animal agriculture takes a serious toll on its producers, its consumers also do not escape the industry's negative effects. Since one in three American adults is obese²⁹ and heart disease is the leading cause of death,³⁰ the influence of animal product consumption on the national health crisis is seriously worth examining. Regular meat consumption has been linked to higher intake of total fat, saturated fat and total calories, and a higher risk of chronic disease. Nutrition-based studies have found that compared to plant-based diets, meat-centric diets result

²⁵ "Lives on the Line: The High Human Cost of Chicken." Oxfam America. Web. 22 Nov. 2016.

²⁶ Leibler, Jessica H., and Melissa J. Perry. "Self-Reported Occupational Injuries Among Industrial Beef Slaughterhouse Workers in the Midwestern United States." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* 14.1 (2017): 24. Web. 2 May 2017.

²⁷ *Safety in the Meat and Poultry Industry*.

²⁸ Blatt, Harvey. *America's Food: What You Don't Know About What You Eat*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008. 202. Print.

²⁹ "Understanding the American Obesity Epidemic." American Heart Association, 9 Mar. 2016. Web, 23 Nov. 2016.

³⁰ "Leading Causes of Death." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.

in higher blood pressure, cholesterol levels, rates of hypertension, likelihood of type 2 diabetes, prostate and colon cancer, and mortality rates from heart disease.³¹ Obesity, greatly compounded by American animal product consumption, is one of the leading drivers in preventable chronic disease and healthcare costs.³² Over 20% of U.S. healthcare costs are obesity-related, valued at almost \$200 billion dollars per year.³³ And while Americans are eating themselves to death and eroding the national economy, the western diet is supporting the deprivation and starvation of populations in developing countries. The immense inefficiency of using the Earth's limited land and water resources to harvest plants to feed to animals who will be slaughtered and fed to humans creates an inadequate global food supply. It takes about one hundred times as much water to generate one kilogram of meat as to produce the same amount of grain. One acre of harvested vegetables, legumes and/or grains supplies between ten to fifteen times as much protein as an acre of meat production.³⁴ The western preference for meat is absorbing mass amounts of natural resources that should be redistributed towards plant-based farming to reduce global starvation rates. Americans are consciously contributing to global starvation alongside our own fatal overindulgence, causing colossal harm to ourselves and others.

IV. Beneficence

The fourth principle of principlism is beneficence, an ethical directive that upholds doing good to others. Beneficence maintains that not only must we contribute positively to the welfare of others, but we should also prohibit any harm done to them.³⁵ In framing animal consumption

³¹ Wang, Y., and M.A. Beydoun. "Meat Consumption is Associated with Obesity and Central Obesity among US Adults." *International Journal of Obesity* 33.6 (2009). US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health. 621. Web.

³² Cawley, John, and Chad Meyerhoefer. "The Medical Care Costs of Obesity: An Instrumental Variables Approach." *Journal of Health Economics* 31 (2010): 226. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.

³³ Grandoni, Dino. "20.6% of U.S. Health Care Costs are Caused by Obesity." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 06 Feb. 2017.

³⁴ Colb 110.

³⁵ Vaughn 10.

within the beneficence principle, omnivorous advocates often argue that humans actually advance animal welfare by sustaining the lives of domestic farm animals. Without animal consumption, farm animals would serve no purpose for humans which means we would cease mass reproduction and they would die out. But a life filled with disease, fear, loss, pain and often cannibalism is not good for these animals; by definition it does them harm. Others say that animal products provide the protein and calcium nutrients humans need to survive, affirmatively fortifying human health. However, animal-heavy diets actually produce deleteriously excessive protein levels in omnivorous Americans.³⁶ And to the surprise of many, populations like the U.S. with increased dairy consumption have higher rates of osteoporosis than countries with minimal dairy consumption. In fact, protein and calcium rich food sources like beans, vegetables and nuts are the healthiest food choices for obtaining the nutrients humans need.³⁷ The central beneficent act provided by animal consumption is the satisfaction of a palatable craving, which is ethically outweighed by the five central maleficent outcomes of animal agribusiness.

V. Justice

The final tenet of principlism is justice, applying to animal agriculture with the core perspective that equals must be treated equally. Justice is based on the perspective that without ethically relevant grounds to treat someone differently, all “people” deserve the same consideration.³⁸ Adhering to Professor Singer’s views on animal inclusion in the utilitarian calculus means we can expand this notion of equal consideration to animals because in life’s experiences of pleasure and pain, all sentient life is equal. America’s species bias has done significant harm by revoking animal autonomy and prompting physical and psychological pain,

³⁶ Colb 27.

³⁷ Ibid 28.

³⁸ Vaughn 12.

environmental decline, human exploitation, unhealthy lifestyles and unnecessary death and starvation. Animal agriculture yields too much harm and not nearly enough good to continue as a dominant cultural practice and since animals are equals to humans in the experiences of sentient life, they do not deserve such exploitation.

Under the five tenets of principlism it becomes painfully clear that animal agriculture has no justifiable ethical means as an industry. The great harm and suffering inflicted by animal food production with minimal benefits indicates that American lawmakers should make strides towards dismantling animal agribusiness all together. Veganism has proven to be a healthy and practical lifestyle for Americans of all ages³⁹ and with the eradication of animal-based products, vegan foods and products should gain more prominence in American consumer culture. This argument was centered on animals as tools for food consumption, but the principlist framework should be extended to remove animals from harmful practices including animal testing, wool and leather production, zoos, circuses, rodeos, dog and horse racing, etc. And although animal agriculture procedures vary globally, efforts should be made to eliminate the issues of animal suffering, global warming, worker exploitation, obesity, starvation and unsustainable practices that American animal food production exemplifies.

³⁹Mangels, Reed and Winston J. Craig. "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 109.7 (2009): 1266-282. NCBI. Web. 2 May 2017.

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