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The Ethics of Accountability in Factory Farming

Abstract

Factory farming practices have had a harshly negative impact on animal well-being, human health, and the environment. This paper interrogates the widely held precept that this is primarily the responsibility of corporations and instead explores the hypothesis that large corporations, farmers, consumers and government officials should all be held responsible for unethical animal treatment and meat production in factory farms. It investigates how these four groups behave and make decisions in relation to factory farming. Applying various ethical principles such as Deontology, Fairness, Community, Harm, Double Effect, and Utilitarianism, this paper analyzes the ethics of accountability in factory farming based on the duty of corporations, farmers, consumers, and government officials. Finally, this paper proposes that all of these parties should be more aware of their own role in relation to animal husbandry.

Factory farming, in our current money-driven society, often means the industrial farming practice of raising a high density of livestock in confined and inhumane living areas. This type of farming is practiced to maximize profits by raising efficiency and lowering costs. In a factory farm, one farmer manages thousands of chickens or cattle within an excessively small space where the animals cannot even roll over or turn around. Due to the high stocking density in such crowded spaces, animals get sick more often, and antibiotics are frequently required in order to control the fast spread of diseases. Furthermore, to minimize the feeding expenses, animals are provided with feedlot diets such as the meat of dead animals and corn mixed with antibiotics. In addition to increasing efficiency by limiting both living space and food resources, factory farm animals are injected with hormones for the purpose of promoting growth and accelerating their breeding rate. While some animals in the wild are eaten by predators and succumb to diseases, the suffering wild animals' experience does not occur throughout their entire life as it does when animals are raised on factory farms. Or, to put it in other terms, the conditions animals are subject to would not even be considered acceptable for the most confined of human prisoners, at least not in the United States or in most developed countries. If an advanced alien species factory

farmed humans in an inhumane living quarter and traded their carcasses on an intergalactic futures exchange, we would consider this an atrocity. If we are to live by the interspecies golden rule and treat other species as we ourselves hope to be treated, we must consider the conditions on factory farms to be atrocious.

These every-day atrocities have become accepted norms to many, and large corporations are usually thought of as the primary culprit perpetuating this vicious cycle of unethical animal treatment because corporations make executive decisions and take the largest percentage of profit from the meat production industry. Thus, they are considered the most powerful in the production cycle. But, are they alone in their culpability? In this paper, I will consider the issue of accountability in relation to factory farming practices. It is tempting to say that large corporations are primarily responsible for this chain of unethical animal treatment, but are farmers, consumers, and even government officials blameless in this affair? In assessing this issue of accountability, I will draw upon the work of several theorists who have written about ethics in contemporary society.

At the basis of my ethical framework is Immanuel Kant's notion of deontology, which is a duty-based approach to ethics. As I will discuss, the factory farming industry has become run by self-serving rather than common moral duties. In "The Moral Instinct," Steven Pinker draws attention to how capitalist ideologies have shifted our ethical norms i.e. — whereas community used to be an ethical priority, we have come to favor monetary fairness over loyalty to community. Due to this prevalent value of fairness, our collective deontology has become skewed and problematic. People justify these practices from a utilitarian rationale, reasoning that monetary affordability and gain means the greatest good for the greatest number. The negative side effects (i.e. animal cruelty) are often marginalized because of the doctrine of double effect,

which explains that the permissibility of an action that causes harm depends on the agents' intention. Kwame Anthony Appiah, in "The Case against Intuition," argues that making moral judgments should not depend upon our own intuition, but instead on moral principles and reasoning, such as the doctrine of double effect and cost and benefit analysis. Although education ought to be increased to make sure everyone is aware of the impact of their decisions, there are those who are conscious of the unethical practices of the factory farming industry which continue to purchase and provide meat, and regulate meat production, based predominantly on profit based motivations. We need a new system of ethics of animal treatment and meat production, yet the implementation of such ethical norms might not be feasible until we reconceptualize our deontology so that (monetary) fairness no longer trumps community. In order to better examine the issue of deontology, in turn, we must address the accountability for animal treatment and meat production, which dictates the ethics of farming practices.

Corporate behavior is largely responsible for the model that favors profit over ethics, the model which dominates the meat production cycle. In "Cruel Intimacies and Risky Relationships: Accounting for Suffering in Industrial Livestock Production," Natalie Purcell points out that corporations restrict the methods farmers use to raise livestock with financial pressure, noting that "Corporations [require] small contractors to make their own capital investments (take out large loans to build, say, chicken housing facilities) and [construct] compensation systems that leave local farmers in competition with each other for low returns. Contracts are always worded so the company need not pay farmers or ranchers if they don't or can't deliver on schedule" (73). Purcell suggests that cruelty to factory animals is driven by the financial risk transfer from the large corporations to farmers. With large loans and restricted contract agreements, farmers have to maximize their profit by providing minimal resources and care to animals. Otherwise, they

face the risk of going out of business due to fierce competition, which makes them unable to pay back loans. In addition, corporations exert their power over consumers by keeping them uninformed about how livestock are raised. In "Factory Farms in a Consumer Society," Chad Lavin relates the situation that the consumer is in: "The ethical critique [of factory farming] does not merely exploit images of animal suffering in support of a vegetarian agenda, it insists that the opacity of commodity markets severely limits the ability of consumers to buy products that live up to their own ethical codes" (77). Efficiency-oriented value in farming practices deprives eating freedom from consumers by limiting the meat choices available to them. This opacity makes it extremely difficult for consumers to get the information necessary for them to make ethical eating choices. The corporations do not only manipulate farmers and consumers but also politicians. In the movie *Food, Inc.*, Pollan and Schlosser point out that our government is dominated by large corporations. For example, Wendell Murphy had served as a senator in North Carolina before he worked at Smithfield (Kenner). Such great power over farmers, consumers, and politicians grants corporations free reign to place profit above the well-being of both animals and humans.

The policy of "Corporate Personhood" also contributes to the growing power of corporations. This policy grants corporations rights and responsibilities similar to those of a natural person. However, Bradley Smith believes that this rule conflicts with human rights, noting that "to suggest that corporations lack speech rights would affect a great many rights and protections that we have come to rely on." The rights granted to corporations weaken individuals' rights because the corporations are too influential and do not have conscientiousness to act ethically. Because corporations are not sentient beings, there is no inherent value in corporate

rights other than giving rights to human beings. In “Our Humanity, Naturally,” Dave Niose, an attorney and president of the Washington-based American Humanist Association, writes,

“If corporations are indeed ‘persons,’ their mental condition can accurately be described as pathological. Corporations have no innate moral impulses, and in fact they exist solely for the purpose of making money. As such, these ‘persons’ are systemically driven to do whatever is necessary to increase revenues and profits, with no regard for ethical issues that might nag real people.”

Since corporations only act on their economic interests, and since they cannot be as ethical as humans who experience guilt and empathy for other humans, they can bring great harm to our society when they exercise their rights if they are too influential and powerful in our society. The examples of corporations controlling farmers, consumers and politicians make evident how the power of corporations causes damage (for example, to animal welfare) in the farming industry.

The act of corporations abusing their power and influence deviates from the moral codes of loyalty to community. Pinker states that “In the West, we believe that in business and government, fairness should trump community” (Pinker). The heavily emphasized individualism in western countries propels people towards individual fairness rather than communal altruism. Perhaps, this is why corporations prioritize monetary fairness above the welfare of the communities of farmers and consumers. One may argue that corporations have fiduciary duty which requires them to make money for shareholders. Kant’s deontology says that people should do their own duty, and thus it is ethical for corporations to be profit-oriented because they need to be responsible to shareholders. Just being profit-oriented is not inconsistent with being ethical, but the resulting adverse consequences are ethical problems. Fiduciary duty and social duty can coexist. Namely, corporations can be profitable and socially responsible simultaneously. In the movie *Food Inc.*, the success of Stonyfield Farm can serve as a perfect example that corporations can make profit and have community responsibility at the same time. Stonyfield Farm does not

support factory farming, but it was the third largest yogurt plant in America in 2008 and was acquired by Group Danone, a \$23 billion food conglomerate (Kenner). Although the intention of corporations is to make money but not bring harm to animals and humans, their power and influence in society make it extremely difficult for farmers to raise livestock morally, consumers to eat ethically, and politicians to regulate the farming industry without bias. Thus, corporations are in large part accountable for unethical farming. However, they are not the only ones to blame.

In order to survive in farming business, farmers have to become profit-driven because they are financially strained by the corporations. With large loans and low return, farmers have to minimize their expenses, which forces them use an inexpensive but unnatural feedlot diet for cattle consisting of corn with antibiotics. Since corn is subsidized by the government, farmers replace the cattle's natural diet of grass with the corn plus antibiotics. However, "regular corn feeding wreaks havoc on the cattle's health, destroying their livers and producing painful gas" (Purcell 61). Because animals are sentient beings, inflicting pain to animals draws a line between ethical and unethical animal treatment. One could argue that humans inflict pain to animals when they are killed for meat. We need to understand the difference between being painful for the entire life and at the end of the life. Due to the great capacity of animal to suffer and feel pain, it is wrong to inflict pain to animals for such a long period of time. Ethical animal operation requires "interspecies empathy" (Siebert), which enables us to be more aware of the welfare of animals. The feedlot diet is not nutritious and violates the natural state of the cattle because the bacteria living in the cattle's stomachs are accustomed to digesting grass not corn. Without grass diets, antibiotics are needed to kill those bacteria in order to prevent cattle from becoming sick. Purcell's reading of Pollan points out to us how this feedlot diet can potentially harm human health as well, noting that "The antibiotics he's consuming with his corn were at that very

moment selecting, in his gut and wherever else in the environment they wind up, for bacteria that could someday infect us and resist the drugs we depend on” (74). It is extremely difficult to treat humans who are infected by bacteria that develop antibiotics resistance. Animal health is closely linked to human health. For instance, zoonotic diseases such as bird flu, swine flu and mad cow disease are capable of being transmitted from animals to humans. The overuse of antibiotics also causes the development of resistant bacteria, which can potentially harm human health.

Through the lens of Kant’s deontology, farmers’ social obligation is to provide good care to animals and healthy meat to consumers. The suffering animals and contaminated meat with antibiotics and bacteria exemplify that farmers do not do their duties. According to the principle of double effect, it is permissible for an agent to bring unintentional harm. Is it permissible for farmers to bring unintentional harm to animals and humans? Here, deontology becomes more explicit because the doctrine of double effect is not at work while farmers are directly inflicting harm to animals and consumers. Maximizing profit at the expense of consumers’ health deviates from Pinker’s moral code of freedom from harm. In an example of this moral code, Pinker writes, “Rhesus monkeys...go hungry rather than pull a chain that delivers food to them and a shock to another monkey” (Pinker). Just as these monkeys do not harm other monkeys for their individual benefit, humans, as moral agents, should not do anything that can harm other humans and sentient beings merely for the sake of increasing profits.

Furthermore, not every farmer supports animal husbandry that favors ethical farming practices. A factory farmer who holds a degree in animal science argues that, “If we go away from [factory farming], it may improve the welfare of the animal, it may even be better for the environment, but I don’t want to go back to China in 1918. I am talking about starving people” (Foer 95). This farmer believes that the resulting cheap meat produced from factory farms can

alleviate the problem of hunger in the world, and thus factory farming should be supported. However, Henning notes that “according to the USDA, the ratio of kilograms of grain to animal protein is... 2.3 to 1 for chicken, 5.9 for pork ... [and] 13 to 1 for beef ... the scale of lost edible nutrition is as staggering as it is morally unacceptable” (68-69). This means that it takes 2.3 kg, 5.9kg and 13kg of edible grain to yield 1 edible kg of chicken, pork, and beef, respectively. A portion of the total energy and nutrition are lost in the process of raising livestock. In other words, it does not make economic sense to raise animals in factory farms if we want to solve the hunger problem in the world. In addition to the loss of nutrition and energy, this farmer fails to consider external costs of factory farming such as adverse human health and environmental pollution. This farmer exemplifies how individuals can become consumed by a corporate mentality and lack interspecies empathy, thereby losing focus of their social duties as food providers.

The spread of profit-driven mentality does not only infect farmers but also consumers who prioritize eating utility above eating ethics, thus showing how they prioritize a deontology of fairness over a deontology of community. Gary Chartier, a professor of law and business ethics from La Sierra University, argues that “uncoordinated individual consumer meat purchases” in the giant meat market has little impact on the establishment of the factory farm (233). He notes,

If the positive utility yielded by the performance of a given act is virtually certain, and equals or exceeds the utility certain to be generated by any other available act, then even if there is very small chance that great disutility will be generated by the act, one should perform the act. We know, arguably, that the utility yielded by a meat purchase in the market is virtually certain, and equals or exceeds the utility certain to be generated by any other available act. Therefore, one may make a meat purchase in the market during the specified periods. (244)

Chartier suggests that consumers should not be responsible for the unethical farming since the chance that meat purchasing will encourage the establishment of factory farms is small. To

extend his logic, if there is small chance of terrorists obtaining nuclear weapons, we should ignore it. Chartier's logic is clearly flawed because he is essentially rationalizing away the negative consequences of meat purchase in order to absolve an individual of guilt. The rationalization is perhaps "because most of us would simply rather not be reminded of exactly what meat is or what it takes to bring it to our plates" (Pollan 305). The fear of knowing how animals are treated and killed suggests we don't want to be morally obliged towards animals since most of us are not willing to make the sacrifices financially or politically. The behavior of consumers also speaks to fairness versus community. Consumers' deontological obligations have not been erased; rather, they have been aligned with fairness and concepts such as "utility" over community oriented values such as guilt, especially in terms of materialistic enterprises. We can also better understand Chartier's rationalization through Pinker's thinking, "The science of the moral sense also alerts us to ways in which our psychological makeup can get in the way of our arriving at the most defensible moral conclusions. The moral sense, we are learning, is as vulnerable to illusions as the other senses" (Pinker). Chartier suggests that the moral beliefs of consumers are founded upon illusions. This moral conclusion allows him to prioritize consumers' utility above eating ethics.

One could argue that consumers may not have access to information about how factory farm animals are treated. Pollan draws attention to how uninformed consumers are, noting that "in the industrial food economy, virtually the only information that travels along the food chain linking producer and consumer is price" (136). Due to lack of knowledge about farming practices, consumers can only make purchasing choices based on the price of products. Singer and Mason echo Pollan's idea on how cryptic farming practices lead to unethical eating, stating that "it is probable that anyone who eats meat will, unknowingly, from time to time be eating

meat that comes from an animal who died an agonizing death” (566). Consumers do not always know how animals are killed because we cannot access the slaughterhouse. Consequently, we do not always realize we are doing something that crosses our ethical line when we are eating meat.

Even when we do have an awareness of the unethical production of the meat we eat, our eating ethics can be analyzed by the principle of double effect. Appiah notes, “the doctrine of double effect ... [is] about bring-about and allowing-to-happen” (90). This rule can be understood as the permissibility of bringing about harm with intention versus allowing harmful events to happen with no intention but with the same consequences. If consumers purchase meat with no intention to support unethical farming practices, then they should not take responsibility for the harmful outcome according to the doctrine of double effect. If consumers only care about the cost of the meat but not the well-being of animals and humans, and environments, they should be held responsible for harm caused by the factory farms. However, consumer behavior is not always easily deciphered, as “people tend to align their moralization with their own lifestyles” (Pinker). This idea echoes Appiah’s rejection of intuition: our moral decisions should be based on ethical reasoning rather than individual lifestyle choice. In order for consumers to have an ethical eating lifestyle, we need a social network that can educate consumers and provide them with foods that are produced ethically.

Learning about the consequences of certain farming policies can lead us to understand politics and ethics differently. The conflict of interest between the government and corporations leads many of our current farming policies to favor factory farming over traditional farming practices. Singer and Mason condemn how our government favors corporate rights above animal welfare, noting that “there is no federal law governing the welfare of farmed animals on the farm ... This is not because there is any constitutional barrier to covering the welfare of animals

on farms, but simply because Congress has never chosen to enact any such law” (547). No federal law to protect the welfare of factory farm animals suggests that our government indirectly supports unethical farming in the United States, and that the cruel treatment of animals is permissible to them. Furthermore, farming subsidies contribute to the increase of unethical farm practices. The corn subsidy serves as a good example of how political policies can cause farmers to abuse animals with antibiotics. The efficiency of industrial farming is at the expense of tax money. The cost of the efficiency of factory farms extends detrimentally to animals’ well-being, humans’ health, and environmental conditions. Thus, it is unethical for government to support factory farming as Pinker suggests that everyone should be free from harm.

The deontological obligations of government officials are greatly hindered by the closely-tied relationship between corporations and politicians. This close relationship can be seen by the examples in which both Republicans and Democrats were influenced by the benefits they obtained from Tyson Foods. These corporations can have so much power that many policies seem to be personalized for their own interests. In *Animal Factory*, David Kirby notes, “The EPA [US Environmental Protection Agency] announced an unprecedented program that granted amnesty to large CAFOs [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] that violated the federal Clean Air Act ... [after] Tyson had contributed \$100,000 to the second Bush inauguration celebration, more than almost any other entity in the country ” (Kirby 300). Kirby suggests that the regulation favoring Big Ag (Big Agriculture) after politicians received donations from corporations was not a mere coincidence. Interestingly, Big Ag also has powerful allies in the Democratic Party. “Hillary [Clinton] had her own Tyson baggage, in the form of \$100,000 overnight profit she once made trading on cattle futures” (Kirby 396). The influence of food corporations extends from the meat production industry to our government independent of

Republican or Democratic Party affiliation. This influence allows Big Ag to exert its power over our society. The government's job is to regulate the farming industry on behalf of its citizens. How can a politician expect consumers to trust their government to regulate fairly when politicians receive so many benefits from the private industry? The goal of a corporation is to make profit; the goal of the government is to act in the best interests of the people it serves. However, if politicians and regulators are in bed with private industry, then they are more likely to act out of self-interest rather than civic duty, and therefore cannot regulate the farming industry without bias.

Political policies should not be a means of encouraging the growth of large food corporations' wealth and power, but should instead be a means of protecting the well-being of the citizenry. Appiah suggests that decisions should depend upon the expected value of the outcome, noting that "we should pick options on the basis of expected costs and benefits" (Appiah 85). If we view farming policies and how they affect our society as a whole, the benefits of the farming subsidies only apply to large corporations and not to individuals. Furthermore, Pinker echoes Appiah's ideas, stating that "utilitarian standard...results in the greatest good for the greatest number" (Pinker). This rule suggests that we should maximize the sum of "happiness" or utility in our society. Ethically, the costs outweigh the benefits because healthy lives are more valuable than the profits of food corporations. Since the overall benefits or utility of animals and humans is greater than that of just the large corporations, producing meat in factory farms is not an ethical farming practice when looked at from a utilitarian standpoint. After all, government subsidies are usually done to boost the economy of the country or to help small and weak groups within a society, and not to increase the gap between the rich and the poor, or in this case,

between corporations and consumers. This gap can be reflected in consumers' weight and health as a result of what they eat.

Because of the side effects of factory farming, the accountability in relation to factory farming needs to be addressed. After applying ethical principles such as fairness, community, freedom from harm, utilitarianism, deontology, and the doctrine of double effect, we can conclude that corporations, farmers, consumers, and government officials are all to some extent responsible for the negative consequences of the unethical cycle of animal treatment and meat production in factory farms. If we view these issues through utilitarian capitalist logic, we can see how our lack of ethics does not result from an innate evilness but rather from the profit motive that hinders our ethical responsibilities. As Singer and Mason say, "The real ethical issue about factory farming's treatment of animals isn't whether the producers are good or bad guys, but that the system seems to recognize animal suffering only when it interferes with profitability" (554). Unethical farming is caused by a profit-pursuing value prevalent in our society, and producers are just exercisers of this value because they cannot avoid being influenced. Like producers, other people, who participate in supporting factory farms directly or indirectly, cannot avoid being subsumed by the profit mentality.

Corporations, farmers, consumers, and government officials all need to be made more aware of their deontological responsibilities. Corporations should monitor how livestock are raised and the meat quality. Farmers should provide good care to animals and healthy meat to consumers. Consumers should educate themselves about meat sources and make food purchase based on the ethics of farming. And, government should regulate the farming industry. Pinker's freedom from harm, fairness, and community can be utilized to analyze subsequent consequences of deviation from social deontological obligation of each group. For example,

harmful effects such as cruel treatment of animals and spread of disease are a consequence of farmers not being able to do their duty. Furthermore, if we view this society as a whole, utilitarianism can be applied to examine the political policies which are legislated by politicians. People who act against their sense of social deontology should be blamed, yet those who break this rule without intention and unconsciously bring harm as a result should be exempted according the doctrine of double effect. Reconstructing the accountability requires each party recognize that their social deontological obligations are to act as individuals serving the community because we all mutually implicated in the ethics of factory farming. Corporate personhood and the prioritization of individual benefits has skewed our sense of individuals and communities, but if we realize that all of us are somewhat accountable in the matter, then we can work towards re-conceptualizing these terms and building an altruistic community that values empathy among different individuals and species.

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