

Down on the Factory Farm

Peter Singer

A biographical sketch of Peter Singer is found on page 183.

The title of Singer's piece is ironic. The factory farm of today is not the pastoral farmyard of yesterday. In former times, most human beings had contact with the animals they raised for food. Often, they lived together on farms where the animals were accorded some consideration and could enjoy a natural and healthy existence before being slaughtered. The advent of the industrial era brought with it enormous changes to the way in which animals are raised and slaughtered for food in the United States. Singer argues that today's industrialized farm more closely resembles a mechanized assembly line than the farms of yore. In this process of modernization, the livestock industry and, tangentially, consumers of such meat and dairy products, has degraded the status of the animals raised simply to be parts of a great machine with no moral status. Singer describes in detail the fate of chickens and veal calves in a vast automated system that gives little or no regard to their well-being.

Down on the Factory Farm ...

*or what happened to your
dinner when it was
still an animal*

For most human beings, especially those in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with non-human animals is at mealtime: we eat them. This simple fact is the key to our attitudes to other animals, and also the key to what each one of us can do about changing these attitudes. The use and abuse of animals raised for food far exceeds, in sheer numbers of animals affected, any other kind of mistreatment. Over 100 million cows, pigs, and sheep are raised and slaughtered in the United States alone each year; and for poultry the figure is a staggering 5 billion. (That means that about eight thousand birds—mostly chickens—will have been slaughtered in the time it takes you to read this page.) It is here, on our dinner table and in our neighborhood supermarket or butcher's shop, that we are brought into direct touch with the most extensive exploitation of other species that has ever existed.

In general, we are ignorant of the abuse of living creatures that lies behind the food we eat. Buying food in a store or restaurant is the culmination of a long process, of which all but the end product is delicately screened from our eyes. We buy our meat and poultry in neat plastic packages. It hardly bleeds. There is no reason

to associate this package with a living, breathing, walking, suffering animal. The very words we use conceal its origins: we eat beef, not bull, steer, or cow, and pork, not pig—although for some reason we seem to find it easier to face the true nature of a leg of lamb. The term "meat" is itself deceptive. It originally meant any solid food, not necessarily the flesh of animals. This usage still lingers in an expression like "nut meat," which seems to imply a substitute for "flesh meat" but actually has an equally good claim to be called "meat" in its own right. By using the more general "meat" we avoid facing the fact that what we are eating is really flesh.

These verbal disguises are merely the top layer of a much deeper ignorance of the origin of our food. Consider the images conjured up by the word "farm": a house; a barn; a flock of hens, overseen by a strutting rooster, scratching around the farmyard; a herd of cows being brought in from the fields for milking; and perhaps a sow rooting around in the orchard with a litter of squealing piglets running excitedly behind her.

Very few farms were ever as idyllic as that traditional image would have us believe. Yet we still think of a farm as a pleasant place, far removed from our own industrial, profit-conscious city life. Of those few who think about the lives of animals on farms, not many know much about modern methods of animal raising. Some people wonder whether animals are slaughtered painlessly, and anyone who has followed a truckload of cattle on the road will probably know that farm animals are transported in extremely crowded conditions; but not many suspect that transportation and slaughter are anything more than the brief and inevitable conclusion of a life of ease and contentment, a life that contains the natural pleasures of animal existence without the hardships that wild animals must endure in their struggle for survival.

These comfortable assumptions bear little relation to the realities of modern farming. For a start, farming is no longer controlled by simple country folk. During the last fifty years, large corporations and assembly-line methods of production have turned agriculture into agribusiness....

The first animal to be removed from the relatively natural conditions of the traditional farm was the chicken. Human beings use chickens in two ways: for their flesh and for their eggs. There are now standard mass-production techniques for obtaining both of these products.

Promoters of agribusiness consider the rise of the chicken industry to be one of the great success stories of farming. At the end of World War II chicken for the table was still relatively rare. It came mainly from small independent farmers or from the unwanted males produced by egg-laying flocks. Today in the United States, 102 million broilers—as table chickens are called—are slaughtered each week after being reared in highly automated factorylike plants that belong to the large corporations that control production. Eight of these corporations account for over 50 percent of the 5.3 billion birds killed annually in the U.S.

The essential step in turning chickens from farmyard birds into manufactured items was confining them indoors. A producer of broilers gets a load of 10,000, 50,000, or more day-old chicks from the hatcheries, and puts them into a long,

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windowless shed—usually on the floor, although some producers use tiers of cages in order to get more birds into the same size shed. Inside the shed, every aspect of the birds' environment is controlled to make them grow faster on less feed. Food and water are fed automatically from hoppers suspended from the roof. The lighting is adjusted according to advice from agricultural researchers: for instance, there may be bright light twenty-four hours a day for the first week or two, to encourage the chicks to gain weight quickly; then the lights may be dimmed slightly and made to go off and on every two hours, in the belief that the chickens are readier to eat after a period of sleep; finally there comes a point, around six weeks of age, when the birds have grown so much that they are becoming crowded, and the lights will then be made very dim at all times. The point of this dim lighting is to reduce the aggression caused by crowding.

Broiler chickens are killed when they are seven weeks old (the natural lifespan of a chicken is about seven years). At the end of this brief period, the birds weigh between four and five pounds; yet they still may have as little as half a square foot of space per chicken—or less than the area of a sheet of standard typing paper. (In metric terms, this is 450 square centimeters for a hen weighing more than two kilos.) Under these conditions, when there is normal lighting, the stress of crowding and the absence of natural outlets for the birds' energies lead to outbreaks of fighting, with birds pecking at each other's feathers and sometimes killing and eating one another. Very dim lighting has been found to reduce such behavior and so the birds are likely to live out their last weeks in near-darkness.

Feather-pecking and cannibalism are, in the broiler producer's language, "vices." They are not natural vices, however; they are the result of the stress and crowding to which modern broiler producers subject their birds. Chickens are highly social animals, and in the farmyard they develop a hierarchy, sometimes called a "pecking order." Every bird yields, at the food trough or elsewhere, to those who are higher in the pecking order, and takes precedence over those who are below. There may be a few confrontations before the order is established, but more often than not a show of force, rather than actual physical contact, is enough. As Konrad Lorenz, a renowned observer of animal behavior, wrote in the days when flocks were still small:

Do animals thus know each other among themselves? They certainly do.... Every poultry farmer knows that ... there exists a very definite order, in which each bird is afraid of those that are above her in rank. After some few disputes, which need not necessarily come to blows, each bird knows which of the others she has to fear and which must show respect to her. Not only physical strength, but also personal courage, energy, and even the self-assurance of every individual bird are decisive in the maintenance of the pecking order.

Other studies have shown that a flock of up to ninety chickens can maintain a stable social order, each bird knowing its place; but 80,000 birds crowded together in a single shed is obviously a different matter. The birds cannot establish a social order, and as a result they fight frequently with each other. Quite apart from the inability of the individual bird to recognize so many other birds, the mere fact of extreme crowding probably contributes to irritability and excitability in chickens,

as it does in human beings and other animals. This is something that farmers have long known:

Feather-pecking and cannibalism easily become serious vices among birds kept under intensive conditions. They mean lower productivity and lost profits. Birds become bored and peck at some outstanding part of another bird's plumage.... While idleness and boredom are predisposing causes of the vices, cramped, stuffy and overheated housing are contributory causes.

Farmers must stop "vices" since they cost money; but, although they may know that overcrowding is the root cause, they cannot do anything about this, since in the competitive state of the industry, eliminating overcrowding could mean eliminating one's profit margin at the same time. Costs for the building, for the automatic feeding equipment, for the fuel used to heat and ventilate the building, and for the labor would remain the same, but with fewer birds per shed to sell, income would be reduced. So farmers direct their efforts to reducing the consequences of the stress that costs them money. The unnatural way in which the birds are kept causes the vices, but to control them the poultry farmer must make the conditions still more unnatural. Very dim lighting is one way of doing this. A more drastic step, though one now very widely used in the industry, is "debeaking."

First started in San Diego in the 1940s, debeaking used to be performed with a blowtorch. The farmer would burn away the upper beaks of the chickens so that they were unable to pick at each other's feathers. A modified soldering iron soon replaced this crude technique, and today specially designed guillotine-like devices with hot blades are the preferred instrument. The infant chick's beak is inserted into the instrument, and the hot blade cuts off the end of it. The procedure is carried out very quickly, about fifteen birds a minute....

Even when the operation is done correctly, it is a mistake to think of it as a painless procedure, like cutting toenails. As an expert British government committee under zoologist Professor F. W. Rogers Brambell found some years ago:

Between the horn and the bone is a thin layer of highly sensitive soft tissue, resembling the "quick" of the human nail. The hot knife used in debeaking cuts through this complex of horn, bone and sensitive tissue, causing severe pain.

Moreover the damage done to the bird by debeaking is long term: chickens mutilated in this way eat less and lose weight for several weeks. The most likely explanation for this is that the injured beak continues to cause pain. J. Breward and M. J. Gentle, researchers at the British Agricultural and Food Research Council's Poultry Research Centre, investigated the beak stumps of debeaked hens and found that the damaged nerves grew again, turning in on themselves to form a mass of intertwining nerve fibers, called a neuroma. These neuromas have been shown in humans with amputated stumps to cause both acute and chronic pain. Breward and Gentle found that this is probably also the case in the neuromas formed by debeaking. Subsequently Gentle, expressing himself with the caution to be expected from a poultry scientist writing in a scientific journal, has said:

In conclusion, it is fair to say that we do not know how much discomfort or pain birds experience after beak trimming but in a caring society they should be given the benefit

of the doubt. To prevent cannibalism and feather pecking of poultry, good husbandry is essential and in circumstances where light intensity cannot be controlled the only alternative is to attempt to breed birds which do not exhibit these damaging traits.

There is also another possible solution. Debeaking, which is routinely performed in anticipation of cannibalism by most producers, greatly reduces the amount of damage a chicken can do to other chickens. But it obviously does nothing to reduce the stress and overcrowding that lead to such unnatural cannibalism in the first place....

"A hen," Samuel Butler once wrote, "is only an egg's way of making another egg." Butler, no doubt, thought he was being funny; but when Fred C. Haley, president of a Georgia poultry firm that controls the lives of 225,000 laying hens, describes the hen as "an egg producing machine" his words have more serious implications. To emphasize his businesslike attitude, Haley adds, "The object of producing eggs is to make money. When we forget this objective, we have forgotten what it is all about."

Nor is this only an American attitude. A British farming magazine has told its readers:

The modern layer is, after all, only a very efficient converting machine, changing the raw material—feedingstuffs—into the finished product—the egg—less, of course, maintenance requirements.

The idea that the layer is an efficient way to turn feed into eggs is common in the industry trade journals, particularly in advertisements. As may be anticipated, its consequences for the laying hens are not good.

Laying hens go through many of the same procedures as broilers, but there are some differences. Like broilers, layers have to be debeaked, to prevent the cannibalism that would otherwise occur in their crowded conditions; but because they live much longer than broilers, they often go through this operation twice. So we find poultry specialist Dick Wells, head of Britain's National Institute of Poultry Husbandry, recommending debeaking "sometime between 5 and 10 days of age," because there is less stress on the chicks at this time than if the operation is done earlier, and in addition "it is a good way of decreasing the risk of early mortality." When the hens are moved from the growing house to the laying facility between twelve and eighteen weeks of age they are often debeaked again.

The sufferings of laying chickens begin early in life. The newly hatched chicks are sorted into males and females by a "chick-puller." Since the male chicks have no commercial value, they are discarded. Some companies gas the little birds, but often they are dumped alive into a plastic sack and allowed to suffocate under the weight of other chicks dumped on top of them....

Whatever the method of rearing used, all the big egg producers now keep their laying hens in cages. (These are often referred to as "batteries" or "battery cages," not because there is anything electrical about them, but from the original meaning of the word "battery" as "a set of similar or connected units of equipment.") When cages were first introduced there was only one bird to a cage, the idea being that the farmer could then tell which birds were not laying enough eggs to give an economic return on their food. Those birds would then be killed. Then it was found that more birds could be housed and costs per bird reduced if two birds were put in each cage. That was only the first step. Now there is no question of keeping a

tally of each bird's eggs. Cages are used because of the greater number of birds who can be housed, warmed, fed, and watered in one building, and the greater use that can be made of labor-saving automatic equipment.

The economic demand that labor costs be kept to an absolute minimum means that laying hens get no more individual attention than broilers. Alan Hainsworth, owner of a poultry farm in upstate New York, told an inquiring local reporter that four hours a day was all he needed for the care of his 36,000 laying hens, while his wife looked after the 20,000 pullets: "It takes her about 15 minutes a day. All she checks is their automatic feeders, water cups and any deaths during the night."

This kind of care does not ensure a happy flock, though, as the reporter's description shows:

Walk into the pullet house and the reaction is immediate—complete pandemonium. The squawking is loud and intense as some 20,000 birds shove to the farthest side of their cages in fear of the human intruders.

Julius Goldman's Egg City, fifty miles northwest of Los Angeles, was one of the first million-plus layer units. Already in 1970, when the *National Geographic Magazine* did an enthusiastic survey of what were then still relatively novel farming methods, it consisted of two million hens divided into block-long buildings containing 90,000 hens each, five birds to a sixteen-by-eighteen-inch cage. Ben Shames, Egg City's executive vice-president, explained to their reporter the methods used to look after so many birds:

We keep track of the food eaten and the eggs collected in 2 rows of cages among the 110 rows in each building. When production drops to the uneconomic point, all 90,000 birds are sold to processors for potpies or chicken soup. It doesn't pay to keep track of every row in the house, let alone individual hens; with 2 million birds on hand you have to rely on statistical samplings.

In most egg factories the cages are stacked in tiers, with food and water troughs running along the rows filled automatically from a central supply. The cages have sloping wire floors. The slope—usually a gradient of one in five—makes it more difficult for the birds to stand comfortably, but it causes the eggs to roll to the front of the cage where they can easily be collected by hand or, in the more modern plants, carried by conveyor belt to a packing plant....

Under the conditions standard on modern egg farms in the United States, Britain, and almost every other developed nation except, shortly, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Sweden, every natural instinct the birds have is frustrated. They cannot walk around, scratch the ground, bathe in the dust, build nests, or stretch their wings. They are not part of a flock. They cannot keep out of each other's way, and weaker birds have no escape from the attacks of stronger ones, already maddened by the unnatural conditions....

Of all the forms of intensive farming now practiced, the veal industry ranks as the most morally repugnant. The essence of veal raising is the feeding of a high-protein food to confined, anemic calves in a manner that will produce a tender, pale-colored flesh that will be served to the patrons of expensive restaurants. Fortunately this industry does not compare in size with poultry, beef, or pig production; nevertheless it is worth our attention because it represents an extreme, both in the degree

of exploitation to which it subjects the animals and in its absurd inefficiency as a method of providing people with nourishment.

Veal is the flesh of a young calf. The term was originally reserved for calves killed before they had been weaned from their mothers. The flesh of these very young animals was paler and more tender than that of a calf who had begun to eat grass; but there was not much of it, since calves begin to eat grass when they are a few weeks old and still very small. The small amount available came from the unwanted male calves produced by the dairy industry. A day or two after being born they were trucked to market where, hungry and frightened by the strange surroundings and the absence of their mothers, they were sold for immediate delivery to the slaughterhouse.

Then in the 1950s veal producers in Holland found a way to keep the calf alive longer without the flesh becoming red or less tender. The trick depends on keeping the calf in highly unnatural conditions. If calves were left to grow up outside they would romp around the fields, developing muscles that would toughen their flesh and burning up calories that the producer must replace with costly feed. At the same time they would eat grass, and their flesh would lose the pale color that the flesh of newborn calves has. So the specialist veal producers take their calves straight from the auction ring to a confinement unit. Here, in a converted barn or specially built shed, they have rows of wooden stalls, each 1 foot 10 inches wide by 4 feet 6 inches long. It has a slatted wooden floor, raised above the concrete floor of the shed. The calves are tethered by a chain around the neck to prevent them from turning in their stalls when they are small. (The chain may be removed when the calves grow too big to turn around in such narrow stalls.) The stall has no straw or other bedding, since the calves might eat it, spoiling the paleness of their flesh. They leave their stalls only to be taken out to slaughter. They are fed a totally liquid diet, based on nonfat milk powder with vitamins, minerals, and growth-promoting drugs added. Thus the calves live for the next sixteen weeks. The beauty of the system, from the producers' point of view, is that at this age the veal calf may weigh as much as four hundred pounds, instead of the ninety-odd pounds that newborn calves weigh; and since veal fetches a premium price, rearing veal calves in this manner is a profitable occupation....

The narrow stalls and their slatted wooden floors are a serious source of discomfort to the calves. When the calves grow larger, they cannot even stand up and lie down without difficulty. As a report from a research group headed by Professor John Webster of the animal husbandry unit at the School of Veterinary Science, University of Bristol, in England, noted:

Veal calves in crates 750 mm wide cannot, of course, lie flat with their legs extended.... Calves may lie like this when they feel warm and wish to lose heat.... Well-grown veal calves at air temperatures above 20 degrees C [68 degrees F] may be uncomfortably hot. Denying them the opportunity to adopt a position designed to maximise heat loss only makes things worse.... Veal calves in boxes over the age of 10 weeks were unable to adopt a normal sleeping position with their heads tucked into their sides. We conclude that denying veal calves the opportunity to adopt a normal sleeping posture is a significant insult to welfare. To overcome this, the crates would need to be at least 900 mm wide.

American readers should note that 750 millimeters is equivalent to 2 feet 6 inches, and 900 millimeters to 3 feet, both considerably more than standard 1 foot 10 inch crates used in the United States.

The crates are also too narrow to permit the calf to turn around. This is another source of frustration. In addition, a stall too narrow to turn around in is also too narrow to groom comfortably in; and calves have an innate desire to twist their heads around and groom themselves with their tongues. As the University of Bristol researchers said:

Because veal calves grow so fast and produce so much heat they tend to shed their coats at about 10 weeks of age. During this time they have a great urge to groom themselves. They are also particularly prone to infestation with external parasites, especially in mild, humid conditions. Veal calves in crates cannot reach much of their body. We conclude that denying the veal calf the opportunity to groom itself thoroughly is an unacceptable insult to welfare whether this is achieved by constraining its freedom of movement or, worse, by the use of a muzzle.

A slatted wooden floor without any bedding is hard and uncomfortable; it is rough on the calves' knees as they get up and lie down. In addition, animals with hooves are uncomfortable on slatted floors. A slatted floor is like a cattle grid, which cattle always avoid, except that the slats are closer together. The spaces, however, must still be large enough to allow most of the manure to fall or be washed through, and this means that they are large enough to make the calves uncomfortable on them. The Bristol team described the young calves as "for some days insecure and reluctant to change position."

The young calves sorely miss their mothers. They also miss something to suck on. The urge to suck is strong in a baby calf, as it is in a baby human. These calves have no teat to suck on, nor do they have any substitute. From their first day in confinement—which may well be only the third or fourth day of their lives—they drink from a plastic bucket. Attempts have been made to feed calves through artificial teats, but the task of keeping the teats clean and sterile is apparently not worth the producer's trouble. It is common to see calves frantically trying to suck some part of their stalls, although there is usually nothing suitable; and if you offer a veal calf your finger you will find that he immediately begins to suck on it, as human babies suck their thumbs.

Later the calf develops a need to ruminate—that is, to take in roughage and chew the cud. But roughage is strictly forbidden because it contains iron and will darken the flesh, so, again, the calf may resort to vain attempts to chew the sides of his stall. Digestive disorders, including stomach ulcers, are common in veal calves. So is chronic diarrhea....

As if this were not enough, the calf is deliberately kept anemic. Provimi's [a feed manufacturer] *Stall Street Journal* explains why:

Color of veal is one of the primary factors involved in obtaining "top-dollar" returns from the fancy veal markets.... "Light color" veal is a premium item much in demand at better clubs, hotels and restaurants. "Light color" or pink veal is partly associated with the amount of iron in the muscle of the calves.

So Provimi's feeds, like those of other manufacturers of veal feeds, are deliberately kept low in iron. A normal calf would obtain iron from grass and other forms of roughage, but since veal calves are not allowed this, they become anemic. Pale

pink flesh is in fact anemic flesh. The demand for flesh of this color is a matter of snob appeal. The color does not affect the taste and it certainly does not make the flesh more nourishing—it just means that it lacks iron....

Calves kept in this manner are unhappy and unhealthy animals. Despite the fact that the veal producer selects only the strongest, healthiest calves to begin with, uses a medicated feed as a routine measure, and gives additional injections at the slightest sign of illness, digestive, respiratory, and infectious diseases are widespread. It is common for a veal producer to find that one in ten of a batch of calves do not survive the fifteen weeks of confinement. Between 10 and 15 percent mortality over such a short period would be disastrous for anyone raising calves for beef, but veal producers can tolerate this loss because the high-priced restaurants are prepared to pay well for their products....

If the reader will recall that this whole laborious, wasteful, and painful process of veal raising exists for the sole purpose of pandering to people who insist on pale, soft veal, no further comment should be needed...

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How much of our current indifference to the plight of the billions of creatures being processed in the factory farms is due to our ignorance of the realities of farm factory systems? How much is due to our alienation from the animals that we no longer see in their natural state? What, if anything, could be done to increase our awareness?
2. Why does Singer find the veal industry especially repugnant? Do you agree with his assessment?
3. Do you think societies that permit factory farming are grossly remiss in their duties to animals—directly or indirectly? Should they be blamed for callousness and cruelty?

Puppies, Pigs, and People

Alastair Norcross

Alastair Norcross (b. 1960) is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He specializes in ethics, applied ethics, and political philosophy, and he has published articles in journals, including *The Philosophical Review*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, and *Philosophy & Public Affairs*.

Norcross argues that we are morally obligated to abstain from eating factory-farmed animals. He begins by describing Fred, a man who tortures and kills puppies to harvest a hormone that enables him to enjoy chocolate. Norcross asserts that there is no difference between Fred and those who eat factory-farmed meat: both enjoy food that comes from the torture and slaughter of innocent animals. Norcross dismisses the excuse of

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