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EUPHORIA ON THE CONVEYOR BELT  
ON THE MORALITY OF FACTORY FARMING

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In this paper, the author seeks to establish what accounts for the intuition that there is something morally abhorrent about factory farming. The author considers two rivaling views: First, factory farming is morally wrong because of the suffering it produces, as proposed by Peter Singer. Second, extrapolating from Mark Rowlands's view, factory farming is wrong because it violates the rights of animals. My analysis shows that suffering does not adequately explain what is wrong with factory farming. Rather, there is reason to believe that animals may rightfully be regarded as rudimentarily autonomous. Since this autonomy carries moral relevance, animals should be granted a basic right to freedom, as also follows from Rowlands's account. The author also considers implications of these observations on other human-animal relationships—namely, pet ownership and meat consumption in general.

**Key Words:** Factory Farming, Contractarianism, Animal Rights

## INTRODUCTION

It seems clear that there is something morally abhorrent about factory farming. What is it, however, that explains this intuition? At first glance, this might seem like an easy question: When animals are hung upside down, are dipped into electric pools and have their throats cut open, it does not seem controversial to assert that these animals suffer great physical harm and that this is morally abhorrent. Indeed, Peter Singer argues that suffering is what is morally wrong with factory farming.

This, however, does not seem to be the full story. Even if the animals do not suffer and factory farming is carried out in a careful manner where very

little pain, if any, is caused, there seems to be something morally objectionable about the idea of slaughtering animals in this structured and mechanical way. Drawing from the work of Mark Rowlands on contractarianism, I offer a possible explanation. Animals, I will argue, have moral rights. Factory farming is wrong, therefore, not because of the suffering it entails, but because it violates animal rights. For this reason, I will argue that whether the animal suffers cannot explain what makes factory farming morally abhorrent—it is the violation of animal rights to which we object.

The suffering of an animal, I argue, cannot adequately account for the wrongness of factory farming. For this reason, I will draw from the work of Mark Rowlands and argue that it is actually the violation of animal rights which explains our moral abhorrence to factory farming. I will argue that there is reason to believe that animals possess a rudimentary kind of autonomy, in virtue of which it makes sense to grant them certain rights. In particular, it makes sense to grant them a right to basic freedom. Factory farming prevents animals from having autonomy, thereby violating their right to freedom, and this, I will argue, explains what we morally intuit to be fundamentally wrong with the practice of factory farming.

I will begin by explaining the two accounts (i.e., that of Singer and that of Rowlands) of our moral intuition that factory farming is wrong, the basis of these accounts, and their implications for factory farming. While Singer explicitly discusses factory farming, Rowlands does not, and so I will offer an explanation based on my application of his view to this problem. Second, I will motivate my subsequent contribution to the debate by considering how the authors are likely to object to each other. Because these objections are likely to boil down to disagreements over fundamental moral commitments, I will present a thought experiment suggesting that Singer's account is inadequate. In particular, I will invite the reader to imagine a factory farm that is in all respects like a typical farm but where the animals are artificially induced into a state of painless euphoria. Having presented my argument as to why this farm is impermissible, I conclude that the violation of animal rights accounts for the moral impermissibility of factory farming. Lastly, I will discuss some implications of my view with regards to the morality of other human-animal interactions.

Singer argues that suffering is what is fundamentally wrong with factory farming. Singer is an act utilitarian. This is the view that a practice or act *P* is morally right if and only if it, out of all acts available to the agent, produces the maximum amount of happiness. Happiness, or utility, is defined as the net balance of pleasure over pain. Pain is equated with badness and held to be the only thing bad in itself; pleasure, or the absence of pain, is equated with goodness and correspondingly held to be the only intrinsic good. Consequently, *P* is right if and only if it maximizes pleasure, or—if no pleasure is possible—minimizes pain. This requires that the agent treat the interests of all individuals affected by his action as if they were his own; in particular, the interest of one individual must be given equal consideration to the like

interest of any other individual. Given these presuppositions, Singer argues that animals have moral standing. We know that the morally right action is defined as the one that maximizes pleasure over pain, and since this requires equal consideration, all individuals capable of experiencing pleasure or pain are morally relevant. Since animals are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, animals have moral standing; in particular, their interest not to suffer must be given equal consideration to this very interest of any human. Second, Singer argues that factory farming is morally impermissible. Between factory farming and not factory farming (the two acts available), factory farming involves the production of a great amount of suffering that is not outweighed by any pleasure accrued from the practice (perhaps primarily the pleasure of eating meat). In virtue of the suffering, and the lack of resulting pleasure, factory farming does not maximize happiness and is therefore morally impermissible.

Drawing from Rowlands's work, however, we get a different explanation. Factory farming is wrong not because of the suffering it causes, but because it violates animal rights. Rowlands's argument is based on John Rawls's contractarianism, a theory Rowlands subsequently extends to animals. Rawls argues that the correct principles of morality are those that rational, self-interested agents would conceivably agree upon if they were unaware of which societal position they occupied. In this "original position," the agents are placed behind a "veil of ignorance": They have perfect knowledge of all the general facts about the world, but no knowledge of their individual features. In particular, all "undeserved" features are unknown. By undeserved is meant those features that we have done nothing to achieve; for example, which family we are born into, our talents, and our physical appearance. Since we have not earned the possession of these features, we do not deserve to reap their benefits or to be harmed by their ills—but we are bound to have such features. Thus, in order to guarantee that the contract is established impartially, the agents are unaware of these features.

Rawls argues that it follows that the rules the agents would agree upon, the resulting contract, would be such as to benefit the worst off. Since the agents do not know what their position in society will be, but are self-interested, they will establish principles that ensure that, should they end up in the worst position, they will nevertheless be made as well off as possible. In particular, Rawls argues that they would agree to what he calls the "liberty principle," according to which all individuals are to be granted a basic right to freedom—i.e., a right to make their own choices. The reason for this is that because the agents do not know where in society they will end up, they will not want to limit anybody's freedom, for they might end up being the person whose freedom is limited. Thus, all persons will agree to give everyone covered by the contract a basic right to freedom, hence autonomy, of the person.

Rowlands argues that such a contract necessarily extends to animals. We know that the agents in the original position are unaware of their underserved properties. Rationality, however, is an undeserved property: Individuals cannot do anything to determine what rational capacity they will be endowed with;

this is determined solely by nature. Consequently, whether or not one will be rational is unknown in the original position. Since animals are not rational, it follows that agents must account for the possibility of occupying the position of an animal. Since the agents are self-interested, they will want this position to be the least bad, and hence the contract will extend to animals, granting them moral rights. While Rowlands does not state exactly which rights animals should have, it is reasonable to maintain that the liberty principle applies. After all, if rational agents would extend the liberty principle to all humans to avoid the possibility of ending up in a position without the right to decide over one's own life, then it seems that rational agents would extend this right to freedom to animals, too, in case they end up occupying the position of an animal. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that one implication of this view is that a basic right to freedom is attributable to animals.

A second implication is that factory farming is morally abhorrent because it violates animal rights, namely the liberty principle. Life in a factory farm does not allow animals to have a basic freedom: The animals are locked in, prevented from moving properly due to a lack of physical space (the animals are placed in crates, or cannot move due to the effects of hormonal supplements). The conditions of factory farming do not allow animals the basic right of freedom. Consequently, factory farming violates the liberty principle and is therefore morally impermissible. In conclusion, on Rowlands's account, what is fundamentally wrong with factory farming is that it violates animal rights.

So there are two candidate explanations: Factory farming is wrong because it produces suffering or because it violates rights. I will now consider what the authors might say in response to each other. First, Rowlands might raise the general objection that because utilitarianism cannot make sense of justice even as it pertains to humans, it fails before it can even begin to account for just, and so also moral, treatment of animals. On Singer's act-utilitarian view, an act is permissible so long as it maximizes overall happiness. Supposing we have a group of racists, wishing passionately to rid their society of some minority group, utilitarianism justifies such oppression so long as the racist group is sufficiently large. But this is highly counterintuitive: Racism and oppression are arguably manifestations of severe injustice regardless of whether they maximize happiness by making the oppressors happy. Since utilitarianism licenses such practices, it is fundamentally flawed. Therefore, Singer's argument may not get off the ground.

In response, Singer would presumably maintain that he is not troubled by the fact that his theory might be inconsistent with some moral intuitions. He might argue that the method of validating a moral theory by comparing it to popular intuitions is an inappropriate method in the first place. Our moral intuitions are heavily influenced by our particular culture and perhaps even by our biological makeup. For this reason, discrediting normative theories on the basis of such seemingly arbitrary grounds is inappropriate.

Rowlands may push back at Singer that this response misrepresents the intended use of intuitions in his theory. Rowlands might argue that there is

a dialectic exchange between intuitions and moral theories such that both are potentially subject to revision. If we cannot ground our intuitions in reason, this suggests that our intuitions are wrong; if our theory produces highly counterintuitive results, without good reason, this suggests that the theory requires revision. Contractarianism supports this kind of reflective process. The reason utilitarianism fails to provide a satisfying account of justice is not merely that it produces counterintuitive results, but that it treats as equally legitimate the interests of the racists who want to oppress the minority, as the interests of the minority who desire not to be oppressed. While Rowlands can condemn the desires of racists because people have a right not to be oppressed, Singer cannot.

At this point, the debate might reach a stalemate. Singer explicitly denies that individuals have rights and so is unlikely to be convinced by Rowlands's response. Indeed, utilitarianism measures morality in terms of overall utility, whereas rights are thought to apply irrespective of an individual's utility to others, and so there is little to no room for rights within a utilitarian framework. Within Rowlands's contractarian framework, however, rights play an imperative role. Since the authors are unlikely to reach an agreement over the general question of rights, it is unlikely that they would reach an agreement on the particular question about what is fundamentally wrong with factory farms. In order to answer this question, and thus bring the debate to a possible conclusion, I will now present a thought-experiment followed by an argument to show why Rowlands's account is superior.

Suffering is not what we morally object to about factory farming. To see this, consider the following hypothetical farm. Take a typical factory farm: Genetically modified animals, filthy cages, conveyer belts, and hormonal supplements causing abnormal growth. Now, suppose that the animals are injected with a drug that renders them permanently euphoric and unable to experience any pain. The drug has no further side effects nor does it negatively impact human health. Consequently, we have a factory farm seemingly devoid of any suffering: Even as the chicks hang upside-down, ready to take a soak in the electric pool, they are ecstatic. The sow over in the barn next door is joyous as she lies in her own feces, in the same crate where she has spent most of her life. In this factory farm, there is euphoria on the conveyer belt, but no suffering.

Is this a good farm? No: It is a thoroughly disturbing, artificially-euphoric hell. On Singer's account, however, this imagined farm is acceptable. This farm maximizes happiness: The animals are ecstatic, their interest not to suffer is adhered to, there are no negative health impacts, and no behavioural change is required on the part of consumers. Still, however, there seems to be something morally abhorrent about this hypothetical factory farm: The fact that the animals are experientially indifferent to their condition does not seem to justify subjecting them to it. For example, the fact that I (hypothetically) cannot experience pain in my right arm, does not give you license to pierce it with a pair of scissors, even if you find great enjoyment in such a practice.

Analogously, even if an animal does not experience any suffering, this does not give license to rear them in the confining and claustrophobic conditions of a factory farm. Thus, suffering alone cannot account for what is fundamentally wrong with factory farming. Singer's explanation fails.

This hypothetical farm also isolates and highlights a kind of alienation: The animals are not themselves. This alienation is analogous to what may occur under heavy intoxication; we seem prevented from acting as or according to our sober selves, and so we are, in a sense, alienated from our genuine selves. Drugs thwart our autonomy and prevent us from acting freely in a way that emanates from our genuine selves; analogously, factory farming, with or without euphoric drugs, thwart animal autonomy by preventing them from acting freely in a way that emanates from their genuine selves.

There is reason to believe that animals are rudimentarily autonomous. By autonomous I mean having the ability to choose one's course of actions, or ends, in accordance with one's own, authentic desires, preferences, or values. As such, autonomy involves self-governance. Self-governance may be seen as existing on a spectrum. At one end, we have human self-governance. This may be characterized as deliberative choice, and the choices made need not be what the individual actually prefers. On the other end, we have plants and other non-conscious living organisms. These are self-governing insofar as they are responsive to stimuli in their environment, and their responses are presumably predominantly according to what is desirable for their kind. For example, a flower may turn towards the sun, if sunlight is desired for its growth. However, plants clearly are not autonomous. While there are preferred states for plants, plants lack the capacity to choose, and so this end of the spectrum does not involve autonomy. Between these extremes, however, we find animal autonomy, that is, self-governance by choice based on preference. While animals cannot deliberate, they do have preferences and they can choose. Insofar as they are able to make choices based on their individual and species-specific preferences, they possess a rudimentary kind of autonomy.

This kind of autonomy, albeit different from human autonomy, has moral relevance. Human autonomy enables individuals to independently choose one's own way of life. If this did not have moral relevance, we could not morally criticize the enslavement of other people. Slavery necessarily thwarts an individual's ability to independently choose her own way of life, i.e., her autonomy. Indeed, it seems that the slave-owner is blameworthy for this very reason. In other words, determining another's fate without regard for what that individual desires for herself is arguably wrong. So we may morally criticize the slave owner, a fact which illustrates that autonomy has moral relevance for us. Animal autonomy functions analogously: Autonomy for animals means that they can choose their ways of life in accordance with their own preferences or desires. Since the kinds of autonomy are analogous, and the function of autonomy for humans has moral significance, so must the autonomy of animals. Thus, animal autonomy has moral relevance.

Since animals may be thought of as rudimentarily autonomous, and be-

cause this autonomy carries moral significance, it makes sense that they should be granted rights. In particular, it makes sense that they should be granted a basic right to freedom. Enslaving individuals means taking away their freedom; and it seems reasonable that because the slaves are autonomous beings, they have a right to freedom, despite whatever utility they have for the slaveowner. Analogously, since animals possess rudimentary autonomy, they have a right to basic freedom.

It follows that Rowlands's explanation surpasses that of Singer. Factory farms thwart animal autonomy: The animals are locked up in abhorrent conditions, forced to suffer a fate they cannot be reasonably said to prefer, and are given no choice but to be so confined. Factory farms, therefore, violate the animal right to basic freedom. Thus, even if animal suffering is limited or eliminated, what we still find morally repugnant about factory farming is that, by thwarting animal autonomy, it violates the animal right to freedom, a right implied by the liberty principle endorsed by Rowlands. Thus, we have arrived at Rowlands's conclusion, and we can see that his explanation can account for our moral intuitions when it comes to factory farms that cause no felt suffering while Singer's cannot.

Before I conclude, I will attempt to clarify my view by considering a possible objection—namely, that my argument entails that any domestication of animals is morally impermissible. One might argue that it seems that an implication of my view is that we must literally let all animals loose. This objection, however, is based on a misrepresentation of the liberty principle: This principle confers a basic, not unrestrained, right to freedom. A basic right to freedom is not a right to unlimited freedom, and so it does not follow that we must open the doors and let the animals run wild. Just as it makes sense to put limits on our personal freedom to facilitate our ability to live safely in a functioning society, so too does it make sense to put limits on the freedom of domesticated animals. Thus, I do not contend that the domestication of animals is entirely impermissible.

Lastly, it may be objected that granting animals a basic right to freedom is practically meaningless, i.e., does not allow us to distinguish right from wrong action. It seems plausible that rights apply meaningfully to an individual only if it is possible, at least in principle, to know whether the rights are in fact upheld. Rights are invoked to define the permissibility of various actions. Consequently, if we are unable to know whether we are acting in accordance with rights, they do not serve the purpose for which they were originally invoked, rendering them meaningless. The right to freedom of animals is defined in terms of animal autonomy and animal autonomy is defined in terms of preferences. But how are we supposed to know the preferences of animals? We cannot ask them and any assumptions we make based on observation will therefore remain precisely that: Assumptions. It follows that we cannot know whether or not we are upholding an animal's right to freedom, which renders such a right practically meaningless.

I agree that it may not be possible to know exactly what an animal's prefer-

ences consist of; however, I do not agree that such certainty is required to sufficiently uphold a right to freedom. First, while we may only be able to form empirical assumptions about their preferences or desires, at least some such assumptions are highly probable. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that physical health is preferred over disease for conscious beings in general. Second, assuming that some assumptions are well-grounded and highly probable, there is reason to believe that these are sufficient to guide our treatment of animals. Ethical matters involving animals, as opposed to those pertaining to human-human interactions only, are peculiar in that we may have less of an ability to relate to and understand how various circumstances are perceived.

Given that we do not share a common language, we are indeed unable to consult animals and ask them to share their opinions verbally. Our understanding of humans' minds and perceptions, however, is also limited—persons may lie, be unaware of their true feelings, or be unable to express what they are feeling in words. This, however, is not something we would say makes human rights practically meaningless. Despite these difficulties, we work hard to try to read body-language, communicate (in whatever ways we can), and infer based on our own experiences what others might desire. I therefore contend that, when it comes to animals, at least some highly probably and well-grounded empirical observations adequately serve to guide action and can be used to determine whether or not animal rights are upheld. And this makes it not the case that granting animals a basic right to freedom is practically meaningless. That life in a crate or being strapped onto a conveyor belt is inconsistent with even the most basic notion of freedom hardly requires verbal confirmation.

In sum, I have argued that suffering alone fails to explain what is morally wrong about factory farming. Rather, I have proposed that violation of animal rights, attributed to them in virtue of their being rudimentarily autonomous, more adequately accounts for the immorality of the practice. I address two possible objections: That my account rules out some seemingly benign human-animal interactions, and that attributing rights to animals may not enable us to morally evaluate such interactions anyways. I conclude by saying that factory farming violates the autonomy of animals in an unacceptable way and that we must preserve their right to freedom if we are to begin to find morally permissible ways to consume meat. It may, after further reflection, turn out that no form of meat consumption is morally permissible, but that is an argument too large to make for this paper and so I will leave the question open for the reader to ponder.

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