

Agriculture as Mutualism

Cameron Walden

Faculty Introduction

Dr. Zachary Bachman

Cameron Walden presents a thought-provoking argument in defense of the practice of eating meat. Most ethicists who tackle the issue conclude that the practice of eating meat is morally wrong due to the poor living conditions of the animals we eat, and that therefore we as individuals should abstain from the practice. Walden argues this form of ethical analysis overlooks an important aspect of the problem, namely that the living conditions of agricultural animals is a structural problem rooted in how animals serve as raw material in a profit-seeking practice. If we collectively take back the means of production, we can give the animals we eat a good life. An implication of Walden's argument is that many ethicists are completely missing their moral target. Many of the 21st century's moral challenges are structural in nature. When ethicists analyze structural problems through an interpersonal lens (what do I owe you?), they distort the moral framework of the problems they analyze. In motto form: *structural problems require structural analyses*.

Abstract

In this paper I explore the ethicality of using animals for agriculture by describing the views of two ethicists, Peter Singer and Roger Scruton. Singer holds a popular view among ethicists, namely that consuming animals is almost never permissible. Conversely, Scruton argues that it is in the best interest of animals that we continue to consume them. Both Singer and Scruton use utilitarian arguments to make their case, and both ethicists suggest an interpersonal course of action: the cessation or continuation of consuming meat respectively. I argue that both of their analyses fail to provide a satisfactory answer to the issue. I contend that the moral issues raised by consuming meat in the modern world are too large and too complicated to be properly addressed by individual dietary choices. What we must do, collectively, is take control of animal agriculture away from those who practice it unethically.

The question of the ethicality of animal agriculture is a philosophical question as complex as it is old. Many cultures have different traditional answers to this question. The Christian answer is that God created the animals for humans to use, and so all use of them is ethical.¹ In some Eastern religions and traditions, it is unethical to ever consume the flesh of another creature.² Because there is no clear reasoned answer, modern ethicists still discuss the issue. Two who stand in opposition on the issue are Peter Singer and Roger Scruton. Singer argues that it is not permissible to consume animal products that have been produced in factory farming conditions, and he argues it is likely immoral to consume animals at all. Scruton takes a different approach, arguing that it is “not just permissible but positively right to eat these animals whose comforts depend on our doing so.” In fact, Scruton writes, “I find myself driven by my love of animals to favor eating them.”³ Both ethicists use utilitarian ethics to arrive at jarringly disparate conclusions, neither of which sufficiently answer the question of consuming animal products produced in an industrialized capitalist society. In this paper, I will argue that simple utilitarian ethics fail to answer modern questions of consumption of products produced unethically, particularly when personal decisions of abstinence are insufficient solutions to systemic ethical failings.

Singer’s argument is very straightforward and easy for anyone to understand, even someone with no familiarity of utilitarianism. In short, utilitarianism is the belief that the most ethical action is the one that results in the most pleasure and the least harm, weighted evenly among all individuals affected by the outcome. In other words, even if the decision creates a small amount of harm for the one making the decision, if it creates a larger amount of good for others, that is the ethical decision to make, compared to one that creates a small amount of pleasure for the decision maker and a large amount of harm for others.

Peter Singer and other animal rights ethicists believe the pleasure and harm animals experience should be weighed the same as pleasure or

¹ Genesis 9:3 (ESV)

² Jenny L. Mace, and Steven P. McCulloch. 2020. “Yoga, Ahimsa and Consuming Animals: UK Yoga Teachers’ Beliefs about Farmed Animals and Attitudes to Plant-Based Diets.” *Animals*. 10 no. 3: 480

³ Roger Scruton. *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. (London: Demos, 1998.) 72

harm experienced by a human. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer dispels the illusions he feels many hold regarding the production of meat and other animal products. He outlines how small agriculture operations have been systematically purchased or driven into financial ruin by the introduction of corporate interest into the farming industry. Singer, in order to demonstrate factory farming conditions are indefensible, lists the inhumane conditions of factory-farmed chickens, including their dying at a young age, being overcrowded, and being mutilated in order to prevent aggression stemming from overcrowding.⁴ He goes on to detail the same list of atrocities for egg-laying fowl, pigs, and cows. Singer is as exhaustive with his evidence as he is correct in his assessment of the practices as indefensibly immoral. This ethical calculus is very straightforward: the suffering of animals at factory farms is much larger than the joy created by consuming them. Thus, Singer argues the moral individual will adhere to a vegan diet, therefore not participating in the mass torture of animals. Singer also suggests taking political action against factory farms, but insists taking up a vegan diet is the best thing one can do to fight against factory farming.⁵

Roger Scruton agrees with Singer in regards to the conditions of factory farms being unacceptable. However, Scruton is more open to the possibility of humans being able to provide animals a life worth living, even livestock animals that are being kept for use. Scruton asserts, so long as the animals are being provided a certain level of material conditions, there is nothing unethical with using them; in other words, Scruton believes, under the correct conditions, the ethical calculus can work out in a way that the joy provided to the animal can counteract

the negatives of being a livestock animal. Scruton calls these material conditions giving the animals a “fulfilled life.”⁶ Again, factory farms are under no

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circumstances meeting the criteria of giving their animals a fulfilled life, but if the money or resources gained from animal agriculture can enable an agriculturalist to give an animal a fulfilled life, Scruton argues that it

⁴Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* (Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 2009), 157-162

⁵Singer, 237

⁶Scruton, 62

is positively moral to do so.⁷ While Scruton recognizes the virtue of the good farmer who provides for his animals, he offers little solution to the stranglehold factory farms have on meat and egg production. However, by further exploring Scruton's idea of providing a fulfilled life, we can begin to put the pieces together and assemble our own ethical calculus to determine if humans can provide enough for an animal to outweigh its being bred for human use.

It is often assumed that the ideal life for an animal is one that is lived in nature, in its natural habitat. It's easy to see why this assumption would be made; the wild animal has the freedom to do as it wills, to roam where it pleases, and freedom from ownership by another being. However, humans, also being animals, clearly prefer artificial environments that provide creature comforts nature never could, even at the cost of giving up the aforementioned benefits of living in nature. I suspect if this were not the case, the majority of people would not live in human-built structures and sacrifice their time and freedom working jobs to pay for these artificial conditions. I see no reason to believe we are unique in these respects. The life of a well-kept livestock animal being provided a fulfilled life will be dramatically easier and less stressful than a wild animal that must provide for itself.

The first hardship that wild animals face and domesticated animals are spared is scarcity. Animals in the wild are responsible for securing their own food and water for themselves and their offspring. Even in years without drought or natural disaster, this task can prove difficult, particularly since human settlements encroach further into the natural habitats of wild animals every day. However, on the other side of the fence, livestock animals are fed daily, with constant access to water.

The second hardship wild animals face with absolutely no recourse is disease. Wild animals that get sick, especially prey animals, have no ability to rest in safety, and certainly have no medicine. They will likely become the target for predators looking for an easy meal (more on that later). Again, the domestic animal fares far better, having shelter and medicine to increase their odds of survival.

Finally, and the likely largest difference in quality of life between the two groups, is the access domesticated animals have to a humane death.

⁷ Scruton, 72

When the unfortunate time comes for the animal agriculturalist to put an animal down, the prudent farmer will select a method that causes the fastest, least traumatic route to loss of consciousness. A predator in the wild feels no such responsibility. A prey animal in the wild stares death in the face every day until its last, and when that day comes, it comes brutally and mercilessly, oftentimes resulting in being eaten while alive. Predators do not spare young animals, and in fact target them with greater frequency than they do adult animals. Factory farms do torture animals, but nature is only a marginal improvement. Being provided a fulfilled life is a much larger improvement.

The massive roadblock to animal agriculture being a net positive to animals is just that: many farms do not provide animals a life worth living. Factory farms that have their stock born and die in a tiny box, never seeing the sun or being able to move around, are inarguably unethical. Further, the vast majority of animal products in the world are now produced in such conditions. This presents individuals with the ethical quandary that Singer attempts to resolve by recommending adherence to a vegan diet. However, I believe singular focus on individual dietary choice is short-sighted on Singer's part. Singer presents the idea that through market forces, the reduced demand on animal products will make factory farms less profitable; therefore, fewer animals will be harmed by the industry. However, is relying on capitalist market forces to carry out ethical justice a winning plan? Is trusting the very people who created factory farming to scale down production rather than "innovate"

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a new way to torture even more money out of animals really the best we can come up with? The primary positive outcome of becoming vegan is that, as individuals, people can maintain their sense of ethicality by not participating. I believe there is a better solution, one that means individuals don't have to trust in markets or CEOs to make the right choice: ethically producing your own animal products.

Let's run the utilitarian calculus here: by taking on the burden of ethically producing your own animal products, one lessens the reliance on unethical farming as much as swearing those products off. Imagine if one were to raise egg-laying hens, and only consumed eggs laid by one's own birds. That person is still not consuming any factory-farmed eggs

and is therefore participating in Singer's egg boycott to the same extent he is. In addition to reduced reliance on cruel agricultural mechanisms, you also have created a safe environment for several happy, safe, well taken care of animals that would have either died at the feed store or potentially been mistreated if they were not under your care. Even further, the scale of animal agriculture is such that there is normally an enormous surplus of product that one family cannot use. By giving this product to friends, family, or neighbors, you have now lessened other peoples' reliance on those unethical mechanisms. This adds up to not only less reliance on factory farmed goods than a boycott, but also an additional enormous amount of positive outcomes in the form of happy birds. That's without mentioning that veganism is not an easy sell. It is my experience, though I suspect widely true, that handing someone a dozen eggs is easier than convincing them to not eat eggs for the next two weeks, and accomplishes much the same thing.

Clearly, this method is not practical for everyone. Those who live in cities might not own the land they live on, have enough space, or have enough money to care for animals, presumably at a much steeper cost than the supermarket. However, this same criticism is true for the ability to ethically consume almost anything. Clothes made in sweatshops are cheaper and more widely distributed than those made ethically. Some products we rely on, like smartphones, don't even have an ethically produced option on the market. There is no way to buy a smartphone without contributing to child slavery and ecologically destructive mining practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and unethical factory conditions in Vietnam and China.⁸ Despite this, it is nearly necessary in today's world to have a smartphone. This example suggests that the problem is not simply one of animal rights, but rather a problem about how we access the commodities we need in a world hostile to providing those things in an ethical way.

Fortunately, or perhaps frustratingly, none of these things are produced unethically because there is no possible way to produce them ethically. The conditions under which they are mostly produced are unconscionable, but this outcome is by choice. Apple could pay fair

⁸ Davis, Matt. "To Make a Smartphone, Lose Your Ethics." *Big Think*, April 19, 2022. <https://bigthink.com/technology-innovation/smartphone-manufacturing-is-unethical/>

wages to the people who assemble their phones; farms could ensure safe working conditions for migrant laborers who harvest their crops; Tyson could provide humane conditions for their birds. It is the singular focus on capital that corrupts these things. The agriculture of animals is merely one of the things corrupted.

Animal rights are harmed primarily by the same thing that harms human rights: corporate greed. For thousands of years, humans have conducted agriculture as a mutualistic relationship with animals, providing materially for the animals in exchange for them providing materially for us. However, capitalistic exploitation spares nothing and has transformed our mutualism into parasitism. Simple utilitarian analyses such as Singer's can be used to find good answers to problems individuals have the power to solve. But the problem we are faced with as a society is too great to be tackled by a series of scattered individuals making large choices with small outcomes, and too complicated to believe our choices will be matriculated up through the unknowable stream of capitalist market forces. Large problems require solutions on the scale of community. Providing a good life to animals in service of your community creates more joy and reduces more suffering than boycotting the consumption of meat. ■

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Student Biography

Cameron Walden is a senior at Sam Houston State University majoring in History and minoring in Ethics. He is interested in studying the history of labor and ethical theories, and especially the intersections between the two subjects. He and his wife Kami have kept egg-laying hens for five years, which has led to a personal interest in the ethics of animal agriculture that preceded his academic research into the subject. With the help of Dr. Bachman, a philosophy lecturer at Sam Houston, Cameron developed his experience and interest in animal agriculture into a critique of interpersonal ethics as they pertain to the use of animals. Cameron will graduate in spring of 2024 and plans to teach history at a Texas public school.