

32. The problem of justifying animal-friendly animal husbandry

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Abstract

Intense or industrial animal husbandry is morally bad. This consensus in animal ethics led to the emergence of veganism which is recently in decline in favour of ‘conscientious carnivorism’ which advocates eating animal products from animal-friendly animal husbandry in response to the moral problems of industrial farming. Advocates of animal-friendly husbandry justify rearing and killing ‘happy animals’ by highlighting that the animals live pleasant lives and would not have existed if not reared for human consumption. In this paper, I tackle this ‘logic of the larder’ by showing that it serves as a purification strategy to conceal the harm that animals experience in this alleged animal-friendly type of farming. Defenders of ‘happy meat’ claim that animal-friendly animal husbandry is in the animals’ best interests and that it is in effect a ‘win-win situation’ for humans and farm animals alike. Departing from two critics of animal-friendly animal husbandry, I will show that the problem of this logic is that it evades the fact that moral residuals, which is the experienced harm by the animals, remain by this practice. Even if there may be strong reasons for the consumption of meat and derivatives of ‘happy animals’, the experienced harm for the animals will not be extinguished. I will denote the detachment that derives from the strategy of rendering the animals’ experienced harm in animal-friendly animal husbandry invisible as guilt. I will conclude that instead of purifying eating animals the ‘good way’, we should face the responsibility we have when killing ‘happy animals’ for ‘happy meat’.

Keywords: ethics of eating meat, happy meat, logic of the larder, guilt

Introduction

Intense or industrial animal husbandry is morally bad. This statement reflects, except from a few exceptions (e.g. Hsiao, 2017), a consensus in animal ethics. The adverse effects of intense animal husbandry are far reaching and include, besides the harm to animals, negative impacts on the environment and climate or the threat of global influenza pandemic – to name just a few (for an exhaustive critique of the adverse effects of industrial animal farming see Rossi and Garner, 2014). An often-discussed alternative to industrial farming and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO) is veganism, which advocates the rejection of eating meat and other animal products, and eventually the abolition of animal husbandry *per se* (e.g. Gruen and Jones, 2016). But this position is recently in decline in favour of what can be called ‘conscientious carnivorism’ (Scruton, 2004) or ‘virtuous omnivorism’ (Bobier, 2021) which advocates eating animal products from animal-friendly animal husbandry (Milburn and Bobier, 2022), a type of farming that aims at avoiding the adverse effects of industrial farming, above all: the harms to animals. Conscientious carnivorism is advocated as a practice that benefits the farm animals and some even claim that it is our duty to eat such produced meat since it favours the animals’ welfare (Zangwill, 2021).

The common justification of animal-friendly animal husbandry (in the following: AFAH) is simple and straightforward, as Tatjana Višak sums up:

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[T]he animals are granted pleasant lives, usually in connection with the claim that they would not exist at all if it were not for the purpose of our consumption. By consuming and farming animals, we are actually enabling their existence and granting them a pleasant life, which seems better than not existing at all. (Višak, 2013: 1)

Accordingly, eating meat from AFAH is seen as morally good: the animals live a 'happy life' – except from the 'one bad day' of slaughter – and humans must not refrain from the habit of eating meat. The 'win-win situation' that defenders of AFAH advocate results from a kind of moral thinking that tries to neutralize, or better *purify*, the negative effects if the expected outcome is positive: animals in AFAH lead a happy life and would not have existed if not reared for human ends. Additionally, humans profit from high-quality animal products. Seemingly, no moral residuals remain.

Contrary to this view I will argue in this paper that the justification of AFAH is flawed as the positive effects that result for human beings by consuming animal flesh or milk or eggs from AFAH will not neutralize the harm experienced by the animals when killed. Evading responsibility by excusing the animals' experienced harm with the animals' seemingly 'happy lives' does not neutralize the harm, and in any case moral residuals remain.

In the following, I will discuss the rationale that renders AFAH as morally viable. I then consider two critical voices on AFAH which I subsequently contrast with a concept of guilt which is basically the claim that there is no redemption of animal suffering. The aim of the paper is to argue for the conception of guilt as a way to criticize the purification strategy that underwrites the conception of AFAH.

Justifying animal-friendly animal husbandry

The justification – or rather: the purification – of AFAH is closely connected to what Henry S. Salt coined as the 'logic of the larder' which was originally formulated by Leslie Stephen in this polemic statement from 1896: 'Of all the arguments for Vegetarianism none is so weak as the argument from humanity. The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all' (Stephen in Salt, 1976: 186). According to this, the pig should be happy to be eaten as it would not have even existed was it not for man's demand on her or his flesh. It should be in the pig's best interest to be eaten. Further, man does not only benefit the pig who will be slaughtered but also the next animal that replaces the killed one, whereas the latter is given the opportunity to live a happy life, which would not be the case if the former was not killed.

Probably, many would feel repugnant to the formulation of Stephen's statement. But in essence, it reflects the justification strategy that advocates of AFAH employ and which is echoed in Višak's citation further above. It also reflects the idea that animals benefit from farming and that a good, harm-free consumer-farmer-animal relationship is possible. In fact, this is what many organic food stores advertise as animal-friendly produced meat (or derivatives such as milk and eggs). Animal-friendly commercials and labels reassure the consumers that the animals are well off on the farms.

The idea of AFAH as presented here serves as a kind of 'confessional booth'. It is not debated that the animals have something to lose: their lives. But the 'happy lives' of the animals overall neutralize the harm that the animals experience. Eating 'happy meat' is seemingly a guilt-free endeavour, it is morally purified according to Stephen and his followers. And I think that precisely in this respect the logic of AFAH is flawed as it is not a guilt-free practice. Before proposing a critique of AFAH that relates to the concept of guilt, I will briefly discuss two critics of animal-friendly animal farming.

Critics of animal-friendly animal husbandry

According to Peter Singer, the logic of AFAH cumulates in ‘the replaceability argument’ ‘for it assumes that if we kill one animal, we can replace it with another as long as that other will lead a life as pleasant as the one killed would have led, if it had been allowed to go on living’ (Singer, 2011: 106). This argument does not apply to industrial farming as the animals do not live a pleasant life there, but it seemingly applies to animals who lead ‘happy lives’ as is echoed in the justification of AFAH. However, by accepting the replaceability argument, one runs into this problem: people might be replaceable too! Humans might be, for example, reared for organ banking and will be later replaced with other humans who lead at least as happy lives as the replaced ones (Singer, 2011: 107).

To avoid this repugnant conclusion, Singer states that only ‘merely conscious beings’ are replaceable: ‘The merely conscious being does not have a preference for continued life. ... Killing does not thwart more desires than putting the being asleep’ (Singer, 2011: 86). So, merely conscious beings do not have any *personal* interest in continuing their lives and are thus replaceable (Singer, 2011: 119). But this does not apply to humans and to the animals that are reared in AFAH such as pigs, cattle and poultry. They are not merely conscious but intelligent, rational and self-aware to different degrees and have strong interest in continuing their lives – thus, replacing them is not allowed and consequently AFAH as presented here should be rejected.

Višak (2013) rejects Singer’s argumentation as animals are always worse off when killed and slaughter cannot be compensated by bringing a new animal into existence. Her main critique is that beings cannot just be replaced by other beings with the same expected amount of welfare. Singer’s account allows for replaceability as his conception of welfare is not fixed to particular individuals. Rather, welfare is *impersonal*: ‘It is as if sentient beings are receptacles of something valuable, and it does not matter if a receptacle gets broken so long as there is another receptacle to which the contents can be transferred without any getting spilt’ (Singer, 2011: 106). Višak rejects that view and claims that something must be good or bad *for* someone; welfare always affects someone. So, she ‘does not accept that bringing into existence can benefit a being. Killing a being that could otherwise have had a pleasant life, harms that being’ (Višak, 2013: 145). Consequently, ‘happy farm animals’ are not replaceable.

In effect, both, Singer and Višak reject AFAH as it cannot account for the welfare lost – be it impersonal or personal. But Singer and Višak approach the problem in a detached and abstract manner, calculating and contrasting possible welfare outcomes. For Višak, however, a welfare loss remains if a being is killed, and this loss cannot be compensated. While Višak aims at rejecting the possibility of replaceability, I am interested in the moral residuals that remain if a being is harmed. In the next section, I will propose an alternative to Singer and what could be seen as a supplement to Višak, in outlining a concept of guilt that takes moral residuals seriously.

Animal-friendly animal husbandry and the concept of guilt

One thing is certain: animals who are slaughtered experience an early, violent death that is *not* natural (Pluhar, 2010: 462). Some advocates of AFAH might nevertheless suggest that there are forms of killing which are ‘species-appropriate’ and do not involve pain for the animals like pasture-shots on free-ranging cattle:

Take a cow, let her enjoy the last moments of bliss in the same fields where she was raised, and then pull the trigger on her from a deer stand a few yards away. The rest of the herd looks around, but doesn’t panic, and then gets back to grazing. Lock, stock and smoking barrel.
(Western Farm Press, 2013)

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However, it is hard to assume that regular slaughter methods do not produce any stress for the animals: usually, animals are separated from their groups, and mammals with pronounced social behaviour like pigs and cows probably experience fear and distress from being separated from their group for slaughter. Slaughter without negative side effects seems rather to be a theoretical construct and does not correlate with most slaughter practices. So, it can be assumed that slaughter is a harm for the animals. Call this experienced harm a 'moral residual'.

Moral residual(s) are fundamental to my – admittedly peculiar – conception of guilt. If someone performs an action that results in harms for some being(s), she creates something that cannot be compensated but that remains: a rest, a moral residual. This person is then guilty of having caused harm. This perspective makes purification strategies impossible as it draws attention to the experienced harm that remains as a moral residual. Let me illustrate this with an example: Someone is stranded on an island and must hunt and fish to survive. One might be inclined to purify these actions as they guarantee the survival of the stranded individual – she could not have managed this otherwise. But nevertheless, the animals lost their lives and (possibly) pleasant futures, and their killing was maybe also accompanied with considerable suffering if the stranded was not an experienced hunter or fisher. The harm experienced by the animals remains and the stranded becomes guilty for her actions.

Note that in this example strong reasons are given to conduct the actions. Killing animals by hunting and fishing was necessary for survival. But this 'fact' does not purify the actions. Rather, the circumstances give reasons to produce harm which creates moral residuals. What I denote as 'guilt', then, is the production of these moral residuals. Accordingly, there may be people who need to eat meat for serious health reasons which may give strong reasons to engage in AFAH (Smolkin, 2021: 254). But it is quite different from claiming that there are strong reasons that urge to eat meat from AFAH and respect the moral residuals – the harm experienced by the slaughtered animals – than to advocate the logic of the larder which claims that the animals should be happy to be killed and eaten as they would not have existed otherwise.

I am here not interested in the subjective experience of guilt, though, which is often denoted as 'remorse'. R. M. Hare, for example, frames 'remorse' as a subjective feeling of guilt that arises from the failure of acting according to one's beliefs: 'If a person does not do something, but the omission is accompanied by feelings of guilt, etc., we normally say that he has not done what he thinks he ought' (Hare, 1967: 169). According to this view, one could have remorse about eating meat from animals who were reared in industrial farming if she thinks that eating such meat is wrong and ought to refrain from doing so. Or the farmer could feel remorse, as the slaughter of a well-known farm animal with whom she has established a close relationship can be conceived as 'a gross betrayal of trust' (Serpell, 1996: 187).

These are certainly important instances of remorse. But I am much more interested in the detachment that results from the conceptualization of AFAH that cumulates in the purification strategy as presented further above. Let me illustrate that discussing Hare. He justifies being a demi-vegetarian and why we should not refrain from eating meat reminiscent to Stephen:

The reason is that if we gave up eating animals the market for meat would vanish, and no more animals would be raised for meat-production. ... This thought gives me pause when I walk in the fields around my home in England, and see a great many apparently happy animals, all destined to be eventually eaten. As it happens, they are mainly pigs, who would certainly not be kept except for the bacon market. (Hare, 1999: 240)

Combining Hare's statements on remorse and on AFAH, I conclude that Hare would say that he has 'done what he thinks he ought' when consuming 'happy meat'. But I think that this is a form of detachment that Hare not only advocates but engages in. This form of detachment results in a purification strategy. Here, ethical argumentation serves as a means to avoid guilt (Grimm and Schleissing, 2019). It aims at extinguishing guilt by conceiving AFAH as a 'win-win situation'. But: the animals' harm, even if their lives were the happiest imaginable, is real as the animals' lives are early and violently ended. This is simply what slaughter is.

But what if, in the future, a technique could be invented that would allow animals to be killed painlessly while they sleep in AFAH? Would this produce moral residuals and hence guilt, too? I would affirm the latter question as the animals are prevented from experiencing their pleasant futures (living a pleasant life and future is a core assumption of AFAH). And as Singer and Višak argue for: cows, pigs and chicken have interest in continuing their lives. So, it seems reasonable to assume that even painless killing produces harm – the prevention of experiencing a pleasant future – and thus moral residuals.

What I propose, then, is this: I am less interested in the subjective feeling of guilt, i.e. remorse, that someone might experience when eating 'happy animals' or by being aware of the faultiness of the logic of the larder. I rather frame guilt as the detachment that derives from the strategy of rendering the animals' experienced harm in AFAH invisible. In this sense, guilt does not only appear in individuals (consumers or farmers) but also in the system that advocates the logic of the larder. Guilt tethers the experienced harm to the actions that produced that harm, thereby pressing to the fact that the animals' experienced harm, i.e. moral residuals, remains. Someone can be guilty, and this can be the case even if she lacks the feelings of guilt. Likewise, a food production system can produce, in the sense of collective action, guilt.

The upshot of the critique of AFAH with my conception of guilt is that it shows that we are, on the one hand, responsible for the outcomes of our actions. But we are also, on the other hand, responsible for how we conceptualize AFAH. If we aim to follow the logic of the larder, we are engaging in a purification strategy that conceals the experienced harm of the animals. Singer accepts that strategy but wishes to reduce it to merely conscious beings. Višak is somewhat closer to my account as she rejects the idea of replaceability, but her account does not scrutinize the role of responsibility and does not criticize the purification strategy to eradicate guilt in AFAH. Still, Singer's and Višak's criticisms of AFAH cannot account for what Serpell further above calls a 'betrayal of trust' as they are exploring the issue from an abstract, detached perspective. The conception of guilt as presented here, in contrast, takes responses as described by Serpell seriously as it is addressing the responsibility of farmers, consumers and systems alike.

Conclusions

The justification of AFAH as presented here is flawed as it aims at purifying the harm that the animals experience due to slaughter. My conception of guilt contrasts with that. But it also does not necessarily run into political veganism. There might be strong reasons for the consumption of the meat of 'happy animals'. But these strong reasons do not purify the harms experienced by the animals. What I tried to argue for in this paper, in this sense, is not the abolition of AFAH but a shift in approaching the phenomenon. AFAH is an economic endeavour which exists to satisfy human ends. The reason that 'happy farm animals' exist is fundamentally tethered to this fact. If we (as individuals but also as society or as a food system in the sense of a collective agent) are prepared to kill and subsequently eat animals, we are faced with their harm, we are guilty of having caused it. So, instead of praising the alleged privilege of living a happy life that is merely possible because the animals are killed for their meat and derivatives, we should face the responsibility we have when killing 'happy animals' for 'happy meat'. If strong reasons are pressing to engage in AFAH, like serious health reasons, the harm that results for the animals *may* be justified. But it is not merely justified by the aesthetic pleasure that derives from eating meat and

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eggs and milk. Simply bearing the guilt because one wants to stick to eating habits or pleasure will not do it. But then we are still faced with this problem: How can we compensate for the loss of the animal's pleasant future? Just bringing a new farm animal into existence will not do it.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Erich Linder and the reviewer in charge for their helpful comments. I also thank Herwig Grimm for enriching discussions on guilt and ethics that inspired this article.

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