ARTICLES

Varieties of Harm to Animals in Industrial Farming

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Skeptics of the moral case against industrial farming often assert that harm to animals in industrial systems is limited to isolated instances of abuse that do not reflect standard practice and thus do not merit criticism of the industry at large. I argue that even if skeptics are correct that abuse is the exception rather than the rule, they must still answer for two additional varieties of serious harm to animals that are pervasive in industrial systems: procedural harm and institutional oppression. That procedural and institutional harms create conditions under which abuse is virtually inevitable only increases the skeptic's burden.

KEY WORDS: animal abuse, animal agriculture, animal cruelty, concentrated animal feeding operation, CAFO, harm, industrial farming, institutional oppression

In recent years, public debate over the moral standing of animals used in farming has enjoyed a higher profile in part because of the efforts of advocacy organizations to bring the realities of industrial farming systems to the attention of wider audiences. One of the most common strategies employed to this end is the online distribution of video footage taken by undercover investigators of the conditions inside industrial farms and production facilities. Presumably in order to achieve maximum impact on viewers, these videos tend to focus on overt and often egregious instances of animal cruelty or neglect, showing workers beating, kicking, throwing, and even sexually abusing animals and depicting worker indifference to animals wallowing in manure pits, languishing on downer piles, living among the corpses of their former cage mates, and suffering from illnesses and deformities that result from extreme neglect.[1]

Given the shocking nature of such footage, it is not surprising that the first inclination of many viewers is to jump to one of two extremes. On the one hand, there are skeptics who cite suspicion of the motives of "biased" activists or perhaps cite personal experience of their friends' or family members' farms as reasons for believing that the cruelty and neglect depicted in such videos are the rare exception rather than the rule and that the industry as a whole should not be judged on their account. On the other hand, there are

Journal of Animal Ethics 1 (2): 122–131
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true believers who readily assume that the vast majority of workers in the vast majority of industrial facilities perpetrate such acts with equally reckless abandon. Though these two common responses are obviously polarized, they both frame the issue (albeit usually implicitly) as if the central question concerning the morality of industrial farming is whether individual workers, as a general rule, do or do not engage in overtly cruel or neglectful treatment of animals.

As important as this question may be, framing the issue in this way has several regrettable consequences. First and foremost, it shifts attention away from the central moral problem at stake—the harm that animals experience in industrial farming systems—and onto the tangential issue of the reprobate behavior of some of the people who farm them. Second, this shift in focus predictably leads to acrimonious disagreement in which clear-eyed assessment of the moral implications of industrial farming *as a system* takes a back seat to heated efforts on both sides to vindicate or villainize the *individuals* who work within it. Third, when the debate takes this direction, skeptics enjoy a significant strategic advantage, insofar as the animal advocate's case against industrial farming now seems to depend on substantiating the unpopular and frankly unlikely claim that those who work in the industry are, by and large, a cruel and negligent lot. Even if this claim were defensible, it would presumably have very little purchase with skeptics, whose firsthand experience with friends or family in agriculture or whose status quo confidence in the good character of most farmers would leave them feeling perfectly justified both in dismissing the concern and in judging its advocates according to all the standard stereotypes: alarmist, misanthropic, sentimental, and generally out of touch with reality.

My aim in this article is to outline a strategy for shifting the burden of proof back onto skeptics while keeping the interests of animals front and center and defusing the hostility that often prevails when individual farmers (rather than systemic problems with the industry) become the focal point for criticism. I consider three distinguishable but closely related varieties of harm that animals endure in industrial farming systems: "abuse" experienced through their cruel or neglectful treatment by farm workers and other handlers, "procedural harm" experienced through their subjection to standard industry procedures for managing their confinement and profiting from their production, and "institutional oppression" endured through the deprivation of their ability to exercise their most basic instincts and interests.

Although abuse is without question the most sensational and thus the most publicized of these harms, procedural and institutional harms are arguably more insidious because—though they typically garner much less attention—they occur pervasively, even when workers treat animals as well as is feasible under the current system, and their pervasive occurrence creates conditions that are ripe for the abuses of cruelty and neglect. But if animals experience serious and pervasive harm as a matter of course within the industrial system even when workers are on their best behavior, then skeptics face an unenviable dilemma. Either they must legitimate the harm in question by demonstrating that it is morally justified, or they must deny the widely held assumption that inflicting or supporting serious harm requires a moral justification (claiming, perhaps, that pragmatic

justification is enough). That procedural and institutional harms create conditions under which abuse is virtually inevitable only increases the skeptic's burden.

Before commencing my analysis, I should clarify two brief points regarding my intent. First, my account is intended as a descriptive classification rather than an evaluative hierarchy of harm. In my estimation, each of the varieties of harm under discussion is far enough across the threshold of moral seriousness that there is little to be gained, at least for my purposes here, in attempting to discern which, if any, are more or less objectionable than the others. Second, this descriptive classification is intended as a heuristic tool rather than a comprehensive taxonomy of stringently delimited categories. One could no doubt put a much finer point on things than I am able to here. My hope, however, is that the distinctions I propose are nonetheless useful for their intended purpose of complicating matters for those who suspect that the harm animals experience in industrial systems is confined to comparatively rare instances of abuse that are insufficient to merit serious moral scrutiny of the industry at large.

I should also say a bit more about my usage of the term "harm" and my assumptions regarding its application to animals. The sense of "harm" I have in mind is nontechnical and more or less in accordance with common usage. To say that one has been harmed is just to say that one has been hurt, injured, or damaged in some way, including but not limited to physically or psychologically. Although direct instances of physical and psychological injury are among the most common examples of harm, it is not atypical to say that one is harmed when one's interests in general well-being are curtailed or defeated in some respect even if no direct, easily quantifiable physical or psychological injury is involved. In cases of institutional sexism and racism, for instance, when we say that women are harmed by salary inequities and that persons of color are harmed by the inaccessibility of bank loans, the harms we have in mind are not specific physical or psychological injuries per se, but rather the curtailment or defeat of these individuals' interests in realizing various goods pertinent to their well-being (e.g., an interest in receiving fair compensation or in becoming a homeowner).

My assumption here is that animals too have analogous, species-appropriate interests in their own well-being and can thus experience harm. However controversial this assumption might once have been, it is now widely accepted. One can readily infer as much simply by considering our national statistics on companion animals: 62% of U.S. households share their lives with animals and spend almost 50 billion dollars annually seeing to their interests and keeping them from harm ("American Pet Products Association," n.d.). However inconsistent our culture may be in its decisions about which animals' interests matter, there is no basis in common sense or contemporary science for denying that—just like dogs, cats, and cockatiels—animals raised for food such as cows, pigs, chickens, and turkeys have basic interests in avoiding physical and psychological injury as well as in realizing day-to-day well-being in keeping with the unique capabilities of their species.[2]

In what ways, then, are these basic interests curtailed and defeated in industrial farming systems? Abuse might seem the obvious place to start. But insofar as the combined

effects of procedural and institutional harm create conditions that both increase the likelihood of abuse and influence the types of abuse that occur, I treat these former two varieties of harm first so as to secure the benefit of the perspective they provide on the abuses of cruelty and neglect.

I have defined procedural harm as harm that animals experience through their subjection to standard industry procedures for managing their confinement and profiting from their production.[3] Some procedural harm is inflicted directly and suffered acutely, as when animals undergo dehorning, branding, tail-docking, beak-trimming, artificial insemination, forced separation from their young, transport handling, slaughter, and other painful, stress-inducing procedures at the hands of workers. Other such harm occurs indirectly and is suffered chronically, as when animals experience the daily traumas of confinement, overcrowding, perpetual exposure to respiratory irritants, digestive unrest from supplemented feed, lethargy from unnaturally rapid weight gain, and the aggressive behavior of other stressed animals. In many cases, furthermore, acute harm engenders chronic harm, as when procedural mutilations are executed unskillfully or heal improperly, leaving animals debilitated in any number of ways (unable to eat, groom, self-defend, etc.) and highly vulnerable to further injury. And speaking of vulnerability to injury, even animals' own bodies have been co-opted into instruments of procedural harm, given that they are now commonly bioengineered to produce a higher ratio of meat to bone than their skeletal and respiratory systems can healthfully support.

For the benefit of skeptics who have visited industrial farms without seeing what they discern to be direct evidence of these procedures, it is important to point out that much procedural harm is unlikely to be witnessed by non-employees for several reasons. First, many of the procedures at issue—including some of the most unpleasant ones—take place in other locations such as hatcheries, transport vehicles, and production facilities that are not supervised by the management of the farm one is visiting. Second, when harmful procedures are performed on site, visitors are not typically permitted to attend, since (among other reasons) the allowance of spectators adds further stress to scenarios that are already taxing and even dangerous for animals and workers alike. Finally, many instances of procedural harm—especially those that involve chronic pain, discomfort, or psychological stress—are not directly discernable to people who are unfamiliar with animal behavior and thus are unable to detect the often subtle signs of disorder.

As such, when friends, family, and media representatives visit a shed or two on a given farm, they typically are neither witness to the most harmful procedures that occur there (much less those carried out elsewhere) nor in a position, as casual observers, to "see" the discomfort of a steer's feed-induced digestive unrest, a sow's crate-induced leg abrasions and depression, or a hen's cage-induced osteoporosis. This realization is an important one, given that the discovery of such missing information about procedural harm could change the game for some skeptics. One might become more favorably disposed to the concerns of animal advocacy, for instance, upon learning that, regardless of how well hens may be said to have it in some of the "better" operations, modern egg production nevertheless depends on the procedure of "chick culling"—the maceration or suffocation

of hundreds of millions of live male chicks per year just days after they hatch because they have no economic value to the industry.

One could cite many other examples, but the upshot is that managing and producing large populations of confined animals requires the aggressive and ongoing regulation of these animals' lives from pre-conception to death, and the infliction of serious harm is endemic to the process. A simple Web search of any of the procedures noted here, moreover, will provide ample evidence that the industry is well aware of this reality, as their own publications and instructional materials acknowledge the harms in question, discuss potential ways to address them, and frequently conclude that the financial or procedural challenges associated with their mitigation are too burdensome to meet.[4] The crucial insight to grasp about procedural harm, then, is that its pervasive infliction is an irreducible feature of industrial farming systems even when workers are simply following standard procedures—indeed, even when they go the extra mile to conduct these procedures as humanely as the system permits. I shall leave it to skeptics to defend whatever resemblance there is to discern, if any, between the ordinary meaning of "humane" and the sense of the term at issue when one speaks of conducting these procedures "as humanely as possible."

The wide array of virtually inevitable physical and psychological maladies that animals endure by dint of procedural harm should be sufficient, on its own, to give the inquiring skeptic pause. Nonetheless, a full account of the harm that animals experience in industrial farming systems must go beyond their procedurally inflicted pain and suffering to account for their institutional oppression—for the ways in which the system that dictates their circumstances deprives them of the ability to realize their interests in general well-being even when they are not discernibly in pain or under stress. Like procedural harm, institutional oppression is endemic to the system, insofar as it results inevitably from the standard operating procedures that comprise the system. The distinguishing difference, however, is that, whereas procedural harm is typically experienced in the *infliction of maladies* that degrade animals' well-being, institutional oppression is typically endured through the *deprivation of goods* required for realizing well-being.

To make this distinction more concrete, consider the case of a gestating sow on a particularly well-managed confinement farm who, unlike many of her less fortunate contemporaries, is as fit as is possible under the circumstances. Though she has experienced procedural harm in the past and will no doubt experience it again in the future, at the moment she is abrasion-free, mentally stable, well fed and watered, and protected from the elements. Setting aside the likelihood that she is bored (a condition that some might consider an instance of procedural harm), she is not currently suffering any acute or chronic physical or psychological distress. Even so, it would be difficult to describe her as realizing the kind of well-being for which her interests and capabilities suit her. She cannot turn around, much less move about or go outdoors. She has little to no interaction with other sows. And though her crate is flushed twice daily, she cannot maintain hygiene as she is disposed to by nature. Her inability to obtain these basic goods, moreover, is not the result of any defect of her interest in or capacity for realizing them; had she been

born a free-living woodland pig, or raised on a typical farm in 1930, or even sold into a contemporary non-confinement setting, she presumably would have realized them all. As such, though she may be enjoying a temporary respite from procedurally inflicted maladies, she is nonetheless being harmed through institutional oppression.

And she is not alone. At least the following basic goods are among those that are unduly difficult or impossible to realize for most animals living in contemporary confinement settings: free range of movement, regular access to the outdoors, regular physical exercise, and the pursuit of basic interests in grooming, foraging, nesting, caring for offspring, and establishing social relations with other members of their species. Though skeptics sometimes protest that farmed animals in today's confinement systems have had these interests bred out of them, or that in any case they cannot aspire to realize goods they have never experienced, such claims are belied by the thousands of animals who have escaped confinement only to take up the pursuit and realization of these and other goods within days and even hours of beginning their new lives as sanctuary residents or adopted companions.[5]

Admittedly, discerning the extent and limits of animals' institutional oppression is less straightforward than accounting for procedurally inflicted harm that the industry itself acknowledges. Indeed, there is a wide diversity of opinion even among committed animal advocates on the questions of what animals' well-being amounts to, which goods are requisite for it, and whether it is compatible with their domestication and use by human beings.[6] I cannot engage that important debate here. Rather, in keeping with my modest aim of aiding animal advocates in complicating matters for skeptics, I have chosen to highlight examples of institutional oppression that all animal advocates and hopefully many inquiring skeptics can acknowledge as instances of serious harm.

But if I have elected to set aside some of the more contested suggestions regarding animals' institutional oppression—the suggestion, for instance, that the deprivation of freedom entailed by their status as property is the most foundational harm of all (Francione, 2008)—I maintain that even a limited discussion of some of its more obvious examples can serve, upon reflection, to nudge at least some skeptics beyond welfare concerns into serious consideration of the rights position. After all, for those who come to realize that animals are institutionally oppressed in these less controversial respects, it is often just a matter of time before they discover that the central moral question on their minds is no longer "how should we treat the animals we use?" but rather "should we be using animals at all?"

The principal strategic advantage of the foregoing analysis is that it puts skeptics back on the defensive: Even if one assumes for the sake of argument that cases of abuse are relatively isolated instances that do not reflect the practices of the industry as a whole, skeptics must still answer for the industry's infliction of procedural and institutional harms that are serious, pervasive, and systemically inevitable. The two options at their disposal for meeting this burden, moreover, both present daunting obstacles. Either they must provide a moral justification of these harms—a challenge that is increasingly formidable in view of what contemporary science and philosophy tell us, respectively, about the

capabilities of animals and the consideration we owe to them as a result.[7] Or they must deny that inflicting or supporting serious harm requires a moral justification, arguing perhaps that a pragmatic or economic justification is sufficient and rejecting thereby a basic moral principle that is strongly entrenched in the majority of both secular and religious approaches to moral reasoning. In case the moral fallout associated with this second option is not worrisome enough on its own, I should add that any proposed pragmatic or economic justification would have to contend with competing pragmatic and economic concerns raised by the burgeoning evidence that industrial animal agriculture is among the leading contributors to global environmental and energy crises.[8]

A second key advantage of my analysis is the additional perspective it provides on harm inflicted through abuses of the sort described at the outset. Although there is no excusing such voluntary acts of cruelty and neglect (even skeptics and industry representatives repudiate them), an awareness of how procedural and institutional harms affect the respective living and working conditions of animals and their handlers does render these instances of abuse somewhat easier to understand. The animals, for their part, are not exactly eager or compliant patients: Traumatized and often debilitated by acute injury, worn down from the chronic rigors of confinement, dispirited from deprivation of their natural interests, and understandably wary of human beings, they have every reason to avoid, resist, and even retaliate against their handlers.

Workers too face taxing, frustrating, and often dangerous conditions: They work long hours in the same inhospitable environment as the animals live; their labor is difficult, often unfulfilling, and low-paying relative to the risks involved; and the high rate of employee turnover as a result of job dissatisfaction (especially in slaughterhouses) often means that they are poorly trained and inexperienced (Schlosser, 2002). Given that their jobs require them daily to oversee and carry out procedures that repeatedly cause harm to large numbers of unwilling and often resistant animals, it is hardly surprising that many of them come to view animals as objects rather than individuals—indeed, as obstacles and even adversaries to the accomplishment of their work. To take an empathetic view of animals' interests under such conditions would likely compromise one's ability to do the job, and in any case, it can be hard to muster empathy for those who make one's job more difficult.

In view of these considerations, it does not take a great leap of inference to see that abusive acts of cruelty and neglect are not just likely but fully expectable under such conditions; it would be surprising, in other words, were they not to occur from time to time, if not routinely. The important point to distill from this discussion is that the proposed analysis of procedural and institutional harm can exercise two different forms of leverage over the skeptical suspicion that abuse is a rare occurrence: It can *neutralize* this suspicion by showing that industrial farming systems do serious harm to animals even on the assumption that abuse never occurs, but it can also potentially *dispel* this suspicion by showing that the pervasive occurrence of procedural and institutional harm renders the opposite inference more plausible, namely that abuse is routine rather than rare.

A third and final advantage, in conclusion, is the potential of this analysis to diminish some of the rancor that often prevails when animal advocates and skeptics butt heads on

the moral implications of industrial animal farming. By shifting the focus of the discussion from the shaming and blaming of uncharitably typecast individuals ("despicable farmers" and "animal extremists") to the more measured consideration of systemic problems in which everyone has a stake, animal advocates stand a much better chance of engaging skeptics in productive conversation, earning their respect, and perhaps even changing their outlook.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, Brianne Donaldson, and Mark Jensen for helpful conversations on the ideas discussed in this article.

Notes

1. Examples of videos depicting these types of animal cruelty and neglect are in no short supply on the Internet, as a simple key word search reveals. See, for instance, the websites of Mercy For Animals (http://www.mercyforanimals.org/investigations.aspx) and Compassion Over Killing (http://www.cok.net/investigations), two prominent animal advocacy organizations that specialize in undercover investigations of industrial farming facilities.

2. Recent literature in the field of cognitive ethology not only confirms the common sense of most people that animals have basic interests but also strongly suggests that the cognitive and emotional capacities of animals used in farming are considerably richer and more complex than is commonly supposed. See, for example, Balcombe (2007, 2010) and Bekoff (2007). Other helpful sources on the inner lives of animals include Grandin (2005) and Masson (2003).

3. In addressing procedural harm, it is important to note that the procedures discussed here are standard industry practices widely documented in current scholarly and journalistic writing, recent video footage taken by facility employees and undercover investigators, eyewitness interviews, and even the trade publications of the industry itself. Reliable sources on the methods of industrial animal agriculture and its effects on animals used in farming are too numerous to list here, but the following sources are particularly helpful: Grandin (2005); Mason and Singer (2006); Regan (2004a, 2004b); Safran Foer (2009); Scully (2002); and Schlosser (2002). Peter Singer (2002) has compiled an account of the practices of industrial animal farming that is drawn largely from the trade publications of the industry itself.

4. I strongly encourage readers to conduct their own web research on industry descriptions of these and other common procedures. Not only are the results eye opening, but also the fact that these procedures and the harms that result from them are openly documented by the industry itself typically carries more weight with skeptics than the best-researched work by "advocates." The following are just a few examples that resulted from searches of several key terms: On dehorning, see http://www.avma.org/reference/backgrounders/dehorning_cattle_bgnd.asp; on beak trimming, see http://www.poultryhub.org/index.php/Beak_trimming; on stress during animal transport and handling, see http://www.grandin.com/references/handle.stress.html (originally published in Grandin, 1997).

5. Stories about animals' surprising and often inspiring transitions from life in confinement in farms to life on sanctuaries or in adoptive homes are available at the websites for Farm Sanctuary (http://www.farmsanctuary.org) and Animal Place (http://www.animalplace.org). See also Baur (2008).

6. For an overview of the spectrum of positions held on these matters within the philosophical literature, see Sapontzis (2008) and Engel and Jenni (2010). For discussions of the issues involved in what is often called the "rights vs. welfare" or "abolitionism vs. incrementalism"

debate within the animal advocacy community, the following sources are helpful: Jones (2008); LaVeck and Stein (2007); and Torres (2007).

7. For an overview of the recent scientific literature, see the extensive notes and bibliographical sources provided in Balcombe (2007 and 2010) and Bekoff (2007). Philosophical resources for defending animals against these and other forms of exploitation can be found in virtually all the major approaches to moral theorizing. For helpful summaries of the philosophical literature, see Sapontzis (2008) and Engel and Jenni (2010, pp. 21–36). From the utilitarian perspective, see Singer (2002). From the deontological perspective, see Regan (2004). From the perspective of religious ethics, see Linzey (2009). From the care perspective, see Adams and Donovan (2007). For a "consistency argument" that advances from assumptions widely held by members of the general public (rather than from a specific theoretical framework), see Engel (2000). Tzachi Zamir (2007) has argued that the abolition of many human uses of nonhuman animals follows even from "speciesist" assumptions.

8. For an overview of the contributions of industrial animal farming to global environmental, energy, and food security problems, see Halteman (2010).

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