

# The Ethics of What We Eat

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1 December 2010

Word Count: 2552

Today, most of us still hold the image that the animals we consume are raised in spacious farms filled with pasture. People go into the supermarket, walk to the meat aisle and see pictures of farmers, farmhouses, and green grass on these labels. But if you trace the truth of these labels, you will find a very different reality - a reality that has very little to do with animals running around the ranches or farmlands, but one that involves a prison-like shed environment where the animals are confined, unexposed to sunlight, and brutally abused their entire lives. However, given that the food industry spends \$11 billion annually trying to make us crave their products, it only seems natural that we hold that false image (4). It is a frightening phenomenon that contemporary food production techniques are concealed to deliberately hide the truth from us. In *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, the authors Peter Singer and Jim Mason disclose the disgusting practices of factory farming, particularly placing focus on the unethical and horrifying treatment of animals before food is delivered to our plates.

The fact that factory farming has become the most conventional farming method in the present day comes as no surprise. Most people in the United States follow the Standard American Diet (SAD) that is characterized by high consumption of animal-based foods, including meat, eggs, and dairy products. The simple rule of economics tells us that a large consumer demand necessitates a proportional supply. Thus, the factory system of farming was introduced that increased volume and efficiency of animal production by bringing in assembly lines and division of labor to ensure that each process is optimized. Large food companies including Tyson, Gold Kist and Perdue all

follow this scheme of mass production and control the majority of our food system today (Food, Inc.). Under this system, food companies benefit by being able to cut costs and increase profits, and consumers benefit by having access to cheap goods in the supermarket. However, these benefits blind us from seeing the negative consequences of factory farming. Moreover, food corporations aid in this deception by encouraging consumers to keep buying these products, insinuating that the food system is flawless and best for society. This illusion must be broken: factory farming is harmful to the environment, workers and consumers' health, and, of course, the animals themselves. In this utilitarian food model, efficiency of animal production has priority over animal welfare; for example, the number of eggs laid per month has priority over the number of hens that stay healthy per month. As the industry continues to practice factory farming methods, animals will always be treated as commodities rather than sensitive beings.

Concern about how we treat farm animals is far from being limited to the small percentage of people who are vegetarians or even vegans - eating no animal products at all. Despite strong ethical arguments for vegetarianism, it is not yet a mainstream position. More common is the view that we are justified in eating meat, as long as the animals have a decent life before they are killed (Singer). The biggest problem that the authors address in this book is that industrial agriculture denies animals even a minimally decent life.

It is common to find people who naively believe that cows graze on green pastures their entire life before they are processed for food production. Nevertheless, the authors discovered that beef cattle may be fed anything from corn to fish meal, chicken litter (complete with chicken droppings) and slaughterhouse waste (Singer). Cows have a digestive system that has evolved to break down grass. If they do not get enough roughage in a daily basis, they develop lactic acid in their rumens, which creates a gas and causes feedlot bloat, a condition so severe that they can suffocate from it (61). Putting cattle on a corn-based diet is like putting humans on a diet of candy bars, you can live on it for a while, but eventually you are going to get sick. However, in a beef producers perspective, that does not matter as long as the animal does not drop dead before being slaughtered (62). Such human cruelty and ignorance has backfired with repercussions such as the mad cow disease in Europe. The incident shocked many people not only because it shattered beef's image as a safe and healthy food, but also because they learned that the disease was caused by feeding cattle the brains and nerve tissue of sheep, fecal matter, dead birds, chicken feathers, restaurant leftovers (62).

Tens of billions of chickens produced today never go outdoors. They are bred to have enormous appetites and engineered by humans to gain weight as fast as possible, then kept in sheds that typically measure 490 feet long by 45 feet wide and will hold 30,000 or more chickens (22). The level of ammonia in the air from their accumulated droppings stings the eye, causes blindness in severe cases, and hurts their lungs. It also gives them chronic respiratory diseases, sores on their feet and hocks, and breast blisters (25). Eventually, the birds grow so heavy that it hurts them to keep standing up, so they spend much of their time sitting on the excrement-filled litter (24). Slaughtered at only 45 days of age, their immature bones can hardly bear the weight of their bodies. Some collapse and, unable to reach food or water, soon die, their fate irrelevant to the economics of the enterprise as a whole (27).

Conditions are, if anything, even worse for laying hens crammed into wire cages so small that even if there were just one per cage, it would be unable to stretch its wings. However, there are usually at least eight or nine hens per cage, if not more (37). The space allocation per hen is even less than that of a broiler chicken, ranging from merely 48 to 72 square inches (37). Under such crowded conditions, the more dominant, aggressive birds are likely to peck the weaker hens to death. To prevent this, producers sear off all birds' beaks with a hot blade. A hen's beak is full of nerve tissue – it is, after all, her principal means of relating to her environment – but no anesthetic or analgesic is used to relieve the pain (37).

Pigs may be the most intelligent and sensitive of the animals that we commonly eat. When foraging in a rural village, they can exercise that intelligence and explore their varied environment (44-45). They are capable of doing everything a dog can do in the way of herding sheep (44). Professor Stanley Curtis in the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of Illinois trained pigs to operate joystick-controlled video games, and they learned quickly and he discovered that there is much more going on in terms of thinking and observing by these pigs than we would ever have guessed (45). To keep a dog locked up for life in a crate too narrow for her to turn around or walk more than a step or two forwards or backwards would be cruel and illegal. Yet when it comes to how pigs are kept in the U.S., there is no federal law governing the welfare of pigs on the farm and cruelty is legal as long as it is considered a common farming practice (45). Additionally, sows or female pigs use straw or leaves and twigs to build a comfortable and safe nest in which to nurse their litter before they give birth. But in today's factory farms, pregnant sows are kept in crates so narrow that they cannot

turn around, or even walk more than a step forward or backward. They lie on bare concrete without straw or any other form of bedding (46). The piglets are taken from the sow as soon as possible, so that she can be made pregnant again, but they never leave the shed until they are taken to slaughter (46-47).

With these unethical treatments in mind, some people have resorted to organic food choices. Products marketed under the organic label must come from animals that are fed organic grains or other organic foods and must not be given growth hormones or antibiotics (animals can be treated, but cannot have products sold as organic). Neither plants nor animals can be subject to genetic engineering, and organic foods cannot be irradiated (199). Also, organically raised animals must have outdoor access, including access to pasture for ruminants. From these guidelines, it seems that organic farming is much more ethically justified than factory farming, and should be the farming standard we strive for, just like how our ancestors did in the past. However, the authors learn that the well-being of these organic animals are not necessarily better-off than factory animals. For example, as hens start to lay fewer eggs, they are sent to be slaughtered since it becomes uneconomical to keep them (107). Some producers have been known to pack them into containers and bulldoze them into the ground burying them alive (106). In addition, several companies poorly adhere to organic standards. Horizon, an organic dairy company that is a subsidiary of Dean Foods, "...owns a 4,500-head dairy in Idaho. When investigative journalist Rebecca Clarren visited it, she found the cows standing in crowded pens, in a stark, arid landscape with no pasture in sight. Her judgment: The cows don't look that happy (217). Another organic dairy, Aurora, is also a subsidiary of a corporation. They own a 5,700-cow dairy in the plains north of Denver. Most cows are kept in pens, outdoors, but at a density far too high to permit grass to grow. They stand on bare earth and are fed on organic grain. They go out to pasture only before they start producing milk and for brief periods before they give birth to their calves, where they are again not producing milk (217). The treatment of the cows goes against the ideals of organic farming. These companies place their priority in production and using the guidelines as a bare minimum to get the organic label on their products. Mark Kastel, a senior policy analyst at Cornucopia, a non-profit group supporting the family-scale farming community, told a reporter from the Chicago Tribune that a factory farm is a factory farm and a dairy farm shouldn't qualify as organic simply because its owners cram organic feed down the throats of [their] high-producing cattle (218). Even when steps are taken towards a more natural and ethical style of farming, corporations find a way to go against these organic ideals. Thus, it is insufficient for consumers to look for the organic label, but they

must also research these companies and look behind their farming practices to determine whether or not their products are truly produced ethically.

Defenders of these production methods argue that they are a regrettable but necessary response to a growing population's demand for food (231). On the contrary, when we confine animals in factory farms, we have to grow food for them. The animals burn up most of that food's energy to breathe, keep their bodies warm, and use much of the nutritional value to form bone and other inedible parts of their bodies, so we end up with a small fraction – usually no more than one-third and sometimes as little as one-tenth – of the food value that we feed them (231). For example, unlike farmland cattle that feed themselves, factory cattle are fed in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). As the name implies, it is an operation where we concentrate cows or other animals together and feed them in bulks. Every CAFO relies on cropland, on which the food the animals eat is grown. It would have been much more efficient to use this cropland to grow food for humans to eat (231). It takes about 13 pounds of grain to produce a single pound of beef (232). Likewise, it takes about 6 pounds of grain to produce 1 pound of boneless pork (232). Even these figures are flattering to meat production because a pound of meat contains much more water than a pound of grain does (232). In terms of water consumption, a report by A.K. Chapagain and A.Y. Hoekstra, published in 2004 by the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, in Delft, Netherlands, gives a global average figure for beef of 1860 gallons of water per pound, with an average of 1584 gallons for beef produced in the United States (235). Hence, we see that factory farming actually places a great demand on the environment in terms of land, energy, and water.

It is tragic that countries like China and India are copying Western methods and putting animals in huge industrial farms to supply more meat and eggs. If this continues, the result will be animal suffering on an even greater scale than now exists in the West. As consumers, we have a moral obligation to reject factory farming that are cruel to animals and bad for the environment we live in (Singer). Reasons such as being accustomed to eating animal products, unable to imagine a meal without them, or liking the way they taste are not ethical justifications for not stopping. Supporting factory farming by knowingly buying its products is wrong (274).

In the face of these harmful trends, the authors believe that there is hope in the growing movement toward ethical food consumption. Many people stopped eating veal or young calves when they discovered the appalling

nature of veal production (272). Veal consumption has fallen to less than a quarter of what it was in 1975 (4). Furthermore, people are learning to ask tough questions about where their food comes from and how it was produced. Is the food grown without pesticides or herbicides? Are the farm workers paid a living wage? Do the animals involved suffer needlessly (5)? What we urgently need is to raise global awareness of our food origins and how unethical factory farming is. Knowing about this issue is a good first step to ultimately abolish factory farming.

## References

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