

Care Ethics and Animal Welfare

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Care theorists have outlined an approach to animal welfare issues that appears to avoid many of the most contentious claims of other animal welfare positions.¹ The reason to oppose animal suffering from the perspective of care ethics is not because we wish to maximize utility or consistently apply our rights theory across species, but because we have relations with animals and care about them. By grounding human beings' moral duties to animals in our relationships with them, care theorists sidestep debates about whether or not animals possess the necessary cognitive capacities to qualify for rights possession. They likewise evade disputes about whether or not social utility actually supports abolishing factory farming, eliminating animal testing and the like.² In care ethics, our duties to animals arise out of the concrete, empirically verifiable relationships we have with them.

Despite its promise, care ethics' approach to animal welfare issues has been criticized as vague and underdeveloped, or in the words of one critic, as "simplistic and superficial," "confused and confusing."³ Some care theorists suggest that our capacity for caring is located in an innate sense of sympathy that needs only to be extended to include animals.⁴ Julian Franklin asks, however, whether we should extend sympathy to all animals or only some: Should we sympathize with the lion or the gazelle, the hawk or the field mouse? By his account, some sort of general rules or guidelines are necessary for deciding conflicts and directing applications of our compassionate feelings. "The lack of a rule of reason to regulate compassion is . . . a serious objection to the ecofeminist 'ethic of care'."⁵ Critics have also argued that care theorists fail to explain adequately why we should extend our sympathy to animals. Tom Regan asks, "What are the resources within the ethic of care that can move people to consider the ethics of their dealings with individuals who stand outside the *existing circle* of their valued interpersonal relationships?"⁶ Regan's question is important since the majority of people currently do not seem to consider most animals worthy of moral consideration. Gary Francione further censures care theorists for failing to justify their speciesist bias.⁷ Most care theorists endorse some preference for human life over animal life, but fail to explain why human beings should enjoy absolute protections to life and bodily integrity while animals might sometimes be killed or harmed.

Care ethics' ambiguous position on animal welfare reflects deeper ambiguities in this still relatively new field. Carol Gilligan first outlined an account of care ethics about twenty-five years ago, and it is only in the last decade or so that care

theorists have begun to develop a philosophical apparatus to support it.⁸ In the first section of this article, I outline a moral theory of caring that builds upon recent work in this field. Since I have defended this account of caring elsewhere, I do not go into great detail here.⁹ Nonetheless, it is necessary to provide a brief account of my approach to care ethics in order to lay the foundation for my animal welfare argument. In the second section, I apply my account of care ethics to the treatment of animals. While I argue that human beings do not have any absolute obligation to care for animals, we do at least owe animals moral sympathy and take on moral duties to care for animals when we make them dependent upon us for their survival and basic well-being. This sets the stage for the third section where I discuss whether eating meat and using animal products is justifiable within a caring framework.¹⁰

Care Theory and Human Beings

There is as yet no settled definition among care theorists about what it means to care for others, but most care theorists agree that caring at least entails helping others to meet their basic needs, develop their basic capabilities, and avoid unwanted suffering and pain. Building upon this minimalist approach, caring may be defined as everything we do directly to help others (1) to satisfy their basic needs for food, sanitary water, clothing, shelter, rest, a clean environment, basic medical care, and protection from harm; (2) to develop and maintain their basic capabilities for sensation, emotion, mobility, speech, reason, imagination, affiliation, and literacy and numeracy; and (3) to avoid harm or alleviate unwanted suffering and pain. The most general goal of caring is to help others to survive and function so that they take care of themselves and others and pursue some conception of the good life. Examples of caring include feeding the hungry, providing medication to the sick, teaching a child to walk or talk, sheltering or clothing someone, and helping a person to regain basic functioning after an accident.¹¹

Because we all depend upon the care of others at various times during our lives, capable human beings can be said to have a duty to care for other human beings in need. The argument for this duty to care can be demonstrated by drawing upon Alan Gewirth's "dialectically necessary method."¹² Gewirth's dialectically necessary method does not rely upon the actual beliefs, thoughts, or statements of individuals, but rather draws out the moral claims and principles necessarily implied by people's actions. While my argument draws upon Gewirth's methodology, it should be emphasized that I depart from the substance of his argument. Gewirth's argument rests at root upon human autonomy; my own is based upon human dependency.¹³

The first step of the argument is as follows:

1) All human beings can be assumed to value their survival, the development and functioning of their basic capabilities, and the avoidance or alleviation of unwanted pain and suffering—unless they explicitly indicate otherwise.

If individuals did not value these goods, they presumably would not act to satisfy their needs, practice their capabilities, and attempt to avoid pain and suffering as we all do every day. Even infants exhibit a variety of activities including clinging, suckling, crying, and fussing that point to an implicit desire to survive and develop the capabilities necessary for survival. The desire for survival, development, and basic well-being (meaning here basic functioning in the absence of pain) can further be inferred among sleeping, unconscious, or incapacitated individuals (unless they have previously indicated otherwise) based upon their prior conscious activities and what we generally know about human behavior.

The second step of the argument highlights the necessary role of caring in helping human beings to survive, develop, and achieve or maintain basic well-being:

2) *Given the necessary facts of human existence, all human beings depend upon others to help them meet their biological and developmental needs and maintain basic well-being.*

This claim is most obviously true during infancy and childhood. Infants and small children would not survive for very long or develop the basic capabilities necessary for their survival and functioning without the care of parents or some parenting figures. Our dependency upon others does not, however, abruptly end with childhood. Most human beings experience periods of illness, disability, frail old age, or particular hardship during their lives when they depend upon the care of others for their survival and basic well-being.¹⁴ We all more generally depend upon the care of others to reproduce society and make civil life possible. If no one cared for others, society would cease to exist within a generation, and our own ability to survive and function would be seriously compromised.¹⁵ “Without aggregate caretaking there could be no society, so we might say that it is caretaking labor that produces and reproduces society.”¹⁶ Even the most anti-social people depend (and certainly have depended) on the care of others to survive, develop, and function.

The third step of the argument follows directly from these considerations:

3) *Insofar as we value our survival, development and basic well-being, we all necessarily make claims on others for care when in need, meaning that we at least implicitly assert that others should help us to meet our basic needs, develop and maintain our basic capabilities, and avoid or alleviate pain when we cannot reasonably achieve these goods on our own.*

The normative content of this claim is supplied by the person in need of care, and need not (at least at this point in the argument) be recognized as normatively binding by the persons toward whom it is directed. The claim is, to borrow the language of Joel Feinberg, aspirational rather than a valid rights claim.¹⁷ The person in need asserts that others *should* help him or her to achieve a set of goods that he or she values and cannot achieve without their help. A person who is being assaulted by another or drowning will call out for help and at least implicitly assert the moral duty of others to help him or her, regardless of how others may view his or her claims. The same may be said of a person who is desperately in need of food

or water. Even the demands of infants for care have something of this quality. Since their survival and development depend upon the care of others, they implicitly (or not so implicitly) make strong demands on others to care for them that extend beyond mere pleas for beneficence.¹⁸

The fourth step of the argument identifies the general moral principle that all individuals may be said implicitly to appeal to in attempting to justify their claims for caring:

4) In claiming care from others, we imply that capable human beings ought to help individuals in need when they are able to do so consistent with their other caring obligations.

In actual practice, individuals may make use of more particular principles to justify their caring claims, drawing upon familial ties or group loyalties. Individuals are nevertheless necessarily committed to the more general justifying principle outlined above—at least insofar as they value their survival, development, and basic well-being—for two reasons. First, our needs might be met by any capable human being and we cannot know in advance who might care for us. In calling upon others for care, we effectively say: anyone capable of helping me (and others like me with similar needs, if we are to be consistent) ought to care for me. Thus, capable human beings ought to care for human beings in need. If our parents, friends, or compatriots happen to be available, we may contingently attempt to justify our claims for care by appealing to more particular, conventional, or emotive principles. But insofar as we value our survival, development, and basic well-being, the more general justification always lingers just behind these more particular justifications. The second reason we are necessarily committed to this general justification in claiming care from others is because our claims on particular others for care necessarily involve others besides them. Potential caregivers often need the care of still others in order to be able to care for us. The particular care we seek exists within a web of linked and nested social relations.¹⁹ In making claims on others for care in any particular situation, we therefore often have to make claims on many others beyond our immediate potential caregivers. Our own particular claims thus necessarily require claiming and justifying care for anyone in need, including our potential caregivers. Indeed, at the most general level, our particular claims on others for care involve the broad social claim that all capable human beings ought to help all individuals in need, since otherwise society would not exist and there would be no one available to care for us.

There are nonetheless moral limits to the response we might legitimately expect from others. Because our claim for care relies upon a general moral principle, we should be able to understand if individuals forgo caring for us when it would involve extreme danger to themselves, seriously compromise their long-term well-being, or undermine their ability to care for other individuals who depend upon them. Morally speaking, our own care does not outweigh the care of other individuals, including their care for themselves.

Up to this point in the argument, the moral claims we make upon others for care remain unjustified. We may think it would be a very good thing if others were

to come to our aid in times of need and assert that they should do so. Yet, there would seem to be no necessary reason why others should satisfy our claims for caring upon them. The validation of our claims for care appears in the final step of the argument. When individuals all needing care from others and making claims upon others are placed in a social context of relationships and dependency, then each can validate his or her claims for care on others by appealing to the general moral principle that capable individuals ought to care for individuals in need. Because all individuals have sought care from others, all individuals have made use of this general moral principle in attempting to justify our claims before others. All capable individuals should therefore logically recognize and honor this moral principle when others make use of it to validate their claims for caring on them. Loosely following Gewirth, we may dub this final step in the argument *the principle of consistent dependency*:

5) Since all human beings depend upon the care of others for our survival and basic functioning and at least implicitly claim that capable individuals should care for individuals in need when they can do so, we must logically recognize as morally valid the claims that others make upon us for care when they need it, and should endeavor to provide care to them when we are capable of doing so without significant danger to ourselves, seriously compromising our long-term well-being or undermining our ability to care for other individuals who depend upon us.

Capable individuals who refuse to honor this principle violate the principle of noncontradiction and behave hypocritically. They fail to follow the moral principle that they themselves have made use of (and likely will make use of again one day) to justify their own care. More seriously, they implicitly renounce the web of caring upon which their own lives, society, and human life generally depend.

The principle of consistent dependency brings about the transition from a prudential to a moral rights claim for care. An individual in need can rationally justify his or her right to receive care from others by pointing out that they have likewise called upon others to care for them and justified their right to care on the very grounds now being invoked—that capable human beings ought to care for others in need insofar as they are able to do so. There is a circular quality to this argument for our duty to care for others, and intentionally so. Care theory derives our moral obligations not from some abstract quality such as autonomy or self-consciousness but rather from our relations with others as dependent social creatures. We have duties to care for others because we have appealed to others for care, and other individuals have duties to us because they have appealed to still others. There might be some point in the recesses of evolutionary history when the first claim for care was made upon another and satisfied out of sheer benevolence. But here and now, every living human being has made claims on others for care and consequently has obligated himself or herself to help others to meet their biological and developmental needs when and if he or she is able to do so. Our duty to care for others ultimately derives from our nature as dependent creatures who need the care of others to survive, develop, and achieve basic well-being.

Care Ethics and Nonhuman Animals

The theory of obligation outlined above does not apply in any simple or direct way to our relations with animals, but does justify some moral duties to them. More generally, it helps to sort out and justify the different nature of our obligations to humans and animals. Human beings have a natural obligation to care for other human beings in need because we have all made claims on other human beings to care for us. Because we have all made claims on other human beings to care for us, we are all implicitly committed to the moral principle that capable human beings should care for human beings in need—or more specifically, for creatures like us who necessarily depend upon human care for our survival and development.²⁰ While all human beings can be assumed to endorse this principle, they cannot be assumed to endorse any broader moral principle, such as that capable human beings should care for all creatures in need. The narrower principle follows directly from the desire of all human beings for their own survival and development whereas the broader principle does not. Now, because nonhuman animals do not necessarily depend upon the care of human beings for their survival and development, they fall outside the scope of this principle and cannot validate any implied claims for care that they may make upon human beings. Human beings therefore have no natural obligations to care for animals. Our desire for our survival and development commits us only to caring for creatures like us who necessarily depend upon human care for survival and development. To be clear, then, we have no natural obligations to care for animals not because we do not depend upon them for care (though we usually do not), but rather because they do not necessarily depend upon us for care.

Care ethics nonetheless does suggest that we should at least show sympathy to animals, and even maintains that such sympathy is morally compulsory. Animals share with us many of the same basic biological needs—for food, water, shelter, and protection—and some of the same capabilities—for mobility, sensation, affiliation, and perhaps emotion and some measure of imagination and reason. They further appear to desire survival, functioning, and the avoidance of pain much as we do. If we consider it desirable, or good, in our own case to be able to meet our needs and satisfy our desires, then it would seem that we should consistently recognize it as desirable, or good, for animals to be able to do the same. There is no nonarbitrary reason to limit our moral sympathy on these matters to human beings alone. The nature of our biological and developmental needs and desires are so similar to those of animals as to be nearly indistinguishable. We might justifiably set aside our sympathies for animals where our own lives or functioning are threatened or can only be sustained by taking or limiting the lives of animals. Our obligations to care for human beings remain supreme. All things being equal, however, it would seem inconsistent not to sympathize with animals' efforts to satisfy the common needs and aims we share with them, and wrong to obstruct their attainment of these needs and aims unnecessarily or without justification. Killing or maiming a rabbit or dog without reason is usually

(and rightly) considered gratuitous and cruel—and certainly inconsistent with the behavior of a caring person.

Insofar as we sympathize with animals in their attempts to satisfy their needs, we can also recognize some moral responsibility to help them meet these needs when they have no other means to do so and we are capable of helping them. Since the satisfaction of basic needs can be construed as good for animals, our helping them to achieve these needs can be understood as a moral act (in the sense of doing good for them); and if we can construe our help as a moral act, then there is a sense in which we “should” do it insofar as we are able. If we were to come across a drowning cat in a pond, for example, the moral thing to do (all things being equal) would be to pull the cat out of the pond or extend it a stick so that it could climb out. Sympathy seems to dictate at least this much. Our responsibility to the cat nonetheless remains something less than a duty in this case because it remains unjustified—that is, there is no way to validate the cat’s implied claim on us for care.

We take on moral obligations to animals only when we take some action that makes them dependent upon us for their survival, functioning, and well-being. We assume moral duties to animals when we make them dependent upon us because we then actively bring them into a relationship of dependency with us. We make their ability to achieve aims that we can recognize as good for them—survival, development, and basic well-being—dependent upon our care. Refusing to care for them in this case is tantamount to denying that these goods are good for them or that we have made their attainment of these goods contingent upon our actions. Demonstrating the former requires showing the radical biological difference of animals from us. Proving the latter requires showing that we have done nothing to make the animal dependent upon us. What separates this case from more contingent cases of animal dependency (e.g., coming across a drowning cat in a pond) and makes our duty morally obligatory is our own self-assumed action in generating the animal’s dependency. We contradict ourselves when we take some action that generates a need whose fulfillment we recognize as good but then refuse to fulfill it. In other words, we should not create dependency without being prepared to care for the creatures that we make dependent upon us.

The clearest practical example of this principle of self-assumed responsibility for animals is our relations with pets or companion animals. Unlike some animal rights positions, care ethics recognizes and justifies the morality of maintaining and caring for pets. In caring for pets, we help them to meet their basic needs, develop and exercise their capabilities, avoid pain, and usually live a better life than they would have been able to achieve on their own. All of this is a positive moral good from the perspective of care ethics.²¹ The notion that we ought to treat all animals as autonomous actors and grant them some sort of absolute right to freedom is foreign to this theory. If we adopt an animal as a pet, however, care ethics does assert that we take on a moral duty to care decently for it. In this regard, care ethics taps into a broadly held moral intuition. Most people consider it morally wrong to adopt a dog, lock it in a room, and deprive it of food and water

until it dies. The reasoning behind this moral intuition follows from the argument above: (1) we generally sympathize with animals based upon our recognition of the likeness of their needs and aims with our own; and (2) we recognize a self-assumed obligation to help animals to meet their needs and aims when we make them dependent upon us to achieve these goods. Our obligations to our pets may vary, of course, depending upon the degree to which we make them dependent upon us. A person who adopts a cat and keeps it in his or her city apartment is wholly responsible for its care; a farmer who adopts a barn cat may need only provide it with water on hot summer days and access to a warm sleeping place on cold winter nights. The general point is this: to the extent that we make animals dependent upon us, we have moral obligations to care for them.

The duty to care for human beings in need nonetheless retains moral priority over the duty to care for animals in this framework. The duty to care for human beings in need is a natural duty of justice that cannot be overridden by self-assumed obligations to animals. Thus, if forced to choose between saving a human infant from a burning house or our pet dog, we would be morally obligated from the perspective of care ethics to save the human infant. This moral priority applies importantly even to the so-called marginal cases of mentally impaired infants. Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and other animal advocates make much of marginal human cases in their arguments for animal rights. They suggest that if we consider human infants and especially mentally impaired infants as deserving of moral consideration then we should also extend moral consideration to animals, since most adult animals have a more complex consciousness than these human beings. Indeed, if forced to choose between saving a mentally impaired human infant and healthy adult dog, both Singer and Regan suggest that preference should be given to the dog because of its higher level of self-consciousness. Care theory sets aside considerations about complex consciousness, arguing instead that we have special obligations to all human beings because we have claimed care from other human beings, and consequently owe other human beings similar moral consideration regardless of their mental or other capacities. It does not matter that mentally impaired infants cannot and perhaps never will be able to care for us or any other human beings. We are bound to care for other human beings not because they can or someday may care for us, but because they are dependent on us just like we are (or have been) dependent on other human beings. Mentally impaired infants make claims on us for care just as we have made claims (and will likely do again one day) on other capable humans, and thus can justify their claims in a way that animals cannot. In care ethics, the duty to care for mentally impaired or other disabled individuals is not a marginal case but paradigmatic of our duties of all human beings.

This argument is blatantly speciesist, but represents a defensible form of speciesism.²² Every species would seem to be justified in caring first and foremost for its own kind since we all depend primarily on our own species for survival and development. In care ethics, what sets human beings apart from other species is not so much our reason or complex consciousness but our necessary dependency

upon the care of other human beings in order to survive and develop. The bad reputation of speciesism stems primarily from Singer's and Regan's association of it with racism and sexism. In Singer's and Regan's philosophical frameworks, which are oriented around sentience and self-consciousness, it does seem prejudicial to grant moral considerability to infants or mentally impaired humans while withholding it from chimpanzees, pigs, and dogs. Care ethics, however, provides a morally relevant reason for preferring humans over animals that annuls the comparison with racism and sexism. Distinctions made among people on the basis of race or sex are morally irrelevant from the perspective of care ethics because these characteristics have no bearing on our need for human care. All human beings need human care and make claims for care on all capable human beings regardless of race or sex. Our relations to animals are different. Animals generally cannot provide us with the care we need to survive, develop, and avoid or alleviate pain. There is thus a morally relevant dividing line between human beings and animals quite different from the morally arbitrary distinctions of race or sex: we have special duties to care for human beings because we specially depend upon human care to help us survive, develop, and maintain basic well-being.

Care Ethics, Factory Farms, and Moral Vegetarianism

If we think it is morally wrong to deprive pets of necessary care, and more generally agree that we have moral obligations to care for animals that we have made dependent upon us, then we logically must conclude that human beings' treatment of most animals currently under our care is morally deplorable. The factory farming system that accounts for almost all the meat, eggs, and dairy products consumed in the United States provides one of the most egregious examples. Each year more than eight billion chickens, 100 million pigs, and forty million cows pass through the factory farming system in the United States alone. No one even pretends to defend this system by suggesting that it provides decent care to animals. The only defense given for factory farming practices is the high profits and cheap food and other products they generate.

The horrible treatment of animals in factory farms has been well documented by Peter Singer, Mark Bernstein and many others and need not be fully rehashed here.²³ A few examples should suffice to make the point. Nearly all chickens raised in the United States spend virtually their whole lives crowded together in indoor cages that provide each chicken the equivalent of a six-by-eight inch living space.²⁴ The chickens endure the painful process of debeaking, and many suffer osteoporosis and a variety of other health problems as a result of their lack of exercise and overcrowding. Many pigs likewise spend most of their lives in warehouses with concrete or metal floors surrounded by (or literally living over) their own excrement. These animals are deprived of the opportunity to develop and practice most of their basic capabilities, and suffer many health ailments. As many as 70 percent of these animals have pneumonia, for example, at the time of their slaughter.²⁵ Cattle are likewise increasingly raised or spend significant

periods of their lives in crowded and barren feedlots with as many as 900 animals per acre.²⁶ Even those cows who live for some time on the open range still suffer branding, dehorning, and (for males) castration without anesthesia, and are then crammed 40 or 50 to a truck en route to feedlots and slaughterhouses.²⁷ The slaughter of cows, pigs, chickens, and other animals is also often brutal. Chickens are literally ripped from their cages in a process that often tears feet or wings from their bodies.²⁸ Cows and pigs are supposed to be stunned before slaughter (not an especially caring procedure to begin with), but because slaughterhouses prioritize speed and quantity over safety and care, many animals are improperly stunned on the first attempt and have to be stunned over and over again. Some of these animals are also placed on hooks, skinned and bled while still conscious.²⁹

The factory farming system is morally indefensible from the perspective of care ethics. Having made billions of animals dependent upon us for their survival and basic well-being, we deprive them of some of their basic needs (including a clean environment and nutritious diet), thwart the development of their basic capabilities (such as movement and nesting), and inflict unnecessary pain upon them. The care provided to these animals is so inadequate as to seem the very antithesis of caring: in many cases, it seems to approximate a form of torture. Animals under our care ought at least to be provided adequate food, water, and shelter, enjoy a clean and healthy environment, have the opportunity to develop and practice their basic capabilities for movement, sensation, companionship and the like, and live as much as possible free from pain. If we recognize this principle as valid in the treatment of pets—as we should—then we should also consistently apply it to chickens, pigs, cows, and other farm animals. The only practical way to achieve this goal, however, would be to abolish factory farming.

Primary responsibility for the treatment of animals in factory farms falls upon the owners, managers, and workers in these businesses. Secondary responsibility falls upon consumers who implicitly support these practices by purchasing meat, eggs, milk, and other animal products from these companies. A more general collective responsibility falls upon all of us who live in societies that legally sanction and even provide government subsidies to the factory farming industry. At the very least, we should all cease to support factory farms by refusing to purchase products from them and advocate for their legal abolition. The abolition of factory farming is morally obligatory from the perspective of care ethics given the arguments outlined above.

A further question arises here as to whether care ethics also requires moral vegetarianism or even moral veganism (i.e., refraining from the use of any animal products whatsoever). The more extreme of these two positions—a strict moral veganism—is not supported by care theory. It is at least possible to imagine people raising chickens in a caring manner and selling their eggs, or tending sheep and selling their wool. Care theory does not demand that human beings stop using all animal products, but only that any animals that are raised by human beings are treated in caring ways. If human beings raise animals in caring ways and then sell their eggs or wool without harming them, there is no moral objection from the

perspective of care theory to purchasing and consuming these products. The hard question is whether human beings might also raise animals for slaughter, using and selling their meat, skins and other products, in a manner consistent with care ethics.

There are at least two reasons for thinking that raising animals for slaughter is inconsistent with care ethics. At the very least, the act of killing a healthy animal is contrary to the aims of caring because it causes the animal at least some momentary pain and more importantly ends the animal's life. As Regan writes, "Death is the ultimate, the irreversible harm because death is the ultimate, the irreversible loss, foreclosing every opportunity to find satisfaction."³⁰ Raising animals for slaughter would also not seem to be very conducive to treating them in a caring manner. Most people wish to distance themselves from animals that they must ultimately kill. Rita Manning notes in this regard that after her sister and brother-in-law reared a pig for food, naming him and treating him like a pet and then slaughtering and eating him, they "never raised another pig or any other 'meat' animal." She concludes: "I take it that this is evidence of the difficulty of truly caring for an animal destined for slaughter."³¹

Conversely, though, caring as I have defined it does not necessarily involve naming and coddling the animals that one might raise for slaughter. A good farmer might adequately care for animals simply by providing for their basic needs, giving them an opportunity to develop and exercise their basic capabilities, and helping them to avoid pain and suffering. Good farmers of this sort may be few and far between in today's corporate agricultural industry, but they do exist. At Polyface Farm in Virginia, Joel Salatin and his family raise six different types of animals—cattle, pigs, chickens, rabbits, turkeys, and sheep—in a way that allows each species, in Salatin's words, "to fully express its physiological distinctiveness."³² Chickens are put out to pasture to eat insects and grass; pigs are allowed to roam about the barnyard and root through compost. After visiting the farm, Michael Pollan observed: "In the same way that we can probably recognize animal suffering when we see it, animal happiness is unmistakable, too, and here I was seeing it in abundance."³³ Salatin slaughters the chickens and rabbits that he raises in a swift and minimally painful manner right on his farm, and would slaughter the other animals if the United States Department of Agriculture would let him.

Despite the apparently good care Salatin provides to animals, the fact that he slaughters them still might seem to render his enterprise uncaring. As suggested above, there is a sense in which this judgment seems right. Even if it is possible to provide good care right up to the moment of slaughter, the slaughter itself is uncaring. Alternatively, though, few if any of these animals would be given the opportunity to live or receive any care at all if human beings had no use for them. Nor is it realistic to think these animals might be liberated from human care and go on to live successfully in the wild. Cows, pigs, chickens, and sheep have been bred over many generations for docility and dependency. A flock of laying-hens or

broiler chickens turned loose into nature would be easy prey for any predator, and would likely starve or freeze over the winter. The same can be said of cows, pigs, and sheep: their liberation into the wild would almost surely mean their near extinction.³⁴

The question then is this: Is it more caring to raise animals for human consumption, providing them with a good life right up to the moment of slaughter and killing them as swiftly and painlessly as possible, or is it more caring not to bring animals into existence at all if we intend ultimately to kill them? The first position would allow many animals that might otherwise never exist to enjoy a happy life up to the moment of slaughter. A person might defend this position from the perspective of care theory by arguing that the happy lives of well-cared for farm animals outweigh their unforeseen, quick, and relatively painless deaths. An advocate of moral vegetarianism might respond, however, that killing and consuming an animal provides it with something less than a happy existence. It cuts short the life of this being, the development and practice of its capabilities, and inflicts the ultimate harm upon it—all contrary to the being's apparent desire for survival and functioning and the aims of caring. Yet, this second position radically discounts the value of the life, development, happiness, and caring that a being might enjoy right up to the moment of slaughter. It counts the swift and relatively painless killing of the creature as of far more weight than the day-to-day care a person might provide the creature and the creature's happy existence during its life.

Care ethics ultimately admits of some room for reasonable disagreement on these issues. On the one hand, it recommends against harming or killing any creature without good justification. On the other hand, it endorses the act of caring for creatures and promoting their happiness as good. These two dictates come into conflict in the treatment of most farm animals. Most farm animals will have an opportunity to receive care and enjoy a happy existence only insofar as they are killed and consumed. Care ethics is thus left pointing in two contrary directions when it comes to raising animals for consumption. A plausible case can be made for bringing animals into existence and caring for them right up to the moment of slaughter, and a plausible case can also be made for not bringing them into existence when their ultimate fate is slaughter.³⁵ Because both arguments seem reasonably plausible given the premises of care ethics, care ethics must admit some room for reasonable disagreement among people about what is the most caring approach to take toward animals. The compromised choice we face here is a product of the complicated relationship humans have forged with these animals. We have made most farm animals dependent upon human care for their existence, and yet we are likely to care for these animals only insofar as we raise them for slaughter.

While care ethics allows some space for reasonable disagreement about animal slaughter and meat-eating, it nonetheless draws a fairly sharp line around what constitutes the acceptable treatment of animals. If one is going to raise animals for slaughter or consume animal products, one has an obligation to make sure these animals are well cared for. This obligation is all the stronger because of

the questionable nature of raising animals for consumption at all. Farmers should ensure that their animals are happy, healthy and can practice their capabilities. They should further provide them with the opportunity to enjoy a happy existence for some reasonable amount of time—allowing chickens, for example, to live at least a couple of years. We all should advocate for the passage of stricter animal welfare legislation mandating that animals raised for human purposes should have their basic needs adequately met, have an opportunity to develop and exercise their basic capabilities, enjoy a happy existence for some reasonable amount of time, and live as much as possible free from pain and suffering. We likewise should advocate for tighter regulations on slaughterhouses and the strict enforcement of these regulations, as well as encourage the development of more humane ways of killing. At least until these reforms are put into place, we all should refrain from using animal products, or at least take special care to consume animal products only from farmers who raise and kill animals according to these guidelines. Care ethics does not necessarily support moral vegetarianism on philosophical grounds, but given the current treatment of most animals in the United States and many other countries, it does practically support moral vegetarianism at least until animals receive better care.

The result of these reforms would be a great reduction in the number of animals raised for human purposes and significant increases in the price of meat and other animal products. Yet, an increase in the price of meat and other animal products in no way violates our duty to care for other human beings. Easy access to meat is not necessary for a healthy human diet, but may actually be harmful.³⁶ It is only in the last fifty years or so, for example, that individuals in the United States have had ready access to cheap meat, and the consequence appears to be a decline in people's health.³⁷ Since we do not need much or any meat for our survival or health—and certainly not in great quantities—there is no conflict in making it less readily available. The same point can be made about leather and other animal products for which there exist ready alternatives. We have chosen to make meat, leather, and other animal products readily available to human beings at the cost of caring for animals. While care ethics weighs our duties to human beings over our duties to animals, it does not support treating animals in harsh and uncaring ways simply for the sake of human convenience, taste, or fashion.

Conclusion

Care ethics offers a unique approach to the moral treatment of animals that grounds our moral duties to animals not in rights or utilitarian considerations but in our sympathy for animals and relationships with them. By grounding moral duties in sympathy and relationships, care ethics avoids some of the more problematic elements of other animal welfare positions. It skirts contentious and abstract debates about whether or not animals possess the requisite qualities to qualify for rights ownership or whether or not social utility favors radical changes in our current practices toward animals. It further explains why we should favor

human life over animal life while nonetheless demonstrating that we have some strong moral obligations to animals. Perhaps most importantly, care ethics capitalizes on the already existing moral sentiments that many human beings feel toward their pets and other animals.³⁸ Formalizing the principle of care most people already recognize toward dogs, cats, and other companion animals, care ethics suggests that we have a duty to provide at least a modicum of decent care to all animals whom we have made inescapably dependent upon us.

From the perspective of many animal rights advocates, care ethics will seem to concede too much, since it admits as a practical matter the moral defensibility of raising animals for consumption. Care ethics acknowledges the tenuous nature of this claim, but suggests the alternative is no less problematic. Whether or not we consider it caring to raise animals for slaughter is a question that ultimately points beyond care ethics to deeper metaphysical questions about how we value animal life in itself. Utilitarian and rights arguments remain useful here. The positive contribution care ethics makes to the animal welfare movement is to focus our attention on the way we actually treat the animals that are dependent upon us. Care ethics returns our moral attention to the relationships we have with animals and the quality of life we provide for them. In this regard, it may offer a better ground for improving the lives of animals in the short term and within the existing social context than more abstract and absolute animal rights approaches.

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Notes

¹Mark Bernstein, *Without a Tear: Our Tragic Relationship with Animals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 161–87; Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, eds., *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams, eds., *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals* (New York: Continuum, 1996); Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993); and Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

²See, for example, Carl Cohen and Tom Regan, *The Animal Rights Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); R. G. Frey, *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); and Michael Leahy, *Against Liberation: Putting Animals in Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

³Gary Francione, “Ecofeminism and Animal Rights: A Review of *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*,” *Women’s Rights Law Reporter* 95 (1996): 97.

⁴Josephine Donovan, “Attention to Suffering: Sympathy as a Basis for Ethical Treatment of Animals,” in *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*, eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1996), 147–69; Brian Luke, “Justice, Caring, and Animal Liberation,” in *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*, eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1996), 77–102.

- ⁵ Julian Franklin, *Animal Rights and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 80–81.
- ⁶ Tom Regan, *The Three Generations: Reflections on the Coming Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 95.
- ⁷ Francione, “Ecofeminism and Animal Rights,” 103.
- ⁸ Diemut Elisabet Bubeck, *Care, Gender, and Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Grace Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice: Feminism and the Ethic of Care* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: The New Press, 2004); Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- ⁹ Daniel Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory: The Practice of Caring and the Obligation to Care,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 50–74. See also Daniel Engster, *The Heart of Justice: A Political Theory of Caring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ¹⁰ There are many other issues that could be addressed, including the moral justifiability of animal experiments, hunting, capturing animals in traps, keeping animals in zoos, and using them in circuses and rodeos. Because of space limitations, I focus here only on meat-eating and the use of animal products, but the approach I develop should at least provide some guidance for thinking about these other issues.
- ¹¹ Caring also necessarily involves the virtues of attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect, since one cannot care effectively for another without these virtues. See Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory.”
- ¹² Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 42–47.
- ¹³ Pluhar develops an animal rights argument that builds more directly upon the substance of Gewirth’s argument. See Evelyn Pluhar, *Beyond Prejudice: The Moral Significance of Human and Nonhuman Animals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
- ¹⁴ Fineman, *Autonomy Myth*. Kittay, *Love’s Labor*.
- ¹⁵ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 28, 92.
- ¹⁶ Fineman, *Autonomy Myth*, 48.
- ¹⁷ Joel Feinberg, “The Nature and Value of Rights,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 4, no. 4 (1970): 243–60.
- ¹⁸ Nussbaum makes a similar point: “Any failure on the part of the caretaker to fulfill those wants [of the infant] will lead to reactive anger, as if (to put it in prematurely complex terms) some right of its own had been slighted.” See Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192.
- ¹⁹ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 66–70.
- ²⁰ Regarding the possibility that human beings might survive and develop without human care, Mary Midgley notes, “Stories of wolf-children etc. are hard to evaluate, partly because the actual evidence is slight, partly because all have died soon after capture. It seems impossible that a child should be brought up from the start by wolves or any other terrestrial species, because the sheer physical work needed is beyond them.” It might further be noted that these children never develop most of their basic capabilities. Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 107.
- ²¹ Some animals, such as cougars, cannot usually be maintained as pets in a caring way because our keeping them as pets impedes the development and practice of their capabilities.
- ²² For recent critiques of speciesism, see Mark Bernstein, “Neo-speciesism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2004): 380–90; and Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks, “The Origin of Speciesism,” *Philosophy* 71 (1996): 41–61.
- ²³ Bernstein, *Without a Tear*, 92–115. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1990), 95–157.
- ²⁴ Bernstein, *Without a Tear*, 106. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 98–119.

²⁵ Bernstein, *Without a Tear*, 99.

²⁶ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 139–41.

²⁷ Bernstein, *Without a Tear*, 95–96. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 148–50.

²⁸ Bernstein, *Without a Tear*, 113–14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97, 101–2.

³⁰ Regan, *Case for Animal Rights*, 117.

³¹ Rita Manning, “Caring for Animals,” in *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*, eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1996), 119.

³² Michael Pollan, “The Unnatural Idea of Animal Rights,” *The New York Times Magazine* November 10 (2002): 64.

³³ Pollan, “Unnnatural Idea of Animal Rights,” 64.

³⁴ J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 30–31.

³⁵ While care ethics generally considers it good to bring a creature into existence and provide it with a happy existence, it does not support any obligation to do so. Since a merely potential creature cannot be said to desire to come into existence, we cannot be said to have any obligation to benefit it in this way.

³⁶ Kathryn Paxton George argues that moral vegetarianism rests upon a male physiological norm, suggesting that although adult men do not need meat for a healthy diet, infants, children, pregnant and lactating women and others do. See *Animal, Vegetable, or Woman? A Feminist Critique of Ethical Vegetarianism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2000). George’s argument is convincingly refuted by Sheri Lucas, “A Defense of the Feminist-Vegetarian Connection,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 1 (2005): 150–77. Groups who must eat meat in order to survive are justified in doing so under care ethics, since care ethics gives priority to the care of human beings over animals.

³⁷ John Robbins, *Diet for a New America* (Tiburon, CA: H. J. Kramer, 1987); Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Perennial, 2001).

³⁸ As other care theorists have noted, Singer scorns this sort of sentimentality in developing his animal liberation position. See, for example, Josephine Donovan, “Animal Rights and Feminist Theory,” in *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*, eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1996), 34–59.

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