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Animal Ethics

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Introduction

Animal husbandry is traditionally understood as a blend of the producer's self-interest and duties of humane treatment for the animals on which we depend. A livestock operation cannot prosper without healthy and reproductively fit animals, and thus the profitability of a farm has tended to be regarded as a good indicator of well-being for its animals. In some settings, farmers and industry spokespersons alike emphasize the business aspects of animal husbandry, and this has prompted the use of language that likens animals to "profit machines," and that can seem like livestock are not seen as the living creatures that they are. Yet while profits provide an economic incentive for husbandry, livestock producers have never evaluated animal welfare solely in terms of dollars and cents. Taking proper care of one's animals has always been understood as an ethical responsibility, as well as a necessary business practice.

The ethical responsibilities of animal husbandry have usually been thought of in terms of duties that individual people—farmers and farmhands—must perform on behalf of the animals in their care. Any practice that results in ill-health or poor treatment of a farm animal has been thought of as a fault for which the lone, individual husbandry man should be held accountable. Although it is still true that the husbandry imposes ethical duties on those who practice it, animal agriculture has changed dramatically in scope and complexity over the last few decades. New technologies pose challenges to the way that we understand how animals fare in a given production system. New methods may seem to enhance one dimension of animal health and well-being, while seemingly causing a decline in another. New scales of production can provide opportunities for improvements in overall herd health, reproductive success and profitability, while reducing the amount of care and attention that can be given to an individual animal. Emerging trends in marketing and contracting constrain producers' flexibility and introduce powerful new actors into decision-making roles that affect animal health and well-being. This means that although the ethical responsibilities of the individual husbandryman are still important, there is a growing need to examine the ethics of animal care on an industry wide basis.

Ethical Responsibility

Science and imagination are needed to assess the overall impact of these trends in animal production, and it is important to ensure that the ethical side of animal husbandry does not lose out. In a technologically complex world in which a producer's choices are sharply limited, it is no longer appropriate to place the entire burden of ethical responsibility on the shoulders of individual farmers. Above all, consumers must not expect individual farmers to undertake practices that will make them uncompetitive in the marketplace. Livestock producers will do what is necessary to compete, or else they will not be livestock produc-

ers for very long. This means that the ethics of farm animal welfare will increasingly come to be seen in terms of industry standards, market structure and government regulation, in addition to individuals' responsibility to the animals in their care.

We are entering a time when the public's demand for ethical treatment of farm animals is starting to register in the form of price premiums and special contracting requirements, as well as pressure for government action. Clearly there is a danger that the emerging system will serve neither animal nor human interests well. Scientifically-validated and ethically-grounded industry standards can provide an alternative to rules and regulations imposed from without, but only if three key conditions can be met. First, it must be clear that the ethical goals and principles place appropriate weight on the welfare and interests farm animals themselves, at the same time that they recognize the role of animal agriculture in satisfying vital human needs. Second, consumers must have confidence that standards are taken seriously and that livestock producers faithfully follow recommended practices. Third, producers themselves must believe that standards are fairly established and administered. Although some mix of market incentives, government regulation and self-administered industry standards may eventually emerge to address the new challenges of ethical husbandry, only a system that meets all three of these criteria can truly said to be ethically justified.

Implementing a new system

Who will take the lead in formulating and implementing such a system? One response has been the U.S. Department of Agriculture's creation of Western Regional Coordinating Committee 204 on animal ethics. This effort to bring together interdisciplinary researchers, including ethicists, is an important first step. But producers themselves can seize the initiative, either through existing commodity groups or through some yet-to-be-formed organization that would be one step removed from the day-to-day concern with farm policy and profitability. They will need to work with scientists and government, as well as finding new partners among non-farm groups with an interest in animal care. One thing is certain. If producers undertake a new effort to provide assurance that animal interests are being taken into account in contemporary husbandry, they can be sure that people from outside will be watching carefully, even skeptically. What is more, such an undertaking will almost certainly meet opposition from people whose view of animal protection leaves no room for animal agriculture. At present, the broader public is caught between these extremists on the one hand, and on the other a farm community polarized by extreme views and reluctant to take any coordinated action at all. As Dr. Bernard Rollin (Colorado State University) has long argued, the new social ethic for animals demands that animal interests be given due consideration in a system that still provides healthy and economical products for consumers. Producers can and should accept the challenge of ending that gridlock, for no one is truly served by it and public confidence in the food system is its greatest casualty.

As science and technology advance, we have come to expect that standards for husbandry will evolve, and that periodic updating and revision will be the norm. The complex trade-offs between animal welfare, consumer prices and producer profitability will also be affected by shifting social values and technical change. This points, again, to the need to go beyond the view that ethical responsibilities fall solely on individual producers and animal caregivers. Ethics itself must come to be seen in terms of responsiveness to change and to what we have learned. The ethics of husbandry will consist as much in how the animal industries adapt to new knowledge and altered circumstances as in the individual performance of age-old duties of animal care. The 2002 version of the Swine Care Handbook reflects what we have learned most recently about responsible husbandry, but it also represents a commitment to continue in the search for better knowledge and better practice. Producers can meet their responsibility for ethical husbandry only by practicing what we believe to be right today and by resolving to test those beliefs, to learn and to improve in the future.

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