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Ethics

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Morality of Factory Farms

When we walk into a grocery store we see thousands of items neatly packaged and organized. This can give the illusion that all items are similar in the sense that choosing one item over another is not necessarily a big deal. However our individual choices in the grocery store as an aggregate define farming practices and affect ecosystems around the world. Factory farms are widely used for meat production of every animal which should make us consider whether or not it is ethical to cram millions of chickens into tiny enclosures just so we can eat our McNuggets, or if there are better alternatives two factory farms.

1. It is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering
2. If factory farms cause unnecessary suffering, it is wrong to eat meat produced by factory farms
3. Factory farms cause unnecessary suffering
4. It is wrong to eat meat from factory farms

Premise one seems fairly self explanatory. It simply states that if there is suffering and there is also a way to remove that suffering without causing harm to anyone else, it is preferable to remove that suffering. This is similar to the idea of making Pareto Improvements in economics in which the goal is Pareto Efficiency, meaning the goal is a situation in which no individual can be better off without causing harm to at least one other person. Nobody that is not a sadist would disagree with premise one. Premise two continues this idea, specifying that if factory farms cause unnecessary suffering, we should make that pareto improvement and refrain from using factory farms. Premises three and four complete the modus ponens, asserting that factory firms indeed do cause unnecessary suffering, therefore giving us a duty to refrain from their use.

One could argue with premise two by claiming that no method of food production is innocent of causing suffering. It may be true that factory farms cause suffering for those animals, but any method of food production simply causes different kinds of suffering. While we could refrain from using factory farms we would simply be shifting the suffering to another method, making some sort of suffering necessary for us to eat food that we need to stay alive. If it is wrong to eat food from any source that causes unnecessary suffering, we must consider the impact of every food that we eat. Eating plants that have been produced with toxic chemicals may harm the environment in different ways, making it difficult to produce any food on a large enough scale to feed everyone without some sort of unnecessary harm to the environment. We must pick our battles here and consider the true cost of other methods of food production that may simply boast the illusion of harmlessness.

Large scale farming of any type of food may have an impact on something in the environment, but the scale of the suffering that occurs in factory farms, as well as the emissions produced from the animals is so incredible that it cannot possibly be the least harmful way to make food. We have learned as time goes on what chemicals may be harmful to the environment when farming certain crops and

while we did not get it right on the first try we enacted regulations to reduce the harm to the environment. Well large scale crop farming may not be perfect, there is no way that it causes more suffering in the short or long term than slaughtering animals at an incredible scale.

The food that is produced in factory farms feeds millions of people around the world. This access to cheap food alleviates nutrition concerns for those millions of people, and provides food security. It may be the case that the ease of suffering on humans from factory farms outweighs the harm done to the lesser beings in those farms. If we are able to agree that it is good for millions of people to have access to food that they can afford, without fear of running out, that may be a great enough good to justify the suffering that is caused by factory farms.

It is clearly good for people around the world to have food security and the means to afford that food. Hunger is a major problem in some areas that cannot be ignored. However, meat in many cases is not the healthiest option available. Access to nutritious fruits and vegetables should be a higher priority than an unlimited supply of ground up pig guts. And as far as meat goes, the meat produced in factory farms is less nutritious than from farms where animals have been provided with lives that have less suffering. Also, if we are worried about the well being of humans, we should not be feeding them red meat that is a proven carcinogen.

Whether or not you like factory farms they are in wide use and are unlikely to go away anytime soon. There are also countless people, me included, that cannot find a moral justification for eating meat, especially from factory farms- however we still eat it either because it is convenient or simply because we like the taste. In my mind there is no way to justify factory farms and I will likely continue to consume meat produced in them. But if we continue to think about this issue and even occasionally choose to not eat meat or to eat meat produced more ethically, we are reducing the suffering in the world by just a little bit, and every bit counts. We cannot solve any issue in one fell swoop, but through a slow shift in decisions that we make over a long period of time. This is what we must do if we want to reduce the amount of suffering caused by factory farms, and I believe it is our duty to do so.