

Factory Farming Ignores the Suffering of Animals

The Rights of Animals, 2009

Oliver Broudy, "The Practical Ethicist: 'The Way We Eat' Author Peter Singer Explains the Advantage of Wingless Chickens, How Humans Discriminate Against Animals, and the Downside of Buying Locally Grown Food," *Salon*, May 8, 2006. This article first appeared in Salon.com, at www.salon.com. An online version remains in the *Salon* archives. Reprinted with permission.

Peter Singer is the DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University who is often cited by animal rights groups. Oliver Broudy is a writer and a former editor of the Paris Review. whose work has appeared in the New York Times and Mother Jones.

Peter Singer is a professional ethicist. Best known for his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*—a canonical text of the animal rights movement and the inspiration for untold thousands to take up vegetarianism—Singer, in the last quarter-plus century, has published a string of books on everything from test tube babies to the ethics of [President] George W. Bush. Considered fearless by some, and dangerous by others, virtually all agree that he is among the most influential philosophers alive today....

Oliver Broudy: One of the things that distinguishes your new book [The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter] is all the field research that went into it. What most shocked you, over the course of doing this research?

Peter Singer: Probably this video I saw of this kosher slaughterhouse, *AgriProcessors*. I guess I had this idea that kosher slaughter is more strictly controlled than normal slaughter, and when you see that video and you see these cattle staggering around with their throats cut, and blood pouring out—by no stretch of the imagination is this just a reflex movement. It goes on and on. And this happens repeatedly, with many different animals.

How are kosher animals supposed to be slaughtered?

They are supposed to be slaughtered with a single blow of a sharp knife across the throat. There's a virtually instant loss of consciousness, because the brain loses blood so quickly. That's the idea, anyway. But when you see this video, it's so far from that, I really did find it quite shocking.

You mention in your book that cows today produce three times as much milk as they did 50 years ago. That's a great advance, isn't it?

It is an advance, but you have to consider how this has been achieved. Fifty years ago, cows were basically fed on grass. They walked around and selected their food themselves, food that we can't eat, chewing it up and producing milk that we *can* eat. Now cows are confined indoors, and a lot of their food supply is grown specifically for them, on land that we could have used to grow food for ourselves. So it's actually less efficient, in that we could have gotten more food from the land if we didn't pass it through the cow.

[Even in an organic farm] there were no hens outside at all. The hens were all in these huge sheds, about 20,000 hens in a single shed, and they were pretty crowded.

Most of us have an idealized notion of what an organic farm is like. You visited an organic chicken farm in New

Hampshire. Did it meet your expectations?

I have to say that it didn't. I guess I was expecting some access to pasture for the hens. When I got to this place, although it was in a beautiful green valley in New Hampshire, and it was a fine, sunny fall day, there were no hens outside at all. The hens were all in these huge sheds, about 20,000 hens in a single shed, and they were pretty crowded. The floor of the shed was basically a sea of brown hens, and when we asked about access to outdoors, we were shown a small dirt run which at the best of times I don't think the hens would be very interested in. In any case the doors were closed, and when we asked why, we were told that the producer was worried about bird flu. So, yes, it was not really what I expected. It was still a kind of a factory farm production—although undoubtedly it was much better than a caged operation.

How much space are birds allotted in caged operations?

In the U.S., birds have as little as 48 square inches, a six- by eight-inch space. The United Egg Producers' standards are gradually increasing over the next five years. We'll get up to 67 square inches. But that's still not the industry average, and even 67 square inches is just [the size of] a sheet of standard letter paper. In a cage, the birds are unable to stretch their wings. The wingspan of the bird is about 31 inches, so even if you lined one bird up on the diagonal, she wouldn't be able to spread her wings. And there's not just one bird in these cages, there are four or five. The weaker birds are unable to escape from the more aggressive birds. They end up rubbing against the wire and getting pecked, so they lose a lot of feathers, and they can't lay their eggs in the nesting box.

Requiring a hen to lay in an open space [is like] asking a human to shit in public. They don't like it.

One good thing about this organic farm in New Hampshire is that there was this row of nesting boxes. It's been shown that hens have a strong instinct to lay in this kind of sheltered area. Conrad Lawrence, the science fiction writer and author of *The Council to Save the Planet*, once compared requiring a hen to lay in an open space to asking a human to shit in public. They don't like it.

What if it were possible to genetically engineer a brainless bird, grown strictly for its meat? Do you feel that this would be ethically acceptable?

It would be an ethical improvement on the present system, because it would eliminate the suffering that these birds are feeling. That's the huge plus to me.

What if you could engineer a chicken with no wings, so less space would be required?

I guess that's an improvement too, assuming it doesn't have any residual instincts, like phantom pain. If you could eliminate various other chicken instincts, like its preference for laying eggs in a nest, that would be an improvement too.

It seems to come down to a trade-off between whether the bird has wing space or whether you can fit more birds in your shed, and therefore have to pay less heating costs. How does one go about weighing these alternatives? How does the ethicist put a price on the impulse of a chicken to spread its wings?

We ought to be prepared to pay more for eggs so that the chicken can enjoy its life, and not be frustrated and deprived and miserable.

We recognize the chicken as another conscious being. It's different from us, but it has a life, and if something is really important for that chicken, if it would work hard to try to get it, and if we can give it without sacrificing something that's really important to us, then we should. If it's a big burden on us, that's surely different, but if it's a question of paying a few more cents for eggs, when we pay just as much if not more for a brand label we like, then we ought to be prepared to pay more for eggs so that the chicken can enjoy its life, and not be frustrated and deprived and miserable.

What constitutes a big burden? Doubtless the chicken farmer would say that building a larger shed or paying a bigger heating bill is a big burden.

It's only a burden to him if it harms his business, and it only harms his business if he can't sell the eggs he produces because other producers who don't follow those standards are selling eggs more cheaply. So, there's two ways around that: Either you have ethically motivated consumers who are prepared to pay a somewhat higher price for humanely certified eggs, or you cut out the unfair competition with regulations. Prohibiting cages, for example. And that's been done already, in Switzerland. And the entire European Union is already saying you can't keep hens as confined as American hens; it's on track to require nesting boxes, and areas to scratch, by 2012. So you can do it, and it doesn't mean that people can no longer afford to eat eggs.

In your book you discuss this in terms of the right of the chicken to express its natural behavior.

I tend not to put it in terms of rights, because philosophically I have doubts about the foundations of rights. But yes, I think these animals have natural behaviors, and generally speaking, their natural behaviors are the ones they have adapted for. And if we prevent them from performing those natural behaviors, we are likely to be frustrating them and making them miserable. So, yes, I think we ought to try to let them perform those natural behaviors.

We have, over centuries of history, expanded the circle of beings whom we regard as morally significant.

Could you explain your position on "speciesism," and what this has to do with your call to "expand the circle"?

The argument, in essence, is that we have, over centuries of history, expanded the circle of beings whom we regard as morally significant. If you go back in time you'll find tribes that were essentially only concerned with their own tribal members. If you were a member of another tribe, you could be killed with impunity. When we got beyond that there were still boundaries to our moral sphere, but these were based on nationality, or race, or religious belief. Anyone outside those boundaries didn't count. Slavery is the best example here. If you were not a member of the European race, if you were African, specifically, you could be enslaved. So we got beyond that. We have expanded the circle beyond our own race and we reject as wrongful the idea that something like race or religion or gender can be a basis for claiming another being's interests count less than our own.

So the argument is that this is also an arbitrary stopping place; it's also a form of discrimination, which I call "speciesism," that has parallels with racism. I am not saying it's identical, but in both cases you have this group that has power over the outsiders, and develops an ideology that says, Those outside our circle don't matter, and therefore we can make use of them for our own convenience.

I don't think we can say that somehow we, as humans, are the sole repository of all moral value, and that all beings beyond our species don't matter.

That is what we have done, and still do, with other species. They're effectively *things*; they're property that we can own, buy and sell. We use them as is convenient and we keep them in ways that suit us best, producing products we want at the cheapest prices. So my argument is simply that this is wrong, this is not justifiable if we want to defend the idea of human equality against those who have a narrower definition. I don't think we can say that somehow we, as humans, are the sole repository of all moral value, and that all beings beyond our species don't matter. I think they do matter, and we need to expand our moral consideration to take that into account.

So you are saying that expanding the circle to include other species is really no different than expanding it to include other races?

Yes, I think it's a constant progression, a broadening of that circle.

But surely there's a significant difference between a Jew, for instance, and a chicken. These are different orders of beings.

Well, of course, there's no argument about that. The question is whether saying that you are not a member of my kind, and that therefore I don't have to give consideration to your interests, is something that was said by the Nazis and the slave traders, and is also something that we are saying to other species. The question is, what is the relevant difference here? There is no doubt that there is a huge difference between human and nonhuman animals. But what we are overlooking is the fact that nonhuman animals are conscious beings, that they can suffer. And we ignore that suffering, just as the Nazis ignored the suffering of the Jews, or the slave traders ignored the suffering of the Africans. I'm not saying that it's the same sort of suffering. I am not saying that factory farming is the same as the Holocaust or the slave trade, but it's clear that there is an immense amount of suffering in it, and just as we think that the Nazis were wrong to ignore the suffering of their victims, so we are wrong to ignore the sufferings of our victims.

But how do you know at what point to stop expanding the circle?

I think it gets gray when you get beyond mammals, and certainly it gets grayer still when you get beyond vertebrates. That's something we don't know enough about yet. We don't understand the way the nervous systems of invertebrates work....

Chickens get some slaughterhouse remnants in their feed, ... so that could be a route by which mad-cow disease gets ... into the cattle.

I wanted to list a few factoids that jumped out at me while reading your book, and if you want to comment on them I'd love to hear your thoughts. First, each of the 36 million cattle produced in the United States has eaten 66 pounds of chicken litter?

The chicken industry produces a vast amount of litter that the chickens are living on, which of course gets filled with the chicken excrement, and is cleaned maybe once a year. And then the question is, what [do] you do with it? Well, it's been discovered that cattle will eat it. But the chickens get some slaughterhouse remnants in their feed, and some of that feed they may not eat, so the slaughterhouse remnants may also be in the chicken litter. So that could be a route by which mad-cow disease gets from these prohibited slaughterhouse products into the cattle, through this circuitous route.

Second factoid: 284 gallons of oil go into fattening a 1,250-pound cow for slaughter?

That's a figure from David Pimentel, a Cornell [University] ecologist. The fossil fuel goes into the fertilizer used to fertilize these acres of grain, which are then harvested and processed and transported to the cattle for feed. We get back, at most, 10 percent of the food value of the grain that we put into the cattle. So we are just skimming this concentrated product off the top of a mountain of grain into which all this fossil fuel has gone.

So even if we all started driving Priuses we'd still have these cows to worry about.

Yes. In fact, there's a University of Chicago study that shows that if you switch from driving an American car to driving a Prius, you'll cut your carbon-dioxide emissions by one ton per year. But if you switch from a typical U.S. diet, about 28 percent of which comes from animal sources, to a vegan diet with the same number of calories, you'll cut your carbon-dioxide emissions by nearly 1.5 tons per year.

Third factoid: We have more people in prison in the United States than people whose primary occupation is working on a farm?

A local chicken farm was getting rid of hens at the end of their laying period by throwing them by the bucketload down a wood chipper.

Isn't that amazing? Just as an example, when I wrote *Animal Liberation* 30 years ago or so, there were more than 600,000 independent pig farms in the U.S. Now there are only about 60,000. We're still producing just as many pigs, in fact more pigs, but there has been such concentration that we are now producing more pigs with a tenth as many pig farms. The same has happened in dairy and many other areas.

And finally, it turns out that a wood chipper is not the best way to dispose of 10,000 spent hens?

Yes, this also came to mind when you asked me what most shocked me. This was in San Diego County, in California. Neighbors noticed that a local chicken farm was getting rid of hens at the end of their laying period by throwing them by the bucketload down a wood chipper. They complained to the Animal Welfare Department, which investigated, and the chicken farmer told them that this was a recommendation that had been made by their vet, a vet who happens to sit on the Animal Welfare Committee of the American Veterinary Medical Association. The American Veterinary Medical Association, I should say, does not condone throwing hens down a wood chipper, but it is apparently done. We've also had examples of hens being taken off the conveyor belt and simply dumped into a bin, where by piling more hens on top, the hens on the bottom were suffocated. These old hens have no value, that's the problem, and so people have been killing them by whatever means is cheapest and most convenient.

So if you were stuck with 10,000 spent hens, what would you do with them?

I think you have a responsibility. Those hens have been producing eggs for you for a year or 18 months. You have a responsibility to make sure they are killed humanely. And you can do that. You can truck them to a place where there is stunning, or, better still, you can bring stunning equipment to the farm, and you can make sure that every hen is individually stunned with an electric shock and then killed by having its throat cut.

Avoid factory farm products. The worst of all the things ... is intensive animal agriculture.

I thought you might suggest a retirement program.

That's an ideal that some people would like to see, but if you have to maintain and feed hens when they are no longer laying eggs, that will significantly increase the cost of the egg, and even the organic farms don't do that.

After reading this interview, some readers might be inspired to change their diets. If you could suggest one thing, what would it be?

Avoid factory farm products. The worst of all the things we talk about in the book is intensive animal agriculture. If you can be vegetarian or vegan that's ideal. If you can buy organic and vegan that's better still, and organic and fair trade and vegan, better still, but if that gets too difficult or too complicated, just ask yourself, Does this product come from intensive animal agriculture? If it does, avoid it, and then you will have achieved 80 percent of the good that you would have achieved if you followed every suggestion in the book.

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Source Citation:

"The Animal Agriculture Industry Cares About the Welfare of Animals." *The Rights of Animals*. Ed. Auriana Ojeda. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2009. Current Controversies. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 2 Oct. 2010.

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Gale Document Number: GALEIEJ3010062269

The Animal Agriculture Industry Cares About the Welfare of Animals

The Rights of Animals, 2009

Testimony of Congressman Charles W. Stenholm to the House Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry, May 8, 2007. <http://agriculture.house.gov/testimony/110/h70508/Stenholm.DOC>.

Charles W. Stenholm was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas from 1979 to 2005. He is now a lobbyist who represents various agricultural interests. The following viewpoint is taken from Stenholm's testimony before the House Committee on Agriculture's Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry, on May 8, 2007.

If you eat or wear clothes, you are affected by agriculture. The industry remains an important part of the United States economy, and according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), animal products account for the majority (51 percent) of the value of U.S. agricultural products, exceeding \$100 billion per year. As a farmer and rancher, I believe in the significance of the agriculture industry and in the value animal agriculture producers put on the safety and welfare of their livestock....

With over 130 years of racing history at Churchill Downs [site of the Kentucky Derby], it is clear that the owners, trainers, and riders of the Derby care about the welfare of their animals. I'm sure many of you went to zoos as a child or will bring your children and grandchildren to one this summer. In fact, more people attend zoos every year than all sporting events combined, and the caregivers at zoos nationwide care about the welfare of their animals. Many of you probably remember the first time you saw the circus and may attend when it comes here. The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation has one of the most successful breeding programs for endangered Asian elephants outside of Southeast Asia. They care about the welfare of their animals. Just like these groups of animal owners, production agriculture has not been given the credit it is due by animal "rights" activists, and we, too, care about the welfare of our animals. There is one thing that everyone agrees on: all animals should be treated humanely from birth to death....

Livestock Producers Care About Animals

Livestock producer associations ... all care about the same thing: ensuring the health and well-being of their animals is their number one priority. The livestock industry has worked hard both from a legislative standpoint and through industry guidelines to improve animal welfare conditions. Animal agriculture constantly works to accept new technologies and science and apply them to the industry, investing millions of dollars every year to ensure the wellness of their livestock. Producers recognize the need to maintain animal welfare regulations for the safety and nutrition of their livestock, for the conservation of the environment, and for the profitability of their operations. But those regulations should be based on sound science from veterinary professionals that best understand animals, working together with legitimate animal use industries.

Many of the livestock groups have quality assurance programs in place. For example, the New Jersey Legislature and Department of Agriculture commissioned Rutgers [University] in 2003 to perform a study on veal calf production, and experts at the land grant university concluded that the Veal Quality Assurance program and the principles behind it were scientifically sound. The poultry industry also continues to work on a united front to

maintain a high level of oversight on animal welfare issues that ensures all employees practice the industry guidelines that were adopted. The animal agriculture industry continues to strive to improve animal health and welfare through scientific research, educational outreach, advocacy, legislation, and regulations.

Activist groups ... have used falsehoods and scare tactics to push their hidden agendas of fundraising and systematically abolishing all use of animals.

While the livestock industry has a long history of supporting animal welfare, many activist groups such as PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals], the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and Farm Sanctuary have used falsehoods and scare tactics to push their hidden agendas of fundraising and systematically abolishing all use of animals, including production agriculture, zoos, circuses, and sporting events. These groups campaign for animal "rights," which is not synonymous with animal welfare, using half-truths or complete deception. For example, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), Farm Sanctuary charged veal farmers in New Jersey of malnutrition practices because of the absence of fiber in their calves' diets. However, a coalition of dairy farmers, animal nutrition specialists, and dairy extension specialists at Rutgers University testified that it is typical to not give calves fiber because it is not healthy for a calf's developing digestive system.

These groups also fail to mention the millions of dollars in fundraising and assets that drive their misguided goals. HSUS has accumulated \$113 million in assets; has a budget three times the size of PETA's; and according to the ActivistCash website, has more than enough funding to finance animal shelters in all fifty states, yet only operates one animal sanctuary, Black Beauty Ranch in Texas, which is at full capacity. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, two offshoots of HSUS spent \$3.4 million on Congressional elections and ballot initiatives, which is more than Exxon Mobil Corp. [spent.] And there is an ongoing investigation by the Louisiana attorney general to determine if the \$30 million in HSUS fundraising during the Hurricane Katrina crisis has been handled appropriately.

These activist groups use the platform of animal "rights" to advocate for regulations so strict that they will put animal agriculture out of business (which is their real goal). A video recently circulated to Members of Congress and a video produced by HSUS make numerous false claims against the livestock industry. For example, the videos suggest that horses are inhumanely transported on double-decker trailers. However, a law exists that has banned the use of double-decker trailers for transporting horses on their way to slaughter, and if a horse does arrive on one of these trailers, the processing facilities will not accept it. In addition, numerous truck drivers invested in new trailers that comply with the law, and animal agriculture stepped up once again to improve animal welfare conditions.

More Misleading Rhetoric

Another example of the misleading rhetoric by animal "rights" activists involves the process of "captive bolt" euthanasia. The previously mentioned videos claim that captive bolt is not humane. However, the 2000 report of the AVMA's Panel on Euthanasia specifically approves the use of captive bolt as a humane technique of euthanasia for horses. It is also an approved method of euthanasia for pork, cattle, and lamb. The captive bolt method meets specific humane requirements set forth by AVMA's Panel on Euthanasia, USDA and the HSUS Statement on Euthanasia because it results in instantaneous brain death, and it is generally agreed to be the most humane method of euthanasia for livestock.

Watching the end of life for any living creature is not a pleasant experience, even when performed in the most

humane manner. However, these groups continue to use human emotion and sensationalism to prey on the public's sensitivity in order to reach their goal of abolishing animal agriculture.

Protect America's Farmers and Ranchers

Unfortunately, we all know mistakes happen and laws are broken. I will not try to convince you otherwise. But when these unfortunate incidents occur, appropriate actions should be taken. We should not get in the habit of creating arbitrary, uninformed, and emotionally based regulations on an industry whose livelihood depends on the health and well-being of its animals. We should not tie the hands of researchers and investors that continually seek improvements in animal welfare practices, and we should not tie the hands of producers who work night and day to ensure the quality of life of their livestock so they can provide this country and others with the most abundant, safest, and most affordable food supply in the world.

Professional experts ... continue to have their expertise questioned by animal "rights" activists who line their own pockets with donations secured by exploiting and distorting the issues. These groups throw sensationalistic and often staged photos in the faces of those who do not understand [the issues] and ask them to give money to save the animals. But what they do not do is use their millions of dollars in fundraising to build animal shelters, provide research for new technologies and procedures or provide truthful information to consumers about the animal agriculture industry. Emotions run high, and with continued antics by activist groups the ultimate outcome will be devastating. If animal "rights" activist groups continue to be successful like we have seen in recent months with the closing of U.S. horse processing facilities, abandonment of animals will increase, animal welfare will decline, honest and legal businesses will close, America's trade balance will worsen, jobs will disappear, family heritage and livelihood will be stolen, and the best interest in the welfare of animals will be lost.

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Source Citation:

"The Animal Agriculture Industry Cares About the Welfare of Animals." *The Rights of Animals*. Ed. Auriana Ojeda. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2009. Current Controversies. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 2 Oct. 2010.

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