

*Images of Death and Life: Food Animal Production and the Vegetarian Option**

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The memories of one Maryland chicken slaughterhouse will always be with me. It was summer, 90 degree heat, humid, no shade, and the chickens were in stacked crates. As we walked in, we were breathing the palpable stench of warm, dying bodies. It soaked through our clothes and skin. We took some birds out of the crates, and they tried to drink melting ice from our hands. They were too weak to keep their heads up. They would have stayed there until the next morning, dying of heat prostration, respiratory failure and so on. We made the security guards call in the manager to finish them off. It's the closest I've ever been to Auschwitz.

Ingrid Newkirk, unpublished interview

'Enough to turn you vegetarian, places like this,' Quantrill said gloomily into Tail's ear. His work in rural police divisions had taken him often enough into slaughterhouses, but he had never overcome his sense of depression at their sights, their sounds, their smells, their frighteningly casual doing-to-death.

Sheila Radley, *Death in the Morning*

The heat of the summer city was unbearable. The pigs were waiting, small eyes intent on the men they had learned to fear. Ears and tails flicked with irritation at the tugging pain of scratches, the caked mud clinging to their bodies, and the ever-present insects. One animal lay stretched out, his sides heaving, lost in the agony of a heart attack. Another stood, her head trapped firmly in a gate, moaning with helpless misery. Panting from the heat, several individuals stood near these two sufferers, gently nudging at their bodies to express their sympathy. Waiting.

Presently, a man appeared, equipped with heavy boots and an electric prod. The pigs were overwhelmed with dread. Their screams rose in the open air. The man flayed aimlessly about him, striking legs, heads and backs, as the animals climbed over each other, desperate to escape.

A forced run down the darkened chute; wild thrashing to evade the merciless blows of the captive-bolt pistol; then, unconsciousness. Remorselessly, one by one, human killers stilled the pigs' voices.

Harriet Schleifer, 'Echoes of a Canadian Stockyard', unpublished

The passages you have just read are imaginative descriptions of reality, not documented scientific facts. Systematic factual accounts of the meat industry's treatment of animals, such as Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines*, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Jim Mason's and Peter Singer's *Animal Factories*, are almost numbing in the evidence they present of the needless exploitation and widespread abuse that our diet creates for other sensitive living beings. Surveying the problem on the broadest scale, they distract one's attention from the suffering of each individual and blur its unique significance.

Many people are overwhelmed by the extent of food animals' suffering. The rearing of livestock is commonplace in virtually every society on the planet, and there are billions of deaths every

* In PETER SINGER (ed), *In Defense of Animals*, New York: Basil Blackwell 1985, pp. 63-73.

year. Indeed, in *The Hungry Planet* Georg Borgstrom has calculated that the global population of domestic food animals equals our own human population. When the number of fish caught and killed to feed us annually is added to this total, the death toll becomes staggering.

In the USA the meat industry is the second largest manufacturing and processing concern (the largest is the manufacture of cars) and worth approximately \$50 billion a year. It plays a prominent role in other countries' economies as well. Large-scale fishing is of primary economic importance in much of the Third World, and significant in developed countries. Related industries, such as steel production and pharmaceutical manufacture, dramatically increase the meat and fish producers' influence and power. The steel industry supplies cages and machinery for factory farms, while more than half the world's production of antibiotics is used in medicated animal feeds.

But these statistics need not be disheartening. However great its size, the farm animal industry is extremely vulnerable to the threat posed to its continued existence by public compassion for the animals it victimizes. Well aware of this fact, meat producers go to extraordinary lengths to conceal and mystify the true nature of their activities. Factory farms and slaughterhouses are hidden from view, located away from urban cores and relatively isolated. Most prohibit all visitors. Our consciousness of what goes on in them is blurred by the way in which meat is typically sold, in neat, bloodless packets. Body parts which would identify meat as animal corpses - feet, tails, fur, eyes - are carefully removed, ostensibly for consumer convenience.

Slick and seductive advertising campaigns reinforce these illusions. Thoughts of living, suffering animals are virtually obliterated. Everyone is familiar with the smiling cows, dancing pigs, and laughing chickens depicted on meat, dairy, and egg industry packaging and vehicles, and which are also frequently used as restaurant logos. Wayne Swanson and George Schultz report in their book *Prime Rip*, which investigates fraud in the meat industry, that 'the industry has always operated strong educational and public-relations programs to keep Americans thinking positive thoughts about meat'. To cite just one example, culled from Dudley Giehl's *Vegetarianism: A Way of Life*, the California Beef Council routinely issues press releases to 'some 500 newspapers and over 300 radio and television stations in California'. Other animal exploiters, such as the dairy and egg industries, use similar tactics. Promotional handouts to supermarkets are common. These banners, posters, and literature are referred to as 'consumer information' despite their industry source. Supermarkets themselves spend the largest proportion of their own advertising budgets on publicity for meat. Meat is a high profit margin product, with a mark-up of about 20 per cent, and they consider it a principal draw for customers.

Aside from their fraudulent use of animals in advertising, some meat industry advocates apparently have no qualms about manipulating public prejudices to sell their products. In *Vegetarianism: A Way of Life* Giehl describes a booklet called 'The Story of Meat', published by the American Meat Institute. It asks the question, 'Why couldn't the North American Indians living in a land teeming with natural resources lift themselves above their primitive stone age culture?' The answer? The Indians 'failed to domesticate livestock for their principal food necessity - meat.' Sexism is also condoned and encouraged. *Prime Rip* mentions a \$4.6 million advertising and marketing campaign designed to sell 'sensual beef: "Sex sells everything else," said a spokesman, 'so why not beef?'"

Special promotional efforts are directed at children, whose open and uninhibited appreciation of living animals presents the most dangerous challenge to a meat-centred diet. Giehl notes that a large proportion of meat industry propaganda is distributed in the public school system. This is confirmed by Swanson and Schultz. According to their research, 'Trade groups are a major provider of educational materials on nutrition (obviously stressing the importance of meat)'. Such material contains not pictures of slaughterhouses but attractive portraits of living animals and commentary on what they 'do for us'. The McDonald hamburger chain is a major producer of children's television commercials. In one of these Ronald McDonald explains that hamburgers 'grow in little hamburger patches'. Star-Kist has developed a series of ads in which

Charlie the Tuna tries to be caught so he can be processed by the company. Perhaps the most outrageous example, however, is an Oscar Mayer commercial in which a group of children sing: 'Oh, I wish I was an Oscar Mayer wiener, for that is what I'd really like to be.' As Giehl wryly comments, 'The old maxim that honesty is the best policy does not apply if you expect children to eat meat without compunction'.

The food animal industry has largely succeeded in its attempt to make desirable practices that are inexcusable. A measure of its success is found in *Prime Rip*, whose authors state in all seriousness that 'Many Americans would sooner give up their freedom than give up their meat.' Unfortunately, meat has become a symbol of status. Preferences for specific kinds of meat vary widely, ranging from insects to frogs' legs, from buffalo*steaks to pork chops, but it is universally related to wealth, and its absence from the diet is regarded as voluntary or involuntary privation. The problem becomes evident in the marketing of meat analogues, which the status-conscious meat eater rejects as 'imitations', no matter how much they resemble the real thing.

Faced with the onslaught of propaganda and the fact that the consumption of animal products is a respected and entrenched custom in our society, it is little wonder that few people have the temerity to challenge the basis of the entire system. Still, nothing frightens the meat industry more than the idea of vegetarianism. They oppose its spread with aggressive vigour. Frances Moore Lappe's book *Diet for a Small Planet* was criticized as hysterical, unscientific faddism. Of course, significantly, it is the food animal industry that either funds or otherwise supports most research which claims to prove that its products are healthy and nutritionally sound. Its manipulation extends even to the most respected scientific bodies. The 1980 National Academy of Science report exonerating cholesterol as a factor in disease was prepared by paid consultants of the meat, dairy and egg industries. In 1976 intense lobbying by angry meat producers forced the American Government to delete a recommendation in the McGovern report on nutrition, 'Decrease consumption of meat', and to change it to 'Choose meats, poultry and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake'. Such obsessive hostility towards the alternative of a vegetarian diet strongly suggests that its promotion may be a powerful weapon against the habit of meat consumption.

The animal liberation ethic demands a basic shift in moral consciousness, a repudiation of human superiority over other species through force. Our way of viewing the world becomes more compassionate, more respectful of the needs of other living beings. The vegetarian lifestyle is both a fundamental and a personal means of affirming such a shift. Confronting the oppression of food animals through vegetarianism lies at the heart of the animal liberation ethic and offers the greatest potential for the radical transformation of our society.

Killing, unless it is done as a merciful act, must involve a deliberate withholding of sympathy from the victim. Done repeatedly, it results in a hardening of the emotions. Thomas More, although not a vegetarian, recognized this when he wrote *Utopia* in 1518: 'The Utopians feel that slaughtering our fellow creatures gradually destroys the sense of compassion, which is the finest sentiment of which our human nature is capable.' The same theme has reappeared in countless writings, usually with a suggestion that heightened human sensitivity is a desirable goal. Mahatma Gandhi expressed this very clearly in *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism*, edited by R. P. Prabhu. He commented, 'I do feel that spiritual progress does demand at some stage that we should cease to kill our fellow creatures for the satisfaction of our bodily wants'.

The ethical argument for vegetarianism becomes even more persuasive when one considers the reasons for it that are not related directly to farm animal welfare. (I will not discuss any of the health considerations that make the vegetarian diet an attractive option, since they do not have an essentially moral basis.) Wildlife conservation is a popular concern for many people, though few know the extent to which domestic animals compete with wildlife for space and resources. Ninety per cent of agricultural land in the United States, more than half of the

country's total land area, is presently used for meat, dairy and egg operations, making it unavailable as human or wildlife habitat. Nor do people realize that numerous species, among them the dodo and the passenger pigeon, became extinct because we chose to eat them and that other species are currently endangered for the same reason. Furthermore, the men who exploit animals for food do not take kindly to wildlife that interferes with their activities: American ranchers kill predators, antelope and prairie dogs, Australian sheep farmers kill kangaroos, and Japanese fishermen destroy dolphins - in each case because the animals are 'pests'. Other animals are 'incidentally' exterminated; tuna and shrimp nets drown hundreds of porpoises and sea turtles.

Ecologically the production of animal products is wasteful and inefficient. According to Keith Akers' *A Vegetarian Sourcebook*, energy and water requirements are between ten and 1,000 times greater than they would be for an equal amount of plant food. Consequently, most soil erosion (90 per cent), consumptive use of water (80 per cent) and deforestation (70 per cent) is the result of livestock agriculture. It is also responsible for most of our water pollution.

Meat consumption in Western countries is a primary cause of hunger, both at home and in the Third World. Only 42 per cent of an animal's original weight becomes meat. In addition to this wastage, John McFarlane, Executive Director of the Council for Livestock Protection, has calculated that 'The amount of meat lost each year through careless handling and brutality would be enough to feed a million Americans for a year'. Although the unfair distribution which characterizes international trade makes it an unlikely dream, it is also a fact that if everyone in the developed world became a vegetarian, it would be possible to give four tons of edible grain to every starving person.

Many studies have speculated on the connection between meat eating and inter-human violence, although none has been conclusive. Nevertheless, the links are suggestive. In *Fettered Kingdoms*, John Bryant mentions several sources which note that the rate of violent crime in communities is related to the presence of slaughter facilities. Certainly it is true that the slaughterer's occupation is grim and brutalizing. Few people work in stockyards by choice. Most are there because their families have worked in the business; many are illegal immigrants. Workers are forced to become indifferent to the vocal protests and struggling of the animals they kill. It is likely that the callousness they develop in order to endure the realities of their jobs will affect other areas of their lives.

The fact that most consumers try to ignore the horror of meat animals' lives and deny its moral importance suggests an underlying awareness of the unjustified cruelty involved. Human beings do not like to see themselves as killers, notwithstanding the exaggerated glamour we ascribe to the caveman and hunter. We are relieved to have animals killed for us by others, relieved that the distressing sights and sounds of death do not haunt our meals. Some of us repress the facts so well that we can hardly believe that suffering and death are part of meat production. In an interview published in the March/April issue of *Agenda*, Quebec animal rights activist Karen Urtnowski tells of a schoolmate who thought that steaks were surgically removed from cows, who then returned to a peaceful existence in their meadows. If such an example seems farfetched, consider the fact that a large percentage of intelligent, educated adults do not associate cow's milk with the animal's pregnancy. Nor do they realize that the unwanted calves become the raw material of the veal industry.

Whatever their level of awareness, it remains true that people eat meat because they are accustomed to its colour, shape, texture and flavour, and have been conditioned to regard it as a highly desirable food. Their attitudes must be challenged, and changed. As Peter Singer has pointed out in *Animal Liberation*, 'Those who, by their purchases, require animals to be killed have no right to be shielded from this or any other aspect of the production of the meat they buy. If it is distasteful for humans to think about, what can it be like for the animals to experience it?'

The meaning of what we do to meat animals transcends hard statistics. The destructive impulses of the human spirit are grimly revealed in the suffering of these creatures, and most of us naturally recoil from the vision. As with the image of nuclear disaster, knowledge of the meat industry's exploitation of animals confronts us with the unthinkable, and demands a personal response we may feel unable to give. So we reassure ourselves with platitudes about the 'necessity of meat' in human nutrition, arguments about our 'dominion' over nature and the window-dressing provided by regulations designed to ensure humane slaughter.

Sadly, some elements within the animal rights movement itself have accepted these evasions. In despair at the apparent hopelessness of stopping the exploitation, or unwilling to face its reality, they attempt to be 'reasonable' about the issue of food animals. The majority withdraw from the controversy altogether, on the grounds that the public is not ready to deal with it. They offer the myth of the 'attainable goal' as a further rationalization. The idea behind this is to attack less widespread abuses, such as hunting or circuses, in the hope that smaller successes will build up the movement's credibility and popular support and allow the issue of food animals to be dealt with effectively later. The difficulty with this approach is that it tends to involve its proponents in lame excuses about their inaction on the larger problem or, worse, in deceit, actual denial that it has any significance. In effect, they reinforce the food animal industry's messages. The public comes to feel that the use of animals for food is in some way acceptable, since even the animal welfare people say so. This cannot help but make it much more difficult to eliminate the practice in the future. Far better to follow the strategy of union activists, who demand 20 per cent in the hope of receiving at least 10 per cent.

We cannot live in fear of making the public uncomfortable. Change that matters always involves initial doubt and pain, and it is our responsibility to guide that process in a constructive way, to ease the transition from a society that exploits to one that respects other species.

If it is true that once the public understands the immorality of other animal rights issues, it will be easy to convince them to become vegetarians, it is equally true that vegetarianism provides a consistent base for criticizing the lesser wrongs done to animals. Rejecting animal exploitation as ethical vegetarians saves us from the perilous acrobatics involved in dividing animals into two moral categories: animals that it is unequivocally wrong to abuse, and others that it is acceptable to exploit in a benevolent fashion.

Furthermore, the attitude that allows us to raise animals for food colours our treatment of all other creatures, from pets to laboratory animals and wildlife. Once we have accepted that we may utilize animals for so trivial a reason as our enjoyment of the taste of their flesh, it is easy to use them for any purpose which is equally frivolous, such as domesticating them as pets or confining them in zoos to amuse us, or for those which are more serious, such as using them in medical experiments that we believe will save human lives.

Other animal rights activists settle on the 'compromise' solution of humane slaughter to ease their dilemma. The contradictions inherent in adopting such a position are evident. To begin with, sincere concern for living individuals leads such people to become, ironically, experts on the techniques of mass death-dealing. They learn to compare the speed, facility and cost of various devices and systems; the question of whether their use is justifiable at all never arises. The worst aspect of the humane slaughter option is that it focuses discussion on the least important consideration, the method of killing. By doing so, it suggests that the taking of life is not a problem, only the way it is done.

At the very core of the animal liberation philosophy is the idea that we should extend consideration to other species' needs and weigh them against our own. How is it possible to do that while denying, *prima facie*, that food animals should be free to live out their natural life

spans and while killing them not even because it is desirable for them to die, for whatever reason, but simply because we enjoy the taste of their dead bodies? The falseness of advocating humane slaughter, while professing to believe in an animal rights ethic, is patently obvious. As John Bryant declares in *Fettered Kingdoms*, the philosophy behind all food animal farming, whether traditional or intensive, is the same, 'the arrogant stance that we can use animals for whatever purpose we wish'.

To make matters worse, the notion of humane slaughter ignores the fact that the specific moment of death is only a fraction of a larger process. Even were we to agree that the death of food animals is acceptable, humane slaughter's preoccupation with the brief experience of dying is misleading. Some animal rights groups do demand that provisions made for animals prior to slaughter be humane, that they include adequate food, water and shelter. Yet few are willing to discuss regulations to minimize the terror of animals awaiting their deaths in stockyards. In fact such a goal is impossible to achieve. Death for meat animals does not come as a sudden, unexpected shock. Thousands of animals are assembled in a single location, close to a building that all of them must enter to die. They cannot remain unaware of their fate, and intense fear is the natural and inevitable result.

It sometimes seems as if advocates of meat eating understand the nature of the food animal industry better than we do. Adopting the view that killing is an unpleasant necessity, they are often more clear-sighted about their activities than are animal rights campaigners. The comments of Wayne Swanson and George Schultz, authors of *Prime Rip*, are particularly revealing, all the more so because of the complete absence of any empathy with the animals themselves. Evaluating the possibility of reducing corruption in the meat industry, they state:

No matter how much new technology is developed, and no matter how nicely meat is packaged, the central facts of the meat business cannot be changed. This is an industry built around noisy, foul-smelling animals whose fate is to have an eight-inch-long pin fired into their foreheads at point-blank range. Their blood and guts will spill forth on the killing floor, and their carcasses will be stripped and carved and chopped during a process that, although it is governed by 'humane slaughter' laws, can be nothing other than gross and brutal.

In any event, exploitation is not just killing. It is also the manipulation of animals' genes to make them machines for our use, the denial of freedom, the causing of pain and fear throughout their lifetimes. Death can be a minor evil compared with these. People who believe that the raising of food animals can be made humane are deluding themselves. Meat is murder. If an animal does not have the basic right to exist, any other rights become meaningless. John Bryant says the 'whole concept of "marketing" living individuals is wrong'. It cannot be improved by reforms, however liberal.

The rationale behind much animal abuse, the excuse that an animal is going to die anyway, so it is all right to do X to it, is tempting and convenient and quickly erodes all other considerations. The intensive systems in use today are only the logical and unavoidable outcome of our general attitude towards farm animals as property. The animals' welfare and our desire to have high-quality meat are in direct conflict: well-exercised animals produce stringy meat; their freedom to control their own sex lives makes births too unpredictable and variable.

As long as a farm animal is perceived as an edible object, an 'it' to be put on our dinner plates, he or she will never have any meaningful rights. Domestication itself is an unnatural process, a method of enslaving animals and subjecting their life processes to our will. Animal liberation would return domestic animals to their wild origins, free to pursue their destinies without human interference.

Concrete individual and group action to promote vegetarianism can be both simple and significant. All we need to do is boycott the food animal industry's products. According to my calculations, which are somewhat complicated and which I will not detail here, every person who becomes a vegetarian is directly responsible for saving between forty and ninety-five creatures every year, depending on her or his level of meat consumption. It is the single most effective step one can take to assist individual animals.

Those who choose to take collective action as well increase their impact on the situation proportionally. The possibilities are endless. We can demystify meat through public education and pressure on Governments. Perhaps a law requiring stores to sell only whole, intact animal bodies would be effective in emphasizing what meat is. We could confront those who promote meat directly. Suitable targets for such action might include single stores, restaurants or, for the more ambitious, nationwide chains. In *Big Mac: The Unauthorized Story of McDonald's* Max Boas and Steve Chain estimate that the Corporation, whose hamburgers represent only 1 per cent of the wholesale beef in the United States, accounts for the deaths of over 300,000 cattle annually. Closing them down would be a major triumph. We could publicize the vegetarian alternative, informing people about its potential and preparing meals for them to demonstrate its culinary attractiveness.

George Bernard Shaw wrote in his autobiography: 'eating the scorched corpses of animals - cannibalism with its heroic dish omitted - becomes impossible the moment it becomes conscious instead of thoughtlessly habitual.' As animal rights activists, it is our responsibility to stimulate the necessary thought to make such a transformation possible, both for ourselves and for others. The choice is open to each one of us. Here is one more reminder of what we are trying to stop:

The young sheep lay dying in the stockyard pen, her broken body filthy with dust and urine, patches of wool torn from her side. A straw thrust painfully at the edge of her nostril, as she drew breath after struggling breath. Flies crawled industriously over her oozing wounds, and tickled her half-closed eyelid. Other sheep milled around by her side, dazed with exhaustion, yet restless with fear. The horror of her memories drifted through her mind: the harsh cries and painful thud of sticks driving her into the truck; the endless, thirsty ride on metal flooring, slippery with blood and dirt; the crush of panicking bodies as she stumbled down the ramp into the straw; the nightmare cycle of mounting fever, nausea and fear.

Two humans drew close, and her terror peaked. But the hands of the animal liberationists lifted her with gentleness. She felt a sharp pain in her leg, and the relief of death was hers.

Harriet Schleifer, 'Echoes of a Canadian Stockyard', unpublished