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AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO FARM ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

Recently I watched a toad at the bottom of a river struggling up a submerged branch. First, a back leg was carefully placed forward, then a front leg, then the body and I could see how, beneath the skin, the muscles worked with great purpose to move the toad along. I came to see that in its physical workings the animal was in essence little different from me.

Watch the fear of a rabbit chased by a dog, the joy of lambs playing in a field or the pain of a cow with lame feet. Again, there is little difference between the *core* emotions of animals and ourselves.

So, what entitles us to use them for our purposes? I suspect that nothing *gives* us this right, but rather that we *take* it. We are able to use animals because we have the power to force them to do what we want – we have the strength and the technical means to confine them in factory farms or laboratory cages, or to force them to submit themselves to slaughter.

If we are going to use animals, we must take responsibility for that use – we must ensure that it is ethically based, that it responds to the animals' needs. Our use must be founded on respect for animals as living creatures who share this planet with us

and who are entitled to live their lives without having pain and suffering inflicted on them by us.

Let us look at the sheer quantity of farm animals that we use. Each year in the European Union we rear 200 million pigs, 28 million cattle, 70 million sheep and 4,000 million chickens. That means that each day in the EU we slaughter just under a million cattle, pigs and sheep and over 10 million chickens.

Rarely do we ask if this slaughter is carried out humanely. The answer is: often not. Animals are hustled through modern abattoirs at such great speed – 300 pigs an hour, 160 chickens a minute – that it is very difficult to safeguard their welfare.

Slaughter is one of the last great taboos. We prefer not to know what is done in our name. I believe that we must face up both to the quantity of animals slaughtered and the suffering so often involved.

What can we do? Perhaps we should consider eating a little less meat. This would make it easier to replace factory farms and high throughput abattoirs with better systems. Eating less meat would also reduce environmental pollution, benefit our health and enable us to reduce EU imports of soyabeans, etc. for animal feed, food which would be better used to feed people in developing countries rather than animals in Europe.

Before considering what needs to be done to introduce an ethically-based animal husbandry, let me first describe the industrial farming which disfigures much of Europe and the United States. Industrial agriculture is characterised by practices which impose pain or serious health problems on the animals and/or prevent them from carrying out their natural behaviours.

Over 90% of the EU's egg-laying hens are kept in battery cages so tiny that they cannot even spread their wings. Nor can they peck and scratch at the ground, build a nest or do any of the things a hen wants to do. Moreover, due to lack of exercise, their bones become so brittle that many suffer from broken bones. These cages have been banned as from 2012. To my dismay, the industry wants to replace them with so-called 'enriched cages'. These offer no significant welfare benefit to hens as compared with the banned cage. I urge the industry to abandon the enriched cage – let's go over to good perchery and free-range systems.

And this is an important point if we are serious about wanting an ethically-based agriculture. It is not enough to ban the really bad systems – we must replace them, not with systems which are only a little bit better but which are still rather poor, but with ones which really provide a good environment for the animal.

At any one time, 6 million pregnant sows in the EU are confined in stalls so narrow that they cannot even turn round. The inability to move has a detrimental impact on their health. As compared with sows housed in groups, sows kept in stalls have weaker bones and muscles, poorer cardiovascular fitness and a higher incidence of lameness and urinary tract infections.

So far I have been speaking about the breeding sows – the animals whose role is to produce piglets. I turn now to the fattening pigs – the pigs reared for their meat. Scientific research shows that in natural conditions pigs spend 75% of their daylight hours in activity – rooting, foraging, exploring. None of these activities are possible for most of today's pigs, the majority of whom are ruthlessly factory farmed. They are kept indoors throughout their lives in barren, overcrowded, often filthy pens. Usually they are given no straw, being kept instead on bare concrete or slatted floors. Often they are kept in old, damp, poorly ventilated, poorly insulated buildings – a perfect recipe for respiratory disease.

Prevented from performing their natural behaviours, they turn to the only other 'thing' in their pen: the tails of other pigs. Bored and frustrated, they begin to bite those tails. Science shows that the right way to deal with tail biting is to keep the pigs in good conditions. Factory farmers, however, try to prevent tail-biting by slicing off part of the tail with pliers or a hot docking iron.

Similarly, hens are often de-beaked to prevent feather pecking even though science shows that the right way to prevent this is to keep hens in good conditions. Surely the ethical approach is not to cut off part of the animals' bodies to make them 'fit' barren systems, but rather to farm in ways which respond to their needs and so are much less likely to lead to behaviour such as tail-biting and feather-pecking.

Nor are the problems of industrial agriculture limited to bad housing and mutilations. Selective breeding for enhanced productivity has led to serious health problems.

Broilers – the chickens bred for their meat – have been pushed to grow so quickly that often their legs and hearts cannot support the over-developed bodies. As a result, each year in the EU, millions die of heart failure and tens of millions suffer from painful, sometimes crippling leg disorders.

The problems of industrial agriculture stem from the fact that it regards animals purely as means of production whose role is to produce as much meat, milk or eggs as possible, as cheaply as possible. Animals are seen merely as resources placed in this world for human convenience, for us to use as we wish.

Set against this view, there is a growing feeling that animals have their own intrinsic value, that they are born into this world to live their own lives, not primarily to serve us.

This view would suggest that, if we want to use animals it must be on the basis not of a power relationship, but of a two-way symbiotic relationship in which the animals, as well as the humans, receive certain benefits. The animal may, for example, benefit by being given a natural outdoor life when the weather is good, while at the same time being provided with shelter, protection from predators and veterinary care.

A move towards an ethical agriculture must start with the recognition that each animal is not just a part of a flock or herd, not just one of the 200 million pigs reared annually in the EU, but an individual with her or his own personality and qualities. Each one suffers within her or his own body if he or she is caged, or ill, or in pain, or frightened, or hungry. Similarly, each one is capable of feeling – and I would say entitled to – a sense of well-being and comfort.

So, what needs to be done if we are to create an ethically-based agriculture? It's simple – all we have to do is change our attitudes, our spending habits, the Common Agricultural Policy and the World Trade Organisation rules.

An ethical obligation to treat animals humanely means making some hard choices. We must decide: how important is that obligation to us? Is it more important than pragmatic concerns, such as maximising production, minimising costs and trade liberalisation? As I have said, ethics is about making choices. What we cannot do is say: “Yes, we want animals to be treated properly, but only as long as this makes no difference at all to our cheap food and free trade”.

If we want an ethical agriculture, first we must recognise that human self-interest has to give way to consideration of the needs of other creatures. The pigs' need for space and straw is more important than our desire for large amounts of cheap pigmeat.

We need to move away from the attitude that we will only treat animals humanely if to do so does not threaten our own interests. Thus farmers and politicians often assert that better systems can only be introduced if the resultant meat or eggs will cost no, or little, more to produce than under industrial farming. Similarly, laws on animal experimentation only outlaw animal suffering in cases where relatively little human benefit is expected to ensue. If substantial benefit may arise, the imposition of suffering on experimental animals is permitted.

The notion that we will only treat animals humanely if it costs us little to do so – either economically or in terms of foregoing possible medical advances – has much more to do with expediency than ethics. A proper ethical approach recognises the need to act humanely even when it is against our own interest to do so. At the heart of any real ethics is the recognition that certain values must be placed above a narrow view of our own self-interest. For this reason I am opposed to the ‘cost-benefit’ test which only protects animals if their suffering outweighs benefits to people. Again, this feels like expediency not ethics. Ethically, we should not inflict suffering on animals even when we benefit from doing so.

That said, I believe that it is in our interests to introduce humane farming as such methods are inherently linked with a sustainable agriculture that produces safe food, does not damage the environment and creates rural employment.

If we want better farming systems, we have to let go of the cheap food policy, which is what has fuelled industrial agriculture. The cost of changing to better systems is often exaggerated. That said, in most cases humane food does cost a little more to produce.

Today we spend only 17% - or even less – of our income on food, whereas around 50 years ago it was over 30%. So, the suggestion that we pay a little more for our food

comes at a time when food is costing us less, as a proportion of overall expenditure, than ever before. The dramatic fall in the proportion of our income spent on food has in part been achieved by the use of cruel husbandry systems. If we were willing to slightly increase the proportion of our income spent on food (perhaps by ½%) we could easily afford to introduce humane farming methods.

I believe that as responsible consumers, we should be willing to pay the little bit extra needed so that animals can be kept in kinder and healthier systems. The EU is in general a reasonably wealthy society. We can afford holidays abroad, the lottery, a range of luxuries - are we really saying that we cannot afford decent standards of animal welfare? Indeed, it is a sad irony that along with the United States, we are the wealthiest society that there has ever been and yet use the cruellest farming methods ever developed.

The drive to produce cheap food has arisen not because most of us are so poor that we could not feed ourselves without factory farmed food, but because we wish to save money on essentials so that we can afford ever more luxuries. As Gandhi said: "There is enough to feed man's need, but not his greed".

That said, there are some people for whom every penny counts. The answer here is not to continue with industrial agriculture but to adopt social policies designed to ensure that everyone can afford food which is safe, nutritious and humane.

So, as consumers we should be willing to pay a little more for our food. As taxpayers, we should insist that part of the 40 billion Euros spent each year on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), is used to help farmers move away from industrial agriculture. The attainment of high animal welfare standards should be written in as one of the CAP's central objectives.

For many years the Common Agricultural Policy has not really been a policy at all but simply a way of distributing money to farmers with little thought as to its impact on animal welfare, nutrition or food safety. The time has now come for it to become truly a *policy* – it must encourage the kind of agriculture we want and discourage the kind we do not want. The CAP must be completely overhauled so that taxpayers' money is no longer used to support undesirable farming methods, but instead to promote the natural, humane and safe agriculture that the public increasingly wants.

One key choice we have to make is: do we value animal welfare enough to make some real changes to our thinking on trade liberalisation? At present, our attempts to achieve a better agriculture are threatened by the free-trade rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Under these rules, the EU cannot block the *import* of produce coming from animals reared in ways which are illegal on welfare grounds within the EU. This makes it difficult for the EU to ban cruel systems in its own territory as its farmers risk being undermined by cheap, low-welfare imports.

It is ridiculous that we have signed up to an international Treaty which insists that free-trade must take precedence over ethical concerns such as human rights and animal welfare. If we really want to introduce an ethically-based agriculture, we must re-negotiate the WTO rules so that they can no longer impede us from doing what we believe to be morally right. Let me make it clear: I am not saying we should be able to discriminate in favour of our farmers, simply that we should be allowed to ban the import of meat and eggs produced in ways which are illegal on cruelty grounds in the EU.

In conclusion, I believe that we need to rediscover a reverence for life, a sense of awe about the world in which we live. I believe that we have an obligation to treat animals humanely and that our current industrial farming systems totally fail to fulfil

that obligation. If we want a better relationship with animals, we must begin to challenge our obsession with cheap food and free trade.

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Compassion in World Farming

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