

ARTICLE

Ethics, Animals and Intensive Farming

Peter Singer*

University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, United States.

*Corresponding author. Email: psinger@princeton.edu

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Abstract

The principle of Equal Consideration of Interests ought to govern our treatment of animals. Instead, however, the current treatment of animals is dominated by speciesism, a prejudice against taking seriously the interests of beings who are not members of our species. This prejudice resembles other prejudices such as racism and sexism. The worst forms of speciesism can be seen in the intensive confinement facilities used in many countries to produce animal products, such as meat, milk and eggs. These systems of animal production cause severe suffering on a scale so large that it is barely comprehensible. Moreover, the production of animals in confinement does not increase the availability of food for humans – on the contrary, the system wastes the majority of the food value of the crops that we grow to feed the confined animals. To confine animals in these conditions is ethically indefensible and should be prohibited.

Keywords: Ethics; Animals; Speciesism; Equal consideration; Suffering; Factory farming; Intensive confinement

1. Equal Consideration for Similar Interests

Many thinkers have proposed the principle of equal consideration of interests, in some form or other, as a basic moral principle; but few have recognized that this principle is not limited to human beings, but also applies to animals capable of experiencing pleasure or pain. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, was one of the first to recognize that animals are entitled to be included within the sphere of morality. In a forward-looking passage, composed at a time when slaves of African descent had been freed by the French but were still enslaved in the British dominions, Bentham wrote:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity [having fur] of the

skin, or the termination of the os sacrum [having a tail] are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? (Bentham 1780, chp. 17).

In this passage Bentham points to the capacity for suffering as the vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration. The capacity for suffering—or, more strictly, for suffering and/or pleasure or happiness—is not just another characteristic like the possession of reason or language, self-awareness, or a sense of justice. Those who draw “the insuperable line” with reference to these characteristics are including some beings with a capacity for suffering and excluding others. Bentham, however, is saying that we must consider the interests of all beings with the capacity for suffering or enjoyment. He is not excluding any interests from consideration, because the capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests, a condition that must be satisfied before we can properly speak of interests at all. It would be absurd to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is, however, not only necessary but also sufficient for us to say that a being has interests—at a minimum, an interest in not suffering. Mice, for example, do have an interest in not being kicked along the road because they will suffer if they are treated in that way.

If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing pleasure or happiness, there is nothing to be counted. So the limit of sentience (using the term to indicate the capacity to experience pain or pleasure) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.

Are we not justified, though, in giving greater weight to the interests of other humans—because they are members of our own species, whereas other animals are not? In my view, there is no justification for giving preference to members of our own species. Most people today accept that racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race, and sexists violate it by favoring the interests of their own sex. Today we can recognize that such purported justifications for racism and sexism are spurious ideologies that were accepted only because they served the interests of the dominant group. Similarly, I argue, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. In each case there is a dominant group that sees those outside it as inferior in order to justify using them as they, the dominant ones, wish. Hence we should reject, not only racism and sexism, but also speciesism. Members of different species may have different interests, but when their interests are similar – for example, in not feeling similar kinds of pain – we should give them equal consideration, whether the animal is human or not.

You might be thinking: No, humans are different! We are smarter than animals, we are rational beings, we are self-aware, we plan ahead, we are free, we are moral agents. Hence we have rights that other animals do not have, and we are entitled to use other animals as we wish. But, as Bentham pointed out, this argument has the implication that human infants—who are less rational, less self-aware, and less capable of planning ahead than many nonhuman animals—would also lack rights, and we would thus be entitled to use them as we use animals. The same would hold for some humans beyond infancy who, whether from a genetic abnormality, or brain damage, will never match the cognitive capacities of some nonhuman animals.

A series of studies led by Harvard psychology researcher Lucius Caviola, together with other

researchers in psychology and philosophy at Oxford and Exeter universities, has shown that differences in mental capacities don't really explain why people give humans moral priority over other animals. On the contrary, when subjects were asked to say whom they would help in a situation in which they must choose between a human and a chimpanzee, 66 percent chose to help the human, even when told that the chimpanzee had more advanced mental capacities than the human (Caviola, *et al.*, 2022).

2. Progress – But Not Enough

I wrote *Animal Liberation* nearly fifty years ago. During that period, there has been progress for animals in many areas:

- In 1975, there was no animal rights movement, and anti-cruelty organizations were mostly concerned with dogs and cats. Now millions of people support organizations working to reduce the suffering of farmed animals and animals used in research.
- In Europe, and a few U.S. states, it is now illegal to keep farmed animals in cages or stalls too small to allow them to stretch their limbs, turn around, or walk a single step.
- The basic treaty of the European Union recognizes that animals are not mere items of property, conferring on them the legal status of a sentient being.
- The media no longer ridicules animal rights activists: mostly, it takes them seriously.
- In 1975, no one knew what the word “vegan” meant and no one used the term “plant-based” to refer to food. Now, in many countries, these terms are widespread on restaurant menus and supermarket labels.

Yet this progress is not universal. Industrial methods of animal production, first developed in the United States, and commonly known as “factory farming” are spreading in parts of Asia and Africa. Because many people who eat meat, or other animal products, do not know how their food was produced, it is worth taking some time to describe these methods and what they do to animals. Of course, not all methods of producing meat, eggs or dairy products use these methods, but they are particularly commonly used to produce food for large cities and other urban areas. I will focus on the industrial production of chickens for meat, as there are approximately 80 billion chickens produced in that way – the largest number of animals raised for food, apart from fish. I will focus on U.S. conditions, because I have more information about that than I do about conditions in Africa, but similar conditions are likely to be found in at least some African countries.

3. Industrial Chicken Production

The essential step in turning chickens from farmyard birds into manufactured items was confining them indoors. Typically, a producer contracts with one of the big poultry corporations, which delivers 50,000 or more day-old chicks from the hatcheries, along with their feed and instructions on how to raise them. The producer puts the birds into huge, windowless sheds, holding about 20,000 birds each. These chickens have been selectively bred to have voracious appetites and to grow rapidly. Inside the shed, every aspect of the birds' environment is controlled to make them grow faster. Food and water are supplied automatically. The lighting is adjusted according to advice from agricultural researchers. For instance, there may be bright light for twenty-three or even twenty-four hours a day for the first week or two, to encourage the chicks to gain weight quickly; then there may be a longer period of darkness, perhaps up to six hours a day. As the chickens grow and become more crowded, the lights will be kept dim at all times to reduce the aggression caused by crowding. For the last few days before the birds are rounded up and taken away to be killed, the period of darkness will again be reduced, to encourage more eating and hence more weight gain.

Broiler chickens are killed when they are between 5 and 7 weeks old. At the end of this brief period, the birds weigh, on average, 6.5 lbs, or just under 3 kg. This is an astonishing rate of growth

for a chicken less than 7 weeks old: In 1925, it took the average chicken 16 weeks to reach a weight of 2.5 lbs (National Chicken Council, 2022). As the birds grow, they take up more space, and the shed becomes more crowded, until the birds have as little as half a square foot of space per chicken—or less than the area of a sheet of standard typing paper. Higher stocking density means bigger profits. As an industry manual put it: “Limiting the floor space gives poorer results on a per bird basis, yet the question has always been and continues to be: What is the least amount of floor space necessary per bird to produce the greatest return on investment?” (North and Bell, 1990, p.456).

If you walk into a chicken shed, the first thing you are likely to notice is an overpowering stink; and soon you realize that it isn’t just a harmless stink either; the air is stinging your eyes, which may start to tear up, and burning your lungs (King, Westbrook, and Kessel, 2022). It’s ammonia, from the birds’ droppings, which are typically allowed to accumulate in the litter on the floor, not just for the six or seven weeks that one flock is there but often—to save the expense of new litter and the burden of disposing of the old litter—for years. According to extension poultry scientists at the University of Georgia, “many poultry companies and broiler producers have adopted the practice of reusing litter for one, two or even more years of production.” In fact, they added, this has “become a standard in the industry.” The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sets standards for human exposure to ammonia in the air: 35 parts per million (ppm) for 15 minutes exposure, and 25 ppm for exposure up to 8 hours. But the University of Georgia scientists refer to levels of 50–110 ppm, and the chickens are confined in the shed, living in that air, every day, for their entire lives. They develop chronic respiratory disease from breathing the ammonia-laden air, and because ammonia is corrosive, they often develop sores on their hocks and blisters on their breasts if they rest on litter that has absorbed moisture. At the highest levels of exposure, birds may go blind (Ritz, Fairchild and Lacy, 2005).

At one time birds who fell sick or were injured could be attended to, or if necessary, quickly killed. Now one person looks after tens or even hundreds of thousands of birds—except that with so many birds, there really isn’t any “looking after” at all. As long ago as 1970, the U.S. secretary of agriculture wrote enthusiastically about how the then-new method of raising chickens indoors enabled one person to “care” for sixty thousand to seventy-five thousand chickens (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1970, p. xxxiii). The same idea of “caring” for an impossibly large number of birds is still in use. Under the heading “animal welfare,” a 2018 article in *Farm and Dairy*, an Ohio-based farming newspaper, describes Hannah Malmsberry as “nurturing” more than a hundred thousand chickens. She clearly isn’t looking at the birds individually, for to spend even one second a day inspecting each bird would take more than twenty-four hours (Mumaw, 2018). University of Georgia poultry scientists have said that the labor requirements of modern chicken houses amount to between four and six minutes per thousand birds, which works out to about one-third of a second for each bird (Harris 2004).

Chickens in broiler houses succumb to a number of diseases related to their rapid growth. As described in a veterinary manual, affected birds “die suddenly, with a short, terminal, wing-beating convulsion.” Many affected broilers just “flip over and die on their backs.” (Sander, 2019). How common this is depends on the conditions in the broiler house and on the strain of birds, but one study found its incidence in broiler chickens to range from 0.5 to 9.62 percent. Because producers want fast growth, they will accept the deaths of a percentage of their birds rather than slow down the speed at which their birds put on weight (Brockotter, 2020).

If human babies grew at the same rate as today’s chickens, researchers at the University of Arkansas have pointed out, by the time they were two months old, they would weigh 660 lbs, or 300 kg! This rate of growth leads to other problems that are, from the point of view of animal welfare, of more concern than sudden death. After all, the birds who die prematurely in the broiler house are really the lucky ones—they are spared the trauma of being gathered up, crammed into trucks, and driven to the slaughterhouse. Less fortunate are the birds in whom the fast growth rate causes direct and prolonged suffering, most obviously because the birds’ immature leg bones struggle to

support the weight of their bodies. Already in the early 1990s, a study found that 90 percent of broilers had detectable leg problems, while 26 percent suffered chronic pain as a result of bone disease. The researchers linked these problems to genetic selection for fast growth, but that selection has continued over the past thirty years, so that nowadays growth is even faster. Professor John Webster of the University of Bristol's School of Veterinary Science, in England, and one of the most highly respected experts on the welfare of farmed animals, has said: "Broilers are the only livestock that are in chronic pain for the last 20 percent of their lives. They don't move around, not because they are overstocked, but because it hurts their joints so much." (Webster, 1995, p. 156). The birds may try to avoid the pain by sitting down, but they have nothing to sit on except the ammonia-laden litter, which, as we saw earlier, is so corrosive that it can burn their bodies. Their situation has been likened to that of someone with arthritic leg joints who is forced to stand up all day. Webster has described modern intensive chicken production as "in both magnitude and severity, the single most severe, systematic example of man's inhumanity to another sentient animal."

Defenders of factory farming often say that if the birds or animals were not happy, they would not thrive and hence would not be profitable. The grim truth about the chicken industry provides a clear refutation of this naive myth. Everyone knows how to stop the suffering of the chickens, but it continues because it is profitable. Each death before the chickens reach the slaughterhouse costs the grower money, but the bottom line is determined by how much saleable product each batch of birds produces. Researchers at the University of Arkansas set out to discover if producers would make more money by raising a slower-growing breed of birds with lower mortality. They found that the answer depends on the precise costs involved but concluded that often "it is better to get the weight and ignore the mortality." (Tabler and Mendenhall, 2023)

The suffering caused by breeding for rapid growth is not limited to the young birds sold to be eaten. The parents of the chickens sold in supermarkets, known in the industry as "breeder birds," are, of course, bred to have the genes that are desired in their offspring—genes that give them their insatiable appetites and ability to convert food to body mass. As we have just seen, this causes widespread leg problems in their young chickens raised for meat, but, despite the chronic leg pain those birds experience, most of them survive until they are slaughtered at six or seven weeks old. If they were not killed so early, and were given all the food they wanted, they would gain even more weight and many more would die with each passing week. Chickens are not able to breed, however, until they are eighteen to twenty weeks old, and once they reach that age the producers want them to keep breeding as long as possible. If they were able to eat as much as they wanted, they might well die before they became sexually mature; and if they did reach maturity, they would be so fat that they would not be able to mate. The chicken industry has a characteristic solution: to give the parents 60 to 80 percent less than they would eat if the food were available.

In an article on feeding the genetic parents of fast-growing chickens, poultry specialists at the University of Georgia described how those who raise the breeding birds in the United States use a "Skip-a-Day (SAD) feeding program," which means that the birds are fed only every second day (Wilson *et al.*, 2018). A summary by Canadian scientists of several studies on the effect of these diets shows that the abbreviation is appropriate. Birds on SAD feeding spend 25 percent of their time pecking at the empty feeder. They also start eating their litter, which consists of indigestible substances such as wood shavings and feathers. Their unsatisfied desire to eat is so strong that it can lead to aggression and what the researchers described as "redirected oral behavior toward themselves, other pullets and equipment or objects." (Arrazola, *et al.*). In other words, these birds are so desperately hungry that they will try to eat anything.

4. Feeding the World

Agribusiness leaders sometimes say that we need to have factory farms to feed the world's growing population. That is the opposite of the truth. Because it may be thought that this provides a reason for accepting industrial animal production in countries with growing populations, I need to say something about this misconception.

Every animal raised by humans for food has to eat in order to grow to the size and weight at which it is killed and eaten. If a chicken gains weight roaming freely around a village, eating insects or grass seeds, the result will be a net gain of available food for humans. But if we take chickens and put them indoors, we need to bring food to them, and that food must come from crops grown on arable land that could be used to grow crops we can eat. Chickens, like cows, pigs or other animals kept indoors, must still burn food merely to keep their bodies warm and maintain the vital functions that keep them alive, and to build bones and other body parts we do not eat. Only a small part of the nutrients we feed to these animals remains to be turned into flesh that, if not wasted, is eaten by humans.

Most people have no idea how high a proportion of the crops we grow are fed to animals. When I tell people about my favorite ways of cooking tofu, they often say, "But tofu is made from soy, and the Amazon is being cleared to grow soybeans, so I wouldn't want to support that!" What they don't realize is that 77 percent of global soy production is fed to animals and thus converted to meat and dairy products. Some is used for biofuel, and some for vegetable oils. Only 7 percent is eaten directly by humans, as tofu, tempeh, edamame, and soy milk. It's not tofu that is driving deforestation but the meat and dairy industries (Ritche and Roser, 2022).

Just how wasteful is this process? Because animal products provide us with both calories and protein, we need to divide that question into two: How many calories do we feed to animals in order to get each calorie of food from the animal product? And how many grams of protein do we feed to animals in order to get one gram of protein from the animal product? One study, looking at the United States only, provided the following answers:

- Beef, the least efficient product, has a caloric conversion efficiency of only 2.9 percent and a protein conversion efficiency of 2.5 percent. In other words, we have to feed cows 34 calories in order to get 1 calorie we can consume, while with protein the ratio is 40:1.
- Pork is more efficient, at 9 percent for both caloric and protein conversion efficiency, but that still means we are feeding them more than 10 units for each one unit we obtain from them.
- Chicken is another step up, at 13 percent caloric and 21 percent protein efficiency.
- Cows producing milk rather than meat have a caloric conversion efficiency of 17 percent and a protein conversion efficiency of 14 percent.
- Hens kept for their eggs have a caloric conversion efficiency of 17 percent and, at 31 percent, the best protein conversion efficiency of all of these animal products.

The most efficient conversion of any form of animal food eaten on a large scale by Americans, therefore, still involves feeding more than three grams of protein to hens for every gram of protein we get from the eggs they lay. The authors of this study pointed out that a dietary shift in the United States that replaces just beef with plant-based high-protein foods such as legumes would have the potential to provide enough food for an additional 190 million people. In a separate study, the same authors estimated that replacing all animal-based items in the U.S. diet with nutritionally equivalent plant-based alternatives would free enough land to feed an additional 350 million people (Shepon, *et al.*, 2016; Shepon, *et al.*, 2018).

Global patterns of food consumption vary greatly in the amount of land they require to feed people. Researchers from Scotland, Germany, and Australia found that if everyone in the world ate like people in India, 55 percent less land would be required to feed them; whereas if everyone ate like people in the United States, we would need 178 percent more land. The difference, of course,

depends on the types of food eaten—and particularly on the impact of animal products—rather than on the quantities eaten. There is, quite rightly, concern about spoilage, waste, and other losses in the passage of food from farm to table, but by far the greatest form of waste is using arable land to grow food for animals.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that the industrial production of chickens is responsible for an immense amount of suffering. Moreover, this suffering does not increase the amount of food, or the amount of protein, available to humans – in fact, it wastes the majority of the food that we feed to the chickens. The situation is similar for any intensively raised animals, whether chickens raised for meat, laying hens kept indoors in small wire cages to produce eggs, to turkeys and pigs, and to intensively raised cows kept for meat or milk, if they are not able to go out on grass and find their own food.

I have argued that these practices cannot be reconciled with the principle of equal consideration of similar interests, and that they are therefore wrong. They should be stopped, preferably by passing laws that make these systems of confinement illegal; but in countries where these methods of producing animals exist, each one of us has a moral responsibility to avoid supporting such practices. To avoid doing that, we should not buy the flesh, eggs or milk of intensively confined animals¹.

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1. This article draws on my recent book, *Animal Liberation Now* (HarperCollins, New York, 2023). Please see this book for further details.

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