The Ethics of Care and Humane Meat: Why Care Is Not Ambiguous About “Humane” Meat

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Not to hurt our humble brethren (the animals) is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it.

St. Francis of Assisi

As consumers learn about the maltreatment of animals on factory farms or confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) some choose to purchase “humanely raised” products with the expectation that the animal they are about to consume was properly cared for. While these alternative farming operations only account for a small fraction of the animal products available on the market today, they are increasing in popularity due in part to people’s concern for the welfare of the animals. Indeed, ninety-five percent of respondents to a nationwide telephone survey conducted by Oklahoma State University agreed with the statement, “It is important to me that animals on farms are well cared for.”

So an important ethical question arises: is “humane” meat really humane or are conscientious consumers being duped by a growing and persuasive marketing scheme? In this article I hope to shed more light on the issue and in particular I will argue that the “humane” meat industry does not serve as an instance of what it means to bestow genuine care to farm animals. Framed by an ethic of care model, my argument will show how the practices allowed under the “humane” label violate certain aims of care, including the obligation to help farm animals avoid unnecessary pain and suffering. The point will be that, on practical grounds at least, moral veganism is required by care ethics, contrary to Engster’s assessment. Since bringing farm animals into existence for the sole purpose of slaughter goes against certain caring virtues that Engster himself
endorses, I will also suggest that care ethics does support moral vegetarianism on philosophical grounds, although Engster claims otherwise. Because I support Engster’s definition of care and the importance of including caring virtues, my critique is not so much a rejection of his account as it is a sympathetic extension of it. My aim here is to suggest that Engster’s complete account of care may have more to say about moral veganism/vegetarianism and “humane” meat than he himself claims.4

In “Rethinking Care Theory,” Daniel Engster develops both a definition of what it means to care and a rational argument as to why we are obligated to care for others who cannot meet their own needs.5 Caring for others means we do our best to meet three basic aims. One of the aims of care is that we strive to help others meet the basic biological needs necessary for their survival and basic functioning. Providing food, sanitary water, shelter, a clean environment, rest, and basic medical care would satisfy this basic requirement. The second aim of caring on Engster’s view is “helping others to develop or sustain their basic capabilities for sensation, emotion, movement, speech, reason, imagination, affiliation” in order to assist them in pursuing “their conception of the good life.”6 The third basic aim of caring is “helping individuals to avoid or relieve suffering and pain so that they can carry on with their lives as well as possible.”7 Care, according to Engster, is defined as “everything we do directly to help individuals to meet their basic needs, develop or maintain their basic capabilities, and live as much as possible free from suffering, so that they can survive and function at least at a minimally decent level.”8 However, if we want the concept of care to extend beyond the parochial whims of individuals we must also provide a rationally compelling account as to our obligation to care; otherwise caring will seem a practice that one can choose to do or not depending on their personal tastes.9 To avoid this charge, Engster draws upon dependency theory and Alan Gewirth’s “dialectically necessary method” to show why we are obligated to care for others. The argument goes as follows: (1) we all value having our basic needs met; (2) at some point in our lives, we must depend upon others to help us meet those needs; (3) since we value having our basic needs met we tacitly lay claim to others for care when we are in need; (4) when we lay claim to others to care for us, we also imply that we should help others when they too are in need; (5) therefore, we must logically recognize that our failure to care for others when we value being cared for ourselves is to act inconsistently and hypocritically.10 Care then is understood as a social norm (i.e., a web of caring) that is both necessary to meet basic needs and capabilities (and overall social welfare) and obligatory in the sense that we owe it to others to return a favor.

So how might Engster’s account of care and dependency justify some of the moral duties we have toward animals raised for consumption or, to put it another way, how might it guide our thinking as to whether slaughtering animals for food is justifiable within a caring framework? As Engster explains in “Care Ethics and Animal Welfare,” whether we have an obligation to care for animals in this way depends upon the nature of our relationship with them.11 We have
no natural obligation to care for animals when they do not necessarily depend on us for their survival and development. However, when we have made certain animals dependent on us for their survival, functioning, and well-being we have transformed the nature of the relationship to one in which requires care. Appealing once again to dependency theory, Engster argues:

We assume moral duties to animals when we make them dependent upon us because we then actively bring them into a relationship of dependency with us. We make their ability to achieve aims that we can recognize as good for them—survival, development, and basic well-being—dependent upon our care. ... In other words, we should not create dependency without being prepared to care for the creatures that we make dependent upon us.12

Domesticated animals, including those raised for food, lay a special claim on us because we have made them dependent on us for their very survival and development.13 We have a duty to care for these animals because we created their dependency on us.

Our relationship with animals in general remains one of profound ambivalence and paradox, and factory farming is arguably the most egregious example of the ways in which human beings have failed to properly care for those that depend on us.14 In light of the fact that industry profits rely on denying animals some of their most basic needs and opportunities to express their natural capabilities, Engster rightly claims that, “No one even pretends to defend this system by suggesting that it provides decent care to animals. ... The care provided to these animals is so inadequate as to seem the very antithesis of caring: in many cases, it seems to approximate to a form of torture. ... The abolition of factory farming [therefore] ... is morally obligatory.”15 However, whether the ethic of care would support raising animals for food on “humane” or non-intensive farms remains an open question for Engster.

He points to Polyface Farms in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley as an example of the best practices that “humane” meat can offer. Joel Salatan and his family raise cattle, chickens, rabbits, turkeys, sheep, and pigs and no farm gets more publicity for its exemplary treatment of animals. Chickens for instance enjoy time out on the pasture where they can have their fill of grass and tasty insects, and, although they are destined for slaughter, Engster is happy to note that, “Salatin slaughters the chickens and rabbits that he raises in a swift and minimally painful manner”16 Providing an animal with some conception of the good life prior to slaughter may be consistent with the basic aims of what it means to care, especially when we bear in mind the acute misery inflicted upon her factory-farmed cousin. But Engster remains cautious about this initial moral assessment; after all, “the fact that [Salatan] slaughters them still might seem to render his enterprise uncaring” because to be slaughtered is to endure pain and fear (even if momentarily) and it prematurely ends an animal’s life.17 Perhaps care requires we not bring farm animals into existence in the first place if our only intention is to butcher them. “Care ethics,” Engster concludes, “is thus left
pointing in two contrary directions when it comes to raising animals for con-
sumption. A plausible case can be made for bringing animals into existence and
caring for them right up to the moment of slaughter, and a plausible case can
also be made for not bringing them into existence when their ultimate fate is
slaughter.”

In other words, care ethics appears to leave some room for reasona-
bale disagreement on these issues and as such may not require moral veganism.

This ambiguity, however, may be overstated. Common practices in the
“humane” meat industry routinely violate the basic aims of care, including the
provision that we should help our dependents avoid or relieve unnecessary
suffering and pain. Amputations and mutilations (e.g., debeaking, castration, and
tail-docking) without anesthesia are legally permitted under “humane” label regu-
lations while severe crowding and insufficient time outdoors remains a serious
concern. It is not unusual for hens to number the thousands crammed in large
barns or chicken houses where each bird has about one square foot of space and
farmers are not required to provide cage-free laying hens with actual access to the
outdoors to be certified “humanely raised.” In addition, cows and pigs can suffer
long stressful transports to the slaughterhouses sometimes in extreme weather
because the U.S. Federal Meat Inspection Act does not permit farmers to slaughter
them on site. They can go for days without food, water, or rest and sometimes
they reach the abattoir sick or nearly dead. Calves can arrive to their destinations
with what the industry terms “transport or shipping fever,” a pneumonia-like
respiratory disease originating from the hardship of the journey. In most cases,
whether animals are raised on “humane” farms or CAFOs they usually meet their
ultimate fate on the same transport trucks and in the same slaughterhouses. At
Polyface Farms, rabbits are kept in small suspended wire cages while chickens
(the same genetic breed that supplies factory farms) are kept in crowded mobile
wire pens. A review of sustainable poultry systems by the National Sustainable
Agriculture Information Service noted that with Salatin’s pens, “The confined
space inside the pens makes bird welfare a concern” and that the crowding “can
lead to pecking problems, because the birds lower in the pecking order cannot run
away.” Salatin also kills his birds by placing them upside down in a metal cone-
shaped contraption where their throats are cut and they are left to bleed out. A
trade magazine friendly to the industry offers a grizzly description of this author-
ized practice. The workers must kill and clean 250 hens in just two hours, so:

Slaughter begins promptly at 8:30 a.m. The goal is to be completely finished by 10:30
a.m. O’Connor, the least skilled of the workers, manhandles the first of 30 crates of birds
from a stack on a tractor-drawn trailer outside the pavilion. The birds were taken off of
feed and crated about 12 hours earlier so that their craws would be clear for slaughter. He
grabs the birds by their feet. Wings flap. . . . Razor-sharp boning knives flash in the early
morning sun. The chickens’ throats have been slit. . . . In a minute or so, the chickens are
“bled out.” They’re moved on to the next station in the processing line. And a fresh batch
of birds is inserted into the cones. They’re racing to keep the line going, trying to meet
their own deadline.
When the workers, some with less skills than others, grab the birds by their feet one can reasonably assume the animals are afraid and highly stressed. Note also the pressure to “process” the birds in a timely manner which brings to light a potentially ironic feature of the “humane” meat industry. Motivated out of concern for animals, the conscientious omnivore may inadvertently contribute to practices that become less “humane” when demand rises to such an extent that actual animal welfare may deteriorate. Can we be reassured that the lesser skilled worker cuts the artery properly every time at this hurried pace? Hope Bohanec in her expose about the industry writes, “You simply cannot provide the quantity of meat or eggs needed to feed the world, and make a profit, with humanely treated animals. It is economically impossible.”

All chickens (broilers or egg layers), whether they are raised on factory farms or non-intensive facilities like Polyface Farms, begin their lives in large-scale commercial hatcheries. Undercover investigations in these facilities reveal the harsh reality behind the “humane” label. After the chicks hatch in metal drawers they travel along a fast moving conveyer belt where they are promptly sorted out by a chick sexer (a trained employee who can determine by quick observation the sex of the chick) who then throws all the females into a nearby crate while the male chicks are promptly killed. Because they do not lay eggs and their flesh is an unwanted commodity male chicks are worthless to the industry, so it is permissible under the “humane” label to throw thousands of them in large dumpsters where they will eventually suffocate under the weight of other chicks. Electrocuting, gassing, or being ground alive (also referred to as “instantaneous euthanasia”) are other permissible methods. Each year 200 million male chicks end their one or two-day existence in this brutish manner.

Unbeknownst to most consumers, buying “humane” eggs grants direct financial support and indirect approval for this disturbing practice. If commercial hatcheries had glass walls I suspect consumers might earnestly reconsider the prevailing notion that no one has to suffer or die in order to consume “humanely” raised eggs.

Dairy production on non-intensive farms also involves animal suffering. In order to maximize the amount of milk collected, calves are separated from their mothers and will either be sold for beef or veal production or, if female, returned to the dairy industry. No matter how this situation is handled the separation causes obvious stress and noticeable suffering for both mother and calf. Mother cows like many other mammals form strong maternal bonds with their offspring. One study found that this bond was formed in as little as five minutes. Mother cows will bellow for days once separated and have been known to walk miles to reunite with their calves. Perhaps dairy cows fare better on some non-intensive farms in terms of living longer and healthier lives; however, their longer life means more artificial inseminations, more pregnancies and deliveries, and more experiences of pain accompanying each separated calf throughout her lifetime. So if “humane” practices fail to comply with the aim to help others avoid unnecessary pain and suffering, then it seems care ethics is not ambiguous
about “humane” meat, dairy, or egg production. On practical grounds at least care ethics does support moral veganism (i.e., refraining from the use of any animal products, including milk and eggs).

Proponents of the industry, however, often stress how “humane” practices inflict less suffering. While this welfarist position may appease some in terms of what counts as proper animal care, it ultimately fosters a disturbing form of compliance toward unnecessary animal suffering. Stephen Clark best captures why, despite these instances of suffering, “humane” farms continue to receive outspoken praise: “the wickedness of factory farming operations has a merit in that it makes the horrors caused to animals more difficult to ignore, but it also has the demerit of making the appearance of humane farming more courteous and kind.”

Factory farms should not be the moral yardstick from which we measure compassion for it surely sets the bar far too low. Care, if it is to have moral muscle and integrity, ought to demand more from caregivers. If we strive to make the world a kinder place for animals we must not settle for gentler forms of suffering.

A further question arises as to whether care ethics requires moral veganism or vegetarianism on philosophical grounds: can care govern our thinking about those cases where killing animals for food does not involve pain and suffering? Consider Engster’s point: “It is possible to imagine people raising chickens in a caring manner and selling their eggs, or tending sheep and selling their wool. If human beings raise animals in caring ways and then sell their eggs or wool without harming them, there is no moral objection from the perspective of care theory to purchasing and consuming these products.” It is not clear whether he is referring to people selling eggs or wool as a means for profit or as a backyard hobby. If it is the former (i.e., for profit) I worry about the competing aims of maintaining acceptable profit margins and the humane treatment of animals and whether hens are sent to their early deaths and slaughtered once they stop producing eggs. It may not be commercially viable to allow hens to live out their natural lives which can range from 7 to 10 years. The cost to care for them may outweigh any profit made during their egg-productive years. So, I have strong reservations about the practical possibility of selling eggs for profit without violating the terms of care theory. Selling eggs as a hobby, on the other hand, may not succumb to the same pressures of meeting profit margins, because it allows the hens to be treated with greater care; although care, given the barbaric way in which male chicks are killed in commercial hatcheries, would object to selling eggs as a backyard hobby if the female chicks were purchased from these facilities. In the case of someone selling wool garnered from her/his small flock of sheep, care theory would not necessarily object as long as the aims of profit do not impede the proper treatment of the animals. Unfortunately, the demand for profit brings about acute suffering in the industry, especially for Merino sheep who must endure an industry-wide practice called “mulesing” where large areas of skin are removed to treat bow fly infestation called “flystrike.” Like egg selling, humane wool production may be theoretically
possible on a small scale, but wool from profit-driven industries, where the majority of commercial wool fabric originates, violates the basic aims of care. So Engster’s contention that a strict moral veganism is not supported by care at least in theory may carry some weight with regard to selling wool and eggs under certain conditions (e.g., a small-scale or hobby-like practice). I have serious doubts, however, about the practical possibility of selling eggs and wool on a large scale for profit. Like the “humane” meat industry, selling eggs and wool for profit usually results in diminished animal welfare and unnecessary suffering. Nevertheless the theoretical possibility of painless killing brings an important challenge to the care approach, one that deserves more attention.

Suppose I raise a cow, Betsy, on my hobby farm where I provide for all her basic biological needs and assist her in developing and maintaining her natural capabilities. She is healthy and on all accounts thriving on my farm. Nonetheless, Betsy’s flesh will be sold for meat and so one day, after five years of meeting all the basic requirements of what it means to care, I walk up to her without alarm and fatally shoot her in the head with a bolt gun. It was, as they say, a “clean” shot. Her death was quick and painless. This theoretical case appears to demonstrate why “care ethics does not necessarily support moral vegetarianism on philosophical grounds” since it satisfies all the practical goals of what it means to care for a farm animal, including assisting her in avoiding unnecessarily pain and suffering.30 This critical assessment would hold if it was grounded upon a fully developed account of care, but it is not. To claim that the ethic of care “does not necessarily support moral vegetarianism on philosophical grounds,” as Engster contends, is to settle for a thin account of care.31 Helping to avoid unnecessary pain and suffering may serve as a necessary requirement in the care model, but it is not a sufficient moral criterion and I suspect Engster would agree. Care theory involves not only meeting the three (quasi-utilitarian) goals outlined above; it also demands we satisfy those aims in a caring way, in accordance to the caring virtues that Engster himself laid out:

[C]aring may be said to include everything we do directly to help others to meet their basic needs, develop or sustain their basic capabilities, and alleviate or avoid pain or suffering, in an attentive, responsive and respectful manner. The last part of this definition is important. Caring means not only achieving certain aims but also doing so in a caring manner.32

For Engster these caring virtues—attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect—"are constitutive of caring in the sense that one cannot successfully achieve the aims of caring without them, or at least do so with any regularity."33 The inclusion of these virtues offer a more robust definition of what it means to care for another and it is this feature of Engster’s account that may provide the conceptual framework and requirement for moral vegetarianism.

To be attentive means that one has empathy for others. It calls for a watchful and concerned disposition that leans toward others, especially dependent
others. Transcending one’s own personal frame of reference in order to cross over to the other by way of reflective empathy allows one to better fulfill the goal of meeting the needs of the cared for. If we want care to pack a moral punch and motivate others to reflect upon our complex relationship with other animals—fellow mortals with whom we share a way of being in the world—we must focus upon our capacity to empathize with them. Otherwise we run the risk of distancing ourselves from our dependents and not responding in a caring way. When calves are pulled from their mothers and chickens struggle desperately in metal cones, attentiveness requires us to engage with them and ask, “What are you going through?”  

I live across a large pasture where about fifteen cows graze year round. In autumn they each give birth to one calf and for about nine months the joy of living is apparent in those calves. Kicking their hind legs up in play, butting heads and chasing each other along the pond, these animals are really no different from young dogs in displaying their joy. Their idyllic life however ends ten months later when the rancher arrives with truck and trailer to collect the calves (and any “spent” cows). The ordeal is dramatic for all members of the herd. The mothers are forcibly pushed away from their calves with the rancher’s swaying hands and aggressive shouts. These docile giants, afraid and confused, do all they can to stay together. Distress and fear eventually manifest themselves as desperate cries, but the cows will inevitably lose this battle just like last year and the year before that. After the calves are herded into the trailer and driven away to an auction facility where they will be sold and transferred to either the dairy or beef industry, the mothers are left to bellow for days to come. A haunting echo fills the night sky and it affects me profoundly. In an exercise of moral imagination, I try to picture myself as if I was in the place of her body and try to imagine how she feels. I try to empathize with her grief and profound loss. Genuine care, with its call for empathic understanding, requires we transcend our own frame of reference to consider the point of view of the animal before us. When animals garner our moral attention in this empathic way it becomes extremely difficult to view them “merely as food.” Once we empathize with farm animals in this attentive way, they can occupy a moral status very similar to other dependent animals (i.e., cats and dogs), those that are not usually found on one’s dinner plate. In other words, I find it extremely difficult to reconcile convenience killing with the kind of empathetic engagement described above. We might understand moral vegetarianism therefore as a kind of embodied empathy for animal others. Moreover, to kill another simply because I can (which is the case here since it is not a matter of euthanasia, self-defense, or survival) and to classify that action as an instance of care is to imply that care theory endorses a form of “might makes right” ethic which is completely untenable.

Attentiveness goes hand in hand with the second caring virtue, responsiveness. “Responsiveness,” according to Engster, “means engaging in some form of dialogue with others in order to discern the precise nature of their needs, and
monitoring their responses to our care (whether verbal or nonverbal) to make sure they are receiving what they need.”36 Care then involves engaging in some form of dialogue so we can come to know our subjects of care as individuals with distinct needs. Josephine Donovan’s dialogical ethic of care complements if not strengthens this account of what it means to be responsive. Feminist animal care theory, according to Donovan, is not so much a matter “of caring for animals as mothers (human and nonhuman) care for their infants as it is one of listening to animals, paying emotional attention, taking seriously—caring about—what they are telling us.”37 Donovan suggests “we shift the epistemological course of theorizing about animals to the animals themselves” and develop a feminist dialogical approach that challenges the anthropocentric nature of our relationships with animals where we all too often impose our voice onto the “voiceless.”38 “A dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care approach” would for Donovan “put front and center the feelings of the animals in question and not dismiss those desires as irrelevant to the argument.”39 “If we care to take seriously in our ethical decision making the communicated desires of the animal,” Donovan explains, “it is apparent that no animal would opt for the slaughterhouse.”40 We know this, deep down inside we know this, and “a dialogical ethic must be constructed on the basis of this knowledge.”41

Fourth-generation poultry farmer Frank Reece owns and operates Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch in Tampa, Kansas, the first turkey farm to be certified by the Animal Welfare Institute. After decades of raising turkeys Reece knows their vocabulary. “I know the sound they make if it’s just two turkeys fighting or if there’s a possum in the barn. There’s the sound they make when they’re petrified and the sound they make when they’re excited over something new. ... Turkeys know what’s going on and can communicate it—in their world, in their language.”42 The point is that Donovan’s call for listening to farm animals is a real possibility, and while misunderstandings in communication are possible (as they are among humans) we could minimize this possibility with proper education on animal biology and habitat. A focus on developing critical thinking skills, moral sensitivity, and reflective imagination may also contribute to a meaningful and effective dialogical ethic of care. When animals run away, bite back, scream in pain, or approach warily it becomes clear they do not wish to be harmed and this is why I approached Betsy from behind when I shot her. My method not only acknowledges that she will protest if she suspects harm will befall her, it also points to my unwillingness to pay emotional attention and to take seriously what she is telling me. Instead, I focus on my interests only and turn a blind eye to her shared desire not to be harmed and to survive.43

The third caring virtue, respect, according to Engster, means we treat others “in ways that do not degrade them ... by acknowledging the abilities they have ... [and] it asks that we honor our dependents’ worthiness and value as distinct individuals even if they have needs that they themselves cannot meet.”44 Unfortunately, farm animals cannot be bought and sold as commodities with
any realistic expectation of truly respecting them. Whether human or nonhuman, the commodification of bodies usually leads to a degradation of respect for those individuals and their group membership. One cannot simultaneously value farm animals’ distinctiveness and abilities while treating them at the same time as property or as that which belongs in “the category of the edible.” When we think of animals as mere consumable objects (or things) we simultaneously erase their individuality (or subjectivity), the very attribute we are asked to respect. The conceptualization of animals as mere food products already situates them as objects. And herein lies the conceptual contradiction in the “humane” meat movement. Proponents advertise how their practices are superior to factory farming methods where animals are routinely treated as mere objects or biomachines. “Humane” farms, they claim, understand farm animals as individuals with specific needs, preferences, and distinct personalities. Yet animals raised on “humane” farms are brought into existence with the sole intent of reducing them to food products, to be bought, sold, and slaughtered just like their factory-farmed cousins. This shared intent, I argue, makes it clear that both industries (factory farms and “humane” farms) already understand these sentient beings as “things,” as commodities or production units. To reduce someone to something is to defy what it means to respect that individual. When care involves respecting animals as worthy individuals with whom we can empathize with and respond to, they can no longer be seen as only food products. In other words, care theory would not endorse bringing animals into existence simply for the purpose of slaughter (especially when it is a matter of choice) because that would be treating them as mere commodities, and the ethic of care approach involves caring for and respecting individuals. Care theory, therefore, supports moral vegetarianism on philosophical grounds because bringing animals into existence only to “process” them into luxury culinary products forecloses the possibility of caring for them in an attentive, responsive, and respectful way.

Another key feature associated with care theory that was not included on Engster’s list of virtues but that is nonetheless relevant is trustworthiness. Domesticated animals, like all dependents, are especially vulnerable to exploitation and in many cases have no option but to trust their caregivers. Similar to dependency theory, I want to suggest that when we (i.e., human guardians of farm animals) actively foster a relationship built on trust we also create a special responsibility to honor that trust to the best of our ability. If we contribute to animals trusting us then we have an obligation to be trustworthy, all things being equal, but this caring feature is threatened under the “humane” label. Consider again turkey farmer Frank Reece; while many celebrate Thanksgiving holiday, he experiences great sadness when he sends about 4,000 birds to slaughter each year:

I hate seeing them on the truck, waiting to be taken to slaughter. They’re looking back at me, saying, “Get me off of here.” Sometimes I justify it in my mind that I can at least make it as good as possible for the animals in my custody. It’s like … they look at me and I tell them, “Please forgive me.”
Reece’s poignant testimony reveals, I think, the kind of betrayal that routinely happens on “humane” farms. Tamara Murphy, a well-known and respected chef in Seattle, writes openly about this kind of betrayal when she sends her piglets to slaughter: “The hardest part of the slaughter,” she explains, “was the betrayal. The pigs get in the trailer because they trust you, they get out of the trailer because they trust you, they go into the [slaughter] pen because they trust you.”\(^{48}\) Apparently, slaughtering animals is made easy when they trust us or—to put it more bluntly—when we betray their trust in us. Despite Murphy’s poignant confession, she and other advocates of “happy” meat go on to reassure consumers that their animals are slaughtered with respect and honor, meaning that Murphy will look the pig in the eye before the animal’s last moments on earth. To act otherwise, they contend, is to stick your head in the proverbial sand about where meat comes from. I suspect a vast public outcry would quickly ensue if this way of thinking and practice involved other animal dependents like kittens, puppies, or baby pandas, but when it is a matter of preparing pork chops for an up-scale dinner ironically entitled “Celebrating a Pig’s Life,” betraying an animal’s trust is reported as both noble and principled. While I certainly acknowledge the value of people knowing where their meat comes from and grasping the horrific reality of what it means to butcher animals, to suggest that betraying an animal’s trust is somehow made noble when we “look an animal in the eye” smacks of anthropocentric hubris. This kind of sardonic rhetoric represents one of endless cover stories we adopt to assuage our inner discomfort about killing defenseless and, in this case, trusting dependents. If an ethic of care approach means honoring our dependents’ trust in us, as I think it should, then it cannot support this sheer exploitation of the most vulnerable among us.

Furthermore, the degree of this kind of betrayal presents a deep paradox for consumers of “humane” meat. In many respects the degree of betrayal is a direct function of the degree of trust and dependence. As Hope Bohanec explains, “The greater the degree of dependence, the greater the degree of trust, and the greater the bond of trust, the greater the magnitude of betrayal to the animal.”\(^{49}\) In other words, the greater the care of the animals, the closer the bond of trust between them and their human guardians (farmers), and the greater the trust, the greater the betrayal when they are sent to slaughter. So, herein lies the paradox; on the one hand, many consumers believe it is important that farm animals are properly cared for, the greater the care the better; on the other hand, properly caring for animals involves relationships built on trust (as in the case with turkey farmer Frank Reece), a bond that is inevitably betrayed, in part, by the consumer demand itself. Ironically, the “humane” meat on one’s plate may be an instance of greater betrayal than the factory farmed “product.”

Thus far I have argued that the ethic of care approach practically supports moral veganism since “humane” practices violate the basic aim of helping animals avoid unnecessary harm. On philosophical grounds, care ethics supports moral vegetarianism because bringing animals into existence when their ultimate fate is slaughter runs counter to what it means to bestow care in an
attentive, responsive, respectful, and trusting manner. I close with responses to some anticipated objections and a positive case of what it means to care for farm animals. The issue of raising animals for the purpose of slaughter, Engster writes, “ultimately points beyond care ethics to deeper metaphysical questions about how we value animal life in itself.” Because this issue necessarily involves metaphysical questions about inherent or intrinsic moral worth, he claims that care ethics is unable to guide our moral deliberations. For Engster, abstract and universal approaches, such as utilitarian and rights-based arguments, may be more effective when addressing this particular issue.50 Endowing animals with certain rights and reducing animal suffering are important moral initiatives and may play a crucial role in changing the world for animals. So, I am not suggesting that care ought to replace these justice-based approaches. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on the useful ways care can complement (not as a deferential adjunct but as a critical partner) other moral frameworks, and I am sympathetic to those arguments. My point here is to suggest that the ethics of care can govern our thinking about this complex issue without depending upon abstract concepts. There is no need to put forth some mysterious metaphysical property (e.g., animal rights) or appeal to an abstract universal concept (e.g., the greatest happiness principle) because the issue before us can also be critically examined by focusing on the nature of our relationship with dependent others and our special responsibility toward them as genuine care givers.

If bringing animals into existence when their ultimate fate is slaughter runs counter to what it means to bestow care in an attentive, responsive, respectful, and trusting manner, then does my argument defend a form of caring that is too restrictive? After all, the only reason farm animals exist is because they will be slaughtered and consumed, so cows, pigs, and chickens may virtually go extinct if we remain committed to bringing animals into existence only under the moral pretense that we have an obligation to care for them in this way. Is it not better, my critic asks, to exist and be cared for in a compromised manner than not to exist in the first place? The sort of care advocated here may not be as radical as one might suspect, especially when we consider that such an understanding of care is already in place when it concerns other dependent animals.

Not bringing additional cats and dogs into existence is usually regarded as morally responsible and an act of care. To act otherwise, to not spay or neuter them, is to subject future cats and dogs to a high probability of suffering and premature death given the insufficient homes available to them. My argument seems to coincide with this widely held belief.51 Furthermore, fulfilling the aims of care would not necessarily result in the extinction of farm animals. Caregivers can and do raise cattle for show, pigs as pets, and chickens in their backyards as a hobby while still meeting the basic aims of care.

A third worry is whether the ethic of care here represents a distinct moral theory. After all, my analysis in the first half of the argument seems to be grounded on a utilitarian model while the second portion of the argument appears to rehearse key elements of virtue theory. Have we not simply swept
care under the proverbial utilitarian and virtue ethics rug? A complete response would exceed the scope of this project, but a few remarks may suffice here. Reducing unnecessary suffering in the world and increasing our capacity to emphasize and respect others are noble aims, all things being equal. So, some of the commitments in care are not necessarily incompatible to other established traditions and it is this kind of overlap that brings forth this stock criticism.\textsuperscript{52} However, care’s emphasis on particularity (i.e., eating/slaughtering animals in a social context where it is unnecessary), partiality (i.e., that we have a special responsibility to those whom we have made dependent on us), and the important role of emotions (i.e., empathetic engagement with other animals) make care a distinct moral framework from utilitarianism and its emphasis on impartiality, universality, and quantifiable judgments. I have argued that satisfying biological needs is only part of what it means to achieve the practical goals of care. To care for bodies, including animal bodies, requires that we meet those goals in an attentive, responsive, respectful, and trustworthy way. The worry here is that care has been subsumed under virtue ethics. However, the relational ontology of virtue ethics differs from the relational aspects of care ethics. According to Maureen Sander-Staudt, whereas care ethics “construes the entire self as constituted, known, and maintained through relationship, and construes virtue as a quality that nurtures relationships appropriately,” virtue ethics “emphasizes the relational aspects of being in terms of individual virtue development.”\textsuperscript{53} The caring virtues in this project aim to develop a self through the relations that nurture the human and nonhuman community and not only my development as a virtuous person. In a care ethics framework, we are defined by our relationships to others and virtue is a quality that nurtures those relationships, and as such care ethics has the potential to apply relational ontology more broadly than virtue ethics. While this rebuttal attempts to carve out a subtle distinction between virtue ethics and care ethics, it seems to me there may be some room for future debate concerning a possible union between care ethics and virtue ethics as it pertains to the animal question.

Caring for animals in the manner in which care theory advocates is an everyday reality on farm animal sanctuaries around the country. One summer I volunteered at Farm Sanctuary in Orland, California, where as part of a team of interns and professional caregivers I looked after 300 pigs, sheep, cattle, chickens, and other rescued farm animals.\textsuperscript{54} The no-profit organization is the largest of its kind in the United States. Rescued farm animals arrive from all parts of the country (including from non-intensive farms) and often in dire straits (with broken bones, severe dehydration, parasite infestation, etc.). Barns are cleaned every day and veterinarian visits are routine, with every animal given individualized attention in terms of her or his medical and dietary needs. In fact, many of them outlive their life expectancies due to the exceptional care they receive. But meeting their basic biological needs is only the starting point for the kind of care these animals will enjoy. All the animals on the farm are identified by name (e.g., “Valentine” and “Ripley”), not numbers—a practice that acknowledges
farm animals as distinct individuals instead of mere commodities. Caregivers, recognizing the emotional capacities of these animals, emphasize the importance of each animal having a companion (or more) to forge strong bonds with. Many of the caregivers themselves form strong trusting bonds with the animals as well. Unlike the plaque displays one might read at zoos where animals are described simply in terms of their species affiliation, geographical origins, and a handful of certain biological facts, the animals at Farm Sanctuary are defined by their life narratives. Each farm animal at these sanctuaries is understood and treated as someone (not something), as a fellow mortal creature who brings a rich psychological presence to the world. Farm Sanctuary serves as a fine example of what it means to extend care to farm animals in a caring manner. It is a moral oasis for these individuals, a place where for the first time in their lives they experience the capacity of human compassion, trustworthiness, and genuine care.

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

Notes

1 In this article I use “animals” to substitute for “nonhuman animals” with full recognition that humans are animals too.
2 Nine billion animals were slaughtered in 2013 (see “Farm Animal Statistics: Slaughter Totals,” Humane Society of the United States, retrieved April 17, 2014, from http://www.humanesociety.org/news/resources/research/stats_slaughter_totals.html), and of that number 76.8 million were raised under certified humane standards. See Humane Certifications, retrieved June 17, 2014, from http://www.humaneitarian.org/what-is-humanely-raised-meat/humane-certifications/#.U6XAX_ldWSo
4 Like others who have taken the ethic of care approach to the meat-eating issue, I will defend a contextual moral veganism/vegetarianism which recognizes the myriad ways in which dietary choice can be affected by personal circumstance, geographic location, and perhaps culture. When killing animals is a choice and not a matter of survival or self-defense, as it is in the United States, our alimentary decisions can become embroiled with questions regarding the domination and exploitation of vulnerable others and as such an appropriate study for moral evaluation. The objective in this article is to suggest that, in those cases where butchering animals is a matter of choice, convenience, or taste, it ought not to be done.
5 Daniel Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory: The Practice of Caring and the Obligation to Care,” Hypatia 20, no. 3 (2005): 50–74.
6 Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory,” 52.
7 Ibid., 53.
8 Ibid., 53–54.
9 Ibid., 57.
10 Ibid., 62–65.
12 Ibid., 527.
13 For instance, farmed turkeys cannot reproduce naturally and must be artificially inseminated. See “Modern Turkey Industry,” Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, retrieved January 4,


16 Ibid., 531, my emphasis.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 532.


27 From a feminist care perspective the consumption of milk and eggs carries special significance since those products depend on the exploitation of female reproductive capacities. In this way, ethical vegans make a deliberate choice to actively resist patriarchal ideologies about female bodies and aim to make the personal political. See Carol Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 1990).


30 Ibid., 533.

31 Ibid.

32 Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory,” 55.

33 Ibid., 54.


36 Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory,” 54. My emphasis.


38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 311.

40 Ibid., 309.

41 Ibid.

A possible implication here is that all hunting is morally wrong. After all, it appears that hunters violate the virtues and the basic aims of care when killing deer, raccoons, or waterfowl. However, because the scope of my argument is limited to animal dependents and not free-range animals, hunting falls outside the scope of this project. Care theory, at least as it is applied here, concerns our special moral responsibility toward those who depend on us for their survival and well-being.

Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory,” 55.


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