HUSBANDRY AS THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR ANIMAL AGRICULTURE

Domestication of animals, approximately 12,000 years ago, was a rational successor to an earlier period of hunting and gathering. With the assurance of a stable food supply, culture and civilization could develop.

As approaches to domesticated animal agriculture grew more rational, its basis in good husbandry became firmly established as well as becoming both a prudential and an ethical imperative. Husbandry has been termed “the ancient contract with animals,” where, as in any fair contract, both parties benefit from the relationship.

The essence of husbandry was good care. Humans put animals into the most optimal environment congenial to the animals not only surviving but thriving, the environment for which they had been evolved and selected. The better off the animals were, the better off humans were. Humans provided farm animals with sustenance, water, shelter, protection from predation, such medical attention as was available, help in birthing, food during famine, water during drought, safe surroundings and comfortable appointments.

Since husbandry was grounded in human self-interest, very few additional ethical rules or laws for animal treatment were required. Sustainability was assured by the same sorts of considerations.

THE DECLINE AND DEMISE OF HUSBANDRY

It was husbandry agriculture that made possible a secure and dependable food supply, which in turn created the leisure time necessary for the development and flourishing of culture; art, science, and technology, culminating in the industrial revolution. In one of history’s great ironies, the development of industry and technology in the agricultural area created the conditions for the end of husbandry.

The industrialization of agriculture in essence created room for capitalism in agriculture. Agriculture could now be done for profit, not just for sustenance. Animal producers no longer viewed themselves as constrained by the animals’ nature and thus by their biological limits. No longer were breeding and good husbandry the limiting factors for animal productivity. The animal welfare that was assured by the need to put square pegs in square holes, round pegs in round holes, was rendered obsolete by newly emerging “technological sanders” that allowed producers to force square pegs into round holes and round pegs into square holes – animals into environments congenial to profit, but radically inimical to the animals’ biological natures.

New technology radically severed the connection traditionally obtaining between productivity and animal welfare. Under technological agriculture, animals were ripped from the pastoral.
environments they were evolved to live in, and crowded into abrasive and alien confinement situations where they were totally unable to express their telos, i.e. their inherent psychological and biological natures. If husbandry-era producers had attempted to raise, for example, hundreds of thousands of chickens in cages for egg production, the animals would be dead within months, the flocks decimated by disease that would take hold and spread like wildfire. Under an agriculture based in husbandry animals were slaughtered, processed, and consumed within a relatively short distance from where they were reared. Today, animals are shipped hundreds and even thousands of miles under conditions highly erosive of their health and well-being, where they are sold to consumers oblivious to how they came to be.

One of the most prominent “sanders” is the prolific use of antimicrobials both to promote growth and to enable the animals to survive and be productive under pathogenic and stressful conditions. Ultimately, the illegitimate use of antibiotics as a cornerstone of industrial agriculture created, or at least was instrumental in creating, an entire host of ethical issues compromising animal welfare and sustainability.

These issues include:

- the development of antibiotic-resistant pathogens, endangering human and animal health;
- the creation of conditions that severely harm and impede farm animal welfare;
- the loss of husbandry and the loss of “animal-smart” workers;
- the loss of small farmers and the correlative loss of thriving rural communities;
- domination of animal agriculture by huge corporate entities;
- the advent of numerous production diseases;
- significant problems of animal waste disposal;
- correlative pollution of land, air, and water;
- dependence on Petro chemically-based fertilizers.

CURRENT ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES IN CONFINEMENT AGRICULTURE

The comfortable fit between agricultural animals and how we managed and raised them was perverted and ultimately destroyed by the rise of industrial agriculture, with industrial values of efficiency and productivity eclipsing the traditional values of husbandry, way of life, and good care for the animals. Capital replaced labor; good husbandry became a thing of the past.

The welfare of all farm animals raised under industrial confinement conditions is severely compromised. This claim encompasses swine, egg laying chickens, meat chickens, dairy cows, and, to a lesser extent, beef cattle raised in feedlots, as well as fish. (Only beef cattle raised under widespread extensive conditions live lives appropriate to their natures.) A detailed
discussion of all of these areas is required to fully understand the egregious nature of industrial agricultural systems from the perspective of animal welfare. This will be provided in my long paper.

THE CONCEPT OF ANIMAL WELFARE

It is essential to understanding the full measure of these animal welfare issues to realize, contrary to the claims of some scientists, that the concept of animal welfare is not exclusively a scientific concept, determined by empirical means by scientific research. Animal welfare is partly an ethical concept revolving around the question of what we owe animals, and to what extent. This is extremely easy to illustrate. A document called the CAST report, first published by a consortium of U.S. agricultural scientists in the early 1980’s, discussed animal welfare, and it affirmed that the necessary and sufficient conditions for attributing positive welfare to an animal were represented by the animals’ productivity. A productive animal enjoyed positive welfare; a non-productive animal enjoyed poor welfare.

In contradistinction to this profit-based definition of welfare, it is easy to cite what animal welfare organizations provided as a definition. FAWC (Farm Animal Welfare Council), for example, defined animal welfare in terms of the famous Five Freedoms:

The welfare of an animal includes its physical and mental state and we consider that good animal welfare implies both fitness and a sense of well-being. Any animal kept by man, must at least, be protected from unnecessary suffering.

We believe that an animal’s welfare, whether on farm, in transit, at market or at a place of slaughter should be considered in terms of ‘five freedoms’ (see www.fawc.org.uk).

1. **Freedom from Hunger and Thirst** – by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor.

2. **Freedom from Discomfort** – by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

3. **Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease** – by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

4. **Freedom to Express Normal Behavior** – by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal’s own kind.

5. **Freedom from Fear and Distress** – by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

The difference between these two definitions of welfare could not be more obvious. Whereas the CAST definition is oriented towards profit, the FAWC definition is about what the animal
experiences. Not only are these definitions based in ethics not science, *the science one pursues is clearly based in the ethical presuppositions underlying each definition*. If one presupposes the CAST view, one’s animal welfare science will study conditions necessary for maximum productivity and profit – much what animal science does traditionally. On the other hand, given the FAWC view, one will study the animals’ experiences and look for signs of pain and distress.

**WHAT VIEW OF ANIMAL WELFARE SHOULD AND WILL PREDOMINATE IN SOCIETAL DEBATE?**

The question immediately arises as to whose ethic will determine the form that animal welfare takes, since there is in fact an indefinite number of ethical positions that can underlie and inform the concept of animal welfare. If the notion of animal welfare is inseparable from ethical components, and people’s ethical stance on obligations to farm animals differ markedly across a highly diverse spectrum, whose ethic is to predominate and define, in law or regulation, what counts as “animal welfare”?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to recall some basic ethical distinctions. Of paramount importance is the distinction between *personal ethics* and *societal consensus ethics*. While many people are inclined to affirm that, since ethical judgments are not validated by gathering empirical data, ethics is simply a matter of *subjective opinion*. But a moment’s reflection reveals that if that were indeed the case, society would be chaotic and anarchic. To take a silly example, we are not permitted to shoot one another if we do not like how other people dress. Thus, we adopt a strong *social consensus ethic*, usually (but not always) embodied and articulated in laws and regulations. The expectation is that everyone will abide by these principles. These include laws against rape, robbery, and murder. On the other hand, ethical decisions which do not have major and possibly negative effects on other people, such as whether or not one is a vegan, or what one reads, are left to an individual’s *personal ethic*.

The fact that in the United States in 2004 some 2100 bills pertaining to animal treatment were promulgated in federal, state, and local legislatures shows that the treatment of animals is ever-increasingly becoming an object of major societal concern. In addition, laws prohibiting cruelty to animals, traditionally the only social consensus ethic pertaining to animals, have been elevated to felony status in most states.

Plato pointed out that if one is dealing with ethics and adults, one cannot *teach* (i.e. impose new ethical principles on others); one must *remind* (i.e. show those you are trying to get to acquiesce to new ethical ideas that those ideas are in fact implicit in what they already believe.) This is, of course, what Martin Luther King did. The major reason Prohibition was so dismally ineffective was that it did not accord with people’s pre-existing ethics!

It is thus perfectly reasonable to assume that society would look to its extant ethic for humans and apply it appropriately modified to the treatment of animals. And this is precisely what has occurred.
In our ethic for humans we make most societal decisions by reference to the general welfare. By the same token, we protect basic aspects of the human individual from oppression even for the sake of the general welfare. We build fences around the fundamental and basic interests comprising human nature. These protections are called rights, and they include freedom of speech, freedom of belief, protection against torture etc. We are allowed to use other human beings for our benefit, as long as we hold the interests dictated by their nature sacred. Animals also have natures, what Aristotle called their telos, the “pigness of a pig”, “the cowness of the cow.” Those natures were automatically protected under husbandry, or else those raising animals would not succeed. When the creation of technological sanders allows us to no longer respect animal natures, and thus ride roughshod over animal welfare, the emerging ethic for animals demands that protections for animal nature be encoded in the societal ethic, i.e. in the legal system. This is what I have elsewhere called “animal rights as a mainstream phenomenon.” This ethic does not prevent us from using animals, it rather constrains how we use them. We explain this in detail in our long paper.