

Farm factories: The end of animal husbandry

by [Bernard E. Rollin](#) in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

A young man was working for a company that operated a large, total-confinement swine farm. One day he detected symptoms of a disease among some of the feeder pigs. As a teen, he had raised pigs himself and shown them in competition, so he knew how to treat the animals. But the company's policy was to kill any diseased animals with a blow to the head—the profit margin was considered too low to allow for treatment of individual animals. So the employee decided to come in on his own time, with his own medicine, and cured the animals. The management's response was to fire him on the spot for violating company policy. Soon the young man left agriculture for good: he was weary of the conflict between what he was told to do and how he believed he should be treating the animals.

Consider a sow that is being used to breed pigs for food. The overwhelming majority of today's swine are raised in severe confinement. If the "farmer" follows the recommendations of the National Pork Producers, the sow will spend virtually all of her productive life (until she is killed) in a gestation crate 2 1/2 feet wide (and sometimes 2 feet) by 7 feet long by 3 feet high. This concrete and barred cage is often too small for the 500- to 600-pound animal, which cannot lie down or turn around. Feet that are designed for soft loam are forced to carry hundreds of pounds of weight on slotted concrete. This causes severe foot and leg problems. Unable to perform any of her natural behaviors, the sow goes mad and exhibits compulsive, neurotic "stereotypical" behaviors such as bar-biting and purposeless chewing. When she is ready to birth her piglets, she is moved into a farrowing crate that has a creep rail so that the piglets can crawl under it and avoid being crushed by the confined sow.

Under other conditions, pigs reveal that they are highly intelligent and behaviorally complex animals. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh created a "pig park" that approximates the habitat of wild swine. Domestic pigs, usually raised in confinement, were let loose in this facility and their behavior observed. In this

environment, the sows covered almost a mile in foraging, and, in keeping with their reputation as clean animals, they built carefully constructed nests on a hillside so that urine and feces ran downhill. They took turns minding each other's piglets so that each sow could forage. All of this natural behavior is inexpressible in confinement.

Factory farming, or confinement-based industrialized agriculture, has been an established feature in North America and Europe since its introduction at the end of World War II. Agricultural scientists were concerned about supplying Americans with sufficient food. After the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, many people had left farming. Cities and suburbs were beginning to encroach on agricultural lands, and scientists saw that the amount of land available for food production would soon diminish significantly. Farm people who had left the farm for foreign countries and urban centers during the war were reluctant to go back. "How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm now that they've seen Paree?" a song of the '40s asked. Having experienced the specter of starvation during the Great Depression, the American consumer was afraid that there would not be enough food.

At the same time, a variety of technologies relevant to agriculture were emerging, and American society began to accept the idea of technologically based economies of scale. Animal agriculture began to industrialize. This was a major departure from traditional agriculture and its core values. Agriculture as a way of life, and agriculture as a practice of husbandry, were replaced by agriculture as an industry with values of efficiency and productivity. Thus the problems we see in confinement agriculture are not the result of cruelty or insensitivity, but the unanticipated by-product of changes in the nature of agriculture. Confinement-based agriculture contradicts basic biblical ethical teachings about animals. Yet despite the real problems in these farm factories, few Jewish and Christian leaders, theologians or ethicists have come forward to raise moral questions about them or the practices characteristic of this industry.

The Old Testament forbids the deliberate, willful, sadistic, deviant, purposeless, intentional and unnecessary infliction of pain and suffering on animals, or outrageous neglect of them (failing to provide food and water). Biblical edicts against cruelty helped Western societies reach a social consensus on animal treatment and develop effective laws. The Massachusetts Bay colony, for example, was the first to prohibit animal cruelty, and similar laws exist today in all Western societies.

The anticruelty ethic served two purposes: it articulated concern about animal suffering caused by deviant and purposeless human actions, and it identified sadists and psychopaths who abuse animals before sometimes “graduating” to the abuse of humans. Recent research has confirmed this correlation. Many serial killers have histories of animal abuse, as do some of the teens who have shot classmates.

Biblical sources deliver a clear mandate to avoid acts of deliberate cruelty to animals. We humans are obliged, for example, to help “raise to its feet an animal that is down even if it belongs to [our] enemy” (Exod. 23:12 and Deut. 22:4). We are urged not to plow an ox and an ass together because of the hardship to the weaker animal (Deut. 22:10), and to rest the animals on the sabbath when we rest (Exod. 20:10 and Exod. 23:12). Deuteronomy 25:4 forbids the muzzling of an ox when it is being used to thresh grain, for that would cause it major suffering—the animal could not partake of its favorite food, and allowing it to graze would cost the farmer virtually nothing (also in 1 Cor. 9:9 and 1 Tim. 5:18). We are to save “a son or an ox” that has fallen into a well even if we must violate the sabbath (Luke 14:5), and to avoid killing an ox because that would be like killing a man (Isa. 66:3).

Other passages encourage humans to develop a character that finds cruelty abhorrent. We are to foster compassion as a virtue, and prevent insensitivity to animal suffering. The injunction against “boiling a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exod. 23:19; Exod. 34:26; Deut. 14:21) is supported by Leviticus 22: 26-33, which commands us not to take a very young animal from its mother, and not to slaughter an animal along with its young. The strange story of Balaam and his ass counsels against losing one’s temper and beating an animal (Num.22) and Psalm 145 tells us that God’s mercy extends over all creatures. Surely humans are being directed to follow that model.

As one of my colleagues put it, “The worst thing that ever happened to my department is the name change from Animal Husbandry to Animal Science.” The practice of husbandry is the key loss in the shift from traditional to industrialized agriculture. Farmers once put animals into the environment that the animals were biologically suited for, and then augmented their natural ability to survive and thrive by providing protection from predators, food during famine, water during drought, help in birthing, protection from weather extremes, etc. Any harm or suffering inflicted on the animal resulted in harm to the producer. An animal experiencing stress or pain, for example, is not as productive or reproductively successful as a happy animal. Thus proper care and treatment of animals becomes both an ethical

and prudent requirement. The producer does well if and only if the animal does well. The result is good animal husbandry: a fair and mutually beneficial contract between humans and animals, with each better off because of the relationship. Psalm 23 describes this concept of care in a metaphor so powerful that it has become the vehicle for expressing God's ideal relationship to humans.

In husbandry agriculture, individual animal productivity is a good indicator of animal well-being; in industrial agriculture, this link between productivity and well-being is severed. When productivity as an economic metric is applied to the whole operation, the welfare of the individual animal is ignored. Husbandry agriculture "put square pegs in square holes and round pegs in round holes," extending individualized care in order to create as little friction as possible. Industrial agriculture, on the other hand, forces each animal to accept the same "technological sanders"—antibiotics (which keep down disease that would otherwise spread like wildfire in close surroundings), vaccines, bacterins, hormones, air handling systems and the rest of the armamentarium used to keep the animals from dying.

Furthermore, when crowding creates unnatural conditions and elicits unnatural behaviors such as tailbiting in pigs or similar acts of cannibalism in poultry, the solution is to cut off the tail (without anesthetics) or debeak the chicken, which can cause lifelong pain.

There are four sources of suffering in these conditions:

- violation of the animals' basic needs and nature;
- lack of attention to individual animals;
- mutilation of animals to fit unnatural environments;
- an increase in diseases and other problems caused by conditions in confinement operations.

A few years ago, while visiting with some Colorado ranchers, I observed an example of animal husbandry that contrasts sharply with the experience described at the beginning of this article. That year, the ranchers had seen many of their calves afflicted with scours, a diarrheal disease. Every rancher I met had spent more money on treating the disease than was economically justified by the calves' market value. When I asked these men why they were being "economically irrational," they were

adamant in their responses: “It’s part of my bargain with the animal.” “It’s part of caring for them.” This same ethical outlook leads ranchers to sit up all night with sick, marginal calves, sometimes for days in a row. If they were strictly guided by economics, these people would hardly be valuing their time at 50 cents per hour—including their sleep time.

Yet industrialized swine production thrives while western cattle ranchers, the last large group of practitioners of husbandry agriculture, are an endangered species.

Confinement agriculture violates other core biblical ethical principles. It is clear that the biblical granting of “dominion” over the earth to humans means responsible stewardship, not the looting and pillaging of nature. Given that the Bible was addressed to an agrarian people, this is only common sense, and absolutely essential to preserving what we call “sustainability.”

Husbandry agriculture was by its very nature sustainable, unlike industrialized animal agriculture. To follow up on our swine example: When pigs (or cattle) are raised on pasture, manure becomes a benefit, since it fertilizes pasture, and pasture is of value in providing forage for animals. In industrial animal agriculture, there is little reason to maintain pasture. Instead, farmers till for grain production, thereby encouraging increased soil erosion. At the same time, manure becomes a problem, both in terms of disposal and because it leaches into the water table. Similarly, air quality in confinement operations is often a threat to both workers and animals, and animal odors drive down real property value for miles around these operations.

Another morally questionable aspect of confinement agriculture is the destruction of small farms and local communities. Because of industrialization and economy of scale, small husbandry-based producers cannot compete with animal factories. In the broiler industry, farmers who wish to survive become serfs to large operators because they cannot compete on their own. In large confinement swine operations, where the system rather than the labor force, is primary migratory or immigrant workers hired because they are cheap, not because they possess knowledge of or concern for the animals. And those raised in a culture of husbandry, as our earlier story revealed, find it intolerable to work in the industrialized operations.

The power of confinement agriculture to pollute the earth, degrade community and destroy small, independent farmers should convince us that this type of agriculture is incompatible with biblical ethics. Furthermore, we should fear domination of the

food supply by these corporate entities.

It is not necessary to raise animals this way, as history reminds us. In 1988 Sweden banned high confinement agriculture; Britain and the EU ban sow confinement. If food is destined to cost more, so be it—Americans spend an average of only 11 percent of their income on food now, while they spent more than 50 percent on food at the turn of the century. We are wrong to ignore the hidden costs paid by animal welfare, the environment, food safety and rural communities and independent farmers, and we must now add those costs to the price of our food.

If we take biblical ethics seriously, we must condemn any type of agriculture that violates the principles of husbandry. John Travis reported the following comments made by the Vatican last December:

Human dominion over the natural world must not be taken as an unqualified license to kill or inflict suffering on animals. . . . The cramped and cruel methods used in the modern food industry, for example, may cross the line of morally acceptable treatment of animals. . . Marie Hendrickz, official of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said that in view of the growing popularity of animal rights movements, the church needs to ask itself to what extent Christ's dictum, "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you," can be applied to the animal world.

It is a radical mistake to treat animals merely as products, as objects with no intrinsic value. A demand for agriculture that practices the ancient and fair contract with domestic animals is not revolutionary but conservative. As Mahatma Gandhi said, a society must ultimately be morally judged by how it treats its weakest members. No members are more vulnerable and dependent than our society's domestic animals.