Factory Farming Through Bentham's Ethical Theory

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Factory Farming and Animal-Welfare Ethics

With the passage of time, there has been a rising awareness about animal rights; there are numerous animal rights groups that are working to bring a positive change in the conditions of animals. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) coined the idea of a straightforward quantification of morality that can also be applied in the case of animal suffering due to the actions of humans. This paper analyzes the dynamics of factory farming through the application of Bentham's approach (using scope, intensity, duration, and probability) (Singer, 1975).

Bentham's Utilitarian Theory of Pleasure and Pain

Jeremy Bentham was of the view that human beings aim to increase their pleasures and decrease their pains; in this background, the scope of actions of human beings is very wide. If one analyzes the farming industry in detail, he or she will come to the conclusion that there is no end to the suffering of the animals as humans want to increase their pleasures, and sometimes they don't care how much the other parties are bearing the cost of their pleasure. The scope of the suffering of farm animals is very wide; on farms, animals are packed in a very tight space, they don't have enough space to move and even breathe easily. The humans put them in worse conditions to get benefits at all costs and consequences for the poor birds; there is only half a square foot of space for each chicken on the farm. The same is the case with other animals and birds, like a turkey, which has only three square feet of space for each bird. The farm animals have to bear with the harsh and sometimes cruel treatment of farm employees. In poultry farms, male birds are left to die as no eggs can be obtained from them.

Intensity of Animal Suffering

The intensity of the suffering of the animals varies from farm to farm and location to location. With the passage of time, there has been a rise in awareness about animal rights, and some other factors like regulations and technology have played their role in somewhat positive ways. These positive developments are limited to farms in only a few countries. Bentham argued that animals are like humans in a number of ways; they have the capacity to feel pain and therefore deserve better living conditions and moral protections. He articulated that even though there are important differences between humans and animals, there are also important and relevant similarities, the chief being the

capacity to feel—that is, the capacity to experience pleasure, pain, and suffering. It is one of the reasons that these farm animals feel pain and sometimes so intensely that they lose their lives even before they are supposed to be culled by the farm staff. Due to tight and insufficient space and uneasy conditions, they fight, so they use their beaks and claws (Bentham, 1789/2000).

Duration of Suffering in Factory Farms

The duration of the sufferings of the farm animals is very long; in some cases, it covers their entire lives (which is approximately six weeks for the chicken and a little longer for turkeys) on farms. It is interesting to note that the sufferings begin even before the farm animals and birds are born. Biotechnology has enabled scientists to genetically modify farm animals, and this has been done to maximize human pleasures as described in the theory by Bentham. Due to genetic modifications, the animals sometimes are unable to perform natural functions like sustaining their weight on their feet and mating in a natural way. The saga of suffering continues for the rest of their lives in one way or the other.

Probability and Future Reduction of Harm

There is a very low probability that the sufferings of the farm animals will recede over the life span of the animals. There has been a rising hue and cry from the animal rights groups for the improvement in the living conditions of the farm animals. Economics has a role to play here; the price of meat from farm animals is considerably less as compared to the price of meat from free animals; according to Bentham, humans want to maximize their pleasures, so the chances that they will opt for the free animal meat are very thin. Free animal meat, also termed organic meat in some cases, is not widely available, and only well-off people can afford it. If humans want to increase the probability of betterment in the living conditions of the farm animals, there is a need to make concerted efforts.

Conclusion Through Bentham’s Ethical Framework

The above analysis boils down to the point that the core philosophy of Bentham has strong ground: humans are there to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pains, and most of the time, they do not care about the consequences and cost to the other parties. The farm animals are in a weak position as they don’t have the power to raise their voice against the harsh and cruel treatment they face on the farm. There are various factors that play a role in increasing the suffering of farm animals. The government, regulators, civil society and animal rights groups should join hands to make a positive change.

References

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