

Effective Reducetarianism

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The vast majority of the animals we eat are raised in factory farms. These are not humane places. The living conditions of factory farm animals have been extensively documented in books, magazines, and documentaries, so I will spare you the grim details here.¹ The key issue is that they inflict severe and unnecessary suffering on animals merely for the sake of slightly cheaper produce. If you care about animal welfare—and most people do, as we see whenever someone mistreats a pet— then the conditions of animals in factory farms give you strong reasons to make some changes to reduce the amount of animal products in your diet.

However, this argument applies much more strongly for some animals than for others. This is because there is considerable variation in both the conditions animals are kept in and the number of animals needed to produce a given amount of calories. As a consequence, some types of animal produce involve a lot more animal suffering than others. Let us consider these two sources of variation in turn.

The first variation is in the animals' quality of life. Some farm animals live much worse lives than others. Of all the animals raised for food, broiler chickens, layer hens, and pigs are kept in the worst conditions, by a considerable margin.² Bailey Norwood, an economist and agricultural expert, has estimated the welfare of different animals on a scale from -10 to 10, where negative numbers indicate that it would be better, from the animal's perspective, to be dead rather than alive.³ Norwood rates beef cattle at 6 and dairy cows at 4. In contrast, his average rating for broiler chickens is -1, and for pigs and caged hens is -5. In other words, cows raised for food have lives that are comparatively good, in contrast with chickens, hens or pigs, who suffer terribly.

The second variation is in the number of animals needed to produce a given number of calories. A cow will feed an entire family for several months, whereas a chicken

¹ For details, see e.g. Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The way we eat: why our food choices matter*, New York: Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2006.

² In this discussion, I don't talk about fish, for two reasons. First, the data on both the number of fish used for human consumption and their quality of life is much more limited than the corresponding data for land animals. Second, there's more uncertainty about the sentience of fish relative to that of land animals than there is about the sentience of different land animals. Still, from the data that does exist, I suspect that cutting out fish is of comparable importance to cutting out chicken: the fish people eat have often been fed other fish, so the total number of fish deaths indirectly resulting from human consumption is very high, and it appears that the lives of factory-farmed fish are very bad, too.

³ F. Bailey Norwood and Jayson Lusk, *Compassion, by the pound: the economics of farm animal welfare*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 227-9.

can be eaten in a single meal. In a year, the average American will consume the following: 28.5 broiler chickens, 0.8 layer hens, 0.8 turkeys, 0.37 pigs, 0.1 beef cows, and 0.007 dairy cows. On the basis of these numbers it would seem that cutting out chicken meat has a far bigger impact than any other dietary change.

Things are not quite so simple, however. Most broiler chickens only live for six weeks. Cows, by contrast, live for several years. Insofar as we care about how long the animal spends in unpleasant conditions on factory farms, it's more appropriate to think about *animal years* rather than about *animal lives*. If we adjust the figures in the previous paragraph so that they account for the varying lifespans of the different animal species in factory farms, the number of animal years that go into the average American's diet are as follows: 3.3 from broiler chickens (28.5 chickens consumed, each of which lives 6 weeks), 1 from layer hens, 0.3 from turkeys, 0.2 from pigs, 0.1 from beef cows, and 0.03 from dairy cows.

Combining these two considerations, we arrive at the following conclusion: *if you are only reducing the amount of meat you consume, rather than going entirely vegetarian or vegan, the most effective way to reduce animal suffering is to stop eating chicken, then eggs, then pork.* Targeting the animal products that cause the most suffering insures that your efforts as a reductarian have the highest payoffs in terms of animal cruelty avoided. If you are not prepared to go vegetarian or vegan, but you still want to reduce the negative impact that your diet has on animals, it is crucial that you focus on the worst offenders.

This shows the importance of *effective reductarianism*, an example of a general approach I call *effective altruism*. Effective altruism is about asking, "How can I make the biggest difference I can?" and using evidence and careful reasoning to try to find an answer. It takes a scientific approach to doing good. Just as science consists of the honest and impartial attempt to work out what's true, and a commitment to believe the truth whatever that turns out to be, effective altruism consists of the honest and impartial attempt to work out what's best for the world, and a commitment to do what's best, whatever that turns out to be.

As the phrase suggests, effective altruism has two parts. As I use the term, altruism simply means improving the lives of others. Many people believe that altruism should denote sacrifice, but if you can do good while maintaining a comfortable life for yourself, that's a bonus, and I'm very happy to call that altruism. The second part is effectiveness, by which I mean doing the most good with whatever resources you have. Importantly, effective altruism is not just about making a difference, or doing some amount of good. It's about trying to make the most difference you can. Determining whether something is effective means recognizing that some ways of doing good are better than others.

Reductarians recognize that human diets vary *in degree* in the amount of suffering they cause, and on this basis seek to reduce the amount of animal products in their diet. *Effective* reductarians accept this important insight, but combine it with the

recognition that some animal products cause much more suffering than others. For effective reducetarians, the goal is not merely to eat fewer animal products, but to eat fewer of those products that cause the most suffering.

Ideally, I think we should eliminate as much animal produce from our diet as possible. This is why I myself have been a vegetarian for many years. However, we must understand that many people are not prepared to go that far. Instead of blaming these people for failing to attain that ideal, and implying that anything short of it is equally morally blameworthy, we should encourage them to be selective about the animal products they eat, and to reduce those that harm animals the most.