

Ethics in the poultry industry – answering moral questions of society

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Formulating the essential questions of animal ethics

When poultry welfare is discussed in our society, we usually confront a tangled bundle of pictures, intuitions and often personal judgment of ideals and principles. The lack of communicative clearness is enhanced by the fact that everybody considers himself or herself a competent expert in this field. In assessing the conditions under which animals or poultry are kept, we find: everybody knows how it should be done. People think they could do it. That may sound trivial, but I like to point out that the same is not true e.g. for orthopedic dentistry, an area of applied human knowledge that is hardly more complex than keeping animals with proper attention to all details. The fact that the definition and realization of “good” poultry husbandry involves substantial knowledge does not keep the general public from voicing their own strong judgment.

We are unlikely to find people who would admit that they do not know how to assess whether the management conditions for poultry are “good” or not. Possible reasons for the different reaction of people to issues of poultry husbandry and welfare than to orthopedic dentistry are an interesting subject for further research. You may start with pictures in books for pre-school children showing farm animals and poultry. The main point is that the professional expertise does not reach the general adult public when it comes to animal and poultry farming.

People not only have strong opinions how animals should be kept, but feel that their own judgment is non-debatable on moral grounds. Many may admit that they do not understand all necessary details to judge whether our tax laws are fair, they “know” what is right or wrong about keeping animals.

A similar self-assured attitude may be found regarding other moral questions: considerable disagreements in detail, while every engaged party is sure of their own moral superiority. Again, this may sound trivial, but we should keep this in mind as a fact when trying to resolve conflicts regarding farm animal management. For popular moral judgment on poultry husbandry we find specific intuitions which dominate and aggravate the issue:

- 1) Poultry is seen as typical „mass animal production“; the low economic value of each bird results in huge numbers of birds in commercial operations. Pictures from modern poultry farms reinforce the image of “mass animal” production. This has generally been conceived and judged as “unjust” in terms of an idyllic perception of humanity’s relationship to farm animals, regardless of the birds’ health and wellbeing.
- 2) The second point is cage management; a negative symbol frequently used in terms of poultry welfare. Like no other issue in animal farming, the fight against laying cages has become a symbolic battle. Apart from the factual issue, we should not overlook the communicative implications. Many questions regarding farm animal production are complicated and not easily answered with yes or no, but “the cage” forces us to come up with an answer, which may turn out much more rigorous than questions like optimal width of slats or minimum space per animal.

In other words, „the cage“ is an ideal object to communicate: simple and easy to recognize by everybody and to be against. Pointing this out should not be misunderstood as an endorsement of cage management, but only to explain the focus of society and politics on banning cages.

Morals and ethics

With all this, we are first of all dealing with morals, i.e., action based on human judgment of good and evil. Morals means following what “one” ought to, living according to convictions, intuitions and actions about morality. The questions with which the poultry industry is confronted have a moral basis. Dealing with these moral questions requires ethical judgment.

Unlike morals, ethics requires reflexing, critical and self-critical thinking about moral dimensions and principles. Thoughtful evaluation of our moral standards regarding farm animals is an essential part

of the reflective living of responsible people. This approach enables us to reflect about current practices in animal agriculture and to develop ethical judgment.

Thinking about our own moral standards also helps us to structure and promote a dialogue about moral questions in animal farming. Only a defined position can be discussed fruitfully. In the colorful concert of people who offer their opinions on poultry welfare, it is not sufficient to refer to personal experience and professional training. Since moral perspectives are always involved in the discussions, it is important and helpful to explain the principles of our own actions and to justify them rationally.

For these two points, ethics is required to reflect about morals. Although animal welfare issues get considerable attention in public, sometimes with heated discussions, most ethicists are more interested in areas of applied ethics other than the treatment or mistreatment of animals.

As Thurnherr (2000) stated ten years ago, “the search for reliable indicators suggesting the application of moral principles to animal farming is stuck in normative ethical reflections, and has not yet reached the normative applied level of reflection”. There has been some progress, but it is still true to say that there is an abundance of general literature on the relationship between humans and animals, but very little on ethically relevant specific situations.

An exception is the classical topic of animal experimentation. Other specific relationships between humans and animals with quite different problems are hardly touched by ethics research. This includes the almost totally neglected area of domestically kept animals as hobby, but we also find little on farm animals. Practical aspects are addressed mainly by animal scientists with a background in veterinary medicine or agriculture who ask questions related to animal welfare, without engaging moral issues.

Questions of principles and the impact of Albert Schweitzer

Ethical reflection must be able to base its judgment on plausible principles of decency. To find these principles and to get them generally accepted is not an easy task in our culture. More and more people question or find unacceptable how animals are being kept. The current awareness of animal welfare issues still differs profoundly between countries of the Western World, but the changes are dynamic and strong. This may be seen as a revolution, because respect for animals does not have a strong tradition in our culture. On the contrary, Christian tradition cannot offer a single renowned philosopher to answer our question.

“Bio-centric” arguments play a dominant role when ethical (no legal) aspects of animal and poultry farming are discussed in Germany. Albert Schweitzer’s (1875-1965) ideas still play a commanding role in this context. For Schweitzer, the principle to save lives was the “essence of all moral thinking”. For “thinking and reflecting people”, it follows that “it is good to save life, to support life and to develop it to its highest potential; it is evil to destroy life, to damage life and to keep life down” (Schweitzer, 1974). The fundamental intention of Schweitzer to save all lives is incompatible with the fact that the survival of some animals depends on killing other animals.

Our own species depends on other animals, and the same goes true for some of the animals we keep for various purposes. Saving all life indiscriminately is impossible. Schweitzer himself repeatedly dealt with the recurring problem that in certain situations it is not possible to save all lives.

The ethical maxim of Schweitzer „to respect all life equally“ creates considerable ethical problems. Radically thought and lived, the equivalence of all living things leads to contra-intuitive results or at least considerable difficulties when applied as daily practice in the real world. Schweitzer does not offer a solution for this dilemma for intentional and systematic reasons.

The seeming weakness in offering rules or even instructions on how to act in situations of ethical conflict turns out to be an advantage for its central demand. Schweitzer sees no need to offer “instructions” how to apply his ethics of respect for life. This is imminent in his ethics. In Schweitzer’s (1974) eyes, ethics as a set of rules how to deal with recurring moral conflicts by resorting to accepted forms of decent behavior, involves a perfidious self-deception. “A ready-to-use balance between ethics and needs suggests a false security. A good conscience is an invention of the devil.”

If there were an ethic dictating what is right and what is wrong, the individual would be released from having to reflect and judge. Such an ethic is not only utopic, but not even desirable for Schweitzer. If you have a functioning compass, you are not likely to get lost, even if you don't have a detailed road map which tells you where to turn. Similarly, ethics cannot and is not intended to guide us step by step in each and every imaginable situation.

Pathocentricity – our responsibility to minimize suffering of animals

The continuing challenge is to find the the least burdensome alternatives to limit killing and suffering of all animals to an essential minimum. Nobody can be released from this responsibility.

This special responsibility is involved whenever humans have contact with animals. Discussions are always about specific options for treating animals, because people control the situation. This is especially true for farm animals which are totally dependent on the husbandry provided by their owners or caretakers.

For farm animals, the pathocentric perspective can be used to measure and evaluate the degree of suffering for individual animals. In the case of farm animals, we are especially emotionally distressed if we see animals suffer and this can be argued on ethical grounds. Whether we have the right to "use" or "exploit" animals, cannot be answered unequivocally with philosophical arguments.

Enlightened philosophy no longer believes in „objective“ natural causes: for each answer we assume a certain conception of the world, which always depends upon a subjective interpretation how we see the world and our position in it.

In contrast, we don't need any reference to metaphysics to agree that it is an evil to inflict pain or suffering upon an animal. Pathocentricity allows us to measure and evaluate the burden of suffering we impose on the animals. Veterinary medicine offers indicators for this evaluation. On this basis the discussion can become more factual and leave the realm of subjective judgment, although many details may still be disputed as to which treatments are acceptable.

Ethical problems start when the animal shows symptoms of stress, get sick or injured or exhibit abnormal behavior. According to the pathocentric principle, farm animals don't need to be kept "naturally", but under conditions which allow them to be as well off as possible. Therefore the management ideal is not "artgerecht" (appropriate for the species, with reference to the wild ancestor), but "tiergerecht" (animal-friendly for farm animals). The criterion is the apparent wellbeing of the individual – which is of course easiest to achieve if the environmental conditions are designed to take the inherent needs of the species into account.

With the pathocentric demand to minimize any suffering and stress for animals, current management practices that may compromise an animal's wellbeing are being challenged: Is it necessary, and if so, can the same goal be reached with less pain or stress for the animal? Is a more animal-friendly management system available? Is there an alternative to a given housing system, breed or line to reduce the chance of problems? Are there alternatives to specific treatments of animals? What can be avoided and how?

An animal may only be subjected to a painful or stressful treatment if no alternative is available and the treatment itself is not too extreme. Strict adherence to this principle is in agreement with existing animal welfare laws and a realization of the proverb from the Old Testament of the Bible (12,10) "The righteous care for the needs of their animals".

Advantages of the pathocentric approach

The pathocentric approach uses „suffering“ (pathos in Greek) of animals as criterion, a term which goes beyond "pain" and "damage" as used in §1 of the German animal welfare law. In their interpretation of the German animal welfare law, Lorz and Metzger (1999) arrive at the concept of suffering by counting only those "factors which compromise wellbeing" which are neither pain nor damage, whereas the ethical term is understood as including all "factors which compromise wellbeing" regardless of their origin.

The pathocentric approach offers a number of advantages for ethical evaluation (KUNZMANN, 2005; 2010):

- 1) When alternative management practices are being discussed, „suffering“ can be quantified to assess the burden imposed on animals. The capacity to measure different degrees of suffering allows us to judge how much should be “acceptable”. Not all human handling of animals is equally critical and “levels” of stress can be measured and judged with the pathocentric approach. From an ethical point of view, we can then also say: as stress response to treatment increases, indicating more severe interference with the animal’s wellbeing, there must be strong arguments for such treatment (“treatment” in this context is not meant in the therapeutic sense, but any handling which may affect the wellbeing of animals).
- 2) With farm animals, the pathocentric approach immediately gets to the ethically relevant point. While Schweitzer used the metaphysical “will to live” as argument, pathocentricity uses only the assumption that suffering is an evil which has to be avoided. This is evident and immediately obvious. Schweitzer’s approach, on the other hand, becomes only plausible in the context of ideological and religious convictions. The same goes for a number of other ethical theories. We may say that the pathocentric approach to bioethics is the “leanest” in terms of justification. As Busch and Kunzmann (2004) put it, „suffering“ has the function for animal ethics to provide a reason and a means: “The reason is that animals can suffer, which we have to respect; and the means is that we cannot escape the postulate to avoid suffering of animals as a fundamental basis of ethically legitimate activity”.
- 3) Direct verification is possible: Whereas the „will to live“ of Schweitzer depends largely on the personal intuition of the observer, there are several indicators which reflect the wellbeing of animals and disturbances. Adopting the pathocentric approach requires measurements of the animals. Despite possible pitfalls inherent in the methods used, it should be possible to measure and evaluate reductions in wellbeing.

Unshelm (in Methling & Unshelm, 2003) lists the following criteria which can be used to measure the reaction of animals to their housing system:

- Behavior
- Performance
- Physiological parameters
- Clinical symptoms
- Mortality and causes of death

There are many possibilities to test to what extent the wellbeing of an animal is affected: is it exhibiting unusual, atypical behaviors such as stereotypic repetitions or purposeless idle movements? Performance can be measured in terms of feed intake, daily gain or egg production. Physiological parameters can be measured, e.g., in terms of elevated hormone levels in blood samples. Are physical defects visible that are caused by the housing system? How many individuals are lost during one life cycle? All these criteria can provide information about compromised animal welfare. Ethical evaluation is based on the empirically determined condition of individual animals.

As an important afterthought, it should be noted that good results according to the indicator traits, especially performance, cannot be interpreted as proof of the animal’s wellbeing. Even if all parameters are OK, it is difficult to determine whether an animal feels well. Nevertheless, significant deviations from wellbeing are expressed in these parameters. In the context of pathocentric animal ethics, this is sufficient. Whenever the wellbeing of an animal is affected, the person in charge must be held responsible.

The „suffering“ of farm animals

How suffering of animals should be avoided has been uniquely formulated by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in terms of the five freedoms:

- 1) Freedom from hunger and thirst – access to fresh water and good nutrition.
- 2) Freedom from discomfort – suitable housing with protected areas to rest.

- 3) Freedom from pain, injuries and diseases – prevention, diagnostics and treatment.
- 4) Freedom to express normal behavior – sufficient space, adequate equipment, contact with pen mates.
- 5) Freedom from fear and suffering – husbandry conditions and treatment which do not cause psychic suffering.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council visualized the five freedoms as ideals that can never be completely realized in practice with farm animals. Animal production without any welfare compromise is not imaginable. But animals are adaptable within certain limits, and not every limitation automatically means that the animals will be suffering. We interfere with the wellbeing of the animals if their adaptability is exceeded or ignored. The definition of animal-friendly management in terms of limits to adaptability should not be misused to justify management practices “at the edge of a razor blade”.

Ethical evaluation in steps

Our model of ethical evaluation (Busch & Kunzmann, 2006) starts from the five freedoms: every treatment which interferes with these five freedoms has to be justified with a specified reason or benefit, analogous to the German animal welfare law, which requires “reasonable justification”. The model rests on three principles:

- 1) Every treatment that affects the wellbeing of animals has to be justified.
- 2) Animals should under no conditions be subjected to certain treatments.
- 3) Every morally allowed treatment has to be subjected to an evaluation of possible alternatives to minimize the burden.

In applying these evaluative principles, the model uses the following steps:

- a) The first step determines how severe the treatment is. This step is especially important, because many controversies in animal ethics remain unresolved because critics and defendants of a certain practice cannot even agree as to how “severe” they consider the effect for the animal. This is not an ethical, but a factual question. How „severe“ is, for example, dehorning calves from the calves’ point of view?

A classical case is the controversy over battery cages for laying hens, where opposite parties have not been able to agree how “severely” the hens “suffer” if they cannot express their natural behavior. Only after agreeing on the intensity of the treatment can we think in a meaningful way about justification.

The severity of a treatment results from its depth and duration. The more intensive a treatment and the longer lasting its negative effect, the more serious is its implication for the animal’s wellbeing. The model identifies not simply the obvious, massive or „brutal“ treatments as problematic, but includes treatments which may only be “unpleasant” at the time of treatment but have a long-lasting effect. The German Supreme Court put conventional cages for laying hens into this category.

This decision is an example for the next step of evaluation:

- b) The treatment is in itself too severe.

In this case, the treatment is excluded at this point of the evaluation, because it cannot be justified. This goes in Germany not only for conventional laying cages, but also for forced feeding of geese or ducks to produce fatty liver, and for raising calves tied down. We don’t have to search for further arguments; the severity of the treatment precludes any attempt to balance animal suffering against economic or other benefits. This is also the point when animal welfare laws and regulations usually take action to prevent such practices.

At this point, it must be recognized that judgment is not and will never be completely clear. In specific cases, it will be difficult to find a consensus among all experts in defining a precise borderline for acceptable burdens. Controversies over “borderlines” for specific situations will continue, and this for several reasons:

First of all, the definition of a borderline relies on available knowledge. As new information becomes available from scientific research, judgment may change. More importantly, human judgment draws the line which we and other humans must not transgress to protect the wellbeing of animals. The

“suffering” can only be determined by measuring the response of animals, but the borderline has to be decided by humans. Such judgments are necessarily based on the social environment in a given society.

For example, the ban on forced feeding for fatty liver production in Germany rests on broad consensus of society, while delicatessen stores in Germany may still offer Pâté Foie Gras imported from France, where forced feeding is still tolerated. Despite this apparent gap between freedom to produce and freedom to choose as consumer, very severe treatments may be banned by law based on moral grounds if the society considers the treatment unacceptable in terms of animal welfare. Both the social environment and the growing body of knowledge regarding the needs of the animal contribute to shifting these borderlines over time. In Southern Europe, chained watch-dogs are common, as in Germany only a few decades ago. Nowadays, this practice would not be considered acceptable in Germany.

The important point is that our model identifies a number of treatments as unacceptable before proceeding to an evaluation of arguments justifying the practice. Certain practices that are not conflicting with existing law may be morally unacceptable. According to the model, treatments are only acceptable if the intended benefit cannot be achieved without this treatment. Benefits may be for the owner of the animal in terms of reduced work load, increased security or income, but also for the animal, e.g., if the claws of cows or sheep are treated or chickens “beak trimmed” to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism.

In contrast to the balancing of goods in the common meaning of the expression, it is seldom possible to perfectly weigh the benefits against the burdens, at least not without “off-hand” judgment as we weigh benefits for man against burdens for the animal. We don’t have a “common currency”, i.e., we are always comparing apples with pears.

- c) The model therefore follows a different logic: the logic of necessity. If a treatment is not in itself too severe and if it serves a plausible benefit, it is required that the same benefit cannot be achieved by other means, i.e. that no alternative treatments are available.

A treatment is legitimate, because necessary, only if it is impossible

- 1) to achieve the same effect within the same system, e.g. by improved husbandry or with reduced density of housing. The focus in this case is on reducing the burden for the animal by improving the conditions with relatively little expenditure: more space per bird, enriched housing to allow species-specific behavior and choice of strains. At this point, poultry geneticists are especially challenged to contribute to acceptable solutions
- 2) If this approach does not lead to acceptable results and the undesirable treatment remains necessary, the second alternative is to change to another system, e.g. from cages to floor systems for laying hens. The basic idea is still to achieve a benefit for the owner with minimal expenditure, but with lower burden upon the animal. Many treatments are directly connected with the management system and – following the logic of the model – only legitimate if no alternative system exists. This again depends on whether the surrounding “structures” allow other management systems: supply and demand in a free market, legal restrictions and regional programs to support animal agriculture. Of course a farmer will only invest in alternative management systems if he or she can expect to be successful in the foreseeable future.
- 3) If, under present structures, the farmer is unable to change to another system, there is one last possible alternative to realize an acceptable profit with minimal burden for the animals, supported by changing consumer preferences and legal incentives.

A classic example is the Swiss banning of cage management for laying hens, made possible by a whole package of factors, including changed structures. A less dramatic structural change may be achieved with labeling products. The focus here is always on changing the structures for the benefit of the animals. Of the three possibilities, this approach will take the longest time and have the most profound effect, but it cannot be implemented by an individual producer.

Instead of appealing to “the consumer”, the ethical model addresses first and foremost the owners of animals who must look for alternatives. Consumers and politicians have to contribute their part to the solutions if no acceptable solutions can be reached within existing structures.

A treatment can only be accepted as necessary if no alternative can be found which interferes less with one of the five freedoms of the animal. Application of the model works like a sieve which finally filters out only those treatments which are morally legitimate, justified by a benefit, causing no excessive burden on the animal's wellbeing, and for which no alternatives exist 1) to modify the current local practice, 2) to change to an alternative system or finally 3) to change the structure.

It is not the job of the ethicist to go through all details of current management practices and to play the role of a judge to decide what is necessary. The model can only offer a guideline to disentangle the current controversial discussions and to focus upon realizing possible improvements for the animals.

Summary

Keeping animals has become an issue of highly controversial debate. Ethical reflections on animal husbandry must address popular moral intuitions. The paper presents an ethical model based on human responsibility for animals capable of suffering. This pathocentric model differentiates types of action that can be justified with ethical standards.

Zusammenfassung

Ethische Antworten auf moralische Fragen an die Geflügelhaltung

Inmitten unübersichtlicher gesellschaftlicher Diskussionen über Tierhaltung allgemein ist es auch für die unmittelbaren Akteure sinnvoll, den bunten moralischen Intuitionen mit ethisch reflektierten Urteilen zu begegnen. Dazu dient das skizzierte Bewertungsmodell. Die Tierethik wird in der Verantwortung des Menschen und der Leidensfähigkeit des Tieres grundgelegt. Daraus folgt in Stufen, welche Handlungen sich auch ethisch begründet rechtfertigen lassen.

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