Farming Animals and the Capabilities Approach: Understanding Roles and Responsibilities through Narrative Ethics

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Abstract
In the Proceedings that emerged from the Second International Workshop on the Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group Level, Sandoe, Christiansen, & Appleby (2003) challenged participants to ponder four fundamental questions:

a. What is the baseline standard for morally acceptable animal welfare?
b. What is a good animal life?
c. What farming purposes are legitimate?
d. What kinds of compromises are acceptable in a less-than-perfect world?

Continued reflection on those questions warrants examination of the shape of our modern agricultural ethic. It also calls for a reexamination of recent work by Nussbaum (2004) on extending the capabilities approach to animals and the interface of Nussbaum’s work with Rollin’s scholarship on telos (1995a). The resources of narrative ethics are summoned to navigate the above-mentioned questions and to explore how Nussbaum’s approach and Rollin’s notion of animals’ natures relate to the main storyline associated with developments in agriculture.

Keywords
animal ethics, animal welfare, farm animal ethics, narrative ethics

The last decade or so has seen some important gains in the ways we assess animal welfare and understand the very nature of animal welfare. Understanding animal welfare as it relates to the shape of agriculture and our agricultural ethic has received growing attention as well. In this essay, I will attempt to animate the latter discussion further by showing how narrative ethics, an underappreciated area of moral reasoning, can move us closer to realizing a more humane and respectful animal agriculture postindustrialization.
My essay is organized into the following sections:

A. A brief look at animal agriculture as moral tragedy
B. A discussion of what is distinctive about narrative ethics
C. A description of the moral forensics aspect of narrative
D. An exploration of the capabilities approach as a promising philosophical animal ethic
E. A consideration of how the capabilities approach, in concert with a narrative analysis of animal agriculture, can help us address the four critical questions raised by Sandoe et al. at the Second International Workshop on the Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group Level in 2003 (Sandoe et al., 2003, p. 471).

A. Animal Agriculture as Moral Tragedy

Broadly speaking, there are two prominent sets of competing stories or images that form the socio-historical-moral narrative concerning today's animal agriculture in the United States. One speaks of a vision of farming that is concerned with sustaining good relationships; farming well "permits the emergence of virtuous individuals, just communities and becoming people" (Thompson, 2001a, p. 225), and "makes people healthier... preserves the earth... and its network of life" (Worster, 1984, p. 31). This image also reflects an era where some measure of animal-centeredness prevailed in agriculture. The other set of images celebrates the humancentric gains that have emerged through technologically-oriented commercial animal agribusiness.

A third image is currently being constructed. It is reactionary and bemoans the fractured equilibrium between human beings and farmed animals as a result of the recent revolution in agriculture. Here, the dominant thread is still being stitched, and many different strands are competing for position on the main tapestry.

Image One

The first image associated with agriculture comes in two general forms. Both extol the virtues of more traditional forms of farming for its apparently more humane, animal-oriented, and environmental bright spots. They also reflect the once ubiquitous interspecific "social contract" in livestock production, along with the promotion of place prosperity (Thompson, 2001a; Thompson, 2001b). They are pastoralism and agrarianism.
Pastoralism

The pastoralist ethic extends to this day as an influential moral image that resides at the heart of farming. This biblically influenced folkway mandates (by divine fiat and encapsulated in societal mores) appropriate attentiveness or diligent husbandry of domesticated animals. While not ascribed moral status equal to human beings, animals, according to the pastoralist ethic, were considered “beings” and not mere objects. They were entrusted to human beings, who were considered the vice-regents of a higher power. These vice-regents understood “dominion” over animals as a morally obligating responsibility to care for the needs of their animal dependents and to respect them as morally considerable fellow others (Preece and Fraser, 2000). Thus, under the pastoralist ethic, animals could be used legitimately if, and only if, appropriate divinely inspired social conventions were observed. For example, animals had to be slaughtered and prepared according to ritual conventions before being consumed. Attentive shepherding was not a vocation to be taken lightly and gratuitous maltreatment was condemned vociferously (Fraser, 2001a).

Agrarianism

Agrarianism also remains a powerful image on the agricultural tapestry, despite the ubiquity of modern production technologies and practices (Thompson, 2001a; Burkhardt, 2000). Agrarianism profiles small-scale agriculture and its attendant values as essential components of a flourishing community (Berry, 2002). Commitment to place and to each other through the practice of wholesome food production made for a virtuous life. Agrarian life was inextricably linked to conscientious citizenship and democratic principles (Thompson, 2001a; Thompson and Hilde, 2000). Agrarians were “…the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (Jefferson, 1984). Agrarianism extolled family farms and farming animals under legitimate conditions. Animals not only contributed to farm ecology or served as food and a means for local commerce; they were important moral vestibules in which caring sentiments and duties were passed on to children (Thompson, 1993).

Image Two

The story of industrial, technologically-oriented commercial animal agribusiness centers around the noble goals of food security, the amelioration of on-farm labor retention problems in the wake of emigration to urban centers, and
increasing overall human flourishing (Fraser, Mench, & Millman, 2001; Mench, 2003). Industrialization, mechanization, and vertical management of farms were also embraced by Western states after World War II in response to increased global consumption of animal products and trade patterns. Animal farming, especially in the laying hen and swine industries, emerged as “factory farms.” Efficiency of production was embraced as the *industry* mantra, consequently fueling a heart-wrenching debate over the moral status of farming: should farming be viewed (primarily) as a business or as a (noble) form of life (Thompson, 2001a; Burkhardt, 2000). Significant increases in consumption of animal products and the numbers of animals farmed, as well as the preference for technological solutions, have resulted in a global meat sector that has had a face-lift with respect to distribution and demand patterns and channels, and consumer behavior. Producers’ behavior has also been transformed by competition to be more cost-efficient on the international stage. (Fraser, 2002; Fraser, 2001a; Appleby, 2004)

The concatenation of “industrialization of animal agriculture,” commercialization of the food system and hypertechnologically fitted production systems has resulted in an era of agriculture with its own set of cultural attitudes and values toward animals, giving rise, if you will, to a different social meaning of animals. These changes have influenced or *framed* how we view and value farmed animals, their welfare, and our relationship to them, how we understand what counts as a good life for them, and our judgments about proper treatment of them. Buttressed by technology, scientific knowledge, and desire for productivity, the narrative that has emerged in the last half century is one of a self-centered humankind.

A dominant metaphor used to describe animals in this starkly humancentric plotline is that of “absent referents” (Adams, 2000), perhaps (once) viewed more as beings, now relegated to the status of products or commodities (or in their final form as “white or dark meat” or “protein”). As commodities, they are valued strictly for their utility and are subjected to the above-mentioned industry mantra—to be produced efficiently for the lowest cost. In the images of this narrative, animals live an impoverished existence relative to conspecifics of old and those farmed under less intensive conditions. These animals, especially laying hens and sows, are denizens of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), typified by specialized confinement enclosures, managed and fed indoors in large part by automation and not human labor (Fraser, et al., 2001; Mench, 2003).
Image Three

The unfolding of events in animal agriculture over the last half decade or so mirrors the narrative genre tragedy (more on narrative analysis below). Three distinct stages can be delineated:

a. Stage one: a healthy equilibrium or flourishing existed between animals and their husbandmen, especially when a reciprocal arrangement of the sort—“If we farm animals then we have a responsibility to care for their needs by ensuring commensurate husbandry conditions” (Anthony, 2003)—was observed, as demonstrated by pastoralism and agrarianism.

b. Stage two: an inequilibrium or “catastrophic stage” emerged as the dominant paradigm in agriculture, supplanted the reciprocal convention in livestock production, and reframed agricultural values. Adoption of the industry mantra relegated farmed animals to absent referents.

c. Stage three: a restoration of the equilibrium or revitalization of the core values found in stage one images. Win-win practices are sought on the farm, as well as the rekindling of meaningful relationships with animals.

Image three emerges at a time when modern agriculture is in a state of moral infelicity because moral governance in agriculture is significantly absent. Our current agricultural ethic is made up of incompatible fragments of irreconcilable images that make it difficult to cement a sustainable reconciliation between farming as a way of life and as a business sector. While the tapestry is overrun with the dominant theme of industrialization, counterhegemony movements like animal protection and sustainable and organic farming, which appear juxtaposed to industrialization, can be seen emerging close to the surface. The third image, currently being composed, seeks to bring some moral accord back to the main narrative. There are two major strands here. The first is concerned with revitalizing certain pastoralist and agrarian values in lieu of the dominant paradigm. Another strand is concerned with the moral status of animals as a result of the physical and moral distance between animals and human beings.

Revitalization

Proponents of a revitalization of core pastoral or agrarian values contend that agriculture is not simply a business venture with no special moral status. It is first and foremost a lifestyle, one which does not view animal welfare as a luxury that can be set aside to meet efficient productivity requirements.
A seminal text that ushered in reflection on, and critique of, the moral shape of our modern agricultural ethics is Harrison’s *Animal Machines* (1964). Harrison spurred a fervent debate about the moral propriety of industrialized, motivated confinement systems for animal agriculture. An innovative thinker for her time, she raised public consciousness of the suffering of farmed animals due to a technologically dependent agricultural system that misleadingly correlated farming *well* with efficiency, productivity, and profit maximization. This first strand sees the industrial revolution in agriculture as undercutting the interspecific moral ideal found in pastoralism and agrarianism. As one animal scientist observes, with this “transformation of farming the American public has lost its agrarian roots and its corresponding ethic [where] intensive animal production systems are not only blamed for poor animal treatment but also for playing a contributing role in environmental destruction and food safety problems” (Swanson, 1995, p. 2744).

A reconstitution would mean moving away from the exaggerated myopic humancentricism to something more interspecifically symmetrical or counterbalanced. Seeing animal welfare issues addressed in earnest would be part of a concerted restructuring of commercial animal agriculture. Reinvigorating our general agricultural ethic with core pastoralist and agrarian ideals would subsequently point toward a more felicitous relationship with animals where the focus is back on appropriate and attentive use and care of animals (Thompson, 2001b, and Rollin, 1995a).

**Moral Status**

Harrison also sparked philosophical debate regarding the substantive question of the moral status of animals. The fact that animals were being raised in modern production systems that did not suit their natures and that they were relegated to “absent referents” by profit-minded agribusiness agents, violated their alleged interests or rights. Ethical theories such as utilitarianism and rights theory were deployed to assist in restoring some semblance of equilibrium to the human-animal relationship. Animals are moral subjects and are bearers of protected interests or rights (Wise, 2004; Francione, 2004). Philosophers and legal experts paid relatively little attention to the global structure of agriculture as they tried to resist the tendency to reduce animals to mere means to human ends. Singer (1990) and Regan (1983) are leading proponents of these types of arguments, championing animal protection in terms of the capacity for sentience or inherent value, respectively.

Without rehearsing major grievances with these approaches (see Anthony, 2003; Thompson, 2001a; Fraser, 1999; Garner, 1996), suffice it to say that they have left a very complicated philosophical area of debate extremely unsettled.
A major piece of the discussion that appears to be missing concerns the “big picture” outlook regarding the moral meaning of agriculture as such. What is absent is a critical and general discussion of our motives and tendencies, one that looks back as well as forward and transcends “simplistic formulas for assessing the consequences advanced in standard animal welfare and animal rights literature” (Anderson, 2004, p. 296).

I believe that the approach that could give us morally reliable results is narrative ethics. As I will attempt to show below, a narrative analysis could help us recast the morally salient features of pastoralism and agrarianism to meet present-day “on the farm” concerns and help marry recent attempts (like the capabilities approach discussed below) aimed at overcoming the rampant view of animals as mere commodities. To this we now turn.

B. What is Narrative Ethics?

A narrative is a story, “a more or less coherent written, spoken, or . . . enacted account of occurrences, whether historical or fictional,” that expresses a plot or a point of view (Hunter, 1996, p. 306). It is a conjunction of events organized in a followable sequence that explores with an audience the proclivities and motivations of the agents or subjects portrayed. Through a constructed web of logical and/or emotive connections, narrative can also challenge audiences to evaluate the predicaments of the agents involved from a moral point of view, by examining and justifying the normative claims embedded within them.

Recently, narrative has gained ascendancy in ethics—in part, in reaction to the top-down principalist approach in biomedical ethics (e.g., Beauchamp and Childress’ Principles of Biomedical Ethics, 2001). Unlike much recent writing in the field of philosophical animal ethics, which has assumed the prose paradigm of analytic Anglo-American argumentation (where valid inferences are established from a catalogue or collection of propositions), narrative tends not only to circumnavigate founding ethical behavior in theory (contra Singer and Regan, for example); it also resists reduction of the content of morality to a mere ensemble of discrete propositions or principles. Narrative does not act as an “all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all could be efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 19). Narrative as a vehicle of moral forensics enables us to “[see] a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way, [and helps us to take] in what is there, with imagination and feeling.” Stories can guide us to significant moral insights and introduce us to new vistas of moral understanding and knowledge (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 152).
Narrative plays a substantive role in ethics by offering rich biographies and facts, and by encouraging audiences to observe carefully and investigate comprehensively both present states of affairs and precedent histories. In light of these features, ethicists use narratives to motivate moral examination, explanation, and justification. While narrative can add moral weight to rules and principles under debate, it also encourages deeper philosophical investigation and contemplation on the background forms and structures of life itself. Narrative not only sparks our curiosity about the lives of the characters; it also occasions a certain kind of “living as if” one is the characters and “living through” their predicament. Narrative stirs us to “see with” or “be as” the agents or subjects portrayed. Narrative affords audiences with the opportunity to apprehend what is morally relevant for subsequent attitude (re)examination and action, often through a marriage of moral emotions and theoretical principles (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 44).

Narrative can help lubricate moral discourse and reasoning in the following significant ways:

a. Through cases or case studies

Cases help to present a treasure trove of details that influence moral decision-making (Clouser, 1996, p. 339). Cases are often used in biomedical ethics to highlight both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the probe, and to test theses, conventions, moral underpinnings, and commitments. Hypothetical, virtual, and real stories can be used to expose the framing assumptions, motivations, and tendencies of the agents involved in a particular narrative. Cases underscore the tensions associated with being embedded in particular moral relationships with others and with occupying particular social positions. They also unearth amoral dimensions that factor into what agents believe and how they act.

With their emphasis on context and attention to specific details, cases steer audiences away from abstract and empty discourse and open the possibility for them to envision workable solutions to real life concerns. Cases can also help audiences test the validity of their moral imperatives or principles under question or different possible interventions. They give audiences the ability to see the implications of the target principles, imperatives, or interventions (and their alternatives) on the lives of the characters. Prioritizing and weighting of different alternative principles, imperatives, and interventions can then be done more effectively in the context of the practical realities of the everyday lived experience faced by the subjects portrayed (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988, p. 314). Alternately put, narrative incarnated as cases gives us a way—through broader appreciation of context and background—to recheck more handily
our commitments as far as what is permissible, obligatory, or forbidden, and what can work in practice.

With this in mind, cases challenge those who are concerned with ameliorating the welfare of animals to consider a broader perspective of how an animal’s welfare is influenced or determined by his or her location within a complex of human activities. Thus, any assessment and assurance program dealing with animals’ welfare should not consider only their biology, psychological and physical endowments or adaptations, ontogenic development, or husbandry circumstances. Context-specific intervention also involves appreciating the economic, social, and moral underpinnings of those who care for animals and how animals have assumed the roles (and values) they have in human societies.

b. Through foundational stories or mythologies

Foundational stories or mythologies (the main focus of this paper) are pervasive cultural snapshots or images of our cultural tapestry. They permeate the very fiber of our collective consciousness and capture central cultural commitments, which then serve as foundational fodder that sources our moral intuitions or judgments. They form the basis of our moral tradition and present us with wisdom about how to live well and right by imposing a particular frame or mental structure on us. Foundational stories, in concert with ethical theory, can help to tease out a robust ethical lifestyle and carve out what it implies to live meaningfully. According to Preece:

The stories of myth . . . reflect in part the cultural, social, political, and economic realities of the type of society in which they arise. The forms of the society play a significant role in molding the consciousness of the people. A lot of our important cultural mores and ethics regarding animals [for example,] we acquire through mythologies—they are a source of moral education, they permeate various avenues of our cultural life, including childhood literary tales. . . . We would thus expect rather different tales to emerge from hunter-gatherer, agricultural and pastoral societies, and from expansionist urban state empires, such as the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Incas. Differing myths and religious parables are, in part, the consequences of differing everyday life experiences. (2002, p. 1)

Foundational stories can be philosophical histories or philosophical reflections of present-day sensibilities. They can be dynamic in nature and are shaped by existential realities. They reflect our moral selves, who we are, the nature and significance of our relationships with others, and how we have assumed our current attitudes and dispositions toward others. They make note of how our moral underpinnings and views of others emerge by way of certain historical
or social developments. Examples of foundational narratives in animal ethics include Ojibwa and biblical accounts of creation, pastoralism, and agrarianism (Fraser, 2001a).

C. How Narrative Expresses and Justifies Norms

Narrative is often used as a vehicle to persuade us to behave in certain ways. For example, the words or metaphors used impose on us particular worldviews or lenses. Narrative can give us assurances that our commitments are the right ones and that our beliefs and attitudes are formed reliably and are connected with truth or longstanding foundational stories or mythologies (Murray, 1997).

Foundational stories, for example, provide reliable moral knowledge or justification through precedence. Precedence is underscored by deeply held intuitions and values. The wisdom of precedence can help us to judge what should be proper conduct toward others. Also, competing moral principles can be evaluated for their coherence in the context of a body of rich beliefs and moral knowledge. “Right” or “permissible” actions must fit people’s catalogues of beliefs in order for them to be accepted—i.e., they must resonate with our aspirations and overarching concerns, with what gives meaning and value to life or reflects other interests that we have. For example, as in the case of pastoralism and agrarianism, foundational stories can give us reliable moral knowledge about which kinds of lifestyles lead to meaningful lives and good human-animal relationships. Furthermore, foundational stories can give us a way to evaluate the implications of adopting alternate principles or moral rules by examining them against precedence or the concatenation of events that are ground for our initial intuitions. Here, the coherence of ascribing moral or legal rights to nonhuman animals in a strictly egalitarian sense has come under scrutiny because it fails to acknowledge morally significant species differences (Steinbock, 1978; Warren, 1987; Pollan, 2002).

Foundational stories tend to exert normative push or pull. As a vehicle of understanding normative action, foundational stories as narrative persuade by “presenting a logical explanation, a pathetic proof, and a palpable demonstration of good ethos” (Liszka, 2003, p. 49). The logical proof reflects how the events in the narrative unfold in light of the plot or theme that is being developed and thus is connected to how well the thematic unity is developed and sustained. The pathetic proof refers to the kinds of emotions or cogitations the narrative evokes—i.e., how has the story “moved” us. Lastly, the ethos of a narrative deals with the moral character of the agents or subjects portrayed and the extent to which audiences are able to identify with them, and whether they
are led to personal transformations or to revisit their own moral underpinnings (Liszka, 2003, p. 49).

D. Narrative Ethics and the Capabilities Approach

Recent philosophical animal ethics has seized on the moral import of narrative. Scholars have begun to mine the fruits of narratives that deal with human-animal relationships in earnest. Examples include important contributions such as *The Lives of Animals/Elizabeth Costello* by John Coetzee, Donna Haraway’s *The Companion Manifesto*, *Gorillas in the Mist* by Dian Fossey, and *In the Shadow of Man* by Jane Goodall. These narratives challenge the traditional human-animal distinction and help to develop ways to build a more inclusive moral community by teasing out the moral forensic proof delineated above.

A narrative ethics analysis of animal agriculture has helped to reinvigorate the belief that animals should live naturally in conformity with their adaptations and be afforded the opportunity to develop as per their species-specific sensory and ontogenic modalities. It is a central element in the foundational story that nourishes the core of agriculture itself, and informs the social meaning of animals and their moral standing. Some degree of nonegoistic respect and attentiveness to the animal’s nature and adaptations, and its contribution to, and dependency on, human beings are encapsulated in the foundational stories of both pastoralism and agrarianism (Fraser, 2001a, 2001b; Thompson, 1999; Rollin, 1995a; Thompson 1993). Foundational stories of the latter traditions also suggest a powerful moral precedent in the form of a reciprocal convention that founds the human-farmed animal relationship and that is sanctioned by certain social expectations about what constitutes humane or equitable farming (Rollin, 1995a).

As briefly alluded to above, narratives that are *tragedies* often have plots in the following structure: An initial stage of equilibrium, calm, or flourishing; a stage riddled with inequilibrium or calamity; and a restoration, reconciliation, rebirth, or revitalization stage. These stages correspond to “a rise and fall” in the main storyline, with a responsive reconstitution stage anchoring the eventual moral redemption (Liszka, 2003).

Understanding recent historical developments in agriculture in terms of *tragedy* reveals that a “new social or [supplemental] ethic” (Rollin, 1995a, pp. 3; 8-16) has emerged in response to frustrations over current-day production circumstances brought on by industrialization. Previously (and generally speaking), gratuitous infliction of pain, cruelty, and suffering were forestalled
by adherence to a conscientious husbandry ethic or as a result of the producer’s own self-interested personal ethic. Rollin contends that this “supplemental” ethic for animals’ welfare will not only “mean control of pain and suffering, it will also entail nurturing and fulfillment of the animals’ natures, which [he identifies as] telos” (Rollin 1995a, p. 9). He adds that, given the recent advent of a new paradigm of farming animals, telos [should be] the basis of moral respect (Rollin, 1995a, pp. 3-26; Rollin 1995b, pp. 176-185). Telos is “a nature, a function, a set of activities intrinsic to [an individual of a particular species], evolutionarily determined and genetically imprinted” (Rollin, 1981, p. 39). Alternately put, telos refers to an animal’s inherited “adaptations” (Frazer et al., 1997, p. 201) or its constitutive nature—the “pigness of the pig, the cowness of the cow”; “fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly”—which are essential to their well-being. Common sense tells us that animals who are built to move need to move to feel good; there is no point in trying to prove that they are fine if kept immobile… [T]o promote welfare of animals, we need to raise them in ways that respect their natures” (Rollin 1995b, p. 159).

Upon closer analysis, the notion of telos—which provides the “supplemental” ethic to address oppressive production circumstances associated with confinement technologies and the industrial-style business ethic and management practices endemic to much of commercial agriculture—is inextricably embedded in the philosophical histories or cultural mythologies of both pastoralism and agrarianism. When we look at recent grievances from a narrative perspective, for example from…

Ruth Harrison: “Have we the right to rob [animals] of all pleasure in life simply to make more money more quickly out of their carcasses?” (Harrison, 1964); and

Astrid Lindgren: “[I]t might even be possible to guarantee that young animals… get a little summertime happiness, at least a temporary reprieve from the floors of barns and the crowded spaces where the poor animals are stored until they die. Let them see the sun just once, get away from the murderous roar of the fans. Let them get to breathe fresh air for once, instead of manure gas” (Astrid Lindgren, in Anonymous, 1989); and

the Brambell Committee: “In principle we disapprove of a degree of confinement of an animal which necessarily frustrates most of the major activities which make up its natural behaviour…” (Brambell, 1965)

…we hear loud echoes connecting the notion of telos to images of agriculture’s foundational narratives mentioned above. The foundational stories (that
inform the social meaning of animals and their moral status) serve as sources and justification for our farm ethic and persuade us to “see with” and “be as” the animals we farm (and gain appreciation for their plight).

When we are able to “see with” and “be as” the animals, we are compelled to reexamine not only the shape of our lives, but also the shape of our agricultural system, from a moral viewpoint. When we look for normative justification from the main storyline of agriculture, the thematic unity and performative conditions mirror back disapproving glances. The concatenation of the logical proof—that an unjust sequence of events has befallen farmed animals over the last fifty years; the pathetic proof—the conditions bespeak a humanity severely lacking in compassion; and the ethos—continuing to allow the status quo to persist depicts a flawed character, is morally evocative. If the images portrayed in stage two of the plight of animals in CAFOs move us to feel guilt, shame, or moral outrage, then we are faced with the urgent need to do something to bring about an equilibrium again in animal agriculture.

What might a reconstitution look like? How might we recast or reframe the foundational or precedent images so that the important values and views of animals at the heart of our agricultural ethic can guide us postindustrialization but avoid being simply a romantic reaction? Enter the capabilities approach, which not only seeks to revitalize precedent values and standards found in pastoralism and agrarianism, but also addresses the question of the moral status of animals, and speaks to the political and practical realities of farming (and thus to the four-part query posed by Sandoe et al., 2003).

A major proponent of the capabilities approach is political and moral philosopher, Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum’s recent extension of her capabilities approach to animals echoes similar themes found in Rollin about respecting an animal’s naturally inherited capacities and thus is rooted (as for Rollin) in agriculture’s foundational mythologies. However, it also challenges us to (re)consider the current narrative that underscores our relationship with animals.

Nussbaum’s position is based on her intuition that the question of justice is strictly implied by the notion of agency (Nussbaum, 2006). Nussbaum argues that, as a matter of justice, we should be concerned with the quality of an animal’s life, his or her dignity and free movement, and affiliations with conspecifics. As with her work on promoting human rights, she argues that “there is waste and tragedy when a living [nonhuman animal] has the innate, or ‘basic’ capacity for some functions that are evaluated as important and good, but never gets the opportunity to perform those functions” (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 305). She calls on all nations to adopt constitutional guarantees to protect animals as subjects of political justice. International accords protecting the
habitats of animals and preventing cruelty are further implications of recognizing the dignity of animals.

The capabilities approach acknowledges that animals have a good of their own and this founds the basis of our direct obligations to them. Species norms or animals’ constitutive natures are “evaluative.” That is, investigations into the lives of these animals give us some purchase on the truth of what it is to be an individual, a “this of a particular kind.” We can better figure out the central interests and needs that flow from an individual’s telos (in Rollin’s terms). Knowing the constitutive natures of animals informs us of our responsibilities toward them and helps us to form judgments about how they should be treated and what ought to be made available in order that they may thrive (Nussbaum, 2004, pp. 310-311, 315-316).

Nussbaum contends, “The general aim of the capabilities approach in charting political principles to shape the human-animal relationship would be… that no animal should be cut off from the chance at a flourishing life and that all animals should enjoy certain positive opportunities to flourish. With due respect for a world that contains many forms of life, we attend with ethical concern to each characteristic type of flourishing and strive that it not be cut off or fruitless. . . . Human beings affect animals’ opportunities for flourishing, pervasively . . . Respect for other species’ opportunities for flourishing suggests [a more] . . . robust, positive political commitment to the protection of animals . . .” (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 307).

Here, Nussbaum appeals to something like animal dignity to underscore her capabilities approach and, I would contend, to reinvigorate the social meaning of animals as ends in their own right and not mere “absent-referent” or commodities. This notion captures a moral ideal that has always been a central part of the cultural ethos or foundational story of farming. The indelible idea etched into the cornerstone of agriculture, steeped in its very marrow, is that respect for animal dignity (arguably) grounds the reciprocal convention mentioned above. In standard form, this amounts to something like the following:

1. If we respect an animal’s dignity, then we respect her constitutive nature.
2. If we respect her constitutive nature, then we should promote husbandry conditions that allow her to cope in her environment.
3. If we should promote husbandry conditions that allow her to cope in her environment, then she is likely to fare well.
4. If we respect an animal’s dignity, then she is likely to fare well.

The obligatory action, then, is to ensure that the animal has what she needs so that she can cope in her environment.
Digging slightly deeper into the narrative, when we look to the foundational stories of pastoralism and agrarianism through the lenses of narrative ethics combined with Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, we see that these societies practiced what may be likened to “attentive love” (Weil, 1977). This is a metaphor of nurturant guardianship or custodianship toward dependents. It requires engaging the other in nonegoistic perceiving or “receptive perceiving” (Weil, 1977). Attention to the other as she experiences her situation and not as we do or attempt to (contra empathy), reinforces our respect for her dignity. By accepting her on her own terms, we let the other be as she is, instead of imposing our will on her (Ruddick, 1989). This notion of “attentive love” shines attention on the moral significance of the animal’s life in itself. It forces us to recognize that in order for an individual to flourish as the peculiar kind of being that she is, we must provide her with a particular kind of environment to which she can adapt herself and express her “capabilities.” To this end, it is important to bear in mind the ways in which an individual has evolved and the corresponding environments that have produced her unique instincts, abilities, and biological drives (Fraser et al., 1997). That is to say, if one is a guardian of some being, one has to know what her behavior means, what her expression means, and what her needs are in order to discharge one’s responsibility well, so that she can flourish. The responsibility component here tells us that part of what it means to be a nurturing caregiver is to be keenly aware of the needs and characteristics of one’s dependents.

On this analysis, Nussbaum’s notion of animal dignity recasts the values underlying respectful treatment of animals as found in agriculture’s grounding story to meet the concerns raised by stage two of the narrative presented above. Her capabilities approach translates the abstract notion of respect for animals’ dignity into actions that can be performed when it comes to promoting animal welfare. It is to this latter connection that we now turn.

E. From Theory to Practice

How might the capabilities approach buttressed by a narrative ethics analysis of animal agriculture address the four questions laid out by Sandoe et al. (2003)?

a. What is a good animal life?
Taking its lead from Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, trans. 1941, Books 1-3), the capabilities approach discussed here emphasizes the importance of knowing “the what it is to be what it is” of a creature as commensurate with respect. Attentiveness to the animal’s constitutive nature is where we should start in order to reestablish the view of animals as beings. A good life for animals...
means reinserting something like attentive love and responsibility into the very structure of agriculture postindustrialization.

In concrete terms, we are reminded of the importance of turning our attention to understanding animals on their own terms. That is, respect amounts to appreciating their natures and their inherited adaptations. Respect translates into studying how animals prefer to live, promoting their basic health, biological functions, and positive affective states, as well as reducing their pain and suffering, and better accommodating their species-specific tendencies.

Nussbaum and others have noted that turning our attention to animals’ capabilities again in the wake of this radical anthropocentrism may involve strengthening legal protection of animals and reforming industry standards (including boosting accreditation programs), to “guarantee a more robust set of animal rights” (Sunstein, 2004, p. 252). Different strategies might be called on to overcome the consequences of the methods of production that have occasioned a kind of invisibility of animals. Moral imagination is key, in order to undertake the fundamental task of reestablishing the view of farmed animals as (primarily) “beings.” On the topic of the social meaning of animals, the capabilities approach also challenges us to be constantly vigilant, lest we continue to promote an inhumane and disrespectful animal agriculture.

Here, Nussbaum strongly supports alerting the consuming public to sensible alternatives, such as meat from animals raised under humane conditions. Her approach emphasizes the importance of a good or decent life and painless death for these animals. She also advocates establishing legal standing for animals in order to provide more urgency and teeth to the enforcement of existing anticruelty laws. It should be noted that, while the capabilities approach requires human beings to promote the realization and expansion of animals’ capabilities, it does not amount to a “sweeping set of categorical imperatives for animals, [that is] valid in all contexts for all creatures possessing some defined capacities” (Anderson, 2004, p. 294). We certainly have more to do to understand what a “bill of rights” for animals should look like, exploring the relationship between welfare and capabilities, and the social meaning of animals’ dignity in connection to important human moral ends.¹

b. What is the baseline standard for morally acceptable animal welfare?
This question asks about the relationship between dignity and animal welfare—i.e., what are the conditions for a good life for farmed animals? Since dignity for animals means their being raised in a manner consistent with their constitutive natures, providing the environmental means, adequate husbandry conditions, and opportunities for them to express their natures appears
to be an essential starting place. Our responsibilities thus translate to ensuring that animals are raised in husbandry conditions that map onto their adaptations—conditions in which they are able to exhibit their species-specific sensory and ontogenic modalities.

More specifically, in order to promote a good life for animals (see Nussbaum, 2004, pp. 314-317 for her complete list; see also Fraser & Weary, 2004):

• Animals should fit well in dwellings that afford satisfactory biological functioning; this includes opportunities to satisfy their need for food, drink, shelter, species-typical nutritional requirements, and protection from predators.
• Animals should have the opportunity to perform rewarding activities associated with their natures, including being unfettered and being able to move in characteristic, species-specific ways.
• Conditions should promote positive affective states and freedom from negative ones, including opportunities to engage in pleasurable activities, the ability to hide or flee when necessary, and to play.
• The concept of animal dignity calls into question particular practices like ear cropping, dehorning, and tail docking, as well as forms of genetic modification that may be inimical to an animal’s own good.
• A component that focuses on human vigilance is important. Appropriate and timely discharge of human responsibilities should be at the forefront of our minds in order to avoid the same sort of complacency that has emerged with industrialization (Anthony, 2003).

The importance of ethological study of the whole animal cannot be overstated here. Further, assessing animal welfare in a robust way must also include investigation of the place of human agency in promoting a good life for animals before more than just minor gains can be obtained.

c. What farming purposes are legitimate?
A narrative analysis of the shape of agriculture exposes the need for vision, partnership, and strategic and moral leadership in order to sustain good human-farmed animal relationships before this question can be tackled in any genuine sense (Fraser, 2001b). Revitalizing core values found in the foundational stories of agriculture and recasting them to meet the challenges of industrialization requires a community-minded animal agriculture with a stricter eye toward moral governance. This would necessitate constant public discussion of these issues, acknowledging the sacrifices of animals, linking consumers and producers in partnership so that the primary caregivers of animals can have more viable livelihoods as well as promote ecologically sound
farm practices. Furthermore, hard questions need to be asked as we come to terms with what it means to respect the dignity of farmed animals, including whether animal farming in this or that particular way is really necessary, whether we should stop farming some species of animals that demonstrate certain laudable characteristics from a moral point of view, as well as whether and how to reduce the numbers of individuals, if we do continue to raise and slaughter for food (Anthony, 2003).

d. What kinds of compromises are acceptable in a less-than-perfect world? Here again, in order to answer this question, we need to look at the burdens we are willing to incur ourselves in order to be less humancentric. A counterbalanced agricultural ethic does not only entail that consumers appreciate the multifaceted aspects of the food system. It will also require them to revisit their philosophy of technology in order to strengthen their philosophy of animal ethics. That is, reflection on our relationship with technology and how our values and views of animals have been inadvertently shaped by seemingly laudable motives, will—one hopes—help to forestall future harm to our fellow others. This reflection may also highlight instances of genuine interspecific conflicts of interest, which may not be as many as currently thought.

Conclusion

Animal dignity is a normative notion that integrates the physical and psychological dimensions of sentient beings, and their need for certain kinds of environments, with the human responsibility to provide it. Pastoralists and agrarians were cognizant of the “capabilities” or beingness of animals and readily embraced their fiduciary responsibility of attentive care. That is, “squeezing round pegs into square holes” was not a viable option in these societies. Part of what was endorsed as respectful and culturally acceptable farming was not to impose human will too drastically onto animals (albeit perhaps for self-interested reasons) (Rollin, 1995a, and Thompson, 1993), but to allow animals to live according to their “adaptations” or natures so that they could flourish.

The narrative approach, as applied to animal agriculture, provides rich resources to address concerns for a more equitable human-animal relationship. It makes lucid that we need to “acknowledge the plurality of values, the inadequacy of simplistic formulas, the dependence of rights on the natural and social contexts, and consequences of their enforcement” (Anderson, 2004, p. 296). It highlights, as William Kittredge has eloquently surmised, that:
We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character, and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark and rework our stories. We do it again the next morning, and all day long, before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing reasons for our lives. Other than such storytelling there is no reason to things. (1996, p. 157)

Our task, then, is not only to reshape animal agriculture in a way that respects the dignity of animals as found in their biological and evolutionary inheritance, but also to author the social meaning of the human-animal relationship in a way that reflects a compassionate humanity. The capabilities view offered here challenges us to (re)consider the character of our moral lives—i.e., how have we come to emphasize domination or exploitation instead of respectful coexistence as the dominant form of social meaning of animals? This aspect of the capabilities approach is highlighted when we take a narrative approach.

A narrative account of animal agriculture challenges us to look hard at the moral character that has emerged as a result of our agricultural practices. Assessment of the shape of agriculture itself highlights the extent to which certain core values embedded in laudable foundational stories of agriculture have been usurped by an unattractive form of humancentricism, in the wake of industrial agriculture. Considering the morality of certain recent images on the main storyline should shake us from the moral torpor that has led us to turn a blind eye to the welfare of billions of farmed animals for human benefit.

The performative condition, the pathetic proof and ethos associated with agriculture’s main storyline, calls for moral imagination, justice, and compassion. In response to “the fall” of traditional husbandry ethics, the capabilities approach not only serves to ground practice, but it helps us “see with and through” exactly what is involved when we start to pay attention to the experiences of animals in CAFOs in earnest. Institutional and infrastructural issues that challenge the viability of farming well deserve serious collective attention. Respecting the dignity of animals involves making hard choices and some costs to us. How we author the third stage of the narrative will reflect on the extent of our willingness to be more humane and just. The capabilities approach profiled here is a viable approach, since it not only emphasizes a more animal-centered agriculture, but also challenges us to reflect on our responsibilities and to investigate our motives and the consequences of our practices on our moral character.
Notes

1. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for persuading me to explore further this implication in the context of the analysis of the capabilities approach discussed here.

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References


