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### Recommended Citation

Nobis, N. (2009). The "Babe" vegetarians: bioethics, animal minds and moral methodology. In S. Shapshay (Ed.), *Bioethics at the movies*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press. (pp. 56-73).

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# The “Babe” Vegetarians: Bioethics, Animal Minds and Moral Methodology

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“The fact is that animals that don't seem to have a purpose really do have a purpose. The Bosses have to eat. It's probably the most noble purpose of all, when you come to think about it.”  
– Cat, “Babe”

"The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men."  
– Alice Walker

## 1. Animal Ethics as Bioethics

According to bioethicist Paul Thompson, “When Van Rensselaer Potter coined the term ‘bioethics’ in 1970, he intended for it to include subjects ranging from human to environmental health, including not only the familiar medical ethics questions . . . but also questions about humanity's place in the biosphere” (Thompson, 2004).

These latter questions include ethical concerns about our use of animals: morally, should animals be on our plates? Should humans eat animals? The fields of animal and agricultural ethics address these questions. Thompson categorizes these fields as within bioethics since “agriculture has obvious effects on the broader environment, and it is impossible to ignore questions about the moral standing of agricultural animals or the impact that food production has on wild nature.” Another bioethicist, Gregory Pence, notes that bioethicists who are “big picture” thinkers often discuss the “rights of animals” (Pence, 2000).

Ethical questions about the treatment of animals thus are profoundly bioethical, especially in the term’s original sense. And animal issues overlap, at a conceptual and practical level, many other issues in bioethics: abortion, the responsible use of research funds, food safety and politics, concerns about global nutrition and poverty, and preventative medicine, to name just a few.

But ethical issues about animal are often ignored in many bioethics courses, writings and discussions. <sup>[1]</sup> Many factors might explain this, but one possible reason why this is so is that, unlike many other bioethical questions, moral questions about animals are *personal*. Philosopher Tom Regan writes that, “the issue of animal rights forces us to ask what we should do *when* we sit down to our next meal or *when* we go shopping for a new coat. Animal rights is an in-our-face kind of inquiry whose questions force us to make a moral inventory of our most common choices, our day-to-day way of living in the world” (Regan, 2003). And philosopher Peter Singer has observed that, “For most human beings, especially in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with non-human animals is at mealtimes: we eat them” (Singer, 2002). He then argues that, “In doing so we treat them purely as means to our ends. We regard their life and well-being as subordinate to our taste for a particular kind of dish.”

Singer, Regan and other many other philosophers challenge people to rationally justify their daily, animal-eating dietary habits and, if they can’t, to change. Since people tend to prefer to avoid challenges to the morality of *their own* beliefs, attitudes and behavior, and generally resist change, this might explain some bioethics’ focus on impersonal social policy. Thinking about what *other people* should and should not do is far less-personally challenging. That bioethical questions about animals are personal, however, presents unique challenges, and great opportunities, for moral progress in thought, attitude and deed.

## 2. The “Babe” Vegetarians

Here I discuss the role the film “Babe” has played in helping people address these challenges and make this moral progress. It is thought that a significant number of young people (mostly girls, now young women) became vegetarians due to their seeing “Babe.” These people are often called “Babe Vegetarians,” influence by what has been called “The Babe Effect.” Many of their stories are found on the internet. <sup>[2]</sup> For example, Jessica Alleva, at the age of 16, writes:

In 1995, a very famous movie called “Babe” was released. The movie, starring James Cromwell and one pink piggy, Babe, was an awakening. Like the Buddha reaching enlightenment or the apple that had fallen on the head of Thomas Edison, I knew then that for me, my life was about to change. Though only eight years old, I’d decided never again to eat another animal. I looked at my food in a new way, and realized that pork, for example, was not merely a food product, but was once a living, sentient being. I reasoned that animals, like humans, can feel sadness, happiness and pain. From this broad comparison, the line dividing humans and animals is diminished (Alleva).

Megan Palame, a college senior, writes:

I did become a vegetarian when I was 10 from watching “Babe.” I always loved animals as a child growing up with them as pets, or visiting them at the zoo, and somewhat equated them with having similar feelings as humans, such as happiness and fear. Then when I saw the movie, everything made sense to me. Just as Babe the pig did not just want to be a “pig,” but be a shepherd, more than just his role on the farm, this made me think that animals are forced into their roles as food, and only food. Babe the movie was the epitome of connecting an emotional level to animals; if an animal could even just want to live, was enough for me not to be responsible for their murder. The visualization of animals conversing, loving, surviving, and aspiring helped me see animals in a different light.

Actor James Cromwell, who played Farmer Arthur Hoggett in “Babe,” also became a vegan – a person who consumes no animal products – as a result of his role in the film. He explains, “I was so moved by the intelligence, sense of fun and personalities of the animals I worked with on Babe that by the end of the film I was vegetarian. If any kid ever realized what was involved in factory farming they would never touch meat again.” <sup>[3]</sup> The films’ influence surely continues today.

But *should* the film have had the influence it has had? *Should* people have found “Babe” as morally persuasive as they have? Or is this reaction based on mere sentimentality and emotion, not strong moral reasoning, as critics of vegetarianism likely have claimed? I will argue in favor of the former, that there is a strong, inspiring, case for vegetarianism found in the film.

To do this, I discuss recent results from cognitive ethology, the science of animal minds, regarding the minds of farmed animals. While, to many, “Babe” seems to a fantasy, in terms of its attributing complex mental states to farmed animals, I discuss recent empirical research regarding the pigs, sheep, cows, and chickens that suggest that the reality of farm animals’ minds and lives is closer to “Babe” in many ways that people tend to suspect.

Based on these facts about animals’ minds, I give reasons to think that it is wrong to raise and kill beings like this for the *pleasure* of eating them. I then consider many objections to this argument. Ironically, many of the animals on the farm accept a prejudicial moral outlook, according to which individuals are judged not on their *own* merits but, rather, on morally irrelevant considerations. This same kind of reasoning is often used by those who attempt to justify harmful practices in animal agriculture. I show that this reasoning is faulty.

Thus, I argue that “Babe” helps us get the facts right about animal minds, and helps us see better methods of engaging in moral reasoning. The “Babe vegetarians” were right, and “Babe effect” is morally justified.

## 3. What Farmed Animals Are Like, on Film and in Reality

What are animals like, according to *Babe*? Of course, in the film animals can *talk* – that’s false – but what does the film present that is true? Many things. At a most basic level, the film presents animals having minds: they have beliefs and desires: they wanting things and have beliefs about how to get them. Animals are not mindless, preference-less beings: what happens to them matters to them, even if

it doesn't matter to anyone else. It shows animals having emotions: they can be sad and lonely, happy and content. Most importantly, it shows that animals can feel pleasure and pain: they can *suffer*.

The film opens showing Babe with his brothers and sisters, nursing on his mother. It is later said that Babe's mother cared for him and treated him lovingly. So animals are shown in families, caring for each other, especially the mother for her children. "Fly" the dog illustrates this with her pups: she cares for them and misses them when they are sold off to new homes. It shows animals mourning the loss of another animal, when "Maa" the sheep was killed by the intruder dogs. It says that Babe and Farmer Hoggett "regarded each other," they had a relationship, a closeness that developed through the film. There is occasional jealousy among animals and, finally, fear, including fearing being eaten.

So the film presents animal – both dogs and cats *and* animals who are routinely raised to be killed and eaten, such as pigs, chickens, and cows – as having complex mental and emotional lives. How far is this from the truth? The *Humane Society of the United States* offers a summary of some of the recent research on intelligence, perception, memory, sociability, communication, and learning abilities of farmed animals. [\[4\]](#)

About pigs, they report:

Pigs are intelligent animals, and many consider them to be equal—or superior—to dogs in intelligence. When living among humans, piglets learn their names within two to three weeks and respond when called. Pigs have also demonstrated a strong sense of direction, with the ability to find their way home even across long distances. Pennsylvania State University Professor Stanley Curtis conducted research that found pigs can respond to verbal communications and play computer games. The pigs used their snouts to move joysticks, which controlled cursors on the screen that could hit their targets. The pigs had a hit rate of over 80%.

In nature, pigs live in social groups. Pigs who know each other engage in certain behaviors, much like humans shake hands or hug. A pig may greet a friend by making nose-to-nose contact or by grooming the other. It has been suggested that pigs can recognize and remember up to 30 other pigs. They establish a stable social group by evaluating each other's behavior and understanding which companions are more aggressive and dominant. Pigs are so communal that they even sleep together, huddled in a nest.

Pigs can learn where food is located by watching each other. Scientists at the University of Bristol found that showing one pig where food was hidden could benefit others in the group. Other pigs would notice that their companion had located food and would "follow the leader" rather than search on their own.

Although you may think "oink, oink" is the only sound pigs make, they are actually quite vocal animals with a wide repertoire of "words." Their language includes jaw chomping, teeth clacking, grunts, roars, squeals, snarls, and snorts. Boars (male pigs) use mating songs when attracting females. Sows (female pigs) use a special grunt to tell their piglets it is time to suckle. Piglets (baby pigs) even have a special distress call they use when separated from their mother.

The bond between piglets and their mother is very strong. Before giving birth, the pregnant sow builds a large nest for farrowing, or birthing, her piglets and for protecting them after they're born. In nature, pregnant sows are very particular about the location and quality of this nest. A mother may walk three to six miles before finding a sufficiently isolated and protected spot, and she can take up to ten hours to build her nest.

Once the piglets are born, mother and children remain in the nest for up to two weeks. After this period, the family leaves the nest and returns to the rest of the herd. Around this time, play becomes an important part of the piglets' lives. Beginning with play fighting, their activities later include chasing, frolicking, and exploring their environment. The piglets are gradually integrated into the herd and, around 17 weeks of age, they are weaned and begin eating solid food.

About sheep, research suggests that:

Sheep have highly developed social awareness and interactions. Researchers at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge, England found that sheep can be taught to remember the faces of 50 different sheep. After learning what the other sheep looked like from the front, they were also able to recognize one another in profile, with their visual recognition lasting for up to two years. The study's findings were reported in a 2001 issue of *Nature* and concluded that sheep, like humans, have the capacity to distinguish between faces that are very similar in

appearance. According to Dr. Keith Kendrick, one of the authors of the study, their remarkable memory systems and ability to recognize faces are signs of higher intelligence.

In everyday parlance, we may refer to a "herd of sheep" with negative overtones, suggesting that someone is conforming to the expectations of others. While sheep do have a strong instinct to "follow the leader," this is an important part of their social nature. A flock of sheep may follow the group's leader anywhere, but this characteristic can save them from predators, including coyotes, domestic dogs, mountain lions, and wolves, as animals who prey on sheep will home in on those sheep who separate from the flock. An individual sheep will become agitated when deprived of the security of her or his mates.

For chickens, research shows that:

These birds also form strong family ties. A mother hen begins bonding with her chicks before they are even born. She will turn her eggs as many as five times an hour and softly cluck to her unborn chicks, who will chirp back to her and to one another. After her chicks have hatched, the devoted mother dotes over her brood, teaching them what to eat, how to drink, where to roost, and how to avoid enemies. Young chicks separated from their mother huddle together at night for a couple of months, eventually lining themselves up on a perch and roosting like adults.

Chickens are intelligent animals and good problem-solvers. More advanced than young children, chickens possess the ability to understand that an object, when taken away and hidden, nevertheless continues to exist. And their communication skills are so developed that they use separate alarm calls depending on whether a predator is traveling by land or in the sky. Australian scientists recently discovered that some hens emit high-pitched sounds to signal they have found food. The more they prefer a particular food, the faster they "speak."

"Chickens show sophisticated social behavior," Dr. Joy Mench, Professor and Director of the Center for Animal Welfare at the University of California at Davis, "That's what a pecking order is all about. They can recognize more than a hundred other chickens and remember them. They have more than thirty types of vocalizations."

Finally, the childhood taunt "chicken" is inaccurate when it suggests cowardice. In the wild, a mother hen will threaten other hens who come within 20 feet of her chicks. Chickens will also fight with eagles and foxes to protect their kin.

And, finally, about cattle:

These animals communicate with each other in a number of ways. Vocalizations or "calls" can indicate excitement, frustration, interest, pleasure or stress. Cattle may also use a call to regain contact with a companion after they've been separated; as a prime example, when newly born calves are removed from their mothers, the cow will call to her child for days. Odors are also important to their communication and behavior, and cattle can detect smells up to five miles away.

Cattle live in hierarchically ranked groups and begin to order themselves within the group at a young age. Physical communication and grooming help to establish this social ranking. What may appear to be a game, such as head-butting or shoving, is actually a method of determining which animals within the group are dominant. Interestingly, the strongest or most dominant animals do not necessarily become the leaders. Researchers in France recently discovered that traits such as intelligence, confidence, and experience help to determine who moves up the social hierarchy. Observing 15 two-year-old grazing cows, the researchers found that the herd consistently followed the same individual toward a new feeding site. According to the study's lead author, Bertrand Dumont, "It's adaptive to the animals to follow successful leaders, as this will improve their own food research success."

Scientists have discovered that cattle have the mental capabilities to nurture friendships. Cattle in a small herd, for instance, will join with up to three other animals to form a small group of friends. The animals in the group will spend most of their time together, frequently grooming and licking each other. They will tend to dislike other cattle who are not part of the group. And, like most animals, cattle also experience strong emotions such as pain, fear, and anxiety.

Thus, the picture of animals that "Babe" presents is quite close to the truth: animals do indeed have complex minds with a range of intellectual, emotional and social capacities.

#### 4. A Moral Argument for Vegetarianism <sup>[5]</sup>

In light of this information about animals, I will now examine the common assumption *that there is nothing wrong with harming animals -- causing them pain, suffering, and an early death – so they might be eaten*. Here I present some of the reasons given for and against taking animals seriously, as many viewers of “Babe” have done, and reflect on the role of reason in our lives. Our method, useful for better understanding all bioethical debates, is to identify unambiguous and precise moral conclusions and make all the reasons in favor of the conclusion explicit, leaving no assumption unstated.

Why is the treatment of animals a moral issue? Plutarch suggested an answer nearly two thousand years ago when he reflected on the killing of animals for food:

*But for the sake of some little mouthful of flesh we deprive a soul of the sun and light, and of that proportion of life and time it had been born into the world to enjoy.*

The simple answer is that animals are *harmed* by the practices required to bring them to our plates, and harms need rational defense. As we saw above, pigs, chickens, cows, sheep and other animals are conscious, can feel pleasure and pain, and their lives can go better or worse, from their own point of view. Raising and killing them is *bad for them*: they experience pain, suffering, deprivation, boredom and an early death. *Everything* is taken from them so that they might be eaten.

Let us consider the common view that, even though it's true that animals are harmed (indeed *greatly* harmed) by the practices required for meat eating, *these practices are morally permissible* nevertheless. We will see that common arguments for this perspective all have premises that are either false or in need of serious defense. The methods used in responding to these arguments will prove useful for addressing further arguments and objections beyond those discussed here.

One of the first things said is that it's not wrong to harm animals for food because it's a “tradition”: it's something we do, and have done, for a long time. Indeed, many of the animals in Babe said just this: about killing animals for the farmer to eat them, they said “that's how things are” and resolved to accept their fates. While it's true that, for many people, eating animals *is* a tradition, we must remember that not all traditions or “ways things are” or have been are good or right, and the important question is always whether an aspect of a tradition can be supported by good moral reasons or not. Also, for many people, eating animals is *not* a tradition: for thousands of years there have been people who extend their compassion to animals, and many other people who were raised eating animals start new traditions when they see that consistency and moral reasoning demands change.

Second, some people say that it's “natural” to raise and kill animals to eat them, so it's right. But the meaning of “natural” is extremely obscure: people can mean very different things when they use the term. Whatever meaning one uses, however, it's very hard to see how modern, industrial methods of factory farming, transport and slaughter (briefly shown in “Babe” and briefly detailed below) are at all “natural.” It's not even clear how an individual's raising and killing, say, a pig or a chicken in her backyard would be “natural” either.

But the relationship between what's “natural,” in *any* sense of the term, and what's morally right does not help this argument. Selfishness and cruelty are often quite “natural,” but they are not right or good. Walking on one's hands is a quite “unnatural” way to transport oneself, but it's usually not wrong to do so. Some “natural” behaviors *are* right, but many are deeply wrong, and advocates of this argument forget that simple point. Whether something is “natural” or not is irrelevant to its morality.

Third, some people insist that it's *nutritionally necessary* to eat meat, milk and eggs and, therefore, it's right that animals are raised and killed to be eaten. But this argument ignores common

sense and disrespects medical science. If it were true that we *have* to eat meat and other animal products, then there would be no people who abstain from doing so because they would all be dead. But there are such people, alive and well, and medical science supplements common observations with evidence to show that they are often healthier than omnivores. Consider the position statement of the leading authority on nutrition in North America based on their seventeen-page review of the recent nutrition research:

*It is the position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. . . Well-planned vegan and other types of vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence. . . A vegetarian, including vegan, diet can meet current recommendations for all of these nutrients. . . Vegetarian diets offer a number of nutritional benefits, including lower levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein as well as higher levels of carbohydrates, fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate, and antioxidants such as vitamins C and E and phytochemicals. Vegetarians have been reported to have lower body mass indices than nonvegetarians, as well as lower rates of death from ischemic heart disease; vegetarians also show lower blood cholesterol levels; lower blood pressure; and lower rates of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and prostate and colon cancer.*

So this defense of eating animals is either ignorant of, or disrespectful towards, the huge (and growing) body of research that shows the health benefits from eating a diet based on vegetables, legumes, fruits and whole grains, and ignores the growing literature detailing the variety of harms for humans that can result from the production and consumption of animal products. This argument thus has a false empirical premise, one that many “Babe” watchers, even children, clearly realized was false.

A pattern is emerging, and we can use it to make a point about how to critically respond to reasoning given in ethics. There are two useful critical ways to respond to moral arguments: an “Oh yeah?” response, and a “So what?” response. The former “Oh yeah?” response denies the truth of the premise and the latter “So what?” response denies the truth of the (often unstated) assumption needed to validly reach the conclusion. We can see these helpful responses in action by considering more arguments in favor of harming animals.

A fourth argument is based in the claim that “meat tastes good” or that it is pleasurable to eat it. But *so what?* Just because something causes pleasure doesn’t make it right. We do not think that pleasures *automatically* justify harming humans: *if* things are different in the animal case, we need reasons to see why this would be so. And, besides, there are many other pleasure-producing cuisines (often they are ethnic) to choose from that aren’t based on animal products anyway.

A fifth argument is based on someone’s claiming that he or she “just couldn’t give up meat or dairy products or eggs.” *Oh yeah?* Since so many other people have given these up, or never ate them in the first place, this claim is likely disingenuous. And since this person probably hasn’t even tried changing his or her diet for moral reasons, he or she likely lacks the evidence needed to confidently make that judgment.

Sixth, people claim that animals eat other animals, so it’s right for us to do. *Oh yeah?* Only *some* animals eat other animals, and these are not chickens, pigs or cows. And *so what?* Many animals do lots of things that we wouldn’t want to do, and should not do (e.g., eat their own excrement and, sometimes, their young), so why should we imitate animals in only some ways, but not others? A *principled* response is needed for this argument to have any force.

Seventh, people say eating meat is “convenient.” *Oh yeah?* Many meat-based dishes are *inconvenient* to prepare, and plant-based dishes are usually *as convenient* as eating meat anyway. It’s just a matter of choosing something else from the same menu or same grocery store. But since doing the right thing *sometimes* requires our being inconvenienced in minor (and sometimes major) ways, *so what?*

Eighth, it is sometimes said that we have a *right* to treat animals these ways, and that animals

have *no rights* to not be treated these ways. That might be true, but reasonable people want *reasons* for why they should think that. First, they will want to know what “right” is under consideration. Suppose it’s *the right to not be caused to suffer and die for someone else’s pleasure*. Is it because animals don’t do math problems, write novels or make moral decisions that they don’t have this right? If so, since babies and many other humans don’t (and, for some, can’t) do these things, this view about moral rights denies them rights also.

In response, however, some might claim that since *most* human beings have sophisticated intellects and so are able to reason in these ways and, and – on their view – this is what moral rights depend on, *all* human beings have such rights. But this sort of reasoning is faulty: *most* adults are able to drive a car, but it doesn’t follow that *all* are able to, since some are blind and have other disabilities that prevent them from being able to drive a car. So, even if rights depended on sophisticated moral capacities (which is doubtful), the fact that *some* humans have these capacities wouldn’t imply that *all* humans have rights. Whether all human beings have rights depends on what each human being is like: individuals should be evaluated on their own characteristics, not the characteristics of others that are in some ways like and in other ways unlike them (Nobis, 2004; Graham and Nobis, 2006). Many animals on Hoggett’s farm might deny this: they seemed to think that Babe shouldn’t have been a shepherd because *most* other pigs lack the skills to do so or it’s not normal for a pig to have those skills. But this is to ignore individuals’ unique, and sometimes morally relevant, features. Babe had the skills to do shepherding, so there was nothing inappropriate with doing so, even though most other pigs lacked these skills. Again, individuals should be judged on their own merits.

Another proposal is that since animals are not *biologically human* they lack the right to not be harmed for others. Interestingly, nearly all philosophers who have considered these issues reject this kind of theory: on their views, the fact that we are biologically human has little to do with what we are owed, morally. This hypothesis is confirmed, in part, by each of us asking us what it is *about* ourselves that, e.g., *makes it* such that it would be wrong to cause us pain and kill us. For most people, the obvious explanation is that this would hurt greatly, we would suffer enormously and our early deaths would prevent us from experiencing all the good things we (hopefully) would have experienced. It’s not because of some genes we have or where we are on some chart in a biology book that explains our moral status; rather, it is a matter of our vulnerability to physical and/or psychological harm.

But since many animals are also vulnerable to such harms, these animals seem to be due the respect due to, at least, *comparably-minded* humans. Since this respect requires not raising and killing these humans for the mere *pleasures* of eating them, rational consistency requires the same treatment for chickens, cows, pigs and other animals who often have far richer mental lives than many humans. Again, this is a fact that “Babe” can help us see.

## 5. Farming Facts

These are just a few of the more common arguments given in defense of raising and killing animals for food. The fact that they are all quite weak suggests that people’s resistance to change regarding these issues might be based on non-rational influences, not critical thinking and unbiased inquiry. But the fact that a strong defense of the *status quo* is lacking does not give us yet enough positive reason to think that animals are treated wrongly. To see these reasons, we must consider in brief detail how are animals are harmed so that they might be served on our plates. [\[6\]](#)

The treatment of animals in farms and slaughterhouses has been well documented by *all* major print and television media. On *both* “factory” *and* the few remaining “family” farms – both kinds are depicted in “Babe” – baby animals are castrated, branded, ear and tail-docked, and teeth are pulled, all without (costly) anesthesia. “Veal” calves, the male by-products of the dairy industry, spend their entire life individually chain at the neck and confined to narrow stalls too narrow for them to turn around in. “Broiler” chickens, due to selective breeding and growth-promoting drugs, are killed at



forty five days. Such fast growth causes chickens to suffer from a number of chronic health problems, including leg disorders and heart disease. “Layer” hens live a year or more in cages the size of a filing drawer, seven or more per cage, after which they routinely are starved for two weeks (“force molted”) to encourage another laying cycle. Female hogs, like “Babe’s” mother, are housed for four or five years in individual barred enclosures (“gestation stalls”) barely wider than their bodies, where they are forced to birth litter after litter. The narrator of “Babe” says that, “There was a time not so long ago when pigs were afforded no respect . . . they lived their whole lives in a cruel and sunless world,” but that time is now. Until the recent “Mad Cow” scare, beef and dairy cattle too weak to stand (“downers”) were dragged or pushed to their slaughter.

Many people would describe the treatment of animals in slaughterhouses as simply brutal: the title of a 2001 *Washington Post* entitled “The Die Piece by Piece: In Overtaxed Plants, Humane Treatment of Cattle is Often a Battle Lost,” is suggestive of standard operating procedures in American slaughterhouses; more recent stories reveal similar inhumane conditions. A 2004 *New York Times* story documented workers at a chicken slaughterhouse stomping on chickens, kicking them, and violently slamming them against floors and walls. Those attentive to the news media see stories like this all too often.

One hopes that this treatment is not routine, but there are good reasons to be skeptical of claims that it is not. After all, there are no laws protecting farmed animals, since they are explicitly excluded from the Animal Welfare Act. The Act says that, “the term ‘animal’ ... excludes horses not used for research purposes and other farm animals, such as, but not limited to, livestock or poultry, used or intended for food.”

## 6. Reasonable Ethics

So should we think that the harmful treatment of animals in farms and slaughterhouses is wrong and should not be supported? This conclusion follows only when *moral principles* are conjoined with facts about animal agribusiness and, perhaps, the fact that we do not need to eat animal products to survive and thrive.

Fortunately, complex moral thinking is not needed to find plausible principles to apply to this case. The simple, but powerful, “common sense” principle that *we should avoid inflicting and supporting needless harm* is all that is needed, and is supported by a wide range of theoretical perspectives – secular and religious – in ethics (in fact, nearly all of them). These theories urge that we should promote goodness and lessen badness or evil, respect *all* beings who are conscious and sentient (not just those who are “rational”), treat others as we would like to be treated, and otherwise promoting caring, compassionate, sympathetic, sensitive and fair attitudes and behavior. All of these theories condemn the practices of contemporary animal agribusiness (Taylor, 2003).

Perspectives that deny that we should avoid inflicting needless harm typically degenerate into infantile “might-makes-right” moral theories (that we teach our children to reject: the fact that Suzie *can* beat up Johnny doesn’t make it right!) or they falsely imply that it’s *only because* “rational agents” care about non-rational beings (humans and animals) that it’s wrong to harm these beings

Thus, it seems that reasonable humans (all of whom have to eat and *can easily* choose animal-free foods; they cannot claim they are “too busy” to refrain from eating animals or that there are “more important things” to do, so they *must* eat animals) should broaden their *serious* moral concern to include conscious, sentient beings who are not human: reasonable people should not eat animals, since this is what the best moral reasons support.

One final response to arguments for vegetarianism is a response common to many arguments about issues that challenge how we live our lives: “People are going to *believe* whatever they want to believe, and people are going to *do* whatever they want to do.” This fatalistic attitude is shared by many animals in “Babe,” uncritical of any aspect of the status quo. It’s important to realize that this response is lamentable: it’s an evasion of the issues, since it does not engage the arguments. For this

issue, it's an attempt to avoid rational engagement with uncomfortable questions about the lives and deaths of, each year, tens of billions of conscious, feeling beings.

Those who are committed to the value of reason in guiding our beliefs, attitudes, and even our feelings should discourage this response, and promote reasonableness in *all* things, not just a select few, personally-convenient, topics. They should do this also because this response is false: people sometimes *do* change their beliefs and behaviors, and on the basis of good reasons. This is true about many issues, and confronting ethical issues about animals can often help us better see this for, and in, ourselves, and "Babe" helps us see that. *The "Babe vegetarians" were right!*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Bioethicist Bernard Rollin suggests that "there is perhaps no set of social issues on which otherwise sane people on either side of the question allow themselves to be as overwhelmingly irrational as in matters pertaining to the treatment of animals, and our moral obligations to them." Is this true? If so, what is it about ethics and animals issues that might explain why people respond these ways? Is it *bad* when people respond "irrationally" to moral issues? What can be done to lessen this kind of response and encourage better responses (what are these?)?
2. Some people argue that movies like "Babe" and "Charlotte's Web" "anthropomorphize" animals. What does it mean to "anthropomorphize" something? Is it a mistake to anthropomorphize *any* animals? It is a mistake to anthropomorphize *all* human beings (or all beings who are *biologically* human?)? Why or why not?
3. Some people claim that there are "more important" moral issues to address than the treatment of animals in farms, labs, slaughterhouses, etc. How does one *argue* that one moral issue is "more important" than another? Is the number of beings affected relevant? Is it the severity of the harms relevant? How does one decide this? If one issue is *more* important than another, does that mean another is *not* important? Discuss these issues as they relate to animal issues.
4. Some animal advocates argue that there are important similarities between (past) movements for women's rights, rights for minorities (e.g., African-Americans) and other oppressed humans and the (present) movement for animal rights. What are these similarities? What are the differences? Which are more morally important here, the similarities or the differences? Why?
5. Most people would not eat their pet dog or cat. What would their *best* reasons for not doing this imply for whether they should eat chickens, pigs and cows?

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[1] Questions about the morality of animal experimentation are common to bioethics, but typically not in a broader context of ethical questions regarding animals. And common responses to that issue are typically not taken to their logical implications. For example, people often argue that cosmetic testing on animals is wrong because there are cruelty-free ways to test cosmetics for safety: since these harms to animals are needless, they are \thereby wrong, many people claim. However, this reasoning suggests the moral premise that *causing needless harms to animals is wrong*, a premise that has profound implications for the morality of raising chickens, pigs cows and other animals to be eaten, as my essays argues.

[2] Search for phrases such as "Babe" and "vegetarian."

[3] This quote is widely found on the internet, but I do not know its original source.

[4] References for these studies should eventually be posted on the Humane Society's webpage. They are also available by emailing the Paul Shapiro, Director, Factory Farming Campaign, The Humane Society of the United States, [pshapiro@hsus.org](mailto:pshapiro@hsus.org). Many of the original studies can also be found by searching the internet for keywords related to the study.

[5] Below is an adaptation of a paper entitled "Reasonable Humans and Animals" that I use for teaching these issues.

[6] The information in this paragraph below is from a newspaper piece by Tom Regan called "The Myth of 'Humane' Treatment," widely reposted on the internet. For additional sources of information, see Regan's *Empty Cages*, Singer's *Animal Liberation*, as well as the documentary films suggested below. Also see, e.g., the investigative films produced by *Compassionate Consumers* ([WegmansCruelty.com](http://WegmansCruelty.com)), *Compassion Over Killing* ([COK.net](http://COK.net)), *Farm Sanctuary* ([FarmSanctuary.org](http://FarmSanctuary.org)), and *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* ([PETATV.com](http://PETATV.com)), *Tribe of Heart* ([TribeofHeart.org](http://TribeofHeart.org)) among other sources. Animal use industries generally do not produce films showing the details of their practices: for an interesting exceptions, however, see "Veal Farm Tour" at <http://www.vealfarm.com/veal-farm-tour/> and the *Fur Commission's* "Excellence Through Humane Care," "What Can I Say?" and "Chow Time" at <http://www.furcommission.com/video>. For a list of animal-use industry webpages, see the references in Regan's *Empty Cages*.