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Meat for Thought: Factory Farming at Its Worst

When people eat a delicious fast food burger, they rarely stop to think "I wonder where this meat came from." More often than not, these same people do not realize that when they eat that burger they are contributing to the pollution of rivers or the problem of hunger. They may not know that they are eating meat that has been injected with hormones and steroids. They might not support how factory farms operate, and they might not condone animal abuse, but because they are eating meat that is supplied by a factory farm, they are financially contributing to all of these problems. I suggest that factory farming should be stopped because it pollutes the surrounding environment, contributes to global warming, causes more hunger than it prevents, uses unhealthy growth hormones in animals, encourages unhealthy eating habits, and is morally wrong.

To understand why factory farming should be stopped, it is essential to first understand what factory farms (also known as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations or CAFO's) are. According to Encyclopedia Britannica Online, factory farming is a "system of modern animal farming designed to yield the most meat, milk, and eggs in the least amount of time and space possible." Today, factory farming has taken over the agricultural industry in the United States, and small family farms have become almost obsolete. In fact, three percent of the farms in the United States generate 62 percent of the agricultural products for the entire country (Reuters News). In order to produce so much food on such a small portion of farmland, these farmers must employ factory farming

techniques. This method of intense agriculture causes many problems, and is harmful to the environment, humans, and animals.

One of the largest issues with factory farming is how detrimental it is to the environment. To start, when thousands of animals are confined in a small area, they produce massive quantities of bodily wastes (i.e. feces, urine etc.). In fact, factory farm animals produce about 500 million tons of excrement per year (sierra club). This enormous amount of waste pollutes the environment that surrounds it, often leaking into surrounding rivers and streams. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "hog, chicken, and cattle waste has polluted 35,000 miles of rivers in 22 states and contaminated groundwater in 17 states" (sierra club). These statistics are staggering and downright frightening, especially since these pollutants are not only deadly to fish and other water wildlife, but also humans. For example, in 1993 in Wisconsin, it is suspected that a factory farm contaminated the local water supply, causing over 100 deaths and leading to hundreds of thousands of people getting sick (sierra club).

Today, one of the largest environmental issues is global warming. Global warming is the theory that the Earth's temperature is rising because of the release of "green-house" pollutants (PBS Online Glossary). Recently, extreme weather conditions and melting polar ice caps are just a few of the many indications that global warming is a serious problem for the entire planet. The United States Pentagon recently reported that global warming "should be elevated beyond scientific debate to a U.S. national security concern," (emagazine.com). What many people do not know is that one of the largest contributors to global warming is factory farming. This is because farms that hold massive amounts of cows or other livestock produce millions of tons of carbon dioxide

and methane per year. These two gases contribute more than 90 percent of the United States greenhouse emissions, and “substantially [contribute] to global scorching” (emagazine.com). One step that the world needs to take toward fixing the problem of global warming is to eliminate factory farms, and all the toxic gases that come with them.

A simple solution to the ecological problems caused by factory farming is to implement an agricultural system that relies on small family farms. This will lead to a “diverse ecosystem and create no more waste than can be recycled within the system” (Grace Factory Farms Project). This change will lead to a healthier environment, and in turn a healthier community.

Next, factory farming does not just contribute to an unhealthy environment, it also contributes to hunger. At first glance, this seems like a ridiculous statement. How could producing mass amounts of meat and dairy products cause hunger? The answer is simple. It is obvious that animals, just like humans, must eat in order to survive and grow. As such, when mass quantities of animals are produced, they must eat large amounts of food to survive. However, when an animal eats food, it uses some of the nutrients provided as energy. As a result, the amount of food produced by the meat of the animal is less than the amount of food that is used to produce the animal itself. For example, it takes about 20 pounds of animal feed (grain) to produce one pound of consumable meat (Tansey and D’Silva 9). By eliminating mass production of meat and dairy products, the 19 pounds of food that is lost through animal production could be consumed by the 852 million people who die from hunger each year (O’Brien). When viewed in from this perspective, it is plain to see that factory farming actually produces less food and more hunger for everyone.

Factory farming also uses dangerous hormones and steroids in meat production in order to obtain maximum results. Each year 36 million beef cattle are raised in the United States. Of those 36 million cattle, about 66 percent are “fattened-up” through the use of hormones (Rallof 1). These are the same hormones and steroids that many professional athletes take to enhance performance, the same hormones that are illegal for U.S. citizens to consume. This practice causes concern for a variety of reasons. First, many people fear that residues of these hormones could pass directly to humans through consumption of the infected meat and cause negative health effects. Hormones could also pass through the animal’s feces and enter the surrounding environment, eventually contaminating the surrounding water and food supply. If these hormones get into the body they can cause side effects such as cardiovascular diseases, mood swings, swelling, and nervousness (Tips For Teens). The big question here is, if we do not want our athletes to consume these dangerous hormones, do we really want our children eating their cheeseburger that could be contaminated with these same products?

Although the hormones used on factory farms are a large concern, one area that is often overlooked when discussing factory farms is the health concerns associated with over-consuming meat. In fact, “meat-eating societies, such as the United States, tend to have higher levels of cholesterol in their blood, and higher rates of coronary heart disease than societies where people depend more heavily on plant foods” (New York Times Online). In turn, the average vegetarian (someone who does not eat meat) in America has lower cholesterol levels than the average meat consuming American. In addition to this, the average vegetarian also has a lower body fat percentage, and lower blood pressure than those who eat meat (New York Times Online). Not only that, but

vegetarians have “a cancer rate that is only 40 percent that of meat-eaters” (PETA).

These statistics show an obvious connection between excessive meat consumption and chronic health issues. If factory farming was ended, meat production would most likely decrease. As a result, most people would be forced to eat less meat, simply because the supply could not match the current demand. This could help prevent some of the chronic health issues discussed above that directly correlate to the over consumption of meat, and possibly lead to the general population living longer, healthier lives.

In response to this, many people may say that being a vegetarian also has negative health effects. They may claim that these effects are just as bad, if not worse, than the negative health effects associated with eating too much meat. The main concern of these people is that a vegetarian diet does not provide an adequate amount of protein. This point is valid in some cases, but there are plenty of sources of protein that do not involve meat products. For example, soy products such as soy milk, tofu, and nuts all provide an excellent source of protein. In addition to this, there are more meat substitutes available than ever before. “Veggie” burgers, hot dogs, and even deli slices are available at most grocery stores, making it easier than ever to “go-veg” (PETA).

It is also important to understand that eliminating factory farms would not force everyone to become vegetarians. By simply eating less meat, small family farms could take the place of factory farms, and provide meat for the nation. These farms could provide meat that was hormone and disease free, and the country as a whole would reap the physical benefits of consuming lower amounts of animal products.

Putting all of the environmental and health concerns aside, factory farming should be stopped because it is morally wrong. Realistically, animals on factory farms are

treated like meat, not like living, breathing, feeling beings. They have no rights, they rarely (if ever) smell fresh air, and they live among thousands of other animals in very compact spaces. For example, chickens on factory farms that lay eggs are thrown into cages so small that they often cannot turn around or even move, and cattle are put into small stalls from birth until they are slaughtered (Britannica Online). These animals do not get to live normal lives, or experience anything that is natural. In addition to all of this, they are often subjected to excessive cruelty. For example, chickens have their beaks cut off at a young age, and male cows and pigs are often castrated with no anesthetic (PETA).

To really put this into perspective, let's put ourselves in the same position as the animals of factory farms. Imagine if our only purpose in life was to be feed people. For our entire lives we are in one cage, surrounded by hundreds, or even thousands of other animals. Imagine being unwillingly castrated or tortured, with or without anesthetic. Does this sound like a life anyone would like to live? Of course not, and as such it should not be the life we force hundreds of thousands of animals to endure.

Many people may argue that because animals are not as intelligent as humans, they do not deserve the same right to live a normal life. This is obviously incorrect. If this was the case, then humans who are not entirely mentally coherent (such as those with mental disabilities or illnesses) would not have the right to live a normal or free life, because they are not as intelligent as the "average" human. The right to life should not be determined by intelligence but by feeling, and all animals feel. If someone needs proof of that, all they have to do is go pet a dog, cat, or horse and see how they react.

Factory farming should be stopped for a variety of ecological, health, and moral reasons. It not only hurts the animals on the farms, but also the environment surrounding the farm, and the people who consume the meat. Factory farming will continue in the United States as long as the demand for meat is high, and it is therefore up to us, the consumers, to stop factory farming. It is not necessary to stop eating meat entirely, but it is necessary to find alternative methods of obtaining meat and dairy products in a way that is ecologically safe, physically healthy, and morally sound. The best way to do this is to eliminate factory farming, and re-implement family farming techniques. By taking this simple step we can fight pollution, help the hungry, and live healthier, happier lives.

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