

ANIMALS IN TRANSITION: ON ETHICS AND LIVESTOCK FARMING

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Abstract: Livestock farming is part of the dynamic discussion about the future of food. This paper argues that attention to the role and position of animals is essential in the discussion on sustainable development in the agricultural and food sector. Analyzing transitions in the agri-food sector from the perspective of animals contributes to finding different perspectives on the transition: e.g., on what the nature of the problem is, what values underlie the transition or how a problem can be best approached. Furthermore, it prevents that animals are overlooked in current food transitions, which is highly problematic given the strong arguments for acknowledging animals as having moral status whose role in transitions should be taken seriously for their own sake. Using an example about the transition towards circular agriculture this claim is further elaborated. Next, the paper shows the important but unclear role animal welfare plays in the discussions on the role and position of animals in transitions in the agri-food sector. I show why animal welfare can only function as a key concept in the discussion if one is aware of its limits. Based on the analysis, the paper concludes with a five step argument to broaden the scope of the ethics of livestock farming and to use a more integrated approach that starts in a moral vocabulary that is broader than animal welfare, that include more than the participation of experts and builds on interdisciplinary work from animal science, veterinary science, social science and ethics.

Keywords: animal welfare, sustainability, food ethics, animal ethics

Livestock Farming as Part of the Dynamic Context of Agriculture and Food

The future of livestock farming is on the public agenda. It is a topic that is not restricted to technical questions such as about health status, milk yield or meat production. It has clear ethical dimensions. To trace these ethical aspects of livestock farming, it is relevant to look at the ethical discussions about the wider views on the future of agriculture and food. In this domain a clear trend can be recognized. Where food ethics started in questions of food security and food safety, the discussion in the 1990's onwards changed to ethical issues related to food quality (Mephram 1996, Korthals 2004). This included discussions on consumer freedom, the role of animal welfare and the role of novel (bio)technologies in food production. Since the start of this century the discussion shifted further to questions of sustainability that included questions of biodiversity, justice, and the position of future generations (Pothast et al 2015; Schübel and Wallimann-Helmer 2021). Interestingly this is not just a development in which previous themes such as food security become obsolete. It is rather the other

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way around: due to new developments such as climate change new questions of security and safety occurs. This entails that ethical issues become more complex. That also holds for the questions that include animals. The role of animals in development towards sustainable food production is rather unclear. In some cases, animals are portrayed as the cause of many undesirable situations in food production, such as due to the emission of greenhouse gases (Garnett 2017), while they also are seen as victims, inspiration for innovations or part of the solution (cf. Van Zanten et al 2019).

The issues at stake in the discussions about the future of food production are too complex for one view on the role of the animal. If we would reduce the position of animals to one role, we may overlook relevant dimensions of the discussion on future food and agriculture. This does not only hold for technical issues, but also would leave out relevant moral dimensions, such as power relations, views on justice, and questions of uncertainty and precaution. Furthermore, a choice for just one role may entail that we run the risk that the animal (and its moral position) is overlooked. For instance, when the animal is merely considered to be a hurdle for sustainable food production or a source of zoonosis, it may be a small step to only evaluate the animal from this perspective rather than acknowledging that the animal has its own interests and may also be a victim of a (production) system or can inspire to mitigate climate or health problems.

Therefore, in this paper I propose to take the animal as the starting point in our discussions on the ethics of future food and on the related questions of livestock farming. Before elaborating on this, one could argue that this starting point would only further complicate the ethical discussion. Animals do not only play multiple roles in food transitions, but their position in society is also in transition and we are still confronted a plurality of views on the moral position of animals. This is a valid point. However, one can recognize trends in society that are also reflected in regulations and surveys that show that animals are no longer considered as mere instruments but become part of the moral community. This is, for instance reflected in the increased attention to animal welfare (EC 2016; Schukken et al. 2019; Randler et al. 2021).

Animals as the Starting Point

To approach the developments towards a more sustainable food production from the role and position of animals serves three functions. First, it has a heuristic function. The focus on animals contributes to different perspectives on the transition: e.g., on what the nature of the problem is, what values underlie or how it can be best approached. Second, it has an epistemic function. The approach helps in getting better grip and understanding animals and their position in society. Finally, it has a normative function. The approach aims to prevent that animals become or remain a blind spot in current food transitions. This would already be problematic if this entails that part of the problem (and solution) are not explicit. However, starting from the normative view that animals have moral status and that we can have duties towards them, their role in transitions should be taken seriously for their own sake.

To show what this imply in practice, I use the example of the initiative towards circular agriculture, which starts in closing cycles of nutrients and other resources to minimize losses and end the impact on – among others – climate change (Van Berkum and Dengerink 2019). Next to several technical questions, this transition has impact on animals and their health and welfare. On the one hand, current forms of livestock farming contribute to climate change and loss of biodiversity. From this perspective animals are perceived as part of the reason to find more sustainable forms of agriculture. On the other hand, animals can play an important role in circular agriculture, e.g., by converting biomass that humans are unable or unwilling to eat and so helping to close circles

(Van Zanten et al. 2019). Although the role animals can play is not fully ignored, the animal health and welfare dimensions of circular agriculture seems to be a blind spot (Meijboom et al. 2021). For instance, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality indicates that animal welfare is an important element in the transition towards circular agriculture in the 2018 strategy document. However, in the 2019 Plan of Action a reference to animal welfare is lacking. The only reference to animals is about the government intention to “support further research into the optimal composition of animal feed to reduce emissions.” (Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality 2019). Looking at the three functions mentioned at the start of this sections, it turns out that a start from the perspective of the animals first shows that animals tend to be evaluated as start of problem, e.g., as source of GHG-emissions and as potential public health risks rather than as part of a solution or as victim, expect from the animal related impact of biodiversity loss. The epistemic function shows that we (still) have a broader problem to position animals and their welfare as part of sustainable development. Already in the Triple Bottom Line concept that resulted in the Triple P concept there is no explicit attention to the interests of animals. (Elkington 1997). Although this model does not entail a fundamental exclusion of the interests of animals and even Elkington admitted they should have a position in this model (Janssen 2020, 145), it is paradigmatic for the undervalued positions of animals in the sustainability debate. Finally, the normative function shows that (a) animals are recognized as morally considerable by the Dutch government, but at the same time are not yet embedded in a more solid way and easily remain a blind spot and that (b) the attention for animals is mainly in terms of attention to animal welfare.

Within the scope of this paper, it is not possible to elaborate on each of these dimensions in details, but by focussing on the concept of animal welfare I aim to show how the position of animals are best integrated in the discussion on the ethical dimensions of food transitions. In addition, I use this to show that animal welfare can only play a central role if we are aware of its limits in the ethics of livestock farming and more generally the ethics of food transitions.

Animal Welfare: Between Blind Spot and Overarching Concept

With regard to the role of animal welfare in the discussion on sustainability and livestock farming a remarkable tension can be recognized. On the one hand, as we have seen in the above example that welfare is still easily overlooked as an independent parameter to evaluate innovations. Furthermore, attention regularly starts in rather shallow views on what welfare means for an animal, e.g., no more than a reduction on discomfort or in traditional views that are less able to deal with new welfare issues, such as those related to big data, AI or new housing systems. In line with the arguments, I presented in the previous section this blind spot with regard to animal welfare is problematic given the strong arguments to include animals in the moral community.

On the other hand, more than once animal welfare is presented as the overarching concept to deal with ethical issues in livestock farming. This should not come as a surprise, because despite different views on animals and their moral position, animal welfare seems a common denominator. However, this view on the role of animal welfare is not without risks. First, animal welfare as the ‘lingua franca’ of the public debate on human-animal interactions invites people to translate all kinds of non-welfare related considerations in terms of animal welfare. This leads to an undesirable overload of the concept of welfare. For instance, in the discussion on separating calves from cows in dairy farming there are arguments against this practice that start in views on the moral importance of care relations or views of justice. However, such arguments are regularly translated as if they were animal welfare arguments. As a result, it seems as if all use the same term, but in practice it only makes the discussion

more complicated and is a hurdle to get clarity on the role animal welfare can play in discussing the impact of our actions on animals.

Second, animal welfare as the overarching concept entails that important issues remain undiscussed. By making animal welfare the dominant frame people will not only translate their concerns into animal welfare related arguments, but they may also abstain from bringing some arguments into the debate. For instance, arguments that refer to virtues, power relations or animal rights. This would be a serious loss for debates such as the one on the future of livestock farming, because they add morally relevant dimensions next to welfare to discuss our dealings with animals. Therefore, animal welfare can only function as a key concept in the debates on ethics of livestock farming if we are aware of its limits.

Ethics of Livestock Farming: 5 Steps to Broaden the Scope

Based on the above analysis that starts in an approach that starts in the position of the animal, I sketch five steps that are important for an ethics that is able to deal with questions about the future of livestock farming. Each of these steps are meant to broaden the scope of the current discussion. Although these steps do not pretend to be completely novel, in practice they are often lacking or are only applied partly. The first step refers to the previous section and is the step to broaden the moral vocabulary beyond an animal welfare only approach. Animal welfare is a key aspect in the ethics of livestock farming but will only play its role if we are aware of its limits. Arguments such as those related to human-animal relationships, animal integrity, animal capabilities or rights need to receive genuine attention. Their position in the debate should not only be explained with a reference to giving words to moral intuitions, but also have theoretical underpinnings that need attention in its own right. The fact that these additional arguments will further complicate the discussion cannot be an argument to ignore them. On the contrary, broadening the moral vocabulary can do justice to the complex nature of the ethical issues at stake (cf. Donaldson and Kymlicka 2016; Feinberg 1974; Gruen 2014; Millar and Morton 2009).

The second step is a plea not to reduce the ethics of livestock farming to the discussion on pro or against meat production and consumption. For this I have two arguments. First, the debate on the future of meat is still an ongoing discussion. Meat production clearly has negative effects on animals, humans and the environment. However, whether these are strong enough to stop producing meat or ban its consumption is still subject of discussion and requires a careful democratic process. On top of this, even if one starts from the need to stop producing meat, then livestock farming is a reality and needs careful reflection. A recent OECD/FAO report calculates that in the next decade worldwide meat consumption will increase (2021). Therefore, a single focus on meat production simplifies the ethical issues related to livestock and ignores relevant dimensions such the position of animals in sustainable development, in circular agriculture, position of farmers or the cultural dimensions of food.

The third step focus on who should be included in the ethical debate on the role of livestock in food transitions. As a start, experts are essential to discuss the socio-ethical dimensions of the future of livestock farming due to its complex nature. This includes experts in farming- and breeding-related disciplines. Furthermore, the input from social science and ethics in this kind of debates seems evident. However, experts are not enough. Public engagement is essential. Only engaging with technical experts, we risk 'omitting the true breadth of these issues by limiting our perspective to dominant perspectives' (Kayumova et al., 2019: 223).

A fourth step focuses on the increasing role technology plays in livestock farming. Especially in relation to transforming food systems novel technologies raise ethical discussions, because they can be both portrayed a part of the solution and as symptomatic for a rather problematic perspective on our relationship with animals and food production (cf. Middelveld and Macnaghten 2021). However, it is important not to reduce the focus of the ethical evaluation to the only the novel aspects of a technology. This may lead to the flawed conclusion that if an innovation does not fundamentally change the status quo in ethical terms, it would be automatically morally neutral. However, existing ethical issues will be perpetuated or aggravated by innovations and therefore reason for ethical reflection (Kramer & Meijboom, in press). Furthermore, innovations are not only 'just' a technique on itself, but always part of specific practices (e.g., animal management, breeding) and chains (e.g., from transportation to slaughter).

The final step underlies the previous steps and strive for a more integrated and multidisciplinary approach. From the above analysis, it follows that discussing the ethical issues related to livestock farming and broader questions of future food needs contributions from many disciplines such as animal science, veterinary science, next to social science and ethics. This also enables an integrated approach that aims get grip on the complexity at stake and can do justice to the multiple dimensions of the problems related to livestock farming. Finally, this step includes a chain approach, i.e., bringing all relevant parties together and bridging gaps. This final step may easily be evaluated as a quick route to paralyze the entire debate: if everyone have to discuss everything then it probably leads to nothing. However, this step starts from the awareness that the ethical questions about future of livestock farming are too multilayered for one discipline, too multidimensional to be addressed from one perspective and too complex to be answered by one partner. Therefore, it may not always be possible to reach this final step to the ideal situation but is essential for the ethical debate on the future of livestock farming to take a broad perspective, both in terms of disciplines and topics and take the interests and values of both humans and values seriously. This may not answer all ethical issues that are on the agenda but enables to better deal with the ethical dimensions of livestock farming as part of the dynamic discussion on the future of food.

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