Chapter 13
Re-thinking the Ethics of Intensification for Animal Agriculture: Comments on David Fraser, Animal Welfare and the Intensification of Animal Production

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In a recent essay published in the prestigious series of readings in ethics issued by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations David Fraser discusses the relationship between animal welfare and modern, intensive animal production. His main view is that it is possible to uphold a decent level of animal welfare within intensive animal production and that the best way to promote animal welfare is to reform rather than reject intensive animal production.

Fraser is aware that other people hold credible views on this subject; he is also aware that his own views differ from those of influential authors who, approaching the matter from the perspective of animal welfare or animal rights, often criticize intensive animal production. Indeed, it should be noted that Fraser’s chapter in the present volume seems to have anticipated many of the criticisms that I present here and therefore, as far as I can see, has moderated a number of the claims made in the FAO booklet. My comment here is offered to highlight some of the important points on which these two statements differ. The original FAO Ethics Paper is, in fact, largely an argued rejection of the perspective and conclusions of critics of intensification of animal production.

Specifically, the FAO document criticizes the following three widely believed propositions: (a) there is a strong link between intensive animal production and problems with animal welfare; (b) the development and maintenance of intensive animal production is driven by the greed and lack of care of the producers; and (c) the way forward is either vegetarianism or a return to traditional, extensive, small-scale, multipurpose farming.

Regarding (a) the FAO paper asserts that intensive production systems have some positive effects on animal welfare, and moreover that there is no reason to think that intensive production systems cannot be developed so as to provide high levels of

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welfare. As for (b), the claim is that development of intensive animal production was mainly driven by economic factors beyond the control of individual farmers; and that for this reason, as Fraser puts it, “some of the standard claims made by critics of intensive animal production are seriously flawed” (p. 1). Finally, in connection with (c) Fraser argues that the way forward is to reform rather than abolish intensive animal agriculture.

It is timely that someone like Fraser, with a background in the study of animal welfare and ethics, is speaking out in favour of a more balanced discussion of intensive animal production. I agree with most of Fraser’s conclusions; indeed I accept all of Fraser’s main contentions except one. The exception is Fraser’s generally wholesale rejection of the perspective of those urging greater emphasis on animal welfare and/or animal rights. Fraser’s attitude to these (in effect) opponents is uncharitable and simplistic. Rather than saying that those who oppose intensive animal production are prompted to do so by a flawed understanding of the world, he should admit that there can be genuine, debatable, non-trivial disagreements about the underlying ethical principles here. It is also my view that the thinking leading Fraser to the conclusions he draws is occasionally questionable. In what follows these friendly criticisms of Fraser’s influential essay will be presented.

The Link Between Intensive Production and Animal Welfare

Fraser argues compellingly that its critics often have a one-sided view of intensive animal production. For example, it is not true that intensive animal production will, in all cases, lead to farms being run by huge corporations. Thus in Denmark, which is the world’s largest exporter of pork and a country where intensive livestock farming is the norm, the vast majority of pig farms are still family farms.

Furthermore, if animal welfare is defined in the way that it is most often defined by scientists studying animal welfare, the confinement systems typically used in intensive agriculture “appear to have both advantages and disadvantages” (p. 8). However, as Fraser himself notices, this crucial point in his line of argument very much depends on the way in which animal welfare is defined; and he is aware that many people would not accept the narrow definition of animal welfare he wishes to deploy here – a definition, that is, according to which welfare involves the absence of suffering and/or proper functioning. The FAO document mentions a Dutch study which found that “for some people, animal welfare depends on animals having freedom and living in natural environments” (p. 8). Recent Danish research in which I was involved made similar findings (Lassen et al. 2006).

Fraser’s FAO paper seems to reject the idea that a wider definition of animal welfare should be taken seriously. Thus he says that according to such a definition of animal welfare “confinement systems are, by definition, incompatible with high animal welfare” (p. 8). In saying this he appears to assume that, in a discussion, serious moves cannot be made by ruling out opposing claims by definition. However, this cannot be true in general. Of course, if one simply closes a discussion
by means of a definition made up just for the purpose of closing the discussion, this is not a serious move. But if a definition reflects a widely felt moral concern that is not patently mistaken, it cannot, it seems, be rejected out of hand.

Consider, to draw an analogy, a discussion about whether a person’s welfare is eroded when another individual does something to that person without his or her prior consent. Here one could sincerely argue that according to one’s definition of human welfare (i.e. one’s preferred account of what constitutes a good human life) the answer is ‘yes’ – or, more guardedly, ‘yes, in normal circumstances’. Would that not be a serious move? It seems that it would; and therefore a criticism of intensive agriculture based on a definition of animal welfare that includes natural living of some form should be taken seriously.

In this connection it is also worth pointing out that in Europe it has recently been decided, in the light of concern about animal welfare, that some of the most widely used confinement systems in animal production will be phased out. Thus in future pregnant sows in Europe will have to be loose-housed. Equally, egg producers will no longer be permitted to keep laying hens in traditional cages; the hens will have to be housed either in enriched cages or larger groups. But this certainly does not mean that intensive animal production will be phased out in Europe. It merely means that in the future, in Europe, intensive animal production will be based less on confinement of animals than it used to be.

It is interesting that some scientists (see, e.g., Savory 2004) criticize moves away from confinement systems in intensive animal production precisely because, as they see it, the animals (e.g. laying hens) are better off in confinement systems (battery cages) than they are in systems that are less confined (barn systems). Needless to say, these critics tend to deploy a narrow definition of animal welfare. There is, then, a real discussion to be had here – one that combines scientific perspectives and value issues. And this discussion is extremely relevant to public discussion about whether and how to reform intensive animal production so as to meet animal welfare concerns. Unfortunately, as a result of his rather polemical approach, Fraser simply stays out of this discussion. In doing so, he contrives to represent debate over animal welfare and intensive animal production more black and white than it really is.

Intriguingly, where the link between intensive animal production and animal welfare is concerned, the position taken by Fraser in the FAO document seems to share an important bias with those that he criticizes, for he in the paper focuses on the environment rather than on the animals themselves. This focus introduces a danger that the effects of a cornerstone in the development of intensive animal production – farm animal breeding – will be overlooked, or at least underestimated.

In parallel with the development of confinement systems and other production facilities that typify intensive farm animal production there has been an ongoing effort to breed farm animals so that, evermore efficiently, they produce meat, milk, eggs, and so on. Since the 1950s, average milk yields of dairy cattle in the developed countries have more than doubled. Similarly, the time it takes a broiler chicken to grow from hatching to readiness for slaughter has more than halved. It is true that some of this increase in efficiency is due to improved feeding, housing and disease control, but most of it derives from selective breeding.
Unfortunately, a negative side-effect of developments brought about by breeding has been a dramatic increase in various production-related diseases – notably, mastitis and metabolic diseases in dairy cattle and leg problems in broilers (Sandøe et al. 1999). There is very little that individual farmers can do about this. Particular in the poultry sector, animal breeding is controlled by a handful of multinational companies for whom the largest share of the market is found in regions where animal welfare has so far not been seriously recognized as an issue. In pig and cattle breeding centralisation is also increasing. Regrettably, it is difficult to see how legislation or market pressures could, in reality, prevent or significantly mitigate negative effects on animal welfare from farm animal breeding (Olsson et al. 2006).

In my view, then, selective breeding of farm animals for production is a significant part of the family of problems we now have with intensive agriculture. But sadly it has not received nearly as much attention as it deserves. This is partly because the critics of intensive production whom Fraser locks horns with in his paper do not seem always to have been aware of it. One serious weakness in the original FAO paper is that Fraser repeated the errors of those he criticizes on this important point.

Intensification Driven by Economic Forces – and So What?

In a section labelled “An alternative interpretation” Fraser attempted to put his finger on the forces that led to intensification of animal production in rich parts of the world from the 1950s onwards. Here he provides an economic explanation – one that he neatly summarises in the following way:

In summary, this alternative hypothesis proposes that developments in the twentieth century, notably in transportation and food preservation methods, allowed a greatly expanded trade in animal products and consolidation of the food processing industry; that the resulting increase in competition caused periods when producers received very low profit per animal; and that these periods of low profit were a major factor contributing to the shift towards larger units and confinement housing, and also necessitated cost-cutting in factors such as space, staff time and other amenities. (p. 13)

Immediately after this passage, Fraser admitted that his economic explanation is “greatly over-simplified” (p. 13). He acknowledged that other factors such as a shortage of labour, rising wages and general developments in technology may have been at least as important as those he mentions.

However, in the case that Fraser tried to make against what he calls “the standard critique” of intensive animal production it does not really seem to matter which specific economic factors have driven developments. The key point is that these developments were not driven or directed by the voluntary choices of individual producers; they were determined by wider economic forces beyond the control of the producer. And they left the producer with just one choice: intensify your production or go out of business (and, of course, as we can now see, the vast majority of producers “chose” to go out of business).
Fraser eloquently summarized the way in which his explanation of the push for intensification is relevant to ethical discussion:

In terms of production methods, it emphasizes not the macro-level features of increased farm size and use of confinement systems, whose influence on animal welfare is arguably mixed, but the micro-level features, specifically the cost-cutting required of producers at the same time that animal production intensified. In terms of economics, it suggests that the problem has not been excessive profit-taking by large corporations, but low and unpredictable profits and the constraints these place on producers. In terms of values and ethics, it suggests that the key problem is not the erosion of animal care values by producers as much as the values of consumers, expressed through their purchasing habits, which leave producers little room for discretion in applying the animal care values that they may hold. (pp. 13–14)

A serious concern about this line of argument is that is not at all clear why proponents of “the standard critique” should feel that they have been hit by it. Why would they want to deny that developments in animal production are driven by economic forces? Looking into the, in fact very short, section of his paper in which Fraser described the views of his opponents, one searches in vain for a quotation from anyone suggesting that the intensification was brought about by evil and greedy farmers.

What does emerge from the quotations in the relevant section here is a change in the values informing the main drivers of the business – roughly speaking, from care and good stockmanship to profit-seeking at all costs. But in these quotations, no claims are made concerning what is supposed to be the cause and what is supposed to be the effect in the relevant developments; and in fact there seems to be little or nothing in Fraser’s account of the growth of intensification with which more radical critics of intensive animal production need to disagree.

So what really seems to divide Fraser and the adherents of the standard critique of intensive animal production is disagreement of one kind or another about values and strategies. The assumptions about values (V1–V3) and strategy (S) that underlie the position advanced in the original FAO ethics paper advocate for a reformist attitude to intensive agriculture, and they appear to be these:

\[ \text{V1: Loyalty to farmers and the farming community.} \]
\[ \text{V2: Animal welfare. We should do our best to minimize stress, pain and other} \]
\[ \text{forms of suffering in animals we deal with.} \]
\[ \text{V3: Consequentialism. We should focus on how our actions will help to bring} \]
\[ \text{about the largest total good (or absence of bad things) rather than on what, in} \]
\[ \text{a more narrow sense, we ourselves do.} \]
\[ \text{S: More good, in terms of farm animal welfare, will be brought about if people} \]
\[ \text{who care about animals embark on reforming intensive animal production} \]
\[ \text{than would brought about by such people spending their energy on promoting} \]
\[ \text{vegetarianism and/or small-scale extensive farming.} \]

To me, it seems that each of these assumptions except V2 might well be sincerely disputed by at least some of the critics of intensive animal production.

In his endorsement of V1, Fraser, like me, is probably very much influenced by what he describes as “veneration of the farmer and farm family living in harmonious
relationship with the land” (p. 4). Although relationships have become, even by Fraser’s standards, much less harmonious with the development of intensive animal production, part of the old value framework still lives on in the spirit of the farming community. However, it is not clear why anyone who has not, through his or her background or professional experience, had the same contact with the farming community should share this loyalty.

Regarding V3, clearly some of the critics with whom Fraser is engaging – notably Peter Singer and other utilitarians – are committed to a consequentialist approach. However, other critics are inspired by alternative theoretical standpoints such as the animal rights approach advocated by Tom Regan (Regan 2004). These critics may not accept consequentialist conclusions. They may argue that since animals have a right not to be treated in the way they are treated within intensive animal production systems, each of us has a duty to become a vegetarian, and that this remains so even if a different strategy might lead to less grave effects on animal welfare or to a smaller number of violations of animal rights.

Discussions within both academic philosophy and applied ethics demonstrate that the debate for and against consequentialism is not an easy one; there are knowledgeable, clever people on both sides of the discussion. Hence consequentialism cannot just be taken for granted in ethical discussion: it has to be argued for. The burden of the present observations, then, is not to criticize Fraser for being a consequentialist. It is to criticize him for assuming that nobody in their right mind would disagree with him on this point.

Turning to strategy, S is clearly a controversial assumption. Critics of intensive farming, notably Peter Singer (e.g. Singer 1993), have argued that the only effective strategy to reduce the suffering of animals in modern animal production is by promoting a vegetarian life-style. Thus Singer, it seems, would simply disagree with Fraser over the facts here. And since counterfactual claims about what would happen at the macro-level if one strategy rather than another is promoted are notoriously difficult to support empirically, Fraser really should not criticize Singer and other holding similar views in a dismissive way. More humbly, he should try to argue that, on balance, the available evidence speaks in favour of his strategy rather than Singer’s.

Reformism – A Solution or a Cover-Up?

The last section of the original FAO Ethics Paper lists six “solutions that will promote animal welfare in a world where vast amounts of animal products continue to be eaten, and where much animal production will continue to follow intensive production models” (p. 15).

The first solution consists of finding “ways that animal care values can be encouraged and sustained” (p. 15). In my opinion this sounds highly programmatic and does not give us much guidance on what, specifically, to do. This impression is even stronger in the case of the fifth solution. Fraser set out this solution in the
following way: “Fifth, as long-distance trade in animal products increases further through trade liberalization, we need to ensure that this trend does not lead to a new phase of near-zero profits and further constraints on producers’ ability to act in ways that favour animal welfare” (pp. 16–17).

Fortunately, the four remaining suggestions are much more specific:

The second is to create economic incentives for producers to look after animal welfare. There are four examples of such incentives:

(1) product-differentiation programs that provide premium prices for products produced according to specific standards; (2) government programs to help producers adjust to animal welfare standards, perhaps modelled after monetary incentives used to encourage conversion to organic methods; (3) purchasing agreements whereby corporate customers (chain restaurants, retail chains) agree to pay higher prices in return for guarantees of animal welfare standards; and (4) supply management programs that ensure that prices paid to producers reflect the cost of producing animal products in a manner that conforms to agreed animal welfare standards. (p. 16)

Fraser himself acknowledged that international competition and the lack of harmonisation across countries may undermine such incentives. In my view, only (1) and (3) are realistic in today’s climate of free trade. They will allow animal welfare friendly production for segments – probably rather small segments – of the market. However, general government subsidies will run into trouble with international trade agreements; and general supply management programmes will face problems with competition from companies who do not run such programmes. Thus, in the foreseeable future, economic incentives will probably only affect the high-end segment of the market.

The third solution Fraser offered focused on “identifying and correcting the key management factors affecting animal welfare in all systems” (p. 16). Here there can be room for collaboration between farmer’s or producer’s organisations, research institutions, advisors, veterinarians and moderate animal welfare organisations. To some extent there can be a shared interest, since better management may simultaneously improve production and welfare. But the limit of this approach is, of course, economic: devoting resources to improved management will only be economically viable up to a point. Beyond that, there will be the usual dilemma between animal welfare and the bottom line.

The fourth solution was to adopt standards enforced by international law. For example, already as mentioned earlier in this commentary, the EU has a number of directives defining minimum standards for the housing, transport and slaughter of farm animals; and attempts are now being made to impose minimum standards world wide through the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). These efforts may have some effect. However, there are problems getting beyond what might be considered an ‘absolute minimum’ of animal welfare; and there may well be huge problems with compliance and enforcement.

The final solution suggested in the FAO Ethics Paper was to promote a new ideal of what constitutes a good animal producer, “one that emphasizes a high level of animal management skill, scientific knowledge, staff management ability, a professional ethic of animal care and an appreciation of the need to conform to standards”
Certainly, this would be an important element in efforts to further a new vision of animal welfare that goes hand in hand with intensive animal production.

However, it remains to be seen whether these welcome-looking initiatives will have a significant impact on the welfare of farm animals – or whether they will, in effect, benefit only a minority of animals produced in well-off countries where some consumers are willing to pay for animal welfare. It remains possible, then, that all these well-meant initiatives would, in essence, operate as a cover-up for a crueller reality where the majority of production animals, thanks to market forces and the indifference of most of the players in the business, are living and dying in conditions ranging from the inadequate to the truly appalling.

Like Fraser I think that reformism is the only way forward. However, I am painstakingly aware, first, that I may actually serve as a useful idiot in my public defence of the view that it is possible to reform intensive animal production so as to improve animal welfare; and secondly, that the radical critics which Fraser so vehemently opposes have an important role to play. These critics help to raise awareness and force the industry to take steps in the right direction, including steps towards alliances with moderate pragmatics like Fraser and myself.