



PUBLICATIONS

Charlotte's Web and the ethics of animal husbandry

David Fraser, Animal Welfare Program, University of British Columbia

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E.B. White's classic, *Charlotte's Web*, opens with a scene that captures some of the turmoil surrounding animal agriculture today. The story begins when 8-year-old Fern looks outside and sees her father carrying an axe.

"Where's Papa going with that axe?" she asks her mother. The mother explained that some pigs were born in the night, but one of the litter turned out small and weak, "so your father has decided to do away with it."

"Do away with it?" shrieked Fern. "You mean kill it? Just because it's smaller than the others?" Fern ran outdoors to protest.

"Fern," said the father, "I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. A weakling makes trouble. Now run along!"

"But it's unfair," cried Fern. "The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?"

"Certainly not," smiled the father, "but this is different. A little girl is one thing, and a little runty pig is another."

"I see no difference," said Fern. "This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of."

Eventually the father gave in, bundled the pig into a cardboard box and brought it into the house for his daughter to raise by hand. "He's yours," said the father, "Saved from an untimely death. And may the good Lord forgive me for this foolishness."

In this disagreement between Fern and her father, we see two classic views on how animals should be treated. Fern wants to treat animals according to the rules of fairness and justice that we apply to other humans. Killing the pig because of its size looks like sheer discrimination; and the pig, who "couldn't help" being small, had done nothing to deserve being killed.

The father's sense of right and wrong comes from a tradition of animal husbandry. He knows that a weak piglet is likely to die a slow death from starvation, and that a runt "makes trouble" for the rest of the litter. It is far better, he believes, to kill the pig immediately, and prevent the suffering and practical problems that it might bring. The father was not uncaring or mercenary. In fact, E.B. White portrays him as a good and kind man, acting from a tradition of animal husbandry ethics.

But the public today is bombarded with much less flattering views of animal agriculture. For his book *Animal Liberation*, author Peter Singer combed agricultural publications and put together some damning examples of poor production practices and producer attitudes. He quoted an egg producer who said:

"The object of producing eggs is to make money. When we forget this objective, we have forgotten what it is all about."

and a pig producer who justified selling crippled pigs with the comment:

"We don't get paid for producing animals with good posture around here. We get paid by the pound."

Singer's sweeping conclusion was that "the meat available from butchers and supermarkets comes from animals who were not treated with any real consideration at all while being reared". And this view of animal production has been echoed over and over in books, articles, and broadcasts for the past twenty years.

I find Singer's sweeping generalization maddening for two different reasons. One is the manifest injustice of tarring all producers -- caring and uncaring -- by the same brush. The other is the fact that Singer's description of poor treatment of farm animals is all too true in some cases, and both animals and agriculturalists suffer as a result.

What can we do to improve both farm animal welfare and the reputation of conscientious animal producers? I think the first step is to bring the ethics of animal husbandry out of the closet so that the public and producers alike are clear on what good husbandry involves. And I think the best way to do this is by thinking about some of the actual animal care decisions that producers face every day.

Here are two examples. In one widely publicized case, economists advised US egg producers that they can make more profit by putting 4 or 5 birds into a 3-bird cage when egg prices are high. The crowding would lead to poorer health and higher mortality rates, but the extra birds would still give more eggs in total and hence more profit during price peaks. Should producers follow this type of advice to maximize profit at the expense of animal welfare?

In another case, a veterinarian reported visiting a farm where he found a pregnant sow with a broken leg, unable to stand and eat. The veterinarian wanted to put the sow down, but the manager refused because he was keeping the sow alive for a few more days until she farrowed. Is this acceptable animal husbandry, or do we believe that the economic value of an animal should never result in this type of suffering?

Decisions about animal care arise every day on farms. By sharing and discussing these decisions, I think we can create -- and communicate to the public -- a clearer picture of the basic principles of good animal husbandry.