

and a cultural heritage. He does not get what he had hoped for, namely, a categorical argument for saving the family farm. But this does not seem necessary anyway for reasons noted above.

The question of what we ought to do as a nation seems to me to be more complex, however. Preservation of the traditional family farm and rural life will require the outlay of public funds; all are in agreement about that. Decisions about the rightness or wrongness of providing such funds must be made within the context of shrinking economic and natural resources and of other claims for the protection of many different kinds of interests. Some of these interests are based on the prior commitments of the government to serve the population in certain ways, and other interests take the form of claims concerning basic human rights. Family farmers must make their claims about justice within an ongoing social sphere that is populated, for instance, by the inner city poor and homeless, the increasing poverty of our children, high infant mortality, inequity in health care and education, and the continued mistreatment of animals and the environment. It may well be that we should save family farms, but there will be a price to pay in unmet needs of others. Thus, we must have a clearer understanding of the inter-relationship of these interests and of how to give them just consideration. I think this precludes categorical conclusions about the fate of the family farm but leaves open the possibility for making good arguments about how our institutions should be arranged to protect the public interest and individual rights.

Notwithstanding my reservations noted above, I recommend this book to those who are interested in exploring these issues in some depth. No text or anthology can encompass all views. Most of the essays are clear, well-written, and accessible to even the novice. I have no doubt that as a classroom text it will provoke a large amount of useful debate and enlightenment.

Notes

¹ The definition of just what constitutes a "family-farm" has been the center of contention, since many large corporate farms, such as Cargill, are owned and operated by a family. In the "Introduction," Comstock accepts Luther Tweeten's definition with a modification noted here in italics: "a family farm is an agricultural operation *loved, worked, and owned* by a family or family corporation, with gross annual sales of forty thousand dollars to two hundred thousand dollars, hiring less than 1.5 person-years of labor" (p. xxv).

Response: The Rights of Animals and Family Farmers

Gary Comstock
Iowa State University

It is a pleasure to be asked to comment on Kathryn P. George's review, and not only because she so insightfully criticizes the book I edited. Her review provides me the additional opportunity to declare in public that I have changed my mind about the respective rights of animals and family farmers. As George points out, I argue in my conclusion that you can defend traditional family farms and animals. My reason is that, even though the backbone of family farming is the raising and slaughtering of food animals, smaller sized "family" farms seem more likely than larger sized "factory" farms to provide animals with humane care, room to exercise, and quick, painless deaths.

Since finishing *Family Farm*, I have come to believe that humane care and slaughter are not the issues. The issues are whether we harm animals with central nervous systems when we kill them, and whether we have the right to continue breeding mammals, with no other purpose in mind than to carve them into steaks at a young age. This is likely to be the issue of most concern to readers of *BTS*, so I begin here, reserving for later my comments on George's criticisms of my family farm argument.

I have learned from feminists and narrativists the value of first person stories in ethical discourse, and I think it is important for ethicists to tell their stories, especially when they have given up major parts of their background beliefs. I have given up a major part of my background beliefs, and I must tell you how it happened. I was not motivated by professional considerations



DISCUSSION

alone when I began working on *Family Farm*.. It is true that I thought Iowa State University, a land-grant school in the middle of the U.S. heartland, needed someone doing research on the topic, but I took up the issue as much out of personal as academic reasons. As readers of the book are told in the "Introduction," my Uncle Harold and Aunt Sandy Pippert faced financial difficulties on their farm in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, in the mid-1980's. The first Pippert farmers in that county were my great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother. That was around 1860. Around 1939, my grandma and grandpa bought the 160 acres Harold and Sandy now farm, and on which my brothers and sister and cousins and I spent large chunks of our childhood. The home place is dear to me. My wife and children have taken a liking to it, too, and we regularly visit there. Our favorite weekend activity is to go to Nora Springs on Friday night to watch the high school football game. This fall, my cousin Jason played fullback and his sister Jenny led cheers from the sideline.

I tell you all of this to stress how much the Pippert farm means to me. Our stories tell us about our background beliefs and about the narrative traditions in which our ethical beliefs are formed. For me, the continued existence of family farms is not an abstract problem in applied ethics, and I cannot approach it with disembodied principles or a utilitarian calculus. I care about the Pippert farm, and I love my aunt and uncle and cousins.

The economic health of the Pippert farm rests on the practice of raising and slaughtering animals. In the summer, Uncle Harold, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him, raises corn, soybeans, oats, barley, and hay. Eighty percent or more of these crops are converted into feed grains for cows and pigs and chickens. All of the chickens are gone from the farm now, and the handful of hogs and cattle that remain are little more than Jason's last 4-H project before going off to college. Nonetheless, Harold and Sandy's corn crop is a money maker because it winds up in front of animals at cattle feedlot, hog confinement, or broiler hen operations.

When the book was published in February, 1988, everyone on my side of the family ate meat, and so did I. None of us, I dare say, thought much about it. As I began to think about it, I had a fleeting thought: to reject meat might be equivalent to rejecting the history and identity of the Pippert family. I say it was a fleeting thought because I purposely put it out of my mind. I thought it morally insensitive to waste my time

exploring the rights of hogs and cattle at a time when the economic pressures on hog and cattle raisers were so severe. The playing field was so biased against smaller farmers, and smaller farmers' problems produced so much anxiety, that I found myself wondering what sort of person would ask questions about the well-being of farm hogs when the well-being of farm children was at stake.

After finishing the book, I gave the issue the attention it deserves. I realized very quickly that the intentional killing of hogs at six months of age, when the animals might otherwise live for a period ten times that length, calls for justification. I looked for philosophical defenses of meat-eating, and found remarkably few. Other than R. G. Frey, very few ethicists have taken it upon themselves to defend meat-eating.¹ Reading Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* convinced me that some mammals probably have mental lives roughly analogous to some humans' mental lives, and that some mammals are conscious beings with social lives much like some humans' social lives.² I did not come to believe nonhuman mammals are morally autonomous, but I did not see why that fact should entitle us to kill and eat them.³ I did decide that a central issue is whether a being has the potential to have interests, in the sense of "able to take an interest in something." For if a being potentially has interests in this strong sense, it potentially has the ability to take an interest in things in its future. Having the potential to take an interest in things in your future, it seems, should be all you need to give others the duty not to kill you, in the absence of good reasons to kill you.

Do cows and pigs and chickens have the potential to take an interest in things in their future? I think this is largely an unsettled empirical matter, and it calls for psychological, neurological, and ethological study. I cannot say that I know for certain what the answer will be. But in the absence of an answer, it seems we ought to err on the side of caution. That means not killing (or breeding more of) cows and pigs and chickens unless we have strong reasons to override our duty not to harm individuals. Providing ourselves with protein is not a strong reason, and neither is scientific research to find out whether animals have future interests. We can get plenty of protein from vegetable sources, and we can live happy lives without vivisectioning animals.

Thus I came to believe I ought to be a vegetarian. As many readers of this journal know, to become a vegetarian is much more difficult than to decide to

become a vegetarian. Slowly, over the course of several years, with much opposition, and much support, from various members of my family, I gave up meat and fish. What finally pushed me over the edge was Tom Regan's account of Barry Holstun Lopez's stories about wolves planning ambushes of caribou.⁴ If wolves anticipate the course of caribou several days hence, and devise and follow plans to surprise their prey at a given point, I can no longer believe that all nonhuman mammals are unable to take an interest in things in their future. Nor can I continue to think it ethically unproblematic to raise and slaughter so-called food animals.

Professor George notices how briefly I discuss animal rights in my conclusion. Kindly, she does not charge me with the philosophical coward's way out, begging the question. Unfortunately for me, the charge sticks. I wrote only that proving animals have rights "is very difficult to do" and tried to leave my reader with the impression that animals do not have rights. George calls me on the point.

But if I now believe pigs and cows have a right to life, how do I square this belief with my continuing love for family farms? Can you defend the rights of animals and the rights of family farmers? To the extent that family farms require the premature killing of animals, the answer seems to be "no." But that answer need not be read as a condemnation of the way of life of family farming, because farming is possible without slaughtering animals. For most farmers in the Midwest, raising animals, or raising feedgrains for animals, is the largest part of the agricultural economy, and to change this situation calls for radical adjustments. Yet food animals are not the sum total of farming, even in the Cornbelt, and there will be plenty left over for farmers to do if one day there is no longer a market for beef and pork. There will always be green beans, broccoli, and sweet potatoes, apples, pears, and oranges, filberts, almonds, and pecans to raise. A tofu-cooking, vegetarian America will need lots of soybean and (sweet) corn farmers.

That said, I must add that the possibility exists that a vegetarian America might not need the current system of medium sized, owner-operated, farms. Suppose that efficient vegetable farming can be done on very large, "factory" farms. Suppose, too, that these large vegetable farms are owned by union workers who plant, weed, rotate, and harvest crops in an ecologically sound manner. An efficient and equitable and environmentally sustainable farm system such as the one I am now

imagining might render current "family" farms obsolete. The likelihood is not great, but the possibility exists.

This leads me to George's reservations about the way I qualify my final argument "from responsibility" for family farms. George rightly points out that arguments need not be "categorical" arguments in order to be persuasive moral arguments. And yet it is equally true that arguments that rest on highly contingent socio-economic conditions will lack the force of arguments that do not rest as heavily on variable social conditions. Suppose that this year small family farms have a comparative advantage over large factory farms because of technologies of scale. Suppose that technologies and world markets change and five years later the advantage has switched to large farms. The socio-economic conditions that support arguments about the superior efficiency of family farms may change, and the next year, family farms may not be as efficient as others. Would we want to rest our claims for family farms on grounds as variable as the grounds just mentioned?

Because the efficiency of family farms is the weakest argument that can be made for preferring family farms to factory farms, I searched for something stronger on which to rest my case. If there are no stronger grounds, then I see no reason to consider asking nonfarm taxpayers to bear costs associated with saving family farms. If, on the other hand, there are much stronger grounds for saving family farms, such as "These farms serve basic cultural, social, and spiritual needs of the nation," then we may be justified in asking taxpayers to bear short-term costs in order to achieve long-term ends.

It was in the interest of finding the strongest moral argument for family farms that I turned to arguments from stewardship and cultural identity. I may, as Kathryn George and Paul Thompson both suggest, make too little out of these arguments.⁵ But there are weaknesses in both arguments, and my own argument from responsibility tries to draw on the strengths of the others, while avoiding the others' weaknesses.

On another point, George suggests the book needs a discussion of moral theories, and again, she is right. I had, however, to place certain limits on what could be included, and I decided to include farmers' stories and religious statements about the farm crisis rather than philosophers' discussions of metaethics. While the latter is readily available in textbooks, the former is not.

Even had I chosen to include more ethical theory, I would not have thought to argue that family farmers

have a moral right to demand support from land-grant universities, or at least the right to demand that research at such universities serve the needs of smaller farmers. I find this an intriguing and promising idea, and I hope George will have more to say about it.

A last thought, about the place of religion in secular ethics. I made an effort to include in the book contributions from various Christian thinkers. There are various reasons for this choice, the strongest two reasons being: the intimate historical connection between Christianity and the development of this country's rural areas and the recent appearance of strong statements supporting family farms from various church groups.

George apparently wants to exclude religion from secular discussions of ethics, a desire not foreign to many contemporary philosophers. It is not a desire I share. Moral values in the West clearly derive historically from religious traditions, and some moral values are also grounded ontologically on religious beliefs. I do not mean, of course, that all of ethics rests on religion, nor do I want to defend Divine Command theories. I mean only to acknowledge the rationality of thinking about religious values, practices, beliefs, and institutions as one thinks about applied ethics and public policy. I mean to suggest that public discussion of ethical matters would occasionally be strengthened by careful, intellectually respectable, theological discourse. I actually believe we have too little, not too much, public God-talk, a situation obscured by the fact that the public God-talk we do have comes almost exclusively from Presidents of the United States and television evangelists. If more politicians, academics, and business folk were more forthcoming publicly about the religious convictions they hold privately, their religious and moral convictions would probably be more rational. Public discourse about ethics would be more enlightened and elevated. Toward this end, we continue to seek contributions from representatives of various religious traditions at the annual ethics conference at Iowa State University.

Theology is not irrelevant to philosophical ethics or public policy. George rightly points out that not everyone agrees with the premises of theological arguments, but that is no reason to rule theological premises out of bounds. If we were to dismiss arguments any time we could find people who disagreed with the premises, ethical debate would be impossible. And democracy would be in a far sorer state than it is

already. You may have serious objections to the conclusions of the various statements of the U.S. Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Churches, and you may find the reasoning in the documents abysmal. But that should not make you want to censor such groups. It should make you want to educate them, challenge them to do better. Philosophy is not about excluding people from the conversation but, rather, about continuing the conversation with everyone of good will who wants to continue in it.

George helps me see how we might continue this particular conversation in some fruitful directions. For that, I thank her, again.

Notes

¹ R. G. Frey, *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); *Rights, Killing, and Suffering* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); "Autonomy and the Value of Animal Life," *The Monist* 70 (January 1987): 49-63; and "Moral Standing, the Value of Lives, and Speciesism," *Between the Species* 4 (Summer 1988): 191-201. Michael A. Fox, who once defended the widespread use of animals in scientific research, has changed his mind.

² Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983).

³ I discuss this question in "The Moral Irrelevance of Autonomy," forthcoming, this journal.

⁴ Regan, *Animal Rights*, p. 101. Regan refers to Lopez's book *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Scribner's, 1978).

⁵ See Paul Thompson's review in *Agriculture and Human Values* 6 (Fall 1989): 62-65.

