

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
Animals and the Economy

Steven McMullen
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Despite their obvious and enormous importance, it's easy for philosophers to ignore the economic forces that shape the human use of animals. The tools we bring to bear on the problems of animal use and abuse are generally focused on individuals—e.g., their moral failings, their epistemic shortcomings, and so on. Increasingly, of course, philosophers are devoting more attention to structural factors that influence our beliefs and behaviors, but very few of us know enough of the relevant social science to theorize about them in detail. In such circumstances, Stephen McMullen's *Animals and the Economy* is an especially welcome contribution to the literature.

Setting aside the introduction and conclusion, the book has ten chapters. In the first two, McMullen summarizes the status of animals in the economy—namely, the normal ways in which they are used, the economic institutions that promote and preserve that use, and the various respects in which economic theory is stacked against recognizing the interests of animals. The next two chapters provide a depressing overview of the reasons why the economy fails to provide consumers with products that were derived from animals who enjoy(ed) decent lives, and generally stands in the way of ethical consumer action. Nevertheless, he tries to show that consumers remain responsible for purchasing morally objectionable animal products, and makes the case that consumer action does in fact make a difference.

In the following pair of chapters, McMullen considers producers. He shows that, in our current regulatory system, they have few options other than sacrificing welfare for the sake of profit: the margins are just too slim. He also contends that regulation could, in fact, improve the situation of animals, and he makes some tentative suggestions about how those regulations might function.

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Finally, after a brief discussion of animal experimentation, McMullen uses the remaining chapters to explore the notion of animals as property. Gary Francione, of course, argues that the basic right of animals is not to be human property. McMullen argues, to the contrary, that we don't need to abandon entirely the property framework to achieve the aims we might have for animals, and, in fact, preserving that framework may actually provide us with some tools to promote their rights and well-being. The book wraps up with an alternative theory of animal ownership that's designed to secure just these ends.

Anyone working in animal ethics ought to make time for this thoughtful introduction to, and reflection on the possible futures of, the place of animals in the economy. It is well-researched, accessible, and full of striking insights into the mechanisms behind all too familiar practices. There is much on which to comment, but I'll limit myself to the issue that I found particularly striking: namely, McMullen's discussion of consumer responsibility.

Let me summarize, very briefly, just a few of the points that McMullen makes about the way that the economy stacks the deck against the interests of animals.

Most obviously, the mere fact that something is for sale tends to signal that it's permissible to buy and consume it. You can't purchase human arms in the grocery store, but you can certainly buy chicken wings. That strongly suggests that there's a categorical difference between them, and we shouldn't overlook the way that what's for sale shapes our moral vision. But even if we set aside the symbolic significance of animal products being commodities, we can see that our particular economy is

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set up to enable and encourage the purchasing of animal bodies and byproducts.

Consider, first, that consumer preferences are shaped in part by advertising campaigns, some of which are federally funded, and which are heavily skewed toward animal products. Second, a large market economy makes it difficult to know how goods are produced, and there are legitimate reasons to be suspicious about the various sources of information available to consumers. Ethical information is, after all, difficult to communicate effectively credibly to consumers: this creates a “systematic bias toward goods whose primary virtues are visible quality or low-cost” (55). Third, there is also a bias toward goods that are entirely fungible, which strongly incentivizes the kind of mass production that’s so harmful to animals.

Fourth, agricultural markets have three features that spread responsibility across producers, distributors, and consumers. For instance, the harms to animals are overdetermined. No one individual is necessary for them to occur. Moreover, the choices people make are interdependent. Each one relies on the acts of others to accomplish his or her ends. Additionally, the decision that actually results in harm isn’t due to a single factor. Instead, a long list of considerations explains why welfare standards are such as they are in factory farms. Finally, McMullen surveys some experimental work that seems to show that moral considerations are less likely to guide our behavior as markets exhibit more and more of these features. So, it seems that the size and structure of the market make it quite difficult to feel accountable for the harms of animal agriculture, which lowers the odds that consumers will be motivated to lobby for significant changes.

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Now, McMullen doesn't spend much time arguing that consumers bear some responsibility for their purchasing decisions. Nor does he say much about the extent of this responsibility, or whether it rises to the level of making individual purchases morally wrong. However, it's clear that he does think that consumers bear some responsibility and that they can act wrongly by purchasing; if this weren't his view, it would be hard to explain why he would spend so much time arguing that there are, in fact, things that consumers can do to improve the lot of animals. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is reason to wonder whether his work undermines the charge that consumers act wrongly by buying animal products, whatever their origins. Here, in short, is the line of reasoning that I have in mind.

When people act wrongly, we tend to blame them for it. There are, of course, plenty of cases in which people act wrongly but excusably, and then we don't. But those aren't the norm. Instead, those are circumstances where unusual factors somehow change the relevant moral calculus. With that in mind, note that we ordinarily don't blame consumers for buying animal products. This isn't because they have no choice but to buy meat and milk: there are plenty of morally superior options available. However, the structural forces just outlined have some notable affects. They shape and satisfy consumer demand, they increase the burden on anyone who wants to shop in nonstandard ways, they make it hard to know who to trust for information, and the sheer size of the market makes it plain that, at best, any individual's impact is probabilistic, which lowers the motivation to act. Moreover given how few others are acting, an understandable (albeit unfortunate) fatalism tends to emerge. These facts seem to go a long way toward explaining why we are so tolerant of those who purchase animal products, even when we are their friends and family, and

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so have standing to blame them. But if we don't blame them, then we should wonder whether they're really acting wrongly.

Compare this to our decision not to blame one another for failing to give much to charity. Parallel structural forces seem to explain why we treat giving as supererogatory, appealing to the better angels of our nature to promote good behavior. This suggests that we think that while it would be very good to give, and there are strong moral reasons to do so, they don't rise—in our particular circumstances, and contra Singer-style arguments—to the level of obligation. If the opposite were true, we would expect our blaming practices to be quite different, at least among those who have been moved by the relevant arguments. But they aren't, and likewise with respect to purchasing animal products. If all that's so with respect to giving, it might be so with respect to our food consumption patterns too.

I get no pleasure from this conclusion, and I hope that it's wrong. But it's difficult to take a long, hard look at the powerful forces that influence and even constrain our behavior without adopting a more modest view of the culpability that attaches to any one individual. Even if that's right, however, there may be a silver lining. Thinking clearly about the ethics of the human use of animals may well require developing new, interdisciplinary conceptions of moral responsibility, ones that take better account of the ways in which markets have sway over our lives. McMullen's book—and ones like it—could guide us as we take the first steps down that path.