

Factory Farming

Nearly all animal products consumed in the United States come from animals raised on factory farms, which are industrial-scale agricultural facilities that keep hundreds to thousands of animals in high-density confinement.¹ These factory farms are only one component of the highly-consolidated animal agriculture industry, which is no longer controlled by family farmers, but by a handful of large corporations. The animal agriculture industry produces cheap animal products by prioritizing efficiency above all other considerations, including animal welfare, the environment, rural communities, human health, workers, and small family farms.

Industrial animal agriculture—when coupled with heavy government subsidies and a near total lack of regulation—makes animal products cheap at the grocery store and, therefore, available to people across socioeconomic statuses. In fact, animal products are cheaper than many plant-based products, and they tend to be ingredients in many processed foods. Most Americans enjoy eating animal products,² and such products are reliable sources of protein, vitamin B12, and other essential nutrients.

On the other hand, while the high costs of industrial animal agriculture are not reflected at the grocery store, they do exist—and they have been externalized to animals, the environment, rural communities, human health, workers, and small family farms. First, factory farmed animals suffer in filthy, cramped conditions with no opportunity to engage in natural behaviors, and their lives are cut short when they grow large enough to be trucked to the slaughterhouse. Second, factory farms are significant sources of greenhouse gases, which fuel climate change. They also create vast quantities of waste, which pollute the air, soil, and water (including drinking water). Third, this pollution disproportionately harms rural communities—especially rural communities of color and low-wealth communities,³ which are targeted to host factory farms because they tend to lack the political power of white, affluent communities. Fourth, factory farm pollution and practices threaten human health in a variety of ways, including by causing severe respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses, breeding antibiotic resistant bacteria, and spawning zoonotic diseases. In addition, diets heavy in animal products—especially red and processed meats—can increase risk of developing obesity, diabetes, heart disease, some forms of cancer, and other serious illnesses.⁴ Fifth, factory farm workers—some of whom are imprisoned persons, undocumented persons, or are members of otherwise vulnerable populations—labor in filthy, dangerous conditions for low wages. Finally, the expansion of industrial animal agriculture into rural America is driving small family farms to extinction, as they simply cannot afford to compete with the hyper-efficient, corporate-dominated animal agriculture industry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it immoral to consume factory farmed animal products?
2. Is it unjust to prohibit the consumption of factory farmed animal products?
3. Do facts about the individual efficacy of our actions affect our moral obligations?

¹ CDC, "Understanding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and Their Impact on Communities"

² Gallup, "Nearly One in Four in US Have Cut Back on Eating Meat"

³ Sustainable Development Law and Policy Brief (17:1, 2017), "CAFOs: Plaguing North Carolina Communities of Color"

⁴ Journal of the American Osteopathic Association, "Is Meat Killing Us?" (116, 2016)

