

# THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE HUMAN–ANIMAL BOND ON THE FARM

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## Abstract

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*Arguably, grounding animal ethics in traditional moral theories such as utilitarianism or rights-based ethics is impoverished since they emphasise impartiality and abstractness in our ethical deliberations at the expense of giving proper weight to special relationships we have with other individuals. Here, I explore the human–animal bond as a starting point for animal ethics, and focus on the resulting moral implications of this bond on farm animal welfare. The human–animal bond revisits values inherent in the nature of animal husbandry and is also influenced by philosophical ethics of caring. Farmers or stockpersons who form close bonds with their animals make an implicit promise to discharge duties to their animal companions above and beyond respectful treatment as sentient beings. Scientific study suggests that interpersonal human–animal relationships may translate to better care and consideration for farmed animals, promoting both better animal welfare and on-farm productivity. Acknowledging the existence of human–animal bonds on the farm and encouraging farmers and animal handlers not to shy away from forming bonds with their animals is recommended. Farmers, stockpersons, and contract-farmers for agribusinesses should be given an ethical voice to lodge grievances about how farmed animals are treated and be encouraged to participate in discussions on farming practices and animal welfare standards. They should also be educated on gains made through scientific enquiry regarding the capacities and needs of animals as well as on welfare advances.*

**Keywords:** *agricultural ethics, animal welfare, human–animal bond, human–animal relationship*

## Introduction

The recent foot-and-mouth epidemic in the UK was a bitter pill to swallow for those who saw their livelihoods evaporate into putrid smoke. The dread pierced deeper for some due to heartbreak and ethical distress at the thought that they were betraying their animal friends and partners by being co-conspirators in their execution. As some recounted, “I ask you to understand the pain and feeling of our local UK farmers, who look upon the herds of sheep, cows, pigs, hens ... as extended family”; elsewhere, those who enjoy working with animals were devastated by the loss: “everyone a character in her own right, everyone known intimately.<sup>1</sup>” Farmers and their animals alike were impotent, unable to defend themselves

<sup>1</sup> BBC News TALKINGPOINT/Foot-and-mouth: How is it affecting your life?  
[http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/English/talking\\_point/newsid/1238000/1238739.stm](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/English/talking_point/newsid/1238000/1238739.stm) (4/6/01)

against the disease and the mass slaughter policy. These statements reflect what many in farming already know: that animals and human beings can form close interpersonal relationships. These relationships play a crucial part in how animals are perceived morally and treated.

In this article, I examine some of the moral questions that arise as a result of the human–animal bond (HAB, hereafter) on the farm. I begin by borrowing a page from philosopher Lilly Marlene-Russow’s general conceptualisation of HAB. Then, I consider what conventional theories of ethics say (or rather fail to say) about the moral implications of this bond and discuss how our moral obligations toward farm animals are affected by this relationship. I end by suggesting ways industry, producers, citizen–consumers and government can help farm animal caregivers promote better relationships with their animals in order to address and promote animal-welfare-related issues.

### The nature of the bond

In many instances, those who raise, interact with and care for animals become emotionally invested in them. Some animals may also become attached to human beings after repeated close encounters with them. This phenomenon has led to closer scientific examination and study of human–laboratory animal relationships (Arluke 1988, 1990; Davis & Balfour 1992) and human–companion animal relationships (Beck & Katcher 1996). In farming, human–animal relationships have been studied by animal welfare scientists (Seabrook 1972; Hemsworth & Coleman 1998; Boivin *et al* 2001). What is of interest to us here is whether these special relationships have any implications for how we ought to view and treat farm animals.

Russow (2002, p 34) has identified three central characteristics with ethical implications that distinguish HAB from other sorts of interspecific interactions:

- a. *HAB is a personal relationship forged between two individuals.* HAB emerges when two individuals “recognise”, or mutually appraise each other as distinct individuals, ie when they are no longer anonymous beings. HAB is not forged with “cattle” but with individual cows and bulls. A “feeling of affection” is directed especially toward the singled out individual (Lehman 1992). For the animal, the bond modifies its behaviour such that it demonstrates a preference for the human individual with whom it has bonded. For the human being, this special discrimination affects her attitude and behaviour such that she takes a keen interest in how the animal fares. The bond is not exclusive since both the human and the animal can have simultaneous close relationships with many other individuals.
- b. *HAB is “reciprocal and persistent”.* This relational stability implies that there are multiple interactions that occur between the two individuals and that they are able to distinguish each other from other human beings or animals, as the case may be. For the animal, HAB generates expectations that its human counterpart will treat and provide for it in certain ways. The animal comes to trust its human counterpart. For the human being, the bond may generate companionship, a greater understanding and appreciation of the animal’s cognitive capacities and emotional dispositions and may promote deeper caring for its needs. The nature of the relationship is however non-egalitarian and asymmetrical (also in Larrère & Larrère 2000; Campbell 1994) since the relationship is between individuals of unequal social, political and moral standing. While there is an underlying mutuality between both parties, the bond need not be reciprocated in the same way by both individuals nor be equally intense. A

fully developed HAB may be characterised as a genuine attitude of caring or love for “the other”.

- c. *HAB promotes the welfare of both parties.* Relatively speaking, HAB may give rise to several welfare benefits. For the animal, human affection may be comforting and enriching and may result in a less excitable, fearful or stressed animal. The animal may be easier to handle and tolerant of certain procedures, which may make performing some aversive procedures on the animal unnecessary. In some cases, this may mean a more productive animal as well (Seabrook & Mount 1993). For the human being, frequent and close contact with the animal often results in greater familiarity with the animal’s disposition, capacities, needs and behaviour, potentially resulting in better detection of animal welfare problems. HAB also means acknowledging the dependency of the animal on the farmer to provide basic resources, including health care, food, water, a suitable environment, and also companionship (depending on the species) and it encourages more frequent performance of routine husbandry practices. This congeniality with the animal may translate to less injury and a ‘smoother’ or less frustrating discharge of animal-related farm chores. Work-related stress may be reduced as a result. Perhaps more importantly, familiar animals are not perceived as mere economic entities nor are they valued simply in terms of their utility (Russow 2002, p 36). HAB is different from other interspecific interactions because it focuses on the disposition we ought to take towards animals. Here, the human being has to come to terms with her role as provisioner of care. A morally other-regarding attitude toward the animal(s) under one’s charge emerges when one is closely involved with it (Varner 2002).

In a word then, HAB is potentially rewarding for both humans and animals and may have important benefits for the welfare of both. It is a mindset (that may engender a program of action) that orients us to be other-regarding to animals under our charge. It is a concern for care and duties owed to “*my*” animals (those directly under an individual’s charge), and need not be a strict concern about the moral standing of *all* animals.

### **HAB and moral theories**

Traditionally, conceptual (and political) boundaries were erected that closed animals out of the moral arena. Animals were excluded because they did not possess certain human-centred morally relevant characteristics such as rationality or language. They were perceived to be automata, or strictly appetite-driven, lacking in requisite beliefs or desires that would propel them into the moral sphere (Frey 1980; Midgley 1983).

Recently, two dominant theories, utilitarianism and the rights-based approach, have challenged this traditional view of animals. In the former, Singer, taking preference utilitarianism to its logical conclusion, argues that moral respect should be extended to animals capable of experiencing pleasure and pain (Singer 1975, 1990, 1993). The interests of these sentient animals deserve equal consideration as the morally similar human interests. Regan, from the rights-based framework, argues that animals are morally considerable because they have (among other things) beliefs, perceptions, a sense of the future, and a psychological identity over time, which qualifies them for inherent value. These animals, being “subjects-of-a-life”, possess the *moral right* not to be ill-treated or exploited for human benefit (Regan 1983, 2001).

Apart from highlighting individualism, both Singer and Regan emphasise impartiality (moral disinterestedness to treat like cases alike) as essential to the endeavour of extending

moral inclusion to animals. For them, differential treatment due to special relationships is unacceptable. According special preference to those with whom we are specially related may result in adopting incoherent moral standards, and encourages all sorts of arbitrary and unfair patterns of discrimination. In the absence of HAB, some animals may not receive the consideration or care they deserve.

While Singer and Regan raise important questions regarding the moral considerability of animals, their commitment to the principle of impartiality (as part of their commitment to their respective theories) has been called into question precisely because they fail to consider the legitimacy of close interpersonal connections as a serious moral determinant (Steinbock 1978; Midgley 1983; Noddings 1984; Warren 1987; Rollin 1992; Preece & Chamberlain 1995; Russow 1999; Varner 2002; Fraser 2001b, 1999). While recognising the moral significance of possessing intrinsic properties such as sentience or subjecthood, we should (contra Regan and Singer) also make room for the moral implications of the personal relationships that we may develop with animals (Midgley 1983; Noddings 1984; Warren 1987; Rollin 1992; Burgess-Jackson 1998). In contrast to certain forms of anthropocentric ethics that tend to exclude animals and modern sentientist ethics which include them but in an impartial and impersonal way, philosophers (in part influenced by feminist ethics) have recently latched onto the care aspect of animal ethics in striving for a more balanced moral disposition toward the treatment of certain animals, especially those under our charge.

The ethics of caring has long been a powerful force in day-to-day human–animal relationships but it has largely been ignored in philosophical ethics until recently. The ethics of caring focuses on the moral relevance and importance of personal relationships in ethical deliberations. It also encourages us to confront moral problems in the context of relationship preservation (Gilligan 1982). In agriculture, the ethics of caring, which has always been a pervasive normative force in agriculture, puts *nurture* and *empathy* as primary or integral starting points of discussion. The ethics of caring raises questions about the nature of a farmer's role. The *true nature* of farmers is one of “mothering persons” (Campbell 1994). Not unlike mothers, farmers invest themselves in the protection and empowerment of their dependent animals. Upon further reflection, the ethics of caring calls attention to the problems of power disparity, vulnerability and disintegration of trust in animal agriculture. The ethics of caring, then, in the context of human–farm animal relationships, meets head-on the difficulties associated with balancing animal welfare provisions and promoting better opportunities for them to thrive, as well as with the business aspects of maintaining and sustaining animals, by attending to the particulars of a given situation.

By grabbing the horns firmly, the ethics of caring raises very necessary questions about our willingness (or lack thereof) to share the burdens of being in a relationship with others and what it means to be genuinely concerned for the good of others. For agriculture, this translates to a responsibility to provide husbandry conditions which are *as good as possible* during an animal's lifetime even if it should come at our expense.

But what of the charge by Regan and Singer regarding arbitrary partialism or moral inconsistency? Cottingham (1986) has argued that some partiality may be justified (philosophic or “friend” partiality), if understood within the context of wishing and wanting to promote another's welfare for her own sake (p 364). While we have a *prima facie* duty to discharge respectful treatment to individuals who are not qualitatively dissimilar, it is morally defensible in some cases to give more consideration to those with whom we are specially related (p 368). Our partiality is morally defensible if our special concern for others to whom we are related results from a genuine desire to see them flourish and be happy for

their own sake, and not from the desire to treat others badly. This context is consistent with the moral ideal of being “other-regarding”, and contributes to leading a richer and more fulfilling moral life (p 368). A morality that does not recognise the moral significance of personal bonds is impoverished since it fails to give due credence to the significance of human relationships, such as between parent and child, between spouses and between friends (Russow 2002). It neglects requisite role-defined or acquired responsibilities ensuing from those bonds (Burgess-Jackson 1998) and assumes the presence of arbitrary partialism.

### Implications for the farm

These abovementioned three conditions taken together imply that “HAB is a form of implicit contract” (Russow 2002, p 34). I suggest that in the case of agriculture, this implicit contract is best understood in light of the context that legitimises the raising and slaughter of animals; ie a *reciprocal convention* that acknowledges that:

“If we farm animals then we have a responsibility to care for their needs by ensuring commensurate husbandry conditions.”

This reciprocal convention regards farm animals as fiduciary subjects, ie dependents to whom we have responsibilities, not unlike children or mentally unfortunate human beings or even companion animals. Those who have animals under their charge assume role-defined duties as trustees and are enjoined to deliver certain goods that matter to their animals. These responsibilities include providing suitable environments for the animal to develop and exercise its evolutionarily determined set of psychological and physical capacities, minimising suffering and frustration, and making available appropriate care and adequate and appropriate life-sustaining resources throughout an animal’s lifetime. As fiduciary agents (or trustees), farmers or stockpersons make a tacit promise or commitment to treat *their* animals well and to meet their welfare needs. More importantly farmers start out with an other-regarding attitude in relation to their animals; a program of action, not only to refrain from injuring their animals but to endeavour to benefit them, may complement this orientation.

While a farmer may not form bonds with all her animals, she has a general fiduciary responsibility to all the animals in her fold in that she commits a greater injustice to familiar animals than to those from without her fold. Building on this theme, she commits a greater injustice to those animals with which she has developed intimate personal bonds and encouraged to have certain expectations of her. Ideally, farms should be manageable enough so that farmers can potentially form bonds with all their animals and *vice versa*. In larger farms, a healthy ratio of animals to stockpeople should be encouraged to this end. This ideal for interspecific personal relationships has precedence in exemplary modes of agrarian and pastoralist frameworks (Thompson 1997; Preece & Fraser 2000; Fraser 2001a). While HAB privileges some animals in virtue of our personal relationships with them (DeGrazia 1996; Burgess-Jackson 1998), it does not imply that we should treat others badly. Favouritism should not come at the expense of harm to other animals, and fulfilling HAB obligations is not an excuse to jeopardise the welfare of those animals with which bonds are not or cannot be formed. Careful consideration of HAB promotes increased understanding and appreciation of animals and encourages us to ruminate carefully on criteria which we should go by in order to give proper weight to the importance of personal relationships (Russow 2002, p 36). It allows us to consider particular details of each animal, and weigh them with other relevant considerations and competing interests in order to make well-reasoned moral decisions. Acknowledging the moral significance of personal relationships may help us to bring into focus the needs of the animal in question (in balance with other considerations) instead of

automatically concentrating on the animal's final form or its utility or economic aspect (Russow 2002, p 36). Granted this is gesturing toward utopia, but it may encourage some to think more carefully about some of their present on-farm attitudes and behaviours towards their animals.

Thus HAB provides for an important conceptual shift. In farming, HAB affords a natural step to thinking about our roles as nurturers, and sets (arguably) an alternative attitude to take toward animal-dependents. We are obliged to animals and their welfare for as long as they are under our charge, above and beyond our general obligations to refrain from causing them harm.

### **A brief note on consumerism and human–animal relationships**

Farming is an integrative activity that involves not only those who produce food. Farmers, apart from being motivated by an internal ethic to treat their animals in certain ways, may value animals based on societal standards of what is appropriate treatment of food animals and on the demands of consumers for cheap food. The ethics of caring as applied to animal farming, in highlighting the interconnectedness between farmers and their animals, also spotlight the interconnectedness between consumers, industry agents and farmers and, by extension, farm animals (Campbell 1994). While we are more remote in physical relationship to farm animals and may never see farm animals apart from at the dinner table, let alone bond with them, we are bound by collective responsibility to set and preserve animal welfare standards, no matter if we are citizens–consumers, or government or industry agents. What we tell farmers by “voting at the check-out counter”, being indifferent to inhumane farming practices, or through industry initiatives, has consequences for the nature of HAB between farmers and their animals. Arguably, by recognising our interconnectedness to farmers, we may help farmers concerned about their animals' welfare take active measures to ensure that their animals have happy and healthy lives. All of us have a role to play in helping farmers develop better human–animal relationships.

### **Moving forward**

As the abovementioned foot-and-mouth scenario reflects, farmers who form HAB with their animals are often caught in conflict between meeting the demands of good husbandry, allegiance to their animals and broader economic and political considerations. Ensuring a comparably good life for farm animals often competes with other considerations such as threat of disease, political thrust for cheap and abundant food, and challenges to manage economically viable livelihoods. HAB is a morally privileged relationship which brings with it special obligations to not “break faith” with an animal with whom we have cultivated certain expectations (Baier 1985; Burgess-Jackson 1998). HAB provides us with an alternative ethic that focuses not on impersonal individuals, but on the ethical implications of being in relationship with others. In this case, the “others” are farm animals. Complementing the ethics of caring and trusteeship are scientific studies (Hemsworth & Coleman 1998; Boivin *et al* 2001) that suggest that interspecific human–animal bonds promote welfare. If we are serious about improving farm animal care, then we must:

1. Acknowledge that bonds are formed in farming and as a community (including industry agents and consumers), so endeavour to support initiatives that promote or enhance HAB on the farm. This may mean paying slightly more at the till so that farmers can take measures to ensure that their animals are kept without detriment to their health and welfare.



2. Explore the relationship between HAB and human and animal welfare with an emphasis on species-specific interactions and their role in enhancing on-farm productivity and efficiency.
3. Give contracted farmers and stockpersons “an ethical voice”. Empowering them will help them see to their animals’ needs. By understanding their animals they may gain insights into some aspects of farming relevant to production and welfare. This is good for farmer morale and may also allay public fears that animals are not receiving appropriate care.
4. Provide support structures for farmers and stockpersons who are torn between the internal mandate to care for animals with which they are bonded and to protect their livelihoods. This requires a clearer public message regarding appropriate treatment of food animals and/or regulation and economic incentives to encourage and reward conscientious farming.
5. In the case of larger farms, these principles may encourage downsizing the number of animals on one’s farm, reducing time pressure on farm staff such that they can give appropriate attention to individual animals, and paying closer attention to staff selection characteristics such as general attitude to animals, the capacity for empathy and patience with animals.

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