

Another Point of View

An Ethicist's Commentary

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I have addressed this issue in a number of books and articles in reference to genetic engineering of animals: If animals are miserable in confinement, is it morally acceptable to engineer them so that they are, in fact, happy in the system wherein we compel them to live? I believe that the same answer is relevant whether one uses artificial selection or genetic engineering, assuming that the latter modality does not cause unanticipated negative welfare consequences.

As a specific example, consider the chickens kept in battery cages for efficient, high-yield, egg production. It is now recognized that such a production system frustrates numerous significant aspects of chicken behaviour under natural conditions, including, for example, nesting behaviour (violates the telos or nature of the animal), and that frustration of this basic need or drive results in a mode of suffering for the animals. Let us suppose that we have identified the gene or genes that code for the drive to nest. In addition, suppose we can ablate that gene or substitute a gene (probably impossible) that creates a new kind of chicken, one that achieves satisfaction by laying an egg in a cage, or suppose we create a pig that prefers not to move. Would that be wrong in terms of the animal ethic that is emerging in society?

If we identify an animal's telos as being genetically based and environmentally expressed, we have not changed the chicken's telos, so that the animal that is forced by us to live in a battery cage is satisfying more of its nature than is the animal that still has the gene coding for nesting. Have we done something morally wrong?

I would argue that we have not. Recall that a key feature, perhaps the key feature, of what I have called the new social ethic for animals is concern for preventing animal suffering and augmenting animal happiness, which I have argued involves satisfaction of telos. I have implicitly argued that the primary pressing concern is the former, the mitigating of suffering at human hands, given the proliferation of suffering that has occurred in the 20th century. I have also explicitly argued that suffering can be occasioned in many ways, from infliction of physical pain to prevention of satisfying basic drives. So, when we engineer the new kind of chicken that prefers laying in a cage and we eliminate the nesting urge, we have removed a source of suffering. Given the animal's changed telos, the new chicken is now suffering less than its predecessor and is thus closer to being happy, that is satisfying the dictates of its nature.

Why then does it appear to some people to be *prima facie* somewhat morally problematic to suggest tampering with the animal's telos to remove suffering? In large part, I believe, because people are not convinced that we cannot change the conditions rather than the animal. If people in general do become aware of how animals are raised, as occurred in Sweden and as animal activists are working to accomplish elsewhere, they will doubtless demand, just as the Swedes did, a change in the raising conditions, not a change in the animals - it is far more sensible to raise the bridge than

lower the river, just as it is more reasonable to alter clothes than surgically remodel a body - and it is quite plausible to do so, since we raised chickens for millennia outside of confinement deprivational conditions.

In the end, to breed or engineer pigs or chickens to fit confinement life as continuous with what we have always done with domestic animals - select them to live with us. If there is anything horrifying in the case under discussion, it is an aesthetic revulsion born of disgust at our own behaviour - "Have we really gone so far over the edge in how we treat animals that we must radically modify the animal for the sake of a cheap meat?"