

VOL. 83, SPRING 2010

# SPRING

*A Journal of Archetype and Culture*

MINDING  
*the*  
ANIMAL  
PSYCHE



# CHICKEN-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: FROM PROCRUSTEAN GENOCIDE TO EMPATHIC ANTHROPOMORPHISM

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## Sound of a Battery Hen

*You can tell me: if you come by the  
North door, I am in the twelfth cage  
On the left-hand side of the third row  
From the floor; and in that cage  
I am usually the middle one of eight or six or three.  
But even without directions, you'd  
Discover me. We have the same pale  
Comb, clipped yellow beak and white or auburn  
Feathers, but as the door opens and you  
Hear above the electric fan a kind of  
One-word wail, I am the one  
Who sounds loudest in my head.*

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In Greek mythology, Procrustes (“the stretcher”) is a bandit who keeps an iron bed into which he forces people to fit. Watching his victims approach from his stronghold, Procrustes stretches or shrinks the bed in advance to predetermine their failure to fit into it so that he may torturously reshape them to suit his will. If the victims are too tall, he amputates their limbs; if they are too short, he stretches them to size. I suggest that Procrustes is a particularly “fit” symbol of the false anthropomorphism used by many human cultures, in particular today’s industrialized society, to force nonhuman animals into constructions fundamentally alien and inimical to their nature. The wishes and desires of the modern human psyche seldom coincide with the needs and desires of animals; hence a Procrustean solution is sought whereby the animal is either cut down to size or stretched to fit the agenda. In diverse aspects of our modern human culture, animals are physically altered, rhetorically disfigured, and ontologically obliterated to mirror and model the goals of their exploiters. The tortured and deformed patterns of industrialized animal bodies and lives reflect the self-same patterns of the human psyche responsible for creating such suffering. By maintaining the illusion that (animal) body and human (mind) are somehow separated, humanity maintains an image of life and meaning built on profound suffering. Psychology cannot aspire to heal the human psyche without acknowledging the true reality in which psyche lives.

#### ANIMAL GENOCIDE

Forcing animals, “stretching” and “amputating” them like Procrustes, to fit a preconceived human pattern or agenda is the very essence of the genocidal assault on nonhuman animal *identity*. It goes beyond the physical extermination of millions of animals and expropriation of their land and homes. By “genocidal assault,” I refer to the concept of genocide as originally formulated by the Polish jurist, Raphael Lemkin, in 1944, to refer not only to the deliberate physical annihilation of a group by direct killing, but also to the destruction of the *identity* of the targeted group or groups, as in their “extinction” by incarceration and/or genetic manipulation, an extinction reflected in and reinforced by rhetorical formulations misrepresenting the targeted groups.<sup>1</sup> Recalling the experience of the Jews under the Nazis to

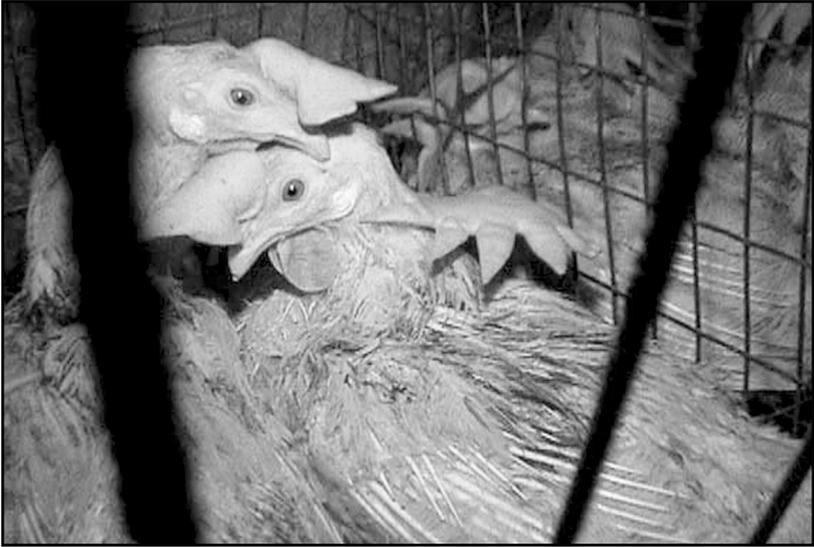


Fig. 1: Caged hens at Weaver Brothers Egg Farm in Versailles, Ohio.

*Photo courtesy of Mercy For Animals*

illuminate the plight of nonhuman animals subjugated by humans, Roberta Kalechofsky writes of both victimizations that, “[l]ike the Jew,” the animal is trapped in the “symbolism of another group. The animal’s life and destiny are under the control of the symbolic signs of others.”<sup>2</sup>

The concept of genocide that includes physical, cultural, and ideological forms of victim annihilation defines humanity’s relentless assault on the individuals, families, communities, and bodies of other animal species as a “genocidal” project both in its own right and in the context of organized human-on-human genocide. Just as it makes sense to speak of a “genocidal relationship implemented through racism” in the case of America’s aggression in Southeast Asia,<sup>3</sup> for example, it makes sense to speak of genocidal relationships implemented through speciesism in the myriad examples of humankind’s conquest of nonhuman animals and their living space.

The destruction, exile, and/or relocation of countless animal species and remnant populations of animals, under the assertion of the human “right” to possess and impose its cultural and psychological patterns, corresponds to the European colonial assault on the native human inhabitants of the African and American continents. It parallels the

Nazi territorial expansionism known as *Lebensraumpolitik* where Nazi politics of “must have” living space unfolded as an extension of the nineteenth century American “manifest destiny” that justified conquest of the Southwest and the Northwest, and islands in the Pacific and Caribbean, following its previous and continuing depredations and exterminations in South and Central America.<sup>4</sup> French anthropologist Edmond Perrier wrote in 1888: “Just as animals disappear before the advance of man, this privileged being, so too the savage is wiped out before the European.”<sup>5</sup>

Genocide represents the imposition of the oppressor’s pattern of life and beliefs on the life pattern of an oppressed group. The group becomes subject to the oppressor’s laws and cultural norms, a process that may, but does not invariably, entail the complete physical annihilation of the subjected group. Vestiges and deformations of the original culture may remain for shorter or longer periods, despite, or at the behest of, the oppressing agency for diverse purposes. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre noted that dependence on the labor of the subject people and the preservation of the colonial economy places restraints on the physical genocide that otherwise proceeds where no material advantage is gained from restraint. This dependency on the subject people provides protection from physical genocide, even as “cultural genocide, made necessary by colonialism as an economic system of unequal exchange,” continues.<sup>6</sup>

The model of genocide crafted for humans-over-human oppression parallels humans-over-nonhuman-animals conquest.<sup>7</sup> Billions of chickens, turkeys, ducks, cows, pigs, and other animals, like their wild counterparts, evolved to lead complex social lives in their own natural habitats; they have shown their ability to revert to living independently of humans, to become feral. Genocide is not to be rendered only physically, but is proliferated in virtually endless re-formations of animal bodies to fit the procrustean beds of global industrial agriculture and research. The chicken is one example.

The fate of chickens brings a hideous twist to the myth of the Phoenix, the mythical Egyptian bird who rises eternally young out of his own self-made funeral pyre. Traditionally, he is regarded as a symbol of the indomitable spirit of life and inexorable ability to be reborn from the ashes of death. In the light of animal agriculture, the Phoenix takes on a sinister aspect. Modern-day phoenixes, chickens, are unable to

die and become extinct under conditions equivalent to their eternal rebirth in a maniacal womb. A further irony derives from the fact that ancient Egyptians are considered the original inventors of the enormous incubation ovens that later became the model for the mammoth incubators used today for hatching tens of thousands of baby chicks artificially and simultaneously without a mother hen sitting on the eggs. The Egyptians provided the blueprint for today's mechanical Phoenix-like matrix in Hell to produce the "tidal wave of baby chicks" that flows invisibly across the earth today to stock human tables and satisfy human palates.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 2: Hatchery chicks at the beginning of their sad and terrible journey to human tables.

*Photo courtesy of UPC*

Factory-farmed chickens are imprisoned in buildings that are themselves part of a global system of confinement and international transport. Baby chicks, turkey poults, and hatching eggs intended for breeding are stowed as cargo on flights from one country to another, adding to the billions of birds being crated in delivery trucks from hatcheries to growout facilities to slaughter plants and elsewhere, up and down main roads and back roads all day, every day. There is a veritable poultry highway shuffling avian souls throughout the planet. However, the reality of this aboveground other-world is largely hidden from view. As noted by the agribusiness watchdog group GRAIN, which

tracks and reports on the global spread of avian influenza and its sources, “Rare are photos of the booming transnational poultry industry. There are no shots of its factory farms hit by the [bird flu] virus, and no images of its overcrowded trucks transporting live chickens or its feed mills converting ‘poultry byproducts’ into chicken feed.”<sup>9</sup> The absence of image brings an absence from mind and effects perceptual genocide.

Most humans are culturally conditioned to believe that chickens naturally exist as objects for human consumption and use, their “natural” habitat assumed to be the human-constructed world of a farm. However, chickens and other factory-farmed animals are totally separated from the natural world in which they evolved. Here, past these Dante’s gates, we find the Procrustean myth played out in the flesh. Farmed animals are imprisoned in alien, dysfunctional, and disease-prone bodies genetically manipulated for food traits alone,



Fig. 3: Debeaked chicks with bloody beaks.

*Photo courtesy of UPC*

bodies that in many cases have been surgically altered, creating a disfigured appearance. Animals are debeaked, de-toed, dehorned, ear-cropped, tail-docked, castrated, and (in the case of piglets), dentally mutilated—and always without painkillers. In the procrustean universe of animal agriculture, these amputations can be made to sound sensible and even benignant. A poultry researcher writes: “The emotion-laden word ‘mutilation’ is sometimes used in describing husbandry practices such as removing a portion of a hen’s beak.

. . . [However] removal of certain bodily structures, although causing temporary pain to individuals, can be of much benefit to the welfare of the group.”<sup>10</sup> Every effort is made to obscure and dent the reality of chicken experience. To control the debate between animal agribusiness and its adversaries, a poultry industry veterinarian has suggested that the word “debeaking” should undergo a procrustean facelift and instead be called “beak conditioning.”<sup>11</sup> The turkey industry has now adopted this term.



Fig. 4: Thousands of bloated baby chickens gasp for breath in this standard industrial facility filled with toxic excretory ammonia fumes and manure-soaked bedding. Perdue Farms, Delaware, USA.

*Photo courtesy of David Harp*

Factory-farmed animals are imprisoned and bound in a belittling image that has little to do with who they really are. Disfigured and lumped in a sepia-colored, excremental universe, huddled together awaiting their slaughter in a foreseeable future of featherless bodies and mutilated faces already come to pass, these brilliant, resplendent miracles of nature are almost literally cookie-cut to fit the human-created conception of mere raw material to be processed into human geometric food products and animal byproducts.<sup>12</sup> Their predicament is not new as much as it represents a further turn of the screw that continues to turn. In *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, Harriet Ritvo describes how animals became surrogates for nineteenth-century agendas, in particular Britain's imperial enterprise in which "material animals" and "rhetorical animals" embodied the most powerful possible symbol of human possession and control: "As material animals were at the complete disposal of human beings, so rhetorical animals offered unusual opportunities for manipulation; their positions in the physical world and in the universe of discourse were mutually reinforcing."<sup>13</sup>

#### ANTHROPOMORPHISM

*We are told we are being "emotional" or "anthropomorphic" if we care about a chicken, empathize with a chicken, or grieve over a chicken's plight. By contrast such "manly" ("science-based") emotions as pride, conquest, control, and mastery of "poultry" and "livestock" are admired.*

Ever since Darwin's theory of evolution erupted in the mid-nineteenth century, animal exploiters have invoked the word "anthropomorphism" to suppress protests of cruel and inhumane treatment of animals and to enforce the doctrine of an unbridgeable gap between humans and other animals. (Ironically, anthropomorphism was a term historically reserved to describe the attribution of human characteristics to the deity.) Despite the concept of species continuity that Darwin asserted and that is embraced by science today,<sup>14,15</sup> science has adamantly insisted on an indelible *discontinuity* between humans and all other species. However, this scientific law bends conveniently. Species continuity is called upon when it is necessary to justify a particular enterprise, such as the chicken genome project, in which the chicken is said to be "well positioned

from an evolutionary standpoint to provide an intermediate perspective between mammals, such as humans, and lower vertebrates, such as fish.”<sup>16</sup> The unbridgeable gap between humans and other animals is capriciously set aside any time it is required to further exploit animals. Animals are welcomed back into the fold as in the case of genetic engineering that “has the potential to remarkably improve, not only animal health and well being, but also human health.”<sup>17</sup>

“Anthropomorphism,” as it is used today, refers almost entirely to the attribution of consciousness, emotions, and other mental states, commonly regarded as exclusively or predominantly human, to nonhuman animals. While there is no longer any scientific doubt regarding the neurobiological, physiological, anatomical, and *psychological* continuity between human and nonhuman animals, scientists are reluctant to acknowledge mental continuity, and when it is recognized, refuse to address the implied ethics.<sup>18,19</sup> Until recently, about the only emotional capacity scientists have been willing to grant unstintingly to animals was fear. Scientists have set up countless “agonistic” experiments to elicit fear and fighting in captive animals, perhaps because there is unacknowledged pleasure in inducing the emotion of fear in others and watching them fight to the death in the controlled experiments of one’s godlike designs. In contrast to fear and other stressful emotions, the emotional capacity for pleasure, happiness, and joy in animals is a touchier issue. Yet, “according to Darwin, there is evolutionary continuity among animals not only in anatomical structures such as hearts, kidneys, and teeth, but also in brains and their associated cognitive and emotional capacities.”<sup>20</sup> Evidence of joy in animals is already “so extensive that it should hardly need further discussion.”<sup>21</sup> But not everyone agrees. University of Oxford zoologist Marian Stamp Dawkins criticized ethologist Jonathan Balcombe’s book *Pleasurable Kingdom: Animals and the Nature of Feeling Good* for arguing that animals can experience pleasure and happiness. This idea, she said, threatens to usher an abandonment of “all standards of scientific reasoning,” resulting in a chaos in which there will no longer be any distinction “between the anthropomorphism of Bambi and the scientific study of animal behavior.”<sup>22</sup> Here we see the powerful force of psychological denial and cognitive dissonance, for arguments such as Dawkins’ are based on selective science.

Nonetheless, the exploitation of animals is based on precisely such ploys and succeeds because there is strong motivation to oppress other species. The rhetoric of exploitation cuts and pastes nonhuman animal identity, just as scientists cut and paste the bodies of animals to fit human desires. Sometimes the animal is ennobled if there is something wild and warlike about “him” (the “noble steed,” the “majestic wild turkey” who deserves the best gunshot), but usually not. Humans, by virtue of a shared verbal language, can aggressively challenge the profanation of their identity. By contrast, nonhuman animals such as chickens are made powerless through language (for example, calling a human a “chicken” means the human is a coward and weak) and practice (through material subjugation). A hen is represented by egg producers as an “egg-laying machine,” or as a symbolic uterus for the deposition of a human being’s spiritual impurities, as in the Hasidic custom of *kapparot* (“atonements”) in which chickens are configured as receptacles for practitioners’ sins and punishment.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, the practice of vivisection—the invasion of a living creature’s body with a knife or other instrument of direct physical assault—is based on the anthropomorphic construction of the nonhuman animal as a “model” for the human condition into whose body human diseases are injected in what is, in essence, a form of interspecies rape by a human of a nonhuman animal victim. As in rape, so in vivisection, the victim is treated as a receptacle for the victimizer’s defilement. In both cases, the victim is involuntarily made to appear as an aspect of the victimizer’s identity, as when scientists call animals used in vivisection experiments “partners” and “collaborators” in the quest for knowledge. A biotechnology representative told an audience at a symposium on the future of animal agriculture that animals who are being modified and “recombined” every which way, to fit every conceivable purpose and whim, are “serving mankind” as part of an enterprise which “recognizes that animal welfare is of paramount importance and therefore has been and will continue to ensure that animal welfare is unsurpassed.”<sup>24</sup> The physical world and animals are described in symbol and myth not to express who they really are but what the human psyche wants them to be.

## FALSIFYING THE FATE OF VICTIMS

Similar to myths circulated by U.S. slavery owners about their human “property” during the nineteenth century, animal victimizers typically insist that their victims do not mind their plight, that they are unable to experience it “as you or I would,” or that the victims are complicit in their plight, even, on occasion, to the point of gratitude. The victims, in other words, are not really “innocent.” Rabbi Avi Shafran, Director of Public Affairs for Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox rabbinical association, said that chickens, rather than suffering in being “swung” and slaughtered in kapparot rituals, may be regarded as “gratified by the privilege” of being killed for a “holy purpose.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, regarding his deportation of tens of thousands of Jews to their deaths, Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann pleaded his case by insisting that the Jews “desired” to emigrate and that “he, Eichmann, was there to help them.”<sup>26</sup>

This is not exceptional psychology, as students of sexual assault are well aware. Victimiziers often represent themselves as the innocent parties in their orchestrations of the suffering and death of others. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt cites an Egyptian deputy foreign minister who claimed, for instance, that Hitler was “innocent of the slaughter of the Jews; he was a victim of the Zionists, who had ‘compelled him to perpetuate crimes that would eventually enable them to achieve their aim—the creation of the State of Israel.’”<sup>27</sup> If you want to hurt someone and maintain a clean conscience about it, chances are you will invoke arguments along one or more of these lines: the victim doesn’t feel, doesn’t know, doesn’t care, is complicit, or isn’t even *there*. In the latter case the victim is configured as *an illusion*.

In the case of animals, their fate, for each individual him and her, is to be absorbed into a human-centered hierarchy in which the animals cease to count, or even exist, apart from how humans use or have used them. *Our use becomes their ontology*—“this is what they are”—and their teleology—“this is what they were made for.” Procrustean genocide is etched into human cultures and myths. To this day, animals are ritually sacrificed by Hindus whose practice is based on the idea that “the sacrifice of an animal is *not really the killing of an animal*.” The animal to be sacrificed is not considered an animal but is instead “a symbol of those powers for which the sacrificial ritual stands.”<sup>28</sup> In Hindu

mythology, according to Basant K. Lal, “if a soul migrates to an animal form from a human life, it moves from a superior to an inferior form of life, and it does so because of its misdeeds while in the human form.”<sup>29</sup> As in traditional Judaism, the Hindu attitude toward animals is not based on considerations about the animal as such but on considerations of how the animal advances the purificatory process leading to human salvation.<sup>30</sup> In Christianity, lambs disappear into the body and symbolism of Jesus Christ whereby they are elevated and redeemed into something that matters. In Buddhism, according to Christopher Chapple, the animal world is one of the lesser destinies, “along with the hell beings and hungry ghosts.” Birth as an animal in the Buddhist tradition, although a basis for compassion, including the promotion of vegetarianism and other forms of nonviolence towards animals, is also a punishment for “evil deeds” and “deludedness.”<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, there is a long tradition of thought in which nonhuman animals are represented as benefiting from their victimization and even gratefully assisting in their own destruction, which is formulated as their “liberation.” In Greek mythology, the ox runs from the fields to the city and stands at the altar to be sacrificed, and a bird flies to the altar and delivers itself “into the hands of the high priest.”<sup>32</sup> In Hassidic lore, flocks of wild doves come of their own accord to lie down under the slaughterer’s knife.<sup>33</sup> It has been argued that the doctrine of metempsychosis—the belief that human souls can become trapped in “lower” life forms as punishment for their misdeeds—rather than promoting vegetarianism, favors the consumption of flesh, since slaughtering an animal releases the human soul imprisoned within.<sup>34</sup> Meat in these accounts does not remind one, as it came to remind former chicken slaughterhouse worker Virgil Butler, of “the sad, tortured face that was attached to it some time in the past,”<sup>35</sup> but only of the human sinner or penitent, whose superior identity is defiled by being trapped in an animal’s body. In Isaac Bashevis Singer’s story “The Slaughterer,” the rabbi seeks to convince the main character, Yoineh Meir, who does not want to slaughter animals, but is coerced into doing so, that everyone benefits from the slaughter: “When you slaughter an animal with a pure knife and with piety, you liberate the soul that resides in it. For it is well known that the souls of saints often transmigrate into the bodies of cows, fowl, and fish to do penance for some offence.”<sup>36</sup>

Little has changed since earlier times. The ancient concept that animal sacrifice is acceptable if a prayer of gratitude is expressed by the human consumer has been absorbed by New Age practitioners. In today's world, pigs, cows, and even children want to be turned into Oscar Meyer wieners. Rabbits "collaborate" with vivisectors to test cosmetics so women can look pretty. Chickens run around headless in supermarkets demanding to be served with Swanson chicken broth. In the rhetoric of exploitation—as opposed to the language of liberation—animals can be redeemed from being "just animals" only by being sacrificed to "higher" forms of life, via science, religion, entertainment, or edibility. Hence, whatever was or is done to them is justified by the "will" of the animals themselves. Nonhuman animals want to be raped, mutilated, imprisoned, and even murdered, if it will make them "higher" and more humanlike, privileged to serve the human interest. This is the essence of false anthropomorphism and of the genocidal erasure of the animal's true identity in favor of the abuser's image.

#### EMPATHIC ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The opposite of cultural narcissism is *empathic* anthropomorphism, in which a person's vicarious perceptions and emotions are rooted in the realities of evolutionary kinship with other animal species in a spirit of goodwill. In contrast to the false anthropomorphism fashioned by animal exploiters, anthropomorphism based on empathy and careful observation is a valid approach to understanding other species. Humans are linked to other animals through evolution, and communication between many species is commonplace. Reasonable inferences can be drawn regarding the meaning of an animal's body language and vocal inflections based on what we know about comparable responses in humans in similar contexts. Chickens, for example, have a voice of unmistakable woe or enthusiasm in situations where these responses make sense. Their body language of "curved toward the earth" (drooping) versus "head up, tail up" is similarly interpretable. My experience with chickens for more than twenty years has shown me that chickens are conscious and emotional beings with adaptable sociability and a range of intentions and personalities. When they are enjoying their lives and pursuing their own interests, chickens are cheerful birds, quite vocally so, and when they are dispirited and oppressed, their entire being expresses this state of affairs as well. The

fact that chickens become lethargic in continuously barren environments shows how sensitive these birds are to their surroundings, deprivations, and prospects. Likewise, when chickens are happy, their sense of wellbeing resonates unmistakably.<sup>37</sup> Chickens are neither stupid or impassive by nature; it is only human perception that defines them as such.

From this perspective, anthropomorphism makes sense. One may legitimately formulate ideas about animals and their needs that the rhetoric of exploitation seeks to discredit. One may proffer a counter rhetoric of animal liberation based upon empathy and careful observation. As Jonathan Balcombe writes in *Pleasurable Kingdom*, “We cannot feel the hummingbird’s response to a trumpet-flower’s nectar, the dog’s anticipation of chasing a ball, or the turtle’s experience of basking in the sun, but we can imagine those feelings based on our own experiences of similar situations.”<sup>38</sup> Consider this picture of a wild turkey mother leading her brood, including an errant youngster:

They hurry along as if on a march to some particular point, sometimes tripping along in single file, one behind the other, and at other times scattered through the woods for fifty yards or more. When on these scattered marches it is pleasant to note some straggling youngster as he wanders out of sight of the main flock in an attempt to catch a fickle-winged butterfly, or delays by the wayside scratching amid the remains of a decayed log in search of a rich morsel in the shape of a grubworm. . . . [W]hen he discovers that he is alone . . . [h]e raises himself up, looks with his keen eyes in every direction for the flock, and, failing to discover them, gives the well-known coarse cluck. Then he raises his head high in the air, and listens intently for his mother’s call. As soon as it is discovered that one is missing the whole flock stops, and the young turkeys raise their heads and await the signal from their mother. When she hears the note of the lost youngster, she gives a few anxious “yelps,” which he answers, and then, opening his wings, he gives them a joyous flap or two and with a few sharp, quick “yelps,” he goes on a run to join his companions.<sup>39</sup>

These days, in the morning when I unhook the door of the little house in which eight hens and Sir Valery Valentine the rooster spend the night, brown Josephine runs alongside me and dashes ahead down to the Big House where she waits in anticipation while I unlatch the door to let the birds who are eagerly assembled on the other side of

that door out into the yard. Out they rush, and in goes Josephine, straight to the favorite spot shaped by herself and her friends into a comfy nest atop three stacked bales of straw that, envisioned in her mind's eye, she was determined to get to. Why else, unless she remembered the place and her experience in it with anticipatory pleasure, would she be determined day after day to repeat the episode? In her mind's eye, is my own role in her morning ritual. I hold the Keys to the little straw Kingdom Josephine is eager to reenter, and she accompanies me trustingly and expectantly as we make our way toward it.<sup>40</sup>



Fig 5: Sanctuary hens running in the poultry yard.

*Photo courtesy of Davida G. Breier*

“Anthropomorphic” evocations like these, of a strolling turkey family and a sanctuary hen’s eager intentions, are the opposite of the false anthropomorphism of, say, the fighting cock, the circus elephant, and the Thanksgiving turkey. In cockfighting, roosters are forced to die in stylized rituals of masculinity having nothing to do with natural bird behavior in an actual chicken flock. So-called circus elephants are taken from their natural habitats and forced to perform human-contrived antics for human entertainment. Thanksgiving turkeys are maledicted as “dirty birds” that become magically clean only by being slaughtered, cooked, and consumed by “superior” humans.

Such constructions exemplify the kind of anthropomorphism on which animal exploitation depends. It consists of insisting that animals are not suffering, that they are happy and grateful to be exploited, despite a congeries of evidence to the contrary. If animal advocates say, for instance, that a hen in a battery cage or a chicken buried alive in his own flesh is miserable, they're accused of anthropomorphism—of attributing human feelings to chickens. If producers say that the chicken is happy or (as one egg producer rewrote the company language in response to criticism) “content,” the claim is accepted as “science.” Consider the latitude accorded to agribusiness philosopher Paul Thompson, whose claim that blind hens “don't mind” being crowded together in cages as much as do chickens who can see is accepted as a “science-based” proposition with a view to improved animal welfare, in light of the blind chickens' alleged “reduced susceptibility to stress.”<sup>41</sup> If blind chickens, or featherless chickens, or whatever genetically modified animal forms can be shown “quietly” to increase economic efficiencies in the industrial environment, the procrustean solution can be represented as a “holistic fit between a farm animal and its environment.”<sup>42</sup>

#### PROCRUSTEAN SOLUTIONS TO ANIMAL WELFARE PROBLEMS

Thus far we have considered the plight of animals caught in the toils of agribusiness and other institutionalized predicaments in which they and their identities are forcibly reconstructed against their will to fit human purposes. The ethical conundrum posed by this arrangement has been represented in public debates mainly in terms of the fact that animals can suffer. Animals are feeling beings. They are “subjects of a life,” in philosopher Tom Regan's phrase.<sup>43</sup> Animals can experience what they are doing and what is being done to them.

But what if an animal's capacity for experience could be reduced or even eliminated? What if scientists could create animals whose adjustment to abusive environments consisted in their being unable to experience their own existence, animals who were essentially the oblivious entities they are treated as being? This prospect may seem farfetched, but is it? More than a decade ago an engineer predicted that the future of chicken and egg production would resemble “industrial-scale versions of the heart-lung machines that brain-dead human beings need a court order to get unplugged from.”<sup>44</sup>



Fig. 6: Lively young chickens reduced to a sepia-grey sea of pure suffering.  
*Photo courtesy of David Harp*

The creation of insentient, brain-dead animals to fit the procrustean systems of industrialized agriculture is most likely in the works already. In *Minds of Their Own: Thinking and Awareness in Animals*, avian ethologist Lesley Rogers writes that “the identities of individual animals are completely lost.” In industrialized farming, chickens and other animals are seen only as objectified bodies “to be fattened or to lay eggs.” Their higher cognitive abilities are discarded, “ignored and definitely unwanted.” The ultimate aim of breeding programs is to obtain animals with minds “so blunted” that they will passively accept the worst treatment and living conditions.<sup>45</sup>

As yet, there is no evidence that domestic chickens, or any other animals in commercial use, have been so cognitively blunted that they need no more stimulation than they receive in industrialized conditions. However, their overt signs of sensitivity will continue to be suppressed by these conditions. A writer for *The Guardian* described his impression of thousands of young chickens being raised for slaughter in a facility in the United Kingdom as “a sea of stationary grey objects.”<sup>46</sup> The fate of chickens and other farmed animals is not to be treated as

fellow creatures with feelings, but as pieces of meat and whatever else the market desires. They may have minds and consciousness, but they will not be treated as such.

For some critics of factory farming, the genetic engineering of animals to fit them to conditions from which they cannot escape is considered a welfare solution of sorts. The utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer exemplifies this view. Asked if he would consider it ethical to engineer wingless chickens to give them more space in battery cages, he replied that a wingless chicken would be an improvement, “assuming it doesn’t have any residual instincts” such as phantom limb pain (which debeaked chickens have been shown to experience). He added that, “if you could eliminate various other chicken instincts, like its [*sic*] preference for laying eggs in a nest, that would be an improvement too.” Asked if he would consider it ethical to engineer a “brainless bird, grown strictly for its meat,” Singer said it would be “an ethical

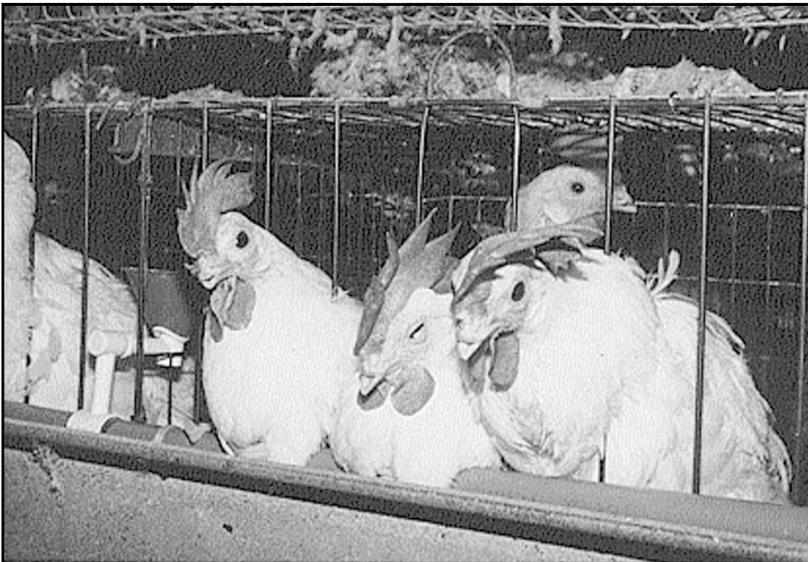


Fig 7: Suffering for the sake of science has been the yearly fate for millions of chickens. These hens had thick red plastic contact lenses shoved into their eyes which prevented their eyes from breathing and caused painful eye infections and disintegration under the lenses. California Polytech State University, San Luis Obispo.

*Photo courtesy of UPC*

improvement on the present system, because it would eliminate the suffering that these birds are feeling. That's the huge plus to me."<sup>47</sup>

One must challenge this viewpoint. For one thing, most people who hope for a genetic solution to the suffering of animals on factory farms have no idea of what actually goes on in genetic engineering laboratories where countless live animals are routinely being "modified" and trashed. In 1994, I attended the First International Symposium on the Artificial Insemination of Poultry at the University of Maryland, College Park. In a talk entitled "Beyond Freezing Semen" (available in the published *Proceedings* which includes photographs of some of the procedures), Robert Etches, a researcher at the University of Guelph in the Department of Animal and Poultry Science, joked that his presentation might just as well be called "The Night of the Living Dead." He was discussing the experimental freezing and thawing of semen obtained from laboratory roosters (notably, extracted by masturbating them) to create chicken chimeras—chickens with genes from other species inserted into their embryos. Of birds hatching with no outward sign of the desired change, he said, "We simply throw them away."<sup>48</sup>

From an ethical standpoint, genetic engineering is not a solution to the suffering of animals on factory farms; rather, it is an extension of the system and mentality that produced and produces such suffering in the first place. Suffering involves more than the sensation of an injury; it includes more than pain. Suffering refers to the sustaining of a harm, wound, or disease, an injury, painful or otherwise. Millions of birds and other animals are being tortured in laboratories, forced into mutilated forms of existence, then discarded with no more concern for them or their feelings than if they were paperclips. What, then, is the difference from the standpoint of a purely nominal "concern" for animals between surgical amputation of their body parts and genetic amputation of their body parts including their brains? Does anyone wonder how a wingless bird might feel? Are wings just mechanical appendages to the bodies of birds that can be excised or "deleted" at will to enhance the "welfare" of their progeny in the terrible places to which we consign them to satisfy our appetites? Could other aspects of their existence be adversely affected by having their wings removed that would offset any welfare advantage obtained in the tradeoff?

Dr. Eldon Kienholz, a professor of poultry nutrition at Colorado State University, described experiments that he did on newborn chickens and turkeys, in which he literally cut off their wings and tails to see if by doing so he could demonstrate a savings in feed costs, since feed would not be needed to grow wings and tails in birds raised for meat. Later, he wrote that some of these de-winged birds, as he called them, “couldn’t get up onto their feet when they fell over.” It wasn’t pleasant, he wrote, “seeing them spin around on their side trying to get back onto their feet, without their wings.”<sup>49</sup>

This raises many questions, including whether a bird’s wings are mere physical, expendable appendages, or whether they are an integral part not only of the body but of the very *being* of a bird. The neurologist Oliver Sacks discusses the persistence of what he calls “emotional memory” in people suffering from amnesia who have lost the ability to connect and recall the daily events of their lives, but who nevertheless appear to have “deep emotional memories or associations . . . in the limbic system and other regions of the brain where emotional memories are represented.”<sup>50</sup> He suggests that these emotional memories, perhaps



Fig. 8: Consider the implications in the differences between what chickens have become and who they were meant to be.

*Photo courtesy of Farrell Winter*



Fig. 9: Former “battery” hens take naturally to perching in trees.

*Photo courtesy of Pamela Winter*

more than any other kinds of memories we possess, are what make us who we truly are in the most profound, if elusive, sense. The available evidence suggests that the consciousness of other animals, including

birds, is also rooted in and shaped by emotional memory. Birds, too, possess limbic systems and other regions of the brain in which instincts and emotions are formed and coordinated, and they have been shown to share with humans a complexly evolved brain that processes information and gives rise to experience in much the same way as the human cerebral cortex. Given that neuroscience itself admits to a unitary model of vertebrate brain, minds, and behavior—that is, the structures of human, turkey, and chicken brains and their minds are generally shared—it is no inferential stretch to assume that their experiences are similar to our own as well as their communication capacities.<sup>51, 52</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

Scientists cite neurological evidence that the amputated stump of a debeaked bird continues to discharge abnormal afferent nerves in fibers running from the stump for many weeks after beak trimming, “similar to what happens in human amputees who suffer from phantom limb pain.”<sup>53</sup> A “memory” of the amputated beak part persists in the brain, beak, and facial sensations of the mutilated bird even after “healing” has occurred. Scientists also cite the persistence of “ancestral memories” in intensively bred, factory-farmed chickens who, though they have never personally experienced so much as the ground under their feet, have “the same drive to scratch away to get their food,” given the opportunity, as do their junglefowl relatives who spend long hours scratching away at the leaves of the forest floor to reach the tiny seeds of bamboo which they love.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps these deeply structured memory formations, retentions, and ineffable networks of knowledge in the body and brain of the factory-farmed bird give rise to “phantom limbic memories” in the individual: to subjective, embodied experiences in which even dismembered or mutilated body parts nonetheless awaken in the individual a distant memory of who and what he or she really *is*, ontologically.

We must assume that other animals, like ourselves, have dimensions of interiority and proprioceptive awareness all their own, and that in consequence, the surgical and genetic mutilations they experience, the grievous wounds they suffer at our hands, are as much existential and psychic as they are physical. Wingless, featherless, blind and brain-damaged, entrapped in the hell of humanity, do they recall their

wholeness in the phantom limbic soul of themselves? And if they do, are their memories of their essential identity, eluding the procrustean blades of annihilation, experienced as compensation or curse? When hens in a battery cage fall asleep, perchance to dream, how do they feel when they wake up? We have become accustomed, through the environmental movement, to think of species extinction as the worst fate that can befall a sentient organism. But the chicken's doom is not to become extinct.

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