**Case 4**

Factory Farming and Animal Suffering

“Factory farming” refers to the concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) used to produce the foods most Americans like best: chicken, beef, and pork. The practice is widespread, because about 9 billion chickens and half a billion turkeys are raised for human consumption in the United States each year. Let’s look at these farming practices in a little more detail.9 When raised on a CAFO, few chickens or turkeys ever catch a glimpse of the outside world in their lifetimes (which run about six weeks for chickens and a little longer for turkeys). To save space (and thus money), these poultry are raised in pens that provide about half a square foot for each chicken and less than three square feet for each turkey. When the birds are grown, they don’t have enough room to even stretch their wings. Perhaps because they’re so close together or because they are bored stiff, these birds can get rather feisty. To prevent them from injuring each other, their beaks are cut off. For turkeys, the tips of their toes are clipped as well—without using anesthetic. To prevent infection (which can rapidly spread in such crowded conditions), the birds are given heavy doses of antibiotics. These antibiotics are also necessary because the pens normally remain quite unsanitary. As you can imagine, this also produces a pretty horrible stench, mainly from bird feces. Both chickens and turkeys have been genetically altered to grow faster and bigger. A faster turnover in birds allows for faster profits, which helps keep the cost of meat lower for the consumer. Fatter birds also mean fatter profits. Unfor- tunately, some chickens grow so heavy that their legs collapse under their own weight. Turkeys grow breasts so large (Americans prefer breast meat!) that they can’t reproduce normally; they must be artificially inseminated. Turkeys are also prone to falling down and may be injured by other turkeys stepping on them. When the birds are brought to the slaughterhouse, they are dumped from their crates onto conveyer belts, and some fall off. Because of the speed at which workers process the birds, the fallen birds may not get picked up again; as a result, they either die from exposure or from getting torn up in the machinery. Once on the conveyer belt, the birds are hung upside down by their feet and are first run though a bath of electrified water. This step adds a humane touch of stunning the birds; however, it’s not legally mandated because chickens and turkeys don’t fall under the Federal Humane Slaughter Act. In fact, the stun- ning is done primarily to expedite the slaughtering process. However, some birds emerge from this bath still conscious. Conscious or not, they then proceed toward a mechanical knife that cuts their throats. Because of the high process- ing speeds, some birds manage to survive even this step. Thus, some are still alive as they reach their last stop—a scalding tank that submerges the birds in boiling water. As repulsive as some of these facts may be, there are points in favor of CAFO processing. First, although birds are obviously capable of suffering, it is unlikely that they have the sorts of experiences we may imagine as we think about the slaughterhouse. We tend to anthropomorphize—to think from a human point of view. For instance, we may picture a bird experiencing overwhelming terror as it proceeds along the conveyer belt. Yet birds are not likely to even remotely appreci- ate the fatal significance of the process. In addition, human beings benefit from factory farming in many ways. For one thing, chicken farmers don’t earn much, and factory farming helps their businesses remain profitable. Cheaper methods also pass significant savings on to consumers. For a family living below the poverty line, this savings could make the difference between having meat at the dinner table or not.

Answer these questions

1. Because utilitarianism is inclusive and as birds can clearly experience pain, most utilitarians include them in their calculations. do you agree that animal experiences ought to be included in the moral evaluation of factory farming?
2. do the important human benefits of factory farming outweigh the disutility of the animal suffering?
3. Birds don’t anticipate much of their suffering or impending death. neverthe- less, any human parent can fully appreciate the significance of not being able to afford dinner for her child. How should such differences enter into our utilitarian considerations? Are there other relevant differences between humans and animals that need to be considered?
4. Are there any morally preferable alternatives to factory farming?