

REVIEW OF *COMPASSION, BY THE POUND*

I appreciated this book for two main reasons:

1. It provides validation for an important assumption made by many vegetarians/vegans: that our *individual* purchasing decisions affect how animals are treated.
2. It gives a better defense of current animal agriculture practices than I've encountered before.

1. Does it matter what you buy?

Assume, for the moment, that you believe the way animals are currently treated in our food production system is severely immoral. Does this imply you should avoid buying animal food products? Would that actually help the animals, or be a purely symbolic gesture? You might doubt that an industry which slaughters billions of chickens each year is going to slaughter any fewer just because little old you decides to abstain from the nuggies.

Bailey and Norwood are economists specializing in animal agriculture, so they seem like the right people to address this question. And they seem confident:

a permanent decision to reduce meat consumption (1) **does ultimately reduce the number of animals on the farm** and the amount of meat produced (2), but it has *less* than a 1-to-1 effect on the amount of meat produced.¹

The degree of effect varies because “the magnitude of the demand and supply elasticities—the degree of which consumers and producers are sensitive to price changes”² varies for different food items. (Consumer price sensitivity matters because when enough people refrain from buying a product, the price will go down, and the new lower price point may make other people willing to buy more of it. The more price-sensitive other consumers are, the more an abstinence on your part will be offset by an increased indulgence on their part.)

Bailey and Norwood use elasticity estimates to calculate the net effect of an individual buying less of various animal products; I've copied the table below from the book.³ Notice

¹F. Bailey Norwood and Jayson Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound: The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 222–23, bold added but italics in original.

²Ibid., 222.

³Ibid., 223. I'm pretty confident “0.91 Lbs” was a typo, so I corrected it in pen in my copy.

that even in the case where the ratio of production-decrease to consumption-decrease is lowest (milk, 56%) it's still more than half. My takeaway is that individual choices do have a large impact.

Table 8.1 Long-Run Effects of Reducing Consumption of Six Animal Food Products

If you give up...	Total production eventually falls by	Per capita consumption of food item
One pound of beef	0.68 lbs	65.20 lbs
One pound of chicken	0.76 lbs	85.10 lbs
One pound of milk	0.56 lbs	600.00 lbs
One pound of veal	0.69 lbs	0.50 lbs
One pound of pork	0.74 lbs	50.80 lbs
One egg	0.91 lbs eggs	250.00 eggs

Note: All products are assumed to be conventionally raised and sold as a generic animal food product. If pork is produced in a crate-free (confinement-pen) system the number 0.74 can be replaced by 0.71, and if the pork is raised in a shelter-pasture system the number can be replaced with 0.53. More details on these alternative numbers can be found in the footnotes of Table 8.A1.

2. How badly are animals treated?

When I first read about animal welfare issues several years ago, I was shocked by some of the horrible practices that were described. I was also surprised at how difficult it was to find a serious rebuttal to those descriptions—I couldn't really find anyone who seemed informed who was saying *no, it's not actually like that*.

These authors do seem informed, and they have a more nuanced take. They discuss a number of considerations for each type of animal in detail, which I'm not going to try to summarize here, but here's the ten-thousand-foot view from the end of the book:

Although animal well-being can be enhanced in most typical animal production systems, we are quite certain that the overall level of animal welfare is higher in the broiler, dairy, and beef industries than the egg, pork, and veal industries. Beef cattle in particular experience high levels of well-being. A movement to improve the lives of egg-laying hens or sows would substantially reduce animal *suffering*, whereas an improvement in the beef industry would only make *happy* animals happier—both are praiseworthy, of course.⁴

⁴Ibid., 354.

The following table from the book⁵ puts numbers on one of the author’s judgments—the other author “is more likely ... to believe that chickens and hogs in conventional systems are better off alive than dead”⁶. Negative numbers indicate a belief that the “[a]nimal is better off dead, not being born and raised for food”⁷. (Note that the book provides this mainly as an example; they want readers to make their own assessments about what the appropriate scores are.)

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Table 8.2 Bailey’s Personalized Welfare Scores for Various Livestock

Welfare of animals raised to produce (raised conventionally unless otherwise noted)	Welfare score of one breeder animal	Welfare score of one market (non-breeder) animal
	(−10 score for worst state, 10 score for best state)	
Beef	8	6
Chicken meat	−4	3
Milk	not relevant	4
Veal	not relevant	−8
Pork	−7	−2
Crate-free pork ¹	−5	−2
Shelter-pasture pork ²	4	4
Egg from cage system	3	−8
Egg from cage-free system	3	2

Notes: ¹Pork produced in the absence of gestation crates; farrowing crates are still permissible. This system is referred to as a confinement-pen system in Chapter 5.
²This system is defined in Chapter 5. It provides pigs with both shelter and pasture, and in many cases could be sold under the private label Animal Welfare Approved, developed by the Animal Welfare Institute.

The high score for beef fits with my expectations, but I’m surprised by the relatively positive assessment of chicken and dairy production. For broiler chickens, the book mentions that painful issues related to the birds’ legs are widespread (“About 28 percent of birds were assigned a gait score of 3 or higher”; in an experiment, “Birds with a gait score of 3 or higher consumed the food with pain relievers at a significantly higher rate”⁸). And “between 14 percent and 25 percent of all dairy cows suffer from some form of lameness”⁹. I remain skeptical that the animals’ lives are overall good in light of these and other issues, but I’m

⁵Ibid., 229.

⁶Ibid., 227.

⁷Ibid., 225.

⁸Ibid., 131.

⁹Ibid., 148.

much less confident than I was before and need to research this more.

One thing the book intentionally avoids discussing (I'm not sure whether it was factored into the scores in the table above or not—the table is from a later chapter) is what happens at the end of animals' lives:

In this chapter, we tended to focus primarily on the everyday life of farm animals. Animal advocacy groups will often mention a myriad other issues such as the transportation and slaughter of livestock. These issues, while important, are temporary experiences for the animal. We sought to describe the everyday life of farm animals, not the single worst days.¹⁰

I feel this underestimates the ethical importance of what happens on those “worst days”. Consider the following from this Humane League article:

Animals can be held captive in transport trucks for long periods of time. In the US, truck drivers are only required to stop animal transport trucks once every 28 hours, and this law is seldom enforced. In order to cut costs and maximize the amount of animals that can be transported at once, animals are often deprived of food and water for the entirety of their journey—up to 48 hours at a time—pushing them to the limits of how much starvation and dehydration they can endure. Can you imagine the stress of traveling for two days without stopping for food or water?

And the following from another article:

Given how many animals are stunned the wrong way, leaving them conscious through the worst moments of their lives, it's safe to say that thousands upon thousands do feel pain, not only before the slaughter but during it. When their throats are slashed. When their bodies are boiled. When their limbs are severed.

3. Labels

Does buying “organic” help the animals? Bailey and Norwood give a qualified yes:

Animals produced under organic systems probably experience higher levels of well-being than animals in non-organic systems, but the difference might not be as marked as many believe.¹¹

¹⁰Ibid., 165.

¹¹Ibid., 158.

Some of the factors that keep organic from being purely positive include:

Organic production prohibits the use of antibiotics (both therapeutic and subtherapeutic), which almost certainly lowers well-being as more animals become sick without access to antibiotic treatment. Animals that become sick on organic farms are either allowed to remain sick and potentially die or are segregated, given antibiotics, and are sold at a lower price in the non-organic market. Too many sick animals, we believe, do not receive proper treatment because the farmers fear the loss in income they will experience in having to sell the animal on the non-organic market.¹²

And:

...organic producers have a difficult time meeting their animals' dietary needs, and the animals suffer. A number of animal scientists in the US feel organic production is cruel for this reason.¹³

If “organic” isn’t a great indicator of welfare, is there another label that is? The authors speak very highly of **Animal Welfare Approved**.

There’s also the question of whether producers actually adhere to the requirements of a label, or merely claim to. Bailey and Norwood indicate that in their experience the labels can indeed be trusted:

A final comment about the organic, AWA, and other such labels is warranted relating to consumer skepticism over the possibility of producers “cutting corners” by using practices that lower costs while still looking to sell at a premium under a brand. This skepticism is not entirely unfair. We have visited hog farms selling under a brand claiming to sell antibiotic-free pork, but the farmers told us plainly that antibiotics are used. We have visited hog farms claiming to produce under standards dictated by one of the humane labels but it was transparent the operation did not meet the standards... However, these are just a few exceptions to the many farms we have visited that are in compliance with the standards. Both the AWA and organic standards require routine farm inspections, which does help to minimize non-compliance.¹⁴

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 160.