Foreword

Those who know my views from *Animal Liberation* may be surprised to find me writing a foreword to a book entitled *The Future of Animal Farming*. Doesn’t the animal liberation movement do its very best to ensure that animal farming has no future? If the correct moral principle for guiding our conduct towards nonhuman animals is to give their interests equal consideration with our own, at least where our interests are similar, should we be farming them at all? Shouldn’t we all be vegans?

Then there is the book’s subtitle: *Renewing the Ancient Contract*. How could there really be a contract between humans and animals? The idea of a contract presupposes that both parties choose to enter it. Cows, pigs, and chickens don’t have the capacity to make an informed choice about whether or not to associate with humans – to mention just one critical fact, they cannot know that their premature death is part of the bargain. The reality is that domestic animals have always been captured, bred, reared, and killed for the benefit of humans, and rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to break free and live on their own. The slave trade is a closer parallel to this than the modern idea of an agreement between freely contracting parties. No doubt traditional farmers were more likely to care for their animals as individuals than the people who manage today’s vast factory farms, but the fact that some slave-owners had a genuine, if paternalistic, concern for the welfare of their slaves was not enough to make the slave trade a contract between Europeans and Africans.

I do not resile from the position I took in *Animal Liberation*. I see the rearing of animals for food as a manifestation of speciesism, that is, a human prejudice against giving proper consideration to the interests of beings of other species. Commercial animal raising is inherently likely to sacrifice the interests of the animals to our own convenience. Refusing to buy animal products is the surest way to avoid supporting the unethical treatment of animals. But I also recognize that while the number of vegetarians and vegans has grown, at least in developed countries, during the past three decades, the number of animals raised and killed for food, worldwide, has grown even faster. This is in large part because of greater prosperity, both in the developed world and in countries like China, and the higher demand for animal products that this prosperity brings. That demand has in turn led to a staggering increase in the number of animals spending miserable lives in the close confinement of factory farms.

In the face of this vast universe of animal suffering – which is also an ecological catastrophe on many different levels, from local water pollution to the acceleration
of climate change – should the animal movement confine itself to promoting veganism? Over the next 10 or 20 years that strategy may, with luck, increase the percentage of vegans to 5% or even 10% of the population, but on the basis of what we have seen so far, the chances of it succeeding in persuading the majority of meat-eaters to abandon all animal products are remote. (At least, unless the development of in vitro meat offers a more economical but otherwise indistinguishable alternative to meat derived from animals.) This means that during the next decade or two, billions of animals will live and die in factory farms, their numbers barely diminished by the slowly growing number of vegans, and their sufferings entirely unaffected by it.

It therefore seems better to pursue a different strategy. We should do our utmost to reduce the suffering of those billions of animals. This is not an either/or choice. The animal movement should continue to promote a cruelty-free vegan lifestyle, and to encourage those who are not vegans to eat less meat and dairy products. Recognizing that not everyone is ready to make such changes, however, the movement should also be involved in improving the welfare of animals used in commercial farming.

This strategy can succeed. While I was writing this foreword Oregon became the third state in the US to ban sow stalls – known in America as gestation crates – which are commonly used to confine pregnant sows in metal crates too small for them even to turn around or walk a few steps. Earlier, Florida and Arizona had passed similar bans as a result of referenda initiated by the signatures of large numbers of voters. Significantly, the law in Oregon was the first in the US to come about through the normal process of representative democracy at the state level. The European Union and Australia have also agreed to prohibit sow stalls for most of the sow’s pregnancy. In addition to these legal changes, the suffering of an even larger number of pigs will in future be reduced by the decisions of Smithfield Foods and Maple Leaf Foods – the largest pork producers in the US and Canada, respectively – to phase out sow stalls.

Of course, getting rid of sow stalls is only the beginning. It doesn’t mean that pigs will be able to go outside, to roam around a pasture, or to have straw rather than bare concrete to lie down on. Even when sow stalls have gone entirely, there will still be a long way to go. But the readiness of voters, legislatures, and big corporate animal producers to make changes shows that animal suffering can be reduced, on a very large scale, by democratic, nonviolent processes. Obviously, as long as most people continue to want to eat animal products, a key role in these decisions is the demonstrated viability of alternative ways of meeting that demand. That is what the Food Animal Initiative is trying to achieve. When I toured their facilities at Wytham a few years ago, I was impressed by the significantly better quality of lives for the animals kept there than in the more conventional commercial operations I have
seen over the years. Yet the farm at Wytham is a viable commercial operation, paying its own way without the assistance of sponsorships or research subsidies.

Many people will ask how we can really know what good animal welfare is. Marian Dawkins' aptly defines it as a situation in which "animals are healthy and have what they want." That raises the further question "How can we know what animals want?" The defenders of corporate agribusiness often say that their critics are responding "emotionally" to the sight of, say, six hens crammed into a small wire cage. A proper scientific approach, they say, indicates that, since the birds are laying eggs, their welfare is satisfactory. Here Dawkins has been a pioneer, finding ingenious ways of enabling the animals themselves to tell us what they want, and thereby showing that the science of animal behavior supports the critics of factory farming, and not its defenders.

This book is dedicated to two other pioneers in the struggle to give farm animals at least a minimally decent life: Ruth Harrison and David Wood-Gush. I would like therefore to take this opportunity to say that Ruth Harrison's Animal Machines had a huge influence on me when, as a graduate student in philosophy, I first began to think about the ethics of how we ought to treat animals. In 1970 Animal Machines was the only book to tell how animals were treated in the - then still relatively novel - factory farms that were increasingly providing more of the chicken, pork, and eggs I had unwittingly been eating. Ruth Harrison's powerful and well-documented attack on factory farming persuaded me that there could be no ethical justification for the way we were treating animals, and that if I wanted to have any respect at all for myself as an ethical person, I could not continue to eat animal products from factory farms. That set me on the path that led to Animal Liberation.

In an important sense, this book is continuing the work started by Ruth Harrison and David Wood-Gush, and bridging the gaps between science, farming, and the ethically concerned consumer. May this work continue to thrive.

Peter Singer
Princeton University