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English Composition II

December 22, 2019

Where's the Beef?: Ethics and the Beef Industry

Americans love their beef. According to a 2005 study on beef consumption, between 1994 and 1998, Americans consumed an average of 67 pounds of beef per year, the equivalent of approximately three ounces of beef per day (Davis & Lin, 2005). Despite this high rate of consumption, in recent years people in the United States have grown increasingly concerned about where their food comes from, how it is produced, and what environmental and health impacts result from its production. These concerns can be distilled into two ethical questions: is the treatment of cattle humane and is there a negative environmental impact of beef production? For many, the current methods of industrial beef production and consumption do not meet personal ethical or environmental standards. Therefore, for ethical and environmental reasons, people should limit their beef consumption, and the beef that they do eat should be humanely raised, locally sourced, and grass-fed.

The first ethical question to consider is the humane treatment of domesticated cattle. It has been demonstrated in multiple scientific studies that animals feel physical pain as well as emotional states such as fear (Grandin & Smith, 2004, para. 2). In Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), better known as “factory farms” due to their industrialized attitude toward

Comment [SL1]: Hi Logan! This is a great title.

Comment [SL2]: Good use of data as an effective hook statement.

Comment [SL3]: This is a very strong, well-formed thesis statement that takes a clear stance on a debatable topic. Well done.

cattle production, cattle are often confined to unnaturally small areas; fed a fattening, grain-based diet; and given a constant stream of antibiotics to help combat disease and infection. In his essay, “An Animal’s Place,” Michael Pollan (2002) states that beef cattle often live “standing ankle deep in their own waste eating a diet that makes them sick” (para. 40). Pollan not only describes Americans’ discomfort with this aspect of meat production. He also notes that they are removed from and uncomfortable with the physical and psychological aspects of killing animals for food as well. He simplifies the actions chosen by many Americans: “we either look away—or stop eating animals” (para. 32). This decision to look away has enabled companies to treat and slaughter their animals in ways that cause true suffering for the animals. If Americans want to continue to eat beef, alternative, ethical methods of cattle production must be considered.

Comment [SL4]: This is a much better way to connect your ideas regarding the physical and psychological aspects of killing animals and how Americans deal with them.

In addition to the inhumane treatment of animals, CAFOs also raise ethical questions in terms of the environmental impacts of industrial agriculture. Because cattle raised on factory farms are primarily “grain-fed,” meaning that their diet largely consists of corn and/or soy rather than grass or other forage, huge amounts of grain are required to provide the necessary feed. This grain comes primarily from “monocropping,” an agricultural practice that involves planting the same crop year after year in the same field. Although rotating crops to different fields each season helps to retain the natural balance of nutrients in the soil, mono-cropping is considered to be more efficient on an industrial scale, providing larger yields of grain even though it also requires the use of more chemical fertilizers to provide adequate nutrients for the plants.

According to Palmer (2010), these chemicals can leach into the groundwater, polluting both the surrounding land and the water supply.

Comment [SL5]: Yes!

The emphasis on a grain-based diet, and therefore a reliance on mono-cropping, also contributes to the inefficient use of available land. The vast majority of grain production (75-

90% depending on whether corn or soy) goes to feeding animals rather than humans, and cattle alone account for a significant share. As a result, a majority of land available for agriculture also goes to producing livestock, whether actually housing the animals or growing grain to feed them (Lappé, 2010, p. 22). This inefficiency means that a disproportionate amount of agricultural, food, and monetary resources are poured into a type of cattle production which has been demonstrated to be inhumane and to have negative environmental consequences.

Comment [SL6]: Great job tying these ideas together here.

Other environmental issues include the amount of manure produced by factory farmed cattle. Traditionally, cattle graze a large area and distribute their waste accordingly. In contained situations such as CAFOs, however, animal waste builds up in a relatively small area and the runoff from rainstorms can potentially contaminate the groundwater (Sager, 2008, para. 7). Furthermore, because closely contained animals are more prone to disease, factory-farmed cattle are routinely treated with antibiotics, which can also leach into the local ground and water, potentially affecting humans. According to Brian Palmer, a man who has done extensive research on the topic (2010), “Based on some estimates, we spend more than \$4 billion annually trying to clean up CAFO manure runoff. In addition, the long-term, low-dose antibiotics CAFOs give livestock can lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria, further undermining our dwindling supply of useful medicines” (para. 12). The negative impacts of antibiotic runoff, manure contamination, fossil fuel use, and mono-cropping indicate that sourcing beef from CAFOs is neither an ethically responsible nor an environmentally sustainable decision.

Comment [SL7]: Much better.

An alternative to the grain-fed cattle raised in CAFOs is cattle which are allowed to range and forage for grass and other greenery as their primary form of nourishment. This “grass-fed” beef is, almost by definition, more humane than grain-fed beef because the animals are allowed to move freely and eat a more natural diet. There is also some evidence that grass-fed beef is

healthier than grain-fed beef for the humans who consume it: it is higher in cancer fighting, vitamin-A producing beta-carotene; it is much lower in fat, including having half the saturated fat as grain-fed beef; and it contains many more omega-3 fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which prevents cancer growth, and vitamin E, which prevents cancer as well as heart disease (Ruechel, 2006, p. 235). Due to the benefits of a grass-based diet, as well as the benefits of being raised in pastures rather than feedlots, grass-fed cattle themselves tend to be healthier. Taken altogether, grass-fed cattle production is better physically for both the cows and humans.

Comment [SL8]: Interesting!

It is important to note that grass-fed does not inherently mean organic, which is a separate, legal category with its own requirements. It is possible to find grain-fed beef from cattle raised or slaughtered in inhumane conditions that is labeled “organic” because the cattle were fed organic grain, whereas grass-fed beef may come from cattle that have been raised on land that does not meet the requirements for organic labeling (Sager, 2008, paras.10-15). However, in a guide to raising grass-fed cattle, Julius Ruechel (2006), notes that “Raising [cattle] in a pasture reduces or even eliminates the use of toxic pharmaceutical pesticides to control parasites and all but eliminates residues of high doses of antibiotics used on cattle in feedlot conditions” (p. 236). Even though it may not always be organic, choosing grass-fed beef reduces or eliminates many of the environmental and ethical concerns raised by factory farming.

Grass-fed beef also comes with some benefits to the environment. As noted earlier, most grain-fed beef relies on environmentally damaging mono-cropping. This problem is not an issue with grass-fed beef, which relies primarily on forage and does not require the same crop to be planted year after year. Further, if the grass-fed beef that one eats comes from local farms and ranches, it lessens the environmental impact, whereas the long-distance shipping required by factory farming practices consumes fossil fuels, which contribute to global warming. Lappé

(2010) explains the massive effects that industrial food production has on the environment, noting that throughout the life cycle of production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste, our food chain may be responsible for as much as a third of the factors causing global climate change (p. 11). However, as Pollan (2002) argues by the end of his essay, farms which focus on traditional agricultural practices are both more humane and more environmentally friendly than CAFOs. Ultimately, food decisions should be made with an eye to sustainability and humane treatment, ethical stances that are both supported by local farms focused on sustainable diversity.

Despite grass-fed beef scoring better on an environmental impact level than grain-fed beef, it is still not perfect, a fact that highlights the problems of eating beef at all if one is concerned with environmental ethics. Most notably, to assuage Americans' rapacious appetites for beef, landowners in South America often clear cut rainforest in order to create grazing land. "The realities of the global market are a great temptation to many: Where land is cheap and the demand for grass-fed cattle is on the rise, the local economy may respond by cutting down a forest to create pasture or by planting grass where millet or rice has been grown" (Sager, 2008, para. 21). This practice has negative environmental impacts on the local landscape and the planet as a whole, since losing vast swathes of rainforest increases the amount of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, contributing to ozone depletion. In their article for Science magazine, scholars Molly Brown and Christopher Funk (2008) examine how climate change will affect food security and find that people in the developing world are at particular risk for a lack of food due to climate change. Mono-cropping and mono-grazing practices, designed to snag American dollars in the short term and not to sustain the local population in the long term, will only exacerbate these effects (p. 580–81). Furthermore, the rise in the market for grass-fed beef has

Comment [SL9]: Great use of signal phrasing here.

meant that much grass-fed beef is shipped to the U.S. from South America and Australia. Even if these animals are raised in a humane and sustainable manner, the long distances they travel to reach American bellies has significant, negative environmental impact, again due to the use of fossil fuels (Sager, 2008, para. 21). This reinforces the importance of buying beef which has been locally produced, reducing the impact of long-distance shipping and potential mono-grazing in other countries.

Comment [SL10]: Great concluding sentence.

No matter how ethically sourced, one can still identify some serious ethical problems with the raising and slaughter of beef, and those ethical quandaries are passed on to consumers. While grass-fed beef is clearly an ethical improvement over grain-fed beef in terms of humane treatment and potentially in terms of environmental impact, “No matter how you slice it, eating beef will never be the greenest thing you do in a day. Scientists at Japan’s National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science estimate that producing 1 kilogram of beef emits more greenhouse gas than driving 155 miles” (Palmer, 2010, para. 2). A kilogram of beef is about the equivalent of two generously sized rib-eye steaks. Multiply this by the amount of beef consumed by Americans in a year and the impact of these greenhouse gasses cannot be ignored. However, as compelling as this argument is, it is not reasonable to expect that Americans will stop eating beef altogether. In the short term, it is more practical to encourage Americans to eat humanely raised, locally sourced, grass-fed beef, which will ultimately lessen the ethical and environmental consequences.

Comment [SL11]: Good. You’re not dismissing the counter-arguments, but you’re indicating that your argument is more persuasive. Well done.

If consumers are truly concerned about the ethical treatment of animals and the environmental impact of agricultural production, then the logical action is to stop eating meat altogether. If Americans are not willing to do this, then the next best action is to focus on humanely raised, locally sourced, grass-fed beef, while acknowledging that this may affect our

beef consumption at many levels. Pollan (2002) concludes his essay by acknowledging that more humane treatment of animals would likely cause higher prices and lower consumption. However, he states, “maybe when we did eat animals, we’d eat them with the consciousness, ceremony and respect they deserve” (para. 82). This emphasis on the respect for and well-being of the animals cultivated for food benefits both the animals and the consumer, acknowledging the desire to be true omnivores while satisfying our need for ethical clarity.

Comment [SL12]: Very good concluding statement!

References

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Reflection Questions:

1. **How much time did you spend revising your draft? What revision strategies did you use and which worked best for you? (2-3 sentences)**

I spent about an hour and a half revising my draft. I spent a lot of time going over each of the critiques I was given, and thinking about how I can implement those in a way that will truly make my essay better. Creating unity and coherence was the most satisfying to me, because it allowed me to put everything together in a way that made me proud.

2. **List three concrete revisions that you made and explain how you made them. What problem did you fix with each of these revisions? Issues may be unity, cohesion, rhetorical appeals, content, or any other areas on which you received constructive feedback. (4-5 sentences)**

One I came up with was moving the paragraph on how the production of meat can raise questions in terms of environmental impacts. This helped increase the flow and effectiveness of how the information was being presented. Another critique I made was including a more focused thesis statement. This helped include all of the points I made. Another revision I made was adding more appeals to my claim that chemicals can leach into the groundwater, polluting both the surrounding land and the water supply. This helped add legitimacy to my argument.

3. **What did you learn about your writing process or yourself as a writer? How has your understanding of the research process changed as a result of taking this course? (2-3 sentences)**

I learned that writing a truly good Argumentative Essay is way more than just writing and research. You need to dig deep into your sources, and really learn about both sides of the arguments are you taking on. The entire process is important to make your argument a solid and supported one.

<u>Final Research Essay Rubric and Feedback</u>		
<i>Rubric Category</i>	<i>Feedback</i>	<i>Score (acceptable, needs improvement etc.)</i>
Revising	There was a clear effort to adjust your previous draft. You effectively revised the organization of your essay to gain a better focus on the argument being presented.	35/40
Editing	You did a great job strengthening your arguments by editing some of the word choices throughout your essay.	38/40
Source Integration	You were able to introduce your sources effectively and seamlessly using a variety of different types of citation.	19/20
Cohesion	Updating the flow of your argument throughout your essay has really made it a more effective argumentative essay. Well done!	18/20
Conventions and Proofreading	You have done a great job ensuring there are no major convention errors.	19/20
Reflection	You demonstrate thoughtful reflection, consistently including insights, observations, and examples in your responses.	10/10
<i>Overall Score and Feedback: 139/150</i> Logan – You have written a very thought-provoking and well-researched essay. You use relevant information from credible sources in order to support your argument. You strike a good balance between these sources and your own discussion, allowing the reader to see how you are using this information to further your own, unique argument. You write very clearly, linking your ideas and paragraphs together in a very logical and smooth manner. You remain consistently focused on your argument throughout. I really enjoyed reading your essay! Nicely done!		



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