Opinion

The Mistakes That Will Haunt Our Legacy

As we topple statues, let's also search for our own moral blind spots.

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A chicken farm in North Carolina. Randall Hill; Reuters

As we pull down controversial statues and reassess historical figures, I've been wondering what our great-grandchildren will find bewilderingly immoral about our own times — and about us.

Which of today's heroes will be discredited? Which statues toppled? What will later generations see as our own ethical blind spots?

I believe that one will be our cruelty to animals. Modern society relies on factory farming to produce protein that is inexpensive and abundant. But it causes suffering to animals on an incalculable scale.

Over the last 200 years, the world has become far more sensitive to animal rights. In feudal Europe, a game consisted of nailing a cat to a post and head-butting it to death; now, growing numbers of states have passed animal protection laws, McDonald's is moving to cage-free eggs and there are legal debates about whether certain mammals should have standing to sue in courts.

The upshot is court cases like Cetacean Community v. Bush, in which the plaintiffs were whales, dolphins and porpoises, and Naruto, a Crested Macaque, v. Slater.

Pope Francis suggests that animals go to heaven, and many humans would agree: Paradise would be diminished without pets.

Yet while we adore our pets and coddle them — a dog in a wealthy family may get better medical and dental care than a child in a poor family — we as a society often do not extend this empathy to unseen farm animals, especially poultry.

Some 9.3 billion chickens were slaughtered last year in the United States — 28 per American — and here's how they are typically killed: Workers shove the chickens' legs into metal shackles, and the birds are then carried upside down to an electrified bath that stuns them before a circular saw cuts open their necks and they are dunked in scalding water.

Even when this system works perfectly, chickens sometimes have legs or wings broken as they are shackled. When the system fails, they are not stunned and struggle frantically as they are carried to the saw. The saw in turn misses many birds — the Agriculture Department says that 526,000 chickens were not slaughtered correctly last year — and some are boiled alive.

A child who plucks out a bird's feathers may be punished, but corporate executives who torture birds by the billions are showered with stock options.

Factory farming also diminishes human frontline workers, from struggling farmers who raise animals to the miserably paid and poorly protected slaughterhouse employees now falling ill from the coronavirus.

In the face of all this, attitudes are changing: Eight percent of young American adults said in 2018 that they were vegetarians, compared with just 2 percent of Americans 55 and older.

I became a vegetarian almost two years ago (not a strict one, and I do eat fish) because my daughter nagged me ("provided moral guidance" would be a nicer spin), and I suspect that ethical and environmental considerations — and the increasing availability of tasty alternatives to meat — will lead our descendants to eat less meat, and be baffled at our casual acceptance of an industrial agricultural model built on large-scale cruelty.

"One day future generations will look back on our abuse of animals in factory farms with the same attitude that we have to the cruelties of the Roman 'games' at the Coliseum," Peter Singer, a Princeton University philosopher, told me. "They will wonder how we could be blind to the suffering we are so needlessly inflicting on billions of animals."

A second area that I think will leave future generations baffled at our heartlessness is our indifference to suffering in impoverished countries. More than five million young children will die this year around the world from diarrhea, malnutrition or other ailments; we let these children perish essentially because of our own tribalism. They are not a priority to us.

While I denounced the mistreatment of broiler chickens, it's only fair to note that about 5 percent of those birds die prematurely. In contrast, 7.8 percent of children in sub-Saharan Africa die by the age of 5, according to UNICEF. So heartless agribusiness concerns do a better job ensuring the survival of baby chicks than the international community sometimes does for human babies.

A third area where I suspect our descendants will judge us harshly is climate change. Our generation's denialism will lead to more extreme weather, more flooded homes, more heat waves — and resentment that early-21st-century humans could have been so selfish as to refuse to take small steps to reduce carbon emissions.

I raised this issue of our moral blind spots in my email newsletter the other day, and one reader, Brad Marston, a physics professor at Brown University, put it this way: "In 100 years our generation may be as poorly regarded as 19th-century racists are today (or worse), due to our failure to tackle climate change, leaving a damaged and possibly ruined planet to future generations."

So I'm all for re-examining history and removing statues of Confederate generals. But just as important is our obligation to think deeply about our own moral myopia today and address it while there is still time.

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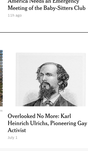

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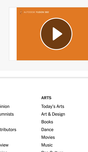

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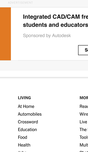

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