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# A Linguistic Method of Deception: The Difference Between Killing Humanely and a Humane Killing

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*I examine how the use of moral language is tactically employed by the meat-eating industry to exploit and manipulate the moral community. In particular, I discuss the treatment of the word humane in the context of factory farming. I argue that when the meat-eating industry employs phrases such as killing humanely, it deceitfully directs the attention of the moral community by inviting us to make judgments about the method of killing farmed animals, while ignoring judgments about the whether or not such killing ought to happen. This difference is between killing humanely and a humane killing.*

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Key words: humane, humane killing, killing humanely, language, absent referent, carnism, factory farming, farmed animals, eating animals

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to bring to light ways that the meat-eating industry has deceived the moral community by confusing its outcry against the mistreatment of farmed animals. The deception I have in mind concerns how the meat-eating industry has taken advantage of the moral language that sought to expose and condemn such mistreatment. Specifically, I will discuss the manipulation of the concept *humane*.<sup>1</sup> By taking hold of this moral concept, and applying it in ways that improperly imply moral action, the industry that unashamedly engages in the methodical killing of nonhuman animals is able to exploit our moral sensibilities.

Most disconcertingly, the meat-eating industry is able to use moral language to trick the moral community into adopting objectifying attitudes toward nonhuman animals; we are fooled by ethical concepts into accepting what Carol Adams (1990) calls the *absent referent*. This is made possible by a conceptual distinction between *killing humanely* and a *humane killing*. I argue that where the former refers to a process or method of killing, the latter refers to the justness or fairness of ending life. Despite both phrases involving

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the moral term *humane*, when the former phrase is used it implicitly carries assumptions about whether someone ought to die in order to focus our evaluations solely on the killing method. In other words, in order to think about permissible methods of killing someone, we must take for granted that someone can be rightfully killed. And it is this diversion that I believe is so successfully employed by the meat-eating industry. The trick is to induce a belief in consumers that they are participating in morally permissible practices when they buy and consume animal products, when in fact they are being duped into ignoring considerations of justice and virtue in deliberations about death.

## CARNISM AND ITS DISSIDENTS

Social psychologist Melanie Joy (2009) names the ideology of meat-eating *carnism*—an invisible system that conditions people to consume products derived from nonhuman animals. Joy explains that carnism is a dominant system of beliefs in Western culture that reduces nonhuman animals to a use value of consumable objects by violently denying their meaningful subjectivity.

This movement from subject to object is made possible, at least in part, by language. Through methods of conceptual redefinition, and a social imposition of function, the subjectivity of a nonhuman animal is foregone when placed in the context of consumption, allowing our eyes only to see cooked meat instead of burnt flesh. Carol Adams (1990) calls this the *absent referent*:

Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food. (p. 21)

For Adams (1990), language serves as a way to desensitize ourselves to death. By use of objectifying terms, we fail to acknowledge the intrinsic value of nonhuman animals and unjustly delimit our circle of moral consideration. In other words, our language objectifies nonhuman animals; it transmutes an animal's existence as a living, moral being into a dead object cultured for the purpose of guilt-free consumption.

It is this method of objectification and fragmentation made possible through language that is responsible for the immense suffering of nonhuman animals, especially in the blood-splattered walls of factory farms. Jeff Johnson (2015) describes this grave injustice transparently:

These animals have their beaks, tails, testicles, and horns cut or seared off without any pain relief. For nearly their entire pregnancy, mother pigs are kept in cages so small that they cannot turn around. Chickens who lay eggs are kept in cages so small that they are each afforded less than an iPad's worth of space in which to live out their lives. After being forced to become pregnant, mother cows and mother pigs are prematurely separated from their babies. And all the animals are killed at a fraction of their natural lives. (p. 123)

These atrocities are still pervasive in the meat-eating industry. However, in recent time we have seen a strong and building resistance to the carnist ideology. A general consciousness of nonhuman animal welfare has been fostered, promoted, and enacted in the hope of revising the structures that oppress nonhuman animals. An increasing number of members of society have woken up to the abhorrent conditions that nonhuman animals are subjected to and, in effect, have *restored*, to some extent, the absent referent; a movement back from object to subject. Agents are seeking to abstain from participating in violent, bloody, and dominating cultural practices. In other words, efforts to overturn the carnist ideology is fought on a *moral* front.

### MORAL COVER AND KILLING HUMANELY

Johnson (2015) argues that when thinking about the humane killing of farmed animals, we wrongly tend to focus on whether the deaths of these animals are painless, or as painless as possible. In other words, we unsuccessfully try to take *moral cover* under the shelter of painless death. In order to bring out why he believes that painless death is not equivalent to humane killing, Johnson considers the euthanizing of companion animals in two circumstances. The first he describes as “uncontroversial”:

Consider the case of euthanizing a companion animal. It is important, no doubt, that the killing be done as painlessly as possible. But it is also important that the animal is sick and that she is unlikely to get better. It is important that she is suffering and that ending her life will help to alleviate her suffering. It is important that when one decides to end her life, there is consideration of whether it would be best for her to die. We should ask, for instance, whether her good days are outnumbered by her bad days. And when we end her life it is important that we do it for her sake. (Johnson, 2015, p. 124)

In order to see how these factors are important, Johnson (2015) invites us to consider a second example in which the considerations mentioned in the previous passage are missing:

Suppose that my cat, Bubs, is perfectly healthy, that he is not suffering, and that his bad days are far outnumbered by his good days. Suppose that I decide to have him killed nevertheless, perhaps because I am going on vacation and I cannot find anyone to watch him while I'm gone. It is not what is best for him that guides my decision here but rather what is convenient for me. (p. 124)

In this example, it is far from good sense to say that killing Bubs was humane; it does not help to know that Bubs was killed as painlessly as possible. Various factors that play into the right killing of a companion animal need to be considered in order to satisfy a minimal requirement for moral action. In other words, to act morally, we cannot focus on one moral consideration while ignoring others. For Johnson (2015), we cannot take moral cover under pain-free death alone.

Extending this reasoning to our moral deliberations about farmed animals, Johnson (2015) writes:

We are told by producers that the chickens, pigs, and cows raised on small farms are not sick. We are told that they are not suffering. We are told that their good days far outnumbered their bad days. Being killed, then, is not what is best for them. What guides the decision to kill farmed animals is what is best for producers and what is best for us if we want to eat them. (p. 124)

Given these considerations, and as we saw in the case of Bubs, it is hard to think of the routine killing of farmed animals as being humane, even when we consider whether their deaths were painless. By focusing entirely on the amount of pain suffered by a nonhuman animal, too many factors that play into careful moral calculus are ignored, and we lose simple sight of what's best for the life in question.

### KILLING HUMANELY AND A HUMANE KILLING

I believe that Johnson's (2015) examples bring out an important distinction between *killing humanely* and *a humane killing*. At first glance, it won't be obvious that there is a difference between the two: If we learn that S was killed humanely, it doesn't seem absurd to assume that such an act was a humane killing of S. After all, the atoms of the respective phrases have simply been switched, though they have different linguistic properties.<sup>2</sup> However, I maintain that there is a substantive difference in use and meaning that goes beyond this change in syntactic roles.

The difference can be brought out by understanding the respective referents of each phrase. *Killing humanely* refers to a process; it is a *method* of killing that does not concern anything but the pain experienced by a subject of killing. There is no question of whether the death or killing *ought* to happen, since this consideration is implied by the *context* in which our evaluations are made; namely, evaluating the killing methodology. In other words, the context implies that someone is to be killed, and we are not invited to consider whether the killing is right. Once the context has been set, distinct killing methods are evaluated according to a standard of permissibility, and in our case it is *humaneness*. This evaluative standard distinguishes between better and worse killing methods according to the amount of pain that is suffered during the killing process. Of course, the more pain someone suffers, the more it is judged to be inhumane. In essence, *killing humanely* denotes *how* a subject is killed and whether the subject is killed as painlessly as possible.

On the other hand, *humane killing* refers to the justness or fairness of a killing. It takes into consideration whether the killing *itself* ought to have happened, and not just whether the killing was painless. In other words, a humane killing makes use of moral considerations that go beyond deliberations of pain in determining whether such an act is right, just, or fair. The context in which we evaluate the killing of someone extends further than what methods are permissible under some standard of acceptable endurance of pain.

The main lesson of Johnson's (2015) article is that in our considerations about the permissibility of killing we cannot take into account only the pain suffered by a subject,

for this is not enough to give us moral cover. Instead, we need to take into account various features that play into the overall morality of killing itself. This thought I have tried to capture with the distinction between different uses of *humane*. However, contrary to Johnson, I believe that when we think of Bubs, in his healthy state, there is a sense in which one might rightly consider whether the killing was in fact humane. For instance, if we were to ask someone whether Bubs was killed humanely, they could respond, “Well, in one sense yes, in another sense no: Bubs certainly didn’t deserve to die, but at least it wasn’t painful.” Now we should take exception to this reasoning; painful or not, killing Bubs would be immoral. However, we can see how the two uses of *humane* are being employed in this kind of thought: in the first place to refer to fair action, in another to refer to an acceptable degree of pain. Hence, *humane* is ambiguous across different uses. How can we explain this ambiguity?

I propose the following. When *humane* functions as a typical predicate attributed to the noun *killing*, our interpretative faculties take into consideration broad and diverse aspects that go into a round judgment of a *fair* or *just* killing. That is, the term *humane* provides the context in which a killing is judged and takes into account varied features of justice; it takes into account the properties that determine fair action. However, when the adjective *killing* is partnered with the adverb *humanely*,<sup>3</sup> our interpretative faculties form a judgment based on the context of *how* something is killed; in other words, the killing methodology. That is, since the adverb *humanely* is modifying the adjective *killing*, the context of our judgment concerns methods of killing according to a standard of humaneness, where our attention is captured by considerations of pain. We concern ourselves with whether or not Bubs suffered, and not whether or not Bubs ought to have been killed. To avoid possible confusion, let me state the difference more clearly: In the latter, the provided context invites us to judge the *method of killing*, whereas in the former we are invited to consider the *killing in its entirety*; in the latter we judge *how* someone died, and in the former we judge whether they *ought* to have been killed.

What can be further brought out by an ambiguity of this sort is a shift in moral attitude toward a situation. Given the nature of the word *humane* concerns *morality*, its application by a speaker can induce a belief in a listener that something is moral or permissible, even when in fact it may not be. For example, using Bubs again, we can think of two locutions that seem to express different content. Consider Johnson (2015) speaking to someone about euthanizing Bubs despite being in perfect health. Johnson could say to someone, “Look, Bubs was healthy, but I had him put down.” Now, this utterance would rightly be met with sheer disbelief and outrage. However, consider if Johnson were to say instead, “Look, Bubs was healthy, but he was killed humanely.” While this utterance might still be met unhappily, a listener can take solace in knowing that Bubs did not suffer. However, this is a distraction. Our minds should stay focused on the injustice: *Bubs should not have been killed*. Instead, our moral judgments are lessened because the word *humane* functions to describe or convey something as being moral or permissible. In the former case, our outrage is directed toward the injustice of the action; Bubs is a meaningful subject, with many good days ahead of him. In the latter case, our deflated

moral judgment comes about as an effect of how the term *humane* functions to change our attitude about the *value* of Bubs; we might come to believe that Bubs is the property of Johnson (i.e., has only a use value), and hence Johnson can do whatever he likes to Bubs *so long as it is painless*.

In our current taxonomy, what seems to have happened to Bubs is that he has been made absent in the latter utterance. That is, Bubs disappears as a subject in and of himself because of the way the phrase *killed humanely* ignores whether or not the killing ought to have happened in the first place and focuses instead on the killing method. In other words, we judge the rightness of the action based on the method of killing instead of the justness of killing. This is not true in the former utterance. Bubs is still present and is attributed all of the moral properties that he properly deserves. Instead of judging the killing method, our moral reactive attitude is based upon considerations expounded by Johnson (2015) above, namely *whether it is in Bubs's best interest to die*.

The subtlety of the distinction between *killing humanely* and a *humane killing* can often be passed over unnoticed, and the effect of this can be dire for farmed animals. As I mentioned above, we can be distracted by the word *humane* given its life as a moral term. Just as we saw with the example of Bubs, I believe that this method of deception is routinely employed by the meat-eating industry to confuse and exploit the outcry of the moral community that demands an end to the mistreatment of farmed animals. This deception has serious effects. It perpetuates the absent referent, making us blind to the injustice suffered by nonhuman animals by directing our judgments to the killing method instead of the justness of a killing. In virtue of this, we are collectively misled and unknowingly contribute to reinforcing the carnist ideology.

## A LINGUISTIC METHOD OF DECEPTION

As I mentioned above, *killing humanely* refers to a process or method of killing. It ignores the permissibility of killing by focusing on the permissibility of killing methods. A *humane killing*, however, concerns whether a killing is just. Its interest is not (only) in the pain that one suffers during the killing process, but whether the killing ought to happen. Hence, *humane* is ambiguous across these two uses.

Consider this distinction and ambiguity in the context of a moral community that is outraged by the mistreatment of farmed animals, and further in the context of an industry whose sole purpose is for profit. The result is a diabolical. I believe that the story plays out a little something like this:

The moral community sees the abhorrent conditions that farmed animals are subject to. Distraught by the violence that community members see, they demand that such mistreatment come to an end, and some begin to abstain from the consumption of products derived from nonhuman animals. The meat-eating industry hears these cries and realizes that its profit margins could be severely affected if enough people kick up a storm. Given that the pleas of the moral community are precisely moral, the meat-eating industry must respond with a moral solution. What it comes up with is a distraction. It tells the moral

community that the meat it produces is killed humanely; the animals will no longer suffer, or at least suffer less, through the killing process. Distracted by the term *humane*, the moral community takes this as a win. Some believe that farmed animals will start being treated justly. However, what has happened is something deeply nefarious. The outcry against the meat-eating industry was an effort to restore the absent referent; to make visible the nonhuman animals who are being cruelly handled and brutally slaughtered for consumption. It was a moral call for change, to bring nonhuman animals out of the darkness and into the public moral perception so that we might scrutinize the actions of the meat-eating industry. The nonhuman animals, who had been exposed to light for too long, were dragged back into the dark slaughter chambers when the meat-eating industry responded to the cries by introducing the concept of killing animals humanely. The moral community no longer concerned themselves with whether or not the killing of farmed animals was just, but whether the killing procedure or method was painless. Their judgments moved from whether or not an animal deserved to die to whether or not the killing method caused too much pain. The result, of course, is that farmed animals became absent again; they became faceless meat and consumable flesh. Their deaths had returned to certainty, though how they were to die required revision.

Though the story may not look exactly like it is told here, I strongly suspect it is something very similar. When the public is told that farmed animals are being killed humanely, some of the public will infer that this means that animals are being humanely killed. That is, some will come to believe that farmed animals are being treated justly. But this is an invalid inference. As we have seen, being killed painlessly is far from being killed justly. However, it is a natural inference to make, and it is a dispositional inference that is exploited by the meat-eating industry. When one hears the term *humane*, it is not irrational to think that the term is being used in a way to denote something as being moral. But, as I have attempted to show, this is not always true. *Killing humanely* refers only to a method of killing that does not take into account all of the moral factors that should be considered in careful moral calculus. A failure to satisfy the basic requirements of moral deliberation is a failure to be moral; it is a failure to treat the target of moral judgment as a subject of value. And it is this that we, the moral community, are tricked into believing.

The moral community is forced only to see narrowly the moral concerns of our treatment of animals with respect to *how* they die, and not whether they *ought* to die. This is because of the how the context of moral judgment gets fixed. When we consider whether someone has been killed humanely, the context that provides the basis of our judgment will be *how that person was killed*; and that person will be killed humanely if they have not suffered a certain amount of pain. But when we consider a humane killing, our attention is drawn to considerations of justice. We may or may not take into account the amount of pain suffered by a subject, but we certainly examine questions about whether or not the killing ought to have happened. In line with Johnson (2015), we consider broadly whether it is, or was, in someone's best interest to die.

When these concepts are conflated, our typical moral judgments about the rightness of an action can be dangerously affected. We can be manipulated into approving of

things that we might otherwise not have under full moral disclosure. I believe that this is what the meat-eating industry does so well. By use of tactical language, the meat-eating industry can distract us by forcing our judgments into the context of killing methodology, and because of this we take for granted the question of whether farmed animals ought to be killed. Hence, by buying into judgments about killing methodology, we must also buy into the belief that farmed animals can be rightly killed, buy into the absent referent, and buy into the carnist ideology.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that there is a meaningful distinction between killing humanely and a humane killing. The difference is between a context in which we assess a method of killing and a context in which we consider the overall rightness (justness/fairness) of a killing. In the former, we do not judge whether a killing ought to happen, whereas in the latter we do. The effect of this difference is seen most disconcertingly in its employment by players in the meat-eating industry. By promoting its product as being killed humanely, the meat-eating industry exploits the outcry of the moral community by focusing its attention on the killing method instead of the rightness of killing. When our attention is directed toward the killing method, we take for granted that an animal can be rightly killed, and in effect accept the absent referent. By accepting the absent referent, we reinforce the carnist ideology and make inaudible the cries of the suffering, allowing the continued mistreatment of farmed animals.

## Notes

1. However, I do believe a similar story can be applied to cognate terms such as *free range* and *ethically sourced*.
2. When the term *humane* appears before the term *killing*, it functions as a typical predicate, attributing a property to a subject. When the term *humane* appears after the term *killing*, it functions as an adverb that modifies the adjective *killing*.
3. This is true whenever the adverb *humanely* modifies any grammatical version of *kill* (i.e., the verbs *kill* or *killed*).

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