**The meaning of animal labour[[1]](#footnote-2)**

Nicolas Delon

**Introduction**

The critique of factory farming generates some of the starkest disagreement among those whose concerns include animal welfare, food justice, labor rights, global warming, and pollution. On the one hand, many animal rights advocates argue for the abolition of animal agriculture, not just factory farming. On the other hand, advocates of humane husbandry argue that the ills of factory farming call for more traditional, small-scale, sustainable practices and a shift in consumption. The contrast overlooks some intermediate positions but should suffice for preliminary purposes. The bone of contention is this: It does not follow from critiquing factory farming that domesticated animals have a claim not to be used in agriculture. Both sides claim to be advocates, even friends, of animals. Yet, despite their common target, they appear to make incompatible claims–about what a good life for animals entails; whether we may kill them for food; and whether their use in any agricultural system is exploitation. In other words, what are domesticated animals’ interests? And what is a relationship between humans and other animals? One instance of this disagreement is the claim that domesticated animals have an interest in the continuation of certain relationships with human beings, and that work is one such valuable relationship. The abolition of animal agriculture, the reasoning goes, would eliminate work, which is the sole valuable relationship animals can have with human beings. Farm animals, on this view, are workers performing a valuable activity that is necessary for their existence, flourishing and our mutually rewarding relations.

This chapter addresses the strategy of using the value of work as a justification for raising and killing animals for food (RKA for short), and in particular the assumption that animal agriculture, insofar as it entails slaughter, is an irreplaceable form of human-animal relationship. I will question this and other assumptions of what I call the labor-based defense of humane agriculture (LDHA) and consider alternative opportunities to sustain meaningful relationships with domesticated animals that do not entail raising and killing them for food. RKA makes husbandry (breeding and raising) conditional on slaughter. My thesis is that LDHA fails to support RKA and leaves unscathed a number of criticisms. I focus on an influential critic of veganism, representative of the humane husbandry movement. French sociologist and former farmer Jocelyne Porcher offers a distinctly labour-based version of so-called compassionate or conscientious omnivore position. In doing so, Porcher also offers a husbandry-based version of the case for animal labour. Both arguments go hand-in-hand. Work is valuable for its own sake, and husbandry is one, though not the only, way to promote it. Happy meat without work is not truly happy. More broadly, Porcher envisions a “reinvented” (but in some way ancestral) way of living together with animals, a “collaborative utopia” for the 21st century (Porcher 2011a; 2017). My central question is whether Porcher succeeds in vindicating RKA, merely LDHA, or neither. I believe that she only succeeds in championing the value of work. But LDHA or RKA do not follow. I will thus push against the idea that we need to kill and eat animals in order to preserve valuable relationships with them. Porcher stands out insofar as she sees killing as a constitutive part (if a necessary evil) of husbandry. Porcher’s strategy is therefore a unique illustration of LDHA in that she ties together justifications for work *and* justifications for RKA. Mirroring Porcher’s utopia, the abolitionist ideal is sometimes perceived as “dystopian”, severing meaningful connections between vegan urbanites and nature and animals (Weele and Driessen 2013, 656). In this chapter I explain why I believe Porcher tackles, not a strawman, but a crude, non-representative critique of RKA. Valuing interspecies relationships, including work, need not entail LDHA, much less RKA.

In the first section, I introduce Porcher’s terminological, conceptual and evaluative distinction between “animal productions” (livestock industry) and “animal husbandry,” and how it fits into the debate about humane RKA.[[2]](#footnote-3) In section 2, I discuss Porcher’s appeal to “the link,” as instantiated in work, as a justification for RKA. In section 3, I look more closely at the idea of animal co-worker, and I consider alternatives. In section 4, I rely on Purves and Delon (2018) to argue that RKA deprives animals of meaning in their life.

**1. Industry vs. husbandry**

Here’s the central problem raised by the intensification of agricultural production. The growth of farm operations–absolute size, number of animals, output, and profitability–allows for economies of scale which appear to benefit farmers. On the other hand, farmers increasingly lose direct control over their operations, in particular the ability to oversee closely the day-to-day operation of their farm and the individual behaviors and needs of their animals. Traditional farmers, as praised in agrarian thought, used to know their animals on a personal basis, were in the best position to care for them and speak on their behalf, and doing so preserved land, communities and practices (Bruxvoort Lipscomb 2016). But they have been supplanted or increasingly assisted by a range of technology and technicians over which they have at best limited control. The good shepherd’s identity and role are fading, as public opinion increasingly blames farmers–often indiscriminately and sometimes unfairly–for a range of ills from pollution to animal cruelty. A large factor in this change is the exponential growth of demand for animal products over the second half of the 20th century in Western countries and, lately, in the emerging, so-called BRIC, countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). These global trends outweigh the slight rise of vegetarianism, and the growing demand for products that comply with stricter welfare standards, in North American and Europe. In the United States, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are the epitome of industrial systems, and their model is gaining traction in countries like China.

Let us begin by considering Porcher’s distinction between “animal husbandry” (*élevage*) and “animal productions”. Husbandry is a relationship between farmers (*éleveurs*) and animals, “meaningful labor with multiple rationalities—economic, but also relational and identity-based.” (Porcher 2009, 162) Industrial (e.g. pig, chicken, rabbit) and intensified (e.g. dairy, veal) productions are the outgrowth of an industrialization process that began mid-19th century with emerging “zootechnics”, or science-based breeding and husbandry, which she calls the “science of the exploitation of animal machines”. Animal husbandry is “part of our culture and … *is* a culture the value and fragility of which we fail to appreciate” (ibid.) In contrast, animal productions lack culture or history. The distinction yields two distinct triads: animal-farmer-husbandry *v*s. product-production-producer. The latter generates a tension between livestock animals being individuals (incidentally presented as such for advertising purposes) and their treatment and perception as products (p. 163).

Much of Porcher’s sociological fieldwork is about the “lived subjective experience of labor” of human workers, in particular their suffering, which results from the suffering that the industry expects them to inflict on animals for the sake of efficiency, the necessity of inflicting or tolerating death (whether in slaughterhouses or on farms), and their public image (critics of animal productions end up blaming animal farming as a whole). For instance, Pascale Molinier and Porcher emphasize the suffering stemming from “lack of recognition” for workers on an industrial pig farm, from “their boss, the farmers’ assisting team (veterinarians and technicians), consumers and, broadly, co-citizens who seemingly perceive the job of pig farmer as dirty work.” (Molinier and Porcher 2006, 6) Pigs and farmers experience “shared suffering” (Porcher 2011b).

Domestication, thinks Porcher, has been misconstrued. A single term applies to plants and animals. This translates into practice: “today we can treat farm animals as ‘raw material’ and use it like we use plant matter” (Porcher 2009, 165).[[3]](#footnote-4) Indeed, in the industry, common phrases include “animal matter” (for edible animal products), “destruction” (for the slaughter of animals for economic or safety reasons) and “*valorisation*” (in French, i.e. ‘exploitation’ of “matter” and “waste” as sources of fuel or compost) (p. 163-164). Porcher argues that both animal liberationists and the livestock industry misconstrue farming as the exploitation of matter. But, she argues, husbandry does not inherently use animals as resources. Accordingly, the husbandry/production distinction makes space for *relations* (not use) that can be emancipatory for human and nonhuman coworkers.[[4]](#footnote-5) Instead, animal productions make it impossible for workers, such as female employees on industrial pig farms, to work *well* and act on this possibility. The high turnover in the industry owes a lot to a double bind:

Because of the intersubjective nature of relations between human beings and animals, the link inevitably persists even in industrial systems … but it is distorted because the organizational structure of work denies the existence of this link *qua* link. … [W]orkers can be subject to the double order of being “their sows’ friend” and of being disposed to knock their head with a sledgehammer (Porcher 2009, 167-8; also see Porcher 2008)

In other words, workers are prevented from treating animals as society expects them because it also expects them to provide a cheap food supply. Farmers and farm workers do their job with the sense of accomplishing a mission, “the most important part of which is ‘feeding people’” (Porcher 2009, 169; also see Mouret 2012). But it’s “overshadowed” by the critique of industrial systems, whose workers are “accused of polluting, mistreating animals and producing a suspicious food”. Ultimately, the breakdown of relations jeopardizes the recognition of workers by animals themselves, who would otherwise “collaborate intentionally.” In industrial systems, “[a]nimals do not say thank you; they can even sabotage the work.” (p. 169)[[5]](#footnote-6) Porcher’s explanation of workers’ suffering suggests that animal abuse is a *symptom* of the system, which inflicts suffering on animals by proxy so to speak.

We can now restate our problem following Porcher. We do not appreciate the possible value of RKA because we conflate husbandry and unconscionable farming practices. By the same token, animal liberation *or* exploitation is a false dichotomy. LDHA can purportedly evade the exploitation of animals as raw material if we appreciate the history of human-animal entanglement and work as its irreplaceable embodiment. With Porcher’s diagnosis and pivotal distinctions laid out, I spell out her conception of animal labour in the next section. I argue that Porcher replaces a false dichotomy with another one (abolitionism *or* RKA). Indeed, I argue that taking the view that animals can be co-workers seriously undermines the case for RKA.

**2. Porcher’s conception of animal labour**

We have a diagnosis of what can go wrong with RKA. Can traditional husbandry provide a cure? Porcher’s conception of animal labour purports to. Labour, on this view, implies a dyadic or collective relation between human and nonhuman co-workers. Its value is inherently relational. Indeed, it’s “the link” that Porcher considers worth preserving for its own sake. So, what is genuine labour on this conception?

Before delving further into her case for LHDA, let us consider a non-genuine type of work. Recently, the livestock industry has invested in new techniques attempting to remedy the ills of factory farming while preserving large-scale production. It knows that treating livestock as individuals with particular needs and preferences, as opposed to interchangeable production units, can serve optimized production. “Precision Livestock Farming” (PLF) (Berckmans 2004; Lehr 2014; Werkheiser 2018) involves standardized, certified methods, supported by the European Union, which seek to improve agricultural sustainability (environmental impact, efficiency, food safety, welfare) while meeting both a steady or growing demand for animal products (indeed, food for a forecasted 9 billion human population by 2050) and stricter welfare standards. PLF prolongs the livestock industry through novel means—information technology and innovative techniques such as “automatic milking systems, micro-chipping, remote electronic surveillance, precision feeding, building atmosphere surveillance, virtual fences, artificial insemination technologies and robotization”. In a way, PLF replicates on a large scale the agrarian ideal of the good shepherd. Ironically, because it is focused on animals’ individual characteristics, this system, which purports to be the most effective and attuned to particular needs, makes farmers replaceable. PLF seeks to minimize negative impacts on animals. But since, because they are so numerous, factory farmed animals are not accustomed to human interaction, PLF does that by minimizing interaction. Advocates of the good shepherd like Porcher see these trends as an outgrowth of alienating production systems—destroying workers, jobs, and relations. Instead of promoting farmers who familiarize themselves with animals early on, which only small farms allow for, the welcome attention to individuals has fostered a kind of contactless exploitation. PLF makes “intensive ecological livestock farming” possible (Porcher 2017, 36).

How does Porcher’s husbandry differ from PLF? CEMA (European Agricultural Machinery), the European association representing the agricultural machinery industry in Europe, is a major promoter of “smart farming”. Among its many virtues, says CEMA, are that automatic solutions dispense with the constraints of human labour and thus offer more opportunities for animals to choose and engage in natural behaviors, in addition to improved productivity, real-time digital information, and big data.[[6]](#footnote-7) On the other hand, PLF restricts the expression of animals’ preferences, hence participation, in structuring signal reception and interpretation by imposing a system designed by engineers, biologists and economists for optimization, in consultation with only poorly informed farmers (Lehr 2014; Werkheiser 2018). Traditional husbandry purports to foster direct attention to particular animals so that they can communicate their needs and preferences effectively to farmers, which PLF seeks to replicate at scale. Unlike both PLF and standard intensive agriculture, though, husbandry promotes active animal participation. For instance, on some farms, cows can participate in the milking process by choosing whether or not to interact with the milking robots, and who goes first, sometimes even declining the expected reward in exchange for some quiet time (Driessen 2014; Driessen et al. 2015; Porcher and Schmitt 2010; 2012; Stuart, Schewe and Gunderson 2013). While larger operations could allow for some degree of choice, PLF tends to discourage participation. PLF techniques undermine animals’ autonomy and expression, thereby undermining their status as co-workers and active community members. PLF, in sum, does not fit the bill of Porcher’s LDHA.

How plausible, in contrast, is Porcher’s account of the value of work? We need to ask why we should live with animals in the first place, and why living together would entail labour. Porcher’s main argument starts from an empirical premise blending history and anthropology—in a nutshell: we are happier together and have always lives together:

Farmers and domesticated animals have lived and worked together for thousands of years, perhaps simply because it’s much more interesting and a much greater source of joy to live together than separately (Porcher 2009, 166)

The empirical premise implies an axiological one: work uniquely embodies the intrinsic value of living-together. To the extent that husbandry has been a central type of valuable work throughout history, it seems to follow that we should promote husbandry. And since husbandry entails killing (in order to feed people and for various practical reasons), the intrinsic value of living-together seems to entail that we should promote RKA. Why does it merely seem so? Because the inference is fallacious. Let me explain.

For one thing, as I will continue asking: Why assume that, if joy motivates the existence and continuation of relationships, these have to be *work*, especially killing-based productive work? Porcher is suspicious that the detached, commercial way most pet owners currently relate to their pets involves the relevant type of relationship. Both pets and farm animals can be true companions, but only if we conceive of companionship as work (Porcher 2017, 1-22). But even so, why think that the value of work requires husbandry, much less RKA?

Furthermore, Porcher’s argument is one from history. She rests her case on mutually rewarding relations. So, she is rightly concerned with individual welfare interests. But while she praises relations between particular individuals over particular lifetimes, the historical argument appears to turn on relations between our species and others over time. Let us grant that domestication has been beneficial for a range of species and breeds, including for human beings, in terms of evolutionary fitness. Many domesticated species and breeds are part of ecological symbiotic associations.[[7]](#footnote-8) But, even so, it’s only a descriptive point. History *per se* provides no justification for domestication, let alone current practices. Justifying present relations and inferring their best possible form on the basis of their origins are instances of the *genetic fallacy*. In particular, domestication can hardly justify the practices it gave rise to. By exploiting created dependency, modern farming turned what *might* have been a symbiotic relation into one of asymmetrical vulnerability. Granted, current farming practices may be unjust but leave the core value of domestication unscathed. My objections to Porcher do not concern domestication *per se*. I simply point out how little we can infer about the value of current practices from their history.

One final point concerning history. LDHA arguments typically involve the so-called *replaceability argument* to justify humane RKA. In a nutshell, we create happy individuals who would otherwise not exist and kill them for food (relatively young), and as long as we replace them with equally happy animals, the practice generates overall net benefits for animals, farmers, consumers, and the environment and society at large. Even if death were a harm to animals, the argument goes, it would be offset by the benefit of a pleasant life. A short happy life is worth more than no life at all. Examining the argument closely is beyond the scope of this chapter[[8]](#footnote-9), so let me simply note, first, that Porcher often appears to endorse, if implicitly, a version of the replaceability argument, where farmers give animals a good life cut short by a good death as late as possible (which is still prematurely and for food)[[9]](#footnote-10); second, that the argument assumes that someone, presumably animals, would be worse off if they did not exist (or at least someone better off existing). But that it is good for them to exist does not entail that it better for them to exist than never to have been. If we were to motive the argument by appealing to the existence of breeds and species, the alleged benefits would be even more abstract. Existing individuals do not enjoy them. If they do, relative to what baseline are they are better off? The farming relation persisted because it was mutually adaptive, but this tells us nothing about *welfare* benefits to individuals. That some species have thrived evolutionarily speaking (think dogs vs. wolves) tells us little if anything about how to treat individuals. The unit of selection, the gene, is morally irrelevant. The standpoint that matters is that of animals themselves.

Porcher’s argument, then, is incomplete unless she can show both that husbandry is necessary to preserve the intrinsic value of living-together and that individual animals enjoy benefits that they could not other otherwise enjoy and which outweigh the harm of a premature death. To Porcher’s credit, not just any life will be good enough:

A good life … means a life that is in accord with the animal world and its relational, cognitive and affective potentialities. It also means a habitat that is co-constructed with animals, a place where they can go or not go, and an individual or a collective space. It means diversified food that not only accords with the needs of animals, but equally with their tastes. It means an organization of work which respects the animals’ rhythms, which takes into account relations animals have between themselves: the ties of friendship, the ties between mothers and their young but also ties of conflict. It means an organization of work which … gives animals a chance to live their lives, and allows them a life expectancy that is congruent with this project, both inside and outside the field of production, so that for domestic animals, there is a life outside of work, and after the working years. (Porcher 2017, 119)

Is it worth it? The farmer, coming back from the nursing of calves by their mothers, calls himself “the happiest man” (Porcher 2009, 166), experiencing a joy based on “harmony”, “a shared well-being.” Setting aside replaceability, we can at least imagine that farming truly involves mutual flourishing. But Porcher conflates two things. On the one hand, there is the loss that actual animals would incur if they could not work as farm animals. On the other hand, there is the loss that nonexistent animals would incur if we were to phase them out, as would likely be the case for breeds, if not species, that we would cease to breed for food. But nonexistent beings never experience any loss. As for actual animals, they might be harmed by poorly managed retirement, neglect or euthanasia. But we should neither assume that these are the only alternatives nor that species or breeds themselves can be harmed.

Interestingly, one example of Porcher’s does not involve farming. Mahout elephants used for logging in Asia, or donkeys and horses in France, are deprived of work by the mechanization of labor. As a result, in order to preserve the link, “[b]reeders are now seeking employment for elephants and donkeys, such as carrying tourists … so that these animals don’t disappear from the human world” (Porcher 2009, 167) Plausibly, elephant labour is one way to preserve a form of interspecies collaboration, including for conservation purposes. Nicolas Lainé (2017) has described the seasonal working routine of elephants with people from remote villages in Laos, the elephants helping the villagers transport goods and clean out the forests and weed. If Porcher and Lainé are right that these constitute valuable embodiments of “the link”, then it need not involve domestication or captivity. Let’s assume their working conditions are compatible with their flourishing. The mahout-elephant relation is ancestral (potentially 5,000 years old), embedded in familial traditions (Hart and Sundar 2000) and considered a form of work partnership (Hart 1994). For these relationships to be truly flourishing, though, we would need to ensure that elephants are only held captive temporarily. For, despite our ancestral shared history, elephants’ highly complex mental and social lives make them unfit for captivity (Poole and Moss 2008; Vanitha et al. 2011). Finally, these elephants are not bred in order to be killed for food—an altogether distinct type of relation than husbandry. The lesson to be drawn from this example is that mutually rewarding work is highly demanding and likely to be species- and context-sensitive. It tells us little about farming.

The argument from work, then, is of limited scope. If elephants, donkeys and horses are at least as well off as workers as farm animals can be, then preserving “the link” does not require RKA. Further, if these animals are better off as workers than they would be without work, the benefits are only conferred to *these* particular animals. Again, nonexistent animals would not be worse off. Porcher’s argument, in sum, proves too much or too little. The comparison between two possible lives for existing beings would only justify creating new ones with either of these lives if we could show that we *must* create new beings. But we’re considering possible, not necessary beings, whose very existence depends on the choices we make. Porcher owes us an argument that we have decisive reasons to bring to existence beings with lives worth living. If it were the case, we would likely have a duty to preserve an immense range of practices as long as the animals’ lives would be sufficiently worth living. Even Porcher is not making that claim.

Hers is a more demanding case for giving animals good lives, not just lives worth living. Porcher, as we saw, appeals to affects, joy in particular. I wonder if, taken seriously, this does not create a more stringent standard than she suspects. For one thing, many current practices involving animals would no longer be permissible by this standard—if anything, the balance of joy over misery in the lives of most currently farmed animals is dramatically negative. A more intriguing question is what sort of work, including husbandry, can meet the standard of joy. Animal labour is typically hard work, structured by rigid external constraints (e.g., the labor of carriage horses, tourism elephants, dogs used for police, security, search, among others, draft animals, etc.) (DeMello 2012, 194-214). Surely, many of these interactions involve shared positive affects–police and military work can involve meaningful personal bonds (ibid. and Clinton Sanders, cited p. 234-5). Despite the inherent risks and constraints of a strenuous job, these very well may be joyful mutually rewarding interactions. And the standpoint of human workers matters too. Like traditional farmers, animal handlers, trainers and other people working with animals acquire valuable insights into animals’ wants and need. Their testimony is a valuable source of “folk expertise” (Andrews 2009) and provides a counterpoint to the industrial perception of animals. Yet work may also obscure some signals. Specific aims, values and needs, inherent biases can distort the perception and interpretation of signals. Humans are not just guardians or trustees; they breed and raise, buy and sell, train and confine livestock and other animals for specific purposes that shape what signals to pay attention to. Hence, what kind of jobs can provide for good lives remains an empirical question. We can’t simply assume that anecdotal evidence collected among workers accurately captures the experiences of animals themselves over a wide range of jobs and working conditions.

So, we can agree with Porcher that the flourishing of many domesticated animals requires interactions, perhaps even partnership or friendship, with human beings, possibly fostered by work, “guaranteeing [humans’] income and [animals’] daily bread” (Porcher 2009, 167). But why restrict meaningful forms of association to labour? Even Porcher’s conception of friendship is strained. Typically, work and friendship are distinct spheres, even when they overlap. It’s often a bad idea to have friends working for you. I’m sure there are plenty of exceptions, but friendship thrives in nonhierarchical relationships and work often requires constraints inimical to friendship. If the analogy with friendship is to carry any weight anyway, the onus is on Porcher to show that friendship allows, let alone requires, breeding, fattening and slaughtering you, or confining and coercing you to work hard, in order for me to make a living. Now, companionship (as between companion animals and their persons) may be preferable to labour from the perspective of friendship, but one might reply that labour is preferable to companionship from the perspective of agency. Indeed, Porcher sometimes reproaches current pet keeping practices for not involving genuine meaningful interactions. Pets have to fulfill *some* form of (pet-specific) work: “Without work, however discrete it may be, as with the work of pets, there are no ties.” (Porcher 2017, 120) Being a companion *is* a form of work. Moreover, companion animals also provide care work, emotional support, assisted therapy, among other services they fulfill. Porcher is right that many existing forms of pet keeping thwart animals’ agency. Just because, say, dogs can only be captive does not mean we can’t enhance their dog-like agency (Horowitz 2014). The question then becomes: why can’t companionship be sufficient for preserving the link if we can foster agency therein. In companionship, including with trained dogs, horses and birds, we find models of meaningful human-animal bonds whereby companions, albeit not equal in abilities, stand in genuinely reciprocal affective relations. Gary Varner (2002), for instance, has described a type of relationship with companion animals, such as dogs and horses, dubbed “domesticated partnerships,” which foster the respectful development and exercise of their faculties.

Porcher has described symptoms, a diagnosis and a possible cure. I have argued that, as it stands, Porcher’s LDHA fails to establish that we have decisive reasons to preserve strenuous work, much less husbandry, much less RKA. The next section adduces further reasons to reject LDHA and to consider alternatives.

**3. Husbandry or what?**

In this section, I review two respects in which Porcher’s account of labour fails to support husbandry: her failure to consider alternatives and her failure to draw the full implications of the idea of animal co-workers.

**3.1.** Porcher lays out a trilemma (husbandry, liberation or industrial agriculture). She argues that the last two horns entail breaking “the link”. Even synthetic or cultured meat and animal products, she has repeatedly alleged in press and in public lectures, rests on the biotechnological industrial exploitation of matter and constitutes a strategic alliance with animal rights activists and industrial conglomerates with a view to producing “living death” on a massive scale while dispensing with real life (Porcher 2017, 99-100; 2007; 2014). For the sake of argument, I have granted that we have reasons to preserve the link. Indeed, in the last section I argue we have reasons to do so for the sake of animals themselves. I don’t think most animal advocates would recognize themselves in Porcher’s depiction—many, if not most, of them want to preserve meaningful human-animal interactions (more on this below). What I reject is the trilemma. In her reply to my previous article (Delon 2017), Porcher (2018) lays bare the tragic toll of attempts to preserve the link without husbandry. If we want to live with, say, cows, she notes, health requires genetic diversity, which requires that we have large enough populations. But this itself requires managing them through culling, i.e. RKA-based husbandry. As she wrote elsewhere: “Animal reproduction and the sale of the young are a means of making relations durable.” (Porcher 2017, 113) In other words, if we reject RKA, according to Porcher, we are committed to sterilization (ultimately having to phase out the animals we wanted to preserve), euthanasia or letting them starve. That is, animal ethicists who, like me, value relationships really “promote husbandry without knowing it” (like Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain speaking prose) (Porcher 2018, 120-1).

Porcher thus suggests that rejecting both husbandry (assuming it entails RKA, which it does by her own lights) and factory farming entails abolitionism. But many advocates, like her, agree that domestication could be a form of “emancipation” rather than exploitation (Porcher 2009, 164)–just on very different terms. The abolition-exploitation dichotomy is a false one and not one most animal ethicists now put forth. If, like Porcher, we assume that any acceptable form of the link entails a tragic cos—killing really, not merely death—then we are begging the question.[[10]](#footnote-11) Many animal rights theorists and activists are not abolitionists regarding “the link” even though most are regarding RKA (e.g. Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Cochrane 2012[[11]](#footnote-12)). Porcher conflates the critique of RKA with the critique of human-animal relationships, but one need not imply the other, and defending the potential value of animal labour fails to motivate LDHA.

Suppose the social identities and occupations embedded in husbandry are morally significant and give people a sense of meaning (which they certainly do for many small-scale farmers). Still, as old practices disappear new ones emerge, along with new identities and occupations. The point is well put by Josh Milburn (2018, 270) in a recent paper on “clean milk”:

It is true that large-scale adoption of clean milk may mean that certain *modes* of relating to cows—specifically, certain careers—would no longer be open to people, but this is the standard consequence of moral, social and technological advancement. Indeed, it is not normally presented as a cause for concern. It is hard to imagine that many people lacking financial interests worry about the loss of jobs in the tobacco industry as smoking becomes less socially acceptable. Similarly, people are no longer employed as pin-setters, ice-cutters, or telegram operators due to technological advancement, while work as a cockfighter, resurrectionist, or hangman is hard to find due to changing ethical/legal norms. In the future, the professions of dairy farmer and slaughterhouse worker may face a similar fate … At the same time, new—more humane—jobs should be created, including those tied to a new dairy industry, and those grounded in new (or expanded) modes of peaceful human/animal coexistence

For sure, the automobile, fossil fuel and tobacco industries do not involve the sort of link that Porcher finds valuable. Yet theexistence of a career *per se* has little normative weight.

**3.2.** Yet another ground for skepticism vis-à-vis Porcher’s cure lies in what legitimate work entails. Recently, suggested

putting some sort of “labour law” in place for domestic animals … which would form the basis of our duties to animals depending on the work that we expect from them, and on what they expect from the work. We could imagine that in our utopia the gift of a good life for animals would be a prerequisite. (Porcher 2017, 119)

As we saw, the “good life”

gives animals a chance to live their lives, and allows them a life expectancy that is congruent with this project, both inside and outside the field of production, so that for domestic animals, there is a life outside of work, and after the working years. (ibid.)

Indeed, if we really think animals can be workers (Porcher and Schmitt 2010; 2012; Cochrane 2016; Coulter 2016), labour entails a certain status. Animal workers are not simply domesticated animals, with whom we share a spatial, social and potentially political community; nor are they reducible to either pets, livestock or sanctuary animals. It’s a distinct category with implications of its own. Co-workers share a *workplace*—e.g. farm, field or street–and have certain *rights*.For instance, Cochrane (2016) considers the rights to unionize, to fair wage, a safe and healthy environment, rest days, retirement and benefits. In this volume, Cochrane argues that “good work” for animals has a three-fold basis: it provides pleasure through affording opportunities to use and develop skills; which allows for the exercise of animals’ agency; and which provides a context in which animals can be esteemed as valuable workers recognized as members of the communities in which they labour. But we should also note that if animals are entitled to meaningful retirement, it is *prima facie* unjust to cull them once their productive life is over. Porcher has recently considered the upshot in more detail:

we can imagine other rules governing the retirement of animals, or of slaughter. First of all, this should concern the choice of breeds, as they determine the life expectancy of animals. Rather than slaughtering industrial pigs at five and a half months, it would be better to breed Limousin pigs up to the age of 18 months. … Is providing us with meat all that it can do? In my opinion, it is not. Pigs can have many other jobs, particularly in the forest … It is the same for calves and lambs. If the gift and counter gift between animals and us is expressed by a good life for the animals, they must have more time to live their lives. If, for example, … animals have an active place in work, the question of when to retire them must be asked. Many farmers, particularly of goats, do not send their old animals to the abattoir, but construct a sub-herd, retired from production but not from the collective. (Porcher 2017, 113-4)

In this remarkable passage, Porcher comes close to defending (‘without knowing it’!) a no-kill form of husbandry—as far as harvesting milk, eggs, or wool at least—many animal ethicists might welcome (Cochrane 2012, 86-89; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 139; Milburn 2018).[[12]](#footnote-13) Still, according to Porcher, farm animals typically won’t be retired, unlike, say, police dogs: breeding them entails killing them (Porcher 2018). If, on the other hand, retirement is not among their rights, are they meaningfully workers? Porcher (implicitly) dissociates the status of worker from the right to *choose one’s employment*, unlike Donaldson and Kymlicka or Blattner (this volume). Porcher’s conception appears tailored to rationalize the continuation of what many would plausibly count as exploitation.

Retirement is thus an issue. So is consent, or lack thereof. Despite the Industrial Revolution, some types of work continued or even intensified animal use in the 19th century, mainly of horses, cattle and dogs, for dairy production, mining, transportation, draft and war. As French historian Eric Baratay (2008) has argued, such work typically turned animals into *proletarians* more than co-workers (also see Hribal 2007), much less friends. Further, a worker, at least in contexts where work is praised, is supposed to *consent* to work and written or tacit contractual terms. Even when animals cannot express consent, they can *assent*, at the very least *dissent* (see Blattner, this volume). While dissent clearly indicates refusal to work, we should also attempt to secure the animal’s assent, expressed non-verbally, to providing services in exchange for life, food, housing, and care. Even then, work animals typically have a very limited range of options which cast doubt on the import of their choice. Because they are bred and sold for particular purposes, they may have no choice at all. Whatever freedom they have within the bounds of work, they often lack freedom to enter or exit.

In sum, Porcher’s trilemma only concerns abolitionists like Gary Francione (2008), who consider any use of sentient beings as inherently wrong regardless of its effects on welfare[[13]](#footnote-14). Domestication, on this view, entails inherent dependency, which is bad, and exploitation, which is unjust. This is not my view or that of other theorists mentioned earlier. The extinctionist approach holds that, ultimately, we should painlessly phase out domesticated animals and abolish our mutual relations. On Francione’s account, it is wrong to use sheep to graze a field, even if everyone is thereby made better off. Donaldson and Kymlicka, in contrast, allow for using animals in ways that foster mutually respectful relations as co-citizens (e.g. donkeys or dogs for herding or, under stringent conditions, farm animals for wool, eggs or milk). However, use is only just if it guarantees flourishing and genuine freedom of choice (whether or not and when to work), and does not presuppose premature killing (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 134-40). In fact, reconstructing our relations to domesticated animals on a just basis can partly repair the historical injustices of domestication, unlike extinction. *Pace* Porcher, criticisms of domestication need not be extinctionist.

Such possibilities are no less plausible than Porcher’s fancied husbandry. Porcher’s LDHA fails. I have, however, suggested that she and animal ethicists converge more than she recognizes on the value of “the link”. They disagree about what types of communities they want to promote. In the last section, I rely on recent work with Duncan Purves to suggest what meaningful work could look like for domesticated animals.

**4. Meaningful work and life**

Purves and Delon (2018) argues that an individual’s life is meaningful if and to the extent that the individual contributes through intentional agency to some finally valuable state of affairs. In other words, by actively doing good, whether or not one intends to do so (*qua* good), one confers meaning on one’s life (more locally, on one’s actions). Meaning can but need not supervene on a life as a whole, construed as a coherent narrative. It applies to life chapters, moments or discrete actions. Because a narrative sense of one’s life as a whole, or a concept of meaning, is not required, and because many animals are agents of a sufficient sort, many animals can act and live meaningfully.

Animals can act intentionally and do good. Anecdotes abound: a dog risking his own life to remove from the road a canine companion hit by a car on a busy Chilean highway; a female elephant distressed and trying to help the dying matriarch of another family; and a gorilla rescuing a small boy, who has fallen into her enclosure, handing him over to zookeepers (Rowlands 2012). Meaningful action need not be morally grandiose or involve some grand purpose. Infant-rearing is a way of contributing intentionally to well-being, something that matters for its own sake, Nonhuman parents or caretakers (predominantly though not exclusively mothers) engage in intentional nursing, play, and protection in ways appropriately connected to value. A meaningful interaction of which we routinely deprive farm animals.

Here, I contend that our view accounts for meaningful work insofar as it fosters good-contributing agency. Contributing to value is intentionally left open—human and/or animal interests count. Animals could meaningfully sacrifice their own good for the good of humans or other animals (we mention, for example, rescue animals, animals in war and seeing-eye dogs). In fact, our account itself does not preclude work as construed by Porcher from conferring meaning onto human and animal’s actions. Work on the farm, tourism, security, and search and rescue work all contribute to some good, and they all rely to some extent on animals’ agency. Porcher and I agree that work should be meaningful and that, when it is, it can be valuable.

Yet severe constraints exerted to make animals work compromise their agency, hence the meaning of their actions. The account of meaning I introduced, to the extent that it involves agency, thus leaves little room for exploitative work. Moreover, if we supplement it with an account of justice, the requirements of just work (see the previous section) preclude the type of work that would thwart animals’ flourishing in the service of human interests. In the paper, we considered novel research practices to better promote meaning in the lives of animal subjects (Purves and Delon 2018, 336). In contrast with standard biomedical practice, Marino and Frohoff (2011) have described nascent “interspecies collaborative research” (ICR) for working with cetaceans: “possibilities for studying free-ranging cetaceans who initiate close proximity and even sociable interactions with humans … providing unique scientific opportunities for an era of less-invasive cetacean research.” (2011, 4) Whether or not research qualifies as work, “ICR holds the potential to yield valuable results for researchers (and cetaceans) while accommodating the complex psychological and social needs and preferences of animals.” (Purves and Delon 2018, 336) Varner’s “domesticated partnerships” and Donaldson and Kymlicka’s intentional-community sanctuaries could generate meaning in similar ways.

In contrast, exploitative work undermines opportunities for meaning by preventing animals from doing things that matter to them by themselves. Unjust labour can curtail the sort of basic agency that matters for meaning, thereby undermining the material conditions constitutive of a good life—if meaning is part of a good life. When control is pervasive, as it is in work driven by economic considerations, such that animals depend on their captors for their basic needs, whatever agency they have is left may be insufficient for meaning. Animals on farms, industrial and sometimes “humane” and “organic” alike, do not merely suffer, physically and psychologically, from pain, stress, boredom and anxiety; they’re deprived of opportunities to exercise agency. Again, Porcher is not defending this kind of unjust labour. But we need to take the question seriously: What are acceptable constraints on animal agency from the standpoint of meaning?

For meaning is something that matters to an animal’s well-being beyond the bare satisfaction of needs. Indeed, recent research in motivation psychology (Franks and Higgins 2012) argues for a richer model of the “good life” (the Effective Organization of Motives or Effectiveness Theory of Motivation) as requiring *truth*, *control*, and *value* motives to work together effectively. Animals are motivated to act “beyond a motivation for adequate nutrition and safety (value motivation)”. They are “also motivated to manage their environment (control motivation) and to learn about it (truth motivation).” (p. 165) These features contribute to meaning in their lives and, the authors argue, are relevant to questions of human and animal well-being.

The connection between well-being and agency gives ammunition to a defense of animal labor. But as noted, it does not support LDHA, let alone RKA, especially relative to alternatives. Constraints fall along a spectrum, of course. Likewise, the material conditions of a meaningful life vary according to the relevant range of possible options. To the extent that labour curtails agency, by preventing one from engaging in the exploratory and social behaviors that contribute to value, it curtails opportunities for meaning. By contrast, by raising challenges and inducing adaptations, agency-enhancing work (but also play or activities not directly involving human beings, production or service—see Donaldson and Kymlicka, this volume) may create opportunities for meaning. In sum, a concern for animal agency and well-being within human-animal relationships need not commit us to RKA.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that Porcher’s defense of animal husbandry fails. Insofar as her work is representative of LDHA, the onus remains on advocates of husbandry to explain how work can justify RKA. Porcher, a prominent advocate of husbandry, fails to marshal a conception of labour that does not entail unjust work and obscures alternatives to RKA. Insofar as other relations can meet the desiderata of a commitment to human-animal relationships LDHA fails. Killing in the context of work undermines the alleged dimension of joy and mutual respect meant to justify it. Finally, while meaningful work for animals is possible, it rules out RKA.

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2. For a recent comprehensive statement of Porcher’s views in English, see Porcher 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Larrère (2010) illuminates the Cartesian model of living things as machines as primarily a representation of life. The model evolved from mechanism (the clock or automaton analogy) to thermodynamic to biotechnological models. The representation of the organism then enables its use as a machine. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Porcher (2014) writes: “In farming … this centrality of work is defeated by the livestock production industry, which reduces man and beast to their behaviors and standardized means of functioning. It is equally defeated by theories of animal liberation, which reject the question of work. … Why do animal liberators, many of whom claim to be political, even revolutionary in their doctrines, ignore the question of work, which is the political question par excellence? I believe it is because a political analysis of work with animals evidences the extreme closeness of man to beast, and the objective of animal “liberation” is in fact to separate them. Work recognition is a recognition of ties. It is thus effectively revolutionary.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. On animal resistance in labour, see e.g. Hribal (2007). On the resistance of animals through the slaughter process, see Rémy’s (2009) ethnography. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See “Smart Farming” at [http://www.CEMA-agri.org](http://CEMA-agri.org) (accessed January 15, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The empirical story is sometimes deployed in support of the idea of a social “domestic” compact (Budiansky 1999; Larrère and Larrère 2000). See Palmer’s objections (2010, 57-62). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Delon (2016) for an overview. See e.g. Utria (2014) for a critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In her work, the argument draws on the Maussian idea of “*don/contre-don*” (gift/counter-gift) (Mouret 2012; Porcher 2002; 2017, 73-83). For instance: “Because the farmer gave them life, he is committed to his animals and they should be able to rely on him … This gift of life that animals received and which puts them under the farmer’s responsibility, as well as his daily protection and care, commits them to giving back.” (Porcher 2002, 27) Farmers’ gift is repeated, sustained throughout the animal’s life, in particular when they postpone or try to avoid culling. “Farmers commonly appear to think that this repeated gift of life … which is against their economic interests … implies an increased counter-gift on the animal’s part (p. 31). Porcher presupposes that RKA is a gift of comparable significance to animals’ giving their own life. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Porcher repeatedly emphasizes in her fieldwork the suffering that the necessity of death causes to farmers and slaughterhouse workers, who allegedly wish it were not necessary and seek to postpone it as much as is economically feasible. “For animals do not want to die and we know that. The question remains, particularly because of the changing sensibility of farmers with regard to animals. … [T]here are now vegetarian farmers. There are also farmers who would really be content with only 20 cows, even with 2 or 3.” (Porcher 2017, 113) RKA implies premature death, but husbandry only reluctantly accepts it. Mouret (2012) describes the relation between (pig) farmers and death as “grieving” (also see Porcher, 2002 and Mouret and Porcher, 2007). On Mouret’s account, this attitude is a complex of relational affects and recognition of the badness of death, whether through euthanasia, culling or slaughter, against a background of cyclical “gift-counter-gift.” (Mouret, 2012, 77-80). Mouret acknowledges that gift is snatched from animals rather than consented. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Even abolitionist critics of Porcher (e.g. Utria 2014) do not condone phasing out domesticated animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. On the model of intentional communities, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015) argue that radically novel forms of human-animal coexistence are possible in farmed animal sanctuaries, which do not require harms characteristic of RKA, while offering space, protection, companionship, and presumptive non-interference with fundamental interests (e.g. life, reproduction, within- and between-species socialization). Porcher (2018) tackles *Zoopolis* (more than she engages with Delon 2017, in fact). The authors of a recent paper (critical of antispeciecism) state: “Donaldson and Kymlicka’s project is to reinvent a type of relation, husbandry, that has existed for thousands of years, but without by removing killing from the equation. Whereas husbandry is a situation in which, when animals are born, others must die, *Zoopolis* offers a project of cohabitation, with no killing.” (Gardin et al. 2018, 8; edited translation)

    [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Unless one reads Francione’s view as stating that dependency and being used as a resource are contrary to welfare. But Francione uses “welfare” to refer to welfarism (as opposed to abolitionism and rights) (Francione and Garner 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)