

# Re-evaluating the Alignment of Omnivorous Choice and Animal Farming with Sustainable Development: Insights from Care Ethics

**Rozważając powiązanie pomiędzy wszystkożerstwem, hodowlą zwierząt i zrównoważonym rozwojem: spostrzeżenia wynikające z etyki opieki**

**Upamita Mukherjee\*, Prabhu Venkataraman\*\***

*Indian Institute of Technology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Guwahati, India*

*\*E-mail (Corresponding Author): [upamita.mukherjee@iitg.ac.in](mailto:upamita.mukherjee@iitg.ac.in),  
ORCID: 0009-0005-4571-7608*

*\*\*E-mail: [vprabhu@iitg.ac.in](mailto:vprabhu@iitg.ac.in),  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1080-0792*

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## Abstract

Care ethics plays a significant role in the philosophical investigation of sustainable development. This paper is an attempt to comprehend the intricate relationship between care ethics and omnivorism, particularly in the context of economic sustainability, animal farming, and holistic well-being. Care ethics emphasizes empathy, relationships, and responsibility, basically applied to human interactions with other humans, animals, and the environment. Omnivorism denotes the consumption of both animal-based foods and plants. Inspecting all these concepts through the lens of economic sustainability involves considering the impact of consumption choices on agriculture, resources, and environmental costs. Self-care sustainability involves assessing personal choices regarding health, well-being, and the broader ecological system. By examining omnivorism and care ethics in the context of these two sustainability dimensions, this paper finally proposes to provide insights into the complex interplay between moral values, consumption habits, and the long-term well-being of individuals and the planet.

**Key words:** care ethics, omnivorism, empathy, holistic well-being, sustainability

## Streszczenie

Etyka opieki odgrywa znaczącą rolę w filozoficznych badaniach nad zrównoważonym rozwojem. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą zrozumienia zawiązku pomiędzy etyką opieki a wszystkożerstwem, szczególnie w kontekście zrównoważonego rozwoju, hodowli zwierząt i holistycznego dobrostanu. Etyka opieki kładzie nacisk na empatię, relacje i odpowiedzialność, zasadniczo stosowane w interakcjach człowieka z innymi ludźmi, zwierzętami i środowiskiem. Wszystkożerstwo oznacza spożywanie zarówno żywności pochodzenia zwierzęcego, jak i roślinnego. Przeglądanie wszystkich tych koncepcji przez pryzmat zrównoważonego rozwoju obejmuje rozważenie wpływu wyborów konsumpcyjnych na rolnictwo, zasoby i koszty środowiskowe. Zrównoważony rozwój samoopieki obejmuje ocenę osobistych wyborów dotyczących zdrowia, dobrego samopoczucia i szerszego systemu ekologicznego. Badając wszystkożerstwo i etykę opieki w kontekście tych dwóch wymiarów zrównoważonego rozwoju, w artykule proponuje się ostatecznie wgląd w złożone wzajemne oddziaływanie pomiędzy wartościami moralnymi, nawykami konsumpcyjnymi oraz długoterminowym dobrostanem jednostek i planety.

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**Slowa kluczowe:** etyka opieki, wszystkożerność, empatia, holistyczne dobre samopoczucie, zrównoważoność

## Introduction

For climate targets and Sustainable development goals to be met, it is imperious to have extensive evidence about the current food consumption and production systems, especially in industrialized countries (United Nations, 2017). Though meat is one of the essential sources of protein, excessive consumption of meat has been questioned as it relates to sustainability issues. The convergence of care ethics and omnivorism presents an intriguing landscape, particularly through the dual prisms of economic sustainability and self-care sustainability. Care ethics, rooted in fostering empathy, responsibility, and interconnectedness, traditionally apply to human relationships (Gilligan, 1982). However, extending this moral framework to examine how these values interact with consumption patterns by taking into account dietary preferences such as omnivorism.

Omnivorism, the practice of consuming both animal-based foods and plants, has prevalent societal implications (Park, 2017). When analyzed within the outline of economic sustainability, questions arise regarding the competent consumption of resources, the impact on agricultural systems, and the environmental costs associated with diverse dietary preferences. How do our choices as omnivores align with care ethics when it comes to responsible resource sharing, especially considering the strain on land, water, and energy resources? Moreover, the notion of self-care sustainability brings attention to the individual breadth. How do omnivores' dietary decisions affect their overall well-being and long-term health? Can care ethics guide us in making choices that are not only aware of our wellness but also encompass empathy towards the welfare of animals, which becomes crucial in omnivorism?

Examining omnivorism and care ethics together with the economic and self-care sustainability lenses prompts a critical evaluation of the values we prioritize. It requires a nuanced understanding of how our choices impact the broader ecosystem and how societal and ecological considerations influence our well-being.

As we navigate the complex interplay between care ethics and omnivorism, it becomes evident that these considerations are not isolated but complicatedly entwined. Balancing economic sustainability with other priorities, which pertain to responsible resource use, and self-care sustainability, which centers on individual health and well-being, requires a reflective approach that embraces both rationality and empathy. The current research aims to comprehend the complex dynamics that influence our food decisions. By analyzing care ethics and omnivorism through economic and self-care sustainability lenses, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical, economic, and personal dimensions that shape our intricate relationship with the food we consume and the world we inhabit.

## Overview of Care Ethics

In the mid-1980s, psychologist Carol Gilligan and philosopher Nel Noddings formulated care ethics as a different moral theory. An ethical approach to care seeks to confirm the well-being of the care-givers and care-recipients in a network of social relations by contextualizing and promoting their well-being. Rather than a theory, care is more often defined as a practice in which we maintain our worlds and meet the needs of others. Care ethics holds that moral decisions depend on specific circumstances or facts. Gilligan's Care Ethics has been studied as a specific illustration of situation-based ethics. In her theory, she tries to avoid abstractions and focus more on *particularity* (Gilligan, 1982).

Care is often defined as a practice or virtue that includes taking care of oneself and others. It intensifies the need to watch out for the helpless and reliant. Therefore, accurately defining care is complicated. However, care is typically portrayed in care ethics literature as an overlapping set of notions and is frequently stated as a practice, attitude, disposition, or virtue (Tronto, 1993). Though it is very difficult to give the exact definition of care, Jonathan Herring has noted that given the very nature of caring, it is impossible to describe accurately. What exactly qualifies as caring will change depending on the two people's connection, dispositions, and interests. This prevents an objective definition from being possible (Herring, 2019). Herring did not define care; instead, he listed its four distinguishing characteristics: satisfying needs, responsibility, respect, and rationality. Given that it is context-based, the definition of care could be more precise. The concept of care encompasses both labor and ideals as forms of labor and judgments and behaviors that guide normative judgments.

## Care, Omnivorous Choices and Sustainability

In recent years, there has been much discussion on the issue of meat consumption and how it affects environmental sustainability. Numerous studies and research endeavors have stressed the necessity to decrease animal food consumption for the sake of the environment (Hamilton, 2010; Kasser et al., 2004). In recent decades, the notion that human health relies on the use of animal products has been the subject of a comprehensive inquiry. The scientific endorsement has reinforced the health aspect of vegetarianism, enhancing its longstanding moral significance (Rosenfeld, 2018). An extensive body of captivating evidence now supports the idea that a plant-based diet helps good health and contributes to sustainability (Gullone, 2017). On the other hand, in the existing literature, many counterarguments suggest that eating meat can benefit our physical and mental health (Dobersek et al., 2021).

Recent findings show that individuals who adhere to a diet devoid of meat and other animal-derived products may suffer from nutritional deficiencies, such as insufficient intake of vitamins B12 and D, omega-3 fatty acids, calcium, iron, and zinc, which may subsequently contribute to weakened physical health (Cofnas, 2019; Craig, 2010; Igual et al., 2019). Additionally, there is a rising body of research that found a connection between abstaining from meat consumption and the occurrence of mental disorders and compromised psychological well-being. Empirical research reveals that vegans are more likely to engage in self-harming behaviors, significant depression, and anxiety than people who consume meat (Hibbeln et al., 2018; Baines et al., 2007).

Care ethics, a moral framework emphasizing compassion, empathy, and responsibility towards oneself and others, aligns with non-vegetarian food choices that promote physical and mental well-being. As cited in the work of Dobersek et al., the definition of mental health by WHO is *a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to her or his community* (Dobersek et al., 2021, p. 624). Nurturing one's mental health through a balanced diet, which may include moderate meat consumption, reflects an act of self-care that is consistent with care ethics. This perspective encourages us to give importance to the well-being of individuals, acknowledging that a diet that supports our health can be a form of moral self-responsibility.

Indeed, self-sustainability becomes highly relevant when contemplating the potential advantages of eating meat for physical and mental health. Self-sustainability means the capacity to independently and adequately meet one's basic requirements. When it comes to the context of diet, this means striking a harmony between dietary choices that enhance overall well-being, such as incorporating meat for its nutritional value, while also considering the sustainability of these choices in the long term. Balancing personal well-being with self-sustainability involves awareness of the sources and types of meat one consumes and their comprehensive environmental and moral implications. People can match their eating habits with self-sustainability and personal health by choosing meat from ethical and sustainable sources, exercising moderation, and reducing food waste. This approach not only promotes individual well-being but also plays a role in making a healthier planet, stressing the interconnectedness of personal choices and broader sustainability goals.

There is a reliant relationship between these two concepts: self-care and self-sustainability. As earlier mentioned, self-sustainability involves taking responsibility for one's well-being, including aspects such as health, resilience, and resource management, so, without adequate self-care and attention to one's own needs, it becomes challenging to maintain physical and mental energy, which are required to care for others or contribute to broader sustainability efforts. Self-care builds the capacity to care for others and engage in sustainable practices. Ignoring one's well-being can lead to exhaustion, decreased resilience, and a reduced capacity to contribute positively to the well-being of others or the environment. Therefore, recognizing the value of self-care is crucial for one's well-being, providing others with reasonable care, and participating actively in social sustainability projects.

In summary, it is proved that there is a strong connection between self-care and self-sustainability, with self-care as the cornerstone aiding individuals to care for themselves, others, and the environment effectively. In order to sustain personal well-being, these factors must be balanced and foster a sustainable and caring society. Uniting meat with a wide array of plant-based foods further enhances overall health and minimizes environmental impact. Individuals possessing the moral attribute of compassion typically exhibit a keen sensitivity to the quandary of animals, rendering them disinclined to participate in activities that inflict harm upon animals, particularly when they possess the voluntarily available option of adhering to a strict plant-based dietary regime. This ethical posture harmonizes consistently with the overarching principle of sustainable development. Hence, within the care ethics framework, one could argue that those with compassion tend to live in wealthy civilizations and would logically embrace a strict plant-based dietary regimen. This extrapolation leads to the idea that those of us living in wealthy nations, where plant-based alternatives are widely available, have a moral obligation to follow a rigorous diet. Accordingly, refraining from the espousal of such a dietary regimen may be considered a breach of moral obligation.

Nonetheless, it has become well-established that strict plant-based dietary practices inherently involve a degree of harm imposed upon animals, with the term 'harm' being employed in a comprehensive sense encompassing a spectrum from mortality to physical suffering (Abbate, 2019). This harm appears as a result of several activities, such as the use of pesticides, field traps, land clearing, and mechanized harvesting, which negatively influence a variety of animals, bird species, and aquatic life. Some facets of this harm are deliberate in nature, such as pest control trials, while others result unintentionally, such as the accidental demise of underground creatures like moles (Gonzalez, 2019). Notably, the deforestation started by the establishment of palm oil plantations has tragic consequences, including the immolation of orangutans. Furthermore, the mechanical harvesting of crops does not exempt field-dwelling animals from fatalities. Although precise quantification of the exact number of birds, animals, and fish subject to harm remains challenging, it is widely acknowledged, as stated by Fischer, that undeniable harm is presently being inflicted upon certain wild animals within plant agriculture (Fischer, 2016).

One might contend that according to the principles of sustainable development, it is advisable to give priority to agricultural practices that have the potential to ultimately reduce harm to animals, especially those that use humane

production methods, like greenhouses or backyard gardens. Nonetheless, an obvious challenge arises in this context, as most individuals residing in affluent societies are bereaved of ready access to humane plant agriculture; even among those who engage in humane plant agricultural activities, the capacity to cultivate a self-sustaining supply of food still needs to be discovered.

Think about a situation when someone diligently devotes more than 40 hours per week to their professional goal; it becomes evident that procuring the entirety of their sustenance exclusively from humane farms becomes an impractical proposition. Even a careful farmer, motivated by care and compassion, is controlled by the limitations of agricultural output and would inevitably find it necessary to supplement their provisions through commercial channels, as few possess the resources to produce an all-encompassing self-sustaining food supply. So, here, we should direct our attention towards animals characterized by either insentience or exhibiting a low degree of sentience. Including animals in one's dietary choices who do not possess the capacity to experience pain and thus remain resistant to harm is an effective strategy to reduce the overall count of animals subjected to harm within food production. Encouraging moral and environmentally responsible food choices, including non-painful, non-harmful animals in one's diet, is in line with sustainable development. Sustainable development includes social and ethical considerations. By choosing animals that do not experience pain, individuals support more humane dealing of animals, aligning with the ethical width of sustainability.

### **The Crucial Link Between Animal Farming, Income, and Sustainability**

Undoubtedly, there is an apparent contradiction between environmental sustainability and animal farming. Scholars who prioritize environmental concerns have recognized a connection between meat production and the deterioration of ecosystem quality, encompassing factors like air, soil, and water quality, as well as the depletion of essential resources like water and land (Ernstoff et al., 2019; Chamanara et al., 2021). While the argument against meat production heavily emphasizes the adversative environmental and ecological consequences, it also highlights noteworthy challenges faced by individuals residing in regions with limited or no arable land, which hinders the adoption of exclusively plant-based diets. Here, a possible solution could be found in cultured meat, which aligns with the principles of a sustainable food system. Cultured meat holds promise in justifying several ethical concerns linked to traditional animal farming for meat production. However, it is crucial to remember that the current method of producing lab-grown meat still uses animals to gather stem cells.

Within the context of animal farming, care ethics inspires a comprehensive consideration of the interests and well-being of animals while recognizing the social and economic dimensions of farming communities. The debate surrounding animal farming has grown more complex in recent years as concerns over environmental sustainability, animal welfare, and economic feasibility continue to intersect. The care ethical approach presents a distinctive viewpoint that considers the welfare of animals and the economic sustainability of communities that depend on animal husbandry among the numerous ethical frameworks governing this discourse. One of the central tenets of care ethics is the emphasis on empathy and the acknowledgment of the moral significance of caring for others, including animals. Supporters of animal farming within this context contend that caring for animals responsibly and humanely is not only ethically desirable but also necessary for the sustainability of farming communities. Animals treated with kindness and respect are typically healthier and more productive, which benefits farmers' bottom lines.

The economic implications of animal farming cannot be understated. In many regions, for example, in India, especially rural areas, animal farming is a vivacious source of income and livelihood. It provides employment opportunities, supports local economies, and helps maintain the social fabric of communities. Additionally, by supplying a consistent supply of animal-based goods like meat, dairy, and eggs, animal farming helps to ensure global food security. Despite supporting animal farming for economic sustainability, the care ethical method has difficulties and moral conundrums. Critics argue that even with the best aims, modern industrial farming often falls short of care and ethical standards. Concerns regarding the moral treatment of animals have been raised by issues including factory farming, cramped living quarters, and antibiotics that promote development.

However, From the perspective of care ethics, our possible suggestion is that, animal farming would not be a headache for achieving Sustainable development goals if the following three principles were to be implemented in the future:

- 1) Ensure animals have good living conditions: Giving them a good place to live, decent food, and appropriate care to keep them healthy and happy. It is not only the right thing to do, but it also helps animals live longer and be more prolific on the farm.
- 2) Reduce stress and suffering for animals: Making sure that animals do not feel anxious, hurt, or unhappy is a primary goal of ethical care techniques.
- 3) Take care of the environment: Care ethics also means being accountable for the land and resources we use for farming. To preserve the environment's health for future generations and to maintain productive farms, farmers who uphold care ethics are more likely to employ practices that do not hurt the environment.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has delved into the profound philosophical framework of care ethics and its profound inferences for the significant issue of meat consumption. The exploration of care ethics has illuminated its exclusive and thought-provoking perspective that transcends the confines of traditional principle-based moral theories. Through this analysis, we have emphasized the profound significance of these three critical dimensions, namely, economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and self-sustainability, which significantly inform our dietary habits.

Care ethics, as an alternative moral theory, urges us to broaden our ethical considerations beyond the treatment of animals to encompass a comprehensive view of our dietary habits. This approach stimulates us to explore the far-reaching consequences of our dietary choices, not only for the sentient beings we share this planet with but also for our global community. Moreover, the ecosystems that sustain us. By practicing the virtue of care and compassion, individuals and societies alike can embark on a transformative journey toward a more conscientious and harmonious coexistence with the world around us and ethical foundations of care extend beyond our plates to shape a world marked by empathy, responsibility, and the flourishing of all living beings. Finally, this paper invites us to question prevailing norms, engage in meaningful dialogue, and actively seek ways to reduce harm and promote well-being. In doing so, we can collectively contribute to a more sustainable and compassionate future, and here it is to underscore the pressing relevance of care ethics in addressing the multifaceted hurdles posed by meat consumption, inspiring us to embrace this paradigm shift towards a more reasonable, sustainable, and ethically grounded relationship with our environment and its inhabitants.

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