

ETHICAL CONTROVERSY OVER THE SLAUGHTER OF BILL AND LOU

by ANTONIA FRASER FUJINAGA on 13th Nov 2012

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The author of this article is finishing a PhD about Iranian criminal courts at the University of Edinburgh and currently lives in San Francisco with her husband. She has collaborated in several animal rescue efforts and cares for a number of small rescued animals at home.

An international furor has erupted over the intended **slaughter of two draft oxen** who worked on a university farm for a decade and were well-loved by their community.



Photo credit: BarbaraLN/ Flickr

Bill and Lou arrived at **Green Mountain College** (GMC) in 2002 and spent the ensuing ten years ploughing the fields of the university's Cerridwen Farm. The college's mission is to embody, teach and promote **sustainable food production**. The oxen became well-known and beloved figures in the community and were showered with affection and included in graduation ceremonies. But Lou was injured last summer and could no longer work; it was claimed that Bill would have refused to work with another partner. Consequently the student body voted to **slaughter and eat the oxen**. Various offers to give the oxen a permanent home, some accompanied by offers of sums going into the tens of thousands of dollars, were rejected on the basis that if the oxen were to retire, they would consume resources even outside GMC's lands without producing anything, and this would be incompatible with GMC's ethos of promoting resource efficiency worldwide, and not just within its own confines. There followed a proliferation of petitions gathering tens of thousands of signatures, **articles written by scholars** and other commentators for or against the slaughter, and attempts to persuade GMC to reconsider its decision. But despite the controversy having reached worldwide proportions, GMC maintained its resolve to slaughter the oxen. On 11 November, GMC President Paul Fonteyn reportedly authorised **Lou's euthanasia**, citing the pain caused by his injury. Bill's fate remains in the balance.

Unfortunately, it is too late for Lou, and because we could not obtain his medical data or an impartial report of his medical condition, we may never know if his euthanasia was truly necessary (perhaps it was). But an analysis of the arguments posed throughout the controversy remains relevant to Bill's fate and to the issue of the treatment of draft animals.

Considerations of space preclude a full analysis of all the arguments posed for and against the slaughter, but here we shall present the most persuasive arguments offered for the slaughter when both oxen were alive, and the corresponding arguments against them.

Arguments For The Slaughter Of Bill And Lou

Before Lou's euthanasia, the most cogent reasons that GMC offered for slaughtering Bill and Lou instead of **sending them to a sanctuary** were as follows:



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1. 70% of GMC students eat meat. This meat is usually obtained from **factory farms**, but GMC is working towards full self-sufficiency. In this instance, eating Bill and Lou would allow GMC to avoid factory-farmed meat for one or two months. Instead of eating nameless animals with brief, tortured lives, they would be eating animals who had led **happy lives**, and this would reduce the harm involved in meat eating. The choice is either to eat Bill and Lou or to replace them with vastly unethical factory-farmed meat.

2. If the oxen were to live without working, they would consume large amounts of water and forage without balancing this out by producing resources. It does not matter who would be providing this food and water. Their survival would be a net loss to the ecosystem of planet Earth, and GMC, as a **promoter of sustainability** and responsible use of resources, cannot set such a wasteful example or

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cause such a net loss. Furthermore, sustainable farming operates on such a small margin that allowing such waste could bankrupt a small farm attempting self-sustainability. Therefore, by allowing these oxen to retire, GMC would be promoting an impossible model for **sustainable farming**. The alternative would be to have no draft animals and use polluting machinery instead.

3. It is culturally unrealistic to expect the world to abandon meat consumption. Consequently, sustainable farming models must include meat production.

4. Lou is in pain because of his injury. Therefore killing him **would be humane**. Bill would be heartbroken without Lou and so his death would also be an act of kindness.

Arguments Against The Slaughter Of Bill And Lou

Opponents of slaughtering Bill and Lou used the following arguments.

1. For humans, meat is a choice, not a necessity. Bill and Lou 'have' to die not because people *need* their flesh, but because they *feel like eating* it. The oxen's need for their own lives – in view of the survival instinct and the well-known fact that animals do everything they can to resist death – is fundamental, and certainly incomparably greater in magnitude than anyone's desire for their flesh. Furthermore, the choice between eating Bill and Lou and eating factory-farmed meat is false, because GMC could equally well **avoid factory-farmed meat** by consuming vegetable protein during the time when Bill and Lou would have been on the menu. It is untenable to subordinate one sentient being's entire existence to another's gastronomic preference. Need overrides choice.

Some, including long-standing farmers, have doubted that 11-year-old ox meat is edible.

2. The rationale whereby unproductive consumers must die to preserve resources would justify killing disabled, aged, or otherwise unproductive humans. The only difference here is that humans are humans and oxen are not. The fact that it is precisely humans who are arguing for their own special treatment undermines the credibility of this argument, which could plausibly be the **result of self-interest**. The argument "I am me, therefore I have more rights" is inherently flawed, and, if upheld and universalized, would justify chaotic strife and ultimately the unfettered rule of the mighty over the weak ('might is right') because whichever "I" managed to prevail at any given moment would impose its own superiority (only to be, probably, ousted eventually by the next "I"). This issue is muddled by the fact that currently, as far as is known, only humans have language on this planet; but if another species had language and could argue, it would probably become swiftly clear that the "I am me, hence I prevail" argument is problematic.

As for the sustainability argument, GMC is advocating a practice – meat production – which is **inherently unsustainable** because meat requires many more resources, including land and water, to produce than do plants, and it is extensively documented biological fact that many times more people can be fed by plants directly than plants through animals. GMC is promoting short-term sustainability – killing Bill and Lou to save a relatively small amount of water and forage – while condoning the long-term unsustainability of meat production just because it happens to be the **status quo**. This renders its argument from sustainability inconsistent.

Additionally, though a meat-producing farm has many animals who consume resources, a farm which omits meat needs only draft animals, not **meat animals** (assuming it chooses draft animals over more ecologically detrimental diesel tractors or similar machinery). As demonstrated by GMC's example, few draft animals – in this case, two, replaced every decade – are needed on a small-scale farm. A vegetarian farm would **save significant resources** that would have otherwise been used by many generations of meat animals. The resources thereby saved would be far greater than those expended by allowing two draft animals to retire once every ten years – an infrequent event. Therefore, this would be a net gain. A vegetarian farm which retired its draft animals would still consume fewer resources than a meat-producing farm which sacrificed its unproductive draft animals.

All things considered, by switching to exclusive plant production, GMC would use fewer resources, avoid the ethical quandary of killing sentient beings, reduce ecological damage, and promote long-term worldwide **ecological sustainability** by presenting an example which is not only workable, but also compassionate and resource-efficient. In so doing it would also avoid jeopardising its reputation in the eyes of the tens of thousands who have so vehemently opposed its plan to slaughter Bill and Lou. The only loss here would be to those who would

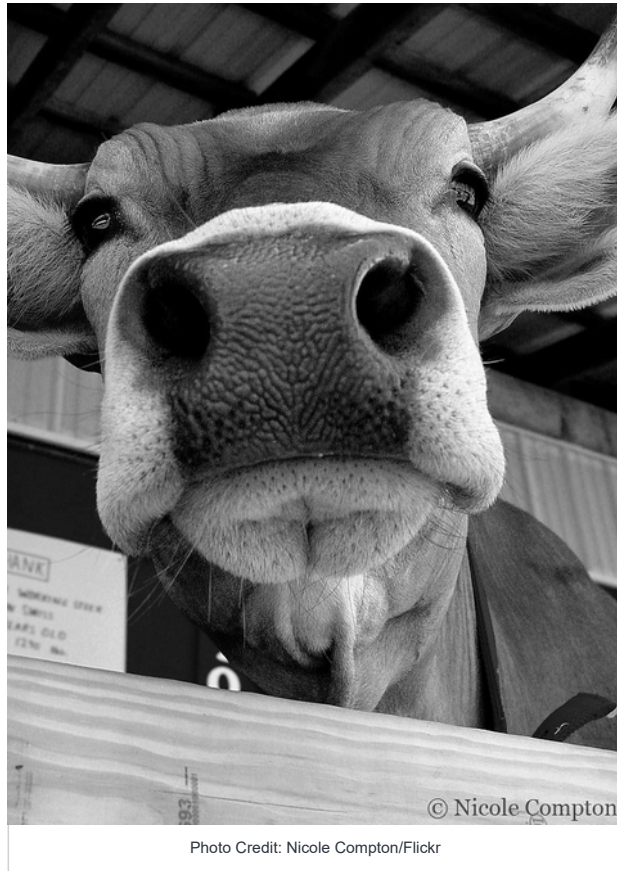
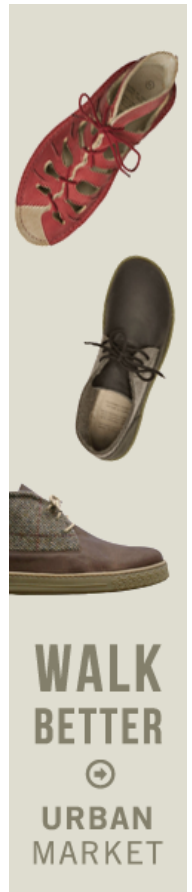


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rather have meat than equally nutritious, and equally delicious, meatless cuisine. Allowing this one preference to sweep away all these benefits would be inefficient and self-defeating.

3. GMC is trying to 'change the world' by going against the powerful mainstream system of ecologically detrimental but very lucrative large-scale agriculture. This is an uphill battle because it challenges the status quo. Yet some (and we do not say all) GMC representatives then dismiss others' attempts to 'change the world' by going one step further: promoting ecologically sound agriculture which also avoids meat production. This is inconsistent. Also, this attitude condones apathy and would have militated against so many past efforts which, in their day, went against the grain and 'unrealistically' battled the mainstream in pursuit of justice: the anti-slavery movement, the female suffrage movement, the anti-segregation movement and so on. Just as GMC wants to strive for greater justice and logic, so do those who oppose meat production. The second group is merely more inclusive in terms of who will benefit from that improvement.

4. We do not know the details of Lou's ailment, and it is possible that even with the earliest and best medical care, euthanasia would have been inevitable. However, those who offered the oxen a home also offered veterinary care, and some who had first-hand knowledge of the oxen have argued that Lou was initially only 'uncomfortable' and might have recovered if given the full extent of medical attention immediately. We shall probably never know.

Concluding Remarks

Sadly, the arguments in favour of sparing and providing medical attention for Lou are now moot in his case following his euthanasia. However, useful conclusions can still be drawn from this analysis of the arguments which were posed for and against the slaughter, not only in pursuit of Bill's release but also for the benefit of future draft animals at GMC and other small farms.

GMC's overall aim to promote responsible, ecologically viable agriculture is useful and laudable. In this instance, its representatives offered several arguments, of varying cogency, for why slaughtering its elderly draft oxen would be advisable and consonant with its policy of advocating and embodying a sustainable model for agriculture. The most persuasive of these arguments were those with roots in ecological and biological data. However, those very data belie the ecological sustainability of the carnivorous model, which was offered as justification for these animals' deaths.

An alternative model is hereby proposed: one which allows for draft animals, but also permits them to survive their 'usefulness' and retire, because their use of resources is by far inferior to the resources saved by not raising animals for the express purpose of eating them. This model would serve GMC's praiseworthy goal of becoming a beacon for sustainable agriculture; it would do so considerably better than would a carnivorous model for small-scale farming; and it would thereby avoid the ethical quandary of killing sentient beings. The losses involved would be so minimal as to be dwarfed by the benefits of this choice.

The major obstacle which stands in the way of this proposed alternative model is cultural habit: one of the sturdiest incarnations of the status quo. But just as GMC is resisting the status quo in its quest for agriculture driven by ethics and responsibility rather than mere profit, so it could add another ethical, and indeed ecological, facet to this effort. As demonstrated by the known examples from the centuries and millennia of human history, from struggles against powerful tyranny recorded in Sumerian clay tablets to the fight against racial segregation which is within living memory, the drive for justice, the desire to improve the lot of all, has challenged the status quo many a time, and won. GMC can add yet another example to this illustrious list.



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ABOUT ANTONIA FRASER FUJINAGA

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Antonia Fraser Fujinaga is finishing a PhD about Iranian criminal courts at the University of Edinburgh and currently lives in San Francisco with her husband. She has collaborated in several animal rescue efforts and cares for a number of small...

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