

# Unconscious slaughtering

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Reception: April 2018

Acceptanc: April 2018

## Primary publication

This document was published in Italian for the first time in the scientific journal *The Future of Science and Ethics*, II-2, December 2017 pp. 154-157 (ISSN 2421-3039)

## Abstract

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Slaughtering is a critical issue, in ethical terms, in the relationship between human and animals. The text builds a strategy to review the balance of interests between human and animals, in order to avoid the perception of events to the animals.

Keywords: bioethics, animals, slaughtering, balance of interests, scientific research, legislation, food supply chains, food.

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It is surprising how something that is immensely dutiful, widely supported, concretely possible and capable of reducing the suffering of sentient beings is not being applied. Considering what currently happens during the slaughter of animals for human consumption, one cannot help but feel surprised. With some simple adjustments, in fact, this butchery could be carried out in an *unconscious* manner for the slaughtered animal already from this day, where, briefly, by *unconscious* slaughter the Bioethics Committee for Veterinary Medicine of Italy (hereinafter CBV, as per the acronym in Italian) intends a process that is carried out following procedures and techniques aimed to reduce sensibly the sufferings and awareness of the animals, including using drugs and slaughter carried out at the farm. Substantially, animals could live for months, or years, a relatively comfortable life to then lose consciousness of events before the phase of slaughter begins.

The CBV emphasises the urgency of a realistic and impartial evaluation regarding the feasibility and legal compatibility of forms of *unconscious* slaughter, that is of butchery forms of animals that minimise negative emotions, stress and suffering, before and during the process. The progress of medical-veterinary and pharmacological knowledge has been such to make this potentially possible. According to the CBV, it is therefore necessary to define as quickly as possible the procedure, technologies (including the use of drugs), and legal rules that make a general *unconscious* slaughter practice in the near future.

The CBV, though aware of the level of ethical and cultural issues concerning the subject, and who's members express individually diverse dietary choices which remain such

notwithstanding the unanimous agreement on the present Document, feels the dutiful necessity of raising this matter.

The position of the CBV is not to be intermediary between those who sustain the need to abolish totally the use of animals for dietary purposes (such as the case of vegan choice) and those who on the contrary do not deem necessary to modify the current dietary habits that are mostly popular. It is neither the result of a mediation between far and incompatible visions. It is, rather, a new position and one that does not lack ambition. On the contrary, this can result as the most recommended choice in the current context of animal use for dietary purposes in the measure in which it confronts the problem in its effective dimensions and it aspires to produce immediate and possible changes for those animals destined to be slaughtered.

During the past decades, animal slaughter, even though oriented (rightly so) on sanitary aspects, that is hygienic safety and quality of the meats, has provided legal protection in favour of the animals related to the phases of transportation and stunning as well as regarding the structure and the ergonomics of physical facilities where the process takes place. However, the procedures of neutralisation of the perception of the animals of the events around them that will lead to the moment of death have not yet been taken into consideration.

During the same period in which the attention towards the condition of the animals has grown and in which this has reverberated in the legal rules that have become more precise and efficient, the practical effect has not resulted to be in favour of the animals compared to some decades ago. The extreme intensification, if not industrialisation of farmsteads and of all the production chain up to the consumption of the products, damages the animals, during the course of their life as well as during the moment of slaughter. All in all, it has to be admitted that we are in the paradox situation of animals in worse living conditions compared to the past and this notwithstanding the enhancement of institutional policies on animal welfare.

The CBV deems that the ambivalent situation between the sanitary system on one hand, the quantity of available (not excessive) and the price of the meats and, on the other hand (for those animals destined to be slaughtered), animal interests against suffering and the duty of human beings to take responsibility of such suffering, needs to be dealt with without delay, with the aim of modifying, for those animals intended for human consumption, the conditions of butchery and the phases that precede it.

Some solutions for a “good life” of the animal and for an *unconscious* slaughter are already available. A free-range or semi-free-range animal - and therefore one in more acceptable ethological conditions - can be stunned and slayed at the breeding place without being transported to the slaughterhouse (legal rules already accept emergency slaughter<sup>1</sup> and the use of a mobile slaughterhouse). Moreover, the butchery can be carried out in *unconscious* conditions obtained by the use of drugs that can be quickly assimilated and the residues of which are not dangerous for man. These drugs need to be studied and refined through a significant investment in scientific research. The above mentioned solutions such as the choice of reducing the damage at least in the final phases of the life of the animals could be applied even to hyper-intensive or industrial breeding farms, that the CBV considers however unnecessary.

It is possible though that the application of pharmaceutical strategies however could result in a potential risk, even though limited, for the health of consumers. Can the balance between animal welfare and human health allow the acceptance of such a risk? Is it ethically acceptable to put the human being under this marginal and known risk for the benefit of

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<sup>1</sup> Regulation (EC) No. 853/2004, Annex III, Chapter VI (emergency slaughter outside the slaughterhouse)

strongly decreasing animal suffering? Can ethic education be extended also to the nutrition of young children who are not able of expressing their valid consent for such a risk? And from a legal point of view, how would the matter be regulated?

According to the opinion of the CBV, *unconscious* slaughter, including those slaughters carried out on the farms, together with the improved conditions of breeding, could be an ethically sustainable result yet keeping in mind the previous questions that remain, at least partially, open. Those who eat meat will continue to do so, however with sensibly lower animal suffering and such to justify the compensational acceptance of a marginal risk by the human being. Those who do not eat meat for moral reasons, cannot but appreciate the improvement obtained and the increase of cultural awareness on animal suffering that could result from it. As far as minors are concerned, one can distinguish according to the development of skills and by the level of maturity reached, whether it is such to express and independent opinion regarding the acceptance of such a risk.

A bioethical approach of the *possible* seems more efficient to the CBV than a principle-based and absolute bioethical one. This is the approach with which the Committee has always faced the great moral questions regarding animals and their relation with human beings.

For the CBV it is therefore necessary and can be no longer postponed to confront the problem of animal derived products if not that of food in general, introducing some new elements of minimisation of suffering in an effective way and without the fear of introducing new elements in a context of ethic and cultural pluralism into the debate.

In view of all that has been presented and with the aim of obtaining the objectives above illustrated, the CBV:

1. Hopes that a public discussion about *unconscious* slaughter can be initiated and offers to be an active party for its promotion with the present document;
2. Asks research financing agencies, above all at European level, and the scientific community to economically support and to carry out the research on the biological, pharmaceutical and health aspects of *unconscious* animal slaughter obtained through the use of active pharmaceutical substances, without increasing the suffering of the animals involved in the research;
3. Moreover, it asks that research be carried out, in respect of the animals, to create procedures and techniques to handle the slaughter process in such a way as to minimise the suffering and consciousness of the animal;
4. It asks Italian and European political institutions to remove legal obstacles that make slaughter on the farm site difficult and asks that the complex legal issues regarding *unconscious* slaughter be examined;
5. Recommends that specific production lines be defined so as to make some initial possible realisation of *unconscious* slaughtering recognisable to the consumer (even through labelling or “quality branding”).