

## 42. Nothing else, mothers – conceptual and ethical perspectives on motherhood in pig farming

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### Abstract

The economic value of the multifunctional body of sows cannot be overestimated. The female body plays a key role in the production process in pig breeding and farming. Traditional farming reduces motherhood to reproduction, motherhood is valued with the parameters quantity and quality of healthy piglets in the modern farm system. But with the increasing critique of crate stalls in Europe and the new conditions sows are held under, a new norm of the ideal of porcine motherhood appeared in breeding standards. Additionally to healthy piglets nestbuilding, interaction with the piglets, careful walking and lying down, and friendly behaviour towards the farmer are mentioned as normative standards, sows should meet. In this contribution the changing concept and new standard of motherhood is analysed first. Because motherhood has to be understood as a 'thick ethical concept' with descriptive and normative aspect, we ask secondly, what role does motherhood play from a moral point of view, particularly in the context of animal ethics?

**Keywords:** pig farming, pig breeding, motherhood, animal ethics, animal welfare

### Introduction

Trust I seek and I find in you  
Every day for us something new  
Open mind for a different view  
And nothing else matters

(Hetfield and Ulrich, 1991)

'Female flesh is a powerful resource' (Penny, 2010: 1). This statement doesn't apply for the human sphere only, it is also true in the context of pig breeding and production. The multifunctional body of a sow plays a key role in animal farming. She alone has the ability to create and maintain a body, that can and will be consumed and/or have the potential to (re)produce further bodies. This ability makes female bodies also vulnerable to exploitation<sup>11</sup>. Traditional farming reduces motherhood to reproduction, motherhood is valued with the parameters quantity and quality of healthy piglets in the modern farm system. But with the increasing critique in Europe<sup>12</sup> and the new conditions sows are held, a new norm of the ideal of porcine motherhood appeared in breeding standards. The new advertisement of the Danish Genetics company claims to select 'a super sow that can handle its own piglets, produce more meat per sow per year, give birth to strong and robust piglets, and is easy to handle' (DanishGenetics, 2021). It reflects, that besides the numbers of piglets also the caring behaviour of the sow is aimed at. But what does motherhood mean within a highly economic context and why is it morally relevant?

<sup>11</sup> On the development of capitalism from the perspective of women and reproduction, see Federici, 2021 and further Radin, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> See also the European Citizens' Initiative 'End the Cage Age' (<https://www.endthecageage.eu/>) and the Communication from the Commission on the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) 'End the Cage Age' (European Commission, 2021)

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In the following contribution we will trace this current shift in motherhood concepts. In a first step the new concept is described. In a second step, we will put it in the context of animal ethics.

### The new concept of motherhood in pig farming

There is no consistent definition of the terms ‘motherhood’ and ‘maternity’, neither for human nor for animal. Also the distinction between the two seems to blur. While ‘Maternity’ frequently appears in scientific, medical and legal contexts, it often refers to the time period of (a woman) being pregnant and ending with the birth. ‘Motherhood’ in contrast is mostly used as qualities of being a mother or refers to the state of being a mother. Because motherhood also involves a normative dimension, we will distinguish between both terms and use them as just described: Motherhood refers to ‘thick ethical concept’ with descriptive and normative aspects. Maternity is used descriptively as time period starting with pregnancy and ending with birth. Unfortunately, the adjective ‘maternal’ is used in both ways in the discussion too. But context provides usually enough information to make clear how it is meant.

The idea of motherhood in farm animal husbandry goes beyond that of a *natural phenomenon*. Motherhood is measured and aligned with what potentially results from it: the milk, the eggs, the piglet. Farm animal motherhood is controlled and mostly artificially initiated and terminated. As one of the few animals in farm animal husbandry, the sow’s motherhood does not end when she has borne her young. Pig production focuses on breeding and fattening healthy and fit pigs as much as possible. The lactating sow is the primary source of nutrition and immunity for the first weeks of life.

At the same time, the sow becomes the greatest health risk for the piglets (Tölle, 2004: 1): Crushing by the dam is reported as the most common cause (60%) of death for suckling piglets (Vasdal *et al.*, 2011). This is not only a financial disaster; also from an ethical point of view the avoidable death of animals capable of suffering has to be condemned. To prevent this from happening, two methods are currently practised: The first and most common is the crate stall, which physically separates the sow from the piglets. The crate does, at once, prevent any movement of the sow, apart from standing up and lying down.<sup>13</sup> Where the other, alternative housing system is used, the sow either stays only the critical week after farrowing in the crate or has the opportunity for freer movement right from the start in housing systems such as the free farrowing pens. Here, the sow herself is to become the solution to the crushing problem. Certain behaviours such as ‘nest-building, interaction with the piglets, careful walking and lying down, and friendly behaviour towards the farmer’ (Tölle, 2004, Ocepek and Andersen, 2017) are intended to prevent crushing of the piglets and are therefore now targeted by many breeding programmes. As the conditions change, so do the normative standards for the sow: sensitivity, docility and carefulness now make a sow valuable. So-called ‘maternal behaviour’ is stated today by 60% of German pig farmers as the most important criterion for the selection of a breeding sow (Herrmann, 2020).

Breeding for ‘maternal behaviour’ is expected to have advantages for the animal: more movement for the sow and less risk for the young suckling piglet. At the same time, however, the demands on the sow are growing; for example, when she is supposed to react appropriately to piglet cries, but not to those cries caused by management measures by the farmer, such as castration (Tölle, 2004: 2f). The sow is meant to fulfil a motherhood ideal, but her actual needs before, during and after farrowing go beyond *more movement* and are not covered by the construct of a *super sow* only. This is morally problematic from several positions in animal ethics. But how should the new motherhood concept be assessed? What role does motherhood play from a moral point of view? In the next section we will put the new concept of motherhood into the context of animal ethics.

<sup>13</sup> The majority of sows in Europe are kept in this type of crate (e.g. Austria 95% Schlatzer and Lindenthal, 2018: 5).

## Motherhood and animal ethics

A brief overview on the canonical works in animal ethics reveals that no in-depth discussion on the topic 'animal motherhood' has taken place. Although the argument of loyalty and the related duties that may exist between a mother and her child is known among preference utilitarians (Hare, 1981: 134ff.), it hasn't found entry in Peter Singer's work on animals (e.g. Singer, 2011 [1979]). The argument of loyalty is raised as a counterargument against utilitarianism. It says that utilitarianism fails to recognize and adequately represent personal relationships in the utility calculation. It would be worthwhile to adapt this subject to the animal realm and analyse if it is relevant in this context too. Also, in the animal right tradition specific motherhood duties and possible conflicts between them are neglected (e.g. Korsgaard, 2018, Regan, 2004 [1983]). As just described above regarding utilitarianism, an inspiration to analyse, adapt and modify the subject of motherhood in the animal rights view, may be found in the rights literature on humans.

Even more interesting is the observation, that approaches such as the ethics of care tradition, the capabilities approach and the like, which recognize and consider relational duties as morally relevant, don't discuss motherhood deeply (e.g. Adams, 2013 [1990], Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011, Gruen, 2015, Midgley, 1984, Palmer, 2010). Although the mother animal, shaped as dairy cow, laying hen and also sow, occurs within examples for the domination over and the exploitation of animals in general (e.g. Adams, 1991), the concept and normative dimension of motherhood – what defines a good (animal) mother? – is neglected. This lies in sharp contrast to the human realm, where motherhood is subject of widespread discussions (e.g. Heti, 2018, Badinter, 2013). Using a distinction from Nel Noddings (1986) care ethics could use this research gap to reflect about several relations between 'the one-caring' (human, sow), and 'the cared-for' (sow, piglets).

Although motherhood isn't explicitly mentioned or discussed at length in animal ethics, we want to stress that especially relational approaches have the potential to acknowledge motherhood as a morally relevant feature. Although Nussbaum takes into account neither motherhood in general nor pig farming in particular, within her *Capabilities Approach* (2006) it is possible to make an argument about the importance of maternity and maternity as a special, temporal relation between a sow and her piglets. Among the ten capabilities, which according to Nussbaum define the minimal standard for a dignified existence and a just society, the capability 'affiliation' (nr. 7, Nussbaum, 2006: 398) is listed. In the case of motherhood one can derive the conclusion, that a mother sow has an entitlement to interact with her children and should have the opportunity to care for them. In fact her entitlement starts already before farrowing. Motherhood imposes additional conditions on a dignified life, including a retreat to build a nest during pregnancy. A soft base and sufficient nesting and burrowing material additionally functions as crushing prophylaxis after birth, that allows the piglets to crawl out from under the mother if given (cf. Röcklingsberg, 2001: 74).

In a more recent debate about moral emotions in animals Susana Monsó, Judith Benz-Schwarzburg and Annika Bremhorst (2013) argue that sympathy and its sensitivity to the morally relevant property of stress is a moral emotion. With reference to the capabilities approach, they say, '[i]f moral emotions akin to sympathy are indeed basic capabilities, this means that the individuals who possess them are entitled to lead lives in which the exercise of these capabilities remains possible for them' (Monsó *et al.*, 2013: 296). So to prevent a sow to engage in affiliative behaviour towards her piglets can be stated as harm, that should be avoided. The foregoing is also of moral relevance within Claire Palmer's relational approach (2010). The core of her approach is, that positive duties of humans towards animals are grounded on various distance and dependency relationships. This results for example in special duties towards domesticated animals, but not wild animals. Because of the dependency relationship of the domesticated sows and piglets, one could similarly argue for a special duty for farmers and care takers

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that arises before, during and after periods of motherhood. This could concern the following aspects: Provide space to retreat, nesting and burrowing material to build a nest or a special diet, that meets the increased requirements before, during and after the gestation period, such as the suckling period.

In a broader context, the new concept of motherhood raises also interesting questions about breeding of sows (Karg and Camenzind, 2022). Assuming that a mother should be given the opportunity to care for her piglets, current breeding practices should be challenged. From a caring perspective, it is incomprehensible that a sow would drop more piglets than she has teats to suckle. The capabilities approach and Palmer's relational approach would support the new breeding practice only, if the sow is actually able to carry out caring behaviour. Otherwise it would be only new source of injustice. Although in Nussbaum's and Palmer's case it is possible to formulate special duties before, during and after maternity, a precise answer what a good mother should be – in general or in the special case of sows – is not obvious. This means that an answer, if we should promote or prohibit new breeding trends cannot be given within their normative frameworks.

## Summary and outlook

The initial situation was the observation, that the change of housing conditions for sows is accompanied by a change of the concept of motherhood. The farm animals whose motherhood benefits humans often spend most of their lives either preparing for birth, actually giving birth or lactating postpartum. Within these states, which differ significantly from those of fattening pig or cattle, an animal's interests and needs also change. The example of the sow shows that the experiences of motherhood are massively curtailed by restricted movement and mechanised processes in most pig farming and the sow cannot act out natural behaviours such as building a nest or interacting with her piglets. Although alternative housing systems offer a different view of pig farming, from an ethical point of view it is important to note, that also within these new conditions not only the economic benefits should count, but also the interests of the sow matters. This may lead us to rethink certain breeding standards.

Additionally a literature review showed, that the concept of motherhood in general, and motherhood in pig farming in particular has not yet been explored deeply with various approaches in animal ethics, even within relational approaches. However, Nussbaum and Palmer's approaches provide a good foundation for grasping the responsibility that surrounds keeping and handling a mother animal. In this contribution the focus layed on pig farming only. It is assumed that the concept of motherhood will vary among other mammalia or aves species. Supplementary to the concept of motherhood, it would also be interesting, to adapt similar questions to the concept of fatherhood in animals. Here we want to encourage to apply and adapt our thoughts to other animal groups.

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