

Slaughterhouses: The Hypocrisy Death Penalty Abolitionists Must Face at the Dinner Table

Jeff Hood

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SLAUGHTERHOUSES: THE HYPOCRISY DEATH PENALTY
ABOLITIONISTS MUST FACE AT THE DINNER TABLE

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Written by Jeff Hood.

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*For all who cannot speak for themselves...the condemned and the
creature alike.*

Introduction: Two Rooms, One Morning

Somewhere in America, on the morning of an execution, a man is eating his last meal. The tray comes through a slot in the door. The guard who delivered it did not make eye contact. The condemned man eats alone. The lights in this part of the building never change, so there is no way to tell from the quality of light that this morning is different. The cell is the same. The silence is the same. Only he knows that in a few hours he will be moved to a room he has never entered but has imagined, in the particular way the condemned imagine such things, for years.

Somewhere else in America, at this same hour, a line of animals is moving toward a room they can smell before they enter it. They have been here overnight. The ones at the front press backward. The ones behind have nowhere to go. A worker moves them forward with a prod. He is wearing earplugs. He has learned to wear earplugs. The sound does not become ordinary. The earplugs help.

The condemned man will be strapped to a table. Witnesses will watch through glass. Someone behind a wall he cannot see will administer the chemicals. The procedure has been refined over decades. It is meant to look like medicine. It is meant to look like sleep. It is meant, above all, to look like something other than what it is.

The animal will be stunned, shackled, hoisted, cut. The line will continue. What enters the building as a living creature will exit as a product. The process has been refined over decades. It is meant to look like industry. It is meant to look like agriculture. It is meant, above all, to look like something other than what it is.

Both rooms are killing rooms. We have decided to call only one of them that.

By the time the condemned man's chaplain finishes praying with him, thousands of animals will be dead in that facility. By the time the witnesses take their seats behind the glass, the number will be higher. By the time the death certificate is signed, the slaughterhouse will have killed more living creatures than there are people in the county where it operates. Both facilities will have generated paperwork. Both will have followed procedure. Both will have done what they were built to do.

This book is written for the person who finds the first of these scenes morally intolerable and has not yet sat with the second.

* * *

We who oppose the death penalty already know how to do what this book asks. We have already learned to look at something the culture has decided we do not need to look at. We have insisted that a human being inside a system designed to process them toward death is still a human being...still a subject...still a person whose suffering is not canceled by the institution's paperwork.

We did that work in the face of people who told us it was misplaced. Who told us the condemned had forfeited our concern. We did it anyway, because the principles that formed us required it. Life has sanctity. Legal authorization is not moral authorization. Institutional procedure does not transform killing into justice.

We followed the moral argument where it led. This book asks us to follow it a little further.

The condemned man and the animal in the chute are not morally identical. This book does not argue otherwise. What it argues is that the same moral logic we have spent years applying to the execution chamber applies with genuine force to the slaughterhouse. That the eyes which learned to see through the glass of the witness room can see through the

walls of the facility two hundred miles away, where the line is running right now, where it will run tomorrow, where it has been running every day of our adult lives while we fought to end one form of sanctioned killing and funded another.

That is the confrontation this book offers. Not an accusation. A mirror.

We begin where every honest argument must begin. With what is actually happening, in both rooms, at this hour.

PART I

Understanding Institutionalized Killing

Chapter 1: Inside the Death House

The Room

The execution chamber is a small room. Painted a neutral color. The table in the center is padded, covered in vinyl, bolted to the floor. The straps are wide and multiple: across the chest, the wrists, the thighs, the ankles. The table tilts slightly so that witnesses can see the condemned person's face through the glass.

Behind the glass, chairs are arranged in rows. The victim's family sits on one side. The condemned person's family, if they have come, sits on the other. Nobody speaks above a whisper. Some people cry before anything has happened. Some do not cry at all and find later that this surprises them.

The room where the chemicals are administered is sometimes hidden behind another wall entirely, connected only by tubing through a small hole. This is by design. The person who presses the plunger should not have to see the face of the person they are killing. The system distributes the act of killing across as many hands as possible so that no single person is required to experience it as their own.

And so no one is innocent. And the killing continues.

The condemned person has been offered a last meal, a shower, a change of clothes. These gestures have been carefully designed over decades to suggest that the institution takes seriously the weight of what it is about to do. They do not change what it is about to do.

They are the form of moral seriousness in the absence of its substance.

The warden reads the death warrant aloud. The condemned person is asked if they have a final statement. Some speak at length. Some say

nothing. Some said everything they needed to say years ago, in appeals that failed, in letters that went unanswered. The warden gives a signal. The chemicals flow.

This is killing. We call it execution. The word does not change what it is.

A History of the State Deciding Who Dies

Capital punishment does not exist outside history. It is one of history's products and carries in its current American form the marks of every culture that has practiced it before us.

From the earliest organized societies, execution served functions that were as much symbolic as practical. To kill someone on behalf of the community was not merely to remove a threat. It was to make a statement about power: who held it, who was subject to it, what the community was prepared to do to maintain its arrangements. The oldest legal codes reveal something we should not forget: the wealthy could often purchase their way out of death sentences applied with mechanical regularity to the poor. This asymmetry is not an accident of ancient legal systems.

It is their constitutive logic. And it is ours.

Roman law distinguished between citizens and non-citizens not merely in whether one might be executed but how. Citizens could not be crucified. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves and subject peoples. The method of killing was itself a statement about who counted. The cross said: you are not a person of account. Your suffering is not a cost that power will recognize.

The United States has maintained capital punishment into the twenty-first century while virtually every comparable democracy has abandoned it. This demands honest self-examination. America's

particular history...of racial domination, of punitive individualism, of the political exploitation of crime and fear...has made it unusually resistant to the moral argument the rest of the democratic world has found compelling.

We know why. We have always known why.

The Certainty That Cannot Be Had

Consider what we are claiming when we execute a person. Not merely that the evidence met the legal standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt. We are claiming something stronger: that we are certain enough in our judgment that no subsequent evidence could change what we ought to have done. That our investigation was thorough, our witnesses credible, our forensic methods sound, our prosecutors honest, our defense adequate, our jury unbiased.

We are claiming the whole system worked. We cannot make that claim.

Hundreds of people condemned to death have been subsequently exonerated. Each exoneration represents a case in which the system failed: witnesses lied, forensic evidence was fabricated or misread, confessions were coerced, prosecutors suppressed exculpatory material, defense attorneys were inadequate, racial bias distorted the verdict. These are not exotic failures.

They are the ordinary failures of an ordinary human institution. We execute people anyway.

If the system produces wrongful convictions in capital cases and we execute people on the basis of those convictions, we will execute innocent people. Not might. Will. The wrongfully imprisoned can be released. The wrongfully executed are beyond any remedy we can offer.

Every other consequence of institutional failure is in principle revisable. Death forecloses revision absolutely.

We know this. We have always known this. And the executions continue.

Race, Wealth and the Geography of Death Row

The death penalty, as actually practiced, is not a punishment for murder. It is a punishment for being poor and Black and accused of murder.

The most revealing racial pattern is this: the race not of the defendant but of the victim. A homicide involving a white victim is dramatically more likely to result in a death sentence than one involving a Black victim. The legal system assigns different values to human lives based on race. It treats the death of a white person as a more serious harm. This finding is among the most robust in the entire literature on criminal justice.

The system does not malfunction when it produces these results. This is the system functioning.

Capital defendants with skilled legal representation rarely receive the death sentence. Those without...the vast majority...receive overworked public defenders with minimal investigative resources. The outcome of a capital trial is, in substantial measure, a function of the resources available to the defense. Resources are distributed by wealth. Wealth is distributed by race and class.

We know this. We oppose the death penalty because we know this. We will not pretend we do not also know what follows.

What the System Does to Everyone Inside It

A corrections officer who participated in executions described what it was like to go home afterward. You drive. You don't know where you're

going. You end up somewhere and you sit in the car and you think: I just killed somebody. And nobody wants to talk about that. So you don't. And it stays.

The psychological literature documents a consistent pattern in those who carry out executions: nightmares, intrusive memories, depression, damaged relationships, a haunted sense of complicity in something that resists categorization. These are symptoms of moral injury. The elaborate ritual of execution...the careful procedure, the medical vocabulary, the attempt to make the killing resemble treatment...none of it convinces the people closest to it that what they are doing is a neutral bureaucratic function.

Their moral psychology refuses the lie. Their suffering is testimony.

A society that normalizes killing trains itself in a particular moral sensibility. It trains itself to believe that some people are beyond mercy, that the proper response to the worst human failures is to mirror them with institutionalized violence, that the circle of moral concern can legitimately exclude those whose actions have placed them outside it.

This training does not stay inside the execution chamber. It never has.

Chapter 2: Inside the Slaughterhouse

The Other Room

The kill floor of an industrial slaughterhouse is also a room built for killing. The ceiling is high to accommodate the overhead rail system: the hooks, the chains, the moving line that carries what enters as an animal and exits as a carcass, then a cut, then a product.

The workers wear protective gear: aprons, boots, earplugs. They have been trained in specific tasks...the stun, the shackle, the stick, the cut...and they perform those tasks in sequence, for hours, for a wage that reflects how invisible this work is to the people who benefit from it.

The animal enters the kill chute from the holding pen. It has been here overnight. It can smell the blood. Its behavior in the final approach to slaughter is documented in the scientific literature: elevated cortisol, increased heart rate, attempts to reverse direction, vocalizations. These are the physiological markers of fear.

The animal is experiencing something. We know what it is experiencing. We have chosen not to let that knowledge reach us at the table.

The stun is meant to render the animal unconscious before the kill. When it works correctly, the animal does not experience the moment of death. When it does not work correctly...and in a facility killing hundreds of animals per hour, the rate of imperfect stunning is not trivial...the animal is shackled and hoisted and cut while still capable of experiencing what is being done to it.

This is not a rare failure of an otherwise humane system. This is the system.

The Animals

Broiler chickens are bred to grow so rapidly that their skeletal systems frequently cannot support their own weight. Lameness is endemic. Cardiac failure is common. They spend their lives in windowless sheds housing thousands of birds, on floors of accumulated waste that generates ammonia levels high enough to chemically burn the tissue of any bird that rests too long against it. They are killed in the first weeks of a life that could last years.

Whether they experience their circumstances as uncomfortable is a question the system's design has never been required to ask.

Pigs are, by most measures of animal cognition, more intelligent than dogs. They solve problems, recognize individuals, form social bonds and display emotional states that are legible to researchers and to anyone who has spent time with them. Breeding sows are confined in gestation crates...metal enclosures so small the animal cannot turn around...for most of their adult lives. The behavioral response of a cognitively complex social animal to total immobility and sensory deprivation is exactly what the animal welfare literature predicts: stereotypic repetitive movements, immune suppression, elevated stress hormones.

These are not the findings of activists. They are mainstream science. We fund this science with every purchase.

The Workers, the Communities, the Damage

The workers inside industrial slaughterhouses are among the most economically vulnerable people in this country. Many are undocumented immigrants. Injury rates in meatpacking and poultry processing are among the highest of any industry. The work is fast, repetitive, cold and conducted with sharp instruments at speeds that make careful attention to safety genuinely difficult.

The psychological toll is documented and serious. Elevated rates of PTSD, depression, substance abuse and domestic violence among slaughterhouse workers. The same pattern found in soldiers who have killed in combat. The same pattern found in executioners. Human beings are not built to kill at industrial scale and the institutions that require them to do so have generally not provided the support structures that would allow them to process what they are doing.

The institutions depend, instead, on the workers finding ways not to think about it. Some find those ways. Many do not.

The communities surrounding large animal agriculture operations bear their own costs: air and water contamination, elevated rates of respiratory disease, the gradual degradation of living near a place that smells of industrial death. These communities are disproportionately poor, disproportionately Black and Hispanic and disproportionately without the political resources that more affluent communities routinely deploy to protect themselves.

The geography of animal agriculture overlaps with uncomfortable precision with the geography of disposable people.

The Architecture of Not Knowing

Ag-gag laws...legislation criminalizing the undercover documentation of conditions inside agricultural facilities...have been passed in multiple states. Investigators who have entered these facilities to document conditions have been prosecuted. A prison can be inspected. A hospital can be investigated. A slaughterhouse, in most jurisdictions, is legally protected from the scrutiny that could make its operations visible to the people who fund them three times a day.

We do not eat cow. We eat beef. We do not eat pig. We eat pork. We do not eat calf. We eat veal. These substitutions are not accidents of

etymology. They are centuries of deliberate cultural work. The animal named as an animal makes a moral claim. The product named as a product does not.

The renaming is the concealment. The concealment is the system's condition of survival.

The industry's interest in concealment rests on an unstated recognition: if the public could see clearly what the food system requires, a significant portion would object.

We know this. The industry knows we know this. That is why the walls are high.

Chapter 3: The Same Logic in Two Rooms

A Direct Comparison

Here is what the execution chamber and the slaughterhouse have in common.

Both are rooms where killing happens that the broader society has decided it does not need to witness. Both are insulated from public view by physical distance, institutional design and...where necessary...explicit legal protection. Both produce death at the end of a process so thoroughly routinized that those who administer it can experience their individual roles as something other than killing. Both require workers to perform, as a routine occupational function, an act that their own moral psychology recognizes as significant. Both produce in those workers the characteristic damage of people who have been required to do something they cannot fully make peace with. Both are described by the institutions that maintain them in language carefully designed to make what is happening seem orderly, necessary and just.

Both exist because the people who benefit from them have arranged things so that the cost is paid by someone else, in a room they will never enter.

Language: The Grammar of Sanctioned Killing

The execution chamber calls what it does an execution. Not a killing. A legal act. A sentence being carried out. The word implies prior wrongdoing and authorized response. It implies the opposite of arbitrary violence. The word does all of this work before a single argument is made.

The slaughterhouse calls what it does processing. The animals are processed. Workers process units. The word implies industrial

production...the transformation of raw material into finished goods. It implies the opposite of violence. It implies there is no victim...only an input and an output.

Both words are lies of the same kind. Both make the killing describable without making it visible.

We have spent years insisting that “execution” means killing, that legal language does not launder moral reality, that critical capacity transfers directly. “Processing” also means killing. The word is also a lie. The same refusal of euphemism that built our movement must be brought to bear on the slaughterhouse.

The room is the same. The language is the same. The refusal must be the same.

Procedure: How Bureaucracy Lauanders Violence

The execution does not happen all at once. The verdict, the sentencing, the appeals, the denial of clemency, the scheduling of the date, the death watch, the final hours, the warrant read aloud, the signal, the chemicals. Each stage performed by different people. Each person experiencing their role as limited, as procedurally defined, as insulated from the full weight of what they are collectively performing.

The slaughter does not happen all at once either. The breeding, the feeding, the transport, the holding pen, the kill chute, the stun, the shackle, the stick, the line. Each step performed by different workers. Each worker performing their specific task. The animal's death dissolved into a sequence of occupational functions that none of them, individually, is required to experience as killing.

The system distributes responsibility so widely that no one is required to experience the act as their own. And so no one is innocent. And the killing continues.

We who oppose the death penalty already insist that distributed responsibility is still responsibility...that the system's diffusion of moral weight does not eliminate the moral weight. That the consumer who purchases the product is not merely a passive beneficiary of what the supply chain does. They are the demand that drives the supply chain.

We already know this argument. We have made this argument. It applies to us.

The Hierarchy of Lives

The execution chamber operates on a premise: this person's life is worth less than the community's sense of justice. The condemned has been placed on the wrong side of the line that separates those whose lives are protected from those whose lives may be taken.

The slaughterhouse operates on a structurally identical premise: these animals' lives are worth less than human gustatory preference. They have been placed, by the category of "food animal," on the wrong side of the line.

Both premises establish a hierarchy of lives. Both use that hierarchy to authorize killing. We oppose one. We fund the other.

Both hierarchies have been constructed to serve the interests of those with power over those without it. The hierarchy that places condemned persons outside full moral protection has served systems of racial and economic domination, applied most consistently to those at the bottom of every other social hierarchy. The hierarchy that places animal lives below human lives serves industries built around the exploitation of

animal bodies. Neither hierarchy is natural. Neither is inevitable. Both require our continued consent to survive.

We have withdrawn our consent from one. We have not withdrawn it from the other. Not yet.

We Already Know

We who have worked against the death penalty have already developed every moral capacity this argument requires. We have already learned to see past the institutional suppression of moral reality. We have already insisted that legal categories do not determine moral categories. We have already refused the comfort of distance. We have already said: the being inside the system is more than the system has decided to acknowledge.

We have paid a real cost for knowing these things. We have stood in parking lots at midnight. We have written letters to people whose names most of America would not recognize. We have sat in courtrooms and said, over and over, in every available forum: look at what is happening in that room.

This book asks us to look at the other room.

We already know how.

PART II

Ethical and Theological Foundations

Chapter 4: The Sanctity of Life...What It Actually Means

The Question Both Rooms Raise

The condemned man on the table and the animal in the chute raise the same foundational question. We have arranged things so that we ask it in only one of the two cases: what makes a life valuable and who gets to decide when that value has been forfeited?

The execution chamber gives one answer: the state, acting through its legal procedures, can determine that a specific human life has been forfeited through specific wrongful acts and can authorize the taking of that life as a legitimate exercise of justice. The slaughterhouse gives another answer: human beings, acting through their market preferences, can determine that all animal lives are available to be taken for the purpose of food, at whatever scale and under whatever conditions the market makes profitable.

Both answers are claims about the nature of life's value. Neither has earned the certainty with which it is held.

Three Accounts of Why Life Matters

Philosophy has approached the question of what makes life valuable from three directions.

The first grounds the value of life in subjective experience: in having a point of view, experiencing wellbeing and suffering, pursuing ends and caring about outcomes. What makes a life valuable is that it matters to the one living it. Its continuation or destruction makes a difference to a being for whom things can go better or worse.

The condemned man has a point of view. He experiences his existence as his own. He has interests...in seeing his family again, in the appeal still pending, in the morning coffee that has been part of his routine for a decade. We who oppose the death penalty know this. It is why we fight.

The animal in the gestation crate also has a point of view. The research is extensive and not seriously contested. We have chosen not to let this knowledge govern our choices.

The second account grounds the value of life in deprivation: death is bad because it takes away all the future goods the life would have contained...experiences, relationships, moments of pleasure, the continuation of whatever was in progress. Death cuts a life short. It destroys possibilities.

The condemned man, executed in the middle of his life, is deprived of potentially decades of existence. The broiler chicken, killed in the first weeks of a life that could last years, is also deprived. These are deprivations of different magnitudes. But a difference of magnitude is not a difference in kind.

Both are genuine deprivations. Both involve the destruction of something real.

The third account grounds the value of life in specific capacities: rationality, moral agency, biographical selfhood. This account faces a problem it cannot resolve. If these capacities ground full moral status, then the principle at work is not species membership but the possession of those capacities. Not all humans possess them fully. Infants do not. People with severe cognitive disabilities may not. If species membership then overrides the cognitive criterion, the argument is circular.

We cannot have it both ways. Either the argument holds everywhere or it holds nowhere.

The God Who Was There Before the Hierarchy

The theological traditions that have most deeply shaped our opposition to capital punishment do not ground the value of life in human hierarchy. They ground it in something prior to human judgment entirely.

The creation narratives of Genesis do not present the world as existing for human benefit. They present it as existing for the pleasure of God, who declares each category of creature good before human beings appear. The goodness of creation is prior to human presence and independent of human use. The Psalms are full of creatures praising God simply by being what they are. The divine speeches in Job present the wild animals as objects of God's delight and care, entirely independent of their usefulness to people.

The world was declared good before we arrived to rank it. We do not have the authority we have assumed.

The Islamic concept of khalifa...stewardship...grounds the human relationship to creation in fiduciary responsibility. A steward who damages the property in their care has violated their duty. The animals in the factory farm, suffering in conditions that bear no resemblance to any concept of responsible care, are not being tended by stewards taking their responsibilities seriously.

They are being consumed by beneficiaries who have confused stewardship with ownership. We are those beneficiaries.

The doctrine of the imago Dei...that human beings are made in the image of God...has been the theological cornerstone of arguments for human dignity and against capital punishment. Its meaning has been consistently misread. The Hebrew word for "dominion" in Genesis 1:28 is also used to describe the responsibility of a shepherd over a flock. The

companion text in Genesis 2 places human beings in the garden to serve and guard it. The image of God in human beings is not a license for domination.

It is a calling to the kind of care that God exercises over creation. We have not answered that calling.

The Cross and the Chute

The Christian tradition's most theologically serious statement about state violence is the crucifixion.

Jesus of Nazareth was killed by the state in a procedure that was legal, authorized, procedurally regular and administered by officials performing their duties within an established system of law. The people who killed him were not acting outside the law. They were administering it. The execution was, from the perspective of the Roman state, a legitimate exercise of the power to maintain order.

It was also the most profound moral catastrophe imaginable. Legal authorization and moral authorization are not the same thing. We know this. The cross is why we know this.

The cross does not merely tell us that this particular execution was wrong. It exposes the logic of all sanctioned killing: the logic that legal procedure confers moral justification, that the community's interest in order is sufficient to override the dignity of the individual condemned by that order. This is precisely the logic our movement challenges in the execution chamber.

It is the same logic, in the same register, that the slaughterhouse depends upon. The cross speaks to both rooms.

The original human diet in Genesis is plant-based. The vision of Isaiah is a peaceable kingdom in which violence between creatures ceases.

Between these two poles, the tradition is not moving toward the normalization of killing. It is moving toward its overcoming. The death penalty and the slaughterhouse both participate in what the tradition calls the fallen order.

The call of the tradition is not to accept this order as permanent. It is to work toward its transformation. That work begins at the dinner table and ends at the chamber. Or it does not begin at all.

Chapter 5: Compassion...What It Demands and Where It Ends

The Feeling That Is Also an Argument

Compassion is not merely a feeling. When we sit across from a man on death row and listen to his story, something happens that is simultaneously emotional and cognitive: we experience distress at his suffering and we recognize that distress as a moral signal...as the indication that something is wrong, that this person's situation constitutes a claim on our attention and action.

The feeling and the recognition are not separable. The compassion is how the moral claim registers.

The question this raises is simple and uncomfortable: why does this moral perception stop at the species boundary?

The animal in the gestation crate is suffering. The suffering is real, documented and measurable. The animal's behavioral and physiological responses to total confinement are exactly what the science predicts. The suffering constitutes a claim.

We already know what to do when suffering constitutes a claim. We have built our lives around doing it. The question is whether we will do it here.

The Same Walls, the Same Purpose

We who oppose the death penalty have learned to see through walls. Not merely physical walls...the linguistic walls, the institutional walls, the social narrative walls. We have learned to see that a human being inside a system designed to make their humanity invisible is still a human being. We have refused the cultural permission not to see.

The walls of the slaughterhouse are built the same way, from the same materials, for the same purpose. The language transforms living creatures into units of production. The institutional process moves them through a sequence of stages as thoroughly rationalized as any prison procedure. The social narrative tells the broader community it does not need to think about what is happening inside.

We have already learned to see through this kind of wall. The decision to use that skill here is ours to make.

Nonviolence: What We Actually Believe

The commitment to nonviolence...to refusing participation in harm to sentient beings...is not an absolute rule. It is a strong presumption: a default disposition that requires serious justification to override, that places the burden of justification squarely on those who would harm rather than those who would protect.

Applied to the execution chamber, this presumption generates our position: the state's power to take human life requires the most serious justification and a system that is demonstrably fallible, racially biased and economically conditioned cannot provide it.

The killing fails the test. Applied to the slaughterhouse, the killing also fails the test. The justification offered is human dietary preference. This is not a justification of the relevant kind.

In the execution chamber, we would not accept "the community finds the condemned person's continued existence disturbing" as sufficient justification for lethal force. The logic that refuses this justification in one room and accepts its equivalent in the other is not a principled logic.

It is a double standard in search of a principle it does not have. We recognize double standards. We oppose double standards. We are living inside one.

What We Become Through What We Do

The virtue ethics tradition makes an observation about moral character that bears directly on the connection between these two commitments: the habits of moral attention cultivated in one domain of life generalize into others. The capacity for compassion is not diluted by extension. It is deepened by it. The moral muscle exercised in attending to the suffering of the condemned is the same muscle required to attend to the suffering of the animal.

Using it in one context makes it stronger in the other. Refusing to use it in one context weakens it in the other.

The person who has trained themselves to consume the products of industrial animal agriculture without moral distress has trained themselves in a general capacity for moral inattention that does not stay confined to the dinner table. The same capacity that allows a person to fund institutionalized animal killing without examination is the capacity that, in another context, allows a person to support institutional violence without examining what they are supporting.

We know what that capacity produces. We have spent our lives fighting what it produces. We cannot cultivate it in one room and oppose it in the other.

Chapter 6: Justice...What Consistency Actually Demands

The Standard We Have Already Set

We who oppose the death penalty have already established a standard. We have already said: the fact that an institution kills in an orderly, legal, procedurally regular way does not mean the killing is just. We have already said: the fact that a hierarchy of moral status has been constructed to place certain beings outside the circle of full moral protection does not make that hierarchy legitimate. We have already said: the interests of the powerful are not sufficient justification for the violent suppression of the interests of the powerless.

These are arguments we have made about the execution chamber. They are also arguments about the slaughterhouse. We made them. We own them. They reach further than we have let them reach.

Like Cases, Treated Alike

The formal core of justice...the principle stable across virtually every philosophical tradition that has engaged with the concept...is that like cases must be treated alike. If the suffering of a being is morally significant in some cases, it is morally significant in all cases where the relevant features are the same. If the destruction of a life requires serious justification in some cases, it requires serious justification wherever the morally relevant features recur.

We are moved by the suffering of a human being on death row. We are not moved by the suffering of a pig in a gestation crate. We treat these as different moral categories. The question is whether we can justify that difference...whether we can identify a morally relevant distinction

sufficient to explain why one demands our opposition and the other demands nothing at all.

We cannot. We have tried. The distinction does not hold.

Retribution, and Why It Fails in Both Rooms

The strongest argument for capital punishment is retributive: justice itself requires that those who take innocent life forfeit their own. This argument has genuine content. Wrongdoing creates moral imbalance. Serious wrongs call for serious consequences. These are real moral intuitions and they deserve engagement.

But the retributive argument fails in three ways we already know. First, no human system of justice can provide the certainty of guilt that retributive theory requires. The system demonstrably convicts innocent people. Therefore, the system demonstrably forfeits innocent lives. Second, legal authorization is not moral authorization. The cross demonstrates this. Third...and this is the dimension we have perhaps thought less about...retributivism treats suffering as the currency of moral reckoning. Once accepted, that logic does not confine itself to the execution chamber.

A retributive framework generates a calculus of when killing is proportionate. That calculus is available to justify the slaughterhouse as readily as the chamber. If we oppose retribution, we oppose it everywhere.

We who argue for restorative justice...who insist that justice means restoration and not retribution, healing and not symmetrical harm...have committed ourselves to a position deeply incompatible with the industrial food system. The restorative question is: what harm has been done and how can it be addressed? Applied to the food system, the answer begins at the dinner table.

We already know what it means to follow an argument to a place we did not plan to go. This is that place.

The Double Standard and Its Source

The double standard that treats the condemned man's suffering as morally significant and the animal's suffering as morally negligible does not arise from careful reasoning. It arises from cultural formation...from the fact that the culture in which we were formed had already decided, before we arrived, that animal suffering was in a different moral category and that this decision did not require defense.

We know what this feels like from the other side. We know what it is like to hold a moral conviction that the surrounding culture has not ratified. We know that the culture's failure to ratify a moral conviction is not evidence that the conviction is wrong.

We know this because it is how we learned to oppose capital punishment. The same epistemology applies here. We must apply it.

The Vision We Say We Hold

The abolitionist case for restorative justice rests on a vision: that the proper response to wrongdoing is not the imposition of symmetrical harm but the repair of what has been broken. The Hebrew concept of shalom...peace, wholeness, the right ordering of relationships...is restorative rather than retributive. It points toward a world in which harm is addressed by healing rather than by the addition of more harm.

The vision of Isaiah, in which the wolf lies down with the lamb, in which violence between creatures ceases, is the same vision in a different register: a world in which no creature is defined by its availability to be killed for the benefit of another. This is the vision we invoke when we

oppose capital punishment. It is not a vision that stops at the species boundary.

If we mean the vision, it reaches both rooms. If it does not reach both rooms, we do not yet fully mean it.

PART III

Living the Mandate

Chapter 7: Vegetarianism as Moral Practice

What the Dinner Table Is

The dinner table is not a neutral space. Three times a day, we embody our moral commitments...or we do not. What is on the plate is not merely food. It is the visible trace of a set of choices about which lives count, which suffering is acknowledged, which killing is funded.

We who have stood outside a prison on an execution night, who have held a candle and said that what is happening inside that building is wrong...we have already declared, in the most public and costly way available to us, that our moral convictions govern our lives. This book asks whether those convictions govern the morning. Whether they reach the kitchen. Whether we who would not consent to an execution will consent, three times a day, to fund a parallel system of institutionalized killing that runs on a larger scale, in greater secrecy, with less public debate.

This is not a rhetorical question. It is the question our own principles pose to us.

The Journey Is the Same Journey

We did not arrive at opposition to the death penalty fully formed. We came to it. Perhaps through a particular case...a name, a face, a story that made the abstraction into a specific human being whose death was not abstract at all. Perhaps through an argument we followed until it arrived somewhere we had not expected. Perhaps through sitting with someone on death row and understanding, in a way no argument could fully produce, that the person in front of us was a person.

The moral journey toward vegetarianism works the same way. It comes from contact...with the reality of what the food system does, with the specific animals whose lives it involves, with the workers who carry out its operations, with the communities that bear its costs. It comes from following an argument until it arrives somewhere unexpected. It comes from allowing principles already held to reach further than they have previously been applied.

We already know how to make this journey. We have made it before. The path is familiar. The destination is not.

The Spiritual Discipline of the Table

Across the religious traditions that have most deeply shaped our opposition to capital punishment, the act of eating is a moral and spiritual practice, not merely a biological function. The food laws of the Hebrew tradition served as a discipline of attention...a way of ensuring that even the most ordinary acts of daily life were performed with intentionality and moral awareness. You were not simply eating. You were inhabiting a framework of meaning.

The table can be a site of moral transformation. What is transformed at the table does not stay at the table.

We who bring unflinching attention to the courtroom can bring unflinching attention to the kitchen. We who ask of the death penalty...who authorized this? whose suffering does it require? what is concealed from me that I ought to see?...can ask the same questions of our food. The table that has been examined is a different table. The person who eats at it becomes, over time, a different person.

This is the ordinary work of becoming more consistent with what we believe. We have been doing this work in one domain for years. It continues here.

How Choosing Vegetarianism Ends the Death Penalty

The Concrete Claim

The widespread adoption of vegetarianism on moral grounds would, through identifiable and traceable pathways, bring about the end of capital punishment in the United States. Not as a distant theoretical possibility. As a predictable consequence of the moral, psychological, political and cultural transformations that a genuine mass shift toward plant-based living would set in motion.

The pathways are ordinary. They operate through normal mechanisms of social change: the formation of moral character, the shifting of cultural norms, the reorientation of political coalitions, the transformation of economic interests, and the gradual expansion of the moral imagination of an entire society. None is sufficient alone. Together, they constitute a causal case.

This is not metaphor. This is mechanism. We need to understand both.

First: The Normalization of Killing

In the hours surrounding an execution, in facilities across the country designed to make their operations invisible, thousands of animals are dying. This is the moral background of the society in which the death penalty debate takes place. A society that has already accepted, as a basic condition of daily life, the routine institutional killing of sentient beings on a scale that dwarfs all other forms of human-caused death combined. It has accepted this killing so thoroughly that most people never think of it as killing at all.

When killing is the background, killing becomes easier to justify everywhere. The first normalization prepares the ground for the second.

A culture that genuinely refuses this normalization...that has decided, at scale, that convenience and pleasure do not justify the institutional killing they require...has removed a significant piece of the moral infrastructure that the death penalty depends on. It has insisted that killing requires justification even when it is routine, even when it is profitable, even when the beings killed are defined by the system as appropriate objects of lethal force.

That insistence, applied to the death chamber, is abolitionism. It is the same insistence.

Second: Language and the Refusal of Euphemism

The execution chamber and the slaughterhouse share a linguistic system. In the death chamber: execution, not killing. Capital punishment, not state violence. Carrying out a sentence, not taking a life. In the slaughterhouse: processing, not killing. Harvesting, not slaughter. A processing plant, not a killing facility. Beef, not cow. Pork, not pig.

Both words are doing the same work. Both are lies told by institutions that cannot survive honest language about what they do.

We who oppose the death penalty have already developed the critical capacity to see through this linguistic system in the domain of criminal justice. We insist that “execution” means killing. That same capacity transfers directly. “Processing” also means killing. The word is also a lie. A society that has developed this linguistic resistance across both domains is a society that has made the moral reality of both institutions visible.

Institutions that cannot survive moral visibility cannot survive. They depend on the looking away. We will not look away.

Third: Procedure and the Refusal of Its Authority

Both the execution chamber and the slaughterhouse have developed elaborate procedural architectures whose function is to transform the act of killing into a series of individually unobjectionable steps...to dissolve the moral weight of the killing into the administrative logic of the process. In the execution chamber: the verdict, the appeals, the scheduling, the warrant read aloud, the signal, the chemicals. In the slaughterhouse: the breeding, the feeding, the transport, the holding pen, the kill chute, the stun, the stick, the line.

The system distributes responsibility so widely that no one is required to bear the full weight of it. This is the mechanism that makes both systems possible. And so no one is innocent. And the killing continues.

We have already learned to refuse the procedural authority of the execution chamber...to insist that the orderly administration of lethal chemicals is still the killing of a human being, that legal authorization is not moral authorization. That same refusal, brought to bear on the slaughterhouse, produces the same conclusion: the efficient processing of animals is still the killing of sentient beings. Institutional regularity does not transform a moral problem into a logistical one.

The room is the same. The refusal must be the same.

Fourth: The Moral Imagination, Expanded

We who have genuinely reckoned with the suffering inside a factory farm...who have allowed ourselves to see what happens in the gestation crate, in the windowless shed, in the kill chute...have performed a specific kind of moral work. We have exercised the capacity to extend moral concern beyond the circle of beings socially recognized as mattering, into a domain where suffering is real but where the culture has arranged things so that it need not be acknowledged.

This is exactly the capacity the abolition of the death penalty requires. We already have it. We developed it in one room. It works in both.

A society in which enough people have practiced this discipline...have insisted on seeing what their food system does...is a society with a substantially enlarged collective moral imagination. Capital punishment depends on the majority of the population declining to imagine too clearly what is happening in the room. A society that has refused that selective blindness in one domain finds it increasingly difficult to sustain in another.

We will not look away. That commitment does not stop at the refrigerator door.

Fifth: Consistent Principle, Applied Without Exception

When we commit to vegetarianism on moral grounds, we commit to a principle: that the unnecessary killing of sentient beings capable of suffering is wrong and that legal authorization, economic profitability and institutional normalization do not change this.

This principle, when examined honestly, applies with equal force to state execution. We cannot claim the principle and exempt the chamber. We cannot claim the principle and exempt the slaughterhouse. A principle applied selectively is a preference. We are not interested in preferences. We are interested in principles.

We who have genuinely internalized the principle behind our dietary choice cannot consistently stop at the refrigerator door. The principle reaches further. Following it is not a matter of importing a new argument from outside the abolitionist tradition. It is a matter of following our own argument to a conclusion we had not yet reached.

We already know how to follow arguments to unexpected places. It is how we became abolitionists.

Sixth: Political Transformation Through Moral Credibility

Capital punishment persists because the political coalition that sustains it is larger and better organized than the coalition that opposes it. The widespread adoption of vegetarianism on moral grounds would change this arithmetic in specific ways.

We who oppose the death penalty on moral grounds and have also reckoned seriously with our food choices possess a particular political credibility: the credibility of people who have demonstrated, in the most personal and daily way possible, that we are willing to accept personal cost in the service of moral principle. We cannot be accused of selective compassion. Our dietary practice is evidence...public, habitual, consistent evidence...that we mean what we say about the value of life and the wrongness of institutional killing.

This kind of credibility matters. It is the difference between advocacy that can be dismissed and advocacy that demands to be taken seriously.

Seventh: The Children Who Grow Up Differently

The deepest pathway operates across generations. The children who grow up in households where the moral dimensions of food are discussed...where the question of where food comes from and what it costs in suffering is treated as a real question...grow up with a moral formation genuinely different from previous generations.

They grow up understanding that the claims of beings who cannot advocate for themselves are real claims. That the fact that a practice is normal and profitable and socially accepted is not a sufficient defense of it. That the institutions of a society are accountable to moral principles and that holding them accountable is real work.

The household that has reckoned seriously with the slaughterhouse is a nursery for the next generation of abolitionists.

Eighth: The Shared Witness of the Voiceless

In the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible, God's special concern is for those who have no advocate...the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the prisoner, the one who has no voice within the halls of power. The claims of the voiceless have a special moral and theological urgency. The failure to hear and respond to those claims is not merely a political failure.

It is a spiritual failure. We know this. It is why we became abolitionists.

The condemned man on death row cannot speak for himself in the political arena. The system that will kill him is also the system that shapes the public conversation about whether he should be killed. We have insisted on hearing his voice anyway. We have practiced the prophetic discipline of listening to those the social order prefers to silence.

The animal in the gestation crate has no voice in the political arena either. It cannot testify, organize, petition or appeal. The practice of hearing the voiceless...of allowing the suffering of those who cannot speak for themselves to constitute a genuine moral claim on our behavior...is the same practice in both cases.

We have already learned to hear the condemned. We can learn to hear the animal. The spiritual discipline is the same discipline.

The Counterpoint, Honored

Many meat-eaters oppose the death penalty. Many vegetarians do not. The argument of this chapter does not require it to be otherwise. Individual exceptions are expected. The claim is not about individual causal links. It is about what happens to the moral culture of a society when enough of its members have committed, through daily practice, to a specific kind of moral seriousness.

Cultural moral conditions shift slowly and unevenly. They do not determine the opinion of any particular individual. But they shape what is thinkable, what requires justification, what can be defended in public without embarrassment. The gradual shift of a culture's moral background is exactly how every major moral reform in the history of democratic societies has been accomplished...not through a single dramatic argument but through the slow accumulation of practices, commitments and cultural shifts that made the old arrangement increasingly difficult to sustain.

We know this. It is how the abolition movement itself works. It is how all such movements work.

Chapter 8: The Work of Abolition...What Both Commitments Look Like

Two Kinds of Advocacy, One Moral Vision

Abolition work takes many forms: legal advocacy that exposes individual injustices, legislative advocacy that pursues state-level abolition, pastoral engagement that visits the condemned and makes their humanity visible, cultural advocacy that changes the stories a society tells about crime and justice and what it means to take a life.

All of these forms of advocacy are strengthened by the moral credibility that comes from a life lived in accordance with the principles being advocated. We who oppose the death penalty on grounds of the sanctity of life and who have also reckoned seriously with what the sanctity of life requires at the dinner table bring to our advocacy a wholeness that is not merely philosophically satisfying.

It is politically powerful. It demonstrates that our principles govern our lives...not only our public commitments but our private ones.

The Faith Community as Moral Seedbed

Faith communities have been central to every major movement for moral and social transformation in American history because they possess something secular political organizations typically lack: a narrative of ultimate meaning that makes long-term, costly moral commitment sustainable. The abolition movement is exactly the kind of long-term, costly work that requires this sustaining narrative.

The faith community that has also committed...theologically, communally, practically...to reckoning with the moral dimensions of food is a faith community that has developed the very capacities the

abolition movement needs. It has demonstrated that its principles are not merely theoretical. It has practiced the discipline of seeing what institutional arrangements conceal. It has built, through the shared practice of eating differently, the kind of communal solidarity that sustains moral commitments when the cost of holding them becomes high.

The congregation whose fellowship meals are plant-based because the congregation has genuinely reckoned with the sanctity of all life is a congregation ready for the hardest pastoral work the abolition movement requires.

What the State Cannot Provide

The theological case against capital punishment rests on a claim about the limits of human authority. The state can do many things. What it cannot do is what retributive capital punishment requires: know, with the certainty that the taking of a human life requires, that the person it is about to kill deserves to die. It cannot guarantee its system has not produced a wrongful conviction. It cannot make an irreversible act reversible. It cannot stand in the position of final moral judgment over any human life.

The tradition reserves the final accounting to a wisdom and compassion that human institutions can never fully embody. We act within that tradition. We must act consistently with it.

The slaughterhouse is also an institution that has placed itself in a position of judgment it has not earned. It has decided, through the accumulated force of law, economics and cultural convention, that the question of whether the killing is just is a question it is not required to answer. We who have decided, in our own lives, to require that question to be answered...who have decided that "it is legal and profitable and

normal” is not a sufficient answer...have done the most important political work available to us.

We have withdrawn our consent. That withdrawal matters. It must extend to both rooms.

Chapter 9: Toward a Culture of Mercy

What Culture Actually Is

A culture is not a set of policies. It is not even a set of beliefs. It is a set of practices...things people do, habitually, without requiring justification for each instance, because the practices have become the texture of ordinary life. A culture of mercy is not primarily a culture with merciful laws, though it will have those. It is a culture in which the practices of daily life have trained its members in the habits of moral attention that merciful institutions require.

The practices that develop these capacities are ordinary. They include eating. They include what we allow ourselves to know. They include whether we show up.

Two Systems, One Decision

The execution chamber and the slaughterhouse are not two separate problems requiring two separate solutions. They are two expressions of the same problem: a society that has arranged its institutions so that the killing they require is insulated from genuine moral scrutiny, distributed across so many hands that no individual bears the full weight of it, described in language designed to prevent rather than facilitate moral understanding and sustained by a cultural common sense that treats the question of its justification as closed.

We have decided, in the domain of criminal justice, that we will not let that question stay closed. The same decision is available to us in the domain of food. It is waiting for us at every meal.

We who decide, simultaneously, that we will not consent to state executions and will not fund industrial animal slaughter have not taken

on two separate moral burdens. We have made one decision: that we will not participate in institutional arrangements that insulate killing from moral accountability.

One decision. Both rooms. This is what it means to mean what we say.

What a Merciful Society Looks Like

A society genuinely committed to mercy does not execute its condemned. Not because it is indifferent to the crimes they may have committed but because it has decided that the taking of a human life by an institution that cannot know with certainty, that cannot reverse its decision, that has demonstrated its susceptibility to racial and economic bias, is not something it is willing to do in the name of justice. It has decided that justice means restoration, accountability, the genuine repair of what has been broken.

A society genuinely committed to mercy does not factory-farm its animals. Not because it is indifferent to the need for food but because it has decided that the routine, industrial, institutionalized infliction of suffering and death on countless sentient creatures, at a scale and under conditions designed to prevent moral scrutiny, is not something it is willing to sustain for the sake of dietary preference. It has decided that the sanctity of life applies more broadly than it had previously acknowledged.

These two decisions reinforce each other. The culture capable of making one is, through the making of it, more capable of making the other.

The room is the same. The commitment must be the same.

Conclusion: Two Rooms, One Turning

The condemned man is strapped to a table. The witnesses are behind glass. Somewhere in this same country, at this same hour, a line of animals is moving toward a room they can smell. Both rooms are quiet in the way that rooms built for killing are quiet...the quiet of procedure, of protocol, of human beings performing their assigned functions within systems designed to make the performing of those functions feel like something other than what it is.

In the execution chamber, a warden reads a warrant. In the slaughterhouse, a supervisor watches the line. In both rooms, the institution has done its work of preparation...the paperwork filed, the equipment checked, the participants briefed on their roles. In both rooms, what is about to happen has been made to look orderly. Orderly, and necessary, and...this is the crucial word...inevitable. As though the question of whether it should happen at all is a question that has already been answered, long ago, by someone with the authority to answer it, and what remains now is only execution.

The word for what happens in the death chamber is "execution." The word for what happens in the slaughterhouse is "processing." Both words are lies told by institutions that cannot survive honest language about what they do.

* * *

We who oppose the death penalty already know this about the execution chamber. We have spent years insisting that the word 'execution' is a lie, that what happens in that room is killing, that legal language does not launder moral reality, that the straps and the glass and the warrant and the chaplain's prayer are the apparatus of moral concealment rather than moral seriousness. We have been right about this. Everything we

know about how institutions use language and procedure to insulate themselves from accountability is true. We have paid a real price for knowing it and saying it out loud.

This book has asked us to apply that knowledge to the other room.

The animal in the kill chute did not commit a crime. It was born into a system that assigned it a value measured in weight and price and nothing else. It cannot appeal. It cannot make a final statement. It will not be visited by a chaplain, because the institution that holds it has not found it necessary to perform even the gestures of moral seriousness. It simply moves forward, because the animals behind it are moving forward, because the worker with the prod is doing his job, because the line must keep moving, because somewhere at the end of the supply chain we are waiting...carefully insulated from every detail of what is happening in this room...so that we can eat without thinking about it.

We know what it means when an institution is designed so that its beneficiaries do not have to think about it. We have made it our work to make people think about it anyway.

We have stood in parking lots at midnight holding candles for people whose names most of America would not recognize. We have written to men on death row who had stopped expecting letters. We have sat in courtrooms and legislative hearings and said, over and over, in every available forum: look. Look at what is happening in that room. Look at who is inside it. Look at what it costs.

This book has asked us to look at the other room with the same eyes.

* * *

The condemned man and the animal in the chute are not the same. The moral weight of a human life exceeds the moral weight of an animal life and nothing in this book has argued otherwise. What this book has

argued is that the moral weight of an animal life is not zero...that a being capable of suffering, of fear, of the experience of its own existence being taken from it, constitutes a genuine moral claim on the people who profit from its death.

We have already committed ourselves to the principle that moral claims do not disappear simply because an institution has decided to ignore them. That principle applies here. We cannot exempt it.

We cannot build a fence around our principles. We cannot say: these apply here, in the domain of criminal justice, but stop at the door of the slaughterhouse. Principles applied selectively are not principles. They are preferences dressed in the language of principle. We who fight institutional killing with one hand and fund it with the other three times a day have not found a way to hold two positions simultaneously.

We have found a way not to look. And not looking is exactly what we have spent our lives fighting against.

Reconciliation...the closing of the distance between what we believe and how we live...is never finished. It is a direction, not a destination. We who reckon with this book and change nothing have not failed. Those who change one thing and then another, who hold the question open rather than closing it with a comfortable answer, are doing the only moral work there is: moving, however slowly, toward a life that does not require a room we are not permitted to see.

* * *

On the morning of an execution, two rooms are running. In one, a man is dying by the authority of a state that has decided his life is forfeit. In the other, animals are dying by the authority of a market that has decided their lives were never worth counting. Both rooms have been designed so that the people who benefit from what happens inside them will not

have to be present for it. Both rooms depend, for their continuation, on our willingness to look away.

The condemned man and the animal in the chute are both waiting, in rooms they did not choose, for what is coming. They cannot speak to us. They cannot ask us for anything. The system that holds them has made very sure of that.

But we can speak. We have always been able to speak. It is, in fact, what we do.

The question this book leaves us with is not whether we oppose killing. We do. The question is whether our opposition is as large as our principles...whether it reaches all the rooms, or only the ones the culture has already told us to look at.

Look at the other room.

Then decide what we will do.

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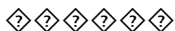
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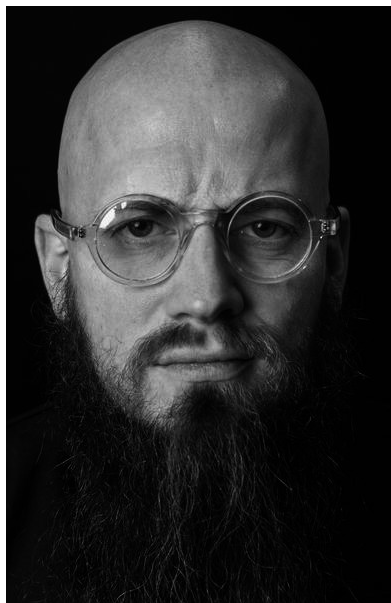
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About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is a theologian and spiritual advisor to death row inmates nationwide. He has accompanied over a dozen men to their executions and was the first spiritual advisor to be present for a nitrogen hypoxia execution. Rev. Hood has been profiled widely, including in the Rolling Stone documentary *The Spiritual Advisor*. He is the Founder of the Execution Intervention Project.

Read more at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jeffhood/>.

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