

## **Our Collective Role in the Global Pandemic**

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When it comes to creating a virus that will kill thousands of people and leave millions sick throughout the world, the issue is not if it will emerge, but when. In recent news, scientists have made the link between the emergence of COVID-19 to a food market in Wuhan, China.<sup>1</sup> Globally, this issue has been in the headlines of numerous reports and has sparked the conversation of reconsidering the food choices we make. Nearly all of the viruses that make humans sick originate from animals—the novel coronavirus is one of them. To illustrate, the virus that causes influenza comes from birds and pigs, Ebola is likely to have originated from bats, and evidence suggests that COVID-19 is likely to have originated from a bat to a pangolin before infecting a human.<sup>2</sup> In many cultures, the consumption of wildlife and livestock domesticated animals is normalized and strongly encouraged by signifying wealth status and claiming unsubstantiated health benefits.<sup>3</sup> Despite the evidence—copious scientific research that suggests that this phenomenon is the source of various environmental issues, such as climate change through the rise of greenhouse gas emissions and our current pandemic—why do we continue to follow this trend?

First, we need to take a closer look at humanity's use and abuse of wild and domestic animals. We can take the COVID-19 pandemic as a prime example in the discussion of humanity's treatment of animals. Although viruses are good at jumping between species, it is rare for a virus this deadly to make the journey all the way to humans. In order for this virus to make its way to humans, it must have interacted with each host (e.g., bat, pangolin, human) at some point.<sup>4</sup> Wet markets make it possible for this type of interaction to occur effortlessly. In these markets, live animals are routinely slaughtered and sold for consumption.<sup>5</sup> The conditions in

which these markets operate are essentially petri dishes for infectious diseases. Wildlife and livestock domesticated, virus-carrying animals are stacked in cages, one-on-top of another, allowing for their excrements to cross-contaminate with other wildlife animals.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, humans that buy and consume these animals then become infected with the virus. This creates a domino effect due to the highly infectious rate of these viruses, thus the mortality rate in humans increases as a result. Evidently, these types of environments make it fairly easy for a dangerous virus, such as COVID-19, to spread and wreak havoc. In fact, we saw this happen back in the early 2000s with SARS,<sup>7</sup> however, it was not at the same magnitude as COVID-19.

In Mylan Engel Jr.'s *The Commonsense Case for Ethical Vegetarianism*, Engel addresses anthropocentrism in the way humans eat. In Western society, our diets typically consist of meat, but we rarely consider the origin of our food sources. Engel uses facts that we already know to further prove his point. Engel makes the argument that just as it would be morally wrong to groundlessly harm your pet dog, it would be morally wrong to harm any sentient being regardless of its relationship to you, because both beings are capable of experiencing pain and suffering. In fact, this commonsense, moral argument extends to the livestock animals we slaughter for our benefit. As a society, we are notorious for having a bad track record when it comes to our treatment of wildlife and livestock animals. Animal agriculture is a breeding ground for diseases like COVID-19 and many others to occur.

The process is the same throughout the world, animals are overcrowded in these football-size factories and are placed snout-to-snout on top of one another surrounded by their wastes. In the motive of profits and greed through overproduction, the practices found in these animal factories are unethical. From overcrowding animals, which causes stress that cripples their immune system, lack of sunlight,

overproduction of ammonia from their decomposing wastes that negatively affects their lung health, to the lack of oxygen that is available to them. These factors contribute to the perfect environment for these super strains of influenza viruses to emerge.

Wet markets offer a plethora of wildlife animals from all around the world for consumption.<sup>8</sup> The more animals that are confined in one area, the more likely resistant bacteria and viruses are breeding in these conditions. In China, wildlife trading is a cultural norm and each wildlife animal has the potential to carry deadly viruses. In fact, more than 70% of new infectious diseases are said to have originated from animals.<sup>9</sup> Historically, these wet markets emerged out of desperation when people had to survive and were unable to afford popular food options, such as pork and beef. Small farmers opted to catch wildlife animals in order to sustain themselves.<sup>10</sup> This activity was later encouraged by the Chinese government due to its demand and success in sustaining the people—physically and economically.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese government then made this type of activity legal by claiming wildlife animals as resources owned by the state and protected those who participated in wildlife farming.<sup>12</sup> This language suggests that wildlife animals are natural resources that were put on this Earth for human benefit only. As Engel refutes, this anthropocentric viewpoint is not a good enough, moral reason to support this practice. Consequently, these small farms slowly turned into industrial-sized operations. Given our current circumstance, we can see that having this anthropocentric view has clearly had detrimental effects to our health, economy, and environment. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Chinese public is unanimously calling for a permanent ban on wildlife markets and trade.<sup>13</sup>

You may be asking, why do we continue to allow these practices to occur? As Engel explores, the answer simply revolves around money. Although this pandemic is likely to

have emerged from these wet markets, it is not solely a Chinese issue—this is a global issue. In fact, there are wet markets throughout the globe outside of Asia. Similar practices such as those observed in the wet market overseas are found in factories right in our backyards—in the United States. We have seen that our consumption of animals is directly linked to the spread of deadly diseases, yet as a society we continue to feed in these habits. There needs to be an immense cultural shift away from animal agriculture. As a society, we need to accept the facts and understand the consequences of our actions whenever we make the decision to consume wildlife and livestock domesticated animals. We have seen how easily viruses can spread from host to host as a result of our consumption of animals. These viruses have the potential to wipe out all of humanity if we gave it the chance with our lethargic efforts to combat it.

This pandemic is not the first nor will it be the last if we continue to make irresponsible choices. Scientists are reasonably worried that the next pandemic could likely emerge from our farms in the United States. Mutations among viruses happen often, however these mutations vary and could potentially be more deadly than what we have already seen. Moreover, for a virus to survive it needs to find a host in order to replicate. Eventually, when the host dies a new one is needed in order for the mutations to occur consistently. This is why factory farming in the United States is the best design we have for the next pandemic to emerge. Factory farms increase the chances of potential deadly viruses to replicate and mutate due to the easy access of more hosts. These hosts will then increase the likelihood of a mutated virus to survive at an exponential rate. In addition, this process is multiplied through the trading of live animals by shipping them from cities and states throughout the United States and even internationally.<sup>14</sup> Through this cyclic process, viruses are exposed to other viruses with similar genetic code,

which then share and exchange their genetic components to co-infect a single cell and form a chimeric offspring that will be the culprit of the next pandemic.<sup>15</sup> In fact, we have already seen this process take place in 2009 with the emergence of the H1N1 virus. The H1N1 virus was able to evolve in Mexico City due to the transportation of pigs across the border from the United States to Mexico.<sup>16</sup> This catastrophe led to the death of hundreds of thousands of people by the time a vaccine was able to be developed. The probability of another pandemic increases as we continue to expand the pool of viruses through factory farming.

Truthfully, we are not well equipped to deal with problems on the microbe-level. Scientifically speaking, not only is there a lack of funding, but there is a lack of knowledge in this area. Collectively, we know substantially more than what we knew years ago, but there is still a lot more information that is both unclear and unfathomable. As we move forward, we have to be more conscious of the food choices we make in order to avoid disasters like the one we are facing. In effect, these disasters have the potential to compromise our health, collapse economic systems and drive us further into a recession with the ability to destroy the environment by accelerating climate change.

With this in mind, you may be wondering why we do not take these harmful risks seriously. In fact, there are logical explanations to address this, none of which are justifiable. One of the main issues is corporate greed and money interests that are placed in these industries. The pharmaceutical industry provides antibiotics, by the truckload, to the animal farming industry to prepare these animals. After these animals have been injected with these drugs, they are plumped and ready for slaughter. These two industries have a stranglehold over our political system, which allows for these practices to continue, despite the insurmountable data suggesting we need to halt this type of activity.

Ultimately, the only reason why Ebola, H1N1, SARS, COVID-19 and future deadly viruses have the potential they do is because we allow it to happen. We allow for the cross-contamination to happen through the practice of wet markets and factory farming. We allow for the exponential spread of the virus by consuming wildlife and livestock animals. We allow the pharmaceutical and animal agriculture industry to have weight and corrupt our government with greed through our decision to buy wildlife and livestock animals and their byproducts. We allow for innocent people to die, immunocompromised people to live in fear, essential workers to risk their lives through our consumption of animals. Lastly, we allow for our home, the environment, to suffer from increasing greenhouse gas emissions through animal agriculture. As Engel says, even though we are not physically slaughtering animals we are still morally culpable, because we are the consumers and the slaughterhouse workers are doing it to satisfy the demand. If we made the decision to stop eating wildlife and livestock animals, we would dramatically reduce these effects—if not completely eradicate them.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.