

Cows, a tragically misunderstood species, have been portrayed as dull, dim-witted and unfeeling creatures. However, contrary to this popular belief, scientists have shown that cows possess great depth of character and vibrant personalities. Cows “can be highly intelligent, moderately so, or slow to understand; friendly, considerate, aggressive, docile, inventive, dull, proud, or shy,” says the author of The Secret Lives of Cows, Rosamund Young.¹ Scientists have found that cows have impressive memories, and possess the ability to hold grudges, develop friendships, and form complex social hierarchies.² Research at Cambridge University revealed that cows even become excited by solving intellectual puzzles. Researchers challenged the animals to find out how to open a door in order to get food. They measured the cows’ brainwaves using an electroencephalograph. “The brainwaves showed their excitement; their heartbeat went up and some even jumped into the air,” when they completed the puzzle, said Daniel Broom, a professor of animal welfare involved in the research.³ Evidently, cows are thoughtful, emotional beings, and yet humans continue to raise and slaughter cows in some of the most inhumane ways possible. Imagine two calves; each possesses complex emotions and thought processes, each is capable of feeling personal achievement, anger, and love:

These two calves are born inside a factory farm on the same day; one male, his coat silky white splashed with golden brown, one female, her coat black as night. The mothers nurse and lick their newborns lovingly. Their babies are taken from them the next day; they moan and wail for days on end until they lose hope. The male calf wakes up in a tiny crate. He opens his eyes, but there is only darkness, and when he tries to move, he finds that there is not even space to turn around. He stays almost completely

immobilized for months, fed a diet lacking in iron, causing him to suffer from diarrhea. He is still a baby, and he is frightened and alone. One day, he is led out of his crate for the first time. He is dragged forward; the chain is cutting into his neck. He is brought to the slaughterhouse and yanked into a pen where many hands and eyes inspect him. He hears the bellows of cows around him, and the air is rank. Suddenly he is slammed on the head, sending him in and out of consciousness. He is panicked and confused as he feels chains locking his hind legs; suddenly he feels a burning pain through his legs as he is hung upside down. He slips out of consciousness again, but jerks back awake as he is slashed at the neck - the blood is warm. He is moving, slowly, down a line. He feels pain everywhere and kicks out to a chorus of yells. His eyes flutter as the searing pain intensifies, but the world slips away and the pain is gone. He is later served, a deliciously juicy slice of veal, to a woman at an Italian restaurant. He was only three months old.

Meanwhile, the female calf has lived her life in a filthy barn with a rope around her neck. Her tail was docked upon arrival, and now she suffers chronic pain as well as agitation from the flies she is unable to keep off. When she is ready to bear calves, she is artificially impregnated. Eventually, she gives birth, but is immediately separated from her baby. She cries for him, wishing she could protect him. Instead, she is fed hormones and hooked up several times a day to a machine that takes her milk. Her udders become bloated from the hormones, and the pain is unbearable. She is as miserable as she could possibly be. After four years, she is deemed too sickly to bother with any longer, and her life is ended in much the same way the male calf's was. Sick and weak, she produces cheap, low-grade meat which is sold for a buck at McDonald's to a little boy in his Happy Meal. She was almost as old as the boy who ate her.

These two cows could have been any of the thousands of cows raised in modern-day factory farms; the tortures the two calves were subject to represent real and common afflictions cows suffer from during and leading up to their slaughter. The lives cows lead in factory farms are horrific. Cows are given hormones, chemicals and antibiotics. In fact, they are the most medicated creatures on Earth, so much so that humans are at risk for developing immunities to the antibiotics in beef. The hormones, chemicals, and antibiotics cause the cows to grow so large that their bones may be crushed under their own weight, and they can be made to produce ten times the amount of milk they would naturally, causing painful diseases of the udder, such as mastitis, an infectious disease which causes painful inflammation of the mammary gland. Cow feed may include “expired dog and cat food, poultry feces, and leftover restaurant food,”⁴ and worst of all, the ground up meat of other cows who die in their pens. While they eat, cows stand on painful, slatted metal floors above their own excrement, and as a result they often suffer from anemia, diarrhea, pneumonia, and lameness. The average life span of a cow is 25 years. In a factory farm, a cow is lucky if he lives to be five.

The issue of inhumane treatment occurring in factory farms was raised long ago and has yet to be solved. Only last month, in January of 2009, a video was released of a Westland Meat factory farm in California showing “workers using chains to drag cows unable to stand; shoving and rolling crippled cows with forklifts; and rampant use of electric prods to drive infirm animals to slaughter.”⁵ In 2001, slaughterhouse workers in a factory farm known as Iowa Beef Processors, Inc., reported dozens of cows moving through slaughtering stations, (including the “hide-puller,” where all the skin is removed from the neck down), clearly alive. Some workers wore hockey pads and masks to shield

themselves from the kicking, “dead” cows, while others reported similarly “dead” cows opening their eyes and looking around while they were being slaughtered. “The line is never stopped simply because an animal is alive,” said Martin Fuentes, a worker at IBP, Inc. IBP’s brutality was not limited to cows. IBP, Inc. became Tyson Foods, Inc. in 2001. Hiding behind a new name, IBP continued its abuse of animals, and was criticized by PETA, who released a video showing workers burning chickens alive, throwing them around for fun, and ripping their heads off while they were still alive.⁶ The cruelty had not ended, but the government still did nothing to rectify the situation. Tyson foods, Inc. still produces meat today.

The list of cruel tortures animals are often subject to in factory farms is endless. Many Americans are under the illusion that current laws are effectively preventing this kind of abuse. However, federal oversight is lacking and without enforcement, the laws are often disregarded. The 1960 Humane Slaughter Act “has no provisions for awarding fines or penalties, is generally not enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and is routinely ignored.”⁷ The American government is doing an inadequate job of protecting animals from cruel mistreatment. It is up to the American people to accept the responsibility of raising awareness about animal cruelty in factory farms. Humans are inherently compassionate and open to change. Two years ago, I gave a presentation to a roomful of people on the environmental, health, and ethical aspects of animal agriculture, arguing for a vegetarian diet. My own family has since almost entirely stopped eating meat, and a few peers who saw my presentation told me their families were cutting back on their meat consumption as well. In less than ten minutes, one seventh grader convinced several people to eat less meat. One person can make a difference. If more

people could be made aware of the horrible truth about factory farms, fewer people would support the meat industries with their purchases, forcing the industries to change their practices. Next year, I will be starting an Animal Rights club at my high school with a mission to spread awareness about factory farms through announcements, submissions to the school newspaper, speeches, and fundraisers. I believe Americans can join a collective effort to reverse this country's long history of animal mistreatment. When this happens, I will truly feel proud to be an American.

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