The Creature That Has Never Been

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While I was living in Wisconsin, there were countless mornings and afternoons when I drove a truck up and down, back and forth, hauling manure from a conventional dairy operation.

The first time I visited the dairy after driving through endless fields of genetically modified corn and soy, I parked on the driveway of the farmhouse. Red and pink geraniums greeted me on the windowsill. Halved oak barrels, filled with flowers, delineated parts of the driveway, and the air was filled by the mooing of the heifers, kept in the barn behind the house.

Crossing the road toward the main barn, which looked more like a warehouse, I again was met by flowery windowsills. Now it was the mooing from the calves in their hutches, tidily aligned, that filled the air. The place gave an impression, despite its size and form, that someone cared for its aesthetics and animals. The owner of the farm was just finishing feeding the calves with her "milk taxi" pasteurizer dispenser. Warmly greeting me, she was very friendly and was happy to give away some manure. That was one thing they had enough of, she said.

Manure, without a doubt, was one thing this dairy had plenty of. It even had a full time employee named José — a young worker from Mexico — whose main job was to manage this "waste". It was when I began to meet his world and the conditions of the milking cows that I gained a completely different impression of the farm, the animals, and the owner's mindset. The air was impregnated by pungent and offensive smells. The cows, all hornless and devoid of tails, lay in extremely tight pens filled with sand. With little space to move, they lived day after day confined in this warehouse without ever seeing pasture or hay. Year round their sole contact with the outside environment was circumscribed by a small concrete patio. So they were never immersed in the unfolding of the seasons in the landscape or exposed to a seasonal variety of fodder.

Although there were hundreds of cows within the building, it was difficult to perceive them as a herd. They felt more like unrelated units. The familiar picture of cows gathered around each other as they ruminate in communal kinship was not to be seen. Here production was the bottom line. Decontextualized from their ruminant nature, those cows had become bioreactors producing a marketable white substance, with their manure causing a significant waste problem.

Although I often had a good laugh with José as I asked him each morning where the "skid steer" was, the sight of that dairy soon grew to be a disturbing and gut-wrenching experience.

There always seemed to be inexhaustible piles of manure. While sitting with seatbelt tight in an open cabin of a skid steer, I would find my view shrouded by steam with each bucket load of manure. It filled my lungs with a pervasive noxious smell. Bucket by bucket the truck would be filled. I'd then drive it back to the farm with mixed feelings about the whole endeavor. Far from being just a "manure mine," that dairy left deep impressions on my soul. It caused me to ponder our relationship and responsibilities towards our fellow creatures — the domestic animals.

As I laboriously engaged with their manure, transforming it into compost and trying as best I could to redeem it, I would ask myself: How did we ever come to have such a distorted and utilitarian relationship to these animals?

Dirty Machines on Factory Farms

> The cow is the crudest machine in the world. Our laboratories have already demonstrated that cow's milk can be done away with and the concentration of the elements of milk can be manufactured into scientific food by machines far cleaner than cows. (Quoted in Grandin 2010)

Milk is still a strong presence in our lives and the modern food industry has not "done away with it." But the cow, tragically, seems indeed to have turned into a crude, dirty machine. At least, that's the picture and reality of thousands of cows confined in our modern factory "farms." It is what I witnessed at that dairy in Wisconsin.

The quotation above is from Henry Ford in 1921, long before the establishment of our industrial dairy operations. Yet, the father of the assembly line already saw a living creature — an animal once considered holy — as a machine. (One can also wonder about his view of the human being on his automobile assembly line.) The picture that Ford gives is so shockingly absurd that at times it could sound almost surreal. Yet, at the same time it has become so very real, present and concrete. This particular mentality is present not only in factory-like operations, but also shows itself throughout our whole culture, even in places we wouldn't expect.

Chickens or Broilers?

I once worked in a beautiful biodynamic farm community. Its landscape and its people were all creatively interwoven and both seemed to thrive harmoniously. There was only one thing that came across as being out of balance and which I dreaded the whole time I was there. It was what we called "the meat birds." In the spring, when the first chicks arrived, they were all so chirpy and cute, and to bring water and give them, for a time, fresh pasture was always a pleasant activity.

But since they grew remarkably fast, their composure quickly changed. They became sluggish and acquired a lameness that made their gait look strange and abnormal. They developed a disproportionately large body, and suddenly their very gaze and presence had an uncanny feel. I was the one responsible for bringing them to the local butcher. And I was strictly warned not to miss our scheduled appointment. I would quickly learn why.

Broilers are a hybrid variety of *Gallus gallus domesticus*. The ones kept on this farm were the Cornish X Rock, which at times are advertised as "barbecue specials". Although our birds did not have a high protein diet and weren't forced to reach their slaughter weight in six weeks, as is common on commercial farms, they still grew extremely fast and large. That was the reason why we had chosen this breed. But concealed within this short-term "benefit" were unintended side effects. Because of their sped-up growth, broilers suffer serious physiological, behavioral, and morphological effects, such as skeletal disorders, heart failure and metabolic diseases.

(Note: This biodynamic farm no longer uses the Cornish X Rock. They are now raising a different hybrid variety, called Freedom Ranger, which has a slower growth rate than the Cornish X Rock.)

One morning, as I carried two buckets of water toward their paddock, I noticed that one of the birds was down, as if it had simply toppled over on its breast and there remained. Holding its wings, I tried to place it on its legs, but to no avail. It could no longer support its own weight. The next day two other chickens suffered the same fate. There were still a couple of days left until our appointment with the butcher. So I had to sacrifice these animals and discard them into the compost pile, for there was no time to clean and process them. Now I knew why we could not miss our appointment! For if those chickens were to live beyond their planned life span, their legs and organs would fail them.

It did not matter that they didn't receive any hormones, were not overfed, or that the grains were of organic and biodynamic quality. Broilers have been bred to such an extent that they no longer have any possibility of healthy development. They are the result of the narrowness of our focus and our greed for an ever more lucrative and efficient system of meat production. These chickens have become imprisoned by our lack of imagination and our inability to perceive their wholeness and develop a contextual understanding of organisms. There is hardly any *chicken* left in broilers.

Meeting Ourselves in the World

Industrialized agriculture is not only the fruit of the political interest and economic power of agro-business. It is also the result of our own way of seeing, thinking, and speaking about the world. For what we meet in a factory farm is not only a particularly efficient system but, decisively, an expression of human consciousness.

Writing about the assembly line, Stephen L. Talbott, asks: "How much of the town's conversion to a spread-out, impersonal, rationalized, streetlight-controlled, machine-adapted metropolis was already prefigured on the floor

of the first assembly-line factory?" (Talbott undated)

In this light we can also ask: "How many of the physiological, behavioral, and morphological problems of the broilers were already prefigured in our limited breeding goals? The "chickeness" of this bird was reduced to the provision of a high percentage of breast meat. Breeding was a mere instrument of narrow human interest, and the wholeness and integrity of the animal fell victim to our conception of its usefulness.

Responsibly Engaging with the World

Describing an alternative view and the concerns a breeder might have, biologist Craig Holdrege writes:

> We can and do, as human beings, choose to modify plants and animals for human purposes. If this interaction is to be at all responsible, we cannot do this solely according to our own sense of utility. At least to some degree we must get to know the organism we are dealing with on its own terms — that is, by attending to how it expresses its unique qualities through its form, life, and behavior. Only then can we adapt our intentions to its propensities. (Holdrege and Talbott 2008, p. 129)

One way to begin changing our relation to domestic animals is by paying more attention to the language we use to refer to these animals. Why? Because the uniqueness of organisms — their form, life and behavior — will be perceived and expressed in part through the quality and richness of our language.

If we keep referring to chickens only as "meat birds" or "broilers," our language will have failed them, binding them to a narrow scope of possibility and treatment. The cow is not a machine, but it can become so when we lose sight of its ruminant nature and its relationship with the landscape. Similarly, its manure is not a "waste" in need of "better management," but is a vital extension of the herd as a member of the agricultural landscape. That is something we need to understand and adequately characterize.

Long before Henry Ford expressed his contempt for the cow as the crudest machine in the world, the German scientist Johann W. von Goethe developed a very different picture of animals:

> Hence we conceive of the individual animal as a small world, existing for its own sake, by its own means. Every creature has its own reason to be. All its parts have a direct effect on one another, a relationship to one another, thereby constantly renewing the circle of life. (Quoted in Holdrege and Talbott 2008, p. 114)

In Goethe we find not only a different picture of the animals, but also the beginnings of the possibility of a new science of nature. Along with the recognition of the importance of looking at the way plants and animals interact with their environments, he also was aware — as the above quotation indicates — that the organism itself is a context in which we must understand the particulars of its morphology and physiology (Holdrege and Talbott 2008, p. 114). He makes a radical invitation for a new relationship with our living world, stating: "If we want to attain a living understanding of nature, we must become as flexible and mobile as nature herself."

If we take this seriously, our relationship with our fellow creatures could gain a new depth and achieve the quality of a conversation. Our breeding goals could be redefined into a much broader perspective, far beyond just our narrow sense of utility or an abstract sense of animal welfare. The standard of animal health will be provided by the animals themselves, that is, by our own contextual understanding of their wholeness as living beings. A breeder or farmer may then begin to ask: "Am I contributing toward or hindering the organic integrity of this animal? Is it healthy and whole? Will the new characteristics I'm trying to breed for contribute to the health of my farm? And will my farm contribute to this creature's health?"

The perception of a living understanding of nature must arise through us, and it demands our responsible engagement. At the same time it calls for an arduous commitment to develop the required flexibility and mobility that Goethe describes. This contextual way of looking opens up the possibility for us to have a co-creative and reverential conversation and relationship with our world. Rainer Maria Rilke suggests such a creative relationship in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Oh, this is the creature that has never been.
They never knew it, and yet, none the less,
they loved the way it moved, its suppleness,
its neck, its very gaze, mild and serene.

True it never was, yet because they loved it,
a pure creature came into being. They always allowed room.
And in that clear uncluttered space, it lightly reared its head
and hardly needed to exist.

They didn't nourish with grain, but only
with the possibility of being ...

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