**Dairy is Scary: A Philosophical Perspective**

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**Part I: Introduction**

The dairy industry exploits female cows through the commodification of their breast milk. The majority of humans are avid consumers of cows’ milk, but also have empathy for animals. This paper explores both why this contradiction exists and how the exploitation of female cows occurs. In our analysis of empathy, we will build on Edith Stein’s observations that humans, because they understand themselves as living bodies, are also able to recognize the living embodiment of other beings. As such, they retain the ability to project themselves into the spaces and experiences of others and thereby grasp an expanded understanding of the lived experiences of other human and non-human animals. Prominent philosopher and economist, Rosa Luxemburg, devoted much of her career to the study of wage labor in a capitalist economic system. Her analysis, when applied to the dairy industry, assists us in understanding the implacable impetus for the mistreatment of, and brutalities inflicted on, dairy cows. Luxemburg argues that because owners of the means of production generate profits from the surplus labor of their workers, they are incentivized to reduce their workers’ standard of living and keep them laboring as long as possible.[[1]](#footnote-1) This method of production creates increased profits for owners while encouraging the maltreatment of laborers, and is particularly effective in the dairy industry where the quality of life of dairy cows is largely unregulated and social opinion prioritizes economic profit over the cost of the laboring cows’ lives. We will then turn to ethics and feminist philosophy specialist, Elizabeth Anderson, in our exploration of how the degradation of female cows helps to perpetuate dairy consumption and production. Anderson’s investigation of the commercial surrogacy industry reveals ways in which the commodification of female labor demeans mothers expected to surrender their offspring and how it encourages the trivialization of their bond with their children. Dairy cows, all of whom live in a cycle of forced impregnation followed by the immediate removal of their newborn calves, are similarly subjected to the cheapening of their traumatic experiences. Finally, philosophers Else Voigtländer and Kristie Dotson’s respective analyses of the ethical sense of self and epistemic violence assist us in understanding why, if humans can have empathy for animals, we continue to support practices that cause an immeasurable degree of harm to cows. Humans have the capacity for empathy towards cows, but we perpetuate their exploitation and degradation through dairy consumption because we actively avoid knowledge that has the potential to diminish our self-worth.

**Part II: Establishing the Human-Animal Connection Through Empathy**

Humans experience empathy with non-human animals. When a cow screams in pain while giving birth or gallops playfully through a field, humans have the capacity to identify shared feelings and sensations with that cow as another living and emotionally embodied being. In exploring the concept of empathy, Edith Stein first identifies the distinction between, and synthesis of, the living body and the physical body. In doing so, she shows that the “I,” or sense of self, is inextricably tied to the living body which, in turn, embodies the physical body.[[2]](#footnote-2) Without this form of embodiment, Stein argues, the physical body is no longer identifiable as a living being. As such, every living body is the body of an “I.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Empathy is only possible because humans are able to accept in themselves this “fusion of external and bodily perception” and to then project that understanding on to others.[[4]](#footnote-4) Empathy allows us see others as embodied beings, not just external objects. “The fields of sensation of others,” Stein writes, “are there for me in the same way: the foreign living body is ‘seen’ as a living body.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In engaging in an act of empathy we essentially transport ourselves into another’s place, be they a human or non-human animal, in order to experience their perceived sensations and perceptions, while retaining the ability to identify them as foreign.

Stein’s predecessors argued that empathy was a feeling of oneness, of a collapse between the self and the other. To empathize was to undergo the same experience and to experience it in the same way. Stein challenged this standard by distinguishing between the subject who is experiencing, the feeling that is being experienced, and the object that is creating the experience. Because we all possess unique identities that cannot be perfectly reconstructed, we cannot have the exact same lived experiences as other beings. Additionally, the empathizer did not actually have the experience happen to them. In an act of empathy, what is being re-experienced can only be the sensation or the feeling of the experience. Since one can only empathize with the sensation being experienced, rather than the original experience as a whole, the *reason* for the experience is not necessary to empathy.

With Stein in hand, we see that it is possible to empathize with a sensation without understanding the reason for that sensation. As such, empathy is in no way limited to human beings. Rather, empathy is a universal theory reliant only on the idea of embodiment. We are embodied; therefore, our embodiment predisposes us towards empathy. Empathy, Stein posits, is the foundation for all intersubjective relationships. The ability to empathize is fundamental to embodied interactions.

Hypothetically, our capacity to empathize is restrained only by the limits of embodiment. Oftentimes, though, it becomes increasingly difficult to fully empathize with foreign embodied beings who appear differently than we do. Stein uses the example of a dog when she writes:

If, by comparison, I consider the paw of a dog, for instance, I also have something that is not just a physical thing, but a sensing part of a living body. Here, too, a certain projection is possible, for example a sensing-in of pain, if the animal is injured. But other things-- certain postures and movements, for instance -- are given to us only as empty representation, without the possibility of fulfillment. The further we go from the type ‘human’ the smaller the number of possibilities for fulfillment becomes.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Our alienation from other beings can limit our empathy, but because empathy does not require understanding, those limits are malleable. As Stein helped us establish earlier, all embodied beings are an “I.” Therefore, even though humans may not understand the facial expressions or gesticulations of a cow, they can still identify that cow as a foreign embodied being for whom they can have empathy. If a cow screams when her baby is taken away, or when she limps on an injured foot, humans are particularly susceptible to empathy because these expressions fit within the human lived experience. They need not have broken an ankle or lost a child themselves to “sense-in” to the cow’s physical or emotional anguish.

The boundaries of empathy are flexible, but their placement and structure are also informed by our socialization and conditioning. This is made evident by the hierarchical nature of humans’ interspecies relationships. For instance, in many western societies, people empathize more fully with dogs and cats than they do other non-human animals. This is because these cultures have designated those specific embodied beings as companion animals, deserving of humans’ care and empathy. Cultural norms identify people who intentionally hurt these types of animals as violent and cruel. Yet, someone who poaches a gorilla for sport, or slaughters a pig for meat when alternative sustenance is readily available is not condemned by these societies in the same way. In this scenario, our empathic limits are established not by the aesthetic differences between humans and other beings, but by social precedent.

Empathy is naturally occurring in most animals and its existence offers us significant benefits.[[7]](#footnote-7) Our ability to grasp others’ lived experiences gives to us a perceived dignity of other beings. It grants us a multidimensional perspective of the world that increases both our knowledge and our capacity to understand foreign concepts. Stein muses that acts of empathy “show the possibility of enriching one’s own worldview through another’s; it shows the significance of empathy for the experience of the real external world.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In saying this, Stein posits that empathy has consequences which extend beyond our internal lives and into the real external world. It gives us an external mirror through which we can see and judge ourselves, and it proves the existence of the external world through shared experience and sensation. “Confined within the limits of my individuality,” she says, “I could never get beyond ‘the world as it appears to me.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Part III: Universal Exploitation in the Dairy Industry**

While Rosa Luxemburg comes from a radically different philosophical tradition than does Edith Stein, her analysis of surplus value in a capitalist system is crucial to our understanding of the ubiquitous mistreatment of dairy cows. In her article, “Wage Labor,” Luxemburg argues that profit-prioritizing endeavors inevitably lead to the exploitation of laborers. She observes that labor-power can only be a useful commodity if it produces enough commercial material to pay for the laborer’s own wages with enough left over for the employer to use for profit. Luxemburg identifies “surplus labor,” or labor for which the worker is uncompensated and that is essentially donated to the owners of the means of production, as the generator of profit. In order to increase profits, capitalist owners must make the most of this surplus labor. Dairy cows do not receive wages, but their owners must still account for the cost of their housing, food, and general upkeep. These are the elements of life which human wages account for as well, so Luxemburg’s use of “wages” will here be used to refer to cows’ cost of living or standard of life.

For human workers, the ability to create surplus labor has only become possible through industrial development. These developments, Luxemburg argues, are not natural to human or non-human animals, but are rather social phenomena which have emerged over time.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly, female cows who, like humans, only produce milk after pregnancy for the offspring they bear, are only able to generate enough milk to fill grocery store isles because of an industrial restructuring of dairy farming that occurred throughout the 20th century.[[11]](#footnote-11) This industrial form of milk production requires that female cows be continuously and forcefully impregnated. Although it is safest to wait until a cow is 15 months old for breeding, most dairy cows are artificially inseminated for the first time at 12 months.[[12]](#footnote-12) When profits are driven by surplus values, Luxemburg says, “the more unpaid work that can be obtained from the workers, the better.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Because the majority of cows maintain peak breast milk production rates only during the first four years of their lives, dairy farmers who want to obtain the greatest amount of surplus labor must start their pregnancies as early as possible. This same concern for surplus value also necessitates dairy cows’ unnaturally short lifespan. Cows who are healthy but have declining milk production are turned over to the beef industry to be killed for meat. This means that, healthy or not, dairy cows are usually slaughtered by the time they are five years old, even though their natural lifespan would be about 20-25 years.[[14]](#footnote-14) To put this in perspective, it would be as if human workers were retired and killed at the age of 16.

According to Luxemburg, unrestrained capitalism encourages the overuse and overexertion of workers.[[15]](#footnote-15) In the dairy industry, this can be observed in the perpetual cycle of pregnancy that female cows are forced to endure throughout their lives, but it is truly epitomized by the frequency of cow recumbency. A recumbent cow is one who can no longer stand of her own accord and has fallen down, unable to stand up. People who work in the industry generally refer to these collapsed animals as “Downers,” or “Creepers” in the event that they are still able to move their legs.[[16]](#footnote-16) Downer cows usually collapse from pain, exhaustion, or untreated illnesses.[[17]](#footnote-17) While it is possible to treat these cows, treatment is an economically inefficient option for dairy farmers, so they are almost always taken directly to slaughter.

In discussing the maltreatment of laborers, Luxemburg wrote “It was clear that, if the natural drive of capital for surplus value were not reined in by the state, it would sooner or later turn whole states into gigantic graveyards… but without workers, no exploitation of workers.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Here, Luxemburg illustrates two connected, but unique issues. First, she highlights the unrelenting motivation of labor exploitation in a capitalist system. We have already explored the consequences of this in the dairy industry. Secondly, Luxemburg identifies a potential pitfall of capitalist commercial industry: if employers exploit their workers to the point at which they can no longer work, the capitalist system of production would then crumble. To prevent this from happening, they must either treat their workers with enough care that they can continue to labor for longer periods of time, or they must make sure that they have a reserve army of workers waiting to take the place of those who are rendered fall. For the dairy industry, the latter option is economically preferable. Because cows must become pregnant to produce breast milk, the industry facilitates the simultaneous production of both commodity and reserve workers. While dairy cows’ male babies are slaughtered for veal, their female calves become dairy cows themselves within their first year of life. This reserve army of dairy cows disincentivizes the prolonging of the laborers’ lives.

Luxemburg also explores the capitalist justifications for minimizing provisions and compensation given to the labor force. Capitalist employers, Luxemburg asserts, intentionally define “cost of living” as a malleable concept.[[19]](#footnote-19) This justification allows them to offer workers less compensation. By reducing the percentage of labor which goes towards the care of the laborers themselves, employers are able to increase the percentage of labor that can be devoted to profit. The ramifications of this in the dairy industry are manifold. In order to diminish their cost of living, dairy cows are often subject to poor living conditions, untreated mastitis—a painful infection of the mammary gland, teat lesions, and starvation. The most significant consequence, though, is the immediate removal of their newborn calves. This is yet another symptom of capitalist profit-seeking as described by Luxemburg. The babies of dairy cows are permanently separated from their mothers within the first hours of their lives so that they do not consume any of the milk which is reserved for sale to humans. While this serves to generate higher profits for farmers, it is traumatic for the separated mothers and newborns. Cows, who, like many animals have strong maternal bonds with their young, will fight to stay with their children and often cry for days after their calves are taken from them.[[20]](#footnote-20)

These observations do not support a conclusion that dairy farmers are inherently cruel. Rather, Luxemburg shows us that industrialization and capitalism have dovetailed to create an impossible situation for owners of dairy cows. Because of the competition from large-scale dairy operations, non-industrialized methods of milk production are simply no longer economically viable. This economic analysis illustrates the realities of the capitalist labor market which drive the mistreatment of laborers and of which the dairy industry provides a brutally poignant example. Her work is important in helping us grasp the impetus for, and universality of, exploitation in the dairy industry.

**Part IV: Commodification of Cow Milk Perpetuates Objectification of Female Cows**

“When women’s labor is treated as a commodity, the women who perform it are degraded.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Elizabeth Anderson’s statement here refers to the social devaluation of the bond between mothers and their children when economic standards are applied to childbearing. While she makes this assertion with the surrogacy industry in mind, Anderson’s argument can be comfortably applied to the dairy industry as well. The commodification of childbearing, Anderson says, not only violates the normal role of emotions in pregnancy, but also reduces producers’ “claims to respect and consideration.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Because cows are impregnated with the primary goal of milk production rather than child production, a lack of care for the mother is particularly apparent in the dairy industry. Cows are often treated indifferently during their pregnancies and occasionally become recumbent after giving birth because of broken pelvises or spinal injuries due to mishaps during the birthing process.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Widespread social acceptance of mother-child separation denies the legitimacy of the mother’s perspective of her own pregnancy. Like surrogates in the commercial surrogacy industry, female cows are forced to repress their biological instinct towards care and protection of their offspring. In order to justify these actions, the industry works to trivialize both the experience of pregnancy and the bond between mother and child. As non-human animals who are considered commodities themselves, cows are frequently objectified in the most literal sense. Their experience of pregnancy and giving birth is stripped of its legitimacy as a genuinely emotional experience through brutal language and abusive practices. Industry terms for the devices used to inseminate female dairy cows vary, but many farmers refer to them as “rape racks” or “sperminators.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The usage of vulgar terminology serves to make light of the insemination process which can often be traumatic in and of itself. The abuse suffered by dairy cows at the hands of their keepers is further indication of their rampant objectification. Footage of dairy farms has shown farmers beating and stabbing cows with pitchforks, attacking cows with tasers, using tractors to drag recumbent but alert cows by the neck, breaking bones in cows’ tails in an effort to make them move, and even bragging about beating cows and calves to death.[[25]](#footnote-25) Anderson would likely identify a denial of the cows’ emotional capacity as the reason for these abuses.

The primary distortions which arise from treating women’s labor as a commodity -- … her degradation and her exploitation – stem from a common source. This is the failure to acknowledge and treat appropriately the surrogate mother’s emotional engagement with her labor.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Because it serves to underplay the significant trauma that they endure, the degradation of female cows helps to perpetuate dairy production and consumption. The abusive farmers’ behavior, while abhorrent, is a common reaction to the commodification of sentient beings and assists in the trivialization of their lived experiences.

**Part V: Why Do Empathetic Humans Perpetuate Harmful Practices**

We have established that humans have the capacity to engage in acts of empathy with non-human, embodied beings and that empathy serves to benefit human existence. We have also observed that pressures of a capitalist economy have made the exploitation of female cows in the dairy industry universal and that these exploitative practices are legitimized by the degradation of these embodied beings. We must then ask *why* humans contribute to the harming of creatures with whom they can empathize through their continued consumption of dairy products. Common responses to this question are that milk gives people calcium that they need to strengthen their bones and that the taste of cheese is simply irresistible, but these justifications are flawed. The World Health Organization notes that diet does have a relationship to osteoporosis, but recommends high fruit, vegetable, and soy product intake rather than dairy consumption to combat bone frailty.[[27]](#footnote-27) A cup of tofu contains considerably more calcium than does a cup of cow’s milk.[[28]](#footnote-28) And, while many people have learned to love the taste of cheese, there is now such a wide variety of dairy-free cheese alternatives that no one would be limited in enjoyment of their preferred quality or type of cheese taste by foregoing the cow’s milk option. These easily disputed arguments for continued consumption of cow’s milk serve to obscure the more substantive reason for these actions.

In analyzing the ethical sense of self, Else Voigtländer argues that, when confronted with the fact that we have done something that falls short of our own standards of goodness, we are faced with a choice. We either accept this information and allow it to diminish our sense of self, or we choose not to internalize it and continue living with an undisrupted degree of self-worth.[[29]](#footnote-29) I assert that most humans avoid the dilemma entirely by remaining ignorant of the injustices committed by the commercial dairy industry. The knowledge that an ambiguous and opaque wrong is occurring within dairy production dissuades many humans from seeking out exactly what harms are being committed for fear that internalization of such knowledge, and consequent damage to the ethical sense of self, would be unavoidable.

The intentional avoidance of knowledge about the brutalities inflicted on dairy cows would be described by Kristie Dotson as pernicious ignorance. In her work, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” Dotson defines pernicious ignorance as “a reliable ignorance or counterfactual incompetence that, in a given context, is harmful.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This form of ignorance makes successful linguistic exchanges between speakers and audiences difficult because the speaker is able to perceive a lack of reciprocation in their audience and consequently censors their speech. When others demonstrate that they are ignorant of the topic about which a person would like to discuss, what Dotson calls “testimonial incompetence,” the potential speaker, understanding that the burden of enlightenment and explanation lies on them, will often choose not to speak at all.[[31]](#footnote-31) Because most dairy consumers remain willfully ignorant of dairy farming practices, dairy cow advocates are frequently subject to this type of coerced silencing. A cycle is thus created in which those who would like to inform others about dairy farming feel pressured to remain silent, which then feeds into the pernicious ignorance of their potential audience. This, in turn, makes dairy cow advocates hesitant to engage with a non-reciprocal audience. Ignorance of dairy farming, although derived from one’s desire to protect their self-worth, causes significant harm to others and serves to reinforce the perpetuation of that ignorance.

**Part VI: Conclusion**

Humans are embodied beings capable of feeling empathy for other embodied beings. This empathy can be limited by relatively alien appearances, but these limitations are conditional and shaped by social contexts. Consequently, humans are frequently conditioned to suppress their empathy for other beings, such as cows, who have been commodified and subsequently exploited by the labor market. The dairy industry is held hostage by capitalist industrialization. Because capitalist market structures incentivize and ultimately demand practices harmful to dairy cows, the commodification of cow’s breast milk creates impetus for the objectification of female cattle. This objectification encourages both dairy farmers’ and dairy consumers’ rejection of cows’ emotional capacity and in doing so, allows them to disengage from the abusive nature of dairy farming practices. Despite their ability to empathize with cows, humans perpetuate cows’ brutalization through dairy consumption because they are emotionally incentivized to remain ignorant of said abuse. The consequent pernicious ignorance discourages dairy cow advocates from engaging with potentially non-reciprocal audiences. Humans’ refusal to inform themselves about the dairy industry and engage empathetically with commodified species is limiting to their worldviews and gives them an unnecessary disadvantage by denying themselves enlightenment.

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