

Understanding Animal

The age-old question of “How should we treat animals?” still remains.

by **Kasey Brown**, associate editor

Have you ever wondered why people can have such varying opinions about things sometimes? From heavy topics like politics and religion to something as simple as chocolate or vanilla, opinions run deep, and they are strong.

The question, “How should we treat animals?” is one of the oldest questions of humankind, David Fraser, professor of animal welfare at the University of British Columbia, told attendees of the 4th International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare in Ames, Iowa, July 16-18. The varying answers to this question elicit strong debate among farmers, ranchers, agriculturists and consumers. The debate can even turn to legislation. Understanding the deep-seated cultural views behind these opinions can help drive the discussion forward from its present stalemate.

Conflicting views

This question dates back to Biblical times. The *Bible* adopted a pastoralist view in that humans could use animals but should care diligently for them, he explained. At the time, animals were viewed as fundamentally different from humans.

As science progressed, however, it was discovered that animals and humans have similar skeletons and organs. Recognition of these anatomical similarities led to more philosophical contemplation of our relationship to animals. More recently, research on animal behavior by Jane Goodall and many others has shed light on the emotions and social lives of animals.

Fraser noted, “Once people began to see animals and humans as having similar anatomy, a shared evolutionary ancestry and some similarity in their emotional lives, this led us to rethink the original question, ‘How should we treat animals?’”

A second development that helped shape ideas about animal welfare was the conflict that arose during the Industrial Revolution between “romantic” and “industrial” worldviews.

Fraser shared the classic romantic story *The Nightingale* by Hans Christian Andersen. In the story, the Emperor of China learned that the most beautiful thing in his empire was the song of the nightingale. A peasant girl



led his advisors to find the nightingale, and the bird agreed to come to the palace where it became a great hit, although the Emperor kept it in a cage.

Eventually, the Emperor was given an artificial bird that impressed the court with its ornate appearance and mechanical waltz tune, and the nightingale escaped back to the forest. In time, long after the mechanical bird had worn out, the Emperor became deathly ill. The nightingale returned, and its song was so beautiful that the Emperor regained his health. The nightingale then agreed to keep singing for the Emperor, so long as he could

continue to live free in the forest.

This story is a prime example of the romantic worldview, Fraser explains. The romantic worldview values a simple, basic life; it values nature ahead of technology; and it values emotion and individual freedom.

When it comes to animal welfare, the romantic view emphasizes the emotions of animals, including comfort, contentment and avoidance of pain and distress. It also values the ability of animals to live reasonably “natural” lives in systems like free-range and pasture, he said.

The contrasting “industrial” worldview came from the promoters of the early factories. It emphasizes productivity, and it sees change as a form of progress that should

be welcomed. The industrial worldview sees nature as an imperfect state that we can improve by science and technology. It values rationality ahead of emotion and the productivity of enterprise ahead of individual freedom.

In terms of animal welfare, the industrial view emphasizes the basic health and productivity of animals ahead of their emotions or the naturalness of their lives.

The different worldviews help us understand the conflicts over animal welfare, Fraser explained. Some people, especially urban dwellers, emphasize the “natural” side of animal welfare, and think animal welfare depends on animals being kept in systems such as free-range and pasture. Others emphasize the emotional side. For them, good animal welfare means that animals are “happy” and that unpleasant emotional states, including pain and discomfort, are well-controlled.

Additionally, for others, especially intensive animal producers, good animal welfare means that animals are healthy and productive, even if this involves artificial environments and painful procedures.

Although a few people are dyed-in-the-wool romantics or dyed-in-the-wool industrialists, most of us are “conflicted” over the different worldviews and see all aspects of animal welfare — health, happiness, naturalness — as important. Therefore, animal welfare standards and practices need to strike “a reasonable balance among the three views of animal welfare,” Fraser asserted.

Finding solutions

A very practical conflict during the Industrial Revolution has also shaped our response to animal welfare, Fraser said. A major concern over the early factories was the welfare of the workers — men, women and young children — who worked incredibly long hours in cramped areas without sheathed equipment or air free of fumes or dust. Eventually, laws called the “Factory Acts” were made to protect workers by regulating the working environments and hours of work, he explained.

“The intensification of animal production, which uses confinement and automation to

increase production, is largely perceived as a good thing in the less industrialized parts of the world,” he said, “but in the industrialized countries, intensification was perceived as another form of industrialization.” As a result, when concern arose over the welfare of animals in intensive environments, the main response was legislation very similar to the Factory Acts, which tried to protect animal welfare mostly by regulating the animals’ environment.

However, Fraser noted many studies that show great variation in basic animal welfare problems like leg lesions, lameness and mortality rate, even when the same type of environment is used. Simply put, he said, “The same type of environment can produce very different welfare outcomes.”

This is because animal welfare is affected by more than the physical environment. It is

also affected by nutrition, health care, genetic selection and handling, all of which depend on the skill, knowledge and attentiveness of the producers and staff. Animal production is a skill-demanding task, and the skill level of producers can vary.

Instead of the analogy to factories, farms could be likened to a long-term-care facility for patients or the elderly, Fraser thoughtfully suggested. Instead of a factory, in which its workers go home and care for themselves, farm animals are in the constant care of farmers and ranchers. Their care depends largely upon the skill, knowledge and attentiveness of the caretakers. How to achieve a high level of care, especially in today’s large operations, is the next hurdle in the pursuit of animal welfare, he challenged.

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Cattle psychology: Where the romantic meets the pragmatist

Commentary by **Anne Burkholder**, Feedyard Foodie blog, owner of Will Feed, Inc.

A couple of weeks ago at the International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare, I heard Dr. David Fraser speak about the conflicting ideas of “romantic” vs. “industrial” thoughts toward animal welfare. Listening to his presentation cemented my belief that I was a conflicted romantic and pragmatic animal-welfare supporter.

Saturday morning while exercising calves during a beautiful sunrise, it occurred to me that perhaps I am so drawn to cattle psychology because it is where the romantic meets the pragmatist.

I had spent the week working with some 550-weight fall-born calves, which arrived at the feedyard anxious and unsettled. The first morning they waited, grouped together in the back corner of the pen, too unconfident to actively seek the feedbunk. Using great care, I entered the home pen and asked them to move in straight lines seeking to engage the “thinking” part of their brains. I then gently asked them to exit the pen gate and travel down the alleyway. Sensitive to their large flight zone, I used very mild alternate pressure to guide their movement.

After working with them in the main corral for a few minutes, I asked them to again travel back to the home pen where fresh breakfast had just been placed in the feedbunk. The long-stem prairie hay and calf ration in the bunk caught the attention of several of the heifers as they traveled back into the pen, and before long, many of the calves were lined up at the bunk finding breakfast.

As part of my regular cattle acclimation protocol, I followed this same routine every morning for five days. Each day the animals gained a greater level of confidence and a better understanding of life in their new home. When I entered the pen on Saturday (Day 5), I knew that the cattle were acclimated.

They looked at me with curiosity and hesitated before agreeing to leave the home pen as if to ask, “Are you sure that I really have to leave?”

I love it when a calf asks me a question. I love it even more when he accepts my response and offers an appropriate reaction.

A good cattle caregiver can sense when a group of animals is settled and comfortable.

The natural energy to leave the home pen is less than the energy seen when the animals return to the home pen. In addition, the cattle travel down the alleyway and past a handler with confidence. Sometimes it is hard to attain this, but when it happens it is a thing of beautiful harmony.

The romantic in me smiles because I know that I have made a positive difference in the welfare of the calf. The pragmatist in me also smiles because my “job” as a cattle caregiver just got a lot simpler. That calf will now handle more easily, is less likely to get sick, and converts his feed more efficiently, thereby reducing the environmental footprint of my beef.