

## Why Are Cows Meat, Pigs Pork, Turkeys Turkey, and Tunas Tuna?

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June 24, 2020

*Names and labels used for "food animals" are psychological ploys to distance people from their meals and reduce [cognitive dissonance](#)...*



Walter, a rescued turkey, at Luvin' Arms Animal Sanctuary – image by Tito White

A few weeks ago I received an email from a 12-year-old boy (Erwin) who was concerned and confused about the names and labels that are used to refer to so-called "food animals." He asked, "Why are cows meat, pigs pork, turkeys turkey, and tunas tuna?" The [COVID-19](#) pandemic is calling [attention](#) to the lives and plight of a wide variety of nonhuman animals. He had read about the horrific conditions at pork-producing meatpacking plants and, while he knew that what we call pork had previously been a sentient pig, he hadn't really thought much about it.<sup>1</sup> I reminded him that the meat and pork industries are more appropriately called the cow and pig industries, that a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich is really a [pig, lettuce, and tomato sandwich](#), and that the real question at hand is "[Who's for dinner?](#)" rather than "What's for dinner"? A few other email exchanges showed me he clearly understood what I was writing.

Erwin also mentioned that when he asked his mother this same question, she casually told him that animals don't really have emotions or feelings, and "These words are used are for [marketing](#) and people don't want to come to terms with the fact they are eating a cow or a pig." Erwin wondered, rightfully, why birds, fish, and invertebrates who are eaten usually

called by name, for who they are—chicken, turkey, goose, tuna, halibut, lobster—and wanted to know more about the names and labels that are used to refer to nonhumans who are regular features on countless humans' meal plans. He also wondered why lamb chops are a popular food item, and I couldn't say much about it given that it's well known that sheep are fully sentient beings just like cows, pigs, and other mammalian "food animals," but I was pleased he asked. I once asked a hunter why deer meat is called venison, but people freely talk about elk steaks. He said something like, "Many people don't want to face the fact they're eating a cute deer like Bambi."

### **Why are cows meat, pigs pork, sausage or bacon, chimpanzees bushmeat, turkeys turkey, chickens chicken, tunas tuna, and lobsters lobster?**

Of course, there are many other examples of misleading speciesist names and labels used to refer to "food animals." Indeed, they have become global memes. In my emails to Erwin I mentioned a few things that are easy to summarize. I began by writing that his mother was right on the mark—most people don't want to know they're eating cows or pigs, but don't really think about who they're eating when birds, fish, or some invertebrates are on the menu. Numerous people think that animals whose species' identities aren't hidden or disguised aren't really sentient or emotional and they're all the same. This couldn't be further from the truth, given what solid science has shown us about birds, fish, and numerous invertebrates.<sup>2,3</sup> We also know that mammals, birds, and fish don't like being caged and brutally abused in ways that defy any compassion or empathy at all, that birds and fish don't necessarily suffer less than mammals, and that they have unique personalities. Animal sentience isn't science fiction and animal suffering isn't an enigma.

I also mentioned that the words and labels that are used are very effective psychological ploys that distance people from their meals and reduce cognitive dissonance for those who fully know—or should know—who they're consuming, but want to forget about it. He fully understood what I meant. Also, some people know the animals suffer and still can't stop themselves from eating them—eating misery—and can't resolve the "meat paradox" by not doing what they well know causes pain, suffering, and death.

### **The 3 Ds that influence meal plans: How denying and distancing work to reduce dissonance.**

I went on to tell Erwin that his mother was incorrect in saying that nonhumans don't have emotions or feelings. I wondered if she really meant this or if it was her way of denying and distancing herself from who she was eating. As incredible as it sounds, there still are people who deny that nonhumans are sentient and emotional beings. They're clearly stuck in the darkest of dark ages and maintain that we don't really know if other animals have emotions. These denialists go on to falsely and inane claim that there's no science to support the idea that other animals are sentient and emotional beings, so therefore they're not. I won't belabor the crude logic here, but it really does exist. For example, recently, The Ontario Federation of Agriculture made this absurd claim, despite clear scientific evidence that numerous nonhumans have rich and deep emotional lives.<sup>4</sup> I told Erwin that the real question at hand is *why* emotions have evolved, not *if* they have evolved, and that they matter very much to the individuals experiencing them.

I also explained to Erwin that the vast majority of "food animals" produced by massive industries are numbered, rather than named. This is another way for people to distance themselves from *who* the animals—each and every individual—truly are. Animals on sanctuaries, such as turkey Walter (above), are invariably named, and this helps to establish close and enduring relationships and recognize every single one as the unique individual they are. Of course, unnamed animals aren't less sentient than named individuals. All should be referred to as "who," rather than "it," "which," or "that."

Finally, I mentioned to Erwin that many people who choose to unmind "food animals" and falsely rob them of their emotional lives don't hesitate to attribute rich and active minds and a wide variety of emotions to companion animals with whom they share their homes. Uminding is a ruse by which some people claim certain animals such as cows, pigs, sheep, and others who wind up on humans' plates are dumb and don't have feelings, and this ploy allows them to eat and otherwise use and abuse them without a care in the world. While many people don't like to admit it, in terms of harms, pain, suffering, and death, dogs and cats don't really suffer more than individuals who find themselves on humans' meal plans. When people ask me how can I work in China helping to rescue moon bears from the bear bile industry knowing that people there eat dogs and cats, I usually respond by politely saying something like, "Well, I live in the United States where people eat cows, pigs, sheep, and other fully sentient animals, and I dislike both practices. What's the difference?"

While it may sound strange or heartless, there really isn't a difference between eating traditional "food animals" and companion animals, because they're all sentient and deeply suffer on the long and pain-filled journey on their way to peoples' plates.<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, in her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism*, Melanie Joy "explores the many ways we numb ourselves and disconnect from our natural empathy for farmed animals." She came up with the term *carnism* "to describe the belief system that has conditioned us to eat certain animals and not others."

### **Youngsters offer hope and we must listen carefully to them.**

I'm pleased that Erwin wrote to me. He raised a lot of issues, many of which he was unaware were so salient, current, and on the minds of numerous people. I'm also happy that he understood what I wrote to him, or came to understand it after a few exchanges. Along the way, his mother thanked me and said she was revising her ways of thinking about animal sentience and animal emotions. I was pleased that she and Erwin could have further conversations about who we eat, how they're labeled, and why. I thanked her and noted it was a win-win for all.

I've written a number of other essays motivated by great questions from curious youngsters.<sup>6</sup> These discussions give me hope. We really need to listen carefully to what they're are saying and asking. We must do the very best we can to leave future generations a more compassionate and friendlier world in which humane education and peaceful coexistence are high on the agenda.

### **References**

#### **Notes**

- 1) More information about how meatpacking plants have become COVID hotspots can be seen [here](#).
  - 2) More information on the emotional lives of birds, including "food birds," can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).
  - 3) More information on the emotional lives of fishes can be seen [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).
  - 4) More information and numerous references on the emotional lives of cows and pigs can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
  - 5) For more detailed discussions of why we interact with different animals in vastly different ways, see Hal Herzog's [\*Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals\*](#), Melanie Joy's [\*Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism\*](#), [Why Do We Feel Compassion and Empathy For Specific Animals?](#), and [The Psychology Behind Why We Love and Exploit Animals](#).
  - 6) ["My Friend Eats Fish and Says She's Vegan. Is She Really?"](#) (A question from 12-year old Marnie); ["I Sure Wouldn't Put My Dog in a Puppy Mill, Would You?"](#) (I was thrilled when a 10-year-old asked me this question.)
- Bekoff, Marc. [Psychological and Environmental Aspects of Who We Eat](#).
- \_\_\_\_\_ . [Who we eat is moral question: Vegans have nothing to defend](#).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Cows: Science Shows They're Bright and Emotional Individuals](#).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Babe, Lettuce, and Tomato: Dead Pig Walking](#). (You want a what?)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [The Emotional Lives of Cows: Ears Tell Us They're Feeling OK](#).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Assuming Chickens Suffer Less Than Pigs Is Idle Speciesism](#).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Are Pigs as Smart as Dogs and Does It Really Matter?](#)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Do Animals Think or Feel?](#) (The Ontario Federation of Agriculture says no, despite clear evidence they do.)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Animal Emotions, Animal Sentience, and Why They Matter](#).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [For the Birds: From Exploitation to Liberation](#). (A new book by Dr. Karen Davis called [For the Birds: From Exploitation to Liberation](#) focuses on chickens, turkeys, and other domestic fowl.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [All Turkeys Should Be Respected and Pardoned](#).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [On World Day for Farmed Animals, Let's Honor Who They Are](#). (The amount of pain and suffering these animals endure is incalculable.)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [The Mistreatment of Female "Food Cows" Includes Sexual Abuse](#). (Have you ever stopped to consider how female cows are objectified and exploited?)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ . [Why Sheep Matter: They're Intelligent, Emotional, and Unique](#). (An important new essay reviews sheep cognition, emotions, and personalities.)

\_\_\_\_\_. [Is an Unnamed Cow Less Sentient Than a Named Cow?](#) (A comment on a discussion on using "who" or "which" to refer to nonhumans.)

\_\_\_\_\_. [A Tribute to Dr. Victoria Braithwaite and Sentient Fishes.](#) (There are numerous references in this essay, and Dr. Braithwaite's book [Do Fish Feel Pain?](#) was, and remains, a game changer. In this book she writes, "I have argued that there is as much evidence that fish feel pain and suffer as there is for birds and mammal —and more than there is for human neonates and preterm babies." (Page 153)

\_\_\_\_\_. [Fishes Show Individual Personalities in Response to Stress.](#)

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Oh, I know animals suffer, but I love my steak": The self-serving resolution of the "meat paradox.](#)

Chisenhall, Jeremy. [Kentucky meat plant cited, penalized after cow shot in the head 4 times.](#) Herald-Leader, June 23, 2020.

Telesca, Jennifer. [Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna.](#) University of Minnesota Press, 2020.