

## Reckoning with the Beast: Animal Theory and its Vicissitudes

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### Abstract

*Are there any substantial intellectual or ethical challenges posed by the **status quo** use of animals in modern societies? If so, are formal arguments and philosophical science-fiction the appropriate means with which to address the issue? This article compares theories and argumentative strategies from both of the major traditions of modern Western philosophy, with a view to ascertaining how they relate to each other, and to human agents concerned with animal welfare. It also examines the role of religion in the sanctification of ideas about the place of animals in the overall scheme of things. Since, for the majority of people, their most frequent interactions with animals occur on the dinner plate, the focus is on so-called ‘food-animals’ and vegetarianism. It is concluded that rationality in ethics should be extended beyond mere appeals to logical consistency, and that the dubious yields of conceptual exercises contrived to ‘test’ moral principles in absurd situations are anathema.*

**Keywords :** Animal ethics, Posthumanism, Ethical thought-experiments

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## ข้อกังขาในอมนุษย์: ทฤษฎีสัตว์และ สภาพที่เปลี่ยนแปลง

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### บทคัดย่อ

วิธีที่มนุษย์เราปฏิบัติต่อสัตว์ในสังคมปัจจุบันถือว่าเป็นปัญหาในเชิงปรัชญา และจริยธรรมหรือไม่? หากใช่ มีข้อกล่าวอ้างใดหรือแนวทางปรัชญาใดที่มุ่ง ประเด็นตอบคำถามนี้บ้างหรือไม่? บทความนี้ทำการเปรียบเทียบทฤษฎีและ แนวคิดทางปรัชญาตะวันตกที่สำคัญสองทฤษฎี เพื่อให้เข้าใจว่าทฤษฎีทั้งสอง เกี่ยวข้องสัมพันธ์กันในเรื่องดังกล่าวอย่างไร และมนุษย์มีความตระหนักในเรื่องนี้ อย่างไร นอกจากนี้ยังนำเสนอแนวคิดทางศาสนาที่เกี่ยวกับสถานะของสัตว์ เนื่อง ด้วยคนทั่วไปจะเกี่ยวข้องกับสัตว์โดยหลักแล้วคือการกินเนื้อสัตว์เป็นอาหาร บทความนี้จึงมุ่งประเด็นไปที่ “สัตว์ที่เป็นอาหาร” และ มังสวิรัติ ซึ่งนำมาสู่ บทสรุปที่ว่า จริยธรรมควรจะขยายไปกว่าเดิม ไม่เพียงแต่ตั้งคำถามตรรกะธรรมดา และหากมีข้อกังขาเกี่ยวกับความคิดหลักที่จะใช้ทดสอบหลักจริยธรรมเรื่องนี้ ข้อคำถามนั้นจะกลายเป็นคำถามต้องห้าม

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*“... knee-jerk liberals on racism and sexism ought to go knee-jerk about cows and guinea-pigs; ...”*

Cora Diamond

*“The last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize the maxims for drives, this dog was a descendant of the dogs of Egypt.”<sup>3</sup>*

Emmanuel Levinas

*“There is no meat that is pure in three ways: not premeditated, not asked for, and not impelled; therefore refrain from eating meat.”*

Lankavatara Sutra<sup>4</sup>

## Introductory Remarks

‘Animal theory’ is used in the present article to refer to various attempts to address the status of animals since the mid-1970s, when the so-called ‘animal rights’ movement first emerged in the West. While it is not a designation any of the practitioners would necessarily accept, their endeavours are all *theoretical* in the minimal sense of extending traditional conceptual resources to problematize the orthodox status of non-human animality (where ‘non-human animality’ serves to remind human theorists that they, too, are taxonomically animals, lest their theoretical endeavours

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<sup>3</sup> The dogs did not bark as the Hebrew slaves made their escape. *Exodus 11: 7* “But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know that Yahweh doth make a distinction between Egyptians and the children of Israel!”.

<sup>4</sup> The *Lankavatara Sutra* is one of the most explicit Mahayana texts advocating vegetarianism. As the pious Buddhist composers could not claim originality, the exhortations were put into the mouth of the historical Buddha himself.

result in biological amnesia).

The ‘theory’ in question is not always argumentative in the standard philosophical sense. In fact, part of the exercise is to examine to what extent *mere* logic and rational argument can assist in persuading those who are not yet fellow-travellers, those who will ‘die for a dogma who will not stir for a conclusion’.

The 1975 publication of Peter Singer’s book, *Animal Liberation*, was a turning point that led to systematic discussion of the treatment of animals as a *moral* issue (and it came to pass in the largely apolitical milieu of modern Anglo-American analytical philosophy). The book situated itself within an ongoing *secular* ethical project that had successfully dealt with issues of racism and sexism in the modern era, and the arguments were utilitarian, focusing on the consequences for overall happiness of taking animal interests seriously.

The ethical tradition of deontological rights was articulated when Tom Regan published *The Case for Animal Rights* a few years later. The book’s retort to the Consequentialists is that moral *trade-offs*, which could still validate the exploitation of animals in the calculus of overall sentient happiness, were unacceptable. One had to reach a point of ‘the Devil take the consequences’, and insist on an intrinsic value that was inviolate regardless of the overall benefits of overriding it. Regan employs the notion of a ‘subject-of-a-life’, something which animals also are insofar as *what happens to them matters to them*; animals are ‘somebodies’ with lives of their own.

It is a matter of some pride for the Animal Rights movement, generally speaking, that “Philosophers served as midwives of the

animal rights movement in the late 1970s.”<sup>5 6</sup> Furthermore, during more than two thousand years of Christian theological and philosophical reflection, less than one hundred works were written about the moral status of animals, compared to 240 works between 1970 and 1988 alone. The list of such works currently numbers in the thousands.

Insofar as these interventions were secular, and often secular *because* the Judeo-Christian tradition says so very little about animals as objects of moral concern, Christian theologians started contributing to the debate along the lines of ‘creativity within the Canon’. For example, what were the implications of the notion of *eschaton* (idyllic end-times) for ethics in the present? Various attempts were made to ‘immantize the Eschaton’, by letting the proverbial lamb lie with the lion *before* the Second Coming (cf. Appendix II).

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<sup>5</sup> Singer quotes this from *The Animal Rights Crusade*, by J. Jasper & D. Nelkin, in his 2007 Dasan Memorial Lecture entitled “*Ethics and Animals*”. He has a bleak view of the Continental tradition’s failure to address the issue, as well as of its mode of philosophizing: “Despite the much-vaunted ‘critical stance’ that these thinkers [Heidegger, Foucault, Levinas, Deleuze] are said to take to prevailing assumptions and social institutions, this extensive body of thought has largely failed to grapple with the issue of how we treat animals ... the British tradition of Hume, Bentham and Mill already reached the conclusion that the capacity for experiencing pain and pleasure is what is crucial to moral status. In contrast, the continental tradition, focused more on Kant, made the ability to reason, and with it the capacity for autonomy, the crucial requirement. Still, it is astonishing that so few of Kant’s followers noticed that this gave rise to a problem about the status of human infants and humans with profound intellectual disabilities ... The real lesson to be learned from the failure ... is that to adopt a ‘critical stance’ requires us to be critical about vague rhetorical formulations that appear profound or uplifting, but do more to camouflage weaknesses in reasoning than to hold them up for critical scrutiny.”

<sup>6</sup> Those working in the Continental tradition have an equally bleak view of the ongoing debates on the other side. Matthew Calarco (2004) states that “... these once thought-provoking and institution-changing discussions have ... become ... pedantic disputes among scholars ... most writers have become content with fine-tuning one or another set of established arguments or theories.” This is opposed to “... deepening the discussion of what is at stake in animal ethics – which is nothing less than a contestation of the primacy of human beings with respect to the ethical ...”. (p.175).

When the Continental tradition eventually joined the debate, it was only to problematize the position of the animal in Western metaphysics *tout court*, something to be addressed before any decision could be taken as to whether eating animals could be seen as ‘eating well’.

The marginalization of non-human animals was to serve as ammunition in the ongoing battle against philosophical humanism, in the way animals were dismissed by characterizing them as ‘poor in world’ (*weltarm*) and separated from human beings by ‘an abyss of essence’ (Heidegger).

Since the transmission of Buddhism to the West is also proceeding apace, many members of the intellectual class look towards Buddhism’s respect for all forms of sentient life as a way to ground animal theory and practice. The paucity of resources with which to deal with animals in the Abrahamic traditions thus sometimes leads to intellectual flight to the East, to *ahimsa* and other felicities not to be found at home.

However, the appropriation of Buddhist theoretical resources, both from a Buddhist ‘convert’ perspective, and from the position of profane scholarship, is fraught with pitfalls (*cf.* Appendix I). And vegans of Occidental extraction are, regrettably, not averse to lecturing the Asian ascetic class about their perceived dietary improprieties.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gary Francione’s “Ahimsa and Veganism”. *Jain Digest*, 2008. The tenured Western academic blithely urges Jain monks to abstain from dairy products because “... a glass of milk contains as much suffering as a steak.” In addition, robed ones, “The range of vegan clothing has increased dramatically ... and it is now easy to avoid the use of animal products for clothing.” Available online at <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/pdf/Ahimsa.pdf>.

## Animal Advocacy

The capacity to suffer is *normative* in all beings, and should therefore regulate how humans relate to ‘second-rate’ beings that suffer, and often suffer at human hands. If a being has the *capacity* to suffer, it has *interests* that need to be respected, not least of which is the interest not to be caused unnecessary pain (taking it as uncontentious that animals can and do suffer).

So begins the standard utilitarian argument for the extension of moral considerability by moral agents (humans) to moral patients (animals). Utilizing an equality principle that states that equal cases should be treated equally, – in this case, the ability to suffer, – the argument then appeals to various anti-discrimination sensibilities previously harnessed to unmask the prejudices in racism and sexism.

That is, if humans ignore the interests of animals *merely because* they are not human, this form of discrimination is logically indistinguishable from the discrimination and oppression against people on the basis of their race or sex. To ignore this arbitrariness of the species boundary, would be to fall into the sin of speciesism, to show preference for members of one’s own species when this is not justified. If the lion does display a preference for his own species; well, lions don’t do philosophy.

At this point, so-called ‘marginal cases’ are paraded to show that any species distinction is arbitrary. For instance, there are intellectually-challenged humans and children that we do not put in cages and eat; therefore, to do so in the case of non-human animals, is morally unjustifiable. If intellectual ability is not the attribute that can set humans apart morally, nor can other

candidates like language, autonomy, or self-awareness, for all of these may be absent in marginal humans.

The argument has been stated in this summary fashion in order to recreate the sense of *incredulity* it often evokes when first encountered by those without already existing ‘liberal’ predispositions, hence those who will not go ‘knee-jerk’ when the extension to species from sex and race is presented for consideration. For people generally do *not* view themselves as being unkind to animals, or complicit in the institutionalized suffering caused by the animal-industrial complex.

Incredulity apart, the speciesist can now either defend her regard for her own species, or come up with another property that makes humans more morally significant. In the ensuing arguments, one is bound to encounter something approaching the ‘torture of logic.’<sup>8</sup> For reasons that will become apparent later on, that is not the argumentative *Via Dolorosa* to be followed here. However, a few brief comments are in order.

Despite the supposed parallels between speciesism and sexism/racism, there seems to be a fundamental *disanalogy* between them. A black person is thought to have characteristics in common with *normal* ‘white’ humans, and this makes racism ethically problematic. A woman is thought to have capacities in common with *normal* males of every hue, and disregarding this makes sexism problematic. However, in the species case, animals are said to have characteristics in common with *abnormal* humans,

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<sup>8</sup> Cavell, S. (2003). *Disowning Knowledge*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 135

the so-called marginal cases. Moreover, as disadvantaged *humans*, the marginal cases are deprived of uniquely human opportunities to flourish; they cannot thrive as happy baboons, since vital aspects of what it is to be human are permanently absent from their lives.

In addition, the tactless ‘marginal human’ way of approaching speciesism seems to miss the fact that animal activists are unlikely to be satisfied when, in some utopian future, such humans are treated as tools of research in the way that animals presently are. Moralistic accusations of speciesism seem far-fetched to most human ethical agents, and

Furthermore, the Animal Rights movement frequently *equates* ‘humanism’, (the privileging of humans in ethical dilemmas) with ‘speciesism’, thus analogizing humanists with such oppressors as racists, sexists, and homophobes. If speciesists *arbitrarily* favour the interests of their own species, not all humanists have to do so. Humanism at its best is perhaps not as easily disposed off as most animal theorists seem to assume by characterizing it as *merely* another prejudice.

As for rights, they are mere means to ensure forms of *practical respect and protection*, not metaphysically inherent in either humans or animals. They are therefore best viewed as stipulations for behaviour, like acting *as if* everyone were equal. But equality in this sense is not an empirical fact, but a regulative moral ideal. And animal rights are easily overridden by even their most ardent advocates, for Regan admits that in a life-boat situation with four humans and one dog, it is not just that specific dog that will be thrown overboard, but *one million dogs* (because humans are superior ‘subjects-of-a-life’).

## The Question of the Animal

This is the question said to underlie issues of animal ethics in the Continental tradition. For some thinkers, however, animals are more of an *afterthought*, simply because the task as conceived is so all-encompassing. It amounts to nothing less than rehabilitating *Logos* itself, that is, western metaphysics, which from times past to the present has done violence to the 'heterogeneous multiplicity of the living'. This means that western thinking *per se* is intrinsically speciesist. The philosophical ethics that emerges in such a context is rather different from that encountered in Regan and Singer, who would more modestly link speciesism to sexism and racism.

To seriously believe that animal liberation should be conditional upon debunking all of western thinking, is to make the former dependent on a perhaps never-ending project, for it is not clear that humans could ever achieve a completely non-humanist intellectual praxis.

Some of the conceptual interrelationships may be briefly stated as follows:

(1) Firstly, western logic is exclusivist in that it repeatedly creates dual categories like human/animal, which privileges one term at the expense of the other. This exclusion results in the Protagorean *homo mensura*, man as the measure of all things. The aim is to rid thought and theory of this humanist bias once and for all (for the benefit of all sentient beings, and Parisian philosophers in particular).

(2) The original animal rights movement simply moves the line of exclusion to humans and animals on one side, and all other living entities on the other, thus perpetuating exclusion.

(3) Devout ‘Knights of Good Conscience’, who think that not eating meat is some final ethical *terminus ad quem*, are content to get up every morning and follow a rule mechanically. This is buying good conscience on the cheap.

(4) Ethics is interminable. It is based on responsiveness and recognition of the ethical appeal of the Other, something that is neither rule-based, nor a form of knowledge, hence undecidable.

In order to comprehend some of the fundamental concerns in this tradition of thought, it is necessary to briefly rehearse the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, considered by many to be the most important ethicist to have written since the War.

Levinas’s ethics involves responding to the ethical call of the Other when confronted with his/her face. The face is the ground of ethics in its appeal not to be killed, but ethics as such has no determinate *content* which can be expressed in rules once and for all. Although it is centred around the “Thou shalt not kill” of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Levinas has never understood this as “Thou shalt not put to death *the living in general*.”

As opposed to the ethical tradition implicit in Regan and Singer, there are thus no unassailable standards of moral conduct that are valid in all cases. What makes these standards ethical, in the Regan-Singer view, is that they are never set aside, even in extreme situations. In Levinas’s conception, such a mechanical application of rules relieves one of the burden of decision and responsibility; it is an example of the very automatism Descartes associates with animals. We cannot know in advance where the face begins or ends.

When it comes to animals as such, Levinas poignantly describes his time in a Nazi prison camp where he and his fellow inmates were treated by their captors as ‘a subhuman gang of apes’. Only a stray dog treated them respectfully, jumping up and down and barking in delight when they appeared at morning assembly. As Levinas says, “For him, there was no doubt that we were men”; – Kantian respect for persons in animal guise. Moving as the anecdote is, and although the dog might look and sound like a Kantian, he is not one. He is simply ‘*trop bête*’ as the French condensing of idiocy and animality would have it. So animals are *ethically faceless*, which is not surprising if Palestinians are.<sup>9</sup>

Derrida’s late philosophical excursions into animal theory occurs within this context, and he is as loathe to use the word ‘animal’ unthinkingly, as he is to endorse vegetarianism.

For vegetarians, too, are complicit: “*Les végétariens eux aussi mangent de l’animal et même de l’homme. Ils pratiquent un autre mode de dénégation.*” (Calarco, 2004, p. 194). That is, vegetarians also ‘deny’. Perhaps by wearing leather shoes, or insisting on the ‘arbitrary’ distinction between plant and animal matter, when

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted in passing that the work of Levinas is far from uncontentious. In the aftermath of the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in the Shatila and Sabra refugee camps, Levinas said on French radio that ethics is not applicable in the Palestinian context because they are ‘the enemy’. Some of his other comments include the view that “Humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks...All the rest – all the exotic – is dance.”, as well as the perception that the task of Jewish thought is to account for the ‘underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses’ that threaten Judeo-Christian ‘Sacred History’. Although Gottlob Frege’s anti-semitism need not directly affect the estimation of his work in mathematical logic, the comments of an ethicist with Zionist sympathies are probably of a different order. These remarks are informed, no doubt, by the idea, explicit in his book *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, that the chosen people have ultimate duties, and embodies a moral consciousness that knows itself to be the centre of the world.

slicing up a cow is akin to slicing a carrot; definitely by feeding your cat at the expense of all other cats (Derrida's cat, it has to be said, has become the most famous feline in the history of philosophy, having seen its master conceptually *in delecto flagrante* as he was about to take a shower).

Derrida uses 'eating well' (*bien manger*)<sup>10</sup> according to the precepts of deconstruction and post-structuralism generally, resisting all totalizing knowledges and practices, especially those that would make *distinctions* between who eats and who gets eaten. One notes, in the spirit of Hegel, how *die schöne Seele*, the 'beautiful soul' of the ethicist, lives in such dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being, that it flees from contact with the real world in order to preserve *theoretical* purity. (The Phenomenology of Spirit, §658).<sup>11</sup>

## No Justice; Just Us

Our human 'negative omnipotence' in relation to animals is so all-pervasive that it mostly goes unremarked and unthought. When it does get noticed, is often produces shame. What is shaming, if not animal powerlessness, submissiveness, and the failure to 'fight back' in the face of blatant abuse and the breaking of trust? In this

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<sup>10</sup> The tradition currently has at its disposal numerous derridean neologisms relating to animals, including *carno-phallogocentrism* and *l'animot*. The latter lets 'the plural of animals be heard in the singular' by adding *mot* (word) to *l'animal*, so that it sounds like the plural, *les animaux*, but with a singular article. The former adds *virile* meat-eating to the already existing post-structuralist sins of privileging males and the *logos* (speech rather than writing) as 'modes of mastery'.

<sup>11</sup> This is not the final word on Derrida's painstaking work regarding other animals, merely first impressions gleaned from some of the writings of wide-eyed disciples.

context, philosophical appeals to logical consistency in thinking come across as comical rather than compelling.

Which is not to deny that *the argument has been won*. However, the knowledge of what is being done to animals is often incapacitating, there is acute *normative solitude* (as expressed in the animal rights slogan in the section heading above). People who live in this knowledge are often marginal and marginalized. The failure to convince others of a moral vision, the inability of humans to change themselves, is a further source of shame.

Conceding that the general argument in favour of animals has been won, does not mean that '*the way of argumentation*' in ethical matters is not suspect. The very idea that *all* thoughts are permissible thoughts, is a corrupting one. The extremism this mode of thought encourages, can be found in any modern text on ethics: "Suppose that a woman, without family or friends, dies giving birth to a healthy infant. At the same hospital there are three five-year-old children who will die if they do not receive organ transplants, and the newborn has exactly the right tissue type."<sup>12 13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Fearful Thoughts", review of Jeff McMahan's *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*, by Stephen Mulhall (*London Review of Books*, 24, 2008). Mulhall observes acerbically that, in the tradition of ethical thought-experiments, "[b]eing a fearless thinker matters more, it seems, than avoiding fearful thoughts." He outlines why the use of thought-experiments is misguided. Insofar as they are exercises in the pursuit of clarity, they concentrate on numbers, and are 'arithmetical tales' that attempt to systematize morality by numbers. In the example under discussion, Mulhall notes that it eliminates anyone with whom the newborn might have a human relationship – the distress involved would complicate the sums. Then there should be enough *older* children to outnumber the newborn, to show that three is at least three times more than one. Does this do justice to either the texture or complexity of human ethical reality?

<sup>13</sup> *Blasé* public discussions of torture, something unprecedented since the time of the Inquisition, now go hand-in-hand with self-satisfied Animal Correctness. The conjunction is revealing. Another revealing indicator of the prevailing state of discourse is the praise heaped on Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 documentary, *The Act of Killing Ugal*, ('butcher', in Indonesian), which convinced some of those responsible for mass atrocities during Indonesia's anti-Communist purge (1965-1966) to dress up and *re-enact* the crimes of their choice in different Hollywood styles, from *film noir* to the Western. One wonders whether this would have been acceptable had the victims not been Communists, and Asian.

The additional *fanaticism* generated can be observed when a feminist (Adams, 1995) relates the tale of a pregnant vegetarian acquaintance who, having no guarantee that the child she was about to bear and give up for adoption would not consume and exploit animals, aborted.

It is exceedingly difficult to accept that we may have inherited a way of life that *rests on a mistake* when it comes to animals. To accept, furthermore, that morality can fail, and has failed consistently for some time, when it comes to animals.<sup>14 15</sup> Nevertheless, one can ‘sign on’ to the animal rights project, as at least a project, if not one that will eternally withstand theoretical scrutiny and hindsight. For once certain attributes count as subjectivity *for us*, and are protected legally, they are to be protected wherever recognised subsequently, regardless of species, and *by us*, by our species, not benevolent agent-neutral Martians acting *sub specie aeternitatis* (for that is not a good species under which to act).

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<sup>14</sup> The question of *relapse* in vegetarians is revealing. Lapsed vegetarians frequently relate the incident of relapse with relish and detailed attention to the kind of flesh that caused it. They would perhaps not relate a relapse to racism in similar vein (the jokes are just so good, *etc.*). Even as thoughtful a thinker as Stanley Cavell, although never vegetarian, notes with some amusement that he had resolved to eat each animal once, *for the sake of philosophy* (Cavell, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> The lapsed vegetarian is an unruly beast when it comes to flights of fancy regarding the animals that are now on the menu again. After concluding that vegetarianism is a virtue of affluence, *at most*, the grotesqueries are dished up: “... one enormous and enormously insensitive cow might be enough to meet the needs of whole communities ... And the animal so kept would count for only one on the hedonic calculus, which would make it easier to override her interests, if she had any ....”. Further: “I have a dream. It is that the rule ‘to each according to his needs, from each according to his ability’, should apply to all animals ... domestic animals, who are no longer able to take care of themselves, should at reasonable intervals quite painlessly be killed and eaten, or perhaps distributed as largesse to the poor and needy.” (Harrison, 2008). *Épater les bourgeois* with aspirations to *Acheronta movebo*? (‘raise hell/move the underground’, Vergil, *Aeneid*, Book VII).

As for posthumanist pieties; yes, there is perhaps a need for organic intellectuals *à la* Gramsci to represent animals in the Academy. But the aspiration to immaculate theory is a vain one, in both senses of the word, and the obsession with philosophical anthropomorphism leads to *needless distraction* by the Western canon. Yes, philosophy is being done, but not necessarily as a debate with Aristotle, Augustine and Kant<sup>16</sup> about animals. Would we debate slavery with Aristotle today? Then why animals? Descartes did not even know about the existence of higher primates, so what does he have to contribute now? (except insofar as factory farms literally *embody* the Cartesian view of animals as automata; animals are machines because humans treat them as machines).

Beyond merely functioning as each other's bad conscience, however, the posthumanists and Anglophone philosophers converge in misguidedness simply because of the nature of the concept *human*. It is not, alas, merely a *biological* concept. It is not 'at hand' and metaphysically given prior to doing ethics; we are not merely one more species of animal, although we are also one. For this reason, humanist prejudice is structurally different from other prejudices. What we are, both as humans and animals, is not sempiternally determined *before* ethical reflection begins. We learn, at the dinner table, for example, what some of the differences are: that *we eat them*, "... we are around the table and they are on it."(Diamond, 1978, p.

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<sup>16</sup> But see the interesting work in animal ethics by the neo-Kantian Christine Korsgaard, including "*Interacting with Animals: A Kantian Account*", "*Reflections on the Evolution of Morality*", and "*Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals*".

Therefore, being human is not just another property like sentience. And this accounts for the obtuse sermonizing of a lot of debate about animals, that only capacities, - to feel pain, to have a future, - are taken into account when deciding about acceptable treatment. The fundamental ethical relation is not constituted by attending, merely, to the capacity to suffer of beings of some *generic* class, without any specific connection to the human world other than sentience and a shared mortal coil.

Perhaps an intuitive ethical leap without a theoretical safety-net, either analytic or deconstructive in tenor, might be what moves most people to greater concern for animals. Kierkegaard talks about a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ in relation to the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Abraham knew it was ethically wrong to sacrifice his son, but ignored this by attending to something ‘higher’).

In a secular context, a *political suspension of the ethical* would move humans beyond this initial leap, still focused on precious *individual* attitudes about the eating of animals, towards attention to the interlocking injustices prevalent in animal industries (that mainly the poor and immigrants are employed, *etc.*), as well as suitable *public* acts (outer work). In this sense, compassion (inner work) is not enough, and animals need to become part of larger emancipatory projects not reliant on benevolent gestures (let’s make the lion’s cage bigger, *etc.*).

What is good enough in practice, is often not so in theory. Conversely, what is presently acceptable in theory, need not be acceptable in practice. Human acceptance of ‘You can be eaten because you are just an animal and cannot talk’, is not the final word when spreading the word.

Like the Jewish rabbi who was embarrassed by the divine permission to kill, yet could not deny it on pain of blasphemy, 'excuses' need to be found not to kill.

And so here, in every individual case, on every individual plate. Until breaking bread no longer involves heads on a platter.

## Conclusion

The foregoing has dwelled on some of the difficulties inherent in philosophical attempts to address the moral standing of animals, and the way in which the two Occidental traditions of philosophy tend to talk past each other on this issue.

Whereas one tradition values rigorous argument and consistency, these very logical exercises often serve as a deflection and escape from the concrete horror of animal lives in industrialized societies.

The other tradition, vain about its critical stance towards the prevailing *status quo*, sees the analytic animal rights movement as part of the problem, and therefore subscribes to nothing but the radical interminability of ethics as it proceeds to 'deconstruct' all that lives and ingests.

The impasse is illustrated by their differing stances towards vegetarianism: a minimum necessary condition of the moral life for the one; a false and inauthentic choice for the other.

It is, however, difficult not to question a professed concern for animals by those who refuse to abandon flesh-foods and yet want to be part of the moral discussion. That is, in some instances philosophy might demand more of its interlocutors than the mere disembodied exercise of reason. It is not merely a sophisticated debating club about abstract choices.

If, given the alternatives in our present circumstances, eating meat is ‘as empty a gluttony’<sup>17</sup> as bull-fights, fur-trapping, and pulling the wings off flies, then the locution ‘speaking as a vegetarian’ is not a morally vacuous one.

When the theoretical beast holds forth on ‘eating well’ and regurgitates its animal theory, it matters what kind of matter is in the belly of this beast.

## Appendix I: Imperialist Nostalgia & other Western Woes

“...the academic study of Buddhism as we know it is the heritage of a colonialist and missionary past. These activities have utilized scholarship as a means of consolidating power over other peoples, and...scholarly analysis continues to recapitulate its colonialist past.”<sup>18</sup>

The current Western embrace of Buddhism no doubt has numerous *additional* causes unrelated to colonialism, not least of which is the Enlightenment critique of all indigenous religion. Insofar as it is the *unfinished* aspect of “... the most far-reaching (and still ongoing) intellectual revolution of the past two thousand years ...”<sup>19</sup>, that remains paramount, it determines the Western scholarly approach towards as yet *uncritiqued* fields.

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<sup>17</sup> Clark, S. (1977). *The Moral Status of Animals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 183

<sup>18</sup> Cabezon, J. (1995). “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory”. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 18, p. 267

<sup>19</sup> Brassier, R. (2007). *Nihil Unbound*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. xi

There are legitimate concerns about ‘modes of Othering’ in Western scholarship, as well as the hegemony of a so-called *salvage anthropology* which strives to rescue the passive, feminized Third-World, from the deleterious influence of the modern, masculine West. The theoretical foundations at work here tend to view change as contamination, and is based on an often unacknowledged *imperialist nostalgia*, “...a profound sense of longing for pre-Western traditional culture that the colonial agent herself destroyed.”<sup>20 21</sup>

When it comes to Buddhism specifically, it has been noted, not without accusations of Eurocentrism, that many Asian Buddhist reform movements were in fact a response to Western colonialism, and incorporated numerous foreign ideas. This new form of Buddhism has been called Buddhist Modernism or Protestant Buddhism. Some of the features of this ‘post-Contact’ Buddhism may be listed as follows: (i) the extolling of rationality; (ii) the rejection of ritual, superstition, and cosmology; (iii) laicization and

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<sup>20</sup> Quli, N. (2009). “Western Self, Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for ‘Tradition’ in Buddhist Studies”. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 16, pp. 1- 38. The dull earnestness of politically correct *doxa* in scholarship may be observed in the author’s insistence on the female pronoun when very few European women were actually ‘active in the field’ as colonial agents (which is not to deny cultural complicity, etc.).

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Žižek (2008) situates these self-flagellating attitudes within the context of a continuing ‘white man’s burden’: “In the PC [politically correct] vision, the Other’s violence against us, deplorable and cruel as it may be, is always a *reaction* against the ‘original sin’ of our (white man’s imperialist, colonialist, etc.) rejection and oppression of Otherness. We, white men, are responsible and guilty, the Other just reacts as a victim; we are to be condemned, the Other is to be understood, ... such a stance of true ethical masochism repeats racism in its very form: although negative, the proverbial ‘white man’s burden’ is still here – we, white men, are the subjects of History, whilst others ultimately react to our (mis)deeds. In other words, it is as if the true message of PC moralistic self-blame is: if we can no longer be the model of democracy and civilization for the rest of the world, we can at least be the model of Evil.” (*In Defence of Lost Causes*. London: Verso, p. 490, footnote 12).

democratization; (iv) the valorization of meditation and an optimistic view of *nirvana*, culminating in the hitherto unprecedented widespread practice of meditation among the laity; (v) an ecumenical attitude toward other Buddhist sects; (vi) the increased status of women; (vii) interest in social engagement; (viii) the tendency to define Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion; (ix) a return to the ‘original’ teachings, particularly the Pali canon.

## Appendix II: Animal Theologies

Religions have historically had a central role in the transmission of basic values regarding living beings. They therefore deserve some attention from animal activists and theorists, despite the fact that the recognition of animal rights in the Western world has proceeded largely independently of religion.

The rise of a *religiously* based concern for animals in the West commenced after an unexpected *mea culpa* for the ethical anthropomorphism of Christianity set the stage for an encounter between animality and theology. Christian theologians admitted that there was a ‘dark side’ to the religion, and began spreading the Good News about animals by drawing on sub-traditions (eg., St. Francis of Assisi).

Attempts to make the tradition less autistic to animal realities often appeal to animality’s Divine Origin, an origin that dictates that animals are not to serve merely as a background while humans attend to soteriological concerns. Some think, furthermore, that the deity has rights about how the Creation should be treated, so-called *theos*-rights (which would still grant only *indirect* rights to animals – a familiar tale).

Other versions are grounded in the supposed Christ-like nature of animal suffering, their blamelessness and defencelessness. This theme is often given to rather gory extension, as, for example, that Christ is the cow being eaten<sup>22</sup> or the dog being experimented on in the animal laboratory, suffering anew for human sins.

In the midst of the transmission of Buddhism to the West, it is not surprising that theorists should also look towards the conceptual resources available within this tradition regarding relations between animals and humans. The most obvious starting-point is the First Precept, which forbids the taking of sentient life. However, despite this precept, most Buddhists are not vegetarian, and Singer claims that animals are treated no better in communities which accept it.

Given that the historical Buddha never explicitly endorsed vegetarianism, it is interesting that Buddhist intellectuals in the Mahayana tradition felt it incumbent upon themselves to compose sutras with an explicit vegetarian message. Some of the inducements to abstain from meat-eating in these sutras include the fact that one's kin could be on the dinner plate, now or in the future, as well as issues of impurity and the terror the prospect of being killed inspires in animals.

This last brings us to the most important Buddhist ingredient –

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<sup>22</sup> There are numerous suggestive passages relating to animals in the Bible, more so when read in conjunction with Christ's inclusion in the food-chain, at least symbolically, in the Eucharist. If all is indeed vanity, then *Ecclesiastes 3:21* also renders vain the supposed crucial distinction between human and animal souls: "Who knows that the spirit of man ascends upward and the spirit of the beast descends downward to the earth?" *Mark 1:13* relates how Jesus was amongst animals whilst being tempted: "And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, ...". *John 4:34* has "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me ..." (modern translations have 'nourishment' for Greek *broma*).

that of compassion for all living beings. Sentient beings are all alike in that they desire happiness. Add to this the fact of the interdependence of all living things (necessitating kindness to beings that might have been one's parents in previous lives), as well as the inherent dignity of all living creatures because of the capacity to achieve enlightenment, and the stage is set for interspecies goodwill.

For it would appear that, in this context, there is no deep conflict between apparent self-interest and morality (although no Buddhist would so state the matter). The aim of Buddhist practice is to benefit all sentient beings everywhere and advance their welfare, and it so happens that the most effective way for each agent to do this, is to work toward his own awakening (or *vice versa*; awakening is the aim, and the best means is compassion towards beings).<sup>23</sup>

Compassion involves the idea of a creature that is suffering blamelessly. Yet it seems to omit an essential element, that of *blame for wrongdoing*. Yes, life is suffering in that it invariably involves pain and death, but that is vastly different from the *specific* suffering caused by humans to battery hens or foxes hunted for fun and fur.

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<sup>23</sup> Some aspects of Buddhist doctrine and tradition, within which the First Percept is ensconced, that might be problematic in the secular tradition of Western intellectuals, include rebirth, karma and paternalism. For Western thought, death as final is axiomatic. Secondly, karma as a seeming justification for the socio-political *status quo* sits awkwardly with a social justice tradition stretching back to the Hebrew prophets. Finally, deference towards the opinions and insights of ascetic virtuosi is troubling once the exercise of reason has been construed as the great equalizer. Modern apologists for religious paternalism usually adduce recent sociological and psychological studies documenting everyday irrationality. This is said to excuse the strong paternalism encountered in, for example, the *Tevijja Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya, XIII*), where a Brahman interlocutor is given *buddhist advice* about how to attain his rather different soteriological goal, that of union with the godhead. Another note-worthy aspect of the *Tevijja Sutta* is that it is usually construed as a refutation of monotheism. But only if the deity in question is seen as inhabiting a *pre-existing* karmic matrix, which is precisely what no sophisticated monotheism would grant.

### Appendix III: The Holocaust on your Plate

The mass killing of animals as analogous to the Holocaust? It is difficult to imagine a more provocative claim. Yet many animal rights activists have made the comparison, which began immediately after the Second World War, when the lack of resistance by victims was first described as being led to death like ‘sheep to the slaughter’.<sup>24</sup> In an infamous post-war interview, Martin Heidegger also suggested that Nazi death-camps and modern meat-processing plants were part of the same ‘technological system’. The Jewish Nobel Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor, Isaac Bashevis Singer, has written that, “In relation to animals, all people are Nazis; for the animals, it is an eternal Treblinka.”

In 2003, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) ran a campaign entitled “The Holocaust on your Plate”, which featured, amongst others, a photograph of rows of concentration camp inmates lying on bunk beds alongside rows of chickens in laying batteries, under the heading “Where animals are concerned, everybody becomes a Nazi.”

The outraged objections, however, still rely on animal slaughter as some sort of negative touchstone: if people died like cattle, it does not mean that cattle die like people. Unsurprisingly, human deaths are special from the human perspective.

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<sup>24</sup> Gandhi’s notorious advice to the Jews in Nazi Germany to commit mass suicide: “But the Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher’s knife.”, utilizes the same animal slaughter analogy.

The elevation of the Holocaust<sup>25</sup> into the supreme metaphysical evil in the West, disqualifies any contextualized explanations as anti-semitic negations of its uniqueness (a rather unequivocal *Denkverbot*, thought-prohibition). Furthermore, it disqualifies any comparisons with Third World colonial genocides. Decolonialist Aimé Césaire has noted that Hitler apparently cannot be forgiven for applying colonial practices *inside* Europe. As Frantz Fanon puts it, “Nazism turned the whole of Europe into a colony.” (cf. Mamdani, 2005).

It is revealing that the shipwreck of Enlightenment ideals had to wait for Auschwitz, while earlier colonial genocides went completely unremarked: – the slaughter of countless Native Americans during the conquest of America, the millions of Africans who were enslaved, *et cetera*. A consequence, no doubt, of the notion that “... among the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction.” (Levinas, “*Une religion d’adultes*”).

Not only are humans special in relation to animals, there are also special humans. This must be the poverty of humanism.

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<sup>25</sup> Jewish scholars prefer the Hebrew term *Shoah*, calamity. The Greek *holokauston* means sacrifice by fire or burnt offering, and has undesirable implications of animal sacrifice. Interestingly, the seemingly innocuous capitalization of ‘Holocaust’ when referring to the historical Nazi holocaust, has caused some controversy (cf. Norman Finkelstein’s 2003 book, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*. London & New York: Verso).

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