

Animal Rights and Ahimsa: An Ancient Discourse on Humans, Animals, and the Earth

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The significant problems we face today can not be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.

– Albert Einstein

Introduction

Nearly a decade ago Cornell University ecologist David Pimentel and his colleagues predicted sweeping changes in American agriculture and eating patterns over the next sixty years, based on demographic, agricultural and other trends. With a doubling of population and a reduction of arable land by some 180 million acres (thirty-eight percent) by 2064, American dietary practices could become similar to those of large portions of the rest of the world. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz, reflecting on the ramifications of Pimentel's study, wrote:

For Americans, food costs would increase by a factor of between three and five-- at worst, up to more than half of total income. Should these calculations prove correct, however, the composition of the American diet would also have to change substantially. While nearly two-thirds of the national grain product of the United States, grown on over 100 million acres, is now used as livestock feed, by 2060 all of it would have become food for us, not for our cattle and pigs and poultry (Mintz 1996:122).

Consequently, Sidney Mintz notes, there would have to be a significant reduction of meat consumption in the United States:

Since India's nearly one billion people and the People's Republic of China even larger population get 70 to 80 percent of their calories and nearly all of their protein from grains and legumes, such a change in the United States would be in the direction of aligning North American consumption with that of the rest of the world. It would also contribute to a vast improvement in American health (Ibid. 122-123).

Whether or not such conditions will occur as predicted, Pimentel's and Mintz's observations raise questions about what kind of changes in public attitudes toward meat consumption might be required (or helpful) to accommodate this trend, and what might contribute to a more comprehensive animal ethic which would bring twenty-first-century humanity into a more sustainable relationship to the land we inhabit with a myriad of other life forms. Here I will explore these questions from a perspective of Indic discourse on *ahimsa*, or nonviolence¹ -- a pervasive and persistent theme that informs all Indic religious traditions. This may serve as a corrective to Western animal ethics discourse, which suffers from a paucity of vocabulary in the animal rights issue. Together with the term '*dharma*' (roughly, duty),² '*ahimsa*' adds important vocabulary for meaningfully discussing human-animal relations. More broadly, *ahimsa*-talk is a powerful means of clearing space for an ethos that could counterbalance the consumerist thinking that dominates rights language today by fostering a principle of human self-understanding centred in participation rather than competition.

Surely to import foreign terms such as *ahimsa* or *dharma* into Western discourse is problematic. Yet the urgency with which environmental ills call us to respond justifies listening intently to voices from around the globe and helping articulate to others whatever may serve the ailing earth. A good example of such cross-cultural investigation is Christopher Chapple's

¹ Many definitions have been given for *ahimsa*. For convenience I use the expression coined by Mohandas Gandhi. More precise might be "absence of the desire to harm or kill." Monier- William's Sanskrit Dictionary merely gives "not injuring anything; harmlessness."

² *Dharma* is as difficult a term to translate as, probably, "*tao*" of Chinese origin. Monier- William's Sanskrit Dictionary gives, for example: that which is established or firm, statute, ordinance, law; usage, practice, prescribed conduct, duty; right, justice, virtue, morality; doing one's duty.

Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions. Chapple writes in his introduction:

It is suggested here that the ethical challenge posed by *ahimsa* can help address issues of contemporary life, such as the abuse of animals, the current state of ecological ravage, and the disconnectedness and dehumanization of mass society. A system such as *ahimsa*, which originates from outside the structures of science and technology, might help inform or perhaps inspire new models for personal and societal reform (Chapple 1993, xiv).

Another useful source for this enterprise is Padmanabh S. Jaini's (1991) article entitled *Animals as Agents in Ahimsa Action and Spiritual Life* which, focusing on Indic narratives involving animals; suggests an important corrective to purely discursive thought on human action in relation to animals. Following Jaini, here I will give brief examples of Indic narrations that imagine agency and voice for animals, raising them toward a human level as moral agents rather than lowering humans to a level of animals as moral non-agents. Even amidst heated doctrinal crossfire, religious texts of varied Indic traditions grant animals (even if only imaginatively) human voices and capacity for moral action. Such narrative imagery deserves attention as an important expression of *ahimsa*. Within the cultural fabric of India it expresses means by which biotic violence is contained or, one might even say, accommodated and restrained. Yet, originating as it does from outside the structures of science and technology it offers an important challenge to such structures as perpetuators of violence.

Ahimsa and Dharma in Three Traditions of Containment

Indic religious traditions recognize the reality of biotic violence as much as do Western traditions. All these traditions might agree with feminist writer Rosemary Reuther's (1992) observation that "[T]he consumer-consumed relation is an inevitable part of the biotic condition." The *Bhagavata Purana* (I.13.47), an important *Vaishnava* Hindu text, puts it succinctly:

jivo jivasya jivanam,
One living being provides life for another.

But in varying ways all the Indic major schools would take issue with Reuther's conclusion:

Consequently the effort to escape from the ambiguity of killing other life in order to live is finally impossible (Reuther 1992:225).

Much Indic traditional *ahimsa* discourse, can be seen as a questioning of Reuther's latter statement, or as a variegated theological / practical proposition to do the impossible, to escape from the ambiguity of killing. As located in the three major well-known traditions – Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina – each variation on the *ahimsa* theme shows a different emphasis that, for simplicity, can be associated with the three classical Indian pious acts, namely *yajña* (sacrifice), *dana* (charity), and *tapas* (austerity). Keeping in mind the dangers of over-generalization and historical non-specificity, for heuristic purposes we can locate Hinduism in the concern for *yajña*, Buddhism in the concern for *dana*, and Jainism in the concern for *tapas* (Agarwal 1991:263). These three traditions all champion the observance of *ahimsa*, and they are all concerned with the maintenance of *dharma*. To this end each defines selfhood in ways that comprehend relationship to nature and society yet, transcend temporal and spatial constraints; and each finds a different solution to the common problem of biotic existence.

***Yajña*: Ritual Containment**

Since Buddhism and Jainism are often seen as heterodox reactions to the Vedic tradition out of which Hinduism developed, we do well to first look at Vedic-Hindu conceptions of *ahimsa*, *dharma* and *yajña*. Here I focus on their expression in classical *Vaishnava* texts. One narration in the *Bhagavata Purana* (III.13) illustrates these relationships:

The earth, having become overburdened by a *dharma*, or the neglect of proper performance of duty, is restored to its proper place by Varaha, a descent (*avatara*) of the supreme divinity Vishnu in the form of a gigantic cosmic boar. Normally, perceived as a lowly creature, the boar is an appropriate form for Vishnu to assume for dredging the earth out from the depths of a cosmic ocean. Nor does being a hooved creature hinder him in valiant duel with the giant *Hiranyaksha* (“Golden-Eyed”), the battle-hungry immediate cause of the earth's displacement into the primeval waters and disruption of *dharma*. In their victory eulogy, sacrificial priests identify each of Varaha's limbs with the various ingredients and utensils of the sacrifice as the gargantuan theriomorphic victor lifts the earth – now identified as his consort – on his shoulder. Concluding their praises,

the Brahmin priests announce, O Lord, to provide residence for both moving and non-moving beings, you sustain this earth, your wife. We bow unto you, our father, along with mother earth, in whom you have invested your own power, as a sacrificer invests fire in sanctified wood (BP III.13.42).

As represented in the *Bhagavata Purana*, the divine personage who restores *dharma* is also the personification of sacrificial ritual – the brahmanical process of maintaining cosmic order and locus of *dharmic* activity; moreover, as Vishnu, Varaha is the beneficiary of the sacrifice by receiving fire oblations; he is the personification of the *Vedas*, the sacred texts delineating the sacrifice; and as the upholder of *dharma* in the form of a wild animal he imbues the earth with power to sustain all creatures. Finally, rather than being a sacrificial victim as in a typical Vedic *yajña*, this “animal” is victor over he who would disrupt the practice of ritual sacrifice to undermine the practice of *dharma*.

In this narration we encounter a beast of superlative moral status by virtue of its identity as divine Vishnu. Throughout the *Bhagavata* in passages describing Vishnu and his descents we are reminded repeatedly of his divinity, so also in the *Varaha* narration. Yet, that a lowly abhorrent boar exhibits superhuman heroism superior to that of his titan opponent suggests an unsettled relation between human and beast. Divinity becomes the arena of ambiguous identity, wherein the lowest becomes highest, a reversal of position made possible by ritual Vedic sacrifice (Jaini 1991:269).

The presentation of an animal as victor in this narration accords well with Vedic scholar J. C. Heesterman’s view that nonviolence was incorporated fully within the Vedic sacrifice, instead of arising, as some scholars hold, externally to it as a later idea. Herman Tull notes,

“Heesterman’s viewpoint [...] means that we must take seriously the Vedic assertions that the animal killed in the sacrifice is not really killed – or, at least is perceived as not being killed – at all. Thus, in the *Rigveda* the already dismembered sacrificial horse is told: ‘You do not really die here, nor are you hurt’ (RV I.162.21)” (Tull 1996:225).

We may well wonder in what sense a sacrificial animal is “not hurt.” In the *Bhagavadgita*, the famous conversation between Krishna and his warrior friend Arjuna, Krishna exhorts Arjuna to fight in the battle and assures him:

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He whose temperament is free from egotism and whose intelligence is not tainted, even were he to kill [all] these worlds, kills not, nor is bound (Bg. 18.17).

Thus, the *Bhagavadgita* echoes the *Rigveda* assertion, stressing the proper attitude of the person acting, while recognizing that to act in the world involves apparent harm to others. By acting for the essential purpose of the sacrifice, namely cosmic maintenance and divine satisfaction rather than personal gain, there is no legal implication in the broader sense of *karma* as the invisible binding force to obligatory subjugation by the forces of material nature. By no means is this so, where an improper attitude prevails retribution is to be expected from the very beings one has harmed or killed. Returning to the *Bhagavata Purana*, in its Eleventh Book a sage warns (XI.5.14):

Those presumptuous, sinful persons who consider themselves, to be pious, without compunction commit violence against animals that fully trust in them. Those (same) animals eat such persons in the next world.

This and similar warnings in the *Bhagavata* and other *puranic* literature urges one toward the culture of renunciation that, as we will see, characterizes Buddhist and Jaina traditions.

For the Hindu ascetic, escape from the ambiguity of killing comes as resorting to self-sacrifice, either through knowledge (*jñana*) or devotion (*bhakti*), in which biotic existence is but a temporary vehicle for transcendent life. *Sankara*, the great eighth-century theologian, argued that the general rule in the performance of ritual sacrifice is the prohibition of *ahimsa* the exceptions within certain specific sacrifices become an impetus for the genuine seeker of truth to awaken a stronger desire to gain release from the world, which is a world of ambiguity, duality and, at best, mixed happiness (Tahtinen 1976:22). To reject outright the Vedic sacrifice would be to unleash the tendency for violence beyond the contained and controlled realm of ritual and thus to wreak havoc in the world at large. But if one can take to *jnana-yajna*, the sacrifice of knowledge, one avoids all types of violence and elevates oneself to the realm of *samadhi*, full absorption in transcendence, by meditation. Some passages in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* extol such a monistic understanding as the basis for the practice of *ahimsa*:

That person who sees being as like his own self,
who casts aside the stick and whose anger is conquered,
 prospers happily in the life to come.
Even the gods are bewildered at the path
of the one who seeks transcendence,
who regards all beings as similar to oneself (Chapple 1993:112).

For followers of Hindu theistic *bhakti* traditions such as *Vaishnavism*, the ambiguity of killing is resolved by taking refuge in directives such as are found in the *Bhagavadgita* to offer all foods prepared for oneself as sacrifice to God, strictly abstaining from the flesh of animals. Whatever *karmic* reaction may accrue from the growing and harvesting of grains and vegetables is absorbed by God and thus, neutralized. A life dedicated to the service of God thus, becomes sacrificial and sanctified.

Hindu theistic devotional literature is full of narrations describing animals infused with devotional qualities - An elephant attacked by a crocodile recollects prayers it learned in a previous life; a vulture sacrifices its life in an attempt to protect Rama's wife Sita from the abducting Ravana (later receiving a full ceremonial burial from Rama, as one would do for one's father); wild animals in a forest assemble to praise Krishna, induced by the *bhakta-avatara* Shri Chaitanya; cows come running to answer the call of Krishna's transcendental flute. Thus, animals become participants in the celebration of spiritual pastimes in a transcendent realm where all forms of life are fully conscious agents dedicated to the service of their Lord.

Devotional ascetics' meditations could well include remembrance of such animals' exemplary behavior as a means of becoming themselves free from material existence, with its attending ambiguities of killing and exploitation. Pious Hindu householders are likely to participate in *goraksha*, the protection of cows, either themselves or by supporting cow sanctuaries, as a means both of gaining *punya*, pious credit, and as a means of worshipping Krishna by supporting his favorite animal (Lodrick 1981).

Dana: Containment in Charity

The well-known monastic system of early Buddhist tradition made a sharp social demarcation between householder laypersons and ascetic monks. In this system, *dana*, or the giving of charity, became a central vehicle for the acquiring of religious merit by householders, promising gradual freedom from suffering and ultimate release, or *Nirvana*. Motivations for one's

actions gained particular attention in a framework of religiosity that rejected the Vedic sacrificial programme and the associated social structures of *Varna*, or class division. Intentionality became a marked component of nonviolence, such that, as the Dhammapada states, to desist from the desire to harm is itself the cause for the cessation of suffering (Tahtinen 1976:7). Psychological analysis of the origin of violence and nonviolence becomes significant. The *Abhidarmakosa* locates the origin of violence in *klesha*, affliction; the source of the intention of nonviolence is the perception of nonviolence; or, we might say, it is the perception of the possibility or option to desist from violence.

Prior to the rise of the later Mahayana Buddhist practice of vegetarianism, a Buddhist *bhikku* (monk), as a “field of merit” receiving the charity of laypersons, would dutifully accept whatever alms were offered, provided he had no knowledge that any meat won by begging came from an animal expressly killed for serving him (Ruegg 1980:234-35). The monk’s duty was to receive charity so that donors may gain pious credit for their efforts (Chapple 1993:26). In this system, *himsa* is contained within *ahimsa* in the sense that a social system which recognizes the superiority of the renounced life dedicated to seeking liberation pays honour to those who discourage, but do not entirely prohibit, animal slaughter. Containment of violence toward animals also took on a legal dimension through Asoka’s pillar edicts, which listed numerous species forbidden to be killed (Ibid. 24-25).

The *Jataka* stories of early Buddhism are replete with animal narrations demonstrating the primacy of charity as the vessel of *ahimsa*, in which animals give themselves for the sake of others – either humans or other animals. Sometimes, these stories show animal thinking capacity; at other times they emphasize not only thinking capacity and willpower but also cleverness in offering one’s own life for the sake of others (often by virtue of the animal’s, having been the *Bodhisattva*). Padmanabh Jaini (1991) recounts a case of *guptadana*, or anonymous charity, wherein the *Bodhisattva*, as an elephant, wishing to save one thousand lost travelers in the jungle from starvation, arranges to provide his own body for their sustenance. Anxious that travelers will be physically incapable of killing him, the elephant informs them that a dead animal lay ahead, fallen from a nearby cliff, then proceeds to throw himself over the cliff to his own death before the starving party arrives. The author of the *Jatakamarana* comments:

Even though born as animals, there is seen the charitable activities of great beings, performed according to their capacities (Jaini 1991:272).³

The Indic Buddhist tradition extolled respect for and protection of animals, but singled out no particular type of animal as worthy of worship.

Tapas: Containment in the Heat of Self-restraint

Although, both Hindu and Buddhist traditions preach principles of self-restraint linked with the practice of *ahimsa*, neither shows quite the extremity of practices to minimize harm to living beings as the *Jaina* tradition. And if we find ascetic practices and attention to personal, individual religious culture in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, all the more so does Jainism advocate the practice of *tapas* (austerity, penance), as the most promising vehicle for realizing *dharma*. Chapple (1993:10), noting that “At the heart of Jainism is the practice of *ahimsa*”, points out that vegetarianism finds its fullest articulation in this tradition, as one of but several observances aiding one in the practice of *ahimsa*.

For a follower of *Jaina* tradition, which enumerates no less than 432 types of violence (Tahtinen 1976:15), the ambiguity of killing is minimized by pursuing a program of carefully graded reduction of actions harmful to other beings culminating, as a final resolution to the problem of harming others, in the practice of *sallekhana*, fasting unto death. Sharply contrasted with suicide, which is strictly forbidden, this practice is offered in *Jaina* texts to those who recognize the inevitable approach of death through sickness, old age, calamity or famine. After prescribing a procedure for gradual reduction of food intake to nil, the second century CE Ratnakarandaka Ravakacara enjoins:

³ We need not assume that animals are always seen as saintly creatures in these traditions. The Pali Buddhist Suttanipata notes that the life of one whom like, a beast, takes delight in injuring others is very wicked, and he increases his own bondage (Tahtinen 1976:40). In all Indic texts there is discussion of the possibility to be born as an animal as a result of sinful behavior as a human – a form of condemnation which is difficult to overcome, usually over many lifetimes. As we will discuss later in this article, in the *Hitopadesa* (usually considered a Hindu text), humans are distinguished from animals by virtue of their ability to practice *dharma*, whereas animals are generally seen as following the strict rule of nature.

During the observance of the vow, one should not commit any of the transgressions: entertaining a desire to live, wishing for a speedy death, exhibiting fear, or desire to meet friends or remembering them or expecting to be born with all comforts and pleasure in the next life (Chapple 1993:101).

In this extreme vow of *tapas* all tension between *himsa* and *ahimsa* principles dissolves in the abandonment of any effort to preserve the body, the instrument by and for which one inevitably commits violence to other beings. Suicide, on the other hand, is violence committed against oneself, for which reactions (*karma*) accrue.

As in the Buddhist texts, numerous stories within the *Jaina* tradition tell of some conscious self-sacrifice for the sake of another being, either human or animal. Fitting to the *Jaina* assertion that animals possess thinking capacity (*manas*) as well as will-power is the famous story of the elephant that protected a rabbit: As all the forest animals crowded around a forest lake to avoid a raging fire, an elephant lifted its leg to scratch an itch, giving opportunity for a rabbit to find space beneath its leg. Jaini summarizes the story:

The elephant, out of an overwhelming desire not to hurt the rabbit, stood on three legs for more than three days until the fire died down and the rabbit scampered off. By then, his leg was numb and he toppled over. Still retaining a pure mind and heart, the elephant died. As a reward for his compassion he overcame the need for embodiment as an animal and was born as a prince by the name of Megha and eventually became a disciple of Mahavira, taking the vows of a monk in hopes of transcending all forms of existence (Chapple 1993:12-13, quoting Jaini).

Thus, we see a creative broadening of the moral circle such that animals exercise thinking and will-power specifically for altruistic purposes underscoring the *ahimsa* principle, quite independent of human presence. Sometimes, an animal is simply credited with pious intentions for which it is rewarded in the next life, as in the story of a frog on its way to hear a sermon from Mahavira: Upon being accidentally trampled by a royal elephant, the frog is reborn in heaven due to its devotion to the *Jaina* Tirthankara (Jaini 1991:278). As might be expected of Jainism, the moral circle includes not only the avoidance of hurting, but also the protection of animals. Thus, India

is familiar, since several centuries, with the Jaina practice of maintaining animal hospitals, or *panjrapoles*.

Yajña, Dana, and Tapas: Three Means of Executing Dharma

So far I have briefly represented the three Indic religious traditions in terms of the principle of *ahimsa*, typifying each in relation to one of three central concerns of all the traditions, namely *yajña*, *dana*, and *tapas* – sacrifice, charity, and austerity. For convenience I have linked Hinduism to *yajña* as a central concern, Buddhism to *dana*, and Jainism to *tapas* in order to make rough distinctions which, if examined too minutely, would certainly lose their neatness. Out of the chorus of voices urging practice of *ahimsa* which is the body of Indic religious texts it can be difficult to separate specific voice registers. But what is for us to observe here is that all the strains of Indic religious life hold *ahimsa* as a central principle to the maintenance of *dharma*, or duty, in which one or another means of accommodation of the biotic demand for violence is accomplished, the moral status of animals is in some way raised to approach that of humans, and humans are provided facility for encountering the non-material dimension of their existence.

The *Bhagavadgita*, generally considered a work of theological synthesis among a variety of schools, is centrally concerned with *dharma*. In it, *yajña*, *dana* and *tapas* are all upheld as practices “never to be given up” (*Gita* 18.5). Agarwal (1991: 263) notes that the modern *Gita* commentator Vinoba Bhave equated these three categories with, respectively, the “effort to replenish nature’s loss,” the “help given through body, mind, material resources and other means to discharge the debt to society,” and “self-discipline needed for removing the deficiencies and distortions in the body caused by normal wear and tear”. In other words, the practice of *dharma* includes proper human action in relation to the cosmos, human society, and the individual, all of which are to be carried out with a certain attitude conducive to liberation, namely detachment. Significantly, it is in the context of detachment that we find explicit mention of rights in the *Bhagavadgita*.

As is well known, the *Bhagavad-gita* opens with the great warrior Arjuna wishing to withdraw from an impending battle: the kingdom of Arjuna and his four brothers, unjustly usurped by a rival part of the same clan, can be regained only by war. Such is the conclusion of Krishna, who has found all attempts at diplomacy a failure. As Arjuna’s charioteer, Krishna instructs Arjuna on the principles of *dharma*, insisting that,

Only with respect to your prescribed duty do you have a right. You are not entitled to the fruits of (your) action. Never become the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duties (Gita 2.47).

The Sanskrit word *adhikara* means right, jurisdiction, authority, privilege, prerogative, or entitlement. The ‘fruits of action’, ‘*karma-phala*’, in contradistinction to the performance of action (*as yajña, dana* and *tapas*), are not objects of entitlement and are hence not to be the source of one’s motivation to act. M. Hiriyanna comments on this verse:

The significance of this principle is to elevate the moral quality of actions above their content. What really matters is the motive inspiring their doing – how actions are done and not what they are. ‘God cares,’ some one has stated, ‘more for the adverb than for the verb’ (Sharma 1986:152).

Duty is to be performed, according to the *Gita*, “without considering happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat” (2.38) in order to free one from the taint of action. By maintaining such an attitude in relation to duty a person does not succumb to the whims of the mind and senses out of which stem insatiable demands for acquisition of objects over which exploitation can be exercised. By adopting the dutiful attitude of detachment, the activities of *yajña, dana* and *tapas* become joyful enterprises as one upholds *dharma* through replenishment of nature rather than its destruction; through reciprocation with one’s neighbors (including those of other species) rather than exploitation of them; and through understanding the self rather than self-effacement or self-indulgence.

The *Gita*, as an important Indic religious text exploring the concept of *dharma*, thus challenges a fundamental assumption of modern legal rights discourse upon which much animal and environmental protection argumentation has foundered. At the same time, the *Gita* challenges a prevailing conception of self as independent agent. Krishna’s initial lesson concerns the relation of the *jivatma*, the individual self, to the *deha*, the body,⁴ after which he discusses the important concept of *karma*, action, which must always be executed within the context of *daivam*, the higher, spiritual order. To think of oneself as a completely independent moral agent

⁴ Of course, here Buddhist teachings depart from those of the *Gita*, claiming that there is ultimately no ultimate existence of self.

is a fundamental feature of illusion, according Krishna. In the *Gita*, Krishna repeatedly urges Arjuna to act decisively, having become free from the manifold illusions of temporary embodied existence, such that at the end of the text Arjuna can finally proclaim:

“My delusion is now destroyed. By your grace my memory is recovered. I now stand free from perplexity, ready to execute your order” (Gita 18.73).

Animal Rights and Moral Agency in Animals

In her article *Animal Liberation and Ahimsa*, Maithili Schmidt-Raghavan proposes a re-examination of the notion of duty as a corrective to the unproductive rights-language prevalent in present-day discussions on animal protection. She observes:

The whole language of rights is so tangled up with talk of claims, entitlements and contracts that it is recalcitrant to attempts by philosophers to distill the moral connotation of the term. The ambiguity of the concept has created complications over the requirements for something being an appropriate ‘bearer of rights’. The term ‘rights’, which seemed to equip advocates of animal liberation and vegetarianism with a shining new tool to crack the barriers of speciesism has, in fact, led to the skidding of their feet. Their preoccupation with rights has led them off in the wrong direction (Schmidt-Raghavan 1993:71).

Schmidt-Raghavan instead proposes to ‘redraw the ethical map’ to include the ‘moral considerability’ of animals by upholding a doctrine of the ‘unity of life’ through ahimsa practice. Laudable as this idea is, we need to think carefully what ‘moral considerability’ might involve. Let us remember that, while ahimsa is central to Indic ethical discourse, it issues from the recognition of the biotic fact of violence in nature and seeks to reconcile that fact with the philosophical assumption of the unity of life. The inclusion of the moral considerability of animals in a human ‘ethical map’ invites us to at least imagine animals as moral agents, as so many Indic narrative texts do. Jaini notes,

The concept of animal rights imply the presence of moral and spiritual capacities in animals, however hidden that may be from human eyes...

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animals too have moral and spiritual capacities, a fact deeply perceived by parts of the Indian tradition. In this sense, even animals are held to be capable of *ahimsa* as of other elements of *dharma*. To have such a perception is to go one step beyond merely stipulating that we humans ought to comport ourselves *ahimsa*-wise towards all members of the animal kingdom... animals are not merely at the receiving end but also at the giving end of moral and spiritual conduct, especially when it comes to *ahimsa* and all that it implies (Jaini 1991:275).

But is Jaini here proposing a total erasure of the distinction between animals and humans? Hardly, he quotes a well-known saying from the *Hitopadesa*, an Indic book of moral instruction:

Men are the same as animals
As far as food, sleep, fear, and sex are concerned.
They are distinguished only because of *dharma*:
(A man who) lacks *dharma* is the same as the animals (Ibid. 270).

By *dharmaic* conduct humans are distinguished from animals, and central to *dharmaic* conduct is the exercise of nonviolence (in one or another form, according to capacity) by which, inversely, animals seen as other-than-human are admitted into the human social world as morally considerable beings. In short, humans become conscious of the possibility to communicate with animals, in ways that may challenge our rationalistic sensibilities. While this opens up a fascinating, if not perilous topic,⁵ suffice to note here that this is, I think, a real possibility suggested by Indic insights into human-animal relations clustered around the notions of *dharma* and *ahimsa*.

In the concluding chapter to his book *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate*, Richard Sorabji (1993) observes that both ancient and modern Western discussions on animals have produced disappointingly one-dimensional moral theories. Neither ancient arguments for animal protection (i.e.- useful contract and *oikeiosis*, or belonging), nor the two modern arguments of Peter Singer and Tom Regan (preference satisfaction and inherent value) take into account the variety of

⁵ Of the considerable literature on animal training and communication with animals, little is quite so engaging philosophically and entertaining as Vicki Hearne's *Adam's Task*. See Sources.

relationships occurring between animals and humans. Sorabji (1993:208-217) questions the very need for a moral theory at all, especially one that 'boils down all considerations to one'. He rather proposes the following, with the assumption that he is addressing moral people who have no wish to hurt their fellow human beings:

Whatever protects our fellow humans (and I have no theory to tell me what does), the same will protect animals, to the extent that they do not differ in morally relevant ways. We should then study the ways in which other species do differ, and be ready to consider whether these ways are, or are not, morally relevant. The relevant differences, I have suggested, will include possible relationships to us (Ibid.217).

Seen from a broad perspective, what Indic religious traditions seem to suggest is that what protects both humans and animals is *dharma*, understood as the internal regulating function of which humans can become consciously aware and upon which they can act. This regulating function is a trained sensitivity to one's place in relation to the world, society, and the source of all being, or God, which is nourished by the detached attitude conjoined to an ethos of *ahimsa*. If the West could become more engaged with these notions, we may be able to stop skidding our feet in animal rights and animal talk and get to the deeper level of thinking and acting required for healing the earth and, while we are at it, improving our diets and our health.

Practical prescriptions for environmental healing as conclusions to theorizing can be either disappointing or angering. But as I noted in the beginning, radical change in American dietary patterns that suggest a significant reduction in the consumption of meat might be imposed by economic forces. While, like other vegetarians, I would welcome the trend away from animal consumption, I am also apprehensive, knowing the trigger-happiness of many non-vegetarians, whose hunting instincts would likely surface the moment they think their dietary habits threatened. The Roman Catholic apologist G.K. Chesterton wrote,

We talk of wild animals; but man is the only wild animal. It is man that has broken out. All other animals are tame animals; following the rugged respectability of the tribe or type all other animals are

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domestic animals; man alone is ever undomestic, either as a profligate or a monk. (*Orthodoxy*. Quoted in *The Critic*, Summer 1994, 83).

Indic teachings on nonviolence offer a chance to tame ourselves, to become less of a source of fear to the animals that our civilization now slaughters at the rate of some sixteen million daily to please our palates. When *ahimsa*-talk enters the discussion on environmental protection and animal rights, there is at least hope that if we insist on eating meat, we will think to ask the animals first whether they will permit us to kill them. This would be a major step toward becoming enough tame that human civilization could begin to seriously protect the environment. Otherwise, sooner or later we can expect our wild nature to catch up with us, and there will be nowhere for us to break out to.

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