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The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals

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THE SPECTER OF SPECIESISM: BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF ANIMALS. *By Paul Waldau.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. xv + 303 pp.

At the Parliament of World Religions held in Cape Town in 1999, Dada Vaswani, a leading spiritual voice within India, proclaimed that the nineteenth century brought the liberation of slaves, that the twentieth century brought the liberation of women, and that the twenty-first century will bring the liberation of animals. For Paul Waldau, a key piece in this transformation will result from the insights of ethology, the specialized branch of biology that offers new information regarding the consciousness of animals. Scientific research has revealed that animals occupy a complex world, replete with desires and emotions. Based on this scientific research, Waldau asserts that a new morality will arise that acknowledges the inherent moral standing of animals, and will overturn the long-held view that animals serve only one purpose: to serve humanity. Otherwise, he asserts, humans will remain enmeshed in the tyranny of speciesism.

In this meticulous study, Paul Waldau assesses the origins of the term "speciesism," coined by Ryder in 1970. He explores the link between speciesism and slavery, colonization, and the oppression of women and children. Just as ethical discourse has been altered through history regarding these issues, Waldau suggests that as more information becomes available, human attitudes regarding animals will evolve. However, due to entrenched religious views, this change will be gradual. This book consists of a sustained argument for expanding our categories of worth beyond purely anthropocentric values. Waldau suggests that although humans hold a power advantage over animals, "[d]ifferences in abilities, and even hierarchy, to the extent they exist, do not automatically imply the propriety of dominance, let alone tyranny" (p. 39).

To develop his argument, Waldau writes about three higher-order mammals that merit consideration: the great apes, elephants, and cetaceans (whales and dolphins). Each of these groups of animals display complex abilities and have, in proportion to the size of their bodies, large brains. Genetically, chimpanzees and humans share 98.4% identical DNA. Chimpanzees can develop high language functioning and use

tools, subverting the assumptions that these two capabilities are uniquely human. In regard to elephants, Waldau writes that “[b]oth Aristotle and Pliny designated elephants as the animals closest to humans in intelligence” (p. 79). He particularly notes their highly developed matriarchal social structure and their ability to communicate over long distances. Similarly, Waldau summarizes recent research on cetaceans’ ability to protect one another through echolocation and a highly intricate communication system based on touch and soundings. Because of this scientific research, Waldau asserts that Descartes was wrong to proclaim that “dumb animals do not think” (p. 89).

Waldau’s underlying argument asks that humans not “lump” all animals together under one umbrella category, but assess each group of animals according to its own gifts. He asks that we not regard humans as utterly unique (and hence better), but pay attention to current scientific research and ethical insights that value animals for their inherent worth. Though Waldau does not attempt to establish a new hierarchy of more-valued creatures, he does argue persuasively that great apes, elephants, and the cetaceans deserve greater respect, and that we need to re-examine and hopefully deconstruct the inherited cultural understanding of all animals as simply “other.”

This brings us to the primary focus of the book: an investigation of the place of animals in Buddhist and Christian traditions. In Buddhism, animals suffer their fate because of negative karma, and, at best, can hope to be reborn as a human being capable of receiving the Buddha’s teachings. Waldau cites various texts, from the Jataka tales to the Mahayana sutras, that accord conscience and agency to specific animals. He claims, however, that Buddhist cultures have generally not gone out of their way to cultivate a culture of animal benevolence, citing the example of elephant trainers in Southeast Asia. Some mention of the Buddhist practice of purchasing and releasing animals, widely practiced in East Asia, would have been helpful. Unlike some authors, Waldau avoids romanticizing Buddhist attitudes toward animals.

In his study of Christian material, he notes that Christians consistently arrogate animals to an inferior ontological status. Not only does he cite evidence from such Church Fathers as Clement, Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine, he also draws from the new Roman Catholic Catechism of 1994, which asserts that humans may use animals in whatever manner they deem suitable, including for scientific experimentation. Though moral considerations must not be disregarded, the measure of propriety is to be found in human benefit, with man seen as unique among animals and hence better within the Christian view.

Paul Waldau has presented a challenge to both Buddhists and Christians. In the light of new information about animals, all religions need to rethink their categories, to become more open to the possibility that nonhuman animals deserve more respect. Both Buddhists and Christians place the human at a much higher status than other animals. Through “conceptual improvements,” Waldau suggests, these faiths can deepen their understanding of nonhuman animals, which will lead to “the dismantling of pervasive prejudices and exclusions regarding living beings who happen not to be members of the human species” (p. 218).

This book includes an excellent bibliography of literature in this newly emerging field. *The Specter of Speciesism* will be a standard reference for years to come, both for its content and its methodology.

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