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A HISTORY

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OXFORD PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

Edited by PETER ADAMSON & G. FAY EDWARDS

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A HISTORY



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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Adamson, Peter, editor; Edwards, G. Fay, editor.

Title: *Animals : a history* / edited by G. Fay Edwards and Peter Adamson.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017036011 (print) | LCCN 2018004743 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780199375998 (online course) | ISBN 9780199375981 (updf) |

ISBN 9780199375967 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780199375974 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: *Animals (Philosophy)*

Classification: LCC B105.A55 (ebook) | LCC B105.A55 A74 2018 (print)

| DDC 113/.8—dc23

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Webcom, Inc., Canada  
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc.,  
United States of America

CHAPTER THREE

# Illuminating Community

ANIMALS IN CLASSICAL INDIAN THOUGHT

*Amber D. Carpenter*

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**In this chapter by Amber Carpenter, look for how various Indian traditions understand the animal ontologically (in its “being—becoming-ness”), how this ontology overlaps or differs from Greek views we examined in the previous session, and how the Indian accounts shape their view of moral treatment of animals.**

Animals are everywhere throughout classical Indian literature. They are found in law books and ethical codes; they populate the major epics; they figure as stock examples in philosophy—the rope mistaken for a snake (or, more dangerously, the other way around), and the dewlap as the characteristic mark of the cow; and of course they are familiar as the main characters of the rich Indian fable literature, about which I will have more to say. What we do not have, however, is anything tying all of this animal talk into a single discourse.

One significant reason for this is that the Indians, unlike their European counterparts, did not make the barbaric mistake.<sup>1</sup> The Indians do not typically get overly exercised about locating, repeating, and emphasizing “the fundamental” difference between humans and other animals, lumping all nonhuman animals together as if they were much the same compared to how different they are from human beings. And when occasionally the matter of human distinctiveness does arise, the



Sanskrit (and Pāli) texts do not show anything like the almost obsessive concern the European tradition has had in particular with whether animals are *rational*.<sup>2</sup>

In Greece we find Hesiod, standing at the front of the European tradition's thinking about animals, claiming, "This law for man was established by the son of Chronos: that fish and beasts and flying birds eat one another, since right (*dikē*) is not in them; but to mankind he gave right which is by far the best" (*Works and Days* 10.277–80<sup>3</sup>). For Aristotle, only humans can be properly happy (*eudaimon*), since that blessed state requires something of a rational appreciation of the good or the fine for its own sake as the reason for one's actions. When he turns to psychology, if Aristotle thinks humans are special it will be in virtue of a certain special form of intelligence, *nous*; and the Stoics banish animals beyond the circle of justice because they cannot put together a grammatically correct sentence.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, what the European tradition is anxious about is what makes "them" different from "us," in virtue of which we are allowed to do whatever we like with them. They don't have justice; they can't enter into an agreement; they are machines. This should not just salve our guilty consciences but illuminate what is so special about us. We cannot do to humans what we can do to other animals because humans are not machines; we have a moral sense; we can enter into meaningful agreements with each other; we have opposable thumbs. The "barbaric mistake" underwriting this instrumentalization of animal-talk for the sake of discovering the "uniquely, truly human" is that there is *nothing* that all non-human animals have in common—except that they are not human. They are not a genuine kind. So there is an important sense in which, in this tradition, we are not thinking about *animals* at all, and it is perhaps no wonder that trying to discover the human through examination of the nonhuman should end (and go on) in irresolution and frustration.

Now the Indians were perfectly capable of having a "humans are distinctive"–type thought, and when they do, it is not an altogether unfamiliar thought. Here is a Hesiod moment from the *Hitopadeśa*, written

sometime between the eighth and twelfth centuries of the Common Era but drawing on much earlier didactic tales and fables, particularly from the third century BCE *Pañcatantra*<sup>5</sup>: "Food, sleep, fear, and sex are common to humans and beasts.... Dharma is the distinctive quality without which human beings are the same as brutes."<sup>6</sup> *Dharma*, like Hesiod's *dikē*, eludes satisfactory translation in a single English word; both are to be located in the area of what we in English would today call "the moral," specifically associated with what is fitting, right, appropriate, just, and to be done. Like Hesiod for the Greeks, the *Pañcatantra* and texts like it were widely taken as sources for practical advice about how to live and who to be, about what outlook to adopt in life. In fact the *Hitopadeśa*, like the *Pañcatantra* it draws on, is explicitly didactic, classified as *nītiśāstra*—that is, advice for how to get on with others, and get on in life, so as to survive and flourish as much as possible. These two collections, like the even earlier Buddhist *Jātaka* tales they are sometimes based on, have almost entirely nonhuman animal characters.

Now the thought picked out in *Works and Days* and in the *Hitopadeśa* is strikingly similar, and probably touches on something that many feel "intuitively" correct: for all our similarities, whatever they may be, with other animals, there is after all something that distinguishes human beings from other animals; if we try to pinpoint what it is, it is to be found somewhere in the region of our own appreciation of *moral* right and wrong, a sense of justice and fairness, that we do not expect other animals to have or to hold themselves to. It is a sense of right and wrong that cannot be traced to biological flourishing and success, and can even come into conflict with it.<sup>8</sup>

So consider the Hesiod quote again: animals eat one another; humans do not. From a survival point of view, such abstemiousness seems inexplicable and squandrous. Break an egg in a henhouse, and the hens will sensibly help themselves to the nutrient-rich egg. We would be horrified if humans did the equivalent. This sense of restraint—of there being certain things *we just don't do*, even if they might give us

a material advantage—is what makes us human, and different from all other animals.

The Indian texts, as the *Hitopadeśa*'s observation makes clear, were perfectly capable of recognizing this sort of difference. For the Buddhists, at least, animals were notorious committers of incest and cannibalism in particular,<sup>9</sup> and this view was shared widely beyond Buddhist popular thought. It is *humans* who may not eat each other or sleep with their mothers or brothers. The Jains, Hindus, and Buddhists all recognize some way in which *dharma*, understood as virtue, is not applicable to animals—but, as we will see, this is not a hard and fast rule, and all three of these Indian traditions at certain points back away from or even eschew altogether the claim that morality is the exclusive prerogative of the human.<sup>10</sup> The tradition did not speak with one voice on the issue and, more important, it did not make heavy weather of the claim one way or another. The *Hitopadeśa* quote stands out to those coming to the question of animals with an agenda set by the European tradition (or coming from Hesiod directly). But it is far from the dominant or even a central *motif* in classical Indian thought about animals. That *dharma* is for humans is a defeasible generalization, and not a hard and fast rule, for the observation was not made in the service of a theory of human nature in the first place.

However broadly acknowledged, here is what the acknowledgment of virtue and morality as special to the human did not do: it did *not* license us to suppose that whatever it was that made humans the same as each other and different from other animals entitled us to exclude animals from our moral world and our moral consideration. If anything, having *dharma* does the opposite: it imposes a new set of restrictions on our behavior, not just vis-à-vis each other but overall, vis-à-vis other animals and the environment generally.

The fact that classical Indian thought about animals does not focus on identifying the unique feature of the human has typically been traced to the difference in background cosmologies between Greece and India and to the Indian cosmology of rebirth in particular. There

is likely a measure of truth in this, and I will explore in what senses there is a plausible connection between rebirth cosmology and the relative absence or weakening of human exceptionalism. That animal rationality in particular is not an issue of concern can be traced, I will suggest, to the popularity and pervasiveness of the fable in Indian culture. Both of these operate as forces for supposing that when we do think about animals, it is not to learn by contrast about the human but to learn by communion.

#### REBIRTH AS GROUNDS FOR CONCEPTIONS OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS

A cosmology of rebirth looks to be part of the pan-Indic cultural background nearly as far back as we can go. While there were categories of living beings (gods, humans, ghosts, animals, hell-beings is one popular Buddhist division),<sup>11</sup> these categories were always seen as bridgeable through rebirth.<sup>12</sup> What happens now to be a human life could become any kind of nonhuman life next time around. If we are familiar with the minority Pythagorean tradition in ancient Greek and Roman thought, then we might suppose there is a direct line from a belief in rebirth to a thoroughgoing nondistinction between human and non-human animal. Xenophanes recounts a story told of Pythagoras taking pity on a puppy being beaten in the street; he asks that the beating stop because he recognizes in the dog's cry the voice of a deceased friend.<sup>13</sup> If the beast I am beating, exploiting, about to step on, or about to eat might be my deceased grandfather, then there is as much absolute prohibition against eating or beating it as there is against eating or beating my grandfather.

But there is in fact no direct line from interchangeability to empathic kindness to nonhumans. And considered in the abstract, there is no reason why it should be so. If the scorpion is no different from the human (in whatever the relevant respect is meant to be), then the human is likewise no different from the scorpion. Of itself the nondistinction

would speak no more in favor of kindness to animals than in favor of brutality to humans. But even if the scorpion *is* your beloved grandfather, with the usual valence that is thought to have, until we know the quality of his scorpion life (and perhaps many other things besides) we cannot say whether we would not be doing Grandpa a favor to step on him and thus relieve him of his scorpion existence.<sup>14</sup>

What does the work in the Indic traditions is not primarily rebirth but nonviolence (*ahimsā*). While the Jains can perhaps be credited with initiating emphasis on *ahimsā*,<sup>15</sup> and with taking it most seriously, Buddhists and Hindus agreed (in their different ways) that nonviolence was a paramount virtue.<sup>16</sup> It is because of a prior commitment to nonviolence that the continuity between human and nonhuman expressed in a rebirth cosmology will not in fact tell in favor of generalized disregard. Against the thought Xenophanes presents regarding Pythagoras, the value of *ahimsā* in classical Indian thought was not usually argued on the grounds that some animal lives might once have been human lives, for in that way the principle could protect nonhuman animals only once it had been established to apply to humans—and it would make for heightened interest in techniques for determining which animals had previously been human (inedible) and which had not (edible). Such an interest is wholly lacking in the various classifications of animals according to their edibility.<sup>17</sup> Rather the principle comes first—“No breathing, existing, living sentient creatures should be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, unchangeable, eternal law which the clever ones, who understand the world, have proclaimed”<sup>18</sup>—and applied to human and nonhuman animals alike. Because the specialness of humans is neither presumed nor invoked as the basis for *ahimsā*, it is evident without further comment that nonviolence applies wherever violence is possible, and violence is possible wherever harm is possible. Harm (as opposed to mere damage) is possible wherever there is sentient life, so that the pressing need is to determine the extent of sentience.<sup>19</sup> Here indeed is where we find vigorous dispute and discussion within the classical Indian tradition.<sup>20</sup>

This did not ensure peaceable coexistence between animal kinds, not even between the human and nonhuman. In spite of the widely shared agreement that nonviolence is better, and alongside a cosmology of transient identities crossing permeable boundaries, ancient India was an agrarian society, with plenty of use for domesticated animals; it was a martial society, with plenty of use for horses<sup>21</sup> and elephants—and occasion enough to kill both human and nonhuman animals; it was a hierarchical society, wherein a certain class of people amused itself in the hunt; and it was for many centuries a place of animal sacrifice. In the face of stricter Jain and Buddhist interpretations of nonviolence, those who followed the ritual practices of the Vedas gradually preferred dough stand-ins for the ritual animal sacrifices, but they had already found ways to reconcile animal slaughter with the nonviolence principle: according to the ancient *Laws of Manu* (5.39),<sup>22</sup> “killing in sacrifice is not killing,” and “violence (*himsā*) ordained by the Veda is really *ahimsā*.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere the *Laws of Manu* put ritual animal sacrifice and complete abstention from meat-eating on a comparable moral footing: “A man who abstains from meat and a man who offers the horse sacrifice every year for a hundred years—the reward for their meritorious acts is the same” (V.53).<sup>24</sup>

Besides a certain ambivalence regarding *ahimsā*, we can see here that how humans treat nonhuman animals is not a categorically different matter from how humans interact with each other. Just as nonviolence does not necessarily preclude just war, so too it does not necessarily preclude human employment of nonhuman animals in agriculture, nor their sacrifice in ritual. The question of how humans may treat nonhuman animals, just as the question of how they might engage with other humans, was treated as a question of what is *dharma* and *adharma*—where *dharma* may prescribe specific behaviors with respect to specific species of animal but refrains from instituting categorical distinctions between human and nonhuman as such. In the particular requirements or permissions of *dharma*, each species may be treated in its own right, but there is no categorical difference between humans



and “the rest.” Basic principles by which humans are bound, such as *ahimsā*, are valid across the board, even if the nature of the correct application may be tied specifically to context: killing a horse is wrong, just as killing a person is wrong, but a soldier killing in war may be *dharmā*, just as slaughtering a horse in a Vedic ritual may be *dharmā*.<sup>25</sup>

Thus when the Buddha objected to practices of animal sacrifice in Brahmanical society, this was as much on account of its inefficaciousness as on account of cruelty to animals—indeed part of its cruelty might be said to be due to its inefficaciousness, just as practicing austerities is self-cruelty because release from suffering is not thereby attained.<sup>26</sup> In spite of commitments to universal care (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*maitrī*), the earliest Buddhists were not vegetarians.<sup>27</sup> They considered not killing the animal oneself or having it killed for one sufficient to satisfy the requirement of nonviolence.<sup>28</sup> Eating leftover, donated meat was *not*, in their view, the equivalent of eating one’s kin or another human. The Jains, more thoroughgoing in their interpretation of nonviolence, criticized the comparatively lax Buddhists accordingly.<sup>29</sup> But this was a variation in the interpretation of the demands of *ahimsā* and not of the nature or implications of rebirth.<sup>30</sup>

This universal scope or the lack of categorical distinction between the human and nonhuman is not derived from a rebirth cosmology by first assuming the specialness of humans. It is based on the vulnerability to harm that is shared across species, regardless of their various distinct qualities and capacities—and regardless of what they might have been before or might be after their deaths. There is simply no straightforward line from rebirth cosmology to conceptions of or attitudes toward animals.<sup>31</sup> This does not mean, however, that there are no lines to be drawn at all, or that Olivelle is wrong to call rebirth “the most significant religio-cultural belief that is connected to animal anthropomorphism”<sup>32</sup>; it is certainly relevant to attitudes toward, and thinking about, animals.

In your own → words, try to explain what Carpenter means when she says that rebirth requires one to understand the human by comparison, rather than contrast, to animals.

### REBIRTH ARTICULATING THE HUMAN BY COMPARISON, NOT CONTRAST

Instead of reasoning from “rebirth” to any specific attitudes toward animals, we should consider the picture the rebirth cosmology presents as a whole. A division of possible realms for rebirth—human, animal, god, etc.—represents a way of conceiving the human condition. Humans live and move within a world populated by other animals. These other animals are not just the backdrop against which the truly important action of human life takes place. They are, on the contrary, equally pursuing their lives. That is, the interchangeability aspect of rebirth makes it natural to conceive nonhuman animals as *having lives*, in the relevant sense: having projects, plans, wishes, desires, relationships, and so on. These relationships are with other animals of their kind or not, and may sometimes be relationships with human animals. Among the many nonabsolute taxonomies of animals in Sanskrit literature, one significant (though not exhaustive) distinction is between village animals, wild animals, and farm animals that do not quite count as either. From this relation to human habitation follows a host of specific rules about how humans may or may not, must or must not interact with, treat, or consume the various animals so classified.<sup>33</sup> Conceiving the cosmos as one in which lives extend over multiple and various incarnations means conceiving the human world as fundamentally a *shared* world, and shared not just with other humans but also with nonhuman animals. These creatures are on the same journey as we are, are liable to the same conditions and pressures as we are. To think about them is to think about us, not by contrast but by comparison.

While it is largely agreed that an animal form of life is a less desirable one than a human form, this is mostly thought to be due to differences in degree rather than in kind. Nonhuman animals tend to be liable to greater pain and suffering than humans, with less opportunity for mitigating or eliminating that suffering. (Gods, by contrast, are



comparatively less liable to pain than human beings.) Thus Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus all take a dim view of animal incarnation, and it is not infrequently presented as a punishment or an evil consequence for someone who has behaved badly in a human incarnation.<sup>34</sup> Most animal lives are considered to be full of discomforts that affect human lives rather less; the domesticated ones labor as beasts of burden, for instance, and the wild ones live in constant fear of not having enough to eat or of being eaten themselves.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps more important, animal lives are thought of as miserable because animals are considered to have no options. This is related to the question of whether animals have *dharma*.<sup>36</sup> On the whole, nonhuman animals are thought to lack the capacity to, for instance, refrain from violence or revise their conception of the good so that they do not live in constant fear. Lacking a capacity for revising one's desires and restraining one's impulsive behavior, and perhaps lacking a sense of right not driven by natural necessity, is a disadvantage that makes life on the whole more miserable and less desirable than a human life—even than an impoverished and difficult human life.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, however, the view of animal moral capacities was much more complex and ambiguous in the various Indian traditions. In a way we should expect this—within a cosmology of reincarnation, coupled with a moralized doctrine of *karma* (as it was in classical India), if animals (and other beings) cannot behave morally, it looks as if they could never be reborn in a better estate; this would have obvious awkward implications about the direction the world is heading. More important, the exclusion of animals from the possibility of engaging in ethical behavior would be such a massive constraint on the interchangeability aspect of the system as to render it virtually meaningless. If damnation were permanent, or if it were just the effects of *karma* without the possibility of generating fresh action, we would no longer be conceiving of nonhuman beings as participants in our shared world.

So while the official line in Hinduism is that “only human beings, in the ordinary course of things, have access to *mokṣa* or *mukti* (spiritual

liberation)”—and indeed this is sometimes, as with Śaṅkara, restricted still further to only well-born male humans—the tradition nevertheless abounds in tales of extraordinary animals that were able to rise above their expected station and behave in morally exemplary ways, and some that were able even to attain liberation.<sup>39</sup>

For the Buddhists likewise animals “are not considered to be capable of growth in the *dhamma* and the *vinaya* [monastic discipline],”<sup>40</sup> but this excludes them from activities that certain classes of human beings are excluded from in the same clause. So beings vary in their moral-spiritual capacities, but not according to their status as human or otherwise. And Buddhist texts are nevertheless explicit and consistent in treating animals as, in a sense, ethical beings: nonhuman animals can be reborn in a better station in the same way that any living being might be reborn in a better station, namely, as the natural consequence of living an ethical life, where that is primarily understood as acting out of care and concern for others.<sup>41</sup> Still more, animals might live *exemplary* lives. “That animals as well as humans are considered capable of truly ethical behavior is underlined by a striking passage from the *Vinaya Piṭaka*,” writes McDermott:

Here a partridge, a monkey, and a bull elephant are pictured as having undertaken the five moral precepts, and living together, “courteous, deferential, and polite to one another.” Their life-style is referred to as “Partridge Brahma-faring,” and set up as a model of morality upon which even the Buddhist *bhikkhus* should pattern their lives.<sup>42</sup>

Nonhuman animals are considered sufficiently like the human sort in kind, and in situation, that they may act as role models for how humans ought to live.<sup>43</sup> At their worst, animals are beings of the same sort, just less wise, more violent, and unhappier than humans, so that they are appropriate beings toward whom *śīla* (right and restrained conduct, speech, and livelihood) is to be expected.<sup>44</sup>

## ... BUT CAN WE EAT THEM?

While animals may be on the same journey as humans, and while this set Buddhists against the sacrificial practices of their Brahmanical contemporaries, we noted earlier that this was not originally seen by Buddhists as a reason to refrain from eating them. Instead, and reflecting the Buddhist emphasis on intent and disposition, one may not *kill* living beings for the purpose of eating them (or for any other purpose) nor have them killed or even knowingly allow them to be killed for one's sake. "Meat should not be eaten when it is seen, heard or suspected to have been killed for one," the Buddha is recorded as saying (*MN* 55); if one does not see or hear or suspect that an animal has been killed for one, then if meat is given, one may eat it. This disregard for actual suffering or harm caused, regardless of intentions, was severely criticized (mocked, even) by the more austere Jains.<sup>45</sup> It had, however, a distinct practical advantage among a community committed to living exclusively on alms within a meat-eating society.<sup>46</sup> Moreover such pragmatic accommodation looks less ridiculous when we recognize that the Buddhists are not attempting to set one principle of right (intention) over another (outcomes); the Buddhist project—perhaps the Indian project of moral thinking *tout court*—was not a quest for a decision principle or a source of normativity. This is no doubt related to the relative lack of presumption about the categorical specialness of human beings.<sup>47</sup> At any rate, for the Indian Buddhists, moral thinking is in the service of our quest for moral improvement and ultimately for liberation, and for that, the focus is rather on who and how to *be*. The Buddhist interpretation of *ahiṃsā* is that we should live and be in such a way that we intend no ill or harm to any living being, directly or indirectly.

In fact this Buddhist emphasis on the cardinal dispositions of loving-kindness, equanimity, care,<sup>48</sup> and sympathetic joy led very naturally to an ethic that disregards differences in animal kinds when considering how to engage with others. Of course how one *expresses* loving-kindness, say, to a human being may differ from the expression of

loving-kindness toward a vulture, but in every case loving-kindness is what is called for—and similarly for the other virtuous dispositions (*brahmavihāras*).<sup>49</sup> It should be no surprise, then, that Buddhism did ultimately come to advocate vegetarianism, and not just as a monastic discipline but as a moral precept for all (albeit a precept liable to violation). The Mahāyāna movement, which, among other things, drew the ambitions of monastic life into the daily lives of nonmonastics, seems to have initiated the commitment to refraining from eating animals even if they were not killed for one's own sake.

The eighth chapter of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* is an instructive text in this regard,<sup>50</sup> although this chapter is possibly later than the rest of the (probably) third-century CE text. The chapter consists of a series of reasons why one should not eat meat. The appeal throughout is to care and have concern for living beings: anyone who cares for the welfare of other beings would not eat animals because. . . . One of the most charming reasons is that meat-eating makes you stink. This is not a problem because other human beings might be offended by your body odor; it is a problem because animals with much more discerning senses of smell will immediately detect your scent as "meat-eater," and therefore as a possible danger to themselves. "If this is a meat-eater, it might eat me!" think all the small furry creatures in your surroundings. Even if you have no intention of eating rabbit, or that particular rabbit, for dinner tonight, it is cruel and thoughtless to walk around striking terror into the heart of every living being around you. Restraining one's appetites is a courtesy to others.

A second striking argument is a slippery slope argument. If you start by eating animals of any sort, the thought goes, you will eventually turn to eating forbidden or filthy animals, and may well even find yourself eating human flesh.<sup>51</sup> This is backed up by, on the one hand, a story of a notorious king who apparently did just that and, on the other hand, by a claim about the psychology of meat-eating. By eating meat one develops a taste for it and simultaneously desensitizes oneself to what one is doing in eating meat (to the fact that it is a dead animal, a

stinking corpse, you are eating). This instigates a kind of craving for new, fresh, intense meaty flavors, unchecked by a natural repugnance, which has been blunted; this in turn leads to further and more various meat consumption, and so on.<sup>52</sup> The point of interest here is the emphasis on mental training. Eating meat cultivates and perpetuates a psychological disposition and outlook, and this is what is particularly pernicious about it.

Finally there is the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra's* argument from rebirth. The text argues that since all beings have been reborn innumerable times, there is no way to know that any given animal is not a close relation to you at some point in the process. This is the argument for vegetarianism that one expects within the context of rebirth cosmologies; it trades on the strong intuition that eating your kin is obviously appalling, and of course on a literal notion of rebirth. But the text then does something more interesting: it juxtaposes this with the oft-repeated observation that the Buddha, and anyone striving for the enlightenment he reached, regards all living beings as his only child.<sup>53</sup> Here the claim is precisely *not* trading on a literal notion of rebirth. The Buddha does not think all beings were, in some incarnation, his only child. Rather, knowing this not to be literally the case, he nevertheless regards them with the intense affection and concern that parents typically have for their only child. This is the recommendation of a stance to adopt toward all creatures (and not a claim about essences, either similar or different). We do not see ourselves as radically distinct, but as radically—intensely, closely—related. Starting with an appeal to literal rebirth, in a culture where that is a going item, gets one to begin to see what adopting this outlook means. One of the difficulties of non-rebirth cultures, then, is how to get a foothold in radical relatedness.<sup>54</sup>

The Jains were the most systematic in extending the nonviolence principle to every living thing and had the widest understanding of what was alive. This difference was indeed based on a distinctive cosmological picture, but not on any variation of a theory of rebirth.

The Jains opted for a single, stable, and exhaustive taxonomy of living beings, organizing them according to the number of sense faculties they have. Plants have one sense faculty (touch); mammals, birds, and fish have all five (touch, taste, hearing, sight, smell); and various insects and smaller creatures have various subsets of these.<sup>55</sup> This taxonomy, however, does not establish a normative ranking; creatures with more sense faculties are not thereby more worthy.<sup>56</sup> These characterizations are purely descriptive. Anything with any sense faculty is capable of suffering or flourishing in some respect, and the classification of living beings according to their sense faculties provides valuable information about how they can be helped or harmed—and so what may and may not be done with or to them. This classification of living beings enables Jainism to establish “a truly unprecedented philosophical foundation for compassionate behavior toward animals.”<sup>57</sup>

Arguing against their non-Jain contemporaries that more care must be taken to avoid harming all sorts of living beings, the Jains generally presented arguments from virtue and character rather than from the basis of the natures of living beings.<sup>58</sup> Violent is as much a bad thing to *be* as violence is bad to *do*. That is, the fact that it harms others is not the foremost consideration against violence—after all, harming others is the point of violence, so pointing out that my violence harms others has not yet given me a reason to desist. A hostile mentality itself is not an edifying one. Violence is counterproductive; over the long run it does not help to achieve one's aims; it is frowned upon or sanctioned by gods or society; having hurtful intentions, and then especially acting on them, does violence to myself. The Jains share with the Buddhists an emphasis on character, on what sort of person I become through either careful or aggressive behavior toward others, both human and nonhuman.

Like the Buddhists (and, to some extent, the Hindus), the Jains fill their texts with stories of animals behaving morally. As with the Buddhists, their behavior determines their next incarnation, which can be either good or bad; that is, being an animal does not mean that one is bound to act viciously. In fact these stories even depict animals



as *choosing*, and so as responsible for their acts even on a more robust account of moral responsibility.<sup>59</sup>

In sum, a rebirth cosmology does not of itself determine that we owe animals the same treatment we owe other humans, and it does not entail that we cannot distinguish between the moral relevance of killing a person and the moral relevance of killing a rat. Taken as a logical proposition, almost nothing follows from a commitment to rebirth. Taken, however, as a description of the human condition, the cosmology of rebirth offers a depiction of that situation in which there is nothing distinctively human about it. Humans do not act out the lead roles on a stage set by a relatively undifferentiated nonhuman environment. Animals, and indeed all living beings, are part of our shared world; anyone might occupy interchangeably any position within this shared world. Where all animals (or living things) are interchangeable, identity is fluid, not essential. That is a fact about the human condition, and the fact is, it is not a distinctively *human* condition at all. All animals are on the same journey or in the same predicament; their suffering takes different forms, and the resources they can bring to difficulties differs. This is what is precious in a human incarnation: our resources, should we choose to use them, are so much more varied and effective. But these additional resources bring with them additional responsibilities: it is much easier for human beings to restrain their desires and not act out of fear than it is for a tiger, and so it is more incumbent upon us to do so. Doing so, at the same time, gives us easier access to the fruits of virtue. But these differences are generally thought of as a matter of degree, and there is no great pressure to hunt down some essential difference that marks out humankind.

#### FABLES

The metaphysics or cosmology did not work alone in creating the sense of a shared world and shared condition between humans and other animals. Indeed if the foregoing is correct, even the apparently

metaphysical and cosmological works in a more literary fashion—suggesting and articulating an outlook and way of relating—than by providing grounds for inescapable conclusions. We should not consider principles like *karma*, *ahimsā*, and *karuṇā*, then, independently of the explicitly literary works that encoded these principles and provided opportunity for their concrete engagement and exercise.

From the perspective of ancient Indian literature, it is a striking fact that there are no talking monkeys in the *Iliad*. There are no snake kings or eagle heroes, no helpful mice or shifty jackals.<sup>60</sup> If animals exist in the ancient Greek literary world, they are the backdrop against which the real action of human life takes place, or props in an act of human madness; significantly, they do not take on speaking roles.<sup>61</sup> In ancient India, by contrast, although in an oral tradition it is impossible to be certain, it looks as if the practice of sharing tales involving talking animals is perhaps as old as the cosmology of rebirth. Stephanie Jamison has argued, for instance, that although there are no animal fables proper in the *Rg Veda*, we see in certain passages evidence that such stories were told and expected to be familiar to the audience of the *Rg Veda*.<sup>62</sup> Talking animals are not only very old, but were also extremely widespread. The sheer quantity and pervasiveness of animal fables is difficult to overestimate. The earliest surviving collection we have may be the voluminous *Jātaka* tales, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, likely composed around the fourth century BCE. Some of these previous lives are as a human or a god, but very many are nonhuman animal incarnations. For these tales Buddhists likely drew in part on an existing body of stories already familiar to their audience and reworked them to serve the purpose of describing the Buddha's long journey to enlightenment as a series of studies in particular virtues. When Buddhism was at its height in India—let us say, from around the period of the Buddhist convert emperor Aśoka (third century BCE), who unified much of India, and for the next seven or eight centuries—these stories would have been very widely known. *Avadāna* tales collected and circulated during this time, sometimes featuring virtuous

animals,<sup>63</sup> and the so-called “commentary” on the *Dhammapadā* of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. consisted of morality tales, some involving animals.<sup>64</sup> Some stories were taken up and reworked into non-Buddhist animal fables and included in the (third-century BCE?) *Pañcatantra*, a massive collection of animal tales, organized as sage practical advice, particularly on how to be successful in one’s dealings with others.<sup>65</sup> Some of these are in turn taken up by the *Hitopadesa* (eighth–twelfth century CE), a similar sort of text, which also incorporates animal fables from other unnamed sources. There is also the eleventh-century CE *Kathāsaritsagara*, the *Ocean of Rivers of Stories*, the largest compilation of Sanskrit tales and fables, several of which involve animals as primary characters (some of these taken from the *Pañcatantra*). With so many talking animals about, it would have been most incongruous to argue that the *essential* difference between them and us—the difference that casts them outside considerations of right and wrong—is their irrationality.

This is even more so since the talking the animals are depicted as engaging in is invariably of a practical sort (asking, What ought I to do? What is the good thing to do, or the right choice?) and often collaborative (What should *we* do?). These fables involving talking animals have an avowedly didactic role and seem always to have been recognized as such. In keeping with this didactic function, narratives of talking animals engaged in practical reasoning were popular and practical—a part of the everyday fabric of life and upbringing in the broadest sense, not reserved for the rarified domain of the literary elite.

But the very fact that these tales should illustrate moral or practical advice for the human, social world raises the ready objection that such tales are not, in fact, about animals at all. Since the animals talk like humans in order to teach us about humans and being human, perhaps we should say the *Jātaka* tales, for instance, present animals as “mere vehicle[s] for human traits” rather than treating “animals as subjects” in their own right.<sup>66</sup> Such fables are anthropomorphizing, the objection goes, indicating much concerning what their audience thought

about human social life, perhaps, but nothing at all about what or how they thought about animals. After all, we are not to suppose that an ancient Indian listener conversant in these fables would have supposed of any actual mouse she encountered in the pantry that it might indeed speak to her.

Now there is a curious feature of this anthropomorphizing objection. The very notion of anthropomorphizing presumes we have a distinct and stable notion of the human—of human character and social life—which we then foist upon our nonhuman animals and that we have a definite sense of “the other” animals as necessarily quite distinct from humans in just these respects, so that granting them these “human” characteristics can only be foisting on them something that does not properly belong there. But if our starting point is not the assumption of radical difference, then it is more difficult to articulate the objection *as* an objection. It is true that in these fables, familiar characteristics or traits are isolated and identified particularly with certain animals. The jackal is “the epitome of greed and cunning”; the crow is “smart and curious”; the ass is interested only in food and sex.<sup>67</sup> But what we have here is not so much anthropomorphism as caricature: the distilled forms of virtues and vices are presented and deployed to didactic effect. These caricatures are used not just as particular anecdotes to distill and advertise the folly of pride, say. They are also used cumulatively to argue over many instances for general points: that creatures behave according to their nature, for instance, or that fate does (or does not) determine one’s actions. So the story of the carnivorous lion is not taking the lion to stand for a person of a particular kind; it is taking a stand in an argument about the scope of choice, for anyone. Nature made the lion carnivorous, says the story, and it is futile to ask him to be nice and vegetarian. Similarly the lesson states that human individuals or even classes have their natures, and one cannot expect them to suddenly change these or act out of character.<sup>68</sup>

Both storytellers and audiences knew the animals whereof they spoke. In fact to serve their didactic function the animals of the tales

cannot be a mere blank onto which human features are inscribed. They must be sufficiently similar to human beings in relevant ways and similarly situated. The similarity thought relevant here is not in biological functioning or bodily parts but rather in what might be very broadly characterized as moral situation. Nonhuman animals have natures (*svabhāva*), for instance, just as we do, which they can conform to or try to act against. Having distinctive natures, in their case as in ours, is immediately related to having related duties and propensities (*svadharma*).<sup>69</sup> They are the bearers of the consequences of their actions, just as we are; they have mental states that affect their actions and choices, and are in turn affected by them. These are not picturesque ways of thinking about animals, but thoughts about what animals are actually like. Of course the particular natures ascribed to each kind of animal are, to a certain extent, something the storytellers project onto each animal. And yet the storytellers and their hearers were also acute observers of nature, so that the characters they gave their various animals are recognizable from observation of actual animals, their characteristic reactions and behaviors.<sup>70</sup> The storytellers did not *project* the eternal enmity of the snake and the mongoose onto those poor creatures; they discovered it there, in the observed behavior of the animals, and used it for their storytelling. Nor did narrators *project* subjective mental states such as fear, care, cooperation, aggression, cunning onto empty ciphers; they had experience of animals as subjects and could rely on their audience having the same.

This is why, curiously, we can see that the lessons in a fable may also go the other way; rather than observations about human interactions being projected onto animals so that they can mirror it back to us, we see observations from the animal world turned to lessons for the human world. One example is the proverb repeated in the *Pañcatantra* that “there can be no friendship between grass-eaters and meat-eaters, between a food and its eater” (e.g., *Pañcatantra* II, 9).<sup>71</sup> Here it is animals informing the human world rather than presumptions about humans coloring in otherwise uncharacterized animals. The instruction,

illustrated of course with colorful stories, is to look about you in the natural world; see how there is no friendship between the grass-eating animals and the meat-eating animals? There can be no friendship between food and its eater, between two parties, the one of which survives at the cost of the other. So think: when someone offers friendship, is he in a position to offer it? Can he be trusted? If his interests are fundamentally at odds with yours, then do not expect friendship—even if he promises it, and even if he genuinely intends to extend it. If a person cannot survive without consuming you, you will find that, at some point, you have become his supper. Such an implicit line of reasoning relies on an appreciation of the continuity between the human condition and the nonhuman, on a view of whatever lives as essentially in the same situation and liable to the same concerns and constraints.

Sometimes the lessons are not to be carried over from animals to humans in any obvious way at all. The animals remain animals. Take this example from the *Jātaka* tales. The Buddha, in a life prior to his awakening (when he was just a *bodhisattva*), is living as the king rat among a community of rats.<sup>72</sup> A jackal pretends to be very holy, practicing austerities, and persuades the king to allow him to act as sentry when the rats leave their nest to search for food. After several rats have gone missing, it is discovered that the jackal has been using his post as sentry to pick off the last rat through the door when they return each evening. So far, so familiar. The *Bodhisattva* (who will become the Buddha), currently the rat king, then lunges on the wicked jackal and slits open its jugular so that the jackal dies. It is very unclear what lesson is meant to transfer from this heroic mouse escapade to the human world, particularly in terms of teaching Buddhist values of compassion and nonviolence. The story seems simply to recognize that it is in the nature of a *rat* to react murderously to threats and treachery. Taking on board that there is something characteristic of rats in the episode, we can then consider this as a (ratty) expression of the virtue of individuals in community looking out for and defending each other and acting on each other's behalf.



What is going on in such stories, and generally in these animal fables, is not so much anthropomorphism *instead of* taking the animals as subjects (an unhelpful dichotomy) as a lack of recognition of a significant gulf between animals and humans. This is a fitting literature for a cosmology of interchangeability, but it also reinforces, explores, and deepens the sense of commonality, of animals as our fellows—some of them rascals, some of them friends, all of them trying in a way compatible with their natures and naturally given resources to find a way to live a satisfying life in a world populated with many and various other creatures trying to do the same.

#### CONCLUSION

In Indian classical literature, philosophical, legal, and literary, there is a great deal to be said about specific kinds of animals and forms of interaction appropriate to different specific animals, including the human. But there is not so much evidence of that presumption of a fundamental difference between human and nonhuman forms of life that allows us in English, for instance, to use the word “animal” simply to mean “nonhuman animal.”

This means that the concept of the animal is not best suited to explore the nature of the human by *contrast*. Instead we more often find a background presumption of a common condition: whatever lives seeks to sustain its life, wants pleasure and not pain, wants its desires and aims satisfied rather than thwarted. Differences in animals, including the human animals, are then just so many differences in opportunities for pleasure and avoiding pain, abilities to conceive of desires and satisfy them, and forms of vulnerability in having these ambitions frustrated. The many tales of talking animals both express and sustain this basic orientation toward commonality, and they enable us to illuminate the human social world not because the animals are anthropomorphized but because reality is not anthropocentric in the first place.

Instead of seeing the doctrine of rebirth as a reason or ground for assimilating animals to humans, we should see it as expressive of an understanding of fluid and temporary identities, each of which is a variation on a single common condition. A cosmology of rebirth works together with its popular literature to create a sensibility of awareness to the aliveness of things. Both the cosmology and the sensibility, however, require independent appreciation of the badness of violence, the value of *ahiṃsā*, before we can begin to put these together into prescriptions for attitudes or behaviors toward nonhuman animals. Animals are, at bottom, less fortunate versions of ourselves, and if there is anything distinctive of the human role in this relationship, it is that we can perhaps appreciate this fact and possibly even extend sympathy on its basis.<sup>73</sup>