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Concluding Ruminations

The previous chapter sketched a vision for cow care in the late modern world, in the form of anticipatory communities and affirmations regarding cow care's ethos and practices. As a vision, it is a proximate echo to the temporally distant vision portrayed in Chapter 2: There, we glimpsed the Rigveda's mysterious world in which cows and words for "cow" converge and diverge, the words sometimes seeming to take lives of their own in poetic flights that stretch linguistic parameters of meaning. As we traversed through later Sanskrit and eventually non-Sanskrit Indic literature in search of "bovinity," we found it to be ever in proximity to divinity. This is most apparent in the world of the Bhagavata Purana, where he who is seen as *purna-bhagavan*—the supreme divinity-in-full, Krishna—makes cowherding his daily, playfully pleasing vocation.

Between these two visions are two fields of modern discourse. The first (discussed in Chapter 3) is a debate on how to regard ancient Indian tradition with respect to cows and, more broadly, what should be understood from textual accounts of animal (including cow) sacrifice and the apparent opposite, namely textual exhortations to nonviolence. The second field of

discourse (discussed in Chapter 5) is how traditional Hindu ethical ideals may be brought into conversation with contemporary animal ethics thought. In the middle of this sandwich, in Chapter 4, we viewed the varied and complicated present-day situation in India regarding cow care and, sadly, the widespread *lack* of care for cows as a consequence of changing economic, social, cultural, and political pressures.

As we step back to reflect on the terrain thus traversed, I see a broad conceptual binary emerge, one of a “utopian/dystopian” character. The two visions that open and close this account may strike us as utopian, in the sense of being imaginary, nostalgic, and wishful thinking. Yet within the ancient idyllic vision lurks always the threat of dystopian chaos, embodied in the demon serpent Vritra (disruptor of environmental balance), in the Panis (disruptors of the Vedic ritual order), and in the threat of cattle rustlers (disruptors of social well-being). Further, toward the end of the Bhagavata Purana there is a detailed anticipation of a pervasive cultural breakdown in the progression of the present age, *kali-yuga*. We recall that Kali personified senselessly tortures the earth-cow and the dharma-bull, but is nevertheless given shelter in places of impiety by King Parikshit, enabling Kali to insidiously spread his debilitating influence throughout the world. This account near the Bhagavata’s beginning prepares readers for the much more detailed description of the Kali age near the text’s conclusion.

Sage Shuka begins this latter account (BhP 12.2) by listing characteristics of human life that diminish day by day. Dharma, truthfulness, cleanliness, tolerance, mercy, life duration, and physical strength all dwindle by the force of time. As good qualities diminish, dark qualities become prominent, such that truth gives way to hypocrisy and audacity, dharma yields to the desire for fame, and justice is cloaked in greed for power. In this state of affairs, Shuka asks rhetorically, “What can a person who injures other living beings for the sake of his body know about his own self-interest, since his activities are simply leading him to hell?” (BhP 12.2.41; translation: Goswami et al., in Prabhupada 2017). But then, following his description of the Kali age, Shuka recites the Bhumi-gita—the Song of the Earth (BhP 12.3). In this song, Earth (as a feminine personage) laughs at the folly of countless kings in their futile efforts to conquer her. In seeking control of her, they fail to control their own sensory urges and become

oblivious to their own impending death (BhP 12.3.4–5). The upshot of such ignorance is misuse of the earth’s gifts, leading to scarcity. Swami Prabhupada discussed this dynamic on numerous occasions, for example in a lecture he gave in Los Angeles:

As soon as you make misuse, the supply will be stopped. After all, the supply is not in your control. You cannot manufacture all these things. You can kill thousands of cows daily, but you cannot generate even one ant. And you are very much proud of your science. You see. Just produce one ant in the laboratory, moving, with independence. And you are killing so many animals? Why? So how long this will go on? Everything will be stopped. (Prabhupada 2017; Lecture, Bhagavad Gita 3.11–19, Los Angeles, 27 December 1968)

Again, mistreatment of cows is linked to mistreatment of the earth, and these are seen as products of human arrogance. Such arrogance is epitomized in scientists who make brash, unfounded claims to the effect that humans’ well-being will always be secured by their (scientists’) inexhaustible powers to create. Therefore—so the arrogant reasoning goes—the killing of animals can continue without restriction. And so, as the slaughter continues, it is such “reasoning” that drives the dystopia that humans are making of this planet today.

We wonder, what is the trajectory of our collective human behavior toward our planet earth? A related question concerns the possibility, or impossibility, of changing our habits, perhaps our very “nature.” From one perspective of early Sanskrit literature, one should not hope for such change. The well-known guidebook of prudent conduct (*niti*), the Panchatantra, consists of several talking animal fables. Among these, a dominant theme is that one cannot expect persons to change their nature (*svabhava*), and in particular, predators will always remain predators, no matter their apparently “reformed” behavior (Taylor 2007, pp. 47–50). By this understanding, as long as humans see themselves as meat-eating predators, all our philosophies can only serve to perpetuate this identity and our *wild*—unrestrained—behavior. As G.K. Chesterton (1909, p. 265) aptly put it,

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 domestic animals; man alone is ever undomestic, either as a profligate or a monk.

Further, if the present age is characterized by diminishing observance of normative precepts—dharma—what can be expected to motivate persons to “tame” themselves in their eating habits? For clearly, this is the crucial point. Humans have allowed themselves to be conditioned to regard the taste of animal flesh as greatly pleasurable, and any amount of ethical or even medical argumentation for avoiding meat—however compelling to reason this might be—fails to change our hearts. To give up meat is regarded as an unwanted austerity, maybe good for saints but not for “normal” people. Habit persists, justified simply by virtue of being habit, which we can at least label as “carnism” (Joy 2010, p. 29).

And yet, our human inquisitiveness impels us to ask, can human wildness be tamed? Could it be that what makes us human is quintessentially our capacity for inner reform and transformation, a capacity facilitated and nourished by spiritual wisdom, ethical reasoning, reflection, and conscious choice? This, I would argue, is particularly the view represented in the Bhagavad Gita and in the entire bhakti stream of Hindu tradition. Further, this view is of critical importance for understanding and *changing* taste, which is so foundational to the existence and changing of eating habits. More on this in a moment, but first some background by way of a short look at general principles espoused in the Bhagavad Gita, linking these to the story of King Yudhishtira and the dog, discussed in Chapter 5.

We have already considered one key theme of the Bhagavad Gita, namely *equal vision (sama-darshana)*: “A learned brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, or a ‘dog-eater’—a wise person sees [them all] with equal vision” (Gita 5.18). It was such equal vision that enabled King Yudhishtira to insist that his companion dog be admitted with him into heaven; and by this insistence, he exercised his power of *choice (iccha)*. With these two foundational capacities—seeing with equal vision and making a conscious choice based on that vision, the king was empowered to practice *nonviolence (ahimsa)* and, in the process of doing so, to *teach by example (acharya)* to the world. To hold fast to this teaching despite all resistance

from the world required and enabled him to realize *humility* (*amanitva*), which he could experience blossoming into true *affection* (*priti*) for fellow beings.¹

Changing Taste

A key stanza early in the Bhagavad Gita (2.59) gives a clue about how all six of these themes are realized, through a subtle but decisive shift in “taste” (*rasa*):

Sense objects fade away for the embodied who does not partake of them, except for the taste; for one who has seen the Supreme, even this taste fades. (translation based on Schweig 2007, p. 52)²

The word *rasa*, here translated as “taste,” has a rich constellation of meanings, bringing the physical, sensory experience of tasting into direct application in the sphere of classical Sanskrit aesthetic theory. For us to note here is the link indicated in this stanza between two sorts of perception, namely perception of sense objects, on the one hand, and, on the other, perception of divinity (the latter referred to in this stanza as “seeing”—from the Sanskrit verbal root *drish*). Bhakti is the means by which the sensate self (*atman*), ordinarily absorbed in matter, is enabled to experience its counterpart—the trans-temporal higher self (*paramatman*) in an aesthetically pleasing, or “relishable” relationship (Valpey 2019). Such a relationship is the culmination of realizing the six above-mentioned themes, with reciprocal affection experienced as an ever-dynamic *sharing* (a basic translation of the word *bhakti*). Such affectionate relationship becomes the basis for molding action according to *divine preference*, as we discussed in Chapter 5.

¹I am grateful to Shaunaka Rishi Das for calling attention to this sixfold thematic understanding of the Bhagavad-gita.

²H.D. Goswami’s alternative translation (Goswami 2015, p. 159) replaces “who has seen the Supreme” with “on seeing something better.” The Sanskrit term in question is *param*, which can have both senses. Arguably, the entire Bhagavad-gita makes the case that the “something better” that one aspires to see is none other than the supreme person. See also Swami Prabhupada’s translation of the stanza in n. 18 of the previous chapter.

Bhakti, as presented in authoritative Hindu texts, has both an individual, private dimension and a social, public dimension. Reciprocal affection with the divine cowherd Krishna has practical implications that extend outward into the world to include a positive, care-full (caring) engagement with the environment to the furthest extent of human influence on the environment. Naturally, such care-full engagement impacts human political and economic behavior, whereby fresh, feasible ideas for bringing about the good for all can be welcomed and implemented. From “good taste” in spiritual matters, good choices for long-term well-being are made.³ Good choices include wise—restrained—uses of technology based on a clear sense that human life becomes humane only when there is self-restraint.

For Vaishnava Hindus, in its most aesthetically refined and perfected form, wise engagement inspired by the bhakti paradigm brings about the realization of Vraja-Vrindavan, the land in which bovinity and divinity find their perfection. Krishnadasa Kaviraja offers a striking vision of such realization in his Chaitanya Charitamrita account of the Vaishnava bhakti saint, Sri Chaitanya. According to Krishnadasa, to fully appreciate the potential of this vision, we best regard Chaitanya as none other than Krishna incarnate.⁴ But although he is Krishna, he covers his divine identity for the duration of his earthly manifest life (during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries), preferring to be absorbed in the identity and mood of Krishna’s devotee. It is in this mood (*bhava*) that Chaitanya, after having taken the vows of a renunciant (*sannyasin*), had set out from Puri, on India’s eastern coast, journeying by foot with a single companion, Balabhadra, toward far-away Vrindavan. For our discussion, it is an episode said to have occurred along the way to Vrindavan that is significant.

As Chaitanya and Balabhadra were passing through the Jharikhanda forest (present-day Jharkhand, central India), they encountered many animals, including elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, boars, deer, and assorted bird

³With consideration of economics, I am thinking of Alf Hornborg’s radical proposal for “redesigning money for sustainability, justice, and resilience” as a viable means for consequential transformation of human–environmental relations that would have immediate and far-reaching benefits for the planet as a whole and for individual animals. See Hornborg (2017).

⁴Krishnadas elaborates a detailed theological treatise to justify this claim in the opening four chapters of his Chaitanya Charitamrita. Here, suffice to say that he refers extensively to scriptural proof-texts, but he also offers his own theological reasoning and, through the entire work, an account of Chaitanya’s life by way of confirming his claim.

varieties. These creatures, attracted by Chaitanya and his joyous singing of divine names, would follow him along the path, prompting Chaitanya to feel that he was already in Vrindavan and to recite a certain Bhagavata Purana stanza:

Vṛndāvana is the transcendental abode of the Lord. There is no hunger, anger or thirst there. Though naturally inimical, human beings and fierce animals live together there in transcendental friendship. (CC Madhya 17.39, quoting BhP 10.13.60; translation Prabhupada 2005, Madhya-Lila vol. 4, pp. 20–21)

Krishnadasa tells his readers that Balabhadra, initially fearful of the jungle animals, became shocked and amazed to witness how Chaitanya would induce them not only to “sing” the name “Krishna,” but to also “dance.” Indeed, “the tigers and deer began to embrace one another, and touching mouths, they began to kiss. When Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu saw all this fun, He began to smile. Finally He left the animals and continued on His way” (CC Madhya 17.40–43; translation Prabhupada 2005, Madhya vol. 4, pp. 21–22).

This is a vision that may be said to go beyond the two visions presented in the second and sixth chapters of this study. As fantastical as it sounds, this vision of divine-human-animal celebratory interaction awakens our imagination to a state where our most fundamental presuppositions about the workings of nature and the necessity of biotic violence are, at least momentarily, suspended. It also points to a particular notion prominent in Hindu aesthetic tradition, namely the experience of *wonder* (*adbhuta-rasa*). Wonder can be seen as the seed of humility—the acknowledgment of our smallness, vulnerability, and limited reasoning power, that can open us to the sort of inner transformation—the change of heart—necessary for a truly ethical way of life in relation to all living beings in this world. Out of such humility may come the sort of understanding that could allow us to embrace and live by the implications of Chaitanya’s assertion (which he is said to have spoken to his student Sanatan Goswami, on his return journey to Puri from Vrindavan): “All creatures (*jivas*) are eternal servants of the supreme person, Krishna” (CC Madhya 20.108). The simple shift in consciousness from trying to be masters to accepting that we are servants

can, according to Vaishnava Hindu understanding, make all the difference for realizing our proper relationship to all beings.

Throughout this book, I have attempted to bring Hindu thought and practice regarding nonhuman animals—especially cows—into view for consideration in the broader area of animal ethics. The fact that we specify as a “branch” of ethical reflection our approach to nonhuman animals already indicates a major distinction we make, between humans and nonhumans (and it seems to imply that this branch is at best peripheral to what are regarded as the central issues of ethics, confined within human society). Here, I have made a further distinction, namely between humans who regard themselves or are regarded as Hindus and other humans (many of whom may have never heard the term “Hindu”). With this distinction and a further distinction—between cows (a type of *bovinae*) and other nonhuman animals—I have added complexity to the discussion about desirable behavior of humans in relation to nonhuman animals. I have also attempted to show how, by looking closely at how Hindus regard cows in the context of a worldview that fundamentally questions the nature of selfhood—human or otherwise—we can, despite our wildness, open ourselves to broader and better ways of thinking about and acting within our—non-nonhuman—relationships with nonhuman animals (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2).



Fig. 7.1 Govardhan Eco Village Responsible Animal Care brochure indicates cow care as care affirmation (Used with permission of Govardhan Eco Village [Thane, Maharashtra, India], all rights reserved)



Fig. 7.2 Week-old Balaram (same calf as on front cover) is examined by his bovine seniors at Care For Cows goshala, Vrindavan (Source Image courtesy of the photographer, Filip Cargonja)

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