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Introduction

Cows—certain types of *bovinae*—can evoke strong emotions among people, different emotions rooted in different worldviews. One worldview, which is arguably a galaxy of worldviews emerging over centuries in India, has come to be called “Hindu.” Some people who identify themselves as Hindus have strong feelings about cows—feelings that tie into their sense of conviction that cows are not just different from, but are *more than* animals, that they are in an important sense sacred, set apart, worthy of reverence, and therefore worthy of special care and protection. With a slight wordplay echoing the term *divinity*, we can speak in this context of *bovinity* as a descriptor for cows as more than animals.

For persons with other worldviews, cows may also evoke strong emotions. For some, the emotion evoked may be rooted in a strong sense of possessiveness. Oddly, such possessiveness has affinity with affects of Hindus who see cows as more than animal. Both regard cows as valuable. The difference is that the (*possibly* non-Hindu) persons in the second group find value in cows’ bodies more for what they provide once dead than what they provide while living.

I say *possibly* non-Hindu because some who might identify themselves as at least nominally Hindu, whether or not they would admit it, share this latter sense of cows' value.

Again, cows—bovines—can evoke strong emotions among people; conversely, cows can also be objects of indifference. Surprisingly, this is—or has become—especially true in India, a land typically associated with Hindu worldviews that include high regard for cows. A strange state of cultural cognitive dissonance appears to affect many people throughout the entire country of India, from top government officials to simple farmers.

Again, strangely, whether objects of strong emotions (either as bovinity or as commodity) or objects of indifference, all three of these sorts of persons tend to regard cows as *objects*. As objects, cows serve humans, or not. If they serve humans, it is either by divine arrangement that they do so, or by welcome accident that they can be used by humans, as sources of commodities. If they do not serve humans, cows are expendable, perhaps to be left to become either rewilded or extinct.

To consider cows as *subjects* is the starting point of this book, as it is the starting point for an ethical consideration of cows and, with cows, other nonhuman animals, in particular “farm animals.” Also, since positive regard for cows (more or less as bovinity) is strongly associated with Hindu traditions, this book is concerned with what has come to be called Hinduism, although the Hindu landscape may be better described in the plural, as “Hinduisms.” For many (both Hindus and non-Hindus), concern for cows beyond their utility is, or has come to be, a defining feature of Hinduism.¹

However, the process of defining Hinduism can lead to objectification, or rather, to *misplaced* objectification, by which I mean a misunderstanding or failure to recognize what is regarded in Hindu philosophical traditions as objective metaphysical truth. Some—perhaps many—Hindus objectify themselves with the label *Hindu*, such that they may forget or ignore basic teachings of sacred texts they would readily identify as Hindu. Yet, somewhat ironically, to these texts the term “Hindu” is unknown.

More specifically, this term is foreign to the Bhagavad Gita, widely regarded as a key text of several Hindu traditions. The Gita (for short)

¹ For a book-length discussion on issues involved in defining Hinduism, see Llewellyn (2005).

does, however, mention cows, including them in a brief list of living beings: “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). The equation of wisdom (or a well-educated person—*pandita*) with “equal vision” toward living beings points to subjectivity, rooted in an essential understanding of Hindu metaphysics, namely that consciousness is foundational to existence, being prior to, and indeed the source of, matter. In turn, arguably for most Hindus, consciousness indicates *personhood* as a fundamental category of reality; in contrast, designations such as “Hindu” and “cow” are of a secondary order, of identities that do not endure. Seeing equally means seeing all creatures as conscious beings who, depending on the particular bodies they occupy, exhibit varying degrees of the potential for full, enduring personhood. The implications of this worldview for animal ethics are considerable.

But if equal vision is so highly valued, why are cows singled out for special attention by Hindus, and why are they selected as the focus of this book? Why indeed. Much of this book will be concerned with answering this question, and in the attempt, the book will function largely as an extended commentary to the Gita stanza just quoted. I will argue that there are good reasons that cows are to be privileged (insofar as subjectivity of cows and other nonhuman animals is recognized or valued, at least in principle), and there are also less than ideal reasons that cows are privileged (insofar as objectification—of cows, nonhuman animals, and humans) is the result. The “less than ideal” reasons are nonetheless reasons for privileging cows: living cows do provide substances that humans benefit from, and this fact cannot and need not be ignored.

One reason for singling out cows for special attention has little to do with Hinduism as such, and more to do with soil. Healthy, well-cared-for cows (and ruminants more generally) and healthy soil go together; the opposite is also true, and the misuse and abuse of cows have accelerated degradation of soil throughout our planet, leading to expanding—indeed runaway—desertification.² Another important sacred text of Hindus, the

²According to Prof. Sir Bob Watson, chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, currently some 3.2 billion people worldwide are affected by degraded soils. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-48043134>. Accessed 29 April 2019.

Bhagavata Purana, seems to acknowledge this relationship when it identifies earth with cow and, in other texts, the dung of cows—which is extremely nourishing to soil—with Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune.

Considering the bio-zoological relationship of earth and cows, and considering the environmental damage from cattle farming for meat, leather, and other by-products—all for nonessential human uses, the sheer numbers of cows slaughtered annually give pause for thought: Worldwide, the lives of some 300 million cows annually, or roughly 34,000 cows per hour, are cut short by human intervention. Surprisingly, cow slaughter in India accounts for a substantial percentage of these numbers. In 2016, nearly nine million cows were slaughtered, putting India fifth among nations with the greatest numbers of cows slaughtered.³ It seems that despite India's legacy of special regard for cows, counter-forces have increased and accelerated, such that high regard for cows as beings to be cared for throughout their natural lives competes with disregard and purely instrumental regard that condemns them to commodification's relentless ways of disposal.

In this book, I sketch a sphere of Hindu ethical concern for animals that has as its locus the care and protection of cows. My aim is to (1) set out prominent features of the historical and current complexity of issues surrounding cows as animals of special concern in India; (2) suggest ways that some aspects of Hindu thought may contribute to and enrich present-day animal ethics discussion; (3) highlight limits on the value of Hindu animal ethics thought and practice, insofar as the priority of values is located in being Hindu rather than in respecting animals; and (4) illustrate practical ways that nascent “anticipatory communities”—communities with Hindu roots but reaching beyond this designation—are demonstrating alternative ways of living—both in and outside India—in which what I will be calling *cow care* is an integral feature. With the phrase

³<https://faunalytics.org/global-animal-slaughter-statistics-and-charts/>. Accessed 1 April 2019; page dated 10 October 2018), based on data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. China ranks highest, with almost 50 million cows slaughtered in 2016, Brazil is next, at over 37 million, then United States, at 31 million, followed by Argentina at 11.7 million. Taking into account population, the per capita number of cows slaughtered in India is relatively small. Still, these numbers are vastly greater than would have to be assumed in pre- or early modern India. I should note that another source consulted gave a much higher number for cows slaughtered annually in India, but I suspect that this higher number (some 38 million) includes water buffaloes.

“cow care” I generally mean the practice, or set of practices, centered on keeping and caring for cows (which will mainly, though not always, be referring to both male and female bovines) throughout their natural lives.

As a wide-ranging overview focused on cows, my aim is to make a case for cow care in particular and to set this case within a viable animal ethics discourse framework. I will be attentive to the practical challenges involved in cow care practice while questioning the current dominant instrumentalist and extractive economics of agribusiness that blinds us to the possibility of a different vision, a vision we may loosely call *traditional*. What I offer here are some rudiments of a vision of balance, as suggested by the Indic word *dharma*, and of interspecies care, as suggested by the Indic word *bhakti*.

Present-day Hindus who champion cow care are likely to invoke the tradition of sacred texts as evidence for cows’ special regard from ancient times. In Chapter 2, I offer a diachronic literary overview of relevant texts, beginning with the earliest known work, the collection of hymns known as Rigveda. Continuing with relevant references in later Vedic, post-Vedic, and classical Sanskrit works—the philosophically reflective Upanishads, the epic narrative Mahabharata, and the preeminent work of the Purana (ancient lore) genre, the Bhagavata Purana—we then touch on vernacular pre-modern and present-day literature. What emerges from this survey are two sorts of polarity—one of values, ranging between the Indic terms *dharma* and *bhakti*, and the second polarity one of meaning, ranging between literal and figurative understanding. These two polarities converge in the Sanskrit term *artha*, which indicates both *value* and *meaning*. Thus, cows as living beings and “cow” as a concept converge as a central locus of thought and action that strives for ethical integrity in all aspects of human life.

The textual survey of Chapter 2 listens mainly to the voices of brahmanical Hinduism, that of the literati and priesthood through the ages. This bias continues in Chapter 3, but with a significant shift in the face of modern critical thought. Since ancient times, the pursuit of ethical integrity has taken ritual form, centrally in performance of *yajna* (Sanskrit: *yajña*), usually translated as “sacrifice.” Controversy in modern times for some Hindus has revolved around whether or to what extent animals—especially cows—have been immolated in ancient sacrificial rites. In Chapter 3,

I examine this controversy, after surveying the modern emergence of a Cow Protection movement in India out of which the controversy emerged. I introduce four prominent makers of this history—Dayanand Sarasvati, M. K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Here, in calling attention to cow protectionism's Hindu identity politics within a growing nationalist movement toward independence from British rule, the semantic field of bovine meaning reaches well into the sphere of modern state governance. Consequently, a rhetoric of dharma—especially *sanatana-dharma* (unchanging dharma) takes a pivotal role, but in the process, I suggest, the dharma concept becomes impoverished as it is privileged over dharma's important counterpart, bhakti. The interest of actual cows is served when both principles are held in balance, the one dynamically complementing the other.

As modernization and globalization extend their reach throughout India, one response of cow carers wishing to preserve bovine sanctity has been to establish cow shelters or sanctuaries (*goshalas*). Throughout present-day India, there are several thousand goshalas of widely varying size and quality. Attempts to demonstrate the importance and viability of cow care can be seen in these goshalas, where one can also see sincere and determined people doing their best to realize a balance of dharma and bhakti in their daily care for cows. In Chapter 4, I offer snapshots of a few such current projects, hearing from their managers or owners about the challenges involved in pursuing an ideal amidst adverse conditions. I also survey economies of cow care in terms of charity and of (living) bovine products, ranging from tangible goods (especially milk and dung, and oxen traction) to less tangible or intangible goods (such as positive influence of cows on the environment and on people). The aim is to examine the inherent tension between utility and care, seeing how this tension is perceived, negotiated, resolved, or unresolved, within the ideological framework of the dharma and bhakti paradigms. Again, I suggest, if dharma is divorced from bhakti, the impulse toward self-centeredness persists, a tendency that plays out in the broadest sense as anthropocentrism, the root of human alienation from nature and hence from nonhuman animals.

Chapters 2 through 4 provide a setting for what follows in Chapter 5. Having viewed the literary, historical, and present-day complexities surrounding cow care, we step back to consider Hindu ethics with respect to

animals more broadly, drawing largely from the Indic classical literature to see how the dharma-bhakti polarity of values might be constructively applied. Here, I point to three aspects of dharma—as settled duty, deliberation, and cultivation of virtue, each with positive aspects and limitations. I then introduce *yoga*, an important Hindu tradition of intentional self-cultivation toward spiritual freedom, as a link between dharma and bhakti paradigms. Turning then to bhakti, the key point is to suggest a complementarity between bhakti and the contemporary (Western) “ethics of care” thought stream applied to animal ethics. To appreciate how the bhakti paradigm can enrich the ethics of care approach, I consider the theistic character of bhakti in terms of what I call *divine preference ethics*, which holds human choice to be crucial in realizing the full depth of loving relationship that leads to the good—the aim of ethical deliberation and action. Further, the practical application of ethics of care in bhakti calls for a consideration of an expanded understanding of *citizenship*, as proposed by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2013). The citizenship ideal honors nonhuman animals that are in direct relationship with humans (“domestic” or “farm” animals) while acknowledging their varied contributions to human well-being in non-exploitative conditions, always in the pursuit of ahimsa—nonviolence—as an ideal toward which human society must purposefully aim. To illustrate how nonhuman animal citizenship might be applied in relation to cows, I consider four of the nine “specific areas of presupposition for citizenship” discussed by Donaldson and Kymlicka, namely (1) mobility and the sharing of public space; (2) use of animal products; (3) use of animal labor; and (4) sex and reproduction. Yet it is further necessary to consider the broader political framework in which such citizenship might function. The proposed framework is *dharma-based communitarian* in character, which is currently being implemented (in very small scale) in “anticipatory communities” in which cow care is a key element.

In Chapter 6, the focus returns to cow care, and the aim is to imagine a possible positive future for cows whereby the principles outlined in Chapter 5 are applied, at least initially in anticipatory communities. Here, I point to two existing such communities, one in India (West Bengal) and one in Central Europe (Hungary), both affiliated with the institution established by Swami Prabhupada (introduced in Chapter 3). As young as

both these communities are, only time will tell how successful they will be; yet they point in a direction and strive to realize the sort of dharma- and bhakti-centered cultures in which the ideals of cow care can be practiced in contemporary life. Inevitably, one of the challenges these communities face is end-of-life care for cows. Keeping with the theme of futures for cows, I therefore briefly consider this, referring to two specific cases seen as wrongly treated and one case seen as a good and indeed glorious cow (bull) death leading to what his carers regarded as a bright future in this animal's expected afterlife. I then move to another register of future-thinking, namely, that of activism in the public sphere, to suggest lesser and greater effectiveness of such efforts in terms of the Indic thought system of Samkhya, with its threefold typology of qualities (*gunas*). This brings us back to the theme of objectification. In this context, objectification happens when cows are championed more as symbols than as actual living beings with needs for extensive care. Such "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (as A. N. Whitehead might put it) displays characteristics of the two lower, or denser, *gunas* (*rajas* and *tamas*—passion and darkness). By way of contrast, I offer a sixfold series of *affirmations on the dharma of cow care* to illustrate what a luminous (*sattva-guna*) future for cows could look like.

These six affirmations may give the impression of a hopelessly utopian vision—a wishful but impossible dream. Yet Hindu traditions, reaching back at least three thousand years, suggest that a longing to find a meaningful and mutually enriching relationship of humans with nonhumans has persisted. In Chapter 7—Concluding Ruminations—we consider this book's utopian/dystopian binary through two further visions presented in Vaishnava Hindu texts, raising the question whether "human nature" is changeable for the better, and if so, how. The bhakti paradigm offers a way forward toward deep transformation, specifically, transformation of *taste*. Through such transformation, *care-full* engagement with our environment—our world—becomes possible and feasible. Today, there is a pressing need to find a way forward toward long-term well-being for animals—both nonhuman and human—in relation to the whole of being. A good starting point may be the very meaningful and mutually enriching relationship of humans with cows, a relationship that can be well nourished by the inclusive, devotional spirit of bhakti.

Terminology and Spelling

As we are discussing Indian (generally Hindu, but more broadly Indic) texts and thought, this book will make considerable use of terms, phrases, and book titles from Sanskrit and Hindi traditions. I have generally removed standard transliteration diacritic marks, in the interest of accessibility to a wide readership. I have, however, retained original diacritic marks in quotations and in bibliographical references. On occasion, I have also retained diacritic marks of a few in-text Sanskrit and Hindi terms and phrases.

As I am discussing *cows* throughout the book, I take the liberty to occasionally change terms. As in common English usage, the word “cow” often refers to both male and female bovines, so also in contemporary Hindi (*gāi/gau*). I sometimes refer to “bovines,” as a gender-inclusive term, and when referring to male bovines specifically I will use the word “bull” or “ox.”

References

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