

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY: CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CHRISTIAN WORLD AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS

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When we suffer, we suffer as equals and in their capacity to suffer the dog is a pig, is a bear, is a boy.

Philip Wollen¹

When it comes to considering nonhuman animals with which we as human animals share this world – whether ‘cute,’ domesticated, endangered, wild or livestock – it is my opinion that all are of equal value, deserving of consideration, compassion and a peaceful, unhindered life. Although I do not identify as Christian, I respect and believe in many of the values considered to lie at the core of Christianity: love, peace, justice, hope, grace and service, to name a few. Religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism have similar beliefs when it comes to appropriately moral ways in which to live life, and these are apparent in their culture of practicing non-violence (*ahimsa*) and vegetarianism.

ANIMAL REPRESENTATION

The four evangelists associated with the Christian Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are commonly represented by nonhuman animals or as human with nonhuman animal heads. Matthew the angel embodies brotherly sympathy; Mark the lion is associated with royal power; Luke the ox is connected to sacrifice; and John the eagle, contemplation. All are considered to represent aspects of Jesus Christ. These are one of many examples in Christianity (and pre-Christianity) in which nonhuman animals are linked to spiritual power and are seen as material representations of desirable attributes, embodying god(s) and correspondingly treated as deities.

The same can be seen in ancient Egyptian religion, where gods and goddesses such as Anubis, Horus and Bastet are pictured with nonhuman animal heads. Bastet (a goddess of protection) offers an explanation of cat worship in Ancient Egypt as she is represented with a cat or lion's head, resulting in the veneration of cats in her honour. Hundreds of common idioms – ‘brave as a lion,’ ‘gentle as a mouse,’ or the less affirming ‘fat as a pig,’ ‘blind as a bat’ – present simplified, more contemporary examples of how this concept works. But the question must be asked: Is it ourselves we see in them or them we see in ourselves?

In *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice*, Kathryn McClymond discusses the totemic power of the nonhuman animal, explaining that “within certain communities, specific animals come to be viewed as material representations of the community deity. When crises develop, these ‘totems’ are consumed in sacrificial banquets.”¹²



Figures 1 - 4. Tara James, *Dumb Animals?*, 2013, detail, welded steel, papier-mâché, animal skulls, paint, textiles, wood, found objects, approx. 7 x 2 x 3 m. Photos: Tara James.



The processes behind these acts are entrenched in ancient beliefs involving the link between the animal totem, its deity and the strengthened connection between the community and their god(s) as a result of the sacrifice. This practice is far removed from today's thoughtless ethic of consumption, wherein every week billions of nonhuman animals lose their lives and liberty, to die without respect or honour for the sake of human greed and economic prosperity.

"What do Animals and Religion Have to do with Each Other?"³ is the title of an essay in which Laura Hobgood-Oster, a scholar of the history and comparative study of religions, addresses this very question. She responds: "They have inhabited the world of human religious imagination, ritual, myth, text and community for thousands of years. But in the course of the last several decades this deeply religious relationship has been forgotten, swept aside, ignored, or, sometimes, denied."⁴

TREATMENT OF ANIMALS TODAY

A former bank executive, philanthropist and animal rights activist, Philip Wollen has summarised the disastrous impact of the human race on other animals:

Only 100 billion people have ever lived, 7 billion people live today, and yet we torture and kill 2 billion sentient, living beings every week. 10,000 entire species are wiped out every year because of the actions of one, and we are now facing the sixth mass extinction in cosmological history. If any other organism did this a biologist would call them a virus.⁵

This figure includes an estimated two billion Christians, supposedly practicing Christian values. In his book *For Love of Animals: Christian Ethics, Consistent Action*, Charles Camosy – theology professor, vegetarian, Catholic Christian – addresses this issue. Camosy contributes to a discourse about the mistreatment of nonhuman animals in contemporary society, connecting consumerism, loss of values and a selfish, disconnected lack of concern with this problem.⁶

In his book, Camosy cites a paper entitled "Information and Communication Technologies (ITC) Contribution to Broiler Breeding"⁷ to question the ethics involved in factory farming. In the paper, the author, Dr. Yoav Eitan (an Israeli chicken-breeding company executive), discusses the variables, technologies and genetic 'enhancements' that may affect the growth, and therefore the profitability, of chickens raised in factory farms. He describes in detail the means used to prevent feeding chickens from feeling full, leading to obesity and affecting their reproductive capabilities. Camosy comments: "With these kinds of attitudes and technologies, we are now light years from anything that resembles kindness and respect for animals. The logic of profit and consumerism has taken over completely."⁸ Throughout his book, Camosy maintains an insistence on our species' ethical failure due to the disconnection caused by what Mary Eberstadt describes as "rampant and unexamined Western consumerism" and "an ethic of feckless consumption according to which more is better; all the time."⁹

These sentiments were recently echoed on social media site *Upworthy*,¹⁰ which hosted the online video agency Catsnake Film's presentation on the power of marketing, with a focus on factory farming. The audience, initially lulled into complacency and amused by descriptions of slick advertising techniques (presented by an actress impersonating a marketer called Kate Cooper), is wrongfooted when she concludes with a forceful reference to "the power of willful ignorance." She goes on to state that none of these marketing techniques would be successful were it not for humans' ability to ignore the things they do not want to acknowledge – in this case, the mistreatment and massive, systematised culture of cruelty experienced by the majority of the nonhuman animals we breed and consume.

Opposite page: Figure 5. Tara James, *The Spanish Inquichicken*, 2014, fibreglass, MDF, textiles, 1.2 x 2.5 m. Installation view from SITE 2014, Dunedin School of Art. Photo: Tara James



EXAMPLES OF 'ACCEPTABLE' TREATMENT

There are many farming and nonhuman animal 'production' practices that may be considered cruel and compassionless, or at the very least questionable. In most, if not all instances, these methods are sanctioned and considered acceptable under a variety of international animal welfare legislation. It only takes a minute online, searching topics such as 'treatment of male chicks' or 'veal calves,' to reveal hundreds of evidence-based accounts of the living and dying conditions of these beings.

In 2010, British newspapers *The Telegraph*¹⁰ and the *Daily Mail*¹¹ exposed the truth about the fate of male chicks in the egg industry – facts that animal rights activists had been trying to make public for years. Clandestine film footage revealed the fate of what are considered useless, non-profitable waste products of the industry, as they are dropped alive into giant mincing machines or, in some cases, gassed en masse and deposited in huge rubbish bags. Free range and organic chickens are also subjected to this treatment, as well as debeaking, whereby the females have the ends of their beaks burned or clipped off to prevent aggressive pecking in overcrowded conditions.

A by-product of the dairy industry, veal farming has been widely criticised for its practices. The Humane Society of the United States describes the standard treatment of veal calves on its website.¹² Veal calves are removed from their mothers soon after birth to be confined in crates, tethered by the neck, unable to turn around or move freely. This confinement and subsequent slaughter at 16 weeks result in the production of tender meat that can be sold at a premium. As only female calves are deemed useful in terms of future milk production, it is the males that are culled in this way. Despite recommendations for change made by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Veal Association, and a candid admission of the industry's inhumane, outdated practices by Randy Strauss, CEO of Strauss Veal, America's largest veal producer, these practices continue.

In New Zealand, we look to the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) for information about animal welfare policies and legislation. The Animal Welfare Act (1999) contains codes pertaining to the treatment and welfare of nonhuman animals, and complaints about non-compliance with the act are investigated by the MPI and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Examining the MPI website, a few key points are apparent. While it is stated that the ministry's role is to "lead and facilitate the management of animal welfare policy and practice in New Zealand" and that it "promote[s] policies for the humane treatment of animals, [as a] key participant in the ongoing animal welfare debate,"¹⁴ there is an even greater emphasis placed on commercial factors. Prominence is given to the growth of the economy in relation to New Zealand's primary production industries and an increase in export revenues to boost the country's prosperity. While it should be entirely possible to achieve both of the ministry's stated objectives, it is disheartening to discover the following disclaimer: "Note: Section 73(3) of the Animal Welfare Act 1999 provides that the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) may, in exceptional circumstances, recommend minimum standards that do not fully meet the obligations to ensure that the physical, health and behavioural needs of the animal are met."¹⁵

I can't help but wonder who decides what constitutes "exceptional circumstances" and how these might affect innumerable, helpless nonhuman animals? The literature examined offers no clear answer.

CONTEMPORARY CONSTRAINTS

I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of human beings and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity.¹⁶

Opposite page: Figures 6. Tara James, *Mother*, Fibreglass, 2014, found objects, textiles, ledlights, 2 x 2 x 0.5 m. Installation view from SITE 2014, Dunedin School of Art. Photo: Tara James



According to the Animal Liberation Front¹⁷ website there are a variety of religions, some Christian-based, whose adherents practice a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle and therefore actively choose to remove themselves from participating in nonhuman animal abuse and consumption. While Hindus, Jains and Buddhists are commonly acknowledged for their advocacy of vegetarianism and non-violence, many members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Rastafarians, Baha'i, the Bible Christian Church (which founded the first Vegetarian Society in 1847) and the Quakers (who founded the Friends' Anti-Vivisection Society in 1892) also follow a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle based on their various interpretations of the Christian Scriptures. Other religions such as Orthodox Christianity and the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) have rules limiting the amount and types of animal flesh that can be eaten and the times during which they may be consumed.

In her book *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*, Margo DeMello recognises the important role that nonhuman animals still play in religion worldwide. DeMello discusses their function in expanding our understanding of religious concepts, in mythology and in religious ritual.¹⁸ The concept of reincarnation – the belief in a cosmic cycle of rebirth that is central in Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism – ensures that the practice of peaceful coexistence is of utmost importance. Despite the concept being based on a pyramid of significance, placing humans at the pinnacle, the karmic threat of demotion to an animal form in the next life can only have positive effects for nonhuman animals spared violent treatment.

Hinduism

One can measure the greatness of a nation and its moral progress by the way it treats its animals. ... The cow is the purest type of sub-human life. She pleads before us on behalf of the whole of the sub-human species for justice to it at the hands of man, the first among all that lives. She seems to speak to us through her eyes: 'you are not appointed over us to kill us and eat our flesh or otherwise ill-treat us, but to be our friend and guardian.'

Mahatma Gandhi¹⁹

In 2014 the cow is still sacred and revered in Hindu India as it has been for thousands of years, and in most Indian states it is illegal to kill a healthy cow. In a belief probably originating in Vedic scripture, dating back 5000 years, the cow is thought to embody every positive cosmic energy: purity, goodness and completeness.²⁰ Economically speaking, the cow is also a very valuable nonhuman animal in a largely vegetarian nation that consumes a substantial amount of dairy products, and where cow dung is used as both fuel and fertilizer. In addition to cow worship, in India Hindu gods are able to take on human-animal form. Human-animal hybrids are well known in the cases of Hanuman (monkey form), Ganesh (elephant form) and Vishnu (lion form), to name only three of many.

PERSONAL PRACTICE AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Through experimentation with different techniques and materials, including clay modeling, mould-making, silicone and fibreglass casting, my practice has seen my skill base expanding. As well as increasing my practical, technical knowledge, the shift in materials from animal remains to animal representation also indicates a shift in my work, removing any element of exploitation or commodification of the animal itself. After reading Steve Baker's *Artist | Anima!*²¹ I became more aware of the impact of exploitation and harm done to nonhuman animals, whether actually or symbolically, as a result of the practice of artists. Although more obvious examples of artists with questionable moral attitudes and ethical practices are discussed in Baker's book, in particular it was the work of Damien Hirst and Angela Singer that resonated negatively with me with regard to the use of nonhuman animal remains.

While, ethically, I am completely opposed to the use of nonhuman animals purposely slaughtered to become artworks, as in the case of the shark killed for Hirst's work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, I needed to readdress my feelings toward the use of long-dead remains intended for another purpose,

as in the case of Singer's taxidermy works. Singer argues that " people need to see animals in a new way... [artists need to] shock the viewer into a new way of seeing and thinking about the animal."²² I retort that art is subjective and therefore it is impossible to 'control' the message you may want to impart. I also find it hard to believe that, with the overwhelming infiltration of media and social media, the nonhuman animal is not already viewed in a myriad of ways, from nauseatingly cute to horrifically abused.

It is up to the individual to respond in a way that will effect profound change. Thus, my thinking on this issue resulted in the conclusion that I wanted to distance myself from the use of any nonhuman animal remains in my work, returning to my initial convictions about respecting the dead, the sacred nature of the body and the autonomy of the nonhuman animal. As much as it seems hypocritical and 'speciesist' to keep pets while eating the flesh of other nonhuman animals, it strikes me as equally unjust to commodify nonhuman animal remains for the sake of art, regardless of the message attempting to be conveyed.

COMMUNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

The last two centuries have seen a profound increase in investigation and thought in the areas of nonhuman animal ethics, biopolitics and what has been dubbed posthumanities. Many writers, philosophers and academics are now focusing on our relationships with nonhuman animals, the treatment of nonhuman animals and the autonomy of nonhuman animals as valid, individual sentient beings that have their own unique understanding of the world, independent of their relationship with the 'human world' or human perception of their reality. Giorgio Agamben, Martha Nussbaum and the late Jacques Derrida form a small selection of philosophers focusing on the subject and all have extensive interests in much wider, interconnected fields. Due to the vast scope of the literature on this subject, a brief overview of some of their theories follows.

In his book *The Open: Man and Animal*²³ contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben explores the differences and similarities between humans and nonhuman animals. Traditional hierarchies of being have created boundaries that have impacted upon both nonhuman animal and humans, and this is particularly relevant in terms of human opinion and treatment of nonhuman animals. Such categorising has also had a major influence on the human ontological experience through the perceived connection between these hierarchies and the primacy assigned to human life, including an unchallenged power over all other lifeforms.

While Agamben's focus places him within the fields of biopolitics and post-humanities, Nussbaum discusses our oppositional relationships with different kinds of nonhuman animals in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*.²⁴ As the title implies, animal rights and ethical considerations lie at the centre of her discourse. Essentially a dissection of unchallenged speciesism, Nussbaum's book highlights the marked differences in our treatment of companion nonhuman animals, livestock for food, captive nonhuman animals and nonhuman animals used for experimentation. The hypocrisy exposed here directs her discussion toward legal rights for nonhuman animals and makes a clear connection with centuries-old and ongoing issues involving human animal rights.

Derrida addresses the psychological basis of the notion that the separating of human and nonhuman animals, both physically and philosophically, allows man to reject the idea of his own animality while also placing all other animals in one homogenous group, the nonhuman. This egocentric separation permits humans to feel superiority over nonhuman animals and allows the justification of any treatment (or mistreatment) meted out to the nonhuman animal at the hands of man. In *The Animal That Therefore I am*,²⁵ Derrida speaks of the animal as other but also recognises a connection to his own human animality. In his discussion of the defining characteristic of nakedness, he alludes to the religious origins of the concept of 'otherness': "the property unique to animals and what in the last instance distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short, without consciousness of good and evil."²⁶ Thus we disallow the nonhuman animal a sense of self and relegate them to the position of inferior beings.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I return to the crux of the problem. When considering all the nice, sensible 'rules' we have formulated about love, peace, kindness, non-violence and compassion, how is it possible that one of the world's largest spiritually connected demographic is still accepting the violence, covetous behaviour and rampant consumption associated with the meat, dairy, egg and poultry industries? Why are the heads of Christian organisations not advocating for vegetarianism, or at the very least demanding a dramatic improvement in conditions or an end to factory farming?

Lamentably, at the end of this process, I have no answer other than the sickeningly obvious one: greed. In 2013 I became vegetarian after many months of research and contemplation of my own existence as a human animal in this world. My current art practice acts as a means of visually expressing the respect and adoration I feel towards the other beings we share the world with, while creating the opportunity for discourse about an issue for which I am a passionate advocate. My work makes no apologies to those who find it blasphemous, sacrilegious or disrespectful, as its iconoclastic nature is intended to challenge a disassociated and unchallenged status quo, with the hope that provoking thought will activate change.

We patronise them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.

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