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Dominion or Coexistence? The Hindu Doctrine of Ahimsa And the Western Ethic of Speciesism

Meet Mr. Spock. No. Not the pointy-eared, emotionless science officer of Star Trek. This Mr. Spock is a sleek grey-green, smart-aleck dolphin at Marine World, California. On the weighing scale, his brain cortex is comparable to our three-pounder. Every human cortex can store the equivalent of twenty-million volumes. How about Mr. Spock? How much does he know and can he think? science asks. Well, last year, he demonstrated an entrepreneurial flair worthy of a Harvard business grad. His trainer wanted the Marine World dolphins to help clean up the trash that blew into the pool. He provided incentive by rewarding a fish for every piece of litter the dolphins swam over. Soon, he noticed Mr. Spock was getting all the fish. So the trainer sent his assistant down to the underwater window to watch while the dolphins collected the trash. It turned out Mr. Spock had stashed a cache of paper bags under the diving platform and was bringing them up one-at-a-time for his payment.

Of course, this not only shows intelligence. It's exhibition of greed or perhaps even a sense of humor. If the former, there is a good chance Mr. Spock felt a bit guilty. If the latter, he was probably chuckling to himself through that ever-present bottle-nose grin. Throw in the fact that dolphins are even more sophisticated communicators than was believed one year ago - the University of Hawaii recently had a major breakthrough - and they love to play, snuggle, help people in trouble and socialize. The dolphins - and whales - are being biologically recognized as intelligent beings, capable of deep feelings and subjective cognition. A couple of fiction writers have interwoven dolphin/whale intelligence and communication skills into plots that involve Hindu rishis and advanced extraterrestrial life forms. In these tales, it's the cetaceans (whales, dolphins, porpoises) and primates that make human minds look selfish and puny.

Cetaceans and primates - in the Hindu and Buddhist estimation - could possess a trans-physical sense of inner identity, even of cosmic unity. The physical nerve system - brain and spinal cord - is the neurological counterpart to the radiant

light/consciousness fiber network of the soul body. If the mammal nerve system is advanced enough, there could be some rudimentary meditation going on in the ocean depths or savannah plain.

Dolphins and their whale cousins are not the only species to attain cognitive knighthood. The entire animal realm is being elevated a couple of notches from mere instinctive responsiveness to beings who feel emotions and internal states - including pain - and who can make decisions based on input from the environment and learn and pass on knowledge to progeny. Even pigeons have demonstrated remarkable retentive power - committing over 300 pictures to memory - and are able to associate them by kind and even to relate concepts: they linked raindrops with the ocean.

That is the bright side of research, conducted in a real sense out in the open, in the day light. The dark side is down in the antiseptic dungeons of university life-science and psychology facilities, military, pharmaceutical and cosmetic testing labs. It is a hidden world of psychic trauma, torturous experimentation and death.

On earth every year, over 100 million animals - from rats to Hanuman Langur monkeys - die in a lab at the hands of bio-medical researchers. These are not accidental deaths, but purposeful as in Rich Marrocco's physiology of primate vision studies at the University of Oregon. He performs anesthetized surgery on Macaque monkeys, then kills them to study their brain tissue. His research is basic, not applied, which means his studies do not go to ward specific human diseases or dysfunctions, the classical reason given by science for live- animal experiments. He says he doesn't feel guilty, but Richard Ryder who quit bio-research because of his conscience says the labs are radioactive with suppressed guilt. Hinduism Today was told by the Primate Center that they receive 500 reports on primate research every month for publication in their monthly journal

Lab research is only one slice of the animal exploitation pie. Our in America's slippery and sadistic - pre-death torture is routine - slaughteryards a staggering six billion livestock are knifed every year to end up on the meat-eaters' china. Millions of fur-bearing mammals, so exquisite in their forested habitats, are killed, skinned and stitched into fur coats for fashion-conscious humans. Dolphins and whales are still slaughtered en masse for cosmetics.

Over the past decade, the awareness of animal exploitation has birthed the fastest growing cause movement in the West: animal rights. The movement is formed of humane societies, ethics groups such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), religious groups (Buddhists for Animals, the Hindu-based Mother Surabhi, the Jain Siddashram) and a prime force: The Ahimsa Foundation.

Animal supporters number in the millions, are vegetarian and contribute passionately to ethical vegetarian awareness. They speak of reincarnation, karma, take stands on animal ethics at their work or quit and get a job in line with their conscience. The movement has its own slick monthly magazine - The Animal's Agenda - and an AnimalRights cable TV show viewed by 3 million. It is politically astute and active, bringing considerable pressure to bear on the European and American research establishment. Alternatives to animal experimentation have been developed that are more economical and accurate. There is an entire industry of cruelty-free products, from facial cream to pet food. The European commonwealth has already voted to phase out live animal research by 1991.

If there are doctrinal hemispheres to the animal world, they are ahimsa, the principle of non-violent co-existence, and speciesism, a term coined in 1975 by Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher. It is the non-human counterpart to racism. In its rawest form it is slavery. Indeed, animal advocates draw a startling parallelism between the reasoning of today's spokesmen for animal research and resources and the reasoning of slave owners in the 19th century. African slaves were said to feel no pain, could not think and had no self-or-social identity, the same logic blindly applied to animal abuse and slaughter.

Ahimsa, which was eagerly adopted as a major principle of the animal rights movement, most likely had its origins in Hinduism's oldest empire, the Indus Valley civilization of northwest India. It finds its seminal scriptural expression in the Hindu Vedas, the world's oldest living scriptures. The Rig has nearly an entire section dedicated to ecological and animal protection. Animals were to be treated kindly, to be recognized as vehicles for human souls and other conscious beings. The Atharva, which in English compresses down to the size of the Christian Bible, states: "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water." Jains extended the doctrine to insects, and during the Buddhist convert King Ashoka's reign animal hospitals were established in every province.

Speciesism stems from the doctrine of dominion as enunciated in the Genesis

chapter of the Christian Bible. Man is "to have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowls of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth." This, coupled with Charles Darwin's evolution theory of man's being the pinnacle rung on a ladder of natural selection, led to an explosion of ecological and animal abuse during the past industrialized century. Ironically, Darwin was a vegetarian. And now, neo-Darwinian theory views evolution not as an ascending ladder, but as a thick and vital bush, each branch as biologically profound as the next. Indeed, in the Vedas, Brahman as the universe is metaphorically described as the "world tree." Mr. Spock, the dolphin, would contemplate the cosmos as tide-swaying, bristling seakelp.

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