Japanese Ethical Attitudes to Animals

by Katsuhiro Kohara

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Animals as Intermediaries

Innumerable living creatures die to support a single human life, and that applies as much now as in the distant past. However, being able to open one's wallet and buy as much meat as one wants is, historically speaking, a comparatively recent development and a product of society's modernization and industrialization. In this essay, I propose to critically examine the contemporary relationship between humans and animals from a historical perspective in order to draw out the ethical questions that we ought to consider. In doing so, I will focus on attitudes toward animals in Japan, and changes therein, in comparison with corresponding attitudes in the West and, in particular, in Christianity.

Despite the fact that we kill so many animals, the death of a pet that has been our companion for many years can induce in us a deep sense of loss. As recognition of the psychiatric disorder known as pet loss syndrome demonstrates, such grief can at times be enormous. I was once asked by a small boy at church who had just lost his longtime pet dog, "Do dogs go to heaven?" Adhering to the traditional view of animals held by Western Christianity, according to which only humans have souls, one answer might be that as dogs have no souls, they cannot go to heaven. However, I believe that a more useful insight into some of the issues posed by this question is provided by this passage from the Hebrew Bible:

> For the fate of humans 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. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? (Eccles. 3:19–21, New Revised Standard Version)

These words from the Bible admonish humans for their arrogance toward animals. Indeed, history teaches us that the human sense of difference from and superiority over animals leads to discriminatory sentiment between humans, too, causing "us" to see ourselves as different from "you." When racial discrimination occurs, for example, the object of discrimination is often likened to an animal (typically a monkey or a pig) and despised.

World War I was a war of unprecedented carnage fought between countries with Christian traditions. In his exploration of the fundamental causes of this tragedy, Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

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concluded that it arose from the violence inherent in anthropocentrism, which, he argued, had to be overcome by accepting the equality of all life as propounded in his concept of "reverence for life." The question of how humans relate to animals is one that is also of crucial importance to analyzing human pride and violence in depth.

Relations between animals and humans naturally date back as far as human history itself. Humans have not only needed animals as a source of nutrition in order to survive; animals have also been essential to uniquely human forms of behavior through their use for the ritual sacrifices that accompanied prayer to divine powers. Animals have, in other words, served as "intermediaries" between humans and the supernatural. Given how long animals have been ritually killed and used as offerings, animal sacrifice could in fact be regarded as constituting "religion" itself.

In the Western study of religion that developed in the modern period, religion was defined as something that separated humans from animals (by, for example, Émile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade), and religion was considered to begin where animalism ended. Humans undoubtedly exhibit characteristics not shared by animals. However, the quest to find humans' origins in recent years in fields including genetics, primatology, archaeology, social anthropology, and evolutionary biology has for the most part demonstrated the existence of continuities rather than fundamental differences between humans and animals. Drawing on this scientific knowledge, we need to gain broader insight into humans in the context of their interrelations with animals. I consider next, therefore, attitudes toward animals in Japan as a case example to assist in this process.

Attitudes to Animals in Japan

More than twenty million cats and dogs are now kept as pets in Japan, making them even more numerous than children under the age of fifteen (approximately sixteen million). Japan is by any measure a pet-loving nation, but pet-loving nations are not necessarily animal-friendly ones. By reviewing the relationship between animals and humans in Japan in the past and how it has evolved, I intend to shed light on the religiosity of Japanese society and present-day ethical issues.

I begin by sketching the contours of religiosity (including attitudes to animals) in Japan using several examples. The following passage was written by the novelist Roka Tokutomi (1868–1927). In his life as a Christian, Tokutomi wrote many pieces that depicted the subtleties of nature. The following is an excerpt from a chapter in his memoirs about a dog called Shiro:

> Perhaps he [Tokutomi] had been a dog in a former life, for even in his present life in human form, he could think of nothing as lovable as a dog. As a child, he was always out playing with dogs, getting his clothes muddy and ragged, to his mother's despair, but no matter how much she scolded him for the mess he made of his clothes, he would soon be off again to cavort with his canine friends. He would even share his favorite sweets with dogs, and if he heard a puppy whimper, he would awake even at midnight and look for it, rubbing his sleepy eyes. ("Shiro" in *Mimizu no tawakoto* [Idle words of an earthworm] [Hattori Shoten, 1913])

In this passage, Tokutomi says something that a Western Christian would never have written. Admittedly half in jest, Tokutomi muses that he was perhaps such a dog lover in his present life in "human form" because he was a dog in a "former life." The concept of reincarnation and of past, present, and future lives is one that gained wide currency in Japan. Although it originated in India, its transmission through Buddhism made

its influence felt throughout East Asia.

Belief in reincarnation may not be scientific, but it has clearly had a strong impact on views of life in a broad sense. As noted above, Schweitzer argued for the equality of all life, and the concept of reincarnation provides us with another angle on the equality of lives and how they are correlated. One country in which the relationship between animals and humans was significantly influenced by this view of life is Japan.

For example, the sacrifice of animals to bring rain, practiced throughout East Asia, ceased in Japan. Its place was taken by the contrasting ritual release of captured animals and prohibition of hunting and fishing, and the Buddhist concept of reincarnation and the precept of non-killing became superimposed upon the aboriginal beliefs (animistic views of life) that preexisted the arrival of Buddhism. As the taking of life was considered to disrupt the natural order, capital punishment was prohibited in ancient Japanese society from the beginning of spring until the autumnal equinox. Human life, animal life, and life in the natural world were understood to be connected at the root.

This ancient view of life has, of course, not been inherited unmodified by contemporary Japan. In Japanese subcultures such as manga and anime, however, its vestiges and influence are still widely observable. The epic *Phoenix* series by the renowned manga artist Osamu Tezuka (1928–89), for example, uses the concept of reincarnation to depict a world from ancient times into the far future, while an animistic, polytheistic worldview can be detected in three of the film director Hayao Miyazaki's most acclaimed works, namely *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, Princess Mononoke,* and *Spirited Away*.

The world of Pokémon, whose popularity shows no signs of abating, may also be interpreted as a product of Japan's animistic cultural heritage. Pokémon species are given plant-, insect-, bird-, fish-, and mammal-like features and are depicted as coexisting antagonistically with humans. As the Pokémon GO smartphone application shows, today's Pokémon serve as a link between the real world and the virtual. They have in a sense inherited the role formerly played by animals as intermediaries between humans and the supernatural world. While modern humans admittedly no longer possess the animistic sensibility exhibited by ancient people in their interactions with nature and animals, a "virtual animism" that is descended from this sensibility still has a firm hold on the modern psyche.

Changes in the Modern Period and Ethical Issues

Japan has many legends that tell of the relationships between animals and humans. In the eighth-century *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), even plants speak. Formerly, all kinds of clever devices were used to redress the imbalance in power between animals and humans. Old tales in which animals converse with humans, adopt human and other forms, and marry them were a part of everyday Japanese lives, and they acted as a "circuit" through which people experienced the pain and gratitude that arose from having to kill animals in order to survive.

In contrast, the people of today, who can buy all the meat they want without any sense of pain or gratitude, thanks to intensive animal farming, may conceivably be living in the most barbaric era in human history. We must recover the ability to "listen" to the voices of dumb animals. This is because animals provide us with a valuable measure of what it means to be human, and this ability will open our eyes to the people among us, too, who have no voice.

Modern people destroy nature to satisfy their own desires and justify the taking of animal life. Animals infected with diseases such as avian influenza and foot-and-mouth disease are exterminated, large numbers of experimental animals are killed, and cats and dogs that have been abandoned by their owners are destroyed for humans' sake. I believe, therefore, that it is the duty of traditional religions that have inherited a fertile view of life to encourage contemporary societies that have become excessively anthropocentric—and consequently also filled with violence—to reconsider how life should be lived. We must critically examine the modern concept of "religion" that privilege humans; liberate ourselves from trivialized human-animal relationships; and spin new "tales" for the future that subsume nature, animals, and humans. ❑