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Buddhism and Speciesism:
on the Misapplication of Western Concepts
to Buddhist Beliefs

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Buddhism and Speciesism: on the Misapplication of Western Concepts to Buddhist Beliefs

Colette Sciberras*

Abstract

In this article, I defend Buddhism from Paul Waldau's charge of speciesism. I argue that Waldau attributes to Buddhism various notions that it does not necessarily have, such as the ideas that beings are morally considerable if they possess certain traits, and that humans, as morally considerable beings, ought never to be treated as means. These ideas may not belong in Buddhism, and for Waldau's argument to work, he needs to show that they do. Moreover, a closer look at his case reveals a more significant problem for ecologically minded Buddhists—namely that the Pāli texts do not seem to attribute intrinsic value to any form of life at all, regardless of species. Thus, I conclude that rather than relying on

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Western concepts, it may be preferable to look for a discourse from within the tradition itself to explain why Buddhists ought to be concerned about the natural world.

Paul Waldau, in *The Specter of Speciesism; Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*, argues extensively that Buddhism, like Christianity, values humans and human life more highly than other animals and their lives. Many environmentalists consider such positions to be partly responsible for the ecological crisis, as they imply that what is done to nonhuman beings has little or no moral significance and open the way to the devastation of nature for human purposes. Waldau's argument is a major challenge for anybody attempting to bring Buddhism and environmentalism together and represents a serious critique of what I will refer to generally as Green Buddhism. This term refers loosely to the wide range of positions that attempt to establish the environmentalist credentials of Buddhism as can be seen in anthologies such as *Dharma Rain* and *Dharma Gaia*.¹

Waldau charges Buddhism with being speciesist; that is, with granting moral considerability only to humans and not to any other animals. To support his claims, he refers to the Pāli canon, the earliest texts recorded by Buddhists, which are widely accepted by most schools of Buddhism. Consequently, this article will focus on early Buddhism, which I will attempt to defend from this critique, and issues that may be raised concerning the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna vehicles will not be addressed.

I will begin by outlining Waldau's general argument, starting from his definition of speciesism. It will be seen that this definition is too restrictive in itself and does not correspond to the way the term is generally used. Moreover, Waldau fails to establish that Buddhism is species-

ist according to this definition. More importantly, however, he makes an assumption that does not appear to accord with Buddhist doctrine. This is the idea that beings are morally considerable if they possess certain traits. Waldau charges Buddhism with speciesism because it fails to include beings with these characteristics within the moral circle, but he does not show that Buddhism determines the moral worth of beings based on whether or not they possess these characteristics.

I will then go on to look at the specific claims that Waldau makes about the Pāli texts. The first is that these contain references to the instrumental use of animals, along with an awareness of the harm to these animals that this involves. Because the Pāli texts do not condemn these uses, Waldau argues that they accept them; therefore, Buddhism must be speciesist. I will argue that the Pāli texts seem to contain a tension between acceptance and advocating restraint. More importantly, however, Waldau has once again made an assumption that may not fit the Buddhist doctrines; namely, that morally considerable beings ought never to be treated as means. The conclusion that Buddhism is speciesist will only follow if it is shown that the Buddhist texts allow some morally considerable beings to be used as means, yet prohibit it for humans. The Pāli texts however, contain references to the utilization of humans, too.

Waldau's second claim is that Buddhism affords greater value to humans than to other animals. I will identify two ways in which this is the case, and refer to them as separate value-systems. I will argue that in the first, where the lives of humans are seen simply as more pleasant than those of animals, the charge of speciesism does not apply. My argument will draw upon the distinction, made by Taylor, between a being's intrinsic worth and its merits. As long as the higher evaluation of humans is merely a description of the positive aspects of existence as a human being, it does not amount to speciesism. This is because, to be speciesist, the claim that human life is more valuable than that of other

beings must have implications about the way beings are treated. The teachings about “higher” and “lower” rebirths seem to contain an injunction to treat all beings well, and thus cannot be speciesist as Waldau claims.

However, in the second value-system, which sees humans as better able to follow the teachings of the Buddha, the distinction between merit and intrinsic worth collapses. Here, the merits of human existence imply that what is done to them is more important than what is done to other animals, and concerning this point, I concede that perhaps Waldau’s charge of speciesism is correct. This also reveals a more serious problem for Green Buddhism, namely that the type of value afforded to any form of life is *always* instrumental. Beings are valued, not for themselves, but for the sake of something higher, namely *nibbāna*, which, it could be argued, is something completely different from this world.

It is difficult to see how one can establish an environmental position without recourse to the notion of the intrinsic value of natural beings, where life *per se*, human or otherwise, is what is valued. This would seem to be a major problem for anyone seeking to establish the environmental credentials of early Buddhism. I conclude by suggesting that rather than determining the environmental worth of Buddhism by seeking ideas to fit Western ones, it might be preferable to evaluate the tradition on its own terms.

Waldau’s Argument Outlined

Waldau defines “speciesism” as “the inclusion of all human animals within and the exclusion of all other animals from the moral circle” (38). An animal that is included in the moral circle will have its essential concerns and interests recognized and protected; that is, it will be seen as morally considerable and the way it is treated will be seen as a moral is-

sue. For Waldau, this means that its life should be protected and furthermore that it should be safeguarded from captivity, instrumental use, and infliction of harm (38-39).

Before I address the main issues, I would first like to draw attention to a deficiency in this definition. Must speciesism necessarily involve the exclusion of *all* other animals from the moral circle? Someone who was concerned about the lives, well-being, and freedom not only of humans but also of other primates would not be speciesist under this account. To see the problem with this, we can consider the contrast between this concept of speciesism, and that of racism, with which the former was originally meant to be analogous. Peter Singer, who made extensive use of the concept in philosophical discussion, drew a parallel between the two, claiming that the speciesist gives preference to the interests of his own species just as the racist gives greater weight to the interests of his own race (31). However, a Caucasian who included races such as Asian, Hispanic and others within the moral circle, and yet excluded black people, would normally be considered as racist as one who considered as a moral issue only what was done to white people. Similarly, a speciesist could be someone who includes humans and *certain* other species within the moral circle but excludes others. Waldau's definition then appears to be inadequate as it is simply not wide enough; it does not cover all the positions that could be taken as speciesist. The reason for his restricting condition is somewhat unclear and it will be seen below that the requirement does his argument no favors.

Aside from his restrictive definition, Waldau appears in general to be following Singer, and a significant part of the book focuses on the reasons for including certain animals in the moral circle. Singer argues that if *all* humans are morally considerable, as is usually thought, it must be because of some characteristic they all share. Yet, the only characteristics shared by all humans (including marginal cases such as intellec-

tually challenged people) are also held by at least *some* other animals. Thus, speciesism, for Singer, is the exclusion of these animals from the moral circle, despite their having the same characteristics that are deemed to make humans morally considerable (37-38).

Waldau similarly focuses on the characteristics that make an animal morally considerable. He argues that there are certain “valued” traits which are shared by humans and other animals. These include the use of language; interaction and communication; familial relations and social groupings; social norms and expectation; complexity in individuals; intelligence; self-awareness; intentionality; and tool-making (67-87). These human characteristics are what, in many accounts, render people morally considerable. Waldau seems to be saying that because many other animals possess these characteristics, they *too* ought to be morally considerable. Because Buddhism, he thinks, does not always include these animals within the moral circle, it must be guilty of speciesism.

Critique of Waldau’s Argument

Waldau’s argument does not work for two reasons. Firstly, by his own definition he must show that Buddhism excludes *all* other species from the moral circle, and not just the ones with the characteristics he has picked out, which he calls the key species. This is a point that he acknowledges (155).

Second, and more importantly, the argument will not work because Waldau needs to show that Buddhism actually values those characteristics he has selected, and includes or excludes animals from the moral circle on this basis. He does not do this, however, and it is my belief that the idea is not a Buddhist one at all, but stems from Western moral philosophy. In the history of Western philosophy, various faculties were singled out as the essence of what it is to be human, and a range of

theories and principles were set up, upon their basis, about how other people are to be treated. For example, Aristotle defines man as a rational being, and develops an account of the good life from this basis (Nico. 1098a 13-15). Moral considerability was assumed to belong primarily or exclusively to human beings; indeed, at first it was granted only to free, adult males. The class of the morally considerable gradually became wider and wider, and today, philosophers and policy-makers, at least, generally include all people and perhaps some other animals too. Philosophical discourse still focuses, at times, on the characteristics of a being that will make it morally important, and in fact, a being is deemed such precisely *because* it is rational, or sentient or whatever.

The Pāli texts, on the other hand, rarely seem to make a connection between moral considerability and the possession of any specific quality. In the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, for example we read:

Whatever living creatures there be,
without exception, weak or strong,
Long, huge or middle-sized,
or short, minute or bulky,

Whether visible or invisible,
and those living far or near,
the born and those seeking birth,
May all beings be happy! (SN 1.8, trans. Buddharakkhita)

This *sutta*, which is widely quoted on the Buddhist notions of love and compassion, reveals that in early Buddhism, concern for others' welfare is not limited merely to members of this or that species, nor does it depend on their characteristics. Rather, the moral circle is extended infinitely to "whatever creatures there may be without exception," in other words, to all beings. In fact, the text suggests precisely that moral considerability has nothing to do with characteristics at all; the wish is that

they may all be happy, whether long, short, far, near, and so on. The tendency, as we see from *suttas* like this, is to throw as wide a net as possible and to extend concern to all, independently of what they are like. This can be inferred from the pervasive use, in the canon, of the catchall term “living beings” to denote the object of a moral act (DN 2; MN 9; AN 10.176; Dh. 129; etc.). Therefore, it is a very different approach from the one that seeks to determine, from the outset, which beings are and which are not worthy of moral consideration.

This implies, then, that if the idea of a “moral circle” can be applied to Buddhism at all, it will be very different from that in the Western tradition. Waldau appears to overlook this point, and he seems to import uncritically an idea from Western ethics into Buddhism, which he then criticizes for failing to apply it consistently. Without showing that Buddhism, too, bases moral considerability upon characteristics, Waldau cannot conclude that it is speciesist. That is, apart from telling us that there are certain special traits that some other animals besides humans have, he also needs to show that it is precisely these traits that Buddhism appeals to in determining whether a being is morally considerable or not. Nowhere does he do this, and in his outline of what features of an animal might make it morally considerable, there is hardly any reference to Buddhist thought (59-87). I have suggested that this line of reasoning is, in fact, foreign to Buddhism.

Waldau’s Specific Claims against Buddhism

The instrumental use of animals

So far, then, we have examined the notion of moral considerability in Buddhism, which, I have argued, takes a very different form (if it exists at all) from that found in Western philosophy. Perhaps a closer look at Waldau’s case is now warranted. The main criticism that emerges

throughout the book is that he finds, in the canonical texts, an acceptance and subtle promotion of the instrumental use of some animals even though there is an awareness of the negative consequences for these animals (147-148). The suggestion, then, is that Buddhism is speciesist because it accepts the harmful instrumental uses of other animals (154-155).²

Waldau focuses particularly on elephants. He argues that although the Pāli texts seem to recognize the harm that is inflicted on domesticated elephants, they do not question the assumption that it is acceptable to use them. Rather, he says, they seem to uphold the tradition of owning elephants as property, trading or giving them away, and using cruel practices to “break” them (122). For example, in the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha proclaims: “Now I can rule my mind as the *mahout* controls the elephant with his hooked staff” (Dhp. 1987.177; quoted in Waldau 121). Again, in the *Digha-Nikāya* we read: “E’en as an elephant, fretted by hook, dashes unheeding curb and goad aside . . .” (DN 2.303; quoted in Waldau 128). These, and all the similar examples that Waldau provides, shows that Buddhism accepts the instrumental use of elephants and the harm inflicted on them. Moreover, because elephants are praised when they are tame rather than wild, Buddhism not only accepts, but also promotes this utilization (131-132).

Waldau acknowledges that the Buddha’s First Precept may be supposed, *prima facie*, to go a long way towards protecting the lives and interests of all beings (137-138). The precise meaning of the First Precept, however, has long been debated. In its most popular interpretation the precept entails only abstention from killing, yet in its strictest version, it is an injunction against all forms of harming others (Schmithausen *Buddhism* 11). Moreover, as Waldau points out, there are places in the texts where it is suggested that the precept protects only humans, perhaps only those who are followers of the Buddha (145). Finally, it is also

unclear which type of action the precept covers; it is usually assumed to exclude only deliberate acts of killing or harming, and the extent to which care is taken not to injure other beings has varied widely over different Buddhist communities (Harris *Buddhism* 115).

In all likelihood, these inconsistent interpretations of the First Precept may be a reflection of the fact that, for lay people, especially farmers, cowherds and so on, it is difficult to refrain totally from harming other beings. One may point out here that the utilization of elephants and other animals was simply unavoidable during the times of the early Buddhists, where machinery was unavailable. It is hard to imagine any pre-modern society doing without the use of animals for farming, traveling, and other daily activities, all of which would require some degree of harm to them. There is a conflict, then, between, on the one hand, the instrumental use of animals that was necessary for everyday life, and on the other, the restriction against killing or harming other beings, which only seemed to be an option for monks. This tension was not removed in early Buddhist societies, even when the First Precept was interpreted fairly liberally (Schmithausen *Buddhism* 4-9).

Waldau seems to criticize Buddhism for failing to do enough to challenge the methods and technology of agriculture, animal husbandry, transport, and so on available in the Buddha's times. Buddhism, he claims, simply coexisted with daily, obvious harms to nonhumans (155). Yet, it can be pointed out that despite textual references to circumstances in which they are harmed, Buddhism does propose an improvement in the way animals are treated as is evidenced by the First Precept. It is likely that the examples Waldau points to were merely descriptions of the world as it was at the time. I suggest that Buddhism does make a serious effort to influence positively the way animals are treated and that it does not totally accept their instrumental use, as Waldau suggests.

Rather, there seems to be more of a *conflict* between the demands of Buddhist morality and the necessary utilization of animals at the time.

There is, however, a more significant flaw in Waldau's argument, which once again involves the appending of certain Western assumptions onto his reading of Buddhism. Waldau, as we have seen, finds several examples where the utilization of animals appears to be condoned. Even if this does show that Buddhism approves of this utilization, as he claims, and not merely that there is conflict as I want to claim, his argument of speciesism assumes that Buddhism agrees that morally considerable beings ought never to be treated as means. To derive the assertion that Buddhism is speciesist because it depicts other animals being used instrumentally, Waldau also needs to show that Buddhism specifically expresses disapproval of the instrumental use of humans. This is a common idea in Christian and Western ethics (cf. Kant's philosophy) but may not be one in Buddhist ethics.

On the contrary, the *suttas* and the *Jātaka Tales*, which are the main sources for his examples, also contain several stories about slaves. The Bodhisattva himself (i.e., the Buddha in his previous lives) appears as a slave in no less than five *Jātaka* stories (Rhys Davids 246) and similarly the *suttas* make several mention of the practice of keeping slaves.³ Moreover, there is also an awareness of the harm that is inflicted on slaves, such as we find in the *Kakacupama Sutta*. Here, we are told that Lady Videhika “grabbed hold of a rolling pin and gave her [Kali, a slave-girl] a whack over the head, cutting it open” (MN 21, Thanissaro). The story contains a reference to the instrumental use of humans as well as to the harm that is inflicted on them. I do not want to suggest that Buddhism approves of slavery. Rather, it seems that the Buddhist texts, in referring to the utilization of beings to their detriment, are merely describing the world as they found it.

To ask whether Buddhism accepts the instrumental use of animals, whether human or otherwise is, again, to look for Western concepts and ideas, and perhaps even specifically modern ones, in an ancient, Asian tradition. I do not want to take sides on the issue at all; my concern, rather, is to identify any hidden assumptions that may prevent us from judging the tradition on its own terms. So far, then, we have identified two ideas foreign to Buddhism, which Waldau introduces unwarily into his critique. These are the ideas (1) that moral considerability depends on the possession of certain characteristics, and (2) that humans, as morally considerable beings in this sense, ought not to be treated as means. In the following, we will encounter a third Western concept, that of the intrinsic value of natural beings, which is given utmost importance by environmental philosophers.⁴ I shall suggest that this is foreign to Buddhist doctrine as well. This will emerge from discussion of Waldau's overall charge that Buddhism attributes greater value to human than to animal life.

The higher value of human life

Although Waldau recognizes the sense of continuity, in Buddhism, between humans and other animals (138-139), there is a stronger tendency, he claims, to see other animals as decisively lower. In fact, he says, Buddhism lumps together conceptually all nonhuman animals into one group, and affords them negative value, describing animal life as an unhappy, woeful existence (94-95). Indeed, it is a well-known part of Buddhist doctrine that existence in the "desire realm" is divided into six: the human and two types of godly existence form the "happy goings" (*sugati*) or "higher" realms, whereas animals, *petās* and hell beings form the three "unhappy goings" (*duggati*) or "lower" realms (*apāya*).⁵ The very terminology suggests, then, that human existence is worth more than that of animals.

This emerges in several ways. Firstly, the doctrine claims that human life, as a “happy destination” is better than that of animals, as it is more pleasant and there is less suffering inherent in it. Secondly, human life is seen as a reward for previous moral conduct (MN 41) whereas rebirth as an animal follows a life of misconduct or wrong views (MN 57; AN 8.40). Therefore, according to Waldau, beings that currently find themselves in the animal realms are seen as culpable and ignorant (141, 153). Finally, human life is seen as especially valuable as a means to attain enlightenment (SN 56.48; SN 35.135). In fact, there are several places that suggest only humans can become Buddhas, and the *Vinaya* specifies, as the very first condition for becoming a monk, precisely that one is human (139).⁶ Thus, it would appear, as Waldau claims, that Buddhism deprecates animals. Humans are at the “pinnacle of existence” (139-140).

However, I argue that the different ways in which humans and animals are evaluated need not always affect their moral considerability. To see why, one needs to distinguish between two ways in which a living being may be said to have value. The first is that which Taylor refers to as judgments of a being’s merit, and the second concerns its intrinsic worth. Judgments of merit are those that attribute certain desirable qualities to beings, where these qualities are irrelevant to moral considerability. As examples of these, Taylor mentions intelligence, speed, and agility among others. A being has intrinsic worth, on the other hand, if its own good is valued; that is, if there is a moral commitment in relation to it, and certain forms of behavior and rules regarding the way it is treated apply (74).

Intrinsic worth appears to be entirely independent of a being’s merits. Taylor demonstrates this by pointing out that humans are generally thought to have the same intrinsic worth, irrespective of their abilities. That is, we would not normally appeal to qualities like intelligence, wealth, or beauty to determine our moral attitude to another person;

these features are thought to be entirely irrelevant. Even in class-structured societies, where humans might be thought to have different levels of moral worth, this, once again, has nothing to do with merit, but simply depends on one's birth (74-81). Therefore, the moral considerability of a person is independent of his merits, and to say that, for instance, a person is very intelligent, does not imply that what we do to him matters more than what we do to someone less clever.

The point is that Buddhism's higher evaluation of humans seems to make no claims about the lesser moral standing of animals; therefore, it would appear to be irrelevant to the argument about speciesism. Speciesism, as we have pointed out, has to do only with moral considerability, and with whether animals are seen as proper objects of moral concern. In other words, what is relevant is the question of the intrinsic value of beings. To describe humans as morally superior, more intelligent, their lives as more pleasant and having better prospects for *Dhamma* practice, is always, on the other hand, clearly a description of merits. There is nothing here to suggest that we should treat them differently from other animals.⁷

Still, if we separate two threads in the Buddhist valorization of humans, we will find that a connection between some of these qualities and moral considerability can indeed be drawn. The first value-scheme is simply about the merits of a particular form of life, and has to do with the degree of enjoyment it provides and the moral character of the being (in its past life). Here, although a human life is better than one as an animal, life as a god is valued even more highly.⁸ This is because, in Buddhist belief, the gods' lives are said to be pervaded with bliss and one is reborn there because of having led a morally commendable life. Because rebirth in the higher realms is seen to be the result of previous moral action, it is the gods that are said to occupy the "pinnacle of existence."

This doctrine, then, directs Buddhist followers to act in accordance with what is prescribed as “moral,” that is, to follow the Five Precepts, and the first of these, as we have seen, sets respect for all forms of life as the main rule. Thus, this system of valorization would appear to contain an inherent appreciation of the intrinsic value of all beings. That is, to reach the “pinnacle of existence” under this account, one needs to treat all other creatures well, no matter how “lowly” (AN 8.39).⁹ What is certainly *not* being said is that animals have less intrinsic worth in Taylor’s sense, or that this value-system justifies harsh treatment of them, as Waldau claims (153). That is, in this first value-system there are no implications of speciesism.

One could object here that an appropriate environmental stance will reject even this, and claim that in no way should animals’ lives be considered worse, or lower, than those of humans. A dedicated animals-rights supporter, for instance, might be dismayed by an account that sees animal rebirth as punishment for one’s misdeeds, that sees them as ignorant, or that assumes their lives cannot be as enjoyable as that of a human. Nevertheless, a position that tried to make all animals equal, not only in intrinsic value but also in merit, would also seem rather untenable. Although it may simply be arrogance that leads us to assume, for instance, that human life is more fulfilling than that of our pets, we would still like to think of human life as better than that of a mosquito, say, simply on the basis of its duration. Similarly, we want to say that our intellectual capacities are better than those of apes. What needs to be borne in mind is that the things we pick out as a measure of value—self-fulfillment, longevity, intelligence and so forth—are our subjective choices, and that on other criteria, such as Taylor’s examples of speed or agility, the merits of other animals are greater than ours.

Thus, although Waldau’s apprehension at the Buddhist depiction of animals as “lower” beings can be understood, the alternative, an egali-

tarian outlook that disallows comparisons altogether, hardly seems attractive either. Neither is it required, if it is kept in mind that the negative evaluation of the merits of animal existence in Buddhism is entirely different from its judgments of moral considerability, which are properly sought in the First Precept, and are usually regarded as covering all forms of sentient life. There are no grounds, from our evaluations of merit, to draw conclusions about moral worth.

The second system of valorization, which has to do with potential for gaining enlightenment, reveals, however, that there is a connection with moral considerability after all. Here, what is valued mostly is not enjoyment, but opportunity to encounter and realize the *Dhamma*. Humans have the most of it; they are neither distracted by pleasurable activities, as the gods are, nor are they overwhelmed by a life of torment, as in the lower realms (SN 35.135). The lives of animals and worldly gods contain too much and too little suffering respectively and do not provide opportunities for Buddhist practice; they must be reborn as humans for this. In fact, despite their blissful existence and, perhaps, their morally commendable lives, the gods are seen as deluded and destined for rebirth in lower realms (SN 5.7). Therefore, we find a different type of evaluation altogether here, which has nothing to do at all with contentment, nor with being a reward for previous moral conduct. Rather, the criterion this time is opportunity for enlightenment, and from this perspective, it is humans that are at “the pinnacle” of the rebirth system, rather than the gods.

At first sight, this second system of evaluation would again seem to be about the merits of human existence, rather than its moral worth, and it does not appear to have any direct implications of speciesism. Yet, the *Vinaya* code proposes expulsion from the order for a monk that kills a human deliberately, in contrast with the mere confession that is required when a monk kills an animal (124). Moreover, if the human killed

is an *arahant*, or if a Buddha's blood is shed, these are thought to be heinous crimes that entail rebirth in hells (AN 5.129). This suggests, then, that the discrepancy rests on the greater worth of the murdered human being, based on her relative proximity to the enlightened state, and it would seem that this judgment of merit does, after all, affect moral considerability.

In Buddhism, then, a being that qualifies for moral considerability is one for whom there is a likelihood of encountering the *Dhamma* as well as its actual realization. Insofar as humans are thought to be the only candidates for this, and animals excluded altogether, this will result in speciesism, as it implies that what we do to humans (especially to *arahants* and Buddhas) is more important than what we do to other animals. It seems, then, that the doctrine of the precious human life, insofar as it makes these implications, does contain traces of speciesism, and Waldau has indeed identified a problematic area within early Buddhism. Yet there is another, more serious difficulty that arises for Green Buddhism from all this, as I will now go on to show.

Buddhism and the Notion of Intrinsic Value

The implication that emerges from the above is that Buddhism does not appear to recognize any intrinsic value in the natural world. Within the context of environmental philosophy, besides having to do with moral considerability, the concept of intrinsic value also suggests that something is valued for its own sake (Sylvan). Yet in Buddhism, all forms of existence, whatever their worth, are merely valued for their proximity to the enlightened state; it is not a form of life, or even a particular living creature itself, that is valued as such, but a future enlightened being, or at least the possibility that one may appear. This is a far cry from the way that environmentalists think of natural beings, and certainly not

what we mean when we say that people and other creatures are morally considerable, or that what we do to them matters. For environmentalists, it is *this* person, animal or even species itself that we value, and not a future, improved state of them.

The value Buddhism posits to beings, as we have seen, can occupy one place for certain reasons and another when the focus is changed; sometimes rebirth as a god is best, at other times human life is proclaimed better. It is better to be a god if what is valued for its own sake is an enjoyable life; however, this pales in significance when contrasted with the opportunity for enlightenment, which is what is really valued in the second scheme. Nowhere is any being depicted as precious *in itself*, and if another form of life were to develop that were more delightful, or more favorable for attaining enlightenment, this would, as a consequence, be more highly esteemed.¹⁰

Therefore, any value ascribed by Buddhism to human life is of an instrumental kind. The final goal of all existence is liberation from both animal and human existence, and thus, there is a negative evaluation not just of animal life, as Waldau believes, but also of all life in general. As Schmithausen observes:

In the canonical texts of Early Buddhism, all mundane existence is regarded as unsatisfactory, either because suffering prevails, or because existence is inevitably impermanent . . . Nature cannot but be ultimately unsatisfactory, for it too is marked by pain and death, or at least by impermanence . . . Therefore, the only goal worth striving for is Nirvāṇa, which (is) entirely beyond mundane existence. (*Buddhism 12*)

Schmithausen agrees, then, that neither animals nor human beings are afforded ultimate value in the Buddhist analysis. Although they are not to be killed, as this is precluded by the First Precept, ultimately it would

be better if there were none. “On this level then,” he argues, “there is little motivation for the conservation for nature” (*Buddhism* 16). This, therefore, seems to be a serious problem for anyone seeking to relate early Buddhism to contemporary environmentalism. A view that falls short of seeing anything of intrinsic value in life would appear to be a rather unsatisfactory basis from which to develop an environmentalist position, and the concern to protect nature appears unfounded on this account.

Whether this is a serious problem for Green Buddhists depends upon the possibility of finding other grounds in Buddhist doctrines for concern for the natural world. However, if such possibilities can be found, they are unlikely to correspond exactly to Western concepts and assumptions, as I hope has emerged in this article. We have already seen that Buddhism may not have concepts of moral considerability or of treating beings as ends that correspond exactly to Western ones. There may not be an understanding of the intrinsic value of life at all. One important question, then, is whether Waldau and Schmithausen’s negative conclusions for Green Buddhism stem from an attempt to fit inappropriate Western categories onto a Buddhist framework, that is, whether we are asking the wrong questions, and preventing a truly Buddhist environmentalism from emerging out of the tradition itself.

In conclusion, one might emphasize that great care is required not to read into Buddhist doctrines ideas that are foreign to it, whether one is attempting a positive account or a critique. Insofar as reconciling Buddhism with environmentalism is a viable project at all, it is unlikely that we will find, in an Asian belief-system, concepts and principles that correspond exactly to those of Western ethics. Rather than evaluating these doctrines according to Western standards, perhaps it is advisable to look for a discourse from within the tradition itself to explain why Buddhists ought to be concerned with the natural world.

Summary

I have tried to disentangle various hidden assumptions from Waldau's charge of speciesism. These were the ideas that rationality, language, and other "valued characteristics" are what make a being morally considerable; that morally considerable beings ought not to be treated as means; and that humans, at least, are morally considerable in this sense. All of these belong properly to Western ethics; if they do occur in Buddhism, it needs to be demonstrated clearly. It is my belief, in fact, that these ideas are quite alien to Buddhist doctrine.

Waldau's general argument fails, it was seen, because it assumes that Buddhism determines moral worth based on possession or otherwise of certain valued characteristics, and this assumption is gratuitous. In fact, the texts suggest that Buddhism extends moral considerability to all living creatures, regardless of their qualities. Waldau's preference for mental and human-like traits might be one that is widely shared, yet it is not necessarily present in Buddhist doctrine.

The examples that Waldau cites where animals are used as means, do not support his claims either, as he would need to show, for the conclusion about speciesism to follow, that Buddhism specifically condemns the instrumental use of morally considerable beings. Because the Pāli texts contain stories about human slaves too, as well as captive animals, it seems that there is no speciesism, even if the presence of these stories does entail acceptance of these practices.

The final problem considered was that, in the Buddhist scheme, humans are valued more highly than other animals. As long as the value rests simply in the merits of human existence, such as enjoyment, intelligence and so on, no implications of speciesism will arise. Yet, when the advantages of human existence suggest that they are morally more important, as the *Vinaya* code does, then to an extent Waldau is correct;

Buddhism does contain speciesism. It implies that what is done to a human is more important than what is done to another animal, because human life is a better opportunity to transcend *samsāra*. Nevertheless, if one follows this argument to its logical conclusion, what is discovered is not just speciesism, but something far worse for environmentalists. This is the fact that, in early Buddhism, ultimately no being, human or animal, is valued for its own sake. If Buddhists seek to align their faith with current ecological awareness then, it appears that they cannot avail themselves of the concept of intrinsic value of life either.

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Notes

¹ See for example Batchelor and Brown (1992); Badiner (1990); Cooper and James, (2005); Kaza and Kraft (2000)

² The examples in the texts are only *suggestive* of speciesism, Waldau claims, because the definition requires that Buddhism exclude *all* animals from the moral circle and not just some (155). Again, one wonders why Waldau chose to use such a narrow definition.

³ For example, see MN 21; MN 82; DN 2; DN 11; DN 12

⁴ For example, see Sylvan.

⁵ The Pāli terms *sugati* and *duggati* are usually translated as “happy” and “unhappy destinations,” or literally “goings,” respectively. Nyanatiloka however relates the latter to *apāya*, which he calls “lower worlds” (119), and the implication is that the happy destinations are the higher worlds.

⁶ Waldau acknowledges that there are places in the texts that suggest animals too can be enlightened; however, the overwhelmingly dominant idea, he insists, is that only humans can (139).

⁷ Perhaps it may be thought that although a being's level of moral development is one of its merits, there are also implications about the being's moral considerability. That is, it might be thought that to be morally considerable, one must possess a moral character. However, few would want to claim, for instance, that young children, intellectually challenged people, and so on, who clearly cannot always be thought of as moral agents, have less moral worth than the average adult.

⁸ By "god" I mean here *devas* and not *asuras*. Life as an *asura* is probably valued less than human life in Buddhism, although more highly than animal life.

⁹ It has been argued, by Ian Harris among others, that Buddhist respect for other beings, including animals, appears somewhat self-interested, in that, it emerges, apparently, for the sake of one's own ends (*How* 107). Here, too, the motivation for acting morally towards other animals may similarly seem self-interested in that it is carried out simply for the sake of rebirth as a god, or at least, to prevent rebirth in the low realms. The question is whether the Buddhist attitudes of love and compassion are beneficial to the recipients as well as practitioners. There is no space here to examine this issue; it will suffice to point out that the promise of reward for ethical acts does not always make the act self-interested. Rather, it is simply another thread in the discourse for motivating people to ethical action (Schmithausen *Early* 17).

¹⁰ In fact, later Mahāyāna thought introduces birth in the Pure Land, which is neither human, nor godly, but outside the desire realm altogether. This type of existence is described as extremely blissful, and, once born there, a being is assured of reaching Buddhahood. Pure Land

practitioners aspire to this realm, and the value of human existence becomes insignificant in contrast with rebirth here.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Anguttara-Nikāya</i>
Dhp.	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-Nikāya</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-Nikāya</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-Nikāya</i>
Vin.	<i>Vinaya Pitaka</i>
Nico.	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>

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<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Aristot.+Nic.+Eth.+1098a+1>

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