On the Killing and Killability of Animals: Nonmoral Thoughts for the Anthropology of Ethics

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Nonmoral Thoughts for the Anthropology of Ethics

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What are the ordinary affects that traverse a scene of killing? In the case of nonhumans, what kinds of death count as a killing? We, the two authors of this essay—one who does not eat animals and one who does—approached these questions together, focusing on the deaths of animals that had occurred in our field sites in north and central India. Our ethico-dietary differences prevent us from reproducing an established moral judgment on our ways of life and the ways in which we are implicated in forms of death. What, then, might we investigate about everyday acts of killing, if we do not begin or end with a normative moral claim?

One way to frame such an inquiry would be to think about nonhuman killability as the routinized, emotionally indifferent production of *bare life*, a term closely associated with Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1998). In Agamben's argument, perhaps less fashionable now than it was a decade ago, killability is linked to sovereignty. The "originary activity" of sovereign power, according to Agamben, is "the production of bare life,"[1] namely the capacity to decide which bodies can be killed without the killing counting either as homicide or as a sacrifice. Rather than arguing that humans necessarily have sovereignty over nonhumans or that animals are simply bare life, we want to instead situate our inquiry in a different intellectual region, which we have both been differently, recurrently, drawn to in the past, namely, the anthropology of ethics.

To shift this inquiry around killing and killability from the context of sovereignty (as power over life) to the anthropology of ethics requires some further specification. One of the defining features of the anthropology of ethics has been to view morality not just as locatable in normative codes and idealized oughts but also in the unresolved quandaries of lived experience.[2] However, following James Laidlaw,[3] and a particular reading of the later Michel Foucault (with his emphasis on ancient Greek *askesis*), ethical life has predominantly come to be seen as "a reflexive practice of freedom."[4] In such a framework ethics often becomes a somewhat narrowly humanistic or altruistic field of inquiry into issues such as "traditions of virtuous conduct";[5] "changing practices of self-fashioning";[6] and "affective dispositions such as compassion and devotion."[7] Conceptually, as Anand Pandian and Daud Ali put it, quoting the philosopher Ber-

1. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

2. See Pandian and Ali, *Ethical Life*.

3. See Laidlaw, "Ethical Traditions in Question."

4. Pandian and Ali, *Ethical Life*, 2.

5. Ibid., 2.

6. Ibid., 8.

7. Ibid., 10.

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nard Williams, ethics is the answer to the general question "How ought one to live?"[8] In this essay, we want to pose a different, perhaps darker, question, suggesting that this may also be a subject of ethics, namely, how do we kill? Or more specifically, what is the mode of a killing? What is the mood accompanying that killing? Our implication in particular forms of nonhuman death, sometimes distant and unknown, sometimes immediate and palpable, may be inevitable. One of the questions we pose in this piece is whether that which is inevitable ceases to matter.[9]

This is not the same as the traditional ethical question of what is a good death, which may be seen as a continuation or even the culmination of the question of what it means to live well. Rather, we are interested not so much in the planning or preparation for one's own death, but in the act of killing another being and the ethical repercussions (if any) thereof, even if these are not prescribed or proscribed in state or in customary law. We take ethics here to mean a mode of relatedness, even if the relation is as ephemeral as a mood that may escape measure or description, lying somewhere between mourning and indifference. To write nonmorally on such issues, as the title of our article suggests, is to say that we do not have an a priori moral code based on which we might predict or justify our emotional responses in relation to particular killings ahead, or our sense of what constitutes a good life or death.

To conduct this inquiry, as an open-ended ethnographic inquiry, in the context of India also presents a challenge. A temptation that we resist is to simply reassert fixed moral, political, and religious codes, where the possibility of doubt or further inquiry is foreclosed. For instance, some might argue that in India purity pollution rules dictated and largely continue to dictate the relationship with animals and their death, with the act of killing undertaken only by particular castes and religious groups according to their dharma. Linked to this is the argument that conflates an ethics of nonviolence toward animals necessarily with a Brahmanical or "Sanskritized" moral totalitarianism.[10] Somewhat differently there is the problematic assertion that empathy with animals in late modernity is a product of urban, Western elitism or "bourgeois environmentalism."[11] These are strong positions, and they are often thoughtful and deeply held ones, too. However, neither of us could put them forward in this essay, signed by two authors with divergent relationships not only with the concept and reality of animals, but also with the anthropology of India.

The instances we take up from our respective ethnographies around animal life and death traverse several different domains, showing the traffic between them: religious and secular, rural and urban, industrial and domestic. We are interested in the questions that emerge not out of prior affiliation to any philosophical or moral position, but out of everyday affects, the doubts and pleasures, cruelties and indifference expressed by our ethnographic interlocutors while witnessing or executing the death of animals. Our ethnography spans from chicken shops and industries in urban north India to the decimated forests of central India. Our exploration proceeds in three sections, each defined by a different mood: on ambivalence, on cruelty and pleasure, and finally, on scenes of devastation. Often, as is the case in decimation of forests, which we take up, or in the figure of a child playing with a nearly dead chicken, there is no accompanying ethical or moral discourse to justify the mood around these events. In focusing on the moods and modes of killing, we found ourselves inhabiting what Agamben productively called "a zone between life and death."[12] We do not assume at the outset that we know what killing is. Rather, we attempt to understand what it means in relation to the modes and moods of specific commercial and ritual occurrences. This is part of what we signal with the term *killability*: if the thing is killable, is the act experienced as killing by the executioners? How does killability shade into vitality, and how does it not? Conversely, in the third section on scenes of devastation, we ask, what does it in

8. Ibid., 3.

9. Our thanks to William Mazzarella for posing this question to us.

10. See, for instance, Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat*; Jha, *Myth of the Holy Cow*; and Ilaiah, *Buffalo Nationalism*.

11. See, for instance, Guha, "Authoritarian Biologist," and Baviskar, "Politics of the City."

12. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 148.

fact mean for animals to be *alive* in a severely depleted habitat? Rather than asking how one ought to live, we find ourselves asking what it means to be alive in contemporary India. We seek to answer these questions ethnographically, which is different from saying "culturally," since a culture may not necessarily have answers even to its oldest theological and secular quandaries. The answers and doubts, we find, do not line up neatly along lines of urban, rural, religious, and profane but instead illuminate zones of traffic between these domains. We begin with two scenes of killing, one commercial, and the other sacrificial.

Scenes of Ambivalence

Sunil is a rich man, and a nice, hospitable man. He and his brother own four butcher shops in West Delhi selling mostly mutton and chicken. I, Naisargi, came to his shop early on a Saturday evening in February, along with a mutual friend, Nitin, who made our introduction. Sunil is short and stout with a pleasant face. He was wearing dark pants, flip-flops, and several layers on his torso—an undershirt, multiple shirts, a wool sweater, and a ripped, shiny black jacket. He and three friends were sitting on rickety chairs with tattered, patchwork cushions. They welcomed Nitin warmly and all got up and offered me their chairs. Because I had no choice, I accepted a chair and also a soft drink; Nitin took chai in a tiny plastic cup. Nitin and Sunil chatted about the weather and prices (looking up at the sunny sky, they said in harmony that the price of chicken would be low tomorrow) while I mostly listened and asked the occasional question. The shop itself was on a raised platform, so you had to jump up onto the platform or climb a few metal stairs. Although everything was covered in blood and feathers, there was little smell. Up there sat two boys, the young butchers, who did their chopping on a wood stump. Everyone was smiling, though I couldn't be sure if that was because of me or because they are always like that at work. It seemed like a pleasant enough environment if you're not a chicken.

There was a scale and four large pans in which different parts of the chicken were kept: legs, breasts, gizzards, carcasses. In a bloody clump on the platform were the extra parts—the heads, beaks, feet, skin, and feathers—which were sold for fishmeal. A few customers came by but none required a kill. Nitin, I think, felt I was being disappointed and asked Sunil why it was such a slow evening, and wasn't it a bit boring for their guest? Sunil grinned and said it was no problem, that we could kill a couple of birds for me. I said it wasn't necessary, that I had seen chickens slaughtered before and I didn't want something killed specifically for me. They laughed: they'll all be dead by night, they said, so I might as well see. In acquiescence, I stood and took the cap off my camera lens. On Sunil's signal, a tall man strode toward the stacks of cages. He had a broad, blank face and wore an oversize white shirt, gray pants with wide legs, and rubber slippers. He reached into a cage, rejected the first bird, and grabbed the one behind it. He handed it up to the butcher boy who placed it, squawking and squealing, on the stump and chopped its head off in one fell swoop. The head lay there on the board, the beak moving, the eyes blinking. The broad-faced man dropped the body into the black bleeding drum where it thrashed and kicked, the drum jerking across the ground. It was at least lucky to be the only one; when killing is heavy, say in the morning, the bird at the bottom kicks around down there at the bottom of a growing pile, getting bled on and shat on by other headless chickens, before being unearthed an hour or so later, covered in piss and feces. While this one continued to thrash (they do so for around four minutes) I continued filming, watching the head chirping and the body flailing while the man watched me with a smile on his face. I tried to betray nothing, not that there was much to betray. Around three minutes later, when he believed the bird had bled out long enough, he reached into the barrel, down to his shoulder, and pulled the bird out, still thrashing if a bit more slowly. The head had just stopped chirping moments before, paused at the end with a sudden alarmed opening of its eyes. The man began to tear the bird but Sunil stopped him: "*aaram se*!," he said, do it slowly, presumably so that I could better observe. "*Aaram se nahi*," I said. "*Kar lo*." (Just do it, man.) But he took orders from Sunil, not me, and so with exaggerated slow motion he pulled the wings off and pulled the skin off and then tossed what was left, still pulsing (with life? I don't know), up to the butcher's block where the young man reached into

the warm body from the neck and pulled out its guts. "*Dil dikhao*," Sunil said, show her its heart. The butcher took the heart out, a slippery purply thing, and placed it photogenically on the blade edge of a knife but it slithered this way and that. It beat for a while, not long this one, not as long as the other one he showed me, and I turned off my camera. Sunil apologized with a laugh: *kamzoor tha*. This one was weak.

This was a *jatka* shop, involving a particular style of killing, a single chop of the head rather than the *halal* form of a single slit of the throat. The skin and feathers and heads sat piled in a neglected corner, destined for a fishery that would then take its own remains (scales and heads and so on) and sell them in dried form to the poultry farm, where it would be fed to the chickens who would lay eggs to make us healthy and virile, fertile and strong. There are cycles here of regeneration, but they are one and the same with the full stops: the eyes opened for the very last time, the final beat of the kamzoor heart. There are many kinds of times and speeds, all bound up together. There was the slow time of the butcher's easy hospitality (*aaram se*), which was also the slow time of sadism (puuuulling the skin off of the still-pulsing bird, though all for my benefit). Let us call this moment of killing *profane*, by which we mean a routine, we could even say ritual, process that does not in itself invoke a sacred purpose or value. How would we measure the distance between the poles of the profane and the sacred, in terms of the mood and intention surrounding the ritual of killing?

One long-standing form in which a killing is publicly exhibited is sacrificial death, which can take varied forms. What is the mood surrounding a sacrificial death? Is it necessarily one of veneration? As theorists of ritual have long argued, while the correct mood and rites may be prescribed in texts and codes, sacrifice too is a domain open to innovation, in actual practice, and in the accompanying emotions.[13] Consider one such set of changes in the mood and mode of killing, currently underway in Bhrigu's fieldwork area of Shahabad, a subdistrict of 236 villages at the southeastern border of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The primary focus of my (Bhrigu's) research was the spiritual and material relations and rivalries between the Sahariyas, a community of former bonded laborers, and their once (and to a lesser extent still) dominant cultivator caste neighbors. The Sahariyas are officially classified as a "Primitive Tribal Group" (a subset of Scheduled Tribe *Adivasi*) but also described locally as being one among other Hindu *Jatis*, on par with Scheduled Caste (Dalit) Kori weavers and Mehter sweepers.

One of the most common spiritual transactions for high- and low-caste families in Shahabad is with potentially troublesome ancestral spirits known as *Preet*, common to many parts of South Asia and East Asia. Preets are those in one's lineage, particularly unmarried males who died an *akaal mrityu* (untimely death). For Sahariyas and other lower status groups, the Preet spirit is generally kept *shaant* (pacified) by a goat sacrifice every *tisalla ki saal* (three years). Animal sacrifice has a long history in textual and oral forms of Hinduism, as do arguments against it. In an inversion of formerly prestigious Vedic and Sakta traditions, animal sacrifice is now mostly associated with "low" Hinduism in this part of India. Attending a few such sacrifices and the collective meal that follows (known as *goth*), I found that the actual act of killing the goat was done quite discreetly, without any ceremony, in contrast to the rich variety of musical forms that accompanied other rituals.

In other cases the killing was altogether eliminated, although this involved some negotiation with the Preet spirit. I observed one such negotiation in the household of Dhojiaji Sahariya, who was in his mid-sixties. Over many months Dhojiaji told me his life story, from his childhood as a bonded laborer, to his inheritance of a small plot of land his father received from the government, to more recent trials with his wayward son. In addition there was a recurring worry. "Our Preet may harm us. He is not *bandha hua* [tied down]." Dhojiaji explained that the problem with the Preet hinged on his and his family's increasing aversion to animal sacrifice:

13. See Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*.

> Earlier many goats were killed. But I feel that it is a *maha-paap* (great sin) to take another's life for your own happiness. It began to stop with my generation. Earlier times were also less costly! (Laughs) A goat was only Rs.5 or Rs.10, now it is Rs.1000. Then there is the taking of life. What is the use of someone's untimely death (a Preet) causing another? Last summer all our *gotra* (clan) brothers got together and called the deity. He possesses my father's brother's son. We said, "Baba, we won't give a *bakra* [goat]. *Nahin maane tau humein hi kha le* [Eat us if you must]." The spirit began to get angry. He said if I accept this for you, then others will do the same. Later he said I'll accept this for one person but not for everyone. It is still unresolved.

The resolution of such a negotiation may involve offering other forms of ritual repayment, regular visits on a fixed lunar date, shrine upkeep, a sacrificial substitution (a coconut—also known as a *khopra*, a synonym for the human head—in place of a goat). It would be easy to provincialize Dhojiaji's story, as belonging solely to a particular place or culture or time, say, as an effect of modernization, or as what M. N. Srinivas famously called Sanskritization, the lower-caste imitation of upper-caste norms including the expression of revulsion to "lower" forms of ritual. In contrast, I see Dhojiaji's revulsion as singular and yet global, a human impulse that surfaces in many cultures, not only as an external imposition but as an aspect that may appear even within ritual thought and practice. In their classic work *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss tell us that in Semitic, Greek, and Hindu rituals, "Excuses were made for the act, the death of the animal was lamented. . . . The species was entreated not to avenge the wrong done to them."[14] I asked Dhojiaji and many others if animal sacrifice, such a prestigious part of ancient Vedic religion, had always been wrong. The answer I most often received was that earlier animal sacrifices were not debased because "in earlier times the animal of its own accord banged its head at the altar" (called *moor phodi*—head-banging). Nowadays, people claimed, it was harder to make moral arguments for animal sacrifice.

We offer the juxtaposition of Sunil's profane laughter and Dhojiaji's ambivalence (around seemingly sanctified killing) not to reify the difference between religiously infused conscience and the banality of secular cruelty. Rather, what interests us are zones of movement, as Dhojiaji also hints at with his description of the impact of economic exchange relations on sacrificial transactions with the divine ("Earlier a goat was only Rs.5 or Rs.10 . . .), and the long-standing intimacy between violence and the sacred. Such concerns about the ethical import of one's transactions may also affect those in the business of profane killing. The waking and dreaming life of my (Naisargi's) friend Nitin was marked by such movement.

The day after our visit with Sunil, Nitin and I went on a three-day road trip across the Barwala poultry belt in Haryana. Nitin is a kind and goodhearted guy. I came to know him through a friend at the India office of Humane Society International (HSI). Nitin had been working at Skylark, one of India's five largest poultry conglomerates, selling DOCs, or "day-old chicks," to Barwala farmers. But there were two problems. Nitin is Jain and no Jain wants to marry their daughter to someone who sells chickens for a living. (Not that Nitin wanted to get married, but that rarely matters.) Nitin also had debilitating nightmares about dying chickens. So he left Skylark and joined the Humane Society, using his connections with the poultry industry to advocate a return to cage-free farming. Nitin and Dhojiaji both feel something amiss with contemporary forms of killing—whether for food or sacrifice—but find themselves in sympathy with ostensibly earlier modes, in which they imagine animals had better lives, and therefore justifiable deaths.

The centrality of Jainism in Nitin's ambivalence allows us to turn to James Laidlaw, an anthropologist of Jainism and ethics. As Laidlaw tells us, Jainism is sometimes hailed internationally as the theological "prototype of Green sensibility."[15] In contrast to a straightforward continuity between religious and secular ethics, Laidlaw argues, Jain doctrine, myth, and practice is significantly recast by a younger generation of overseas proponents of "Eco-Jainism," as they deemphasize the world

14. Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 33.

15. Laidlaw, "Ethical Traditions in Question," 65.

renunciation aspect of Jainism and eliminate the fundamental Jain tenet of the "vileness of creation" and the necessity of violence, wherein even ordinary acts such as walking cause cycles of violence and murder, as species-being is crushed beneath one's feet.[16] Laidlaw shows how the modern ethical discourse of Eco-Jainism, rather than being a simple continuation of Jainism (as it is sometimes claimed, even by its practitioners), involves a significant reinterpretation of Jain cosmology. We admire Laidlaw's analysis and want to take it a step further to suggest that ethics may exceed the formulation (however innovative) of an ethical discourse. Tracing the singularity of particular lives, such as Nitin's, may lead us to moral quandaries, spoken and unspoken, for which there perhaps can be no coherent discourse.

For instance, something went wrong between Nitin and HSI, and he returned to Skylark and began supplying the Indian Armed Forces with 2.5 million eggs a day. He is married now, with a pretty wife and a cute son, but still, as he said to me, he is "unhappy like anything." He doesn't want to sell chickens and eggs. He doesn't want to be a provider. He got into this line of work because his sister is married to the director of a poultry conglomerate. They are multimillionaires. But Nitin's sister is a strict vegetarian and "won't even touch an egg." (How many times I heard that phrase from people in the poultry industry!) She makes it make sense by giving many of their millions away, building hospitals and temples and schools in their hilltop village in Himachal Pradesh. I stayed at Nitin's the night before our trip and while I ate breakfast, dressed poorly in jeans and a hoodie, he came out of his bedroom in slacks, a blue dress shirt, and a corduroy jacket, smelling clean and colognged, and prayed in front of his Hanuman mandir that had flashing red lights and canned music. His phone was on the table and it was pinging and buzzing, on a Sunday morning, with rate updates on a kg of boneless chicken in Gujarat and urgent emails from KFC. But he sat there quietly, bathed in the flashing red lights, surely not oblivious to the pressing time of capital.

In remaining alert to the pressures of capital we do not see an irreducible, ontological gap between the time of history/capital and the time of gods, as Dipesh Chakrabarty put it in *Provincializing Europe* in ways not dissimilar to the gap he posits and wants to unsettle in his more recent work on climate change, between the time of nature and "humanist" historical time.[17] In previous work Bhrigu argued against accepting the necessity of an "irreducible" ontological gap between the time of history and time of gods.[18] Here too, in our understanding, the source of human hubris or doubt does not necessarily hinge on a disjuncture of temporality or ontological untranslatability, say between ritual time and the time of capital, since as we suggest, ritual and capital involve certain kinds of exchange relations, which may at times create unpredictable forms of movement across domains such as Dhojiaji's insinuation of the changing price of goats as being a factor in sacrificial thought and practice. Such movements and relations occur not only in small butcher shops or rural sacrificial rituals but could also extend to industrialized, multinational conglomerates, exemplified by the ultramodern Skylark slaughterhouse.

The Skylark slaughterhouse and others like it are the product of a history that began with the Indian state's ninth five-year plan and the drive to intensify the poultry industry, thanks in part to investment from American corporations who saw in poultry a "secular" meat. Claims to secularism notwithstanding, these plants (often with Hindu-Jain Baniya owners) pit themselves against the long-standing *mandi* (live market) system, largely operated by Muslims, but that had begun losing its hold with the advent of mobile phones and the ability of farmers to sell their birds, often to these growing conglomerates, who were not bound to the rate set by the *mandis*. These modernizers say they are more hygienic and are what the Indian consumer will grow to want and, despite their whispered communal rhetoric, make a show of being halal. But because the facility slaughters 1,000 birds per hour, which is simply too fast for the recitation of anything, they say *kalma* only with the first bird and the last, assuming comprehensive coverage for the ones who fall between.

16. Ibid., 72.

17. See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 106, and Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History."

18. See Singh, "Headless Horseman."

Acknowledging certain kinds of emotional, ritual, and commercial traffic across the sacred and the profane, across city and village, let us move further in our exploration of the moods and modes of killing. Perhaps it is easier to sympathize with and thereby morally and conceptually receive the forms of ambivalence above. But in what ways might we understand the secret or not so secret pleasures that may accompany killing and death or the consumption of neighboring species?

Scenes of Pleasure and Cruelty

As is well known, in villages and in cities in India even today, except for a small cosmopolitan elite, for the most part, vegetarianism is associated with upper castes (or with Jain-inflected Hinduism), while nonvegetarianism, particularly when it is pictured as a moral vice or weakness, is implicitly or explicitly associated with lower castes. Moving a step closer, though, we see this seemingly eternal Hindu hierarchy become less stable. In a traditional caste-based practice untheorized or at least undertheorized by an older generation of purity-pollution theorists, the high-status Rajput-warrior castes have an acceptably meat-based diet. "So, then, what makes their consumption of meat 'purer'?" I (Bhrigu) asked many interlocutors, from high and low castes in Shahabad. "It is their dharma, as warriors," some said. And in the absence of war (since most Rajputs have long since ceased to be warriors), does this ethics shift? I found that it did not and that the accusation of impurity never seemed to arise in relation to Rajput diet. "And why is that?," I continued to ask. The general consensus was that "Rajputs cook their meat better, with much more refined spices, while lower castes just throw in some salt and red chili, if they can afford that." I remained unsure whether this hierarchy of refinement was an ethical claim (it was certainly a claim on degrees of cultivation), and if there could be a moral discourse that centered on the pleasure and style of killing and consuming an animal. We return to our opening question, namely, the mood in which a killing is done, and how this accompanying affect makes us judge the act of killing. Among lower castes and tribes in Shahabad, while nowadays narratives of pleasurable and/or heroic killing had much less currency, I did find stories of legendary, examplary hunters, for instance among Sahariyas, Bhils, or those castes occupationally associated with hunting such as the low-status Moghias and high-status Rajput warriors and kings.

It is not impossible to find a philosophical affirmation of such pursuits, even from canonical figures who continue to inspire experiments in environmental ethics such as Henry David Thoreau, who for instance in *Walden* declares hunting and fishing to be necessary aspects of education: "Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers . . . are often in a more favorable mood for observing nature, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation."[19] But then Thoreau also famously states (in lines from *Walden* that Gandhi notably took inspiration from and translated into Hindi and Gujarati): "It is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized."[20] Let us keep questions of moral and civilizational hierarchy in abeyance, as also the justification of pleasure by a "higher" purpose, such as hunting as a form of education or survival or even a way of engaging with nature, in Thoreau's sense, or killing to pacify or to please a deity. Consider instead a less cultivated form of pleasure: cruelty as play.

Nitin and I (Naisargi), on our trip to Barwala, stopped first at the Skylark slaughterhouse, so that I could observe how their birds are killed, dismembered, and packaged. The plant itself is an innocuous facility that looks like an office park on the outskirts of virtually any city. The first truck of many that day arrived shortly after we did. A couple of workers in green jumpsuits began reaching into the cages to pull out the birds that had died during the journey, tossing them into a discard pile, one not yet fully dead but jerking around in the sun under the body of a definitely dead bird, its

19. Thoreau, *Walden*, 179.

20. Ibid., 48.

head a mess of sores and disease. There was a small boy there whom I had seen earlier on the road on a bicycle steered by his weatherbeaten, green-jumpsuited father. The boy walked around in bare feet, quite jauntily, looking through the discard pile for a bird to play with. He found one—one of the ones that was not quite dead yet—took it up to the unloading platform and began playing a game of catch with it with someone I could not see on the other side of the truck. Occasionally the boy would miss, the bird would fall, and the boy would stomp on it and scream at it and then, laughingly, throw it back again.

The boy knew he was playing with something that had once been alive, and that was part of the pleasure and part of the defiance I saw in the eyes of the men who watched me watching him. And yet they couldn't have known that already I—twenty-year vegan of bleeding heart—had stopped thinking of these birds as being alive, as sharing anything with me other than participation in a relationship of power in which they were the losers and, my god, how. They were idiots. Weak little idiots squawking in cages and shitting all over each other and in no more than a few minutes, right after someone in a white lab coat gave the signal to a man in a green jumpsuit, the birds would be taken from the truck and thrown into milk crates and then carried inside and hung upside down by their feet and be sent into a stunning machine and come out like stiff little meaty stones with necks hanging off them, necks whose vein would be cut by a woman with alarming regularity and with no regard to the blood splattering all over her as the birds morphed from stiff little meaty stones to flapping squawking art objects with bright red blood spurting from their necks and performing gymnastic feats in a failed effort to free themselves from this endless ride.

How did I find beauty in this? How could I be mesmerized instead of only horrified by the brightness of blood, the whiteness of walls, the soothing regularity of the rhythm of hooks and tracks? I was all caught up, not only in sense but also in mind, already narrating the story of this harrowing beauty, already at peace with my lack of discomfiture at the child's sadistic play with the deadened (not "dead") bird, with my ability to so easily, so seamlessly, lose all moral sense in the face of a kind of absolute power over animal life and death, the power to turn animals into things, as if they were never anything else. As if this were all inevitable and therefore ceased to matter.

But this is being very human about it all, isn't it?

The child was not strictly sadistic because he was playing with something that had almost ceased: not dead, not killed, but not quite a "being" either. The "not quite" is important, though, because this was not the same as kicking a soccer ball, nor was it the same as throwing a flapping, squawking bird. That aside, the key thing here was play.[21] Yes, there was a truck in front of us filled with immobilized and encrusted birds and the air reeked of shit and piss and vomit. But the late February sun was warm on our skin. The boy was with his father and his father was proud. Among the men was bonhomie. Surely we have seen or can imagine a cat with a ceased-but-not-killed mouse. Pleasure and play in the face of a waxing and waning life is part of a shared field of vitality and cessation; and thus, perhaps the recognition of playful cruelty is also part of an ethic of immanent obligation. At what point does play turn into a different kind of violence? I have never seen a cat breed mice and load them en masse into a truck toward their death, nor do I see the recognition of a shared field of pleasure and play in such planned obsolescence. And so I (Naisargi) will reserve the right to consider such a system, even though I fail to always sense it as such, morally deadening.

Then again, is it deadening or enlivening, or a mix of both? Bhrigu interrupts Naisargi's chain of thought with another line from *Walden*, as a provocation, Thoreau's strangely upbeat mood when thinking about destruction: "We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast. . . . I love to see that Nature is rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations

21. See Graeber, "What's the Point?"

can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp . . . and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood!"[22]

Is there a way to appraise such violence without praising or damning it? Perhaps the anthropologist who comes closest to inhabiting what Friedrich Nietzsche called "festive cruelty" is Michael Taussig. In his essay "Transgression" Taussig approaches the theme of ritual violence with a kind of descriptive ferocity, describing states of intoxication, automutilation, and the "exhausting tendency to seek excess" described, in the instance he takes up, by an ethnographer of the Gahuku in New Guinea, although numerous such examples could be found, in India and in other parts of the world: "Each man stepped forward with rolls of razor sharp leaves, 'flourishing them like a conjurer in a spotlight,' and plunged this vicious instrument up his nose so as to tear at the mucous membrane and force blood to flow. The watching men ululated."[23] While it would be beyond the pale of this particular essay, Bhrigu takes up accounts of Holi in Shahabad and elsewhere in India that involve analogous forms of play. Bhrigu calls this the dramatization of "agonistic intimacy," a relationship of proximity and violence between neighboring social groups. According to Taussig, what we see in such acts are challenges to the limits of the human body, "ever more ingenious games with the body demanded to serve a sacred and supernatural purpose. . . . The most stunning prop is the human and all too profane body with its various appendages, fluids, undulating surfaces, folds, exits and entrances."[24]

And what if the body of a neighboring species becomes the site of such intimate experiments? Can there be any justification? In a recent essay titled "Violence and Nonviolence at the Heart of Hindu Ethics," Veena Das suggests that at least in Vedic texts, sacrificial killing and the theological defense of killing animals (for instance in Vedic philosophical arguments with Jain disputants) is not based on an indifference to the suffering of animals. Rather, sacrificial violence, Das argues, is a dramatization of one's own inevitable death,[25] the depiction of a shared condition of viscerality, a "condition of being ransomed to death."[26] This is not to say that Hindu ritual thought affirms violence. Rather than a stable resolution of these issues of killability and of what constitutes a killing, there is, as Das puts it, "a certain anxiety around violence [that is] integral to the imagination of an ethical life in Hindu texts and practices."[27] At times, as Das also suggests, the most creative transformations within ritual thought may be a "substitution," wherein the trace of sacred violence (and of festive cruelty) is preserved, but the mood and mode of violence is significantly altered. Here is an example of one such substitution from Bhrigu's ethnography, a myth, comic and serious, known to many in Shahabad, which marks and suggests a transition to the most common ritual substitute for animal sacrifice:

> Once all the gods had a meeting and began to narrate their achievements. Bhrama said I created the universe. Vishnu said I was born as the Ram avatar, and then as Krishna. Everyone said that Shiva does nothing. He just sits around all day smoking marijuana. So Shiva said, "I'll also do something." He made a tree of which humans were the fruit. As they became ripe they fell to the earth. Now all the gods got worried. They said if this tree proliferates then the earth will soon be overrun. But Shiva said, "I can't take back what I have done." All the gods begged him, and so Shiva turned the humans into coconuts, but on the condition that this fruit would from now on be accepted as a sacrifice, in place of animals. And so the coconut became the most common sacrificial offering. Even now when a coconut is smashed at an altar, it is referred to by the word *khopra*, meaning literally human head.

According to Das and others, a major theological transformation, a critique of violence (in a nonmessianic, nonsoteriological sense), in South Asia took place with the Mahabharata, which can be read as recasting Vedic sacrificial religion in dispute and in conversation with Buddhism and Jainism. The highest dharma the Mahabharata suggests, according to Das, is not *ahimsa* (nonviolence, a term famously associated with Gandhian

22. Thoreau, *Walden*, 267.

23. Taussig, "Transgression," 354.

24. Ibid., 354.

25. Das, "Violence and Nonviolence," 68.

26. Ibid., 50.

27. Ibid., 39.

modes of political action) but *anrishansya* (noncruelty), what Wendy Doniger calls a "compromise" with the inevitability of violence.[28] The feeling of noncruelty is expressed in the unpredictable attachments, at times across species, in the Mahabharata, such as the parrot who refuses to leave a withering tree or with Yudhistra, who is thrown together with a dog (who turns out to be Dharma, his father), whom he refuses to abandon even at the gates of heaven.[29] Such a formulation, which we might call a form of companionship, is not limited to South Asian thought. It would, for instance, find a sympathetic resonance with what Stanley Cavell calls "companiable thinking" or, somewhat differently, what the feminist philosopher of multispecies minglings, Donna Haraway, calls "companion species."[30]

Although we have learned a great deal from these (respectively quite different) formulations of companionship, or being with others, in Das, Cavell, and Haraway, we cannot accept this term, however polyvalent it may be, as the conclusion of our argument, for a variety of reasons, four in all. First, we contend that companionship may also involve forms of mutual violence, what Bhrigu calls agonistic intimacy.[31] Second, as Das, Cavell, and Haraway would possibly agree, the mere fact of violence's inevitability—whether in affinity or animus—does not remove a consideration of the *mode* of violence from the sphere of the ethical. If we say, as Das does, as Hindu ritual thought does in some readings, that we "cannot escape violence altogether," we must still make space for the consideration of cruelty and of differential vulnerability. We "share with animals the common condition of death,"[32] but sharing is not the same as equivalence. Third, in light of this attention to differential vulnerabilities, certain forms of companionable noncruelty, particularly those prescribed in moral codes (different from Das's more contingent sense of companionship, as being thrown together), may also breed accompanying forms of cruelty. For instance, in Shahabad (and various other places where Hindu moral codes continue to exercise force), there are a number of prescribed punishments and rituals of expiation for *gauhatya* (murdering a cow), even if such a killing happens by mistake. Offenders are expelled from their caste group and various expensive rituals of reentry follow, including a communal meal where a kinsman must volunteer to eat the first morsel, called *hatya ka kor* (the burden of a killing). And yet, the theological and political ban on killing cows in Hinduism is not an end to cruelty (limiting ourselves just to human-bovine relations, and not to the Hindu right-wing appropriation of cow protection as a potentially violent form of collective action and hostility to other religions). In most parts of India, unproductive cows are simply put out to pasture and can be seen in villages and cities, competing with stray dogs for scraps of trash.[33]

This is not to say that it is wholly impossible to understand the pain of a neighboring species. There are signs through which pain might be recognized. For instance, in Shahabad there are three separate words to describe the cry of pain of specific animals; *rambhana*, a calf's cry of separation from her mother; *reikna*, a buffalo's scream; and *bhimmana*, a goat's bleat. Various myths describe the cycles of violence and tragedy that can be animated by these cries of pain, for instance, by the death of a bird, or by a calf's separation from her mother. But our fourth and perhaps most critical problem with companionship, even in the face of such acknowledgments of pain, is that within conditions of death and killing, or what various theologies would differently acknowledge as the inevitability of violence, it is not always clear what noncruelty might be.

The closest thing to a peaceable, not so cruel time that I (Naisargi) saw for a dying chicken was in a meat market in Nagaland. This is not to say that the other animals had it good: there were pigs sawed in half while still alive, dogs clubbed over the head, rats encouraged to lunge for freedom while laughing men held them back with strings. But the chickens awaiting slaughter were living a fine kind of life—certainly compared to the layer hens

28. Doniger quoted in ibid., 52.

29. See ibid., 66.

30. See Cavell, "Companionable Thinking," and Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

31. See Singh, "Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration."

32. Das, "Violence and Nonviolence," 52.

33. See Dave, "Witness," on bearing witness; see Singh, "Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration," on the sacred status of the cow in Hinduism and its relation to everyday cruelty.

in Barwala or the broilers in Sunil's shop—not in cages but in litter, with all the food they could want. A well-dressed family of four came to buy at around six in the morning, surveyed their options, and pointed out their selection. The shop owner picked this—the fattest bird—up and held it with his left hand by the base of the wings. He lifted his right fist in the air and brought it crashing down onto the chicken's back with a deep, satisfying thud. He then tossed the bird into a dirty Styrofoam box. And then nothing: no movement, no jerking, no thrashing. That bird was dead. I asked him later what he had done and he said he had broken a rib that immediately pierced the heart. That's what they do here, he said, because there are no Muslims in this market who require halal kills. But they don't, in actuality, all do it that way. An hour or so later, as the market got busier and I was taking a break from some horrors underground, I came back to the chicken shops. An adolescent boy was in charge of this one, and he was struggling to keep up with the demand. He, too, grabbed a bird with his left hand. He raised his right fist and then brought it down all about the bird, pummeling its back, its head. He had no clue what he was doing. The bird was very much alive when he threw it into a pail of water made hot with an immersion coil and very much alive when he then tossed its half-scalded body, likely full of broken bones, into the defeathering drum, which, if you can imagine, is a large metal can with rotating and thrusting rubber spikes.

It is at times like these that you might dare to imagine there is some benefit to the routinized, Fordist killing of the mechanized slaughterhouses. Within the inevitability of violence, we do not always know what noncruelty might be. Our uncertainties notwithstanding about human animal "companionship" as potentially resolving ethical quandaries, we do agree with Das's proposition that myths, quite profoundly, ask us to think about cycles of violence, and about how an act never exists in isolation and may have reactions, as in chaos theory, much later, at a seemingly unrelated point of time. With this thought and the most recent killing in Naisargi's ethnography in mind, we end this section with the death of a bird and a final instance of intimacy and cruelty on the part of a mythic figure, Sita, usually associated positively with the earth from which she emerged and into which she was subsumed at the end of the Ramayana. The fragment of myth we offer is not from the dominant Tulsidas version of the Ramayana. Rather, it is a *chepak katha* (a hidden story) that almost everyone in Shahabad was familiar with. Chepak kathas are informal subplots within epics that are narrated in improvised forms, often in weddings or more everyday settings. Such hidden stories in many cases begin with a riddle. For the hidden story we offer, the riddle is "Why did an ideal wife like Sita have to face the pain of exile?"

The answer this minor story offers casts the major Tulsidas narrative in a different light. As a child—or so the hidden story goes—Sita was playing in the royal garden when she overheard a *sua* and *saro* (a pair of birds representing masculine and feminine perspectives, akin to the popular *tota-mynah* cycle of stories). The saro was telling her husband what a great destiny awaited Sita. On hearing this, Sita had the bird caught by the royal hunters. "Tell me more," Sita said to the bird. "I'll keep you in a golden cage and give you the best food any bird has ever had." "Let me go," the saro begged her, "I don't want your food or your golden cage. My sua is waiting and I am expecting twins." Sita stubbornly refused to let her go. After much argument, when the saro sensed that there was no way out, she held her breath and died. With her dying breath, she cursed Sita that when she was expecting twins, she too would suffer the sorrow of separation. Years later, the sua and saro were reborn as husband and wife, the washerman and washerwoman (part of the classical textual narrative of the Tulsidas Ramayana). Upon hearing them fight, Ram decided to exile Sita, thereby fulfilling the curse that the hidden story reveals.

Myths ask us to think, what are the acts of violence about which we have not yet begun thinking, for which there is as yet no language or awareness? Maybe we are sometimes like children, like Sita in this instance, stubbornly injuring when we need not. What are the curses presently taking root that will someday come to fruition?

Scenes of Devastation

Bhrigu wants to end by considering a specific form of ecological devastation that occurred in Shahabad. The devastation is local, but it is also

something more than a local event. It is, as many people in Shahabad describe it, the death of a forest. The Sahariyas were and still are officially classified in the census as "forest-dwellers," *Vanvasi*, but the term makes much less sense today, because most Sahariyas survive through agricultural labor, and there is not much forest left to speak of. Importantly though, the quantity of land demarcated as forests has remained stable over the twentieth century, totaling roughly 49 percent of land in Shahabad, compared with 22 percent agricultural land, with human settlements comprising only around 1 percent. Thus, the perceived decline is not a comment on the quantity of land but on the quality of life in the forest. And here the form of death becomes more locally specific. In this part of central India, in botanical terms, the forest would be classified as dry deciduous. So even in its heyday it would not have been a kind of lush, Amazonian forest. In my book on Shahabad, in a chapter called "Who Ate Up the Forests," I take up different interpretations of what it means for a forest to be in ruin.[34] Among Sahariyas, the evidence for this death was twofold; first, the disappearance of several older, richer species of trees, and second, the now almost deafening absence of animals. A 1962 Forest Department Report on Shahabad tells us that "big and small game animals are found in abundance in Shahabad—tiger, panther, bears, deer."[35] Nowadays, one could travel for hours through forestland without seeing as much as a squirrel.

Interestingly, in a milieu with such specific names for the cries of animals, and with a very well-developed theological discourse on animal death and its dangers, there were no ritual laments available for this massive ecological shift, except for the everyday lament that I often heard, *sapai dang kha gaye hamari* (They ate up our forest). Some blamed the commercial felling practices of the state forest department. Others blamed the encroachments of local cultivators. Others still, Sahariyas in particular, blamed particular human-animal assemblages of other neighboring castes and tribes, for instance, the sudden influx of sheepherders and camelherders in Shahabad, whose sheep (some said) denuded the lower soil, while the camels ate up the more succulent and regenerative treetop buds. The herders themselves pointed elsewhere, to the sheer volume of biomass and wood consumed as fuel in villages and urban industries. Among these competing narratives of culpability, as an ethnographer I found that I could not be indignant since there was no one entity to blame and no one particular shameful practice that could be stopped, to end or punish the guilt of this death. Which leads me to ask: Where does the theological and secular imagination meet its limits in thinking or in not being able to lament the death of others? In this scene of loss, I found myself and this milieu at a loss for words and concepts or myths. The idea of companionship and other ethical ideas such as virtue, piety, or self-fashioning, which we mentioned earlier, do not help us work through this kind of loss.

Consider a different proposition. What about the few remaining animals that still inhabit this forest and the precincts beyond? In Shahabad the occasional jackal called out at night. Some people said that there is still one tiger in the Shahabad valley. As I occasionally crisscrossed the highway that cuts across this valley, I looked around wondering where the tiger might be hiding. Perhaps the animals were planning their revenge. Bands of black-faced monkeys sat in linear formations along the Shahbad highway, randomly attacking passing motorcyclists. I was better acquainted with their smaller cousins, the red-faced monkeys who began to make incursions into Delhi after the remaining patches of dry deciduous forest at the edges of our city disappeared. My own neighborhood in Delhi is a site of almost daily conflict between humans and monkeys, one band of whom (which looks distinctly like a nuclear family on closer scrutiny, with an accompanying cousin and uncle) lives in a public garden behind my house. Daily there were reports of someone being attacked. I listened to these reports with a bemused smile until my sister

34. See Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life*.

35. Government of Rajasthan, Working Plan for the Baran Forest Division, Eastern Circle, Rajasthan, 1962–63, 1971–72, Planning and Demarcation Circle, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

was bitten some months back during an evening walk. Some said the monkeys had learned to open refrigerators and were now helping themselves to cooked meals. Occasionally when one of us humans wanted to take action, the best recourse was to call a man named Khan, who owned a black-faced langur. The langur would come with Khan on a bicycle and his commanding presence would scare off the smaller red-faced band for a while, until they forgot about the incursion and returned.

Then it was announced that it was now illegal for humans to employ an animal for labor. So Khan became unemployed and our neighborhood watch committee invited another independent contractor to set steel cage traps. After being trapped, it was said, the monkeys would not be killed but instead be transferred to a more suitable patch of urban forest, which was nearby, just down the road. A previous source of grievance for the neighborhood had been stray dogs, who growled and attacked passersby as they walked home. The neighborhood watch committee called in a municipal dogcatcher now and then, but the bands invariably reappeared. Two years ago one kindly soul, a lawyer, took it upon herself to feed the dogs massive amounts of rice every afternoon, have them vaccinated, and knit them sweaters in the winter. Since then the warring dogs are pacified and now mostly lounge about, looking plumper than before and soaking in the sun, although there are still occasional skirmishes with the monkeys.

Have we strayed too far from a scene of devastation to one of cohabitation? As myths also teach us, agonistics can be comic, even if the repercussions are tragic, which is to say that moods and modes of violence matter. Violence can be more or less liveable, and this *more* or *less* may literally be a difference of life and death, or a zone somewhere in between.

"Everything Has to Die": Concluding Myths, Doubts, and Laments

In 1967 a man named Vinod Kapur founded Keggs Farms and made India the first developing country in the world to create its own parent stock of layer hen. The government of India began promoting egg production in the early 1960s, in the name of boosting the rural economy, but had to import parent stock from Canada and the United States, limiting both autonomy and productivity. I (Naisargi) met Kapur in 2013 at Keggs Farms, which is on the Delhi-Gurgaon highway, now a teeming, chaotic road with factories and hotels and malls but that had as its very first shop, back in 1968, a single tea stall to serve the workers on Kapur's farm. Kapur sat in his leather chair and stroked his chin as he told me the story of buying germplasm from the United States and creating a line called the Keystone Golden that was India's own and perfectly produced for the Indian climate. He pointed dramatically to where I was sitting (where he struck that deal) and said in a booming voice that it was "the birthplace of modern India!" It was certainly the birthplace of something, given that India has become the third biggest producer of eggs in the world. India's behemoth poultry company, Wenky's, started when its founder, B. V. Rao, competed with Kapur and bought its own pure (or homogenous, self-fertilized) line. The layer Rao produced had an advantage over Kapur's, which was that it was smaller and so you could fit more of them into a single cage. We know how this story turns out: farms consolidated; battery cage systems proliferated; rural people became priced out of a product geared increasingly to urban consumers; and Kapur took his fat birds and made a pretty fortune selling "cage-free eggs" at Nature's Basket, which is run by Godrej, which is itself a major integrator. I give Kapur credit: his farm is a beautiful place and the hens seem better off even than the ones who would get thumped in Nagaland. "What happens when they're spent?," I asked one of his staff people who was giving me a tour. "They live a nice life here," he said. And then, more for himself, I think, than me: "Everything has to die."

In this essay we have offered a number of myths, doubts, questions, and laments. "Everything has to die" is a statement that perhaps does not fit any of these categories. Yet the inevitability of death is not merely a question of the routinized (ritual or commercial) production of killable bodies, and of things ceasing to matter. Rather, as we argue, the mode and mood of death may be a matter of life itself. Naisargi had a conversation with an activist in Hyderabad named Sagari Ramdas about the unfavorable effects of agricultural intensification on the lives of pastoralists. Ramdas said to me, "Animals don't *die* in villages anymore." What she meant is that they could only be killed.

What is it to kill, to kill well, to be killed or killable? We have tried to show the ways in which these too are questions for the anthropology of ethics, a critical dimension perhaps of the question of how one ought to live. In thinking of the quality of life of those among us, can we also speak of a quality of death? Can a forest still die or can it only be "eaten up?" What does it mean (for animals, for animals among humans) to be alive or not-quite alive in contemporary India? Within the anthropology of ethics, specifically in relation to discussions of human-animal relations, we argue that companionship is not necessarily a resolution to ethical quandaries, although as we might also acknowledge, Das, Cavell, and Haraway do not necessarily offer this concept as a resolution. We do not have a better moral resolution to offer, but nor do we end with a complete aporia since, as we argue, the mood and mode of killing does matter. *The mood and mode of killing matters.* Would we be able to say this if it were humans killing one another? Probably not. Does this mean that animals (particular animals) are in fact killable, bare life? In examining killability we have tried to show a range of orientations that might exist between the culpability of homicide and the veneration of sacrifice, where life is neither zoe nor bios. Moving through village and city, shop and industry, sacred and profane rituals and myth, what we have attempted is a journey through scenes of killing, which we found are also scenes of life. ıllıı

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