Justice: Extending the Golden Rule to Animals

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Barbara Gardner argues that the Golden Rule should be applied to animals and supports the idea with reference to many religions.

“In every man and in every animal, however weak or wicked, great or small, resides the same Omnypresent, Omniscient soul. The difference is not in the soul but in the manifestation. Between me and the smallest animal, the difference is only in the manifestation, but as a principle he is the same as I am, he is my brother, he has the same soul as I have. This is the greatest principle that India has preached.” - Swami Vivekananda 1847

Compassion forms the basis of all of the world’s spiritual traditions. They all share ‘The Golden Rule’ which says ‘Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself’. But who are these others? The founders of those traditions included, not just humans, but all conscious, sentient beings in their circle of compassion. But today this has been largely forgotten, so it is important for us to examine how compassion for all living beings featured in the original teachings of the major faiths, and to ask ourselves if we are living up to those teachings in the way we treat animals today.

Hinduism, one of the world’s oldest religions from India, believes in a universal spirit, Brahman, which permeates the Universe and is present in every animal, plant and inanimate object. To exclude any living being from your circle of compassion, to ignore the Golden Rule, would be to separate your soul from Brahman, whereas the ‘goal of evolution’ is to be united with it. The Upanishads are full of references to Brahman being present in all creatures. For example, ‘The Lord dwells in the womb of the Cosmos, The Creator who is in all creatures’. The great Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda said, ‘The highest truth is this: God is present in all living beings. They are his multiple form... The first of all worships is the worship of those around us. He alone serves God who serves all other beings’.

Jainism, the ancient Indian faith based on the teachings of the 24 Tirthankars, never lost touch with its roots in compassion for all living beings. Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankar, who was born in 599 BCE said, ‘Unless we live with non-violence and reverence for all living beings in our heart, all our humaneness and acts of goodness, all our vows, virtues and knowledge, all our practices to give up greed and acquisitiveness are meaningless and useless’. He also said, ‘All
breathing, living creatures should not be slain or treated with violence, abused or tormented. This is the supreme unchangeable law’. The present day Jain, Satish Kumar, said: ‘Love is not love if it does not include love of animals’. The Jains have this beautiful prayer: ‘I ask pardon from all living creatures. May all creatures pardon me. May I have friendship for all creatures and enmity towards none’.

Taoism (or Daoism), the ancient Chinese philosophy based on the ‘Way of Heaven’ called the Tao (or Dao), believes the Tao exists throughout the Universe and all around us in nature. To find peace and harmony one must live in a positive relationship with nature. To work against nature will lead to unhappiness. Chi (or qi) energy, flows through everything in the Universe and lives in animals, plants and rocks. There are three treasures of the Tao: humility, moderation and compassion. Of these, compassion ‘Tz’u’, was described as the first treasure by the Taoist founder, Laotse at around 600 BCE. From compassion, follows wisdom and courage, and those who have no compassion have no wisdom. Laotse said that ‘a community of feeling with all things’ leads to a kingliness of character which, in turn, leads to possession of the Tao.

Zoroastrianism, a religion that developed around 1,200 BCE from the Aryan priest Zoroaster on the Russian Steppes, believes that, as everything God has created is pure, it must be treated with respect and love. Therefore, they protected the natural environment and were seen as the first ecological religion.

Buddhism, a philosophy that was founded in northern India around 500 BCE, is based on the life and teachings of the Buddha. Buddha said, ‘All your fellow creatures are like you. They want to be happy. Never harm them and when you leave this life you too will find happiness.’ Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th and current Dalai Lama said, ‘In Buddhism the highest spiritual ideal is to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings and to work for their welfare to the greatest possible extent’. There is a Buddhist prayer: ‘Enthused by wisdom and compassion, today in the Buddha’s presence, I generate the mind for full awakening, for the benefit of all sentient beings’.

Sikhism, a more modern Indian philosophy that emerged in the sixteenth century AD, regards compassion, Daya, as the highest virtue. The Holy Book, the Guru Granth Sahib says, ‘The merit of pilgrimages to the sixty-eight holy places, and that of other virtues besides, do not equal having compassion for other living beings’. Every Sikh prayer ends with, ‘O God, may your will prevail and may the whole creation benefit’.
**The Abrahamic Traditions** - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - are all based on the Old Testament which starts in Genesis with the Creation, where God gives man and the animals a vegan diet: ‘Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all of the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat’.\(^{15}\) Even after the Fall, when Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God ordered them to eat a vegan diet: ‘…Thou shalt eat the herb of the field: in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground…’.\(^{16}\)

After the fall, the prophets Isaiah and Hosea cried out for humans to return to the perfect state again, the Peaceable Kingdom, when ‘The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them’\(^{17}\). According to Isaiah, the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ extended to animals. He said, ‘He that kills an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrifices a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck’\(^{18}\). According to Hosea, God did not want animal sacrifices. He said, ‘For I desire Love not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings’\(^{19}\).

**Judaism** includes the ethical precept in the Talmud of ts’a‘ar ba’alei chayim, the mandate ‘not to cause pain to any living creature’. In the third century, Rabbi Levi taught the importance of ts’a‘ar ba’alei chayim, insisting that the inflicting of suffering on animals must be avoided.

**Christianity**, based on the New Testament, echoes to the words of Hosea, when Jesus said, ‘If you had known what these words meant, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” you would not have condemned the innocent’\(^{20}\). Some have questioned whether his anger in the Temple in Jerusalem was due to the sacrifice of animals, and not just the money changing.

**Islam** has many references to compassion for animals. The Qur’an says, ‘All the beasts that roam the earth and all the birds that soar on high are communities like your own. We have left nothing out in the Book. Before their Lord they shall be gathered all’\(^{21}\). Muslims are instructed to avoid treating animals cruelly, over-working or over-loading them, neglecting them, hunting or fighting them for sport, cutting the mane or tail of a horse, or factory farming. When asked if Allah rewards acts of kindness to animals, the Prophet (PBUH) replied, ‘Yes, there is a reward for acts of charity to every beast alive.’\(^{22}\) He also said, ‘Whoever kills a sparrow or anything bigger without a just cause, Allah will hold him accountable on the day of judgement.’\(^{23}\) In the Mishkat-el-Masabih, an adulteress was forgiven, after she saved a dog from thirst.
Early Christian and Orthodox Saints and the Islamic Sufis shared a concern for animals. Saint Francis of Assisi, known as the Patron Saint of Animals was, in fact, one of the last in a long line of such saints. He said: ‘Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission – to be of service to them wherever they require it’. But this all changed in the 13th century when Thomas Aquinas, basing his teachings on Aristotle, said that only man had reason and therefore had a soul. As a result, for the last thousand years, humans have believed that they alone were made in the image of God and could use and abuse animals at their will.

Hopefully, this will change with the coming of Pope Francis who made many stunning comments in his 2015 Encyclical Laudato Si’, such as ‘Clearly the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures’.

Bahá’í, a very recent faith of the nineteenth century from Persia, believes that all major religions come from the same source and the same God, and that humanity is in the process of a collective evolution and now needs to establish a peaceful unity. The writings of Abdu’l Baha say, ‘The Kingdom of God is founded upon equity and justice, and also upon mercy, compassion and kindness to every living creature ... It is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather they must show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature’.

Secular Ethics questions the illogical prejudice of speciesism, the irrational discrimination between sentient beings based on their species, and aims to include animals in the moral community. Modern animal rights ethics started in the 18th and 19th century with ethicists such as Jeremy Bentham and Henry Salt. It was re-established in the 1960s and 1970s with the Oxford Group which included Tom Regan, Rev. Prof. Andrew Linzey, Prof. Peter Singer and Dr Richard Ryder who coined the term Speciesism and invented the ethical system, Painism.

Conclusion
It is clear that all the major faith traditions teach us to include all living beings in our circle of compassion and to extend the Golden Rule to them. In this Perennial Philosophy, we are all part of the same universal spirit – Allah, Brahm, God, or the Tao. To exclude animals from our circle of compassion and not to extend the Golden Rule to them is to cut ourselves off from the universal spirit that resides within all created beings. Can we say that our use of animals in factory farming, entertainment, sport and experimentation extends the Golden Rule to them - to treat them as we would wish to be treated ourselves? Perhaps the time has
come to reappraise our treatment of our fellow creatures and see them as the many manifestations of the one soul and our fellow travellers along the unfolding journey of Creation. Perhaps it is also time for people of all faiths and none to proclaim the teachings of their founders and to practise universal love and compassion to all those with whom we share the miracle of conscious existence.

End

Links: This has been a whistle-stop tour of animals in the faith traditions. Books on this subject can be found at: https://animal-interfaith-alliance.com/media/books/

For more information about the Animal Interfaith Alliance (AIA), please visit its website at: https://animal-interfaith-alliance.com/

Further information about AIA’s member faith-based organisations can be found at: https://animal-interfaith-alliance.com/about-us/member-organisations/

Barbara Gardner is the founder and CE of the Animal Interfaith Alliance (AIA), an alliance of seventeen faith-based, animal advocacy organisations who are working together to provide education on the original teachings of the major faiths which say that the Golden Rule should include all animals. She is the Editor of The Ark, the magazine of Catholic Concern for Animals and Animal Spirit, the magazine of AIA, and author of the book The Compassionate Animal: An Interfaith Guide to the Extended Circle of Compassion. Barbara is also a trustee and Treasurer of the RSPCA. Here, Barbara briefly touches on some of the teachings from each of the major faiths and asks whether our current treatment of animals is compatible with them.

References:

2. Compassion is the emotional response to empathy, which leads to the desire to alleviate the suffering of others, where empathy is the capacity to recognise and share the feelings of others.
3. The Paramahamsa Upanishad 4  
4. The Svetasvatara Upanishad II 11.16
6. Mahavira - Agamas
7. Mahavira - Sutrakritanga  
8. Satish Kumar - You Are Therefore, I Am (Green Books 2010)  
9. Pratikramana Sutra  
10. Tao Te Ching – chapter 16  
11. Dhammapada  
12. The Dalai Lama - The Universe in a Single Atom, (Morgan Road Books 2005)  
14. Guru Granth Sahib 136  
15. Genesis 1: 29-30  
17. Isaiah 11: 6
18. Isaiah 66.3
19. Hosea 6: 6
20. Matthew 12:7
21. Qur’an 6.38
22. Bukkari Hadith 3:646
23. Sunan Al-Nasa’i
24. *The Life of St Francis* by St Bonaventura
25. Laudato Si’ p68
26. Selections from the writings of Abdu’l Bahá
27. *Painism: A Modern Morality* by Dr Richard D. Ryder (Centaur Press)