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Book Review

Review of *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*, by Jeffrey Mousaieff Masson. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004. 304 pages, $14 US, paper.

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Putting Farm Animals Back *in* Nature

There are no more fundamental environmental issues than how we produce our food, which plays a critical role shaping the material and ethical foundations of human society. Of all the sweeping and speeding changes in global food production, arguably the most significant in an environmental sense is the steadily rising per capita consumption of animal products—the "meatification" of diets—that has tended to grow with affluence. Per capita global meat consumption nearly doubled between 1950 and 1990, and global meat production, by volume, grew by a staggering 41 percent from 1990 to 2003, more than twice as fast as did the human population.[1]

At the same time, the colossal ecological "hoof-print" of animal agriculture has been increasingly well-documented, often framed in terms of the extra land space that must be devoted to agriculture as animal production expands (given the inefficiencies of cycling feed through livestock) and in terms of the burden on freshwater resources (animal agriculture is one of the greatest consumers and polluters of water in North America). The institutionalized cruelty of the industry also raises profound ethical questions with respect to our relationship and moral obligations to non-human animals, and it is this hierarchical sphere of concern, perhaps even more than animal agriculture's environmental burden, that has so frustrated animal advocates about the low priority, or absolute neglect, of animal agriculture within much of the environmental movement. This frustration is encapsulated by a comment from cattle

rancher-turned-vegetarian activist Howard Lyman, who compared a meat-eating environmentalist to a philanthropist who doesn't give to charity.[2]

Part of this disconnect, some have theorized, relates to a view that places farm animals *outside of nature* rather than in it, as a result of millennia of domestication and human rather than natural selection (in contrast to companion animals, where domestication reduced the emotional space between species as animals moved "out of nature"), which genetic engineering has recently amplified. For instance, prominent Canadian environmentalist John Livingston describes domesticated animals as "glazed, dulled, blurred travesties of their once-wild ancestors."[3] Accordingly, the billions of "unnatural" beings raised in artificial environments are widely seen as lower animals at best, inanimate objects at worst, a degraded status which has pushed their rights out of society's moral concern (at least beyond minimal animal welfare laws).

With this in mind, there was a great deal of anticipation in the animal rights community surrounding Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's latest book, *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals* (a companion video about Masson's research was also produced). Masson had first marked himself as a self-styled "ambassador" for animals with the book *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*.[4] There, he challenged the ways that scientific rationality—and what he describes as a form of evolutionary determinism, where all animal behaviour gets attributed to unconscious species imperatives beyond the individual—has misguidedly denied the emotional capacity of non-human animals, arguing that many animals are in fact capable of ostensibly complex "human" emotions such as love (for each other, and of life), sorrow, compassion, and joy.

Blurring the line between how and what humans and non-humans feel has obvious implications for how we view and conceive the rights of other species. Thus, animal advocates hoped that Masson could help make people understand that farm animals too have a capacity to *feel*, and hence should be seen as individuals with minds and emotions worthy of respect—rather than a soulless, indistinguishable mass that can be bred, crammed, mutilated, and killed at will. But convincing people that domesticated or "charismatic" wild animals (the primary subjects of *When Elephants Weep*) can experience emotions is undoubtedly an easier task than convincing them that their hamburger or fried chicken has a life story that is full of suffering (and a more popular one, reflected in the fact that *Elephants* was a *New York Times* best-seller).

To accomplish this objective in *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon*, Masson tries to break down the "higher" and "lower" animal binary. He does this by examining how similar farm animals are to their "wild" ancestors, and how domestication—however much it may have changed their bodies—has not deprived farm animals of other key aspects of their evolutionary inheritance, including their desire to interact with the environment and each other the ways their ancestors did and relatives do. Masson's approach is to connect stories told by people close to farm animals, with both sympathetic and oppositional views, together with discussions of evolutionary biology and animal behaviour research, posing many questions and reflecting on them. While some critics have derided his approach as being too anecdotal, speculative, and unscientific, Masson does not hide the fact that he is presenting plausible hypothesis and suggesting important areas for new research (and in new ways) rather than a definitive account; words such as *seems*, *suggests*, *possibly*, *could*, and *perhaps* abound. Yet though he frames many ideas with caution, the weight of plausible ideas fit together into a compelling argument.

In sharp contrast to Livingston's image, Masson argues that farm animals "have the same capacity for emotional complexity and intensity as did their evolutionary ancestors."[5] Throughout the book, this argument is set against descriptions of the abuses that farm animals routinely face, where the imperatives of profit maximization overwhelm their most elemental rights. By weaving together discussions of farm animals' bio-physical impulses and their expressions of love, playfulness, and friendship with the relentless stress, suffering, and sadness they endure in confinement, the net result is to challenge the reader to think about both the physical and emotional brutality of industrial agriculture, and how this relates to our food choices and our relationship with other species.

As Masson puts it: "Not what you are eating, but whom you are eating is the question on my lips," and this book and the companion film provide highly accessible entry points for stimulating necessary discussion and debates on animal agriculture and environmental ethics.

References

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Notes

[1] Weis 2005.

[2] Lyman 1989, p. 122.

[3] Livingston 1994, p. 24.

[4] Masson 1995.

[5] Masson 2004, p. 221.