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**Appraisal of BA Thesis *Reforming for Abolition: Insights into New Welfare Activism*
by Maria Baranichenko**

In this thesis Maria Baranichenko examines the perspectives of members of a Prague based animal advocacy organisation in light of a rise in industrial animal farming and philosophical debates about human-animal relations. A comprehensive literature review discusses different normative philosophical approaches to human-animal distinctions that justify or contest an ‘exploitative’ treatment of nonhuman animals. The chapter introduces the concepts of speciesism, anthropocentrism, and commodification as well as those that challenge a human-nature divide such as humanimality and lays out different approaches to animal activism. Together, these sections allude to the difficulties of maintaining an absolutist or purist approach for overcoming human and capitalist exploitation of the nonhuman world although it does not discuss research on more collaborative multispecies relations where humans are less centrally positioned than in the approaches to animal (or environmental) protection, animal welfare, and animal rights.

Methodologically, the study draws on an eight-month period of participant observation and five semi-structured interviews with differently positioned activists. The empirical analysis centres on the participants’ approaches to activism, summarised as ‘regard[ing] veganism as an ultimate goal for the future, while deeming welfarist reforms essential to alleviate the suffering of animals in the present’ (37); their envisioning of future human-animal relations in farming, medical research, and entertainment; and the construction of human, animal and society. In order to safeguard the organisation’s anonymity, this analysis focuses mainly on what these activists broadly think and articulate in the interviews, less on their practices, strategies and campaigns. This makes it difficult to understand what ‘progress’ (38) particular activist approaches might have rendered over the period of observation (and how this could be defined) although the author notes a preference for ‘pragmatic rational arguments – instead of solely ethical considerations [that] can be more easily dismissed as personal opinion’ (46). Elements of the philosophical debates such as speciesism and carnism are identified throughout the analysis.

The thesis is well and fluently written. With a keen interest in normative approaches, and while reacting to my critical queries in earlier drafts, Maria has worked on this material largely independently. I appreciate her dedicated exploration of how societal institutions and ‘we’ relatively affluent people in the Czech Republic might change and perhaps unlearn treating other



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animals (as well as plants and inanimate ‘nature’) as mere resource - an issue that is both timely and urgent.

On a more critical note, section introductions and summaries would have helped the reader to navigate this complex terrain by identifying the different angles from which the uses and killings of animals are questioned (in chapter 1) and understanding how the analytical foci were chosen and interlink (chapter 3). Perhaps because she already knew the activists after a longer period of participant observation, Maria tends to take the utterances of the participants at face value, rather than probing tensions and contradictions. This is the case, for example when human-animal boundaries are denied and suddenly reappear in the context of the uses of animals in medical research (‘we’re entirely different animals’ (46)); in the claim that conservation programmes should ‘aim to maintain a certain gene pool’ (46), or in not naming the human centricism and nonchalance when the youngest participant makes clear that abolitionism entails the ‘die out’ of all domestic animals, ‘leaving only wild animals to live in harmony with us’ (44). These utterances need critical unpacking.

Given this, in the defence I would like to invite Maria Baranichenko to address the following queries.

First, what pattern of argumentation in activist practices appeared to be most impactful to achieve a change in the treatment of nonhuman animals – or challenge the social epistemic ignorance of not wanting to know about the effects of industrial animal farming?

Second, are all acts of killing animals practices of animal exploitation? What might be differences between these terms that tend to be equated in the thesis?

Third, what does the study contribute to the philosophical debates detailed in chapter 1?

I wholeheartedly recommend the thesis for defence, and depending on oral defence, suggest the grade excellent (1).

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Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, Ph.D. (supervisor)