

JUST GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT? ANIMALS IN THEOLOGICAL ETHICS APPROACHES*

MARTIN M. LINTNER

ABSTRACT

The way humans treat animals is ambivalent: we bury our pets in animal cemeteries, and we slaughter and eat others. Even though the use of animals and coexistence with them has shaped people's lives since time immemorial, Theology has long misjudged the importance of a theological reflection on animals. This has also led to blind spots in theological ethics. In the meantime, there are not only important approaches to a theology that takes animals into account but also a range of approaches within Catholic moral theology has been developed that seek to do justice to the intrinsic value of animals. They require a profound change in the human-animal relationship in the light of the Christian faith and call for more humane treatment of animals. This article presents the most important of those approaches from the German-speaking region and attempts to show common concerns but also different figures of argumentation.

Keywords

Animal ethics; Animals in theology; Proper value of animals; Human-animal difference

DOI: 10.14712/25365398.2023.12

After more than four decades of intensive animal ethics debates initiated by Peter Singer's groundbreaking work 'Animal Liberation',¹ social ethicists and moral theologians are increasingly dealing

* This paper was originally published in German ('Einfach zum Fressen gern. Tiere in der theologischen Ethik,' *HerKorr* 72 (2018): 28–51). For this English translation, it has been edited and expanded to include the footnotes.

¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975; ^o2015).

with the topic and trying not only to work on the positions of Singer and others but to develop their own theological approaches. Animals have not only arrived in theology but also in theological ethics. The Anglican theologian Andrew Linzey, who is considered a pioneer of animal theology,² and (for the German-speaking world) the Institute for Zoological Theology in Münster, founded in 2009 by Anton Rotzetter (1939–2016) and Rainer Hagenkord,³ play a crucial role in this respect. In this regard, also worth mentioning is a theological research group at the Ruhr University in Bochum.⁴

In addition to many relevant specialist articles, four theological-ethical monographs specifically on animal ethics in the German-speaking region by Michael Rosenberger, Clemens Wustmans, Kurt Remele, and the author of this paper have recently enlivened the debate. Also, the 2019 Congress of the International Association for Moral Theology and Social Ethics was dedicated to the topic of animal ethics.⁵

1. A Red Thread: The Call for More Humane Treatment of Animals

A common thread running through the debates on animal ethics is the ethical impetus to point out the often untenable conditions in animal husbandry, especially industrial livestock farming, and to call for more humane treatment of animals. In doing so, the ambivalence of our society's treatment of animals also comes into view. While some animals play an increasingly important social role in the lives of many

² See e.g. Andrew Linzey's books *Animal Rights: A Christian Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1976); *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK, 1987); *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994); *Animal Gospel: Christian Faith as If Animals Mattered* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999); *Animal Rites: Liturgies of Animal Care* (London: SCM Press, 1999); *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology* (New York: Lantern Books, 2009).

³ See e.g. Rainer Hagenkord's books *Wenn sich Tiere in der Theologie tummeln. Ansätze einer theologischen Zoologie* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2010); *Die Würde der Tiere. Eine religiöse Wertschätzung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011); *Gott und die Tiere. Ein Perspektivenwechsel* (Regensburg: Topos plus, 2018).

⁴ Cf. Simone Horstmann, Thomas Ruster, and Gregor Taxacher, *Alles, was atmet. Eine Theologie der Tiere* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2018); Simone Horstmann, *Was fehlt, wenn uns die Tiere fehlen? Eine theologische Spurensuche* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2020); id. (ed.), *Religiöse Gewalt an Tieren. Interdisziplinäre Diagnosen zum Verhältnis von Religion, Speziesismus und Gewalt* (Human-Animal Studies) (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021).

⁵ See Martin M. Lintner (ed.), *Mensch – Tier – Gott: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an eine christliche Tierethik* (Interdisziplinäre Tierethik Band 1) (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021).

people and families as pets and domestic animals, millions of others are kept, slaughtered, and consumed as farm animals; while separate animal cemeteries are opened and burial rituals designed for some, the others end up in our stomachs or are disposed of and incinerated like rubbish. Just remember the mountains of animal carcasses and destroyed meat after the BSE, bird flu, rotten meat and other scandals. Whether as pets or livestock for slaughter, we like animals as ‘good to eat’, which is the telling, ambiguous title of a book by Bernhard Kathan.⁶

2. The Need for a New Theological Reflection

The most recent theological animal-ethical publications largely have in common that they demand a new approach to the animal-human relationship on the background of the biblical and exegetical insights.⁷ The biblical view of humans and animals expresses a close communion of fate between them (see, in addition to the two creation accounts, also wisdom traditions such as Coh 5:19–21; Job 12:7–8; Ps 36:7; Mt 6:26). Humans, like animals, are vulnerable and each have their own needs that are to be taken into account in order to promote their well-being. The command to rule in Genesis 1:28 – ‘fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that creeps on the earth’ – does not entitle people to reduce animals to their utility value for them, but is to be seen as a mission of responsibility and care. This is concretised in the Bible not least in the special care for the weak and needy, to which animals often belong,⁸ so that helping an animal in distress weighs more heavily than observing the Sabbath commandment (cf. Mt 12:11; Lk 14:5). Beyond the theological aspects of creation, it is also important to reflect on the inclusion of animals in the history of salvation. Animals are also to enjoy the Sabbath rest as an experience of participation in the completion of creation (cf. Ex 20:10; Deut 5:14). They are explicitly included

⁶ Cf. Bernhard Kathan, *Zum Fressen gern. Zwischen Haustier und Schlachtvieh* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2004).

⁷ Notable authors include Erich Gräßer, Bernd Janowski, Othmar Keel, Hans Kessler, Silvia Schroer, Thomas Staubli, Peter Riede, Ute Neumann-Gorsolke and others.

⁸ Cf. Julia Blanc, ‘Arme Tiere: die Option für die Armen als möglicher Anschlusspunkt einer christlichen Tierethik,’ in *Mensch – Tier – Gott: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an eine christliche Tierethik* (Interdisziplinäre Tierethik Band 1), ed. Martin M. Lintner (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 219–259.

in the Noahide covenant (cf. Gen 9:10–15) and part of the vision of the messianic peace (cf. Isa 11:6–8; 65:25) that dawns in the salvific event of Jesus Christ. It is significant that the New Testament explicitly names the animals (cf. especially Mk 1:13) and speaks of the whole creation affected by the salvific event of Christ. Paul explicitly says in Romans that the entire non-human creation awaits participation in the glorification of the redeemed human being (8:18–22, cf. also Col 1:12–20).⁹

This last aspect, by the way, poses an interesting question to dogmatics as to whether animals also ‘go to heaven’.¹⁰ The biblical finding is not only a theological justification but represents an ethical obligation to overcome the forgetfulness of animals that is inherent in the Christian tradition. It is necessary to develop a Christian animal ethic and to overcome the centuries-old deficits of theological ethics with regard to human responsibility for animals, which are still evidenced, for example, by the passages in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that are deficient from an animal ethics perspective (cf. no. 2415–2418). Pope Francis also provides impulses for this. In his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* (2015) he speaks of a ‘despotic’ and ‘misguided anthropocentrism’ that does not respect the intrinsic value of animals, the priority of their being over being useful (cf. LS 68–69). But Francis also emphasises that ‘human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognised and valued’.¹¹ This shows that Christian animal ethics must go beyond the traditional anthropocentric debate and also consider fundamental anthropological questions and reflections on the place of humans in creation.¹²

⁹ Cf. e.g. Martin M. Lintner, “‘Der Herr freut sich seiner Geschöpfe.’ Anmerkungen zum Stellenwert der Tiere in der Liturgie,” in *Mensch – Tier – Gott. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an eine christliche Tierethik* (= Interdisziplinäre Tierethik, Bd. 1), ed. idem (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 241–266.

¹⁰ Cf. Christoph J. Amor, ‘Ist der Himmel auch für Tiere offen?’, *Geist und Leben* 89 (2016): 268–273; idem, ‘Eschatologische Vollendung der Tiere – Ein theologischer Versuch’, *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift* 21 (2017): 219–231.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, 118, available at www.vatican.va.

¹² For a critical discussion of *Laudato si’* from an animal ethics perspective, see: Charles C. Camosy, ‘Locating *Laudato Si’* Along a Catholic Trajectory of Concern for Non-Human Animals,’ *Lex Naturalis* 2 (2016): 1–20; Anatoly Angelo R. Aseneta, ‘*Laudato Si’* on Non-Human Animals,’ *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (2017): 230–245; Martin M. Lintner, ‘Respect for the Proper Value of Each Creature. An Animal-Ethical Rethinking of the Encyclical *Laudato si’*,’ *Louvain Studies* 45 (2020): 26–48.

3. Current Approaches of Theological Animal Ethics

Michael Rosenberger, author of various publications on animal ethics, takes a biocentric and contract-theoretical approach.¹⁵ For him, the biblical finding that animals are co-inhabitants of humans and covenant partners of God is significant for Christian animal ethics. He sees animals as bearers of rights, but also of dignity and thus as addressees of justice. By dignity, he understands a value that is assigned to a living being independent of its aesthetic or utility value and which dictates that an animal should not be used merely as a means to an end. The author understands the Golden Rule as a ‘fictitious contract’ to which the Torah can be traced together with the animal ethics directives and considers the contract-theoretical animal ethics to be biblically justifiable. On the basis of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, he develops a theory of justice that includes animals. Critically, it remains to be asked whether this approach does not contain the problematic assumption that there is only a gradual but no qualitative difference between humans and animals. If, on the other hand, the fictitious contractual partners of rational or responsible actors are extended to those who potentially exhibit a sense of justice, the basic problem is not solved, but the boundaries of the divide between humans and animals are merely redrawn.

Clemens Wustmans wants to counter the prevailing animal ethics discourses with a theologically independent concept.¹⁴ The programmatic title of his study, ‘Animal Ethics as Ethics of Protection of Species’, indicates that he is not concerned with the animal as an individual but with the species, i.e. with the single animal as representative of a species. Based on the understanding of responsibility in Hans Jonas, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he develops the model of a situational ethics of responsibility for animals. The guiding principle of his approach is the interpretation of the biblical finding that humans are not responsible for the protection of individual animals but for the preservation of the succession of generations, i.e. the survival of an animal species (cf. Dt 22:6–7). The author interprets this as a symbol for

¹⁵ Cf. Michael Rosenberger, *Der Traum vom Frieden zwischen Mensch und Tier. Eine christliche Tierethik* (München: Kösel, 2015); idem, *Christian Ethics of Creation. On the Path of Ecological Conversion* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022).

¹⁴ Cf. Clemens Wustmans, *Tierethik als Ethik des Artenschutzes. Chancen und Grenzen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015).

the protection of species as well as for the importance of biodiversity and genetic variance in the context of an ecological system. While the first conclusion can certainly be agreed with, the biblical conclusions leave some questions open. The concern to anchor animal ethics in the broader context of ecological ethics is to be supported. It remains questionable whether an animal ethics approach without looking at the animal as an individual is sufficient and whether the biblical texts are not overburdened if they are to serve as a rationale for theological animal ethics.

Kurt Remele, who is a Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics founded by Andrew Linzey in 2006, explains in detail the historical aspects of the position of the animal in Western Christian history, the development of different approaches to animal ethics and law, but also the position of the animal in other religions, especially the Indian ones.¹⁵ He vividly describes the cruel fate of farm animals, but also animal-cruel Christian customs that stand in stark contradiction to the position of the animal in the Bible. Remele's book is characterised by an appealing basic tone and reads like a committed 'vegetarian-vegan imperative'. However, no systematic approach is ultimately unfolded. Even the concept of dignity, which at least appears in the book's title, is explicitly not reflected philosophically-ethically, but used 'counterfactually', i.e. in the sense of a decisive protest against the factual cruelties against animals, in order to subsequently plead for a minimised use of violence against animals. In addition to the lack of a systematic approach, it should also be pointed out that the pathocentric-utilitarian perspective is too narrow, aiming at the avoidance of unnecessary suffering of the animal. This perspective is correct and important but leaves many questions relevant to animal ethics, such as species protection or biodiversity, unanswered.

4. What is the Human-Animal Difference?

According to the author's approach,¹⁶ what distinguishes humans from animals, or in other words, what constitutes the 'anthropological

¹⁵ Cf. Kurt Remele, *Die Würde des Tieres ist unantastbar. Eine neue christliche Tierethik* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 2016).

¹⁶ Cf. Martin M. Lintner, *Der Mensch und das liebe Vieh. Ethische Fragen im Umgang mit Tieren. Mit Beiträgen von Christoph J. Amor und Markus Moling* (Brixen/Innsbruck: Weger/Tyrolia, 2017).

difference', is the moral capacity. This has found biblical expression in man's mission of dominion over creation. This motif is the result of man's reflection on himself – and his potentially ambivalent (because he is both willing to use violence and to be caring and protective) relationship to his fellow human beings and to non-human creation. Moral capacity, which is founded on freedom of the will and the ability to distinguish between morally right and wrong, between good and evil, requires the responsibility to correspond to the recognisable potential for sense and meaning in reality – including that of animals.

Thanks to their capacity for empathy as well as objectively reflected observation, humans are able to sufficiently recognise the species-specific and individual needs of an animal as well as its sensory, emotional and cognitive abilities. Since moral insights have a binding force, this results in direct duties towards animals, so that one can speak of a categorical animal ethical imperative: In order to do justice to an animal, its needs and abilities must be respected. The animal must not be reduced merely to its utility or to its aesthetic or emotional value or to its ecological function. As a minimum requirement that cannot be undercut, this means respecting the needs and abilities of an animal as a whole in such a way that animal welfare is not jeopardised. In the respective context, it then remains to be weighed up how much is to be actively done to help animals fulfil their needs and capabilities. Here, different obligations and degrees of responsibility towards the wild, farm, and domestic animals can be justified, for example, with the help of a theory of justice.

This approach is intended to take into account the intrinsic value of an animal (determined in relation to species-specific and individual needs and abilities), which is to be distinguished from dignity in the sense of Kant's formula of human self-purpose.

There is a broad consensus that a radically anthropocentric perspective on animals, which measures their value only in terms of their function for humans, must be overcome. In the context of cultural studies and in the young discipline of Human-Animal Studies,¹⁷ there is talk of the animal turn: animals are not only seen as objects of observation, use or protection, but as subjects in their own right with the power to act, which is not a free and consciously reflected action, but rather an

¹⁷ See e.g. Gabriela Kompatscher, Reingard Spannring, and Karin Schachinger, *Human-Animal-Studies* (utb 4759) (Münster/New York: Waxmann, 2017).

ability to act and interact. What does this new view of the animal mean for theology and theological ethics?

Despite the human ability to observe the behaviour of an animal, to interpret it, and to put oneself in its place, an anthropocentric view cannot ultimately be overcome in terms of epistemology. It should also be borne in mind that, biblically and theologically, the special position of humans is not primarily to be reflected on the basis of their ability to reason but in terms of their potential openness to transcendence. However, this does not diminish the creatureliness of the human being and does not abolish it, but establishes his responsibility towards non-human creatures. According to Genesis 1:26–28, the image of God is to be understood less as a statement of essence than as a statement of function, namely to deal with all living beings in a caring and nurturing way in the name of God. The moral ability given with freedom and reason enables man to fulfil this task entrusted to him.

5. Dignity or Proper Value of Animals?

This is where the philosophical question of ‘anthropological difference’ comes in – for example, whether concepts such as dignity, subject, intentionality, or morality can be applied to humans and animals univocally or analogously. A central thesis in Kant’s ethics is that rational beings endowed with autonomy and purpose have an absolute value, i.e. dignity in the sense of an end in itself. Dignity as moral dignity is founded in the capacity for practical self-determination according to reasonable standards. Its recognition is not subject to social agreement.

The uniqueness of human beings can only be recognised when they are placed in the flow of evolutionary history.¹⁸ The human capacity for morality has evolutionary roots, and some elements necessary for its development, such as empathy and a sense of justice, can also be observed in animals (especially those living in social associations). Frans de Waal metaphorically speaks of the fact that in the ‘tower of morality’ the lower floors are also inhabited by animals. There are, therefore, evolutionary and behavioural transitions between animal and human moral abilities, but at the same time, there is also

¹⁸ Cf. Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); idem, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

a qualitative difference. Therefore – according to the author’s position – one can speak of morally analogous behaviour in animals but not of moral behaviour in the true sense of the word: namely, to consciously reflect on one’s own actions and behaviour under the difference of morally right or wrong, of good or evil, and to orientate oneself accordingly. The concept of analogy means that in addition to comparable similarities, there are always greater differences that need to be taken into account and which, in this case, also have an ethical relevance.

The challenge, therefore, is to establish a conceptualisation and fill it with content that fulfils two minimum requirements: On the one hand, it must take into account the human capacity for responsibility as an ethically relevant human-animal difference, without denying the evolutionary as well as behavioural proximity between the human and some animal species and without diminishing human responsibility for animals. On the other hand, it must also adequately take into account the enormous range within the animal kingdom, from the smallest creatures to highly developed animals.

6. The Integration of Animal Ethics into Systemic Contexts

An important issue is the integration of animal ethics into the broad field of systemic economic, ecological, and social aspects. In addition to the effects of intensive factory farming (caused by the high consumption of animal products, especially meat) on ecosystems and the climate,¹⁹ the living and working conditions of people in agriculture and the area of processing animal products (especially in slaughterhouses), topics such as the preservation of biodiversity, the complex relationship between species protection and animal individual welfare, as well as wildlife and hunting ethics should be mentioned. It is also a matter of developing animal ethics in such a way that plant ethics,²⁰ which is still largely a desideratum, can be coherently linked to it.

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Martin M. Lintner, ‘The need for an “animal ethics turn” in animal husbandry,’ *Sustainable Organic Agric Syst* 70 (2020): 1, 17–22, doi:10.3220/LBF1590334788000.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. Sabine Odparlik, *Die Würde der Pflanze. Ein sinnvolles ethisches Prinzip im Kontext der Grünen Gentechnik?* (Angewandte Ethik 12) (Freiburg i. Br.: K. Alber, 2015); idem and Peter Kunzmann, eds., *Eine Würde für alle Lebewesen?* (ta ethica 4) (München: utzverlag, 2007); idem, Peter Kunzmann, and Nikolaus Knoepffler, eds., *Wie die Würde gedeiht. Pflanzen in der Bioethik* (ta ethica 6) (München: utzverlag, 2008).

Finally, in addition to these fundamental questions, many questions in the field of applied ethics need to be explored in greater depth: starting with consumer behaviour and lifestyle, the social significance of animals in the lives of many people and families, and ending with the question of animal burials.²¹ The area of research and biomedicine should also be mentioned, where there are comparatively already more studies, for example, on animal experiments, transgenic animals and human-animal mixtures.

Animal ethics is neither a marginal area of applied ethics nor a mere field of ethics but deeply concerns the self-understanding of human beings. The fact that it is also increasingly discussed in the theological context can be interpreted as a sign of the times, whereby the new view of animals in sciences and human-animal studies, in animal rights and protection movements, but also the special significance of pets for many people seem like foreign prophecies for theology. The approaches presented are to be understood as an indication of problems but also as search processes. One can look forward to in-depth debates.

*Philosophical-Theological College Brixen
Seminarplatz 4
39042 Brixen
South Tyrol, Italy
E-mail: martin.lintner@pthsta.it*

²¹ Cf. e.g. Michael Rosenberger, 'Tiere bestatten. Soziologische und theologische Überlegungen zu einem gesellschaftlichen Trend,' in *Räume der Mensch-Tier-Beziehung. Öffentliche Theologie im interdisziplinären Gespräch*, ed. Clemens Wustmans and Niklas Peuckmann (Leipzig: EVA, 2020), 307–317.