

## REVIVAL OF ANCIENT QUESTIONS: CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THEOLOGICAL ANIMAL ETHICS\*

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### ABSTRACT

Since the middle of the 19th century, animal husbandry has been industrialised and subdued to economic efficiency to an unsurpassable degree. Animals as living beings and fellow creatures have largely fallen by the wayside. Whereas philosophical ethics has reflected this situation critically since the 1970s, theological ethics entered the debate only with a notable delay in the 2010s and was enormously fostered by the encyclical *Laudato si'* in 2015. The article discusses different theological approaches to animal ethics and links it with the origins of Christian animal ethics in the patristic era. Finally, it focuses attention on the most debated controversy in animal ethics, namely meat consumption, and argues for the postponing of this question in favour of progress in animal welfare.

### Keywords

Animal husbandry; Animal ethics; Animal welfare; Creatures; Anthropocentrism; Stoic philosophy; Meat consumption; Vegetarianism/veganism; Monasticism

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In June 2021, the then Austrian Minister of Health, Dr Wolfgang Mückstein, whose portfolio also included animal welfare, spoke out in favour of abolishing full slatted floors in pig farming. Mückstein referred to the animal welfare referendum, which ended very successfully in January 2021 with more than 416,000 signatures and obliged

\* The article is an English translation of: Michael Rosenberger, 'Allianzen für das Tierwohl. Gegenwärtige Entwicklungen der theologischen Tierethik,' *Herder-Korrespondenz* 75, no. 10 (2021): 35–37.

the Austrian Parliament to discuss the central points for better animal welfare defined in the petition. Although Mückstein knew broad groups of society behind him, he reaped a storm of indignation from agricultural officials.

On the one hand, this contradiction of the stakeholders was understandable. Animal husbandry systems have been built for decades and represent long-term investments. A change in the laws would therefore have drastic economic consequences for animal farmers. On the other hand, it is perfectly clear that animal husbandry cannot continue as it has in recent decades. The ‘farm’ animals have been sacrificed too much to merciless economisation.

When in 1860, the already centralised great slaughterhouse of Chicago put the world’s first assembly line into operation, a consistent industrialisation of animal use and animal killing began – half a century before the assembly line production of automobiles which now prevails worldwide. From fertilisation to the dissection of dead animal bodies, a degree of economic efficiency has been achieved that can hardly be surpassed. The animals as living beings and fellow creatures have largely fallen by the wayside. Their exploitation clearly exceeds that of the poorest and most disadvantaged humans. A few clues can substantiate this:

- Procreation has globally become breeding. This is carried out specifically for the purpose of the desired useful properties. Diversity is not desired; economic efficiency takes precedence over animal welfare. Whether a dairy cow has a healthy, robust constitution is of no interest. The main purpose is that it brings maximum (milk) performance.
- Animal breeding with a single breeding goal requires the sorting out of the economically ‘wrong sex’. Male chicks in the laying hen breeding lines and male calves in dairy cattle are killed at the earliest possible time because they are unproductive.
- The trimming of the animal bodies also serves primarily to adapt to economically optimised housing conditions: the docking of the tails of piglets, the dehorning of the cattle, and the shortening of the chicken beaks. All this would be superfluous if the animals had enough space and were not crammed together in a so narrowly confined space.
- However, the keeping of the animals takes place in the greatest confinement and, apart from cattle, usually in completely isolated

stables, into which neither daylight nor fresh air penetrates. During the Covid pandemic, we humans have felt how hard two weeks of quarantine can be. The highly bred farm animals live in quarantine from birth to death. An infection in the stock would be the financial ruin of the operator.

- Finally, at the end of life, slaughter takes place on the assembly line: often insufficiently stunned, not to mention the psychological distress of the animals in advance. Many of them suspect already during transport that nothing good is waiting for them in the slaughterhouse.

Of course, there are also other, very animal-friendly forms of husbandry. Animals that graze in manageable groups all year round or at least in summer; which are allowed to keep their horns, beaks and tails to develop a natural social behaviour in a large space; which are allowed to eat what nature offers them, and not what promotes the highest performance; and which may even end their lives on the farm in the familiar environment. However, currently, this applies only to a negligible proportion of all farm animals.

Although there has been a lively and controversial animal ethical debate in industrialised countries since the 1970s, in which individual theologians have been involved from the beginning, theology has opened up broadly to this theme only in recent years. It has rediscovered the animal-sensitive positions of the Old Testament, from the Noah Covenant, in which animals are naturally included as allies (Gen 9), to individual norms of the Torah, which pay great attention to the protection and welfare of animals. It reinterpreted the incarnation of the Logos (John 1:14) and learned to understand it as God's becoming a creature. It appreciates the animal-friendly practices of popular Christian piety as a theological source of knowledge, e.g. the depiction of an ox and donkey at the manger, the blessings of animals, or the ritual of sharing Easter bread with the animals, which is still practised in some areas today. Finally, theology is increasingly opening up to the idea, strengthened in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, that animals have their place in God's eternity just as much as human beings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. LS 243–244.

Nevertheless, theological ethics in questions of animals is as polyphonic and controversial as other scientific disciplines and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Greatly simplified, two groups can be distinguished:

- Pathocentrist approaches, for which the pain sensitivity of animals is the highest criterion, advocate for killing animals only in self-defence and exempting them largely or completely from human use (as a pioneer since the 1970s we can name Andrew Linzey, later Kurt Remele and Rainer Hagen cord, recently especially Simone Horstmann, Thomas Ruster, and Gregor Taxacher). Ultimately, this position amounts to a vegan or at least vegetarian lifestyle mandatory for everyone.
- Anthropocentrist approaches to animal ethics plead for an enlightened humanism that knows no fundamental limits to animal use but minimises human violence against animals and promotes their well-being as much as possible (e.g., Alberto Bondolfi, Martin Lintner, Christoph Amor, and Markus Vogt). Rather gradually distinguished from them are biocentrist approaches, which underline the fundamental unavailability of the animal by recourse to an inalienable animal dignity and reject a reduction of the animal to human utility considerations (e.g., already 100 years ago Albert Schweitzer, in the 1970s and 1980s Günter Altner, Gotthard M. Teutsch, and Friedo Ricken, and since 2000 the author of this essay). Single colleagues represent an intermediate position between these two (Hans Halter, Hans J. Münk). Anthropocentrist and biocentrist approaches meet in the conviction that they do not reject animal killing in principle but want to massively restrict it and fundamentally improve animal husbandry.

A look at the history of church and theology shows that the controversy about the moral status of animals has been present from the very beginning. In early Christianity, a type of anthropocentrism quickly developed as the mainstream that did not regard animals as ethically relevant and regarded them exclusively as a disposable mass for humans. This difficult course of the early church can be traced most impressively in the debate between the Neoplatonic philosopher and

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<sup>2</sup> A good picture of this polyphony describes: Martin M. Lintner (ed.), *Mensch – Tier – Gott: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an eine christliche Tierethik* (Interdisziplinäre Tierethik Band 1) (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021).

ecocentrist Kelsos and the Christian theologian Origen. In his lost pamphlet 'True Doctrine', Kelsos accuses young Christianity of not being at the height of academic philosophy. Origen then places himself all the more decisively on the side of the mainstream philosophy of the time, the Stoa, which regards anthropocentrism as proof of the wise providence of the gods and thus justifies it theologically (!). The gods had so cleverly created all of nature for man that he could use all plants and animals wonderfully for his purposes. In addition, according to the Stoa, in the reception of an early setting of Greek mainstream philosophy from the 5th century BC, the animals are 'aloga', speechless and irrational beings who are far below humans in the hierarchy of being.

It is clear that such an argument was very suitable for Christianity since it also included the belief in a caring Creator and His kind providence; furthermore, the strict teleology of the Stoa was very convenient for Christianity as well. In addition, early Christians wanted to push back the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, which was closely linked to the creation- and animal-friendly position of Greek minority philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

Kelsos, on the other hand, presents Christianity as an uneducated and socially isolating current and sees no reason for the assumption, which he already perceives as typically Christian (and no longer stoic), that the world was created for the exclusive use of man. Rather, one could argue that it is there for the sake of the animals. For by nature, no single species is destined to dominate the world. Christian anthropocentrism is therefore mistaken because the cosmos forms a totality in which every component has equal significance.<sup>4</sup> In his defence of Christian anthropocentrism, Origen adopts the rationalist position of the Stoa and thus the philosophical mainstream of his time. In this way, he can incidentally refute Kelsos's core thesis that Christianity is uneducated and isolates itself.

The animal- and creation-friendly, bio- or cosmocentrist minority position of Greek philosophy, as it lives on in Neoplatonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism, is also reflected in the young church as a minority position.

<sup>5</sup> Günther Lorenz, *Tiere im Leben der alten Kulturen. Schriftlose Kulturen, Alter Orient, Ägypten, Griechenland und Rom* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2015), 245.

<sup>4</sup> Origen refers to the Kelsos position in *Contra Celsum* 4:74–99.

On the one hand, it is represented by early monasticism, which for ethical and biblical (!) reasons, consists in strictly vegetarian, partly even vegan lives. This minority position in 2000 years of church history never gets completely lost and is present impressively to this day, especially in Eastern monasticism, but always remains an elitist and increasingly less noticed minority position.

On the other hand, the animal-friendly minority position is represented by groups that subsequently qualify ecclesiastical orthodoxy as heretical or schismatic and exclude it from the large church: Manichaeans, Marcionites, and other groups. In contrast to the desert fathers and mothers, who see their vegetarian lifestyle as an anticipation of paradise and as a free option, the Manichaeans and Marcionites claim that the vegetarian or even vegan lifestyle is mandatory for all Christians. If I understand it correctly, it is still historically unclear whether this positioning contributed to the exclusion of the groups concerned as heretical. In any case, it is clear that the Church is also pushing its practice of eating meat in order to distance itself from such groups.

Meat consumption and meat renunciation always (!) had a religious dimension. Even the earliest religious-historical testimonies indicate that the killing of animals was regarded as religiously significant. This has remained the case up to this day. As soon as debates about meat consumption or animal use ignite, consciously or unconsciously, questions of one's own identity and worldview come into play. People say that they *are* (not) meat eaters and not only that they (do not) *eat* meat. The proportion of vegetarians and vegans who have no religious confession is strikingly high<sup>5</sup>. In the 2000 years of its history, mainstream Christianity has always cultivated meat abstinence for certain days and times, thus recognising that animal killing has religious relevance – even if the slaughter ritual has been abandoned for the sake of the mission to the Gentiles.

So opinions on meat consumption differ – in the early church as well as today. It does not take much prophetic talent to suspect that this will remain the case for decades to come, despite the current trend toward vegetarianism and veganism. As in the early Church, there are two ways to deal with it: one can seek the bitter confrontation that prevailed between Orthodoxy and Marcionites or Manichaeans, or one can

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Rosenberger, *Wie viel Tier darf's sein? Die Frage ethisch korrekter Ernährung aus christlicher Sicht* (Würzburg: Echter, 2016), 34–35.

seek integrative cooperation, as happened between church and early monasticism. The Church developed times and practices of meat abstinence and thus gave space to the cause of monasticism in Christian everyday life. At the same time, the Church showed an appreciation of the monastic lifestyle and saw it as a special charism – including its radical renunciation of meat! Conversely, monasticism accepted that being a Christian is not necessarily associated with a complete renunciation of meat but can also mean a very moderate use of meat.

For the anthropocentrist and biocentrist positions of theological animal ethics, it is undisputed that in industrialised countries, a reduction of meat consumption by three-quarters is necessary – from around 60 to about 15 kilograms of meat consumption per person per year – for animal ethical, climate policy, health and social reasons (world nutrition). The dispute between these and the more radical pathocentrist positions thus concerns only the last quarter of meat consumption. In this respect, its processing should be postponed. There is still no practicable model of organic farming without animal use, and it is not certain whether such a model can be developed in the coming decades. Thus, a solid scientific basis is missing to rethink the entire cycle of agriculture, food production, and nutrition ‘animal-free’.

The remarkable experience of the Austrian animal welfare referendum was that it brought together the different currents of the animal welfare movement and united them in a common concern. The ‘crucial question’ of meat consumption was deliberately excluded, and all those involved agreed to it in order to stand up together for more animal welfare. It is precisely such strategic alliances that are needed if we really want to achieve something for the animals and not just be right.

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