

Animals/ Shared-World

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The relationship between non-human animals, the shared-world (*Mitwelt*), and human animals is characterized by mutual interdependence. However, since around the 19th century, technical-industrial development has led to the extensive human exploitation of other animals and our shared-world. In the face of humanity's destructive violence, Christian theology is called upon to reflect upon what kind of treatment of other animals and the shared-world is truly Christian. While this question most directly affects other animals and the shared-world, it also indirectly affects future human beings who will suffer severely from climate change and species extinction.

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Editorial Note

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1. Human, Animal, Shared-World

Viewed from a biological perspective, *Homo sapiens* is a distinct species. However, humans are just one species among many others, all of which are part of the animal kingdom (*regnum animalium*).^[1] In biology, the animal kingdom is

distinguished from the kingdom of plants, fungi, protozoa, and bacteria. These creatures are equally a part of the human shared-world as are landscapes (in the geographical sense) and the climate. Human-caused climate change and the correlated extinction of species make it clear that the question concerning our treatment of our shared-world is an imperative one, not only for the sake of the shared-world's continued existence but also for the survival of the human species. ^[2]

Humanity's treatment of other animals and the shared-world is an old theme in theology (2.). However, the ethical questions surrounding this topic are currently highly charged. As a result of technical and industrial development, the brutal exploitation of other animals and the shared-world by humans has now reached immense proportions. From a Christian point of view, we should have long ago changed the way we treat both. Yet, grounded in the assumption that the world exists for humankind's use, we still breed, torture, and kill other animals on a massive scale. Similarly, we are emitting enormous amounts of greenhouse gases, and waste abounds. As a result, the life and survival of both the shared-world and humanity are under massive threat.

This article deals with the dimensions of the problem sketched above, with a primary focus on the relationship between humans and other animals from a philosophical (3.) and Protestant theological (4.) perspective. It provides examples of influential positions that give different weight to common arguments. Finally, it takes a look at the consequences of the current human treatment of animals and the shared-world (5.).

2. Biblical Connections

"Subdue the earth!" Insofar as it is interpreted as the handing over of the shared-world for human exploitation, God's command to *Homo sapiens* at the very beginning of the Bible (Genesis 1:28) is seen as the cause of the ongoing ecological crisis. In the last century, L. White ^{GND} (among others) blamed (cf. art. Guilt) Christianity for the destruction of the shared-world. He predicted in 1967 that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." ^[3]

In order not to mistake Genesis 1:28 as a mandate to destroy the shared-world, three things should be taken into account: First, these lines of poetry were written thousands of years ago, at a time in which neither the rainforest was cleared away nor the sea filled with garbage. Factory farming and overfishing also did not exist. Secondly, the biblical text calls for a non-violent dominion over our fellow creatures (*dominium terrae et animalium*) that does not involve bloodshed. The reference in Genesis 1:29 to an originally exclusively vegan diet for humans indicates this. Thirdly, Christians in particular should love their fellow creatures (see 3.).

Unlike Genesis 1, the Priestly authors of Genesis 9:3 portrayed God as a creator (cf. art. Creation) who, having seemingly lost control over human beings, allows the latter to consume animal flesh. This text reflects reality as it is, since humans do in fact live at the expense of other animals and do use them for their own purposes. Psalm 8:7–9 indicates that humans have been given this power.

However, the biblical texts also grapple with the fact that humans are dependent on their shared-world and, indeed, are even at its mercy. Among other things, they experience torrential floods (Gen 7:10–24), the forces of the sea (Ps 93) and wild animals (Job 41) as life-threatening. The longing for a "kingdom of peace," which Isaiah 11:6–9 describes as a "peace of the beasts," is therefore intelligible.

It is notable that the wickedness (cf. art. Evil) of humankind mentioned in Isa 11:9 (also in Gen 6:5) is overcome by the sacrifice of the meekest of animals. That is, redemption takes place through the death of Christ on the cross, and Christ is referred to as the "Lamb of God" (cf. John 1:29.36; 1 Corinthians 5:7). However, this NT insight into God's redemptive act does not give rise to an exhortation to non-violence toward our fellow creatures. Rather, the consumption of meat (even meat sacrificed to idols) is expressly permitted (see 3.1 below).

3. Philosophical Positions

3.1. Plutarch's plea for life

In the first and second centuries CE, Plutarch ^{GND} criticized sharply the brutal treatment of other animals. Although meat consumption was nowhere near what it is today, those in wealthy circles consumed animal flesh for the sheer pleasure of it, considering it a luxury food. According to Plutarch, this kind of meat consumption is unnecessary and therefore by no means justified. In fact, it is contrary to the purpose of other animals qua living beings, that is, as beings that ought to live. A famine, however, would justify meat consumption. Outside of such contexts, Plutarch deems it inappropriate for humans to follow a carnivorous diet. ^[4]

3.2. Nussbaum's Concept of Justice

In our current context, M. C. Nussbaum ^{GND} has written extensively on the human treatment of other animals. ^[5] According to Nussbaum, human and non-human creatures are similar insofar as they are both ends in themselves and therefore bearers of dignity. In *Frontiers of Justice*, she claims that there is "no respectable way to deny the equal dignity of creatures across species." ^[6] In *Justice for Animals*, Nussbaum makes explicit that, although there are different "dignities," all creatures are ends in themselves. "The fact that the dignity of a dolphin or an elephant is not precisely the same as human dignity [...] does not mean that there is not dignity there, that vague property that means, basically, deserving of end-like treatment rather than means-like use." ^[7]

On the basis of an understanding of dignity that is dependent on the diversity of living beings, Nussbaum argues for the just treatment of other animals. ^[8] Such justice is only present when certain of their *capabilities* are legally protected. ^[9] Among others, these capabilities include physical integrity and freedom of movement. ^[10] However, what Nussbaum counts as most important among the capabilities that should legally be guaranteed is the carrying out of a lasting life. ^[11]

It is therefore somewhat remarkable that she justifies her own consumption of fish by arguing that those fish killed painlessly after happily swimming around for a certain period of time do not experience their death as evil. ^[12] Her assumption that there is a human right (cf. art. Right/ Fundamental Right) to end another animal's flourishing life prematurely is surprising.

Nussbaum's position on research involving experiments on other animals also undermines her conviction that they should be granted life. ^[13] Given the fact that her philosophical position promotes both respect for the self-purposefulness (*Selbstzweckhaftigkeit*) of other animals and their corresponding rights, Nussbaum should reject animal experiments as unjust. However, she refrains from putting her ethical judgment into practice because, ultimately, she values the self-purpose of humans more than the self-purpose of other animals. In doing so, the theorist of justice not only softens her own claims about animal justice but also indicates that her novel understanding of dignity does not exclude the reduction of other animals to mere means.

4. Positions in Protestant Theology

4.1. Zwingli's Understanding of Food Freedom

On March 9, 1522, the Froschauer sausage meal that initiated the Zurich Reformation took place. Motivated by H. Zwingli's ^{GND} sermons, the printer Ch. Froschauer ^{GND} handed out slices of smoked sausage to his employees during Lent. This led to a scandal, and the city council called on Zwingli to defend his understanding of Christian freedom. ^[14] In *Von erkieſen vnd fryheit der spysen* ^[15] (1522), Zwingli explains that humans are incapable of redeeming themselves through their own actions. Salvation, he argues, is only accomplished by God's will, and this is precisely why Christians

should not observe the command to fast from meat as a means through which to achieve salvation (as the Church promised). Zwingli grounds this argument in the use of Paul ^{GND} (1 Corinthians 10:25).^[16] Paul grants “that we may eat without remorse everything that is sold in the butcher’s shop.”^[17] According to Zwingli, Christians should not allow their way of life to be constrained by fasting regulations. Instead of bringing about salvation, the observance of such regulations in fact restricts the Christian freedom granted by God. There is nonetheless a standard by which all acts of Christian freedom must be measured – namely, the commandment to love one’s neighbor.^[18] “Food freedom” is also to be measured by this standard.^[19] However, Zwingli does not count other animals among the “neighbors” whom the commandment instructs us to love.

4.2. Schweitzer’s insistence on love of neighbor

A. Schweitzer ^{GND} argues that the commandment to love one’s neighbor should apply to humanity’s dealings not only with its own species but also with other animals. On this basis, he criticized European philosophy in the middle of the 20th century: “It cannot make the decisive step of regarding benevolent behavior toward [other] creatures as an ethical imperative in absolutely the same way as it is in our relations with each other.”^[20] Schweitzer takes this challenge on by seeking to interpret the Christian love commandment in accordance with his principle of “reverence for life” (*“Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben”*). When correctly understood, the reverence for life demands a treatment of the shared-world that is fitting for love.^[21] Schweitzer is aware of just how challenging such a claim is, especially given that life can only be preserved at the expense of other life.^[22]

5. Contemporary Practical Challenges

Maintaining that the commandment to love one’s neighbor extends to all creatures by all means brings with it complex processes of ethical adjudication, dilemmas, and cognitive dissonances. As a result, speciesist and selfish interests, habits, and arguments in favor of human indulgence continually seem to keep at bay the demand to love our fellow creatures.^[23]

In our geographical latitudes, it is certainly the case that a large number of pets are kept, with their owners sparing hardly any expense for this form of “animal love.”^[24] At the same time, however, certain other animals are consumed on a massive scale at low prices. The tortured creatures are not the only ones who suffer for the sake of this consumption; it will also cost future generations of humans dearly, as well as the shared-world as a whole. A glance at the consequences of our current, non-essential mass consumption of animal meat makes this clear:

Such a diet contributes significantly to the acceleration of climate change. The reason for this is that animal husbandry alone causes massive greenhouse gas emissions.^[25] It also requires land for the cultivation of plants that the animals consume and convert into flesh, although a far smaller amount of plants would suffice to feed people if they ate the plants themselves.

Large areas of rainforest are being destroyed in order to grow soy on the cleared land for animal feed. Considerable amounts of this soy are subsequently transferred to Europe in order to fatten pigs and chickens in Germany, which humans then consume. This clearing of the rainforest further increases the already immense amount of CO₂ that is being released. The burnt trees can, however, no longer absorb the climate-damaging gas.^[26]

The clearing of forests brings about the loss of numerous species’ habitats, leading in turn to an increase in extinction rates.^[27] People are also being driven out of this habitat, and future generations of people will suffer considerably from accelerated climate change.

This current self-centered treatment of the shared-world for the sake of (excessive) meat consumption cannot be reconciled with the call to love one’s neighbor.^[28] From a Christian perspective, the mandated love for all creatures and respect for their dignity, which would prevent their thorough exploitation,^[29] should therefore be reflected in the

form of shared-world rights (*Mitweltrechten*)/rights of nature (cf. art. Right/ Fundamental Right).^[30] This would be entirely in the spirit of Christian freedom, according to which people are redeemed by Christ's death on the cross from all self-centered concern for their own salvation. They are thereby liberated to care for other animals and the shared-world as a whole.

Recommended Literature

McLaughlin, Ryan, Art. Nonhuman Animals in Christian Theology, in: St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, 20.04.2023 (<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/NonhumanAnimalsinChristianTheology>), abgerufen am 08.03.2025.

Singer, Peter, Animal Liberation, New York et al. 2009.

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- ¹ Cf. Hickman, Cleveland P. et al. (Eds.), Zoologie, aus dem Amerikanischen übers. v. Thomas Lazar, deutsche Bearbeitung v. Wolf-Michael Weber, München et al. ¹³2008, 931.
- ² On the extinction of species due to climate change, cf. Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), Landmark UN Report Reveals Shocking State of Wildlife: The World's Migratory Species of Animals Are in Decline, and the Global Extinction Risk Is Increasing (<https://www.cms.int/en/news/press-release-landmark-report-state-world-migratory-species>), accessed on 08.04.2024. On the threat to the human species posed by human-made species extinction, cf. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), FAO's Global Action on Pollination Services for Sustainable Agriculture. Pollination & human livelihoods, (<https://www.fao.org/pollination/en>), accessed on 08.04.2024.
- ³ White, Lynn, The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis, in: Science 155 (1967) 3767, 1203–1207, 1207.
- ⁴ Cf. Plutarch, On the Eating of the Flesh I, in: Ders., Moralia XII, ins Englische übers. v. Harold Cherniss und William C. Helmbold (LCL 406), Cambridge/London 1957, 540–561. German translation: Plutarch, Darf man Tiere essen? Gedanken aus der Antike, aus dem Griech. v. Marion Giebel (Reclams Universalbibliothek 19313), Stuttgart ³2015, 87–95.
- ⁵ Nussbaum develops her position, among other things, in dialogue with John Rawls' ^{GND} ethics of justice and Peter Singer's ^{GND} preference utilitarian animal ethics, which argued against speciesism and is influentially developed in his *Animal Liberation* (1975).
- ⁶ Nussbaum, Martha C., *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge 2007, 383.
- ⁷ Nussbaum, Martha C., *Justice for Animals. Our Collective Responsibility*, New York et al. 2022, 96.
- ⁸ To this end, Nussbaum refers to the "capabilities approach" developed by herself and Amartya Sen ^{GND}.
- ⁹ Cf. Nussbaum, *Frontiers*, 94: "The capabilities approach does not urge uncritical nature-worship: instead, it urges evaluation of the basic powers of a creature, asking which ones are of central importance for its good. This is a difficult job." Cf. also Nussbaum, *Frontiers*, 337.351; the term "capabilities" refers to abilities that animals should be able to exercise. For example, if they are capable of social companionship among their own kind, they should also be allowed to do so. For the topic of legal protection, see Nussbaum, *Frontiers*, 398f.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Nussbaum, *Frontiers*, 392–401.
- ¹¹ Cf. Nussbaum, *Frontiers*, 393.
- ¹² In this regard, cf. Nussbaum, Martha C./Bendik-Keymer, Jeremy, *On Justice for Animals*. Martha Nussbaum on her new book – and why a full development of our humanity requires developing our capacities to care for animals, 08.02.2023, (<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/on-justice-for-animals/>), accessed on 08.04.2024: „And therefore, the painless death of a fish – and I really mean painless: not line fishing, but conking with a mallet, for

example – who’s had plenty of time to swim around in the wild and must have had a pretty decent life overall is not a harm to the fish, I believe. So I actually do eat fish. And I am less troubled about that than needing seventy grams of protein a day to stay healthy with my age and my exercise level. I feel happier about that than I feel about any dairy product that I might use. It’s something I wonder about, and I don’t feel happy about it, and I want us to learn more, but that’s where I am right now.”

¹³ „We should admit, [...] that there will be an ineliminable residue of tragedy in the relationships between humans and animals. Research that should be allowed to promote human health and safety will continue to inflict the risk of disease, pain, and premature death on animals. As a matter of ideal entitlement theory, this research is morally bad. As a matter of current implementation, I do not favor stopping all such research immediately.” (Nussbaum, Justice, 404).

¹⁴ For the ecclesiastical-historical classification of the events described, cf. Köpf, Ulrich, Art. Reformation, in: RGG 7 (⁴2004), 145–159, 147f.

¹⁵ For the text in its original language, see Zwingli, Huldrych, Von Erkiesen und Freiheit der Speisen, mit Einl. und Kommentar, bearb. von Emil Egli und Georg Finsler, in: Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke, Bd. I, hg. v. Emil Egli et al. (Corpus Reformatorum 88), Berlin 1905, 74–136. For the quotes that follow, see the following edition, which also translates the title: Zwingli, Huldrych, Die freie Wahl der Speisen, übers. v. Samuel Lutz, in: Ders., Schriften I, im Auftrag des Zwinglivereins hg. v. Thomas Brunnschweiler und Samuel Lutz, Zürich 1995, 13–73.

¹⁶ Cf. Zwingli, Speisen, 51. Here Zwingli translates 1 Cor 10:25.

¹⁷ Zwingli, Speisen, 52, translation by Dylan S. Belton. Cf. also Rom 14:2–3.

¹⁸ Cf. Mt 22:37–39; Mk 12:30–31; Lk 10:27.

¹⁹ “Because we are bound by no law except the law of love, and because food freedom does not detract from love for one’s neighbor – provided that this freedom is properly taught and understood – we owe nothing to the commandments and laws of the tradition of the Church” (Zwingli, Speisen, 72, translation by Dylan S. Belton).

²⁰ Schweitzer, Albert, Philosophie und Tierschutzbewegung, in: Schweitzer, Albert, Die Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben. Grundtexte aus fünf Jahrzehnten, ed. Hans Walter Bähr, München ¹¹2020, 92–98, 92, translation by Dylan S. Belton. For Schweitzer’s criticism of the philosophical neglect of questions of animal ethics cf. also Schweitzer, Albert, Kultur und Ethik. Kulturphilosophie, 2. Teil, in: Ders., Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Bd. 2, München 1974, 95–420, 362f. (reprinted with new German spelling in Schweitzer, Albert, Die unvollständige Ethik, in: Schweitzer, Albert, Ehrfurcht vor den Tieren, ed. Erich Gräßer, München ²2011, 75–76, 75).

²¹ Cf. Schweitzer, Albert, Das große Gebot, in: Schweitzer, Albert, Ehrfurcht vor den Tieren, ed. Erich Gräßer, München ²2011, 57–59, 59.

²² Cf. Schweitzer, Philosophie, 98 und Schweitzer, Albert, Alles Leben ist heilig, in: Schweitzer, Albert, Ehrfurcht vor den Tieren, ed. Erich Gräßer, München ²2011, 25–27, 26.

²³ On this theme of cognitive dissonance, cf. Käfer, Anne, Gottes Werk und Fleisches Lust. Tierethische Erörterungen aus evangelisch-theologischer Sicht, Baden-Baden ²2024, 185–196.

²⁴ Cf. Käfer, Werk, 175–185.

²⁵ On the level of greenhouse gases caused by livestock farming, cf. Foer, Jonathan Safran, We Are The Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast, USA 2019, 227: “Two of the most frequently cited reports on animal agriculture’s contributions to the environmental crisis – *Livestock’s Long Shadow* from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in 2006 and “Livestock and Climate Change” from the Worldwatch Institute in 2009 – provide two different sets of numbers on what is one of the most important data points in all environmental science [...]. *Livestock’s Long Shadow* was the first report of its kind to gain widespread attention, and when it claimed that animal agriculture caused 18 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, it attracted applause and criticism. Mostly, however, it triggered alarm: 18 percent was more than the entire transport sector combined. It was therefore surprising when, in 2009, the Worldwatch Institute published its report in response to *Livestock’s Long Shadow*, claiming that animal agriculture was not responsible for 18 percent of annual

greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, but in fact *at least* 51 percent.” Foer considers the estimate of 51 percent to be more convincing and writes in Foer, *We Are the Weather*, 232: “And I’m not alone. A 2014 UN General Assembly report elevated the 51 percent assessment above the FAO’s estimate [...]. UNESCO, another UN agency, also published a report favoring the 51 percent estimate above that of the FAO. The UNESCO authors write that the Worldwatch calculation ,represents an enormous shift in perspective, and further strengthens the evidence for the relationship between meat production and effects on climate change.”

²⁶ Cf. Käfer, *Werk*, 196–203.

²⁷ On these connections Benton, cf. Tim G. et al., *Food System Impacts on Biodiversity Loss. Three Levers for Food System Transformation in Support of Nature*, ed. Chatham House, London 2021, v. a. 39: The importance of the tropical rainforest is noted here: “[T]ropical rainforests and tropical peatlands – these types of ecosystems are species-rich, contain unique species and store large amounts of carbon.”

²⁸ On this, see Luther, Martin, *Temporal Authority. To What Extent It Should be Obeyed*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45. *The Christian In Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt. Philadelphia 1962, 118: “For cursed and condemned is every sort of life lived and sought for the benefit and good of self; cursed are all works not done in love. They are done in love, however, when they are directed wholeheartedly toward the benefit, honor, and salvation of others, and not toward the pleasure, benefit, honor, comfort, and salvation of self.”

²⁹ The existence and life of all creatures is made possible by the eternal and all-powerful love of the Creator. They are all valued by his love. They are endowed with inviolable dignity because, prior to all human activity, they are valued by God’s love. For more on this, cf. Käfer, *Werk*, v. a. Section II.2.2.2., 50–57 und Section IV.7., 148–160.

³⁰ On the necessity and possibility of rights of nature, cf. Stone, Christopher D., *Should Trees have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*, in: *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972), 450–501. Cf. also Käfer, Anne, *Von Menschen und Tieren. Das Recht der tierischen Natur aus vernünftigen Grund*, in: Gräb-Schmidt, Elisabeth (Ed.), *Konzeptionen der Natur. Zum Naturverständnis in gegenwärtigen Positionen der Theologie und Philosophie*, Leipzig 2015, 97–117. For an argument against animal rights, cf. Huber, Wolfgang, *Gerechtigkeit und Recht. Grundlinien christlicher Rechtsethik*, Gütersloh ³2006, 375–381.

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KEYWORDS

