

THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

121. Jahrgang

– Juli 2025 –

Jauernig, Anja / Fischer, Bob: *What Do We Owe Other Animals? A Debate.* – New York / London: Routledge 2024. 250 S. (Little Debates about Big Questions), brosch. £ 27,99 ISBN: 9781032579573

What humans owe animals is a pressing ethical and societal question today. Thus, it is not surprising that the book, among other things, deals with the issue of which diet-related choices humans should make based on what is morally defensible, especially regarding the exploitations of animals that we can witness today. The book *What Do We Owe Other Animals? A Debate* by Anja Jauernig and Bob Fischer is structured, as the title suggests, as a debate that wants to answer the title's question based on the two authors' (different) ethical reasoning. It includes opening statements starting with J., followed by two rounds of replies where each author responds to the other.

The foreword by *Dustin Crummett* introduces the topic, explaining that both authors agree that humans treat animals in a morally unjustifiable way—a view shared by most animal ethicists. He summarizes J.'s and F.'s positions and introduces key concepts of the discourse like "sentience", "moral standing", and "moral status".

The short chap. on factory farming describes the treatment of different animals (cows, pigs, and chicken), provides a basis for further discussion, and includes video recommendations on the topic. The lengthy opening statements (50–70) elucidate J.'s and F.'s positions, introducing key concepts and theories of animal ethics that are relevant for their lines of argumentation. There, a summary of their conclusion on the book's central question is already provided. The writing style can be described as academic when theories and arguments are being explained but at times also conveys an informal tone.

In the first round of opening statements, J. argues that our behaviour towards animals "ranks very high in the worst-moral-evils-of-all-times list" (9) and asserts that all animals have moral standing. She answers the book's central question (What do we owe other animals?) by stating that we owe all morally significant beings compassion, which includes not harming them and helping them in need (14). Throughout her opening statement, J. provides concepts and (basic) theories regarding animal ethics, connects the debate to social movements like feminism and anti-racism, critiques *Human Exceptionalism* (27–29), and questions whether it is harming plants to eat them or if we are harming bacteria because for her, plants count as living beings (67).

F. begins his opening statement by linking the book's question to veganism, asking whether we ought to go vegan (75). His answer is no, stating that "you aren't failing to satisfy any of your moral obligations if you keep eating chicken." (75) He shifts the burden of proof to J. as she asserts a moral obligation towards animals (e. g. 76) and criticizes two common ethical arguments for veganism.

Moreover, he examines the *Equal Consideration Principle*, rejecting it while maintaining that animals matter but do not deserve equal consideration (113).

In the first rounds of replies, both authors address certain aspects of the other author's opening statement rather than every argument in detail. J. challenges F.'s stance on the burden of proof and the Anti-Complicity Argument, arguing that his objections are not convincing. She concludes that we are morally obliged to abstain from purchasing factory-farmed animal products as otherwise we would be complicit in its practices. F. replies to what he calls J.'s "extreme view" (159), focusing on the concept of a "human-friendly" Status Egalitarianism and on J.'s criticism on Human Exceptionalism. He emphasizes his practical rather than theoretical approach to ethics as the basis of his argumentation.

In the second round of replies, J. criticizes F. for shifting between Human Exceptionalism and Human Prioritism for his argumentation, "depending on which objection he is considering at the moment" (203). She also responds to his view that her stance is radical. F., in turn, emphasizes their disagreement about the "demandingness of morality" and focuses again on the burden of proof and the Anti-Complicity Argument. The book ends with F.'s conclusion of his second reply, indicating that animals matter and that we need to do better on a collective level.

To me, the debate format is interesting as it ensures equal representation of both positions and enough room to react to one another which allows dynamic interaction between the authors. The clear structure with distinct sections and info boxes makes the book accessible, especially for beginners in animal ethics. These features help the reader to follow the arguments and grasp key concepts more easily. The inclusion of philosopher insights and ethical explanations further supports understanding. By presenting two contrasting views, the book highlights the diversity of arguments in animal ethics and connects them with issues that are relevant to our everyday life and the (diet) choices we make.

However, at the same time, it can be irritating that the authors address the question on two different levels: J. explores consequences arising from theoretical reflections while F. seeks a suitable theory to justify his practical stance ("top-down vs. bottom-up"). Moreover, the opening statements are quite long, especially for beginners in the field of animal ethics. Shorter opening statements and replies could have made the debate even more dynamic, allowing for more back-and-forth exchanges on specific arguments. More rounds of replies would have enabled the authors to engage with each other's points in greater depth and clarity. Moreover, while both positions have flaws and weaknesses, F. stands out for his lack of logical rigor and theoretical depth. J.'s claim that plants have moral standing as well is not convincing to me, but her approach is well structured and methodologically sound, which is why it is comprehensible. In contrast, F. fails to thoroughly explain why certain arguments—especially J.'s—do not hold for him, making his position less compelling. He seems to avoid certain aspects, citing a lack of space (e. g. "I can't tackle that here", 91) which weakens the theoretical basis of his arguments. While he agrees that animals matter, he seems reluctant to explore practical consequences of what he calls "radical" ethical concepts as seen in his remark "If we're at the point where we're worried about whether to eat oysters, the defenders of veganism have won" (78) as if the debate is about not conceding to veganism at all costs. J. also responds to F.'s accusation of her position being radical, stating that "[f]or a moral view to be radical can be a good thing. All views that are on the vanguard of moral progress will count as radical when they are first proposed" (213), which can again be linked to her comparison to social movements. Nonetheless, F. anticipates

counterarguments well, summarizes both positions effectively and his at times non-academic writing style makes it interesting and accessible for young or new readers in animal ethics.

F.'s claim that those advocating moral obligations towards animals bear the burden of proof is particularly questionable to me as it frames moral duties as burdens rather than steps toward progress. Thus, this attitude makes it rather difficult to achieve moral progress in our society. There are many moral beliefs that seem to be inconvenient at first but still remain valid morally speaking. His argumentation at times appears to avoid deeper reflection on complex issues, exemplified by statements like: "Humans are equal. Animals aren't. We don't know why—yet. And we can live with that." (122) or "On my view, if a theory starts questioning whether we should save people over pigs, something's gone wrong" (162). Due to his lack of convincing arguments, failure to invalidate J.'s argument on the same philos. level and apparent search for justifying his own position rather than being open for practical consequences of valid ethical reasoning, I agree with her when she states: "wishing something to be the case out of laziness or inconvenience-avoidance does not make it so." (142)

In summary, the book can be regarded as a refreshing and interesting debate format that wants to discuss a significant question, linking animal ethics with relevant aspects of our everyday life (e. g. diet choices), providing an introduction for new readers in the field of animal ethics. Some animal ethicists, however, will much likely be irritated by the different levels of philos. argumentation („top-down vs. bottom-up“), which becomes apparent when the authors react to one another.

Über die Autorin:

Henrike Herdramm, Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin an der Professur für Praktische Theologie am Institut für Katholische Theologie der Technischen Universität Dortmund (henrike.herdramm@tu-dortmund.de)