

**“The Animal in Itself:”  
New Scientific Perspectives on the Relationship  
between Animals and Humans**

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

**08-09 November 2010, Munich, Germany**

**Sponsors:** Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), Munich, Institut Technik-Theologie-Naturwissenschaften at LMU Munich, Stiftung Bündnis Mensch & Tier, Munich, and the Evangelische Akademie Tutzing.

**Conveners:** Martin Held (Evangelische Akademie Tutzing), Dr. Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center), Carola Otterstedt (Stiftung Bündnis Mensch & Tier, Munich), and Stephan Schleissing and Herwig Grimm (Institut Technik-Theologie-Naturwissenschaften at LMU Munich).

**Participants:** Thomas Blaha (University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover), Herwig Grimm (Institut Technik-Theologie-Naturwissenschaften at LMU Munich), Sonja Hartnack (Vetsuisse, Zurich), Martin Held (Evangelische Akademie Tutzing), Kurt Kotrschal (University of Vienna), Peter Kunzmann (Ethics Center Jena), Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich), Johanna Moritz (Bayerisches Landesamt für Gesundheit und Lebensmittelsicherheit, Oberschleißheim), Carola Otterstedt (Stiftung Bündnis Mensch & Tier, Munich), Michael Rosenberger (Katholisch-Theologische Privatuniversität Linz), Stephan Schleissing (Institut Technik-Theologie-Naturwissenschaften, Munich), Kirsten Schmidt (Ruhr-Universität Bochum), Beat Sitter-Liver (Universities of Freiburg and Basel), Aline Steinbrecher (University of Zurich), Frank Uekötter (Deutsches Museum, Rachel Carson Center).

---

Food, research, and pets – the contradictions found within the relationship between animal and humans are glaring. Humans interact with animals in many different contexts. In scientific research, animals are used as test objects and measuring instruments. In agriculture, they are used in meat production. On the other hand, animals are kept as house pets, where they are lovingly cared for and assume an almost partner-like role. But do these contradictions present an “ethical scandal?” Does the animal protection movement need a new and better basis?

These and other questions were discussed at the conference “‘The Animal in Itself:’ New Scientific Perspectives on the Relationship between Humans and Animals” which took place on 8-9 November 2010 at the Evangelische Akademie Tutzing and was co-organized by the Institut Technik-

Theologie Naturwissenschaften at LMU Munich, the Stiftung Bündnis Mensch & Tier, the Evangelische Akademie Tutzing, and the Rachel Carson Center.

### **Herwig Grimm: Animal Protection beyond Pathocentrism?**

In his introduction speech, **Herwig Grimm** reflected upon theories of ethics in animal protection movements in light of the often contradictory relationship between humans and animals. Grimm pointed out that a sense of anthropocentrism has led humans to judge the value of an animal as based solely on its usefulness to man. Pathocentric concepts, on the other hand, afford animal protection rights according to an animal's ability to suffer.

Today's animal protection legislation, which is primarily based on the protection of sentient animals (vertebrates), is anchored in such reasoning. Principles which aim to circumvent suffering, pain, and damage, Grimm argued, are not enough to adequately qualify as animal protection. Accordingly, he asked whether the pathocentric viewpoint is really an appropriate way to judge the rights of animals.

In order to address the problems within the animal rights movement, one must define what an animal actually is. Only if we adequately define animals can we do them justice. Here, Grimm addressed Kant's noumenon (thing in itself) and its function as an epistemological caveat. The debate surrounding an "animal in itself" presents further problems. Who decides what the "animal in itself" actually is? Is it even possible to develop a clear and unified point of reference for this position, as the pathocentric position has?

Pathocentrism primarily stresses the biological similarities between humans and animals: both are able to suffer. This ability, according to the pathocentric viewpoint, is morally relevant. Pathocentric ideas, supported by philosophers like Bentham and Singer, represent an important milestone in animal protection. The concept has become, at least in Europe, common sense.

Yet is pathocentrism the only possible way to approach animal protection? Does this approach effectively address questions in animal ethics? Terms like "the dignity of animals," "our fellow creatures," "integrity," and "animal rights" are increasingly being brought to the forefront. Such ideas make the role of humans central, and stress the inevitability of the human perspective in the animal protection debate. This point of view suggests that not just animals, but humans and their humanity are central to animal protection issues.

Finally, Grimm asked whether the animal protection movement needs a new, better basis. In the course of the event, this question was addressed in presentations from the fields of theology, ethnology, philosophy, history, law, and veterinary medicine. Subsequent workshops facilitated active discussion of this question.

### **Michael Rosenberger: The Human-Animal Relationship from a Theological Perspective**

The first section of the conference dealt with scientifically-based animal protection arguments. The topic was introduced by theologian **Michael Rosenberger** from the Katholische Theologische Privatuniversität in Linz, Austria, who surveyed the human-animal relationship from both a theological and an anthropological perspective.

After a quick look at the Decartes' depiction of animals as irrational "machines" unworthy of protection, Rosenberger applied biblical sources to the human-animal relationship. The Book of Genesis, he explained, does not concentrate on differences between animals and humans, but instead stresses their equality. Here, both creatures sit in the "same boat" as part of a common community under God. This sense of equality, which implies a clear regard for the value of animals, is also visible in the laws of Moses.

Yet animals and humans do not share the same role in our world, and the assertion that "man was created in God's image" must be understood in its historical context. Rosenberger interprets this biblical passage to mean that humanity's role is to impart salvation, and are responsible for maintaining equality on earth. Therefore, humans do not have the right to do as they please with animals, but rather have a responsibility towards animals.

But can we say that an animal deserves "dignity?" Rosenberger reminded us that the Bible, if translated literally, refers to the *Fleischwerdung* ("incarnation" with emphasis on flesh) and not *Menschwerdung* (with emphasis on humans) of Christ. Christ was a "creature of the earth." Thus, animals, beings of flesh, can be counted among those deserving dignity. Rosenberger's argument follows the tradition of scholars like Taylor, Ferré, and Mink.

According to Rosenberg, a creature's worth cannot be defined solely by economic determinants. Instead, each being should be considered in the context of justice. Every animal is irreplaceable in a way that cannot be measured in quantitative terms, but rather in terms of human reverence and empathy. Justice, in the context of the human-animal relationship, can only be achieved if humans take animals seriously, and allow them to enjoy the level of prosperity our society has achieved.

In this sense, animal protection means a fair balance of rights.

### **Kurt Kotrschal: No Great Divide between Humans and Animals**

Biologist **Kurt Kotrschal** from the Department of Behavioral Biology at the University of Vienna gave a presentation concerning the biological basis for human and animal relationship behavior.

Kotrschal stressed that, biologically speaking, it is useless to attempt to differentiate between the inherent abilities of both animals and humans to form relationships. Rather, the two are roughly equivalent. Kotrschal alluded to experiments that confirm the speculation that the Darwinian continuum

does not only apply to physical characteristics, but to cognitive traits as well. Experiments with chimpanzees and ravens prove that they possess a certain “theory of mind.” Researchers have discovered that many animals have basic moral capabilities such as the ability to form relationships, empathy, and a sense of justice. These findings suggest that the gap between humans and animals is not as insurmountable as once thought.

Kotrschal went on to discuss the functional characteristics of relationships which can be found in both human and animal behavior. Both human and animal relationships are never entirely harmonious, and, above all, serve to satisfy basic social needs. Studies concerning human relationships with animals show that they assume characteristics of human rather than animal relationships.

Kotrschal’s argument concerning the inherent ability of animals to form relationships proved to be an exceptional reference point, and was referred to several times in the course of the conference.

### **Kirsten Schmidt: The Concept of “Integrity”**

**Kirsten Schmidt** from the Ruhr Universität Bochum presented a draft of her research concerning the concept of “integrity” in the realm of animal ethics. In the beginning, she explained, the animal protection movement primarily focused on Bentham’s pathocentric argument of moral consideration for animals. Today, partially due to developments in modern technology, we are now discovering that Bentham’s argument based on animals’ ability to suffer is not enough.

Thus, Schmidt suggested a new criterion for the basis of the human-animal relationship based on the “integrity” of the animal, which, alongside the health and well-being of an animal, offers a new principle for animal rights. Schmidt’s concept of “integrity” includes both the intactness of the whole body and the dynamic, interactive balance between an organism and its environment. The ability for animals to integrate and understand plays an important role in her thesis. Schmidt’s holistic perspective presents new ways to structure the relationship between humans and animals. In a successful relationship, both the integrity of humans and the integrity of animals will remain intact.

### **Beat Sitter-Liver: The Dignity of the Creature**

In next lecture, **Beat Sitter-Liver**, a member of Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology, examined the philosophical concept of the “dignity of the creature,” an idea which was incorporated into the Swiss constitution in 1992 and has, since then, become an important aspect in the animal rights movement. This argument stresses that the life of an animal should not be reduced solely to what it can offer humans. Instead, it maintains that all organisms have an intrinsic value of their own. This argument stands alone, without the need to incorporate creation-based theories.

Sitter-Liver applied this idea to plants: plants have the right to reproduce, be independent, evolve, and to survive as species. They also deserve the right to be treated with respect during scientific

research, and not to be patented. These ideas, in line with those of Albert Schweitzer, demonstrate certain reverence for life.

Sitter-Liver' concept of the dignity of creatures does not imply that all living organisms should be treated in the same way. The "dignity of the creature," unlike human dignity, cannot be understood as absolute and instead must be conceived of as a balance of rights. There are differences among creatures which justify their unequal treatment. The general concept of "dignity" is thus far broader than the concept of human dignity. Its core meaning is that existence itself is the purpose of life, which holds a certain value for each individual and, as such, is inaccessible.

Sitter-Liver pointed out that dignity-based protection laws by no means guarantee edenic conditions, and that the incorporation of "the dignity of the creature" into the Swiss constitution had little effect on the actual treatment of animals or plants. Sitter-Liver noted that Switzerland needed more time to achieve Bloch's "concrete utopia."

### **Frank Uekötter: The Human-Animal Relationship in the Social and Historical Context**

**Frank Uekötter** from the Rachel Carson Center gave a lecture entitled "The Fine Distinctions: An Attempt to Historicize the Relationship between Humans and Animals" in which he examined the history of animal protection and the animal protection movement in Europe. The world's first animal protection organization, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, was founded in England in 1824. The early phase of animal protection, both in England and in Germany, was strongly influenced by pedagogical concerns. The key concerns were, above all, to combat cruelty to animals for the sake of entertainment (i.e. cock-fights) and later to prohibit vivisection.

In Germany, a landmark animal protection law was passed by the national socialist regime in 1933. The debate surrounding the protection of animals was not only a popular topic, but was also colored by ideological issues of anti-Semitism, which the prohibition of "slaughtering" shows. Especially explosive was the ban on vivisection, or "scientific animal torture." Only after members of the scientific community loudly complained that this ban endangered the Germany's medical advancement was it slowly lifted.

Finally, Uekötter focused on the development of animal protection since 1945, which, he argues, can be explored through the blossoming of the media landscape. In the sixties and seventies in particular, one can observe how animal ethics were put into a "living room-friendly" and "comfortable" format better suited for general audiences. The current media campaigns of animal protection organizations, on the other hand, consciously frame animal protection breaches as scandals which highlight topics like the treatment of animals in circuses and the fur industry.

### **Peter Kunzmann: On the Contradictions of the Human-Animal Relationship**

The last speaker, **Peter Kunzmann**, a philosopher at the Ethics Center Jena, addressed the con-

traditions within the human-animal relationship: each being, he pointed out, experiences different evaluation and treatment. This discrepancy is often perceived as being an “ethical scandal.”

Kunzmann then went on to name seven very different ways in which animals interact with humans, and, based on the context, experience different treatment. Such animals include livestock, circus animals, wild animals, zoo animals, service animals, pets, and laboratory animals. Kunzmann stressed, however, that from his perspective, the scandal was less about the inequality (we treat individual humans differently based on our relationship to them) than about the inappropriate way in which animals are sometimes treated. With this in mind, the intrinsic value of an animal must be acknowledged and respected.

Like Kirsten Schmidt, Kunzmann maintained that advances in technology have rendered the pathocentric argument insufficient. It is, for example, not unimaginable to genetically manipulate an animal so that its suffering is not increased, but rather lessened, and yet such procedures would still test the limits of our moral intuition.

Against the backdrop of pathocentrism, it is not hard to understand why terms like “the dignity of animals” or “integrity” have taken center stage, and why we are currently searching for a new and better basis for a good relationship between humans and animals.

## **Conclusion**

In the conference’s final discussion, it was stressed that humans must be open to new scientific discoveries which may change the very nature of the human-animal relationship. When faced with new data, old scientific paradigms must be revised. Our goal should be to look beyond the pathocentric argument and to understand that aside from the avoidance of suffering, animals have other needs, too. In short, humans must assume responsibility for animals – not just theoretically, but in concrete situations.

It is easy to summarize the conclusions of the conference: anyone thinking about animals must invariably think about humans. Humans must respect animals for their intrinsic value, and not just for what they can offer us. The starting point for animal protection is, invariably, humankind and its humanity.