

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1,28) Human-Animal-Inequality and the Concept of Responsibility from an Interreligious Perspective

DFG-Network “Related in the face of God. The Human–Animal Relationship in Interreligious Perspective”



Speakers:

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Chair:

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The human mandate to rule over the earth within the Abrahamic religions has produced ambivalent and often highly problematic outcomes. In the Jewish and Christian creation narratives, this mandate has often been interpreted as an archetypal justification for human superiority and the exploitation of nature and animals. In Islam, the concept of ḥalīfa, which positions humans as God’s representatives, can similarly give rise to tension-laden interpretations. Such selective readings of sacred texts continue to shape contemporary human–nature and human–animal relationships in ways fundamentally marked by hierarchy and inequality.

Over the past few decades, the call to “subdue” has often been reinterpreted as “taking responsibility”, implying a more respectful approach in regards to the non-human (or: more-than-human) world. However, responsibility is also an ambiguous concept and its interpretation can perpetuate the inequality between humans and animals in certain respects. For instance, responsibility is frequently invoked as an argument for human superiority.

This panel, hosted by the DFG network “Related in the face of God. The Human–Animal Relationship in Interreligious Perspective“, explores the addressed ambiguity. It features contributions that revisit, question, or reimagine the notions of dominion, ḥalīfa and responsibility in light of insights from human-animal studies, recent developments in animal ethics, and the growing impact of the Anthropocene discourse.

We will discuss questions such as: Are there religious resources for a responsible relationship with non-human animals? Does framing humans as “responsible” risk reinforcing hierarchies? Is it necessary to move away from these traditions, can they be creatively reinterpreted, or is it worthwhile to revisit overlooked texts? In how far does the idea of the human being as the image of God function as a potential source for repentance or rather as a pitfall for the exploitation of our common home?



Asmaa El Maaroufi

**Beyond Stewardship: Vulnerability and the Reconfiguration
of Human–Animal Responsibility in Contemporary Islamic Ethics**

This paper proposes vulnerability as a decisive lens for rethinking human–animal responsibility in contemporary Islamic ethics. It takes as its point of departure a critical engagement with stewardship-based approaches rooted in the concept of *khilāfa*, which often presuppose a hierarchical moral order and a privileged form of human agency. While such models emphasise responsibility as delegated authority, they remain limited in their capacity to account for relations marked by asymmetry, exposure, and embodied dependence.

Drawing on Taha Abdurrahman’s ethical philosophy, particularly his understanding of *amāna* and the fragility of the moral subject, the paper develops an alternative conception of responsibility grounded not in mastery or control, but in ethical susceptibility and restraint. Animal vulnerability is treated not as a secondary concern or merely empirical fact, but as a theologically significant challenge that repositions the human subject before God and calls into question claims of moral sovereignty.


On this basis, the paper outlines a relational account of responsibility that foregrounds interdependence, moral risk, and the limits of human agency. Rather than abandoning Islamic theological categories, it reworks them from within, offering a systematic contribution to current debates in Islamic ethics, animal ethics, and broader philosophical discussions of responsibility and vulnerability.

Cornelia Mügge

**Responsibility as Solidarity. Towards an Equality-Oriented
Understanding of Responsibility in the Multi-Species Community**

Interpreting Genesis 1,28 as a call to responsible creation stewardship seeks to counter the exploitation of nature and respect God’s creation. However, the call to responsibility in Christian theology falls short of fully addressing animal exploitation. Instead, it often serves to defend a categorical distinction between humans, who are considered capable of responsibility, and other animals, thereby reaffirming unequal treatment in ethical concerns. Furthermore, ‘responsibility ethics’ focuses on small changes and compromises, criticizing ethical visions of grand transformation. In this way, the concept of responsibility tends to solidify the subordination of animals in the status quo.

The paper asks whether responsible creation stewardship can be reinterpreted and proposes linking responsibility with solidarity, arguing that this leads to a more equality-oriented understanding. Essential to the idea of responsibility as solidarity is, first, a sense of belonging to a shared multi-species community, emphasizing interconnectedness over human exceptionalism. This does not imply assuming equality in every respect or ignoring differences: humans have a particular responsibility due to their planetary impact, and there are differences in capabilities among species – however, these differences do not imply human superiority in the multi-species community or in ethical concerns. Second, the concept of solidarity encourages action that begins with small steps in concrete situations while remaining oriented towards a broader vision of a multi-species community where each individual can lead a good life. Likewise, a solidarity-infused approach to responsibility encompasses both small changes and ethical visions of grand transformation. Ultimately, the concept of responsibility as solidarity better serves the goal of respecting God’s creation.





Yael Attia

Nature, Animals, and the Ethics of Responsibility in Jewish Thought


This paper examines ethical responsibility toward nature and animals as it emerges across Jewish textual, rabbinic, and modern philosophical traditions. Beginning with the Genesis creation narrative, it explores the tension between human dominion over nature and rabbinic interpretations that place limits on such mastery, notably the Talmudic claim that the first human was prohibited from consuming animal life. This hermeneutical move opens space for a Jewish ethics that resists anthropocentric domination. The paper then turns to Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, whose messianic vision reinterprets dominion as moral stewardship and anticipates a future return to vegetarianism as an ethical ideal grounded in compassion for all living beings. Finally, it analyzes Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility, situating his philosophy of life and organism within his own post-Holocaust theological framework. Jonas's reconceptualization of God as self-limiting shift ethical responsibility decisively onto humanity, thus extending moral concern beyond the human to the biosphere as a whole. Read together, the paper argues, these traditions demonstrate that Jewish thought offers robust resources for addressing contemporary ecological and animal ethics, foregrounding responsibility, ethics, and the preservation of life in an age of environmental crisis.

Jonathan Schorsch

Jews Learning from and with other Animals: Commentaries to Perek Shira over the Centuries

Perek Shira (Chapter of Song), an ancient text, offers a biblical verse "song" for a large number of animal species and natural entities (streams, the rain, the moon, sun, etc.). The simple and suggestive litany, possibly mystical, provoked commentators over the centuries. Reading across a number of commentaries, all in Hebrew, all rather understudied, ranging from the early middle ages to the 19th century, some rationalistic, some kabbalistic, I look at how these authors at times destabilize the boundary between the human and animal (Deleuze and Quattari) as they collectively discover and construct cosmic supernatureculture (Mayanthi Fernando) from a Jewish perspective.

Through the lens of tradition, myth, science, and direct experience, animals are endowed by the commentators with surprising subjectivity, the authors recenter anthropocentrism by centering the animal, all within proper theocentrism, of course, indeed, through theocentrism. Coming upon and building an often messy human-animal knowing, encountering, sharing, kinship, differences, similarities, alliances, hostilities, relationship (Haraway), the spiritual and ethical consequences for humans/Jews – responsibility, care, attentiveness – follow strongly for these authors, and, in the case of one late commentary, taking on the language and values of modern animal rights.





Saida Mirsadri
**Broken Webs, Waning Bees:
Destabilizing Human-Centrism in Keller and Jasarević**

This talk brings Catherine Keller's process-relational engagement with apocalyptic imagination into conversation with Larisa Jasarević's *Beekeeping in the End Times*, a Sufi-inflected ethnography of Islamic eschatology in contemporary Bosnia. Although working within different traditions, both thinkers decenter the human and turn to more-than-human creatures as ethical and theological guides in a time of ecological crisis. Drawing on Keller's figure of the broken web and Jasarević's focus on the honeybee, the talk explores how spiders and bees model relationality, vulnerability, and responsiveness amid planetary rupture. It argues that these multispecies figures reveal a shared imagination shaped by damage, precarity, and responsibility, while also showing how war, ecological instability, and lived human-animal dependence condition which theological interpretations of the "end times" become salient.

Thomas Ruster
**'An eye for an eye'
Rethinking the Biblical Law of Mercy with Regard to Animals**

This paper examines the socio-cultural context in which the biblical eye-for-an-eye-law – that can be understood as a principle of mercy – developed and was applied. Ancient Israel had already undergone the Neolithic Revolution and was grounded in the patriarchal social order that emerged from it. Male landowners held power over women, children, enslaved individuals, and animals. The principle of mercy aimed to mitigate the harsh realities of this societal structure, affecting both humans and animals. There are striking parallels between the treatment of slaves and animals, with both benefiting from legislative regulations and protections in ancient Israel. However, just as the Bible did not abolish the institution of slavery, it also did not depart from the agricultural structures that subordinated animals to human control and exploitation. The question then arises: what does the Bible have to say about our responsibility towards animals today, given that the current agro-industrial exploitation of animals represents an escalation of the structures established in the Neolithic era? Should we not strive to overcome the Neolithic order, characterized by some as the "greatest mistake in human history" (C. van Schaik/K. Michel), to make room for a new form of coexistence between human and non-human animals? The Bible also offers approaches that point towards a new order. When animals are included in the divine covenant and attributed divine holiness, as with the regulations concerning clean and unclean animals, this can provide support for biblically-minded individuals today to look beyond long-standing structures towards a promise whose fulfillment the entire creation eagerly awaits.

