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Misery without End?

How the slaughterhouse culture of the industrialized countries prevents a universal animal ethic

It was without a doubt one of the most shocking tragedies of the year. But there was no place for it on the front pages of the big European newspapers or in the headlines of famous newscasts. Even though it was about victims of the international financial crisis. However, not human victims. It was about horses. Horses which, by the tens of thousands, wander around the Republic of Ireland because they were left to fend for themselves by their owners. These unfortunate animals, once bought in affluent times with the hope of quick money with – especially – fast race horses, had become too expensive in times of a recession. So, away with them. Many starved to death or died of thirst during their odyssey across the Green Isle. Scores of them died in traffic accidents. Animal welfare activists could, for financial reasons alone, take in only a few of these creatures which had become "superfluous".

Pity? Charity? When it comes to animals, these words count as little in catholic Ireland as in other, more or less religiously-stamped countries. Especially when money is tight. Could this be a reason why things move so slowly in the so-called interpersonal relationships, that it is impossible to abolish tensions and violent conflicts between ethnically, culturally and politically differently oriented groups?

The world-famous French social scientist Claude Lévi-Strauss once pointed out "that the problem of the battle against racial prejudice on the human plane reflects a far more extensive problem, one which requires a solution even more urgently. I," said Lévi-Strauss, "am talking about the relationship between humans and other forms of life. It is futile to want to solve the one problem without the other. Because the regard for others of our own kind, which we expect of humans, is simply a single aspect of the universal regard for all forms of life. "

Lévi-Strauss defined in his statement of 1971 only what, 150 years earlier, had been the vision of one of the greatest German thinkers, that of Arthur Schopenhauer, born here in Danzig (Gdansk). Schopenhauer, known as the Philosopher of Pessimism, not only painted a ruthless picture of the world with all its boundless suffering, he also pointed the way to at least ease this suffering: through compassion. For all creatures, man and animal.

Compassion, or "Mitleid" in German (literally: "suffering with"), is a relatively young word in the German language. It occurred for the first time roughly 200 years ago, as a short form of the older word "Mitleiden". This is a word which the German mystics used to clarify the emotional or psychological experiencing of another's suffering, as for example the Passion of Christ. This experience of another's suffering is what Schopenhauer applied also to animals oppressed by man.

It was none other than Karl Marx who emphatically pointed out this aspect when he once defended Schopenhauer against an accusation by one of his acquaintances, the married couple Kugelmann, that he hated humans. Marx insisted: "When it comes to the need for help of all that exists, he considers not doing an injustice to any living creature as a simple commandment of justice, which leads to compassion, to the sentence: 'help all as much as you can.' No sentimental impulse ever proclaimed the commandment of charity with greater social ethics. "

"Help all, as much as you can." It is not difficult to prophesy that the realization of such a maxim would revolutionize society more thoroughly and fundamentally than all

world improvement concepts invented to date. A simple formula, which would make superfluous not only all criminal laws but also all animal protection laws. A vision. A utopia.

Two years ago, there was a spectacular law suit before the Kieler district court against a horse trainer. With a hidden camera, the accused had been proven to have, among other things, hit a horse 470 times within half an hour. She beat completely exhausted animals and mauled horses with whip and sharp-edged spurs to such a degree that they bled and limped. A sadist? The delinquent, who was finally given a suspended sentence, saw this differently. To a newspaper, she said: "I'm not the black sheep of the dressage sport, all others work the same way as I do. Riding instruction was always like this, too, and will stay this way. Unless a high court verdict in Germany ultimately finds professional dressage training as violating animal protection laws."

And here, exactly, lies one of the roots of the evils of cruelty to animals, put up with by the masses: animal protection laws protect mainly against the exploitation of animals by man, not the animals themselves. Because the human decides to become an athlete, the horse must compete. For the human, it is a matter of entertainment, money, and power. About 35 years ago, there were 300,000 horses in the Federal Republic of Germany. Today it is nearly a million. They are primarily used for sport and recreation. And while tourists are transported in ever increasing numbers and shorter times by aircraft, on the ground the event managers count on the horse, which in the 21st century has to pull tourists in a carriage through the heat of the city in the summer, whereby the occasional animal – as happened in Berlin before the Brandenburger Gate – sometimes collapses, dead.

At least the horse, in the public awareness, gets sympathy. As an animal which was tightly intertwined with the development and unfolding of human culture, it has great emotional and aesthetic appeal and engenders empathy. Other so-called livestock, man feels less connected to. After all, they are the stuff which constitutes the fundamental organization of the industrialized West: the organization of the slaughter house. Roughly five billion animals (excluding aquatic animals) are slaughtered each year in the European Union for consumption. This includes, for example, hundreds of millions of pigs – which are not inferior to horses in intelligence and social behavior. And even horse meat, whose consumption was once reserved especially for times of war and other hardship, is increasingly being marketed as a special delicacy. While, according to a survey, two thirds of Germans consider pets to be more honest and reliable friends than humans, they at the same time have no problem letting so-called livestock be killed, chopped up and consumed. The dilemma of „loving“ animals and „sacrificing“ animals is not even felt as such.

Loving an animal versus sacrificing an animal. The meat industry accommodates this anthropological dilemma by making the „animal factories“ and slaughterhouses „invisible“, operating them on the outskirts or outside of populated areas. This repression strategy is existential for the safeguarding of profits. Because the „consumer“ should at all costs not be reminded with each bite that the meat, whose consumption is supposed to be „natural“, comes from a place which knows no „natural“ death.

"It is strange that such a complete seclusion and ignorance is possible in an open society," says Austrian director Nikolaus Geyrhalter, whose Film "Unser täglich Brot" („Our Daily Bread“) shows the reality of the food production industry in ruthless truth. Actually, it's quite incredible that this „seclusion and ignorance“ should even be possible in the face of a veritable flood of reports and information about the horrible

conditions in the animal factories, which print and electronic media and especially the internet make available.

Ignorance is, in the end, only possible through the desire for ignorance. This mechanism is by no means new. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose last conscious action in 1889 in Turin was the defense of a horse against a beating from the coachman, had considered, shortly before his mental collapse, to compose a work with the title „Philosophy of Forbidden Knowledge“. With this, he did not have in mind knowledge whose dissemination authorities or rulers would try to suppress, but knowledge from which the majority of humankind endeavors to protect itself, „because the violation of this prohibition in fact must mean eviction from the paradise of self-illusionary certainty,“ as the Austrian philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann writes. Doubtlessly knowledge about „meat products“ belongs to this. He who knows too much can effectively have his appetite spoiled by the knowledge. Added to this is empathy, the ability to imagine oneself in the place of another creature. A natural ability of man, which time and again causes inner conflicts when man is confronted with – or confronts himself with – the miserable life and death of the creatures.

The reaction: suppression. From the outside and the inside. Or „common sense“ is solicited. And „nature“. It is supposed to be „common sense“ to eat meat.

The truth, which the Greek philosopher Plutarch formulated over 2000 years ago, did not manage in our occidental high culture, either, to set a moral standard. Plutarch wrote: „For a bite of meat, we take from an animal the sun and the light and the little bit of life and time, which to enjoy would have been his destiny.“

„Slaughter via conveyor belt, pork production via applied mathematics,“ stated author Upton Sinclair over 100 years ago about the Chicago slaughterhouses, and concluded: "Yet even the most unsentimental of humans could not help but think of the animals. They were so unsuspecting, trotted to him so trustingly, appeared in their protest so human – and thus had the right of it with him!"

However: "To think of the animals" has, to date, not brought much. The *conditio sin equa non* for the repeatedly proposed „humanising“ of slaughter is and remains its abolishment. Because the industrial „production“ of meat belongs, even in the 21st century, to the most horrible and repulsive things which occur on Earth. This unsolvable dilemma shows in the new slaughterhouse regulation of the European Union. The goal is the „minimization of suffering and avoidance of pain in the course of the entire slaughter process“, as it says in best bureaucratese. The slaughterhouses are even supposed to name an „animal protection agent“ – animal protection, when chickens are killed in electric baths and pigs are gassed in special cabins? When, as in Ireland, even the supposedly close-to-humans horses are in the end sacrificed to so-called greater concerns, which in reality are lesser concerns – what can be expected in the case of pigs and chickens in animal factories, in the case of rats and mice in experimental laboratories?

A few years ago, I spoke with the American philosopher Tom Regan of the North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Regan's specialized discipline is the philosophy of animal rights. His book "The Case for Animal Rights" is a standard work in the animal rights and animal liberation movement. To my comment that the term animal rights is very all-inclusive, since after all there are apes and ants and a lot in between, Regan answered: „Of course the decision about it is easier with animals, which are close to us humans, such as is the case with primates. But this is about general moral principles. And their application is, to begin with, independent of whether an animal is large or small. Once we get that straight, even the heedless killing of insects, for example, will be seen in a different light.“

It was the great humanist Albert Schweitzer who also held the opinion that the moral principle postulated by Tom Regan can be symbolically – but not only that – applied to an insect. Significantly, the theologian, philosopher and doctor did not explicitly choose the „large animals“ to illustrate his universal ethic of „reverence for all life“. He wrote: „By helping an insect in distress, I do nothing other than try to clear away some of the ever-increasing debt of the human to the creature.“ In "Mein Wort an die Menschen" („My word to humanity“, Schweitzer emphasized that this ethic makes „no difference between more valuable and less valuable, higher and lower forms of life.“ Because: „Then the consequence of this distinction would be the opinion that there is worthless life, whose destruction or detriment is allowed.“

At the same time, Albert Schweitzer formulated a central fact in the awareness of humans: „I am life which wants to live, in the midst of life which wants to live.“ So man must inevitably impact other life, disturb it, constrict it, even destroy it. But that is only one, generally pointed-out and overemphasized, side of this aphorism. The uncomfortable, neglected and suppressed side is that other „life which wants to live“ and the consequently arising ethical demand for consideration, sympathy and compassion. Where the application of this demand begins, which creatures it includes and which it excludes and for which reason, is an indicator for that which is called humanity. „Even just calling off the animal experiments using up billions of animals,“ cultural philosopher Hubertus Mynarek points out, "would be a tangible, downright, cosmic relief" for the oppressed creatures.“

In May 2005, the former federal development minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul held a speech at the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp Dachau. In it, she brought to mind one of the survivors of this camp, Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz. This poet and author became famous through his „Dachauer Diaries“, which are an important source of information about these hellish Nazi camps.

What, however, is far less well known is this: from his painful experiences, Kupfer-Koberwitz also wrote the book „The Animal Brothers.“ One of the texts in this work deals with fishing. However, not with the suffering of the fish wriggling on the hook, but rather with the suffering of the so-called bait: „The worm in its agony winds around the hook. Unimaginable pain – horrible, slow death! If it were a human, he would surely ask in despair whether it is possible that deity could let such a thing happen... But the fisherman sits by the water, ... listens to the singing of the birds and is happy that these little singers today have a safe, protected life in our area, free of threat by man, thanks to a society to which he also belongs as a recognized, valued member: the SPCA.

Compassion with a worm? Unthinkable, that this would be quoted at an official ceremony. However, exactly this exposes the foundation of a universal humanism, compassion with all that lives, in a surprising and fascinating way. Kupfer-Koberwitz justified even his vegetarianism with a reference to his fate: „I eat no animals, because I do not want to nourish myself from the suffering and death of other creatures – because I myself have suffered so much, that I can feel the suffering of others, even as my own.“

The Czech author Milan Kundera writes in his novel „The Unbearable Lightness of Being“: "The true moral test of humanity, the most elemental test (which is anchored so deep inside that it eludes our sight) is expressed in the relationship of humans to those which are at their mercy: to the animals. And especially here, there has occurred such a fundamental failure of the human, such a fundamental failure, that all others can be derived from it.“

Kundera is doubtlessly right. Because the manner of treatment of the powerless and the helpless, for which animals are predestined candidates, is so telling about the basic nature of a human. But this „treatment“, in the industrial sector, is – aside from pets – so separated and splintered according to the division of labor, that feelings of guilt as well as recriminations are lost in the endless dominion of „one“. „One“ eats meat, „one“ lets animals be slaughtered, „one“ can't change anything anyway. „One“'s hands are clean. What philosopher Martin Heidegger called „the dominion of one“ fits perfectly to the modern slaughterhouse culture. The conscience, which for Heidegger has a central function in the break-out from this dominion, is put to sleep by the apparent indefeasability of an institutional norm.

The American philosopher Mark Rowlands thinks "that the majority of evil done by man is not from perfidiousness, but from the unwillingness to do his moral and epistemic duty." Philosophy considers epistemic duty the obligation to subject convictions to a critical scrutiny, to see whether they are still justifiable based on the available evidence and indicators. For example, through the question of whether abstaining from meat would cause oneself and other creatures greater suffering than the torment of the slaughtered animals. One can also word this question differently: would the world be better, more just, more humane, if the mass and as a general rule exceptionally horrible killing of animals would no longer be part of the daily routine? With his defense of Schopenhauer's compassion ethic, Karl Marx gave an at least indirect affirmative answer to this question. However, left-wing movements and parties which base themselves on Marx and wear out the term solidarity, as a rule have much greater difficulty in regards to their animal fellow creatures.

Which makes even more remarkable an essay, which the communist USA-newspaper "People's Weekly World" published under the Titel "Marxism without meat?". The California author Gene Gordon points out in this article that, however one might envision a communist future, it must of course be free from cruelty. And he asks the question, „whether one of the most horrible cruelties, which proliferates in our time, will spoil our future. I mean the incarceration, torture, and slaughter of billions and billions of animals.“ For Gordon, the monopolistic control of the meat industry, with their greed for ever increasing profit, are the driving force behind this misery – a force which revs up the industrial killing machine, and for which dignity has no meaning, neither that of the worker in the slaughterhouse nor of the massacred animals. „Do we need slaughterhouses in communism?“ asks Gene Gordon. „No, let's have communism without cruelty – Marxism without meat!“

One doesn't have to be or become a communist to share the simple insight that one cannot, on one hand, preach the liberation of man from economic, political, psychological, cultural and other kinds of bonds, and at the same time accept the misery, suffering, torment and death of countless non-human creatures – at best „humanized“ by legal decree. Because, notwithstanding the religiously connoted concept of „fellow creature“ in the German law for the protection of animals, it is less a case of regulations for an effective protection from access and violence by humans, and more a frame for the exploitation of animals, whose contours are determined first and foremost by economical interests of the animal exploitation industry.

How little appeals, laws, and even hard-won articles change in the misery of animals is shown by the reality of the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Union. Whether animal transports of pigs, cattle or horses over tens of thousands of kilometers, whether animal factories containing masses of animals under excruciating circumstances, whether horrible animal experiments for scientific „progress“ or the torment of horses for sport and entertainment: profit dictates what is allowed. And

what isn't allowed is nevertheless done, as long as it pays.

„How much a society recognizes the rights of animals is the most unmistakable measure of the justice of its spirit,“ wrote the German socialist legal philosopher Leonard Nelson about 100 years ago. „Because while humans, when alone too weak to take advantage of their rights can, if necessary, band together via language into a coalition for the gradual enforcement of their rights, this possibility of self-help is denied to animals. Thus it remains in the hands of the humans and their sense of justice alone, in how far they decide to voluntarily respect the rights of the animals.“

The establishment and acceptance of the slaughterhouse system has led to the paradox that, year after year, there are billions of victims, but no perpetrators. Because the hundreds of thousands of workers in the so-called meat industry after all act under „company's orders“, just like those in the scientific branches and the animal-tormenting entertainment industry. Thus it is the anonymity of the „consumer“ and the namelessness of the „consumed“ which form a fatal, yet organic unit. But the socialists ruling in Spain have recently reached a decision in the Madrid Parliament, according to which gorillas, orangutans, chimpanses and miniature chimpanses, due to their kinship with humans, are given certain basic rights: life, freedom, and physical inviolacy. But why should it be permitted that pigs, barely socially and intelligence-wise below the primates, are continued to be mutilated as a piglet, sows forced to vegetate in isolated narrow confines, only to be finally, in a mass killing facility, hopped up? Why should it be allowed that equally intelligent horses are mistreated for horrible „stunts“, or torturously transported over thousands of kilometers, to find a miserable end in a slaughterhouse? And are there valid reasons why other animals, which might be less social and less intelligent, but equally able to suffer, are allowed to be objects of human arbitrariness?

The Polish-american-jewish literature nobel prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer once put the circumstances, under which animals live and suffer in our civilization, into the provoking sentence: „For the animals, each day is Treblinka.“ Singer wrote this sentence in his novel "The Letter Writer". The protagonist, Herman Gombiner, is a jewish employee of a publishing company living in New York; his entire family was murdered by the Nazis. The most significant confidant of the lonely man is a mouse, which he supplies with food and water in his home, with whom he speaks, and feels deeply connected to. Herman loses his job and becomes ill, and in his weakness can no longer care for the mouse, for whom in his desperation he even prays, reaching the accusatory result: „What do they know, all these scholars, these philosophers, these leaders of the world, about you and your kind? They've convinced themselves that man, the worst malefactor among all living creatures, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were only created to give him nourishment and furs, to be tortured and exterminated. Compared to them, all men are Nazis; for the animals, every day is Treblinka.“

Singer became a vegetarian because he did not understand „how we can speak of mercy, or beg for mercy, how we can speak about humanism and argue against bloodshed, when we ourselves have shed blood – the blood of animals and innocent creatures.“

There is no way out of this dilemma without a fundamental paradigm shift. Demands in party platforms for shorter transport times or better conditions in pig factories are a sham, since each new facility for mass animal keeping is first considered under the aspect of the creation of new jobs, and at best will be criticized from an environmental standpoint. The suffering of the animals may be regretted. It is not eliminated.

I would like to close my presentation with a quote from the English moral philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who formulated a truth over 200 years ago which to date has not lost any of its timeliness. Quite the opposite. Because Bentham in his time knew neither the modern facilities for mass animal keeping, nor the factory-like mass killings, nor the excessive animal experiment industry. Bentham wrote: „The French have already recognized that the black color of skin is no reason to consign a man without protection to the vagaries of a tormentor. Some day man will recognize that the number of legs, the hair-bearing of skin, and the end of the os sacrum all are insufficient reasons to leave a sentient living being to the same fate. But what other criteria could be the insurmountable borderline? Is it the ability to think or maybe the ability to speak? But a grown horse or a grown dog are far more understanding and communicative than a child that is a day, a week or even a month old. But even if this were not so, what would that change? The question is not: Can they think? Or: Can they speak?, but: Can they suffer?“

By the way: Is maybe the alleged lack of speech no determining separating factor? Do humans often just not bother to learn the „language“ of the animals? Just as the conquerors of foreign parts of the world assumed that it was permissible to oppress the people living there, because their language was „incomprehensible“ and they looked different? After all, time and again, there were and are people who have gone to the trouble to build communication with animals. Let us think, for example, of Konrad Lorenz, or Monty Roberts, the „horse whisperer.“

Back to Bentham. The philosopher was convinced: „The day will come when the other living creatures (the animals) will be given rights of which they could only be deprived through tyranny.“ An optimism which it is hard to share after 200 years, but which in the face of the meanwhile-won victories over slavery and the discrimination against women may yet be warranted.