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8 Questions – that we asked Can Başkent about the interfaces of Atheism and Animal Rights

Background:

We have conducted this interview with Can in 2014 for our third German issue of Tierautonomie: *Tierbefreiung, Atheismus und Widerstand* [Animal Liberation, Atheism and Resistance], Jg. 1 (2014), Heft 3 > <https://d-nb.info/1210797186/34>] in context with the environmental protests of the Gezi movement (with the apex of their protests in 2013). Segments of the Turkish vegan, animal rights and animal liberation movement/s were at the forefront of the protests, and the tension between religious conservative politics with the progressive secular left (and with them the anarchist groups) became imminent.

Tags: Can Başkent, animal rights, animal sociology, philosophy, atheism, Turkey, religion

About our interview partner

Can Başkent was born in Istanbul, Turkey. He studied math and philosophy as an undergraduate, received his masters degree in logic in Amsterdam and his doctorate in computer science in New York. He continued his academic path at the Sorbonne and the École Normale Supérieure in philosophy and worked at the French Institute for Research in Computer Science and Automation (INRIA) as a researcher. As an activist Can has published a wide range of texts on anarchism, atheism, veganism and animal rights, he's been engaged with the "Food not Bombs" campaign and launched a campaign to support the vegan prisoner of consciousness Osman Evcan. In 2011 Can founded the "Propaganda Press" (<http://propagandayayinlari.net/>), in 2013 he co-authored together with the vegan journalist

Zülâl Kalkandelen (<http://www.veganlogic.net/>) the first enchiridion in Turkish about the political and economic aspects of ethical veganism: “Veganizm: Ahlakı, Siyaseti ve Mücadelesi” (Veganism: its Ethics, Politics and Struggle: <http://propagandayayinlari.net/vegan.html>). Can is a Senior Lecturer in computer science at Middlesex University, London. Can’s website is at <http://canbaskent.net/>.

(The interviewer [Palang] noting in 2023 for the reader: In retrospect I am excusing the length of my questions with the relative ‘newness’ of the matters discussed here – as the human/animal- and animal/human-question is being declinated with other strains of thought than the usual anthro-hegemonical ones. I felt I have to highlight dimensions in some detail for clarification and for not risking that definitions fall into any unhelpful regressive paradigms.)

8 Questions – that we asked Can Başkent about the interfaces of Atheism and Animal Rights

We have asked computer scientist and vegan author and publisher Can Başkent about the visible and the invisible forms of violence against nonhuman animals and the environment carried out in religious contexts, and if an ethical veganism should entail a rejection of a top-down hierarchical view on the evolution and existence.

“Tell me, did you think it was easy to be an atheist in this country, with the main problem being that offending the religious sentiments of others has been branded as a ‘crime’?”

Ramazan’da Ateizm / Ramadan atheism,
<http://www.canbaskent.net/politika/86.html>

“Today religious discrimination is recognized as a violation of human rights. While it has been forgotten that religion is itself is a violation of human rights.”

Bir Devrimcilik Olarak Ateizm / Reformist atheism,
<http://www.canbaskent.net/politika/85.html>

Can: I’ve always thought that people panic for no reason in Turkey. As an atheist, I had no real difficulty or a problem except from receiving some ridiculous threat emails. The thing in Turkey is that such law is applied only to those people who are very popular. Unless you are on TV every now and then, be on newspapers all the time, prosecution does not care if a regular random citizen violates the law or not. So, it is safer than it looks, and we should not hide behind the fear of law.

1. Witnessing an act of killing

Palang: In your text ‘The Festival of the Sacrificed’ (Kurban’in Bayrami, <http://www.canbaskent.net/vegan/19.html>) you question why an argument of cognitive dissonance in a human being, who does not want to become aware of his/her own cruelty, (because he/she does have to become aware of it), could not be fully applied in the case of public animal sacrifices, so that the notion: ‘if slaughterhouses had glass walls, people would go vegetarian’, seems to be wrong at the annual Feast of Sacrifices for example. It seems there is a social acceptance for an outlived and visible brutality to Nonhumans when such an event represents a tradition within the context of a religious praxis.

In the secular West the visibility of the kind of speciesism that is going along with the “killing for ‘meat’” (specifically) is a modified one: killing itself tends to stay mostly or partly invisible, being delegated to be carried out by others. Yet in a mass event of a ritual killing in the name of a religion, the same callousness: *Animal = Meat* and *Animal = Sacrifice* is directly visible for anybody, if he/she wants to see it or not. And if someone is willing to partake in the act, he/she can do so and kill a nonhuman on the street. These events have a strong public visibility and count as tied to specifically religiously colored traditions.

Some people argue that it would be more honest if everybody would have to witness the killing of nonhumans. Is the killing of nonhumans, when it is sanctioned if not encouraged by a religion still the more *basic* act of speciesism, as being something deeply engrained in our society, while the killing of nonhuman animals for generating “meat” carried out mostly by the butchers or in a slaughterhouse represents a *modernism of speciesism*, which needs to be deciphered in different terms?

Can: First of all, I never thought that the reason why most people are not vegan is epistemological. It is not because people do not know or are not aware that what they eat/kill is sentient animals. You know, real psychopaths kill their victims physically facing them. Eating those animals, which is beyond hunting for instance, is a similar act. It is more violent, more “manly”.

Clearly, the religion simply reflects this dictum. As there is no god, as the religions were not really sent by a so-called-god, the “holy” texts simply reflect the dominant paradigm.

I have never thought that prioritizing different reflections and practices of speciesism can be a useful idea. However, as they are different reflections, they must be fought against in different terms.

Here is another piece of thought. Understanding the religious practices, the fear behind them, the neediness that established them are important steps in really comprehending as to why

people really engage in such horrible acts. You cannot dissolve such crimes without crashing the ideal of “heaven”, fear from unpredictable, etc. So, there is a “humane” and “social” reason as to why it is rational why people sacrifice (young girls, animals, etc.) under these assumptions. So, as long as you cannot smash these assumptions, the rest cannot follow.

2. Coming to terms with entrenched positions?

Palang: Ethical vegetarianism can look back on a long history and tradition, dating back before the big monotheistic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism). Yet, it's these religions that take a leading role in our discourse today about the *ethics of life and moral behaviour*.

The *ethical critique against the general society* (in the secular sense) phrased by vegan Animal Rights proponents is normally met with different grades of either dismissal and rejection (speciesism) or a relative open-mindedness and willingness to reconsider the questions about the dramatically problematic constitution of society in regards to nonhumans and the natural environment.

With religious belief-systems it seems we only can expect an opening for fundamentally new conceptions to a lesser degree, since their dogmas and principles have already been fixed in their goals in the historical past of the religion – and this would also include the evaluation of life and the determination of hierarchies of beings/existence: fauna, flora and the earth overall stand below God and below the human and will have to be either protected or tyrannized. Also, *religious practices and traditions* (apart from the dogma) bind the believer to the belief-system, and often imply a view on animals and nature as objects that must be dominated, and that “Man” can handle with benevolence but also with ignorance, without having to fear any further social reproach.

Religions don't list the destructivity towards our fellow beings and the environment as a top sin, but claim an entitlement of their positions as moral instances and ethical signposts in every question of life. Can this claim of the big world religions, to be able to hand out ethical answers about the entire purpose and meaning of life, be authoritative and/or helpful at all, in times in which society increasingly develops a sensitivity towards the questions of animal- and environmental ethics?

And, to what extent do we have to allow religiously driven positions to access and shape our own ethical debate? Equally: to what extent can we, as Animal Right proponents, simply dismiss them as mainly anthropocentric positions?

Can: Pragmatically, who can deny the dominance of religious vegetarianism in India? As you can see, sometimes religions provide some pragmatical benefit, but it is, in the case of

Hinduism, entirely coincidental. However, the real problem with people avoiding killing animals for religious reasons, is simply because it is a limited point of view. Yet, most people, religious or not, have limited point of views in life. What I mean is if we politically ignore or refuse the religion as a sociological fact, we risk losing the majority in our political struggle. A revolutionary political struggle can have one of its foot on reality while keeping the other on the future.

Religion is a social phenomenon enabling ruling people. It has an economical side as well as a “moral” side. Thus, it is not difficult to see that the moral code helps the clergy to gain economical (sexual, governmental, etc.) benefits. Thus, we cannot even call it an honest morality. Politically, there must be a balance, I have to grant. If most people are somewhat believers, and if those people are your target in the animal liberation movements, you have to formulate anti-religious perspectives delicately and directly. This is more or less an art.

After all, in the animal liberation movement, people like you are not my targets, as you are already there. What I am trying to change is the people who eat sausages every day and go to church every week. If I annoy them, it means that more animals will die due to my arrogance and wrong strategy. This is a cost I am not willing to take.

3. Is the apex of existence where “Man” is?

Palang: Animal Rights and the protection of natural spaces and habitats for all living beings make up other *political, social and moral goals* than the goals that the main big religions pursue, which hold men, being made in the “image of God”, at center-stage. Contrary to this, our non- anthropocentric and anti-speciesist resistance movements phrase new questions about ‘hierarchies-of-being’. Is the *questioning of the ‘hierarchies-of-being’* – namely that man can’t dominate the world acting as a “crown of the creation” – a necessary paradigm shift in our thinking, or would it be enough for humans to just pledge to take more responsibility for their co-world and fellow beings, even if that would still just take place with that sense of anthropocentric hubris?

Can: Perhaps now it is a good time to underline that an anthropocentric approach is not an evil in itself. After all veganism is also anthropocentric. People / anthro does not have to be an evil. Thus, it is neither philosophically nor practically useful for us to think or act as non-humans. We have to be humans to be vegan, in other words (forcing your pets to be vegan does not count, for obvious reasons). That said, I believe in a variety in such movements: some people can be more people oriented, some can be more animal/ecology oriented, which is fine. This is [also] relevant to a broader and perhaps more heterodox understanding of god. This is a delicate issue.

If people come up with a harmless notion of god, what would I think? In my opinion, harm is not the only evil associated with god, and removing the harm element does not immediately make it alright. But, in practice, it can help humans and non-human animals. As I said before, we have to be alert when it risks losing animals for political correctness.

I hope you can see the paradox here: animal rights activists sometimes (indirectly) sacrifice animals too, for political correctness. This is an important point to consider.

4. Borders / Barriers?

Palang: Religions speak of the indirect duties that we have towards nonhumans and the environment as the compassion and reverence that we ought to have with Gods other creation, and this would count as a human virtue that is favored by God. In the animal liberation movement we form equations that describe nonhumans and the environment in their independent and autonomous dignity, we seek to describe them in their own value, and in this way, we postulate different foundations that serve their protection and their defence.

If we confront the animal advocacy- and the environmental movements (as non-anthropocentric ethical frameworks) specifically with the religious belief-systems, as two different social epistemologies that are defining ethics, does the *departure from anthropocentrism* (the demand of the Animal Rights and parts of the environmental movement) *contain a potential of conflict* at the moment in which religion (as an anthropocentric framework) takes up a larger space within a society?

In other words: Does religious dogma and authoritarian aspiration (as aspects of religious belief-systems), create restrictions when it comes to the ethical debates that consider anthropocentrism as a barrier in ethical thinking?

Can: No. First of all, the religious philosophy is a very rich and broad field. There are so many great minds who spent their lives writing amazing treatises trying morality with religion.

Averroes and Abelard are the first mind coming to my mind. Religion is more complex than what most atheists think, it had many many more great minds than what most atheists think as well. Of course, not every believer is like Abelard (one wishes that), but religious morality can create a crazy and very smart philosophy, and it did.

Of course, in practice, 99.9% of believers consider religious dogma as a framework of restrictions and taboos. In such a world, rational reasoning becomes impossible.

5. A duty to protest?

Palang: Can we presuppose a *fundamental moral right* to create our own spaces for perspectives in freethinking, in which nonhuman animals and the environment are included into the *ethical center*, even if this puts us into an antagonist position in particular to strongly religious people and religious communities?

And going a bit further: Can such a freedom in thinking about the human-animal and the human-environmental-relation, exclude us from a “societal contractualism”?

Can: No. Any presupposition in morality can lead to an authoritarianism. If you look at all fascist and dogmatic moralities, you can always find such an essentialist point: they may assume people are evil, or in contrast, they assume people are good in spirit. Clearly, this makes the philosophy easier to construct and digest, but, it simply adds yet another metaphysical assumption to the moral philosophy and risks essentialism. Human and non-human contractualism is a very dangerous field in my opinion, which takes veganism beyond its realistic boundaries and reconstructs it, well, religiously. Namely, I advocate an empiric, dynamic and interactive morality that does not need a foundational assumption or right, that includes the right to live.

6. If there is no golden mean?

Palang: If both: religion and animal liberation could be connected in specific points, would we not have to worry that Animal Rights/Liberation and environmental protection again would *only have to be contingent/conditional ethical concerns*, and that through making compromises or through the combination of animal rights ethics and anthropocentric religion, we would again miss out on the desired fundamental shift in thinking?

In other words: Is it a legitimate fear that in a society, that is ethically and morally strongly influenced by religion, no really new and just perspectives and politics “beyond Homo sapiens” can be evolved?

And connected to this: Does a strongly *biologically* assigned field (that is: all the subjects that evolve around nonhuman animals and their natural habitat/the environment) even require a fundamental shift in its ethical, social and political variables?

Can: Well, evolution is a continuous phenomenon. I cannot imagine how the animal liberation movement will be in a hundred years. Even in the past century, we have read an insane amount of good and original ideas supplemented with exciting revolutionary practices. I don't see any reason why we would consume all future possibilities.

7. A utopia?

Palang: Could an anthropocentric religion be stretched and modified so far in its interpretation, that for example, the human alone wouldn't have a privilege of being an "image of God", but that instead the entire world would represent a value that needs to be equally merited with the highest respect and reverence? Would religion even be able to maintain its own meaning, in their ability to create a form of exclusive or/and exceptional identity, if it didn't have these *hierarchical* views on worldly existence?

Can: Of course. Many different interpretation of each major religion (including Islam and Buddhism) has this taste. Heterodox Islam provides quite interesting and cool examples on this for instance where every organism is seen as a reflection of god's good.

8. Physical instincts vs. abstract mind?

Palang: With nonhuman animals we define sentience as the decisive and main criterion (in the secular and scientific context) to qualify the meaning and value of their *lives in the world*. These qualifiers are solely based on the biological constitution of a being and on our understanding of the biological traits.

In the great Abrahamic religions the *meaning of live depends on God's decrees* and on the concept of "sin". The notions of right and wrong, value and non-value, are measured against the parameter "God".

So, on the secular, scientific plane we have the *biological sentience of animality* on the one hand, and on the other hand we have an *abstract human framework of mind and belief* in the religious view of "Man". Aren't such separations between *sentience and mind* perhaps the very point, that keeps the *hierarchies and distinctions*, that we deal with in speciesism, arbitrarily alive? Isn't "feeling" also "mind"? The concepts of "Nature" and "God" thus create a dichotomy between a devalued bodily physicality and a God that is the upvalued mind of non-earthen-being. Is the reductionary and narrow concept of "instinct", i.e. that the animal *body should exclusively be ascribed sentience, but not vital mind and spirit*, not the necessary conclusion of a religious past, which had already pinned down nonhuman animals as the despised nature-physique of a mindless and non-intelligent earthly existence?

Can: These are very difficult questions to answer in one paragraph. There are examples for each cases ranging from Spinoza to Averroes, from Abelard to Siddharta. However, the Cartesian approach to animals has been refuted countless times, thus the philosophy adopted a broader and more scientifically oriented approach.

Palang: Thank you so much for helping us out with these questions Can!

Can: Thank you for these difficult questions :)

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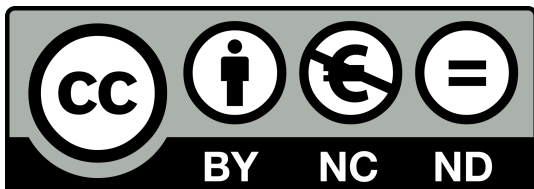
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