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# Dominion, Stewardship and Reconciliation in the Accounts of Ordinary People Eating Animals

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**Abstract:** Despite the growing popularity of vegetarian foods and diets, the vast majority of people in North America and other parts of the affluent world still eat meat. This article explores what ordinary people think about eating animals and how they navigate the ethical questions inherent in that praxis. Drawing from interviews with 24 people living in Ottawa, Canada, the study shows how the concepts of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation manifest in the everyday lives of ordinary people as models for human relations with nonhuman others and the environment. These ideas resonate in the lives of ordinary people, both religious and nonreligious, and entwine as people try to make sense of how to live with the fact that their everyday food consumption causes suffering and harm. This study shows that in the context of everyday life, dominion, stewardship and reconciliation are not alternative views, but connected to each other, and serve different purposes. The study highlights a need for analyses that constitute practical ways to renew the broken relationships within creation and which incorporate nonreligious people into the scope of analyses that focus on the relationships between humans and nonhuman creation.

**Keywords:** dominion; stewardship; reconciliation; meat consumption; food consumption; ethics; ecotheology; nonreligion; lived religion

## 1. Introduction

This article explores what ordinary people think about eating animals and how they navigate the ethical questions inherent in that praxis. By doing so, the study takes part in the discussion concerning the place of humans in the world and the relations between humans and nonhuman animals and the environment. In recent decades, this question has been considered by the fields of theology and the study of religion, as well as by the social and political sciences (e.g., [Linzey 2009](#); [Hessel and Ruether 2000](#); [Gross 2014](#); [Harvey 2013](#); [Beaman 2017](#); [Cudworth 2015](#); [Peggs 2012](#); [Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011](#); [Latour 2004](#); [Adams 2015](#)). I utilise the theological concepts of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation to illuminate the perceived relations between humans and creation that underlie ordinary accounts of consuming animal meat. Drawing from interviews with 24 people living in one suburban neighbourhood in Ottawa, Canada, I suggest that envisioning consumption patterns that rely less on animal meat requires a new paradigm for human relationships with nonhuman others that takes reconciliation and respect as its starting point and listens to the voices of nonreligious people.

The concepts of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation all deal with the place of humans in the world and humans' relationships with and responsibilities for taking care of creation. They give varying normative stances on how these relations should be understood and/or mended. The biblical origin of dominion and stewardship is in Genesis 1–2, where humans are given the status as the image of God and dominion over the rest of creation. Christianity has been accused of promoting a theology of dominion that creates a dualism between humankind and nature and sets humans as masters, users and abusers of creation ([White 1967](#)). The model of stewardship, which emphasises the role of humans as caretakers rather than masters of creation, can be seen as an antidote to dominion.

Reconciliation, in turn, is a theological concept that addresses the renewal of relationships. In traditional theological accounts, reconciliation has been used to refer to an act of God that removes distortion and creates the conditions for harmonious relationships (Vorster 2018; Kärkkäinen 2013; De Gruchy 2002). It finds its formative expression in Paul's theology. In addition to exclusively theological use, reconciliation has lately been utilised outside faith-based contexts. Reconciliation has become "an ideal in the political realms of oppression, division and enmity, and the pursuance of nation building and new societies" (Vorster 2018, p. 1; see also Kärkkäinen 2013, p. 368). It has been used as a model for social renewal, for example, in the truth and reconciliation commissions that aim at restoring and reconciling divided societies such as in South Africa in the aftermath of Apartheid and in Canada with regards to the impacts of the residential school system on Indigenous people.

According to Vorster (2018), the theology of reconciliation has concrete socio-political and ethical meaning. It can be applied to all kinds of relations, and it has implications for ecological ethics. In Vorster's analysis, reconciliation affects and renews four relations: The relationship between the faithful and God, the relationship between Christians in the Christian community, the relationship of all people, and the relationship with creation. For Vorster, reconciliation means "the distorted relationship of domination and exploitation, which results in environmental destruction, becomes a relationship of stewardship over God's creation" (Vorster 2018, p. 4). In other words, Vorster argues that reconciliation leads from domination to responsible stewardship.

Currently, environmental stewardship is the dominant paradigm for the faith-based care of creation (Jenkins 2008, p. 78; Warners et al. 2014, p. 227), and it resonates with nonreligious conceptualisations of environmental action, too. However, the stewardship model has also been heavily criticised (e.g., Palmer 1992; Warners and Heun 2019). Warners et al. (2014, pp. 227–28) point out many of its shortcomings. They maintain, for example, that the idea of stewardship does not have a sufficient biblical basis and it contradicts the understanding of God's immanence in creation. Furthermore, a critique that also resonates outside faith-based contexts underlines the hierarchical and objectifying basis of the model of stewardship, which relies heavily on economics and business vernacular.<sup>1</sup>

Reconciliation is not only a way to move from dominion to stewardship; as a means to renew relationships, it can be also regarded as an alternative to stewardship and its hierarchical relations and objectifying tendencies. Warners et al. (2014) propose a new paradigm to replace the stewardship model: Reconciliation ecology.<sup>2</sup> In their view, this paradigm "can move us beyond stewardship to an even more appropriate understanding of our place and responsibility within God's creation" (Warners et al. 2014, p. 228).

By analysing what ordinary people think about eating animals and how they navigate the ethical questions inherent in that praxis, this article engages in the discussions on dominion, stewardship and reconciliation as models for human relations with nonhuman others and the environment as they manifest in the everyday lives of ordinary people. The study draws from the lived religion research tradition (e.g., Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014), and more specifically, it takes part in the discussion concerning ordinary or lived theology (cf. e.g., Hintsala 2017; Astley 2002), as it analyses how institutional theological formulations work and are embodied and reflected in the context of the everyday lives of ordinary people. The emphasis lies in understanding the relations of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation manifesting in the accounts of the people under study, the nature of

<sup>1</sup> The critique of stewardship has also been counter-criticised. Vorster, for example, sees the critique of stewardship as misguided and a misinterpretation; he argues that "the perception of Christianity as an ecocidal and 'anthropocentric religion', does not represent the true meaning of human stewardship towards creation. The inclination to anthropocentrism is due to sin and should not be regarded as part of the creational order. It is a distortion of the relationship between humankind and creation as God intended it." (Vorster 2018, p. 6) However, Vorster does not address the critique that stewardship is based on hierarchical and objectifying relations. Even his own model of the new relationship with creation and stewardship gives primacy to human (Christian) beings who are assigned an active role "to care for all living things as well as all sources such as air and water sustaining life" (Vorster 2018, p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Originally, the concept of reconciliation ecology was taken up in ecology, where it refers to means of restoring and fostering biodiversity in ecosystems that are dominated by humans. See (Rosenzweig 2003).

the structures and practices that constitute and uphold them, and the trajectories that these modes of thought serve to enable.

Furthermore, this article participates in emerging discussions concerning lived nonreligion (Salonen 2018; Beaman 2017). Currently in many countries—particularly in the so-called Western world—a growing number of people express no religious affiliation rather than identifying with a particular religious community or practicing religion actively (e.g., Woodhead 2017; Beaman and Tomlins 2015; Lee 2014). Despite the growing interest in research on nonreligion, the way nonreligious identities are lived in the context of everyday life is still understudied. One relevant site for such research is the field in which people express environmental concerns and engage in relationships with nonhuman animals and nature (Beaman 2017). However, so far, theological explorations of new ways of envisioning humanity's place and responsibility within creation have excluded from their scope the growing number of people who identify as nonreligious by using the ostensibly inclusive, but ultimately exclusive language of "we Christians" (e.g., Warners et al. 2014). This is unfortunate and even unfounded, given that the current ecological crisis is not confined within the boundaries of certain religious groups. This article aims to correct this course by putting to the fore the voices of people who do not necessarily or primarily identify as religious.

## 2. Eating Animals, Theology and the Study of Religion

The practice and extent of meat consumption in the affluent world has been recently questioned on many fronts and for many reasons. Studies have highlighted the urgent need to reduce meat consumption for environmental and health reasons, both globally and especially in high-income countries (e.g., Allievi 2017; Godfray et al. 2018; IPCC 2019). In addition to the ecological and health-related arguments, changing consumption patterns have been called for due to the harm and suffering that industrial meat production causes to nonhuman animals (cf. Adams 2016; Spiegel 2007; Bastian et al. 2012; Oleschuk et al. 2019). However, despite these concerns and notwithstanding the growing popularity of vegetarian foods and plant-based diets, the vast majority of people in North America and other parts of the affluent world still eat substantial amounts of meat (Oleschuk et al. 2019; Niva et al. 2017). This does not mean that people are altogether indifferent to the ecological, ethical and health-related impact of their food consumption practices. Instead, there is a dilemmatic dynamic in food culture, often referred to as the meat paradox, where people care about themselves, the environment and animals and find their poor treatment problematic, but still continue to eat meat (cf. Oleschuk et al. 2019; cf. Bastian et al. 2012).

There are both individual and structural barriers to reducing meat consumption (Niva et al. 2017). At the individual level, consumers make their food purchasing choices based on various factors. Studies have found that when justifying meat consumption, people tend to refer to four basic argumentative traits: Biology, health, culture, and taste (Joy 2010; Piazza et al. 2015). In addition, the social environment of consumption—from education instruments to layouts in grocery stores—influence consumer behaviour (Alhonnoro and Nuorgam 2018; Apostolidis and McLeay 2016). Furthermore, local, national and global food cultures impact on the types and amounts of meat consumption. A recent study found that when justifying meat consumption, people draw from cultural scripts that emphasise individual identity and consumer liberty (Oleschuk et al. 2019). According to Apostolidis and McLeay (2016, p. 75), due to the special status meat holds in many cultures, reducing meat consumption in the Western diet is likely to require a profound societal transition. In order to envision this societal change, it is important to understand the undercurrents of society where it is considered normal and acceptable to eat animals to the degree that is currently done.

Eating animal meat is not only an environmental and health concern. It also conveys a relational concern, as it brings forth the question of human relationships with nonhuman others. This question lies at the heart of theology and the study of religion. Recently, many scholars in these fields have highlighted the need to consider other-than-human subjects (e.g., Hessel and Ruether 2000; Harvey 2013; Gross 2014; Ezzy 2016; Beaman 2017). The extension of the scholarly field to incorporate nonhuman

others is both philosophically and ethically significant. First, the question of the relationships between human and nonhuman animals outlines what is probably the first existential dualism (Berger 1980) and constitutes the question of humanity's place in the world. According to Gross (2014, pp. 8–9),

“The question of the animal is so fundamental in Western thought (though not only Western thought) that it functions as a question about what it means to ask a question, draw lines, and create categories—a question about what thinking itself means.”

Moreover, the relation between human and nonhuman animals assigns its parties a normative place by pointing out their responsibilities in the world. From a theological and ethical perspective, there is a call for “mending broken relationships between human beings and nonhuman creation” (Warners et al. 2014, p. 221), which requires a new paradigm in terms of humanity's place and responsibility within creation.

Central to the question of relations between human and nonhuman animals are food animals. As Adams (2016, p. 591) puts it,

“If humans want to talk about human–nonhuman relationships, they must bring attention to the 95 percent of the nonhumans whose suffering is caused by humans—terminal animals, that is, the nonhumans used in the food industry to produce milk, eggs, and flesh.”

Gross (2014, p. 198) states that “eating meat today, eating it selectively, and even refusing to eat it are all what scholars of religion might call mythological activities, religious activities”. In other words, how people relate to the question of eating animals is deeply embedded in theological questions concerning human relationships with and responsibilities towards nonhuman creation.

### 3. Materials and Methods

Research that aims at understanding and reimagining human and nonhuman relationships often concentrates on the active efforts of individuals and groups to better the world (e.g., Beaman 2017; Warners et al. 2014). However, while intriguing findings have been yielded by these analyses, it is also important to study those people who are not particularly invested in social action, and those practices that are not deeply reflected upon on an ethical level (Schoolman 2016). In other words, in addition to “world repairing” activities (see Beaman 2017), there is a need to study “world maintaining” conduct.

Studying everyday life and so-called ordinary people is important because ordinary people with their routine practices are the ones who actually keep the world the way it is (Ehn and Löfgren 2010). This study approaches ethics as a facet of everyday life. Following Ezzy (2016), Sayer (2011) and Lambek (2010), rather than aiming for clarity and coherence, I understand ethics as a modality of social action embedded in moral reasoning and attentive to the messiness and indecisiveness of life. In the study, I have used interviews as a means of intervening in the daily life of people, asking them to illuminate what often remains obscured. Among many other questions concerning food and eating, I asked the interviewees for their thoughts on eating animals.

The data consist of interviews with 24 people living in one suburban neighbourhood in Ottawa, Canada. The interviews were collected as a part of an ongoing project that aims to understand moderate food consumption in the context of an affluent society. The study targeted ordinary people who do not necessarily or primarily identify as ethical consumers. One neighborhood was selected as the site of the study, since place has been found to play an important role in producing and maintaining meanings related to food consumption (Johnston et al. 2012). The participants were recruited via local social media sites and community events, snowball sampling and purposive sampling to gain informants from various gender, age and ethnic groups.

The interviewees are between 25 and 79 years old. The majority are women (15 out of 24 interviewees) with European origins (15 out of 24 interviewees). In addition, the majority of the interviewees are middle class. Nine have an annual household income above the city average (ca. 96,000 CAD), while four make do with less than 20,000 CAD. Thirteen of the 24 interviewees explicitly identify

themselves as nonreligious (e.g., atheist, agnostic, or unaffiliated) in the background questionnaire. Eight identify as Christian, but two of them mention in writing that they are non-practicing or unaffiliated Christians, and another two orally commented on their religious identity while filling the questionnaire in a way that implies that they do not actively practice religion. One of the interviewees identifies as Muslim, and two did not answer the question concerning religion. In the following sections, I refer to the religious identity of the interviewees with the terms ‘religious’, ‘non-practicing’, ‘nonreligious’ and ‘n/a’, respectively. The interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms.

The analysis started with the inductive coding and close reading of each interview. I summarised each interviewee’s views on eating animals and then compared and contrasted the views of the interviewees. I then considered the themes in relation to relevant previous research on both religion and food and eating. The theological concepts of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation first started to emerge from the inductive analysis. I then reflected on them in the light of previous theological discussions, but I remained attentive to the informants’ own accounts rather than biblical, dogmatic or faith-based understandings of these concepts. In the following sections, I present the key findings of how the interviewees reflected on the ideas of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation as lived in their everyday life.

#### 4. Everyday Dominion and Foodisation of Nonhuman Animals

At the beginning of the interview, Carla (40+, nonreligious), introduces her fridge:

“That’s open packages of cheese in a sealed container. That is rice, cantaloupe, tomatoes, some sort of leftover meat that I took out of the freezer, there’s pickles at the back and olives, milk, dressing, more homemade pickle, peanut butter, jam, leftover butter chicken, mayonnaise and eggs.”

In the interviewees’ descriptions of their everyday food consumption, food animals were present as inconspicuous parts of everyday foodstuffs; they are found in between vegetables, jams, cheeses, leftovers, and condiments. They are present as a part of the “holy trinity” of meat, starch and vegetable, as Tom (45+, nonreligious) describes the food they ate in his childhood, and as a component of an ordinary dinner, like in Alan’s (60+, nonreligious) apt report: “Today I had leftover roast beef and gravy and bread”. In these accounts, the animal has the role of an object and commodity.<sup>3</sup> These examples illustrate that the people under study did not feel a strong need to justify eating animal meat. This already reflects the idea of dominion, where it is self-evidently justified for humans to eat other animals as their food.

By asking the interviewees for their thoughts on eating animals, I prompted them to think about the issue in more detail. The idea of human dominion over other animals was often present in these accounts. The vision of human dominion was articulated within three occasionally overlapping frameworks: Religion, science and individual taste. First, two of the interviewees framed the idea of dominion in religious terms. When asked what she thinks about eating animals, Vaneeza (25+, religious) says that as a Muslim she is fine with it, and that Muslims are supposed to eat meat. In the course of the interview, Vaneeza raises concerns about the negative environmental and ethical consequences of meat consumption. However, she explains: “The reason I’m not vegetarian/vegan today is because I’m Muslim. We believe that God has permitted you to eat these certain animals, so [we] eat them.” For Vaneeza, her religious convictions provide a reason for her to continue eating animals despite the ethical problems involved in the practice.

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<sup>3</sup> There were some scattered excerpts in the interviews where animals were presented as other than food; as competitors (for example, when a squirrel or racoon was eating the produce in one’s garden), as useful companions (such as when a dog ate food that would otherwise go to waste) or as distant others (when referring to roadkill or pesticides, for instance). Rather than being challenging, these sporadic notions underline how in the context of everyday food consumption, the relations between human and nonhuman animals most often take the form of an unequal relationship between the one who eats and the one who is eaten.

Frank (65+, religious), in turn, frames the question of eating animals in a way that combines the religious and science frameworks. According to Frank, all animals are potential food animals. Frank evokes the idea of the survival of the fittest when he suggests that “If [the animals are] not running fast enough, we eat them”. Frank phrases his view in a form of confession when he states that “I believe in deer, I believe rabbits are food.” Frank states that he has “no objections” to eating animals and thinks that people need to look around: “If they get hungry, everything looks good, even a rat”. For Frank, everything is edible, and in fact everything should be eaten, if a person is hungry enough. Frank tells a story from his childhood of how his grandfather used to take them out to a cabin where they had to hunt and gather all their food. After reflecting on these memories, he concludes: “You learn that all the food you need is around you. God provides. Just look around.” For Frank, the natural order where the strong eat the weak and the biological impulse that everything is edible when one is hungry enough are embedded in the idea that we are living in a world of abundance provided by God.

The accounts of Vaneeza and Frank rely on a perception of a divinely set natural order where all or certain animals are meant as food for humans. Most often, however, the interviewees framed this order in nonreligious terms, for example by referring to humans as naturally carnivorous or omnivorous. Often these views were coupled with biological ideas of human development and evolution. Alan, for example, thinks that as animals, people are intended to eat other animals. Alan says that he considered being a vegetarian earlier in his life, but has given up the thought. In his view, “Physiologically as an animal I am a carnivore or an omnivore and as such, as I am physiologically designed to eat meat and things like that. In as much as it was designed. You know what I mean?” Alan refers to his own particular physiological design as a scientific fact that presupposes his consumption habits and allows him to consume animal meat. By referring to himself as an animal, Alan positions himself as similar to nonhuman animals. However, his account reproduces the vision of human mastery by prescribing the role to the human animal as the one who eats other animals.

Like Alan, Rachel (45+, n/a) also thinks that eating animals is natural and important for humans. She grounds her view on the evolution of the human brain:

“What I’ve read—and again I’m not sure if that’s true—but the reason why our brains were able to get so much bigger and we were able to develop so much further along than most of the other animals is because we started eating meat to have that concentrated energy protein. If we didn’t have that, we wouldn’t have been able to evolve the way we did.”

Rachel’s account illustrates a view that the dominant position of humans in relation to nonhuman animals is actually preconditioned and acquired by eating meat. It is not only that the dominant position allows humans to eat other animals; eating other animals actually gave humans the position of mastery in the first place.

Furthermore, in some of the interviews, the hierarchy between human and nonhuman animals is grounded in the primacy of individual taste. For example, despite identifying as vegetarian, Danielle (30+, nonreligious) sometimes eats fish. “I like it”, she says straightforwardly without feeling the need to justify her stance further. Similarly, when asked what she thinks about eating animals, Hannah (25+, nonreligious) replies: “Animals are delicious. (Laughs) I like them to not be super unhappy, but I still like eating them. (Laughs)” Shawn (60+, non-practicing), in turn, fervently defends the freedom of individual consumers to eat what they want, without giving supplementary justifications for eating meat. He states:

“In different cultures people eat different animals. Who am I to judge what you want to eat? If somebody wants to eat meat, that’s up to them. If somebody wants to be a vegetarian, that’s up to them. It’s an individual choice and I don’t think anyone has a right to tell me what I can or I can’t eat. Likewise, I don’t have a right to tell you what you can and you can’t eat. It’s an individual thing.”

Despite his individualistic perspective, later in the interview Shawn gives a powerful account of how, in his view, people ought to relate to food. He talks about how, as a society, we should be more

aware of our surroundings and think about the social and environmental costs of food. However, he ends his speech thus:

“Those are the things that I believe in, but you know what, I’m not the guy who’s going to tell people. I’m not the environmentalist. I’m not the vegetarian who’s going to say, “You shouldn’t eat animals”.”

For Shawn, it is inappropriate to tell people what they should or should not eat. The idea of unrestricted individual choice echoes the vision of human mastery where people can choose freely what they consume.

The hierarchy between human and nonhuman animals is at its strongest when it does not have to be justified at all. [Sethna \(2017\)](#) uses the word ‘animalisation’ to refer to the ways in which humans are othered and rendered abject. A similar process of foodisation is at work in a latent way in the interviewees’ accounts of food consumption: the animality of the food animals is discarded and their agency is stripped in order for them to become consumable commodities. This observation is in line with the more general notion that, to use the words of [Adams \(2015, p. 48\)](#), our culture “accepts animals’ oppression and finds nothing ethically or politically disturbing about the exploitation of animals for the benefit of people”.

## 5. The Objects, Ideals and Realities of Responsible Stewardship

The interviewees did not only justify eating animals by relying on human mastery and dominion; they also evoked the idea of care and concern. The model of stewardship, i.e. the understanding of human responsibility towards creation, was present in many of the interviews. These accounts varied in what they saw as the object of care. The competing objects of care include care of the land, care of the nonhuman animals, and care of the self and one’s family.

When thinking about eating animals, Carla emphasises the geographical location in which she lives. Carla speaks about eating meat in the framework of naturalness and sustainability, and she associates environmentally friendly food with local food. She thinks that it is unreasonable to not eat meat in Canada, especially in the northern parts of the country where “you have the indigenous, where nothing ever grows that’s green”. In fact, Carla thinks that being vegetarian in the northern parts of the world is ridiculous, although she does give room for individuals to decide for themselves whether to engage in eating meat or not. Carla criticises the promotion of the vegetarian diet, because in her view it does not take food miles into account or encourage people to try different foods. She notes that the contemporary ways of producing vegetarian foodstuffs are not free from causing death. She states,

“There’s an erroneous assumption that growing greens means that there’s no death. Every single farmer in the region has a license to kill any animal that they can prove is eating the crops. I know farmers who’ve had to kill deer. As soon as they plough the soil, you’re killing all the frogs, mice, voles; you’re destroying the soil culture.”

Like Alan in the previous section, Carla justifies her insights with the idea that people are naturally omnivores, and she suggests that the most sustainable diet would be one that takes into account the local context and respects “the growing capacity of our land”. For Carla, the question of eating animals is shaped by the geographical realities of living in the North. She connects the vision of human mastery to the ideal of responsible stewardship, and she calls for food production practices that would better sustain the land that provides the food.

Within the framework of responsible stewardship, many of the interviewees positioned food animals as objects of care by taking up the question of animal treatment and calling for responsible practices that would reduce their suffering. Some interviewees describe how they would prefer to eat meat that comes from animals that are treated well. Tom explains: “Well I think it would be great if there was a company that would make happy meat. (Laughs) Make animals that are happy, so guarantee that the lifetime the animal was living in captivity was happy. (Laughs)”.

Beatrice (50+, nonreligious), in turn, states she feels guilty about eating animals “every single time”. She explains:

“I try and buy [meat] from the butcher and I know how badly treated the animals are. It’s factory farming. They’re all crammed into cages and it makes me want to stop, but I think it’s important that people also realise there’s another ethical way of eating meat. Being vegetarian is one way of being ethical, but also if you do eat meat that comes from animals that are well treated, that are happy, isn’t that the biggest issue? Yeah, they unfortunately die, but they’re not tortured while they’re living.”

Beatrice says that she buys from a local butcher where she can expect to get ethically raised meat. However, she also buys meat from the supermarket, because buying it only from the butcher is too expensive. Beatrice explains that she regularly cooks vegetarian meals and dishes containing only a small amount of meat. “It doesn’t have to be a big honking piece of steak”, she concludes. For Beatrice, occasionally eating vegetarian food, eating less meat and eating “happy animals” from the butcher to supplement the supermarket meat helps her overcome the guilt derived from animal consumption.

Some of the interviewees considered their responsibilities as caretakers and stewards to primarily concern their own and their family’s wellbeing. Many of the interviewees acknowledge that eating animals is ethically problematic, but they do not consider alternatives to it as reasonable. Xandra (40+, Christian), for example, does not consider vegetarianism a realistic option for herself or her family. She says: “I don’t think we’ll ever be vegetarian. That’s just not realistic. [ . . . ] I can’t eat soy because of my thyroid condition, so that limits a lot of the vegetarian options.” Another reason is her husband’s physical job that requires a lot of energy. Xandra explains: “I’ve tried doing vegetarian meals in the past with vegetarian proteins and basically the response was, ‘What’s the next meat service?’ It wasn’t enough.” Xandra also considers the health of her children and concludes that eating meat is a cultural practice she has grown up with:

“To me, I don’t have sufficient proof that a vegetarian diet would be fully healthy for [my children] so I’m not a hundred per cent ready to make the switch, realising that yes okay there are views on animals but again, I come from a farming family. This has been our reality forever. My parents had chickens and stuff like that.”

Xandra acknowledges that eating animals does entail problems, but she continues doing it in order to take care of her own and her family’s health. Accounts by Xandra and others who think along the same lines reflect the idea of the stewardship of the self, and the internalised responsibility to first and foremost secure one’s own wellbeing (cf. [Evans 2011](#), p. 433).

The role of human beings as responsible stewards is often an ideal that either does not manifest or only partially manifests in people’s daily lives. This is well illustrated by the talk of many of the interviewees on the ideal of eating the whole animal. The question of eating different animal parts divided the interviewees. While some were willing and able to eat the whole animal “from tail to finish” (as Lena, 40+, nonreligious, expressed it), some restricted their choices to “traditional parts, so parts that are available in the supermarket and things like that” (as Tom put it). Some of those who emphasised eating the whole animal drew explicitly from the language of stewardship.

Rachel supports using animal fur and skin for clothing and laments how some people are against it. She remarks that “if you just slaughter an animal and throw away most of the stuff then it’s not efficient and it’s not being good caretakers of the resources”. In a similar vein, according to Alan, food animals should be used well, for example by utilising their parts as much as possible in human and animal food and leather products. He says,

“If some animal is going to have its life taken away to feed me, then we better use that animal to the greatest extent we can. So, we should eat as much of it as we can and what we can’t eat, we either turn into leather or we turn into food for other animals or we compost, but we be responsible about it, that we be responsible stewards and farmers.”

Both Alan and Rachel, who we saw in the last section grounded their view of human mastery on ideas from biology, draw here explicitly from the language of stewardship.

However, the idea of eating the whole animal does not often translate into practice. For example, even though Alan emphasises utilising the whole animal, he does not eat every part of the animal himself. In Alan's words, liver "is a questionable part of an animal to eat", since it collects poisons from the animal's body, and he notes that "you really want to know that your cow wasn't eating poisonous things before you then go and eat its liver, right?" Similarly, Rachel, who at the time of the interview was living in a financially difficult situation, often ended up buying meat on sale at the supermarket.

Like Rachel and Alan, Zach (40+, non-practicing) describes how people should ideally consume the whole animal. However, he readily acknowledges that this ideal does not correspond with reality. He explains:

"I think I would love to be the person who eats every part of an animal, but I'm not crazy about liver or stuff like that. I think that's pretty much it honestly. [ . . . ] Because I think there's too much waste with animals. I know it's kind of cheesy and romantic, but if an animal gives its life to feed you, you shouldn't waste any part."

There is a strong undertone of responsible stewardship in these accounts, but as these examples highlight, this does not always manifest in practice, and it does not necessarily lead to reduced or more sustainable meat consumption. Instead, the interviewees speak in a highly normative and idealised register. In the accounts of the interviewees, responsible stewardship is more of an ideal than a practice.

## 6. A Call for Reconciliation and Respect

Eating necessarily involves at least some amount of violence. According to Harvey (2013, p. 101), "everyday acts of consumption are, inescapably, moments of predation." In his view, religion deals with surviving necessary acts of violence involved in consumption, "in order to nurture alternative dynamics of mutuality, survivance and intimacy". Looking at how the interviewees in this study dealt with the question of violence and harm that their everyday consumption practices entail brings us to the question of reconciliation.

For some of the interviewees, violence is a perennial puzzle that comes particularly to the fore with the question of the death of the food animal. In this regard, an interesting example is provided by Kyle (30+, nonreligious). Kyle grew up eating meat and is in principle okay with it. However, for Kyle, the death of the animal causes trouble. He cannot stand blood and finds it impossible to kill a food animal himself. Even though Kyle tells how he does eat various animal parts, such as ox tongue and pigs' ears, he has an issue with eating certain organs, especially the heart. He explains:

"I know Chinese dishes will cook like 20 chicken hearts all together. For me I'm thinking, "Oh, I just ate 20 chickens' hearts." So it might taste really good but at the same time I kind of ate 20 lives. It is the heart, right? Without the heart, the rest of the body's gone. If you take a leg off it might still be able to live right? So in that sense, I can't eat chicken hearts."

For Kyle, taking the life of an animal is unacceptable, even though he can live with the violence caused by eating certain body parts. Kyle draws symbolic boundaries between the consumption of those animal parts, such as legs, without which the animal can (at least in principle) continue to live. By doing so, Kyle circumscribes from his thoughts the act of consuming the lives of nonhuman animals and talks as if the meat could be separated from the actual animal (cf. Adams 2015, p. 50).

Gillian (65+, non-practicing) provides another puzzling account of animal death. When asked what she thinks about eating animals, Gillian promptly distances herself from animal activists and people with religious food restrictions. She says:

"Oh, I'm not one of those people. I'm not one of those bunny huggers, (laughs) tree huggers. I'm not a bunny hugger. I will eat rabbit meat if you give it to me because it's delicious, especially cooked in white wine with onions and carrots. It's really good. No, I'm not an

animal hugger because I do believe that animals are sometimes grown to be eaten. I'm not religious like, "You're not supposed to eat meat, or you're not supposed to eat animals with a hoof"."

However, Gillian starts to question her own thoughts when she thinks about the idea of killing animals further. She says she does not agree with hunting wild animals because "they should be free to run around", and then adds: "Okay, maybe I'm conflicted. If you grow cows to kill them and eat them that should be okay, but they're still a live being and we shouldn't eat them because they're a living creature. I'm sort of halfway." For Gillian, the death of a food animal is a puzzle that remains unsolved.

One answer to the ethical dilemma posed by eating animals is to somehow reconcile and come to terms with violence and harm. Melanie (75+, nonreligious) thinks that in order to eat an animal, one should be able to kill it, and it is foolish and silly not to be able to do so. However, she cannot kill an animal herself, but still eats meat. Melanie reproaches herself for not being able to live up to her own ideals:

"The only thing is I scold myself for not being able to kill something because I think if you're going to eat it, you've got to do the other stuff. [ . . . ] It's just silliness. I tell myself, "How can you eat it and butcher it and do all that stuff and then not doing the killing?""

Melanie finds it puzzling that she cannot live up to her own ideals in terms of being able to end the life of the animal she eats. However, despite these dilemmas, when asked what she thinks about eating animals, Melanie says that she has "come to terms with that". She further explains what she means:

"I mean, we have evolved, and we ate animals at that time to survive and I in principle don't like that we can pick and choose what we think is ethical. If you wear leather shoes, then you've killed an animal. I think you have to harden yourself to that. I have hardened myself to that. I don't eat a lot of meat, but I do eat meat, and I know what I'm eating, and I'm prepared to touch it. I find it difficult to kill something, but I can do everything else. I can butcher it, I can eat the fish with the head on. I can eat offal. I can eat the whole of the inside of an animal. I mean I'm not going to waste anything. I can eat all of that."

Melanie's way of coming to terms with violence and harm is to acknowledge the suffering, harden herself and then live according to her own ideals as much as she can.

Olaf (35+, non-practicing), too, points out that people ought to come to terms with the fact that eating animals inevitably causes suffering. He explains:

"I think even if [food animals] are raised really well, the end of their life is really stressful. So, I think it's important to at least reconcile with those things and even be like, "I know something suffered for this, but I'm okay with that.""

For Olaf, awareness of the harm and recognition of one's own responsibility in causing harm are important first steps for reconciliation. This notion has made him reduce meat consumption and actively seek out meat that comes from animals that are ethically raised. Olaf, for example, wants to know exactly where the meat that he eats comes from. He explains that in the place where he buys his meat, "you can go, and you know the farm that it came from and the animals are raised in a way that they have a dignified, comfortable life that again is minimal suffering".

In the examples above, the interviewees do not hurry to solve the ethical puzzle that they face, but remain indecisive, uncertain and wavering. This is characteristic of ordinary ethics: Everyday ethical conduct is not only about finding a logical solution or watertight psychological coherence, but rather about living through and with the puzzles that one faces (Sayer 2011; Lambek 2010). Pondering about the death of a food animal reveals this. While remaining indecisive about their moral stance, these interviewees engage in thinking about the question of violence and death in a way that Ezzy calls a pluralistic moral ontology. According to him, a pluralistic moral ontology "understands the

world as shaped by competing interests and moral projects which are often contradictory. Suffering, failure and evil are inevitable products of pursuing a good moral project" (Ezzy 2016, pp. 268–69). It is in contrast with dualistic moral ontologies, which "create a radical separation between good and evil, identifying suffering and failure as solely products of evil. Pursuing 'the good' should result in only good things happening." The interviewees cited above acknowledge that eating animals is an ethical question without an easy answer.

In relation to the call to reconcile suffering and violence, a recurring theme in the interviews is the need to acknowledge one's own privileged place in the world and to show respect to the food animals that die to feed people. According to Rachel,

"People should be mindful and respectful of their place in nature and their place in the food chain. Luckily, we're at the top and there's not many predators that eat people, but there are many animals that eat other animals and I think it matters how they're raised and kept, how their life is. And I think it's okay to kill an animal and eat it, but it's so much better if you can be respectful and use every part of the animal and be mindful of its sacrifice and that the animal has as good of a life as it can."

Rachel acknowledges the privileged position that humans inhabit in creation, but states that this place must be occupied mindfully and respectfully, while being attentive to the sacrifice of the food animals.

Aaron (35+, n/a), too, is concerned about respect for food animals. In this lengthy quotation, Aaron explains how he feels about eating animals, expresses his wish that animals were treated with respect and tells how this wish has translated in his life into the practice of reducing meat consumption and choosing to eat ethically raised meat:

"I'm okay with [eating animals]. I don't have qualms about eating animals on an ethical level. I have an ethical issue with how animals are raised and what they do to our earth and especially industrial farming [ . . . ] I have a deep problem with how animals are treated. I've had a significant amount of contact with farming and animals in various situations, from industrial dairy, industrial pig, industrial chicken to co-husbandry and all of that. Eating animals is not an unethical activity. Raising them and abusing them is a deeply disturbing thing for me. In my mind, "treating them like animals", the expression, has sort of a truth about it. I would like to see it be more respectful, that the animals are living beings and not just wandering pieces of meat. In that context, I would rather bring it more locally and smaller. We've reduced our meat consumption in order to reduce the demand on that and counter-pressure it. The meat that we buy is from responsible sources."

Aaron acknowledges that eating animals is a deeply ethical question and calls for a countermove from the foodisation of animals to treating them as living beings. This deliberation has led Aaron and his family to change their eating habits with the wish that this would put pressure to meat producers to change their production patterns.

While the interviewees call for respect at the level of thought, it is often hard to figure out practices of respect. There do not seem to be ways to show respect for food animals in contemporary Western culture, and hence some of the interviewees have drawn from other cultures. Nina (45+, nonreligious) and her husband "learned to eat the entire animal, especially in terms of respect", several years ago when they were travelling in Asia. There, they also learned to eat less meat. Nina describes this change:

"Also, when we lived in Southeast Asia, we realised just how little meat you really need. When you eat in Southeast Asia and you go out for meat, unless it's a feast and a big festival or something, [you get] very little meat. And usually the meat they eat is the other parts of the animals. So, the gristle, the cartilage, the fatty bits. They don't like the meat part. Also, animals over there tend to be much leaner than they are here (Laughs). Way leaner because they're just naturally free range. You have cows walking everywhere, chickens everywhere. There's not a lot of meat on them (Laughs)."

Back in Ottawa, Nina practices her ideals by buying meat only from one local farmer and by eating a lot of offal. If they have meat scraps, Nina freezes them to make soup instead of wasting them. Nina and her husband have also passed on the idea of eating the whole animal to their young children. “So, we try and eat as much of an animal as we can and to eat as ethically possible as we can with the meat”, she says, as she summarises how their experiences with other cultures influenced their practices.

Lena, in turn, draws from what she has learned from Aboriginal cultures. She has tried to explain to her daughter some of the indigenous practices related to animal consumption. She describes her thoughts when they visited a children’s pow wow:

“I typically don’t believe in people killing seals, but I’m not one of those people who say, “No seal can be killed”, because in the Inuit culture, they need to kill the seal, right? It’s not for a trophy and it’s done as humanely as possible and it’s not wasted. So, when we were at this event, they did a lot of honouring of things. So, before they would eat something, they would sort of honour the animal they ate. I like that a little bit more, but we don’t practice that really.”

Lena’s and Nina’s examples highlight the fact that Western food culture does not involve practices of honouring the food animal in a way that some other cultures do. As noted in the previous section, the ideal of responsible stewardship in the principle of eating the whole animal is often difficult to follow in practice. Nina’s example shows that when translated into praxis, it can serve as a deeply rooted way of honouring the sacrifice of the food animal. Yet this practice requires a lot of effort, such as giving up customary ways of acquiring meat and instead integrating alternative practices into one’s ordinary eating habits.

The absence of structures that promote respect and reconciliation is also illustrated in a comment by Olaf’s partner, Patricia (30+, nonreligious). Patricia agrees with Olaf in acknowledging eating animals causes suffering, but she says she did not really think about the issue before they met. She explains: “I would just go to the Metro and buy [meat], so I didn’t really think of it in the bigger picture the way Olaf has, but I think that’s a good way to think about it.” Patricia’s comment reveals that without structures to encourage reconciliation, it is easy to continue without thinking about the consequences of one’s everyday consumption practices. Instead of means to show respect, there is a collective structure and industry that distances and obstructs the food animal and turns it into a commodity. In such contexts, people are often left justifying their eating of animals, instead of having opportunities to reconcile.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has explored what ordinary people think about consuming nonhuman animals and how they navigate the ethical questions inherent in that praxis. This study is based on a small and culturally and geographically specific sample, and thus the findings cannot be generalized outside the context of an affluent North American consumer society. However, qualitative analysis enables us to explore in detail how ordinary people address the question of eating animals and how their accounts reflect the human place and responsibility in the world. Studying everyday life and so-called ordinary people is crucial, since the routine practices of ordinary life keep the world the way it is, while also having the potential to either drastically or gradually change it (Ehn and Löfgren 2010).

The findings of this study show that the theological concepts of dominion, stewardship and reconciliation all resonate in the context of everyday food consumption in affluent Canadian society and the lives of ordinary people, both religious and nonreligious. They help to make sense of how people navigate the consequences of their everyday actions. The findings illustrate that eating animals is positioned in an uneasy place between everyday acts of violence and care. Ideas of mastery, responsibility and respect entwine as people talk about consuming nonhuman animals and navigate the ethical questions inherent in that praxis.

The findings of this study are in line with the notion that contemporary consumer culture facilitates ignorance towards the social effects of consumption (cf. [Warde 1997](#), pp. 97–98). Instead of a collective culture of respect and means for reconciliation, there is a collective structure and industry that distances and obstructs the food animal and turns it into a commodity (cf. [Adams 2016](#); [Plumwood 1996](#); [Sethna 2017](#)). The first step towards more sustainable patterns of eating animals would require acknowledging the animal and rendering it visible—that is, the ‘de-foodisation’ of the animal, which is now absent. Sociologically speaking, there is a need for a profound change in ordinary consumption practices. Theologically speaking, what is required is reconciliation and the restoration of relationships with creation. The findings of this study show that pursuits towards reconciliation and respect do not automatically lead to rejecting eating animals altogether, but can pave the way for a more conscious consumption of animal meat as an opening towards healthier and ecologically and ethically more sustainable consumption.

Drawing from examples of totemic and clan kinship, [Harvey \(2013, p. 128\)](#) notes that careless or irresponsible consumption creates “places damaged by hyperseparation or dominance”. Similarly, the findings of this study illustrate that an absence of practices that enable the expression of respect creates a space that enables dominion. In such a context, people are left to justify rather than reconcile their choices. As [Oleschuk et al. \(2019, p. 19\)](#) note, the cultural repertoires of meat consumption permit people “to make sense of their meat eating and to bracket concerns about animal death, suffering, and the conditions of industrial agriculture”. In order to allow people to engage in practices of respect and to clear space for the possibility of reconciliation, there is a need to explore new ways of thinking about humanity’s place and responsibilities within the world that go beyond the model of stewardship and expand and transcend religious boundaries.

The findings of this study give new insights for both social scientific and theological research. First, when it comes to social sciences, it is widely acknowledged that reducing meat consumption in the Western diet is pivotal for reasons related to public health, environmental issues and the wellbeing of animals (e.g., [Allievi 2017](#); [Godfray et al. 2018](#); [IPCC 2019](#); [Adams 2016](#); [Spiegel 2007](#); [Bastian et al. 2012](#); [Oleschuk et al. 2019](#)). However, it is argued that the transition towards less meat-based diets is likely to require a profound societal change ([Apostolidis and McLeay 2016, p. 75](#)). That change will need not only to challenge meat production, provision and consumption practices, but also the ways in which our societies envision our relationships with nonhuman creation. Rather than providing solutions to changing consumption patterns on a societal level, this article shows why change in eating animals is so difficult on an individual level. The present study adds to previous social scientific studies on meat consumption by emphasising the need to explore people’s accounts of their food consumption in a way that reaches beyond justifications and addresses the question of how they envision the human role in and responsibilities for the wider world.

Second, by giving a voice to ordinary people, this study adds to theological discussions concerning dominion, stewardship and reconciliation. As I described in the introduction, theological arguments suggest that reconciliation either leads from domination to responsible stewardship (e.g., [Vorster 2018](#)) or provides an alternative to stewardship and its hierarchical relations (e.g., [Warners et al. 2014](#)). However, the findings of this study show that in the context of everyday life, dominion, stewardship and reconciliation are not alternative views, but connected to each other, and as such they serve different purposes. The account of Rachel above, for example, highlights dominion (when she states that the dominant position of humans is preconditioned and acquired by eating meat), stewardship (when she maintains that people should utilise all parts of the animals as much as possible instead of wasting them) and reconciliation (when she calls for respect for the food animal’s sacrifice). The findings illustrate that dominion constitutes and enables eating animals, but it also evokes the need for responsibility. Stewardship both restricts and justifies eating animals, and as an ideal rather than a realised practice, it evokes the need for reconciliation. Reconciliation enables and demands change—but it has limited room in contemporary society.

According to Beaman (2019), nonreligion aids in reimagining a world of living well together in a way that transcends the confines of stewardship. Only a small fraction of people interviewed in this study talked about eating animals by referring to explicitly religious content—yet much of what they said is theologically highly relevant. The findings of this study highlight the need to incorporate nonreligious people into the scope of analyses that focus on theologically relevant conceptualisations regarding the relationships between humans and nonhuman creation. They are also affected by and participate in constituting, reproducing and reimagining these relations. The incorporation of nonreligious perspectives does not have to mean a contrasting view to faith-based theological reflection, nor should it highlight differences between the views and practices of religious versus nonreligious individuals. Instead, there is a need for analyses that transcend particular confessional or identity boundaries, but in a way that enables the study of issues, concepts and phenomena that are relevant for theology and the study of religion.

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