# The Philosophical Origins of Vegetarianism

## Greek Philosophers and Animal World

**Letterio Mauro**

*Full Professor of History of Philosophy, University of Genoa*

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2017-001-maur 3830@unige.it

ABSTRACT

*Coeval philosophical texts provide no information about the extent to which the Ancient World practiced vegetarianism or about its concrete aspects. However, they offer a rich array of the arguments used to both justify and promote it. The present paper will focus on the four main philosophical arguments in favor of vegetarianism. These arguments were proposed and revised by various authors. The four arguments that will be studied are: the ascetic-religious one, mainly used by the Orphic tradition and then taken up by various authors, especially the Pythagoreans; the one based on the biopsychological affinity of all living beings, and coherently promoted by Theophrastus; the one based on the dignity and value of the animal world, widely developed especially by Plutarch; and finally the one, central to Porphyry's treatise, that relates abstinence from meat to the need of the soul to elevate itself to the divine and be purified of any element linking it to the body.*

*Keywords:* vegetarianism, animals in antiquity, philosophical anthropology, Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, Middleplatonism, philosophical lifestyle in antiquity, sacrifices of animals, dignity and value of the animal world.

### 1. THE FOUR MAIN ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF VEGETARIANISM IN THE ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

Coeval philosophical texts provide no information about the extent to which the Ancient World practiced vegetarianism or about its concrete aspects. However, they offer a rich array of the arguments used to both justify and promote it (Haussleiter 1935). The present paper will focus on the four main philosophical arguments in favor of vegetarianism. These arguments were proposed and revised by various authors, sometimes

together or linked to others (e.g. the difficult preparation and digestibility of meat), especially by Porphyry in his *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* (*De abstinentia*) – probably written after 270 CE (Bouffartigue and Patillon 1977, XVIII-XIX). Thanks to its ample documentation, Porphyry's treatise represents the most important ancient philosophical source on this topic.

The four arguments that will be studied are: the ascetic-religious one, mainly used by the Orphic tradition and then taken up by various authors (Pre-Socratic and not), especially the Pythagoreans; the one based on the biopsychological affinity of all living beings, and coherently promoted by Theophrastus; the one based on the dignity and value of the animal world, widely developed especially by Plutarch; and finally the one, central to Porphyry's treatise, that relates abstinence from meat (a food difficult to obtain, prepare and digest, and thus having a negative effect on body and mind) to the need of the soul to elevate itself to the divine and be purified of any element linking it to the body.

## 2. Orphism and Pre-Socratic thinkers

From its very origins, vegetarianism has been an option that goes beyond the mere selection of a menu, able to embrace the manifold meanings (symbolic and not) of food. Indeed, it has brought into question the lifestyle and behaviors promoted by the societies of which it was a part; moreover, it also seems to have been linked with the refusal of the sacrificial practices of official religion and with the special position attributed to humans in the great chain of being. Its first appearance in archaic Greece seems to have been connected with Orphism (VI century BCE), a religious reformation movement that had significant and well-known philosophical consequences. Without radically rejecting traditional polytheism, Orphism condemned one of its fundamental rituals, abhorring the bloodshed on the altars of the gods. In so doing, Orphism introduced a new set of beliefs and above all a new interpretation of human existence into Greek civilization (Pugliese Carratelli 2001; Bernabé and Cristobal 2007).

The basis of Orphism was the affirmation of a clear anthropological dualism: the human soul, of divine origin and thus immortal and incorruptible, was condemned to be united with a mortal and corruptible body in order to expiate an obscure guilt, being reincarnated in successive bodily existences (not only in human forms but also in animals). Therefore, the soul aspired to be released from its corporeal confinement and from the reincarnation cycle in order to be reunited with the divine. This could be obtained through purifications, rituals and a lifestyle based on abstinence

from any material reality, above all from the consumption of meat, considered able to bind the soul to the body. Meat-eating was also prohibited for another reason: the idea of the transmigration of souls into animals suggested that it was possible to kill and eat the body of a being into which the soul of a friend or relative had entered.

Therefore, abstinence from meat was a characteristic feature of the Orphic lifestyle, as Plato stated several centuries later:

> Some say it [body] is the tomb (*soma*) of the soul, their notion being that the soul is buried in the present life […]. But I think it most likely that the Orphic poets gave this name, with the idea that the soul is undergoing punishment for something; they think it has the body as an enclosure to keep it safe, like a prison, and this is, as the name itself denotes, the safe (*soma*) for the soul, until the penalty is paid. (Plato, *Cratylus*, 400b-c) [1]

Later, several Pre-Socratic thinkers shared the ban on killing and eating animals with Orphism. According to Porphyry (233/234-305 CE) and Iamblichus (ca. 250 - ca. 325 CE), this ban was adopted by Pythagoras of Samos (ca. 570 - ca. 490 BCE) and the community he founded (Porphyry, *Vie de Pythagore*, *Lettre à Marcella*, 34-9, and Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, XXI, 98-100) [2]. From its beginning, this community was characterized by an interest in the mathematical sciences and by the triumph of the collective spirit over the individual element. This last point makes it difficult to distinguish Pythagoras' contribution from that of his followers and affiliates, "the so-called Pythagoreans" (Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, I, 5, 985b 23-4) [3]. According to Porphyry (*Vie de Pythagore*, *Lettre à Marcella*, 19), Pythagoras was the first to introduce to Greece the doctrine that the human soul is immortal and transmigrates into other species of living beings, as well as the doctrine of the affinity of all living creatures. These teachings gave rise to rules of purification and abstinence (including abstinence from meat-eating) aimed at purifying the body and rendering it submissive to the soul. However, although it shared the idea of vegetarian-

[1] Cf. also Plato, *Laws*, VI, 782c-d: "The custom of men sacrificing one another is, in fact, one that survives even now among many peoples; whereas amongst others we hear of how the opposite custom existed, when they were forbidden so much as to eat an ox, and their offerings to the gods consisted, not of animals, but of cakes of meal and grain steeped in honey, and other such bloodless sacrifices, and from flesh they abstained as though it were unholy to eat it or to stain with blood the altars of the gods; instead of that, those of us men who then existed lived what is called an *Orphic life*, keeping wholly to inanimate food and, contrariwise, abstaining wholly from things animate".

[2] In *Republic*, X, 600b 2-5 Plato explicitly praises Pythagoras' contribution to the formulation of the "pythagorean way of life".

[3] On the question of the creation, development, nature and downfall of the Pythagorean community see Boudouris 1992, 49-69.

ism with Orphism, we cannot characterize Pythagoreanism as a mystery religion or as a movement rivaling the traditional religious beliefs of the Greeks. In contrast with Orphism (some of whose theses it reformed, merging them with philosophy), Pythagoreanism related the liberation of man from the reincarnation cycle not to celebrations or religious rites but to the practice of mathematical sciences, considered the most effective instrument of purification and thus cultivated as a means and not an end.

The ban on the killing and eating of animals was also proposed by another Pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (ca. 485 - ca. 432 BCE) in his *Purifications* (*Katharmoi*), a work close to the magical-sacred tradition of Pythagoreanism and devoted to the purification of the soul. Here again, his position was based on the belief that the soul, understood as a fallen spirit, experiences successive reincarnations (DK 31 B 117) and after a long and difficult itinerary of purification can be freed of all evils caused by its connection with the body. This itinerary includes a number of dietary prescriptions as well as condemnation of the killing of any living being, especially when related to religious sacrifices (DK 31 B 128 and 136).

According to Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160 - ca. 210 CE), both Pythagoras and Empedocles believed that a single spirit, widespread throughout the universe, establishes some sort of fellowship not only among humans and between humans and gods, but also between humans and animals. Therefore, if animals are man's fellows, to kill them and eat their flesh is an unjust and impious act. As he clearly affirmed:

> Pythagoras and Empedocles and the rest of the Italian company declare that we have some fellowship (*koinonian*) not only with one another and with the Gods but also with the irrational animals. For there is one spirit (*pneuma*) which pervades, like a soul (*psyches*), the whole Universe, and which also makes us one with them. Wherefore if we slay them and feed on their flesh we shall be doing what is unjust and impious, as destroying our kindred. Hence, too, these philosophers advised abstinence from animal (*ton empsychon*) food, and declared that those men were impious 'Redden'd the Blessed Ones' altars with warm blood pouring from victims. (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists*, I, 127)

## 3. Theophrastus

The justification of vegetarianism and rejection of cruel sacrifices by Theophrastus (371-287 BCE) is different, according to the fragments of his *Peri eusebeias* transcribed in Porphyry's *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*. Although he was Aristotle's successor at the Lyceum, Theophrastus did not

accept his teacher's hierarchical and anthropocentric view of living beings based on the idea that man was at the apex of the phenomenal world since "man alone of the animals possesses speech [*logon de monon anthropos echei ton zoon*]" (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2, 1253a 9-10). On the contrary, Theophrastus believed that there is a biopsychological affinity (*oikeiotes*) not only among all human beings but also between them and animals and thus it is necessary to treat the latter with *pietas* (Dierauer 1977). Humans and animals belong to the same community, being of the same race (*sugheneis*); they share both the principles of their bodies and the fact of being alive, along with what that entails: appetites, movements of the soul related to sensation, reasonings (*loghismoi*) (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 25, 1-3 = *Peri eus.* fr. 4 Bernays).

This is the basis of Theophrastus' strong sense of the value of animal life and his belief that, just as the existence of wicked men who harm other men does not negate the affinity among human beings, the existence of instinctively ferocious, and thus harmful, animals does not negate the affinity between humans and harmless animals. In other words, the relationship between humans and animals, like that among humans, must be rooted in justice. Therefore, just as it is appropriate to kill a man who behaves unjustly, it is legitimate to kill an animal that instinctively attacks [4], and likewise, as it is necessary to behave fairly with fair humans, it is right and proper to be fair with harmless animals (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, II, 22, 1-2 = *Peri eus.* fr. 4 Bernays).

To Theophrastus it is precisely this "juridical equality" between humans and animals that renders ritual sacrifices impious towards the gods (as well as unjust towards animals), and he emphasizes that the value of such sacrifices is not absolute but linked to precise historical contingencies. He identifies two distinct phases in human history. During the first, governed by Aphrodite, goddess of love and fertility, humans lived in peace among themselves and with all living beings; they had total respect for all forms of life because they perceived their affinity with the other animals and this was reflected in their offerings to the goddess, consisting of part of their harvests and of sober libations. During the second phase, governed by Ares, god of war, conflict prevailed in the relationships among humans but also in those with the other living beings. Once human customs had been corrupted by the habit of shedding blood, it became usual and legitimate to practice cruel sacrifices in honor of the gods, thus breaching the bond

[4] The legitimacy of killing only animals harmful by nature was argued earlier by Democritus (ca. 460 - ca. 380 BCE), DK 68 B 257.

of friendship (*philia*) that was to embrace all living beings (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, II, 21, 1-3; 22, 1-3).

Therefore, Theophrastus presents a new way of understanding man's place within reality and the need to reform the traditional religious customs through the abolition of cruel sacrifices. However, the motivations are biological rather than ethical-religious. Theophrastus' general stance in regard to the human-animal relationship, based on their affinity, leads him to affirm the insuppressible nature of the primary right to life and to maintain, on ethical-juridical grounds, the existence of a relationship of continuity between humans and animals (Battegazzore 1996, 81-93).

## 4. Plutarch's "De esu carnium"

*Moralia* by Plutarch (46/50 - after 120 CE) includes three essays about animals – *On the Eating of Flesh* (*De esu carnium*), *Beasts Are Rational* (*Bruta animalia ratione uti*), *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer* (*De sollertia animalium*) – in which vegetarianism is proposed as part of a cogent discussion of the dignity and manifold qualities of animals. As usual, Plutarch's polemic is directed mainly towards the Stoics and their belief in the supremacy of man as the only possessor of rational thought.

In *De esu carnium*, composed of two brief conferences (*logoi*) part of whose text is now missing, the illegitimacy of meat-eating is based on two precise arguments. The first concerns the unnaturalness of the consumption of meat, shown by the fact that the human body lacks those anatomical parts that permit carnivorous animals to attack and eat their prey:

> It is absurd […] to say that the practice of flesh-eating is based on Nature. For that man is not naturally carnivorous is, in the first place, obvious from the structure of his body. A man's frame is in no way similar to those creatures who were made for flesh-eating: he has no hooked beak or sharp nails or jagged teeth, no strong stomach or warmth of vital fluids able to digest and assimilate a heavy diet of flesh. (Plutarch, *On the Eating of Flesh*, I, 994 F - 995 A)

Plutarch explains that meat-eating could be justified in early times when agricultural techniques had not been introduced and humans had not learnt to use all the resources offered by nature. However, it cannot be justified today now that all these techniques have been acquired; thus meat-eating is a perverse human tendency to satisfy unnatural and false tastes. As Plutarch affirms:

> You who live now, what madness, what frenzy drives you to the pollution of shedding blood, you who have such a superfluity of necessities? Why slander

> the earth by implying that she cannot support you? Why impiously offend law-giving Demeter and bring shame upon Dionysus, lord of the cultivated vine, the gracious one, as if you did not receive enough from their hands? Are you not ashamed to mingle domestic crops with blood and gore? (Plutarch, *On the Eating of Flesh*, I, 994 A-B)

Finally, he observes the negative effects of this diet on both the human body, which fills with unhealthy humors, and the mind, which is unduly weighed down: "the eating of flesh is not only physically against nature, but it also makes us spiritually coarse and gross by reason of satiety and surfeit" (Plutarch, *On the Eating of Flesh*, I, 995 D-E).

The second argument is based on the injustice of killing animals, an act that violates their natural innocence and elegance, inflicting on them terrible suffering merely for the sake of gluttony, as clearly expressed by the examples provided in the text (*On the Eating of Flesh*, II, 996 E - 997 A). Their voices, he explains, are not inarticulate sounds but rather prayers and pleadings for justice. Hence killing animals is contrary to every principle of humanity. From a philosophical standpoint, vegetarianism appears as a nobler attitude than its counterpart:

> Nothing abashed us, not the flower-like tinting of the flesh, not the persuasiveness of the harmonious voice, not the cleanliness of their habits or the unusual intelligence that may be found in the poor wretches. No, for the sake of a little flesh we deprive them of sun, of light, of the duration of life to which they are entitled by birth and being. Then we go on to assume that when they utter cries and squeaks their speech is inarticulate, that they do not, begging for mercy, entreating, seeking justice […]. Do but consider which are the philosophers who serve the better to humanize us: those who bid us eat our children and friends and fathers and wives after their death [5], or Pythagoras and Empedocles who try to accustom us to act justly toward other creatures also? (Plutarch, *On the Eating of Flesh*, I, 994 D-E; II, 997 E)

Moreover, harking back to the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, Plutarch recalls the doctrine of transmigration of souls into other forms of life and thus the possibility that by eating meat one might actually risk feeding on the body of a loved one. Although he believes this doctrine to be insufficiently demonstrated, the very doubt that it might be true should suggest abstinence from meat-eating: "yet even if the argument of the migration of souls from body to body is not demonstrated to the point of complete belief, there is enough doubt to make us quite cautious and fearful" (Plutarch, *On the Eating of Flesh*, II, 998 C-D).

[5] The reference is to the ancient Stoics, in particular Chrysippus who undoubtedly advised that form of anthropophagy; cf. Ioannes ab Arnim 1979, III, 186-7.

## 5. Plutarch's "Bruta animalia ratione uti" and "De sollertia animalium"

In Plutarch's other two essays devoted to animals, vegetarianism is addressed in a less direct manner. However, by amply illustrating the natural abilities of animals, these works also highlight the unreasonableness and injustice of meat-eating and thus argue for its abolition. In *Bruta animalia ratione uti* (a dialogue among several speakers influenced by the expressive manner of the Cynic school and in strong philosophical dispute with Stoicism), Plutarch clearly affirms that the comparison in terms of virtues between humans and animals demonstrates the superiority of the latter: indeed, animals are naturally endowed with virtues while human beings gradually acquire them or are forced to do so. This is the case, for instance, of courage, temperance and, more generally, the ability to limit themselves to satisfaction of natural, necessary desires and pleasures, and to act with moderation in response to natural but unnecessary ones (*Beasts Are Rational*, 989 F).

With particular regard to the desires related to eating and drinking, the moderation of animals with respect to humans is shown by the fact that each species, following nature, eats only one type of food whereas man "in his pleasures is led astray by gluttony to everything edible; he tries and tastes everything as if he had not yet come to recognize what is suitable and proper for him; alone of all creatures he is omnivorous" (Plutarch, *Beasts Are Rational*, 991 B-C). Here Plutarch returns to and clarifies the considerations in *De esu carnium* concerning the unnatural nature of a diet based on animal flesh. Such a diet does not derive from a real need or the lack of more suitable foods but merely from vice and satiety which compel humans to seek new unnecessary foods. This is a recurrent theme in Plutarch's writings on animals: that meat is an appetizer (*opson*), capable of producing – and this is the new element introduced here – impurity in man since it is derived from the killing of a living being:

> His [of man] eating of flesh is caused by no lack of means or methods, for he can always in season harvest and garner and gather in such a succession of plants and grains as will all but tire him out with their abundance; but driven on by luxurious desires and satiety with merely essential nourishment, he pursues illicit food, made unclean by the slaughter of beasts; and he does this in a much more cruel way than the most savage beasts of prey. Blood and gore and raw flesh are the proper diet of kite and wolf and snake; to man they are an appetizer (*opson*). (Plutarch, *Beasts Are Rational*, 991 C-D)

Finally, in *De sollertia animalium*, a lively dialogue in two parts devoted to the question of whether land or sea animals are cleverer, vegetarianism

is presented as the better option on the basis of the recognition in animals of memory, emotions and passions, but also of a form of rationality ("all animals partake in one way or another of reason and understanding"). This thesis is advanced by two of the speakers, Aristotimus and Phaedimus, who provide a broad and concrete array of examples (*Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, 966 B - 985 B).

Reasoning in animals is undoubtedly less perfect than in humans, although the difference is merely in degree, like that observed for other characteristics much more developed in the animals (e.g. speed, strength, sight and hearing). As Plutarch states:

> Mere reason is implanted by nature, but real and perfect reason is the product of care and education. And this is why every living creature has the faculty of reasoning; but if what they seek is true reason and wisdom, not even man may be said to possess it. For as one capacity for seeing or flying differs from another (hawks and cicadas do not see alike, nor do eagles and partridges fly alike), so also not every reasoning creature has in the same way a mental dexterity or acumen that has attained perfection. (Plutarch, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, 960 A; cf. also 962 C)

From this it follows that human behavior towards animals, beings also endowed with reason, should not entail, as often happens, utilitarian exploitation or, even worse, cruelty and injustice. Reproposing a thesis advanced earlier by Theophrastus, another speaker named Autobulus declares that it is necessary to apply a criterion of justice in the relationship with the animals. Meek animals, whose collaboration can facilitate the necessities of life, should be treated humanely whereas it is legitimate to kill those that are harmful and dangerous:

> There is no injustice, surely, in punishing and slaying animals that are antisocial and merely injurious, while taming those that are gentle and friendly to man and making them our helpers in the tasks for which they are severally fitted by nature. (Plutarch, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, 964 F)

Another consequence of the preceding affirmations is the need to ban all those practices or activities that cause pain or violent death to animals not harmful to man, such as meat-eating, cruel spectacles of the arena, hunting and fishing:

> For living is not abolished nor life terminated when a man has no more platters of fish or *pâté de foie gras* or mincemeat of beef or kids' flesh for his banquets – or when he no longer, idling in the theatre or hunting for sport, compels some beasts against their will to stand their ground and fight, while he destroys others which have not the instinct to fight back even in their own defence. For I think sport should be joyful and between playmates who are merry on both sides […]. Just so, in hunting and fishing, men amuse them-

> selves with the suffering and death of animals, even tearing some of them piteously from their cubs and nestlings. The fact is that it is not those who make use of animals who do them wrong, but those who use them harmfully and heedlessly and in cruel ways. (Plutarch, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, 965 A-B)

## 6. Porphyry

Porphyry's treatise *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* is divided into four books and is written as an open letter to his friend Firmus Castricius who, after initially embracing vegetarianism, had abandoned that lifestyle and had "reverted to consuming flesh" (I, 1, 1). Porphyry sought to lead his friend back to vegetarianism, believing it to be essential to an authentic philosophical life: "an inanimate, simple diet, available to all, takes these [evils: a condition of somnolence, intensity and frequency of illness, provocation of sexual desire, thicker exhalations, heavy chains] away from us, offering peace for the reasoning power which provides us with security" (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, I, 47, 2). Indeed temperance permits him who is truly philosophical and thus considers the rational soul to be his real self, despising material pleasures, to approach the god in purity of body and soul.

However, vegetarianism is more than just a sober and virtuous diet. Unlike plants, animals cannot be used as food unless they are killed (since humans do not eat animals that have died of old age or disease) and this represents a fundamental problem to Porphyry: do animals differ so much from man as to justify his killing them?

Rejecting the idea, held mainly by the Stoics, that animals lack reason (*logos*), and thus are extraneous to the human (and divine) community and to the possibility of being treated according to common criteria of justice (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, I, 4, 1-2), Porphyry argues instead that animals are fundamentally similar to humans. Reporting extracts from works by other authors (including Theophrastus and Plutarch) he points out that the bodies of animals consist of the same elements as human bodies and that their physical and emotional responses, like those of humans, possess a recognizable meaning. Moreover, they are able to communicate with each other through species-specific languages (humans are unable to understand these languages just as they do not understand those different from their own, as Porphyry explains by means of many examples in *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 3-4) and to a certain extent with humans; this is shown by the fact that

> Whether the humans are angry or friendly or calling, whether the voice is hunting or wanting something or giving something, in short, whatever it is doing: to every one they respond appropriately. They could not do this unless like worked upon like in understanding. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 6, 1)

Above all, however, animals appear to be aware of the situations in which they find themselves from time to time, they predict future situations, they show practical wisdom and the ability to remember and learn (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 7-15). These behaviors are testaments to the presence in them of *logos*, even if, as previously mentioned, in a form different from humans, so that it must be admitted

> That the difference is a matter of more and less, not of complete deprivation, nor of a have and a have-not. […] So, even if we think more than they do, animals are not to be deprived of thinking, any more than partridges are to be deprived of flying because falcons fly more, or indeed falcons because the goshawk flies more than they and all other birds do. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 8, 7-8) [6]

Porphyry proposes these ideas in the various books of his *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, albeit not always in a systematic way: "his arguments are cumulative rather than sequential" (Porphyry 2000, 13). However, thanks to the broad nature of his argumentation, drawing on various sources and traditions [7], it is possible to have an idea of the different positions for and against vegetarianism, especially the philosophical ones which, as he explains at the beginning of his work, are his main focus:

> Many people have argued against abstinence from animate [foods], and […], among philosophers, the Peripatetics, the Stoics and the Epicureans have made most effort to oppose the philosophy of Pythagoras and Empedocles […]. I shall set out their practical and general questions about the teaching, leaving aside those which specifically attack the arguments of Empedocles. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, I, 3, 3-4)

The arguments against vegetarianism, based mainly on the idea that only humans possess *logos*, indicate that this practice was perceived as a threat in the ancient world since it represented a break not only from the institu-

[6] See also Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 24, 7: "It is no wonder that humans are so different from animals in ability to learn, quickness of thought and all that concerns justice and community. Many animals too surpass all human beings, some in size and swiftness, others in strength of sight and keenness of hearing, but this does not mean that humans are deaf or blind or powerless. We run too, even if more slowly than deer, and we see, even if worse than falcons, and nature has not deprived us of strength and size, even if we are nothing in comparison with elephants and camels".

[7] On this topic cf. Porphyry 1977, 9-41, and Porphyry 1979, 9-50, 138-51.

tions and customs of the time but also from the common mindset (Bouffartigue and Patillon 1977, LXVIII).

Porphyry believes that, while it is legitimate to compare animals and humans, this is not the case for animals and plants: in fact: "it is the nature of animals to have perceptions, to feel distress, to be afraid, to be hurt, and therefore to be injured. Plants have no perceptions, so nothing is alien or bad to them, nothing is harm or injustice" (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 19, 2). Therefore, killing an animal and eating its flesh is equivalent to murder, which can only contaminate both the body and the soul of the perpetrator. For the same reason, no animal can be an appropriate sacrifice to the gods and anyone who thinks differently has an ignoble idea of the divine.

This second point, based on the necessity of a religious reformation (because a true god cannot be satisfied with the wholly material cult deriving from animal sacrifice), even if primarily addressing the issue of sacrifice and not of meat-eating, is also clearly linked to a vegetarian stance.

These two points become central in Porphyry's justification of vegetarianism. Thus, he reclaims some features of ancient vegetarianism: the necessity that the soul have supremacy over the body, that it weaken its link with it as much as possible, thus subduing its demands, and therefore that meat be excluded from the diet. Indeed, if meat-eating severely impairs the health of the body, being a heavy food that is difficult to digest, it also strongly contaminates the soul, increasingly binding it to materiality and thus compromising its effort to ascend to the divine.

It is not surprising then (in fact this seems to be an argument peculiar to him) that Porphyry clearly states that meat-eating introduces evil spirits and the souls of the killed animals into man (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, II, 43 and 47). Hence the truly philosophical person, being a priest of the intelligible god (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, II, 49), understands that "the best offering to the gods is a pure intellect and a soul unaffected by passion; it is also appropriate to make them moderate offerings of other things, not casually but with full commitment" (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, II, 61, 1). After his broad discussion (based on Theophrastus) of the natural affinity of all living beings, Porphyry concludes Book III of his treatise by taking his thesis a step further:

> Someone who does not restrict harmlessness to human beings, but extends it also to the other animals, is more like the god, and if extension to plants is possible, he preserves the image even more […]. which is like the god has true riches by that very assimilation. No one who is rich and needs nothing commits injustice. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, III, 27, 2 and 5)

According to Porphyry, the idea that abstention from meat, especially if practiced collectively or by a spiritual elite, has even greater benefits for human communities is demonstrated by a series of historical examples (from Greece and other communities). If vegetarianism produced a general condition of health and peace, as well as great affinity to the gods, in archaic Greece (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, IV, 2), the same can be said about the lifestyle practiced by Egyptian priests, Jewish Essenes, Persian Magi and Indian Brahmans (*On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, IV, 6-18).

In the final part of his work, Porphyry recalls the model of the true philosopher dedicated to elevating himself to the divine and becoming similar to it. In so doing, he reaffirms the reason underlying his defense of vegetarianism, that is to contribute to that effort though abstention from foods considered contaminants (such as meat) and whose consumption is contrary to *pietas*, to justice and to wisdom:

> A man who engages in philosophy should prescribe for himself, as far as possible, the holy laws which have been determined by gods and by people who follow the gods. It is evident that the holy laws of peoples and cities impose purity on holy people and forbid them to eat animate food, and indeed prevent the masses from eating some kinds, whether from piety or because the food causes some harm. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, IV, 18, 9)

## References

Aristotle. 1959. *Politics*, translated by Harris Rackham. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.

——— 1961. *The Metaphysics*, translated by Hugh Tredennick. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.

Battegazzore, Antonio Mario. 1996. "La concezione teofrastea dell'oikeiotēs e del dikaion verso gli animali alla luce di un passo controverso di Porfirio (*De abst.* II 22, 1-3)". In *Odoi dizēsios: le vie della ricerca. Studi in onore di Francesco Adorno*, edited by Francesco Adorno and Maria Serena Funghi, 81-93. Firenze: Olschki.

Bernabé, Alberto, and Ana Isabel Jimenez San Cristobal. 2007. *Instructions for the Netherworld: the Orphic Gold Tablets*. Leiden: Brill.

Boudouris, Konstantine. 1992. "The Pythagorean Community: Creation, Development and Downfall". In *Pythagorean Philosophy*, edited by Konstantine Boudouris. Athenai: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture.

Bouffartigue, Jean, and Michel Patillon. 1977. "Introduction". In Porphyry, *De l'abstinence*, t. I, edited by Jean Bouffartigue, XI-LXXXIV. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Dierauer, Urs. 1977. *Tier und Mensch im Denken der Antike. Studien zur Tierpsychologie, Anthropologie und Ethik*. Amsterdam: Grüner.

Haussleiter, Johannes. 1935. *Der Vegetarismus in der Antike*. Berlin: Topelmann.

Iamblichus. 1989. *On the Pythagorean Life*, translated with notes and introduction by Gillian Clark. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Ioannes ab Arnim. 1979. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Stuttgart: Teubner.

Plato. 1953. *Cratylus*, edited by Harold North Fowler. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.

——— 1967. *Laws*, edited by Robert Gregg Bury. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.

Plutarch. 1984a. "Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer (*De sollertia animalium*)". In *Plutarch's Moralia*, with an English translation, vol. XII, edited by Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold, 309-486. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.

——— 1984b. "Beasts Are Rational (*Bruta animalia ratione uti*)". In *Plutarch's Moralia*, with an English translation, vol. XII, edited by Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold, 487-533. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann Harvard University Press.

——— 1984c. "On the Eating of Flesh (*De esu carnium*)". In *Plutarch's Moralia*, with an English translation, vol. XII, edited by Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold, 535-79. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.

Porphyry. 1977. *De l'abstinence*, tt. I-II, edited by Jean Bouffartigue and Michel Patillon. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

——— 1982. *Vie de Pythagore*, *Lettre à Marcella*, edited and translated by Édouard des Places. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

——— 2000. *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, edited by Gillian Clark. London: Duckworth.

Pugliese Carratelli, Giovanni. 2001. *Le lamine d'oro orfiche. Istruzioni per il viaggio oltremondano degli iniziati greci*. Milano: Adelphi.

Sextus Empiricus. 1987. *Against the Physicists*, edited by Robert Gregg Bury. London - Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann - Harvard University Press.