

October 2015

## Ancient Animal Ethics: The Earliest Arguments for the Ethical Consideration of Nonhuman Animals

Joshua J. Sias  
*Cleveland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Other Philosophy Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sias, Joshua J.. "Ancient Animal Ethics: The Earliest Arguments for the Ethical Consideration of Nonhuman Animals." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 2. Iss. 1 (2015) .

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Downtown Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

Philosophical concern for animal ethics, or the arguments for and against the inclusion of nonhuman animals in moral realms of ethical consideration, has taken off in recent decades. Topics pertinent to animal ethics, such as vegetarianism and animal experimentation, are no longer confined to the classroom as people throughout the world and across disciplines understand the treatment of nonhuman animals to be an issue of great concern. For many, it may appear that animal ethics is a relatively new area of contention, but this could not be further from the truth. Like many issues of philosophical intrigue, animal ethics can be traced back to antiquity. While this is widely documented and studied in the east, through models stemming from the discourse between Vedic schools of thought and competing ascetic traditions, the academic study of antiquity in the west has largely ignored early thinkers and arguments concerned with animal ethics. As this is the case, the question of whether or not the first western philosophers concerned themselves with the wellbeing of nonhuman animals follows.

This paper will cover early animal ethics through the works of Ancient Greek philosophers. By marking early trends in thought and linking them to popular views of modern animal ethics, an idea as to how the current state of massive NH<sup>1</sup> animal subjugation, suffering, and slaughter came to be can, in part, be exposed. Since religion is generally concerned with ethical conduct, and because the Ancient world was largely structured around religious conceptions, this work will supplement ethical arguments with religious material. That said, those arguments that are explicitly based on religious notions are not the focus of this paper, and instead are utilized to explain the ways in which trends of thought were established and popularized in antiquity. As the tension between religion and ethics (used here as a form of philosophy opposed to theology) is a motivating factor behind the rise and decline of animal ethics, this feature is necessary in order to provide an accurate account of the material presented.

### *I. From Religion to Philosophy: Animals in Ancient Greece*

During the Bronze Age of Ancient Greece, a variety of diets were present. The early Greeks utilized both farming and animal-breeding for food, although the majority of people lived on a vegetarian diet. The primary reason for the prevalence of vegetarianism was the fact that flesh was both “scarce and expensive.”<sup>2</sup> Meat was eaten mostly by elites and landowners; occasionally it was enjoyed by the average citizen in feasts and religious ceremonies.<sup>3</sup> As meat was the product of ritual sacrifice, the language utilized for the procuring of flesh was the

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the body of this paper I will preface the term “animals” with “NH”, denoting “nonhuman”. This inclusion is becoming more common in works of critical animal studies and, as it helps reinforce the nature of humans as animals to those readers who mistakenly remove human animals from their shared realm with other species, I too have chosen to employ this usage in my writings.

<sup>2</sup> Lonsdale, Steven H. “Attitudes Towards Animals in Ancient Greece.” Cambridge University Press. *Greece and Rome*, 2nd series, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Oct., 1979). 02 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/642507>>. p. 147-148.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

language of sacrifice. The consuming of flesh was entirely a product of religious practice.<sup>4</sup> Despite the customs of religious sacrifice in Ancient Greece, there were groups of people who abstained from eating flesh on their own accord; the earliest and perhaps best known of these groups were the Orphic and Pythagorean adherents.

Before describing the views of early vegetarian groups of Ancient Greece, it is important to understand what led them to their ethical stance. Primarily, there exist two beliefs that help form the early vegetarian's commitment: the myth of a Golden Age and the belief in the regeneration of the soul. The Golden Age is best known through the work of Hesiod, although it is also mentioned to a lesser degree in writings before and after Hesiod's eighth century composition *Work and Days*.<sup>5</sup> Hesiod describes the earliest race of mortals, created by the gods and ruled by Cronus. These people are said to have lived peacefully beside NH animals. The earth had enough vegetation to sustain the hunger of all animal life and so no animals (humans included) were driven to feast upon the flesh of others.<sup>6</sup> Life was easy and hard work was not necessary. For these reasons and more, Hesiod depicts the earliest of ages, the Golden Age, as the greatest age known to humankind. With the fall of Cronus and the rise of Zeus, Hesiod portrays the coming of the following ages: the Silver, the Bronze, and the one in which he lived, the Iron Age. With the fall of the Golden Age came corrupt periods of greed and violence. It is in these later ages that Hesiod believed humans began to eat the flesh of other animals.<sup>7</sup> Third-century philosopher Porphyry also utilized the Golden Age in his works on animal ethics, describing in his *On Abstinence from Animal Food* the correlation between war and the onslaught of animal killing. Porphyry declares, "together with the slaughter of animals, war and injustice were introduced [to the world]."<sup>8</sup>

The second of the influential religious views that facilitated the evolution of animal ethics is the belief in reincarnation. Generally associated with eastern religious thought, reincarnation is the idea that one's soul leaves the body at the time of death only to enter the physical form of another entity. For some early Greek religions, such as the Orphic and Pythagorean traditions,

---

<sup>4</sup> Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. "Animals, Gods And Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas." New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod. "Works and Days." trans. Richard Lattimore, in "Hesoid". Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962. Lines 109-201, p. 31, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41.

Reprinted in: Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess., ed. "Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama." New York: State University of New York Press, 2001. p. 17-22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Walters, *loc. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Porphyry. "On Abstinence from Animal Food." trans. Thomas Taylor. London: Centaur Press, 1965. p. 145-8. Reprinted in: Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess., ed. "Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama." New York: State University of New York Press, 2001. p. 23-5. (Quotation on page 25.)

this belief meant that NH animals shared in the cycle of regeneration.<sup>9</sup> According to this doctrine, all animals should be treated as one would treat one's own species. This position is supported by the belief that the essential aspect of life (the soul), being a shared characteristic of human and NH animals, is the criteria in which ethical consideration is granted.<sup>10</sup> Empedocles, influenced by Orphic and Pythagorean beliefs, describes the importance of abstaining from killing animals by noting that the action must also be understood as potentially taking the life of one's own family member.<sup>11</sup> With this belief, the act of eating flesh is made synonymous with acts of cannibalism.

While religious beliefs are capable of initiating philosophical inquiry, and thus ethical action, they are also capable of acting as barriers of separation between groups of beings. This truth is apparent in the fact that Hesiod's depiction of the Golden Age did not necessarily give him a sense of ethical responsibility to NH animals. As Newmyer notes, *Works and Days* includes what constitutes as "the earliest extant Greek attempt to differentiate human beings from other animals on philosophical ground."<sup>12</sup> Hesiod does this by arguing that Zeus gave humans justice, a gift not shared with other species.<sup>13</sup> However, problems arise when arguments from regeneration of the soul are used to influence better treatment of NH animals as well. For example, the Orphic belief in reincarnation also consisted of regeneration into plant life, a problem that plagued the issue of dietary sustenance.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the origins of vegetarianism in the west seem to be historically tied to religious roots. Considering the central role dietary concerns play in shaping the human's overall treatment of NH animals, a philosophically satisfying answer to the question of dietary ethics was an issue of concern for the earliest philosophers of the west.

---

<sup>9</sup> Many scholars believe that Pythagoras' conception of reincarnation was influenced by Indian sages and/or Brahmins he came across while in Egypt. Stuart offers a convincing argument for this stance in his chapter titled *Pythagoras and the Sages of India*.

Stuart, Tristram. "The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times." New York: W. W. Norton, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Dombrowski, Daniel A. "The Philosophy of Vegetarianism." Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. p. 35.

Also see: Riedweg, Christoph. "Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence." Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Kirk, G. S., J. E. Raven and M. Schofield. "The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts." 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. p. 319.

<sup>12</sup> Newmyer, Stephen T. "Animals in Greek and Roman Thought: A Sourcebook." New York: Routledge, 2011. p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Dombrowski, *loc. cit.*

## II. Pythagoras on Animal Ethics

Many scholars of ancient philosophy consider Pythagoras to be one of the most influential philosophers of all time.<sup>15</sup> For many writers, including Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, Ovid, and Voltaire, Pythagoras was considered the first great advocate for vegetarianism.<sup>16</sup> This is supported by the use of the phrase “Pythagorean diet”, which was used well into the nineteenth century to refer to people we now label “vegetarian.”<sup>17</sup> Although many modern critiques dismiss Pythagoras’ vegetarianism due to its connection to religious belief (i.e. reincarnation), many writers noted that Pythagoras also abstained from flesh on grounds unrelated to reincarnation.<sup>18</sup> These reasons included health concerns, as well as more philosophically-founded ethical considerations.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> In *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell famously credits Pythagoras as being the most influential philosopher of all western philosophy. Many others follow, noting his mathematical discoveries, religious beliefs, and the links he made between these otherwise different areas of study.

Russel, Bertrand. “*History of Western Philosophy*.” ed. 1972. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 37.

<sup>17</sup> Phelps, Norm. “The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to Peta.” New York: Lantern Books, 2007. p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to mention that there are accounts of Pythagoras that paint him as a conscious meat eater, forbidding the eating of some parts of animals (or only some animals). In these accounts Pythagoras is not remembered as a vegetarian. Aristoxenus described Pythagoras’ diet as having included all forms of animals except ox and sheep (Dombrowski, 48-9). Aristotle and others reported that Pythagoras and his followers only forbid the consumption of certain parts of animals, including the sexual organs, legs, and brain (Riedwig, 37). Attempting to resolve this apparent contradiction, Riedwig hypothesizes that two different groups of Pythagoreans (followers of Pythagoras’ teachings) existed beside each other, with those who took part in society and hence the practice of animal sacrifice common then, permitted to eat flesh. Others, such as Pythagoras himself, were isolated from society and therefore expected to follow a strict vegetarian diet (69). The view that different sects of Pythagoreans existed is supported in the works of Iamblichus. In these ancient works one finds a description of a class of Pythagoreans known as *akousmatikoi* and another, differing description, of a second class referred to as the *mathematikoi*. The *mathematikoi* are reported by Iamblichus as having been the stricter of the Pythagoreans, meditating rigorously and never consuming flesh (Dombrowski, 47). The confusion between the various accounts of Pythagoras’ life seems to be a result of these conflicting sects of followers and the mischaracterization that each view somehow represented that of Pythagoras (Dombrowski, 49)\*. Nonetheless, most of the textual evidence of Pythagoras’ life points to a Pythagoras that abstained from flesh-based foods.

One observes Pythagoras’ attitude towards nonhuman animals in more than his dietary preferences. For example, Gorman reports that “apart from Aristoxenus [...] all other ancient evidence indicates that Pythagoras refused to sacrifice animals”. Instead, he chose to sacrifice herbs, incense, and metals (75). In addition, Eudoxus of Cnidus describes Pythagoras as a person who “avoided any contact with cooks and hunters” (Riedwig, 37). These descriptions add to the collection of accounts suggesting that Pythagoras abstained from eating flesh.

\* Dombrowski elaborates this point through the example of Aristoxenus who became aware of Pythagoras’ teachings through the society of Pythagoreans that was present in his time. These Pythagoreans Aristoxenus encountered lived at Tarentum prior to the fourth century. The Tarentum Pythagoreans aligned more with the *akousmatikoi*, eating flesh and living as part of a larger society.

<sup>19</sup> Dombrowski, *loc. cit.*

Touching on the philosophical reasoning behind Pythagoras' diet, belief in reincarnation was only one of many reasons for his socially-odd practice of vegetarianism. For Pythagoras, Diogenes Laertius writes, the soul of the human consists of three qualities: "intelligence (*nous*), passion (*thymos*), and reason (*phren*)."<sup>20</sup> NH animals are said to possess both intelligence and passion, characteristics of the animal's soul that do not belong to plant life. It is intelligence and passion, the element of life that allows for sentience, that makes the mistreatment of NH animals unethical.<sup>21</sup> In this way, Pythagoras is documented as having understood, ahead of his time, the idea that humans are essentially one of many species of animal. Gorman notes that:

For Pythagoras man was intimately linked with the rest of the animal kingdom and did not enjoy any innate superiority over the other animals. Man was not the image of the divine, but a living being whose only distinguishing characteristic was his greater ability to be trained and participate in intelligence.<sup>22</sup>

Gorman continues by explaining Pythagoras' view that animals are indeed rational, demonstrating how Pythagoras defends this claim by referring to the nonhuman animal's ability to be trained. In addition, Pythagoras believed that animals were capable of speech, although most people (himself being the exception) could not understand their language.<sup>23</sup> According to Iamblichus, Pythagoras only differentiated between human and nonhuman animals on the grounds that humans used both internal and external speech, whereas nonhumans used only internal speech. This seems to follow from the myth of the golden age, in that it was believed that all animals, humans included, originally shared the same language and spoke to each other directly.<sup>24</sup> In fact, this myth is not unique to Pythagoras, as Plato references the same point in the *Statesman*.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Diogenes Laertius. "Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume II." English trans. R. D. Hicks. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970 ed.

"The soul of men, he says, is divided into three parts, intelligence, reason, and passion. Intelligence and passion are possessed by other animals as well, but reason by man alone" (VIII. 30. p. 347.)

As Dombrowski mentions in his footnote to his discussion on Pythagoras' distinctions between the souls of living things (p. 151, note 64), Diogenes Laertius does not elaborate on what distinguishes *nous* (intelligence) from *phren* (reason). Plato orders these characteristics of soul differently, as will be shown in Section III of this paper.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Gorman, Peter. "Pythagoras: A Life." London: Routledge, 1979. p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Dombrowski, *loc. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Plato, "Statesman." Plato. trans. J.B Skemp. The collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. 271d-4c.

Although plant life does not contain the elements of intelligence and passion, plants too are granted concern by Pythagoras as they have life and create the environment from which more life can spring. For these reasons, Pythagoras is often considered one of the earliest proponents of environmental ethics, teaching his students to use only those plants that are absolutely necessary.<sup>26</sup> This distinction and its link to vegetarianism is notable in its foreshadowing of our current state of environmental devastation; climate change, deforestation, and massive resource consumption (amongst other things) are all linked to the production of animal-based foods.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the arguments pertaining to the soul mentioned above, Pythagoras was a staunch advocate for the popular ancient doctrine of moderation.<sup>28</sup> His diet was understood to further the moderate way of life in that it utilized less resources and kept him “hunger-free.” This ability to eat moderately is described by Porphyry as having helped Pythagoras maintain an ideally constant physical and mental state that gave him the capacity to meditate for long periods of time.<sup>29</sup>

As this discussion demonstrates, Pythagoras and the different accounts of his views on animals and diet show that the issue of animal ethics can be traced back to the very beginnings of western philosophical thought. His immense influence on the philosophy, mathematics, and the sciences that followed is undeniable, yet his views on animal and environmental ethics seem to be largely absent in much of the modern literature discussing his influences. Pythagoras’s influence is perhaps best represented in the works of Plato. As the works of Plato, along with his student Aristotle, are largely considered essential to the development of western philosophy, it is useful to take a closer look at what these two important writers have to add to the long history of animal ethics.

### III. *Plato and Aristotle on Animal Ethics*

Issues most often considered in works on animal ethics, such as the aforementioned dietary and ritualistic use of NH animals, are not directly mentioned in the works of Plato or Aristotle. For Plato, references to diet are found scattered across his many works. Animal ethics in itself does not seem to have been an issue with which Plato concerned himself. Despite Aristotle’s reputation as the first person to study animal life in a biological sense, he too fails to commit himself to the inclusion of NH animals in his ethical writings. In order to get an idea as

---

<sup>26</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 51.

<sup>27</sup> It is not my intention to include an account of the link between animal agriculture and environmental issues here; I am merely linking the ancient thoughts of Pythagoras to the modern science that supports his theories. Much has been written on this topic. If you are interested in reading more about this topic I suggest the work of John Robbins and Richard Oppenlander.

<sup>28</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 45-46.

<sup>29</sup> Riedwig, *op. cit.* 32-33.

to what these philosophers thought about NH animals and their place in moral consideration, one must look at their intellectual influences as well as the nuances of their body of work.

As has been presented, Plato's link to Pythagoras is well documented. In addition to Pythagoras, Plato's affiliation with Socrates, his teacher, is well known. For Socrates, many NH animals share virtues with humans. For example, Xenophon notes that Socrates thought lions were courageous animals.<sup>30</sup> Xenophon also remarks that Socrates is of the mind that humans are "happier" than NH animals for the following reasons:

1. Humans alone have "upright posture."
2. Humans alone have hands.
3. Humans alone have unique tongues that allow for speech.
4. Humans alone have the ability to procreate at their own will, whereas other animals are limited to particular times of year.
5. Humans alone have received "the most excellent soul," a soul that can perceive and worship the gods.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, Socrates believed in a hierarchy put in place by the gods through the endowment of the special features listed above, which allow for humankind's position of superiority over all other animals. From this, Xenophon determines that Socrates put forth the idea that NH animals live amongst men and women to be used as wished by humankind.<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that this argument remains popular with theologians today, often based on the misconception of religious "domain" and its placement in biblical texts.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the question remains whether Plato aligned his own views with Pythagoras or Socrates.

Although no one can be sure of Plato's eating habits, his work suggests that he followed in the steps of Socrates and advocated an early form of the argument from domain. Dombrowski, for example, utilizes Plato's *Statesman*, *Laws*, and *Republic* in forming this conclusion.<sup>34</sup> The *Statesman* mentions "hunting and butchering" animals without a note of disapproval from Plato; the *Laws* follow suit in regards to breeding animals for consumption. In fact, both the *Laws* and

---

<sup>30</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 56.

<sup>31</sup> Newmyer, Stephen. "Animals in Greek and Roman Thought: A Sourcebook." New York: Routledge, 2011. p. 54.

Excerpt included taken from: Xenophon, "Memorabilia (Recollections of Socrates)." I. 4. 11-14

Dombrowski lists reasons 3-5 (p. 56).

<sup>32</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 56-57.

<sup>33</sup> The prevalence of "the domain argument" in modern discourse is no doubt influenced by Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo as well, this will be discussed at length later in this paper. For a more academic approach to arguments for and against 'ethical responsibility towards NH animals from a religious perspective, I recommend the works of Norm Phelps and Andrew Linzey.

<sup>34</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 58.



the *Republic* refer to flesh as a “wholesome food.”<sup>35</sup> The inclusion of these remarks suggests that Plato did not share Pythagoras’ concern for NH animals.

The answer to Plato’s textual adherence to human dominance is perhaps best sought in his work on creation, the *Timaeus*. Containing Plato’s thoughts on the tiered soul, the *Timaeus* presents what can be understood as a combination of Pythagoras’ conception of the soul and Socrates’s (as presented by Xenophon) idea of the divine element inherent in humanity. The highest form of soul, what Plato refers to as the “immortal soul,” possesses an element of the divine that can only be found on earth in the souls of human beings.<sup>36</sup> NH animals share a “mortal soul” with humans, allowing for the capacity to feel pain and pleasure. The soul’s least favorable characteristic, that which should be subjugated to reason, is the desires. Referred to by Plato as “bestial,” the desires are described in relation to the NH animals that possess them.<sup>37</sup> The idea that humans are the carriers of superior souls allows for the construction of a hierarchy of ethical importance, giving humans a higher degree of reason and rationality. This is understood by many ancient philosophers to be a divinely-decreed allowance to use all other animals as they please.<sup>38</sup>

The main criticism of Pythagoras and the earliest vegetarian proponents, which is that their arguments are invalid due to reliance on religious belief, is equally applied to the argument inferred from the works of Plato. The shared characteristic between these two arguments on the use of NH animals is their dependence on notions of “soul” which are undoubtedly built on a religious ground. This is represented in the divinity afforded to the human soul by Socrates and Plato.

On the other hand, further complicating a thorough interpretation of Plato’s views on animals, certain passages within his body of work suggest that Plato was sympathetic to arguments for the abstinence of animal-based foods. Returning to the *Republic*, Glaucon is depicted in conversation with Socrates discussing what foods would be eaten in the ideal city,

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

It is worth mentioning that Plato does display some apprehensions against hunting in his *Laws*, but only certain forms of hunting are considered unlawful. These include forms that consist of little to no skill (824b-c). Regardless, it appears that Plato is concerned with the human’s training opposed to the NH animals involved in the hunt.

Newmyer, *op. cit.* 87-8.

<sup>36</sup> Plato. “*Timaeus*.” trans. Benjamin Jowett. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. [69c-77c].

<sup>37</sup> Gilhus, *op. cit.* 205.

For a further depiction of Plato’s use of “animal” as a derogative metaphor for those aspects of oneself that must be subjugated to reason, see Gilhus chapter on *Internal Animals and Bestial Demons* (p. 205-26).

<sup>38</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 60.

Plato's *Republic*.<sup>39</sup> Socrates remarks with a list of foods, none of which are flesh.<sup>40</sup> Following this, Glaucon asks what would be eaten in a city of pigs (the opposite of the Republic). To this Socrates answers "dishes and sweetmeats such as are now in use,"<sup>41</sup> and shortly afterwards he notes that a city that eats meat requires more doctors than one that does not.<sup>42</sup> In a way, the ideal vision Plato depicts in his *Republic* aligns to the mythic Golden Age, where humankind ate only plants and never partook in flesh. Adding to Plato's Pythagorean beliefs, the transmigration of a human soul into a NH animal is also well-covered in Plato's works.<sup>43</sup> From what has been presented here, it can also be argued that both Plato and Pythagoras noted the health benefits of vegetarianism.

Adding to this, Plato's *Laws* depicts Clinias speaking favorably of earlier philosophers who abstained from flesh, saying that their vegetarianism is both a "current" and a "highly credible" tradition.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Plato included the opinion of Clinias in the *Laws* without added disapproval or critique suggests that Plato agreed with the positive remarks concerning the vegetarian philosophers. As this is the case, one is left to wonder why Plato puts forth varying conceptions of vegetarianism. The ideal society for Plato is a vegetarian state yet he fails to live up to this ideal, instead allowing the use of NH animals for consumption.

Moving on to Aristotle, his emphasis on the observable sciences and his habit of criticizing those theories that relied heavily on religious belief should make for a more practical approach to the subject under review. However, whereas Plato had little to say about NH animals and humankind's ethical responsibility towards them, Aristotle had even less. Similar to Plato, Aristotle's arguments concerning animals are based on his conception of the soul, the only significant difference being the absence of the inclusion of a divine element within the human soul. Instead Aristotle focuses his hierarchy of souls on capacities of reason.<sup>45</sup> The superiority of

---

<sup>39</sup> Plato, "Republic". trans. Paul Shorey. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. [369D – 373E].

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, [372b-c].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, [372d-e].

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, [373c-d].

<sup>43</sup> Newmyer, *op. cit.* 4-6.

Varying accounts of the notion of reincarnation can be found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Timaeus*.

<sup>44</sup> Plato. "Laws." trans. A. E. Taylor. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. [782b-d].

Also see: Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 62-3.

<sup>45</sup> See Dombrowski (p. 64-65) and Newmyer (p. 6-10) for more on Aristotle's emphasis on the human's superior powers of reason.

the human soul is established in Aristotle's work *On the Soul*, in which Aristotle explains that plants contain only a nutritive characteristic while NH animals possess both the powers inherent to the senses and those nutritive abilities found in all forms of life (Aristotle also recognizes the ability of some animals to utilize locomotion).<sup>46</sup> The human's soul contains all the characteristics found in other animals, as well as the human animal's unique powers of rational thinking.<sup>47</sup> Thinking, beyond simple desire, which Aristotle links to the nutritive and sensory powers, is limited to humankind.<sup>48</sup> Aristotle's *Metaphysics* further separates the human species from other animals by giving humans a more complex sense of "experience," through which humans have acquired the ability to practice science and art.<sup>49</sup> All of these examples, spanning different texts of Aristotle, emphasize the superiority of those distinctively human souls endowed with reason.

Aristotle's conception of the various degrees of soul (or psyche) facilitates his thoughts on natural order. He argues in his *Politics* that man rightfully rules over all other life forms because only man has the natural ability to control the passions with his mind.<sup>50</sup> Singer notes that this form of reasoning is what led Aristotle to condone the slavery of humans among men, for while Aristotle grants slaves (and NH animals) sentience, he finds these lives insufficient in their capacity to reason and their lack of objection to their subjugation.<sup>51</sup> Aristotle's argument from domain follows from his thoughts on natural order, the following excerpt from his *Politics* makes this clear:

... plants are for the sake of animals, and that the other animals are for the sake of human beings, domestic ones both for using and eating, and most but not all wild ones for food and other kinds of

---

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle. "On the Soul." trans. J. A. Smith. < <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.2.ii.html>>. [book 2, parts 2-3].

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

The *Nicomachean Ethics* [1097b33-1098a4] has Aristotle "seeking that which is unique [to man]." He finds reason to be that characteristic. (Newmyer, 10).

<sup>48</sup> "On the Soul," *loc. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle. "Metaphysics." trans Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935. [980b-81a].

The "science and art" of Tredennick's translation differs from the "knowledge and skill" presented by Newmyer's version of Aristotle's book one of the *Metaphysics* (p. 10).

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle. "Politics." trans. C. D. C. Reeve. "Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998. [book 1, chapter 5].

I use the word "man" here opposed to "human" as it better represents Aristotle's explicit statement on man's role of ruler (or subjugator) to both NH animals and women.

"For domestic animals are by nature better than wild ones, and it is better for all of them to be ruled by human beings, since this will secure their safety. Moreover, the relation of male to female is that of natural superior to inferior, and that of ruler and ruled." [1254, lines 10-15].

<sup>51</sup> Singer, Peter. "Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement." New York: HarperCollins, 2009 ed. p. 188-189.

support, so that clothes and the other tools may be got from them. If then nature makes nothing incomplete or pointless, it must have made all of them for the sake of human beings.<sup>52</sup>

Ending with human beings, though, Aristotle fails to account for “nature’s” intended purpose of humankind. Instead, his comments merely attempt to justify man’s dominion over “nature.”

As shown, Aristotle deconstructs the union between humans and NH animals Pythagoras championed. His *Nicomachean Ethics* explicitly states his lack of consideration for NH animals, arguing that “there is no friendship or justice towards inanimate objects. Nor is there toward a horse or an ox or toward a slave as slave, for there is nothing in common between them.”<sup>53</sup> His acceptance of the fact that NH animals, like humans, feel pain and pleasure leads one to ask how he considered NH animals to have “nothing in common” with humans. Theophrastus, Aristotle’s successor to the peripatetic school, practiced vegetarianism in part due to the fact that NH animals shared sentience with humans,<sup>54</sup> a lesson that was no doubt influenced by the work he did with Aristotle. Although Aristotle suggests a “nature” that makes nothing in vain, therefore (somehow) making NH animals the products of humans, Theophrastus regarded “the natural environment as fulfilling its own purposes.”<sup>55</sup> The presence of Theophrastus and likeminded vegetarian philosophers<sup>56</sup> in Aristotle’s peripatetic school leads one to question the credence that his views on animal ethics were given during his time.

While it may appear at first glance that concern for the wellbeing of NH animals declined as philosophy progressed, Theophrastus proves this view mistaken. Before concluding this look at ancient views on animal ethics, however, it is important to visit the debate between the Stoics and the Platonists; Plutarch, Plotinus, and Porphyry. While these philosophers may not be as revered in history as those covered thus far, they are essential to the understanding of the development of animal ethics over time. The discussion that follows will be framed as an argument between the Stoics who were influenced by Aristotle’s views on NH animals and the Platonists who followed the Pythagorean tradition.

---

<sup>52</sup> “Politics,” *op. cit.* [book 1, chapter 8. 1256b, lines 15-22].

<sup>53</sup> quoted in Newmyer, (p. 75). [Nicomachean Ethics, 1161a30-1161b2].

<sup>54</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 72.

<sup>55</sup> Hughes, J Donald. "Ecology in Ancient Greece." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal Of Philosophy* 18. (1975): 115-125. Philosopher's Index. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

I borrow Hughes words on Theophrastus as quoted in Dombrowski, p. 72.

<sup>56</sup> Dicaerchus, a Peripatetic and student of Aristotle, was also a vegetarian, citing the myth of the Golden Age as an influence for his abstinence from flesh.

Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 22.

#### IV. *The Stoics and the Platonists: An Ancient Debate on Animal Ethics*<sup>57</sup>

Plutarch, Plotinus, and Porphyry lived in what is now referred to as the Hellenistic era, a transitioning phase in Greek history that saw a revised interest in the Pythagorean school of thought as well as the rise of newer schools such as that of the Stoics and the Epicureans.<sup>58</sup> Although Plutarch spoke in admiration of Pythagoras, leading some scholars to link his views on animals to those of Pythagoras, the arguments he constructed are better understood as a defense against claims put forth by Stoic thinkers. Plotinus and his student Porphyry also addressed common Stoic arguments, defending vegetarian ideals in the process.<sup>59</sup>

The Stoic philosophers took the ideas of Aristotle and used them to justify humankind's use of NH animals. Supported primarily by Aristotle's notion of reason as a uniquely human characteristic, Stoics managed to link lack of reason to deficiencies in speech, which ultimately resulted in a doctrine that denied justice and ethical consideration to NH animals.<sup>60</sup> Despite the fact that the combination of the various pieces, or the chain of lacking elements, was not particularly Stoic in thought, with each claim found in Aristotle's works,<sup>61</sup> the Stoics were essential to the popularization and spreading of them. Diogenes Laertius makes this clear when writing on the Stoic views through the founder of the school, Zeno, and his students:

---

<sup>57</sup> The framing of the exchange that followed Plato and Aristotle's views on NH animals is displayed as an ongoing argument between the Platonists and the Stoics in Gilhus' *Animals, Gods, and Humans*. Utilizing the Platonist/Stoic framework as an organizational tool, my coverage will also employ the dichotomy used by Gilhus.

<sup>58</sup> See Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* for an extensive description on what constitutes the various eras of ancient philosophy.

Russell, *op. cit.* 218.

<sup>59</sup> Dombrowski argues that Plotinus was likely a vegetarian for reasons attributed to his "asceticism" and "desire for spiritual perfection", opposed to his ethical convictions (p. 105). Arguing similarly but in regards to Porphyry, Gilhus remarks that Porphyry's "main incentive seems less to be friendliness towards animals than avoidance of human impurity (146)." As my discussion of these figures continues, I hope to show that these statements are not warranted, as it is not necessary to separate (entirely, at the very least) religious and ethical convictions. Also, the works containing concern for NH animals utilize elements of (if not entirely analogues to) popular works for the moral consideration of NH animals.

<sup>60</sup> Gilhus, *op. cit.* 38-42.

<sup>61</sup> With the exception of speech, the arguments related to reason, justice, and ethical consideration are covered in the discussion of Aristotle's views portrayed earlier in this paper. In regards to speech, Aristotle states that:

... no animal has speech except a human being. A voice is a signifier of what is pleasant or painful, which is why it is also possessed by the other animals ... But speech is for making clear what is beneficial or harmful, and hence also what is just and unjust. For it is peculiar to human beings, in comparison to the other animals, that they alone have perception of what is good and bad, just or unjust, and the rest.

"Politics," *op. cit.* [book 1, chapter 2. 1253a, lines 10-17].

In [the Stoics] theory of dialectic most of them see fit to take as their starting point the topic of voice... while the voice or cry of an animal is just percussion of air brought about by natural impulse, man's voice is articulate and, as Diogenes puts it, an utterance of reason...<sup>62</sup>

It is their doctrine that there can be no question of right as between man and the lower animals, because of their unlikeness. Thus Chrysippus [says] in the first book of his treatise *On Justice*, and Posidonius in the first book of his *De officio*.<sup>63</sup>

Aristotle's early argument "from domain" is also well represented in Stoic thought, as evidenced by the following excerpts from Ancient historian Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetus*:

God constitutes, one to be eaten, another to serve in the farming, another to produce cheese, and yet another for some other similar use; to perform these functions what need have they to understand external impressions and to be able to differentiate between them?<sup>64</sup>

...nature has made animals, which are born for service, ready for use, equipped, and in need of no further attention. Consequently one small child with a rod can drive a flock of sheep.<sup>65</sup>

Given the time periods the Stoics mentioned by Diogenes Laertius and Arrian lived, with Zeno (332–262 BC) founding Stoicism and Epictetus (AD 55–135) being one of the last Greek Stoics, it is apparent that their views on NH animals were shared among Stoic philosophers.

From Porphyry's writings we discover that the Stoics went beyond Aristotle and others before him, arguing that extending ethical treatment to NH animals would in itself be morally repugnant in that it would lead people to stop using animals for labor as well as food, both of which the Stoics argued would bring a decline to human productivity.<sup>66</sup> The remarks on food were the result of the Stoic held misconception that humans could not live on plants alone.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *op. cit.* (VII. 55. p. 1650.)

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, (VII. 129. p. 234-5.)

<sup>64</sup> qtd. in Gilhus, *op. cit.* 40-1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> The Stoics were apparently fueled by agricultural concerns and the misconception that humans cannot live on plants alone.

Newmyer, Stephen T. "Plutarch on Justice Toward Animals: Ancient Insights on a Modern Debate." *Scholias*. Vol. 1 (1992). 38-54. 02 Nov. 2014. p. 46-7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

They attempted to argue that because NH animals and plants both lack reason, vegetarianism would ultimately lead people to abstain from plants as well as flesh foods.<sup>68</sup>

Addressing the Stoics, Plutarch was the first philosopher to have devoted multiple works to the issue of justice for NH animals. He argued that NH animals were rational and sentient beings and that eating creatures was both a disgrace to nature and harmful to human health.<sup>69</sup> Plutarch turned the tables on those who sought answers as to why philosophers like Pythagoras abstained from flesh. *De esu carniū (Of Eating the Flesh)* begins with Plutarch questioning how “the first man with his mouth touched slaughter.”<sup>70</sup> He continues elaborately asking how the stench of slaughter and cries for justice given by those early victims of human desire could have gone ignored.<sup>71</sup>

In attempting to prove that NH animals are rational, Plutarch turned to nature. He did this by noting common interactions between NH animals and humans.<sup>72</sup> For example, the Stoics punish their dogs and horses aiming to correct their behavior: however, if NH animals are without the capacities involved in reasoning, such as reflection, they would have no way of understanding what is demanded of them.<sup>73</sup> The same dialogue sees Plutarch utilizing the opinions of hunters and fisherman, characters who would otherwise oppose Plutarch’s intended arguments. One of the hunters credits syllogistic deduction to NH animals, noting how the fox places her ear across the surface of ice in order to determine whether or not it is safe to cross.<sup>74</sup> Others further remark on the various characteristics they observe in their interactions with NH animals: “Architecture, future-oriented reasoning, artifice, friendship, continence, justice, reason, and equity” are all referenced in regards to NH animals.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 78.

This reasoning by the Stoics is a prime example of the slippery slope fallacy. Despite the clear mistake in reasoning portrayed in the Stoic assumption that vegetarianism leads to abstinence from plant foods, examples of this are still commonly found among those who oppose ethical vegetarianism.

<sup>69</sup> Newmyer, *op. cit.* entire.

<sup>70</sup> Plutarch. “Plutarch's Morals”. ed. William W. Goodwin, PH. D. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1874. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a2008.01.0378>>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Plutarch. “De sollertia animalium.” *Moralia*. trans. Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1957. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0369%3Asection%3D1>>.

<sup>73</sup> Newmyer, *op. cit.* 49.

<sup>74</sup> Plutarch, *op. cit.* [Sec. 13].

<sup>75</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 100.

Continuing his rebuttal on the Stoic presumptions concerning animal ethics, Plutarch argues that many animals possess virtues, by nature, that humans lack and/or need to develop.<sup>76</sup> NH animals show a natural degree of moderation in their eating habits, limiting themselves to a small variety of foods. Humans, being gluttonous and lacking in the excellence of moderation, eat an unnecessarily large amount and variety of foods. Other virtues, such as courage and temperance, are also present in NH animals. Many humans, on the other hand, lack these virtues, and those who possess them have worked to obtain them.<sup>77</sup> For these reasons and more, Plutarch writes that Gryllus, a philosopher who was transformed into a pig by Circe, prefers the life of a NH animal; with no desire for wealth or fame, he considers his existence superior to that of a human animal.<sup>78</sup>

In regards to health, Plutarch adamantly argued for the ancient axiom that moderation was the key to one's wellbeing. The healthy individual, for Plutarch, follows a diet that is simple in variety and preparation. Plutarch describes this diet as one entirely free of flesh, a conclusion reached on the grounds that flesh is not naturally conducive to a human's physiology.<sup>79</sup> In defending this claim, Plutarch focuses on the differences between carnivorous animals and humans. Only humans, Plutarch argues, need tools to hunt and fire and seasonings to cook, and even with these necessary steps one cannot limit the negative effects meat has on one's body.<sup>80</sup> One of these effects, Plutarch mentions in both his *Symposiacs*<sup>81</sup> and his *De esu carniū*,<sup>82</sup> is

---

I included the list Dombrowski used in discussing this dialogue because of its precise yet extensive account of the many points made in Plutarch's "De sollertia animalium".

Also see: Dombrowski, *loc. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> Plutarch. "Bruta animalia ratione uti." *Moralia*. trans. Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1957.  
<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0373%3Asection%3D1>>.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Also see: Newmyer, *op. cit.* 51.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

Gryllus and Circe are literary devices employed by Plutarch. In Ancient Greek mythology, Circe is the goddess (or sorcerer) of magic.

<sup>79</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 90.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

Also see: Newmyer, *op. cit.* 51.

<sup>81</sup> Plutarch, "Symposiacs". *The complete works of Plutarch: essays and miscellanies*. New York: Crowell, 1909. Vol.III. *The University of Adelaide Library*. 14, Nov. 2014.  
<<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/symposiacs/chapter4.html#section35>>. [Book IV. Question 1].

<sup>82</sup> Plutarch, "Bruta animalia ratione uti.," *op. cit.* [Sec. 8].



characterized by the difficulty humans have in digesting flesh. The Stoic's claim that one cannot live on plants alone is easily dealt with by Plutarch, for he needed only to list the many vegetarian philosophers that came before him, who included but were not limited to Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Theophrastus.

As shown, Plutarch offered many philosophical arguments for the inclusion of NH animals in human realms of ethical consideration. Although each argument is profound in its own way, to list them all here would go beyond the intended scope of this work. That said, the driving force behind Plutarch's concern for animals can be summed up in the following two points that are found in almost all of his writings on justice to NH animals. First, NH animals are sentient and because of this they deserve justice.<sup>83</sup> Second, the consumption of animals is an unnecessary and violent act that deprives sentient (as well as rational) beings of the lives they have been given.<sup>84</sup>

Like Plutarch, Porphyry contributed an entire work to the issue of human and NH animal relations. Today Porphyry is known mostly for his compiling and editing of Plotinus' *Enneads*, a work that would later be used by Medieval Christian theologians to bridge theological gaps between Christian doctrines and philosophical understandings of the universe.<sup>85</sup> Given the importance Porphyry placed on NH animals, and the Stoics prominence during Plotinus' life, it is no surprise that Plotinus disputed many of the Stoic axioms. Plotinus' view that "animals and plants have their share in Reason, Soul and Life"<sup>86</sup> explicitly denies the Stoic notion that NH animals are without reason. The fact that Plotinus attributes the same features to plants and animals may appear dangerously close to affirming the Stoic *reductio ad absurdum* claim that vegetarianism leads to abstaining from all foods, but this is not necessarily so. As Plotinus states:

It is surely unsound to deny that good of life to animals only because they do not appear to man to be of great account. And as for plants, we need not necessarily allow to them what we accord to the other forms of life, since they have no feeling.<sup>87</sup>

Like Pythagoras and Plutarch, Plotinus understood that sentience separates animals from plants and that such a distinction warrants ethical treatment towards those that feel pleasure and pain.

---

<sup>83</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 90-91.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

Also see: Newmyer, *op.cit.* 52.

<sup>85</sup> Russell, *op. cit.* 284-5.

<sup>86</sup> Plotinus. "The Six Enneads." trans. Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page. Forgotten books, 2007 ed. p. 198.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

While Plotinus wrote little concerning NH animals, his vegetarianism inspired his students.<sup>88</sup> This is shown not only in Porphyry but also in Castricius Firmus, who abandoned vegetarianism when he left Plotinus' Neoplatonist school. In response to Firmus, Porphyry wrote his *De abstinentia*, a four part work that essentially listed "every possible reason Firmus ought to remain vegetarian."<sup>89</sup> Many scholars theorize that Firmus left the Plotinian School for Christianity, which to Porphyry's disdain was growing in popularity at the time.<sup>90</sup> If true, this act in itself may have contributed to Porphyry's writings *Adversus Christianos* (*Against the Christians*). From Theophrastus, Plutarch, and Plotinus, Porphyry picked up the arguments on sentience, virtue, reason, and soul (arguing that NH animals possess all of these important elements).<sup>91</sup> Although he states his fondness for Pythagoras often, it is clear from the four books that make up *De abstinentia* that Porphyry based his arguments more on likeness, or kinship with NH animals, than the more religious notions (i.e., reincarnation) put forth by Pythagoras.<sup>92</sup>

In a systematic manner, Porphyry addressed and dismantled many of the Stoic claims. Reason, for the Stoics, was considered to be "twofold," consisting of "external speech" and then the internal "disposition of the soul" (thoughts), both of which the Stoics denied to NH animals.<sup>93</sup> Dealing with speech, Porphyry argued that NH animals "discursively perceive the manner in which they are outwardly affected, before it is vocally enunciated by them" and the fact that humans fail to understand the speech of NH animals is by no means characteristic of the NH animal's inability to utilize speech. To argue otherwise, Porphyry continues, is to say that those who speak different languages understood only to those who know the language, speak not at all – a claim few would be willing to accept.<sup>94</sup> The question of internal reason in NH animals

---

<sup>88</sup> Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 105.

"In his *Life of Plotinus*, Porphyry clearly states that Plotinus did not approve of eating the flesh of animals reared for the table, nor would he even accept medicine made from animals."

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

<sup>90</sup> Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess., ed. "Ethical Vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer." New York: State University of New York Press, 1999. p. 35.

Whereas Walters and Portmess state that Firmus left for Christianity, Dombrowski notes that is "unclear why he defected" (107).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 35-6.

Walters and Portmess describe the four books of *De abstinentia* as each having their own focus, they argue that "(1) carnivorousness is intemperate and hence unsuitable for the philosophical life (2) that animal sacrifices are impious, (3) that animals deserve just treatment, (4) and that a distinguished host of past sages condemned flesh eating."

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Porphyry. *op. cit.* 37.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

was not an issue Porphyry felt needed additional defense, as it had already been sufficiently covered by others, and instead he focused on discrediting those who thought “more intelligence” somehow cleared the other of their intelligence:

It does not follow, if we have more intelligence than other animals, that on this account they are to be deprived of intelligence; as neither must it be said, that partridges do not fly, because hawks fly higher.<sup>95</sup>

In both cases, in regards to external and internal reason, Porphyry highlights the absurdity inherent in the Stoics “all or nothing” arguments.

Following this, Porphyry foreshadows later notions of subjective consciousness,<sup>96</sup> “because we are unable to penetrate into the reasoning which they use, we are not on this account to accuse them of irrationality.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, because internal reason is not empirically observable, one cannot deduce that another is entirely without it. As Porphyry appears to have tapped into the conception of subjective consciousness, he also offered the earliest account of the argument from marginal cases. Attributed to modern animal ethicist Peter Singer,<sup>98</sup> the argument from marginal cases is, to this day, one of the most prominent arguments against the use of NH animals by humans. Like Singer, Porphyry begins by noting the importance of sentience and continues his critique on the Stoics by drawing a comparison to other humans: “we see that many of our own species live from sense alone, but do not possess intellect and reason.”<sup>99</sup> To argue that one should not act morally towards NH animals who lack higher degrees of reason, in this view, is to argue against the inclusion of children and mentally deficient individuals in realms of moral consideration. Porphyry’s remarks point to this unintended consequence of the Stoics reasoning.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>96</sup> Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974). p. 435-450.

<sup>97</sup> Porphyry, *op. cit.* 38.

<sup>98</sup> For Singer’s version of the argument from marginal cases see his *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*.

<sup>99</sup> qtd. in Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 78.

Also see: Porphyry, *op. cit.* 42.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

Also see: Singer, *op. cit.* (Chap. 1).

In regards to the argument from dominion, Porphyry refutes it on multiple levels. He notes that many species of animal exist that are not used by humans, such as most insects. Also, he mentions that the mistake in defining the purpose of creatures solely by the way they are used results in humans being created as nothing more than food for the carnivorous animals that kill and feast upon them.<sup>101</sup> The pleasure given to those who eat flesh is also no consolation for Porphyry, for “by admitting that pleasure is the end, justice is evidently destroyed.”<sup>102</sup> He then continues that “since justice consists in not injuring any thing, it must be extended as far as to every animated nature.”<sup>103</sup> Consequently, Porphyry considers the slaughter of NH animals for food to be an unnecessary action committed by “perfectly savage and unjust” individuals.<sup>104</sup>

Sharing many of the opinions of his predecessors, Porphyry brought a refined systematic approach to the views argued before him. As was the case with Plutarch, listing all of Porphyry’s arguments against the use of NH animals by humans would go beyond the scope of this paper. While Porphyry’s arguments were amazing in their own right, his ability to document the position’s held by others, both those he agreed with and those he argued against, was equally commendable. The debate between the Stoics and the Platonists concerning NH animals acts as a reminder that the issue of animal ethics has always been a topic of heated philosophical debate.<sup>105</sup>

Seneca, a Stoic who “inherited and espoused a milder brand of Stoicism,”<sup>106</sup> illustrated elements of the ethical debate over animals throughout his own changing views. As a youth, Seneca dabbled in vegetarianism, stating in his *Moral Letters* that practice “proved not only easy but pleasant.”<sup>107</sup> As the student of Sotion, a Pythagorean, Seneca was familiar with the doctrine of reincarnation and argued that whether one agreed with it or not, vegetarianism was still

---

<sup>101</sup> Porphyry, *op. cit.* 43.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 44-5.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

It is comments such as these, as poignant as they are, that make me seriously question the claims Gilhus (see note 59) puts forth in her discussion of Porphyry’s “intention.” While the Neoplatonist’s may have been concerned with religious or spiritual purity, Porphyry certainly put a great amount of effort into supporting the claim that treating NH animals as objects is unjust.

<sup>105</sup> This is also explicit in Philo of Alexander’s work *On Animals*. In the text Philo argues with his nephew, Alexander, on whether or not NH animals have reason. Like Porphyry’s writings, the views of the Stoics are included in Philo’s dialogue. See Newmyer’s *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought: A Sourcebook* for excerpts from Philo’s work as well as further biographical information (10).

<sup>106</sup> Newmyer, “Animals in Greek and Roman Thought.” *op. cit.* 14.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 104-5.

justified. For the believer the diet brought “blamelessness,” while the nonbeliever maintained an honorable frugality that was well sought in ancient times. The diet also brought a “mind [that] was more acute.”<sup>108</sup> Eventually Seneca’s father, a man who “hated philosophy,” convinced his son to return to eating flesh, no doubt influenced by the arrival of “foreign cults” that practiced vegetarianism.<sup>109</sup> Given Seneca’s Stoicism, he denied reason to animals, and yet he seemed to be sympathetic to the primary result of animal ethics.<sup>110</sup> Seneca’s history as a Stoic once under the tutelage of a Pythagorean adds to the nature in which views concerning NH animals were discussed. While there was a dialogue between schools of philosophy, the pervasiveness of the topic in antiquity appears to have directly affected individuals as well.

#### V. Bridging the Gap between Medieval and Modern Animal Ethics

Pythagoras’ vegetarianism, as documented by many of antiquity’s historians, shows that as an area of philosophical intrigue, animal ethics dates back to the beginning of western philosophical thought. The works of Plutarch and Porphyry continue the discourse Pythagoras began, presenting an astonishing amount of foreshadowing in the process. By shifting the focal point of the debate to a more philosophical understanding of what warrants moral consideration, and consequently to a model of ethics that involves distinguishing the importance of sentience in moral reasoning, Porphyry and his predecessors provided the building blocks of modern animal ethics. The 18<sup>th</sup> century utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham returned to the ancient debate under similar circumstances: responding to claims that lower degrees of reason prevalent in NH animals warranted their exclusion from moral consideration, Bentham famously remarked, “The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”<sup>111</sup> Following and inspired by Jeremy Bentham, Peter Singer composed his arguments against the mistreatment of NH animals in the early 1970s. Today, Singer’s arguments remain essential to the modern animal rights movement.<sup>112</sup>

In *Animal Liberation* (1975), Singer establishes his case for the ethical treatment of NH animals through two major arguments, one of which is the argument from marginal cases

---

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

Also see: Dombrowski, *op. cit.* 80-1.

Dombrowski notes that Seneca may have abandoned vegetarianism as it became “the object of imperial suspicion.”

<sup>110</sup> On Seneca’s denial of reason to NH animals see: Newmyer, *op. cit.* 14-5, 45-6.

<sup>111</sup> qtd. in Singer, *op. cit.* 7.

<sup>112</sup> “Animal Rights” is now commonly used to refer to arguments for the inclusion of NH animals in realms of moral consideration. Despite the designation Singer, as well as many others in the field, are not necessarily rights theorists. It is for this reason I refer to “animal ethics” opposed to “animal rights” throughout this paper.

discussed earlier in relation to Porphyry. While Singer goes much further than Porphyry did in explaining how “characteristic based”<sup>113</sup> arguments are faulted, leading to the unintended consequence of allowing one to act unethically towards children and/or other human beings with lower levels of the characteristic in question, Porphyry’s comments are certainly worthy of credit. This is especially true when one considers that Porphyry lived and wrote in a time when Aristotle’s anthropocentric influence was the norm. Singer’s second major argument, from “speciesism,” is a product of the civil rights and woman suffrage movements and the concepts of racism and sexism that gained popularity during the height of these culturally significant shifts in thought. Analogous to racism, Singer defines speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species”.<sup>114</sup> Given the influencing factors behind Singer’s use of the term “speciesism,” the absence of such an argument in antiquity is understandable. Regardless, the use of sentience as a marker for ethical consideration, the defense against arguments from levels of reason, and the abundance of secondary arguments spanning from environmental degradation to human health effects all have their origins in Ancient Greek philosophy.

Having addressed the first of the two questions that commenced this survey of ancient animal ethics, that of the ancient’s thoughts on the wellbeing of NH animals, what remains to be shown is what, if anything from antiquity, contributed to the current state of massive NH animal subjugation, suffering, and slaughter prevalent in the world today. To address this question it seems appropriate to look to those figures that helped shape the popular opinions that followed Ancient Greek philosophy. The works of Plato and Aristotle, by far the most popular philosophers of their era, are thus an ideal starting point to those seeking answers to philosophical questions rooted in the past. As discussed earlier in this work, Plato’s tiered conception of the soul utilized Socrates’ notion of a distinctively human element of divinity. With a few modifications, Aristotle constructed a hierarchy of souls that replaced Plato’s divinity with higher degrees of reason. With reason acting as the segregating characteristic between humans and other animals, Aristotle argued that “animals are for the sake of human beings.”<sup>115</sup> Aristotle’s arguments from reason and dominion were passed onto the Stoics, who adamantly spread these ideas as doctrines that proved their lack of concern for NH animals was philosophically supported.

Despite the sophistication of the Platonist’s rebuttals to the Stoic’s claims concerning NH animals, the ancient era of philosophy ended with Stoic thought finding new life in the works of

---

<sup>113</sup> Reason is generally the characteristic used to distinguish which beings are granted moral concern; this is obviously the case in the opinions of Aristotle and the Stoics. The word “characteristics” is used here to include other traits that can be used to distinguish between sentient beings, such as the characteristics of speech and locomotion.

<sup>114</sup> Singer, *op. cit.* 6.

<sup>115</sup> For the excerpt containing this line, see page 15.

highly influential early Christian and medieval theologians. Unlike the ancient era, no major philosophical work arguing for the ethical consideration of NH animals exists in medieval thought. Instead, the Aristotelian and Stoic notions were commonly supplemented with biblical material as well as with interpretations of the Bible. Augustine of Hippo displays this tendency of medieval theology in his *City of God* as he writes:

...when we say, ‘Thou shall not kill,’ we do not understand this of the plants, since they have no sensation, nor of the irrational animals that fly, swim, walk, or creep, since they are dissociated from us by their want of reason, and are therefore by the just appointment of the Creator subjected to us to kill or keep alive for our own uses ... the commandment is, Thou shall not kill man.<sup>116</sup>

By fusing the Stoic notions of reason and dominion with his interpretation of biblical decree, Augustine reintroduced the divine element that Aristotle did away with in his views on the soul while simultaneously incorporating Aristotle’s arguments against ethical concern for NH animals. Of course Augustine’s inclusion of the divine element differs greatly from that of Plato, so a look at the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas will help further differentiate between the two types of divinity utilized by Plato and Augustine.

Aquinas wrote extensively on Aristotle, mixing Aristotle’s philosophy with the theology of the Church and devoting multiple works to providing commentary to Aristotle’s thoughts.<sup>117</sup> Aquinas’ appreciation for Aristotle is perhaps best represented in his habit of referring to Aristotle simply as “the philosopher.”<sup>118</sup> Adding Christian terms to Aristotle’s position, Aquinas writes “There is no sin in using a thing for the purpose for which it is. Now the order of things is such that the imperfect are for the perfect.”<sup>119</sup> Aquinas continues by explaining, in a manner almost identical to Aristotle in his *Politics*, that plants are for the use of NH animals and NH animals are for the use of man. Finishing his line of thought, Aquinas ends by linking Aristotle’s philosophy to the contents of the Bible, declaring that “In fact this is in keeping with the commandment of God himself.”<sup>120</sup> The existence of vegetarian theology, as well as sects of Christianity that abstain from flesh foods, goes to show that Aquinas’ claim that God commanded humans to eat flesh is purely interpretative. Although differences in interpretation

---

<sup>116</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “City of God.” trans. Marcus Dods. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009. p. 24-5. (I. 20).

<sup>117</sup> Proudfoot, Michael. and A.R. Lacey. “The Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy.” 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2010. p. 23.

<sup>118</sup> Singer, *op. cit.* 193.

<sup>119</sup> qtd. from *Summa Theologica* (II, II, Q64, art. 1.) in:

Singer, *op. cit.* 193-4.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

can be used to escape the pitfalls of Augustine and Aquinas' use of divinity, their attachment of biblical material to the Stoic's axioms leads to a difficult situation where questioning itself is characterized as going against the entire unit that is the Catholic Church. The acceptance and incorporation of Aquinas and his writings by the Church only further discouraged any challenge to Aquinas' synthesis of philosophical and theological ideas.<sup>121</sup> Plato's sense of divinity, on the other hand, was not nearly as overbearing as that of the early Christian theologians.

Given the powerful position that the Catholic Church has held during the history of human thought, and their alliance to Aquinas and consequently Aristotle's arguments concerning NH animals, it follows that the views they accepted would result in massive consequences around the world. While this in no way suggests that Christianity alone is responsible for the grand scale of NH animal abuse observed today, the link between Aristotle, the Church, and Western culture is well established, and such a fact cannot be taken for granted when one looks to the past for answers to the present.<sup>122</sup>

The plight of the NH animal in modern times is the result of centuries of subjugation and slaughtering at the hands of humankind. The onslaught of the industrialization of nations only increased the downfall of the practice of animal ethics, as individuals were further removed from the processes that brought animal-based products to the market. Other factors, such as the Westernization of diets around the world, should also be included in discussions covering the downfall of concern for NH animals. That being said, it remains evident that the ethical connection between the human animal and the NH animal has long been an area of philosophical discourse. Animal ethics, like many other fields of thought, has been greatly influenced by popular thinkers of antiquity. The result of Aristotle and Aquinas' thoughts on NH animals, in part characterized by the current state of animal suffering today, shows the immense influence these men have had on humanity's continued, albeit destructive, existence.

---

<sup>121</sup> In covering this issue Singer notes that the Catholic Church remains, to this day, attached to the works of Aquinas. The closest resemblance of a break from Aquinas' view on domination came in 1988 when "Pope John Paul II urged that human development should include 'respect for the beings which constitute the natural world'" (196).

<sup>122</sup> Rod Preece argues that Singer's depiction of Aquinas' influence on the Catholic Church, and the widespread effect this union has had on the medieval view of NH animals, is an oversimplification of a complex set of factors (122-3). In support of his critique, Preece supplements his discussion of Aquinas with Christian thinkers who were opposed to Aquinas' conception of dominion. These oppositional characters include Basil of Caesara (128), the poet William Hamilton Drummond (122), and Leonardo da Vinci (138-41). While it is true that these Christians, as well as many others (although most against Aquinas' views on dominion came after the Medieval era, including Drummond and da Vinci), did not agree with Aquinas, the prominence of Augustine and Aquinas' works in shaping Roman Catholic opinion certainly overshadowed those of the thinkers that opposed them on issues surrounding animal ethics. I mention this particular rebuttal, one of many handled by Preece against Singer, as it relates to the conclusions drawn in this work.



## Appendix – The Philosophers Discussed

**Pythagoras** (Late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE): Early philosopher, mathematician. Founded the Pythagorean School or “brotherhood”.

**Socrates** (469-399 BCE): Influential philosopher. His philosophy is known primarily through his students, Plato and Xenophanes.

**Plato** (427-348/7 BCE): Influenced by Pythagoras and his teacher Socrates. Founded the Academy. Teacher to Aristotle.

**Aristotle** (384-22 BCE): Student of Plato. Founded the Lyceum. Contributed to branches of philosophy as well as natural science.

**Theophrastus** \*(371-287 BCE): Student of Plato. After Plato’s death become a student of Aristotle. Aristotle’s successor to the Lyceum. Considered the father of botany.

**Stoics**: Movement founded by Zeno of Citium (336-264 BCE). Leading Stoics included Chrysippus (280-06 BCE), Posidonius (135-51 BCE), Seneca, Epictetus (50-138 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (121-80 CE). Developed propositional logic and “a thoroughgoing materialism”. Later Stoics concerned themselves primarily with ethics.

**Lucius Annaeus Seneca** \*(4 BCE-65 CE): Student of Attalus (a Stoic) and Sotion (a Pythagorean). The mild Stoic.

**Plutarch** \*(50-120 CE): Considered to be the pre-eminent philosopher of “middle Platonism”. A historian and philosopher who opposed the ethics of the Stoics and the Epicureans. Wrote the first works entirely devoted to animal ethics.

**Plotinus** (205-70 CE): Neoplatonist. His views on “the One” and the soul would go on to influence Christian theology.

**Porphyry** (232-304 CE): Neoplatonist. Student of Plotinus. Edited and published Plotinus’ only work. Historian, biographer, and philosopher.

**Augustine of Hippo** (354-430 CE): Renowned Christian theologian. Bishop of Hippo (395/6) Influenced by Stoicism and Plotinus.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225-74 CE): Renowned Christian theologian. Student of Albert the Great. Works fuse Greek Philosophy (primarily that of Aristotle) to Christian doctrines.

**Peter Singer** (1946-): Living philosopher who deals primarily with practical ethics. As a result of his highly influential work *Animal Liberation*, Singer is often referred to as the “father of the animal rights movement”.

Years listed are sourced from entries provided in *The Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Years marked with an asterisk (\*) are sourced from the biographical information provided in Newmyer’s *Animals in Greek and Roman Thought*.

## Bibliography

- Aristotle. "Metaphysics." trans Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935.
- . "On the Soul." trans. J. A. Smith. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.2.ii.html>>.
- . "Politics." trans. C. D. C. Reeve. "Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.
- Augustine of Hippo, "City of God." trans. Marcus Dods. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 2009.
- Diogenes Laertius. "Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume II." English trans. R. D. Hicks. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970 ed.
- Dombrowski, Daniel A. "The Philosophy of Vegetarianism." Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. "Animals, Gods And Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas." New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Gorman, Peter. "Pythagoras: A Life." London: Routledge, 1979.
- Hesiod. "Works and Days." trans. Richard Lattimore, in "Hesoid". Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962. Reprinted in: Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess., ed. "Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama." New York: State University of New York Press, 2001. p. 17-22.
- Hughes, J Donald. "Ecology in Ancient Greece." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal Of Philosophy* 18.(1975): 115-125. Philosopher's Index. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.
- Kirk, G. S., J. E Raven and M. Schofield. "The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts." 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Linzey, Andrew., and Paul Berry Clarke. "Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology." New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 ed.
- Lonsdale, Steven H. "Attitudes Towards Animals in Ancient Greece." Cambridge University Press. *Greece and Rome*, 2nd series, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Oct., 1979). 02 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/642507>>.
- Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", The Philosophical Review. Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974).
- Newmyer, Stephen T. "Animals in Greek and Roman Thought: A Sourcebook." New York: Routledge, 2011.
- . "Plutarch on Justice Toward Animals: Ancient Insights on a Modern Debate." *Scholia*. Vol. 1 (1992). 38-54. 02 Nov. 2014.
- Phelps, Norm. "The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to Peta." New York: Lantern Books, 2007.
- Plato. "Laws." trans. A. E. Taylor. The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- . "Republic". trans. Paul Shorey. The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- . "Statesman." Plato. trans. J.B Skemp. The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

- . "Timaeus." trans. Benjamin Jowett. The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns., ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Plotinus. "The Six Enneads." trans. Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page. Forgotten books, 2007 ed. p. 198.
- Plutarch. "Bruta animalia ratione uti." Moralia. trans. Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1957.  
<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0373%3Asection%3D1>>.
- . "De sollertia animalium." Moralia. trans. Harold Cherniss and William C. Helmbold. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1957.  
<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0369%3Asection%3D1>>.
- . "Plutarch's Morals". ed. William W. Goodwin, PH. D. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1874.  
<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0378>>.
- . "Symposiacs". The complete works of Plutarch: essays and miscellanies. New York: Crowell, 1909. Vol.III. The University of Adelaide Library.  
<<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/symposiacs/chapter4.html#section35>>.
- Porphyry. "On Abstinence from Animal Food." trans. Thomas Taylor. London: Centaur Press, 1965.  
Reprinted in: Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess., ed. "Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama." New York: State University of New York Press, 2001. p. 23-5.
- Proudford, Michael. and A.R. Lacey. "The Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy." 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Riedweg, Christoph. "Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence." Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Russel, Bertrand. "*History of Western Philosophy*." ed. 1972. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.
- Singer, Peter. "Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement." New York: HarperCollins, 2009 ed.
- Stuart, Tristram. "The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times." New York: W. W. Norton, 2007.
- Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess., ed. "Ethical Vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer." New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- . "Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama." New York: State University of New York Press, 2001.