



Attitude of the Greeks towards Animals

W. H. S. Jones

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ATTITUDE OF THE GREEKS TOWARDS ANIMALS.

'THE temperament of the Greek people,' says Gomperz (*Gk. Th.* i. 126), 'was never especially friendly to animals.' This judgment I was once inclined to accept, but a closer examination of the evidence proves, I think, that it is misleading, if not incorrect.

Interest in animals and their ways was quite a common characteristic of the Greeks. This may be seen in the fables attributed to Aesop, in the famous poem of Semonides, or in the *Birds* of Aristophanes. It shows itself also in the scientific spirit which prompted the philosophers to write *Natural Histories*.

But such an interest is quite compatible with a refusal to believe that moral relationships exist between men and animals. The way to this belief was prepared by the feeling of sympathy which arose from the co-operation of animals with their human masters. The ploughing ox was considered sacred (Schmidt, *Ethik* ii. 94), and love for pets was as strong among the Greeks as with ourselves. Examples are the ram of Polyphemus (*Od.* ix. 447), the dog of Odysseus (*Od.* xvii. 304), the love of Hippolytus for his horses (Eurip. *Hipp.* 110, 1219, 1240; cf. also Verrall, *Four Plays of E.* 194, on *Her. Fur.* 1386), the dislike of Aeschylus for cock-fighting (*Eum.* 861-866), the stories in Aelian (affection between boy and eagle, *On Animals* vi. 29; affection between horses and man, vi. 44; kindness of the Athenians to an old ass, vi. 49; dog stories, vii. 10, vii. 13, vii. 29). There are several epitaphs on various animals in the Anthology (*Anth. Pal.* vii. 189-216).

Primitive people look upon men and beasts as akin (Harrison, *Prolegomena* 111), and the sin of killing animals was suggested to the Greek mind by the curious ceremony of the *βουφόνια* (Schmidt ii. 92; Harrison 111-113). This recognition of kinship between man and animals may perhaps be connected with the protection which the gods were supposed to exercise over the brute creation. Aeschylus held this belief strongly (*Ag.* 48-59, 134-145), and it is to be found in Sophocles (*El.*

566-569)¹, Herodotus (i. 159), and Aelian (xi. 31, 35). Porphyry (*De abstinentia* ii.) tries to show that animal sacrifice is a late innovation, and Miss Harrison is inclined to believe that he is correct (*Pro.* 56, 57).

There was a Greek proverb to the effect that 'even the dogs have their Erinyes' (*Paroemiog. Gr.* i. 397, ii. 161, quoted by Schmidt ii. 96). This shows clearly how even the common people were impressed with the idea that animals are under the protection of Heaven.

Either because of this belief, or as the result of taboo (Burnet, *Early Gk. Phil.* 104), there sprang up that asceticism, which was a more prominent feature of Greek life than is generally supposed. It was especially associated with Orphism, the followers of which were wont to abstain from animal food² (Eurip. *Hipp.* 952, fr. 475, Harrison 511, cf. Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1032). Abstinence formed a part of the Pythagorean way of life, which was very popular in the fourth century, as may be inferred from the satire of the comedians (Burnet, 103, 104). Porphyry looked upon abstinence as a great virtue, and Plutarch expresses deep disgust at the man who first touched the corpse of an animal with his lips (*De carnium esu*).

This abstinence was practised for various reasons, sometimes out of pure asceticism, sometimes because it was healthy. It by no means implied necessarily the belief that animal life is sacred; Hippolytus, although a strict ascetic, is, like his patron goddess, an enthusiastic hunter (Eurip. *Hipp.* 18). Such a belief, however, was a natural consequence of the doctrine of transmigration; so we find that Empedocles believed in both (Diog. Laert. viii. 77, and Sextus, *Math.* ix. 127). Plato, on the other hand, while adhering to the doctrine of transmigration, did not hold animal life sacred; convinced that the gradual

¹ Cf. also Eur. *Ion* 179, κτείνειν δ' ὑμᾶς αἰδοῦμαι | τοὺς θεῶν ἀγγέλλοντας φάμας | θνατοῖς.

² The southern element in the Greek nation came from men who were not great flesh-eaters. Harrison, *Proleg.* 57.

perfection of life by a series of incarnations was the divine intention, to be aided by every man to the utmost, he was ready to sacrifice any number of lives, even human lives, if the great cause appeared to be helped thereby.

Greek philosophy, by the mere exercise of reason, and quite apart from sentiment, religious or other, proved that man and beasts are akin; the savage and the man of science arrive at the same truth, although by different routes. Hence some philosophers held that animals have rights. Empedocles said that it was absolutely unjust to kill anything with life in it (Arist. *Rhet.* 1373 b, 14; cf. the fragments of Emp. in Ritter and Preller 184, and Democritus in Stob. *Flor.* 44, 16). Xenocrates believed that even animals have some instinct of the divine nature (Clem. *Strom.* v. 13, p. 698 P), and a pretty story, showing his love of wild animals, is told by Diogenes Laertius (iv. 10). The same philosopher (according to Hermippus in Porphyry, *De abs.* iv. 22) gave as three laws of Triptolemus (1) to honour parents, (2) to sacrifice fruits to the gods, (3) not to hurt animals. The doctrine that animals have rights¹ was denied by Stoics and Epicureans. (Cf. for the Stoics, Diog. Laert. vii. 129, *μηδὲν εἶναι ἡμῖν δίκαιον πρὸς τὰ ἄλλα ζῶα διὰ τὴν ἀνομοιότητα*, and for the Epicureans, *ibid.* x. 150, no duties towards animals, which cannot make contracts; see also Porph. *De abs.* i. 3). This strenuous opposition proves conclusively that many people took the other view. Theophrastus, indeed, holding that the beasts are akin to man, believed that they 'therefore possess rights as against us which forbid us forcibly to rob them of life.' (Zeller, *Arist.* ii. 413).

¹ In Hesiod we are told that *δικη*, the gift of Heaven to man, does not exist among beasts, birds, or fishes (*Works*, 277). But the poet is thinking of the relations of animals to one another, rather than those of men to animals.

I think that this evidence, however briefly it has been given, proves that the *dictum* of Gomperz is incorrect. The Greeks not only appreciated the wonders of animal life, but sympathised with it, and, in some cases at least, believed that animals have their rights. To this school belonged Empedocles, Aeschylus, Theophrastus, Plutarch, and perhaps Sophocles and Euripides. And however much reasons of health, asceticism, and even 'crankiness' influenced the less intellectual of those who followed the Pythagorean mode of life, it cannot be maintained that respect for animals was confined to a few persons, or to any one period of history. Singularly human, and singularly free from prejudice, the Greek reached a moral plane, which, as regards animals and their rights, compares favourably with the theory and practice of the twentieth century.

This feeling of respect for animals must have been of slow growth; but the evidence is not copious enough to show fully the order in time of the various stages of development. One point, however, is clear. The Greek of the pre-philosophic age, and the simple-minded Greek of any age, said (or denied) that Heaven protects the brute creation; philosophers asserted (or denied) that animals have rights. Philosophy clearly defined what had been vaguely felt before.

It is to be regretted that historians have been so careless of chronological considerations in discussing the history of moral ideas. To skip from Homer to Plutarch (a fault all too common in the otherwise valuable treatise of Schmidt) is to leave out of account the changes and developments of a thousand years. Until this defect is made good, an important branch of ancient history will remain in its present unscientific, and therefore unsatisfactory, condition.

W. H. S. JONES.