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Recommended Citation

Bodson, L. (1983). Attitudes toward animals in Greco-Roman antiquity. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 4(4), 312-320.

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Attitudes Toward Animals in Greco-Roman Antiquity

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Both wild and domesticated animals had a direct and wide-ranging role in the life of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The bond between humans and animals which first originated in the economic needs went far beyond strictly practical matters. It did influence and enrich the Classical culture in its major aspects from literature and arts to philosophy and ethics. It also induced people to analyze the main implications of their relationship with "subhuman" creatures. The present paper aims to survey the range of the attitudes they developed about animals. It also examines to what extent they were concerned with the problems related to animal welfare and rights, and how they coped with them.

When one considers the importance of the involvement of animals in the life of the ancient Greeks and Romans, one is bound to wonder how the latter treated those subhuman creatures of which they required so much for all their physical and metaphysical needs (Keller, 1909-1913; Toynbee, 1973). Did they care for them and to what extent? Did they have any definite ideas on the subject of animal welfare and animal rights which was later to become such a sensitive and controversial issue (Magel, 1981; Rollin, 1982)?

The relationship between man and animal is directly affected by the cultural and intellectual environment of the societies and civilizations in which it is rooted. Since it has taken an increasing importance in the past few decades (due to the current economic, scientific, and moral evolution), we run the risk, as always when investigating an ancient tradition on matters of present interest, of being anachronistic. A few preliminary remarks are therefore needed in order to define the sources to be taken into consideration, their limits and prospects.

Although the amount of materials lost over the ages should not be underestimated, the remaining evidence, either direct or indirect, clearly shows the evolution of the mentalities throughout the antiquity. They are scattered over two millenia or so: from the Creto-myce-naean era (2nd mill. B.C.) down to the first centuries of the Roman empire. Some of them, especially those recording the attitudes which were privately adopted towards the animals are concentrated in the Greek and Roman texts of the first three centuries A.D., at the time when people reconsidered the philosophical and ethical theories previously elaborated in ancient anthropology, broadened the debate, and focused on the human-animal bond more systematically than ever before. Yet, the data that they brought up to illustrate the often diverging positions go back to events and episodes which took place earlier, sometimes several centuries before the time when they were definitively written down and preserved. This late emergence does not detract from their importance. Far from being mere anecdotes, colorful but of restricted

meaning, they complete the direct and scarcer evidence and confirm that the problems arising from the daily relationship between man and animal were never despised nor played down at any period. Quite the reverse, they were paid attention to not only by philosophers and moralists, but also by a wider public, by the State authorities, and by those who were concerned in the first place: animal owners, breeders, and keepers. Since those accounts have also given the ancient authors and compilers the opportunity to analyze and comment on the features they reported on, they became significant of the ideas prevailing at the time when they were set forth. Being experienced by all people without exception, the relationship between man and animal in the Classical antiquity cannot be isolated from what influenced it most: the philosophers' and moralists' views and the religious beliefs and rites. All these factors are closely related. For the sake of clarity, they will be outlined separately in the next two paragraphs, as an introduction to the survey of man's daily relationship with the animal in Greece and Rome.

Ancient Philosophers' and Moralists' Views on Animals

As soon as the Greek thought emerged, the question of defining man in his relationship with the world and all living beings arose. Although the debate was to remain strongly anthropocentric, the early anthropology felt it necessary to define both the supranatural and the subhuman creatures: gods and animals. This did not go without flaws, ambiguities, and incoherences as the ideas evolved. In spite of this, most theories, if not all, did affect the relationship between man and animal. Full accounts of the ideas developed on that matter have been given, e.g., by Westermarck (1908), Boas and Lovejoy (1935), and more recently by Dierauer (1977) to which the

reader is kindly requested to turn to further details and references. Only the essential points of immediate interest for the question under examination will be stressed below.

In admonishing his brother on how to behave properly, the moralist farmer-poet Hesiod (7th cent. B.C.) considered the principles which rule the world and stated that justice has been granted exclusively to mankind by Zeus, while the wild animals—fish, birds, mammals—deprived as they are of the *logos* (both intelligence and language) that makes man's superiority, "teared each other to pieces in a merciless struggle" (*Works and Days*, 274–280). Hesiod also praised the ploughing ox, suggested how the farmer should select it, but said nothing even allusively on its welfare (*ibid.*, 405, 436–441). One might, however, admit that the farmer, considering his own and personal interest, at least would care for his "first servant" and grant it the minimal comfort to keep it in good health.

A few decades later, Pythagoras and his followers dealing among other metaphysical concerns with life after death developed the theory of metempsychosis. They believed in the human soul's transmigration to the other living creatures, including the animals, and therefore they taught their contemporaries not to kill them, whether they were wild or domestic. They relied upon a more or less exclusive vegetarian diet depending on the range of animal species involved in the transmigration process (Haussleiter, 1935). The theory of soul transmigration was later to be taken up by Plato who distinguished a double nature in man's soul: for its better part, divine and shared with the gods (*logistikon*: the rational element), and, for the other, related to the animals through the *thymoeides* (the spirited element) and *epithymetikon* (the appetitive element). (See Plato, *Republic*, IV. 439 E–440 E.) Man could only fulfill himself by giving his reason command over the ir-

rational forces of his soul. Aristotle who correlated the rational and sensitive parts of the soul initiated an important program of research in animal psychology. After him, Theophrastus could argue on the physical and mental similarities between man and animal. He concluded to their kinship, since he agreed on the fact that "if they are differences of degree, there are no really qualitative distinctions with regard to the sense perception" (Gomperz, 1955; Gill, 1969; Dierauer, 1977). Such views and similar ones professed by the founders of natural history were connected with the arguments already expressed or alluded to earlier in the tradition, e.g. by Empedocles, and destined to undergo further developments, that the animals are superior in some ways to human beings. The ancient theoreticians of the human-animal relationship also kept alive the polemics generated by the Stoics' ideas on the hierarchy of all beings and their concept of man's superiority correlated with his theoretically absolute dominion over the animal. Epicurians, Cynics, and later Sceptics, neo-Platonists, neo-Pythagoreans, each of them with their own arguments and purposes (Lorenz, 1974; Dierauer, 1977) vigorously contested such theories and the consequences they involved for the status of animals since the beasts were said to exist only for man's use and advantage. Underlining the animals' irrationality, the Stoics denied them any of the abilities indispensable for their being granted recognition of any rights, either natural or legal, and therefore denied them the protection of law and justice. One of the most comprehensive accounts of those controversies preserved along with a good synthesis of the main factors at issue is given by Plutarch's treatises, especially those entitled *The Cleverness of Animals*, *Beasts Are Rational*, and *The Eating of Flesh*. Yet, the most open-minded among the ancient philosophers and moralists never brought the question of

animal rights beyond the speculative level and individual applications. There is no clue of their discussions being influential enough even at some local scale to stir up the radical changes that the mishandling of animals, such as in the games organized by authorities in the Roman empire (see below), would have justified. It is known that in Thessaly the storks and in Argolid the grass snakes were protected by the local laws. The basic reason for such regulation was man's advantages: those animals were judged to be more effective than any other at keeping respectively vipers and small rodents under control. In Athens, an old law mentioned by Plato in his ideal code (*Laws*, IX. 873 E) stated that "if any animal of burden or any other animal murdered anyone—except if they did it when taking part in a public competition—the relatives should prosecute the slayer for murder, and so many of the land-stewards as were appointed by the relatives should decide the case, and the convicted beast they should kill and cast beyond the borders of the country." No consideration of the private right or the civil responsibility of the animal's owner is to be found here. Such a law, anthropocentred as it is, is based on the archaic notion of the blood stain to be resolved in the ritual destruction and expulsion of the culprit, either an animal or even a simple object, as shown in *Laws*, IX. 873 E-874 A (Gernet, 1917). No ancient legislation favoring the mistreated animal with comparable measures has been found so far. Yet some evidence of court condemnation for abuses of animals occurs in the tradition. Plutarch (*The Eating of Flesh*, I. 7) mentioned the Athenian citizen condemned after flaying his ram when it was still alive. Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, VIII. 180) pointed out the case of a Roman citizen "who was indicted for having killed an ox. He was convicted by the public court and sent into exile as though he had murdered his farm-labourer." Such epi-

sodes are commanded by the empathy for the animals in the sense defined by Fox (1980) and the sentences are passed by referring to the penalty for any attempt upon man's life and physical integrity. The contexts in which the episodes are mentioned suggest that the "moral conscience" of the public was hurt by the unmotivated slaughter of and other acts of cruelty towards animals, considered them as intolerable, and sought to curb them by requiring exiles, fines, public reprimands, etc., for the author of the gesture assimilated to a crime. The available evidence, however, shows that such reactions, widely praised by those who emphasized the animal's right of being fairly treated, remained occasional. They even seem to have been exceptional enough to be underlined and remembered as guidelines by those who recorded them. More often than from the laws and official regulations the reactions to animal mistreatment came from the so-called popular wisdom as is expressed in old proverbs. "There are Erinyes (i.e., deities of vengeance) even for dogs", the Greeks used to say meaning thereby that every living being however great or small in the scale of hierarchy would be in the end avenged by the immanent justice. In the meantime, this deeply-rooted belief did not prevent the public from reacting and even overreacting against animal abuse: the killer of a talking raven famous and much appreciated in Rome in the 1st cent. A.D. was "dealt with" by the crowd outraged at what was considered like an act of barbarity (Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.*, X. 110).

The Impact of Religion

Both wild and domestic animals fulfilled countless functions in the Greek and Roman religions, mythologies, and symbols in which they occurred as omen bearers, messengers, and attributes (Hopf, 1888; Pollard, 1977; Bodson, 1978). That privileged relationship with the supranat-

ural world and the sacred forces included in it was intensively perceived and revered, even in the later periods when religion became more formalistic. This played a part in the process which won the animals the moral right of being treated equitably. Yet, the major cult celebration in honor of every god either of first or of second rank included the sacrifice of domestic animals. The slaughter of the victim was one of the main points at issue. Hunting the wild and ferocious animals was always justified as an improvement of the living conditions and as the best training in bravery, courage, and stamina for the youngster keen on becoming a responsible citizen and a good soldier. But even then the rule was not to slaughter the newly-born offspring of at least the undangerous species and to leave them to the goddess Artemis, protectress of both the hunter and the game (Xenophon, *Cynegetica*, 5. 14). The problem was quite different with the domestic species, especially sheep, goats, and cattle, the slaughter of which inspired a full range of rules and devices to justify a compulsory but feared action perceived as an attack on the life of man's first and faithful servants (Durand, 1979). Required by cultural, political, and social reasons (Vernant, 1981), animal sacrifice was not carried out without a carefully designed ceremonial which aimed at counterbalancing the potential danger of shedding blood of innocent victims (Yerkes, 1952; Burkert, 1972). In that sense, the ancients could praise the Scythians otherwise despised as barbarians or the minorities such as the Pythagorean sect, the former as "milk drinkers", the latter as vegetarians. Such diets, although out of reach for the majority, appealed to many because it reminded them somehow of the mythical Golden Age when man and animal were believed to live together in full harmony (Guthrie, 1957). Moreover, in Greece and in Rome, the cult observance could also be fulfilled on certain occasions with

bloodless offerings made of flowers, vegetables, fruits, etc., along with periodical abstinence of meat. Such was the case at some festivals celebrated for the Greek goddess Demeter (lat. Ceres) which spread all over the ancient world the sacred rule once issued at Eleusis and requiring the worshipper "to honour his parents, to bring fruit offerings to the gods, not to injure any living creature."

Individual and Collective Attitudes Towards Animal Welfare & Rights

As seen above, the idea of the natural and moral rights of animals to be fairly treated was largely shared and spread out under philosophical and religious influences. From its very beginning, the Greek literature included significant evidence of pity, compassion, and reverence paid to the animals (Lilja, 1974). Some have got worldwide fame: Argos, the dog faithfully awaiting his master Odysseus during his 20-year long absence (*Odyssey*, 17. 290–327); the horses of the Trojan hero Pandaros who preferred to leave them at home lest they should be deprived of the proper care in all the uncertainties of the battlefield of Troy (*Iliad*, 5. 201–203). Those examples fit very well with the large amount of Homeric similes focusing the interest on the animals and showing the reader that the extension of empathy to animals at the early stage of the Greek civilization implied a better knowledge of their behavior and psychology (Rahn, 1950–1954; 1967). From then down to the Roman period, there is a wealth of evidence on how many among the ancient people experienced and admired the ability of the animals to learn, progress, and react, how much they felt responsible for the animal dependants and concerned to exert their dominion over them by ensuring their welfare. The main and first reason for doing so was their conviction that the animals had the moral rights to be: (1) well treated during their lives including their old age when

they are not able to work any more; (2) honored and praised for the courage and bravery that the best of them put in carrying out their duties; and finally (3) granted the right to die peacefully and to have their mortal remains removed with dignity. Breeders and farmers were trained to pay close attention to the health of the animals they raised and employed, to protect them from bad weather conditions, to provide them with appropriate and sufficient fodder, to spare them any unnecessary hardship (Columella, *On Agriculture*, VI– IX passim). At first, such a policy could seem to be planned for no better purpose than the profit of the animal's owner. Indeed, the advantage of the owner should not be disregarded, but this does not exclude unselfish reasons linked up with the irreplaceable experience of the daily relationship and contacts taking place in the common undertaking of the farm work (Gorteman, 1957). The animals were recognized as sensitive creatures serving man generously and faithfully. They were at his mercy, he had the duty of elementary justice and equity towards them, if for no other reason because he had been granted more intelligence than they. The argument of man's *logos* which could, as seen above, be brought up to set up his superiority on the other animals and to assert his right to use and abuse them was then put forward to justify his duty of humaneness towards them. Quite often, the attitudes towards animals were inspired by heartfelt reasons as much as philosophical ones. According to Xenophon (*Economics*, 5. 20), Socrates used to recommend prayers for farm animals: cattle, horses, and sheep. Indeed, shepherds, cattle raisers, donkey owners, etc., concerned with their beasts prayed the gods to bless their herds and to keep them in good health. The prayer formulas, the rites performed on such occasions, and the monuments erected once the prayer had been fulfilled are identical with those they used when praying

for themselves and for their children (Bodson, 1980). Moreover, many people in Greece and in Rome took steps to have themselves represented with their animals — oxen, dogs, goats, birds, etc., — on the tombstones to be erected after their death (Galletier, 1922; Herrlinger, 1930). It is not unreasonable to conclude from the abundant evidence supplied by excavations that those who wished their animals to benefit by their piety and to continue to share their companionship even after death were motivated by a deep and sincere empathy for them. In that general context, they did not have to refer to religion, philosophy, or laws to criticize and protest against those who mistreated their serving animals: the farmer who harassed his cow just after calving (Bianor, *Palatine Anthology*, X. 101); the bathhouse keeper who forced his donkey to work without rest (Plutarch, *On Love of Wealth*, 5); Cato the Elder who was heartless to the point of selling his horse after campaigning with him for months (Plutarch, *Life of Cato major*, 5. 7). Similar reactions occurred against those who unscrupulously abused their pets or tame animals: Alcibiades cutting his dog's tail to divert the Athenians' attention from his way of handling public affairs (Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades*, 9), the killer of the talking raven mentioned above, or the local authorities of Hippona secretly killing the dolphin which they considered a great disturber of public peace because it attracted thousands of people eager to watch its frolics from the beach (Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 9. 33).

While reminding their readers of those abuses and their consequences in order to prevent them in the future, the authors also wished to point out the occasions when the animals had been properly treated as a positive way to encourage humanitarianism towards animals. Xanthippos, Pericles' father, was remembered among other things because he had ordered a memorial for his dog which had

died from exhaustion while trying to swim behind the boat on which he was being evacuated from Athens before the Persian invasion of 490 B.C. (Plutarch, *Life of Themistocles*, 10. 9–10). The Athenians extended the application of the law designed to grant the athletes public honors to some famous animals distinguished for their services. Such were a mule which had worked tirelessly as a draft animal in the building of the Partheon (Aristotle, *History of Animals*, VI. 24), and a watchdog which had stopped a sacrilegious burglar (Plutarch, *The Cleverness of Animals*, 13). Many private citizens were keen to have their favorite pets portrayed by painters or sculptors and celebrated by poets while the animals were still alive or after their deaths as a last tribute (Galletier, 1922; Herrlinger, 1930). As Carson (1972) pointed out, this was also a means to flaunt one's wealth and social status. But when it came from ordinary citizens for ordinary dogs, birds, or cicadas, etc., or from a Roman emperor like Hadrian who wished to compose the epitaph for his horse (Aymard, 1951), sincere attachment rather than selfish ostentation was probably their true motive.

Yet, for all the sympathy they displayed towards animals, the ancient Greeks and Romans could not always refrain from cruelty and mistreatment. The Greeks, especially the Athenians, did enjoy quail- and cockfights (Bruneau, 1965), the latter being justified as a national celebration since a couple of fighting roosters was believed to have inspired the Athenian resistance to the Persian invaders in the early 5th century B.C. (Aelian, *On Animals*, II. 18). There is however nothing in those shows to compare with what was to become the common entertainment under the Roman empire. Besides the pacific exhibitions and parades of exotic animals, people in Rome and in the more remote provinces as well enjoyed the bloody games of the arena in which thousands of wild animals

were slaughtered at the price of irretrievable damage to the African, Asian, and European fauna (Loisel, 1912; Jennison, 1937; Toynbee, 1973). Even though such games, yet on a lower scale, were originally part of funeral rites, by the turn of the 1st century B.C., they no longer had any reference to a cult or religious purpose. They were sometimes presented as a useful device of the emperors aiming at clearing some parts of the Empire from wild and dangerous mammals in order to enlarge the areas available for human settlements. Yet, they were primarily a political and social phenomenon in which the goals of sport hunting, once defined by Xenophon (see above) were perverted (Auguet, 1970). Contrasting with the literary evidence and the rich diversity of sensitive depictions of animals either common or rare, the sadistic barbarity of those mass slaughtering reveals one of the outstanding paradoxes of the Roman people. While being so much alive to the interest and beauty of the animal kingdom, they took pleasure in gazing at the sufferings and agonizing death of its most impressive species. Cicero's, Seneca's, Plutarch's voices were among the very few which were raised in protest against those hideous practices. They condemned them — unsuccessfully. As for the onlookers, the first and last public protest recorded in the ancient tradition occurred in 55 B.C. during the great show given by Pompey which turned into the killing of about twenty elephants (Scullard, 1974).

Conclusion

Unlike Judaism with the Bible (Rimbach, 1982), the Classical antiquity never disposed of a single and sacred book used as a standard of reference. The evidence to be taken into consideration is therefore less homogeneous but it includes a somehow larger range of data both concrete and theoretical. First of all, they show all the possible attitudes from

cruelty to humanitarianism which once prevailed at different degrees in the relationship between man and animal. Those behaviors originated in all kinds of motives and intentions involving religion, ethics, and psychological factors which were sometimes quite elusive when they were rooted in the special fascination or in the aversion the animal species generated in man's mind.

Investigating the ancient religion and philosophy essentially, Lorenz (1974) came to the conclusion that (p. 240) "tauchte nun im vierten Jahrhundert, für uns greifbar bei Xenokrates and Theophrast, der Gedanke auf, dass die Tötung von zahmen und mit dem Menschen lebenden Tieren ein Unrecht darstelle." Enlarged to the day-after-day experiences of the relationship with animals, the evidence confirms a real empathy towards animals long before the 4th century B.C. Personal and individual feelings of right or wrong in dealing with the animals by standards of humaneness were first designed to rule the relationship between human beings, and then extended to sub-human creatures. These standards were active from the beginning of human-animal relationships, even though they were not always fully asserted. They brought about a sharper and more generous attention to animal welfare. On that general and empirical background, the impulse given by Aristotle and the Peripatetician school to the study of the animal developed a new approach, at both scientific and psychological levels, of the animal nature, of its differences and similarities with the human nature, and of the place of the animal in the hierarchy of living beings. Then, many philosophers and moralists stressed and pleaded for the idea that man could make no better use of his *logos* towards the animals than by granting them the natural and moral right to be fairly treated and by adapting his behavior to that principle. They argued sometimes fiercely against those who contested that right. They cam-

paigned for the animal defense by writing, lecturing on the matter, and by teaching the children to respect the animals (see Bion quoted by Plutarch, *The Cleverness of Animals*, 7), since they thought it to be more effective to prevent rather than to have to curb or even to prosecute the animal abuses. However, near the end of the Antiquity, Plutarch echoing the relentless debates of his time on animal nature emphasized the ever present and paradoxical difficulty to reconcile man's interest and claims with the animal rights to welfare and humanitarian protection or, in other words, to reach the challenging ideal of a harmonious relationship between man and animal. While noticing the cases of empathy he observed towards the domestic animals and pets and underlining the consequences for their welfare, he had to mention the abuses and mistreatments inflicted especially on the wild animals in the Roman empire on a scale broader than ever before.

The paradox still exists, and the challenge as well.

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