

ANIMAL ETHICS

Past and Present Perspectives

edited by
Evangelos D. Protopapadakis



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GEORGIOS STEIRIS*

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE AND AL-FĀRĀBI ON ANIMALS: ONTOLOGY AND ETHICS**

Isidore (c.560-636), Archbishop of Seville, is well appreciated as “le dernier savant du monde ancien”¹, although he lived in a medieval, from all aspects, Spain, which had no affinities with the classical Greek and Roman world. Isidore was an ardent Aristotelian, long before the revival of ancient Greek philosophy in the Arab region and in Medieval Europe. In an epic attempt to preserve the knowledge of the ancients, Isidore compiled the *Etymologiarum sive Originum*, an encyclopedia that affected the medieval world for centuries. Al- Fārābi (c.870-c.950), a leading figure of the medieval Arabic philosophy, was the founder of Arabic Neo-Platonism, and the philosopher who introduced the wisdom of the Greeks to the Arab world. He was an original philosopher and not simply a commentator, a rare feature for medieval philosophers. My purpose is to examine and compare Isidore’s and al-Fārābi’s views on animals so that we understand and evaluate the way medieval Europe and medieval Arab world, in their early phases, perceived animals as beings and agents, besides their different cultural and intellectual milieu.

I. ISIDORE OF SEVILLE ON ANIMALS

Isidore dedicated a book (XII) of the *Etymologiarum sive Originum* to the animals. Isidore followed mainly Pliny’s classification and not that much the Aristotelian model. He was also influenced by *Φυσιολόγος*, a work of Alexandrian origin (2nd century AD).² Isidore suggests that Adam named every animal according to its behavior and the condition of nature which it served.³ Latin speakers use the word *animal* or *animant* because animals are animated by life (*vita*) and moved by *spiritus*.⁴ If the correct translation of the word is “breath”, as it is proposed⁵, probably Isidore follows the Bible, according to which God breathed into the inanimate body the breath of life. While this passage refers to man, who was created superior to animals, the

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Bible lead us to the conclusion that animals may have the “breath of life”, though not an immortal soul in the same sense as humans do.⁶ Democritus and the Pythagoreans hold similar views.⁷ But if the word *spiritus* is translated as soul, Isidore seems to lie closer to Plato and the Platonists, who support that the soul moves the body⁸, although the platonic philosophy is not thorough concerning animals as it is with regard to plants.⁹

On the other hand Aristotle, the other key philosophical figure of the ancient world, supports that self-motion is the main feature of life.¹⁰ Aristotle is ambiguous on what moves the animals. While Aristotle holds that everything is moved by something which is not necessarily something else¹¹, in other passages maintains that, as to animals, whatever is in motion is caused by something else.¹² In addition Aristotle supports that the soul moves the body.¹³ He argues that animals are alive because they are animated or otherwise ensouled.¹⁴ The soul of the animals is characterized by the faculty of originating local movement.¹⁵ The answer to what moves animals is “inasmuch as an animal is capable of appetite it is capable of self-motion; it is not capable of appetite without possessing imagination; and all imagination is either calculative or sensitive. In the latter animals, and not only man, partake”.¹⁶

But in his *De differentiis verborum* (II.98) Isidore explains that there is a difference between the soul (*anima*) and the vital spirit (*spiritus*). The soul itself is a man's life, and presides over the body's sensation and motion; the vital spirit of the soul itself is whatever energy and rational potency it has, through which, by the law of nature, it seems to excel over other animals. For this reason, the soul is the breath of life, making man an animal, but the vital spirit is the force which suppresses carnal desires, and stirs up mortal man for the goal of an immortal life.¹⁷

Another interesting remark of Isidore's is that every beast lacking human language and appearance should be called *pecus*.¹⁸ Besides the fact that this is the name for edible animals, the phrase needs elaboration. Unless Isidore considers humans as beasts, it is not clear which are the beasts who have human language and appearance. Humans are animated by the breath of God, as are other beasts, as Isidore's text suggests. Another possible explanation would be that Isidore refers to creatures like the sphinx, which other ecclesiastical writers describe as having human language and appearance.¹⁹

Isidore's views on animals' rights are traditional, and there is no novelty of any kind in his writings. Namely he suggests that humans are allowed to eat animals and have the right to take advantage of animals in any possible way. Animals are obliged to help humans in their labor, while the latter

use animals in warfare and as pray in sacrifices.²⁰ Isidore does not give any privileged status to bigeneric animals, even if they are half-human, such as Centaurs. Centaurs are half-humans and half-horses. According to Isidore, if a woman looks to a deformed animal during pregnancy, her fetus will be affected and will look like the animal. Procreation is affected by the images the women perceive or create in their imagination.²¹ Although Isidore's interpretation of the beasts seems conservative, he nevertheless influenced medieval writers. According to Isidore, all nature is within the will of God. As a result Isidore bequeathed to medieval thinkers the moral evaluation of the monstrous.²²

After herd animals Isidore discusses the beasts (*bestia*). They are called beasts because they are powerful and ferocious, they enjoy natural liberty, their will is free and their spirit leads them to wander around.²³ Isidore acknowledges that animals have free will (*liberae eorum voluntates*) and spirit (*animus*). The attribution of free will to animals is not so common. In the 13th century Maimonides echoing a certain Jewish tradition suggests that God gave *will* to animals and *free will* to humans. Irrational animals are being moved by their free will, likewise humans.²⁴ Free will, according to the mainstream Jewish and Christian tradition, is a basic feature of humans, not of animals, as Augustine of Hippo mentions several times.²⁵ Aristotle, for example, supports that animals lack rational desire or wish; they have only appetite.²⁶ But in another passage Aristotle suggests that animals' acts are voluntary.²⁷ The Stoics follow Aristotle and hold that animals do have souls, but they lack reason because their *hegemonikon* remains irrational.²⁸

Isidore does not explain further what he means, but it is puzzling why he attributes free will only to beasts and not to other species of animals. It is possible that he connects beasts' free will with their wandering, but Isidore's phrasing does not support clearly such an argument. Despite any possible interpretation, the fact is that Isidore is probably the first high esteemed thinker of the classical and Christian world that attributes *libera voluntas* to beasts.

Moreover Isidore supports the view that natural law is not applicable to all animals. Isidore distances himself from the Roman tradition as expressed by Ulpian.²⁹ The attribution of free will to animals does not equate humans with animals, because the distinctive feature of humans remains their rational intellect.

Furthermore, in an interesting passage, Isidore mentions serpents, and holds that snakes excel in *vivacitate sensus*.³⁰ Isidore's source is the Bible.³¹ But it is worth noticing that Isidore does not follow the biblical text which attributes *sapientia* to snakes.

II. AL-FĀRĀBI ON ANIMALS

The Arabic philosophy is influenced by almost the same traditions that affected Isidore of Seville, with the exception of the Islamic religious element. Muslims, like the Jews and the Christians, hold that humans, while they remain animals, dominate over other animals because they have reason and immortal soul. But Muslims, under the influence of Persian thought, were sympathetic to animals.³² In fact the proponents of one of the major schools of Arabic philosophy, namely the Mu'tazilah, hold that although there is divine providence, free will is granted to animals, and that they receive reward and punishment in the afterlife.³³ Also Maimonides, as I already mentioned, suggests that animals, in like manner with humans, move about as they will. But their will is the will of God.³⁴

Al-Fārābi, the first great philosopher of the Arabic world, was concurrent to the Mu'tazilis. Al-Farabi attempts a thorough philosophical study of the animals. According to al-Fārābi animals are sublunary, compound bodies, and they are divided in animals that lack speech, and animals that possess speech and thought.³⁵ Animals are a combination of matter and form. Their matter is comprised of the four elements.³⁶ In the hierarchical order of nature no species surpasses those animals that are endowed with speech and thought. In a lower level there are the animals which lack speech and thought.³⁷ The animals which lack speech and thought arise as the result of a mixture which is more complex than that of the plants and the minerals.³⁸

As for free will, al-Fārābi leads us to assume that animals do not have free will. He supports that the actions of the free natural bodies ought to be performed through acts of rational choice and will. But the offensive actions of animals are a result of their nature, without any apparent gain.³⁹ In addition al-Fārābi holds that choice as rational desire, the third kind of will according to him, pertains only to man and not to other animals. On the other hand, two different kinds of will can exist even in irrational animals: the first kind is a desire that follows from a sensation; the second is a desire that follows from an act of the imagination. Moral agent is only man, because only man develops the third kind of will. Man chooses between right and wrong, is subject to reward or punishment, and is able to seek or not to seek happiness.⁴⁰ Choice is the will that is derived from the practical intellect. Seemingly similar functions in animals, besides man, are not called choice.⁴¹ As a result al-Fārābi argues that irrational animals are not moral agents. They possess will, but their will remains unresolved. Al-Fārābi's view is by far more explicit and articulated than Isidore's of Seville.

It is worth mentioning that al-Razi (864-925/932), a Persian philoso-

pher and a contemporary of al-Fārābi, attributes some sort of reason and choice to animals.⁴² In addition al-Razi, when discussing justice, suggests that domestic animals should not be killed. On the contrary, killing and slaughtering of wild beasts is allowed, because they are harmful and dangerous for men. Domestic animals' soul can not escape their bodies. As a result their killing offers nothing to them. Reason forbids their slaughter. While al-Razi is aware that ancient and Muslim thinkers held different views, he considers Socrates as his ally on the forbiddance of the killing of animals.⁴³ Also the *Brethen of Purity*, a vast encyclopedia written in the 10th century, condemns the suffering of animals. Similar views expresses, among others - mostly Persians - Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207-1273), a Persian polymath. According to him even animals are aware of the possession of free will; as a result humans must not believe in any kind of determinism.⁴⁴

But, according to al-Fārābi's ontological and hierarchical scale, animals are inferior to humans, although in certain passages he seems to hold that animals exist even for the sake of plants.⁴⁵ In addition al-Fārābi writes: "For every animal has a body and senses and a power to discern somehow that by means of which it labors toward the soundness of its body and senses. But it does not have a desire to understand the causes of what it sees in the heaven and on earth, let alone having a sense of wonder about things whose causes it desires to understand."⁴⁶

Moreover, al-Fārābi makes use of animals in order to elaborate his political views. When he refers to the outgrowths of the city, he compares them to the wild beasts, because the outgrowths have bestial nature. The analogy between beasts and outgrowths brings into notice again al-Fārābi's view: animals are inferior to humans, and must be used correlatively.⁴⁷

III. CONCLUSIONS

Isidore of Seville and al-Fārābi are two seminal figures of the early medieval world. Although their main interest was not in animals, they left us some interesting views and insights. They both follow the traditional view, namely that animals are ontologically inferior to humans, remaining loyal to the principles of their paradigms. But, on the other hand, their argumentation on animal's free will was of great importance for the evolution of animal rights and, I dare say, much more progressive than those of future philosophers and scholars. I hope that the insights provided in this paper will contribute to the promotion of the study especially of medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy, both very rich in ideas concerning animals' rights.

NOTES

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4. Ibid., XII.I.3.
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12. Ibid., 254b 30-31.
13. Aristoteles, *De motu animalium* 700b 5ff.
14. Aristoteles, *De anima* 412a 13, 434b 11-14; also id., *De generatione animalium* 736b 13-15; and id., *De partibus animalium* 681a 12-15.
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26. Aristoteles, *De anima* 414b 5-6, 432b 5.
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 39. Ibid., 18.3, 18.5.
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