

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

## Porphyry, the Argument from Species Overlap, and Rationality

### ABSTRACT

In this article an argument for vegetarianism in Porphyry's (c. 234-305) *De abstinentia* (III. 19) will be analyzed. This argument is today called the argument from marginal cases or, less controversially, the argument from species overlap. In brief, the argument states that any morally relevant criterion for moral patiency status (or for being brought within the sweep of justice) that is possessed by all human beings will not be possessed only by human beings. For example, all humans, but not only humans, are capable of experiencing pain; and while only humans are capable of solving complex mathematical problems, not all humans can do this. If a nonhuman animal has morally relevant characteristics a, b, c...n but lacks reason (or autonomy or language) and a human being has morally relevant characteristics a, b, c...n but lacks reason (or autonomy or language), then we have as much reason to believe that the nonhuman animal is a moral patient and deserving of justice as the human being. The place of this argument in Porphyry's philosophy will also be considered in light of Jonathan Barnes' and G. Fay Edwards' scholarship. The fact that the version of the argument in Porphyry is (as far as the author of the article is aware) the very first instance of the argument from species overlap is noteworthy considering the fact that the argument is still defended by many contemporary proponents of nonhuman animal rights, including Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Dale Jamieson, etc.

DANIEL A. DOMBROWSKI  
Seattle University

Volume 25, Issue 1

Winter 2022

*<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>*

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There is considerable evidence that many of the philosophers from antiquity defended vegetarianism: Pythagoras, Empedocles, Theophrastus, Seneca, Ovid, Plutarch, Plotinus, Porphyry (c. 234-305), and others. (See Dombrowski 1984a for a treatment of these thinkers' views.) Further, there is much evidence from Plato's dialogues that shows his interest in the topic of philosophical vegetarianism (see Dombrowski 1984a, 1984c and 1990). There has been a rebirth of interest in philosophical vegetarianism in the past several decades due to Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and many others, as is well known. This renaissance has rekindled *some* interest in ancient philosophical vegetarianism, but little attention has been paid to the connection between one of the most important arguments in the contemporary debate—the argument from marginal cases or the argument from species overlap—and the very first version of this argument of which I am aware in Porphyry's *De abstinentia*. The aim of the present article is to examine this connection, especially in light of recent scholarship by Jonathan Barnes and G. Fay Edwards.

The ancient thinkers mentioned above defended vegetarianism for at least four different reasons: (1) Several of these thinkers believed in *transmigration*, which led them to spare nonhuman animals due to the belief that nonhuman animals were, or will be, human beings. The story in Diogenes Laertius (VIII. 36) of Pythagoras asking someone to stop beating a dog because he recognized the voice of a deceased friend in the cry of the animal is evidence of this tendency. (2) Another reason for ancient abstinence from meat was the belief that meat-eating was *injurious to the health* of either body or soul. The former belief was tied to ancient medical thought, while the latter was connected to a more general commitment to moderation or asceticism. (3) However, there was also among the

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ancients a concern for nonhuman animals themselves in what is now called an *argument from sentiency*: because nonhuman animals experience pain when they are killed (or are deprived of a life which is theirs if killed painlessly), and because we can live healthy lives on vegetal foods, eating meat is cruel and ought to be avoided. (See Plutarch's "Of Eating the Flesh" in his *Moralia* for one clear expression of compassion for nonhuman animals as a basis for vegetarianism.)

(4) There is at least a fourth approach, however, that can easily escape notice. This is unfortunate due to the fact that it anticipates one of the most powerful arguments in contemporary debates concerning nonhuman animal rights. Let us agree for the sake of argument that the requirement for moral agency (for being able to act morally or immorally and to be held morally accountable for one's actions) is rationality or related abilities like sophisticated language use, consciousness, etc. This nonetheless leaves undecided the question as to what a defensible requirement for moral patiency status might be (for being able to receive moral or immoral actions from others or being able to be treated cruelly by others). It is this debate regarding moral patiency status that has exercised philosophers for the past two generations. The argument in question is meant to illuminate moral patiency status and is described by Singer as follows:

The catch is that any such characteristic that is possessed by *all* human beings will not be possessed *only* by human beings. For example, all humans, but not only humans, are capable of feeling pain; and while only humans are capable of solving complex mathematical problems, not all humans can do this. So it turns out that in the only sense in which we can truly say, as an assertion of fact, that all humans are equal, at least some

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members of other species are also “equal”—equal, that is, to some humans. (Singer 1975, 265)

If we say that we can permissibly eat nonhuman animals because human beings (but not nonhuman animals) are rational, or autonomous, or just, or language-users, etc., then it is important to notice that this assertion is not true of many human beings. Something like the view that moral patiency status requires rationality was defended by Aristotle (e.g., I. 8 of the *Politics*) and the Stoics (e.g., Cicero 1933, II, 14 and 37; 1921, I, 50-51) and it is precisely this view that the argument under consideration in this article was/is meant to counteract. The “marginal cases” of humanity include infants, the mentally enfeebled, and so on. If we “lower” our criterion for moral patiency status to that of sentience (e.g., the ability to experience pain) so as to protect these human beings (and we surely do want to protect these people), we must also protect nonhuman animals with central nervous systems, including those that are routinely killed for the table. (The fact that it was not inevitable that Aristotle took this route is evidenced by the fact that his student, Theophrastus, derived quite different nonhuman animal-friendly conclusions from Aristotelian premises, as detailed by Porphyry.)

As Regan frames the argument, if a nonhuman animal has morally relevant characteristics a, b, c...n but lacks reason (or autonomy or language) and a human being has morally relevant characteristics a, b, c...n but lacks reason (or autonomy or language), then we have as much reason to believe that the nonhuman animal has rights as the human being (Regan 1978, 126-133).

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The argument in question is not claiming that infants or the mentally enfeebled are marginal human beings. Rather, it is when the Stoic thesis that rationality should be accepted as the criterion for moral patiency status becomes normative that infants and the mentally enfeebled *come to be seen as* marginal human beings. Because this point might easily be lost in the heat of the nonhuman animal rights debate, it is understandable why some prefer the label “argument from species overlap” to the label “argument from marginal cases.” I am willing to accept either label.

A third label for this argument that is appropriate is “argument for moral consistency.” This is because, once one sees the disastrous consequences of making the criterion for moral patiency status too high at (Aristotelian or Stoic) rationality, and once one also sees the disastrous consequences of making the criterion too low at, say, pre-sentient life, in that on this basis even cutting grass would be morally problematic, one exhibits *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *sophrosyne* (moderation) by settling on sentience as a workable standard for moral patiency status. A *consistent* application of this standard for moral patiency status, however, would shake us loose of anthropocentrism.

Now I would like to consider III.19 of Porphyry’s *De abstinentia*. This work is a book length letter to a Firmus Castrius, a former vegetarian and fellow student of Plotinus who had fallen away from vegetarianism. Porphyry intends his arguments to bring Firmus back within the fold. The relevant text goes as follows (Taylor translation):

To compare plants, however, with animals, is doing violence to the order of things. For the latter are naturally sensitive

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(*aisthanesthai*), and adapted to feel pain, to be terrified and hurt (*kai algein kai phobeisthai kai blaptesthai*); on which account they may be injured (*adikeisthai*). But the former are entirely destitute of sensation, and in consequence of this, nothing foreign, or evil (*kakon*), or hurtful (*blabe*), or injurious (*adikia*), can befall them. For sensation is the principle of all alliance (*kai gar oikeioseos pases kai allotrioseos arche to aisthanesthai*)....And is it not absurd (*alogon*), since we see that many of our own species (*anthropon*) live from sense alone (*aisthesei monon*), but do not possess intellect (*noun*) and reason (*logon*)...but that no justice is shown from us to the ox that ploughs, the dog that is fed with us, and the animals that nourish us with their milk, and adorn our bodies with their wool? Is not such an opinion most irrational and absurd?

Zeno and the Stoics (including Cicero) were the ones who held such an opinion. The continued prevalence of meat-eating on the basis of the claim that human beings are rational and nonhuman animals are not indicates the pervasive influence of the Stoics on the issue in question. The absurdity mentioned in the Taylor translation is reinforced in other translations. We see the following in the Clark translation: “How can it not be irrational to think that there is justice between us and these [non-rational yet sentient nonhuman animals]?” Or again, “How can it [the view of Aristotle and the Stoics] not be wholly contrary to reason?” In Bouffartigue and Patillon’s French translation we are asked “N’est-ce pas folie?” and “Cela n’est-il pas tout a fait contraire a la raison?”

The Stoics asserted that alliance or intimacy (*oikeioseos*) is the principle to be used in determining which beings deserve justice and be seen as moral patients. But for Porphyry this principle begs the question. What is needed is some defen-

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sible criterion for alliance, some way of figuring out how we should demarcate nature into the various households of edible and inedible beings. The Stoics defended rationality in this regard. For those who think that unnecessary suffering ought to be avoided, however, sensation (*aisthanesthai*) is a principle of alliance that is more defensible than rationality. Porphyry's contrast between plants and nonhuman animals on the criterion of sentiency is instructive. If one suggests that sentiency is an insufficient criterion for being treated with justice or for being seen as a moral patient, we exclude many of our own species who live from sense alone, without reason (*alolon*). If we lower the standard for moral patiency status from rationality so as to commendably include all human beings, we must therefore, in order to be consistent, be willing to include nonhuman animals who are capable of sensation. These would include cows, pigs, chicken, fish, and others all the way down a scale of sentiency until we reached beings like clams (with a cluster of ganglia, but not a central nervous system), who occupy a grey area between sentient and nonsentient beings (Singer 1975, 183-189). The contemporary defender of the Aristotelian or Stoic view would either have to admit their inconsistency or give up an opposition to mistreatment of nonrational human beings. In any event, Porphyry's status as the discoverer of the vegetarian argument from marginal cases or species overlap or moral consistency ought to be acknowledged.

The defender of the argument from species overlap in Porphyry must nonetheless take notice of the fact that in his logical works (*Isogogue* 10. 12-15; 11. 25; 14. 13-17; 15. 1-6; also *On Aristotle's Categories* 63. 23-25; 82. 20-21—for the text of the *Isogogue* see Barnes and for the text of *On Aristotle's Categories* see Strange) Porphyry argues for a thesis that would be quite congenial to the views of the Stoics: that human beings

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are rational and nonhuman animals are not. Jonathan Barnes notices the discrepancy between the attribution of rationality to nonhuman animals in *De abstinentia* and the logical works and responds to this discrepancy by appeal to a distinction between specific and nonspecific predication. The basic idea here is that it is perfectly possible that the same predicate be true of different subjects while being related to them in quite different ways. For example, rationality is predicated of human beings essentially in relation to their species membership, but it is applied accidentally to nonhuman animals in a manner that is not integrally connected to their species. Or again, hot is predicated essentially of fire, but only accidentally of water. There is also a distinction between inseparable accidents and separable accidents. A sheep's whiteness or blackness would be an example of an inseparable accident, whereas a sheep's being hungry at a particular time would be an example of a separable accident. If a nonhuman animal's rationality is an inseparable accident it would render a degree of permanence to the predicate that would not be found if the nonhuman animal possessed rationality as a separable accident. In any event, these distinctions are meant by Barnes to resolve the apparent contradiction between *De abstinentia* and Porphyry's logical works regarding nonhuman animal rationality.

By contrast, G. Fay Edwards in a carefully reasoned article has a significantly different way of dealing with the discrepancy between the attribution of rationality to at least some nonhuman animals in *De abstinentia* and the denial of rationality to nonhuman animals in Porphyry's logical works. Edwards notices that in the logical works Porphyry denies that nonhuman animals can be rational at all, whereas in *De abstinentia* (III. 7) Porphyry seems to suggest that humans and nonhuman animals share the same essence (*ousia*), thereby making non-

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human animals amenable to rationality the way humans are. These considerations, Edwards contends, cause problems for Barnes' view. That is, on Edwards' interpretation, Porphyry in his logical works is denying even accidental rationality to non-human animals. They are *essentially* nonrational. The alternative way proposed by Edwards to account for the discrepancy between *De abstinentia* and the logical works is to suggest a dialectical reading of *De abstinentia*. On this interpretation, Porphyry in Book III is primarily trying to defeat the Stoic view that justice extends only to rational beings. By claiming that nonhuman animals are rational, Porphyry is able to refute the Stoics based on their own view of justice.

I would like to make it clear that I am not aiming to resolve the discrepancy treated in nuanced ways by Barnes and Edwards. I am interested in this discrepancy only to the extent that it illuminates the argument from species overlap in Porphyry. He *does* attribute rationality to nonhuman animals in *De abstinentia*. However, it is crucial to notice that the argument from marginal cases or species overlap does not depend on such attribution! Scholars who do not notice this argument in Porphyry are likely to pay too much attention (or the wrong sort of attention) to the question of nonhuman animal rationality. Likewise, scholars who pay a great deal of attention to the question of nonhuman rationality are less likely to notice the argument from species overlap in Porphyry. This is not to say that rationality plays no role whatsoever in the argument in that when we consider human beings who have no rationality whatsoever (think of someone in a persistently vegetative state), one realizes that there are many nonhuman animals who obviously surpass these individuals in terms of cognitive capacity; whether one attributes "rationality" to these nonhuman animals is secondary to the realization that there is species

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overlap regarding cognitive capacity. In this regard we might be tempted by the thesis that there are degrees of rationality in both human beings and nonhuman animals.

Edwards points out that, as a consequence of “the discrepancy,” it might be difficult to know Porphyry’s own view on the topic of nonhuman rationality. In this regard the problem is a bit like trying to know what Plato’s own views were in light of the conflicting evidence from his supposed mouthpieces in the dialogues. In this regard I would like to emphasize that there *is* a version of the argument from marginal cases or species overlap in Porphyry’s *De abstinentia* even if it was not Porphyry’s own preferred view. It is this version of the argument that I am highlighting. By not noticing this argument, however, scholars like Andrew Smith and to a lesser extent Richard Sorabji are encouraged to focus too much on possible belief in transmigration as the basis for Porphyry’s claims made in favor of nonhuman rationality and as a tool to deal with the aforementioned discrepancy: a being can be rational in one context and nonrational in another. Also, given the implausibility of transmigration to most contemporary scholars, emphasis on this basis for philosophical vegetarianism tends to trivialize both the issue with which Porphyry is dealing and the profundity of his critique of anthropocentrism.

Nor should we ignore the possibility that Porphyry simply changed his mind regarding nonhuman rationality, for which there is some textual basis in Porphyry’s “Life of Plotinus” (20). If this is the case, then the present article is an attempt to understand and explicate an argument at one stage in Porphyry’s career. As I see things, however, the argument from marginal cases or species overlap is interesting enough and intellectually challenging enough to deserve our attention, even if it does not

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represent everything he wanted to say about nonhuman animals and our relation to them. If Dale Jamieson is correct that this argument offers the strongest philosophical challenge yet delivered against our ordinary treatment of nonhuman animals (Jamieson 1981, 232), then we ignore the history of this argument that started with Porphyry at our peril.

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