Plutarch on the Question of Justice for Animals

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Abstract
Plutarch devotes his three texts on animals in the *Moria* to a thoroughgoing critique of the Stoic prejudices of his time. In doing so, he advances two sorts of reason why we should not kill and eat animals: on the grounds that meat-eating and other forms of cruelty to animals interfere with the human pursuit of virtue, and on the grounds that animals merit direct moral concern inasmuch as they possess rationality, language, and emotions. Both of these lines of reasoning motivate Plutarch’s advocacy of vegetarianism. Late in life, however, Plutarch retreats from the robust defense of animals that he advanced in the *Moria*. A reflection on the shift in Plutarch’s thinking about animals helps us to think through a central question in contemporary animal rights debates: exactly what are the appropriate criteria for determining whether a given living being is owed duties of justice? A consideration of the specific experiential abilities that Plutarch attributes to animals in the *Moria*, as well as on the Stoics’ main reasons for excluding animals from the sphere of right, is an excellent starting point for thinking through this question.


Throughout the history of Western philosophy, the question whether human beings owe duties of justice to animals has been hotly contested. According to the dominant line of thinking, which extends from Hesiod to John Rawls, only those beings capable of *logos* are properly members of the sphere of justice. In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod states that a being must be able to “listen to justice” in order to be its beneficiary1. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls asserts in a similar spirit that “the capacity for a sense of justice is necessary in order to be owed the duties of justice.”2

1 Hesiod, *Works and Days* 213, 275.