

## **Porphyry on the abstinence from killing animals**

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In his treatise *On the Abstinence from Killing Animals*, Porphyry (c. 235–307), the student of Plotinus (c. 205–270), the (neo)Platonist philosopher, and the commentator on the works of Aristotle, argues against those of his predecessors who had considered it justified to kill animals and consume their flesh. His strategy is, mainly, to show that the arguments presented by his predecessors to justify the killing of animals were not valid. For example, he admits that athletes do need meat but he points out that this argument does not justify meat-consumption in general. Especially, those very few who aspire to be true philosophers should abstain from eating meat; they should not even consume the flesh of an animal sacrificed to the gods. This is because the true philosopher follows a programme of purification which entails abstinence from consumption of animal flesh as well as sexual and even emotional interaction with other human beings. Insofar as animals are concerned, their capacity to feel pain

is the cornerstone of Porphyry's argumentation. Because of this capacity, we should not harm animals unless they impose an imminent threat to us.

I shall point out that in his treatise, Porphyry presents a conception of justice which differs considerably from the one dominant in the preceding Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. According to Porphyry, justice means abstinence from harming such creatures that do not harm us, and, as he claims, it would be unjustifiable to assume that this should apply to human beings only. He also argues that extending justice to concern animals does not diminish the justice exercised towards human beings, since “a friend of the genus is not any the less a friend of the species.” I also claim that in his treatise *Launching Points to the Intelligible* (*Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes*), Porphyry seems to hold the same idea that justice should be extended to animals as well.