

Plutarch devotes his three texts on animals in the *Moralia* to a thoroughgoing critique of the Stoic prejudices of his time. Plutarch develops his critique along two main lines: As a Platonist he deplores meat-eating and other forms of cruelty to animals on the grounds that they interfere with the human pursuit of virtue, that endeavor to emulate the gods that Porphyry would later call “the Olympics of the soul” (*De abstinentia* 1.31.3). But Plutarch also expresses an unmistakable direct moral concern for animals; he argues against the Stoics that animals possess rationality, language, and emotions, and he maintains that the cries of animals when we kill them signify a demand for mercy and justice (*De esu carniū* 994E). Thus Plutarch, like Seneca, deplores the practice of watching surmullets die before we eat them for dinner, but for a different reason: For Plutarch, surmullets possess worth in their own right “as being friendly and life-saving creatures”; hence they merit the “veneration” shown to them by initiates into the Eleusinian mysteries (*De sollertia animalium* 983F). Plutarch argues that animals “are entitled by birth and being” to the enjoyment and “duration of life” (*De esu carniū* 994E), a position that Dierauer characterizes as the “polemical antithesis to Stoic anthropocentrism” (Urs Dierauer, *Tier und Mensch im Denken der Antike*, p. 274).

Both of these lines of reasoning—that the pursuit of human virtue demands proper treatment of animals and that animals deserve proper treatment in their own right—motivate Plutarch’s advocacy of vegetarianism. Late in life, however, Plutarch retreats from the robust defense of animals that he advanced in the *Moralia*. In his *Life of Marcus Cato*, Plutarch takes the view that we owe duties of justice only toward human beings, whereas we owe duties of kindness or benevolence even “to dumb animals” (*Life of Marcus Cato* 5.2). This shift constitutes a weakening of Plutarch’s view concerning our moral obligations toward animals. It reflects an underlying ambivalence about the moral status of animals in the history of Western philosophy: Already in antiquity thinkers such as Aristotle recognized that many animals have sophisticated cognitive abilities, but even Plutarch would ultimately succumb to the anthropocentric prejudice that we owe no duties of justice to animals. 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 *Moralia*, 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.