

Who Must Abstain from Meat? Audience and Morality in Porphyry's *De abstinentia*

The four books of Περὶ ἀποχῆς ἐμψύχων (= *De abstinentia ab esu animalium*), Porphyry of Tyre's treatise against eating meat (or, more accurately, eating anything with a soul), have generally been regarded by scholars as addressed only to Porphyry's fellow philosophers (Tanaseanu-Döbler 2009: 116, Digeser 2013: 51, Marx-Wolf 2014: 36, Simmons 2015: 39). On this view, Porphyry's arguments against meat-eating are simply not intended for the great unwashed (οἱ πολλοί), whom Porphyry often denigrates. It is certainly true that Porphyry, like Plato and Plotinus, draws sharp distinctions between various classes of people: not only between philosophers and the many (ὁ πολὺς καὶ δημόδης ἄνθρωπος, 1.13.1; οἱ πολλοί, 1.52.3 and *passim*), but also between ordinary philosophers and philosophers devoted specifically to the imitation of the divine (2.3.1). Early in the treatise, in fact, he claims that "my discourse will not offer advice (παραίνεσιν) to every human way of life . . . but to the person who has thought (ἄνθρωπῳ δὲ λελογισμένῳ) about who he is and whence he has come and where he should try to go" (1.27.1). I will argue, however, that multiple passages in the *DA* contain universal injunctions against meat-eating and are apparently not subject to qualification according to one's status as non-philosopher, philosopher, or elite philosopher. By taking these passages into account, it becomes evident, I suggest, that Porphyry's argument against meat-eating is broader, more ambitious in its reach, and more complex than has previously been acknowledged.

Book 2 in particular contains strong injunctions against meat-eating grounded in apparently universal factors. Although early in the book he explicitly releases non-philosophers from the obligation of abstaining from meat – and perhaps non-elite philosophers as well – shortly thereafter he begins to make claims grounded on what he considers ancient and universal

practice. First, he establishes that blood sacrifice from a historical perspective is an innovation; originally, sacrifices were vegetal (2.5). Blood sacrifice came about only after people were punished by the divine force (τὸ δαιμόνιον) for famine and war (7.3). All sacrifice involving slaughter, he says, “begins from injustice (ἐξ ἀδικίας . . . λαβεῖν τὴν ἀρχήν)” (2.11). Further, Porphyry argues, common opinion is mistaken that more expensive sacrifices are thereby better (2.14.3–15.1); the text offers no hint that this holds true only for philosophers. Shortly thereafter, Porphyry states baldly that “it is clear (δῆλον) that we ought by no means (τὸ παράπαν) to sacrifice (θυτέον) animals to the gods” (2.24.5). This prescription is not delimited with reference to different groups: its force seems universal, emphasized by δῆλον, τὸ παράπαν, and the verbal adjective θυτέον. Similarly, Porphyry claims, again with no obvious restrictions on scope, that “we must think it impious to touch animals for the sake of food (τροφῆς χάριν ἄπτεσθαι τῶν ζώων οὐχ ὅσιον ἡγητέον)” (2.31.1–2). These and other passages, primarily from Book 2, seem to indicate a universal scope for Porphyry’s injunctions, at odds with his claims elsewhere that only philosophers need concern themselves with abstinence from ἐμψυχα.

In conclusion, *DA* contains at least two strands of thought. According to one, the πολλοί may be left to their own devices, while (elite) philosophers practice abstention from meat. According to the other, meat-eating and blood sacrifice, regarded as historical aberrations from an original order of society, are altogether immoral and offensive to benevolent deities; no one, therefore, should practice them. By calling attention to this second strand, I hope to have complicated the usual assessment of *DA* as addressed only to philosophers.

Bibliography

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