

Cicero Argues with Himself: Animal Imagery in *De Amicitia*

As a general rule, in oratory and philosophy alike, if Cicero compares a human to an animal, he does so at the human's expense (see May 1996). But in *De Amicitia*, the last of his dialogues, Cicero employs a spectrum of animal images, ranging from the conventionally contemptible to the unexpectedly exemplary. This paper will explore this reversal in Ciceronian strategy.

Cicero in his *philosophica* typically uses animals as a foil for humans. They share with humans the capacity for sense and movement, but they lack humanity's ability to reason (e.g., *Leg.* 1.30). The inability of animals to reason is manifested in their unawareness of the past and the future. They have sense only of the present and thus fail to contextualize their experiences (cf. *Fin.* 2.45, *Off.* 1.11). The resulting reason-free tunnel vision leads them to identify immediate pleasure as their highest aim (e.g., *Acad.* 2.139). And it is in this sense of pleasure-seekers that animals become rhetorically valuable in Cicero's dialogues, as an analog not—as in his speeches—for autocrats, but for Epicureans.

Twice in *De Amicitia* Cicero uses animal imagery for this purpose: first at *Amic.* 20, where Epicureans are implicitly connected to *belvae*, who prefer pleasure even to goods like friendship and wisdom, and then again at 32, where, in contrast to those who seek friendship for love's sake, Epicureans, *pecudum ritu*, seek friendship for the sake of profit or pleasure. This use of animal imagery as criticism echoes passages in *Fin.* 2.32, 2.109, *Acad.* 1.6, and especially *Nat. Deor.* 1.122. In the last of these passages Cicero critiques Epicureans for treating friends like commodities, benefitting from them as if friends were *pecudum greges* (cf. *Amic.* 79). The

critique works on two levels: not only do Epicureans act like *pecudes* in pursuing pleasure, they treat their friends as if they were herd animals from which to profit.

It is therefore all the more striking in *Amic.* 69, when Laelius refers to the *Scipionis grex*, or the “herd” of Scipio. This phrase in this context, undsometimes taken as proof for the existence of a Scipionic circle, cannot conform to the animal imagery associated with the Epicureans. Here it seems to draw on a pair of horse metaphors deployed in the foregoing paragraphs (63, 67-8). In the former instance Laelius seems to recommend the testing of potential friends as if they were horses. In the latter Laelius tries to decide whether new friends should ever be preferred to old friends by comparing friends to horses, crops, and land. This latter example, with its inclusion of lands and crops, closely recalls *Nat. Deor.* 1.122, where Epicureans are explicitly criticized for treating their friends like *prata et arva et pecudum greges*. In these paragraphs of *De Amicitia* (63, 67-8), Cicero subtly and convincingly reverses the very rhetoric he uses to critique Epicureans and their friendship to promote Laelius’ (Scipio’s) ideal of friendship, culminating with his identification of Laelius’ friend group as a *grex*.

Finally, at *Amic.* 81, the animal imagery reappears once more in a more neutral, natural context. Even animals, Laelius says, seek out companionship based on an innate capacity for something like love. How much more, then, ought humans to do the same. The *a fortiori* argument comparing humans to animals closely resembles a common Epicurean argument for the value of pleasure (see Warren 2002, 129-49). According to Epicurus, the fact that even animals seek out basic pleasure proves the naturalness of the instinct, which can then be better understood and honed by humans (see *Fin.* 2.23f.). Again Laelius reverses and adapts Epicurean animal rhetoric—rhetoric Cicero explicitly criticizes in *Fin.* 2.33—in service of his own argument. It is almost as if Cicero is appropriating and reversing his own arguments.

Regardless of why Cicero chooses to invert the animal-friend images in *De Amicitia*, the simple fact that he does it is worthy of note. But the dialogue's context makes the reversal particularly poignant. An explanation for why he does it seems to lie in the final words of the proem, before Laelius steps on the stage, as it were: *quam legens te ipse cognosces*. The *ipse* and *te* here are of course Cicero's best friend and the dedicatee of the dialogue, Atticus, who was himself an Epicurean. By repurposing his anti-Epicurean arguments about animals and friendship in the dialogue Cicero can both maintain his critique the Epicureans and simultaneously create an avenue to redeem such friendship, in appreciation for the genuine friendship he shares with his closest friend, Atticus the Epicurean.

Bibliography

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