

CECILIA MURATORI, *RENAISSANCE VEGETARIANISM: THE PHILOSOPHICAL AFTERLIVES OF PORPHYRY'S 'ON ABSTINENCE'*, LEGENDA, CAMBRIDGE 2020 (ITALIAN PERSPECTIVES, 46), 276 PP., ISBN 9781781883389.

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The book under review is the 46<sup>th</sup> volume of the series *Italian perspectives*, a collection of works devoted to Italian culture under an innovative and interdisciplinary approach. The author, Cecilia Muratori, is Research Fellow at the Centre for Anglo-German Cultural Relations (Queen Mary University of London) and has dedicated several works to Renaissance animal ethics with special attention to the distinction between animals and humans. Now, with *Renaissance Vegetarianism: The Philosophical Afterlives of Porphyry's 'On Abstinence'*, she focuses on the interest that Porphyry's *On Abstinence* aroused in the Renaissance, warning in the first lines of the introduction that the title contains a deliberate, but useful anachronism. As Muratori points out, although the term 'vegetarianism' was not coined before the nineteenth century, the concept did actually exist under other denominations, such as 'abstinence'. While the word 'abstinence' refers to what it is excluded in one's diet, 'vegetarianism' suggests what is permitted.

Ancient authors addressed the issue of avoiding meat by discussing the philosophical question of whether diet affected the human being's way of thinking and attitude towards life. Porphyry maintained that abstaining from the consumption of any kind of animal product – and not only from meat – prepared the body and the mind for spiritual purposes. From this starting point, later philosophers have discussed this topic with a wide range of arguments: not only from a health, religious and anthropological point of view, but also from a psychological and moral perspective. Porphyry represented a turning point in the development of vegetarianism. He revised previous literature on the topic, such as Theophrastus's or Plutarch's texts, and, at the same time, his influence on Neoplatonics was crucial for the continuity of his ideas. In the Renaissance many of these ancient works were rediscovered and largely quoted: from Plutarch's *Bruta animantia ratione uti* and *De esu carnium*, to Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, as well as some Hippocratic and Galenic texts. However, Porphyry's *De abstinentia ab esu carnium* was the star among them. This is the guiding thread of Muratori's book: how *De abstinentia* became an authority for arguing on the

benefits and disadvantages of a meat-free diet in the Renaissance philosophical context. With that aim, the author explores the theoretical background of vegetarianism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and analyzes the impact of Porphyry's arguments in the philosophical environment of the Renaissance. His work brought about the opening of new paths of understanding as well as controversies.

Muratori's book is organized around the four main intertwined topics discussed in Porphyry's work that caught the attention of Renaissance thinkers: (1) Sacrifice, (2) Health, (3) Otherness, and (4) Rationality. These constitute the four chapters of the volume.

The first chapter entitled « Sacrifice » analyzes the link between sacrifice and eating flesh. Since pagan religions ask for sacrifices to the Divine, the question that arises is if the vegetarian philosopher should abstain from religious practices as well. At this point, Porphyry adopts a compromise solution: he argues that killing an animal does not imply eating it. With this answer, Porphyry avoids criticizing pagan religious practices and, by mentioning Theophrastus's *On Piety* he suggests at the same time that slaughtering animals to the gods is the result of a process of corruption. Nevertheless, sacrificing animals on the altar was not a common practice in the Renaissance anymore. At that time, intellectuals were much more interested in analyzing the contrast between the Neoplatonic and the Christian traditions since the latter rejected all kinds of pagan practices. The other central issue under debate was whether rituals involving animal slaughtering had a positive influence on the gods.

For early Renaissance readers Porphyry's original controversy between sacrificing and eating animals was then a secondary, yet not completely disregarded matter. Muratori begins exploring the intellectual context in which Basil Bessarion's work emerges. More precisely, she examines Capuchin friar Jacques Boulduc's *De ecclesia ante legem* (1626), George Gemistos Plethon's *De differentiis Platonis et Aristotelis* and George of Trebizond's *Comparatio philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis*. Her analysis shows how Bessarion uses Porphyry's arguments in his *In calumniatorem Platonis* to freed Platonism from pagan traits and thus making it compatible with Christianity.

The main part of this first chapter is devoted to Marsilio Ficino's translation of *On abstinence*, whose comments focus on Platonic demonology – as it can be inferred from the title, *De divinis atque daemonibus*. In his work, Ficino intends to conciliate Porphyry's and Iamblichus's Platonic approaches towards different issues including sacrificial rituals. The efficacy of rituals and the presence of daemonic intermediaries is at the core of the discussion. Muratori explains how, like Bessarion, Ficino eventually focuses on the compatibility of Christianity with the Platonic theology and demonology by trying to connect Christian ritual and sacrifice. To that end, he does not forget the problems of eating animals and animal

rationality. The chapter continues with a brief discussion on the symbolism of sacrifice in connection with the definition of humanity in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Conclusiones*. Finally, it addresses Francesco Zorzi's *De harmonia mundi* whose analysis of the religious foundations of vegetarianism tries to make pagan philosophers compatible with Christianity.

The second chapter deals with the effects of a meatless diet on health. According to Porphyry, a vegetarian diet strengthens the body, which is in turn essential for the mind. Within this logic, the philosopher must follow a fleshless diet since a strong mind is needed for his activity. Consequently, Porphyry defends the superiority of vegetarianism and warns about eating meat's bad influence on health. But he admits an exception: that of athletes, soldiers, sailors, etc. They need to eat meat, while the philosopher does not. This idea is taken up by Ficino who in his *De vita* discusses about the nourishment appropriate for each kind of person depending on the activity they carry on. The content of this second chapter is closely linked to medicine, particularly to Galenic treatises such as *De alimentorum facultatibus*, widely disseminated in the Renaissance. Arnau de Villanova, the medieval author of *De esu carniū*, wrote on the polemic vegetarianism of the Carthusian order pointing out the strong link between meat diet and religion. His defense of a fleshless diet and his analysis of its consequences on health under a medical perspective was followed by the works of Jean de Gerson and Erasmus for whom meat consumption was not a divine precept. In his *De esu carniū*, but also in his *Colloquia*, Erasmus focuses on the health consequences of abstinence from eating meat mainly considering the physical state of the body, rather than religious or moral matters. At last, Erasmus shows many points in common with Galen in focusing on health and considering abstinence from meat as an exercise of self-control.

The chapter pays special attention to the works of Girolamo Cardano, whose work is especially remarkable for its interdisciplinary approach. Under an eclectic perspective that combines philosophy, medicine, and metaphysics Cardano analyzes the impact of consuming meat on the human being – mainly on health and character, following Galen – as well as on the world's development. Accordingly, he was extremely observant of his own diet, and he took note of the effects of the type and quantity of meat he ate, on his state of health at a given age, etc., thus trying to determine the properties of foodstuff. However, like Hippocrates, Cardano thought that food not only affected health, but also other characteristics, such as behavior. In that sense, eating a beast's heart would lead the person to be crueler. Nevertheless, Cardano claimed that nature owes its perfection to meat-eating which contributes to the hierarchical divisions among different species. Consequently, he stresses that eating flesh is closely related to a higher intelligence and, ultimately, to the superiority of human beings. Julius Caesar Scaliger replied to these arguments in his works – *Exotericæ exercitationes*

and *Thenoston* – by emphasizing Cardano’s contradictions regarding the link between meat-eating, lifespan and hierarchical order of living beings. In her analysis, Muratori points out how Scaliger’s arguments are based on Porphyry’s ideas.

The third chapter adopts an anthropological perspective to discuss the implications of the diet in different populations, especially about its effects on people’s intelligence. Plutarch and Porphyry already associated not eating meat with having a superior philosophical aptitude and provided comparative examples to illustrate their positions. In turn, Renaissance intellectuals used extreme cases for their discussions as new geographical discoveries permitted to compare, among others, Vegetarian Brahmans with American cannibals, and to debate on their cultural differences. Other connections are established between the Ancient and Renaissance world through the comparison between Scythians’ and Americans’ anthropophagy practices, in order to elucidate whether ‘necessity’ justifies cannibalism. This question opens a controversy that Renaissance authors approached in different ways, yet with the shared belief that cannibal practices are intolerable within the human community. To explore this controversy Muratori goes through different works: Montaigne’s skeptic essay *On Cannibals* that points out the similarities between Europeans and those populations that perform cannibal practices; the entries «Anthropophagi» of Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*; the book *Le relationi universali* of Giovanni Botero that suggests the irrationality of cannibals when practicing their savage behavior; some travel reports such as Columbus’s *Libretto* or Vespucci’s *Mundus novus*; Botero and Della Porta’s ideas; Pierre Petit’s debate on the causes and effects of cannibalism, which suggests that these practices are caused by an underlying disease, and the influence of the controversy between Cardano and Scaliger in Giulio Cesare Vanini’s *De admirandis naturae reginae deaeque mortalium arcanis*, among others. The chapter closes with a depiction of the figure of the Brahmans and their vegetarian virtues, showing that they were a feasible model for Renaissance philosophers despite their proximity to Porphyry’s ideal.

The fourth chapter is rooted in the question of whether animals’ rationality is an argument that supports vegetarianism. The debate, that was the starting point of the *querelle de l’âme des bêtes* opened in the seventeenth century, developed into two main positions with different ethical implications: the thesis of the rational animal defended by D’Acquapendente and Montaigne and that of the animal-machine proposed by Descartes in his *Discours de la méthode*. The *querelle* partially ignored Descartes’s distinction between mind and soul because these authors wrongly understood that lack of mind and sensation meant lack of life. Nonetheless, in Descartes’ view, even though animals were deprived of mind they were not necessarily devoid of soul, that is, of life and sensation. Then the question of whether the lack of rationality implies a lack of sensation and the concern on

whether animal language was a sign of rationality strongly aroused among Renaissance thinkers. Both ideas were central in Porphyry's work and lead to a third question: whether the vegetable world could feel or not. Porphyry believed that eating plants is suitable for the philosopher because they do not have sensations nor rationality. In his *De brutorum loquela* Girolamo Fabrici d'Acquapendente, trying to harmonize Aristotle and Porphyry's statements, defended that animal language shows its rationality regardless of the degree of complexity of that language. On the other hand, Montaigne underlines that the lack of understanding through language between humans and animals is mutual, that is to say, they are on an equal footing. In his *Discorso sopra tutti li parlari* Girolamo Giovannini da Capugnano claims that human superiority is part of the divine plan and concludes that there is no gradation between animals and humans because they are qualitatively different. In turn, Tommaso Campanella not only used Aristotle and Porphyry's arguments to substantiate his position, as d'Acquapendente and Girolamo Giovannini did, but also Telesio's ones to claim that humans should not abstain from eating animals. At the very last, Campanella argued that plants can feel, but we need to eat them, invalidating Porphyry's reasoning on the legitimacy of killing and eating animals. The chapter ends with Pierre Gassendi's support of Porphyry's arguments. In his *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* and *De vita et moribus Epicuri*, Gassendi provides an Epicurean re-interpretation under *On abstinence's* light linking vegetarian practices to the frugal way of life that every philosopher should follow.

This book's Bibliography (p. 230–253) presents a useful division between primary and secondary sources. It seems to me exhaustive and updated. Finally, a brief Index (p. 254–259) mainly containing proper nouns is included at the end of the book. Some common nouns also appear in it (as « elements », « elephant » or « emotion »), probably because the author considers them relevant in relation to the topic.

All things considered, Muratori's work provides us not only with an overview of philosophical thinking on vegetarianism from ancient authors to their reception by Renaissance but also with interesting keys to understand the issues that worried intellectuals of those times. Her analysis gives the main clues of the reception of Porphyry's work and shows how crucial it was for the evolution of vegetarian thinking that is still strongly present in our days. The rigor of the research and the excellent way the contents are presented with a simple but accurate drafting make this work accessible and fascinating for scholars as well for curious readers.