

ON ABSTINENCE FROM ANIMAL FOOD BOOK 1; p 11–14 (of 44)

Author: Porphyry

Translator: Thomas Taylor (1758–1835; this translation was published 1832)

Approx. Date Composed: 268-70 CE

Note: *On Abstinence* is the longest work by Porphyry to survive more or less intact. The text advocates that animals should not be killed, not even for food.

Source: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry_text_abstinence_01_book1.htm

Porphyry was trained in Greek thought in the tradition of Plato, but specifically Plotinus' interpretation of Plato, which put him in the "Neoplatonic" line of thinkers according to modern scholars; a common Neoplatonic idea is that all reality emerges from a single principle (the "One" or the "Good").

Book One

Firmus is stated as Porphyry's friend (and likely also a Neoplatonist); this is a VERY long letter to him questioning why Firmus has resumed eating animal flesh. We are reading a small section.

1. Hearing from some of our acquaintance, O Firmus, that you, having rejected a fleshless diet, have again returned to animal food, at first I did not credit the report, when I considered your temperance, and the reverence which you have been taught to pay to those ancient and pious men from whom we have received the precepts of philosophy. But when others who came after these confirmed this report, it appeared to me that it would be too rustic and remote from the rational method of persuasion to reprehend you, who neither, according to the proverb, flying from evil have found something better, nor according to Empedocles, having lamented your former life, have converted yourself to one that is more excellent. I have therefore thought it worthy of the friendship which subsists between us, and also adapted to those who have arranged their life conformably to truth, to disclose your errors through a confutation derived from an argumentative discussion.

2. For when I considered with myself what could be the cause of this alteration in your diet, I could by no means suppose that it was for the sake of health and strength, as the vulgar and idiots would say; since, on the contrary, you yourself, when you were with us, confessed that a fleshless diet contributed both to health and to the proper endurance of philosophic labours; and experience testifies, that in saying this you spoke the truth. It appears, therefore, that you have returned to your former illegitimate conduct, either through deception, because you think it makes no difference with respect to the acquisition of wisdom whether you use this or that diet; or perhaps through some other cause of which I am ignorant, which excited in you a greater fear than that which could be produced by the impiety of transgression. For I should not say that you

Pretty much calling out Firmus for abandoning the philosophy he used to admire

have despised the philosophic laws which we derived from our ancestors, and which you have so much admired, through intemperance, or for the sake of voracious gluttony; or that you are naturally inferior to some of the vulgar, who, when they have assented to laws, though contrary to those under which they formerly lived, will suffer amputation [rather than violate them], and will abstain from certain animals on which they before fed, more than they would from human flesh.

What is Porphyry angry about in this section?

3. But when I was also informed by certain persons that you even employed arguments against those who abstained from animal food, I not only pitied, but was indignant with you, that, being persuaded by certain frigid and very corrupt sophisms, you have deceived yourself, and have endeavoured to subvert a dogma which is both ancient and dear to the Gods. Hence it appeared to me to be requisite not only to show what our own opinion is on this subject, but also to collect and dissolve the arguments of our opponents, which are much stronger than those adduced by you in multitude and power, and every other apparatus; and thus to demonstrate, that truth is not vanquished even by those arguments which seem to be weighty, and much less by superficial sophisms. For you are perhaps ignorant, that not a few philosophers are adverse to abstinence from animal food, but that this is the case with those of the Peripatetic and Stoic sects, and with most of the Epicureans; the last of whom have written in opposition to the philosophy of Pythagoras and Empedocles, of which you once were studiously emulous. To this abstinence, likewise, many philologists are adverse, among whom Clodius the Neapolitan wrote a treatise against those who abstain from flesh. Of these men I shall adduce the disquisitions and common arguments against this dogma, at the same time omitting those reasons which are peculiarly employed by them against the demonstrations of Empedocles.

Now Porphyry is going to take on the arguments against vegetarianism made by the Aristotelian philosophers (called "Peripatetics" or those that walk around) and the Stoics in this section.

The Arguments of the Peripatetics and Stoics from Heraclides Ponticus |13

4. Our opponents therefore say, in the first place, that justice will be confounded, and things immoveable be moved, if we extend what is just, not only to the rational, but also to the irrational nature; conceiving that not only Gods and men pertain to us, but that there is likewise an alliance between us and brutes, who [in reality] have no conjunction with us. Nor shall we employ some of them in laborious works, and use others for food, from a conviction that the association which is between us and them, in the same manner as that of some foreign polity,

Can you rephrase at least one of the arguments here in 4?

pertains to a tribe different from ours, and is dishonourable. For he who uses these as if they were men, sparing and not injuring them, thus endeavouring to adapt to justice that which it cannot bear, both destroys its power, and corrupts that which is appropriate, by the introduction of what is foreign. For it necessarily follows, either that we act unjustly by sparing them, or if we spare, and do not employ them, that it will be impossible for us to live. We shall also, after a manner, live the life of brutes, if we reject the use of which they are capable of affording.

P is still paraphrasing the arguments against vegetarianism here; we'll go back to being animals if we don't use them to advance ourselves!

5. For I shall omit to mention the innumerable multitude of Nomades and Troglodyte, who know of no other nutriment than that of flesh; but to us who appear to live mildly and philanthropically, what work would be left for us on the earth or in the sea, what illustrious art, what ornament of our food would remain, if we conducted ourselves innoxiously and reverentially towards brutes, as if they were of a kindred nature with us? For it would be impossible to assign any work, any medicine, or any remedy for the want which is destructive of life, or that we can act justly, unless we preserve the ancient boundary and law.

5. These are still the arguments against vegetarianism. What do you think the "ancient boundary and law" that must be preserved refers to?

To fishes, savage beasts, and birds, devoid
Of justice, love to devour each other
Granted; but justice to mankind he gave.⁵

This is a verse by the ancient Greek poet Hesiod (circa 7th c. BCE)

i.e. towards each other.

6. But it is not possible for us to act unjustly towards those to whom we are not obliged to act justly. Hence, for those who reject this reasoning, no other road of justice is left, either broad or narrow, into which they can enter. For, as we have already observed, our nature, not being ¹⁴ sufficient to itself, but indigent of many things, would be entirely destroyed, and enclosed in a life involved in difficulties, unorganic, and deprived of necessities, if excluded from the assistance derived from animals. It is likewise said, that those first men did not live prosperously; for this superstition did not stop at animals, but compelled its votaries even to spare plants. For, indeed, what greater injury does he do, who cuts the throat of an ox or a sheep, than he who cuts down a fir tree or an oak? Since, from the doctrine of transmigration, a soul is also implanted in these. These therefore are the principal arguments of the Stoics and Peripatetics.

6. These are still the arguments against vegetarianism that Porphyry is laying out. Try to summarize at least two arguments why humans can't give up eating animals