

Horatian second thoughts on animal sacrifice

by

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Abstract:

Though animal sacrifice is ubiquitous in the ancient world, and though the Roman poet Horace is generally conventional in his views of sacrifice, occasionally he shows some compassion for the tormented animal and expresses sorrow for the vibrant, sexual playfulness of which the animal would be deprived. Indeed, Horace suggests that his gift of poetry might please a deity more than an animal's blood.

In the ode *O fons Bandusiae* (3.13), Horace addresses a fountain that will be honored the next day with the firstling of the flock, a young kid whose horns are just now preparing him for both sexual adventure and battles. For Horace, the kid's destiny is cruelly in vain. With echoes of Lucretius' chilling description of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia—the most terrifying vision of sacrifice in literature—and its sharp attack on the foolish horrors of religion, Horace is extending to the sacrifice of the playful kid the revulsion felt for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Horace concludes his poem by expressing the greater good that *he* will do for the fountain than any sacrifice, for by his verse he will give the fountain a gift of immortal fame.

In evolutionary theory there is, of course, a continuum between animals and humans, and as in any continuum, where a difference in degree metamorphoses into a difference in kind is a matter for hot debate. A sand dune and the Sahara Desert are both made of sand, but the difference is so great as to constitute a difference in kind, and only the most single-minded materialist would insist that there is no difference between them. Only as a joke would someone call the Sahara a sand dune or a sand dune the Sahara. When it comes to humans and animals, most people throughout history, in the absence of an all-embracing theory of evolution, never considered the possibility of a continuum and assumed humans to be something entirely distinct from animals. According to the historically prevalent view, humans differ as for much from animals as gods differ from humans, though humans share qualities with both animals and gods. With animals humans share nutrition and growth; what makes humans distinct from animals is the faculty of reason, a faculty that humans share with gods. With gods, as Longinus puts it, humans share good deeds and truth (*On the Sublime* 1.2); what distinguishes humans from gods is mortality: unlike gods, humans die. And the differences are what count in marking and limiting the categories.

Though the categories of animal, god, and human are exclusive, by mystic or magical transformation, one being might become another. In Pythagorean theories of reincarnation a human soul could experience a later life as an animal; hence Xenophanes jokes that Pythagoras himself met an old friend who had come back as a dog. Xenophanes writes (fr. 7): "They say that once Pythagoras passed a puppy that was being maltreated. He took pity and spoke thus: 'Stop beating it, for it is the soul of a dear friend; I recognized the soul by its voice.'" In myth and story, gods and humans could be changed by magic or divine power into animals. Zeus changes into a swan to corrupt Leda. By misusing a magic ointment, the Latin novelist Apuleius changes uproariously into an ass. A human being, like Heracles or Theseus, could, after a life of extraordinary accomplishment, be changed into a god. In Roman imperial times, the Senate could declare a deceased emperor a god or a pumpkin. And, of course, people could also be transformed by magic into things neither bestial nor divine. A glance at Medusa changed her unfortunate onlookers into stone. Others, like Narcissus or Niobe, were changed into flowers or stones. The process of metamorphosis did not blur the sharp distinctions between humans and other things: transformations were sudden and complete: there were no transitional periods in which characteristics evolved or were shared.

There were in antiquity several groups that did not draw so stark a distinction between humans and animals. One such group was the Orphics, who felt that humans and animals were essentially the same, and that therefore no animal flesh should be eaten at all. For them, eating animals was a kind of cannibalism, and every killing of an animal was a murder, a *phonos*.¹ Speaking of the Orphics in the *Laws* (782C), Plato's Athenian Stranger refers to them as people who "shrank from tasting even the flesh of oxen, and offered no animals in sacrifice; [who] honored their gods with cakes and meal soaked in honey and other such 'pure' sacrifices, but abstained from flesh, counting it criminal to eat it, or to pollute the altars of the gods with blood. Man's life in those days,"

continues the Stranger, “conformed to the rule known as Orphic, universal insistence on vegetarianism, and entire abstinence from all that is animal.”²²

Empedocles and the Pythagoreans, perhaps because of their view concerning the transmigration of souls, found ethical problems in eating former relatives who had returned to earth in the reincarnated form of animals. Some similar concerns arise later, in the Middle Ages, where we find discussion of the form of resurrection available to people who have been eaten by wild animals.³

Another group that reduced the gulf between humans and animals was the atomists, those belonging to the philosophical school of Democritus and Epicurus, who believed that everything—everything—rocks, air, fire, plants, animals, humans, and gods—everything—was made of the exact same stuff—atoms and emptiness. In the doctrines of the atomists, there was a continuum that extended from the most humble mote of dust to the most blessed divinities. For atomists, the difference between the sand dune and the Sahara, or between a human being and a god, really was a question of degree, or, perhaps better, a question of the precise arrangement of atoms.

Now even those drawing the sharpest distinction between humans and everything else appear, when it comes to sacrifice, as Walter Burkert says, to express “a deep-rooted human respect for life as such, which prevents man from utterly destroying other beings in an autocratic way.”²⁴ Thus even for those who drew the sharp distinction, killing a cow was very different from eating a nut that falls to the ground. According to Burkert, “by expressing their ambivalence and remorse concerning even an animal killing, by humanizing the animal and showing a regard for its ‘will,’ the sacrificers put away from themselves the worst possibility that they [would] kill human beings, and kill without pity, becoming themselves bestial.”²⁵

Still other ancients felt that only animals that bleed were suitable as sacrifices; hence the only fish to be sacrificed was the tuna, which bleeds, and this fish was sacrificed to Poseidon.⁶ And there were—and remain—those who felt that killing is a special act that requires a special license from God. For Jews and Moslems, killing animals had to be done, as it still must be done, in specially approved conditions and with special instruments both to obtain God’s blessing and to spare the animals psychological stress or physical pain.⁷

Animal sacrifice was, of course, ubiquitous in the ancient world. In the Bible, even before humans ate meat at all, they practiced animal sacrifice. Thus, in Genesis 4 God accepts Abel’s sacrifice of a sheep while rejecting Cain’s vegetable offering (Genesis 4:4). Humans are granted to eat meat only later, with the Noachide laws (Genesis 9:3). Animals, as Aristotle said [*Politics* 1253 b28.], were considered but living property, and so their sacrifice was like a sacrifice of money or of grain or of other property, where what mattered was the surrender of something of value.

In this paper I shall take a brief look at the views of the poet Horace, who mockingly referred to himself as

a pig from the Epicurean herd (*Epistles* 1.4.16). While Horace’s attitude towards sacrifice is, in the main, the same as that of his contemporaries, even Epicureans, he expresses an unusual sympathy for sacrificial animals, includes them in his general philosophy of *carpe diem*, and—perhaps (I stress *perhaps*)—suggests that a poem might be a worthier gift to a divinity than an animal.

In keeping with the Epicurean view that traditional observances must be kept up, Horace includes in his poems references to the humdrum sacrifices of daily life.⁸ A sacrifice is part of the celebrations for a birthday (4.11.6–20), when, in addition to other festive arrangements, “the altar, wreathed with holy foliage, longs to be sprinkled with a burned lamb”:

ara castis
vincta verbenas avet immolato
spargier agno. (4.11.6–8)

The return of a friend from a long trip merits the owed blood of a bullock (*vituli sanguine debito*: 1.36.2). Augustus’ safe return to Rome ought to be observed by a sacrifice to the righteous gods (3.14.8). In a satirical inversion of the genre of poem wishing a *bon voyage*, the *propempticon*, Horace wishes his enemy Mevius a disaster. If Mevius’ ship crashes and Mevius’s corpse is left for gulls to tear apart, Horace promises a sacrifice of a sexually energetic goat (*Epodes* 10.21–24):

opima quod si praeda curvo litore
porrecta mergos iuveris,
libidinosus immolabitur caper
et agna Tempestatibus.

But if as fat spoil laid out on the curving
shore, you will delight gulls,
a sexually energetic goat will be burned
and a lamb too to the Storms.

Also conventionally, Horace recognizes that sacrifices are not always efficacious. For example, he tells Postumius that no sacrifice, not even three hecatombs of bulls a day, will keep death away (2.14.5–7).

Yet, for all his conventional attitudes, in several places, Horace seems to express some sympathy for the animals. Let us consider one of Horace’s most celebrated odes, 3.13;

o fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro,
dulci digne mero non sine floribus,
cras donaberis haedo
cui frons turgida cornibus

primis et venerem et proelia destinat.
frustra: nam gelidos inficiet tibi
rubro sanguine rivos
lascivi suboles gregis.

te flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae
nescit tangere, tu frigus amabile
fessis vomere tauris
praebes et pecori vago.

fies nobilium tu quoque fontium,
me dicente cavis impositam ilicem
saxis, unde loquaces
lymphae desiliunt tuae.

O spring of Bandusia, brighter than glass,
 worthy of sweet wine not without flowers,
 tomorrow you will be given a kid
 for whom his brow, swelling with its first horns,

marks him for sex and battles.

In vain: for he will dye for you your cool waters
 with his red blood,
 offspring of a sexually energetic flock.

The black hour of the blazing dog-star
 does not know to touch you, you [who] offer pleasing coolness
 to bulls weary from the plow
 and to the wandering flock.

You will become [one of the] noble fountains
 because of me singing [about] the oak planted
 on the hollow rocks, whence your babbling
 waters leap.

In a way, we can look at virtually all of Horace's poems as poems about the idea implicit in the famous words *carpe diem*.⁹ The idea in *carpe diem* is that the various acts of life, to be felt fully, must be intensified, and, to be intensified, must be accompanied with a sadly civilized awareness of its dregs, death. Even he who cries *carpe diem* in frenzied lust is, for the moment, philosophical; for the moment at least, he steps outside the frenzy and advocates a way of life. In this distinguished blend of double awareness, first of love and then of life, first of life and then of death, co-existing in the civilized and yet passionate psyche, Horace attains his artistic and personal goal. Horace's poems are not simply preludes to a moment, though they can and do serve that purpose. Rather, the poems are the moment itself, in a purer and more permanent form than any act.

Now an animal that is to be sacrificed is, of course, only an animal. It is not capable of the kind of philosophical reflection that would yield such a notion as *carpe diem*. But Horace, or any person making the sacrifice, is capable of the idea, and by recognizing the life and love in the animal, its playful sexuality, its friskiness, the poet communicates pensively and deeply the sense of loss that will take place from the animal's death.

In two other odes in Book 3, *Montium custos nemonumque* (3.22) and *Caelo supinas si tuleris* (3.23), Horace similarly offers life-affirming Homeric vignettes to the sacrificial animals. In 3.22 he offers the blood of a boar first rehearsing its sidelong thrusts: (*verris obliquum meditantis ictum/sanguine donem*). In 3.23, he contrasts the image of a sheep grazing on grass peacefully amidst oaks and ilexes with its imminent death at the priest's axe (*nam quae nivali pascitur Algido/devota quercus inter et ilices/aut cescit Albanis in herbis/victima, pontificum secures/cervice tinguet*).

That sexual awakening intensifies the superstition-born brutality of sacrifice is a notion we find most brilliantly in the greatest Epicurean work surviving from antiquity, Lucretius' *de Rerum Natura*. In the famous passage about the kind of atrocity superstition—*religio*—inspires, we find the chilling description of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia to secure the Greeks' passage to Troy from Aulis. Lucretius writes:

nam sublata virum manibus tremibundaque ad aras
 deductast, non ut sollemni more sacrorum
 perfecto posset claro comitari Hymenaeo,
 ed casta inceste nubendi tempore in ipso
 hostia concideret mactatu maesta parentis,
 exitus ut classi felix faustusque daretur (1.95-100).

For having been seized by the hands of men, trembling she was led to the altars, not so that in the solemn custom of sacredness she might be accompanied by the brilliant song of Hymen, but that in the very time of her wedding she, a chaste girl, might foully fall a sad victim by the stroke of her father, in order that a lucky and propitious departure might be given to the fleet.

What magnifies the horror of the sacrifice is the cruel deceit played on the maiden. Iphigeneia is promised a wedding at the altar. And, as the case of the sheep in Horace's poems, we have the sense that she is full of sexual energy and eager for a sexual awakening. The forestalling of sex by death is one of the elements of agony in Iphigeneia's death. In Horace, this agony is shared by his sacrificial lambs. By a poetic osmosis, the terror that we feel for Iphigeneia we feel also for the frisky kids in Odes 3.22 and 3.23.

Returning to the ode *o fons Bandusiae*, we see that the explosive potency in the firstling's budding horns aims at both sex and battle—*venerem et proelia*—the opposite extremes of experience, the extremes represented by the polar deities Mars and Venus.¹⁰

It was, of course, Empedocles who first saw love and strife as the underlying principles of physics. Love, he said, is the principle that brings things together; strife is the principle that separates things into their disparate elements. Lucretius brought this Empedoclean insight into Latin verse, for it inspired the great proem of *de Rerum Natura*, as Venus is invoked to tame the works of Mars (1.30–40). Horace thus defines the possible life for the sacrificial animal by reference to the extremes of war and sex.

As Eduard Frankel writes, "It is, perhaps, characteristic of Horace, the *ruris amator*, the deeply humane poet, that he cannot merely think of such a victim as a thing required for sacrifice but must see before him, and, as it were, feel it, a living being, warm, pretty, and amusing in its youthful pranks, which will only too soon come to an end."¹¹ Thus the animal is brought into the general sorrow of human life—with its awareness of finitude, an awareness that gives life meaning and beauty. Somehow, despite or because of our sympathy for his unfulfilled potency, the animal becomes more valuable as an offering to the *fons Bandusiae*.

There follows suddenly the most powerful word in the poem: *frustra*—in vain, for nothing. The potentialities in the kid will never be actualized. Instead, this offspring of the sportive flock will dye the waters of the spring red. Of the passage, Steele Commager writes, "Destined for love and battle, the 'offspring of the wanton flock' epitomizes life's comprehensive vitality, and as his warm blood mingles with the lucid water it is easy to sense a suggestion of the transformation of life into art."¹² Horace suggests that the spring will find immortality in his verse:

You will become [one of the] noble fountains
because of me singing [about] the oak planted
on the hollow rocks, whence your babbling
waters leap.

Here, in Horace's verse, is a far more permanent way of honoring the spring. And, of course, Horace is right. Aside from Horace's Sabine neighbors and the occasional passerby, who would have heard of the spring of Bandusia? It is the ode and nothing else that has given the spring the immortality that every ancient god and ancient man wanted.

Could a poem substitute for animal sacrifice generally? Perhaps a fundamentalist Epicurean would have seen the folly in any sacrifice. He might have reflected on the sameness of animals, humans, and deities—all made of the same atoms. But, of course, while there were enthusiastic Epicureans, like Diogenes of Oenoanda, there were no fundamentalist Epicureans. Epicureans too led the very worldly and practical Roman life. As Festugière writes: "Since the gods are indescribably happy, to praise them in prayer, to draw near to them on the solemn occasions when the city offers them a sacrifice, and to rejoice with them at the annual festivals is to take part in their happiness. That is why the disciple of Epicurus would be faithful to the prescriptions of religion."¹³ And, of course, if an Epicurean wanted to eat meat, he would have had to participate in the sacrifices of the city.

What, then, shall we conclude about Horace and animal sacrifice? Here and there, he hints at rejecting the need for such a sacrifice. A poem might better please a god. At the same time, he regards sacrifice as a normal part of life's rhythms. Still, perhaps he, and the ancients generally, were more sensitive to animals than we. For them, eating flesh was accompanied by solemn ritual, and, in the case of ancients with a compassionate soul, killing an animal was accompanied by an empathetic sense of loss. We moderns, however, as we stroll down the aisle of our supermarket, listening to Macdonaldized music from invisible speakers, pushing a wagon full of groceries—we don't distinguish between marmalade, or chocolate powder, or lamb chops, or tooth paste.

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¹ Detienne & Vernant 1989, 7.

² Translation by Taylor 1961.

³ Saadia Gaon, for example, discussing the resurrection of someone devoured by an animal, writes (1948): Should someone ask, however, how someone who has been devoured by lions or other animals can be resurrected, seeing that he has been metamorphosed into other bodies, our reply would be that the maker of this assertion assumes that the bodies that are devoured lose their identity by assimilating with the bodies into which they have entered. We must, therefore, answer him on two points at the same time by citing to him a basic principle that we, the congregation of monotheists, profess and acknowledge; namely, that no body of any creature can in any way bring about the extinction of another body. Aye, even if the former were to burn the latter with fire, it could not cause it to be extinct forever, because no one is capable of so annihilating things as to render them nonexistent other than He that created them *ex nihilo* and brought them into being. So far as all creatures are concerned, however, they can only separate the parts of material bodies. Even when fire is enkindled in a certain body, its sole effect is to produce a resolution of its component parts into their original elements.

⁴ Burkert 1966, 106.

⁵ Burkert 1966, 111.

⁶ Detienne & Vernant 1989, 221, n.8.

⁷ An example of sparing psychological pain would be the Halal law that prohibits sharpening the knife in the presence of the animal. For Islamic rules on the slaughtering, see Twaigery and Spillman 1989, 88-90.

⁸ Epicurus says, for example, "Let it suffice to say now that the divine needs no mark of honor, but that it is natural for us to honor it, in particular by forming pious notions of it, and secondly by offering to each of the gods in turn the traditional sacrifices." Quoted in Festugière 1969, 61.

⁹ Even the "patriotic odes." See Arieti 1990, 209-220.

¹⁰ These extremes are of particular importance for the Romans' conception of themselves. See Arieti 1997, 209-229.

¹¹ Frankel 1966, 203.

¹² Commager 1962, 323-324. I'm not sure what Commager means about "life into art" unless perhaps he is speaking of the animal's life serving as inspiration for Horace's art.

¹³ Festugière 1969, 62.

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