

## Book Reviews

Catherine Osborne, *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers: Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), xi + 262 pp.

In this intriguing, quirky, and frustrating study Catherine Osborne adopts a kind of idealist, quasi-Platonist perspective from which to examine and extol the humane outlook she finds in selected authors from Pythagoras to William Blake. The thesis that drives her inquiry is that we can learn moral truths better from listening to poetry and stories than from “arid argument” (viii) and “rational debate” (5).

In chapter 1, Osborne presents selections from William Blake’s *Aururies of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* as evidence that “Blake is right that moral vision consists in seeing things as offensive when they are offensive, and as wonderful when they are wonderful” (5). She challenges the notion that the value of a human being derives from her rationality, intelligence, capacity for altruism, or *any* of her natural features. Rather, “the location of moral value ... is in the outlook of the person who has a developed moral vision” (12), and the humane attitude, which discovers what is precious about nature, is only achieved through poetry, art, and stories. Science and argument, Osborne insists, are impotent to change our sense of “which features of the world demand our attention and our love” (11). If scientists, philosophers, or poetry-haters cannot be convinced of the superiority of this developed moral vision (the humane attitude), so much the worse for them. This vision, Osborne insists, is better not for any pragmatic or utilitarian reasons, or because it promotes human flourishing, “[i]t is better because it is more noble, more admirable, finer, more beautiful, and *because it sees a beauty that is really there*” (14; her emphasis). She ends this chapter by examining two texts. The first is a brief exchange in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part One* between Falstaff and Prince Hal about the mortality of a band of rascals conscripted into Hal’s army. Osborne approves of Falstaff’s rejection of the idea that human life is of some supreme value. She likewise applauds William Blake, in his poem about a fly he has thoughtlessly squashed, for recommending a realistic shattering of our delusions about the relative value of human life. Osborne concludes that anthropocentric pride,

cruelty, and callousness are all to be avoided.

What seems so odd about this account of moral vision, moral value, and moral development is Osborne's total rejection of "academic arguments" (5) as effective ways to learn moral truths. Couldn't a sympathetic reader be equally suspicious of her *argument* for what moral vision consists in and where moral value is located? If her interpretation of Falstaff's line is better than others, then we may well come to see that by being persuaded by her argument for that interpretation. On the other hand, if Osborne is not offering an *argument* for her outlook, then she is merely opining, and that can be done without dragging in Shakespeare, Blake, or any other considerations. It is difficult to see why Osborne wouldn't be truer to her repudiation of arid argument and rational debate as tools for sharpening moral vision by presenting her own stanzas of poetry entirely cleansed of all tedious textual exegesis, soporific scholarly references, and dreary old footnotes. Yet Plato and other artful thinkers since him have shown that it is possible to craft a philosophically fruitful and morally insightful interplay between *both* the mythic-poetic mode *and* the rational-exegetic mode. Appreciating the one does not necessitate reviling the other.

The divisions between us and them, between what can and cannot be done, and between what can and cannot be eaten that our culture foists upon us occupy chapter 2. Osborne examines how several fifth-century BCE thinkers conceived of nature, humanity's place in it, and our moral constraints in dealing with the beasts. In book 3 of his histories, Herodotus portrays nature as provident, a system of checks and balances among all species that prevents any extinctions. From Plato's *Protagoras*, Osborne analyzes the myth about the origins of human political communities told by the dialogue's character Protagoras. The myth describes how the demigod Epimetheus distributes a wide array of abilities, weapons, and protections to the originally naked and defenseless species of non-human animals so that each would enjoy a distinct means of survival. The problem with Epimetheus's forgetful dispensation is that no survival tools remain to provide for helpless humanity. So Prometheus must steal from the gods the use of fire and the arts to give human beings the means to fend for themselves in a harsh and hostile world. In contrast to Herodotus's view of nature in which no species has a privileged status, Protagoras's myth justifies human beings in devising any tactics and weapons necessary for prevailing against the beasts. Communal life arises as a simple expedient of self-protection, and Zeus gives human beings the moral sense to allow for collective *human* society. Justice does not apply to nonhumans. Anaxagoras and Democritus also contrast the relative strength of the beasts and the relative weakness of human resources. Osborne grants that the correct way of dividing nature into us and them

might not be written into the physical structure of reality, since it is our cultural outlook that fixes what counts as morally significant divisions. Yet she rejects relativism in favor of the possibility of a morally better outlook. This superior moral vision will not be a *truer* vision of the world, but one that expresses a perfect ideal of beauty, nobility, and intrinsic loveliness (39). Osborne's humane attitude is thus an aesthetic, not a search for truth.

The transmigration of souls is explored in chapter 3. Osborne sees a thematic resemblance between the myths of reincarnation found in the Pythagoreans, Empedocles, and Plato's *Timaeus*. She analyzes Xenophanes' fragment about how Pythagoras told someone to stop beating a puppy because from its screams he recognized it as the soul of a friend. Osborne infers from this story that Pythagoras's doctrine of reincarnation (a) entails avoiding cruelty to those animals who are one's friends in disguise and (b) assumes that each individual animal possesses a fully human soul that can be treated as a moral agent that is virtuous or vicious just like any normal human being. She also thinks it shows that (c) "Pythagoras can simply ignore distinctions of species, since they make no difference to the identity of the individual soul" (50). This claim oversteps what is said in the fragment. If his human friend were incarnated as a slug or a toad, could Pythagoras recognize him from his tormented wriggles or croaks? Dogs share many more behavioral and physiological features with human beings than they do with amphibians or invertebrates. But the puppy pal story leaves it unclear whether, on Pythagoras's doctrine of reincarnation, human souls may occupy the bodies of dogs alone, or all quadrupeds, or all mammals, or just land animals, and so forth. So Osborne's claim (c) is unsupported. She also offers no argument to justify her choice of interpretations of one of Empedocles' fragments. Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of this chapter is that while Osborne seems to recognize that there is no empirical support whatever for these fantastic doctrines of transmigrating souls, she nevertheless upholds them as superior to any scientific taxonomy of animal species. She wrongly claims that Pythagoras, Empedocles, and *Timaeus* "give us a story to explain how souls can transmigrate and how we might all be kin" (62). Rather, these ludicrous and entertaining stories don't establish but merely *assume* the existence of nonphysical souls that hop from one physical body of one kind of animal to another; they don't begin to explain *how* such psychic journeys happen. Surely Darwin did better showing kinship among species.

In chapter 4, Osborne displays Aristotle's attempt to trace continuity, rather than the radical discontinuity insisted upon by the Stoics, across the human/animal spectrum. Her goal is to show how this project fits with a humane and perceptive attitude toward all nonlinguistic individuals, both human and nonhuman animals. On the one hand she rejects the

Cartesian position that since nonhuman animals lack propositional beliefs, they are not intelligent. On the other she attacks the Wittgensteinian Private Language argument, according to which nonhuman animals cannot have an inner, private mental life structured by an inner private language, which indicates that they lack any mental life at all. Osborne seeks to discredit the idea that language and thought are essentially a set of propositions. She plausibly holds that cats express their needs, desires, and intentions through nonpropositional meows and bodily cues, while we language-users communicate the same needs, desires, and intentions, sometimes via conventional social utterances and sometimes nonverbally. Osborne understands Aristotle's psychology to account for the continuity of mental content between human beings and nonhuman animals by means of the mechanism of *phantasia*. It is *phantasia* rather than linguistic or theoretical concepts that serves to transfer content from an animal's perceptual experience to its purposive imagination, which supplies its inclination to act. This mechanism allows nonhuman animals to "act intelligently without intellect" (84). Insofar as both Plato and Aristotle construe conceptual capacities as continuous between humans and other animals, both bolster her account.

Aristotle is commonly supposed to have a *scala naturae* with human beings at the top of all earthly organisms. Osborne attacks this supposition in chapter 5. She contends that the nutritive, sensitive, and rational functions of the soul comprise a kind of nested sequence, but not a hierarchy, for Aristotle. His account of the increasing complexity of living things from plants, to nonhuman animals, to human beings does not, she thinks, indicate a superiority of any kind. Rather, each species has its own characteristic strengths and capacities that delineate a distinctive form of life that can be lived successfully by that species, "[s]o we may have more things to do, but it does not follow that they are better things to do" (103).

While much of the evidence Osborne presents for this take on Aristotle is persuasive, she blunders in her treatment of contemplation (*theōria*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). She translates *Nicomachean Ethics* X. 8, 1178<sup>b</sup>22-28 in part as follows:

the [nonhuman] animals do not partake of happiness, being completely devoid of this kind of activity [contemplation]. For gods, their entire life is blessed; for humans [their life is blessed] just to the extent that some semblance of this kind of activity exists; but of other animals, none is happy, since it does not engage in contemplation in any way. (104-5)

After accurately translating this text, Osborne inexplicably gets Aristotle's inference backwards. His argument is plainly of the form:  $\sim H$  (no nonhuman animals are happy), *epeidē* ("since" or "because")  $\sim C$  (no nonhuman animals contemplate). This means that his premise is  $\sim C$ , and he concludes from it  $\sim H$ . Yet Osborne denies this, insisting instead that

he reasons ~H, therefore ~C. She makes a decent case that the complexity of human capacities, activities, and desires does not, to Aristotle's circumspect biologist's eye, make human beings superior to other living things. Osborne does not deny that, for Aristotle, human beings are the only animals that share *nous* (theoretical intellect) with the gods. But she doesn't recognize that this is why Aristotle considers human beings to be superior to other animals. We have a divine faculty, *nous*, which they lack, and so we, but not they, can engage in *the* divine activity, contemplation. She writes: "we clearly fall far short of the divine, since for Aristotle's god just thinking is sufficient to reach perfection, and there is no need for any hierarchy of ends, or any calculation of means towards the ultimate goal" (127). While she is right that our lives are not as simple as that of Aristotle's god, she fails to show that his hierarchy of reason—and specifically the divinity of intellectual theorizing—does not amount to a hierarchy of value for Aristotle.

The so-called vice of sentimentality is addressed in chapter 6. Osborne thinks Aelian's story of Androcles and the lion proves that what counts in moral evaluation is not intelligence, consciousness, or linguistic abilities, but rather loyalty, kindness, gratitude, and hospitality. Seeing moral responses in others requires imagination and empathy, which characterize the humane person, along with compassion, love, and the ability to see and respond to the needs of others despite barriers of race, class, or species. She convincingly argues that we care for children because they are vulnerable, needy, and precious, and the same should go for those animals that depend on our gentleness for their survival. But she silently passes over the issue of the propriety of Androcles' diet of fresh meat offered up by his hospitable lion. Is a predatory carnivore's prey food fit for a humane human being? Osborne remarks on the story of the monk Macarius accepting a fleece from a grateful hyena he has healed that Macarius has no moral qualms about accepting it since the fleece is "simply a by-product of her normal way of life" (155). But is skinning a sheep a humane deed in the normal way of life of a monk? Again, she doesn't say. Osborne sees these hagiographical stories depicting uncorrupted beasts instinctively recognizing what is good in nature and pious men recognizing their fellow creatures as companions. She thinks that these stories stretch our imagination by offering us a god's-eye view of human arrogance and corruption designed to turn beastly men into good, compassionate, loving persons. Such stories thus inspire us courageously to resist the corruptions of a brutal, lethal society.

In chapter 7, Osborne discusses passages from Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, *Ajax*, and *Antigone* to illustrate examples of absolutely binding, nonnegotiable obligations. She suggests that declarations of rights are made out of this same need to express binding, absolute moral truths. She

argues that human rights claims are “statements of moral commitment made on behalf of those who are unjustly treated, and they express, in legal language, the moral values of the onlooker, to explain the principles on which they campaign against perceived injustices” (190). Osborne thinks rights talk is popular because it expresses, in a muddled way, a deep respect for moral value in all kinds of actions by moral beings toward immaterial objects, works of art, homes, castles, monuments, creatures, trees, rivers, cliffs and anything one cares for. Rights as such do not exist, she concludes, but declarations of rights do, and the latter can be based on genuine moral perception, and so be appropriate, or based on decadent values, and so be inappropriate. On her view, there is a more urgent need to stand up for voiceless, vulnerable victims of oppression (the unborn, infants, children, the disabled, imbeciles, animals, plants, inanimate parts of nature and the built environment) precisely because they cannot defend themselves.

Osborne’s target in chapter 8 is Democritus’s attempt to establish issues of justice and morality on the basis of what contributes most to the quality of human life. Democritus contends that out of self-defense we ought to kill nonhuman animals when they pose a threat to us, and we similarly ought to exterminate human criminals and enemies that threaten our livelihood. In a footnote, Osborne comments that vegetarianism may be supererogatory, morally right, morally neutral, or morally wrong, and she judges that “it would be morally wrong to refuse animal products from humanely farmed beasts” (198 n.). I can’t see how this position squares with her apparent pro-life position on abortion. If an unwanted fetus is humanely aborted, how could Osborne object? A plodding discussion of the Epicurean Hermarchus of Mytilene fills the rest of this chapter. Osborne attacks his view of morality as a set of strategically effective rules for maximizing the beneficial consequences for members of a flourishing human society. She faults Hermarchus’s theory for seeking a reason to justify decent treatment of others. Seeing an action as the decent thing to do is, for Osborne, the only suitable motivation for moral action. She declares that Socrates got it right: we choose the right course of action willingly precisely because it is good; if we fail to choose it for that reason, that shows a failure to recognize the value of what is good (222). Consequently she concludes that “the intuitive sense of what can and can’t be admired is more secure than the philosophers’ proposed foundations that claim to ground it” (223). Many contemporary ethicists, including Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Cora Diamond, and Christina Hoff Sommers, are antifoundationalists in this regard.

In chapter 9, Osborne’s vision of the humane attitude blurs. She reviews Porphyry’s arguments for vegetarianism in *On Abstinence from Animal Food* and finds them lacking. Porphyry argues that a meatless

diet is a simple, frugal, wholesome means for the philosopher to distance his soul from the decadent, gory, gluttonous passions of the body, that the ritual sacrifice of animals neither pleases the gods nor justifies eating the sacrificial leftovers, and that mistreating or killing animals is unjust. Osborne challenges the assumption on which she thinks all of Porphyry's arguments rest, namely, that eating meat is a luxury we can do without. She faults him and modern proponents of vegetarianism who, as she sees it, overlook that only affluent folk with a surplus of food choices are free to go meatless. Osborne asserts that "it is probably simpler to eat meat than not to do so in most regions of the inhabited world" (228-29), citing no research whatsoever to support this sweeping claim. She champions eating locally raised meat as better for the environment and better for the poor who toil in countries from which vegetarian foods are exported to affluent supermarket-shoppers in European and North American cities. In short, she holds that vegetarianism can be a luxury that exploits others. Osborne insists that vegetarianism is not a possible position for "a traditional Welsh sheep farmer, or someone who ekes out a living from fishing in the North Sea, or a nomadic tribesman, or an Inuit seal-hunter" (236). Perhaps so, but these few thousand people are unlikely to read her book or any academic's writings on ethics, animals, and the environment. Gone is Osborne's view of nonhuman animals as psychic kinfolk and as potential friends with whom hospitality and loyalty can bloom. In the end Osborne sanctions seeing neighboring animals as meals on legs—if sheep, why not cats?

In the four-page conclusion, Osborne opines that "sometimes it is a finer thing to see and dwell upon some facts and to fail to see and refuse to dwell upon others" (241). Exploiting nonhuman animals for food and various products has a long tradition in many countries beyond Wales. As many as twenty vegetarians can live on the agricultural and energy resources required to feed one meat-eater. Millions of people could eat locally grown vegetarian foods without exploiting anyone instead of wastefully cycling feed through animals. As the single largest source of both methane and nitrous oxide emissions, and one of the largest sources of carbon dioxide emissions, raising animals to produce meat generates more greenhouse gases than all the cars and trucks in the world. Consequently, what initially seemed a skillfully woven new tapestry of old texts, *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers* ultimately unravels for failing to see and refusing to dwell on facts like these.

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