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RESOURCE 7.3

Timeline of key thinkers on sentience

S INVESTIGATING NON-RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEWS

Here are ten key thinkers who have influenced attitudes towards sentience in non-human animals in the West.

Pythagoras (c.570BCE—c.490BCE)

Pythagoras believed that non-human animals, as well as humans, have souls. He was vegetarian, believing in the transmigration of souls between and across humans and animals. He rejected the idea that humans are separate from and superior to other animals. He expressed horror at the eating of meat, spoke of butchers being impervious to the cries of a lamb or a calf – cries so similar to the cries of human babies. He appealed to people to be compassionate and sympathetic towards other animals, particularly animals such as the goats, oxen and sheep used for food and labour. In the past it was common to refer to vegetarians as ‘pythagoreans’.

Aristotle (c.384BCE—c.322BCE)

Aristotle argued that everything has an end purpose, which he called ‘telos’: plants exist for the sake of animals, and animals – or ‘brute beasts’ as Aristotle called them – exist for the sake of humans. Aristotle said that as nothing exists without telos, it is undeniably true that animals are here to be used for human purposes, such as food and clothing. The telos of all of nature, he asserted, is the fulfilment of humankind.

St Francis of Assisi (c.1181—1226)

Known by many Christians as the patron saint of animals, St Francis of Assisi emphasised the importance of humans, as gentle stewards of God’s creation, in caring for all animals. Long before scientific studies, he recognised animal sentience – that, like humans, animals feel pain and pleasure, and have emotional needs too. He urged people not to exclude any of God’s creatures from their compassion, arguing that those who do exclude them run the risk of becoming insensitive to their fellow humans as well. St Francis said that all animals have the same source as humans: God the Creator. He taught that not only do humans have the duty to avoid harming animals, but that God also expects them to actively care for animals when they need it.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225—1274)

St Augustine held that humans are superior to animals because only humans were created in the image of God, and this, he argued, is what gives humans capacity for reason and rational thought. Humans possess rational souls, setting them apart from animals and making them superior to them. Augustine saw refraining from killing animals or destroying plants as ‘the height of superstition.’

Aquinas was strongly influenced by the pre-Christian philosopher Aristotle (see left) and his concept of ‘telos’. Aquinas argued that those who have claimed that it is sinful to kill ‘dumb’ animals are wrong because God intended animals to be for human use. Aquinas also claimed that it is not possible to sin against non-human animals.

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