

Human Greatness or Animal Rights? The Case of Fra Anselm Turmeda's *Disputa de l'Ase*

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The animal world (which includes animals, birds, fishes, reptiles and insects), has always been very closely connected with human civilization, providing food, products, a potent work-force and entertainment in a variety of ways. It is only in recent times that mechanization, vegetarianism and an increased awareness of animals' rights have reduced the dependence on animals to a large extent; otherwise, from the beginning of civilization almost, animals have been an inseparable and invariable part of human life, be it during peace or war; on the field or in the house; on mountains or in the plains; with the rich and with the poor. For his part, man too has responded to animals in a variety of ways, though not all responses have been encouraging. While on the one hand humans have over-utilized animals without any regard to their welfare and have caused their deaths simply for pleasure, on the other they have venerated them in literature or apotheosized them in literature and culture. Time has provided a really solid foundation for an anthropological, cultural and economic bonding between humans and animals.

In this article, my attempt is to (re-)interpret a medieval European text that has a human-animal interaction as its central motif. By the term "interaction", I refer to both the literal and metaphorical meanings, for the text indeed provides us with an animated conversation between a man and an animal that eventually throws up a number of interesting viewpoints, which is the focus of my analysis for the purpose of providing an opinion on man-animal relationships, especially in the medieval period. The text is *Disputa de l'Ase* (trans *Dispute of a Donkey*) written in 1417 by a medieval friar named Fra Anselm Turmeda. Anselm was a Franciscan monk from Spain who wrote both in his native Catalan and in Arabic (since he converted to Islam later in his life). *Disputa de l'Ase* is written in Catalan, and the word "dispute" in the title posits it as a notable example of the emerging form of debate literature (like "The Owl and the Nightingale" and "Wynnere and Wastoure"). In this story, Fra Anselm as himself debates with a donkey in order to determine who is superior — man or animal. Both spar with each other over as many as eighteen issues, with Anselm mobilizing all the resources of his intelligence and scholarship to put forward reasons for the nobility of humans, only to be rebutted and refuted patiently, logically and resourcefully by the donkey, till Anselm delivers a coup de grace in his nineteenth argument — Christ assumed a human form when He came to earth.

Utilization of the example of Christ's Incarnation on Earth as a plea for human superiority is not new to theological exercises. Implications of the hypostatic union can be seen right from Gospel of St John, where Christ's Incarnation is very succinctly but

epigrammatically referred to as "the Word made flesh" [John 1:14], and Apollinaris of Laodicea was the first to use the term hypostasis in trying to understand the concept of Incarnation. Cristina Cervone, in her book *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (2013), examines the poetry and narrative of many fourteenth century writers who explored the intellectual dimensions of the gradual blurring of the distance between humanity and divinity with the Nativity of Christ. As Middle English slowly emerged as a legitimate medium for religious expression, writers such as William Langland, Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton and the anonymous writers of the Charters of Christ started producing literature on Christ's appearance on our planet. According to Cervone, William Langland envisaged "Christ's life as a series of ardent leaps, where the Incarnation is the first eager leap that sets the rest of salvation history into motion" (2). Julian of Norwich idealistically viewed the Incarnation as a unification of man with God in a way that could not be broken apart even by sin; Walter Hilton's *Treatise Written to a Devout Man* gives thoughts on the humanity of Christ, while as far as the Charters of Christ are concerned, the "Long Charter" has a discussion on Christ's human life.

One of the many developments that took place with the advent of the Renaissance was the nascent realization of the superior qualities of human beings, which came to be termed humanism. Votaries of Renaissance humanism delighted in cataloguing the physical and mental faculties that made man great, and man's physique was often compared with animals to underline his superiority by contrast. Thus, it was often pointed out that unlike animals that had a horizontal physical frame with a head perpetually looking at the ground, man was miraculously endowed with an erect, vertical physique, with his head held high. Hence, when animals gazed down towards hell, man was divinely destined to look upward contemplating the heavens and his Maker. Moreover, unlike most animals that need four feet to support themselves, man needs just two, leaving his two hands to be utilized for a wide variety of activities. On top of this, the scriptural sanction of the incarnation of Christ as a human (and not as an animal or vegetation) added vigour to the plea of the superiority of mankind over his surroundings. Hence, Anselm's invocation of the mortal manifestation of the divine as the clinching argument at a climactic moment in his debate with the donkey is indeed a strong assertion of Renaissance humanism, coming as it does as early as 1417. It may have paved the way for many such assertions to be made after him.

However, Turmeda's "reassuring use of the incarnation to prove human dignity, was not new" (Kenny 3) either during the medieval period or during the Renaissance. In reality, he was merely stating in an intelligent way what had always been there for everyone to see. But where he is really being innovative is the way in which he shapes the arguments for animals against humans, although his Renaissance grounding would have expected the opposite. Over as many as eighteen arguments, the donkey is able to prove on behalf of animals that they are in no way inferior to humans, when judged from the perspective of appearance, habits, traits, abilities and activities. Both physically and otherwise, animals have it in them to give humans a run for their money. It is only something as great as the mention of Christ that ultimately tilts the scales hopelessly

against them and brings about a judgment. When one follows every pair of the eighteen arguments closely, one discovers that the narrator presents a defence of man's abilities in a succinct, matter-of-fact manner, whereas the donkey's discourse given as a reply is deliberately made much more elaborate and painstaking, is couched in examples and ameliorated with rhetoric. The reader cannot but feel a sense of exhilaration as the donkey refutes every suggestion of Anselm in a dignified and logical manner, making the scholar look like a novice of sorts on more than one occasion, till the weapon of Incarnation is finally hurled.

Turmeda's adroit support for animals in the text therefore makes us suspect that more than being a tract on humanism (which the text obviously and ostensibly is), it is also an early Renaissance commentary on animals' rights (and it is singular in this respect). Pointing out qualities in animals in order to support or criticize humans through explicit comparisons was not new to Turmeda's time. Consider as an instance the following comparison of bees with humans made by Richard Rolle of Hampole:

The bee has three qualities. The first is that she is never idle, and she never associates with those who refuse to work, but throws them out and drives them away. A second is that when she flies she picks up earth in her feet so that she cannot easily be blown too high in the air by the wind. The third is that she keeps her wings clean and bright. In the same way, good people who love God are never unoccupied; either they are at work, praying or meditating or reading or going other good works, or they are rebuking lazy people, indicating that they deserve to be driven away from the repose of heaven because they refuse to work. Here good people "pick up the earth," so to speak, and by reckoning themselves despicable and made of earth, so that they may not be blown by the wind of frivolity and pride. They keep their wings clean; in other words, they fulfill the two commandments of love with a clear conscience and they retain other virtues uncontaminated by the filth of sin and impure desires (128).

Or the following story narrated by Felix of Crowland in *Life of St Guthlac* about the intimacy of wild birds and beasts with the followers of God:

It happened on a time there came a venerable brother to him whose name was Wilfrith, who had of old been united with him in spiritual fellowship. Whilst they discussed in many discourses their spiritual life, there came suddenly two swallows flying in, and behold they raised up their song rejoicing; and after they sat fearlessly on the shoulders of the holy man Guthlac, and then lifted up their son; and afterwards sat on his bosom and on his arms and his knees. When Wilfrith had long wondering beheld the birds, he asked him wherefore the wild birds of the wide waste so submissively sat upon him. The holy man Guthlac answered him and said: Hast thou never learnt, brother Wilfrith, in holy writ, that he who has led his life after God's will, the wild beasts and wild birds have become more intimate with him. (53)

Saint Bernardine of Siena has the following example from the world of beasts to offer to human beings in order to teach them the virtues of filial love:

Thou shouldst take example from the beasts, from the birds; if thou hast not intelligence of thyself to learn. O boys, boys, when you take captive little swallows, what then do the mother birds? All the mother swallows unite together, and do in every way endeavour to aid the little pretty birds. Not so doth man: not alone doth he not endeavour to aid his brother, but he hath not even compassion on him. Worse than the birds is man! Oh, in what confusion will the cruel man find himself, who hath not compassion on him who is his fellow ! For thou seest that the beast is more merciful than thou art. So mayest thou see of the swine which are merciful one towards another, that when one doth squeal all the others run to aid him, if it be possible. (67-68)

The above examples are provided to highlight the fact that many years before Turmeda, benevolent and well-meaning people had started to correlate animals with human life in a meaningful, philosophical way and to think for them. Their acknowledgement of the contribution of animals to the improvement of human quality, coupled with their sympathetic insight into the wretched plight of animals during their time, may have led to the genesis of a new insistence on animals' welfare and animals' rights. One immediately remembers John of Salisbury who writes indignantly in 1159 in his *Policraticus*:

Who more bestial than he who, neglecting duties, rises at midnight, that with the aid of dogs keen of scent, his active huntsmen, his zealous comrades, and his retinue of devoted servants, at cost of time, labor, money, and effort, he may wage from earliest dawn till darkness his campaign against beasts? (12)

Although it would be long before legal orders or ordinances could formally prohibit such cruel, anti-animal pastimes as bear-baiting, bull-baiting, cock-fighting, fishing, fowling, hawking, or hunting, for the time being they did discourage or try to suppress these cruelties. For instance, in June 1363 King Edward III issued a writ to the sheriffs to make proclamation encouraging the practice of archery by way of a pastime in place of football, cock-fighting, etc ("Early Prohibitions").

My alternative interpretation of Anselm Turmeda's *Disputa de l'Ase* is to view it as another tract in this mould, aimed at the welfare of animals. Unlike John of Salisbury discussed above, who minces no words in expressing his disgust for courtiers who derive pleasure from animals' pain, Turmeda is subtle and logical in his plea for a better treatment of animals. The method in which he highlights the admirable qualities of animals leaves medieval man in no doubt that animals are not inferior to humans in spite of their many limitations, and ultimately becomes a strong argument in favour of treating them with the humaneness and sympathy that they deserve. In such a context, the clinching argument in Turmeda's favour is contained, in my opinion, towards the end of the text in the last sentence spoken by the lion, which is overlooked in the euphoria of celebrating the victory of man over animal through the invocation of the name of Christ:

We beseech and entreat you, with all our might, to be so gracious as to teach, tell and exhort the sons of Adam to take good care of our poor animals, since they will be rewarded for this by him who lives and reigns for ever and ever (15).

When one considers the worth of this line, then many communications and contexts preceding this acquire a new significance. The lion had earlier asserted, "... we will leave aside many noble and sharp-witted animals who would need only two or three words to render you as silent as a dumb person" (5). If indeed there were animals wise enough to show Anselm the door in a combat of wits, then why did the lion not deploy them in the first place in such an important argument where the pride of the entire animal kingdom was at stake? It couldn't have been overconfidence on the part of the king of beasts to entrust such an important debate to a donkey, traditionally regarded as less clever than all other animals and that, in this particular story, is itself imperfect: "So I turned round and saw beside me a vile and miserable donkey, his coat abraded all over, snotty-nosed, mangy, without a tail; in my view he would not have fetched a penny at the Tarragona fair" (6). The reply is that the king of beasts must have known all along that it was a battle which the animal community had lost before it had even begun. Further, when Anselm finally invokes the reference to the Incarnation, the donkey admits:

For I swear it is true that each time you said to me that you had another argument to prove the truth of your opinion, I almost perished, fearing that you would utter the argument which you have just now uttered and set out, since I knew that argument well, together with many others ... (15)

This again proves that though the donkey defended the animals' point of view admirably, it was always in trepidation of the scriptural reference that would rule the debate in Anselm's favour. Hence, both the lion and the donkey had been upholding the multifarious achievements of animals not to establish their superiority to humans, but to point out to them that animals deserved a better attitude and a greater benevolence from humans than what they had received till then.

Although in Turmeda's story God's Incarnation as a human ultimately leads to the defeat of animals in the debate on superiority, the very fact can interestingly be produced in support of animals. If humans are so perfect that none other than God chooses their physique to incarnate Himself, then one area in which they should evince their perfection lies in being compassionate towards animals, which they hardly do. Cruelty towards animals was neither a sign of perfection, nor of polish. Further, Jesus had not just incarnated as a mere human, but as a shepherd — a person whose primary responsibility is to look after animals. It is with shepherds and their flock that the ideal form of life called pastoralism is associated; therefore if humans realized that superiority also called for responsibility and compassion, then it would not be difficult at all for humans and animals to settle down in an ideal pastoral setting.

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