

"AND LET HIM HAVE DOMINION"

WILLIAM CURRAN, O.P.



URELY from the point of view of art it is always gratifying to see principles, even false principles, pushed to their logical conclusions. To the artist of logic the progress of the mind in accord with the established rules of thought is in itself desirable. Prudence, of course, would prefer illogicalness to the additional diffusion of error which inevitably attends the ruthless application of false principles, and would unhesitatingly decide in favor of the artistic deformity however monstrous it would be to the artist.¹

Art often finds itself in the ascendancy; and many a placid weaver of theories has to his embarrassment attracted disciples whose art in making conclusions from theoretical principles is far more evident than their prudence in bringing such conclusions to the attention of the world. Thus the Materialistic theory has been forced to many absurd applications. It has professed, of its own accord, as many more and will continue to do so because its initial error is so fundamental and so foolish.

Only recently a serious plea was made that vivisection of animals be discontinued on the ground that man has no right, for the sake of improving the health of the human race or of adding a few years to the life span, so to maltreat these defenseless creatures. The plea demands justice for animals, especially for dogs who are almost as superior to other animals as man is to them, and concludes with the strange assertion that as far as the social virtues are concerned the dog is often man's superior.

Very few would be willing to follow such a plea to its absurd conclusion. Very few would admit the extravagance that dogs or any other animals were in any way to be compared to

¹ The artist who consciously violates the canons of art is less deserving of critical censure than the artist who does so unconsciously. On the other hand, Prudence demands integrity of the will. Therefore, from the point of view of Prudence, he who errs unknowingly is less culpable.—Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, Ia IIae, q. 57, a. 4, c.

men. Yet the conclusion is not absurd if Materialism be true. It is the conclusion which must follow logically from so false a doctrine. If the difference between animals and man is only a difference of degree, if man is merely a dog whose brain cells are by some freak of nature of a slightly higher organization, if the gulf between the dog and the man is not infinite in distance and in depth, then man has no right to use animals as he does. The Materialist to be logical must admit the essential equality between man and animals. He must admit the possibility (at least) of the animal showing himself superior to man in man's proper field. And he must admit the legitimacy of the argument that man has no more right to use animals in his surgical experiments than he has to use other men.

It might seem that on this point, at least, Materialism is more idealistic than the truth it opposes. But as Chesterton somewhere remarked: "Ideals are based on ideas." And ideas must be rooted in truth. The sentimental nonsense which Materialism tries to disguise as idealism is as far from truth as butter tubs are from angels.

Pleading for justice toward animals is like pleading for prevention of cruelty to artichokes. Both complaints presuppose something that does not exist, sensitivity in the artichokes and rights in the animal. It is impossible to be just to animals. Justice renders to every being that which is due to him. A just man is one from whom God and self and neighbor receive what is theirs. That which is due to another is his right. Hence there can be no justice or injustice to a creature incapable of rights. It is just as impossible to owe where there is no right as it is to paint where there is nothing to receive the impression of the brush. A subjective right is a moral power to have or to do something, the violation of which constitutes an injury.² Every right presupposes an obligation, for the right is nothing more than a means or an opportunity of fulfilling that which is of obligation. Thus the right to vote in a Democracy is a means and an opportunity of fulfilling the obligation which every citizen has of obtaining for the country a government for the common good. Right and obligation are correlative and inseparable. Just as vision demands color so obligations require rights; and the source of both is law, either eternal or human.

Obligations presuppose free will. They demand the ability

² Billuart, *Tract. de Jure*, Dissert. I, a. 1.

to obey or to disobey. Their force or coercive power is not physical but moral. They do not move those upon whom they are imposed necessarily but leave them free to accept or to reject. The animal, then, can have no rights nor obligations. He has no more power to disobey the law that rules his nature than the Statue of Liberty has to disobey the law that rules hers. The participation of the animal in the natural law (which in him is called law only by similitude and should properly be called instinct³) moves him necessarily to his proper end. He deserves no credit for its inevitable accomplishment, for there is nothing in any way that he can do about it. The animal has no rational power by which he can direct himself to his end. He is directed by another through the mediacy of his natural instinct. And this itself is a sign that he is intended to be a servant and to be of use to others.⁴ Because of this neither good nor evil can happen to him. He is not the fit subject in himself for these eventualities. Good and evil can happen only to a rational creature and are said to happen to the animal solely in view of the fact that in happening to the animal they happen to man, to whose need and utility the animal is ordained.⁵

This is not to under-rate the animal. Those who demand for him something in no way belonging to him do this because they take from him his essential perfection, the thing that he was created to accomplish. For his perfection as the perfection of every creature, consists in subjection to his superior.⁶ No one denies that plants are intended for the good of animals, that plants are meant to be the servants of animals whose highest perfection is reached in ministering to the order to which they, in turn, are subject. Animals are subject to man and attain their highest perfection in so being subject just as plants are subject to both animals and man. The fact that animals have over the plants the added perfection of sensitivity in no way exempts them from man's dominion nor gives them in themselves any claim to this or that treatment by men. Cruelty to animals is wrong not because animals have any claim to kindness or consideration, not because by cruelty man injures the animal, but because by cruelty man injures himself. He acts contrary to the dictate of right reason; and since man's good is attained by

³ Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.* Ia IIae, q. 91, a. 2, ad 3um.

⁴ *Summa Theol.* IIa IIae, q. 64, a. 1, ad 2um.

⁵ IIa IIae, q. 76, a. 2, c.

⁶ IIa IIae, q. 81, a. 7, c.

acting in conformity with his reason, he suffers evil by departing from its command.⁷

As the servants of man, then, one of the legitimate uses to which the animals may be put is that of vivisection in the interests of medical research. In being thus used the animal serves the good of man and this is his destiny, his highest perfection. The animal attains his final end in supplying the need of the creature he was created to serve. No amount of disordered pity can change this. The animal neither needs nor deserves the pity or the gratitude of man. He is incapable of receiving either. The pity is really a disordered passion going beyond the bounds of right reason; and the gratitude belongs to God Who said of man: "and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls, of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth."⁸

⁷ IIa IIae, q. 123, a. 1, c.

⁸ Gen. i, 26.