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Edited by Jill Kraye

Excerpt

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Part I.
Concepts of Man

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Anselm Turmeda

NEIL KENNY

Introduction

Anselm Turmeda (c. 1352–c. 1423) was an extraordinary figure who straddled the worlds of Christianity and Islam. Born in Majorca, he became a Franciscan and studied theology at Bologna but then went in the late 1380s to Tunis, where he remained for the rest of his life and, at some point, was converted to Islam. His treatise *The Gift* (1420), written in Arabic, is a Muslim refutation of Christianity; but the *Disputation of the Donkey* (1417–18), like his *Book of Good Advice* (1398), is a Christian text written in his native Catalan. This duality enabled both Muslims and Christians of subsequent centuries to claim Turmeda as their own. The intersection of the two religions in Turmeda is illustrated by the fact that the *Disputation of the Donkey* is an adaptation (and in places a translation) of a Muslim work, a tenth-century Arabic fable which is one of the fifty-one epistles constituting an encyclopedia composed by a heterodox fraternity collectively known as ‘The Brethren of Purity and True Friends’.

The *Disputation of the Donkey* takes the form of a debate on the question whether humans are more noble than animals. Friar Anselm produces many traditional arguments in favour of human superiority, but all are demolished by his interlocutor, a donkey. Only the nineteenth argument forces the donkey to admit defeat: Christ took on human form. This reassuring use of the incarnation to prove human dignity was not unusual in the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the text has an overall unsettling effect thanks to the donkey’s eighteen convincing, anti-anthropocentric ripostes, some of which, in attacking man’s ill treatment of animals, have a surprisingly modern ring.

The *Disputa de l’ase* was published in Catalan in 1509 in Barcelona but survives only in a French translation that was first published in Lyons in 1544. The 1544 French text, including the headings and subheadings, is published in Anselm Turmeda, *Dispute de l’âne*, ed. A. Llinares (Paris, 1984); the passages translated are at pp. 39, 45, 47–50, 54, 56–7, 79–82, 87–9, 90–2, 117–19, 121, 138–9.

Disputation of the Donkey: Selections

The disputation of a donkey with Friar Anselm Turmeda, on the nature and nobility of animals. Composed and structured by the said Friar Anselm in the city of Tunis in 1417. In this disputation Friar Anselm uses many lively proofs and arguments to prove that the children of our father Adam have greater nobility and dignity than all the animals of the world.

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*Anselm Turmeda**Friar Anselm Speaks¹*

‘The sight of the world being spurred on to all kinds of wickedness and of everyone living in debauchery made me think it would be appropriate to relate to you an adventure which befell me one day when I was out in the countryside. My debate will make you see that worthless man would be inferior to brute beasts if the divinity had not clothed himself in our infirmity. . . .

‘I found myself quite close to a garden in which shade was provided by an infinite number of flowers and fruits of all kinds. . . . In a word, as I beheld this place I was convinced that it was earthly paradise itself or, at the very least, the splendid, beautiful and fruit-laden garden of the Hesperides. . . . I then sat among the flowers, in the shade, the better to inspect this most divine handiwork. But I suddenly began to slumber while I was gazing at this spot, which was so magnificent, and in my sleep I had the strong impression of a vision in which I had a perfect view of the brute beasts of the whole world arriving at this spacious and beautiful place. . . .’

*Prologue:**In Which the Reason for So Many Animals Gathering Together Is Stated*

The gathering together of so many animals at this time had been caused and occasioned by the death of their king. He had been a noble lion of great wisdom and justice as well as physical courage and bravery. . . . And because of the strong, supreme affection in which they had held this king, they had all assembled in order to elect one of his relatives as king with the consent of all the animals.

*End of Prologue**Here One of the Former King’s Counsellors, a Great Handsome Horse, Begins to Speak*

Then a gracious horse called ‘The Bay’ got up; he was very wise, experienced and well-spoken. He uttered the following words, speaking loftily and with fine eloquence: ‘. . . in the name of almighty God, I hereby declare that the long-tailed Lord Tawny Lion, son of the cousin of our lord, the deceased king, is elected, appointed and confirmed as our king and sovereign. And I hold him to be our true lord and protector for the rest of his life.’

When these words had been spoken, the animals shouted out very loudly with one voice, expressing their agreement, saying that this choice was to their liking and great satisfaction since the lion deserved it in terms of both justice and his own worth.

Of the celebrations which the animals held for their new king

. . . their loud songs, noise, uproar and pandemonium woke me from my sleep, and once awake I was as amazed as I would have been if I had strayed outside my own body. And I heard the following words:

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The Rabbit Speaks

‘O most great and powerful lord, the son of Adam sitting under that tree is a Catalan born in the city of Majorca. His name is Friar Anselm Turmeda, and he is highly learned in all branches of knowledge, exceptionally so in astrology. He is the chief customs official in Tunis, serving the great and noble Maule Bufret,² who is king and lord among the sons of Adam. He is also Master of the Horse to the same king. . . .’

After hearing the rabbit, the king said to him: ‘Tell me, rabbit, is this the Friar Anselm whose arrogance and high opinion of his own learning lead him to state, preach and hold the opinion that the sons of Adam are more noble and excellent, greater in dignity than we animals? I have heard that he goes even further, stating and asserting that we were created only to serve them, that they are our lords and we their vassals. And he says many other fantastic and ridiculous things, preaching against us without providing any proofs or just arguments. And the sons of Adam take his word for it, firmly believing that what he says against us is the truth.’

The Rabbit Answers the King by Saying

‘My lord, this is the man who says all the things you have heard about . . .’

The King Addresses His Barons and Attendants

When the rabbit had said this, the king turned to the great barons and servants who were around him and said to them: ‘What do the rest of you think of this dim-witted beast, Friar Anselm, and his ridiculous, mad notions?’

At this, all of the king’s barons and servants answered of one accord: ‘My lord, what he says and preaches against us can be put down either, on the one hand, to extreme madness or crude reasoning powers, or else to great arrogance and rashness on his part. However, my lord, you know better than we do how it often happens that when people speak ill of someone they are bearing false witness against a person who is in fact innocent, not guilty. If it so pleases you, my lord, let him be summoned immediately to appear before your royal presence and supreme majesty, and let him be questioned about these points. If he accepts that all that has been said about him is true, then let him be asked to furnish proofs for his arguments. After all, when man seeks to prove something, it is not enough (as logicians point out) simply to say “This is so”; rather, we believe that man must sometimes furnish proof in order to prove the truth of what he says about us . . .’

How the donkey was delegated to dispute against Friar Anselm

[Friar Anselm is summoned and the king says to him:] ‘. . . in order for you to know clearly that we animals have greater nobility and dignity than you humans, that reason and justice require us to be your lords and you our subjects and subordinates, 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. Instead, we desire and hereby decree that the mangy donkey who has had his tail cut off should answer you,

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Anselm Turmeda

although he is the most wretched and miserable animal in our court. Address yourself to him all the same; put all your arguments to him and prove the truth of the assertions you have made against us.'

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. And I considered myself ridiculed; I could see clearly that they were mocking me. . . .

Here Begins the Debate between Friar Anselm and the Donkey

'My lord donkey, the first proof and argument showing that we sons of Adam have greater nobility and dignity than you animals is our beautiful form and appearance. For the parts of our body are well made and put together, and they are all well arranged according to beautiful matching proportions: thus, tall men have long legs, long arms and all the other parts of their body are similarly in proportion with its length; and small men have short legs and arms. So all people are proportioned in accordance with the overall size of their body. And this is the opposite of the way in which you animals are built, since there is no proportion between the parts of your bodies. I mean to tell you this in no uncertain terms.

Of proportion in animals: first, the elephant

'The elephant, as you can plainly see, has an extremely large body, big wide ears and small eyes. The camel has a large body, a long neck, long legs, small ears and a short tail. Oxen and bulls have long hair, long tails and no teeth at the front of their jaws. Sheep have long hair, long tails and no facial hair. Rabbits, despite being small animals, have bigger ears than camels. And so it is that you will find a great – almost infinite – number of animals whose bodies are distortions of the correct proportion that should exist between their different parts. For this reason it is evident that we sons of Adam are more noble than you animals.'

The Donkey's Reply

'Friar Anselm, you sin gravely by speaking of animals so scornfully. You are not so innocent as to be unaware that whenever someone scorns or criticizes any handiwork, the scorn or criticism reflects on the owner and author of that handiwork. Are you then criticizing the creator of animals? Your feeble understanding causes you to do so; indeed, you do not even understand my question. Know that the lord God created all the animals which you have named most accurately and wisely. And Moses testifies to this in Genesis [1:25], where he says that God saw all that he had made, and it was very good, in other words, it was without fault.

'I would also like you to know that God gave the elephant big wide ears so that they could be used to brush flies away from its eyes and mouth. It keeps its mouth open all the time because of its large projecting teeth, which God gave it for the defence of its body. And as for your claim that the elephant's eyes would be larger if they were in proportion with its body, I would like you to know that however small

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they may seem to you, their visual power is so perfect and sharp that it can extend to 250 miles if the elephant is on some high mountain. So does it strike you that such extended eyesight is in proportion with the elephant's extended body? This is unquestionably the case. I would also like you to know that every animal in the world with large bulbous eyes protruding from its head has poor, weak vision, while those with small eyes have good, sharp vision.

Of proportion in the camel

'Since the camel has long legs and yet must live off the plants of the earth, almighty God gave it a long neck so that it can reach down to the ground and can also scratch its extremities with its teeth. Almighty God created in similar fashion all the parts of the bodies of the animals which you mentioned, catering for their needs in their every activity. . . .

Friar Anselm Says to the Donkey

'Most worshipful donkey, the argument which proves that we have greater nobility and dignity than you animals and that it is right for us to be your lords is that we sell and buy you, feed and water you, protect you from the cold and heat, from lions and wolves, prepare medicine for you when you are ill. We do all this out of pity and compassion for you. And such works of charity are commonly performed only by lords towards their subjects and slaves.'

The Donkey Answers Friar Anselm

'Friar Anselm, your argument has little worth. For if we must be your subjects and slaves, and you our lords, simply because you buy and sell us, then both Christians and Moors must be in a similar position. But such dominion is gained only by force and usurpation, and where force rules, there is no room for either justice or equity. As for what you say about your feeding and watering us, protecting us from the cold and heat and from all ills, you only do this for your own gain, for you profit by our welfare and lose out if we are harmed. And you do none of this out of pity or compassion for us, but you do it for fear that we should die, since by our death you lose the pennies with which you bought us. And without our help you would drink no milk, eat no cheese, butter or cream. You would have no wool to make cloth, nor any lambskins to make furs, but would perish of cold. You would travel on foot and would also carry loads slung over your neck, like porters.

'As for what you say about taking pity on us, in fact you take lambs and kids and shut them away, separating them from their mothers and letting them die of thirst so that you can drink and turn into cheese the milk which God provided for their sustenance. You do this despite the fact that you have extremely good water and many different kinds of wine which you can drink. Friar Anselm, have you ever seen any of us animals drink milk once we have been weaned and are no longer being suckled? But your gluttony and greed are beyond all words and measure. You are old and yet you still consume milk.

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‘Besides, worse still, you take calves, kids and lambs and kill them. And then you skin them and chop them up; you fry their innards, boil their flesh in a pot and roast it in front of their fathers and mothers, whom you treat similarly, roasting them in front of their children. And they remain silent and endure with great steadfastness all that affliction and cruelty. Where, then, is the pity and compassion which you say you have for animals?’

‘The more you speak, the more you err and cover yourself in shame; for you are held by people to be wise and experienced, but when they hear your words, they consider you mad and ignorant. Therefore, if you have another argument, state it and you will receive an adequate answer, one that will perhaps make you keep your peace and fall silent.’

Friar Anselm Says to the Donkey

‘My lord donkey, another argument and proof that we sons of Adam have greater dignity and nobility than you animals is that we are very clever at building houses, towers and palaces in which to live, constructing them in numerous styles: round, square and in every other shape and size. And this we do through the great cunning and practical wisdom of our minds. All of this is lacking in you animals. And whoever can do all those things is worthy of being a lord. On the other hand, justice and equity demand that whoever cannot do such things should be a subordinate and a vassal.’

The Donkey Answers Friar Anselm

‘Friar Anselm, the more you speak the more you go astray, it seems to me. You think you have considerable knowledge, but you are completely devoid of it. For if you had any reason or discernment, you would plainly see the great folly of your praise of skill; your mind genuinely strikes me as being dull and feeble. And this is clear to everyone because of your foolish praise of your own building activities, since a comparison of all of your works with ours makes that praise look ridiculous.’

How the donkey uses nimble arguments to prove precisely the opposite case

‘Friar Anselm, don’t you see how bees are governed by a king under a good system . . . and how with precise measurements they make and build handsomely their fine houses, some with six sides, others with eight, some triangular, others square and others with more or fewer sides, according to their needs. And they construct these with a single material, wax, whereas men never use just one material for their dwellings, nor could they: they need sand, lime, earth, water, stone, wood, iron and plaster. And even when they have all these materials, they also need hammers, pickaxes, rulers, saws, hatchets, squares, files, tracing-lines and other measuring devices and tools without which they could not construct and erect those dwellings. Bees, on the other hand, do not use any of these things, such is their skill and wit; and there is no man on earth who could build dwellings as pretty and as precisely proportioned as those which the bees make out of a single material.’

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‘Spiders too make their dwellings and palaces entirely out of a single material: beautiful thread. These constructions are woven in various ways; they are finer than silk, transparent, long, square, triangular, round, resembling crêpe. They have many cords and threads, yet they require no spindle, distaff, spool, yarn-winder, carder, tailor or weaver, whereas the sons of Adam lack the ability and knowledge to make a yard of cloth or linen without these instruments. A similar example is provided by the swallows’ construction of their dwellings, and by the other birds which make their nests in high places, so aptly that they appear to have been planned with sound geometry and measurements.

‘Well, Friar Anselm, who are more ingenious in their works, the sons of Adam or animals? Truly, unless you are out of your mind, you will see very clearly that we animals are far more ingenious than men.

‘I will now be silent, for fear of incurring the displeasure of our sire, his highness, our mighty king. So look for another argument; think hard to find proof that your false opinion is right.’

Friar Anselm Says to the Donkey

‘Sir donkey, without having to think I will prove to you that we sons of Adam have greater dignity and nobility than you animals. The reason is that we eat the animals of the earth, sea and sky, in other words, birds of many different kinds. It is therefore evident and certain that the eater is more noble than the thing eaten. So we are obviously more noble than you.’

The Donkey Replies

‘“No fly enters a closed mouth,”³ Friar Anselm. Good God, it would be better for you to keep your mouth closed than to speak foolishly. For if one accepted the force of your argument, worms would be your lords, since they eat you. Lions, vultures and all the other animals and birds and fish of the sea would also be your lords, since they eat you. Wolves, dogs and many other animals would be your lords. And worse still, lice, fleas, bugs, nits, mites and suchlike would be your lords, since all of these eat your flesh. So tell me, in all honesty, whether your case is convincing, given your inability to provide or set out any arguments in favour of it?’ . . .

Friar Anselm Reflects . . .

. . . I began to sweat, such was the mental anguish and distress which I was suffering because of my inability to challenge or refute his arguments. . . .

Friar Anselm Says These Words

. . . ‘My lord donkey, the reason for our superior dignity and nobility is that our soul does not die with our body. We are resurrected and enter paradise, where we enjoy infinite glory. And none of this happens to you animals, for when your body dies your

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soul dies together with it, and you enjoy neither resurrection nor glory. This shows that we have the high place of honour and the dignity of lords. So my opinion is obviously true, not false.’

The Donkey Answers Friar Anselm

‘Friar Anselm, a bad listener turns words on their head. That is what you are doing: for you read the Scriptures without understanding them. After all, Friar Anselm, as wise Cato says: “To read without understanding is not to read; it is to be neglectful of something valuable.”⁴ As you know, Solomon, the wisest son of Adam there has ever been, says in his Ecclesiastes, chapter 3[:21]: “Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward?”; he seems to mean that no one knows except he who created them. I assure you, Friar Anselm, that for this reason you have not spoken wisely. Do you wish to resolve a matter over which Solomon, speaking wisely, casts doubt? And as for your statement that you will enter paradise once resurrected, in fact most of you will go to hell and its eternal, everlasting fires; there the fires will never stop burning and the living will never die, as Scripture says. You will wish you had died in your mothers’ wombs, and few of you will go to paradise, for that is what is stated in St Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 20: “Many are called but few are saved.”⁵ And the prophet David says in Psalms 15[:1–2]: “Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tabernacle?” God answers: “He that walketh uprightly,” in other words, without sin, like us. So if you have any argument to prove that your false opinion is true, put it to me, and you will receive an answer to silence you.’

Friar Anselm Says to the Donkey

‘My lord donkey, another reason why we have greater nobility and dignity than you is that, unlike you, we are made and created in the image and likeness of God. And that gives us a great and supreme place of honour, in the light of which it is just and holy for us to be your lords and for you to be our subjects and vassals.’

The Donkey Answers the Friar

‘. . . Don’t you know that your sins are producing these words? Good God, do you sons of Adam believe that God is made in your likeness? God forbid! For God has neither head, eyes, mouth, hands nor feet. And what is more, he is not corporeal. But you, Friar, you base your argument on the authority of Genesis [1:26], which presents God as saying: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” And there is no doubt that this is the unquestionable truth. But you do not understand it; you do not know how it should be understood. Although I have studied neither in Paris nor in Bologna as you have, I will now explain it to you in the clearest terms, if your dull mind has the knowledge or capacity to understand. So open your ears now, heed my words and you will see how that authoritative text should be understood.’

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The donkey explains that in man's body there are twelve orifices which are made in the likeness of the twelve [zodiacal] signs

'Know, Friar Anselm, that the philosophers state and maintain that man should be called the little world; that is what they call him in their books. This is because, as they point out, man contains everything that is in the great world, in other words, in the heavens and on earth. For just as there are twelve signs in the heavens, so in man you will find twelve orifices: two in the ears, first of all, then two in the eyes, two in the nose, one in the mouth, two in the breasts, one in the navel and two in the lower parts.

Here the donkey speaks of the four elements

'Just as in the great world there are four elements – namely, fire, air, water and earth – so in the little world of man there are four prime organs: the brain, the heart, the liver and the lung. And in the same way that the whole of the great world is ruled and governed by the elements, so the whole of the little world, in other words, the body of man, is ruled and governed by those four organs. . . .

The donkey explains what the front part of man's body corresponds to

'Moreover, the face and front part of man's body is like the populated and inhabited parts of the great world, for just as those parts are populated by towns, villages and castles, so the front part of man's body is populated and inhabited by the nose, mouth, breasts, navel, along with the lower parts, the hands and the feet.

What the rear part of man's body corresponds to

'The spine and the rear part of the little world, of man's body in other words, is like the parts of the great world that are neither populated nor inhabited. In addition, the front part of man's body is like the east, and the rear is like the west. The right hand is like the south and the left like the north. Sneezes, shouts, coughs and the sound and noise made by the bowels are like thunder. . . . And tears, saliva and urine are like rain. Laughter is like daylight, weeping is like the darkness of night. Sleep is like death, being awake is like life. Childhood is like spring, adolescence like summer, youth like autumn, old age like winter. And moreover, just as the great world is ruled and governed by our lord God, so the little world, man's body in other words, is ruled, governed and lorded over by the intellective soul, which does whatever it pleases with that body. When the soul wants the body to stop, it stops immediately, in that very instant and hour; when the soul wants the body to get up, it gets up in that very instant. Also, in general, when the soul wants to make any movement in the body, such as stretching or closing the feet and hands at the same time, closing or opening the eyes, jumping or running, or some greater or smaller movement, then it is performed immediately, without it being necessary for the soul to confer with the body or to give it a signal or sign; rather, in the very instant and moment when the soul wants any of these movements to be made, desire and action are the same thing. So much so that there is no need for the soul to say "Close" to the eyes or "Run" to the legs or "Do such and such" to the other parts of the body. Instead, as I have already said, desire and action are the same thing.