

Vegans vs. Evolution

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In “Animal, Vegetable, Miserable,” an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* on November 22, 2009, Gary Steiner, a philosophy professor at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, makes an unconvincing case for living the life of a vegan, that is, a person who goes beyond mere vegetarianism to eschewing any and all products derived from animals. Though he criticizes meat-eaters as “a self-righteous bunch,” when it comes to pluming and preening Steiner is second to none, characterizing himself as a “strict ethical vegan.”

Steiner provides a sample list of everyday products derived from animals, but a complete list, extending far beyond even what *he* seems to imagine, would stun the average reader. Leather shoes, gelatin, and Band-Aids are the least of it. Reading the insightful letters that the *Times* chose as replies to Steiner’s essay, I was struck more by what was missing in this controversy than what was actually said. The unspoken concept behind his reverence for mice and his cat was “biocentrism,” a hoaxing notion that I have contended with in my own writings about ecocriticism over the past twenty-five years. (See *The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.) Nobody, including the sainted Aldo Leopold (for all his stellar virtues), can even in theory turn out to be anything other than an anthropocentrist. We care about the planet because we are made from its materials. *The planet, c’est moi!* This deludes some people into thinking they can be disinterestedly “biocentric,” having the interests of the planet (and non-human animals) more at heart than those of human beings. But because the so-called environment is the same substance as ourselves, our concern for it is just a disguised case of looking out for Number One. Biocentrism is little more than a type of self-congratulating anthropocentrism. If we all perished from global warming, the planet would continue to exist quite well without us. But not vice versa.

Our survival came about through evolution—our own adjustment to the planet—often ruthless, requiring millions of years (billions, in the larger purview) of both planetary nurturing and destroying of its inhabitants. When life starts out again from residual survivors of catas-

trophe, now in a new ecosystem, those most attuned (“adapted” is the word) to the reconstituted environment produce offspring that can survive. Our prehistoric hominid ancestors were aided in this by animals, their flesh as food, their skins as clothing and shelter, their bones as raw materials for weapons and artifacts. Instead of devoting their days to gathering low protein fibrous plants in the manner of pandas who spend most of their lives chewing bamboo, they were gradually habituated to *hunting* in addition to their gathering, thereby benefiting from more nourishing and quickly digested high-protein food that, according to Richard Wrangham,¹ became even more digestible and nutritious from cooking, which eventually even altered the architecture of our jaws and gut, making us look less apelike and more “refined.” Since survival itself is ruthlessly victimized by other predators in the struggle for resources in changing ecosystems, meat-eating contributed to brain enlargement, which in turn abetted the outwitting of less evolved enemies.

As one of the more keen responders to his article observed, Steiner’s tenderness for his cat is not very different from the “anthropocentric” nurturing of animals in the zoos that he reviles as disrespectful of the rest of the creation. And since I have never met a cat that ate butternut squash or tomatoes, even *his* cat needs to eat meat and fish (unless Steiner can justify cruel deprivation as a form of moral consideration). But Steiner’s respect is very selective indeed, an example of what used to be called the Bambi Syndrome. Only animals beautiful and large enough to be registered by the senses of *Homo sapiens* figure in this tender concern. E. O. Wilson some time ago alerted us to the millions of microscopic life forms found in a square inch of earth he cut out from a rain-forest. Life is everywhere. I squash millions of organisms, micro and otherwise, with each step and wash down the drain unnoticed multitudes with each shower. Brushing my teeth kills innumerable bacteria (it’s them or my gums!). With every swallow I destroy some of the bacteria in my gut that keep me alive by helping to digest my food. But even larger creatures such as cockroaches and rats, do they enter into Steiner’s purview? And the AIDS virus, the swine flu, tuberculosis? Does he want to eschew antibiotics and vaccines for *his* life out of respect for theirs? Would he deprive his children of (animal-derived) drugs and let them die, in the manner of extremist faith-healing religions?

Steiner’s grandstanding for carefully selected life forms, which makes his friends suffer for the presumed benefits of his friendship as they expend effort to subserve his sensitivities—his meat and dairy-free diet, his avoidance of leather and other animal products—doesn’t produce much besides a sense of his own virtue. Does eating or not eating certain foods contribute to one’s so-called spirituality, or does it in fact reduce one’s life to a trivial materiality, sniffing out traces of animal DNA in increasingly minute particles, like a teenager in front of the mirror searching his face for new zits to agonize about? The biggest source of animal DNA is one’s own animal body. The imputed viciousness starts right at home, permeating every aspect of one’s life. Know thyself—an animal among animals!

As the “ethical vegan” constricts his diet, social life, and everything else, in a futile attempt to make his footprint smaller and smaller, will he soon be walking on his toes like a ballet dancer? And if so, what is the step after that—pure spirit (a euphemism for bodily death)? If existence is the problem—which it is—then only nonexistence can cure it. The supreme biocentric act is not to discover yet one more animal product to abstain from (an infinite list). The supreme biocentric act is dying, returning the planet’s finite matter and energy you have appropriated for yourself and

giving them back to the creatures from whom you preempted them by being alive. And what makes *them* so pure? Are they shedding tears as they tear you and each other apart? The real “crime” is existence, not being or using animals. *The Original Sin is life itself. To be alive is to be a murderer.*

My own diet is very high on plants and low on meat and my carbon footprint is small indeed but mainly out of concern for my own health and *the planet that keeps us alive*. Beyond that, I’m an admirer of Peter Singer, Michael Pollan, and J. M. Coetzee and I well approve of their abhorrence of the brutal treatment of animals. But Pollan is not a vegetarian and Singer, even as author of the influential book *Animal Liberation* in 1975, is not a vegan. But by 1999, when J. M. Coetzee’s novella *The Lives of Animals* appeared (a curious but typically ambiguous Coetzee production), the author invited four philosophic replies to be included as a postscript. One of these was by Peter Singer. In a little short story of his own, Singer has *his* philosopher-protagonist raise objections to the extreme egalitarianism of Coetzee’s main character, Elizabeth Costello, who equates human and animal consciousness and condemns the killing of animals for food as the equivalent of the Holocaust. Singer’s philosopher tells his own vegan daughter, a propos of the famous Thomas Nagel essay on human and bat consciousness that so engages Costello, “The value that is lost when something is emptied depends on what was there when it was full, and there is more to human existence than there is to bat existence.”²

Since Singer’s 1975 shot heard ‘round the world, both environmentalism and Darwinian sciences have become two of the leading worldviews of twenty-first-century culture. Organic growing of vegetables and animals and the Darwinian Modern Synthesis that provides a theoretical framework for today’s neurosciences have influenced the matter of killing and eating animals to the point where restaurants increasingly have vegetarian sections on their menus. But the *philosophic* issue has hardly been resolved, which brings us back to *practice vs. theory*.

I think vegetarianism is admirable. I would recommend it, even though farming takes its own toll on the animal creation. And everyday *practical* veganism seems as defensible as vegetarianism, if somewhat extreme. It’s so-called *ethical or philosophical veganism* that has preposterous pretensions of ascetic piety. Unlike ethical vegans, who are enlisted in an open-ended but futile metaphysic of virtue and self-blamelessness that pretends to escape from the materialities of life itself, vegetarians have more limited goals and have marked out a manageable territory with fewer cosmic pretensions. They are concerned about their health. Or they don’t want animals to be raised expressly to be tortured and killed—especially in factory farms and slaughterhouses—for their dinner plates. Or they don’t want to ingest the dead bodies of fairly complex creatures with varying degrees of consciousness, which is apt to make them feel queasy. No doubt they would prefer all animals (whatever that might include) to be treated humanely (in the mode of Temple Grandin³), but they are not prepared to stop wearing leather shoes or eating Jello or treating killer bugs as sacred. Anyone who thinks that any and every type of resistance to the usage of animals “solves” the problem of the savagery of our predation and survival—of existence itself—is living in a self-regarding dream world, a world of narcissism, not piety. Furthermore, there are critics who explain that farming vegetables involves the killing of massive numbers of animals with plows, pesticides, and herbicides. And on an organic farm, the fertilizer is more likely to be the product of animals rather than plant manures such as

alfalfa or buckwheat. And anyone who has grown a large home vegetable garden knows what raccoons, possums, rabbits, mice, birds, and deer can do to the veggies. Moreover, when I sprayed my own (animal) pee around our large corn crop to (very effectively) keep away the raccoons, I was being as virtuously organic as one could wish! Still, without a defensive war on animals, there would be no vegetables for the vegans whose everyday lives are made possible by the same technologies they claim to despise.

At least vegetarianism—though it can't solve the moral dilemma—is more or less possible in both theory and practice. It can turn its attention if it wishes to ameliorate the conditions of animals in factory farms and brutal slaughterhouse conveyor belts, with still living animals hanging from hooks. It can try to convince the general public that feeding ten pounds of grains to cows for one pound of beef is counterproductive in a world soon to face shortages of food from population growth and global warming. It can stress the deleterious effects of saturated fat and cholesterol on human health. It can do good to both ourselves and the planet. But it won't lead to beatification.

"Ethical Veganism" fails on all counts. For behind such a belief is the hopeless longing for innocence. Except that there is no innocence. However delicate our moral sensibilities, it still remains that to be alive is to be a murderer. Tip-toeing through the tulips (we might be killing the bees inside) won't solve the problem. And since we are omnivores from the moment of conception, we emerge from the womb already "guilty." Our animal DNA is everywhere in our lives. Even if our parents eschewed meat, to have been born at all we must have been eating our mother during gestation, and after birth we need her milk, which is just another dairy product from animals.⁴ We're compromised from the start. Death is the only form of purification. Alive, we have no choice but to accept our complicity, because life is a product of death. Do as much as you can to minimize the damage and suffering from the savagery of existence, because the "environment" is us. But as long as we are among the living, we should stop pretending to virtues we can't possibly have.

NOTES

1. Wrangham, *Catching Fire*.

2. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 90.

3. Temple Grandin is Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. She consults with the livestock industry on facility design, livestock handling, and animal welfare. Her autism has enabled unusual sensitivities to the conditions involved in raising and slaughtering animals for human consumption.

4. Months after I had written this sentence, Nicholas Wade, the brilliant *New York Times* science writer, refers to Bruce German, a researcher at the University of California at Davis. Wade's article is "Breast Milk Sugars Give Infants a Protective Coat" (*New York Times*, August 8, 2010). He writes, "Dr. German sees [mother's] milk as 'an astonishing product of evolution,' one shaped by natural selection because it is so critical to the survival of both mother and child. 'Everything in milk costs the mother—she is literally dissolving her own tissues to make it,' he said." In other words, the unique animal protein of a human mother's milk is needed to boost the infant's undeveloped immune system. Her fluid "has been shaped by 200 million years of mammalian evolution and holds a wealth of information about how best to feed and defend the human body." Commercial infant formula just won't do the trick for best human development.

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