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Vera Theisen

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, vtheisen@csbsju.edu

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Table Rites and Animal Rights: Revisiting the Animal Question in the 21st Century

What's for dinner? For most people, the decision as to what to put on our dinner plates is automatic: the portion of meat — steak, chicken, or pork — on the figurative third partition of our plates is usually completed by a vegetable and a form of potatoes, rice, or pasta.

While the habitual choice of meat appears easy to make, it is fraught with deeper questions that humankind has faced over the centuries but that few consider relevant or worthy of discussion today. The reasons we give for eating meat on a daily basis are many — taste, pleasure, nourishment — while the justifications for such choices are becoming more and more problematic. Throughout time, philosophers have expressed clear intuitions about the importance of mankind's relationship to animals as sentient beings, but only now do we have ample scientific evidence to truly and objectively understand those intuitions.

Scientific knowledge in the 20th century has grown exponentially to show clear connections among the various species, including humans. But when we begin to analyze the cultural habits that make us meat eaters, we quickly realize that what we've done for centuries ought no longer be done so mindlessly. We forget how influenced we are by language, culture, and religion regarding profound issues that require more independent thinking. Our food selections, too, now require greater thoughtfulness and insight to be justifiable.

Our culture takes meat eating for granted and has created a number of reasons to explain why: We need meat protein to be strong; we humans are placed highest on the food chain so it's natural to eat down on the chain; and our Christian churches for the most part encourage us to have "dominion" over the animal world. Our language reflects this trend. Images of meat signify strength and vigor — "let's get to the meat of the argument" — while connotations of vegetables signify "women's food" or the weak and less able. For instance, it's common to say that a person "became a vegetable" after a brain injury, or that one is in a "vegetative state" when comatose.¹ Our

culture clearly supports images of masculinity, tying men to steakhouses and showing manhood through the consumption of meat. We have “he-man” dinners and “hero sandwiches” that are rich in meat. A vegetarian female might be accepted (because she may be less strong, more delicate), but a vegetarian man? Not as readily.

What Do Animals Feel?

When we consider that the human species is omnivorous but at times has been totally vegetarian, the notion of meat as a nutritional necessity becomes very questionable. We can observe many athletes and high-functioning individuals who are vegetarian or vegan, making that notion more suspect than ever and truly in need of further investigation.² We are mammals ourselves; we are different, of course, but definitely and deeply tied to the animal world. Scientific research in animal biology, behavior, and intelligence has progressed to the point where we know that the various species of mammals have too many factors in common with human mammals to be ignored. It’s indisputable today that animals have feelings, both physical and emotional, as any dog or cat owner can confirm: they have verifiable and accurate systems of communication, and they possess familial and social structures that have been studied and described by hundreds of scientists. We have read countless examples of dogs finding their owners’ whereabouts from hundreds of miles of distance; dogs that help disabled people with household tasks; and seeing-eye dogs that provide vision and security to the visually impaired. Cows and steers panic when they approach the moment of slaughter — their terror is evident in their eyes. Other studies have shown the effectiveness of including animals in therapy with children who have suffered abuse, or the elderly who feel isolated.

Studies confirming the positive influence of dogs in the therapy process started in the 1960s under the guidance of child psychologist Boris Levinson.³ In his book, *Drawing the Line*, Steven Wise reports examples of parrots who talk intelligently to their trainers and baboons and chimpanzees who have learned a form of sign language corresponding to the knowledge of a four- or five-year old child. The famous gorilla Koko had acquired 215 signs that he could use efficiently to communicate with his trainer.⁴ Some say that animal behavior is simply a matter of imprinting and reflex actions, but careful study of animal intelligence interprets the facts differently. Inquiries into animal physiology, anatomy, and DNA factors (of which humans and mammals share over 90%) are ample evidence of the complex lives of animals that we can no longer ignore.⁵ Hence, a new look into our daily eating habits becomes crucial to gain a clearer understanding of the world and our co-existence with animals. Simply being *different* from other mammals doesn’t make meat-eating right since difference alone can’t be a relevant factor in discrimination.

Animals and Us Through the Centuries

Humankind has always felt deeply connected to the animal world. Our ancestors had quite a clear grasp of our dual nature, animal and human, shown through the creation of mythological figures. The Centaur, the Mermaid, and the Sphinx, whose bodies are half animal and half human, were believed to have unusual powers of strength or divination. According to the Roman legend, Romulus, the founder of Rome, and his twin brother, Remus, were thrown in the Tiber River, rescued unharmed by a she-wolf, and subsequently nourished by her until they regained their strength. In Pre-Columbian cultures, men wore gold masks representing bats and other animals that imparted strength to them in leadership and against enemies.

Today, our mainstream culture is empowered by the animal world, be it cereals with a tiger's strength, bus lines led by speedy greyhounds, or sports teams that gain power through images of bulls, dolphins, and bears. Our involvement with animals is prevalent in every area of our lives.

Connected Yet Disconnected

While on a deep level, human cultures have always felt a strong connection with the animal world, something has gone regrettably wrong: there is a clear disconnect between the love and awe we have for animals around us and the indifference we show by killing and eating them in massive quantities. Many would consider us mad if we wanted to roast our cats and dogs for dinner meat! But why are cats and dogs so cherished, while pigs, calves, and chickens aren't? It is estimated that we spend 47 billion dollars on pets, pet food, and amenities such as spas, massages, and animal trainers,⁶ while at the same time we consume 40 billion chickens, cows, and pigs annually.⁷ We seem to have acquired an insatiable need for meat with no thought of health issues, the environment, and the sheer cruelty of the meat-eating process. Many might ask, "Why is it cruel to eat meat, something we've been doing for centuries?"

In our modern supermarkets, meat has completely lost its real face. In the U.S., we see hygienic packages of a product that has lost its bloody, raw appearance. In the markets of Asia and Central America, meat hangs often un-refrigerated, smelling strongly of decay, and the heads of pigs and cows are used as displays for the products. There are few Americans today who would feel comfortable buying meat under such conditions. Or let us imagine that butchers were no longer willing to cut meat for us, or supermarkets able to present it to us attractively chilled and packaged. Would we be willing to bring our own knife to a place where we would have to cut and carve our piece of raw roast or steak from the hanging animal itself? Could we face the physical, bloody aspects of meat buying under this system? For most of us, the answer to this question is most probably No. No one who has witnessed animal slaughter or has read an account of it will answer in the affirmative.⁸

Our Children and Meat Eating: Are We Honest Enough?

Another powerful aspect that underscores our repressed aversion for raw meat products is our need to constantly lie to our children about the real nature of their food. While we willingly take them to orchards, pumpkin patches, and bakeries, we never take them to slaughterhouses to see where their hamburgers and hotdogs come from. These establishments are today called “processing plants” in order to avoid conjuring up images of killing, blood, and dissecting. Children would be terrified into becoming instant vegetarians! It is dishonest to be vague in explaining meat eating to children and to continue to hold on to our pre-conceived ideas about meat’s value as good nourishment.

As early as age four, children begin to make the connection between the calf they recently petted or the chickens they saw on grandma’s farm with the food on their plate. They become suspicious and uncomfortable. Because they’re usually not given a reasonable explanation about their food, children may begin to make personal choices of not eating the meat on their plates. Parents are surprised, remarking that “Johnny just won’t eat his chicken any more, though he used to love it.”

Robert Coles confirms the real moral concerns of children: “We chronically underestimate the wisdom that resides in children; they ask profound questions, fundamental moral and spiritual questions.”⁹ The least we can do, then, is face the question of meat’s reality as we communicate with our children and explain the facts to them. An example of our lack of honesty is the McDonald’s “Happy Meal.” We know such a meal has nothing “happy” about it except the name, the paper crown, and the small prize included in the box.

The Issue of Vegetarianism

The topic of vegetarianism is usually very difficult to discuss even in educated, well-informed circles because vegetarians and some members of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) tend to stand on high moral ground and perhaps maintain a preachy attitude to others about their beliefs. On the other hand, meat-eaters are not terribly open to reflecting on why they eat meat, feeling perhaps a bit guilty or confused on the issues, and not wishing to admit it or enter into a discussion on it.

What is at the source of this confusion? Or should we call it confusion if we believe that the eating of animals is a natural part of our human lifestyle? These questions are not new, but they’re at the very heart of vegetarianism and have occupied philosophical thought for centuries.

Philosophers’ Reflections

Greek philosophers devoted a good amount of intellectual energy deliberating on the status of animals, whether and how they have the capacity to reason and feel.

Some of the first famous vegetarians, such as Plutarch and Pythagoras, sprang from the classic philosophical tradition and saw a clear connection between our human nature and that of non-human animals — and the need to respect the latter. Ovid describes Pythagoras's thoughts:

Oh, what a wicked thing it is for flesh
To be the tomb of flesh, for the body's craving
To fatten on the body of another.
For one live creature to continue living
Through one live creature's death.¹⁰

Other famous vegetarians, from Leonardo da Vinci to George Bernard Shaw and Albert Einstein, have attempted to explain the reality of the living animal world and the unnecessary harm we inflict on it through meat consumption. In the 16th century, shortly before Descartes proclaimed animals to be simple automatic machines without feelings, the French humanist, Montaigne, was angry at humanity's rational presumptions about animals:

Presumption is our natural and original disease. The most calamitous and fragile of all creatures is man, and yet the most arrogant.... How does he know, by the effort of his intelligence, the interior and secret movements and impulses of other animals? By what comparison between them and us does he infer the stupidity which he attributes to them?¹¹

Leonardo da Vinci also felt strongly about animals' importance and made a startling prediction to his contemporaries: "The time will come when men such as I will look on the murder of animals as they now look on the murder of men."¹²

Predictions and Reality

As we begin the 21st century, da Vinci's prediction is far from being realized, but it is time we seriously reconsider our behavior with respect to the animal world. The similarity between such philosophers' intuitions about animal life in the past and our confirmed scientific knowledge today is undeniable. In light of the overwhelming scientific evidence attesting to the intelligence, sentience, and suffering of animals, eating meat for dinner can no longer be a simple, mechanical act that we perform out of habit.

The ways in which language, culture, religion, and sheer unexamined habits have dulled the original insights that these philosophers passed on to other generations and to us need to be re-examined.

Culture and Tradition

Meat eating is deeply rooted in tradition and culture, not in biological necessity. Many cultures, whose most basic food choices have always been vegetarian, add meat

to their diet because of the status it implies. For instance, in Guatemala the traditional Mayan diet of corn tortillas, beans, rice, and an occasional egg plus many fresh fruits and vegetables, has always been sufficient for good nutrition. Yet recently, this traditional diet has been modified to include chicken and beef, mostly because it's considered a "richer" way of eating. The chains of "Pollo Campero" now proliferating in Guatemalan cities are a direct copy of American KFC chains.

In Italy, pasta with various sauces and pizza with tomatoes and cheese have always been the staple of the poor. All the major ethnic cuisines are complete in their vegetarian versions, to which meat has been gradually added over time due to economic changes. The perceived necessity of meat is a social construction based also on concepts of class. The richer one is, the more one can buy top sirloin, duck, filet mignon, lobster, and shrimp, rather than fresh vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, and herbs. Beans and rice, even with the addition of delicious spices and herbs, seems for many a primitive, peasant type of food to be avoided if one has money to buy other products having higher prestige.

Our Food Pyramids

The information available on nutrition today is clear, abundant, and well-researched. If we want to eat responsibly and in ways that are healthy, there are numerous sources that provide all the information we need. Yet we've been somewhat misled by government sources in our aspirations for good health. For years, the Department of Agriculture published food pyramids that Americans took very seriously. In the 1940s, meat started to figure prominently in the distribution of foods to be eaten and everyone began to believe that larger quantities of meat were essential to obtain adequate protein. Recently, however, this traditional pyramid has changed to include more grains, less fat, and more fruits and vegetables, with a lesser position given to meat products. On some ethnic food pyramids, meat is hardly suggested at all, or at the most on a once-a-month basis.¹³ We can be better informed on nutrition and conduct our own research on the best foods to eat for optimal health, rather than relying on guidelines that often lack objectivity.

The Influence of Religion

Religion has given a strong direction to our eating habits. It is indisputable that Western culture and religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, have been deeply influenced by the message imparted in Genesis on the acceptability of dominance over the created kingdom of God. The Bible contains many passages encouraging mankind to eat products of the earth:

God said: "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit: you shall

have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has breath for life, I have given every green plant for food.” (Gen. 1:29–30)

However, the quote from Genesis that has had the most influence on Western culture is probably the following:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (Gen. 1: 20–26)

This well-known biblical quote has encouraged mankind to feel dominant over the created world and to believe that animals are made for the use of humans rather than as creatures co-existing in an environment where all species have a place and a purpose. Although the Christian churches were in an ideal position to influence the faithful to see animals differently, they failed to do so. Mankind has deemed it natural to control the land, the environment, and the animal world to its benefit, without wider ethical considerations. If, instead of dominion, the notion of stewardship or the co-existence of species had been stressed, surely our treatment of animals would have been different from biblical times onward.

It is regrettable that the Christian churches have not intuited the importance of animals' lives and their interconnectedness to us, and they have not guided the faithful to clearer thinking on the important issue of animal rights and interests. Only the Quakers, the Seventh Day Adventists, and a small sect of the Order of the Cross, founded in 1907 by the Englishman Todd Ferrier, have addressed animal rights. The latter believed that Jesus was a vegetarian like the Essenes and offers some research to confirm this, although it's contested by mainstream theologians. While the Anglican Church does not advocate vegetarianism per se, one of its most famous spokespersons, Rev. Andrew Lindzey, writes eloquently on the topic of animals in relationship to Christian belief. He researched the Bible closely and in it found clear signs that encourage a vegetarian lifestyle.¹⁴ The Catholic Church had instituted fasting and abstaining from meat every Friday of the year, until it was reduced to only the forty days of Lent. The very fact that meat, instead of another food, was chosen as the object of one's penance shows the importance and desirability of meat from the Catholic standpoint.

A Different Viewpoint?

The attempt to see animals from a different perspective can be compared to the figure – ground reversal in a vase – face figure (see Fig. 1), which reverses back and

forth between the vase percept and the face percept, as seen in psychology textbooks. We suddenly see a human face, whereas seconds before it was only a vase.

Figure 1. Rubin, E. *Visuell wahrgenommene Figuren*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1921.



For some, perceiving the real essence of animals comes suddenly, as an “ah-ah” moment. For others, it may come at the end of a long process of maturation and thought. The French chef Alain Passard’s awareness came gradually through the process of cooking. This is how he described his complete change of heart five years ago:

It was many things. There was the fear of BSE. And for years I had been seeing new dimensions in vegetables when I cooked: green beans with peaches and almonds. Seeing them, but not seeing them at all. But, especially, it was because I no longer wanted to be in a daily relationship with the corpse of an animal. I had a moment when I took a roast out into the dining room, and the reality struck me that everyday I was struggling to have a creative relationship with a corpse, a dead animal! And since then — gone! All the terrible nervousness and bad temper that are so much part of the burden of being a chef: that was gone with the old cooking. I entered into a new relation to my art, but also to my life. Everyone in the kitchen commented on it. And the lightness of what I was doing began to enter my body and my entire existence, and it entered into the existence of the kitchen. Digestively, yes, of course, but also spiritually, a new lightness of step

and spirit that entered my life. It was like a light that I saw, and a door that I walked through. One day, I found myself regarding a carrot in a different light, and I saw the *cuisine végétale* ahead of me through an open door.¹⁵

Individuals interested in incorporating foods differently into their lives may have an experience similar to Passard's because the non-meat foods available today are varied, delicious, and fresh — and the possibilities of food-combinations endless. Before deciding which direction to take, a short vegetarian experience could be quite enlightening.

Is Change Possible?

Of course change doesn't always come easily as our culture has conditioned us for so long to see animals as mere food, cooked in hundreds of different sauces that many find appealing and good-tasting. The mere thought of abandoning meat as food is unthinkable to many: no more barbecues, no more hunting! But paradigm shifts do occur, as we know from science and the study of revolutionary changes.¹⁶ For centuries, we did not give equal rights to women and to blacks and other races on the basis of completely erroneous concepts. It is completely possible for us to change our minds concerning our animal partners, especially if we're sincerely interested in exploring different ways of thinking and less wasteful ways of consuming natural resources. The ecological implications of meat production are huge. When one considers that it takes seven pounds of feed grain and 7,000 pounds of water to produce only one pound of beef, or that one single hog farm in Utah produces more sewage than the city of Los Angeles,¹⁷ concerned individuals will want to re-consider their consumption habits and take on greater responsibility for the planet. Ed Ayers of the Worldwatch Institute believes that "the era of mass-produced animal-flesh, and its unsustainable costs to human and environmental health, should be over before the next century is out."¹⁸

Will the 21st century prove Leonardo da Vinci right, who predicted that a time would come when individuals would abhor the killing of animals as much as the killing of humans? According to scholars of evolution, "The Great Leap Forward" did occur and produced important artistic and linguistic changes.¹⁹ We have in place today the scientific evidence and philosophical foundation to help us think along new, promising paradigms and make other leaps forward.

Notes

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