VEGETABLE LOVE

The history of vegetarianism.

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During the great black-pudding controversies of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it was put about that Sir Isaac Newton abstained from this dish because of the Old Testament prohibition against eating blood. After his death, Newton's niece defended his reputation, insisting that he had followed St. Paul's injunction not to make a fuss about food prohibitions—don't be like the bloody Jews—and to "take & eat what comes from the shambles without asking questions for conscience sake." It was true, she explained, that Newton refrained from eating black pudding and also rabbits (whose meat remained bloody because they were killed by strangulation), but his reasons were quite different from those alleged: "He said meats strangled were forbid because that was a painfull death & the letting out the blood the easiest & that animals should be put to as little pain as possible, that the reason why eating blood was forbid was because it was thought the eating blood inclined men to be cruel."

By the time of Newton's death, in 1727, the English black-pudding debate had been running for most of a century. In the "Triall of a Black-Pudding" (1652), Thomas Barlow, a future bishop of Lincoln, noted that God had specifically proscribed blood eating among the Hebrews, whose laws of kashruth mandated the slaughtering and handling of food animals so as to drain them, as far as possible, of residual blood. Genesis 9:4 said, "Flesh with the life thereof, which is the Blood thereof, shall ye not eat," and Leviticus 17:10 underlined the prohibition: "Whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people." Barlow pointed out that the New Testament had never rescinded this law, despite the relief from various other Jewish dietary

prohibitions offered by both Jesus and Paul; furthermore, the ban on eating blood and the flesh of strangled animals was repeated in the Acts of the Apostles. God, Barlow asserted, “would not have Men eat the life and the soul of Beasts, a thing barbarous and unnaturall.” No meat was unclean in itself, but that bit of black pudding in the Great British Breakfast was a violation of both Jewish law *and* the Christian dispensation.

In Newton’s time and beyond, you couldn’t discuss meat eating or its rejection without biting into some tough theology, and Tristram Stuart’s sprawling “The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times” (Norton; $29.95) shows just how hard it was to decipher God’s dietary will and how many other considerations—both sacred and secular—were wrapped up in decisions about whether or not it was right to eat animals. The book is a magnificently detailed and wide-ranging collection of scholarship on what has been said to justify either refraining from meat or consuming it. Of course, a history of justifications is not the same thing as a history of what people actually ate, or didn’t. For many people, through most of history, not eating meat was a given: it was just too scarce or expensive. But, among the few who had the resources, meat’s richness, fatty satisfaction, and nourishment were much appreciated, as in the wonderful Scottish Selkirk Grace:

Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat and we can eat,
And sae the Lord be thankit.

With few exceptions, European proponents of vegetarianism emerged from those who had meat. You can define vegetarianism in any number of ways, but the simple absence of meat from the diet isn’t an interesting way to do it. To be culturally significant, you need some sort of principled justification, and there has been no shortage of that. The arguments that Stuart assembles are part of an immensely tangled and resonant debate. There’s no demonstration of the wrongness of eating flesh that hasn’t been countered by equally powerful arguments for its rightness, and different justifications have a way of both supporting and interfering with one another. Broadly speaking, though, for many centuries the debate centered on three questions, each of which was reflected in Newton’s dietary choices and the objections raised to them: there was the religious question, concerning the implications of Scripture for human alimentation; there were medical questions about the effect of eating meat on human health and character; and there was a philosophical debate about the

proper relationship between man and other animals. There was no distinct category you could call moral, because all of them were, as they remain, intensely moral. Vegetarianism has always been less about why you should eat plants than about why you shouldn't eat animals. And so arguments about vegetarianism, by drawing attention to rights that we claim for ourselves but deny to other animals, inevitably involve basic questions about what it is to be human.

When Newton's friends and biographers tried to clarify his views on black pudding and rabbit meat, they weren't afraid that he'd be thought a closet Jew; they were concerned that he'd be taken for something called a Pythagorean. In the sixth century B.C., Pythagoras of Samos—he of the theorem relating the hypotenuse and the perpendicular sides of a right triangle—founded a community of mystical mathematicians who, it was said, observed a general prohibition against eating animals, "as having a right to live in common with mankind." Interest in the Pythagorean ban was renewed in the third and fourth centuries A.D. by pagan Neoplatonist philosophers seeking purification of the soul in advance of the afterlife, and it persisted until at least the early nineteenth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the resonance of the term "Pythagorean" was more dietary than mathematical. One explanation of Pythagoreans' vegetarianism was their adherence to a doctrine known as metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls. If your soul, after death, could pass into the body of another animal species, vegetarianism was the only sure way to avoid cannibalism. For Christians, however, metempsychosis was heresy. Immortal souls did not migrate between species; they shuttled between earth, Heaven, and Hell—sometimes disembodied from their human frame but never entering into that of another species. During the Middle Ages and the early modern period, anyone advocating vegetarianism might be suspected of belief in pagan metempsychosis.

Even among the devout, there was ample room for disagreement. Original sin—eating fruit from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil instead of from the permitted Tree of Life—was clearly a bad food choice, but there was controversy about Adam and Eve's dietary punishment. Some said that it was the labor of agriculture or cooking: "Thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." Others, however, said that the punishment was the eating of meat. After the Fall, plants had become less nutritious, or the human body had become less able to extract nutriment from plants, and we were now metabolically obliged to kill animals and eat their flesh. Meat eating, then, was a permanent reminder of our sinfulness. Some commentators went further, saying that our fallen nature had given us a taste

for blood, and that we could gauge the extent of our wickedness by our relish for the flesh of dead animals and by our willingness to make them suffer. Other Christians rejected all potentially vegetarian interpretations, pointing out that God, from the outset, had given Adam and Eve "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," and that when, some verses later, God mentioned the edibility of plants, he referred to them as "meat." Some even argued that the suffering of animals killed for food was proof of their sinful nature. Flesh eating was not only part of God's plan; it might even be a divine duty.

When you cited and interpreted Genesis, you were, at the same time, taking a view on what was natural for human beings to eat—what their original diet was and how both that diet and the human constitution had been affected by the fall from grace. For this reason, religious arguments about food have shaded into concerns about what is good for your physical and mental health. The medical framework handed down from the first-century physician Galen sought to explain how different diets worked on your emotions and your personality. Evaluations and prescriptions might differ, but a causal link between diet and character was generally accepted. Meat made you brave; bloody meat made you bloody-minded. Late-seventeenth-century English vegetarian writers blamed meat eating for making people "sordid, surly, and Soldiers"; it was something people did to have their "bestial Nature fortify'd."

But similar reasoning could be enlisted on behalf of the carnivore. The roast beef of Olde England was character-building food, stout fare for stouthearted men, while it was widely presumed that a vegetable diet made men weak, timorous, and effeminate. In Shakespeare's "Henry V," on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, the French observe that the "island of England breeds very valiant creatures," feeding on "great meals of beef," so that they "eat like wolves and fight like devils." Conversely, it was common for physicians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to proscribe meat for patients who had weak constitutions or led sedentary lives. In Galenic medical traditions, roast beef was forbidden to scholars and philosophers, either because it stimulated their natural "melancholic" humor or because the difficulty of digesting it drained the vital spirits away from higher contemplation. In "Twelfth Night," Sir Andrew Aguecheek confesses, "I am a great eater of beef and I believe that does harm to my wit." Belief in the causal connection between meat and the masculine virtues persisted even after the decline of the Galenic medical tradition: Mahatma Gandhi, before reconverting to his original vegetarianism, briefly thought "that meat eating was good, that it would make me strong and

daring, and that, if the whole country took to meat eating, the English could be overcome."

The encounter between Indian and European traditions provides Stuart's book with one of its most striking and contentious assertions. Europeans, having long believed that animal flesh was necessary to sustain vigorous life, were astonished at the existence of the pagan yet pious Brahmins, who ate no meat but evidently thrived. Stuart, a British historian who lived for some years in India, endeavors to show that the spread of vegetarian doctrines in the West during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a result of growing familiarity with the customs of colonized India. Evidently on the side of history's herbivores, he "outs" as vegetarians canonical thinkers who occasionally reduced their meat intake or advised others to do so; he judges the number of Enlightenment vegetarians to have been "incalculably large"; and he celebrates vegetarianism as the leading edge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought. Like so many other arguments in the vegetarian debate, though, the news from India could be used by both sides. Were the Brahmins moral exemplars, or did they prove the association between vegetarianism and religious error?

There is also a big difference between those who refrained from eating meat as part of an abstemious medical regimen and those who took a principled stand against the killing of animals for food, and Stuart tends to underplay the ambiguity of their dietary choices. The great eighteenth-century Scottish diet doctor George Cheyne, who at one point weighed four hundred and forty-eight pounds, was famous for having shed much of his fat by adopting a diet of vegetables and milk, and Stuart notes with approval that Cheyne urged a plant-based diet on many of his patients, including the novelist Samuel Richardson. But Stuart omits to say that Cheyne did not prescribe vegetarianism universally: he reckoned that someone following an ordinary course of life might healthily consume half a pound of "Flesh Meat" a day. Cheyne was outraged by rumors that he forbade meat eating as a general rule. Vegetarianism was reserved for the most desperate medical circumstances.

Cheyne's prescriptions were based on the new matter theory of the scientific revolution. He thought that the smallest particles of meat were so grossly sized and shaped that they eventually occluded the vessels and obstructed the flow of vital fluids. The fine corpuscles of plant matter had none of these inconveniences, and so were much better for you. But the medical commendation of plant eating retained a strong theological dimension, as when Cheyne wrote, "The infinitely wise *Author* of *Nature* has so contrived

Things, that the most remarkable *Rules* of preserving *Life* and *Health* are *moral Duties* commanded us."

The medical idiom for talking about proper diet linked as easily to social and political concerns as it did to religious ones. The connection between eating *carne* and a carnal character made abstinence from flesh eating attractive to radical thinkers who disapproved of violence, war, and the brutish oppression of man by man. And some drew an analogy between the treatment of lower animals and of the lower orders. The seventeenth-century English vegetarian polemicist Thomas Tryon thought that people ate meat so "that they might act like Lions, and Devils, over their own kind as well as over all other Creatures." Many of the radical political and religious sects that erupted onto the English scene in the mid-seventeenth century used diet to criticize the established social order. If, as the sectaries maintained, God was present in all animate creatures, then animals were our brothers and eating them was a sin.

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of an argument for vegetarianism from the perspective of animal rights. George Cheyne and other commentators argued that the habit of killing, like that of meat eating itself, hardened the heart and the nerves, both figuratively and literally. The squeamish human response to animal suffering was the authentic one; the callous reaction induced by familiarity was accounted artificial or false. "To see the Convulsions, Agonies and Tortures of a Poor *Fellow-Creature* … dying to gratify *Luxury* … must require a rocky Heart, and a great Degree of Cruelty and Ferocity," Cheyne wrote. In the early eighteenth century, Bernard Mandeville, in "The Fable of the Bees," judged, "There is of all the Multitude not one Man in ten but what will own, (if he was not brought up in a Slaughter-house) that of all Trades he could never have been a Butcher; and I question whether ever any body so much as killed a Chicken without Reluctancy the first time." Previous eras had seen meat eating as constitutionally conducive to violence, but by the time Jeremy Bentham published "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation," in 1789, the ground had shifted: meat eating *was* violence.

These philosophical and psychological arguments became central to debates about meat eating and remain so. In the seventeenth century, Descartes was at one extreme in insisting that animals were mere machines, no more capable of experiencing pain than a clock, yet even his followers had to come to terms with solid evidence that many people nonetheless felt moved by signs of animal pain. The Cartesians had a response: any such human reaction was itself just a mechanical reflex. There were no moral obstacles to keep you from

enjoying the fruits of the slaughterhouse. For others, however, our capacity to be moved by animal pain was powerful proof of fellowship, proof that we share a moral order with the beasts. Those who framed such arguments didn't doubt that this sympathy was a natural human reaction, evidence to be set against scriptural permission to eat meat.

Compassion-based vegetarianism soon assumed the tone of a moral crusade. The poet Shelley, a sometime vegetarian, was certain that Robespierre's Terror would never have happened had the Paris population "satisfied their hunger at the ever-furnished table of vegetable nature" and that Napoleon would never have made himself emperor had he "descended from a race of vegetable feeders." George Bernard Shaw is said to have asked, "While we ourselves are the living graves of murdered beasts, how can we expect any ideal conditions on this earth?" Yet there is no straight path from the renunciation of meat to a politics of virtue. Nazi vegetarianism raises obvious problems in this regard. Stuart asserts that Hitler's strict adherence to a vegetarian diet was largely medical: "Throughout his life, Hitler continued to believe that abstaining from meat alleviated his chronic flatulence, constipation, sweating, nervous tension, trembling of muscles, and the stomach cramps that convinced him he was dying of cancer." The Nazi leadership, however, sought to extrapolate ideologies of wider application from the Führer's dietary choices. Himmler praised the constitutional virtues of vegetable consumption; he wanted the Waffen S.S. to go vegetarian and thought that once the Germans had dietetically cleansed themselves they would undoubtedly rule the world. Göring arrived at a twisted version of the humanitarian argument, threatening "those who still think they can treat animals as inanimate property" with the concentration camp.

What about us? Theological arguments still flourish: witness such best-sellers as Don Colbert's "What Would Jesus Eat?" (2002) and Jordan S. Rubin's "The Maker's Diet" (2004). So do medical concerns, though they have changed their idiom—from the Galenic "breeding of ill humors" to modern worries about, say, the accumulation of cholesterol plaques. Recent epidemiological studies suggest that adult vegetarians tend to have lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, lower rates of obesity, and, more controversially, higher childhood I.Q.s—though vegans tend to have *lower* I.Q.s than their carnivorous peers, and the nature of the links between vegetarianism, health, and I.Q. is unclear.

Moral arguments about animal suffering are still central to the popular debate. Paul McCartney once said, "If slaughterhouses had glass walls,

everyone would be a vegetarian," and it's true that many of those who have little experience of what goes on in an abattoir are repulsed by any kind of firsthand knowledge, or even by reading vivid accounts. But things are different on the other side of the slaughterhouse wall. Those who kill animals in the course of their working day may quickly become habituated to it, and to dismiss this effect as mere desensitization effectively discounts *great* knowledge of animal death in favor of *slight* knowledge. Similarly, those who like to romanticize country people are frequently discomfited by their uncuddly ways with livestock. A major source of the sympathy with animal suffering that developed so strongly from the Enlightenment may well be the pattern of urbanization that removed so many of us from daily experience of how our food is produced. Why is it "natural" not to know very much about "nature"?

We also hear a lot, these days, about environmental justifications for vegetarianism, although revulsion at factory farming may point not to vegetarianism but to eating sustainably produced—and probably tastier—meat. Environmentally driven vegetarianism is newly prominent, but it has a convoluted history that goes back at least to the late eighteenth century. The English divine William Paley believed that statecraft should aim at maximizing a nation's population, reckoning that an acre of potentially arable land given over to "grain, roots, and milk" could support twice the number of people as the same land devoted to grazing animals to be killed for food. Adam Smith recommended potatoes over pasturage for much the same reason. Utilitarian political economy was closely related to patriotism, and continued to be, in some quarters, into the twentieth century: during the extreme food shortages at the beginning of the Third Reich, Göring inveighed against farmers who gave grain to animals which should have been used to feed Germans. These days, the environmental argument is not about maximizing the number of people that the environment can sustain but about sustaining the environment. Does producing a pound of lentils involve burning less fossil fuel than producing a pound of hamburger meat, or more? How many square miles of forest are cleared to graze cattle? How much biodiversity is lost both in grazing livestock and in raising the corn and soybeans to fatten them? A recent report by the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization reckons that at least eighteen per cent of the global-warming effect comes from livestock, more than is caused by all the world's transportation systems. It has been estimated that forty per cent of global grain output is used to feed animals rather than people, and that half of this grain would be sufficient to eliminate world hunger if—and it's not a small if—the political will could be found to insure equitable distribution.

Yet the energy-cost argument is formidably complicated and cannot by

itself support refusing all forms of meat in favor of all forms of plant matter: shooting and eating the deer chewing up the tulips in your garden may turn out to be more environmentally virtuous than dining on tofu manufactured from Chinese soybeans, and walking to the local supermarket for a nice hanger steak cut from a grass-fed New Zealand steer may be kinder to the planet than getting into your Toyota Prius to drive five miles for some organic Zambian green beans. (Stuart takes his ecological convictions seriously: he identifies himself in interviews as a "freegan," diving into Dumpsters to retrieve discarded food, disturbed that "the food thrown away in [Britain] alone is enough to feed millions of people.")

Stuart is of the opinion that vegetarians have long had the best of the intellectual arguments. If so, that just shows how little intellectual arguments matter to populations' eating decisions. The number of vegetarians in developed countries is evidently on the increase, but the world's per-capita consumption of meat rises relentlessly: in 1981, it was 62 pounds per year; in 2002, the figure stood at 87.5 pounds. In carnivorous America, it increased from 238.1 to 275.1 pounds, and the practice is spreading in traditionally herbivorous Asia. Indians' meat consumption has risen from 8.4 to 11.5 pounds since 1981; in China, it has increased from 33.1 to an astonishing 115.5 pounds. This result has nothing to do with principle and everything to do with prosperity. Stuart's "bloodless revolution" has been much less a conversion than a conversation.

The history of vegetarian (and anti-vegetarian) thought neither adds up nor goes anywhere, except in the sense that it goes everywhere that people disposed to reflection have explored when asking what it means to be human and to be good. It's a history of human morality, but it's no less a history of human ingenuity in moral argumentation. When the sixteen-year-old Ben Franklin converted to vegetarianism, he seemed to have been struck both by its health benefits and by moral sensitivity to animal suffering. But Franklin soon fell off the wagon. On his first sea voyage from Boston, his ship was becalmed off Block Island:

> Our People set about catching Cod, & haul'd up a great many. Hitherto I had stuck to my Resolution of not eating animal Food; and on this Occasion, I consider'd … the taking every Fish as a kind of unprovok'd Murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any Injury that might justify the Slaughter. All this seem'd very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish, & when this came hot out of the Frying Pan, it smeled admirably well. I balanc'd some time between Principle & Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs: Then thought I, if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you. So I din'd upon Cod very heartily and continu'd

to eat with other People, returning only now & then occasionally to a vegetable Diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do. ♦