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On Vegetarianism

Elisée Reclus

1901

Men of such high standing in hygiene and biology having made a profound study of questions relating to normal food, I shall take good care not to display my incompetence by expressing an opinion as to animal and vegetable nourishment. Let the cobbler stick to his last. As I am neither chemist nor doctor, I shall not mention either azote or albumen, nor reproduce the formulas of analysts, but shall content myself simply with giving my own personal impressions, which, at all events, coincide with those of many vegetarians. I shall move within the circle of my own experiences, stopping here and there to set down some observation suggested by the petty incidents of life.

First of all I should say that the search for truth had nothing to do with the early impressions which made me a potential vegetarian while still a small boy wearing baby-frocks. I have a distinct remembrance of horror at the sight of blood. One of the family had sent me, plate in hand, to the village butcher, with the injunction to bring back some gory fragment or other. In all innocence I set out cheerfully to do as I was bid, and entered the yard where the slaughtermen were. I still remember this gloomy yard where terrifying men went to and fro with great knives, which they wiped

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on blood-besprinkled smocks. Hanging from a porch an enormous carcass seemed to me to occupy an extraordinary amount of space; from its white flesh a reddish liquid was trickling into the gutters. Trembling and silent I stood in this blood-stained yard incapable of going forward and too much terrified to run away. I do not know what happened to me; it has passed from my memory. I seem to have heard that I fainted, and that the kind-hearted butcher carried me into his own house; I did not weigh more than one of those lambs he slaughtered every morning.

Other pictures cast their shadows over my childish years, and, like that glimpse of the slaughter-house, mark so many epochs in my life. I can see the sow belonging to some peasants, amateur butchers, and therefore all the more cruel. I remember one of them bleeding the animal slowly, so that the blood fell drop by drop; for, in order to make really good black puddings, it appears essential that the victim should have suffered proportionately. She cried without ceasing, now and then uttering groans and sounds of despair almost human; it seemed like listening to a child.

And in fact the domesticated pig is for a year or so a child of the house; pampered that he may grow fat, and returning a sincere affection for all the care lavished on him, which has but one aim — so many inches of bacon. But when the affection is reciprocated by the good woman who takes care of the pig, fondling him and speaking in terms of endearment to him, is she not considered ridiculous — as if it were absurd, even degrading, to love an animal that loves us?

One of the strongest impressions of my childhood is that of having witnessed one of those rural dramas, the forcible killing of a pig by a party of villagers in revolt against a dear old woman who would not consent to the murder of her fat friend. The village crowd burst into the pigstye and dragged the beast to the slaughter place where all the apparatus for the deed stood waiting, whilst the unhappy dame sank down upon a stool weeping quiet tears. I stood beside her and saw those tears without knowing whether I should

sympathise with her grief, or think with the crowd that the killing of the pig was just, legitimate, decreed by common sense as well as by destiny.

Each of us, especially those who have lived in a provincial spot, far away from vulgar ordinary towns, where everything is methodically classed and disguised — each of us has seen something of these barbarous acts committed by flesh-eaters against the beasts they eat. There is no need to go into some Porcopolis of North America, or into a saladero of La Plata, to contemplate the horrors of the massacres which constitute the primary condition of our daily food. But these impressions wear off in time; they yield before the baneful influence of daily education, which tends to drive the individual towards mediocrity, and takes out of him anything that goes to the making of an original personality. Parents, teachers, official or friendly, doctors, not to speak of the powerful individual whom we call “everybody,” all work together to harden the character of the child with respect to this “four-footed food,” which, nevertheless, loves as we do, feels as we do, and, under our influence, progresses or retrogresses as we do.

It is just one of the sorriest results of our flesh-eating habits that the animals sacrificed to man’s appetite have been systematically and methodically made hideous, shapeless, and debased in intelligence and moral worth. The name even of the animal into which the boar has been transformed is used as the grossest of insults; the mass of flesh we see wallowing in noisome pools is so loathsome to look at that we agree to avoid all similarity of name between the beast and the dishes we make out of it. What a difference there is between the moufflon’s appearance and habits as he skips about upon the mountain rocks, and that of the sheep which has lost all individual initiative and becomes mere debased flesh — so timid that it dares not leave the flock, running headlong into the jaws of the dog that pursues it. A similar degradation has befallen the ox, whom now-a-days we see moving with difficulty in the pastures, transformed by stock-breeders into an enormous ambulating mass

of geometrical forms, as if designed beforehand for the knife of the butcher. And it is to the production of such monstrosities we apply the term “breeding”! This is how man fulfils his mission as educator with respect to his brethren, the animals.

For the matter of that, do we not act in like manner towards all Nature? Turn loose a pack of engineers into a charming valley, in the midst of fields and trees, or on the banks of some beautiful river, and you will soon see what they would do. They would do everything in their power to put their own work in evidence, and to mask Nature under their heaps of broken stones and coal. All of them would be proud, at least, to see their locomotives streaking the sky with a network of dirty yellow or black smoke. Sometimes these engineers even take it upon themselves to improve Nature. Thus, when the Belgian artists protested recently to the Minister of Railroads against his desecration of the most beautiful parts of the Meuse by blowing up the picturesque rocks along its banks, the Minister hastened to assure them that henceforth they should have nothing to complain about, as he would pledge himself to build all the new workshops with Gothic turrets!

In a similar spirit the butchers display before the eyes of the public, even in the most frequented streets, disjointed carcasses, gory lumps of meat, and think to conciliate our æstheticism by boldly decorating the flesh they hang out with garlands of roses!

When reading the papers, one wonders if all the atrocities of the war in China are not a bad dream instead of a lamentable reality. How can it be that men having had the happiness of being caressed by their mother, and taught in school the words “justice” and “kindness,” how can it be that these wild beasts with human faces take pleasure in tying Chinese together by their garments and their pig-tails before throwing them into a river? How is it that they kill off the wounded, and make the prisoners dig their own graves before shooting them? And who are these frightful assassins? They are men like ourselves, who study and read as we do, who have brothers, friends, a wife or a sweetheart; sooner or later we run

It is on account of the ugliness of it that we also abhor vivisection and all dangerous experiments, except when they are practised by the man of science on his own person. It is the ugliness of the deed which fills us with disgust when we see a naturalist pinning live butterflies into his box, or destroying an ant-hill in order to count the ants. We turn with dislike from the engineer who robs Nature of her beauty by imprisoning a cascade in conduit-pipes, and from the Californian woodsman who cuts down a tree, four thousand years old and three hundred feet high, to show its rings at fairs and exhibitions. Ugliness in persons, in deeds, in life, in surrounding Nature — this is our worst foe. Let us become beautiful ourselves, and let our life be beautiful!

What then are the foods which seem to correspond better with our ideal of beauty both in their nature and in their needful methods of preparation? They are precisely those which from all time have been appreciated by men of simple life; the foods which can do best without the lying artifices of the kitchen. They are eggs, grains, fruits; that is to say, the products of animal and vegetable life which represent in their organisms both the temporary arrest of vitality and the concentration of the elements necessary to the formation of new lives. The egg of the animal, the seed of the plant, the fruits of the tree, are the end of an organism which is no more, and the beginning of an organism which does not yet exist. Man gets them for his food without killing the being that provides them, since they are formed at the point of contact between two generations. Do not our men of science who study organic chemistry tell us, too, that the egg of the animal or plant is the best storehouse of every vital element? *Omne vivum ex ovo.*

ourselves a stick in the forest, or to pick a flower in a garden; we shall even go so far as to take a lettuce, or cut cabbages and asparagus for our food, although we fully recognise the life in the plant as well as in animals. But it is not for us to found a new religion, and to hamper ourselves with a sectarian dogma; it is a question of making our existence as beautiful as possible, and in harmony, so far as in us lies, with the æsthetic conditions of our surroundings.

Just as our ancestors, becoming disgusted with eating their fellow-creatures, one fine day left off serving them up to their tables; just as now, among flesh-eaters, there are many who refuse to eat the flesh of man's noble companion, the horse, or of our fire-side pets, the dog and cat — so is it distasteful to us to drink the blood and chew the muscle of the ox, whose labour helps to grow our corn. We no longer want to hear the bleating of sheep, the bellowing of bullocks, the groans and piercing shrieks of the pigs, as they are led to the slaughter. We aspire to the time when we shall not have to walk swiftly to shorten that hideous minute of passing the haunts of butchery with their rivulets of blood and rows of sharp hooks, whereon carcasses are hung up by blood-stained men, armed with horrible knives. We want some day to live in a city where we shall no longer see butchers' shops full of dead bodies side by side with drapers' or jewellers', and facing a druggist's, or hard by a window filled with choice fruits, or with beautiful books, engravings or statuettes, and works of art. We want an environment pleasant to the eye and in harmony with beauty.

And since physiologists, or better still, since our own experience tells us that these ugly joints of meat are not a form of nutrition necessary for our existence, we put aside all these hideous foods which our ancestors found agreeable, and the majority of our contemporaries still enjoy. We hope before long that flesh-eaters will at least have the politeness to hide their food. Slaughter houses are relegated to distant suburbs; let the butchers' shops be placed there too, where, like stables, they shall be concealed in obscure corners.

the chance of meeting them, of taking them by the hand without seeing any traces of blood there.

But is there not some direct relation of cause and effect between the food of these executioners, who call themselves "agents of civilisation," and their ferocious deeds? They, too, are in the habit of praising the bleeding flesh as a generator of health, strength, and intelligence. They, too, enter without repugnance the slaughter house, where the pavement is red and slippery, and where one breathes the sickly sweet odour of blood. Is there then so much difference between the dead body of a bullock and that of a man? The dissevered limbs, the entrails mingling one with the other, are very much alike : the slaughter of the first makes easy the murder of the second, especially when a leader's order rings out, or from afar comes the word of the crowned master, "Be pitiless."

A French proverb says that "every bad case can be defended." This saying had a certain amount of truth in it so long as the soldiers of each nation committed their barbarities separately, for the atrocities attributed to them could afterwards be put down to jealousy and national hatred. But in China, now, the Russians, French, English, and Germans have not the modesty to attempt to screen each other. Eyewitnesses, and even the authors themselves, have sent us information in every language, some cynically, and others with reserve. The truth is no longer denied, but a new morality has been created to explain it. This morality says there are two laws for mankind, one applies to the yellow races and the other is the privilege of the white. To assassinate or torture the first named is, it seems, henceforth permissible, whilst it is wrong to do so to the second.

Is not our morality, as applied to animals, equally elastic? Harking on dogs to tear a fox to pieces teaches a gentleman how to make his men pursue the fugitive Chinese. The two kinds of hunt belong to one and the same "sport"; only, when the victim is a man, the excitement and pleasure are probably all the keener. Need we ask the

opinion of him who recently invoked the name of Attila, quoting this monster as a model for his soldiers?

It is not a digression to mention the horrors of war in connection with the massacre of cattle and carnivorous banquets. The diet of individuals corresponds closely to their manners. Blood demands blood. On this point any one who searches among his recollections of the people whom he has known will find there can be no possible doubt as to the contrast which exists between vegetarians and coarse eaters of flesh, greedy drinkers of blood, in amenity of manner, gentleness of disposition and regularity of life.

It is true these are qualities not highly esteemed by those "superior persons," who, without being in any way better than other mortals, are always more arrogant, and imagine they add to their own importance by depreciating the humble and exalting the strong. According to them, mildness signifies feebleness : the sick are only in the way, and it would be a charity to get rid of them. If they are not killed, they should at least be allowed to die. But it is just these delicate people who resist disease better than the robust. Full-blooded and high-coloured men are not always those who live longest : the really strong are not necessarily those who carry their strength on the surface, in a ruddy complexion, distended muscle, or a sleek and oily stoutness. Statistics could give us positive information on this point, and would have done so already, but for the numerous interested persons who devote so much time to grouping, in battle array, figures, whether true or false, to defend their respective theories.

But, however this may be, we say simply that, for the great majority of vegetarians, the question is not whether their biceps and triceps are more solid than those of the flesh-eaters, nor whether their organism is better able to resist the risks of life and the chances of death, which is even more important : for them the important point is the recognition of the bond of affection and goodwill that links man to the so-called lower animals, and the extension to these our brothers of the sentiment which has already

put a stop to cannibalism among men. The reasons which might be pleaded by anthropophagists against the disuse of human flesh in their customary diet would be as well-founded as those urged by ordinary flesh-eaters today. The arguments that were opposed to that monstrous habit are precisely those we vegetarians employ now. The horse and the cow, the rabbit and the cat, the deer and the hare, the pheasant and the lark, please us better as friends than as meat. We wish to preserve them either as respected fellow-workers, or simply as companions in the joy of life and friendship.

"But," you will say, "if you abstain from the flesh of animals, other flesh-eaters, men or beasts, will eat them instead of you, or else hunger and the elements will combine to destroy them." Without doubt the balance of the species will be maintained, as formerly, in conformity with the chances of life and the inter-struggle of appetites; but at least in the conflict of the races the profession of destroyer shall not be ours. We will so deal with the part of the earth which belongs to us as to make it as pleasant as possible, not only for ourselves, but also for the beasts of our household. We shall take up seriously the educational rôle which has been claimed by man since prehistoric times. Our share of responsibility in the transformation of the existing order of things does not extend beyond ourselves and our immediate neighbourhood. If we do but little, this little will at least be our work.

One thing is certain, that if we held the chimerical idea of pushing the practice of our theory to its ultimate and logical consequences, without caring for considerations of another kind, we should fall into simple absurdity. In this respect the principle of vegetarianism does not differ from any other principle; it must be suited to the ordinary conditions of life. It is clear that we have no intention of subordinating all our practices and actions, of every hour and every minute, to a respect for the life of the infinitely little; we shall not let ourselves die of hunger and thirst, like some Buddhist, when the microscope has shown us a drop of water swarming with animalculæ. We shall not hesitate now and then to cut