

Introduction

THE GOLD STANDARD IS GREEN

WHEN I WAS TEACHING SANSKRIT AT THE UNIVERSITY of Toronto in the 1970s, I came across a phrase that stopped me dead: *ashrayaparavrtti*—a sudden moment of life-changing insight. *Paravrtti* is like a somersault, and *ashraya* is one's home base, so it means letting go of everything you have always believed or understood for a leap into the unknown. The Christian equivalent is known as the Road to Damascus experience in which Saul (later St. Paul) underwent a conversion on his way to Damascus to slaughter Christians and instead became one.

Many people become vegan in just that way: a sudden moment, a blinding insight, a turning one's back on conventional wisdom, in this case, conventional diet. How did it happen for me? Well, I had the good fortune to grow up in a vegetarian family: my parents were "disciples" of a vegetarian guru, Paul Brunton. Even when I gave up the belief in the Hinduism and Buddhism that he taught, I still maintained my

belief in the value of *ahimsa*, not doing harm, which included not doing harm through one's diet. Later, at Toronto, I had a negative epiphany: what was I doing teaching this language that had lost its magic for me? I entered psychoanalytic training. Alas, giving up Sanskrit somehow entailed giving up my vegetarian ways. One day, after becoming a Freudian psychoanalyst, I had another transformative moment: I was sitting at Freud's desk at Maresfield Gardens in London. I opened one of the drawers, and found a stash of letters, all of which dealt with the "hidden" reality of the sexual abuse of children. That was to become my concern (some would call it an obsession) over the next ten years. Only when I decided that I could no longer be a psychoanalyst in good conscience did I reconnect with my former vegetarian self: I started investigating the emotional lives of animals, and what I learned turned me back into a lifelong vegetarian.

During that time, I can remember hearing César Chávez say that if you want to lessen animal suffering, you would do better to eat meat and give up dairy and eggs. Again, one of those defining moments for me. Everything I thought I knew was suddenly challenged, but I also knew that I was not yet ready for such a challenge. I turned my back on that moment. Yet I understood even then that sooner or later I would have to face up to what I could no longer ignore.

That moment came for me when I began to visit dairy farms and hen-laying facilities and saw the misery and suffering that the animals endured just so that we could enjoy their milk and eggs. My denial was no longer possible, and I took the leap. I have asked some other vegans how it happened for them, and got some interesting answers. John Mackey, the CEO of Whole

Foods, told me: “I remember one day in August of 2003 I made the decision to become (near) vegan and that once the decision was made I felt great emotional alignment within my heart. I knew this was the right thing for me to do and I also knew that I was making a decision that I would be committed to for the rest of my life. At last my beliefs and my ethics had come into alignment.” Stanley Godlovitch, one of the people who began the back-to-vegetarianism movement in the 1970s (he and a friend first confronted Peter Singer, then a graduate student in philosophy at Oxford and now the best known animal rights author, about eating meat), told me recently that every vegetarian who drinks milk or eats eggs knows from scratch that there’s “something not quite right.” But for him and his wife, “the push came from our teenage son Daniel, who brought out the ancient Consistency Cannon over dinner and fired at will. I guess I must have been poised, ready, and that was it.”

There is a general feeling among the public at large that to be concerned with the way animals live, or to become vegetarian or even vegan, is now not nearly as odd as it once seemed. Consider that the mainstream group Conservation International (CI) has partnered with McDonald’s to promote *The Bee Movie*! When I saw that movie, I heard kids walk out vowing never to eat honey unless it was “bee-approved.” On their Web site, CI asks that children take the following pledge: “I recognize that I play an important role in the future of our planet. I pledge to get outside and do my part to learn about nature and to protect all living things. I will be a force for good in my neighborhood.” *Protect all living things*—even bees. Sounds good. But how, exactly, does eating at McDonald’s accomplish this? The old cliché still applies: We want the steak but don’t

want to hear about the slaughterhouse. That is why I devote a full chapter to denial.

Sometimes denial, though, is just ignorance. I was having dinner in Thailand in 2007 with my friend Stan Sesser, a writer for the *Wall Street Journal* (he has also been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and food critic for the *San Francisco Examiner*). He asked me why I don't eat eggs or dairy. I told him it was because of the cruelty involved. He was taken aback, never having heard of this problem before. It had been the same for me, and I am convinced that most people just are not aware of how these animals suffer so that we can eat their eggs and drink their milk.

We don't hear the assertion very often today that animals were born to be slaves, destined to be eaten, that they evolved for our benefit. It would take a certain kind of religious fundamentalist to assert this. However, there is an assertion that is not all that far removed. This time it is not about the animals, it is about us. That we are the ones born to eat meat, the ones destined to do the eating (as opposed to being eaten), and the ones who evolved to hunt and kill our food. I have rarely seen this more baldly expressed than by John Buffalo Mailer, in a dialogue with his father, Norman Mailer: "You know, one of the outcomes of living in such an organized society where everything is taken care of—men don't go out, kill their food, and bring it back, etc.—is there's a complicity, almost a sense of deliberately forgetting that when you get right down to it, ultimately we're animals. We will fight each other down to our last bite when our own is attacked. And I don't know if this is true of everybody, but 95 percent of the time when I meet another man, under it all is that sense of 'Could I take you or could you take me?'"¹

Perhaps if you are the son of Norman Mailer, this is understandable. I doubt that the rest of us constantly wonder about the outcome of a fight with every male we encounter. But the greater cliché is the earlier one, that in the past a man went “out,” killed a formidable adversary, and returned with food for his famished family. You can’t blame John Mailer for believing this myth—after all, it has been fed to us for many years now by the leading lights of anthropology departments in American universities: Man the hunter. The myth goes back a long way, and has an impeccable scientific pedigree. No less a scientist than Charles Darwin believed it, along with the view that women depended on men for survival—“Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman, and in the savage state he keeps her in a far more abject state of bondage than does the male of any other animal.”²

Hunting has been described as “the master behavior pattern of the human species,” something that men have been practicing for 99 percent of human history. The main message of the influential book *African Genesis* (1961), by Robert Ardrey, the anthropologist and Hollywood screen writer, was that we are killer apes, who wiped out our peaceful vegetarian brothers. His last book, published in 1976, was simply called *The Hunting Hypothesis*. These books had a notable influence on Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But in the 1980s this view was challenged, successfully it seems to me, by female anthropologists with a broader vision, which culminated in an excellent collection of essays called *Woman the Gatherer*.³ This showed that all the evidence suggests that the early human diet was omnivorous, so that meat was far less important than previously thought. Plant foods provided the

staple diet of most hunter-gatherer societies (with the exception of those in the Far North) and these foods were provided by women. Gathering plants required less energy than going after mobile animals, the food provided a more stable diet, and it was less dangerous to acquire. The women who gathered these plant foods were social, food-sharing, and nurturing people, and they were able to exert enormous pressure on men by choosing those same qualities in men as mates.

This hypothesis has received very strong support recently from Milton Mills, a researcher who graduated from Stanford University School of Medicine in 1991 and now practices medicine at the Fairfax Hospital in Fairfax, Virginia. He is writing a book which takes the position that people are slowly backing into the truth: That humans are anatomically and physiologically adapted for a diet comprised primarily or entirely of plant foods. I spent some time with Stephen Jay Gould at Harvard in 1999, and he too told me that his study of human dentition had convinced him that we were, evolutionarily speaking, primarily herbivores.

Dr. Mills has taken this hypothesis further than anyone else I know, and had already started to do so while he was a medical student at Stanford. He uses as evidence comparative anatomy. The simple proof is the shape of the human head—carnivores have wide mouths, suitable for swallowing large chunks of meat; we have small mouths, suitable for softer plant foods—and the human jaw—when the jaws of a carnivore close, there is a slicing motion that we lack; our jaw joint would be easily dislocated if we tried to subdue struggling prey or crush bones. Carnivorous animals do not chew their food but gorge rapidly, whereas we humans need to eat slowly; the capacious single-

chambered stomach of carnivores contrasts with the stomach of herbivores, which is a simple structure, with a long small intestine; and the human colon has the pouched structure typical of herbivores. Finally, human teeth are similar to those found in other herbivores: our canines are neither serrated nor conical, but flattened, blunt, and small; our incisors are flat and spadelike, useful for peeling and biting relatively soft materials. Human saliva contains the carbohydrate-digesting enzyme, salivary amylase: if we attempted to swallow a large amount of food poorly chewed, we would choke—just watch how your dog swallows meat. In short, concludes Dr. Mills, human beings have the mouth and gastrointestinal tract structure of a committed herbivore.

Think, too, how difficult it would be for an early human, not armed in any way, to use his own body to kill a large animal. After all, humans at the time were less than five feet tall, and weighed less than 110 pounds.⁴ They were hardly a formidable adversary against the much more powerful hunting and scavenging animals. Our nails are not claws. Notice the damage that even a small animal like your cat can inflict on unprotected human skin. Cats are obligate carnivores: killing machines. Imagine meeting and trying to subdue an animal ten times that size. Indeed, in a recent book, the anthropologists Donna Hart and Robert Sussman argue that for much of our evolutionary history, humans have been hunted by other, more powerful animals.⁵ In effect, we were the prey of any number of predators, including the big cats, as well as dogs, hyenas, snakes, crocodiles, and even birds. As a species, we would have been wiped out long ago had we not depended on easily accessible plants and fruits.⁶ Moreover, when researchers feed

animal fats and animal protein in large amounts to captive primates, it produces atherogenic effects (that is, they give you heart attacks, hardly a good survival strategy).⁷

The archeologist Lewis Binford has published a series of influential books arguing that there is no evidence for the human transport and consumption of large quantities of meat. Instead, he suggests that members of the early hominids were marginal scavengers, at the bottom of the hierarchy of meat eaters on the African savannah, sneaking in after the lions, the hyenas, and the vultures had had their fill.⁸

Consider how gross just about everyone finds the idea of eating carrion or rotting flesh. Dogs don't mind at all. In fact, as we all know, they revel in it—rolling in it and eagerly seeking it out. Carnivores prefer raw meat to cooked meat. Except in unusual cases, we like our meat disguised. The more natural it looks, the more likely it is to cause disgust and physical aversion. Part of this, I recognize, is custom. Nobody, surely, takes pleasure in the thought of killing a rabbit with their bare hands and then dismembering it and gulping down the raw flesh. Just reading these lines, I imagine, will make many a reader queasy.

We really know very little about what is “natural” when it comes to human behavior, and all attempts to proclaim some preferred behavior as entirely “natural” is almost always doomed to failure. This is especially true when it comes to human diets in the past. For a while we were treated in the mass media to the Paleolithic diet. Much can be learned from traditional diets and just about any traditional diet would be preferable to the junk food and heavily processed food we eat today. Yet I agree with the authoritative recent opinion of *The*

Cambridge History of World Food that we are not going to return to a hunting-and-gathering lifestyle, and that, in fact, history sheds no light on an ideal diet.

Nor, really, can we rely on the argument that we are “animals,” since animals eat entirely distinct foods. Primates? Yes, chimpanzees do engage in hunting behavior, from time to time,⁹ but gorillas do not. The kind of generalizations that were common among popular historians at the beginning of the twentieth century have fallen out of favor, and when one reads the German amateur historian Oswald Spengler, famous for his *The Decline of the West*, one can see why. He said, “The human race ranks highly because it belongs to the class of beasts of prey . . . [Man] lives engaged in aggression, killing, annihilation. . . . Man is a beast of prey. I shall say it again and again. The traders in virtue, the champions of social ethics, are but beasts of prey with their teeth broken.”¹⁰

What some people mean when they talk about eating meat is that since other animals hunt, kill, and eat one another, and we are just another animal, why should we not do the same? But if you observe what your cat and dog like to eat, you will immediately recognize that we are somewhat different in our tastes. Even more important, which animal are we meant to resemble most? After all, of the approximately 4,200 mammals, only a small number are carnivores. There are surely as many herbivores as there are carnivores, and many animals never kill other animals. It is true that animals seem to have no choice in the matter. No member of a carnivore species has ever been known to choose only roots and fruits. We seem to be the only animal that can “decide” to become a vegetarian.¹¹ But vegetarians cannot always take the high ground when it comes to other

behaviors, such as believing that if they eat no flesh, they are automatically a better person. A vegetarian can be as dangerous to his or her neighbor as someone who eats meat. Similarly, animals who do not eat meat are not necessarily more gentle. There is a common myth that carnivores are more dangerous to humans than herbivores. Carnivorous wolves, however, avoid humans whenever possible, and herbivorous elephants sometimes “decide” to kill people (as I learned when I attempted to get too close to a matriarch with a small baby next to her). No animals are more dangerous to humans than the completely non-carnivorous Cape buffalo, rhinoceros, and hippo. They would not eat us; but they often kill us. You can be as bad-tempered eating only grass as you can be eating only other animals. So I would not argue that human vegetarians are more peaceable than other humans—except to other animals.

What about the claim that the human brain owes its size to eating meat? It is true that the human brain is twice as encephalized as is the brain of an adult chimpanzee and three to five times as large as would be expected for average body mass. Reviews of hunter-gatherer diets indicate that meat varies from 12 to 86 percent of the total daily caloric intake per capita. In contrast, animal products represent only about 5 percent of the average daily calories consumed by chimpanzees, most of them eaten by adult males. Thus, many researchers have claimed that meat is what accounts for our large brains. But brain growth in humans is generally restricted to a critical window of opportunity following birth, for brain weight accounts for 12 percent of body weight at birth in *all* primate neonates, including humans.

The greater rate of growth occurs in humans during the first year and any dietary advantage therefore must be transferred

through breast milk. But milk quantity and quality is surprisingly consistent cross-culturally and it is not dependent on diet. The macronutrients are supplied by nature and have little to do with any other variable. Comparisons of breast milk from vegan, vegetarian, and omnivorous mothers have shown no difference in DHA (docosahexanoic acid) content. There is absolutely no evidence that the breast-fed children of vegan mothers suffer smaller brain sizes. Regardless of the ecological circumstances, it would seem that all infants obtain or produce enough of the specific lipids they need to create the large brains distinctive of our species.¹²

Some people, when they speak of eating meat as “natural,” are not necessarily referring to our evolutionary past. They simply mean that they have always eaten meat, and that most other people on earth have always eaten meat. It is the human tradition. Yet, as Gary Francione, distinguished professor of law and philosophy at Rutgers University, points out: “Were we slaves to tradition, Rosa Parks would still be riding in the back of the bus.”¹³ It should also be pointed out that many traditional societies either did not eat meat for ethical or religious reasons (as in India and many Buddhist countries) or ate very little because it was simply not feasible on an economic basis (rural China and other countries in Southeast Asia). I recently visited the island of Efate in the New Hebrides, and learned that except in Port Vila, the capital, most people rarely eat meat simply because they cannot afford it. The men, who go just about everywhere by running barefoot, look remarkably fit and athletic. The fact that your parents ate meat is not an argument unless you feel that you must maintain all the values of your parents or the community in which you were raised.

But even could we maintain that it is, in fact, natural to eat meat, this would not weigh very heavily in the ethical scale. Aristotle argued that it was natural to keep slaves. We believe he was wrong. But even if he were right, would we not argue that what is natural may not be what is moral or what we choose to do? “Fighting,” or even weighing ourselves against other men, may indeed be “natural,” but few men wish to be enslaved to their nature in this way. Indeed, are we not human precisely because, unlike just about any other animal, we can choose our diet? The big cats have no choice, which is why they are called obligate carnivores. But we can choose what we eat for reasons that have nothing whatever to do with our species, our traditions, our parents, or even our genes. We can choose to stop eating meat because we feel it is wrong to do so. I don’t believe any other animal has this astonishing ability.

“Don’t you care about humans?” I have been asked more times than I like to think. (“You’re on a lifeboat: it’s your life or the life of the dog. Which do you choose?” We are rarely on lifeboats.) Of course I do. I am one. My wife is one. My three children are. I care enough to want to save their health and our planet. Why, I wonder, does caring for anything other than our own species mean to some people that we don’t care about ourselves? Perhaps, if we are suffering, if the world looks to be in a bad way, we do feel sometimes that we have only a limited amount of empathy and need to save it for ourselves. In extreme conditions, conventional wisdom maintains, we are not concerned with “lesser” beings. But as is often the case, the conventional wisdom is only conventional—not wise, and not even true. Think of those people who survived the Holocaust only to discover that this sharpened and deepened their compassion

for animals. Isaac Bashevis Singer's famous comment springs to mind: "When it comes to animals, every man is a Nazi."

We humans have a divided attitude. On the one hand, we want to claim that we are just like animals (which, when you consider that mice and men share about 97.5 percent of their working DNA, only 1 percent less than chimps and humans, is obviously true at some fundamental level). On the other hand, we see ourselves as entirely separate, not just a different species but an altogether different category of species. We are, above all, *not* animals. I have recently noticed how often the phrase "like an animal" is used in outrage. In David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*, John Merrick is chased by a crowd until he has no escape. Finally, turning unmasked to his tormentors, he bellows: "I am not an animal!" This seems to imply that had he been an animal, the torment would be legitimate. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell sees an exhausted woman, with a desolate and hopeless expression, for a fleeting instant:

It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that "It isn't the same for them as it would be for us," and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her—understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.¹⁴

No doubt there are people who truly believe that if animals are unaware how appalling the suffering they must bear is, then

we should have no compunction in perpetrating it or feel no obligation to end it. Yet if animals do not “know” they are being tortured but merely suffer at an elemental level, surely this means we have an even greater responsibility to stop the suffering? Jeremy Bentham’s famous remark belongs here: “The question is not, ‘Can they reason?’ Nor, ‘Can they talk?’ But, rather, ‘Can they suffer?’ ”

Another argument put forward to “prove” that humans are not by nature vegans is that there has never been a single society in the history of humanity that was vegan or nearly vegan. While this is strictly true, a claim could be made that Jainism comes as close as any society has to encouraging a near-vegan lifestyle.¹⁵ Perhaps this is why George Bernard Shaw once said, “I would like to be reborn in a Jain community.”

A few months ago, I went to visit my old friend Professor Padmanabh S. Jaini, Professor Emeritus of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism at the University of California at Berkeley, and arguably the preeminent Jain scholar in the world. Professor Jaini is a bit like me. We both enjoy unusual gems from ancient literature. When I told him the purpose of my visit (to learn more about Jain attitudes toward vegetarianism), he immediately provided me with one such gem. He told me that Jains speak of the three *makaras* (or words that begin with the letter “m”) that must be avoided. They are *madhya*, *mamsa*, and *madhu*—liquor, meat, and, to my surprise, honey!

Jains are not, strictly speaking, vegan. They eat no eggs, but they do eat butter and cheese. So I was surprised by the remark about honey. Vegans do not eat honey because it is an animal product. The argument (with which I agree) is that bees make honey for themselves, not for us. So, when we take their honey,

we are engaging in theft. *Robbing the Bees* is incidentally the name of an excellent book about bee keeping! How could I learn more about this prohibition? From my host, of course. Professor Jaini immediately chanted a verse for me from a twelfth-century text, the *Yogasastra*, by the Jain author Hemacandra, which translates as:

*One who eats honey, which is manufactured by the destruction of tens of thousands of tiny beings, is worse than a butcher, who only kills a single animal at a time.*¹⁶

I remember visiting Jain temples in India. Often over the main entrance I would see inscribed: *Ahimsa paramo dharmah*—*Ahimsa* (non-violence) is the highest religion. Jainism as a religion predates Buddhism, probably by about 250 years. It is the only religion in the world founded on this principle of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* refers to the attempt to live without causing any harm to other sentient beings. It is a noble ideal. The Buddha believed in it, as did Mahatma Gandhi. The Jain scriptures explain that all living beings want to live and do not want to die. This idea has occurred to many people, religious and irreligious, over the centuries. It is the kind of insight that even small children suddenly develop. I have heard a seven-year-old child say that she will not eat meat because the animal from which the meat derived “did not want to die.”

I do not find it surprising that the Jains, the Buddhists, and the Hindus have all taken seriously the lives of others. The ability to imagine ourselves into the minds and bodies of “others”—whether humans we term different from us

(Down syndrome children; Alzheimer sufferers; the so-called mentally ill) or the animals we use for our food—is of central importance because the failure to do so is precisely what led to the horrors of Auschwitz. So, when people ask, Have you nothing more important to think about? the answer is: There *is* nothing more important to think about than the heart of empathy, which in the final analysis is nothing other than the ability to love. Becoming a vegan is simply one manifestation of that love.