

Against Vegetarianism

All of the vegetarians I have known have one thing in common. Most of them feel that vegetarianism will encourage their overall health, which is questionable. Some of them feel that it will be good for the environment, huge-scale meat production being hard on the earth, which is less questionable. Others are physically repulsed by eating meat, which is probably neurotic. But what all vegetarians have in common is the suspicion that it is wrong to kill probably sentient animals for any reason.

It would seem that vegetarians see a similarity between humans (who aren't supposed to kill each other) and many animals, which becomes more cogent the more we learn about the intellectual, emotional, and psychological qualities of those animals. These similarities suggest to vegetarians that it is wrong to kill animals for the same reasons that it is wrong to kill other humans—out of love. Love dictates that humans shouldn't kill other humans; therefore, love dictates that humans shouldn't kill animals. I have a suspicion that many vegetarians, especially those who are also environmentalists, do not care all that much about the human race. But they do care about animals—universally.

The question becomes: what is the nature of the love that vegetarians feel toward animals? Frequently, they cite the

poor handling of animals on many farms, especially industrial farms, and the perceived torture of animals at the slaughterhouse. We are asked to empathize with the animals, packed into cages or tormented by forklifts before they are killed. *We* wouldn't want to be treated that way, and so animals shouldn't be treated that way. No one should be treated that way. Vegetarians desire a world in which there is no bad treatment for any human or animal, a world in which everything is pleasant and kind and gentle and supportive, a world in which pain and nastiness and suffering and exploitation are extinguished. Love, at least the kind of love vegetarians feel, needs prevail.

I call proponents of this kind of love "nice-believers." The nice-believers wish the world could be a pleasant walk in the woods. They are like those women who dress up in pastel colors to go to baby showers, where the expectant mother unwraps tiny little shirts and tiny little shoes and everyone congratulates her on what a beautiful miracle awaits her and everyone speaks in soothing, hushed tones. Everything is pretty. But all of this is nothing but an attempt to hide from view, to conceal, the absolutely awe-inspiring horror show that is to come. It is an effort to smooth over and ignore the blood, the screaming, the defecation, the profanity involved in the expectant mother's expelling an eight-pound object from her guts. (I am not a woman, so I don't pretend to know about these things.)

This illustration demonstrates my key point: suffering, violence, pain, and severe discomfort are *inextricable* from life. It's not just that something like childbirth is so often horrific. Animals are far more wicked than humans when it comes to slaughtering each other, at least if one is inclined to empathize with the animals being eaten. I saw a nature documentary once in which a herd of wildebeests had eaten up all the grass on one side of a moderately sized river. The wildebeests understood that they had to cross the river, not an insurmount-

able task, to get to the lush greenery on the other side. They also understood that the river was crocodile infested. They hesitated before they slowly began to crowd into the river to get across as fast as possible. The crocodiles took their time, but finally began picking off stray wildebeests and eating them alive. Most of the wildebeests made it, but several did not, and indeed, some of those were young. I do not doubt that the wildebeests, and the crocodiles, were sentient; indeed, I suspect when the wildebeests looked at the river they *fully understood* the heartbreaking choice they faced—starvation for all or some of them being eaten. Is human war not filled with just this sort of heartbreaking choice at every turn? Is human life not filled with metaphorically similar situations? Nevertheless, animal life is dominated by this kind of endless violence, on a minute-by-minute basis. The cute frog eats the nasty insect, and doesn't swallow it down before a large bird sweeps in and silently devours the frog.

Nice-believers of all sorts—vegetarians, American leftists and European socialists, good Christians, many feminists, Western Buddhists, and other spiritually minded folks—are *horrified* by this sort of violence and degradation. However, how could we clean up animal life on the planet? All the animals have to eat *something*. There are countless animals who *cannot* become vegetarians. What would it look like if we tried to kill food-mice humanely to feed snakes, for example? There are some animals who *need* to eat live animals. Of course, my questions are silly. We can't clean up nature. And the nice-believers don't advocate that we clean up nature—they advocate that we clean up humanity.

Humanity has advocated its own purification since civilization began. Christianity and Socialism are brilliant examples of intricate theoretical structures that give spiritual and intellectual support, respectively, to the effort to cleanse human life. There is a huge body of literary work advocating

this cleansing. The very first known work of epic literature in the West (until the discovery of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*)—Homer’s *Iliad*—was all about the death, destruction, and suffering caused by Achilles’ wrath. The *Iliad* was a screed against rage.

Nevertheless, human life has not been sanitized of blood and guts in even the slightest way as a result of these enormous, complex, and beautiful efforts. The only reason human life is somewhat less impoverished and uncomfortable now than it was for hundreds of years before 1648 is capitalism. Capitalism has brought more goods and services to more people, and ameliorated their suffering better, than any other social arrangement in the history of human civilization. This does not mean that life is any less violent than before—witness the shameful river of war that was the twentieth century—but it does mean that life is significantly more bearable than it was before capitalism.

However, it is not more *psychologically* bearable. Contemporary theories of capitalism grew up concurrently with the theories of nature, especially evolution. It is not accidental that capitalism is a social arrangement whose basic building block is ruthless competition. The disturbing violence of nature lies at the heart of the very economic arrangement that has ameliorated so much deprivation. Capitalism is violent. Hence, many nice-believers don’t just reject meat eating, but they also eschew capitalism. What is so objectionable, however, is the river of pain and exploitation that capitalism encourages.

Despite our ambiguous economic progress, one would think we could have made *some* progress in sanitizing human life of pain, violence, psychological discomfort, trauma, and blood, given the huge effort on the part of so many. But I’ve already explained why such progress has been so miniscule: it is that the blood and gore of life are as *inextricable* from

human life as they are from animal life. After all—and this is of crucial importance—*human beings are animals*.

As lovers grow older, they are less inclined than their young counterparts to want to change the beloved. Young lovers, usually girls, see the *good* hiding away in their impure beloved, and seek to grow that part, and thoroughly weed the other part of the garden. Older lovers, on the other hand, often outgrow this, and appreciate their beloved just as they are, weeds and all. These examples actually represent two different kinds of love. We have explored the nature of the love of youth and vegetarians, but what is the nature of the older love? It is more subtle. It says, “I love you *because* of your violence and cruelty, as much as because of your gentleness and kindness, because I love you as you are. I seek not to change you.” It is an Eastern Buddhist kind of love, which tries to get its mind, heart, and soul to wrap around the whole picture, not just the sweet bits.

I have used the verb *to sanitize* to describe the efforts of the nice-believers. I choose this verb because it suggests some of the inherent violence of the nice-believers themselves. “I’m going to make you into a good person, even if it kills you.” Hence, historically, we have had an endless stream of war and killing in the name of the religion of love—Christianity. Clearly, if Jesus were still in his grave, instead of next to his Father, he would be rolling over in it. Again, disagreeable violence reenters through the back door, not because the Jesus myth is somehow fundamentally flawed, but because, no matter how much they may try not to be, human beings are animals.

We can still appreciate goodness in human beings as a special kind of balm without trying to expunge the pain and blood and gore of life. What happens if we don’t try to eschew, to exorcise, the animal from our souls, but instead embrace it? In fact, people do this all the time. The capitalist, who gets

high on cold-blooded deal-making; the sexual libertine, who gives personal license to his lust; the football player, who revels in inflicting pain, up to and including concussions, on members of the other team. All encourage their own experience of the animal nature of human life. Don't we secretly like, and fantasize about, rage, revenge, even murder? If we have really left them at the door, why does popular culture spew out such an effluence of these things in books and on television?

In contemporary life, we actually encourage many of these concepts of violence, because we privately know that, while they may be disagreeable, they are actually *good* for us. Leadership is essentially a violent act of emotional compulsion, which consists of one person dominating a group—compelling the group to do his bidding. The lone-wolf action hero, of movie fame, with all of his beautiful savagery, routinely saves all of humanity.

Counterintuitively, surgeons have to *cut open* the human heart or brain, brutally and without hesitation, so they can heal and the patient can thrive. I once had to kill a gull with a broken neck, that I found writhing in my yard. I fussed with the task for forty-five minutes, botching it and cruelly extending the bird's pain and discomfort, all because the nice-believer in me wouldn't allow me to just smash it with a shovel.

The trick is to let our faculties—intellect, love—*modify* and *curb* our animal lusts, so that those lusts aren't able to destroy us. We have already seen how tricky our lust is—how it sneaks up behind us in our efforts to expunge it. So, why try to extinguish it? Why not actually encourage it, nurture it, and indulge it, all the while guarding against excess with our human faculties? In the Kubrick classic, *Full Metal Jacket*, the drill sergeant drives Private Pyle to homicide and suicide. Here, leadership has gone awry. Just a little love and insight might have curbed the drill sergeant's approach, sparing

everyone this horror. America has recently completed the Iraq War, in which over one hundred thousand human beings were brutally disposed of, several thousand of which were American. Somewhat less venality on the part of the trio that started the war could have prevented this magnificent destruction.

As the title of this article suggests, I reject the nice-believers' theory and practice out of hand. I love human violence and destructiveness, because I love human beings. One Taoist thought: creativity can be destructive, while destruction can be creative. Therefore, Christianity and Socialism still have a place in my thought. They provide excellent examples of theories that can invoke efforts to curb, instead of eliminate, the excesses of lust. If only the young man who had to kill the seagull had had my current insight, perhaps a great deal of suffering could have been avoided.

— PUP

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