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The Humanities of Diet

Some years ago, in an article entitled "Wanted, a New Meat," the *Spectator* complained that dietetic provision is made nowadays "not for man as humanised by schools of cookery, but for a race of fruit-eating apes." We introduce bananas, pines, Italian figs, pomegranates, and a variety of new fruits, but what is really wanted is "some new and large animal, something which shall combine the game flavour with the substantial solidity of a leg of mutton"¹ Surmising that there must exist "some neglected quadruped, which will furnish what we seek," the *Spectator* proceeded to take anxious stock of the world's resources, subjecting in turn the rodents, the pachyderms, and the ruminants to a careful survey, in which the claims even of the wart-hog were conscientiously debated. In the end the ruminants won the day, and the choice fell upon the Eland, which was called to the high function of supplying a new flesh-food for "humanised" man.

This is not the sense in which I am about to speak of the "humanities" of diet. I have not been fired by the *Spectator's* enthusiasm for the rescue of some "neglected quadruped," nor have I any wish to see eviscerated Elands hanging a-row in our butchers' shops. On the contrary, I suggest that in proportion as man is truly "humanised," not by schools of cookery but by schools of thought, he will abandon the barbarous habit of his flesh-eating ancestors, and will make gradual progress towards a purer, simpler, more humane, and therefore more civilised diet-system.

There are many signs that the public is awaking to the fact that there is such a thing as food-reform. The reception of a new idea of this sort is always a strange process, and has to pass through several successive phases. First, there is tacit contempt; secondly, open ridicule; then a more or less respectful opposition; and lastly, a partial acceptance. During the third period, the one at which the Vegetarian question has now arrived, discussion is often complicated by the way in which the opponents of the new idea fail to grasp the *real* object of the reformers, and pleasantly substitute some exaggerated, distorted, or wholly imaginary concept of their own; after which they proceed to argue from a wrong basis, crediting their antagonists with mistaken aims and purposes, and then triumphantly impugning their consistency or logic. It is therefore of importance that, in debating the problem of food-reform, we should know exactly what the reformers themselves are aiming at.

Let me first make plain what I mean by calling Vegetarianism a *new* idea. Historically, of course, it is not new at all, either as a precept or a practice. A great portion of the world's inhabitants have always been practically Vegetarians, and some whole races and sects have been so upon principle. The Buddhist canon in the east, and the Pythagorean in the west, enjoined abstinence from flesh-food on humane, as on other grounds; and in the writings of such "pagan" philosophers as Plutarch and Porphyry we find a humanitarian ethic of the most exalted kind, which, after undergoing a long repression during medieval churchdom, reappeared, albeit but weakly and fitfully at first, in the literature of the Renaissance, to be

¹ Cf. Richard Jefferies's complaint of "the ceaseless round of mutton and beef to which the dead level of civilisation reduces us." Yet Vegetarians are supposed to lack "variety"!

traced more definitely in the eighteenth century school of “sensibility.” But it was not until after the age of Rousseau, from which must be dated the great humanitarian movement of the past century, that Vegetarianism began to assert itself as a system, a reasoned plea for the disuse of flesh-food. In this sense it is a new ethical principle, and its import as such is only now beginning to be generally understood.

I say *ethical* principle, because it is beyond doubt that the chief motive of Vegetarianism is the humane one. Questions of hygiene and of economy both play their part, and an important part, in a full discussion of food reform; but the feeling which underlies and animates the whole movement is the instinctive horror of butchery, especially the butchery of the more highly organized animals, so human, so near akin to man. Let me quote a short passage from the preface to Mr. Howard Williams’s “Ethics of Diet,” an acknowledged textbook of Vegetarianism.

“It has been well said,” remarks Mr. Williams, “that there are steps on the way to the summit of dietetic reform, and if only one step be taken, yet that single step will not be without importance and without influence in the world. The step which leaves for ever behind it the barbarism of slaughtering our fellow beings, the mammals and birds, is, it is superfluous to add, the most important and influential of all.”

Let it therefore be clearly understood that this step—the “first step,” as Tolstoy has called it, in a scheme of humane living—has been the main object of all Vegetarian propaganda since the establishment of the Vegetarian Society in 1847. To secure the discontinuance of the shocking and inhuman practices that are inseparable from the slaughter-house — this, and no abstract theory of abstinence from all “animal” substances, no fastidious abhorrence of contact with the “evil thing,” has been the purpose of modern food-reformers. They are, moreover, well aware that a change of this sort, which involves a reconsideration of our whole attitude towards the “lower animals,” can only be gradually realised; nor do they invite the world, as their opponents seem to imagine, to an immediate hard-and-fast decision, a revolution in national habits which is to be discussed, voted, and carried into effect the day after to-morrow, to the grievous jeopardy and dislocation of certain time-honoured interests. They simply point to the need of progression towards humaner diet, believing, with Thoreau, that “it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other, when they came in contact with the more civilised.”

There are, however, many critics of Vegetarianism who have not grasped this ethical principle, and whose contentions are, therefore, quite irrelevant. It has been said, for example, that “the most enthusiastic Vegetarians scarcely venture to deny that the destruction of many animals is requisite for human existence. What Vegetarian would allow his premises to be swarming with mice, rats, and similar pests? Does he permit caterpillars, snails, and slugs to devour the produce of his vegetable garden? Perhaps he satisfies his conscience with the reflection that the destruction of vermin is a necessary act.”

Perhaps the Vegetarian draws a distinction between the avowedly necessary destruction of garden and household pests, and the quite unnecessary (from the Vegetarian standpoint) butchery of oxen and sheep, who are bred for no other purpose than that of the slaughter-house, where they are killed in a most barbarous manner! *Perhaps* the Vegetarian “satisfies his conscience” with this distinction! I should rather think he did.

No wonder that food-reformers seem a strange and unreasonable folk to those who have

thus failed to apprehend the very *raison d'être* of food-reform, and who persist in arguing as if the choice between the old diet and the new were a mere matter of personal caprice or professional adjustment, into which the moral question scarcely enters at all.

To this same misunderstanding is due the futile outcry that is raised every now and then against the term "Vegetarian," when some zealous opponent undertakes to "expose the delusions of those who boast that they live on vegetables, and yet take eggs, butter, and milk as regular articles of diet." Of course the simple fact is that Vegetarians are neither boastful of their diet, nor enamoured of their name; it was invented, wisely or unwisely, a full half-century ago, and, whether we like it or not, has evidently "come to stay" until we find something better. It is worth observing that the objection is seldom or never made in actual everyday life, where the word "Vegetarian" carries with it a quite definite meaning, viz., one who abstains from flesh-food but not necessarily from animal products; the verbal pother is always made by somebody - who is sitting down to write an article against food-reform, and has nothing better to say. It all comes from the notion that Vegetarians are bent on some barren, logical "consistency," rather than on practical progress towards a more humane method of living—the only sort of "consistency" which in this, or any other branch of reform, is either possible in itself, or worth a moment's attention from a sensible man.

To show, however, that this question of the temporary use of animal products has not been shirked by food-reformers, I quote the following from my "Plea for Vegetarianism," published nearly thirty years ago.

The immediate object which food-reformers aim at is not so much the disuse of animal substances in general, as the abolition of flesh-meat in particular; and if they can drive their opponents to make the important admission that actual flesh-food is unnecessary, they can afford to smile at the trivial retort that animal substance is still used in eggs and milk.... They are well aware that even dairy produce is quite unnecessary, and will doubtless be dispensed with altogether under a more natural system of diet. In the meantime, however, one step is sufficient. Let us first recognize the fact that the slaughter-house, with all its attendant horrors, might easily be abolished; that point gained, the question of the total disuse of all animal products is one that will be decided hereafter. What I wish to insist on is that it is not 'animal' food which we primarily abjure, but nasty food, expensive food, and unwholesome food.

If medical men, instead of quibbling about the word "Vegetarian," would recommend to their clients the use of animal products, as a substitute for "butchers' meat," there would be a great gain to the humanities of diet. Incidentally, it must be remarked, the doctors quite admit the efficiency of such substitutes; for in their eagerness to convict Vegetarians of inconsistency in using animal products, they guilelessly give away their own case by arguing that, of course, on *this* diet the Vegetarians do well enough! As for those ultra-consistent persons who sometimes write as if it were not worth while to discontinue the practice of cow killing, unless we also immediately discontinue the practice of using milk—that is to say, who think the greater reform is worthless without the lesser and subsequent one—I can only express my respectful astonishment at such reasoning. It is as though a traveller were too "consistent" to start on a journey because he might be required to "change carriages" on the way.

But it is said, why not introduce "humane" methods of slaughtering, and so remedy the chief evil in the present system of diet? Well, in the first place, "humane slaughtering," if it be once admitted that there is no necessity to slaughter at all, is a contradiction in terms. But

letting that pass, and recognising, as Vegetarians gladly do, that there would be a great reduction of suffering, if all flesh-eaters would combine for the abolition of *private* slaughter-houses and the substitution of well-ordered municipal abattoirs, we are still faced by the difficulty that these changes will take a long time to carry out, opposed as they are by powerful private interests, and that, even under the best possible conditions, the butchering of the larger animals must always be a horrible and inhuman business. Vegetarianism, as a movement, has nothing whatever to fear from the introduction of improved slaughtering; indeed, Vegetarians may take the credit of having worked quite as zealously as flesh-eaters in that direction, feeling, as they do, that in our complex society no individuals can exempt themselves from a share in the general responsibility—the brand of the slaughterer is on the brow of every one of us. But there is no half-way resting-place in humane progress; and we may be quite sure that when the public conscience is once aroused on this dreadful subject of the slaughter-house, it will maintain its interest to a much more thorough solution of the difficulty than a mere improvement of methods.

One thing is quite certain. It is impossible for flesh-eaters to find any justification of their diet in the plea that animals *might* be slaughtered humanely; it is an obvious duty to carry out the improvements first, and to make the excuses afterwards. Those who admit that the Vegetarian, in his indictment of the slaughter-house, hits a grievous blot in our civilisation, often try to escape from the inevitable conclusion on the ground that such allegations tell not against the use of animal food, but against the ignorance, carelessness, and brutality too often displayed in the slaughter-houses. This, however, is a libel on the working men who have to earn a livelihood by the disgusting occupation of butchering. The ignorance, carelessness, and brutality are not only in the rough-handed slaughtermen, but in the polite ladies and gentlemen whose dietetic habits render the slaughtermen necessary. The real responsibility rests not on the wage slave, but on the employer. “I’m only doing your dirty work,” was the reply of a Whitechapel butcher to a gentleman who expressed the same sentiments as those I have quoted. “It’s such as you makes such as *us*.”

At this point it would presumably be the right thing to give some detailed description of the horrors enacted in our shambles, of which I might quote numerous instances from perfectly trust-worthy witnesses. If I do not do so, I can assure my readers that it is not from any desire to spare their feelings, for I think it might fairly be demanded of those who eat beef and mutton that they should not shrink from an acquaintance with facts of their own making; also we have often been told that it is the Vegetarians, not the flesh-eaters, who are the “sentimentalists” in this matter. I refrain for the simple reason that I fear, if I narrated the facts, this chapter would go unread. So, before passing on, I will merely add this, that in some ways the evils attendant on slaughtering grow worse, and not better, as civilisation advances, because of the more complex conditions of town life, and the increasingly long journeys to which animals are subjected in their transit from the grazier to the slaughterman. The cattle-ships of the present day reproduce, in an aggravated form, some of the worst horrors of the slave-ship of fifty years back. I take it for granted, then, as not denied by our opponents, that the present system of killing animals for food is a very cruel and barbarous’ one, and a direct outrage on what I have termed the “humanities of diet.”

It is also an outrage on every sense of refinement and good taste, for in this question the aesthetics are not to be dissociated from the humanities. Has the artist ever considered the history of the “chop” which is brought so elegantly to his studio? Not he. He would not be able to eat it if he thought about it. He has first employed a slaughterman (“It’s such as you makes such as *us*”) to convert a beautiful living creature into a hideous carcase, to be

displayed with other carcasses in that ugliest product of civilisation, a butcher's shop, and then he has employed a cook to conceal, as far as may be, the work of the slaughterman. This is what the *Spectator* calls being "humanised" by schools of cookery; I should call it being de-humanised. In passing a butcher's I have seen a concert-programme pinned prominently on the corpse of a pig, and I have mused on that suggestive though unintended allegory of the Basis of Art. I deny that it is the right basis, and I maintain that there will necessarily be something porcine in the art that is so upheld and exhibited. Nine-tenths of our literary and artistic gatherings, our social functions, and most sumptuous entertainments, are tainted from the same source. You take a beautiful girl down to supper, and you offer her - a ham sandwich! It is proverbial folly to cast pearls before swine. What are we to say of the politeness which casts swine before pearls?

It is no part of my purpose to argue in detail the *possibility* of a Vegetarian diet; nor is there any need to do so. The proofs of it are everywhere — in the history of races, in the rules of monastic orders, in the habits of large numbers of working populations, in biographies of well-known men, in the facts and instances of every-day life. The medical view of Vegetarianism, which at first (as in the similar case of teetotalism) was expressed by a severe negative and ominous head-shake, has very largely changed during the past ten or twenty years, and, in so far as it is still hostile, dwells rather on the superiority of the "mixed" diet than on the insufficiency of the other, while the solemn warnings which used to be addressed to the venturesome individual who had the hardihood to leave off eating his fellow-beings, have now lapsed into more general statements as to the probable failure of Vegetarianism in the long run, and on a more extended trial. Well, we know what that means. It is what has been said of every vital movement that the world has seen. It means that ordinary people, and dull people, and learned people, and specialists, need time to envisage new truths; but they *do* envisage them, some day. Already the medical preference for a flesh diet may be summed up under two heads—that flesh is more digestible, more easily assimilated, than vegetables, and that it is unwise to limit the sources of food which (to quote Sir Henry Thompson) "Nature has abundantly provided."

The first argument, as to the superior digestibility of flesh, is flatly denied by food-reformers on the plain grounds of experience, the notion that Vegetarians are in the habit of eating a greater bulk of food, in order to obtain an equal amount of nutriment, being one of those amazing superstitions which could not survive a day's comparative study of the parties in question. My own conviction is that the average flesh-eater eats at least twice as much in bulk as the average Vegetarian; and I know that the experience of Vegetarians bears witness to a great reduction, instead of a great increase, in the amount of their diet. As for the second medical argument, the unwisdom of rejecting any of Nature's bounties, it ignores the very existence of the ethical question, which is the Vegetarian's chief contention; nor does this appeal to "Nature" strike one as being very "scientific," inasmuch as (ethics apart) it might just as well justify cannibalism as flesh-eating. We can imagine how the medicine-men of some old anthropophagous tribe might deprecate the newfangled civilised notion of abstinence from human flesh, on the ground that it is foolish to refuse the benefits which "Nature" has abundantly provided.

But what of the failures of those who have attempted the Vegetarian diet? Is not the movement hopelessly blocked by Mr. So-and So's six weeks' experiment? He became so very weak, you know, until his friends were quite alarmed about him, and he was really *obliged* to take something more nourishing. All of which symptoms, would remark, could be matched by thousands of similar instances from the records, of the temperance movement, and prove

clearly enough, not that abstinence from flesh food or alcohol is impossible, but that (as any thoughtful person might have foreseen) a great change in the habits of a people cannot be effected suddenly, or without its inevitable percentage of failures. Every propagandist movement, religious, social, or dietetic, is sure to attract to itself a motley crowd of adherents, many of whom, after a trial of the new principles—some after a genuine trial, others after a very superficial one—revert to their former position. Let it be freely granted that a habit so ingrained as that of flesh-eating is likely, and, indeed certain, in some particular cases to be very hard to eradicate. What then? Is not that exactly what might have been expected in a change of this kind? And, on the other side, it is equally certain that a large number of the reported failures—nine-tenths of them, I should say—are caused by the half-hearted or ill-advised manner in which the attempt is made. It is just as possible to commit suicide on a Vegetarian diet as on any other, if you are bent on that conclusion; and really one might almost imagine, from the extraordinary folly sometimes shown in the selection of a diet, that certain experimentalists were “riding for a fall” in their dealings with Vegetarianism—taking up the thing in order to be able to say, “I tried it, and see the result!” I knew a man, a master at a great public school, who “tried Vegetarianism,” and he tried it by making cabbage and potato the substitute for flesh, and after a month’s trial he felt “very flabby,” and then he gave it up.

An important factor in the success of a change of diet is the spirit in which such change is undertaken. As far as the mere chemistry of food is concerned, the majority of people may doubtless, with ordinary wisdom in the conduct of the change, substitute a Vegetarian for a “mixed” diet without inconvenience. But in some cases, owing perhaps to the temperament of the individual, or the nature of his surroundings, the change is much more difficult; and here it will make all the difference whether he have really at heart a sincere wish to take the first step towards a humaner diet, or whether he be simply experimenting out of curiosity or some other trivial motive. It is one more proof that the *moral* basis of Vegetarianism is the one that sustains the rest.

But are there not other reasons alleged against the practice of Vegetarianism? Ah, those dear old Fallacies, so immemorial yet ever new, how can I speak disrespectfully of what has so often refreshed and entertained me! Every food-reformer is familiar with them—the “law of nature” arguments, which would approximate human ethics to the standard of the tiger-cat or rattle-snake; the “necessity-of-taking-life” argument, which conscientiously ignores the practice of *unnecessary* killing; the blubber argument, or, to put it more exactly, the “what-would-become-of-the-Esquimaux?” to which the only adequate answer is, a system of State-aided emigration; the “for-my-sake” argument, which may be called the family fallacy; the “what-should-we-do-without-leather?” that lurid picture of a shoeless world instantaneously converted to Vegetarianism; and the disinterested “what-would-become-of-the-animals?” which foresees the grievous wanderings of homeless herds who can find no kind protector to eat them. Best of all, I think, is what may be termed the logic of the larder, beloved of learned men, which urges that the animals would prefer to live and be eaten than not to live at all—an imaginary ante-natal choice in an imaginary ante-natal condition!

I have now shown what I mean by those “humanities of diet,” without which, as it seems to me, it is idle to dispute over the question of the “rights” of animals. A lively argument was lately raging between zoophilists and Jesuits, as to whether animals are “persons;” I would put it to both parties, is not the battle an unreal one, so long as the “persons” in question are by common agreement handed over to the tender mercies of the butcher, who will make exceeding short work of their “personality”?

I advance no exaggerated or fanciful claim for Vegetarianism. It is not, as some have asserted, a “panacea” for human ills; it is something much more rational—an essential part of the modern humanitarian movement, which can make no true progress without it. Vegetarianism is the diet of the future, as flesh-food is the diet of the past. In that striking and common contrast, a fruit shop side by side with a butcher’s, we have a most significant object lesson. There, on the one hand, are the barbarities of a savage custom—the headless carcasses, stiffened into a ghastly semblance of life, the joints and steaks and gobbets with their sickening odour, the harsh grating of the bone-saw, and the dull thud of the chopper - a perpetual crying protest against the horrors of flesh-eating. And, as if this were not witness sufficient, here, close alongside, is a wealth of golden fruit, a sight to make a poet happy, the only food that is entirely congenial to the physical structure and the natural instincts of mankind, that can entirely satisfy the highest human aspirations. Can we doubt, as we gaze at this contrast, that whatever intermediate steps may need to be gradually taken, whatever difficulties to be overcome, the path of progression from the barbarities to the humanities of diet lies clear and unmistakable before us?

From Henry S. Salt, *The Humanities of Diet* (Manchester: The Vegetarian Society, 1914).