

Daniel A. Dombrowski, *The Philosophy of Vegetarianism*,
Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984, pp. 188

Was Plato a vegetarian? We can't be sure, but in this book Daniel Dombrowski produces incontrovertible arguments to show that Plato took vegetarianism seriously and may have even practiced it himself.

Until I read this book, I had supposed that Greek vegetarianism was based on sheer superstition, or, at best, on the dubious doctrine of the transmigration of the psyche. Dombrowski shows that while these reasons were important, there were ethical reasons as well.

The book is an essay in the history of ideas, not a polemic. He shows that vegetarianism was an idea with a history of nearly 1,000 years in ancient Greece, defended not only by Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, but also by Empedocles, Theophrastus, Plutarch, Plotinus and especially by Porphyry. Then the doctrine vanished for the next 1,700 years, disappearing so completely that the champions of contemporary philosophical vegetarianism saw themselves as creators of a *new* ethic. He points out that the sub-title of Singer's *Animal Liberation* is "A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals" as a case in point.

Thus, his metaphor for the history of philosophical vegetarianism is that of a phoenix, rising from the ashes of an almost forgotten former existence. By reminding us of ancient vegetarianism, he proposes to use the techniques and insights of contemporary philosophy to show the weaknesses of ancient vegetarianism, but he also thinks that the ancients have something worthwhile to say on the subject.

The only other full treatment of

ancient vegetarianism is a tome entitled *Der Vegetarismus in der antike* published in Berlin in 1935 by Johannes Haussleiter who treats vegetarianism as a "stuffed dinosaur" and as "antiquarian lore" rather than a living ethical option. Dombrowski, on the other hand, is a practicing vegetarian who makes no secret of where he stands on this issue. Thus, he has more sympathy for the ancient vegetarians than probably any other modern writer. Up until now, historians of ideas have treated it as either a religious taboo or stemming from antiquated medical ideas which have no relevance to our time. Certainly no one has taken it seriously. It's time we did.

What is to be gained from a detailed study of the ancient vegetarians? Apart from the intrinsic worth of studying the history of any important idea, there is the discovery that the topic is incomparably richer and deeper than we had supposed. Then too, there is the inescapable fact that many lines of thought, stemming from utterly different premises and presuppositions, converge toward similar conclusions. Vegetarianism is neither a contemporary fad nor the hobby of sentimentalist cranks.

Dombrowski shows that the ancients had several bases for their position. Of course we have long recognized that transmigration of the psyche and health were important, but he shows that the mythological belief in a past golden age and a concern for the animals themselves were also important factors.

Why did the phoenix die (in the West)? Dombrowski agrees with others that Christianity is to blame. Augustine, reacting against his former

Manicheanism, taught that to refrain from killing animals was utter superstition. Dombrowski sees three phases within the period of the ashes. The first phase closed with the Middle Ages, while the second phase was Renaissance humanism, which was precisely that: humanism. The return to the ancient dictum "Man is the measure of all things" ensured that animals would continue to be exploited. This phase gets worse with Cartesianism since animals were seen as *mere* bodies, machines, automata. The only difference between cow and a clock was that the cow is constructed by a better craftsman.

The third phase he calls the "era of excuses." Here the best thinkers come to the brink of philosophical vegetarianism, then fall back to the soft, safe lap of convention. Montaigne, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Schopenhauer, Bentham and Darwin all chickened out (excuse the expression) rather than put their semi-convictions into action. This point reminded me quite forcefully of the sorts of excuses I used to make to myself before I finally came to the point of putting my own personal convictions into practice.

Dombrowski has command of the classics. Not only is he completely at home with the major figures of antiquity but also with such minor writers as Dicaerchus, Ephorus, Aratus, and others. There can be no doubt that he has done his homework.

In the last chapter he leaps to the 20th century to discuss Hartshorne and Rorty within the context of an ethic based on virtue. This chapter is more argumentative than the first six. He tries to establish the point that vegetarianism is obligatory rather than supererogatory, and for everyone, not just for philosophers. He briefly takes Tom Regan to task for his view in an early paper that "it is

not irredeemably wrong (for the multitude?) to eat meat, but most of those (philosophers?) who read his essay are meat eaters who ought to change." This doesn't sound much like the Tom Regan I know, so it is apparent that he has long left this view behind.

Dombrowski attacks Richard Rorty for his position that moral status is based on actual or potential membership in the linguistic community. This doctrine is contained in section 3 of chapter 4 of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, entitled "Pre-linguistic awareness." Here Rorty tries to account for the difference between our treatment of pigs and our treatment of animals like koala bears by saying that we can imagine koalas talking to us whereas we have more difficulty in imagining pigs talking to us. Dombrowski thinks Rorty is being prescriptive in this section, telling us that it is not "irrational" to do this. After going back and re-reading this section carefully, I think there is a fair chance that this whole passage is merely descriptive, an attempt to account for the fact that we have so little sympathy for pigs, even though they score high on intelligence tests. When Rorty says it is not "irrational" to do this, he is clearly not saying that is *rational* to do it either. His point is rather that morality is whatever our society will let us get away with. He goes on to make this clear. "This (killing pigs and saving koalas) is not "irrational," any more than it is irrational to extend or deny civil rights to the moronic (or fetuses, or aboriginal tribes, or Martians). Rationality, when viewed as the formation of syllogisms based on discovery of "the facts" and the application of such principles as "Pain should be minimized" or "Intelligent life is always more valuable than beautiful unintelligent beings," is a myth." He goes on to point out that the "facts" which

must be discovered in drawing these lines cannot be divorced from sentiment. No amount of "careful philosophical analysis" is going to show us the difference between "coldness of heart and foolish sentimentality."

Dombrowski accuses Rorty of being "arbitrary" about this and of making a factual empirical claim that is not universally true. He contends that he doesn't find koalas, much less bats, more attractive than pigs, nor can he more easily imagine them speaking than pigs. If I understand Rorty correctly, he would heartily agree that our preference for some animals over others is "arbitrary" if this means not based on the discovery of some relevant facts. If that is what it means, Rorty would welcome the charge, even insist on it.

On the other hand, Rorty clearly overemphasizes the role of language in according moral status to animals. If his view were simply that we care more about the animals that are more nearly like us, he would be right. Snakes are perhaps the most despised and feared animals of all in our culture. Surely this is because some of them are poisonous rather than because we can't imagine them as speaking to us (or to each other). I believe that tactile sensations play a major role in our allocation of moral status to non-humans. We value those like cats with fur which we can stroke, but find creatures with slimy or scaly skins repulsive. Dombrowski

correctly questions Rorty's choice of the bat as an animal that humans can identify with. Many, if not most, humans associate all bats with vampire bats and it is no accident that the bat is a symbol of Halloween. When people still took evil spirits seriously, bats were often identified with them, apparently because they like dark places and have smooth "reptilian" wings. So Dombrowski is correct when he challenges Rorty's empirical generalizations.

The book ends with a survey of Hartshorne's "psychicalism" which Dombrowski finds much more to his liking.

One of the stated aims of the book is to give the contemporary debate about vegetarianism some much-needed depth. He has done that. With this book, Dombrowski emerges as a major figure on contemporary philosophical vegetarianism. His scholarship is solid, thorough and relevant. According to the dust jacket of the book, he is an assistant professor of philosophy at Creighton. I hope this indicates he is a fairly young man who will produce a great deal more work of this quality in the future.

One final note: in an age of cheap, quick and often shoddy printed products this book is a pleasure to handle. The quality of the paper, printing and binding are a fitting match for the quality of the author's work.

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