

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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Plato's Vegetarian Utopia

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PHILOZOON: Good morning, Plato! I was hoping to run into you, so that I could thank you for hosting the symposium. I had a marvelous time.

PLATO: I'm relieved to hear you say so, Philozoon. After you left last night, several of the guests commented that you had seemed listless the entire evening. I confess that, at the time, I shared their opinion.

PHILOZOON: Really? Why is that?

PLATO: Because you spoke sparingly, drank little, and ate like a bird, from which we inferred that you disapproved of the discourse, the wine, and the food. Since three of the chief activities of a symposium are eating, drinking, and conversing, we could reach no other conclusion than that the symposium left you disappointed. But now you're telling me that you enjoyed yourself. Did we make a mistake in our reasoning? If so, please accept my apology.

PHILOZOON: Gladly. I admit that I contributed to the conversation less than others, but I assure you that my silence in no way implied disapproval. In fact, just the opposite—I was so enchanted, especially by your story about the prisoners in the cave, that I didn't care to interrupt. Because I wanted to hang on to every word, I thought I should remain clearheaded, which explains why I drank so little of the wine. As for the food, I ate more like a pig than a bird, particularly relishing the bread, fruit, and vegetables. It was only the meat dishes that I didn't touch.

PLATO: Why not? Was something wrong with them? Was the meat undercooked or too tough or insufficiently seasoned?

PHILOZOON: Not at all. I'm sure the meat, like everything else, was prepared to perfection. My reasons for abstaining were strictly moral. I believe it's morally wrong to eat meat of any kind—whether beef, pork, or lamb, chicken or turkey, fish, lobster, or other seafood.

PLATO: I see. Why didn't you mention this last night? We might have had an instructive and entertaining discussion of the ethics of diet.

PHILOZOON: In fact, I did mention it—it was one of the four or five occasions on which I said something. When a servant placed a beef dish in front of me, I requested that he take it back, explaining that I have moral misgivings about eating meat. Philokreas, who was sitting directly opposite me, overheard my remark.

PLATO: How did he react?

PHILOZOON: He reached for the platter of beef and wolfed it down. He seemed to have no interest in an instructive and entertaining discussion of the ethics of diet.

PLATO: How like Philokreas! He has always preferred feasting to philosophizing. I, however, am more like you than Philokreas. Did you know, Philozoon, that I've just finished writing a dialogue in which I maintain that the ideal diet is one without meat?¹

PHILOZOON: No, by Zeus, I didn't. Please tell me more. Now that you know I delight in hearing you philosophize, I hope you won't begrudge me this request.

PLATO: I'll be happy to tell you more—on one condition.

PHILOZOON: What condition is that?

PLATO: That, as I speak, you not remain as quiet as you did last night. I gather that you've thought a good deal about diet, certainly more than Philokreas has, possibly as much as I have, so that I can learn from you no less than you can learn from me. If we explore the issue together, we'll have a better chance of arriving at the truth. Don't you agree?

PHILOZOON: I do, and I accept your condition. If you don't mind, Plato, I'd like to begin by asking you a few questions about your dialogue.

PLATO: By all means.

PHILOZOON: First of all, what topics does your dialogue address?

PLATO: It covers a wide range of topics but is primarily about justice. In articulating my theory of justice, I describe what I take to be a just city. More precisely, I describe two cities. One of them I call the "true city," the other a "luxurious city."²

PHILOZOON: What are these two cities like? How are they similar? How do they differ?

PLATO: They're similar in that both provide for the needs of their people, as any well-organized city does. But, whereas the luxurious city, as its name implies, takes the additional step of supplying its people with luxuries, the true city spurns all luxuries, favoring instead a simple way of life.

PHILOZOON: When you say that both cities provide for their people's needs, what exactly do they provide? What things qualify as needs?

PLATO: Needs, my friend, include what everyone agrees are needs, namely, those things without which people cannot survive: food, clothing, shelter, and the like. To satisfy these needs, each city employs farmers, weavers, and house builders.³ Since all these craftspeople use tools, the two cities have to have toolmakers as well, and there are also merchants and retailers.⁴ The merchants travel to other cities to trade for goods that their city cannot itself produce, while the retailers remain at the agora, selling the products that the farmers, weavers, and other craftspeople bring to them.

PHILOZOON: What things, then, qualify as luxuries? What does the luxurious city supply that the true city spurns?

PLATO: Among luxuries I count "couches, tables, and other furniture," "perfumed oils, incense, prostitutes, and pastries," "painting and embroidery," "gold, ivory, and the like."⁵ All of these can be found in the luxurious city but not the true city.

PHILOZOON: What about meat? Do you consider that to be a luxury or a need?

PLATO: A luxury, by the gods. Although food is a need, because we must have it to survive, the food on which we survive need not be meat. For survival, a vegetable diet is sufficient.

PHILOZOON: So people living in the luxurious city are meat-eaters, while those living in the true city are meat-abstainers?

PLATO: That's correct.⁶

PHILOZOON: Tell me, Plato, do the inhabitants of the true city refuse all animal products, or only meat? Do they drink milk or eat eggs or cheese?

PLATO: They eat cheese, which I allow them as a “delicacy.”⁷ I’m afraid my dialogue never mentions milk or eggs.

PHILOZOON: What about other uses of animals? For example, here in Athens, I frequently see people wearing leather sandals or plowing their fields with the help of cattle. Would I see such things in the true city too, or does your dialogue not mention this either?

PLATO: It does mention it, and yes, the true city uses animals in these ways. Because people need clothing, weavers and cobblers use animals for their fleeces and hides. Because people need food, farmers use cattle for plowing. Because people need shelter, house builders use oxen to haul the heavy materials from which houses are constructed.⁸

PHILOZOON: So, in the true city, there must be shepherds, cowherds, and oxherds?

PLATO: Yes.

PHILOZOON: Are there also hunters?

PLATO: We may distinguish two kinds of hunters: those who hunt for sport and those who hunt for meat. Which kind of hunters are you asking about?

PHILOZOON: I’d like to know about both kinds.

PLATO: Clearly, hunting for sport, like any other sport, is a luxury rather than a need, and, since I consider meat to be a luxury, I judge that hunting for meat is a luxury as well. Consequently, there are no hunters of either kind in the true city.⁹

PHILOZOON: Very well. I’m now starting to visualize your two cities. Yet I’m still curious about your initial statement—that the ideal diet is one without meat. What’s ideal about the meatless diet of the true city?

PLATO: Compared with the feverish lifestyle of the luxurious city, the simple lifestyle of the true city, including its meatless diet, offers two advantages. The first advantage is health.¹⁰

PHILOZOON: A diet that excludes meat is healthier than one that does not?

PLATO: That’s right.

PHILOZOON: What’s the second advantage?

PLATO: Peace. The true city will not invade other cities. In contrast, the feverish lifestyle of the luxurious city will inevitably lead to war.¹¹

PHILOZOON: I'm not sure I follow you. How does a simple, meat-abstaining lifestyle lead to peace, and how does a feverish, meat-eating lifestyle lead to war? In your dialogue, do you contend that, when we kill animals for their meat, we lose respect for the lives of animals, and that, when this happens, we cannot help but slide down a slippery slope, losing respect for human life as well, with the result that war becomes inevitable? Is this your reasoning?

PLATO: An intriguing argument, Philozoon, perhaps even compelling. But I can't claim it as my own. Instead of appealing to respect for life, my argument centers on need for land. According to my argument, the luxurious city, because of its feverish lifestyle, requires larger tracts of land than does the true city. Assuming that the luxurious city is surrounded by other cities, it can acquire this land only by taking it from its neighbors. Since no city willingly gives away its land, war is unavoidable.

PHILOZOON: I must be as slow as a tortoise, for I still don't follow. Why do those who lead a feverish lifestyle require more land than those who live simply?

PLATO: Do you not realize, my friend, that . . . ?

PHILOZOON: Wait a moment! I think I've figured it out. The true city needs only enough land to grow vegetables and grains to feed its people. But the luxurious city has to grow vegetables and grains to feed the animals its people consume. Because it takes several pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat, the luxurious city has to grow more grain than does the true city, and for this reason requires more land. Have I gotten it right?

PLATO: Another intriguing argument, but once again I have to tell you that it isn't mine.

PHILOZOON: Then what is your argument?

PLATO: I'll try to explain as simply as possible. The luxurious city produces many more things than does the true city: furniture, pastries, paintings, and all the other luxuries—including meat—that I mentioned a few moments ago. Is this not correct?

PHILOZOON: It is.

PLATO: Consequently, the luxurious city has to have many more craftspeople, including furniture makers, chefs, painters, swineherds, and the like?

PHILOZOON: Apparently.

PLATO: The luxurious city, then, is more heavily populated?

PHILOZOON: Let's grant it.

PLATO: From this it follows that more people need to be fed?

PHILOZOON: Obviously.

PLATO: This being the case, more pasture and plow-land is required?

PHILOZOON: Now I follow you. And to get this pasture and plow-land, the luxurious city has to go to war with neighboring cities. Is this your position?

PLATO: Precisely.

PHILOZOON: So you hold that the luxurious city requires more land because it has more people to feed, not because it has more animals to feed, as I had thought?

PLATO: Right.

PHILOZOON: Very well. Let's suppose that the true city is, as you've said, healthy and peaceful. Do you for these reasons consider it the ideal city in which to live? Is this why you name it the "true city"?

PLATO: Indeed, yes.

PHILOZOON: And the ideal city is the most just city?

PLATO: Of course.

PHILOZOON: So you must think that the luxurious city is less just than the true city?

PLATO: That's exactly what I think.

PHILOZOON: Once again I'm confused. Didn't you tell me that the primary purpose of your dialogue is to explore justice?

PLATO: I did.

PHILOZOON: If your purpose is to explore justice, why do you bother to describe a city that's less than perfectly just?

PLATO: Because the true and perfectly just city "won't satisfy some people."¹² To be sure, people are rational beings, and reason informs us that we are best off living simply, in peace and health. But human beings are appetitive creatures as well, and all too often our appetites get the best of us, persuading us that we'll be miserable unless we have all manner of luxuries. Because of the power of human appetites, I'm worried that the simple lifestyle of the true city will be unattainable. It's for this reason that I describe the luxurious city, a city that I hope will be realizable and, if not perfectly just, at least reasonably so.

PHILOZOON: Let me see if I understand you. You agree that a meatless diet is the most rational, the most just, and therefore the ideal diet. But, at the same time, you argue that, because many people are too appetitive to adhere to this diet, we should permit meat-eating, as the luxurious city does. Is this a fair statement of your position?

PLATO: It is.

PHILOZOON: You believe that, whereas meat-abstainers obey their reason, meat-eaters obey their appetites?

PLATO: Yes.

PHILOZOON: What about you, Plato? Do you obey your reason or your appetites? Last night, I was so captivated by the conversation that I didn't pay much attention to what you were eating. However, I have a vague recollection that you were enjoying the same beef dish that Philokreas ate. Am I recalling correctly?

PLATO: By the dog, the god of the Egyptians,¹³ you are.¹⁴ I'm sorry to say that, philosopher though I am, my appetites to an extent still control me—evidently, more than your appetites control you. But, despite the difference in our dietary behavior, I suspect that our beliefs are much the same. Or am I mistaken, just as I was when I inferred that last night's symposium left you feeling listless?

PHILOZOON: My views are certainly closer to yours than to those of Philokreas. But, in all honesty, I can't say they're much the same. With a good deal of what you've said I disagree.

PLATO: What's this? Didn't you tell me that you eschew meat for moral reasons?

PHILOZOON: I did.

PLATO: So don't you agree that, insofar as it likewise eschews meat, the true city is morally better than the luxurious city?

PHILOZOON: I do. I also agree that the true city is morally better in several other respects—for example, inasmuch as it abolishes hunting and ivory collecting. Nonetheless, the true city is, in my opinion, far from ideal.

PLATO: In what ways do you think it falls short?

PHILOZOON: Unfortunately, I can't answer this question quickly or simply. The road ahead is thick with mud, and it twists and turns through a vast wilderness. If we proceed, we'll need to be patient.

PLATO: Philozoon, I remind you that we're on a search for the truth. If we hope to arrive at it, we must have a full discussion. So I ask—in fact, I insist—that you take all the time you need.

PHILOZOON: As you wish. My first concern is that the true city uses animals for the manufacture of clothing, the plowing of fields, and the hauling of heavy materials.

PLATO: But I've already explained to you why the true city does this. Animals are used for the manufacture of clothing because people need clothing; they're used for the plowing of fields because people need food; they're used for the hauling of heavy materials because people need shelter. What fault do you find with this reasoning?

PHILOZOON: The same fault that I find with the argument that we may use animals for meat because people need food.

PLATO: I don't understand. Can you tell me what this fault is?

PHILOZOON: Of course. But I'm surprised you need to ask, since you yourself have already provided the insight that answers your question.

PLATO: I have? Please remind me. What insight did I provide?

PHILOZOON: You pointed out that, even though people need food, it doesn't follow that they need meat, since a vegetable diet is sufficient to meet all nutritional requirements.

PLATO: So I did.

PHILOZOON: Now, if the case were otherwise, if our need for food implied a need for meat, it might follow that we may eat meat. But, since there's no such implication, it's hard to see how our need for food can justify meat-eating.

PLATO: Agreed. But does this shed light on the use of animals for the manufacture of clothing, the plowing of fields, and the hauling of heavy materials?

PHILOZOON: I believe it does. Even though people need clothing, it doesn't follow that they need fleeces and hides. Nor does it follow, from the mere facts that people need food and shelter, that they need animals to plow fields and haul heavy materials. Just as it's hard to see how our need for food can justify meat-eating, so it's hard to see how our needs for clothing, food, and shelter can justify these other uses of animals.

PLATO: What, though, would you have people wear? Linen shirts, when wool or fur would keep them warmer? Wooden shoes, when leather would be more comfortable? How would you have people plow their fields: with hoes and other crude implements? How would you have people haul heavy materials? Must they use their own muscle power?

PHILOZOON: My goodness! The road is becoming muddy already. If I don't pick my way carefully, the mud will sink my argument.

PLATO: By all means, proceed with caution.

PHILOZOON: I'll do my best. On the one hand, do human beings have an interest in wearing warm, comfortable clothing, and in plowing fields and hauling heavy materials as efficiently as possible?

PLATO: Clearly, they do.

PHILOZOON: On the other hand, do animals have an interest in *not* donating to us their fleeces and hides, in *not* pulling our plows, and in *not* hauling the materials out of which our homes are built?

PLATO: I suppose so.

PHILOZOON: Do you see a conflict between our interests and those of animals?

PLATO: How could I not?

PHILOZOON: Do you know what I think we should do when a conflict arises?

PLATO: No. What do you think we should do?

PHILOZOON: In my view, we ought to weigh the two sets of interests as objectively as possible. If the scale tips in favor of our interests, we may satisfy them. But, if the scale tips the other direction, we should not. I'm concerned that, in your dialogue, you neglect to weigh the interests of animals.

PLATO: A muddy road indeed! Let's suppose that you're right—that we ought to weigh the interests of animals objectively. Let's also suppose that, when we do this, the scale tips in favor of the interests of animals, so that we ought to stop wearing fleeces and hides, and we ought to stop plowing fields and hauling heavy materials with the help of animals. I'm by no means certain that the scale will in fact tip this direction, but let's suppose for the sake of argument that it will. Do you honestly expect people to do what they ought? Do you honestly expect them to abandon warmth, comfort, and efficiency, living instead in primitive conditions?

PHILOZOON: I confess that many people will be hard to convince.

PLATO: Then isn't the use of animals inevitable?

PHILOZOON: Perhaps not. With your permission, I'd like to backtrack a moment.

PLATO: Are you going to take me on a detour into that vast wilderness through which our road twists and turns?

PHILOZOON: I very well might, by Zeus. But I don't know how else we can have the full discussion you desire.

PLATO: In that case, I give you my permission.

PHILOZOON: Thank you. A moment ago, we saw a conflict between our interests and those of animals, did we not?

PLATO: We did.

PHILOZOON: It now occurs to me that we might be able to avoid the conflict.

PLATO: That would be nice, but how?

PHILOZOON: People are, as you say, rational beings. With our reason, we might be able to find ways to satisfy our interests in warmth, comfort, and efficiency without exploiting animals. Why, for instance, can't we invent a synthetic fiber that allows us to fashion a coat as warm as any fur coat, and why can't we construct great machines that plow fields and haul heavy materials as efficiently as—maybe even more efficiently than—the strongest animals?

PLATO: Fake furs and mechanical beasts of burden? You have a fertile imagination, my friend.

PHILOZOON: I believe that someday these things will be a reality.

PLATO: I'm not as confident about that as you are. However, let's suppose once again that you're right. Would these inventions be luxuries?

PHILOZOON: Would it matter if they were?

PLATO: Yes, if a simple lifestyle is preferable to a luxurious one. Do you think it is?

PHILOZOON: I'm glad you ask, because your question brings me to my second criticism of the true city. I don't prefer its simple lifestyle.

PLATO: You indulge in luxuries?

PHILOZOON: Occasionally, including several of the luxuries you list in your dialogue. For example, in my home, I have a dining table, and on the wall behind the chair in which I sometimes read hangs a painting that my father made.

PLATO: So it's only your diet that's simple?

PHILOZOON: I wouldn't even say that's simple. I eat a wide range of delicacies: pastries and other desserts, local and foreign cuisines, meals enriched with exotic herbs and spices. The only delicacies I consistently refuse are meat dishes.

PLATO: Apparently, I spoke too soon when I said that my appetites control me more than yours control you. Shouldn't we philosophers care more about intellectual pursuits than physical pleasures? Shouldn't we care more about our souls than our bodies?

PHILOZOON: I like to think we can care about both—just as we did last night, when we enjoyed fine food and fine philosophical discourse.

PLATO: I'm not sure that we cared about either last night. Aren't you concerned that the same thing that's happened to Philokreas will happen to you?

PHILOZOON: What's happened to Philokreas?

PLATO: Surely you've noticed how flabby he is and how easily he tires?

PHILOZOON: Now that you mention it, I have. I saw him fall asleep after his meal last night. His snoring sounded like a pack of hyenas tearing apart their prey.

PLATO: Exactly. According to his doctor, a student of Hippocrates, he falls asleep like this because he feasts too much.

PHILOZOON: Is that so?

PLATO: It is. And when he dozes off, can he benefit from philosophical discourse?

PHILOZOON: Hardly.

PLATO: So feasting causes the body to deteriorate and bodily deterioration causes the soul to languish?

PHILOZOON: Yes, I admit this can happen.

PLATO: Then shouldn't you be concerned for yourself? If you continue feasting on pastries and other such foods, won't you harm your body and soul, just as Philokreas has harmed his?

PHILOZOON: Plato, what do you think Philokreas' health would be today if, from childhood, he had adopted the entirely meatless diet of the true city? Would his health be much improved?

PLATO: Of that I have no doubt.

PHILOZOON: He wouldn't be flabby?

PLATO: Not at all.

PHILOZOON: He wouldn't tire easily?

PLATO: Never.

PHILOZOON: He'd be better able to participate in philosophical discussions?

PLATO: Clearly.

PHILOZOON: In short, not only would his body be healthy, but so would his soul?

PLATO: Well put.

PHILOZOON: Now imagine that Philokreas had not adopted a completely meatless diet from childhood, but had instead consumed meat occasionally and in modest quantities. What would his health be today?

PLATO: As I'm not a doctor, I hesitate to say.

PHILOZOON: Nor am I a doctor. However, I happen to know what doctors believe about eating meat in moderation.

PLATO: What is their belief?

PHILOZOON: The overwhelming majority say that it poses no health risks.

PLATO: Since they're the experts, let it be so.

PHILOZOON: Then what shall we conclude about Philokreas' health problems? Do they result from eating meat? Or do they result from eating too much meat?

PLATO: If we may trust the experts, we should reach the latter conclusion.

PHILOZOON: What about pastries and other such foods? Is the same true of them as is true of meat: that, if we eat them only occasionally and in sufficiently small amounts, they do no harm?

PLATO: Again, I hesitate to say. Do the experts have an opinion on this, too?

PHILOZOON: They do. They have the same opinion as they do about meat. What do you think? Shall we defer to their opinion?

PLATO: For the time being, yes—though at some point I'd like to discuss the matter with our Athenian doctors.

PHILOZOON: Fair enough. In the meantime, what shall we say about my health? Do I need to worry about eating pastries? Or need I worry only about eating too many of them?

PLATO: Once again, the latter conclusion seems more appropriate.

PHILOZOON: Here, then, is my third objection to the true city. It favors a meatless, pastry-less diet on the grounds that such a diet is healthiest. In fact, though, some other diets are at least equally healthy—namely, those that include meats, pastries, and other such foods in modest quantities.

PLATO: Keep in mind, Philozoon, that health is only one of the grounds for the simple diet of the true city. The other, as you'll recall, is peace. Do you accept my argument that the true city promotes peace?

PHILOZOON: Let's examine it. According to your argument, the true city never invades other cities, whereas the luxurious city inevitably wages war?

PLATO: That's correct.

PHILOZOON: Can you imagine a third city, one that's neither as simple as the true city nor as feverish as the luxurious city?

PLATO: I'm trying, but I could use help. Say more about what you have in mind.

PHILOZOON: I'm thinking of a city that, unlike the true city, permits luxuries but, unlike the luxurious city, indulges in luxuries only moderately. Its people eat meat and pastries, but in modest quantities. They adorn their homes with couches and paintings, but not large numbers of them. Can you now imagine the city?

PLATO: Much better, yes. Perhaps we should call it the intermediate city.

PHILOZOON: An apt name. Do you think this intermediate city would ever invade other cities?

PLATO: I have to admit that I'm not sure.

PHILOZOON: It seems that our road is turning muddy again.

PLATO: It is, indeed.

PHILOZOON: Shall we abandon the argument, or shall we persevere?

PLATO: I'd prefer that we persevere, but how can we make progress?

PHILOZOON: I have an idea. I'd like to compare the intermediate city with the luxurious city.

PLATO: Please proceed.

PHILOZOON: Because it provides so many luxuries, the luxurious city needs many craftspeople?

PLATO: That's right.

PHILOZOON: Consequently, it needs a large population?

PLATO: Yes.

PHILOZOON: To feed this population, it needs a great deal of land?

PLATO: True.

PHILOZOON: And, to acquire this land, it has to invade other cities?

PLATO: You remember my argument perfectly.

PHILOZOON: Good. Now what about the intermediate city? Does it need as many craftspeople as the luxurious city does?

PLATO: Since it produces fewer luxuries, I'd say it does not.

PHILOZOON: Does it need as large a population and as much land?

PLATO: Given that it has fewer craftspeople, I don't see why it should.

PHILOZOON: Then is it as likely to invade other cities?

PLATO: Seemingly not. But, Philozoon, what if we compare the intermediate city with the true city? Since the intermediate city produces more luxuries than the true city does, doesn't it need more craftspeople, a larger population, and more land? Isn't it more likely to wage war than the true city is?

PHILOZOON: So what's your conclusion? If we arrange our three cities in order from most peaceful to least peaceful, the true city would come first, the intermediate city second, and the luxurious city last?

PLATO: That's how it seems to me.

PHILOZOON: I'm not convinced, by Zeus. Your argument asserts, does it not, that, as the population of a city increases, so does its need for land?

PLATO: It does.

PHILOZOON: It needs more land because it has no other way of feeding its growing population?

PLATO: Yes.

PHILOZOON: It couldn't produce more food on the land it already has?

PLATO: I don't see how.

PHILOZOON: What if it were to breed faster growing crops? If crops were to grow more quickly, there could be more harvests per growing season, and, with more harvests, the city could feed more people without acquiring more land.

PLATO: How are we to breed faster growing crops?

PHILOZOON: Or what if the city were to develop dependable pesticides, so that more of its crops are eaten by people and fewer by insects and other pests? Or what if the city were to invent new, more effective fertilizers? Wouldn't better fertilizers result in more luxuriant crops and hence greater quantities of food?

PLATO: Intriguing ideas. However, I suspect that your imagination is running away with you, as it did earlier when you imagined fake furs and mechanical beasts of burden.

PHILOZOON: I can imagine other possibilities, too. For instance, instead of having food animals graze in large pastures, as is currently done, couldn't the city confine its animals indoors in narrow stalls and cramped cages?

PLATO: You must be joking. Surely, as a defender of animals, you would never endorse such a practice.

PHILOZOON: You're right, I wouldn't. Nevertheless, wouldn't this practice enable the city to raise more food animals without extending its borders?

PLATO: I don't know. The practice is so far beyond my experience that I'm having a hard time picturing it.

PHILOZOON: What if the city implements not just one but all four of these suggestions, breeding faster growing crops, developing dependable pesticides, inventing better fertilizers, and confining animals indoors? Wouldn't the city be able to feed a great multitude, even if the land it possesses is relatively small?

PLATO: Philozoon, you're moving much too fast. You still haven't made clear how the city could implement one of the suggestions, much less all of them.

PHILOZOON: But, if it could implement all of them, might not even a luxurious city be able to feed its people without adding to its territory, and wouldn't an intermediate city certainly be able to do so?

PLATO: Please, Philozoon, slow down.

PHILOZOON: And, if a luxurious or intermediate city has sufficient land to feed its people, what need would it have to invade other cities? Couldn't such a city be every bit as peaceful as the true city?

PLATO: Whoa! Your imagination is out of control, like wild horses.

PHILOZOON: Plato, don't you think people should abide by their agreements?

PLATO: As a rule, yes.

PHILOZOON: Didn't we agree a while back that we should have a full discussion?

PLATO: We did.

PHILOZOON: To have a full discussion, mustn't we explore all possibilities, no matter how fanciful they may seem?

PLATO: By all means, let's explore possibilities. Doing so might help us find the answers we're looking for. But I wonder: are we exploring possibilities, or are we merely wasting time on impossibilities?

PHILOZOON: I don't believe that any of the four suggestions I enumerated are impossible to implement. However, if it pleases you, I'll set them aside.

PLATO: Nothing would please me more.

PHILOZOON: Then, to please you, I'll assume that you're right, that cities having larger populations need more land.

PLATO: The assumption seems to me unassailable.

PHILOZOON: Even if it is, I'm not ready to concede that true cities are necessarily more peaceful than intermediate or luxurious cities.

PLATO: Why not?

PHILOZOON: I hesitate to say. I'm afraid that you'll accuse me of wasting further time on impossibilities.

PLATO: I confess that I have the same fear.

PHILOZOON: But, at the same time, I believe I have an important objection to your argument. Will you let me tell you what it is?

PLATO: Very well. I will listen to your objection.

PHILOZOON: In that case, I'd like you to imagine a city planning committee.

PLATO: More imaginings? Just what will this committee do?

PHILOZOON: Its first job will be to conduct a worldwide survey.

PLATO: The committee's job is ambitious, to say the least.

PHILOZOON: It is. The survey will consist of one question: "Do you prefer living in a luxurious city, an intermediate city, or a true city?"

PLATO: Given how appetitive human nature is, it's safe to say that most people will go for the first option.

PHILOZOON: I wouldn't be surprised. Presumably, though, a number of people will choose the second option, and some the third. At any rate, the city planning committee will have exact numbers, whatever they turn out to be.

PLATO: If indeed it gets these numbers, what will the committee do with them?

PHILOZOON: It will dismantle all currently existing cities and, based on the numbers it gets, build new ones—luxurious cities for the first group, intermediate cities for the second, and true cities for the third. If the optimal size of a luxurious city is, say, 100,000 people and if one hundred times 100,000 people prefer living in a luxurious city, the city planning committee will build a hundred luxurious cities. In the same manner, it will create an appropriate number of intermediate and true cities. When each city is built, it will be so designed that it has sufficient land to feed its entire population. Thus, luxurious cities will be given the most land, while true cities will be allotted the least.

PLATO: You've described a task that even the blessed gods would have a hard time carrying out.

PHILOZOON: You understand why I was hesitant.

PLATO: I certainly do.

PHILOZOON: But here's my point. According to your argument, the reason one city invades another is that it lacks enough land to feed its people. Yet, with careful planning, all cities—luxurious, intermediate, and true—will have enough land to feed their people. Hence, by your own argument, no city—not even a luxurious or intermediate city—need have any reason to invade another city. It seems that true cities aren't the only ones capable of living in peace.

PLATO: I appreciate the force of your objection. Perhaps the right sort of planning can reduce the likelihood of war, so that, contrary to what I thought when I wrote my dialogue, luxurious cities need not inevitably invade other cities. However, I remain skeptical that a city planning committee can guarantee peace. For instance, what if the population of the world increases, so much that, if most people are living in luxurious or intermediate cities, there will no longer be enough land to feed everyone? Under these circumstances, what could the city planning committee do to prevent war, other than force people to live in true cities?

PHILOZOON: You're right. Guaranteeing peace is like pushing a massive boulder up Mount Olympus. But let's not forget that human beings are capable of incredible feats. Possibly, in response to the example you give, the city planning committee could join forces with a family planning committee, which in times of excessive population growth would encourage or enforce abstinence, sterilization, abortion, or the use of contraception. Alternatively, in some distant future, when technology is advanced, the city planning committee might handle overpopulation by colonizing the moon or other planets.

PLATO: Colonize the moon or other planets? Are you serious? Your overactive imagination is trying my patience.

PHILOZOON: Then let's be done with this line of reasoning. I propose that we turn to a matter that, to my mind, is of greater importance.

PLATO: I wholeheartedly accept your proposal.

PHILOZOON: The matter concerns the two chief arguments that you advance in your dialogue on behalf of the true city: that a simple lifestyle

with a meatless diet is the best way to promote health, and that a simple lifestyle with a meatless diet is the best way to promote peace. We've been examining these arguments for some time now, but I've only just noticed that they have something in common, something I find troubling.

PLATO: What do they have in common?

PHILOZOON: Both appeal exclusively to humanity. The health that the first argument hopes to promote is human health; the peace that the second advocates is peace among human beings.

PLATO: Why do you find this troubling? Aren't health and peace among the most valued of human goods?

PHILOZOON: I wouldn't dream of suggesting otherwise. The problem is not that your arguments appeal to health and peace, but that they appeal to them exclusively, saying nothing about right or wrong done to animals. A little while ago, I maintained that, to determine how we should treat animals, we should consider not merely our own interests but those of animals as well, weighing the two sets of interests as objectively as possible. Shouldn't you have developed a third argument, one that shows whether, and to what extent, a meatless diet is in the interests of animals?

PLATO: As a matter of fact, I have an argument that concentrates on animals.

PHILOZOON: You have? Why didn't you mention this earlier?

PLATO: Because, up until now, our conversation has focused on the section of my dialogue that deals with the true city. In that section, I raise only the first two arguments, not the third.

PHILOZOON: Why don't you raise your third argument there? Is the argument incompatible with the ideals of the true city?

PLATO: Not at all.

PHILOZOON: Then would you mind if we take it up? I'm eager to hear it.

PLATO: That would be fine. I should make clear at the outset that the argument is not my own creation. Many years ago, after Socrates died but before I founded the Academy, I traveled to Sicily. During my stay there, I ran into a group of Pythagoreans, who were kind enough to share with me their teachings and way of life. Among other things, they disclosed that they abstain from meat. When I asked them why, they presented me with the argument in question.

PHILOZOON: I was aware that the Pythagoreans have a keen interest in mathematics, but, by Zeus, this is the first I've heard about their diet. Could you describe the Pythagorean diet in greater detail? Exactly which foods do they eat, and which do they abjure?

PLATO: The Pythagorean diet was developed by Pythagoras himself. Unfortunately, there's much about Pythagoras that nobody knows, including some of the details of his diet. However, he seems to have held to a strict regimen. According to my informants, he ate honey, bread, and raw or boiled vegetables. On rare occasions, he may have eaten seafood, but otherwise he refused all animal flesh.¹⁵ He also never ate beans.

PHILOZOON: Why not beans?

PLATO: I'm not sure. I've been told that some people become ill after eating fava beans.¹⁶ Perhaps Pythagoras was such a person.

PHILOZOON: What about Pythagoreans today? Is their diet equally restrictive? How faithfully do they follow the founder of their sect?

PLATO: Many of them are more relaxed in their eating habits than Pythagoras was.¹⁷ My Sicilian acquaintances, however, were purists, eating neither meat nor beans.

PHILOZOON: For what reason did they avoid meat?

PLATO: Their argument began with the relationship between the soul and the body. Our soul, they claimed, is trapped inside our body, much as the ruler of a besieged city is trapped behind its walls.

PHILOZOON: Or much as a pet bird is trapped inside its cage?

PLATO: Precisely. Just as the cage prevents the bird from soaring into the heavens, so the body prevents the soul from soaring into the realm of the divine.

PHILOZOON: The realm of the divine?

PLATO: Yes. According to my informants, the soul, unlike the body, is immortal. Consequently, its proper place is in the realm of the divine, with other immortal things. But, because of its imprisonment in the body, the soul is forced to dwell among mortal things.

PHILOZOON: It seems that your informants prized the soul but cared little for the body.

PLATO: Naturally, since immortal things are superior to mortal things.

PHILOZOON: Did they value mathematics for the same reason that they valued the soul—because mathematical truths, like the soul, are eternal?

PLATO: They did. The study of mathematics, they believed, allows the soul to come as close to the divine as it can during the time that it's entombed in the body.

PHILOZOON: What happens to the soul when the body dies? Is it freed from its tomb? Can it finally soar into the realm of the divine?

PLATO: I asked my Pythagorean friends the same question. They answered that it can't, because, when the body dies, the soul is reborn in another body. In our next life, we might once again be human. If we are, we could be male or female, rich or poor, strong or weak, healthy or sickly. But we need not be human. We could instead be an animal.

PHILOZOON: The Pythagorean notion of the afterlife seems most unusual.

PLATO: Among Greeks, it is.

PHILOZOON: Did your friends specify how many more times we can expect to be reborn?

PLATO: Not with any great precision. They said only that the cycle of rebirths may continue for a long time to come.

PHILOZOON: What about the past? Did they indicate how many times we've been reborn in the past?

PLATO: Again, they gave no specific number, though they believed the number must be immense. In their view, our rebirths extend to a past so remote as to be incalculable. It was because of this view that my friends adopted a meatless diet.

PHILOZOON: How so?

PLATO: Every soul has been, and will continue to be, reborn so many times that, without a doubt, it at one point or another occupies a human body. Indeed, over the eons, it occupies thousands, even millions, of human bodies. Therefore, when we eat an animal, we eat a former and future human being. According to my friends, this is a form of cannibalism.

PHILOZOON: We certainly don't want to be cannibals.

PLATO: It gets worse. Given the incredibly large number of times they're reborn, any two souls must, during one or more of their lives, share a deep and special bond. Take, for instance, Philokreas and the cow that became his dinner at last night's symposium. Maybe it was a millennium ago, or a hundred or a thousand millennia, but at some time or other they must have been close friends, or lovers, or siblings, or parent and child—and at some time in the future they will be again.

PHILOZOON: Don't forget, my friend, that you ate from the same cow that Philokreas did. How do you know that its soul was not the same as that of Socrates?

PLATO: I don't know, by Zeus. The thought is disturbing, isn't it?

PHILOZOON: Deeply disturbing.

PLATO: My Pythagorean acquaintances were of a similar mind. Since eating friends or relatives, even former or future ones, is wicked, they concluded that we should refuse to eat animals. This is the argument I heard years ago in Sicily.¹⁸ It seemed reasonable to me then, and it still does—even though, appetitive creature that I am, I occasionally eat meat. Does it seem reasonable to you as well, Philozoon?

PHILOZOON: Let's investigate. Tell me, Plato, does every argument rest on one or more premises?

PLATO: It does.

PHILOZOON: Are the premises of some arguments reasonable, and are the premises of other arguments unreasonable?

PLATO: Clearly.

PHILOZOON: Can an argument ever be more reasonable than its premises?

PLATO: No, never.

PHILOZOON: What about the argument that you and your Pythagorean friends have advanced? Are its premises reasonable or unreasonable?

PLATO: To answer this question, we might find it useful first to enumerate the premises.

PHILOZOON: Good idea. What enumeration shall we give?

PLATO: That human beings have a soul; that animals have a soul; that the soul, unlike the body, is immortal; that, upon the death of the body, the soul is reborn in another body; that the body in which the soul is reborn can be that of either a human being or an animal; that the cycle of rebirths extends indefinitely into the past and future. These are among the most crucial premises of the argument.

PHILOZOON: Are any of these premises controversial?

PLATO: I'd say they all are. Some of the greatest minds in all of Greece hold an opposing view.

PHILOZOON: Then mustn't the argument itself be controversial?

PLATO: It must, indeed. That's why, over the years, I've reflected on the premises with great care, amassing evidence in their favor. I've recorded some of my evidence in several of the dialogues that I've written.¹⁹

PHILOZOON: I'm curious what this evidence is. But I'm also still preoccupied by the problem I believe your first two arguments face.

PLATO: That they focus exclusively on humanity, ignoring right or wrong done to animals?

PHILOZOON: Exactly. I'm wondering if the third argument faces the same difficulty. What do you think?

PLATO: I don't think it does. According to the first two arguments, meat-eating should be avoided because it harms the human meat-eaters, damaging their health and forcing them into war. In contrast, the third argument states that meat-eating should be avoided because it wrongs the souls of the animals eaten. Since it appeals to the animals that people eat rather than the people who eat animals, the third argument cannot be justly accused of focusing exclusively on humanity.

PHILOZOON: You're no doubt right that, in a sense, the argument appeals to the animals that people eat rather than the people who eat animals. But the argument also asserts that the animals that people eat are wronged because, in another life, they are human, or are close friends or relatives of ours. Isn't this correct?

PLATO: It is.

PHILOZOON: When they're close friends or relatives of ours, they're human friends or relatives?

PLATO: I believe that's what my Pythagorean informants had in mind.

PHILOZOON: Thus, from the Pythagorean standpoint, the animals that people eat are wronged not because of their present animality but because of their past and future humanity?

PLATO: So it seems.

PHILOZOON: Ultimately, then, the argument appeals to wrong done to human beings, not wrong done to animals?

PLATO: Apparently.

PHILOZOON: Isn't this the very difficulty that your first two arguments face?

PLATO: It seems, Philozoon, that, no matter what argument I put forward, you find an objection. This perplexes me, because I know you consume no meat. If none of my three arguments satisfies you, then what argument will?

PHILOZOON: It is ironic, isn't it, that you, who occasionally eat meat, keep defending a meatless diet, whereas I, who eat no meat, keep objecting to your arguments?

PLATO: It certainly is. What's your explanation?

PHILOZOON: To avoid misunderstanding, I should emphasize that I don't necessarily reject arguments that appeal to humanity. If you can demonstrate that a meatless diet is the best way to promote health or peace or any other human good, or that animals have a soul that, in a previous or future life, inhabit a human body, no one would be more delighted than I. What worries me is not that you proffer such arguments, but that you rest your entire case on them. It seems to me that these arguments are peripheral, that at the heart of the matter lies a different argument, one that appeals to right or wrong done to animals.

PLATO: Exactly what form do you envision this argument taking?

PHILOZOON: As I see it, the argument needs to establish two propositions: first, that the interests of an animal—whether or not it lives as a human being in another life—have the same moral value as the comparable interests of a human being; second, that the first proposition implies that we should abstain from meat.²⁰

PLATO: How can these two propositions be established?

PHILOZOON: I'm afraid that here our road grows muddy again. Luckily, I have with me the most celebrated philosopher in Greece and beyond. I'm sure that, with you leading the way, we can successfully navigate the mire of arguments and counterarguments that we're bound to encounter.

PLATO: Your confidence in me is flattering. But I see from the position of the sun in the sky that noon is upon us. I promised to meet my students at the Academy—we're going to discuss my story about the prisoners in the cave. You remember the story, I told it at last night's symposium.

PHILOZOON: I remember it vividly. But can't you stay a little longer? I crave to know whether we have a moral obligation to abstain from meat, and to this end I could use your expert guidance.

PLATO: I wish I could stay, but even the most celebrated philosopher in Greece and beyond can't be in two places at the same time.

PHILOZOON: Then I fear that, like the prisoners in your story, I'm condemned to remain ignorant. Just as their bonds prevent them from knowing the world outside the cave, so your departure keeps me from the knowledge I seek. Do the interests of an animal have the same moral value as the comparable interests of a human being? If so, do we have a moral obligation to give up meat? How far should we restrict our diet? May we indulge in cheese, as the inhabitants of the true city did? What about seafood, which Pythagoras may have eaten? How about honey, the product of bees, which Pythagoras also seems to have enjoyed? Even if we have a moral obligation to give up meat or other animal products, will some people—perhaps including you and Philokreas—inevitably eat such foods anyway, because they can't control their appetites? Is the power of our appetites a good reason to permit meat-eating? These are a few of the questions we haven't yet addressed. Until we do, until we have the full discussion that you yourself requested, how can I be sure that my meatless diet is the wisest choice?

PLATO: I appreciate, and share, your hunger for knowledge, but I really must run. However, I see Philokreas heading in this direction. Evidently, he has finally awakened from last night's festivities. I suggest that you continue our conversation with him. Goodbye, Philozoon.

PHILOZOON: Goodbye, Plato. . . . Greetings, Philokreas! If you have a moment, I'd like to ask you a few questions.

NOTES

¹ *Republic* 369-373.

² 372e.

³ 369d.

⁴ Toolmakers are mentioned at 370d, merchants at 371a, and retailers at 371d.

⁵ 373a.

⁶ 373c.

⁷ 372c.

⁸ 370e.

⁹ 373b.

¹⁰ 372e.

¹¹ 373d-e.

¹² 373a.

¹³ Plato uses this oath in *Gorgias* 482b.

¹⁴ This is a conjecture. Cf. Daniel A. Dombrowski, "Was Plato a Vegetarian?" *Apeiron*, 18 (1984): 1-9.

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 8.19.

¹⁶ See R. Brumbaugh and J. Schwartz, "Pythagoras and Beans: A Medical Explanation," *Classical World*, 73 (1980): 421-22.

¹⁷ See Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., *Philosophy Before Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), p. 88.

¹⁸ The Pythagorean argument is stated in many places, e.g., John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 58-62.

¹⁹ Plato is especially interested in the immortality of the soul, offering proofs in *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and other dialogues.

²⁰ This is the approach that Peter Singer takes in *Animal Liberation* (New York: Ecco, 2002).