

A BENEFACTOR OF HIS RACE: THOREAU'S "HIGHER LAWS" AND THE HEROICS OF VEGETARIANISM

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Was Thoreau a vegetarian or not? There are several answers to this question.

If dietary practice is to be the sole criterion for judging, then Thoreau cannot be considered a vegetarian, since, by his own account, he ate fish and meat (though the latter rarely).

Yet, despite this fact, Thoreau espoused a vegetarian ethic. So, his practice does not suffice as a criterion for judging the extent of his vegetarianism. Consequently, he has been criticized numerous times, e.g. by Wagenknecht, 1981, Garber, 1977, Jones, 1954, for being inconsistent. How consistent was he in adhering to the vegetarian ideal? The question is not easy to answer. We must ask: consistent from whose point of view? The notion of consistency cannot always and easily be objectively determined, because the critic's own biases distort that which is being viewed, in this case Thoreau's vegetarianism. Thoreau himself at no time expressed any feeling of inconsistency regarding his dietary principles. Only one biographer appears in any measure to have appreciated this point; of Thoreau's apparent contradictions regarding diet, Joseph Wood Krutch (1974) writes:

At Walden existence was too inexpressibly sweet to be troubled even by the contradictions in it, and even the contradictions were justified by the fact that they were contradictions within himself, not contradictions forced upon him from without. The higher laws are glimpsed, but the law really



grasped and lived by is the law which says: "Follow your own genius"--be what you are, whether you are by your own nature hunter, or wood chopper, or scholar. When you have become perfect you will be perfect; but only if you have learned to be, all along, what at each moment you were. (pp 84-5)

Echoing Thoreau, the eminent psychologist, Carl G. Jung once wrote:

I had to obey an inner law which was imposed on me and left me no freedom of choice. Of course I did not always obey it. How can anyone live without inconsistency? (1965, p. 356)

What we need to do in Thoreau scholarship--particularly regarding his dietary views--is put aside our judgments of inconsistency (which frequently represent a defense against areas of conflict in us) and attempt to understand Thoreau from within his own frame of reference.[1] The question with which we began has changed significantly. In the following pages we will be concerned with the central question which occupied Thoreau's attention: what did vegetarianism mean to him?

As Thoreau begins the chapter on "Higher Laws,"[2] which contains his most complete statement about vegetarianism, we see him carrying a fishing pole and a string of fish.



PHILOSOPHY

But there is more: not only do we see him carrying fish; we behold him preparing to chase a woodchuck through the woods, which he would devour raw, if caught.

Thoreau appears to have no qualms about eating fish or meat. In fact, the author of Walden praises the hunters and fishermen of the past as "the best people," because they have spent the better part of their lives in nature and so have become more a part of Nature itself. Thoreau may even be regarded as pro-hunting, since he goes so far as to recommend that young boys should be trained in hunting at an early age, so as to familiarize them with Nature (161).

If we take him literally, Thoreau seems to be an ardent advocate of hunting and fishing. Yet, he confounds everything by insisting that the hunter may be more humane than the Humane society (161). With this oxymoron, it occurs to us that words like "humane" --even "hunter" and "fisherman"--mean something special to Thoreau.

In fact, the author of "Higher Laws" typically invests familiar words with new meaning. "Hunter," for example, signifies not simply a hunter of animals but, in a metaphorical sense, anyone who is a seeker. Similarly, Thoreau uses the word "fisher" to mean someone who is angling for something hidden, concealed below the surface. Both hunter and fisher, in short, symbolize seekers of self-knowledge.

Thoreau borrows these images from the Bible[3] and transforms them for his own use. Regarding their use, Charles Anderson observes:

As with all Thoreau's allusions to the Bible, these are transmuted to new meanings. Hunter and fisher for him become archetypes of those who praise God and serve men. . . . He does not intend any evangelical meaning of "hunters and fishers of men" as those dedicated to saving souls for Christ. They are poetic names for the author of a new scripture, whose mission was to hunt and fish for the human condition, for the true nature of man buried under a material civilization. (1968, p. 149)

Behind Thoreau's notions about hunting and fishing--both in their literal as well as

symbolic senses--lies his faith. The young person, Thoreau says, may start out as a hunter but will eventually discover, provided he has the "seeds of a better life" in him, that the animals he would slaughter are fundamentally of the same nature as him. Thoreau declares:

No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. (162)

This, at least, is Thoreau's own faith. He is well aware that the majority of people still relate to Nature in an unenlightened way, even if they don't actually hunt and slaughter the animals they eat. Thoreau believes that animal slaughter impedes one's moral and religious development, because such killing does violence to one's relationship with the world.[4]

In the case of fishing, Thoreau objects to it less because of any sentimental humane-ness than because the fish "seemed not to have fed me essentially" (163). By "essentially," Thoreau means spiritually.[5] When speaking of meat-eating, which includes fish, Thoreau refers to his imagination several times. Animal food, he writes, is objectionable because it offends his imagination. One could perhaps ask why meat-eating should so offend the imagination, but Thoreau firmly states that such inquiries are vain (164). He says that he is satisfied that the imagination will not be reconciled to meat-eating. Thoreau, in fact, is convinced that the predilection for fish and animal food is not instinctive but, rather, an acquired taste. Indeed, he declares in no uncertain terms his conviction that if anything is an instinct, it is the repugnance to animal food (165).

In realizing the miserable existence of the meat-eater, Thoreau makes a pronouncement unparalleled in Walden. Not the abolitionist, not the individualist, not even the poet receives the status accorded the true vegetarian:

He [the vegetarian] will be regarded as a benefactor of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent and wholesome diet. (164)

Thoreau adds:

Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a 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 civilized. (164).

With this declaration, Thoreau creates the possibility of a new heroics, an heroics of vegetarianism.

His vegetarianism is a new heroics, at least in Western culture, because it symbolizes the willingness--even more critically, the courage--to let Nature alone. Increasingly over the centuries and with unbridled momentum during Thoreau's time, people had seized Nature under the pretense of manifest destiny. The illusion of conquest was, however, a cover for cowardice: in an economy of scarcity where Nature represents peril, there is constant fear; to combat that fear, the roots of which are within, people learned to dominate others in a desperate effort to gain control. As part of Nature, non-expropriated and held as the property of all people, animals were available and vulnerable to control.

For Thoreau, who perceives the indissoluble connection between people and Nature, the need to dominate is absent, because the fear of Nature and dread of succumbing is absent. Hence, Thoreau has no need to control Nature, to hold dominion over the earth, as declared, for example, in Genesis, where humans are granted dominion over animals. His courage, therefore, represents a movement from an ethic of conquest and control to an ethic of harmony. Out of a reverence for life, Thoreau evolves the heroics of vegetarianism.

That Thoreau's ethic of harmony is intimately connected with his notions about the heroics of non-violence toward animals is reflected in a journal entry: "It would be worth the while to ask ourselves weekly, is our life innocent enough?" He continues:

Do we live inhumanely, toward man or beast, in thought or act? To be serene and successful we must be at one with the universe. The least conscious and needless injury in-

flicted on any creature is to its extent a suicide. What peace--or life--can a murderer have? (May 28, 1854)

If, after all this, Thoreau appears to contradict himself by shockingly declaring his willingness to eat a fried rat, the contradiction results from a literal and superficial reading. Not only is a rat--fried or not--an unappetizing diet, but it is also one of the lowliest creatures, one which feeds on filth and transmits disease. To the extent that a fried rat is inedible, it serves the same purpose as board nails, which Thoreau says he could also live on: he means his vegetarian convictions to be taken seriously and not dismissed as the caprice of a faddist (Anderson, 1968, p. 156).

But Thoreau has another purpose in mentioning the rat: by taking an extreme example of meat-eating, Thoreau pushes the reader into direct contact with his/her own repulsion to animal food. For this strategy to work requires both sensitivity and receptivity on the reader's part to what has been discussed by Thoreau hitherto. An unsympathetic reader will see in Thoreau's fried rat no more than an instance of his absurdity. But the rat symbolizes the sordidness which predominates when human appetite degenerates (as is commonly said) to the level of a rat. According to Thoreau, the rat will eat virtually anything. It is as if Thoreau were asking: will human beings do the same?

Behind Thoreau's implied question is a profound concern for the spirit. According to Charles Anderson, Thoreau's "Higher Laws" outlines a uni-directional development that proceeds from earth to heaven ("from wildness to virtue"):

He (man) must accept and understand his savage self before he can transcend it and aspire toward the divine. If he tries a shortcut by denying the animal in him and asserting his higher nature, he lands in the limbo of civilization--where men ignore the natural world and forget the soul, engrossed in the pursuit of abstractions or sunk in the sty of materialism. So Thoreau went to the woods to work his way up from the jungle of nature to the higher laws

of the spirit. (1968, p. 151)

Thoreau believes that one could not deny the animal within him/her and still hope to develop spiritually. Nowhere, however, does Thoreau regard Nature as "a jungle" that must be escaped.

Westerners have a long tradition, traceable to the Old Testament, in which Nature is conceived as a seething jungle that must be avoided at all costs. Thoreau appears also to contribute to this view when he insists that Nature "is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome" (168).

But as with other words, Thoreau endows "Nature" with special meaning when he declares that Nature must be overcome. Thoreau means, in this context, "the animal within us." He does not mean, nor does he imply, that the animal within us must be extirpated or stamped out. He means that "it" should be turned into an "I." In other words, we need to become conscious of primitive desires and impulses within us. It is Thoreau's conviction that higher consciousness, that is to say, self-knowledge, leads to increased spirituality and discipline.

Herein lies Thoreau's definite disagreement with Christianity, which preaches a turning away from the body, i.e., the animal, sensual impulses within. In Christianity a duality exists between spirit and body, divine and animal. In contrast, Thoreau advocates a recognition of the union between these polarities. This leads to a radically different view of redemption than the Christian notion of grace through suffering. For Thoreau, the spiritual life is attained by the flow of the wild and the good into one another, by allowing the individual's mind to "descend into his body and redeem it" (169). In short, Thoreau concentrates his energy in spiritualizing or poeticizing the wild. He has no desire to abolish the primitive but strives instead to make it poetic.

Thoreau's quest to poeticize Nature ought to be borne in mind when reading "Higher Laws." It is a chapter that represents a heightened state of poetic consciousness. By grasping the heroic life, Thoreau elevates his writing out of the ordinary and, in so doing, he alters his relationship to time. Vegetarianism represents for Thoreau an heroics of a future time, a future unlogged by

convention and habit, where humanity has truly become part of Nature.

In Walden, Thoreau knows he is not personally destined to reach this future, yet he is sufficiently receptive to apprehend it vividly. To this extent, Thoreau is like Moses who stands on the mountaintop overlooking the Holy Land but does not live to enter it.

Vegetarianism and higher laws are one and the same precisely because Thoreau creates a new or second reality that is more perfect than the one he sees around him. Thoreau has the courage to create this new reality, not only in literary terms but also significantly in his own life. He bears witness to another, more sublime world. It does not matter to him that he has failed to go "all the way" in practice. As he says, "I went far enough to please my imagination;" that is, his spirit, with regard to the meatless ideal.

By drawing upon Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death, we may understand more clearly the enormously creative dynamic at work in Thoreau's struggle to unify the wild and the good. According to Becker, human beings need a second reality or mythology in which they can find personal meaning. This mythology is a kind of illusion that is characterized by creative power. Indeed, contrary to the perjorative connotation of being the product of pathology, illusion means creative play at its highest level.

In "Higher Laws" and, for that matter, throughout all of Walden, Thoreau concentrates his entire being in the creation of an illusion of mythological proportions that does not lie about reality in response to the crumbling of collective mythologies that people have lived by. There is a striking parallel between Thoreau and Becker in the latter's prescription for psychological well-being in the twentieth century:

What is the ideal for mental health, then? A lived, compelling illusion that does not lie about life, death, and reality; one honest enough to follow its own commandments: I mean, not to kill, not to take the lives of others to justify itself. (1973, p. 204)

"Higher Laws" is an important document

in the literature of vegetarianism because it provides the basis for an ethics of animal liberation that is transcendental rather than utilitarian. Aside from the religious movements that have included vegetarianism among their tenets (e.g., the Seventh Day Adventists), the only American vegetarian movement which has achieved any recognition or measure of success has been the Animal Liberation Movement. Perhaps its leading exponent is Peter Singer, whose book, Animal Liberation, is rooted in the philosophy of utilitarianism espoused by the nineteenth century reformer Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's utilitarianism is succinctly summed up in the phrase "the greatest good for the greatest number." It is, in the main, a philosophy of the collective, the masses. In its application to animal liberation, utilitarianism has engendered a point of view that acknowledges the rights of animals by virtue of the fact that they suffer. Many animal liberationists thus base their philosophy of vegetarianism on the philanthropic desire to reduce the pain which human beings cause animals. The Animal Liberation Movement as represented by Singer is a moral reform movement, but one that makes no reference to an inner law of conscience. Moreover, utilitarians like Singer still hierarchically order sentient life in terms of relative worth, with human beings occupying the top position, although with less arrogance than before.

In contrast to the utilitarian movement in vegetarianism, Thoreau's "Higher Laws" represents a transcendental philosophy. It is above all characterized by absolute reverence for life. Thoreau states very clearly his objection to the philanthropic distinctions that other people, such as those belonging to the Humane Society, make. He understands quite well that philanthropic means "love of man"—a reformism subtly preoccupied with human self-elevation at the expense of those under them—in this particular case, the animals. For this reason, Thoreau views as suspect any philanthropic movement which takes pity on animals, because such pity is not only arrogant and self-serving, but succeeds in perpetuating an even more insidious separation between humanity and nature.

Thoreau's "Higher Laws" contains all the elements of scripture. It is mythological while grounded in reality. It points the way to faith through practice. "Higher Laws"

deserves a place among the sacred writings of vegetarianism. While the author of Walden may not have been a vegetarian to the letter, he was a prophet of the meatless ideal in spirit. Thoreau believed that in living the heroic life of a vegetarian—where courage signifies the strength to refrain from slaughter of any kind—one becomes, truly, a benefactor of the race.

Notes

1. In the only article explicitly addressing Thoreau's vegetarian principles, Joseph Jones (1954) thinly conceals his contempt for the meatless ideal propounded in "Higher Laws." Charles Anderson (1968) notes that the title of Jones' article itself, "Transcendental Grocery Bills," betrays his bias, not to mention the way in which Jones portrays Thoreau as swayed by the "faddist" vegetarians of his time, in effect, dismissing the deep vegetarian convictions of such people as Bronson and William Alcott and Sylvester Graham, among others.

A more recent biographer, Edward Wagenknecht (1981), states that Thoreau was never consistently a vegetarian, though he acknowledges that the author of Walden "did feel very strongly that flesh-eating was filthy and barbarous" (p. 21).

Vegetarian writers have exhibited little more understanding of Thoreau's complex views on the subject. Janet Barkas (1975), the author of a book on the history of vegetarianism, neatly sums up Thoreau's views as contradictory and says no more about the matter. In his book, Vegetarianism: A Way of Life, Dudley Giehl quotes Thoreau approvingly in several places but categorizes his thoughts on flesh-eating as ambivalent and "quite indecisive" (p. 149). See also Sussman (1978) and Garber (1977) for vegetarian and non-vegetarian misinterpretations due to the issue of consistency.

2. The page numbers throughout the text refer to Walter Harding's variorum edition of Walden (1968).

3. Thoreau was not the only one who referred to the Bible in defense of vegetarianism. William Alcott, cousin of Bronson and contemporary of Thoreau, offered a vegetarian interpretation of the Bible in his Vegetable Diet (1838). See also Ellen G. White (1909),

Anna Kingsford (1904), and Szekely (1971).

4. Others, like the French philosopher Rousseau, agreed, declaring:

How can one explain away the fact that great meat-eaters are usually fiercer and more cruel than other men; this has been recognized at all times and in all places. . . . All savages are cruel, and it is not their customs that tend in this direction, their cruelty is the result of their food.

At Fruitlands, a nineteenth century vegetarian commune, Louisa May Alcott and others were given "vegetarian wafers" or primers that made the same point:

Vegetable diet and
sweet repose
Animal food and
nightmare.

Without flesh diet
there would be no
blood-shedding war.

(Quoted In Bedell, 1980, p. 212)

5. A note on the title of the chapter in Walden underscores this point. According to Philip Van Doren Stern (1970), Thoreau originally titled the chapter "Animal Diet" but changed it to "Higher Laws," which suggests not only the direction of his thoughts, but the connection between the vegetarian diet and spiritual development.



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