

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

The King of the Meat-Eaters

ABSTRACT

This article is a word for word reproduction of an unexpected resignation speech. It was given as—or rather, in place of—the presidential address of a recent annual meeting of ISEA (the International Society for the Eating of Animals). Because this is a secret society, the speaker's and the transcriber's names have been omitted. Those of us who were there for this speech will remember the anger and outrage that it provoked. Many of us still cannot believe the ridiculous spin-off resignations that this underwhelming speech somehow managed to provoke. This speech is reprinted here (where it cannot be returned to sender) so that certain recent members can rethink the irrationality and indefensibility of their recent resignations. At the time, and in the heat of the moment, this speech may have seemed to contain an argument. It does not. Consequently, it should be recognized as the feckless claptrap that it is.

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ANNUAL PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS (ISEA, 2011)

I wasn't just a meat-eater; I was the *king* of the meat-eaters. No one defended meat-eating better, or more passionately, than I did. This is not to say that I defended all meat-eaters. On the contrary, I actually despised most of them. I despised them because most meat-eaters didn't really care whether it was okay to eat meat. They ate it *anyway*. This appalled me. I had no doubt that eating meat was morally acceptable, but only so long as certain requirements were met. Most meat-eaters did not meet them. As a result, as far as I was concerned I was surrounded by a lot of terribly confused, non-practicing vegetarians. That, or maybe just a lot of barbarians.

The requirements were fairly simple. First, you needed to know where meat came from. Most meat-eaters did not, not really. I believed that, until you sat at a farm or a slaughterhouse and observed for yourself what happened there, you did not understand what meat even was. Let me try to explain. Despite all the pictures and documentaries we've all seen, meat doesn't actually grow on meat trees. It comes from bodies, bodies that suffer enormous fear, pain, and misery before we finally kill them and cut them into meal-sized pieces. If you doubt that animals suffer in our system, or suffer very much, I knew you only too well. At least, I knew bastards, fools, and buffoons just like you. The bastards were the ones who spoke without ever checking with their own eyes what animals actually go through at human hands. It was enough, somehow, to just guess, to imagine what they *must* go through. The fools were the ones who knew that animals do not experience suffering, specifically because it is impossible to know whether animals experience suffering. And the buffoons were the ones who couldn't imagine what animals had to do with meat trees. During my reign, I encountered many bastards, fools, and buffoons. They always made

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me wonder why the universe was such that I could never have my minute back.

Second, you needed to enjoy meat. No, you needed to *love* meat. Otherwise, what could possibly justify bringing about all that suffering? Stare into the eyes of a person chewing on meat without especially enjoying it and you stare into a moral abyss. And it doesn't matter what the abyss thinks or realizes about itself.

Last, you had to make sure you were being honest. The temptation to lie to yourself, to see the moral truths that you *want* to see, is the villain of our moral age. It preyed on our predecessors, and it preys on us still. Many of us marvel at the ridiculousness of slave-owners who believed that all slaves ought to be set free, but who only arranged for their own slaves to be set free in their wills. Apparently slavery was evil, but not *so* evil that emancipation couldn't be put off until it was more personally convenient. We marvel, but just look at how personally convenient our moral convictions are still. Should taxes be equal, or bracketed according to income? Should campaign spending be monitored during elections? Should 65 year olds be forced to retire? Should smoking be allowed in restaurants? Should child custody go to mothers by default? Is affirmative action a good thing? Oh sure, it might start to *look* like we are biased toward moral convictions that serve our personal self-interest, but those are just coincidences. We aren't biased at all. We uphold our moral convictions because they are *justified*. So we say. But correlations have a way of speaking for themselves, and they speak regardless of whether you agree to listen. My last requirement was that you unplugged your ears. Your meat-eating was not justified because you dearly wanted it to be. If this was all the justification you had, then you were just another

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ridiculous slave-owner, and you had no business eating meat. No, your meat-eating was justified, *if* it was justified, because there were sound, objective arguments in its favor, given your awareness and tastes. It was not enough to suffer greedy delusions, to merely *imagine* that you had sound, objective arguments. You needed the genuine articles. And, in order to know that you really had them, you had to be brutally honest with yourself. You had to fight, and *defeat*, self-serving temptation.

These were my requirements, and most meat-eaters failed them. I, however, did not. I wore the crown on my head with great deservedness. Let me explain.

First, I loved meat. I *cherished* it. All other foods, and I mean all of them, were pathetic and unbearable substitutes. If I ate anything but meat, ever, it was always because something had gone terribly and unavoidably wrong with plan A. I didn't care how meat was cooked, or seasoned, because there was no way to make meat taste better than it already did, and no way to ruin it, either. Even the worst prepared meat was divine, and even the best prepared alternatives were torturous. Eating meat was not just pleasurable; it was a central reason for being alive. It *was* life.

Second, I knew exactly where meat came from. In fact, I knew better than almost anyone. I had seen how animals live, and die, on our wonderfully efficient, wonderfully productive meat trees, and I had seen it because I made it my business to see it. Life is not a movie. You are not allowed to just close your eyes during the scary parts. And you are especially not allowed to pretend that there *are* no scary parts, just because you've somehow never managed to notice any through your selectively closed eyelids. People broke this rule all the time,

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and it disgusted me. I cannot count how many people have said to me, even as they sat chewing their meat across the table from me, that they probably would never be able to keep eating meat if they knew where it came from. My frequent response was to say that German citizens probably would never have been able to keep marching Jews into gas chambers and then gathering up naked corpses afterward if they knew whatever kept happening to the Jews that went in. Sometimes that would end an entire meal, but the way I saw it, it was a repugnant meal to begin with.

I believed that if you planned to shoot a gun on a battlefield, or to have someone go and shoot it on your behalf, you had better know exactly what happens to people when you shoot guns at them. It was the same with the slaughterhouse. Before you ate your chicken, or even your egg, I believed you had better go and see why our chickens all have burn scars instead of beaks, or blistered, bald skin instead of feathers. You had better find out why one out of every two chicks ever hatched is tossed, alive, into a massive meat grinder. You had better, because these things were happening for *you*.

And I did know. You see, I knew meat-eating was justified, for me and for anyone like me, because I knew my great enjoyment of meat made the great suffering morally acceptable. I would suffer even more without meat than the animals suffered to provide it. For people like me, vegetarianism was not just morally unrequired, but morally evil. I was fighting that evil, and I was passionate. I would present my carefully thought out arguments to anyone who would listen, and I would hone and re-hone those arguments with great dedication. I was the king, and oh, what a noble king I was.

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The sorrow of it all is that my third requirement is a devil and a seducer. You believe that you meet it. You *know* that you do. And then suddenly, maybe, you notice something. What you notice is difficult to describe. It is like surveying all of your recent, personal snail mail—all your letters, your postcards, and your Christmas and birthday cards—and suddenly noticing, all at once, that all of the writing is in *your handwriting*, and that none of the envelopes have any postmarks. You can't believe it. You can't even start. But most of all, you can't stop asking yourself: how did I never notice these things *before*?

What I noticed was a young woman. I had been hiking all day in a wooded valley, and suddenly there she was, not far from the path, just sitting and watching me walk by. I thought at first that she must be lost, but no, she was too calm. I was about to keep on walking, and normally I would have, but this time, for some strange reason, it suddenly occurred to me that normally, in a situation like this, I would just keep on walking.

So this time I didn't. This time I stopped. I walked over, and I asked the woman if anything was wrong.

Soon we were sitting together, and talking. It turned out that the woman's great-grandfather had recently died, and that this was what she had been sitting and thinking about. It was sad, she supposed, but probably it was for the best.

This last comment surprised me, and I asked how it could have been for the best. She looked almost puzzled, as though she didn't understand the question. Wasn't it obvious? Didn't I already know?

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“Because he was Klan.”

This really shocked me. It seemed like such a personal family secret to share. Caught off guard, and staring, I didn't know what to say. Soon, I found myself trying to comfort her. I told her that not all Ku Klux Klan members were bad people. A lot of them were just ignorant, or intimidated, or coerced.

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head. “He was *real* Klan. Once, twice, Hell, sometimes even seven nights a week, he'd get all dressed up and excited, and then he'd go rolling out into the world, to bring it fear and misery. And no victim was ever too helpless for him, or too terrified, or too innocent. Can you believe he even killed *babies*? Honest to goodness: *babies*. But I know it's true. My Dad told me. He saw. And you know what? Great-Grandpa was never the least bit sorry about any of it. He was proud. He was always real proud.”

I was taken aback by all of this, and I didn't know what to say. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was better that this man was dead.

And there I sat, thinking about this young woman. She was such an innocent little apple. Had she really grown in the shade of such an evil old tree? I thought back to all the funerals I had ever attended, and all the grieving faces I had seen. Yes, I'd seen some mixed emotions. I'd seen anger, and I'd even seen full out hatred. But had I ever seen this? Had I ever seen such calm, cold disgust?

As we sat in silence together, my mind began to wander. I found myself wondering if I would ever have a child of my own. Would I ever have a daughter? What would she be like?

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Would she grow up to be anything like this pondering, thoughtful young woman?

“He wasn’t all bad, though,” the woman suddenly added. “He told funny stories, sometimes. And this one time, I remember him calling me over—I must have been about five years old—and surprising me with a candy. I can still taste it: it was so minty, and so unexpected. That was nice.”

She tried to smile, but it wouldn’t take. Its remnants melted away slowly, like black tears in red clay.

“And you know,” she said, “it’s not like he was the only one. There were plenty just like him. I even met a few of them, back when I was little. I bet it was real easy to get caught up in it all, without even really thinking about it.”

No, I thought. No, there is a line between moral decency and moral monstrosity, and you do not get *caught up* in crossing it. Even if you somehow get tricked or dragged across, you certainly do not *stay*. You hurry back, and you do your best to never get tricked or dragged across again. Only monsters stay. Only monsters say there is nothing to be sorry about.

She noticed my consternation, and for the first time seemed really intrigued by me. Her voice was very, very clear.

“Do you think he was a bad man? For doing those things?”

I don’t know, I said. I never knew him.

“What is there to know? He did terrible things.”

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Well, I said, maybe he just never realized. Don't people sometimes do terrible things by mistake, without realizing that they shouldn't?

This struck her as bizarre and incomprehensible, and she stared deeply into my eyes, trying to understand me. I'll never forget her puzzled, multi-layered expression. She tried to speak several times, but each time her voice seemed to fail her. Finally, she stood up, and she began to walk away. I watched her leave, and I assumed that I would never hear her voice again.

But then she stopped, turned, and gave me one last, searching stare. Finally, in a voice that told me that she *knew* I was lying to myself, even though I was only just on the threshold of being able to realize that I even *could* be, she asked me one last question.

“Great-Grandpa, how could you hurt and kill *innocent animals*, and not realize that you shouldn't?”

No, my great-granddaughter never actually used the word ‘Klan’. She used a word that hasn't been invented yet, and I heard the only thing that I could: a contemporary approximation. “Klan” is to me what I will be to her. And here's the thing: I already *know* this. In fact, I've *always* known. Somehow, I just never allowed myself to realize.

Looking around the room, I see that some of you are smiling. You think this was an *allegory*. You think I'm *joking*.

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You are wrong. This is *truth*. Or rather, this is what truth looks like when you still don't have the eyes to see it for yourself. I know, because I *didn't* see it for myself. A distant little apple saw it for me.

No, this is no joke. This is shame. I am ashamed.

I am also done. Find yourselves a new king.