VEGETARIANISM AND
THE EVIL OF PREDACTION

[Dr. Alexander F. Skultch] has contributed many fine pieces of thinking to our pages. In this article he sets the question of vegetarianism in a

wide perspective, and commends vegetarianism not for physiological or

other benefits but as “a standing protest against predation.” On certain

ancillary questions such as whether Nature has been guided by “a fore-

seeing benevolent mind” one might have a philosophical difference of

opinion with Dr. Skultch; but on the main thesis he argues with breadth

of vision and a vivid and earnest feeling.—Ed.

Naturalists are greatly concerned with predation. As zoologists and

ecologists, they try to identify and count all the prey which each carnivorous

animal devours. They minutely describe the form and functioning of

the structures that predators use to seize and overcome their victims

—the teeth, talons, beaks, poison fangs, tentacles and other weapons

of the more aggressive kinds; the insidious traps and pitfalls of the

weaker sorts of predators. They are likewise immensely interested in

all the methods which the hunted creatures employ to escape capture,

from direct flight to cryptic coloration and other modes of concealment,

from protective armament and forking spines to nauseous odour and

repellent taste. The interrelations of predators and prey and their effect

on the evolution of animals make a fascinating study for one who pre-

serves a purely objective attitude. Those who conjecture about the

terror and pain of the victims, the distress of parents whose offspring

have suddenly been snatched away and of young animals slowly dying

of hunger and exposure when deprived of their parents—these more

sympathetic naturalists are likely to find predation a melancholy subject.

Although naturalists have investigated predation in vast detail,

philosophers have failed to give it due attention. Yet the problems

which predation poses for the philosopher are hardly less important

than those which it presents to the naturalist. For theology, cosmology,

psychology and sociology, predation has implications which must be

taken into account in any thorough discussion. The theologian has not

gone to the root of his problem if he has failed to ask how it is possible

to reconcile the existence of a powerful, intelligent, benevolent Creator

with that of a world in which a myriad animals must daily mangle and

devour countless other sentient creatures in order to live. The cos-

mologist who is not a theist must consider how a beneficent, constructive

process, which he must postulate in order to account for all the order

and beauty in the Universe, could become involved in the vast strife

which afflicts our planet, chiefly in consequence of the fact that many

animals nourish themselves on the flesh of others. The psychologist

should consider how the passions, attitudes, and behaviour of men and

other animals have been affected in the course of many generations by

the killing and callous exploitation of creatures more or less like them-

selves. That the passions and attitudes which predation foments power-

fully influence the form of society among humans and other animals is

a fact so obvious that we wonder why it is so often overlooked.

To the thoughtful mind, evil is one of the greatest of enigmas. Why

the Universe should be infected with evil is, as Amiel said, a problem

second in importance only to that of its existence. In broadest terms,

evil is disharmony and the pain and sorrow therefrom arising. In the

living world, the chief cause of strife, with all the suffering and loss that

it brings, is predation, especially if we include under this heading not

only the crude form exemplified by the shark and the tiger but likewise

that more subtle form that we call parasitism. The parasite is a pred-

ator which lives upon or in the body of its host, sometimes causing

its death after an acute and agonizing illness, but in other cases per-

mitting it to live with more or less discomfort or pain—a course

advantageous to the parasite, which benefits by the continued existence

of the organism which supports it. Possibly, as some have believed, para-

sitism causes more suffering throughout the animal kingdom than crude

predation. Without attempting to solve this problem, we may recognize

that predation, in the broad sense which includes parasitism, is life’s

greatest evil. Whether we consider the psychic attitude of an animal

that strikes down and rends the flesh of another or the hideously

mangled carcase that results, predation is the most revolting aspect of

nature, the cause of the greater part of the ugliness no less than of the

suffering which afflicts the living world.

But the evil of predation, it may be objected, is merely physical,

and some philosophers have held that bodily pains, even mutilation and

death, are not evil at all, if we view them rightly. Real evil is moral

evil, which exists only in the mind, in the form of hatred, anger, malice,

vengefulness, envy, and similar affections, along with the deliberate in-
tention to injure one’s fellows to which these disruptive passions often
give rise. But, contrary to what certain religions have taught, one who
accepts the evolutionary view must recognize that physical evil, in the
form of destructive clashes between lifeless and then living things, was
rise in the world long before the advent of animals capable of the free-
thought and choice without which moral evil, in the strict sense, cannot
exist. Moral evil is not the cause but the result of physical evil. The
violent passions which so often impel men to wicked deeds grew up
among animals overshadowed by the horror of predation. The fangs
and claws with which predatory animals seize and tear their victims
would be useless without the ferocities that corresponds to them. So
thoroughly has the predatory habit impressed the whole life of raptu-
rial birds that nesting hawks and owls, only a few days old, not infre-
cuently attack and destroy their brothers and sisters in the nest. Such
fratricidal impulses have not been detected among the young of frugiv-
ocous and insectivorous birds.
Not only does predation strongly affect the psychic life of the
predators themselves; it also powerfully influences that of victims which,
if capable of emotion, must fear and hate the enemies that menace
them. Anger, rage and venalishness can hardly fail to stir an animal of
some intelligence who is constantly threatened by a cruel death, who
perhaps has seen its mate or offspring killed and eaten by a predator.
Man, who for countless generations was not only a predatory animal
but likewise the prey of the larger carnivores such as tigers and wolves
and the frequent victim of serpents, inevitably became infected with
the whole gamut of violent passions to which predation gives rise both
in the predators and their victims. This is a principal source of the
heavy burden of disruptive attitudes which we must cast off in order
to live righteously and fit into a good society.

The long, cruel struggle to survive in a competitive world has not
been the only influence to mould our psychic life. Not only must animals
eat and avoid being eaten, since in any case they are not immortal,
they must reproduce their kind. Although many of the lower animals
deposit their eggs and forget about them, the careful nurture of the
young so greatly increases the efficiency of reproduction that parental
care has been widely adopted by the higher branches of the animal
kingdom. The nurture of helpless offspring promotes the growth of a set
of emotions that contrast strongly with those engendered by predation.
Love, tenderness, sympathy and compassion are the exquisite flowers
which the nurture of offspring at last brought forth in the more highly
developed minds. These affections seem to be the direct expression of the
true and inmost nature of a creature formed by the beneficent, con-
structive process of harmonization, of which organic growth is an ex-
ample; whereas the opposite passions of hatred, rage and the like are
antithetic to this inmost nature and were imposed upon animals by the
hard struggle to survive.1

As civilization mitigates the individual's struggle to exist, the dis-
ruptive passions associated with predation tend to weaken. In the
measure that they dwindle, the love and tenderness which are the true
expression of our inmost nature reach the surface and increasingly in-
fluence our lives. Finally there may come a day when we are shocked
and outraged by the harshness, the callousness, the ugliness of the old
predatory life. We rebel against it. We reject whatever bodily satisfac-
tions it might bring us. We will not accept the flesh of slaughtered
animals even if they were killed and disembowled far beyond our sight
and hearing. Like many of the men and women most sensitive to their
inmost nature in all the more advanced cultures since the dawn of
history, we become vegetarians.

At first, no doubt, we refuse to eat the flesh of animals simply be-
cause we will not be responsible for the suffering and death of a sentient
being, nor accomplices in the brutality and ugliness of the slaughter-
house. We find no pleasure in food that has cost another creature's life.
But, as we continue to reflect upon the course we have taken, we see
that it has wider implications. We have revolted against the regime
of predation which has not only brought immense suffering to animals
but has also fostered their most disastrous passions. We have refused
to participate in the greatest evil which afflicts the living world. If we
cannot abolish this evil, we can at least oppose it. Vegetarianism is a
standing protest against predation.

After long abstention from the flesh of slaughtered animals, we find
that the attitudes associated with predation tend to fade from our
minds. Rage, anger, hatred, and destructive violence arise in us less
frequently and are more easily subdued. To exploit any creature, human
or otherwise, becomes increasingly repugnant to us, and we take no
delight in "sports" which consist in killing or harassing animals. Mild-
ness and benevolence displace harshness and aggressiveness from our
souls. We grow steady in those moral and spiritual qualities which
the good and the wise have ever sought for themselves. Vegetarianism
is part of a discipline for freeing our minds of the violent passions and

1 See the present writer's The Quest of the Dharma (Forum Publishing Co., Boston,
U.S.A.), especially Chapter VIII.
selfish attitudes associated with predation. I say "part of a discipline" because it would be fatal to suppose that merely by abstaining from flesh we become perfect in spirit. Our flaws and limitations of character have multiple sources and are not to be corrected by any single procedure. But a vegetarian diet helps us greatly to overcome some of our spiritual defects.

Some writers have supposed that a large share of our most dangerous passions are fomented directly by a diet of flesh, and accordingly abate when we abstain from it. On this view, the undesirable psychic effects of eating flesh would appear in one who had never heard of butchering but had been led to believe that the meat served to him was the fruit of a tree. When we recall that herbivorous animals, as, for example, stallions and bulls, can be very savage, it becomes doubtful whether a diet of flesh is the direct source of the fierceness of carnivores, which seems to be correlated with their violent method of procuring their food rather than caused by the food itself. Similarly, it is doubtful whether change in diet is the immediate cause of the spiritual improvement which the adoption of a vegetarian regimen often effects. I believe that the alteration owes more to mental than to physiological factors. By denying ourselves what many people eagerly seek, we prove that we are capable of restraining our appetites for an ideal end. We have refused to enjoy a pleasure at the price of another creature's pain. This resolution, steadfastly followed from day to day, often in the midst of people who indulge in flesh and perhaps urge us to share it with them, can hardly fail to affect our outlook profoundly. We form the habit of regulating our activities with some consideration for the welfare of other beings of many kinds. This, I believe, is the principal way in which a vegetarian diet improves character. Nevertheless, when we consider the subtle interactions between body and mind, it is probable that our food directly influences our thoughts and emotions in greater or less degree; but we need to know far more about this.

Every generous man wishes that he could do something to mitigate the world's ills. But they are so vast, and the result of such complex factors, that he rarely knows how to proceed to carry out his good intentions. Yet there is one evil, the greatest and farthest-reaching of all, which we may increase or diminish by our personal habits — the primordial evil of predation. Vegetarianism is the daily reaffirmation of our determination to use intelligence perverted by love to overcome some of the horrible predilections into which life has blundered because its evolution has not been guided by a foreseeing, benevolent Mind.

ALEXANDER F. SKELCH

ROBERT GRAVES

[Shrimati Prema NANDAKUMAR is a frequent contributor to The Indian P.E.N. and The ARYAN PATH on literary topics. Like her father, Dr. K. H. Srihivasa Iyengar, she has devoted her interest to such studies, and already has a remarkable output of lively and appreciative critical writing to her credit at her young age.

Her study of Robert Graves was a long one, and limitations of space made it necessary to remove a long section dealing with Graves's autobiography and fiction. This will appear, however, in The Indian P.E.N. very soon. We print below the major portion of the essay, dealing with Graves as poet and thinker on the poetic myth.

Shrimati NANDAKUMAR suggests a parallel between Kali and the White Goddess traced by Graves through early poetic myth. It is the pathos of twentieth-century civilization that its ideals of courage and integrity have encountered (in many ways, in anthropology, in psychoanalysis, in artistic experience induced by the quality of the age) Kali, in whatever name, a Nature fascinating but terrible, for ever loathsome to Apollo. Would to great Karma they could turn to more ancient still and know the Great Mother as she is — Kali, the Dark One, on occasion, for the necessary destruction of evil; but in the heaven of Shiva the Contemplator, Gauri, the White One; rākṣasī, the Queen of Cosmic Order; the Maya of Prakṛti, Power of Illusion, who nevertheless humbly serves the Logos of Spirit, putting those who seek Godhead to the minor and major tests.—Ed.]

THERE ARE certain visible milestones in the lives of the living great, and each new milestone prompts us to survey the hero’s career again and attempt a new assessment of his work. Robert Graves’s recent election to the Oxford Professorship of Poetry is one such. He is no sudden luminary by any means, but has long had an established reputation. He has published a good deal, being a master of the twin harmonies of prose and poetry. The poet and novelist is also a well-known critic, though a critic with a difference; no wonder, then, that he should be called the “hydra-headed genius” of our time. There is a core of stern puritanicalness in all his work, and there is a vigorous intellect engaged all the time. More than anything else, perhaps, it is his reinterpretation of ancient legends and projection of his vital theories on poetic myth that make him a special and rewarding subject of study. Whence, then, this astonishing phenomenon, this solitary reaper on the highlands of modern literature?