

VEGETARIANISM AND THE EVIL OF PREDATION

[Dr. Alexander F. Skutch 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 foreseeing, benevolent mind" one might have a philosophical difference of opinion with Dr. Skutch; but on the main thesis he argues with breadth of vision and a lucid 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 forbidding 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 preserves 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 cosmologist 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 themselves. That the passions and attitudes which predation foment powerfully 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 predator which lives upon or in the body of its host, sometimes causing its death after an acute and agonizing illness, but in other cases permitting 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 that supports it. Possibly, as some have believed, parasitism 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 carcass 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 philosophies 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 intention 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 rife in the world long before the advent of animals capable of the forethought 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 fierceness that corresponds to them. So thoroughly has the predatory habit impregnated the whole life of raptorial birds that nestling hawks and owls, only a few days old, not infrequently attack and destroy their brothers and sisters in the nest. Such fratricidal impulses have not been detected among the young of frugivorous 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 vengefulness 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 that 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 example; whereas the opposite passions of hatred, rage and the like are antithetic to this inmost nature and were imposed upon animals by the harsh struggle to survive.¹

As civilization mitigates the individual's struggle to exist, the disruptive 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 influence 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 satisfactions it might bring us. We will not accept the flesh of slaughtered animals, even if they were killed and dismembered 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 because we will not be responsible for the suffering and death of a sentient being, nor accomplices in the brutality and ugliness of the slaughterhouse. 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 régime 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 abstinence 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. Mildness and benevolence displace harshness and aggressiveness from our souls. We grow steadily 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 Divine* (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 pervaded by love to overcome some of the horrible predicaments into which life has blundered because its evolution has not been guided by a foreseeing, benevolent Mind.*

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