

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

In Defence of the Flesh

[Our esteemed friend Dr. Alexander F. Skutch has provided once again a significant piece of mature reflection. The exact position of the human body has often been misunderstood and human beings have blamed the body for much that is not its fault at all. While true spirituality requires a detachment of the mind from bodily processes, it also gives to the body its own important and indeed sacred, although instrumental, value. We draw readers' attention to two passages from Madame Blavatsky which are reprinted after Dr. Skutch's article.—ED.]

I AM WEARY of hearing the evil in man blamed on the flesh. I resent hearing all his wickedness attributed to his animal nature and his goodness ascribed to his specifically human nature. I repudiate the old notion that body degrades spirit. As a lifelong observer of animals, I take up my pen to defend animal nature, whether in ourselves or other creatures, from unwarranted denigration. As a lover of justice, I cannot refrain from protesting against aspersions unjustly cast upon that wonderful stuff called "matter."

Among the motives that impel me to undertake this defence is gratitude to my own body, which has not only served me well for nearly seventy years but has sometimes resisted when my mind (which for the purpose of this essay I shall consider to be practically synonymous with spirit) tried to lead it astray. As a boy growing up among respected adults who smoked much tobacco and drank strong liquor, I naturally assumed that these were manly, rewarding things to do; nor was I forbidden these indulgences. But my body revolted against them; after a few puffs at a cigarette, a few sips of whisky, it told me, as plainly as it could, that these things were not for me. Before my mind could adduce sound reasons for refraining from these unprofitable and often injurious habits, my body warned me against them; and all my life I have been thankful for this timely veto. Doubtless, if mind, which is imitative and often perverse, had insisted that in order to be a man and a good companion I must do as other men did, I would have continued to force alcohol and tobacco fumes upon my organism until it became vitiated and craved them; but would not the fault then lie with the spirit rather than the flesh?

If I have been more compassionate than certain others, I owe this too, at least in part, to my body. To see living flesh, in man or any other creature, cut or lacerated sends through my own flesh a shrinking feeling that is most unpleasant, as has been true from childhood. I do not know

how it may be with others, but this is one of the reasons why I cannot avoidably hurt any living thing. Certainly mind, with its capacity for insight and sympathy, plays an important part in this spontaneous reaction, which must be attributed to the whole psycho-physical entity rather than to the body alone; but the latter has no negligible share in it.

My body also supported me when, while still in my teens, compassion induced me to become a vegetarian, although everyone that I knew personally was a meat-eater. Since that day, many years ago, when I declared my intention to abstain from flesh, I cannot recall that my body ever craved it, even when I was obliged to sit at table with people who were obviously enjoying it. The human body's capacity to adjust to the most varied foods, and to function well on them, is one of its most admirable qualities. It permits us to choose our diet with regard to economic and moral considerations, and thereby makes an important contribution to our freedom, which would be restricted in various ways were we as narrowly limited to certain foods as some other animals are. Being omnivorous by nature, we can become selectively omnivorous, with advantages to ourselves, to the living things around us, and to the environment.

Although the advanced mystic may find spiritual exaltation by retiring into himself—possibly to that depth where the distinction between mind and body, spirit and matter, vanishes in an approach to ultimate Being—for most of us spiritual growth is outward expansion, the enlargement of knowledge and sympathy, the intensification of aesthetic appreciation, through contact with the external world, human and, more broadly, natural. In this expansive movement, our bodies help us so greatly that we might suppose they were designed for this end. Our outwardly directed senses are more numerous and more constantly active than our inwardly directed senses. Among the latter is taste, which as a source of pleasure is responsible for greed or gluttony. But this, as Erich Fromm pointed out, is a vice not of the body so much as of the mind, which continues to crave this titillation of sense after the body has been satisfied, and often to its detriment. Of the outwardly directed senses, the chief is vision, which reveals the grandeur and beauty of the earth and the sublimity of the heavens, as well as forms dear to us. Next comes hearing, which brings to us all the harmonies of sound no less than the thoughts of those who surround us. To these marvellously organized senses, the products of a very long evolution, we owe a large share of our spiritual growth.

The body of any of the higher animals, especially the warm-blooded birds and mammals, is a construction which, in integrated complexity and capacity for self-regulation, must win the unstinted admiration of

anyone who studies it even superficially. The human body, so adaptable to diverse situations, able to do so many things, so well equipped with sensory organs, and with such an outstandingly large brain, must be reckoned, by wholly objective standards, one of the finest in the whole animal kingdom, if not the very best. It has, to be sure, certain structural and functional weaknesses, such as a vermiform appendix liable to dangerous infection and its easily upset carbohydrate metabolism; but these are far outweighed by its superior qualities. Moreover, the bodies of other animals are not so exempt from disorders as the casual observer might imagine. What amazes us is the lack of appreciation of such excellent bodies that many people show, their readiness to abuse, mutilate, or destroy them — their own or other people's. To call such a marvellous piece of biological engineering "vile" reveals a pathetic lack of insight; yet it can become vile under the influence of a perverted mind. In itself, the flesh is morally neither good nor bad but neutral; its moral tone is determined by the indwelling spirit, which colours it much as a few drops of dye tint a vessel of water.

To believe that the human spirit or mind is wholly good and all man's wickedness springs from his animal body is a psychological fallacy. Hatred is as spiritual as love and may indeed have less of a somatic component, as we are often strongly attracted to the bodies of those we love but perhaps seldom correspondingly repelled by the bodies of those we hate. Similarly, cruelty, gloating over the physical or mental agony of any sentient being, is as spiritual as compassion, and perhaps more narrowly so; for, as already suggested, the latter may be in part motivated by uncomfortable feelings stirred up in one's own flesh by the sight of a lacerated body, whereas the presence of such feelings should tend to inhibit certain kinds of cruelty. Avarice, covetousness, vindictiveness, malice, deceit certainly cannot be attributed to the body but are purely spiritual or mental affections.

A major source of human misery has been the thirst for power or fame that has prompted ambitious men to aggrandize themselves with ruthless disregard of the sufferings of others — their opponents or their followers. Not by their bodies or animal nature, but by their peculiarly human nature, their haughty, imperious spirits, were men like Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, or Napoleon impelled to overrun empires and lay waste wide territories. And can it be other than a satanic spirit that prompted self-styled religious men to torture and burn those who disagreed with them? The body's needs are few and not too difficult to satisfy. The human spirit, on the contrary, often manifests an expansiveness that can hardly be satisfied with anything short of infinity, and,

according to the course it takes, may elevate itself to the skies or sink to the lowest depths.

It has long been evident to perceptive men that spiritual beings may be good or evil. Religions have acknowledged the opposing powers of God and Satan, Ormuzd and Ahriman, Osiris and Set. Even a philosopher as critical as Kant admitted the existence of an evil spirit. In most human spirits, good and evil tendencies are mixed, with the good predominating in some and the evil in others. It is revealing that ancient myths do not attribute the fall of man to his flesh so much as to his spirit. Eve did not eat the forbidden fruit because she was hungry but because she was persuaded that thereby she could attain a higher state than that in which her creator had placed her — and can we despise her for this very human aspiration?

The origin of the evil in the human spirit, the cause of so much suffering and shame, must be sought in the conditions in which animals, including man, evolved. Tending always to multiply beyond the earth's capacity to support them, they were thrown into fierce competition for food and living space or, what amounts to the same thing, for the territories that provided these necessities. In this aeonian struggle to survive, some acquired such weapons as horns for goring, fangs for ripping, talons for seizing victims, venomous stings, and other offensive and defensive armament, along with the instincts and emotions indispensable for their effective use. Man's remote ancestors were doubtless relatively harmless tree-dwellers, devoid of powerful weapons, like many kinds of monkeys today. When, in an era of shrinking forests, they descended to the ground and adopted a more predatory habit, their versatile forelimbs, able to wield sticks and stones, made the acquisition of bodily organs specially adapted to aggression rather superfluous.

Accordingly, the human body is not so obviously formed for fierce aggression as that of the tiger or the eagle. Viewing the human hand busily engaged in weaving, sewing, planting, carpentry, writing, or some other creative task, one might never imagine it capable of wielding lethal weapons. But, as though to compensate for his lack of organic weapons like horns and fangs, man developed an array of passions, violent and disruptive, which can hardly be matched by any other animal. This is the hideous burden forced upon the human spirit by the long evolutionary struggle — a burden which, in obedience to impulses that seem to spring from the inmost depths of our total being, it often strives more or less successfully to cast off.

These passions are part of our biologic inheritance; they have a genetic foundation, like the form and functioning of the body. However it

may be with us in some subsequent existence, in this present life our minds and bodies interact in so many subtle ways that we can draw no sharp boundary between the physical and the mental; we can be understood only as psycho-physical entities. But in so far as we distinguish between the body and the mind, the flesh and the spirit, we must assign our disruptive passions and evil intentions to the spiritual component. We should, in all fairness, try to place the blame for our wickedness or nastiness where it belongs.

Recently, in heated debates over the legalization of abortion, the proponents of this measure, especially among extreme feminists, have contended that each person has, by right, absolute dominion over his own body and can treat it as he pleases; no-one else should interfere. This is a dangerously subversive doctrine. The material components of each person's body, the atoms of which it is made, are uniquely his own for the longer or shorter interval that they remain within it; he holds them in common with no other body. But its form or essence, in the Aristotelian sense, is not exclusively his; it is the common property of man. It might be said that each of us holds the human form in trust. Possessing this generic human form, it appears to be our obligation so to treat it that all men everywhere will have greater respect for it, will be proud to share this form with their neighbours, will hesitate to do anything that might dishonour it and make others ashamed of it.

The human form is dishonoured by those who get drunk and wallow in the gutter; by those who display it lewdly; by those who fail to keep it clean and wholesome; by those who through gluttony make it disgustingly obese; and in various other ways. Those who fail to treat their bodies with respect and to comport themselves with dignity hurt mankind as a whole, by making it more difficult for us to reconcile ourselves to the form that we must wear and to our membership in the animal kingdom.

One of the greatest, most unfortunate defects of the generally admirable human organism is the uninterrupted reproductive potency that begins in adolescence and continues unabated through many years of maturity. This gives rise to distressing problems that are avoided by those many animals that are sexually active only during a limited breeding season, and whose reproductive potential is more closely adjusted to their need for recruitment. It is no exaggeration to say that man's overwrought sexuality has been, throughout the historic period, a major source of his misery and degradation; and at present it threatens to ruin our planet as an abode of life by producing more people than can be supported in any measure of decency without the rapid exhaustion of its re-

sources. But here, again, it would be wrong to cast all the blame for this unfortunate situation upon the body. The mind often perversely exacerbates, in self and others, and all too frequently for commercial gain, passions that might be allayed or controlled by it.

Recognition that a large part, perhaps the major part, of the evil in us resides in the spirit rather than the flesh, in the specifically human rather than broadly animal component of our complex nature, should make us more hopeful for our future. The form and functioning of our bodies are controlled by hereditary factors which no-one can alter in himself and which can change only very slowly in mankind as a whole or in any considerable population. But our thoughts, moral purposes, and spiritual outlook in general are shaped by our culture and can be profoundly modified by education. Many of our troubles can be attributed to the wrong thinking, harmful practices, and inept arrangements transmitted to us by our culture. The human body, just as we have received it from nature, is capable of serving as a foundation for a much nobler spiritual superstructure than most of us erect upon it. Instead of blaming all, or the greater part, of our spiritual ills on the flesh or on those attributes that we share with other animals, the so-called "beast" in us, let us, with Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra, proclaim

All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than
flesh helps soul.

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It is not molecularly constituted matter—least of all the human body (*sthulasarira*)—that is the grossest of all our "principles," but verily the *middle* principle, the real animal centre; whereas our body is but its shell, the irresponsible factor and medium through which the beast in us acts all its life. Every intellectual theosophist will understand my real meaning. Thus the idea that the human tabernacle is built by countless *lives*, just in the same way as the rocky crust of our Earth was, has nothing repulsive in it for the true mystic. (*The Secret Doctrine*, I. 260)

Verily that body, so desecrated by Materialism and man himself, is the temple of the Holy Grail, the *Adytum* of the grandest, nay, of all, the mysteries of nature in our solar universe. That body is an Aeolian harp, chorded with two sets of strings, one made of pure silver, the other of catgut. (*Raja-Yoga or Occultism*, 1931 ed., p. 69)

—H. P. BLAVATSKY