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## Logic of the Larder

It is often said, as an excuse for the slaughter of animals, that it is better for them to live and to be butchered than not to live at all. Now, obviously, if such reasoning justifies the practice of flesh-eating, it must equally justify *all* breeding of animals for profit or pastime, when their life is a fairly happy one. The argument is frequently used by sportsmen, on the ground that the fox would long ago have become extinct in this country had not they, his true friends, “preserved” him for purposes of sport. Vivisectors, who breed guinea-pigs for experimentation, also have used it, and they have as much right to it as flesh-eaters; for how, they may say, can a few hours of suffering be set in the balance against the enormous benefit of life? In fact, if we once admit that it is an *advantage* to an animal to be brought into the world, there is hardly any treatment that cannot be justified by the supposed terms of such a contract.

Also, the argument must apply to mankind. It has, in fact, been the plea of the slave-breeder; and it is logically just as good an excuse for slave-holding as for flesh-eating. It would justify parents in almost any treatment of their children, who owe them, for the great boon of life, a debt of gratitude which no subsequent services can repay. We could hardly deny the same merit to cannibals, if they were to breed their human victims for the table, as the early Peruvians are said to have done.

It is on record, in no less authentic a work than “Hansard” (March 7, 1883), that when Sir Herbert Maxwell argued in Parliament that a “blue rock” would prefer to be sport for pigeon-shooters than not to exist at all, Mr. W. E. Forster satirically remarked that what we have to consider is not a blue rock *before* existence, but a blue rock *in* existence. There, in brief, is the key to the whole matter. The fallacy lies in the confusion of thought which attempts to compare existence with non-existence. A person who is already in existence may feel that he would rather have lived than not, but he must first have the *terra firma* of existence to argue from; the moment he begins to argue as if from the abyss of the non-existent, he talks nonsense, by predicating good or evil, happiness or unhappiness, of that of which we can predicate nothing.

When, therefore, we talk of “bringing a being,” as we vaguely express it, “into the world,” we cannot claim from that being any *gratitude* for our action, or drive a bargain with him, and a very shabby one, on that account; nor can our duties to him be evaded by any such quibble, in which the wish is so obviously father to the thought. Nor, in this connection, is it necessary to enter on the question of ante-natal existence, because, if such existence there be, we have no reason for assuming that it is less happy than the present existence; and thus equally the argument falls to the ground. It is absurd to compare a supposed preexistence, or non-existence, with actual individual life as known to us here. All reasoning based on such comparison must necessarily be false, and will lead to grotesque conclusions.

Take the case, as it stands, between the Philosopher and the Pig. Is it not adding insult to injury that this much-massacred animal should not only be *eaten* by the Philosopher, but should also be made the subject of a far from disinterested beatification — “Blessed is the Pig,

for the Philosopher is fond of bacon.”<sup>1</sup> We can imagine how the Philosopher, when he passes a butcher’s shop, which, according to his showing, is a very shrine and centre of humaneness, since without it there “would be no pigs at all,” must pause in serene self-satisfaction to felicitate the pallid carcass laid out there, with the mockery of an ornamental orange in its mouth. “I have been a benefactor to this Pig,” he must say, “inasmuch as I ate a portion of his predecessor; and now I will be a benefactor to some yet unborn pig, by eating a portion of this one.”

This, then, is the benign attitude of the Philosopher towards the Pig; and what shall be the reply of the Pig to the Philosopher? “Revered moralist,” he might plead, “it were unseemly for me, who am to-day a pig, and to-morrow but ham and sausages, to dispute with a master of ethics, yet to my porcine intellect it appeareth that having first determined to kill and devour me, thou hast afterwards bestirred thee to find a moral reason. For mark, I pray thee, that in my entry into the world my own predilection was in no wise considered, nor did I purchase life on condition of my own butchery. If, then, thou art firm set on pork, so be it, for pork I am: but though thou hast not spared my life, at least spare me thy sophistry. It is not for *his* sake, but for *thine*, that in his life the Pig is filthily housed and fed, and at the end barbarously butchered.”

From whatever point one looks at this sophism, it is seen to be equally hollow. For even apart from the philosophical flaw which vitiates it, there is the practical consideration that a far greater number of human lives can be supported on a grain and fruit-growing district than on one which rears cattle; so that if a larger area of England were devoted to the rearing of “livestock,” we should actually be lessening human life that there might be more beef and mutton; that is, we should be increasing the lower existence at the expense of the higher. It is worth noting, too, that the life of animals doomed to the slaughter is of a far lower quality than it would be if the same animals were either entirely wild, or domesticated to some rational purpose by friendly association with man; the very fact that an animal is going to be eaten seems to remove it from the category of intelligent beings, and causes it to be regarded as mere animated “meat.” “To keep a man, slave, or servant,” says Edward Carpenter, “for your own advantage merely, to keep an animal, that you may *eat* it, is a lie; you cannot look that animal in the face.” The existence of bullocks, for example, can scarcely be called life; they are “live-stock,” but they do not *live*. And what of the “fat beasts” that are yearly exhibited at the Agricultural Hall, and elsewhere, at the season of peace and goodwill? Are these wretched victims of human gluttony to be grateful for the boon of life? Are crammed fowls and Strasburg geese to be grateful? And the calf and the lamb — are *they* to be felicitated on the rather short term allowed them in the ghoulish contract, or must we except the eaters of veal and lamb from the list of animal benefactors?

Let us heartily accept all that may be said of “the joyfulness of life.” But what is the moral to be drawn from that fact? Surely not that we are justified in outraging and destroying life, to pamper our selfish appetites, because forsooth we shall then produce more of it! But rather that we should respect the beauty and sanctity of life in others as in ourselves, and strive as far

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<sup>1</sup> “Of all the arguments for Vegetarianism none is so weak as the argument from humanity. The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all,”—Leslie Stephen in “Social Rights and Duties.”

“If all the world were Jews, it has been well said, there would be no pigs in existence; and if all the world were Vegetarians, would there be any sheep or cattle, well cared for, and guarded against starvation?”—Professor D. G. Ritchie in “Natural Rights.”

as possible to secure its fullest natural development. This logic of the larder is the very negation of a true reverence for life; for it implies that the real lover of animals is he whose larder is fullest of them:

He prayeth best, who *eateth* best  
All things both great and small.

It is the philosophy of the wolf, the shark, the cannibal. If there be any truth in such an argument, let those who believe it have the courage of their convictions, and face the inevitable conclusion. The Ogre has hitherto been a much misunderstood character, but now at last Philosophy and Science are doing justice to his beneficence. His organization has been defective, perhaps, but his spirit has been wholly commendable. He is *par excellence* the zoophilist, the philanthropist, the saint.<sup>1</sup>

But enough of this quibbling! Vegetarianism would save the actual animals, who have been brought into this actual world, from the very real suffering that is inseparable from the cattle-ship and the slaughter-house; and if its only inhumanity is that which it perpetrates on non-existent races by not arranging for their birth, it may bear the charge with equanimity. If there were any unkindness, or any lack of kindness, in *not* breeding animals, the enormity of our sins of omission would be more than the human conscience could endure, for the number of the “unborn is limitless, and to wade through slaughter to a throne, “and shut the gates of mercy on mankind,” would be a trifle in comparison with this cold-blooded shutting of the gates of life on the poor, neglected non-existent!

It is interesting to note that this fallacy—the assumption that it is a *kindness* to bring a being into the world—is as old as the time of Lucretius, who deals with it, in another connection, in a passage of his great philosophical poem, *De Rerum Natura* (v. 176—180), which may be rendered thus:

What loss were ours, if we had known not birth?  
Let living men to longer life aspire,  
While fond affection binds their hearts to earth:  
But whoso ne'er hath tasted life's desire,  
Unborn, impersonal, can feel no death.

We see, then, that a vulgar sophism of to-day was clearly exposed nearly two thousand years ago. It is quite possible that fools may be repeating it two thousand years hence.

From Henry S. Salt, *The Humanities of Diet* (Manchester: Society, 1914).

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<sup>1</sup> “If the motive that might produce the greatest number of the happiest cattle would be the eating of beef, then beef-eating, so far, must be commended. And while, heretofore, the motive has not been for the sake of cattle, it is conceivable that, if Vegetarian convictions should spread much further, love for cattle would (if it be not psychologically incompatible) blend with the love of beef in the minds of the opponents of Vegetarianism. With deeper insight, new and higher motives may replace or supplement old ones, and perpetuate but ennoble ancient practices.”—Dr. Stanton Coit.