

along. As such, this book might not find a very large audience outside of philosophy. Geographers who want a broad history of philosophy, or capsule summaries of a number of philosophical positions, will not find that here. As a study of evil, however, and a contribution to our understanding of what is at stake in the study of ethics, this is a major book with a powerful argument that deserves as broad an audience as possible.

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### **The Ethics of Diet: a Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-eating**

Howard Williams

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At least since Nietzsche, the writing of history and the accumulations of memory have been regarded in many ways as one of the essential foundations of power, guiding its strategies, charting its progress (Said, 2002).

Because perceptions of history are neither shared nor complete, dominant ideologies are fueled by the unique privilege of documentation. Those ethical considerations or movements that aim to turn the tide of dominant worldviews are not often recorded and, therefore, are rarely passed down through the ages. Thus, highly limited renditions of our shared story inform a collective amnesia, leading us to forget that not only are there alternatives to the way we live, but that these alternatives have been argued, defended, and practiced far before our time.

Such is the case with vegetarianism. In recent decades, those forgoing meat in the West may have risen in number, but their ethically informed practice continues to meet instances of defensive scorn as well as bold dismissal as a passing fad. Various books documenting the history of vegetarianism have accompanied the movement of the past 40 years, showing that the 1960s were not the first time people made these ethical choices in diet and lifestyle. Part of what makes Howard Williams's book, *The Ethics of Diet: a Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-eating*, so compelling is that it is more than 120 years old. While Williams perceived a need to extensively document the history of vegetarianism in 1883, the book is in many ways as applicable today as it was when it was originally published—and, in certain ways, perhaps even more necessary in a world where holistic histories are nonexistent.

Williams, the very late British author, humanitarian, and vegetarian, went against the tide of his own time to write an encyclopedic history that catalogues the voices of proponents of vegetarianism and presents the sentiments and logics that led them not

only to stop eating meat but also to argue for widespread dietary reform. The book was last published in 1907, but because of the efforts of scholar Carol Adams (*The Pornography of Meat* (Adams, 2003) and *The Sexual Politics of Meat: a Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Adams, 2000)) it was re-released with appendixes and modern-day contextualization in November 2003. This new reprinting offers a fascinating history to scholars interested in the ethical dimensions of the human relationship with other animals. It provides us not only with a detailed record of an alternative ethic, but one emanating predominantly from white European men, the very forefathers many credit for a long and proudly guarded mainstream tradition of meat-eating.

Williams traces vegetarian arguments and practice back to the eighth century BCE. His range of authorities is mainly European philosophers, doctors, writers, theologians, and scientists. Whereas the text is distinctly Eurocentric, androcentric, and Christian-centric, with some mention given to Hinduism and Buddhism, the very power of the book may lie in the inward elitism of its time. By offering an internal critique, the authorities Williams cites effectively offer a counterpoint to the very hegemonies with which they are typically associated. They dispel fallacies from the inside out, lending power to disruption of power.

Williams explains how many of the authorities he documents overcame significant cultural and social obstacles to ethically and practically commit to vegetarianism. Vegetarianism, according to Williams:

is founded upon the irrefragable principles of Justice and Compassion—universal Justice and universal Compassion—the two principles most essential in any system of ethics worthy of the name. That this argument seems to have so limited an influence—even with persons otherwise humanely disposed, and of finer feeling in respect to their own, and, also, in a general way, to other species—can be attributed only to the deadening power of custom and habit, of traditional prejudice, and educational bias (p. xxx).

Unless one is a dedicated historian, many of the names of the more than 70 authorities cited might not be familiar (though with quite a few obvious exceptions, including Pythagoras, Plato, Pope, Voltaire, Rousseau, Shelley, and Byron). It's the names we don't recognize, however, that further lend to the hidden-history quality of this book. Williams does an excellent job contextualizing both the thinkers and their thoughts. Whereas the writing is distinctly not of today, the book is still a surprisingly accessible read. And we are preceded by a distinguished readership, including Gandhi and Tolstoy, both of whom credited this book with helping to inform their own ethical shifts.

The thinkers documented wrangle with a range of issues surrounding meat-eating and take a variety of ethical approaches. Williams based his own arguments for vegetarianism on humanitarianism, health, economic reasoning, social reform, and science. Many of the scientific arguments represented are catalogued and attributed in an appendix titled 'scientific evidences for the unnaturalness and the unhealthiness of flesh-eating'. Scientific and health arguments by authorities throughout the book include the following: that humans simply were not physically designed to eat meat, as they lack the teeth, powerful jaws, and claws to do so; that flesh-eating propagates disease such as tuberculosis; that one-fifth of the meat consumed is derived from diseased animals; and that a vegetarian diet is far better suited nutritionally for humans.

Some of the more interesting arguments fall under the ethical rubric. The authorities documented by Williams identify and address fallacies put forth by meat-eaters. Interestingly, the rebuttals differ little over the 26 centuries documented in the book, and still sound familiar today: Humans do not have the authority or sanction of nature to eat

other animals; there is no difference between eating human and nonhuman animal flesh except custom and example; just because humans have acquired a taste for cooked flesh does not mean they should indulge in the violent, traumatizing act of murder—especially with other food available in abundance; few humans would eat other animals if they had to kill them themselves, especially without the use of weapons excepting their own hands and teeth; and, lastly, all other species were not brought into being to benefit the human species. To this last sentiment, Alexander Pope dedicates a poem in the early 1700s. Here is an excerpt:

‘While Man exclaims, ‘See all things for my use!’ ‘See Man for mine!’ replies a pampered Goose. And just as short of reason he must fall, Who thinks *all made for one, not one for all* (p. 130).

The book also includes arguments for vegetarianism that we may not hear as often today. For instance, Jean Jacques Rousseau argued in the 1700s that adults should avoid ‘denaturalizing’ children from their indifference to meat and their preference for a vegetarian diet. Judging by the words of other of Williams’s authorities, Rousseau was not alone in this argument, which was largely based on the assertion that a diet that is dependent on violence disposes people to corrosion of character. Rousseau’s Swiss and French vantage did set him apart, however, in choosing examples perhaps based on his own cultural biases. ‘It is certain that great eaters of flesh are, in general, more cruel and ferocious than other men. This observation is true of all places and of all times. English coarseness is well known’ (p. 162).

In the book’s 2003 introduction, Adams points out that new arguments for vegetarianism have appeared since the book’s first publication more than 120 years ago. Specifically, additional ethical dilemmas have arisen with the emergence of agribusiness factory farming and the subsequent worsening of conditions for those animals designated as food by human animals, with the more vivid evidence of environmental destruction wrought by mass scale farming of other animals, and with the introduction of critical theory that provides a lens interlocking the nature of the oppression of women, people of color, and nonhumans.

Still, readers might be surprised at how many of these current issues are foreshadowed or referenced by the thinkers Williams documents. We see that 100 years ago, Percy Shelley laid out an argument that is a distinct predecessor to *Diet for a Small Planet* (Lappé, 1982) and more recently *Fast Food Nation: the Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Schlosser, 2002), stating that:

[t]he quantity of nutritious vegetable matter consumed in fattening the carcase [*sic*] of an ox would afford ten times the sustenance, undepraved, indeed, and incapable of generating disease, if gathered immediately from the bosom of the earth (p. 227).

Williams’s work also lets us regain an alternative culinary memory. For instance, in 1803, long before *The Moosewood Cookbook* (Katzen and Moosewood Restaurant, 1977), George Nicholson, an English printer in Yorkshire, wrote and published a cookbook that solely provided recipes for ‘one hundred perfectly palatable and nutritious substances, which may easily be procured at an expense much below the price of the limbs of our fellow animals’ (p. 191).

Indeed, Williams documents responses to what some might assume are strictly current issues. For instance, there are arguments against animal experimentation and vivisection. What is sometimes chilling when reading many of the arguments in the book is the creeping realization that we are still engaging in many of the same conversations argued

2000 years ago, yet, alas, we are often doing so far less eloquently and in the face of exponentially more human violence toward the more than human world.

While today it is generally vegetarians who find themselves defending their ethical choice, some have argued that it is not for the vegetarian to explain her or his decisions but for the eater of flesh. As with many other ideas, in reading Williams's book, one finds this is no new assertion. Philosopher and rhetorician Plutarch, who lived sometime between 40 and 120 CE, put forth an identical sentiment:

You ask me upon what ground Pythagoras abstained from feeding on the flesh of animals. I, for my part, marvel of what sort of feeling, mind, or reason, that man was possessed who was first to pollute his mouth with gore, and to allow his lips to touch the flesh of a murdered being: who spread his table with mangled forms of dead bodies, and claimed as his daily food what were but now beings endowed with movement, with perception, and with voice...The first man who set the example of savagery is the person to arraign; not, assuredly, that great mind which, in a later age, determined to have nothing to do with such horrors (p. 46).

As Adams writes in the introduction, Williams's book provides us with a 'proof of a tradition'. I agree with Adams, who sees this text as 'a theoretician's goldmine, a historian's raw material, a vegetarian's ethical confirmation' and the meat eater's conscience-disturber. There is a wealth here in this book, a rich history of ethical sentiment that has not been available on bookshelves for generations. Adams writes that Williams's challenge was to 'reinstatate vegetarianism as an ethical imperative *within* history by giving it a history' (p. xv). And this is precisely why the book has been reintroduced to us in this day. Adams questions, 'Is vegetarianism, something that recurs throughout time, actually a fad, that is, short-lived, or is it only imputed to be a fad so that its disruption of the ordered world is minimized?' (p. xii). Williams's book supplies vegetarianism with a highly disruptive record of continuity stretching back far before our lifetimes.

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