

# Introduction: Cruel Fatalities



*If there are any marks at all of special design in creation, one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of all animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals. They have been lavishly fitted out with the instruments necessary for that purpose; their strongest instincts impel them to it and many of them seem to have been constructed incapable of supporting themselves by any other food. . . . The scheme of Nature regarded in its whole extent, cannot have had, for its sole or even principal object, the good of human or other sentient beings. Whatsoever, in nature, gives indication of beneficent design, proves beneficence to be armed only with limited power; and the duty of man is to co-operate with the beneficent powers, not by imitating but by perpetually striving to amend the course of nature—and bringing that part of it over which we can exercise control, more nearly into conformity with a high standard of justice and goodness.*

—John Stuart Mill

**I**n his “Essay on Nature,” John Stuart Mill confesses his wonder at those who would see perfection and beneficent design in nature. He observes darkly that “everything . . . which the worst

men commit either against life or property is perpetrated on a larger scale by natural agents." With callous indifference, "a single hurricane destroys the hopes of a season; a flight of locusts, or any inundation, desolates a district; a trifling chemical change in an edible root, starves a million people."

Mill, like many of the writers in this anthology, contemplates the cruelty of nature and the suffering of sentient beings in light of the metaphysical and moral questions that reflection on nature gives rise to: Is there beneficent design in nature, "a more excellent nature in the universe" as Porphyry declares? How are we to view "devourers and the devoured," predators and prey? Is our own purpose to follow or to amend nature? Do we kill for food as tigers kill or do we resist such violence toward animals that may be natural to us? Is the suffering that nature ordains ultimately good in its provision for the renewal of life?

In confronting the specific cruelty human beings impose on animals killed for food, these same philosophical questions about nature and about human nature arise even when such suffering is believed justified. Such animal suffering, carried out by the human hand and not by the impersonal forces of disease, wind, or fire, has the peculiar power to turn our gaze at once both inward and outward. When the jaguar pounces, when tidal waters flood, when nightingales fall in the nighttime hunt, our gaze turns outward, like Mill's, to a world perplexing in its seeming "redemptionless suffering," its "cruel fatalities." How is the world constituted that this is its being? But when we contemplate the violence of our own hand, the remorseless rituals of the slaughterhouse, "the death-set eyes of beasts," our gaze turns inward to questions about human nature, human violence, and the human relationship to other animals. Is the killing of animals for food a pardonable crime? Is it a crime at all? Is remorse futile? Is the disavowal of violence to animals requisite to any striving for moral goodness?

In all the traditional arguments in defense of killing animals for food—that animals have no soul, that they feel no pain, that they lack rational capacity and moral standing, that they exist for human need, that as brutes their suffering is without moral significance—much importance is given to the "naturalness" of such killing. We too are jaguars. We too prey on the weak. Life is harsh and cruel even to us. And yet, as the selections in this anthology indicate, a fainter but persistent strain of protest can be heard throughout the centuries,

beginning with Pythagoras and resounding in nineteenth- and twentieth-century vegetarian literature on animal rights, animal suffering, global ecology, and modern factory farming. Plutarch's caustic observation that "no one eats . . . flesh just as it is; men boil it and roast it, altering it by fire and drugs, recasting and diverting and smothering with condiments the taste of gore so that the palate may be deceived" reverberates in the outrage Harriet Schleifer feels today at a McDonald's television commercial which speaks of hamburgers that "grow in little hamburger patches." The faint yet persistent history of such protest literature affirms certain themes with constancy: that animal suffering matters, that the brutalization of animals brutalizes the human soul, that moral goodness, in whatever form it is attainable, cannot be achieved without renouncing violence to animals—that, as Porphyry puts it, "the more excellent nature in the universe is entirely innoxious," just, restrained in passion, "possessing a power which preserves and benefits all things."

Moral concern over the suffering caused to animals by humans, faint yet persistent as it has been, is one thing; confidence in the hope that it can be eliminated is another. Some ethical vegetarians are optimistic that the worse excesses eventually will be ameliorated, others are not. Writers such as Percy Shelley, Anna Kingsford, and Henry Salt believe our relationship to animals can be made just and harmonious. Even the less sanguine John Stuart Mill implies that human efforts to "amend the course" of cruel nature can mitigate suffering. But in the minds of others, our brutality to animals is evidence of a world irretrievably broken. Such a gloomy appraisal led William Alcott in the nineteenth century to write that "the world is a mighty slaughterhouse—one grand school for the suppression of every kind, and tender, brotherly feeling—one grand process of education to the entire destitution of all moral principle—one vast scene of destruction to all moral sensibility, and all sympathy with the woes of those around us." The figure of Jean-Christophe in Romain Rolland's eponymous novel echoes Alcott's sense that to contemplate the wretchedness suffered and inflicted by humans is to contemplate "the tragedy of the universe." But he also rages against it as an unpardonable crime that cries vengeance upon the Creator: "If God is good only to the strong, if there is no justice for the weak and lowly, for the poor creatures who are offered up as a sacrifice to humanity, then there is no such thing as goodness, no such thing as justice. . . ."

Out of this deepest of metaphysical and religious question—Can things be made right? Can they be made better?—comes the moral complexity of the writings of this anthology.

**“Animal Life, Somber Mystery”:  
What is Human Duty?**

Whatever the metaphysical, cosmological, or religious meditations occasioned by human cruelty to animals, moral conviction itself is everywhere entwined with it. Here is one such example, taken from Ovid’s account of Pythagoras’ thought, all the more interesting for how alien its cosmology is to that of much contemporary vegetarian literature:

Remember this:

The heavens and all below them, earth and her creatures,  
All change, and we, part of creation, also  
Must suffer change. We are not bodies only,  
But winged spirits, with the power to enter  
Animal forms, house in the bodies of cattle.  
Therefore, we should respect those dwelling-places  
Which may have given shelter to the spirit  
Of fathers, brothers, cousins, human beings  
At least, and we should never do them damage. . . .

Let the bull plow  
And let him owe his death to length of days;  
Let the sheep give you armor for rough weather,  
The she-goats bring full udders to the milking. . . .

Kill, if you must, the beasts that do you harm,  
But, even so, let killing be enough;  
Let appetite refrain from flesh, take only  
A gentler nourishment.

In this evocation of soul-transmigration, the ethical imperative derives not only from disgust at befouling the dwelling place of ancestors, though that is without doubt one of Pythagoras’s main tenets, but also from a sense of the wrongness itself of consuming animal flesh. Ovid writes in the spirit of Pythagoras:

Oh what a wicked thing it is for flesh  
To be the tomb of flesh, for the body's craving  
To fatten on the body of another,  
For one live creature to continue living  
Through one live creature's death.

Elsewhere he associates animal eating with fear, treachery, and cunning, a destruction of all that was once peaceful. An intricate conjoining of both cosmological and moral reasons for abstinence, Pythagoras's vegetarianism springs from a sense that we do justice both to ourselves and to our ancestors, as well as to animals themselves, when we abstain from eating their flesh. Especially fascinating in the Pythagorean records, as well as in more recent vegetarian literature, are the allusions to a golden age, a Garden of Eden, a time when flesh eating was unthinkable, when earth's generosity with her provisions was sufficient for human life. Shining through dark worries about pridefulness, arrogance, and bloodlust is the hope that our brutality to animals is not fixed and immutable, that humans can somehow recapture the innocence they enjoyed before the Fall. This is the lighter counterpart to the dark pessimism of an Alcott or Rolland.

Alien as it now seems, the Pythagorean cosmology of a living, breathing universe, eternal, divine, and unitary, affirms a kindredness of spirit among all living things. If our souls transmigrate to animals, we "winged spirits are evermore the same, though passing always to ever-changing bodies." Thus from a cosmology strange to us today springs a declaration of the unity of life that in various forms is expressed by many writers of this collection—Albert Schweitzer, for one, Howard Moore for another. Rolland describes Jean-Christophe looking into the eyes of the beasts and seeing "a soul like his own, a soul which could not speak." Out of this sense of kindredness comes the ethical conviction that "the continual endeavor of man should be to lessen the sum of suffering and cruelty" even if we cannot eliminate it.

Human duty is more obscure when no golden age casts its glow on the darker present. In his nineteenth-century *La bible de l'humanité*, Jules Michelet, who saw no escape from the killing of animals for food, nonetheless insisted that "the animals below us have also their rights before God. Animal life, somber mystery!

Immense world of thoughts and of dumb sufferings! All nature protests against the barbarity of man, who misapprehends, who humiliates, who tortures his inferior brethren. Life—Death! . . . Let us hope that there may be another globe in which the base, the cruel fatalities of this may be spared to us.” In this pained witness to animal suffering, Michelet implores us at least to forego the pretense of justification for slaughter. If we cannot refrain from killing for food, we can at least cease defending the act, a diminished ethical duty certainly, but an ethical duty nonetheless.

In Richard Wagner’s letter to Mathilde Wesendonck another stark sense of ethical obligation emerges. As he reflects on the fate of the lower animals, who are denied the ability to transcend their suffering and achieve that stoical resignation attainable at least in principle by human beings, Wagner remarks that “all I see—with a sense of my own tormented despair—is their absolute, redemptionless suffering without any higher purpose, their only release being death. . . . And so, if this suffering can have a purpose, it is simply to awaken a sense of fellow-suffering in man, who thereby absorbs the animal’s defective existence, and becomes the redeemer of the world by recognizing the error of all existence.” A gloomy ethical imperative, indeed, but profound in the moral burden it places upon humankind. To shake people out of their complacency, their ignorance—“to make them feel life’s great anguish”—this is what is morally required, if there is no hope of eliminating such suffering.

### **“The Lamb is Fat”**

Alphonse De Lamartine describes in his autobiographical *Confidences* his first realization that butchers kill. As a child he was once given a pet lamb and grew to love it “with that first fondness which little children and young animals naturally have for one another.” But one fateful day the family cook announced to his mother: “Madam, the lamb is fat, and the butcher has come for it; must I give it to him?” Spared by the child’s anguish, the lamb remained alive. Lamartine’s mother later took him through the yard of a slaughterhouse, trusting that his instinctive revulsion would reinforce the horror of the “shameful human infirmity” of carnivorousness. Horror and pity he indeed felt, “a repugnance, based on reason, to cooked flesh,” along with a sober sense of lost innocence. This theme of first awak-

ening to violence, of lost innocence, like first awakenings to sexual knowledge, haunts vegetarian literature. Not only Lamartine, but Mandeville, William Alcott, and Tolstoy, among others, all dwell on the metamorphosis of vision caused by witnessing animal slaughter. "It is such as *you* makes such as *us*"—so Henry Salt has the butcher say. Primal and terrifying, the slaughterhouse becomes indelibly inscribed upon consciousness and the source of deepest moral protest in vegetarian literature. Tolstoy, in his vivid descriptions of visiting a slaughterhouse, concentrates as much on the slaughterer as the slaughtered when he protests not only the cruelty and pain experienced by animals, but also the dreadful suppression in humans of "the highest spiritual capacity—that of sympathy and pity toward living creatures. . . ." We are kindred enough to animals to empathize with their helplessness and pain, yet capable of withholding all pity. The dissonance between these responses reveals, especially for witnesses of animal slaughter, the paradox of our violence toward animals: are we the slaughterer or the slaughtered? Terrifying in the absolute power the slaughterer represents and the absolute powerlessness of the animal awaiting slaughter, the slaughterhouse reveals a larger, unbearable truth about life itself—that we too are subject to such power, not just at moments of violent crime and accident, but in the remorseless movement of all living things toward death. The animal suffers and in that suffering embodies more than its own destiny. Thus the slaughterhouse instructs.

### **"Disciplined Passion"**

Instead of focusing on questions of virtue and moral purity, contemporary philosophical defenses of ethical vegetarianism wrestle, with "disciplined passion," over the more formal question of just what the wrongness is in our killing of animals for food. Is it the denial it represents of the inherent value of animal life? Is it the suffering it causes to kindred creatures? Is it the way in which modern agribusiness mass-produces animals for consumption, the way in which it masks suffering with "smiling cows, dancing pigs, and laughing chickens"? Is it the ecological damage done by factory farming, its despoliation of land and squandering of natural resources? Each of these interpretations has been argued for by recent proponents of ethical vegetarianism.

Such diverse contemporary positions seem far removed from more traditional questions about moral purity and the good life asked by earlier writers. Yet although these modern queries focus on considerations of animal rights and interests, concerns about global ecology, and claims that the slaughter of animals reflects wider forms of political and gender oppression, much of their moral force stems from the same commitment to living justly and well evident in the writings of a Plutarch, Goldsmith, or Tolstoy.

A case in point is the work of Tom Regan. His defense of vegetarianism, based on the rigorously argued premise that animals possess a right to life analogous to the one claimed by humans, carries with it a call both for justice toward animals and moral reformation on our part. He believes that reason, not sentiment or emotion, compels this conclusion. Yet the very rationality of Regan's approach is infused with what he describes as "disciplined passion," a fervent conviction that "the whole creation groans under the weight of the evil we humans visit upon these mute, powerless creatures." This combination of rigorous analysis and disciplined passion is characteristic of other recent arguments for vegetarianism as well, from Peter Singer's thesis that their ability to suffer shows that animals deserve moral consideration, to Carol Adams' linkage of women's oppression with the oppression of livestock.

Contemporary defenders of ethical vegetarianism not only share with earlier writers a passion for justice and the moral life. In the company of ancient proponents of vegetarianism such as Plutarch and Porphyry, they likewise tend to reject the claim that there are essential moral differences between humans and animals—although contemporary writers do so more on the basis of a formal egalitarianism than a Pythagorean sense of the unity of all creation. They accordingly attack what traditionally has been the source of most defenses of our use of animals for food—that in some key characteristic human beings differ from animals in a way that justifies human exploitation of animals.

Regardless of the specific lines of argumentation taken by the authors in this volume, no perceptive reader can fail to see that the ultimate concern which inspires them is animal suffering. Their deep-seated moral ideal of nonviolence rebels against the slaughter of animals for food. Their fundamental intuition that suffering is an evil protests against the perpetuation of panicked death in the slaughterhouse so that human appetite can be pleased. Their hor-



ror at the natural cruelty that “makes the whole creation groan” is too fierce for them to tolerate the additional needless cruelties of factory farming. Compassion for animal suffering, revulsion at human violence: without these abiding themes in the literature of ethical vegetarianism, arguments from justice and virtue would have considerably less force.

**“The waves of the sea, like banditti seize”**

The suffering of animals at human hands, for all its cruelty and callousness, is dwarfed by the suffering that all living creatures endure from life itself. “The waves of the sea, like banditti seize and appropriate . . . with the same accompaniments of stripping, wounding, and killing as their human antitypes,” Mill writes. Life is profligate, destruction prevalent. Species are extinguished by forces of nature, disease and predation diminish animal life even further by painful death, and chance and accident prevail in the struggle of every creature to survive. Michelet is right to remind us of the inevitability—the “cruel fatality”—of this spectacle of death in life.

But there is no reason to conclude that our destiny is to collaborate with nature’s cruelty. Surely Mill’s claim to the contrary that we ought perpetually to strive to amend the course of nature, even if in the end our accomplishment is small, better resonates with our deepest sensibilities. From these sensibilities are born ethical reflection and the determination to seek through argument, metaphor, and regimens of purification a different way to coexist with animals and to rise above that which, natural or not, has long been human habit. To ponder human violence and “animal life, somber mysteries” is to ponder the mystery of life itself and to seek ways to live well amidst nature’s harshness, our own nature, and animal suffering. The writings here gathered are as much reflections on life’s history and meaning as they are on how and why we ought to live a life of ethical vegetarianism.