

## *Dietethics: Its Influence on Future Farming Patterns\**

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Ecological studies now embrace considerations unthinkable in orthodox circles a few years ago. Not only our use for, but our treatment of, animals is at last being seen as a legitimate area for investigation.

But of all the ways in which we have exploited and ill-treated other species, their use for human food has until recently been the most overlooked. Now, however, enquiry into our ethical obligations to the many creatures we directly or indirectly consume has become so strong a concern that it perhaps deserves the label (and I fear we live in a labelled age) of Dietethics. That is, the study of the ethics of diet.

These ethics, let it be stressed, relate not only to the animals we eat, but also to the world's malnourished and starving human millions. In order that the affluent nations may enjoy the meat and dairy products that have long been the focal point of their dietary patterns, vast quantities of grain must be fed to cattle. It is not an over-simplification to say that if we abandoned the grossly wasteful habit of eating our plants via the bodies of animals, there need be no starving people in the world today.

Thankfully, such facts are being recognized, not only by previously unconcerned laymen but also in academic and scientific circles. What is more, there is a growing tendency to correlate these various realizations, rather than treat them in isolation.

Indeed, there appears to be increasing acceptance of the view that the science of ecology stands—or should stand—for a concept of life and values in which the practical, the ethical and the philosophical elements are given equal weight. Now that our exploitation of the natural world is at last being seen to be inextricably bound up with the exploitation of our fellow men and women, we are possibly entering a new age in which the understanding we term "ecology" may have an effect similar in many respects to that compound of wonder, knowledge and fierce inner need for an explanation, a sense of direction, and a framework of behavior, that in the past prompted notions of the Deity.

However, there are still many problems and mental blockages to be overcome. While convinced of the value of communication, and of the need to focus on points of accord rather than on our smaller differences, I think it relevant to warn that although ecological concerns have brought wider understanding of the inter-relations of all species, progress—at least through what we now call the media—is being hampered and misdirected by those whose personal habit patterns influence them more strongly than any rational desire to accept scientific fact, or to arrive at an objective view of our obligations to other sentient life.

The current interest in self-sufficiency is in many respects very welcome, but among its more vociferous spokesmen are those whose concern seems to be more with scale than with any genuine reappraisal of our basic attitudes to other species. These spokesmen include both urban sentimentalizers and pastoral ecomystics, whose determination to cling to the basic diet that until now has been made so easily available by the meat and dairy industries, has provoked their hot defence of "backyard" stock-rearing. That such regression may be possible for some during a transitional period is not denied, but in the long term it is an unrealistic dream for any but a tiny minority; a compromise aimed at reducing rather than eliminating unnecessary cruelty; a measure motivated more by expediency than by compassion.

Perhaps a more dangerous viewpoint needing identification is that expressed by those who

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\* RICHARD RYDER & DAVID PATERSON (eds.), *Animal Rights: A Symposium*. London: Centaur Press, 1979.

conduct anachronistic but popular campaigns to justify the behavioral deficiencies of the most mis-educated members of our species. Commentators in this field would have us believe that the impulse to kill is an innate part of man's biological make-up, and that meat and many of its by-products are necessities, rather than mere wants for which there are ample alternatives. One comes across such nonsensical assertions as that "we should be doing something biologically unnatural if we all became herbivores" (Michael Crawford: *Earth in Danger*).

Most Aunt Sallies of this ilk are already flat on their backs. It is doubtful whether any balanced observer will leave this conference with the illusion that there can be any rational, scientific, aesthetic, instinctual, moral or philosophical justification for our treatment of the creatures we wish to eat. Nevertheless, we must identify and deal with the specious arguments of those who at heart seek no fundamental alteration in long-established patterns of habit.

To turn to practicalities, what feasible alternative is there to the present dominant stock-farming economy governing our eating patterns in the West? I suggest there is no doubt that the only alternative in the long term (and it is the long term we must keep constantly in mind) is vegan farming. This is not to suggest that it is practicable to bring orthodox farming policies to a halt overnight as some of the more hysterically anti-progress lobbies seem to fear. Today's butchers and farmers need not fear for their livelihoods now or in the near future. Fundamental change invariably comes slowly. But they, with us, should face that the only ethical and lastingly workable future economy must be based on farming methods which are solely directed to the growing and consuming of plant foods. There can be no eventual place in such an economy for animals bred under man's control to satisfy his acquired taste for eating their bodies.

These are the first brush-strokes of a rather different picture to that painted by those dinosaurian pragmatists who continue to seek solutions based on animal exploitation. The don't-knock-meat lobby plans actually to *extend* our cruelties by massive programs for farming wild animals on top of a continuing policy of supporting domestic breeds on high protein foods that should go directly, and with far more responsible use of land resources, to humans. Such planning, if we take that vital long-term view, is the opposite of what conservation and ecological studies should be about. It is part and parcel of big agri-business that has spawned such recent developments as the production of protein for animal food from a derivative of natural gas, for the squalid purpose that intensively-reared livestock may continue to bring ever-greater profits to an industry still reluctant to read the writing on the wall.

Many people associate the term "conservationist" with a caring and concerned regard for our environment. But conservationists' pleas for the preservation of wild species need rigorous examination. Preservation for what? Too often, for man to crop them with no more pity than he feels lifting turnips. When I hear the word "conservation" I know that someone is reaching for his gun. If our only motive in conserving certain species is man's long-term benefit, then it would be more compassionate to encourage their earliest possible extinction.

I see no realistic long-term alternative to a world whose natural resources are regarded as factors with which we have to collaborate—not dominate—in order to take our proper place in the scheme of things. I suggest the reasons for this are not only expedient, but evolutionary. The cold arrogance of those who wish man to have self-interested mastery over everything he regards as beneath him is an out-of-date and short-sighted perversion of our responsibilities and potentialities.

However idealistic it may now seem to some, it is surely our role to envisage and work towards a world which is sanely and humanely controlled, not exploited, by those with the vision and humility to question established mores. I say "humility" because it is the arrogance born of long habit and entrenched prejudice that seeks to defend behavioral patterns that have long been a matter of comfortable acceptance for a privileged minority at the expense of the rest of the

world.

It seems inevitable that sooner or later nations must collaborate to restrict populations to a size that will enable them to be fed on the many and adequate forms of plant life, while at the same time adopting those policies of deurbanization and deindustrialization that environmentalists are now recognizing to be essential. Indeed, although this is not the place to argue the matter, for it is hardly an arguable or neglected proposition, the fate of the whole world depends upon our species's success in controlling its numbers. No plague or pestilence is a greater threat than the infestation of humanity.

The symbiosis that could and should exist between man and his environment depends upon our adoption of a dietary system in keeping with our physiological structure. Whatever our spiritual potentialities may be (and I have no qualification to deny that they may be infinite), it is accepted fact that physically man is "by design" neither carnivorous nor omnivorous. He is a frugivore, "intended" to eat the fruits, nuts, shoots and other plant foods that form the basis of the normal diet of those great apes that are our nearest relatives. What habits some members of our species have got into since climatic and other factors supervened is neither here nor there. We know too much to suggest seriously that we can bring anything but benefit to ourselves and our environment by returning so far as is possible to that dietary system for which we are chemically and physiologically constituted.

In the gradual relinquishment of animal husbandry in favor of vegan farming methods, silviculture is an area of enormous potential. The important recent book *Forest Farming*, by J. Sholto Douglas and Robert A. de J. Hart, unfortunately failed to make clear that if we give up farming animals, a silvicultural/agricultural world economy could support even today's populations and provide such an abundance of land that a balanced and sane husbandry could be re-established, based on organic methods and bringing to an end the present vicious spiral of artificial fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Indeed, the book's findings may well be manipulated by those seeking ways of further prolonging an omnivorous economy by tapping sources of high plant protein for feeding to livestock. This is why the ethics of diet must lead, not be led by, the economics and expediences of the situation. Nevertheless, its findings confirm that the yields from farming food-bearing trees are far greater even than from conventional ground crops, and infinitely in excess of the meager returns from farming animals. Responsibly employed, such facts can herald an age as near to the elysian as anything that man in his present state of evolution has any right to expect.

Can the people who are thinking along these lines any longer be regarded as impractical cranks? I think not. Compare the following extract from literature put out by the Vegan Society of the U.K. with what *is* currently being stated (often as though it were some astonishing new discovery!) by respected orthodox nutritionists, ecologists and agriculturalists:

"The age of man the ruthless predator is coming to an end. He is wasting his resources and fouling his nest. It is imperative that those who are alive to the enormous challenge of the environmental crisis, go forward (not 'back to nature') to pioneer a way of life that is attainable by all the world's people and sustainable within natural cycles. Wise land use is of primary importance. What is required is a change from traditional agriculture to intensive horticulture, with careful composting of all wastes with plant materials to keep the land in good heart without animal manure or artificial fertilizers. The landscape of a vegan world would show small fields of cereals, fruits, vegetables and compost-producing plants surrounded by shelter-belts of fruit and nut-bearing trees. Hill slopes and other areas unsuitable for cultivation would be used for trees of all types, as a renewable source of fuel and raw material for many purposes, as well as for their function in maintaining the environment. One-sixth to one-third of an acre per head would be required for the vegan diet. Even in densely populated England, which has nearly an acre for each inhabitant, wide areas would be left for wild life and recreation."

Let us consider for a moment what the habit of meat-eating involves in terms of the world's food supplies. It means the extensive growing of crops, notably grain, in order to feed them to animals from which, after an expensive interval, we take back in exchange an absurdly disproportionate quantity of food in a form that we hallow, quite incorrectly, as being superior to the plant life from which it was derived. In addition to being fed the corn that requires great tracts of the world's land supply, the animals themselves, even in these days of "factory-farming," still need further huge areas for pasture. About four-fifths of the world's agricultural land is used for feeding animals, and only about one-fifth for feeding man directly. Most of the fertile land devoted to cattle could show a much quicker and more economical return if used for crops suitable for direct feeding to human beings. On average, animals eat twenty pounds of protein for every pound they yield as meat. In comparing plant with animal food production in terms of yields per acre in less developed and more developed countries, it has been shown that:

"The plant protein production from cereals and pulses was three to six times the production of milk protein from the same area under the same conditions. For plant protein from leafy vegetables it was seven to twelve times. When these plant/animal ratios were measured against meat protein they were approximately doubled. On the average, about a fifth of the plant protein fed to animals becomes available for human consumption as milk, and about a tenth of it is turned into meat." (*Plant Foods for Human Nutrition*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Pergamon Press).

The ratios and methods of calculation vary a good deal, and I have discussed them in more depth in my book *Food For a Future*. But the conclusion is always the same—that the world's human populations could more responsibly and economically be fed directly on plant life. Meat can be phased out (a process governed by demand) just as other forms of food and consumer goods have come and gone in obedience to fashion and the fluctuations of climate and natural resources. So, too, can the trades that depend on animal foods.

So far from vegetarianism springing from the anthropomorphism of predominantly urban dwellers, as has been suggested by its more superficial critics, it and its inevitable successor veganism are increasingly being recognized as a logical, even inescapable, process, essentially relevant, essentially practical, essentially compassionate to all species; the province no longer of the so-called crank, but of scientists and philosophers and clear-thinking laymen.

The practical details of a switch to a farming economy based on plants as the immediate source of mankind's food are well within our competence to grasp and implement. We are within sight of the day when crop rotation, multiple cropping, and adequate land for resting periods, for green manuring, for cover crops, and for the supply of composting materials will have placed the whole sad and shameful practice of stock-rearing, with all its attendant evils, in the annals of an extravagant and barbaric past. The changeover requires only—or, at least, above all—a change of heart and a conscious decision to rethink our educational priorities.

And therein lies the key. It is only by education that these fundamental changes can come about. This has been mentioned during the conference, but too little stressed. Those of us now in adult life must surely recognize that it is the rising generations who most need to be convinced of such basics as the paramount necessity for preventing the infestation of our own species, and for a truly and less selectively compassionate regard for our total environment. The answers lie always with the young. We must educate them away from becoming yet another generation of dinosaurs—a species which, let it be remembered, abandoned flesh-eating for a herbivorous diet too late in the day to avoid extinction!