

## *The Dubious Right to Eat Flesh\**

WILLIAM PALEY

By the General Rights of Mankind, I mean the rights which belong to the species collectively, the original stock, as I may say, which they have since distributed among themselves. These are,

### I. A right to the fruits or vegetable produce of the earth.

The insensible parts of the creation are incapable of injury; and it is nugatory to inquire into the right, where the use can be attended with no injury. But it may be worth observing, for the sake of an inference which will appear below, that, as God has created us with a want and desire of food, and provided things suited by their nature to sustain and satisfy us, we may fairly presume, that he intended we should apply them to that purpose.

### II. A right to the flesh of animals.

This is a very different claim from the former. Some excuse seems necessary for the pain and loss which we occasion to brutes, by restraining them of their liberty, mutilating their bodies, and at last putting an end to their lives, which we suppose to be their all, for our pleasure or conveniency.

The reasons alleged in vindication of this practice, are the following: that the several species of brutes being created to prey upon one another, affords a kind of analogy to prove that the human species were intended to feed upon them; that, if let alone, they would overrun the earth, and exclude mankind from the occupation of it; that they are requited for what they suffer at our hands, by our care and protection.

Upon which reasons I would observe, that *the analogy* contended for is extremely lame; since brutes have no power to support life by any other means, and since we have; for the whole human species might subsist entirely upon fruit, pulse, herbs, and roots, as many tribes of Hindoos actually do. The two other reasons may be valid reasons, as far as they go; for, no doubt, if man had been supported entirely by vegetable food, a great part of those animals which die to furnish his table, would never have lived: but they by no means justify our right over the lives of brutes to the extent in which we exercise it. What danger is there, for instance, of fish interfering with us, in the use of their element? Or what do *we* contribute to their support or preservation?

It seems to me, that it would be difficult to defend this right by any arguments which the light and order of nature afford; and that we are beholden for it to the permission recorded in Scripture, Gen. ix. 1,2,3: "And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth: and the fear of you, and the dread of you, shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered: Every moving think shall be meat for you; even as the green herb, have I given you all things." To Adam and his posterity had been granted, at the creation, "every green herb for meat," and nothing more. In the last clause of the passage now produced, the old grant is recited, and extended to the flesh of animals: "even as the green herb, have I give you all things." But this was not till after the flood; the inhabitants of the antediluvian world had therefore no such permission, that we know of. Whether they actually refrained from the flesh of animals, is another question. Abel, we read, was a keeper of sheep; and for what purpose he kept them, but for food, is difficult to say (unless it were for sacrifices). Might not, however, some of the stricter sects among the

---

\* Excerpted from *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, Boston: Richardson & Lord, 1825, pp. 76-78.

antediluvians be scrupulous as to this point? And might not Noah and his family be of this description? For it is not probable that God would publish a permission, to authorize a practice which had never been disputed.

Wanton, and, what is worse, studied cruelty to brutes, is certainly wrong, as coming within none of these reasons.