

## *Against Vivisection\**

RICHARD WAGNER

[W]hen first it dawned on human wisdom that the same thing breathed in animals as in mankind, it appeared too late to avert the curse which, ranging ourselves with the beasts of prey, we seemed to have called down upon us through the taste of animal food: disease and misery of every kind, to which we did not see mere vegetable-eating men exposed. The insight thus obtained led further to the consciousness of a deep-seated guilt in our earthly being: it moved those fully seized therewith to turn aside from all that stirs the passions, through free-willed poverty and total abstinence from animal food. To these wise men the mystery of the world unveiled itself as a restless tearing into pieces, to be restored to restful unity by nothing save compassion. His pity for each breathing creature, determining his every action, redeemed the sage from all the ceaseless change of suffering existences, which he himself must pass until his last emancipation. Thus the pitiless was mourned by him for reason of his suffering, but most of all the beast, whose pain he saw without knowing it capable of redemption through pity. This wise man could but recognise that the reasonable being gains its highest happiness through free-willed suffering, which he therefore seeks with eagerness, and ardently embraces; whereas the beast but looks on pain, so absolute and useless to it, with dread and agonised rebellion. But still more to be deplored that wise man deemed the human being who consciously could torture animals and turn a deaf ear to their pain, for he knew that such a one was infinitely farther from redemption than the wild beast itself, which should rank in comparison as sinless as a saint.

Races driven to rawer climates, and hence compelled to guard their life by animal food, preserved till quite late times a feeling that the beasts did not belong to them, but to a deity; they knew themselves guilty of a crime with every beast they slew or slaughtered, and had to expatiate it to the god: they offered up the beast, and thanked the god by giving him the fairest portions of the spoil. What here was a religious sentiment survived in later philosophers, born after the ruin of religions, an axiom of humanity: one has only to read Plutarch's splendid treatise "On Reason in the Beasts of Land and Sea," to return with a tingle of shame to the precepts of our men of science.

Up to here, but alas! no further, can we trace the religious basis of our human forbears' sympathy with animals, and it seems that the march of civilization, by making him indifferent to "the *God*," turned man himself into a raging beast of prey. . . . [Now] our creed is: "Animals are useful; particularly if, trusting in our sanctuary, they yield themselves into our hands. Come let us therefore make of them what we deem good for human use; we have the right to martyr a thousand faithful dogs the whole day long, if we can thereby help one human creature to the cannibal well-being of five hundred swine."

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\* *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*. Translated by William Ashton Ellis, Volume 6: *Religion and Art*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1897, pp. 201-207.