

Man is Not a Meat-Eating Animal: Vegetarians and Evolution in Late-Victorian Britain

Say, puss, was it hard to surrender
The taste that preferred
The succulent mouse and the tender
And delicate bird,
The cat's meat seductive and juicy,
The casual rat?
O grave, philosophical pussy!
("Vegetarian Cat")

Featured in an 1893 edition of the comic newspaper *Funny Folks*, the story of "The Vegetarian Cat" describes an unusually earnest feline who forgoes meat in favour of "cucumbers and beans". Having managed to resist the temptations of "succulent" mice and "delicate" birds, the cat undergoes a transformation of temperament: usually to be found "yelling at night on the roof" these "riotous tendencies" are quietened by the "mild vegetarian diet" to which it now strictly adheres ("Vegetarian Cat"). Victorian readers would have been amused by the notion of a cucumber-eating kitty, but they may have also enjoyed the tale as part of a long-running satire on the absurdities of the vegetarian movement. Whether in the form of fake newspaper reports, bawdy rhymes or amusing songs, *Funny Folks* extracted a good deal of comic material from the pious follies and wrong-headed enthusiasms of dietary reformers. The cartoon "Vegetarian Vagaries", serialised through the 1880s, depicted the everyday conundrums of meat-free living: sheep rescued from the abattoir become household pets, a bowl of salad must be avoided because slugs were harmed in its preparation, a pair of non-leather vegetable-derived boots sprout grassy shoots and an especially dedicated root-eater "evolves" into a turnip.¹ Likewise, the story of the vegetarian cat pushed dietary idealism to a farcical extreme to expose the absurdities of human bean-eaters. Yet the case of the meat-avoiding puss speaks of more than a satirical tradition. Though clearly not intended as serious commentary, the strange tale does raise a number of questions ---regarding the impact of environment on physiological adaptation, the role of diet in species development and the moral capacity of non-human animals--- that vegetarians were also keen to address.

The fantasy of a predator made mild by a change of regimen can be traced back to humoral theories of balance that elevated diet as a key determinant of character, but the metamorphosis of the "Vegetarian Cat" was underpinned by more contemporary scientific thinking. By its publication, evolutionary theory had emerged as the dominant paradigm for interpreting the natural world and the rhyme is grounded in the language of race and adaptation. For their part, vegetarians made key contributions to the public conversation provoked by the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859. Recognising its potential to re-orientate relations between humans and animals, some advocates took up the language of common origins to bolster the meat-free cause, while others offered less carnivorous readings of natural selection. These discussions were not

¹ "Vegetarian Vagaries" was printed in *Funny Folks*, 13 March 1880 and 1 July 1884

usually held directly with evolutionary biologists: when asked for his views on the vegetable diet by the German economist Karl Hochberg, Darwin admitted that he had not given the subject “special thought” and generally it received little attention from the scientific establishment (“Reply to a Vegetarian”). Among a more general readership, however, the topic of meat-eating and its relation to evolution recurred as a point of fierce contention: did proof of common ancestry broaden the scope of cannibalism? Would the insights of comparative anatomy reveal man to be an omnivore or a fruitarian? Especially pressing was the question of human-animal kinship: what the renegotiation of this relationship might mean for dining practices, but also how it might shift conceptions of subjectivity and responsibility. The imaginary of the natural was essential to the vegetarian movement, but the absorption of animals —especially those of a carnivorous persuasion— into their philosophy was not always straightforward and some struggled to reconcile instinctual rapacity with bestial innocence. More troubling still were the implications of the survival of the fittest, a doctrine that threatened to embed meat eating as a part of a ruthless natural order. In response, vegetarians were among the most vocal proponents of alternative readings of natural selection that emphasized the importance of co-operation and altruism in furthering the progress of the species. Despite their sustained engagement with its possibilities and problems, little attention has been paid to their contributions to the history of evolutionary science. In answer, this article looks to uncover a range of flesh-free perspectives, on diet and comparative anatomy, animal kinship and predation, natural selection and mutual aid, which foregrounded the issue of consumption.

The Victorians did not invent vegetarianism, but they did establish it as an organised and public movement for the first time.² The inauguration of the Vegetarian Society in 1847 transformed abstinence from a private endeavour into a political cause, one that drew support from working and middle-class campaigners, religious dissenters, temperance advocates and labour activists. Though it would be misleading to suggest that food reform did not attract any conservative followers, adherence to the diet was usually taken as a culinary expression of progressive politics. Writing on the inauguration of *The Vegetarian* in 1888, for instance, its editor promised readers a “radical, yet rational reformer, cutting at the roots of our national vices and sorrows”, and the periodical’s expansive remit extended to discussions of socialism, spiritualism and female suffrage (Hills 6). Vegetarianism was implicated in a wide range of social issues, but its ethical center was shaped by the problem of cruelty and reformers aligned their cause with the welfare agenda pursued by organizations like the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). Expressed elsewhere in the rise of the zoophilist movement and anti-vivisection activism, meat-free philosophy was celebrated, by some, as evidence of a compassionate turn in British society.³ Certainly, the image of the suffering animal was a key component of vegetarian propaganda, which touched on subjects as diverse as the muzzling of dogs, the immorality of fur coats, the horrors of the slaughterhouse and the evil of blood sports. Animals also appeared in more sentimental

² See Tristram Stuart *The Bloodless Revolution* (2006) and Colin Spencer’s *The Heretic’s Feast* (1993) for a longer history of the meat-free diet.

³ See James C. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (2000) on the rise of the animal welfare movement in Britain and their relationship with the Vegetarian Society.

guises and the movement's literature featured tales of loyal pets, mistreated innocents and noble beasts, whose natural virtue was set in contrast to the learned savagery of modern man. Pitiful stories of animal pain could be used to convert carnivores, but they also served to re-affirm the rectitude of the cause more widely. As James Gregory has argued, welfare constituted the "ethical dimension" of vegetarianism, without which it risked being reduced to a "merely hygienic" concern (88). There existed a broad consensus among activists as to the central position of the animal in their credo, but thinking was divided on the finer nuances of this relationship. Such views were informed by a host of diverse religious, political, cultural and scientific considerations, and eventually by the language of natural selection.

Vegetarians were, of course, not alone in their fascination with the evolutionary insurrection set off by *On the Origin of the Species*. Indeed, as a wealth of scholarship has demonstrated, the popularization of theories of common descent and the transmutation of species fundamentally re-orientated human-animal relations. As Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay propose in *Victorian Animal Dreams* (2004), the effect of "Darwin's ideas were to make the human more animal and the animal more human, destabilising boundaries in both directions"; an ontological shudder that reverberated far beyond biology and into the fields of medicine, psychology, politics and literature (2). In her ground-breaking *Animal Estate* (1987), Harriet Ritvo argues that not only were debates about animals closely tied to key social and moral issues, but that this discourse "expressed many human concerns linked only tenuously to the natural world", and as such constituted a kind of "rhetorical practice" used to code and illuminate identity (4). Animals, in other words, served as metaphors through which human anxieties, attitudes and beliefs were mediated. Which is not to elide the material bonds that existed between people and the creatures ---dogs, horses, livestock--- who populated the everyday world, but rather to point to the persistence of the imagination in humanity's relationship with the rest of animate creation.⁴ The weighting of this dynamic shifted significantly at the turn of the nineteenth century, with the advent of methods of scientific observation that rendered nature increasingly comprehensible and quantifiable. With this new-found mastery came a change in the position of animals from autonomous subjects to objects of ownership, cruelty or kindness. Furthered by the growth of city living and the urban remove from livestock farming, nineteenth-century Britons cultivated a new attitude to the animal world that placed emphasis on control and moral responsibility.

Given the scope of research dedicated to the history of evolutionary theory, it is notable that very little has been said on how questions of meat-eating and meat-avoidance contributed to its development. After all, the issue of consumption, of who eats and who is eaten, was and remains, fundamental to the structuring of human-animal relations. Darwin's observation, made in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), that the "difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind", unsettled the longstanding Cartesian dismissal of all non-human

⁴ This is one of the key insights from the field of animal studies. See Donna Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (1993).

animals as unthinking, unfeeling automaton. The assertion that the “lower animals” experience emotions, like “love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason”, necessitated a re-drawing of tautological boundaries and vegetarianism contributed a great deal to this re-negotiation (85). This involved challenging as well as popularising the tenets of evolution: pushing the theory of common origins to the extreme, disputing the necessity of predation in the natural world, pressing science to consider more critically the practice of meat-eating in relation to kinship and the possibility of further human development.

1.

Cucumber-eating cats were not confined to the pages of comic magazines. A short report for the *Blackburn Standard* in 1890 described a cat who preferred “raw potato” to meat; the *Shields Daily News* described a Persian who refused fish but was much taken with mushrooms; the *Yorkshire Evening Post* told of a family in London who were raising their pet on green beans, and *Pearson’s Weekly* reported on the progress of a “maiden lady residing in Hampstead” who had some success in training her cat to treat a “plump mouse with indifference”.⁵ The eating habits of these cats were newsworthy because they transgressed the carnivorousness of the species and newspaper reports paid special attention to the finer details of their temperate daily repast. Significantly, descriptions of regimen were usually accompanied by commentary on how the avoidance of flesh food had altered temperament: once a keen-eyed predator, the vegetarian cat became a benign creature, friendly with birds and at peace with mice. These reformed felines fed a broader fascination with instances of cross-species amicability, where natural enemies became allies or predators befriended their prey. Alongside children’s books and sentimental paintings, scenes of animal harmony formed the basis of street entertainments like the “Happy Families” shows documented by Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849-1851, 1861). Usually to be found on Waterloo Bridge or by the National Gallery, these travelling carts contained numerous species of animals living in harmony with one another. The showman interviewed by Mayhew boasted an impressively diverse family of “3 cats, 2 dogs (a terrier and a spaniel), 2 monkeys, 2 magpies, 2 jackdaws, 2 jays, 10 starlings (some of them talk), 6 pigeons, 2 hawks, 2 barn fowls, 1 screech owl, 5 common-sewer rats, 5 white rats (a novelty), 8 guinea-pigs, 2 rabbits (1 wild and 1 tame), 1 hedgehog, and 1 tortoise” (214). The lesson imparted by “Happy Families”, that we should look to the animal kingdom for guidance, also informed literary representations by figures like Edward Lear and Rudyard Kipling, whose stories and poems similarly presented examples of inter-species co-operation for the edification of their young readers. Like the cat made mild by a vegetable diet, depictions of animal kindness schooled children in compassion and fellow feeling.

Encountered through the eyes of Mowgli the man-cub, *The Jungle Book* (1894) presents one of the period’s most vividly imagined animal worlds and in its sequel Kipling directly addressed the question of beastly co-existence. Originally serialised in *The Pall Mall Budget*,

⁵ ‘Vegetarian Cat’, *Blackburn Standard* 1 November 1890, ‘Vegetarian Cat’, *Shields Daily News* 7 September 1893, ‘The Vegetarian Cat’, ‘A Vegetarian Cat’, *Yorkshire Evening Post* 14 March 1904, ‘Vegetarian Cat’, *Pearson’s Weekly* 20 August 1903

“How Fear Came to the Jungle” begins as a drought has forced a temporary truce between the plant and meat-eating animals who must now share the only remaining watering hole. When Shere Khan boasts of his plan to kill a man that evening, Hathi the Elephant tells Mowgli the story of how tigers got their stripes and why it is that they are permitted to kill men on one night every year. According to the elephant’s tale, the jungle animals had once lived together in harmony, until the peace was broken by the First of the Tigers and the Grey Ape. The tiger intruded on a dispute between two bucks, breaking one of their necks and bringing death to paradise, while the ape mocked his fellow creatures and brought shame to the jungle. After this period of misrule, the First of the Elephants decreed that henceforth the animals would know the fear of man. Hearing news of this, the tiger set out to kill the “hairless one”, but on his way he passed under some trees and their creepers marked him with the stripe his descendants still have. On discovering the bald animal standing on two legs inside a cave, the tiger ran away in shame of his marked coat. From then on, there would be one designated night a year when man would be afraid of the animals, but at all other times fear would rule over the inhabitants of the jungle (1-28). The story is a re-imagining of the Book of Genesis, which sees the jungle degrade from paradise to a land ruled by discord and dread. This descent is made legible, in part, by a change of diet. Where once plants had sustained all creatures, after the Fall some animals become predators and the rest become prey. Beyond biblical allegory, “How Fear Came to the Jungle” also alludes to a spiritual tradition that condemned the consumption of flesh as proof of humanity’s corrupt nature and urged abstinence as the path to righteousness. Drawn from the teachings of the early Christian church and images of the Golden Age lifted from Greek mythology, it identified autochthonous man by his close and egalitarian kinship with the rest of the animal kingdom. In Kipling’s telling, it is the tiger’s act of disobedience ---his killing a fellow creature--- that corrupts the innocence of the jungle by dividing Eaters of Grass from Eaters of Flesh.

The condemnation of meat eating as a form of spiritual desecration was a key strategy of the vegetarian movement. It shaped Romantic thinking on the rights of animals, underpinning influential texts like Joseph Ritson’s *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food* (1802) and George Nicholson’s *On the Primeval Diet of Man* (1801), which advocated dietary purity as a route back to the harmony with the natural world; and later this Edenic ideal informed the teetotalism practiced by religious sects like the Bible Christian Church in Salford and the Grahamites in North America, whose leaders pressed the spiritual imperative to avoid flesh foods.⁶ Such groups were foundational to establishing the Vegetarian Society in 1847, with figures like the Reverend William Cowherd and Amos Bronson Alcott instituting the prelapsarian ideal as a constitutive element of dietary reform. This radical religious vision was sustained throughout the century by prominent Christian vegetarians and spiritually inclined organizations like the Order of the Golden Age, but it also persisted outside of a theological context and came to inform broader thinking on the value of vegetarianism. In an increasingly industrialized and urbanized Britain, the notion that it might be possible to reconnect with the natural world through a change of diet took on deeper resonance. With the

⁶ I refer to the philosophical tradition that includes John Oswald’s *The Cry of Nature* (1791) and Thomas Young’s *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal* (1811). See Julia Twigg, ‘Food for Thought: Purity and Vegetarianism’, *Religion* 9 (Spring 1978) 13-35 for an analysis of the relation of temperance and spiritual purity to vegetarianism.

rise of evolutionary science came a transformation in the imagery and lexicons of the natural. Evolution had long circulated as a taxonomical model, present in the methods of biological classification introduced by Carl Linnaeus and in Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's writing on species transmutation, but it took until the mid-century for natural selection to emerge as the primary mechanism through which the process occurred. Following the insights of Thomas Robert Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Darwin noted that while all animal organisms reproduced in an increasing ratio, their numbers remained relatively constant and concluded that scarcity of resources must be key to managing populations. Characterized by a constant struggle for survival where the victorious reproduced and the weak died off, the process of natural selection foregrounded competition as a catalyst for successful adaptation. The harmonious world idealised by Christian vegetarians, where man and beast co-existed in plant-eating innocence, had little in common with this brutal vision of nature, but this did not dissuade reformers from putting evolution to work in debates over the meat-free diet.



A GENTLE VEGETARIAN.

“MORNING, MISS! WHO'D EVER THINK, LOOKING AT US TWO, THAT YOU DEVoured BULLOCKS AND SHEEP, AND I NEVER TOOK ANYTHING BUT RICE!”

Fig. 1 George Du Maurier, 'A Gentle Vegetarian', *Punch or the London Charivari*, March 6, 1869

Where abstinence from flesh had once been grounded in a vision of Edenic purity, reformers began adopting the language of comparative anatomy to argue that man was not truly a meat-eating animal. As far back as the eighteenth century, comparative anatomists had

been mapping patterns of biological affinity between man and the animals through the study of homologous and analogous structures. Culminating in the theory of common origins and specifically Thomas H. Huxley's work on our ape ancestry, human physiology was brought into increasingly close proximity with that of other creatures. This shift had significant religious and philosophical implications, but it also impacted on debates over the modern diet and its physiological basis. An 1869 issue of *Punch* featured a cartoon titled "A Gentle Vegetarian" that pictured a toothy hippopotamus addressing a delicate lady through the bars of his cage: "Who'd ever think, looking at us two, that you devoured bullocks and sheep, and I never took anything but rice!". This moment of cross-species communication bridged comparative anatomy with older thinking on food and temperament, with humour derived not only from the disparity in size but also disposition: the well-to-do young woman devours flesh, while the ferocious hippopotamus nibbles grain. The cartoon is a satire on the perceived association of vegetarianism with mildness of character, but by its publication advocates of the meat-free diet had begun to supplement this argument with insights from comparative anatomy that appeared to suggest that man was, at least originally, a plant-eater. This line of reasoning can be traced back to the observations of John Ray, the seventeenth-century founder of botany and zoology, who proposed that because human teeth are better suited to the eating of fruit than flesh, man is not naturally carnivorous (*Historia Plantarum*). While Ray's contemporaries viewed this as proof an Adamic diet long abandoned, nineteenth-century reformers cited his research as part of a growing body of evidence — derived from biology, anatomy, palaeontology--- that man was a vegetarian animal.

Though few identified with the gentle hippopotamus of *Punch*, reformers were keen to connect with other vegetable-eating species, particularly the great apes, and to disavow any association with meat-eating creatures. For example, in an 1888 article titled "Is the Flesh of Animals a Proper Food for Man?", George T. B. Watters cited "anatomical considerations" as proof that humans are naturally herbivorous: compare the 'teeth, stomach, liver and intestines' to that of a carnivorous animal and the difference becomes clear (243). Elsewhere, in the *Vegetarian Review* a contributor called on the "evidence supplied by Comparative Anatomy" to prove that vegetables are the "best food for man". Entreating the reader to consider the human mouth, in which teeth for grinding "grains" predominate, and where the biting teeth are "well adapted for nibbling fruits" but not equipped to deal with flesh, the article concludes that we are not "carnivorous, herbivorous or omnivorous, but frugivorous" (Field, 94). In his *Manifesto of Vegetarianism* (1911), C.P. Newcombe, the editor of the Vegetarian Society magazine and prominent temperance campaigner, called on the opinions of "professors of comparative anatomy" to argue that, judging by his teeth and digestive organs, man was "originally" vegetarian. "Man", Newcombe wrote, is "made an intelligent being of the first rank---he has not to catch his prey like a wolf; he has no claws with which to hold, nor fangs with which to tear" and as such, his digestive system is not adequately prepared to process flesh. According to Newcome, when humans eat meat it remains "detained too long in the system", slowly putrefying in the intestines and eventually becoming a source of disease (3-4). As Watter's complained, while the ape who "closely resembles man in anatomical structure" is wise enough to stick to a frugivorous diet, modern man insists on "consuming the flesh of birds, beasts and fish", which are often in a "state of

advanced decomposition” and remain largely indigestible (242). Here and elsewhere, the consumption of meat signified, beyond any moral concern for the welfare of animals or spiritual anxiety for the fate of the soul, simply a betrayal of basic biology.

Eating out of time with the stomach was the source of many of the debilitating health problems plaguing modern Britain. Diseases of civilization, like dyspepsia and weak nerves, were, reformers insisted, the result of ignoring evolutionary imperatives and continuing to consume indigestible flesh. This argument was made most often with reference to comparative anatomical structure, but it was also supported by the division of raw from cooked food. This separation, according to the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is analogous to the “transition” from nature to culture that cooking facilitates. Writing in the 1960s, he claimed that cooking not only symbolised control over nature, it also defined the “human state” (164). One hundred years earlier, Isabella Beeton made a similar distinction in her *Book of Household Management* (1861), between eating and dining. While all creatures eat, she wrote, it is “not a dinner at which sits the aboriginal Australian who gnaws his bone half bare” because “dining is the privilege of civilisation”. Envisaging a culinary ladder, where the “rank which people occupy in the grand scale may be measured by their way of taking their meals”, Beeton equated refined dining practices with cultural superiority (905). This served as a way of ordering races and nations, a hierarchy that the British inevitably dominated, but it also helped to sustain the boundary between human and animal: one dines while the other eats. Where for Beeton cooking was a means of bringing order to unruly nature, for some vegetarians the complexity of Victorian cuisine amounted to a denial of nature. The elaborate techniques of the middle-class kitchen, the endless seasonings and sauces was evidence, reformers argued, of how unappealing meat was to the human appetite. As Henry Salt, a prominent campaigner for animal rights, pointed out in 1899, if we had the same “instinctive” desire for raw flesh as we have for ripe fruit, then a “slaughter house would be more delightful than an orchard”. Instead we have an “innate horror of bloodshed”, confine abattoirs to back alleys and mask the taste of meat with gravy and salt (*Logic of Vegetarianism* 39). Picking up the theme in an article for the *Vegetarian Review* in 1895, Josiah Oldfield ---a physician and advocate of the fruitarian diet--- urged his readers to consider the natural appetites of children before they have been “taught” to enjoy flesh. Where the kitten “welcomes the squealing mouse as her food”, no child has “yet associated the plaintive bleat of the lamb [...] with satiated hunger” (24). No longer a sign of advancing civilisation, the dining table heaving with roasted joints and hearty stews was an indication of the decadence and degeneration of the age.

In an article for *Fraser's Magazine* Francis William Newman, a prominent supporter of many radical causes, offered a slightly more nuanced take on the question of cooking and nature. He acknowledged that the “roasting of flesh” had been necessary for “man in his barbarism” but insisted that as “evolution proceeds” the need to consume animals should gradually decrease (170-1). Elsewhere, the trajectory from meat-eating primitivism to vegetable-eating culture was mapped onto to an expansive evolutionary narrative that plotted the world's cultures and their peoples, past and present, along a scale from primitive to civilised. In an 1895 article, an historian of the vegetarian movement C.W. Forward, allowed

that the consumption of flesh might be necessary under certain “climatic conditions” and that as such the “Esquimaux”, like the “wandering tribes of old”, may be “exonerated for their carnivorous habits” (144). To persist in consuming flesh was, reformers argued, to swim against the tide of cultural development. “Man has”, the *Vegetarian Messenger* confidently asserted in 1888, “ascended not descended and those who come after us will undoubtedly be vegetarians”. Already positioned on a “higher step of the ladder of civilisation”, advocates of the meat-free diet claimed to forecast the future of the race (Cosmos 53). Vegetarianism was both the original diet of man, as evidenced by the latest discoveries in anatomical science, and the diet of a more advanced future. Evolutionary theory seemed to permit this dual temporality, by both stretching back into the primeval past and by setting in motion processes that would shape the future of the species. Non-human animals played complex and contradictory roles in these evolutionary stories: they appeared as blameless victims of human cruelty and creatures of higher nobility, but they were also characterised by violent instincts and lower passions. Where there is nothing particularly novel, for instance, in Oldfield’s identification of children with Edenic innocence, the comparisons he drew with mouse devouring kittens does raise questions as to how vegetarians interpreted the natural world and where exactly they placed themselves within it. The shattered utopia of “How the Fear Came” offered up an amenable version of meat-free paradise, but vegetarians were equally engaged by the taxonomic force of evolutionary theory that seemed to collapse the boundary between man and animal, calling into doubt the former’s assumed dominion over the latter.

2.

The tales collected in *The Jungle Books* (1894, 1895) and *Just So Stories* (1901) remain among the best-known depictions of animal life in Victorian fiction. Allegorical in tone, they present human archetypes in animal form: the inhabitants of the jungle reflect the passions and anxieties of their author and his age. Anthropomorphism is essential to the magic of Kipling’s stories, but not all readers have been charmed by the antics of lovable bears and wise elephants. Reviewing *The Jungle Book* in 1896, Salt complained that the author had simply “peopled” animals with his “own feelings” and thus reduced them to “pegs on which to hang human traits and habiliments”. Kipling was not, he acknowledged, alone in this folly. Rather it had been the tendency of most fiction to “represent animals as endowed with human desires”, while the scientific world —blinded by the desire for specimens— failed to recognise animals as “conscious, intelligent, self-centred beings” (“Among the Authors” 503). Worse than simply a failure of imagination, the refusal to recognise animals as individuals constituted a perceptual strategy that made it possible to mistreat, slaughter and consume them. In his 1997 lecture “The Animal That I Therefore Am (More to Follow)”, Jacques Derrida makes a similar observation regarding the ontology of animals. Humanity has sustained centuries of violence toward animals on the basis of language, because men have “given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond” (400). The word ‘animal’, Derrida argues, not only confines the vast

multiplicity of nonhuman life to a single category, it also makes brutality and domination justifiable. Along similar lines, Salt condemned Kipling for his blindness to the “great common qualities which belong to human and non-human alike” and urged readers to pursue a “profounder sympathy” with the rest of the natural world (504).

Five years earlier, in 1891, Salt had helped to establish a London-based campaign group whose ambitious aim was the eradication of suffering among all sentient beings. To this end, over the course of nearly two decades the Humanitarian League dedicated itself to a broad-ranging program of social reform. Salt was joined in this endeavour by the literary scholar Howard Williams, occultist Edward Maitland, novelist John Galsworthy, philosopher Edward Carpenter, and vegetarian reformers Ernest Bell and Alice Lewis. In addition to publishing two journals, *The Humanitarian* (1895-1919) and *The Humane Review* (1900-1910), the League also engaged in a number of progressive causes and drew membership from radical organizations like the Independent Labour Party and the National Secular League. Bringing together campaigns against vivisection and blood sports, with actions against capital punishment and Poor Law reform, its manifesto promised to combat the “numerous barbarisms of civilisation —the cruelties inflicted by men, in the name of law, authority, and traditional habit, and the still more atrocious treatment of the lower animals” (*The Humanitarian League*). Advocating “humane principles on a rational basis”, the organization was remarkable in perceiving animal pain and human suffering as resulting from the same systemic oppression. As Salt articulated in *The Creed of Kinship* (1935): the “basis of any real morality must be the sense of kinship between all living beings” (viii). The League, which eventually opened chapters in Glasgow, Letchworth, Manchester, Croydon and Bombay, sought to institute a new moral order opposed to *laissez faire* economics and the veneration of ruthless competition as a driver of progress. Its members shared a view of humanity as innately compassionate but allowed that this virtuous instinct had been blunted by the modern world. In *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* (1889), for instance, Carpenter denounced the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on the mind and body. “Man”, he wrote, once the “crown of the animals” had lately been reduced to a “ludicrous spectacle”, so softened by civilisation that he must muffle “himself in the cast-off furs of the beasts” and “make pulps of all his victuals”. The only way to halt this rapid decline was to re-discover nature and develop a relationship with the animal world based not on exploitation or consumption, but on “companionship” (26). Committed to vegetarianism and tee-totalism, Carpenter advocated the meat-less diet as a route to both personal transformation and social change.

Within the League, vegetarianism and animal rights were argued for on the principle of “Greater Kinship”, a concept derived from an interpretation of evolutionary theory that emphasized the connectedness of all organic creatures. As Dan Weinbren outlines in his study of the group, where “Marx and Engels had adopted Darwinism as the biological counterpart to the class war” and “New Liberals employed ideas derived from Darwin to render their classification and regulation of the poor and the unfit scientific”, the League was invested in the idea of “biological unity [...] as an efficient arbiter of balanced, regulated

society” (89). Their vision of evolution propelled by collaboration rather than competition was supported by Alfred Russel Wallace, co-originator of the theory of natural selection and a committed member of the League. Wallace, who expressed admiration for the vegetarian diet but claimed to be unable to follow it for health reasons, was among the first to apply evolutionary theory to the study of human society (Shermer 253). Social Darwinism was put to work defending economic inequality and colonial expansion, but Wallace consistently pressed the utility of altruism over competition and looked to egalitarianism as the key to progress. The “struggle for existence” was not, he insisted in “Evolution and Character” (1912), an inevitability, but simply a phase of development that could be overcome by the “improvement of social conditions” (24). For Wallace, whose formative years were spent listening to lectures by the utopian socialist Robert Owen, the problem with popular readings of natural selection were that they tended to ignore the role of sociability and co-operation in facilitating modification. In answer, he looked to the French naturalist Jean Baptiste Lamarck, who had argued in *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809) that all beings came into existence through a process of gradual modification, adjusting to meet the demands of the environment through the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Where adaptation for Darwin was essentially arbitrary, under Lamarckism it was possible for an individual to evolve morally and intellectually through force of will, improved abilities that would then be passed directly on to the next generation. Evolutionary theory could provide scientific justification for ruthless self-interest, but in the hands of socialist thinkers it could also underwrite alternative models of progress.

Where Wallace contrasted the persistence of individualism among non-human creatures to the cooperative structure of human society as a way of demonstrating the superiority of the latter, others looked to the animal kingdom as a moral exemplar. Salt, for one, protested against the misrepresentation of nature as “one with rapine”, observing that those who argue that “suffering and subjection are the natural lot of all living things” tend to “exempt themselves from this beneficent law”. To characterise the non-human world as a universal struggle for existence was to exaggerate the importance of competition and discount the “law of mutual aid” (*Logic of Vegetarianism* 20). Among those cited in support of this argument was the Russian-born anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin, who had published a series of articles in the *Nineteenth Century* that protested the calculated oversimplification of a biological theory to justify the “pitiless struggle for personal advantage”. Look more carefully at nature, he argued, and it became apparent that “only those animals who are mutually helpful are really fitted to survive; it is not just the strong but the co-operative species that endure” (‘Mutual Aid’ 338). Emphasizing the collective struggle of organisms to adapt to their environment over inter-species conflict, Kropotkin foregrounded sociability as a key determinant of evolutionary progress. Furnishing the reader with numerous examples of co-operation in the animal kingdom, he was especially keen to demonstrate that “tender feelings” could develop even among the “least sociable carnivores” (“Mutual Aid Cont.” 703). From the white-tailed and bald eagles that associate for hunting, to polar foxes who work together to raid the supplies of inattentive explorers and black squirrels who share playtime, to bonded families of elephants and love between walruses, his essays were natural

history dedicated to animal kindness (“Mutual Aid” 703-5). Where Kropotkin looked to the behaviour of mammals and birds to support his thesis, others took a more microscopic view of co-operation and evolution. In an article for *Contemporary Review* another Russian, the orientalist Léon Metchnikoff, argued that because all lifeforms are composed of “colonies of living cells”, nature is founded on the basis of collaboration (416). Along similar lines, in “Ancient Experiments in Co-Operation” (1892) H.G. Wells refuted the idea of a “frantic struggle for survival” using the language of cell biology. Taking lichens, fungi and algae as his examples, Wells cited the process of symbiosis, where “two dissimilar organisms merge together for their common benefit”, as proof of the fundamental amity of “all living creation” (421) The work of these altruistic visions was two-fold: to cast the animal world in a friendlier light and transform its metaphorical resonance for human society.

The creed of “Greater Kinship” recognised inter-species relationality as the key to a more egalitarian world. Theories of common ancestry called human exceptionalism into serious doubt by pointing to humanity’s profound connection with the rest of the living world, and vegetarian advocates looked to the language of descent to argue for a reordering of human-animal relations. The appeal of evolutionism for reformers lay, in part, with the way it disrupted conventional thinking around the natural order, claims that were often called upon to dismiss the vegetarianism as the product of ill-informed sentimentalism. As an 1887 article for the *Vegetarian Messenger* reflected: given that “not so long-ago children were taught to divide natural objects into the Mineral, Vegetable and Animal Kingdoms; while apart from these, classed in solitary dignity by himself stood Man”, it was not surprising that many were still able to justify their misuse of animals. The achievement of “Darwin and Wallace” had been to demonstrate the “fundamental unity of all living things” and thus call into question the legitimacy of humanity’s fiefdom over the rest of the natural world (Cantab 77). Elsewhere, the question of inheritance lent urgency to arguments in favour of the meat-free diet: no longer simply cruel or immoral, the consumption of flesh could now be condemned as a form of cannibalism. Vegetarians, sometimes with tongue in cheek, re-constituted the theory of common origins as a vast family tree. Writing on “The Dietary of the Twentieth Century” (1898), Oldfield advised his readers to remind the “man about to order the lobster salad” that he is going to “devour a descendent of the earliest type of highly organised life”. Describing the lobster as a member of the diner’s own family, Oldfield argued that once the “kinship of all life” was impressed upon the popular imagination the “horror of eating relatives, however remote, [would] become impossible” (306-307). Some creatures were, however, easier to fold into the extended family than others and thinking was inconsistent on the issue of kinship and consumption. Writing in *Fraser’s Magazine*, Newman assured would-be vegetarians that adhering to a flesh-free regime need not preclude the enjoyment of fish. Where it was necessary to give up “quadruped and fowl”, fish may be eaten because they “have no family life or family affection” and thus to “take one life does not torture another”. Worse still, rather than form lasting bonds with one another, fish are “themselves, nearly all fish eaters” and this inter-species cannibalism justifies the continued consumption of marine life (156), Though he concluded by naming “birds, sheep and oxen” as distant kinsfolk, Newman excluded fish from this heterogenous household because of their apparent

lack of familial feeling (172). The question of meat consumption involved, then, a negotiation of animal alterity and similarity that produced its own hierarchies.

The issue of animal violence served to complicate vegetarian claims to universal kinship. Examining the history of big game hunting, Heather Schell notes how animal welfare advocates “tended to class carnivorous animals as participants in blood sports” implicated, along with their human counterparts, in the cruel destruction of defenceless beasts (233). Divided from their victims, predators were not included in the Victorian economy of sentimentality and this bifurcation bled into the condemnation of meat eating as inherently immoral. In insisting that humans be reclassified with the herbivores, reformers often stereotyped and demonised the qualities of carnivorous beasts. An 1896 issue of the *Vegetarian Review* blamed the “maliciousness” of the monkey and the “cruelty” of the tiger for their inferior position in relation to “altruistic” man (25). Along similar lines, in an article for *Westminster Review* Salt balked at the suggestion that man might be classed as a “predatory animal”: while there was, he avowed, no way to hold the tiger responsible for his actions, to claim that man is driven by the same killer instincts was simply to excuse bad behaviour (“Food Reform” 494). Having praised the tiger as part of a richly diverse natural world, Salt reconstructs the species hierarchy based on relative moral capacity. Oscillating between valorising nature and asserting their superiority over it, vegetarians struggled with the fact of predatory behaviour and its role in furthering natural selection. Evolutionists revealed the biological basis of mental life and demonstrated that the higher mammals shared in human reasoning, sentiments and emotions. These continuities could be put to work in arguing for better animal welfare, but they also brought man into uncomfortably close proximity to long-disavowed instincts. “Civilisation”, the psychologist William James wrote in 1903, depended upon the continued suppression of the “carnivore within”, a denial of bestial impulses and primitive desire to consume only flesh (171). Along similar lines, speaking in regard to the campaign to abolish hunting for sport, Salt warned that the “tiger that lurks within the heart of us” drives a “savage lust for killing” that may make such a task impossible (*Seventy Years* 47). Like the First of the Tigers shamed as a killer by his stripes, carnivorous beasts were called on to represent man’s basest instincts and thus often excluded from the kind of sympathy directed toward their herbivorous counterparts.

Stories of vegetarian cats, reported in newspapers and satirized in comics, appealed to a similar imaginary. Narratives of redemption, in which ferocious predators transformed into mouse-loving peacemakers, these tales of cucumber-munching cats also positioned carnivorousness as moral flaw that might be overcome. Their unwillingness to empathize with flesh-eating animals brought activists like Salt into uncomfortably close proximity with beliefs and practices they had dedicated themselves to dismantling. Views such as those professed by the physiologist Michael Foster, who defended vivisection on the grounds that the “success of the human race in the struggle for existence depends on man’s being well fed; man is therefore justified in slaying and eating a sheep [and] unless man destroys animals, animals would soon destroy man”. (369) Pitting man against beast, Foster instituted meat eating as an essential aspect of the natural order, without which man himself would be vulnerable to predation. To short-circuit this line of reasoning, vegetarians looked to the

“entangled bank” described in *On the Origin of Species*, where a riot of plants, birds, insects and animals were bound by complex inter-dependencies (429). Observed from this convivial bank, evolutionary theory seemed to authorize a version of nature governed by co-operation and mutual aid. Understood in this way, the natural order could no longer be used to justify violence and inequity in human society. Cruelty was, as the American naturalist John Howard Moore complained, the sole preserve of man. “Almost no animals”, he wrote, “except man, kill for the mere sake of killing [...] the human species is the only species of animals that plunges to the depths of such atrocity” (311). Callousness that was apparent not only in the love of blood sports or the practice of vivisection, but more simply in the unchallenged consumption of meat. According to Moore, who was published by the Humanitarian League, flesh-eating was the result of “intellectual sleep”, which prevented people from fully reckoning with the horror of brain, bone and viscera (312). His hope, shared with many of his vegetarian counterparts, was that the doctrine of evolution would awaken the human mind to the “consanguinity of all organic life” and in turn, to the immorality of meat (323). The discovery of common origins, reformers recognised, could unseat man from his position at the top of the food chain and cast the consumption of living creatures in a new light. Grounding their claims in the language of biology and comparative anatomy, they presented vegetarianism as both the original diet of man and the key to his future advancement. Mapping the trajectory from meat-eating primitivism to vegetable-eating culture, vegetarian advocates interpreted evolutionary theory according to dietary principles that emphasized animal rights and human responsibility. This counter discourse, formulated by welfare activists, food reformers and socialist philosophers, opened up a space in Victorian culture to critically assess the role of consumption in natural selection and to challenge the valorisation of man as an apex predator. The cat made mild by a diet of cucumbers held out the possibility that, under the improving influence of vegetarianism, humans might also evolve into more peaceable creatures.

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