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Erica Fudge

Why it's easy being a vegetarian

If questions about nutritional value are set aside, what purpose does the act of consuming an animal possess? I take this as my central question here because meat-eating is not just an issue of nutrition: as Derrida wrote: 'and who can be made to believe that our cultures are carnivorous because animal proteins are irreplaceable?'¹ There is something else going on when an animal's flesh is consumed.

The anthropologist Nick Fiddes offers an explanation as to why we eat meat that is a useful starting point. He argues that it 'tangibly represents human control of the natural world. Consuming the muscle flesh of other highly evolved animals is a potent statement of our supreme power.'² At the meal table we thus declare who we are on a daily basis, and we make plain also some of the structures of power in which we live. But Fiddes recognises that it is not only that meat *represents* human power, it *legitimises* it too. He goes on

Killing, cooking, and eating other animals' flesh provides perhaps the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature, with the spilling of their blood a vibrant motif. Thus, for individuals and societies to whom environmental control is an important value, meat consumption is typically a key symbol. Meat has long stood for Man's proverbial 'muscle' over the natural world.³

Human dominion – the belief that we are superior to animals and thus have certain rights to use them for our own ends – makes acceptable meat-eating, but meat-eating (such a prosaic activity, it happens everywhere, all the time) simultaneously makes human dominion seem 'authentic', a common and unproblematic part of everyday life: it makes natural the structures of order that support human primacy and power. In other words, meat-eating is hegemonic in anthropocentric societies.

Roland Barthes recognised the workings of hegemony when he constructed his 'myths' in the mid-1950s. For him a myth – an iconic

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image ('The Face of Garbo,' 'The Romans in Films'), an idea ('The Great Family of Man,' 'The Writer on Holiday'), or a product ('The New Citroen,' 'Soap-powders and Detergents') – is a 'glossing over' of an 'intentional concept.' And the means by which the 'glossing over' takes place, by which what is historical is made natural, is the essential job of the myth. Myth works, he argues, by 'hid[ing] nothing and flaunt[ing] nothing,' it is, rather, a 'distortion,' an 'inflection':

the intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is read not as a motive, but as a reason.⁴

We can see how Barthes' concept of mythologisation as naturalisation works in relation to meat if we turn to his discussion of the French staple 'Steak and Chips.' In Barthes' analysis, steak is mythically linked to an idea of virility – 'It is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength,' he writes. But steak does more than this: it is a particular virility – a *national* virility – that he finds:

Like wine, steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized. . . . It is a part of all the rhythms, that of the comfortable bourgeois meal and that of the bachelor's bohemian snack. . . . Moreover, it is a French possession (circumscribed today, it is true, by the invasion of American steaks). As in the case of wine there is no alimentary constraint which does not make the Frenchman dream of steak. Hardly abroad, he feels a nostalgia for it. . . . Being part of the nation, it follows the index of patriotic values: it helps them to rise in wartime, it is the very flesh of the French soldier, the inalienable property which cannot go over to the enemy except by treason.⁵

A plate of food is thus revealed to be much more than simply a nutritional repast. The meat has meanings that transcend its materiality.

I could construct a similar myth of Englishness from, say, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. It is solid, dependable, not fancy or effete. It is about family; about Sunday, a time of self-determination and immunity from the pressures of work and world. It is when the Englishman's home is his castle; when the father rules, standing at the head of the table with the carving knife poised.⁶ Ultimately, such a myth is telling us about who we want to be, and about the necessity of such imaginings.

Our eating of the meal is, as Fiddes argued, a legitimization of the myths that are contained within it, as well as an authentication of them. But for Barthes, meat is about identity. We legitimate the myth of who we are when we consume animal flesh. But obviously 'we' here is, as ever, a hugely problematic term: its inclusivity is not only representative, it is actually constitutive. I, for example, cannot include myself in this 'we' as I am a vegetarian, and nor can this 'we' include many other English people – Hindus, for example – as they too could not participate in this consumption of a cow and thus in this national imagining. But, I – a vegetarian – can create this myth of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding without feeling the need to challenge it, or to add tofu into the recipe, and this shows, I think, how far the myth of flesh consumption has penetrated. Indeed, even as the myth makes natural what is cultural, it makes opposition invisible, even to the opposers.

But writing a myth, as Barthes knew, can begin to make that myth unfamiliar; can begin to make the assumptions that underpin it untenable by making them visible and thus strange (Barthes' association of steak with the flesh of the French soldier, for example, makes unfamiliar and troubling the link between masculine flesh and the nation).⁷ Once we begin to think about meat in this way we can see how it is much more than just a meal. And it is perhaps this sense of making meat-eating unfamiliar that can also be found in a suggestion from 1994 that, instead of imposing VAT on fuel bills, John Major's government should tax meat. After all, the argument went, a pensioner could die of hypothermia if s/he could not afford the heating costs, but would not die of being a vegetarian if s/he avoided meat to avoid the extra costs. Meat, it was argued, should not be regarded as a basic of life (like gas or electricity) but as an unnecessary luxury.⁸ And if meat is regarded in those terms, its place in our culture suddenly changes, and so do some of the assumptions that underpin the eating of it. Nick Fiddes writes of one of his interviewees, for example, that 'when asked how she might feel had she to kill animals for their meat herself, [one woman responded] "I don't think I could. I think I'd probably starve."⁹ The assumption that would vanish if meat came to be regarded as a luxury rather than a staple is not that killing an animal for flesh oneself would be impossible; it is that a diet without meat would be the equivalent of starvation.

Thus meat is more than food, and what I want to do in the rest of this essay is explore one of the ways in which we make sense of meat and of the anxieties that I think it produces in the modern west. My focus will be on the ways in which meat-eating is often situated in relation to discussions about what a human being is, should be, or might – terrifyingly – become. As such, thinking about meat allows us to explore some of the

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disquiet that circulates around our relationships with animals and their role in our formation of our own species identity.

Simple taste

But if this is an essay on meat what do I mean by entitling it ‘Why it’s easy being a vegetarian?’ It is a question of borders. Fiddes claims that ‘meat eating and vegetarianism are two sides of the same coin – each being significant in opposition to each other.’¹⁰ This is certainly right, but I want to think rather differently about this opposition. I want to make a claim that it is ontologically (if not always practically) easier being a vegetarian than being a meat-eater because meat eaters have such a hard time of it. What is edible and not edible is not clear for them.¹¹ I am not dealing here with religious distinctions – between Kosher and non-Kosher, for example. That raises a whole other set of issues. What I am thinking about – in the broadest terms – are the meat-eating habits that are the majority practice in Britain. In this practice, a sheep is edible while a dog is not, but not because dog tastes disgusting or is poisonous. It is a cultural distinction that overrides questions of nutritional value.¹² This practice is based on an understanding that snails can be consumed but not worms, even though, I would imagine, cooking and eating a worm would be much more straightforward (although, perhaps this is a question of taste?). In the UK, cows can form the centrepiece of a meal, but not horses, despite both being large vegetarian quadrupeds bred for use by humans (and apparently it is not just that horses can be taught: it is possible to train a cow to be ridden, for example¹³). The idea of bush meat (the flesh of non-human primates) is repulsive to many meat-eaters even as they chew on pork while knowing that pigs are highly intelligent beings. And we know that this is not an aesthetic issue – the fact that anthropoid apes are *anthropoid* – because meat on a plate rarely looks like a piece of an actual animal (and when it does, things can get a bit more difficult for the consumer). Being a meat-eater is hard because it is so rife with contradictions; because the boundary between the edible and the not edible is so complicated.

Vegetarians, on the other hand, have made the boundary clear: everything that is animate and has the capacity for self-motion cannot to be eaten. Here there are no potential contradictions or paradoxes (why cows but not horses?); no requirement for nice judgements to be made (this kind of intelligence is edible, but not that); nor any need for aesthetic decisions (what looks acceptable on the plate). This is why I make the claim that it is easy being a vegetarian: for them – for me – the boundary between edible and not edible is clear.¹⁴ Vegetarianism thus resolves what

can, in other contexts, be an anxious-making process called eating. There is, you might say, no intellectual indigestion involved in meat avoidance.

But this argument for vegetarianism – the belief that it solves category difficulties – is not the usual motivation for taking up this diet. Most vegetarians are so for ethical reasons. But the ethics do not, of course, sit apart from what might be termed the taxonomic argument. Rather, ethics and the question of borders are absolutely inseparable. Having a sense of animal suffering – what many vegetarians base their ethical choices on – is engaging with a question of boundaries. We can look to the past to see how this works, and to remind ourselves that thinking about meat has been going on for millennia. In his *Essay on Flesh Eating* Plutarch (CE46-130), for example, wrote:

You ask me upon what grounds Pythagoras abstained from feeding on the flesh of animals. I, for my part, marvel at what sort of feeling, mind, or reason, that man was possessed of who was the first to pollute his mouth with gore, and to allow his lips to touch the flesh of a murdered being; who spread his table with the mangled forms of dead bodies, and claimed as his daily food what were but now beings endowed with movement, with perception, and with voice.

How could his eyes endure the spectacle of the flayed and dismembered limbs? How could his sense of smell endure the horrid *effluvium*? How, I ask, was his taste not sickened by contact with festering wounds, with the pollution of corrupted blood and juices?¹⁵

Plutarch's technique here is to write out meat-eating in unfamiliar terms in order to unsettle our settled sensibilities: in his eyes it is not vegetarianism that is odd, but the consumption of flesh. But he does more than graphically describe meat-eating.¹⁶ The ethical problem Plutarch outlines is based on his refusal to make a clear distinction between humans and animals. For him animals are like humans in that they have movement, perception and voice: they are not figured as creatures of lack, as in the argument that persists in much classical thinking that only humans have reason (I come back to this).¹⁷ Animals, for Plutarch, have bodies like us, and thus they have 'festering wounds' like us ('festering wounds', of course, that are eaten). And I am reminded here of a text from fifteen centuries later in which a Jew's claim to the humanity that Christian society denies him is voiced in similar terms. In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* the animalised Shylock famously implores 'If you prick us do we not bleed?'¹⁸ The possession of a body, which might mark him as only a fleshy animal, is claimed, in fact, as the important ethical point. It is being a bodily being that allows for the ability to suffer and should thus allow for equality of treatment.

In Plutarch's text the emphasis on fleshiness means that it is not animals' perceived lack of capacity for rational thought and speech that is the focus.

In a later text, *On Abstinence from the Flesh of Living Beings*, Porphyry (CE232-309) reiterates this sense of the important similarity of humans and animals when he writes that 'Sensation and perception are the principle of the kinship of all living beings. And . . . Zeno and his followers [the Stoics] admit that alliance or *kinship* . . . is the foundation of justice.'¹⁹ Recognising this, it becomes absurd, he argues, to propose that eating meat is acceptable, for how can meat-eating be just if the foundation of justice is kinship, and kinship is underpinned by the capacity to sense and perceive, of which animals are capable? To eat meat is to undermine justice.

But if meat-eating is already tied up with paradox and injustice in some writings of the classical period, why, we might ask, is vegetarianism not more popular now: why, in a 2004 survey, for example, did the Food Standards Agency find that only 5% of households in the UK contained one or more vegetarians?²⁰ Clearly Plutarch's arguments have not taken hold.²¹ Instead, another classical tradition, one more frequently articulated, has gained the power of orthodoxy: has been, you might say, naturalised. In this tradition, as I have already mentioned, the underlying assumption is that humans are separate from and superior to animals, an assumption that can be traced most obviously in Aristotle's sense of the human's capacity to reason. It is a view that is also central to key writings of the medieval and post-medieval Christian tradition: in St Thomas Aquinas' thirteenth-century claim, for example, that the sin involved in cruelty to an animal is not a sin concerned with the animal's suffering. For him, cruelty to animals is sinful only in relation to the damage done to another person's property (thus injuring an animal is like scratching a car), and in relation to the damage that inflicting cruelty does to the agent rather than the patient. Being cruel to an animal makes one more likely to be cruel to a human, which makes one more likely to condemn one's own soul to eternal damnation. Kindness to an animal is thus really kindness to the self.²²

Clearly meat-eating can be understood in relation to this tradition. It is because animals are believed to be different from, and inferior to, humans that we can use them as objects for our consumption. Plutarch and Porphyry, however, refuse such a separation of humans from animals: for Plutarch animals have bodies like humans, for Porphyry animals are kin because kinship is based on sentience and animals are sentient like humans. But this division of what we might call the Aristotelians from the Plutarchians is not as cut and dried as might appear. The assertion of the kinship of humans and animals is also, paradoxically, present in the writings of those who support meat-eating. Indeed, if meat-eating is related

to questions of virility, for example, then there must be something in the meat that can affect the eater: there must be a link that allows the human to take on – to take in – the animal. Thus, in discussions of what happens in the act of digesting meat we can see being voiced some anxieties about what might be termed the permeability of the human. Questions are asked that undercut the separation that is inherent in the tradition that supports meat-eating. What actually happens when the human (that superior being) takes in the flesh of an animal? How is the human affected by the consumption of meat?

One answer to this question is offered by Yann Martel in his 2002 novel *Life of Pi*. Here, Piscine Patel (Pi) – brought up on a vegetarian diet by his Hindu parents – finds himself afloat in a lifeboat on the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger called Richard Parker.²³ The provision of food (for himself and for the tiger) becomes a pre-occupation and we witness the vegetarian moving gradually – via his eating of the biscuits in the lifeboat’s locker which are made with ‘animal fat’ – to a diet of at first fish, then turtle, seabird, and meerkat. This diet not only allows Pi to survive; it also transforms him. At the beginning of the novel, Pi is a boy growing up in his father’s zoo in Pondicherry. He has a very clear sense of the important difference (as he understands it) between humans and animals: the most dangerous creature in the zoo being, as his father teaches him, ‘that redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes.’ It is the belief that ‘an animal . . . is “cute,” “friendly,” “loving,” “devoted,” “merry,” “understanding” ‘that is dangerous, because it is when the boundaries between humans and animals are breached that dangers arise – a fact proved to Pi and his older brother Ravi when their father forces them to watch Mahisha, the Bengal tiger, devour a live goat. ‘What if Piscine had stuck his hand through the bars of the cage one day to touch the pretty orange fur?’ Pi’s father asks his distressed wife after the children witness the death of the goat: ‘Better a goat than him, no?’²⁴ The error the father wishes his sons to avoid is the error of thinking that animals are just like us: indeed, for Philip Armstrong, this is the novel’s overall position. He states that ‘*Life of Pi* presents humans as innately different from and superior to animals because they possess a greater capacity for rational inventiveness, adaptability to new circumstances, and mobility.’²⁵ Armstrong is certainly right that the central relationship in the novel – that between boy and tiger – is based on Pi’s control and domination of the animal (at one point he even trains him to jump through a hoop²⁶). But Pi’s time in the lifeboat, however, does begin to undo such fantasies of difference, and this transgressing of species boundaries happens in relation to food.

Eating meat signals, not Pi’s masculinity or his human dominion, but the end of his previous life of secure humanity. From the distance of his

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adult life in Canada, Pi recalls that at first that he was 'forever picking away at bits of dry fat and dry flesh that clung to the inner sides of [turtle] shells, rummaging for food in the automatic way of monkeys.' Later, as if descending the evolutionary scale, Pi states:

It came as an unmistakable indication to me of how low I had sunk the day I noticed, with a pinching of the heart, that I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way of Richard Parker.²⁷

In *taking in* the animal Pi has also *taken on* the animal. This sense of the power of meat-eating has a history,²⁸ and this is now something that is *scientifically*, and not just imaginatively, evident. The imaginative link between eater and eaten, for example, can be traced in Barthes' alignment of the body of the French soldier and the steak: so indebted is masculinity and national character to the steak that the meat comes to be the masculine national character in its most obvious form. But a scientific correlation exists as well, visible in the links between BSE and new variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, for example. This is a problem that allows us to glimpse fears about the permeability of humanity; fears that we are not as stable in our species being as we might think that we are.

Natural Man, unnatural Food

One more tale of potential human permeability can be found in a text written ninety years before *Life of Pi*, in another story of a boy alone with the nonhuman. Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* appeared in magazine form in 1912 and was first published as a novel in 1914. It is interesting here for two reasons: first of all, the story voices some important ideas about what a human is, and as such it can be read as a popular rendition of some orthodox assumptions about our species. And second, the ways in which Burroughs represents Tarzan's innate humanity allow us a glimpse of the anxieties that surround that conception, a conception that we still live with as natural and true. *Tarzan of the Apes* continues to have much to tell us about who we think we are and meat-eating has a role to play in that conception.

Tarzan begins his life on the shores of West Africa. His father, Lord Greystoke, is sent by the British Colonial Office to keep an eye on the way in which another European power is treating the natives who are considered to be British. This other European power is never named, but is certainly Belgium, the excesses of whose colonial conquests were well known at the end of the nineteenth century – they are central to Joseph

Conrad's 1902 novel, *Heart of Darkness*, for example, a novel in which the cannibalism of the successful colonialist Kurtz lurks in the shadows.²⁹ After a mutiny on the vessel on which they are travelling, the Greystokes are abandoned on a desolate beach. Here, Lord Greystoke builds a cabin, Lady Greystoke gives birth to a son – who will grow up to be Tarzan – and dies, and, soon afterwards Lord Greystoke is killed by an ape. The human baby is claimed by a newly bereaved mother-ape and he grows up among the nonhuman primates.

The limitations of ape life are felt by the growing Tarzan in a number of ways. So, when he finds the abandoned cabin that was once his home and in it discovers some children's books, brought along by his parents for their progeny, Tarzan comes to realise the nature of his difference from his companions. One long sentence describes the key scene of this encounter of ape-boy with human civilisation:

Squatting upon his haunches on the table top in the cabin his father had built – his smooth, brown, naked little body bent over the book which rested in his strong slender hands, and his great shock of long, black hair falling about his well shaped head and bright intelligent eyes – Tarzan of the apes, little primitive man, presented a picture filled, at once, with pathos and with promise – an allegorical figure of the primordial groping through the black night of ignorance toward the light of learning.³⁰

Ignoring the over-use of adjectives here, we can see Burroughs attempting to offer us something more than simply the story of a wild boy (although *Tarzan of the Apes* is certainly working within that tradition). For him, *Tarzan* is an allegory, and what Burroughs offers that transcends the narrative is a conception of the human as naturally different from the animal. Tarzan's knowledge of language – here written language, not spoken – is regarded as innate: he always has it within him to teach himself to read and write (which is what he does) and it is this capacity that allows him, when more humans arrive on his coast, to proclaim his own equal humanity. Tarzan leaves the newcomers a note on the door of the cabin:

THIS IS THE HOUSE OF TARZAN, THE KILLER OF BEASTS
AND MANY BLACK MEN, DO NOT HARM THE THINGS
WHICH ARE TARZAN'S. TARZAN WATCHES.
TARZAN OF THE APES.³¹

Where Shylock speaks his capacity to bleed, Tarzan writes his power to kill, and in doing so both proclaim their humanity.

Thus, his ability to learn to read and write (speaking comes later) does more than reveal Tarzan's always existing human status. It also allows him to *experience* his own humanity: 'for now his reason told him that he was of a different race from his wild and hairy companions' we are told, after he has come to recognise the difference between 'M-A-N' and 'A-P-E-S'.³² Tarzan possesses a reflective capacity which is often cited as setting humans apart from animals.³³ Burroughs, then, makes clear that Tarzan's humanity, whatever his upbringing, is never in doubt. This member of the English aristocracy is always human. The individual, as Descartes had predicted, transcends the material and can be found in language.

But Burroughs does not seem to be satisfied in representing Tarzan's humanity in this way. Perhaps the man who wrote that 'The general public does not wish to think. . . I have evolved, therefore, a type of fiction that may be read with the minimum of mental effort'³⁴ considered that utilising philosophical conceptions – ideas of self-possession and language – was too esoteric for his vast popular audience, and so he also underlines Tarzan's species status in another way. He shows that Tarzan is always a man and never an animal by emphasising his relationship to meat. Burroughs does this by arguing that humans are, by nature, carnivorous: 'Tarzan, more than the apes, craved and needed flesh. Descended from a race of meat eaters, never in his life, he thought, had he once satisfied his appetite for animal food.'³⁵ The limitations of ape life are thus felt not only in terms of knowledge and intellectual development but in terms of dietary fulfilment as well.

But if there is a link between humanity and the consumption of animal flesh then knowledge of the categories edible and not edible is crucial, and if categories are cultural rather than natural, then how can Tarzan ever know how to be the Englishman that he truly is? Burroughs confronts this problem head-on. Tarzan meets and follows the 'black savage' Kulonga who has killed his ape mother Kala. He avenges his mother's murder by noosing and hanging Kulonga and then, we are told, he 'examined the black minutely . . . He investigated and appropriated the feathered head-dress, and then he prepared to get down to business, for Tarzan of the Apes was hungry, and here was meat: meat of the kill, which jungle ethics permitted him to eat.' Burroughs writes:

How are we to judge him, by what standards, this ape-man with the heart and head and body of an English gentleman, and the training of a wild beast?

Tublat [his ape rival], whom he hated and who had hated him, he had killed in fair fight, and yet never had the thought of eating of Tublat's flesh entered his head. It would have been as revolting to

him as cannibalism to us.

But who was Kulonga that he might not be eaten as fairly as Horta, the boar, or Bara, the deer? Was he not simply another of the countless wild things of the jungle who preyed upon one another to satisfy the cravings of hunger?³⁶

But Burroughs cannot, of course, have his humans be just one among the 'wild things of the jungle,' and nor can he have his jungle superman be a cannibal. Such would be the act of a beast, and what Burroughs is presenting in the figure of Tarzan is not human bestialisation but human improvement.³⁷ And so something must intervene to stop Tarzan acting on his bodily desire:

Of a sudden a strange doubt stayed his hand. Had not his books taught him that he was a man? And was not [Kulonga] a man, also?

Did men eat men? Alas, he did not know. Why then, this hesitancy! Once more he essayed the effort, but of a sudden a qualm of nausea overwhelmed him. He did not understand.

All he knew was that he could not eat the flesh of this black man, and thus hereditary instinct, ages old, usurped the functions of his untaught mind and saved him from transgressing a worldwide law of whose very existence he was ignorant.

Quickly he lowered Kulonga's body to the ground, removed the noose, and took to the trees again.³⁸

Burroughs does two things here. First of all he reveals that Tarzan's animal instincts (his longing for human flesh) can be overcome by his innate humanity: there is desire but there is also reason (which is unconscious and thus natural). The second thing that this passage does, of course, is make human meat-eating natural and, indeed, make the categories edible and not edible natural too. Tarzan knows what can and cannot be consumed *in his body* and not only in his mind. This is reassuring: it begins to address the problems outlined earlier which allow for the possibility that it is easier being a vegetarian. Here, the anxieties of the complex categorisations thrown up by meat-eating are cancelled and clarity reigns.

But of course it is not true that humans have an innate knowledge of what is edible and what not. As tales of what we might call accidental cannibalism show, it is possible to mistake human flesh for meat: they look the same once cooked. Thus in Seneca's play *Thyestes* (written in the first century CE), for example, the title character is served his children by his brother Atreus (an idea repeated by Shakespeare in *Titus Andronicus* 1500 years later when Tamora is given her sons in a pie). Thyestes consumes his children because he does not recognise them: he sees only

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meat.³⁹ The cooking of the children thus undermines their status as human and removes them to, perhaps, the lowest level possible. Not even animal, they are objectified animal: meat. This is a danger for meat-eaters: humans can easily be mistaken for meat once cooked; after all, we too have bodies like animals, as Plutarch knew.

This is an anxiety that is still being played out and underpins Burroughs' representation of Tarzan's dilemma with Kulonga. Burroughs solves the problem by making meat-eating natural and cannibalism physically impossible (nausea-inducing). But sometimes the conclusion is not so hygienic; sometimes the boundaries leak; and sometimes that is the point. This is the case, I think, in some of the work by the twentieth-century artist, Francis Bacon. He claimed in 1965: 'Well of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal.'⁴⁰ This is an acknowledgement that gets played out in his art. The central panel of his *Three Studies at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1945), for example, is an inverted and meaty image of a crucifixion. Here the body of Christ, which has such central importance in the Christian tradition – and which, of course, is eaten in the taking of communion – is made terrifyingly fleshy. It is as if the atheist Bacon wants to make the myth of the Eucharist painfully real.

The repulsiveness of acknowledging our own fleshiness is also played out in Peter Greenaway's 1989 film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.⁴¹ The final scene sees the Thief being forced to consume his wife's lover who he has murdered – and interestingly, in relation to discussions of Tarzan, he is murdered in part by being suffocated by having the pages of books stuffed down his throat. The Lover, finally, is no longer really human (no longer a possessor of language), but nor is he an illiterate animal: he is presented at the end as being both human and flesh simultaneously. He is laid out on the dining table, a naked man with his roasted skin resembling cooked chicken skin.

Thus Fiddes' argument that meat-eating is a declaration of dominion is only half right. Eating meat is a declaration of human dominion (to consume animal flesh is to declare – with the teeth if not the voice – that these creatures are lower than us, that we have power over them). But eating meat is also an action that can, possibly, undo that dominion: even if we do not follow Porphyry's declaration of human and animal kinship, how do you know you are not eating a human as you tuck into a steak?

Leftovers

But acknowledging this anxiety – which is an anxiety traced in the difficulty of being a meat-eater and the easiness of being a vegetarian – does

not necessarily mean the end of meat and I want to conclude with a new development in meat production. New Harvest, according to its website, is 'a nonprofit research organization working to develop new meat substitutes.' The organisation recognises that current methods of meat farming are unsustainable, and so is working to produce alternatives that respond to environmental concerns as well as to questions of animal welfare. The website tells us:

One novel line of research is to produce meat in vitro, in a cell culture, rather than from an animal. The production of such 'cultured meat' begins by taking a number of cells from a farm animal and proliferating them in a nutrient-rich medium. Cells are capable of multiplying so many times in culture that, in theory, a single cell could be used to produce enough meat to feed the global population for a year. After the cells are multiplied, they are attached to a sponge-like 'scaffold' and soaked with nutrients. They may also be mechanically stretched to increase their size and protein content. The resulting cells can then be harvested, seasoned, cooked, and consumed as a boneless, processed meat, such as sausage, hamburger, or chicken nuggets.⁴²

I have nothing to say about what New Harvest is endeavouring to do in scientific terms, but I do want to think about how interesting this research is in relation to the production of meat substitutes. Why is this research organisation not simply promoting vegetarian alternatives to meat? Why go to the lengths and the expense of producing what has become known as 'real fake meat'? And why, in April 2008, did PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) announce that they were offering a \$1,000,000 prize for the first group to produce this real fake meat?⁴³ New Harvest's intention to produce cultured meat is evidence, I think, of the hegemonic power of meat. It reveals our unwillingness to give up one of the things that makes us who it is that we think we are.

This offers evidence to support Derrida's claim for the necessary presence of animals *as objects* in cultures in which the difference between human and nonhuman is a fundamental one.⁴⁴ Indeed, Derrida argued that in the 'canonized or hegemonic discourse of Western metaphysics or religions' the 'sacrifice' of animals is central to the conception of the subject (even in the critical humanism of Heidegger and Levinas), a fact that allows him to label this discourse 'carno-phallogocentric'.⁴⁵ Without meat-eating there is a possibility that we would no longer be human as we currently understand the term. And Derrida notes that we are all included in this 'we' here: 'Vegetarians, too, partake of animals, even of men.'⁴⁶ By implication, we in the west need to have dominion

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represented, legitimated and authenticated by animal flesh to be who we think we currently are. Without the categorical differences that dominion establishes, that sense of self would be lost.

So perhaps I have to acknowledge that being a vegetarian is not easy after all, because if we were all vegetarians that would bring with it a radically new sense of who it is that we imagine ourselves to be. And that new sense has the potential to be disturbing because it might force us all to acknowledge that, as a man called Bacon said, we are all meat. And who – or what – would we be then?

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Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, 'Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (ed.), *Who Comes After the Subject?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 112.
- 2 Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.
- 3 Fiddes, *Meat*, p. 65.
- 4 Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today' in *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (1972, reprinted London: Vintage, 1993), p. 129.
- 5 Barthes, 'Steak and Chips,' in *Mythologies*, pp. 62–63.
- 6 The masculine pronoun and 'man' are used deliberately here. Carving as a masculine domain has its history in the presence in wealthy medieval and early modern households of a male servant with a special skill in carving. As households became smaller so this specialist role was taken up by other members of the household, and ultimately by the head of the household himself. Hence it remains conventional in many homes in the UK in which the male partner may have little to do with the preparation of food at any other time he has the role of carving the meat on special occasions. This was certainly the case in my own childhood home.
- 7 Questions of visibility and invisibility are significant in another way in Carol J. Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*

- (Cambridge: Polity, 1990). She argues that ‘Through butchering, animals become absent references. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist’ (p. 40).
- 8 I have been unable to verify my recollection of this suggestion which was perhaps made in a radio interview rather than in print. I am grateful, however, to Su Taylor at the Vegetarian Society of Great Britain, for attempting to help me track it down.
 - 9 Fiddes, *Meat*, p. 14.
 - 10 Fiddes, *Meat*, p. 4.
 - 11 I use ‘not edible’ rather than ‘inedible’ here and throughout to signal the distinction between what is inedible because poisonous or disgusting and what is not edible because of the prohibitions attached to it. In this sense, horse is not edible because it is perceived to be a non-meat animal for cultural rather than gustatory reasons in the UK. Parts of the fugu – also known as the blow fish – are inedible because highly toxic.
 - 12 So – as an aside – to say that eating is a fundamental part of human life is to miss out the fact that, on numerous occasions, what is truly fundamental comes before and informs the decision as to what is edible. What is really essential when thinking about meat are the categories into which animals are placed (meat/non-meat exists alongside and inseparable from, for example, non-pet/pet; non-vermin/vermin etc.) It is, you might say, the categories that produce the taste. On the significance of the non-pet/pet distinction and questions of edibility see Marc Shell, ‘The Family Pet’, *Representations* 15 (1986), pp. 121–53.
 - 13 See, for example, <http://www.ridingsteers1.netfirms.com/> [accessed 29 September 2008].
 - 14 Of course there are contradictions within vegetarianism in that, as Peter Singer made so uncomfortably clear in *Animal Liberation*, the dairy industry is inseparable from the meat industry, and thus to drink milk, for example, is to support the practices of meat production. The logical solution here is to become a vegan, a practice wherein animal flesh and all other animal by-products – milk, leather, eggs, wool, honey – are avoided. See Singer, *Animal Liberation* (1975), 2nd ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), pp. 95–157. Other potential contradictions within vegetarian practice might include, for example, the status of road kill: an animal living outside of the restrictions of the food industry and killed accidentally can be acceptable food for vegans. Likewise, the status of what might be termed voluntary cannibalism – where a person offers themselves to be someone else’s meat – may not exist in contradiction with the ethics of veganism in that here the provision of one’s flesh for consumption is self-willed, and not imposed by an outside agency, and thus the power relations inherent in the meat industry are absent. For the purposes of this essay I am thinking about vegetarianism in its broadest terms to mean a diet that avoids the flesh of any self-moving non-human animal.
 - 15 Plutarch, ‘Essay on Flesh Eating’ in Howard Williams (ed.), *The Ethics of Diet: A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-Eating* (London:

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- Pitman, 1883), p. 46. An important study of the perception of animals in classical writings is Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (London: Duckworth, 1993).
- 16 The graphic nature of Plutarch's words is, of course, central though. In *The Lives of Animals* J.M. Coetzee presents 'The Plutarch Response' as the position of his central character Elizabeth Costello: 'Plutarch is a real conversation stopper: it is the word *juices* that does it. Producing Plutarch is like throwing down a gauntlet: after that, there is no knowing what will happen'. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, Amy Gutmann (ed.) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 38.
 - 17 The emphasis on animal *voice* sets Plutarch apart from orthodox ideas in which *speech* is regarded as a significant moral marker – and speech, of course, is only human. See, for example, Irven M. Resnick and Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr., 'Albert The Great on the Language of Animals,' *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70.1 (1996), pp. 41–61.
 - 18 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells (ed.), *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 3.1, 59–60.
 - 19 Porphyry, *On Abstinence from the Flesh of Living Beings* in Williams (ed.), *Ethics of Diet*, p. 70.
 - 20 These and other statistics are collected at the Vegetarian Society of the UK's website: <http://www.vegsoc.org/Info/statveg.html> [accessed 29 September 2008].
 - 21 This failure of Plutarch's and Plutarchan's arguments to take power in England is not because they disappeared or were not voiced. I have traced the significance of just this kind of thinking in early modern England in my *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). What is significant is how far this way of thinking was effaced in post-Cartesian (and especially in modern) thinking.
 - 22 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by R.J. Batten (London: Blackfriars, 1975), pp. 19–21.
 - 23 Importantly, in the context of my discussion of cannibalism below, the tiger Richard Parker is named after the cabin boy on the *Mignonette* which went down in the South Atlantic in 1884. This cabin boy was killed and eaten by the three other survivors of the wreck who were then picked up by another vessel. On their return to England the survivors confessed their crime and two were tried, found guilty and given a death sentence which was commuted to 6 months hard labour. 'R v Dudley and Stephens' (1884) established the legal precedent that 'necessity' is not a defence against murder. See http://www.justis.com/titles/iclr_bqb14040.html [accessed 12 October 2008]. It is strangely appropriate that I – a person called Fudge – am a distant relative of Richard Parker (a fact I owe to my Auntie Doll and to my cousin Ian Hunter's genealogical research).
 - 24 Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), pp. 31 and 36.
 - 25 Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 178.

- 26 Martel, *Life of Pi*, pp. 273–274.
- 27 Martel, *Life of Pi*, pp. 213 and 224–225.
- 28 See, for example, Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 44. See also Erica Fudge, ‘Saying Nothing Concerning the Same: On Dominion, Purity, and Meat in Early Modern England’, in Fudge (ed.), *Renaissance Beasts: Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 79–80.
- 29 Indeed, Elaine Showalter has argued that the cannibalism in *Heart of Darkness* – as in H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) – signifies ‘the final breakdown of civilised ethics.’ Showalter, ‘The Apocalyptic Fables of H.G. Wells,’ in John Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), p. 70.
- 30 Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 53. On the role of the books in *Tarzan* see Jeff Berglund, ‘Write, Right, White, Rite: Literacy, Imperialism, Race and Cannibalism in Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes*,’ *Studies in American Fiction*, 27.1 (1999), pp. 53–76.
- 31 Burroughs, *Tarzan*, p. 115. Burroughs does not stop to consider how Tarzan knows how to transcribe the sound of his ape name into written language, something that would be impossible if – as is suggested – Tarzan writes and reads but does not have speech, and therefore does not know what letters and words sound like.
- 32 Burroughs, *Tarzan*, p. 56. It is surely important that ‘M-A-N’ is in the singular while ‘A-P-E-S’ and ‘M-O-N-K-E-Y-S’ are plural: there is no individuality without language and it is language which gives Tarzan the power to proclaim and reflect upon who he is as an individual human.
- 33 See, for example, Donald Griffin, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness*, revised ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 14–17.
- 34 Quoted in F.R. Leavis, ‘Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture’, in Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an ‘English School’* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 150.
- 35 Burroughs, *Tarzan*, p. 61.
- 36 Burroughs, *Tarzan*, pp. 79–80. The racism of *Tarzan* is reflected in Burroughs’ life: using the money he made from sales of his *Tarzan* novels, in the 1920s he bought up land in southern California ‘which he later subdivided and marketed exclusively to white homeowners’. The town is called Tarzana. Catherine Jurca, ‘Tarzan, Lord of the Suburbs,’ *Modern Language Quarterly* 57.3 (1996), p. 489.
- 37 For William Gleason, *Tarzan of the Apes* is a ‘paradigmatic tale of racial recapitulation’. ‘Wild child becomes savage boy becomes civilized man, who in due evolutionary turn outstrips even his own aristocratic forebears. For only by returning to racial origins, recapitulation theory argued, might one move the present race a step ahead.’ Gleason, ‘Of Sequels and Sons: Tarzan and

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- the Problem of Paternity,' *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, 23.1 (2000), pp. 42 and 41.
- 38 Burroughs, *Tarzan*, p. 80.
- 39 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Thyestes*, translated by Jasper Heywood (1560), ed. Joost Daalder (London: Ernest Benn, 1982).
- 40 Cited in Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 86.
- 41 Greenaway regarded the cannibalism as literal and metaphorical: 'in the consumer society, once we have stuffed the whole world into our mouths, ultimately we will end up eating ourselves'. Greenaway cited in Helen Tiffin, 'Pigs, People and Pigoons' in Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong (ed.), *Knowing Animals* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 248.
- 42 <http://www.new-harvest.org/default.php> [accessed 30 September 2008]. I am grateful to Susan McHugh for pointing this website out to me and allowing me to read her unpublished work on meat production. Similar developments – in fact and fiction – are discussed in Traci Warkentin, 'Dis/integrating animals: ethical dimensions of the genetic engineering of animals for human consumption,' *AI & Society: The Journal of Human-Centred Systems* 20:1 (January 2006), pp. 82–102, especially pp. 97–99. The novel discussed by Warkentin in this context is Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) which is also discussed by Tiffin: 'Pigs, People and Pigoons', pp. 258–60.
- 43 See <http://www.peta.org/mc/NewsItem.asp?id=11306> [accessed 30 September 2008].
- 44 See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Marie-Louise Mallet (ed.), translated by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), *passim*.
- 45 Derrida, 'Eating Well', pp. 112–113.
- 46 Derrida, 'Eating Well', pp. 114–115.