

CHAPTER

1

A Historical-Philosophical Overview

1. Learning from the History of Vegetarianism

Two approaches to the history of ideas have relevance to the topic of vegetarianism. One of these is the view, suggested by William James (1842–1910), that theories pass through three “classic” stages: “First, you know, a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it.” James’s metatheory about theories may be applied to ideas equally well. A catchy but oversimplified formula, it derives its force from the notions that the truth will triumph, and that a baptism by fire must first be endured by positions that initially defy conventional wisdom, human prejudices, or vested interests. Usual examples include such theories as the fundamental equality of all human beings, the heliocentric solar system, the evolution of species, and the nonexistence of absolute truth. While some

might contend that vegetarianism is an idea whose time has arrived, it seems unlikely that, even if this were so, such a claim could be construed as implying that vegetarianism has passed through all of these stages, let alone the first.

Vegetarianism—long well-established in the East—is no longer being ignored in the West by such prominent portions of society as opinion-makers, publishers, and the service sector, but it is still frequently subject to ridicule and hostile/aggressive or suspicious/skeptical interrogation. It is somewhat easier to place attitudes toward vegetarianism on a scale of development or evolution if we acknowledge that the broader concept of animals as beings having or deserving moral status—an important ground for vegetarianism—is itself in its infancy in terms of social acceptance, normative affirmation, and public advocacy. One could scarcely expect vegetarianism, when seen as a specific implication of this moral status, to be any further along in its journey toward general cultural endorsement.

The second way of perceiving the history of ideas that relates to vegetarianism was put forward by Daniel A. Dombrowski, and focuses on its “intermittent” or “phoenixlike” quality: “Often an idea is suggested, held to be true for a while, then ignored, finally to be rediscovered. But if the idea is ignored for too long, the rediscoverers may consider themselves discoverers.”* Dombrowski maintains that Western philosophical vegetarianism is properly viewed as “an idea with a history of nearly 1,000 years in ancient Greece. . . . Then the idea curiously died out for almost seventeen hundred years. After such a long dormancy, all that remained of the idea was ashes, out of which blooms the phoenix of contemporary philosophical vegetarianism.”³ Arguments for vegetarianism are accordingly reaffirmed in a way that is reminiscent of the cyclical manner in which the history of Western thought has been peppered with such antimetaphysical views as Greek skepticism, medieval nominalism, Humean skepticism, the “Scottish School” of common sense, logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, and the “end

of philosophy” theories. The difference, however, would appear to reside in the fact that in relation to vegetarianism—at least if we adopt Dombrowski’s position—a process of reinventing the wheel is at work.

A certain amount of truth in the “phoenix” view of the history of ideas cannot be denied. For example, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) pointedly suggested that there are those who forget “what it means to be a human being,” adding that “the existing individual who forgets that he is existing will become more and more absentminded.”⁴ It is just as easy to forget what it means to exist as a *humane* being. And when we forget, we eventually have to remind ourselves of the meaning. Or, as G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) would observe, the history of ideas, like the history of anything else, reveals a dialectical process in which beliefs are initially championed, then scorned, then reaffirmed in an enriched, “higher” form. Hence some acquaintance with the historical sources of vegetarian thought not only generates an appropriate sense of humility but also imparts greater depth to our understanding of its contemporary manifestations.

The two perspectives on vegetarianism outlined above are neither incompatible nor exhaustive. We are not forced to choose between mutually antagonistic views about the history of ideas in general and of ideas about vegetarianism in particular. Perhaps vegetarianism has, in some meaningful sense, been rediscovered of late in the West. But the contrasting “baptism of fire” image also captures central features of the attempt to establish vegetarianism as a mainstream or socially normative idea. Indeed it might be argued that it is precisely because vegetarianism has not fully emerged as a guiding idea (or ideal) that it *can* be periodically rediscovered and relaunched.

Even when a particular idea is triumphant—and vegetarianism is far from being proclaimed victorious—it is not exempt from having to be rediscovered yet again, after an age of forgetfulness, at some future time. It seems to be the fate of Western and other nonindigenous peoples always to be recovering or un-

earthing the lessons of the past, many of which they themselves have intentionally buried or are actively erasing. And maybe this fateful condition of rediscovery, inasmuch as it is part of the dialectic of moral enlightenment, ought not to be despised. For perhaps it keeps vegetarianism vital and progressive as it gains ever-greater acceptance within new historical contexts.

Beyond the **two** theories concerning the history of ideas discussed above lies another perspective: that an idea such as vegetarianism may be percolating through the ages in a subterranean and subversive, countercultural manner. It is this **PO**-**SI**-**TION** I shall adopt in the discussion that follows.

There are of course plenty of nay-sayers on the issue of whether we can learn from history. We all know the adage that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”⁵ This may be perceived by some as a warning rather than as a pronouncement on the possibility of benefiting from a close scrutiny of the past. But other voices are even more negative. Hegel, for instance, opined that “what experience and history teach is that peoples and governments have never yet learned from history, let alone acted according to its lessons.”⁶ And Henry Ford (1863–1947) once notoriously declared that “history is more or less bunk.”⁷ Presumably Hegel would have exempted the history of ideas from his own censorious generalization, for otherwise he should be at a loss to explain why his approach to so many subjects, philosophy not least among them, was historically constructed in a painstaking and highly self-conscious manner. Sound ideas, for Hegel, grow organically out of a fertile seedbed of past hunches, inklings, insights, and partially correct attempts to understand; out of a process of trial and error in the search for knowledge. Perhaps, then, we may reasonably expect to be rewarded by an investigation into the ideas that lie behind modern vegetarianism.

And yet here too we find detractors. The author of an article on vegetarianism in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* claims that “in this particular subject no sound inferences as to

modern problems can possibly be drawn from any records of the past.”⁸ This seems an astounding statement from a scholar of religious studies, a field that is inevitably historical. And we would do well to ignore such counsel, for while it may be granted that knowing about vegetarian tendencies of the past cannot tell us all we need to know concerning the tendencies of the present, such historical knowledge is nevertheless instructive for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that vegetarianism is not merely an isolated or faddish aberration of our era or of any other. Second, it illuminates the origins of particular arguments as well as their various expressions and amplifications over time. Third, it explains how vegetarianism and its prominent proponents relate to certain historical contexts. Fourth, and most important for our purposes, it enables us to appreciate the complexity and power of vegetarianism by recognizing the diverse sources of the positions that support it. These different dimensions are best explored in their entirety within the framework of a comprehensive historical study of vegetarian theories and practices, which the reader is encouraged to seek in works such as those listed in the Bibliography.⁹ My goals in this chapter are much more modest: to connect contemporary arguments in support of vegetarianism with important historical precursors, and to illustrate, by taking a careful look at the ancient philosopher Porphyry (c. 234–c. 305 CE), how “modern” certain early views about vegetarianism have been.

2. Antiquity and the Special Case of Porphyry

The most striking feature of the history of vegetarianism is its length. Some scholars suggest that prehistoric hominids were vegetarians and develop their case at considerable effort.¹⁰ Perhaps more persuasively (or at least less speculatively), it has been claimed that from observations of present-day tribal groups our ancestors were basically omnivorous scavengers who were nonetheless “semivegetarians.”¹¹ This seems scarcely very

illuminating, however, both because the evidence is thin and because our interest is in vegetarianism as a product of modern critical reflection, not of sheer necessity. For these reasons I shall not discuss this debate further here (but see Chapter 7, Section 4).

Within recorded history, however, vegetarianism is evident as a common way of life well before the birth of Christ.¹² Many discussions begin with the ancient Greeks, but this Eurocentric approach neglects to acknowledge the much earlier appearance in India of ideas and practices centering on nonviolence toward living things. Aśoka, who was emperor of India in the third century BCE, was a convert to Buddhism who prohibited a number of cruel practices involving animals, including animal sacrifice. He adopted vegetarianism himself and strongly encouraged his subjects to do likewise.¹³ Vegetarianism in fact still is a prominent aspect of Hinduism and Jainism, which both date from long before the Common Era (see Chapter 7, Sections 3 and 5).

In the West Pythagoras (c. 580–c. 500 BCE) is generally regarded as the first prominent thinker who prescribed vegetarianism for his followers. His views were influenced by many sources, including Orphic, Zoroastrian, and Egyptian religions and probably the writings of Hesiod (active c. 800 BCE), who relates that the gods feasted only on “the pure and bloodless food of Ambrosia.”¹⁴ Although none of Pythagoras’s own writings has survived, his philosophy can be extracted from several works by other authors, among them the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius (probably early third century CE), the *Moralia* by Plutarch (c. 46–after 119 CE), and *On Abstinence from Animal Food* by Porphyry.

Pythagoras’s vegetarianism arose from his belief in the ensoulment of animals, the identical composition of human and animal souls, the transmigration of souls after death, obligatory nonviolence, and the natural and supernatural kinship of

humans and animals. This form of vegetarianism (which also included abstinence from certain vegetables) thus had a spiritual and metaphysical foundation as well as ethical significance, inasmuch as kindness toward nonhumans became mandatory for **the** Pythagoreans, perhaps at least in part because of their belief that humanity and compassion are extinguished by cruel practices and reinforced by regular observance.¹⁵ It is worth noting that this early vegetarian taught a doctrine that, **two** centuries later, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) made a central principle of his theory of moral education: that virtues are habits we instill in ourselves by repetition.¹⁶ Aristotle, however, unlike Pythagoras, did not recognize that the compassionate treatment of animals should occupy a place in this process. (For more on Aristotle, *see* Chapter 5, Section 2.)

Other notable ancient Western vegetarian philosophers include Empedocles (c. 490–430 BCE), Theophrastus (c. 372–c. 287 BCE), Epicurus (341–270 BCE), Diogenes (died c. 320 BCE), Plutarch, Plotinus (205–270 CE), and Porphyry. Plato (c. 428–347 BCE), too, although he may not have been a practicing vegetarian, advocated a vegetarian diet for his utopian society both because he held it to be a more healthy alternative and because, remarkably, he was aware (as is commonly maintained today) that a vegetarian diet leads to greater economy of land usage.¹⁷

Among these illustrious figures the one who stands out is Porphyry, who authored a detailed treatise on the subject. Like his mentors Plutarch and Plotinus, he lived during the epoch described by Jon Gregerson as “the great pagan vegetarian revival in the Greco-Roman West,” which was spurred by no **less** a personage than the Roman empress Julia Domna (c. 167–217 CE).¹⁸ Porphyry wrote a critique of Christianity and many other works, most of which were destroyed in public book burnings ordered by the Roman emperors Constantine (died 337 CE) and Theodosius (347–395 CE).¹⁹ One of his surviving works is the aforementioned *On Abstinence from*

Animal Food,²⁰ written to persuade a formerly vegetarian friend who had reverted to eating meat to reconsider his choice. This fact is significant because for Porphyry, as for many other vegetarians both past and present, vegetarianism is part of an overall worldview (see Chapter 9, Section 3). A number of his arguments in favor of vegetarianism are still relevant today, and are examples of those viewpoints that were once forgotten only to be rediscovered much later. To a significant extent his work on vegetarianism is a compendium of others' ideas, but Porphyry developed, extended, and represented them more systematically, adding many new insights of his own along the way.

Porphyry contends that vegetarianism is part of a frugal lifestyle that is virtuous in itself, and that has the advantage of depending on foodstuffs that are easily and inexpensively procured.²¹ He also argues that it is more conducive to health and spiritual purification.²² Like the Pythagoreans he looked back to an allegedly simpler, more peaceful, and more benevolent time before agriculture, enmity, and greed had entered human life, distorted our dietary perspective, and made meat seem indispensable.

Porphyry points out that the justifiable killing of animals for self-defense, religious sacrifice, or other reasons does not establish that they may or should be eaten. If it were equally justifiable to eat a being that one may, in given circumstances, be justified in killing, he reasons that cannibalism would also be defensible.²³ Here, as elsewhere, Porphyry argues that no moral distinction should be drawn between humans and animals, and that the slaughter of innocuous domesticated animals cannot be justified from a principle that sanctions the killing of wild animals for the protection of human interests.²⁴ Thus Porphyry clearly places the onus of proof upon those who would kill and eat animals, not on those who would oppose these practices, as has customarily been assumed within our anthropocentric and speciesist tradition.

Porphyry's reflections on animal sacrifice, a practice that preoccupied him and that he vehemently opposed,²⁵ led him to claim that it is preferable to kill plants rather than animals, since in killing animals we take their lives against their will, while this is not the case in killing plants.²⁶ We may also of course receive nourishment from plants—unlike receiving meat from animals—without killing them, by collecting fruits and vegetables that have fallen from them or that will do so in the natural course of events. Therefore, Porphyry concludes, less injury is caused by eating plant foods.²⁷

Animals possess sensation, reason, and memory, according to Porphyry.²⁸ Sensation, or the capacity to experience pain and pleasure, and memory, he notes, are “naturally present” across a large spectrum of species to promote survival and the preservation of well-being, those who deny this and who caution against anthropomorphizing animal life merely distort the facts to suit their own preconceptions.²⁹ We cannot deny that animals possess reason, he continues, simply because they do not speak our language, for most of humankind would accordingly be subject to the same judgment. Animals do, argues Porphyry, vocalize in a manner appropriate to their natural physical constitution. They likewise understand the “speech” of members of their own kind perfectly well. In a prescient passage Porphyry remarks that it is *humans* who are unable to understand animal languages, not the animals who fail to master ours: “We only hear a sound, of the signification of which we are ignorant, because no one who has learnt our language, is able to teach us through ours the meaning of what is said by brutes.”³⁰ Animals, for their part, would be equally entitled to declare humans deficient in communication skills because of the unintelligibility of our speech to them.³¹ Animals' poor performance in typical human tasks is no indicator of their lesser worth, for the same shortcoming is to be found among many members of our own species.³² Porphyry goes on to offer plentiful examples of humans (such as hunters, cowherds,

and shepherds) who **do** understand animal vocalizations because of their intimate association with them in the performance of certain tasks.³³

Porphyry further puts forth anecdotal evidence of crows, magpies, parrots, hyenas, and other animals who imitate human sounds and use them to obtain, through deception, what they desire from us.³⁴ Domesticated animals know enough to obey their master's voice and ignore that of others, to respond to different tones and inflections, to solve problems, to learn complicated performance routines, and to behave with prudence beyond that shown by humans.³⁵ Along with a number of other early thinkers, Porphyry asserts, many centuries before Darwin, that the presence of reason in animals and humans is a matter of degree, not one of absolute presence or absence, just as the same is true within the human species.³⁶ He points out, a millennium before Descartes, that it is equally illogical to deny that a particular species of bird can fly at all because another flies higher as to disclaim animal intelligence merely because humans excel in this regard.³⁷ Again he observes that our lack of understanding of animal behavior does not warrant the conclusion that they cannot possess reason.³⁸ The benefit of the doubt, one might add, should be accorded to nonhumans rather than allowing self-interested and species-chauvinistic principles of parsimony (or economy of description and explanation) to override good sense and faithful observation.

According to Porphyry, domesticated animals and humans exist in a relationship of "innate justice" toward each other,³⁹ which is his way of describing the companionship, mutual protection, and caring husbandry that often characterize such associations. Even wild animals, he avers, would lose their "ferociousness" if they had sufficient food to satisfy their needs.⁴⁰ Porphyry hints that it does not matter whether any sort of social contract exists between humans and other animals, for there are innate natural bonds that create a moral community that includes animals.⁴¹ Many contemporary philosophers

have either assumed or overtly proclaimed, with no reference to Porphyry's work and little awareness of animals' remarkable capacities, that in the absence of such a contractual social relationship between humans and animals, humans have no significant moral obligations to animals.⁴² Porphyry develops his case by affirming that it does not matter that animals have no formal political, legal, or juridical institutions discernible to us,⁴³ since countless generations of our human ancestors lived quite happily and productively without one or more of these.⁴⁴ He suggests as well that tame animals display a thoroughgoing trust of humans that we frequently betray, especially when we slaughter them and deliberately place them in danger.⁴⁵

Porphyry also argues that while humans may be permitted to cause the degree of injury to living things that is necessary to obtain essential nourishment, it is wrong to exceed this limit merely to experience "luxury" or "the enjoyment of pleasure."⁴⁶ In other words, neither sensory gratification, taste preferences, nor self-indulgence should override human obligations to show benevolence toward other life-forms (especially those that serve our needs) and to minimize the harm we inflict on nature in exercising our own right to live. We can best honor these duties by refraining from killing animals for food. In general terms there is no justification for using violence against other living beings beyond the minimum level required for our safety and survival, and it is a mistake to model our relationship with all nonhuman animals on the state of mutual hostility that supposedly exists between humans and wild creatures.⁴⁷ If we try to subvert this argument by appealing to purely utilitarian considerations, we shall find ourselves in trouble, for it will be seen that just as some animals may be said to exist to serve human needs, so do **we** exist to feed predatory animals known to attack humans.⁴⁸

Porphyry elaborates on the theme of nonmaleficence, or the avoidance of causing harm, by arguing that cultivating a

sense of kinship with other species leads to a generalized attitude of benevolence:

For he who abstains from every thing animated . . . will be much more careful not to injure those of his own species. For he who loves the genus, will not hate any species of animals; and by how much the greater his love of the genus is, by so much the more will he preserve justice towards a part of the genus, and that to which he is allied. He, therefore, who admits that he is allied to all animals, will not injure any animal. But he who confines justice to man alone, is prepared, like one enclosed in a narrow space, to hurl from him the prohibition of injustice.⁴⁹

Here he is not merely claiming that cruelty to animals results (or may result) in cruelty to other humans, but makes the broader case that a person who cultivates what the contemporary evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson calls “biophilia”⁵⁰ (see Chapter 7, Section 2) will not wish to harm any living thing, whether human or animal. That cruelty to animals is of no moral concern *in and of itself* was argued, infamously and much later, by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who claimed that we have only “indirect duties” toward nonhuman animals, which are derived from “direct duties” to other humans. Thus, *he* held, we ought not to kill, harm, or cruelly treat animals if and when (but *only* if and when) doing so either destroys or damages animals that are human property, thereby causing some material loss to another human; or *serves* as a bad example to other humans or adversely affects one’s own behavior toward other humans.⁵¹

By sharp contrast the aim of developing in oneself a humaneness toward nonhuman creatures, as Porphyry sees it, is to transcend speciesism rather than to reinforce it, and to mitigate the violent tendencies that lie within us all (see Chapter 4, Section 2). Even a great thinker such as Kant suffered from a narrowness of vision that totally buried this important lesson from the past. (For more on Kant, see Chapter 5, Section 2.)

Porphyry’s philosophical vegetarianism was clearly centuries

ahead of its time. His writing reveals an overwhelmingly modern outlook, a sophisticated analysis that goes to the core of the moral issues, and compelling reflections on what we would call environmental ethics, the likes of which are not witnessed again until comparatively recently.

3. From Medieval Times to the Modern Era

As in the case of all other issues pertaining to the use and treatment of animals, the Western mind (with a few noteworthy exceptions) went into a state of suspended animation in regard to vegetarianism for a millennium and a half, as Dombrowski records.⁵² Christianity built upon the Aristotelian and biblical conception that humans and animals occupy separate realms of being, and reinforced this position with the theological doctrine that only humans have immortal souls. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) consolidated these teachings still further, and it was also he who first promulgated the notion of humans' indirect duty to nonhumans.⁵³ There are of course many other, generally less renowned saints whose kindness to animals is legendary. Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) is merely the most celebrated of these, and as Richard D. Ryder comments, “the closeness of the relationship between St. Francis . . . and nonhumans, far from being unusual, marked the end of a long saintly tradition, not yet revived in the attitudes of the modern church.”⁵⁴ Yet Saint Francis did not compel his followers to adhere to a vegetarian diet, nor is such a rule part of the Franciscan order even today.

Vegetarianism played a central role in heretical Christian movements that swept Europe and the Middle East, from the Gnostics and Manicheans in the first few centuries of the Common Era to the Paulicians, Massalians, Bogomils, and Cathars in the medieval period. Vegetarianism was repeatedly cited as one among many reasons for the Catholic Church's condemnation of such sects. Colin Spencer shows that vegetarianism

alone was sometimes sufficient cause for arrest and the inevitable persecution, torture, and death that followed.⁵⁵ The Cathar movement in southern France and northern Italy, which forbade meat-eating, grew so strong that in the early thirteenth century Pope Innocent III (1161–1216) ordered a Holy Crusade to stamp it out. Much of the energy that went into these early Christians' maintenance of a strict vegetarian diet revolved around their effort to triumph over the evils of the flesh, and therefore had nothing to do with concern for animal suffering or reverence for other species.⁵⁶

Other, isolated religious figures who were distinguished by their attitude toward animals include the Hermit of Eskdale in England. Known as both an early animal liberator and an environmentalist, in 1159 he rescued a wild boar from hunters only to be killed by them for his interference.⁵⁷ The Italian Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) argued that animals' lack of an immortal soul made kindness rather than cruelty the appropriate response to them.⁵⁸ This view challenged the predisposition, which is still operative today, to legitimize the tendency of one who is superior in terms of strength, wealth, power, or the like, to dominate, subordinate, exploit, and oppress one who is "inferior" (see Chapter 6, Section 4). According to Bellarmine and those who share his view, however, compassion and kindness toward those who are at our mercy—whatever their species—are obligatory.⁵⁹

Contrary to what one might suppose, the plight of nonhuman animals actually deteriorated as the medieval world gave way to that of the Renaissance. As Ryder observes, "the influence of the saints faded and the growing anthropocentrism of the Renaissance heralded several centuries of outstanding cruelty."⁶⁰ Philosophically this anthropocentrism—and some would say the cruelty as well—reached its apex with René Descartes (1596–1650), who taught that animals are capable of neither consciousness nor pain sensation.⁶¹ Yet even in this bleak period there were dissident voices in Europe. Michel

Eyquem de Montaigne (1533–1592) affirmed an intimate connection, or “mutual bond,” between humans and nonhumans that requires the latter be shown “respect and affection.”⁶² While both human and nonhuman animals possess their various attributes and capacities to different degrees, Montaigne argued, there is neither a basis nor a justification for placing our species above all the rest in the order of creation. Jakob Boehme (1575–1624) taught that there exists a mystical union between humans and God of which “kinship with the universe was the basis.” Itilling or violence of any kind destroys this union and places “barriers between the soul and God.”⁶³ Saint Thomas More (1478–1535) condemned hunting in his *Utopia* (1516), Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was a vegetarian, and Henry More (1614–1687) argued vigorously against Descartes that animals have not only consciousness but also immortal souls.⁶⁴ Thomas Tryon (1634–1703), another vegetarian, was the first to refer in writing (c. 1683) to the “natural rights” of animals,⁶⁵ and in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) John Locke (1632–1704) urged that compassion is a natural human disposition, whereas cruelty is a learned behavior and state of character.⁶⁶ Locke’s view, unfortunately, marked only a limited advance, for he regarded animals as mere property of humans owing to our species’s divinely granted dominion over nature.

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) spread the ideals of democracy and universal human rights through powerful writings that were widely influential in the newly formed United States and across the world. Without such concepts that so effectively validate and enshrine the principles of equality, justice, and dignity, Spencer believes that “human beings could not begin to allow the concept of animal rights room to seed itself, much less grow.”⁶⁷

Other philosophers of note who contributed to this ongoing debate were Gottfried von Leibniz (1646–1716), David Hume (1711–1776) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Leibniz affirmed that differences between humans and other animals

are ones of degree only and that animals possess immortal souls. Hume, while denying that equality and justice pertain to animals, nonetheless ascribed to them psychological traits readily identified as human: will, passion, reason, pride, humility, love, hate, and sociability. Rousseau maintained that animals have the right to protection against abuse by humans on the grounds of sentience rather than reason.

From the late Enlightenment onward a gradually increasing number of individuals and groups have openly and demonstratively declared their compassion for nonhuman animals and their advocacy of vegetarianism, or have at least explored these issues, often in quite modern ways. For example, in 1791 John Oswald (1730–1793), a British soldier who had studied Hinduism and who fought and died in the French Revolution, produced what James Turner calls “the first published protest on nonreligious grounds against the ‘murder’ of animals for food.”⁶⁸ In 1797 George Nicholson (1760–1825), a writer, printer and crusader against popular prejudices, offered a multifaceted and extended argument for vegetarianism that featured considerations of justice and compassion, and referred to animal slaughter as “murder.”⁶⁹ Joseph Ritson (1752–1803), a well-known champion of scholarly accuracy, was often caricatured for his staunch vegetarianism.⁷⁰ In 1785 the theologian William Paley (1743–1805), author of the celebrated “Great Watchmaker” argument for God’s existence, noted that land is used more efficiently by raising vegetable crops rather than grazing livestock.⁷¹ Unfortunately Paley, like Locke, defended meat-eating on the grounds of humans’ divinely bestowed dominion over nature. His contemporary Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774) reiterated an insight first expressed by the ancients: that it is deeply inconsistent to claim to be compassionate toward animals yet dine on them.⁷² The Dorrilites, an American religious sect founded in 1790 in Vermont, embraced vegetarianism and proscribed clothing made from animal products.

Meanwhile some philosophers in this period began to formulate more considered pro-animal positions. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), from whose thinking flow nineteenth- and twentieth-century utilitarian ethical and political theories, proposed that issues of rationality and language are irrelevant in deciding whether animals belong to the moral community; in such deliberations only sentience (and specifically the capacity to suffer) should be considered, for where sentience exists, so likewise is our moral concern appropriate.⁷³ Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) posited that all living entities manifest an identical underlying metaphysical will, and drew close parallels between his own thought and that of Buddhism, both of which teach compassion in the face of universal suffering. Because of the metaphysical and ethical unity of all living beings, animals are to be treated with compassion; they also have basic rights that dictate corresponding obligations from humans. In spite of all this, and notwithstanding his clearly expressed disgust for “European systems of morality” that are “revoltingly crude” in regard to animals, Schopenhauer was able to state blithely that humans are justified in eating animals because the pleasure they derive from doing so outweighs the suffering experienced by the animals eaten.⁷⁴ (For more on Schopenhauer, see Chapter 7, Section 2.)

In the first decade of the nineteenth century William Cowherd (1763–1816) founded the Bible Christian Church in Manchester, England, with vegetarianism as one of its doctrinal pillars. Ryder refers to this as “the start of the organized modern vegetarian movement,”⁷⁵ which appears to be a fair assessment. As Paul R. Amato and Sonia A. Partridge point out, “members of [Cowherd’s] group later formed the Vegetarian Society in England in 1847 — the first secular vegetarian organization in the West.”⁷⁶ It was cofounded by members of the Alcott House Concordium, which took its name from Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), father of the writer Louisa May Alcott, after his visit in 1842.⁷⁷ (The word “vegetarian,”

incidentally, had first been coined five years earlier, and soon secured a place in both the language and the common consciousness of the period.)⁷⁸ A follower of Cowherd's, William Metcalfe (1788–1862), founded the American Vegetarian Society soon afterward, in 1850. Other Western religious and spiritual movements containing powerful vegetarian currents, including the Theosophists, the Society of Friends, and the Seventh-Day Adventists, also contributed to the spread of vegetarianism. During the 1870s vegetarianism became firmly connected with the animal welfare movement and antivivisectionism via the idea that a healthy diet should make remedial medical treatments unnecessary.⁷⁹

The acceptance of vegetarianism in the nineteenth century—at least among certain segments of society—was enhanced by such social, historical, and cultural developments as the **passage** of early animal welfare legislation in England and Germany; the founding of animal protection societies in England, Switzerland, and Scandinavia; the respectful and sensitive attitudes toward nature that had been projected by naturalist writers since the seventeenth century;⁸⁰ the work of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), which breached the species barrier so dramatically; and the influence of vegetarian writers including Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822),⁸¹ Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797–1851), and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*,⁸² for example, although generally distorted within our contemporary culture, features a vegetarian monster whom Shelley utilizes to explore important themes concerning humans' relationship to nature and hierarchical ethics.⁸³ Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810) and Dorothy Kilner (1755–1836) were among the numerous authors of children's books teaching kindness to animals.⁸⁴ The British social activist Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) was a very outspoken feminist antivivisectionist, the poet Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) was also an antivivisectionist, John Ruskin (1819–1900) and Lewis Carroll (1832–1898) both

crusaded against animal experimentation, and Henry Salt (1851–1939) tirelessly produced tracts on vegetarianism and other animal issues. In 1899 Salt was “probably the first to publish an essay on animal rights in a philosophical journal,” according to Charles R. Magel, the chief bibliographer on this topic.⁸⁵ Salt had previously published a book on the subject (in 1892), and as Magel notes, his works are “amazingly modern in concept and argument, and are historically of great importance.”⁸⁶ Salt’s works were widely influential; Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), for one, although raised from childhood as a vegetarian, reported that Salt’s writing first made him “become a vegetarian by choice.”⁸⁷ (For more on Gandhi, see Chapter 7, Section 3.)

In the early twentieth century few thinkers stand out as dedicated to reexamining the nature of animals, and especially their moral status, in a way that would prove instrumental to advancing the case for vegetarianism. Among those worth mentioning are L. T. Hobhouse (1864–1929), Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), and Leonard Nelson (1882–1927). Hobhouse, in *Mind in Evolution* (1901), not only explored animals’ mental life but also postulated that mind propels evolutionary development in general. Schweitzer has inspired many with his reverence for life, expressed in several works published from 1923 onward. Profoundly influenced by Schopenhauer, he is a pivotal figure in the rapprochement between Eastern and Western philosophical approaches to humans’ relationship to nonhuman animals and to nature as a whole. (For more on Schweitzer, see Chapter 7, Section 2.) Nelson delivered a lecture entitled “Duties to Animals,” composed sometime before 1927 and published posthumously in his *System of Ethics*,⁸⁸ that Magel designates as “probably the first systematic essay by a professional philosopher defending animal rights.”⁸⁹ It is still occasionally cited by today’s philosophers who debate this issue. Nelson argued that conflicts of interest involving humans and animals must be evaluated case by case, and that “in no event is it permissible to regard the animal’s

interest as inferior without good reason, and to proceed to injure it.”⁹⁰ Since animals have an interest of the first order in living, human dietary preference is not a sufficient reason for killing them. Although a case may be made in favor of killing nonhumans for food, this is limited to situations “when our interest in our own life or in the preservation of our own mental or physical powers can be safeguarded only by the destruction of an animal.”⁹¹ Nelson insists that this choice must not be taken lightly, however, for “each time we are confronted with a conflict between a man’s and an animal’s interest in life, we must weigh the interests involved before deciding which of them deserves to be given preference.”⁹²

During the middle part of the twentieth century philosophical attention was turned elsewhere and it is not until the 1970s that animals again become a focus of ethical theorizing. With the appearance of Australian philosopher Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* in 1975,⁹³ a revolutionary shift occurred. As Singer recounts in his book, conversations with fellow students that took place during his period of graduate studies at Oxford University in the early 1970s persuaded him of the philosophical merits of vegetarian thinking and of animals’ systematic oppression by humans.⁹⁴ Most influential among this group was Roslind Godlovitch, who was co-editing (with Stanley Godlovitch and John Harris) a collection of writings on animal issues published under the title *Animals, Men and Morals: An Enquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans*.⁹⁵ Positive response to the review article on this work that Singer wrote for the *New York Review of Books*⁹⁶ encouraged him to write *Animal Liberation*, so it is fair to say that *Animals, Men and Morals* was the catalyst for a new generation of pro-animal literature. The whole question of moral considerability, which had been brewing in the background of ethics, was now opened to intense scrutiny. Who or what has moral status or is an object of moral concern? Why? What level of concern is appropriate to the type of entity under consideration? These and

other matters became pressing issues for analysis in relation not only to nonhuman animals but also to human fetuses and humans who are either congenitally or circumstantially incapacitated (so-called marginal humans or human nonpersons). This sort of inquiry was further stimulated by Tom Regan's 1983 book *The Case for Animal Rights*,⁹⁷ which argued for a much higher estimation of animals' capacities and for the recognition that many nonhuman animals are individual "subjects-of-a-life" that has "inherent value" that belongs to them "categorically," not according to a scale of degrees. Both of these works staunchly defend vegetarianism on moral grounds.

Initially, professional philosophers greeted Singer's and Regan's ideas with general disbelief, derision and a superior, dismissive air, and it was quite some time before these new perspectives could receive a serious hearing. But fortunately this initial resistance was overcome; eventually these two theories came to have unprecedented influence, and have largely shaped the discourse and set the agenda for debate in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond. In fact, almost all of the voluminous recent literature in the area of ethics and animals begins where Singer and Regan leave off. That is, contemporary discussions are generally concerned with either extending their views, exploring their implications, finding their inconsistencies and conceptual problems, or offering alternative perspectives designed to surmount their alleged shortcomings.

One recent work that deserves special mention is Carol J. Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat*,⁹⁸ a landmark of postmodern philosophy and critical theory. In a strikingly original and productive way that does not derive directly from anything published before, Adams delves into the connections between the oppression of women and animals and attempts to create an opening for vegetarian discourse within patriarchal culture. (A detailed discussion of Adams's views can be found in Chapter 2, Section 3.)

Our brief historical overview has shown that, notwith-

standing a dominant and apparently unshakable anthropocentrism rooted in Western thought, strong strands of vegetarianism, and of a reasoning that promotes a more generous and realistic understanding of animals' moral status leading to vegetarian conclusions, are present throughout our tradition. Often ridiculed and sometimes even persecuted, many of these countervailing and neglected tendencies cycle through history, and their prominence in today's world—in both intellectual and practical life—signals for the future the possibility of major changes in thinking about animals as well as dietary habits. Vegetarianism remains today, as in the past, part of the persistent undercurrent of minority ethical discourse that energizes the evolution of personal and social morality.