

A former headmaster of Eton, writing on vegetarianism in Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (Vol.12, p.618f), begins with some comments on a passage in Ovid. The reference is to the poet's version, in the last book of the Metamorphoses (15, lines 75-478), of a long speech by the philosopher Pythagoras, who is said to have had a vision of the divine mind denied to the human senses. First and in some ways most important is the teaching that nature forbids the use of animal food in human diet. Ovid, or his spokesman Pythagoras, gives scant attention to the physiological effects of a non-flesh as opposed to a flesh diet. The arguments given are instead ethical ones. To eat meat requires bloody murder (82), all the more shocking when earth's bounty is so prodigal. Such crime befits beasts more than men, and in fact not all beasts but only the most savage. What a crime it is to bury flesh in our flesh, and for one living creature to live by the death of another (90)! In the age we call golden men did not pollute their mouths with blood: in those happy days birds flew safely, rabbits in the meadows were fearless, and fish were not hooked by their innocent trust. Alas, some unknown innovator began to sink bodies in his belly and paved the way to crime.

Perhaps the start came with the slayings of wild beasts that tried to kill men: this could be done without violating love and duty. From there, however, it was only a short step to killing pigs that rooted up the crops, or goats that ate the vines, and doubtless they deserved what they got. Next came the quiet sheep, born to help men with milk and wool, and harmless, hard-working cattle. How little does he deserve the gift of grain who could unyoke his own fellow-cultivator and proceed to slaughter him! Not content with such treachery, we include the gods in our crime and suppose that the heavenly power delights in the slaughter of toiling bullocks. After the sacrifice the priests peer at the entrails to seek the will of the gods in them, and men dare to eat the forbidden food: if you do that you must realize that you are chewing on your own farm-labourers.

At this point the speaker turns to what may seem at first another topic, but is closely related. He views from afar the blind souls of men with their false fears of death. Bodies suffer no evil in death, and souls are immortal. Nothing dies, but all is changing. The spirit goes here and there where it will, passing from beast to man and man to beast: the spirit remains the same whatever the outward form it may assume. How wicked, then, to thrust out souls akin to your own by impious killing. The Ovidian Pythagoras turns next to the theme so dear to Heraclitus: all is in flux, all forms are vagrant images, time is a flowing river. The seasons change: our bodies change ceaselessly, and tomorrow we will not be what we were or are. The elements of the endless universe are themselves in change, and no appearance lasts for long, even though the sum of things is eternal. After many examples of change in nature and in history the poet-philosopher returns to his beginning. We are winged spirits, and can find homes in wild beasts and cattle, whose bodies have held the souls of our parents and brothers, and certainly held those of our fellow men: these bodies we should preserve and respect. Let the ox plough, the sheep give wool and the goat milk: away with nets and snares and hooks: kill if need be noxious creatures, but do not eat even their flesh, and live on gentler nourishment.

What are we to make of all this? Was Ovid a Pythagorean or a vegetarian, and is he writing seriously? As usual, scholars differ. One suggests that the whole section discussed above is a burlesque of Pythagoreanism. Others pay relatively little attention to this Pythagorean passage, yet we might expect it to be important because of its position in the poet's greatest work. We also know that Pythagoreanism and vegetarianism were influential in Ovid's day, and that the philosopher Seneca was for at least a time a devotee. Even those of us who are not devotees might do well to consider the arguments in this passage, and whether we can rationally refute Dean Lyttleton's conclusion: "... the ethical argument becomes irresistible... the slaughter of animals being unjustifiable unless necessity can be proved... ."