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“MAN IS HOW HE EATS.

Vegetarianism and animalism in a religious perspective”

1. What if Feuerbach were alive today

The contemporary Western society shows a schizophrenic attitude towards food. On the one hand, there is a complete – and often intentional – ignorance about the provenience of what we eat. The rise of this ignorance is co-relative to the decrease in self-cooking practices, such that we are becoming mere “food consumers” and is exemplified by the cropping up of companies such as *JustEat* – the purpose of the company being evident in the name itself. On the other hand, the availability of every kind of food for many people, and a general spread of what we could call the “environmental awareness”, has raised many ethical issues concerning what we choose to eat, in terms of impact, sustainability, quality, and wellness. This has had such a societal impact that a new disease has been born: *orthorexia*¹. In this study we will focus on this second “hand” of the contemporary man, trying to provide a religious-philosophical hermeneutic for some “orthorexist” movements (starting from the conceptual similarity between “orthorexia” and “orthodoxy”, for example); but, in order to do that, we have to begin from the first aspect.

Considering food in terms of a pure satisfaction of materialistic needs (of sustenance or pleasure) seems in line with Feuerbach’s famous aphorism: “Man is what he eats”. Those who have not read the original essay can interpret this motto as a recognition of the “animality” of the human being; we are nothing but material needs and desires: therefore, *just eat!*

There is also a symmetrical interpretation, provided by the wellness-vegan side: Feuerbach meant that, in order to stay healthy, we have to eat well. But this reading is only partially correct if we have reference to

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¹ See S. Bratman, D. Knight, *Health food junkies*, Broadway Books, New York 2000; L.M. Donini, D. Marsili, M.P. Graziani, M. Imbriale, C. Cannella, *Orthorexia nervosa: A preliminary study with a proposal for diagnosis and an attempt to measure the dimension of the phenomenon*, in “Eating and Weight Disorders”, Vol. 9 (2), 2004, p. 151.

the very first occurrence of Feuerbach's maxim. More properly taken, Feuerbach first highlighted the importance of eating healthy in order to have the strength to make revolutions. He says these words in 1850, while reviewing an essay by J. Moleschott entitled *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel: Für das Volk (Doctrine of Food: for the people)*: "If you wish to improve the people, then give them better food, instead of declamations against sin. *Man is what he eats*. If he eats only vegetable food, he is only a being which vegetates, and he has no energy"² (the anti-vegetarian conclusion should be especially kept in mind, today). However, twelve years later, Feuerbach uses the same expression in a completely different way, and in relation to the *leitmotiv* of his thought: the problem of religion. In fact, "man is what he eats" is the *subtitle* of an essay whose main title is really emblematic: *The mystery of Sacrifice (Das Geheimnis des Opfers, 1862)*.

Reading this work, it clearly emerges that the true meaning of Feuerbach's aphorism is the very opposite of a mere reductionist interpretation: man eats what he sacrifices to the gods, and in this act he declares at the same time that he is both separated from and in communion with them. "Man is what he eats" means "man yearns for God", and he expresses this yearning through sacrifice and ritual food consumption. Human beings divinize materiality: this, according to Feuerbach, is the essence of religion, and at the same time the most extreme expression of his radical materialism, which is inherently not a secularized one.

In the same line, the Italian philosopher Adriano Fabris writes that in the religious rules for food "the manner of fulfillment of a material *need* is based on its transformation into *desire*, emphasizing its symbolic and immaterial value"³. Sacrifices, cooking practices, common meals, storage modalities... these all are ways in which human beings *transfigure* food: from need to desire, from instinct to cultures, from matter to symbol. The original, trivial interpretation of "man is what he eats" thus is not only incorrect: *it is Feuerbach's polemic objective itself*. In our "just eat" global culture, we don't cook, we consume without conserving, we eat alone; and the only sacrifices we can make are self-sacrifices in the name of gods called Beauty, Thinness, Trend and Imitation – terrible gods

² L. Feuerbach, *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*, 1850.

³ "Il bisogno trova regulate le modalità del suo soddisfacimento a partire da una sua trasformazione in desiderio, dall'accentuazione del valore immateriale e simbolico di ciò che viene desiderato" (A. Fabris, "Cibo e consumo", in *A tavola con Dio e con gli uomini. Il cibo tra antropologia e religione*, ed. G. Colombo, Vita e Pensiero, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2016, p. 135, my translation). In the beginning of his essay, Fabris writes that "beside a 'philosophy of food' – serious or ironic, always innovative, like that of *Food & Philosophy*, F. Allhoff and D. Monroe eds., Blackwell, Malden-Oxford-Carlton, 2007 –, it can be developed a "philosophy of religions" concerning this aspect" (ivi, p. 133). With this contribution I would like to take up this challenge.

which often desire our flesh⁴. Although we starting by consuming food, we are now consuming ourselves: we are indeed what we eat, and – as we will see – *how* we eat.

In this framework, vegetarianism, animalism, and ecology in general, represent a strange phenomenon in the resurgence of non-egoistic and non-self-oriented hard ethical stances: one sacrifices something which could be *good* for him, in favor of an *environment* whose ethical value is conceived as paramount, equivalent, co-essential or (at least) not-accessory compared to the human life. Furthermore, environmental ethics is often conservative and anti-technocratic, since it establishes moral constraints on technological development and on the advancement of scientific research, and it cares about the safeguarding and protection of ecosystemic goods and balances. In the end, today's ecological ethics is perhaps the most powerful form of heteronomous ethics, in which the norms governing human action come from neither an autonomous choice of the subject (self-determination), nor a pure theoretical-rational reflection, but, at least partially, from external factors to which human beings relate.

However, when these kinds of ethics are asked to present solid arguments, they often fall into vicious and paradoxical circles, thus revealing their *religious* and *meta-ethical* roots. I cannot deal here with the main contemporary ecological movements⁵; let us focus here, then, on vegetarianism and animalism.

2. Animalism as a form of metaphysics

The most famous “animalist” philosopher, nowadays, is undoubtedly Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation* (1975), professor at Princeton University, vegetarian, included in 2005 among the *Time's*

⁴ See for example R. Girard, *Anorexie et désir mimétique*, L'Herne, Paris 2008, (tr. *Anorexia and mimetic desire*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2013).

⁵ See E. H. Reitan, *Deep Ecology and the Irrelevance of Morality*, in “Environmental Ethics”, 18, 1996, https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=enviroethics&id=enviroethics_1996_0018_0004_0411_0424; K.A. Jacobsen, *Bhagavad-Gita, Ecosophy T, and Deep Ecology*, in “Inquiry”, 39, 1996, pp. 219-238; W. Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, Shambhala Publications, Boston 1990; Luc Ferry, *Le nouvel ordre écologique*, Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 1992; R. Dubos, *A Theology of the Earth* (1969), in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, ed. I. G. Barbour, Reading, MA, 1973; F. Doolittle, “Is nature really motherly?”, in “CoEvolution Quarterly”, 29, 1981, pp. 58-63; R. Bondi, *Blu come un'arancia. Gaia tra mito e scienza*, UTET, Torino 2006; see also D. Bondi, *Fine del mondo o fine dell'uomo? Saggio su ecologia e religione*, (Verona: Edizioni Centro Studi Campostrini 2016).

100 most influential people of the world⁶, and defined by Colin McGinn in *The New Yorker* as “maybe the most influential philosopher alive”⁷. We will take him as the paradigmatic example of the links between animalistic and vegetarian ways of thought, rationally expressed. Singer popularized the lucky term “speciesism” (coined by Richard Ryder), defined as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species”⁸.

The key-word of this definition is “interest”. If Singer is often accused for his endorsements in favor of infanticide, euthanasia, sex between humans and animals, or vivisection, it is because he strives to be coherent with his basic philosophical position: interest utilitarianism. In *Animal Liberation* he openly declares harking back to this tradition, and especially to Jeremy Bentham, who incidentally was the first to give a philosophical depth to the concept of “animal rights”, based on the *capacity to suffer*:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog, is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, *Can they suffer?*⁹

Developing this argument – which is certainly *not* exempt from criticism¹⁰ – Singer identifies the capacity to suffer and enjoy as the *conditio sine qua non* to have rights, or rather (since he doesn’t particularly like

⁶ http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656_1972712_1974257,00.html

⁷ M. Specter, *The dangerous philosopher*, in “The New Yorker”, September 6, 1999.

⁸ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York, Avon Books 1975, p. 7.

⁹ J. Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), second edition 1823, chap. XVII.

¹⁰ For instance, why taking the capacity to suffer and not the capacity to talk, or to grow, or to change, or to fly? Who traces the “insuperable line”? Always a human being, reasoning, talking, writing, and moving from his/her own capacities and questions: the problem of “who is an animal?”, or “which is a living being”, is purely a *human* one.

the legal language of rights), to have an intrinsic dignity. In fact, what cannot suffer has no interests, what can suffer has interests:

The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it is.¹¹

Humans and animals share the capacity for suffering and enjoying, and *therefore*, even if *de facto* we can notice some differences between them, they are all equal *de jure*. The utilitarian moral principle which derives from this conception is the following one: act in order to eliminate as much pain as possible for as many animals as possible (human beings included), and to provide as much joy as possible for as many beings as possible. It is matter of calculating, each time, the cost-and-benefit of an action, in terms of potential suffering for some, and enjoyment for others. How many hens suffer, and how much do they suffer, in battery cages? It is a reasonable price in order to enjoy a few extra eggs? Obviously, in this evaluation one should take care of the *specific* features of different animals: for instance, a man sentenced to death suffers more than a pig shipped to the slaughter, because human beings can mentally anticipate the moment of their own death; vice versa, a wild animal in cage suffers more than a human prisoner, because it cannot understand the possibly temporary nature of detention.

Even if we were to agree with Singer's basic stance about the suffering and interests of living beings, it is not sufficient to explain the practical ethical principles he presumes derive *directly* and *only* from it.

For example, why should we not kill a living being, if we can do it without providing any suffering to it? Singer would probably answer that

¹¹ P. Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, 1979), chap. III. There are some surprising links between this "teleological" conception of interest and Robert Spaemann's position about the living beings in *Natürliche Ziele: Geschichte und Wieder-entdeckung des teleologischen Denkens*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2003. In a very summary, following Aquinas, Spaemann says that every living being is characterized by a *finis cuius*, an "end" that is the "form of the thing", indistinguishable from it (the Greek term *entelecheia* suggests the idea of an "intrinsic end"). Living things have normative requirements, obligations, limits. We can also call them "instincts". A cat that is hungry "must" eat. Also without the prospective concept of "duty", it does everything it can to eat. The end is the "limit" condition of a being: it circumscribes a living being, forming it and permitting it to express its own "nature".

the potential capacity to suffer, and not the suffering in effect, is the discriminant point. This could open a wide bioethical debate about his endorsement of euthanasia, but, as far as we are concerned, we should ask here the extreme question provoked by the entirety of Singer's thought: why does the capacity to suffer of a living being have to be considered as a sufficient condition for not killing it without any reason, or for not making it suffer? This can be seen as brutal, but not more than several of the conclusions Singer himself often draws from his "purely rational" utilitarian system. In short, we can find in Singer's moral philosophy an example of (what G. E. Moore called) the "naturalistic fallacy"¹²: the wrong transition from a phenomenal description into a moral prescription. The fact that a living being has an *interest* is not sufficient to justify the prescription to take this interest into moral account.

Now, if we move on from Singer to a wider horizon, we can look at his conception as an archetype of a deeper way of thought, shared by a large part of vegetarian and animalistic movements. This common way of thought is based on the idea that the *ontological equality* of the living beings is a good rational support for vegetarian/animalistic/environmental *ethical issues*. This idea is simply wrong, as its paradoxical outcomes shows: in fact, if I have the same "right to interest" of a wild pig, why should I not kill and eat it? Why should I sacrifice my pleasure for that of other animals? (Beyond the fact that I could make this moral act, while wild pigs cannot be subjected to the same prescription or indication). On the contrary, the biological "egalitarian" argument could be useful in order to explain and support "speciesist" acts, such as taking care of our own children, eating anything which is available and good for our own organism, defending the life of beings of our same species more than that of other species, searching for pleasure, aiming at reproduction rather than just sexual pleasure... indeed, acting just as all other animals do.

In other words, the presence itself of vegetarian and animalistic sensibilities, far from pointing out the equality between humans and other animals, is the proof that human beings can transcend their instincts and

¹² The expression as it is known was coined by G.E. Moore in the *Principia Ethica* (1903). In Moore, it had many meanings, while later it was used univocally as the logical critique against moral heteronomy, above all against the juxtaposition used by R. Hare of the Moorian "naturalistic fallacy" and the *is/ought question*, or "Hume's law" – a law to which Hume, as we have seen, would probably not have subscribed. For more on this topic, cf. W.D. Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question. A Collection of Papers on the Central Problem in Moral Philosophy*, Macmillan London 1969; E. Berti, *A proposito della "Legge di Hume"*, in A. Rigobello (a cura di), *Fondazione e interpretazione della norma*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1986.

interests. *Only the human species has the capacity to be anti-speciesist.* It is neither the pleasure nor the interest which forms the foundation of moral action, but exactly the human possibility of acting in a *disinterested* manner, in a very free way, which makes it necessary to have certain criteria to guide this freedom. Animalistic and vegetarian ethics openly show the attempt of human beings to look at the otherness as an “in-itself”, independent from the subject-oriented point of view. A cat cannot see in the mouse anything else but a prey, and particularly it is unable to see itself in eyes of the mouse. The cat looks at the mouse only from its own point of view, and doesn't see it as a being “in itself”: therefore, the cat cannot even consider the idea of being “one” entity among the others. Every other thing refers to it, and has no value in itself. Only human beings are capable of what Plessner called the “eccentric position”:¹³ the knowledge of being irreducible and limited experiential poles, makes them capable of imagining a transcendence of being beyond their own limited experience.

Therefore, the conceptual framework of animalism and vegetarianism is not the physicalist materialism, but the very opposite: it is the subject of metaphysical spiritualism, it is the subject of “beyond matter”. The optimistic illusion (and therefore the inner weakness) of these doctrines lies in the belief that this transcendence could be reached here, in this world, in the domain of immanence. The holistic eschatology of several environmental movements implies the overcoming of humanity by humans themselves, and that is why contemporary ethics of ecology can be linked to the post-human philosophy. We can retrace the mystical-religious roots of these forms of ethics by exploring their history. In particular, also, the analysis of the animalistic philosophical stances has led us to enucleate some of their logical paradoxes and deep ontological questions, the survey of a few focus points in the history of Western vegetarian doctrines will help us to highlight their religious-spiritualistic grounds. This line of research is fully in line with the anthropology of the sacred developed by René Girard, according to which even the most presumed “secularistic” cultural phenomena are rooted in (and could be seen as) ritual practices of survival of a society, through the symbolic expression of violence and mimetism.

¹³ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1975, p. 288.

3. Vegetarianism as a form of spiritualism

We could start from the Greek sorcerer-mathematician-philosopher Pythagoras, leader of an esoteric sect, which is described by Ovid as a man able to speak both with animals and gods, and also as the first vegetarian of the Western world: “Though the gods were far away, he visited their region of the sky, in his mind, and what nature denied to human vision he enjoyed with his inner eye [...] the first voice, wise but not believed in, to say, for example, in words like these: “Human beings, stop desecrating your bodies with impious foodstuffs. There are crops; there are apples weighing down the branches; and ripening grapes on the vines; there are flavorsome herbs; [...] The earth, prodigal of its wealth, supplies you with gentle sustenance, and offers you food without killing or shedding blood [...]. How wrong it is for flesh to be made from flesh; for a greedy body to fatten, by swallowing another body; for one creature to live by the death of another creature!”¹⁴.

In this quote the *impurity* of animal food derives openly from its proximity to violence and death, *therefore* to the matter, to the world of difference, limit and finitude.

Now, the end of the quote *seems* as much extreme as naive. As it is presented, it would be very critical, like several contemporary arguments which are based on a supposed “naturalness” of vegetarianism: if the fact that we are animals is enough to make us refuse animal food, then the fact that we are material bodies should make us refuse any material food – and someone goes to this extreme outcome, as we will see.

Another simple objection would be to point out that some non-human “creatures” live, actually, by the death of other creatures: why should humans, if they are merely creatures like all the others, do otherwise?

In the case of vegetarianism, like in many others domains, the naturalistic-reductionist arguments often fall into a paradox: in fact, if men are naturally herbivores, then there is something “unnatural” in them that made them become carnivores (let’s call this something “culture”, “sin”, “freedom”...); vice versa, if they are naturally carnivores, then vegetarianism is an unnatural ethics.

In both cases, naturalistic issues end up recognizing in human beings an element which departs from pure naturalness.

But Pythagoras was not nearly as inconsistent as many activists of contemporary vegetarianism. His apparent naturalism can only be fully understood if we take into account his belief in *metempsychosis*.

¹⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 72-93.

“We are not merely flesh, but in truth, winged spirits, and can enter into the family of wild creatures, and be imprisoned in the minds of animals” he explains, according to Ovid¹⁵.

We can find the belief in metempsychosis in several historical spiritualistic religious movements, often linked to vegetarian practices. Let us take, for example, the influences of Manichaeism in the Western World, especially in Catharism. Manichean *Elects*, men and women, carried out the *Seal of the Mouth* – they did not eat meat or eggs, nor did they drink wine – and the *Seal of the Hands* – they did not kill animals and did not cultivate the land. Together with sexual abstinence, such acts were avoided *not* for love of nature, but for the very opposite: because matter was made by dark gods, by Darkness, which imprisoned the Spiritual Light in the world of corporeality. Human beings have to free the divine sparks, which are entrapped in the material body: therefore, they must not be contaminated with anything material, but nurture pure asceticism. It seems that in some Manichaean communities, which believed in the transmigration of souls, the Elects were a sort of “ritual machines”: with their stomach activities, they released the particles of light imprisoned in the fruits and vegetables they ate. Anyway, “eating meat would have meant weighing the body with other matter, postponing the moment of the liberation of the divine, spiritual Self”¹⁶.

The influence of Manichaeism in Europe is a debated topic among historians, but today there is a substantial agreement in recognizing Manichaean traces within the gnostic sect of the Bogomils, a dualist Christian heresy which arose in Southeast Europe in the 10th century, under the parallel influence of Paulician Marcionism. Bogomils – according to the monk Euthymius Zigabenus – believed that also the devil, named Satanael, was the Son of God-Father, indeed the firstborn, and therefore more powerful than Christ. They were docetists, i.e. they refused the reality of the bodily suffering of Christ: Christ wore a flesh that had a material human appearance, but in reality it was immaterial and divine. Only apparently was he subjected to human passions, crucified, died, and resurrected. The Eucharist itself was nothing other than a metaphor

¹⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 453.

¹⁶ See E. J. Mannucci, *La cena di Pitagora. Storia del vegetarianismo dall'antica Grecia a Internet (Pythagoras's dinner. History of vegetarianism from ancient Greek to Internet)* Carocci, Roma 2008, pp. 33-35. See also C. Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast. A history of Vegetarianism*, University Press of New England, Hanover 1995, pp. 108-179. Spencer argues that since 4th century, in the Western World, vegetarianism began to be interpreted as a sign of heresy by Catholic Church. In the Synod of Ancyra (Ankara), in 314, it was imposed on priests who wanted to refrain from eating meat to eat it one last time, on pain of exclusion from the clergy.

to indicate the four Gospels (Christ's body) and the Acts of the Apostles (His blood), which are the only authentic gifts Christ has given humanity. Condemning every materiality as the principle of evil, "Bogomils strictly abstained from sexual intercourse, and from any food that came from a sexual act: meat, cheese, eggs"¹⁷.

Some Bogomil sects in Constantinople converted groups of French crusaders during the Second Crusade (1147). Returning to their homeland, these crusaders founded the first Cathar Churches¹⁸. Catharism spread like wild fire in southern France and northern Italy between the 12th and 13th centuries, until it was hushed up by a special Crusade (culminated with Siege of Montségur in 1243-1244) and by the parallel dissemination of Franciscanism and other new religious orders.

According to the Cathar cosmogony, the entire material world was not created by God, but by the Devil: the "God" of the Jews is nothing but Evil, therefore the Pentateuch was excluded from the Cathar Sacred Text. Flesh is generated from sin and by sin, and the human being must strive to free the spirit from this demonic prison, through practices of asceticism and meditation, and through abstinence from all that is carnal (sex and food included). In fact, those who had received the spiritual baptism (*consolamentum*) were strictly forbidden to eat meat or have sexual intercourse. Finally, the spirit of those who had died without receiving the *Consolamentum* could reincarnate in other animals. In his *Summa* against the heretics, Peter Martyr (1206–1252) argues that a Cathar has made this confession: "Clenched by your objections, I will reveal a secret that even few of our members know. We affirm and believe that the essential reason why we do not eat beef and birds is that some spirits destined for salvation may have been in their bodies"¹⁹.

4. Sacrifice of the body and transmigration of the soul

What we are touching upon, here, is a very decisive point: there is a kind of affinity between a (dead) human being and a (destined to death) animal. Connecting this belief with the widespread archaic ritual practice of animal sacrifice, and taking our cues from the theory of victimization

¹⁷ F. Zambon, *La Cena Segreta. Trattati e rituali catari (The secret dinner. Cathar texts and rituals)*, Adelphi, Milano 1997, p. 37.

¹⁸ Cathars received directly by Bogomils the most important of their apocryphal texts, the *Interrogatio Iohannis* or *Secret Dinner*: this text, which was recently found, was in fact brought by Bulgaria to Nazarius, the heretic bishop of Concorezzo.

¹⁹ Quoted by Zambon, *La Cena Segreta*, cit., p. 91. See also Pseudo-Giacomo de Capellis, *Summa contra haereticos*, in I von Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*, II, Dokumente, Munich 1890, pp. 274-277.

provided by René Girard, we can even venture out this thesis: the belief in *metempsychosis* itself, which supports several vegetarian doctrines, derives from the fact that in the sacrificial rituals animals were used as substitutes for the original human victims. In this way, the vicar animal victim embodies the spirit of the sacrificed human being, who therefore lives a sort of “second sacrificial existence” in the animal, which is killed in his place.

Obviously, the first link that comes to mind is the traditional religious model of Indian culture, in which the cow is “sacred” because it was originally “sacrificed” (from *sacrum-facere*, “to make something sacred”). In this regard, the scholar Alberto Pellissero, professor of Sanskrit at the University of Turin, confirmed that “in the Indian tradition there was animal sacrifice – from 1500 to 500 BC [...] The animal was considered a vicar victim of the sacrifice: one kills an animal because in this way a life is extinguished, but not that of the sacrifice’s customer”²⁰.

Girard’s theory is more sophisticated: the polarization of social violence toward a single human being, who is considered guilty and then killed, is a collective psychological mechanism that allows a society to survive by transferring its own violent potential on a single victim, a scapegoat which with his cathartic death brings peace to the whole community. Since this mechanism works, it also represents the first stage in the birth of religion: the first victim is divinized because with her or his own death peace was brought back to the community. The violent origin of this primordial divinity can be found in many cosmogonic myths: regarding the religions of India, for example, Girard mentions the famous myth of Puruṣa²¹, the “Cosmic Man”, a God-Man which, in the beginning of time, was sacrificed and dismembered, to give rise to the entire material and social world.

Following this theory, whenever a society falls into a crisis, the original mechanism is re-activated, but in a secondary and derivative modality, which is religiously mediated: the God of peace and violence requires a new victim to appease his anger. This would be the root of any sacrificial ritual, which initially was a human one: with the evolution of society, in fact, the sacrifice becomes increasingly symbolic, starting from the living beings which are more “symbiotic” with humans, i.e. animals. Obviously, these sacrificed/sacred animals have to maintain some common elements with gods – who in turn are victimized/divinized human beings²².

²⁰ Interview with A. Pellissero, in P. de Benedetti, *Teologia degli animali (Theology of Animals)*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2011, pp. 38-39.

²¹ See *Rigveda*, chap. X-90.

²² See R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris 1972; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, Grasset, Paris 1982. Surprisingly, we find in Feuerbach an absolutely Girardian in-

Now, if we look at the Greek/Mediterranean roots of our Western culture, we can find exactly all these elements, especially with regard to the bull/ox.

In Greek mythology, Zeus himself often takes on the appearance of a bull, which in fact is the “most sacred” animal: its sacrifice is the most important one, and strictly regulated²³. The bull is the mythical founder animal of Greek culture: Minos was born from the union between Zeus-bull and the oriental princess Europe, who was kidnapped by the “bull-shaped” Zeus and brought to Crete. Here, Minos’ wife Pasiphaë and a sacrificial bull mated, generating the Minotaur: in this way (as Walter Burkert states), “the identification of divine progenitor and sacrificial victim seems complete”²⁴.

Not only is Zeus linked to the bull, but also his counterpart, Dionysos: following the *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus of Panopolis²⁵, and the *Library of History* by Diodorus of Sicily²⁶, Dionysos took the appearance of a bull and was dismembered by the Titans, like a Greek “Puruṣa”.

In general, Burkert underlines that “the animal in Greek sacrifice seems to be associated in a particular way with man. Again and again, myths relate how an animal sacrifice takes the place of a human sacrifice, or, conversely, how an animal sacrifice is transformed into a human sacrifice; one is mirrored in the other”²⁷. The main references are the ritual *Tauropolos*, in which the throat of a man was sliced and offered to the goddess Artemis *Taurica*; or the flagellation of the ephebes at the altar of Artemis Orthia near Sparta; or the myth of the Kerestai (the Horned Ones), who made gruesome human sacrifices to Dionysos²⁸.

sight. These are the last lines of *The Mystery of Sacrifice*: “Only the barbarian, whether learned or unlearned, knows nothing of this mediation and thus finds meaning in the proposition: ‘man is what he eats’ only in formal, actual cannibalism and human sacrifice. But as *man raises himself to the level of culture*, [...] *he then transforms human flesh on the table as on the altar into bread and animal meat*, human blood into ‘the blood of the vine, of the olive tree’ into water, milk and honey or yet other juices, in just this way, because *now he still knows of their effects on the basis of feeling, even if not on the basis of reason, and eats human flesh and blood in plant and animal protein and in the other nourishments necessary for human well-being* as well, and summons his gods for atonement” (Eng. transl. by Cyril Levitt, 2007).

²³ In one of the most famous Greek myths, Prometheus, deceiving Zeus, institutes the practice of animal sacrifices (meat for human beings, smokes and bones for gods) with the first sacrifice of a bull.

²⁴ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion: archaic and classical*, Blackwell, Oxford 1985, § 1.4 “Animal and God”.

²⁵ Ivi, pp. 197-205.

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 75, 4.

²⁷ Ivi, § 1.4 “Animal and God”.

²⁸ On the animal sacrifice in general in the Greek culture, and on its link with human sacrifices, see M.H. Jameson, “Sacrifice Before Battle”, in V. D. Hanson, *Hoplites: The*

The proximity of god and bull in the light of sacrifice is very relevant in another great culture of antiquity: Egypt. Apis is a sacred divinized bull; each Pharaoh brings with himself – as a symbol of divine power – the tail of a bull; in the *Cannibal Hymn* from the Pyramid Text the Pharaoh-God Anus/Wenis is called “the bull of the sky” and also “the Lord of Food-offerings”; and finally Osiris, the dismembered cosmogonic God of Egyptian mythology, is often related to the image of the bull (for example in the Book of the Dead)²⁹.

Even in the Old Testament, Yahweh’s most fearsome opponent is an ox. When the people lose their trust in the god of Moses, they take refuge in old ancestral (maybe Egyptian) idols: they build a gold bull-calf, making offerings and sacrifices to it, dancing, drinking and “celebrating”³⁰.

It would be obviously necessary to dwell on these elements more at length, but we have neither the space nor the competences or the interest here: what we want to say is that the bull (or his little brother goat) represents *animality* as humans *feel* it, i.e. the irrational, material and violent part of themselves. In many religions of the world, this bloody violence finds its expressive form in the practices of ritual sacrifice. Therefore, refusing to sacrifice animals and to eat meat means wanting to expel animality from oneself, and, with animality, violence, matter and death.

Classical Greek Battle Experience, Routledge, London-New York, 1991; see also R. C. T. Parker, *Substitution in Greek Sacrifice*, in *Sacrifices humains / Human sacrifice*, eds. P. Bonnechere, R. Gagné, Presses Universitaires de Liège 2013, pp. 145-152. Parker sees as theoretically problematic the double link, within the sacrificial practice, between animal and god, on one hand, and between animal and human being, on the other. If we accept Girard’s theory, this apparent problem is solved, since there is an original identification between human beings and the god themselves. About the substitutional value of animal sacrifice in the Greek culture, and about its strict connection with vegetarian doctrines, Theophrastus himself declared that animal sacrifice was an ὑπάλλαγμα of human, and that the Pythagoreans sometimes sacrificed animals ἀνθ’ ἑαυτῶν (ap. Porphyry, *De abstinence* 2.27, 2.28). See the notes in G. Clark’s translation, *Porphyry, On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2000, p. 151. For more historical references on practices of animal/bull sacrifices in the ancient Greece, see Xenophon, *Anabasis*, VI 1, 4; VI 4, 22; VI 4, 25; see also Pausanias, *Periegesis*, III 15, 9. I would like to thank the Italian scholars Livia de Martinis and Elena Langella for these precious references and suggestions.

²⁹ See J. P. Allen, *The ancient Egyptian pyramid texts*, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature 2005, esp. p. 47; R. O. Faulkner, *The ‘Cannibal Hymn’ from the Pyramid texts*, in “The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology”, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1924, pp. 97-103; S. Ikram, *Choice Cuts. Meat production in ancient Egypt*, Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 1995; R. Pirelli, *Towards an anthropology of myth and rituals of offering and sacrifice in Ancient Egypt*, Naples 2002; E. Morris, *(Un)Dying Loyalty: Meditations on Retainer Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt and Elsewhere*, in *Violence and civilization: Studies of Social Violence in History and Prehistory*, ed. Roderick Campbell, Oxbow, Oxford and Oakville 2014. I would like to thank the Italian scholar Ilaria Cariddi for these precious references and suggestions.

³⁰ See *Exodus* 32.

5. Fruitarians and Breatharians: our orthorexic mystics

From the modern age onwards, even these “religions” were secularized and rationalized. Vegetarianism, for example, was on the one hand related to utilitarianism (as we have seen), and on the other to some form of medical health enthusiasm. The most famous exponent of this second current was probably George Cheyne (1671-1743), a Scottish doctor residing in England, who made vegetarianism a real social trend: something discussed in the reviews, laughed at in comic strips, staged in theaters... not much differently than today. Cheyne himself was a passionate reader of the Jacob Böhme, and it seems that in the last years of his life he believed in reincarnation³¹. But to find some evident resurrection of the original binomial “vegetarianism-spiritualism” we have to wait for the 19th century.

On September 20, 1847 in Kent, Great Britain, the first Vegetarian Society was born; and in 1850 the first American one. In these two early vegetarian societies, we can find health-conscious doctors, writers (such as Branson Alcott) and some famous religious personalities, like the presbyterian shepherd Sylvester Graham, the inventor of the *crackers* (to counteract the “sexually stimulating effects” of refined flour and meat), or the Seventh-day Adventist Harvey Kellogg, creator of the famous breakfast cereals (to replace the traditional bacon-based English breakfast). There were also some members of “dissident” or “radical” religious communities, such as the Bible Christians of Salford, and the followers of Swedenborg’s theosophy.

Today, it seems that this gnostic core of food taboos has been lost. Vegetarianism (and animalism in general) is often nothing but a fashion style, much more rampant than in Cheyne’s times, and endorsed by politics (right or left) to pick up electoral consensus. The salvation to which these practices had to lead to, has been replaced by physical health, “wellness”, following a secularizing trend which started in the early modern period.

And yet, if we look at the most extreme lines of vegetarianism, we find again the same spiritualistic common theme. I am referring to fruitarians and breatharians. “Beyond the spare shore of the vegan world lay the hungry sea of the fruitarians and the voyage out led to the promised land of the breatharians – people who believed that humans in fact don’t need to eat”³². Fruitarians eat nothing but fruits, and some of them eat

³¹ See S. Tristram, *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times*, W.W. Norton, New York 2007.

³² L. Keith, *The Vegetarian Myth. Food, justice and sustainability*, Flashpoint Press, California 2009, p. 62.

only fallen fruits, without picking them: they can thus boast about their illustrious ancestors, the Manichaean Elects. The Italian fruitarian *guru* Armando d'Elia, said that “actually, every time we ingest a food, we are absorbing condensed light, which is enclosed in the solid forms of food that we are going to eat”³³. Sentences like the latter are merely re-propositions of typical Manichean doctrines: briefly, fruits are the favorite foods because they grow high, on the trees, near the air, the sky, the spirit, as far away as possible from earth and mortal flesh. Following this line, breatharians claim that they (and every human being) can live without eating or drinking, but only absorbing *prana*/solar energy. Among their founding fathers is Roger Crab, a sixteenth-century English haberdasher, initiator of the vegetarian exegesis of the Bible: the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, in this conception, was interpreted as a path of purification from the meat diet, culminating in the consumption of manna, angelic food coming from the sky. Today the main and controversial exponents of breatharianism are the Indian mystic Prahlad Jani (1929) and the Australian essay writer Jasmuheen, pen-name of Ellen Greve (1957). Regardless of any controversy about their alleged evidence of the possibility of living without eating, what we are interested in is what they profess, what they believe. As Lierre Keith says about her fruitarian friend, “there was something in [her] project that I wanted, too: that grace, beyond need and hunger, beyond death”³⁴. In our contemporary forms of *orthorexia* there is still a resonance of the human yearning for transcendence, which is the very opposite of the flaunted ontological equality between all the living beings. A yearning for a post-animal existence of peace, free from death, needs, violence, material finitude. A spiritual desire which clashes with our carnal, animal, instinctive existence, condemning it as something “evil”.

Beyond any specific practical aspect that the ex-vegan Keith faces with competence (cultivation of cereals, digestive systems of different animals, breeding modalities, destruction of humus and living species by agriculture, fertilization of the soil...), she clearly grasps the central philosophical/anthropological point of the matter. We close this essay by quoting her words:

I know that you want to be true, vegetarians. You want to open the circle of concern to everything sentient. With all your hearts, you want us humans to be meant for cellulose or seeds or berries or anything that you believe can't

³³ “In realtà, ogni volta che ingeriamo qualsiasi alimento, ci stiamo nutrendo di luce condensata racchiusa nelle forme solide del cibo che ci apprestiamo a mangiare”. (<http://neuro-pepe.blogspot.it/2012/10/frutta-e-ortaggi-di-ottobre.html>)

³⁴ L. Keith, *The vegetarian Myth*, cit., p. 62.

feel pain. And I'm telling you the truth: it doesn't work. What you are made of – bones, blood, brain, heart – needs animals. This is not the universe you wanted. But it's the way the world, always alive and always hungry, works. [...] I used ideology like a sledgehammer and I thought I could bend the world to my demands. I couldn't. The needs of soil, the truth of the carbon cycle, and the nutritional requirements of the basic human template were a reality of brute, physical facts that would not be moved. I had built my entire identity on death being an ethical taboo, a moral horror, one that provoked a visceral shudder through body and soul. But 'death-free' is not an option that the processes of life offer us. We can rail and cry all we want, but in the end we have to make peace with the world, the good, green earth we claim to love so much but understand not at all. In dreams begin responsibilities, yes, but with understanding comes more. Eventually we see our only choices: the death that's destroying life or the death that's a part of life.³⁵

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³⁵ L. Keith, *The vegetarian Myth*, cit., p. 243, 77.

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