

In defence of tears

“The advent of sentience was also the advent of suffering, but the advent also of compassion [...] Thus was empathy born [...] perhaps the most acute in our own species, paradoxically the most monstrous as well as the most merciful of them all.”

(Harnad, 2019)

I have been a vegetarian for two thirds of my life, and now find myself transitioning to a vegan diet. I would like to think reason and compassion brought me here, but a childhood experience was probably decisive. I was in France on a school outing. We walked past an industrial building; the walls may not have been glass, but the doors were open. And hanging from hooks was a row of slaughtered pigs; pink, fleshy, unmoving save that they swung gently. Every child should visit an abattoir, so as to experience first-hand the origins of animal foods (Monbiot, 2014).

My next memory is of refusing to eat some lamb mince. My mother was perplexed; I cried; she took my supper away. That is how vegetarianism began for me – through childish tears. My feelings seemed perfectly normal. My parents had brought me up with animals; I wept when they died, my upset extending to fights at school. Why, then, would I want to eat them? Much later in life I swapped childhood pets for ex-battery chickens, and still, I am embarrassed to admit, sometimes cry when they (rather frequently) die. I take their bodies, exhausted from farm-factory life, to a quiet place in our woods and say a little prayer for them. I am not sure why, but perhaps it is to acknowledge their innumerable unnamed kindred who are slaughtered without ever being mourned.

At the point in my life I finally became vegetarian, when 18, I had never heard of Peter Singer’s animal liberation nor of Jeremy Bentham’s famous dictum “not whether it reasons, but can it suffer,” and I had not made the connection between eating meat and biodiversity destruction. I did not eat meat simply because I loved animals and I could not understand why people would want to hurt them. I still can’t.

Lacking empathy for beings other than ourselves is difficult to disentangle from the ‘separation’ (Gagliano, 2018: 119) and ‘dominion’ (White, 1967) paradigm, which went on to form the bedrock of a socioeconomic system in which animals became insensate livestock, units of production to be turned into commodities. Farming ratcheted up to industrial global agriculture entails day-old chicks being flown from Heathrow to India via Nairobi, one cog in an accelerating cascade of transport links between producers and end-markets. Such global commodity chains have facilitated the transformation of millions of hectares of Brazilian forest into soya plantations for feeding incarcerated farm animals in Europe, China and elsewhere (Lymbery, 2017: 187–9).

Across the world half the forests have already fallen (Vince, 2014: 267); in the last three hundred years 12 million km² have been felled and 4 million km² of grasslands converted to agriculture (Hall, 2011: 164) – a loss on the scale of Russia (World Bank, 2019). And the deficit continues to grow: 3.6 million hectares of ancient rainforest were cut down in 2018 – most of the losses accounted for by loggers and ranchers in the Amazon (Carrington, 2019). The outcome is an overwhelmingly declensionist trajectory of population declines, species extinctions and ecological impoverishment. People

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born since 2012 have inherited a planet with fewer than half the number of animals than those before 1970 (Waughray, 2018), and now we teeter on the cusp of extinguishing a further million species primarily by extirpating habitats through their conversion to agriculture, combined with an animal killing spree (being called 'defaunation'), climate breakdown and pollution (IPBES, 2019).

The extinguished and extinct no longer suffer, but I am haunted by them. Humanity has caused the loss of over 60% of wild

animals since 1970 (WWF, 2018), and it takes little imagination to conjure into one collective anguished utterance the life we quashed in preceding centuries. We must and should do all we can to preserve and restore wild places, as habitat destruction is among the greatest sources of wildlife decline and suffering, and also do all we can to stop the global plague of animal killings across land and seas (Czech, 2013: 171; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016).

Anthropomorphism is encouraged in bedtime stories, but when we put away

A photo taken in a slaughterhouse in 2005 (Shperniko88; CC BY-SA 4.0 [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>]).



‘childish things’ most of us leave our empathy for animals behind too. I did not because I still see those pigs, hanging in a row, and am awkward in social situations when I have to sit at the same table as people consuming meat. I like to believe explaining that animal agriculture and industrial fishing are among the biggest drivers of global defaunation and extinction would make a difference, but rarely do I have the opportunity, and if I did it would probably not change things. As Richard Powers suggests twice in his novel *The Overstory* (2018), the best arguments do not change a person’s mind; instead, what we need is a good story. He may be right, but in my view, what makes up a person’s mind is largely how they feel, so in trying to change minds we need to make people feel differently.

Early 2019 has been marked with some optimistic episodes in the shape of school strikes and Extinction Rebellion. Alongside swelling voices of protest, the rise of veganism is a most cogent and impactful expression of the same love and solidarity for the natural world, challenging the depredations of animal agriculture and industrial fishing by increasing the demand for meat- and fish-free, dairy-free and industrial-egg-free products. In April 2018 there were in the UK some 3.5 million vegans, up from just over half a million two years earlier (Petter, 2018). More impressively still, the demand for plant-based food increased by nearly ten-fold in 2017 and the UK launched more vegan products than any other country in 2018 (www.vegansociety.com/news/media/statistics). Why do people become vegans? Is it owing to concerns about the loss of wild places and the extermination of their denizens, climate breakdown or human health deterioration? Of course all the above matter, but having emotional attachments to animals also remains central (www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan).

I have decided not to be ashamed of my tears. Feeling is more powerful than thinking. I must make it my mission to help children acknowledge and honour their emotional and spiritual

attachment to animals; when their animal companions die, they are always saddened. Embracing instead of hiding tears of love and empathy might yet save the world. ■

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