

People and Food Animals

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Abstract

Even though people are animals, we like to think of ourselves as separate from and superior to all other animals, and to all sources of food. For millennia this separation has been the formula for human prosperity, too often against the better needs of our innocent domesticated relatives. What can wisdom add to this global dietary and behavioral monolith?

[PROLOGUE: Today's essay is dedicated to my truly awesome nephew, Roger, who this May 10th will receive his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) diploma from Virginia Tech. Doctor Roger Lee Mack will specialize in emergency veterinary medicine.]

When modern grocery shoppers visit their local stores to get food for supper, how many seriously think about how all of this convenient food makes its way to our tables? We worry about inflation, about pesticides, about food poisoning, about brand names, and more. We hardly think about our foods when they were living beings, animal or vegetable. I believe for our highest spirituality we should seriously respect all of their sacrifices.

It is not my agenda to promote, say, vegetarianism over meat eating. Nor am I promoting wild and organic food in every case over less expensive options, and so forth. It has long been said,

“We are what we eat.” Literally, all of our genetic bodies have come from somewhere and some things. We need to mentally step back and look at our *full* relationships with our food chains. An enhanced appreciation is critical for our spiritual nourishment. Food for the human soul is just as important as food for our flesh.

American Indians for many thousands of years have given their kills and meals the highest respect. Such reverence is natural for people who live in harmony with their land. Indigenous people know that without a giving land there is no food to give their own children. Compare this original American heritage with what too often happens when folks prayerfully thank at the dinner table their idea of god for providing their food, and never mention its living origins. Whenever we alienate our feasting from our food, we thus alienate our social selves from our essential selves.

Reification (*ray-i-fi-kay'-shun*) is our top tool for self-delusion. Reification is a word that was popular among 19th-century French sociologists. It means “to make a thing out of something living,” even other people. We typically use dehumanizing words to deny the humanity of our military opponents. In every war the first conscript on each blood-stained side is God.

At the dinner table we *reify* formerly living animals to enjoy abstract burgers. We eat bacon, not pigs. We eat breasts, tenders, and wings from *reified* slaughtered chickens, and so forth. (*The crime here is not in our eating*, because everybody needs to eat to live.) It is deeply degrading for our *spiritual selves* to consider sacrificed whole beings as mere parts of things to eat. When we degrade others for our needs and vanities, we thereby degrade ourselves, becoming both criminal and victim.

Looking into pre-history, we can detect some traces of what we needed to do to feed ourselves long before the first grocery store. About ten million years ago some of our distant ancestors lived beside an ancient African sea. Their pre-human lives were similar to how sea otters live today among the kelp beds off California. Consider the web between both our thumbs and pointing fingers.

No other apes have this web feature. Also, we humans are very good at holding our breaths, a product of our ancient ancestors diving down to shallow sea bottoms for easily hunted foods.

After humans made it fully to dry African lands, they developed the ability to climb trees, as we can today. Significantly, we can run for long distances, literally running down prey to where they will drop, and we can stab them with spears. Envision Spartan soldiers with spears, and even modern Olympian marathoners.

There are many other surviving traits from our hunting past. We have evolved into uniquely versatile hunters, not specialists. Tie that to hunting in groups. Put animal pelts on our backs to survive cold climates. Toss in spears and clubs – and now you have a unique species ready for global hyperkeystone status. The only thing left to perfect our temporary global rule was the industrial revolution, which began around 1750 in England.

The right amount of a good thing usually yields good results. Too much of a good thing can be bad, even very bad. That's just where "modern" humans are. We seemingly dominate the entire global biosphere. We can also insanely destroy ourselves in less than two hours through suicidal thermonuclear warfare, radiation, and nuclear winter lasting years with no sunlight for chlorophyll.

What is most regrettable would be all the many billions of *totally innocent living beings forever erased*, including millions of unique species. Yes, the biosphere will populate again, after several million years. By then opportunistic space aliens might have settled over our fading ruins as the next hyperkeystone rulers. Where today is humanity's body/spirit balance point?

Social humans globally may have very little time to think about ideal balance points. We have generally become indifferent to deep spiritual and ecological values. As a partial corrective, we could seriously contemplate what all *eight billion greedy humans doing their "Malthusian best"* owe to industrially processed, reified animals and plants.

The very worst Biblical passage is *Genesis 1-28*, where God allegedly invites us to essentially rape and pillage the entire world for his glory, of course. There is no deeply religious way to justify such universal evil. If any such dictating god ever existed, that god would only be a local tribal god tricking Biblical scribes, not the wise source of all Creation.

Primal animals simply look for local food within their shared natural ecosystems. Some humans, in sharp contrast, like to shoot standing wild animals for macho sport, and sometimes for trophy antlers to mount on the walls of their man caves.

I guess it is better to shoot large defenseless animals, than to shoot smaller defenseless neighbors. The opportunities for killing our wimpy neighbors are going up, as there are now more guns in America than people. Does all this "guns fever" prove that fat humans are superior to the natural plants and animals we eat without deeper thoughts?