

# Plutarch

## On the Eating of Flesh

Taken from *Plutarch's Morals*. Translated from the Greek by Several Hands. Corrected and Revised by William W. Goodwin, with an Introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1878). Some modifications have been made to the text. This document is in the public domain.

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### TRACT I

1. You ask of me then for what reason it was that Pythagoras abstained from eating of flesh. I for my part do much admire in what humor, with what soul or reason, the first man with his mouth touched slaughter, and reached to his lips the flesh of a dead animal, and having set before people courses of ghastly corpses and ghosts, could give those parts the names of meat and victuals, that but a little before lowed, cried, moved, and saw; how his sight could endure the blood of slaughtered, flayed, and mangled bodies; how his smell could bear their scent; and how the very nastiness happened not to offend the taste, while it chewed the sores of others, and participated of the saps and juices of deadly wounds.

Crept the raw hides, and with a bellowing sound  
Roared the dead limbs; the burning entrails groaned. [Odyssey, XII, 395.]

This indeed is but a fiction and fancy; but the fare itself is truly monstrous and prodigious, — that a man should have a stomach to creatures while they yet bellow, and that he should be giving directions which of things yet alive and speaking is fittest to make food of, and ordering the several manners of the seasoning and dressing them and serving them up to tables. You ought rather, in my opinion, to have enquired who first began this practice, than who of late times left it off.

2. And truly, as for those people who first ventured upon eating of flesh, it is very probable that the whole reason of their so doing was scarcity and want of other food; for it is not likely that their living together in lawless and extravagant lusts, or their growing wanton and capricious through the excessive variety of provisions then among them, brought them to such unsociable pleasures as these, against Nature. Yea, had they at this instant but their sense and voice restored to them, I am persuaded they would express themselves to this purpose:

“Oh! happy you, and highly favored of the Gods, who now live! Into what an age of the world are you fallen, who share and enjoy among you a plentiful portion of good things! What abundance of things spring up for your use! What fruitful vineyards you enjoy! What wealth you gather from the fields! What delicacies from trees and plants, which you may gather! You may glut and fill yourselves without being polluted. As for us, we fell upon the most dismal and affrighting part of time, in which we were exposed by our first production to manifold and inextricable wants and necessities. As yet the thickened air concealed the heaven from our view, and the stars were as yet confused with a disorderly huddle of fire and moisture and violent fluxions of winds. As yet the sun was not fixed to an unwandering and certain course, so as to distinguish morning and evening, nor did he bring back

the seasons in order crowned with wreaths from the fruitful harvest. The land was also spoiled by the inundations of disorderly rivers; and a great part of it was deformed with sloughs, and utterly wild by reason of deep quagmires, unfertile forests, and woods. There was then no production of tame fruits, nor any instruments of art or invention of wit. And hunger gave no time, nor did seed-time then stay for the yearly season. What wonder is it if we made use of the flesh of beasts contrary to Nature, when mud was eaten and the bark of wood, and when it was thought a happy thing to find either a sprouting grass or a root of any plant! But when they had by chance tasted of or eaten an acorn, they danced for very joy about some oak or esculus, calling it by the names of life-giver, mother, and nourisher. And this was the only festival that those times were acquainted with; upon all other occasions, all things were full of anguish and dismal sadness. But whence is it that a certain ravenousness and frenzy drives you in these happy days to pollute yourselves with blood, since you have such an abundance of things necessary for your subsistence? Why do you belie the earth as unable to maintain you? Why do you profane the lawgiver Ceres, and shame the mild and gentle Bacchus, as not furnishing you with sufficiency? Are you not ashamed to mix tame fruits with blood and slaughter? You are indeed wont to call serpents, leopards, and lions savage creatures; but yet yourselves are defiled with blood, and come nothing behind them in cruelty. What they kill is their ordinary nourishment, but what you kill is your better fare.”

3. For we eat not lions and wolves by way of revenge; but we let those go, and catch the harmless and tame sort, and such as have neither stings nor teeth to bite with, and slay them; which, so may Jove help us, Nature seems to us to have produced for their beauty and comeliness only. [Just as if one seeing the river Nilus overflowing its banks, and thereby filling the whole country with genial and fertile moisture, should not at all admire that secret power in it that produces plants and plenteousness of most sweet and useful fruits, but beholding somewhere a crocodile swimming in it, or an asp crawling along, or mice (savage and filthy creatures), should presently affirm these to be the occasion of all that is amiss, or of any want or defect that may happen. Or as if indeed one contemplating this land or ground, how full it is of tame fruits, and how heavy with ears of corn, should afterwards espy somewhere in these same cornfields an ear of darnel or a wild vetch, and thereupon neglect to reap and gather in the corn, and fall a complaining of these. Such another thing it would be, if one – hearing the harangue of some advocate at some bar or pleading, swelling and enlarging and hastening towards the relief of some impending danger, or else, by Jupiter, in the impeaching and charging of certain audacious villanies or indictments, flowing and rolling along, and that not in a simple and poor strain, but with many sorts of passions all at once, or rather indeed with all sorts, in one and the same manner, into the many and various and differing minds of either hearers or judges that he is either to turn and change, or else, by Jupiter, to soften, appease, and quiet – should overlook all this business, and never consider or reckon upon the labor or struggle he had undergone, but pick up certain loose expressions, which the rapid motion of the discourse had carried along with it, as by the current of its stream, and so had slipped and escaped the rest of the oration, and hereupon undervalue the orator.

4. But we are nothing put out of countenance, either by the beauteous gayety of the colors, or by the charmingness of the musical voices, or by the rare sagacity of the intellects, or by the cleanliness and neatness of diet, or by the rare discretion and prudence of these poor unfortunate animals; but for the sake of some little mouthful of flesh, we deprive a soul of the sun and light, and of that proportion of life and time it had been born into the world to enjoy. And then we fancy that the voices it utters and screams forth to us are nothing else but certain inarticulate sounds and noises, and not the several deprecations, entreaties, and pleadings of each of them, as it were saying thus to us: “I deprecate not thy necessity (if such there be), but thy wantonness. Kill me for thy feeding, but do not take me off for thy better feeding.” O horrible cruelty! It is truly an affecting sight to see the very table of rich people laid before them, who keep them cooks and caterers to furnish them with dead corpses for their daily fare; but it is yet more affecting to see it taken away, for the mammoths left are more than that which was eaten. These therefore were slain to no purpose. Others there are,

who are so sparing of what is set before them that they will not suffer it to be cut or sliced; thus abstaining from them when dead, while they would not spare them when alive.

5. Well then, we understand that that sort of men are used to say, that in eating of flesh they follow the conduct and direction of Nature. But that it is not natural to mankind to feed on flesh, we first of all demonstrate from the very shape and figure of the body. For a human body no ways resembles those that were born for ravenousness; it hath no hawk's bill, no sharp talon, no roughness of teeth, no such strength of stomach or heat of digestion, as can be sufficient to convert or alter such heavy and fleshy fare. But even from hence, that is, from the smoothness of the tongue, and the slowness of the stomach to digest, Nature seems to disclaim all pretence to fleshy victuals. But if you will contend that yourself was born to an inclination to such food as you have now a mind to eat, do you then yourself kill what you would eat. But do it yourself, without the help of a chopping-knife, mallet, or axe, – as wolves, bears, and lions do, who kill and eat at once. Rend an ox with thy teeth, worry a hog with thy mouth, tear a lamb or a hare in pieces, and fall on and eat it alive as they do. But if thou hadst rather stay until what thou eatest is become dead, and if thou art loath to force a soul out of its body, why then dost thou against Nature eat an animate thing? Nay, there is nobody that is willing to eat even a lifeless and a dead thing as it is; but they boil it, and roast it, and alter it by fire and medicines, as it were, changing and quenching the slaughtered gore with thousands of sweet sauces, that the palate being thereby deceived may admit of such uncouth fare. It was indeed a witty expression of a Lacedaemonian, who, having purchased a small fish in a certain inn, delivered it to his landlord to be dressed; and as he demanded cheese, and vinegar, and oil to make sauce, he replied, if I had had those, I would not have bought the fish. But we are grown so wanton in our bloody luxury, that we have bestowed upon flesh the name of meat (ᾠψον), and then require another seasoning (ᾠψον), to this same flesh, mixing oil, wine, honey, pickle, and vinegar, with Syrian and Arabian spices, as though we really meant to embalm it after its disease. Indeed when things are dissolved and made thus tender and soft, and are as it were turned into a sort of a carrionly corruption, it must needs be a great difficulty for concoction to master them, and when it hath mastered them, they must needs cause grievous oppressions and qualmy indigestions.

6. Diogenes ventured once to eat a raw pourcontrol, that he might disuse himself from meat dressed by fire; and as several priests and other people stood round him, he wrapped his head in his cassock, and so putting the fish to his mouth, he thus said unto them: It is for your sake, sirs, that I undergo this danger, and run this risk. A noble and gallant risk, by Jupiter! For far otherwise than as Pelopidas ventured his life for the liberty of the Thebans, and Harmodius and Aristogiton for that of the Athenians, did this philosopher encounter with a raw pourcontrol, to the end he might make human life more brutish. Moreover, these same flesh-eatings not only are preternatural to men's bodies, but also by clogging and cloying them, they render their very minds and intellects gross. For it is well known to most, that wine and much flesh-eating make the body indeed strong and lusty, but the mind weak and feeble. And that I may not offend the wrestlers, I will make use of examples out of my own country. The Athenians are wont to call us Boeotians gross, senseless, and stupid fellows, for no other reason but our over-much eating; and Pindar calls us also hogs, for the same reason. Menander the comedian calls us "fellows with long jaws." It is observed also that, according to the saying of Heraclitus, "the wisest soul is like a dry light." Earthen jars, if you strike them, will sound; but if they be full, they perceive not the strokes that are given them. Copper vessels also that are thin communicate the sound round about them, unless some one stop and dull the ambient stroke with his fingers. Moreover, the eye, when seized with an over-great plenitude of humors, grows dim and feeble for its ordinary work. When we behold the sun through a humid air and a great quantity of gross and indigested vapors, we see it not clear and bright, but obscure and cloudy, and with glimmering beams. Just so in a muddy and clogged body, that is swagged down with heavy and unnatural nourishments; it must needs happen that the gayety and splendor of the mind be confused and dulled, and that it ramble and roll after little and scarce discernible objects, since it wants clearness and vigor for higher things.

7. But to pass by these considerations, is not accustoming one's self to mildness and a human temper of mind an admirable thing? For who could wrong or injure a man that is so sweetly and humanly disposed with respect to the ills of strangers that are not of his kind? I remember that three days ago, as I was discoursing, I made mention of a saying of Xenocrates, and how the Athenians gave judgment upon a certain person who had flayed a living ram. For my part I cannot think him a worse criminal that torments a poor creature while living, than a man that shall take away its life and murder it. But (as it seems) we are more sensible of what is done against custom than against Nature. There, however, I discoursed on these matters in a more popular style. But as for that grand and mysterious principle which (as Plato speaks) is incredible to base minds and to such as affect only mortal things, I as little care to move it in this discourse as a pilot doth a ship in a storm, or a comedian his machine while the scenes are moving; but perhaps it would not be amiss, by way of introduction and preface, to proclaim certain verses of Empedocles.... For in these, by way of allegory, he hints at men's souls, as that they are tied to mortal bodies, to be punished for murders, eating of flesh and of one another, although this doctrine seems much ancients than his time. For the fables that are storied and related about the discription of Bacchus, and the attempts of the Titans upon him, and of their tasting of his slain body, and of their several punishments and fulminations afterwards, are but a representation of the regeneration. For what in us is unreasonable, disorderly, and boisterous, being not divine but demoniac, the ancients termed Titans, that is tormented and punished (from τίω)...

## TRACT II

1. Reason persuades us now to return with fresh cogitations and dispositions to what we left cold yesterday of our discourse about flesh-eating. It is indeed a hard and a difficult task to undertake (as Cato once said) to dispute with men's bellies, that have no ears; since most have already drunk that draught of custom, which is like that of Circe,

Of groans and frauds and sorcery replete. [Odyssey, X, 234.]

And it is no easy task to pull out the hook of flesh-eating from the jaws of such as have gorged themselves with luxury and are (as it were) nailed down with it. It would indeed be a good action, if as the Egyptians draw out the stomach of a dead body, and cut it open and expose it to the sun, as the only cause of all its evil actions, so we could, by cutting out our gluttony and blood-shedding, purify and cleanse the remainder of our lives. For the stomach itself is not guilty of bloodshed, but is involuntarily polluted by our intemperance. But if this may not be, and we are ashamed by reason of custom to live unblamably, let us at least sin with discretion. Let us eat flesh; but let it be for hunger and not for wantonness. Let us kill an animal; but let us do it with sorrow and pity, and not abusing and tormenting it, as many nowadays are used to do, while some run red-hot spits through the bodies of swine, that by the tincture of the quenched iron the blood may be to that degree mortified, that it may sweeten and soften the flesh in its circulation; others jump and stamp upon the udders of sows that are ready to pig, that so they may trample into one mass, (O Piacular Jupiter!) in the very pangs of delivery, blood, milk, and the corruption of the crushed and mangled young ones, and so eat the most inflamed part of the animal; others sew up the eyes of cranes and swans, and so shut them up in darkness to be fattened, and then souse up their flesh with certain monstrous mixtures and pickles.

2. By all which it is most manifest, that it is not for nourishment, or want, or any necessity, but for mere gluttony, wantonness, and expensiveness, that they make a pleasure of villany. Just as it happens in persons who cannot satiate their intemperance upon women, and having made trial of every thing else and falling into vagaries, at last attempt things not to be mentioned; even so inordinateness in feeding, when it hath once passed the bounds of nature and necessity, studies at last to diversify the lusts of its intemperate appetite by cruelty and villany. For the senses, when they once quit their natural measures, sympathize with each other in their distempers, and are enticed by each other to

the same consent and intemperance. Thus a distempered ear first debauched music, the soft and effeminate notes of which provoke immodest touches and lascivious tickling. These things first taught the eye not to delight in Pyrrhic dances, gesticulations of hands, or elegant pantomimes, nor in statues and fine paintings; but to reckon the slaughtering and death of mankind and wounds and duels the most sumptuous of shows and spectacles. Thus unlawful tables are accompanied with intemperate copulations, with unmusician-like balls, and theatres become monstrous through shameful songs and rehearsals; and barbarous and brutish shows are again accompanied with an unrelenting temper and savage cruelty towards mankind. Hence it was that the divine Lycurgus in his Three Books of Laws gave orders that the doors and ridges of men's houses should be made with a saw and an axe, and that no other instrument should so much as be brought to any house. Not that he did hereby intend to declare war against augers and planes and other instruments of finer work; but because he very well knew that with such tools as these you will never bring into your house a gilded couch, and that you will never attempt to bring into a slender cottage either silver tables, purple carpets, or costly stones; but that a plain supper and a homely dinner must accompany such a house, couch, table, and cup. The beginning of a vicious diet is presently followed by all sorts of luxury and expensiveness,

Ev'n as a mare is by her thirsty colt.

3. And what meal is not expensive? That for which no animal is put to death. Shall we reckon a soul to be a small expense. I will not say perhaps of a mother, or a father, or of some friend, or child, as Empedocles did; but one participating of feeling, of seeing, of hearing, of imagination, and of intellection; which each animal hath received from Nature for the acquiring of what is agreeable to it, and the avoiding what is disagreeable. Do but consider this with yourself now, which sort of philosophers render us most tame and civil, they who bid people to feed on their children, friends, fathers, and wives, when they are dead; or Pythagoras and Empedocles, that accustom men to be just towards even the other members of the creation. You laugh at a man that will not eat a sheep: but we (they will say again) – when we see you cutting off the parts of your dead father or mother, and sending it to your absent friends, and calling upon and inviting your present friends to eat the rest freely and heartily – shall we not smile? Nay, peradventure we offend at this instant time while we touch these books, without having first cleansed our hands, eyes, feet, and ears; if it be not (by Jupiter) a sufficient purgation of them to have discoursed of these matters in potable and fresh language (as Plato speaketh), thereby washing off the brackishness of hearing. Now if a man should set these books and discourses in opposition to each other, he will find that the philosophy of the one sort suits with the Scythians, Sogdians, and Melanchlaenians, of whom Herodotus's relation is scarce believed; but the sentiments of Pythagoras and Empedocles were the laws and customs of the ancient Grecians.

4. Who then were the first authors of this opinion, that we owe no justice to dumb animals?

Who first beat out accursed steel,  
And made the lab'ring ox a knife to feel.

In the very same manner oppressors and tyrants begin first to shed blood. For example, the first man that the Athenians ever put to death was one of the basest of all knaves, whom all thought deserving of death; after him they put to death a second and a third. After this, being now accustomed to blood, they patiently saw Niceratus the son of Nicias, and their own general Theramenes, and Polemarchus the philosopher suffer death. Even so, in the beginning, some wild and mischievous beast was killed and eaten, and then some little bird or fish was entrapped. And the love of slaughter, being first experimented and exercised in these, at last passed even to the laboring ox, and the sheep that clothes us, and to the poor cock that keeps the house; until by little and little, unsatiableness being strengthened by use, men came to the slaughter of men, to bloodshed and wars. Now even if one cannot demonstrate and make out, that souls in their regenerations make a promiscuous use of all bodies, and that that which is now rational will at another time be irrational, and that again tame

which is now wild, – for that Nature changes and transmutes every thing,

With different fleshy coats new clothing all, –

this thing should be sufficient to change and reclaim men, that it is a savage and intemperate habit, that it brings sickness and heaviness upon the body, and that it inclines the mind the more brutishly to bloodshed and destruction, when we have once accustomed ourselves neither to entertain a guest nor keep a wedding nor to treat our friends without blood and slaughter.

5. And if what is argued about the return of souls into bodies is not of force enough to beget faith, yet methinks the very uncertainty of the thing should fill us with apprehension and fear. Suppose, for instance, one should in some night-engagement run on with his drawn sword upon one that had fallen down and covered his body with his arms, and should in the mean time hear one say, that he was not very sure, but that he fancied and believed, that the party lying there was his own son, brother, father, or tent-companion; which were more advisable, think you, – to hearken to a false suggestion, and so to let go an enemy under the notion of a friend, or to slight an authority not sufficient to beget faith, and to slay a friend instead of a foe? This you will all say would be insupportable. Do but consider the famous Merope in the tragedy, who taking up a hatchet, and lifting it at her son's head, whom she took for her son's murderer, speaks thus as she was ready to give the fatal blow,

Villain, this pious blow shall cleave thy head; [Eurip. Cresphontes, Frag. 457]

what a bustle she raises in the whole theatre while she raises herself to give the blow, and what a fear they are all in, lest she should prevent the old man that comes to stop her hand, and should wound the youth. Now if another old man should stand by her and say, "Strike, it is thy enemy," and this, "Hold, it is thy son;" which, think you, would be the greater injustice, to omit the punishing of an enemy for the sake of one's child, or to suffer one's self to be so transported with anger at an enemy as to kill one's child? Since then neither hatred nor wrath nor any revenge nor fear for ourselves carries us to the slaughter of a beast, but the poor sacrifice stands with an inclined neck, only to satisfy thy lust and pleasure, and then one philosopher stands by and tells thee, "Cut him down, it is but an unreasonable animal," and another cries, "Hold, what if there should be the soul of some kinsman or God inclosed in him"? – good Gods! is there the like danger if I refuse to eat flesh, as if I for want of faith murder my child or some other friend?

6. The Stoics' way of reasoning upon this subject of flesh-eating is no way equal nor consonant with themselves. Who is this that hath so many mouths for his belly and the kitchen? Whence comes it to pass, that they so very much womanize and reproach pleasure, as a thing that they will not allow to be either good or preferable, or so much as agreeable, and yet all on a sudden become so zealous advocates for pleasures? It were indeed but a reasonable consequence of their doctrine, that, since they banish perfumes and cakes from their banquets, they should be much more averse to blood and to flesh. But now, just as if they would reduce their philosophy to their day-books, they lessen the expenses of their suppers in certain unnecessary and needless matters, but the untamed and murderous part of their expense they nothing boggle at. "Well! What then?" say they. "We have nothing to do with brute beasts." Nor have you any with perfumes, nor with foreign sauces, may some one answer; therefore expel these from your banquets, if you are driving out every thing that is both useless and needless.

7. Let us therefore in the next place consider, whether we owe any justice to the brute beasts. Neither shall we handle this point artificially, or like subtle sophisters, but by casting our eye into our own breasts, and conversing with ourselves as men, we will weigh and examine the whole matter....