

Philosophy of Nutrition

A Historical, Existential, Phenomenological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper develops a philosophy of nutrition, based on the idea that nutrition is the fundamental condition of possibility of the existence: being presupposes eating. Eating meat historically presupposes preying, hunting or fishing, that is killing other animals. This violence is at the roots of our civilisation: it transformed human way of life, human way of being. Violence over other species then spreads as violence at the level of the same human, social, relationships. Violence over other species has been called "work" and now the division of work allows the majority of individuals for a life without preying and without violence and so for spreading a new way of thinking and feeling, a new way of living. A new antispeciesist ethics become possible, based on a vegan style of living.

Keywords: nutrition, antispeciesism, ethics, concrete phenomenology, existential philosophy, anthropology, carnivorism, Eros/Thanatos, origin of violence, human dominion over nature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of nutrition could be understood as a new sub-discipline of the more general philosophy, with a thematic object rather overlooked. This perspective arises from the conviction that nutrition would be a trivial biological activity, possibly to be studied mostly in the natural sciences. If anything, it might recognize that nutrition has historically been also linked to religious requirements, then also translated into ethical philosophies or confessional theologies. In this view, the (even the secular contemporary) ethics of nutrition would be not only a marginal part of philosophy, but also a kind of undue infiltration into philosophy, derived from the secu-

larization of religious reasons and cultivated only by new forms of secular sectarianism, and indeed questioned by anthropological (ethnic) relativity of ethics and of nutrition.

Feuerbach wrote as a joke that *der Mensch ist was er isst* (*man is what he eats*) by using assonance as a possible etymological relationship between the two verbs of being and eating in German language (in Greek language, there is assonance between *estin* and the verb *esthio*) (Feuerbach 1866, 1-35).

However, one can state that eating is the first action constitutive of being. As nutrition is more and more analysed, we understand that nutrition is an activity that is part of the priority spheres of our relationship to the world which determines our existential pre-understanding: in this way, nutrition historically determines, as their root, all our philosophical theoretical constructions. Nutrition is the necessary but not sufficient condition of possibility of existence. This is not a merely biological condition but determines the whole mode of existence as an answer to the basic structure of our finite existence which shows itself as need, as a form of lacking. Different forms of nutrition involve different modes of existence.

We shall understand ourselves when we shall make an anthropological and historical analysis of our existence in respect to its condition of possibility. Heidegger started with an analysis of daily existence in terms of care (Heidegger 1927) and Marcuse in Marxian terms of work (Marcuse 1928, 45-68; 1929, 111-28; 1930a; 1930b, 15-30, 304-26; 1931, 541-57; 1932, 136-74; 1965), but we cannot understand mankind without an inquiry on its origins.

We have to develop a *historical phenomenology of existence*. Our knowledge of the origins of mankind has pointed out that there was a transition from the frugivorous diet of Hominids to an omnivorous diet, including meat. Now, the point is that eating meat involved perhaps two stages of evolution: a first one, in which human beings ate flesh of already dead animals; a second one, in which human beings became hunters and killed animals to eat them. This second stage transformed completely human beings into predatory animals, basing their nutrition on a violent mode of existence.

2. CARNIVORISM AND ITS ORIGINS

This violent way of providing nutrition to itself transformed the whole existence of mankind. We are what we eat (Feuerbach 1975 [1866], 357-407): if we eat other living animals and not the fruits of plants and trees,

our flesh is constituted by the flesh of other living animals to which we have taken off life. Our life as long as we are carnivorous beings is the effect of violence and murder of other living animals: even the energy of a caress or of a kiss comes from this violence that constitutes our body, our existence. Carnivorism is at the origin of inter-specific and intra-specific violence. If we started as eating dead beings, then we transformed ourselves into predators. Becoming predators, we distorted our pleasure function: we no longer feel pleasure only by eating to preserve our life or by loving acts to transmit and to create life, but as predators we associate the pleasure of eating to that of giving sufferance and death to the living animals, who are objects of preying in such a way that the pleasure of giving sufferance can be separated from the same act of eating. Thus, violence can give pleasure. Eisler (Eisler 1951; Giannetto 2011, 13-29) has so explained the rise of sadism from carnivorism, but indeed violence at every level can become an important part of our life because our pleasure function was distorted and violence can generate pleasure and increasing pleasure can be derived from the growth of violence. Violence can be pleasure in itself and self-incrementing. In this way, hunting and fishing can become sports, hobbies. The violence without aim of the Nazis can thus be explained. Impulse to death ceases to be only related to the end of self-sufferance and can be extroverted to the end of other living animals, it can become an impulse to death of other animals. Thus the death instinct has been distorted and becomes related to the as well as distorted principle of pleasure and so to violence.

The violent practice of preying was the first way to reduce other living beings to objects of our pleasure. This violent mode of existence implies a pre-understanding of the world, of everything that is a part of the world, as an object of our preying and of our pleasure.

The first way of classifying every being of the world into a two-sided table of values, good/bad, has to be related to something that can conserve life and to something that can destroy life. Thus, there was something that *may* be eaten and something, like another living animal, that *may not* be eaten. When becoming carnivorous, conservation of life by means of nutrition started to become paradoxically associated to the destruction of other living beings this ethical table of values has been turned upside down. Good became simply what *can* be eaten and bad something else that *cannot* be eaten. The first kind of evil related to killing other living animals, then, by carnivorism became transformed into a good skill to provide flesh as food.

Eros seems to be limited and forbidden in human life by a social-politic “principle of reality” which could make it unrealizable. *Eros* seems confined

only within the human sphere, because a biological “principle of reality” (struggle for life and inter-species violence) seems to negate the extension of *Eros* to relations with other living beings. Marcuse’s perspective (Marcuse 1955) makes a deconstruction of this Freudian idea of reality and necessity. It is only an absolutization of a particular historical, economic-socio-politic, and evolutive, anthropological and environmental condition which is indeed contingent. Marcuse makes real an utopy. The eschatological utopy of a future civilisation, based on *Eros* and to be realized through a multilevel revolution, has its foundation on the memory of a primeval condition of a non-carnivorous mankind. Indeed, human beings, since their appearance on the Earth, have been ejected into an environmental condition where there was a struggle for life: preying animals have been hunting even human beings. In this kind of environmental contexts, even defending themselves could have implied killing other preying animals. And a mimesis of these predator animals like wolves could have transformed human beings into preying animals. In any case, however, the partial or total lack of vegetal food within a particular environment could have induced human beings to negate *Eros* within inter species sphere for the aim of individual survival giving rise to a new species of human beings as preying animals. Beginning by satisfying hunger with flesh of other already dead animals, human beings, as well as other animals who then transformed themselves into preying animals (by epigenetical switching on and off some genes) and have been taken as models by humans, have been developing a dependence from the death of other animals and became slaves of flesh food that transformed them into predators and killers of other animals. The death instinct which was part of *Eros* and served to make sufferance cease has been extroverted by a cultural solution: becoming predator animals and eating the flesh of other animals. This was not necessary: humans or other animals could have come back to an environment full of vegetal food and so to a vegetarian diet by switching back on and off some genes. We have to understand Darwinian evolution in a new synthesis with epigenetics. Struggle for life in the sense of animal preying happens only when a certain animal wants to be constantly present for long times relevant for nutrition within a non-fitting-to-animal-life environment (for human beings: arctic ices, desert zones or other non-fitting environments). Successive migrations are not a sufficient motivation to change diet. There are fitting and non-fitting animal life environments: struggle for life and natural selection happen only within environments which are non-fitting for animal life and therefore induce some animals to preying other animals.

I believe that no living being was born as carnivorous predator, but became such by some choice of diet at some existential bifurcation (to

survive by eating meat or to die): epigenetics now explains as phenotypic variations can switch on and off genes and can produce heritable alterations. Carnivorous predators are not such by “nature”, but by evolution: carnivorism can be explained as an epigenetical effect that can be modified by a new way of living and eating. We must recognize that some other animals, as carnivorous predators, as dogs and cats that have made a violent pact with human beings to share the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to share the food of dominion, have distorted their “philosophy of life” into violence before us, but also that many other living beings have never left the vital dimension of *Eros*.

The whole vital power an animal has to live and to be maximally happy is converted against other animals which have to be captured, killed and reduced to food: it becomes violence, destructive power of other living beings. Life instinct is so converted into pulsion of killing other living beings. The same body is converted in a sort of “war-machine” against other forms of life. The same pleasure is converted into something related to doing violence. Being carnivorous is involved by the rejection of our structural being-for-death.

3. CARNIVORISM IMPLICATIONS

The non-acceptance of own individual death even if living implies killing other living beings extroverts death instinct: it becomes a destructive instinct against others. Death instinct becomes autonomous from *Eros* and opposes it: it becomes *Thanatos*. Life opposes death and so life opposes other life. Life becomes slave of *Thanatos* and living is reduced to preying, becoming instrument of violence and death, will to power and to dominion, which operates a distortion of pleasure, now slave of dominion. The active principle of life, the vital energy of life, that is *Eros*, is not only subject of sublimation, but also converted into an instrument of death, into *Thanatos*. Rationalization is not only a process of removing and repressing *Eros*, but also a legitimization of *Thanatos*. Existence becomes a struggle between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, and finally an ethical and political choice/decision between life and death. Living an authentic full human existence implies a world-animal-revolution.

Hunting and fishing changed our perception of animal life and of the world, but also our perception of space and time: space is not anything to be contemplated with wonder, but to be crossed running to prey and to obtain flesh; time is not the quiet measure of the peaceful growing of the varieties of life, but is to be shortened for better preying and killing.

Technical tools had to be developed to overcome the biological inferiority of human beings in respect to other species.

Agriculture implied another radical change in human existence: working the land involved the slavery of other animals as principal workers and has been giving rise to zootechnics, related to animal farming. Realizing a dominion over earth and over other animal species has been called human work. Before killing and eating other animals was better their exploitation: of their own milk, of their fur, of their workforce and, at the end, of their flesh, of their skin, of their bones.

By animal farming, flesh became ever suitable to be eaten and a carnivorous diet became dominant. Sacrifice of other animals to gods became the ideological legitimization of farming and killing by means of religion. The human dominion over earth and all the other animal species constituted a new order of the world (Giannetto 2015, 221-41). This Neolithic revolution (Giannetto 2005, 37-41) in human life changed the improvised form of violence into an organized system. The division of preying, exploiting and killing other animals became the “division of work”. Legitimizing dominion by means of ideological constructions became another kind of work, intellectual work, separated by manual work. Human beings became able to tame not only other animal species, but also their so hidden ferocity ruled by the division of work and by a system of law.

Human beings did not limitate themselves to prey and to kill but started to accumulate the objects of preying and of exploitation for the future and to develop new technologies of exploitation and of killing. Carnivorous diet became part of a wider system of violence and of dominion. Another change in our perception of the world, of life and space and time happened. Our anxiety for death became stronger and stronger: our “civilised” life became sedentary and quiet, but the rejection of death involved a new distorted perception of time and of the future. We started to become slaves of our violence, of our technologies and of our work.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Now, we are no more conscious of this original violence, because our lives are, for the most, free from the direct violence of preying: we find flesh (often without any recognizable form) to eat in supermarkets. Only few human beings work as killers of non-human beings, and killing another animal no longer implies any aggressive behaviour, due to the mechanization of violence and to the act of killing using artificial machines. Thus, we become unconscious of the origin of human violence from carnivorism

(carnivorism is the original sin) (Eisler 1951; Giannetto 2011, 13-29) and we can be carnivorous and non-directly-violent (non-aggressive) persons because we do not directly participate to the act of preying and killing. Paradoxically, this mechanization and industrialization of violence and killing which has led to the highest level of violence and of systematic extermination of other living beings has also allowed the detachment of carnivorism from a violent behaviour and with it the possibility of rejecting the carnivorism itself and of a new, radically non-violent, way of thinking.

Our intellectual work was a legitimation of our violence: what we think is what we eat, and our way of thinking is part of our phagocytation metabolism process. Thinking is a process which is one with living. Thus, thinking is related to the pleasure of living and loving. When the pleasure of living is related to phagocytation of other animals and to giving sufferance and death to other beings, thinking becomes involved in phagocytation, in its preying and dominion strategies, and indeed it becomes a symbolic phagocytation and a strategy for actual phagocytation. Thinking as verbal reasoning is no more an expression of *Eros*, but an expression of *Thanatos*: *Eros* is transformed into *Thanatos* (Marcuse 1955). Human culture became not only a sublimation of *Eros*, but a form of *Thanatos*, a form of virtual phagocytation. The analysis operated by verbal reasoning is a kind of anatomy of the body flesh teared to pieces and dismembered into pieces by preying and then by metabolism: phagocytation becomes the transcendental material condition of possibility to understand verbal reasoning.

However, we can change our mind: the same separation of work allowed for a transformation of the role of legitimation of violence into a form of a criticism of violence. Thus, we can change our carnivorous diet into a vegan one and our philosophy into a criticism of violence and of its ideologies and into an universal ethics of reverence for all forms of life (Schewitzer 1923, 331; Giannetto 2012, 22-33; Giannetto 2015, 75-87).

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