

PIERRE GASSENDI'S ANIMALS: A CASE OF EXCLUSION

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I. Introduction: A Learned Vegetarian

The French priest, professor of mathematics, historian, and philosopher, Pierre Gassendi, was perhaps the most influential and well-respected thinkers of his day.² While the linguistic and conceptual complexity of his Latin tomes excluded him from the philosophical canon that was formed during the late eighteenth, historians are now beginning to appreciate just how central his ideas were to the development of early modern intellectual life. But recent studies of Gassendi have consistently bypassed a major component of his thought: his defense of a vegetarian diet.³ Conversely, because it is no small task to identify and translate the relevant passages from Gassendi's oeuvre, historical surveys of vegetarianism have mostly neglected his arguments.

Indeed, in the history of vegetarianism, emphasis has been placed on religious sectarians or intellectual outsiders such as Thomas Bushnell and Roger Crab, while figures such as Gassendi who were, historically speaking, intellectual insiders have paradoxically been neglected.⁴ Proponents of vegetarianism have thus been shaped teleologically as progressive or even "radical" thinkers. But Gassendi remained thoroughly embedded in the institutions of his day, and channeled the full gamut of humanist apparatuses in his endeavor to integrate the philosophy of the ancient Greek atomist, Epicurus, into the university curriculum. For this purpose, he sought to cleanse Epicurean philosophy of its popular associations with excess, atheism, and debauchery

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² Méric Casaubon, *Generall Learning: A Seventeenth-Century Treatise on the Formation of the General Scholar*, ed. by R. Serjeantson (Cambridge: RTM, 1999), 149. On some aspects of Gassendi's reception in England, see Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 330-97.

³ The most notable studies of Gassendi include, Lynn Joy, *Gassendi, the Atomist: Advocate of History in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987); Barry Brundell, *Pierre Gassendi: From Aristotelianism to a New Natural Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987); Antonia Lolordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007); Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994); and Lisa Sarasohn, *Gassendi's Ethics: Freedom in a Mechanistic University* (London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁴ See Tristram Stuart, *Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India* (London: HarperPress, 2006); Diane Kelsey McColley, *Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton and Marvell* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 171-96; Anita Guerrini, "A Diet for a Sensitive Soul: Vegetarianism in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 23.3 (1999), 34-42; and Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (London: University Press of New England, 1995), 201-51.

by rehabilitating Epicurus as not only a proponent of frugality, but also a plant-based diet. By looking in some detail at Gassendi's arguments for vegetarianism, this paper will demonstrate that abstention from meat was not simply a peripheral reaction to the intellectual mainstream but a significant philosophical position that intellectual insiders vigorously defended.

This talk focuses on the two places in Gassendi's *Opera Omnia*—posthumously published in 1658—that most explicitly grapple with the topic of vegetarianism. The main body of his *Opera Omnia* is known as the *Syntagma Philosophicum*, but this six-volume work also contains material from Gassendi's manuscripts, including his letters. In the first section, this paper grapples with the chapter of *Syntagma Philosophicum* titled “On the Faculties and Organs that Carry Nutrition,” which contains a lengthy deliberation on abstention from meat.⁵ In the second half, I turn to Gassendi's epistolary attempt to persuade the famous Flemish physician and medical reformer, Jan Baptista van Helmont, that vegetarianism had its virtues.⁶ We will see in what follows that Gassendi strove to convince his contemporaries that a vegetarian diet could help them to reclaim the fullness of their God-given natures.

II. The Virtue of Pleasure

In *Syntagma Philosophicum*, Gassendi argues that just as every species has a unique shape and structure, each species likewise has its proper sustenance.⁷ Putting aside the fact that humans are accustomed to eating a wide variety of foods, Gassendi asks: what did God design us to eat? While he later presents evidence from scripture, he supposed that nature itself held the answer to this question. Inspired by a suggestion in Plutarch's “On the Eating of Flesh,” Gassendi recognized that carnivores possess long and sharp teeth, whereas human teeth are short and flat, more akin to herbivorous.⁸ For all his opposition to Aristotle, Gassendi notably retained the Scholastic notion that God did not make any superfluity in nature but rather created everything to fulfill its purpose. Because of this, he argued that God formed mankind with teeth that are suited to the food that we are meant to consume.⁹ Gassendi also notes that animal flesh is “a burden to the stomach” and can hardly “be distributed through the parts of our bodies,” which necessitates the

⁵ See Pierre Gassendi, *Opera Omnia* (Lyon, 1658), Vol. 2, Book 5, Chapter 1, “De facultatibus, ac organis quibus Nutritio peragatur,” 296-302.

⁶ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 6, “Viro Clarissimo, & Philosopho, ac Medico expertissimo Joanni Baptistæ Helmontio amico suo singulari,” 19-24.

⁷ “Dicendum heic aliquid foret de varietate alimentorum, quibus Animalia nutriuntur; verùm res manifesta est, cùm & constet non posse eadem idonea esse omnibus, propter varietatem temperamentorum, ex qua est, ut quæ his gratissima sunt, illis nauseam pariant, neque ab ipsis attingantur” (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 301).

⁸ “Siquidem cùm inter terrestreis, gressileisque animanteis constituerit nos; non taleis nobis tribuit denteis, qualeis iis, quæ ex sua natura vesci debuerunt carnibus, ut sunt leones, lupi, & aliæ, ideò vocatæ carnivoræ; sed qualeis iis, quæ vesci herbis, variisque fructuum generibus, ut sunt equi, oves, & aliæ, quæ non carnivoræ habentur” (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 301). See Plutarch's *Moralia*, ed. by H. Cherniss and W. Helmbold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), Vol. 12, 551-3.

⁹ See Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, I.1, 639b and *Physics*, II.3, 195a. For the persistence of teleological accounts in contemporary discussions of animal ethics, see Bernard Rollin, “Animal Pain: What It is and Why It Matters,” *The Journal of Ethics*, 15.4 (2011), 425-37.

arduous task of cooking.¹⁰ Based on such considerations, he concluded that humans would be very different animals were they designed to feed on flesh. Responding to those who claimed that vegetables lack the energy required for manual or intellectual labors—an argument that still circulates today—Gassendi observed that the “strength of the bull and the swiftness of the deer” must be attributed to their plant-powered diets.¹¹ Gassendi reckoned that these were also the victuals that mankind was created to consume.

A belief that it is possible to unpick layers of societal baggage to arrive at an image of a truly “natural” man underpins Gassendi’s arguments for vegetarianism.¹² Generating a line of reasoning that Jean-Jacques Rousseau later recycles in *Emile*, Gassendi contended that the bodies of children are more physically pure than those of adults, and that children always prefer fruit to meat.¹³ Less optimistic than Rousseau, however, he proposed that even the milk of a mother who regularly consumes meat might condition carnivorous inclinations in her child.¹⁴ Rather than Romantic self-reflection, Gassendi’s appeal to childhood is rooted in his reading of Epicurus’s argument that a newborn instinctively seeks pleasure and avoids pain.¹⁵ Baptizing Epicurus, Gassendi maintained that the pleasure principle is God’s way of providentially directing the natural world without constant intervention. In this sense, humans are not so distinct from other animals (or natural objects for that matter), which all possess desires or inclinations. Harboring an Aristotelian outlook on the “will,” Gassendi supposed that because a rock that is dropped from a high place falls spontaneously it can properly be said that the rock “wills” or “desires” to go downwards, just as a child naturally desires fruit rather than meat.¹⁶ More significantly, he saw it as morally acceptable for a lion to eat a gazelle, for example, since the lion’s pursuit of her prey is a natural act of self-preservation that occurs almost as spontaneously as the falling of a rock. But humans differ from other animals, for Gassendi, in possessing a greater power of reason that allows us to find ever more innovative ways to achieve pleasure.

Far from espousing a Benthamite equality of pleasures, Gassendi posited a four-tiered hierarchy: first is the instinctive desire for pleasure, shared by humans and other animals, and then there is the calculated search for further gratification that animates

¹⁰ “Potest insuper *tum* ex eo, quòd non est herbarum, fructuúmque usus ita stomacho onerosus, ut caro: siquidem cibus levior est; cùm caro Animalium ex parte ipsorum pinguiore facta, compactaque, difficiliùs longè exsolui, ac distribui per parteis nostri corporis possit” (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 302).

¹¹ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 302.

¹² For a relevant discussion, see Lynn Joy, *Gassendi, the Atomist*, 83-105.

¹³ On Rousseau and vegetarianism, see David Boonin-Vail, “The Vegetarian Savage: Rousseau’s Critique of Meat Eating,” *Environmental Ethics*, 15.1 (1993), 75-84.

¹⁴ “Quodammodo, inquam; nam si puer foret & formatus ex semine, & nutritus lacte parentum, qui ipsi abstinuissent à carnibus; aut si saltem dimisso lacte pastus carnibus, jusculisque carnis, non esset, serretur haud-dubiè in fructus impensiùs” (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 302).

¹⁵ *Plutarch’s Moralia*, Vol. 14, ed. by B. Einarson and P. de Lacy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 283. For Gassendi’s adaptation, see *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 701.

¹⁶ See *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 824. For differing discussions of this issue, see Margaret Osler, “From Immanent Natures to Nature as Artifice: The Reinterpretation of Final Causes in Seventeenth-Century Natural Philosophy,” *Monist*, 79.3 (1996), 388-407 and Veronica Gventsadze, “Aristotelian Influences in Gassendi’s Moral Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 45.2 (2007), 223-42.

rational but unenlightened individuals.¹⁷ Gassendi conceived of most people throughout history (and especially non-philosophers) to be unenlightened, and thus they outstripped their childish preferences for fruit, herbs, and vegetables and began to eat animals. The other two kinds of pleasure, however, reinstate a vegetarian diet. Following Epicurus, Gassendi considered tranquillity or lack of pain to be the ultimate happiness that could be achieved in this lifetime. Finally, there is the sublime pleasure of the beatific vision of God, which is reserved for the afterlife. For now, Gassendi's understanding of pleasure as tranquillity is most significant, being the one that he discoursed on at the greatest length. He generally agreed with Epicurus that virtue is a necessary adjunct to pleasure, while he followed Aristotle in defining virtue as a habit that inclines the mind towards the just and honorable, placing a particular emphasis on temperance and prudence. It was through the process of fitting Epicurus's ethical injunction against killing and consuming animals to an Aristotelian framework that Gassendi sought to establish meat-eating as unnatural. In the tradition of virtue ethics, each virtuous action is a mean between two extremes. If humans are natural omnivores, then the mean is to consume meat in moderation. By contrast, if a study of the body leads to the conclusion that humans are herbivores, then eating meat at all is gratuitous and should be avoided. Working with the latter notion, Gassendi held a vegetarian diet to be not only natural and pleasurable, but also virtuous.

Gassendi periodically expressed sympathy towards animals, and he vehemently opposed René Descartes' *bête machine*. In response to Descartes, he maintained that the "power of sensation possessed by animals" might also "deserve to be called 'though', since it is not dissimilar to our own". Accordingly, Gassendi not only retained the traditional Scholastic position that animals were sensitive creatures, but he followed the successor of Aristotle at the Peripatetic school, Theophrastus, in holding that the difference between human and animal reason was "merely one of degree." But, as regards his defence of vegetarianism, he was not chiefly concerned with the pain of other species. In this regard, he differed starkly from contemporary moral philosopher such as Peter Singer who held that the pain caused by killing animals outweighs the maximum amount of pleasure that could be gained by eating them.¹⁸ Rather, the pleasure that Epicurus and Gassendi advocated was known as a *katastematic*; it entailed not only absence of pain but resistance to surplus effort.¹⁹ For Gassendi, the energy that an activity such as hunting requires inevitably detracts from the pursuit of more noble and virtuous undertakings such as philosophizing. But the liberty that God granted humans by equipping them with reason leaves most men enslaved by unnatural and detrimental desires.²⁰ After the fall, meat had become the fruit of a tree from which almost all humans are all too easily lured into eating.

III. The Chymical Challenge

Gassendi initially framed many of the arguments that make their way into *Syntagma*

¹⁷ See *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 659-735. This discussion of Gassendi's notion of pleasure relies on Lisa Sarasohn, *Gassendi's Ethics*, 51-75.

¹⁸ See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55-82.

¹⁹ See Peter Preuss, *Epicurean Ethics: Katastemic Hedonism* (Lampeter: Mellen, 1994) and David Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144-81.

²⁰ On Gassendi and freedom, the best discussion remains Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*, especially 80-101.

Philosophicum in his letter to van Helmont. This lengthy epistle underscore how nutritional considerations proved pervasive and lasting sites for discussions about meat-eating, both because abstention from meat was primarily a dietary issue and because medicine and ethics were thoroughly entangled in the early modern period. Within the Galenic tradition doctors commonly advised patients who were ill to abstain from eating animal flesh. Nicholas Culpeper's 1652 translation of Galen's *Ars medica*, for instance, states that almost all humoral constitutions should "beware of overfilling themselves with meat."²¹ Gassendi believed, however, that if humans habitually adhered to a vegetarian diet then there would be less illness in the first place.²² In early modern medicine, there was a distinction between therapy (the cure of disease) and hygiene (the prevention of disease).²³ By shifting it from a therapeutic treatment to a hygienic prevention, Gassendi hoped to integrate a vegetarian diet into the seventeenth-century mainstream.

In the process of uprooting traditional medical practices, however, Helmontians sought to discredit the Galenic physician's hands-on approach to balancing individual humors through dietary regulation. As a rule of thumb, learned medics treated individual patients, whereas chymists considered diseases more broadly as they were manifest in shared symptoms.²⁴ van Helmont and his followers advised patients to eat what they pleased, since a content patient is more likely to experience a swift recovery than one who is forced into a strict dietary regimen. The Helmontian physician, Thomas O'Dowde, thus desired a patient "to be kind to himself, and (without regard to Dietary Prescriptions) to eat Roast Beef and drink Sack."²⁵ Gassendi thought that neglecting dietary considerations was dangerous, not least because it could clear the way for cannibalism. Addressing stories that explorers relayed regarding the cannibalism of the indigenous people in Brazil, Gassendi writes that they surely suppose themselves "to be following nature as their guide" as much as Europeans who eat other animals.²⁶ While comparisons between the consumption of human and animal flesh may now seem a stretch, this notion was grounded in the seventeenth-century understanding of digestion and nutrition. Galenic physicians on the whole maintained that substances most different from the matter of the human body could be best assimilated, meaning plants were frequently deemed more salubrious than animals. If, by contrast, food that was most similar to the human body (like animal flesh) was best assimilated then there would be far less reason to consider anthropophagy taboo. This would in turn mean that

²¹ Nicholas Culpeper, *Galen's Art of Physick* (London, 1652), 64.

²² *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 302. For relevant discussions of early modern digestion, see the essays in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 43.2 (2012), especially Justin Smith, "Diet, Embodiment, and Virtue in the Mechanical Philosophy," 338-48 and Antonio Clericuzio, "Chemical and Mechanical Theories of Digestion in Early Modern Medicine," 329-37.

²³ See Heikki Mikkeli, *Hygiene in the Early Modern Medical Tradition* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1999), especially 125-40.

²⁴ See Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 399-434.

²⁵ Thomas O'Dowde, *The Poor Man's Physician, or The True art of medicine* (London, 1665), 22-3.

²⁶ "tura ex eo, quòd non est opponendum inventos esse Brasilianos, Hurones, aliòsque feros Homines carnibus vescenteis; quasi illi Naturam ducem insequuti esse videantur; cùm ex hoc capite natura tam in illis potuerit, quàm in cæteris depravari, ac tantò magis, quantò minùs humanitatis retinuerunt, ut pote, qui non carnivori simpliciter, sed etiam Anthropophagi specialiter evaserint" (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 302).

cannibalism might even be ethically justified in so far as it helped to balance the humours; an argument that was to be avoided at all costs.²⁷

All of this is not to say that van Helmont was a champion of dietary decadence. On the contrary, he frequently recycled the Biblical dictum that “*abstinence and sparingness, are the best means in the Dietary part.*”²⁸ But Gassendi recognized that van Helmont was at the forefront of medical reform, and that convincing him of vegetarianism’s advantages for human health could have widespread and concrete effects on the diets of his contemporaries and generations to come. As Gassendi was no doubt aware, there was good reason within the framework of Helmontian medicine to suppose that meat-eating could harm both body and soul. According to van Helmont, the chief agent of digestion was the divine *archeus*: an immaterial principle that permeates the natural world and especially the human body.²⁹ He believed that the *archeus* lost much of its power to assimilate food at the fall—which is why humans now produce faeces—and that it was particularly inept at absorbing rich or fatty foods such as meat.

Yet, instead of dietary strictures, van Helmont had emphasized the radical possibility of restoring mankind to prelapsarian perfection through a universal remedy. In more optimistic moments, he even appealed to an elixir or a “modern tree of life” that could extend individual lives and preserve health for upwards to three hundred years.³⁰ Gassendi, then, endeavored to convince van Helmont that vegetarianism was a more historical and gradual way to restore the human body to some of its former excellences.³¹ In doing so, he makes it clear that the most “natural” bodies are not those of children but rather the ones that Adam and Eve possessed in their pristine state. For Gassendi, it was one thing to dispute interpretations of Genesis, but a more fundamental concern was that van Helmont’s emphasis on medicinal perfectibility and the prolongation of life could strip the notion that prelapsarian humans were vegetarians of its practical import. This is one sense in which radical or positivistic modes of thought belied arguments for abstention from meat. In contrast to such millenarian inclinations, Gassendi saw ancient philosophy and especially the Bible as blueprints for behavior, in keeping with the humanist emphasis on reading for action.³²

IV. Conclusion: The Beatific Vision

²⁷ See Cătălin Avramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), especially 162-82.

²⁸ See Jan Baptista van Helmont, *Van Helmont's works: containing his most excellent philosophy, physick, chirurgery, anatomy*, trans. by J. Chandler (London, 1664), 70.

²⁹ See Walter Pagel, *Joan Baptista van Helmont: Reformer of Science and Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 96-101.

³⁰ See *Van Helmont's works*, 645-7. Also see Georgiana Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge: The 'Christian Philosophy' of Jan Baptist van Helmont (1579-1644)* (London: Routledge, 2016), 172-92

³¹ “Etsi enim fieri videmus, ut ex usu vulgarium ciborum vix Homines possint propagare vitam ad sæculum usque, aut aliquid ampliùs, nihilominus certum esse paratam suisse arborem in Paradiso terrestri, ex cuius esu homo potuisset immortalis euadere: & aliunde in hac naturæ corruptione probabile fieri, parari posse Elixir, cuius usu homo possit, nisi æternum tempus vivere, tot certè sæcula durare, ut duratio homini possit videri quædam æternitas” (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 6, 20-1).

³² The classic work on this topic is Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, “‘Studied for Action’: How Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy,” *Past & Present*, 129.1 (1990), 30-78.

Working with an Augustinian understanding of fallen man, Gassendi maintained that humans should continually seek the ultimate pleasure of communion with God even if it could not be fully realized in this lifetime.³³ He saw the consumption of flesh as wrapped up with this beatific vision, since the natural world corroborated Biblical evidence in suggesting that humans would not eat meat after death, “when men are no longer ignorant of God’s ways.”³⁴ In many regards, this notion can be seen as the culmination of Gassendi’s eclectic endeavor to Christianize the ancient heathens. Not only did Gassendi deploy arguments from medicine, the Bible, Epicurus, and Aristotle but his emphasis on the eventual communion with God was derived from the ascetic stress on purity as a path to godliness among vegetarian neo-Platonists like Porphyry and Plotinus, along with Church Fathers such as Tatian. As a Catholic priest, Gassendi held that actions in this lifetime were of central importance in preparing the body and soul for the next, which is another respect in which he reached an impasse with his more radical contemporaries.

Rather than exclusively shaping abstinence from meat as dutiful preparation for the hereafter, however, Gassendi grounded his acceptance of vegetarianism on the historical virtue and excellence of its practitioners. He thus considered advocates of abstention from meat to have been some of the most enlightened and Godly individuals in their societies. Far from an advocate of radical egalitarianism, Gassendi’s argument for vegetarianism was premised on the notion that the best ideas in the history of philosophy, medicine, and theology should be studied, extracted, and fused. Recognizing the widespread practice of vegetarianism among those writers whom he and many of his contemporaries most admired—and not least the Epicureans—Gassendi sought to make arguments for vegetarianism as pinnacles of natural and moral philosophy. For Gassendi, if not all humans, then at least *humanists* should be herbivores.³⁵

³³ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 2, 662 and 717.

³⁴ “Quid quòd etiam post primam labem, cum homines adhuc tam multa superarent sæcula, carni um usum nullum audimus; sed tum demum ille est inductus, cùm iam corruptis hominum viis Deus illum, ut permulta alia, ob duritiem cordis concessit?” (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. 6, 21)

³⁵ For the sense of humanism used here, see Nicholas Mann, “The Origins of Humanism,” *Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by J. Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-19.