



WHY I AM NOT A VEGETARIAN

Posted on August 1, 2017 by James Redwood



I was slaughtering a sheep a month ago. It's from my flock of [Arapawa](#) sheep, a feral sub-species. They are lean and small, goat-like with small hooves. I do it outside in a facility I made myself.

It was humid, phasing between mist and drizzle, basically inside a cloud half-way up a mountain.

I was pushing my fist under the skin to separate it from the carcass; it was warm and smelled of fresh fat and wet wool.

Flies gathered but they were reluctant to land on the hogget's exposed flesh. They wanted my exposed flesh, with its salt and sweat. They were persistent and they bit - cattle flies. I was also being attacked by mosquitoes.

Around this point the irony hit me, all the more acidic for its belated obviousness.

If someone really wants to, I'll get into the argument about energy, sustainability and animal farming later. For now I'll proceed with a [permacultural](#) view: that animals are a vital part of the ecology, therefore animals are a vital part of an ecology that includes humans.

This is true even for vegans. But I personally am swayed by biology. We've got an omnivore's digestion system, and for optimum development we need cooked animal products in our diet, among many other things. I have no doubt we have evolved to do better on this diet.

Our recent evolutionary development into humanity was driven by a relatively high-animal-fat diet (compared to other apes). We are smart because we started eating cooked animal fats. We have actually evolved - most recently, most incredibly, most uniquely - **because** of this diet.

Our closest ape relatives, co-members of our tribe [Hominini](#), are the chimpanzees and bonobos. Chimpanzees are the most omnivorous ape other than us, they are also the next smartest.

But how does this square with the Golden Rule? I can't think of any good reason to exclude animals, or plants, or even microbes from the "others", to whom we must do unto as we would have done unto us.

For me, this condition is well-met when eating meat. It boils down to this: I eat and I am eaten - while I am still alive - by flies, mosquitoes, dust mites, entire ecosystems of microbes living on my surfaces inside and out.

I eat and I am eaten - so I am complying with the Golden Rule. This cycle is the core reality of life, and is the ultimate expression of relying on each other to survive.

All the arguments of vegans, vegetarians, pescetarians, raw foodists and their discriminations are just opinions about lines in the sand. Personally, I can see no reason why a cell of [spirulina](#) or an alfalfa sprout has less right to live than a pig or a human. Vegans kill as much as omnivores do, just smaller

scale organisms.

All life is precious, and all life consumes other life. We should eat what makes us healthiest, and, for now at least, we will have to be resigned to disagreeing about what that means.

This is a good place to point out that I take it as understood that animals should be treated with care and respect, and never treated cruelly. I am implacably against animal confinement systems of all stripes. Death, when it comes, should be as quick and painless as possible.

While they are alive, farmed animals should be given freedom to express their normal behaviour, and fed an appropriate, local, nutritious diet. Power should not equal cruelty, obviously.

All of this is settled in my mind. But I can't do it any more; kill sheep, that is.

I got the flock of sheep in order to do two things, take responsibility for my family's survival on a more personal, local level, and get more in touch with my karma - to borrow another religious idea.

I am from farming people, and did not need to re-learn much about slaughter and butchery, though I am sure I am still doing some parts wrong. I liked the satisfaction of being able to provide in this way, making my family more secure.

I also have been an animal lover all my life. The meat-eater/animal-lover dilemma has torn me from very early on, as it now tears the consciences of my children.

I've been a vegetarian, and considered veganism. The more I learned about human evolution the more certain I was about returning to meat, but I have always had a nagging conscience. So a few years ago I got the sheep, to commit to my karma. To see how it made me feel.

I think all meat eaters should actually do this, at least once in their life, participate in slaughter and butchery; just so they can get a visceral understanding of the reality behind the vacuum-packed packets in the supermarket. It might do to them what it did to me, make me change my line in the sand.

I no-longer have the stomach for it. I can't do the act without psychological trauma, no matter how quick and gentle I am. Holding them while the life vanishes from their eyes and their minds is a very troubling thing. It is a real feeling, I can't control it, it might be a result of biochemistry, but it might also be a result of a connection between my aliveness and theirs.

If I can't kill a sheep then I can't kill a cow or a pig. And, if I can't do it, I can't ethically pay someone else to do it for me, so no more red meat. That's my new line in the sand - no more mammals, they make me too sad when I kill them.

A chicken or a duck, though, or a fish - I don't get the same feeling. The knowledge that all life lives off other life is more soothing to me when I'm preparing this level of animal life for the table. I am less empathetic - chickens are aggressive killers and cannibals, big fish eat small fish. Ducks, well, let's just say duck behaviour is proof that there's nothing natural about ethics. So I still eat meat, from birds and fish.

Yep, there's sustainability issues with fish, but not all fish.

So it's a rule; life lives off life - or death, to be more precise. And we've evolved not just to eat meat, but to eat cooked meat. Denying any part of that is illogical and ignores clear evidence if you've seen it.

Discriminating between life forms as being intrinsically worthy or unworthy of exclusion from our diets is too trivial to waste time arguing about. We should listen to our gut instead, and keep a scientific eye on our health.

My gut - my feelings - tell me to lay off red meat, my health tells me to keep eating animal products in moderation. I do this in the knowledge that I will also be eaten one day - by the smallest and most under-appreciated forms of life. I eat, I am eaten, and I will be fully consumed in time.

So I can still kill a chicken. It's even easier when I'm hungry.

A prayer for sustenance:

For The Slaughter And The Table

This is your death

This is our life

This is my choice because you give me life

And I am stronger than you.

I eat and I am eaten.

Now it is your turn

In time it will be mine.

(Note: I am indebted to [Yuval Noah Harari's](#) book, [Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind](#)).

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The [photo](#) shows, "Strayed Sheep," painted in 1852, by William Holman Hunt.

