To Eat Flesh They Are Willing, Are Their Spirits Weak? Vegetarians Who Return to Meat. By Kristin Aronson. New York: Pythagorean Publishers, 1996. Pp. xiii + 338.

Several books[1] have been written on philosophical vegetarianism in the last couple of years. There have also been a few new arguments for it[2] including, most recently, one philosopher who has even argued that Kant's categorical imperative can be interpreted to support the ethical case for vegetarianism.[3] Yet to my knowledge Aronson's is the first book devoted to *lapsed* vegetarians, which she dubs "lapsos". Aronson declares "...I have no intention of answering the question posed in the book's title, although I shall ask what it means" (3). Yet, evidently despite her intention, by the end of the book she writes "...many struggle with the implications of eating or not eating meat. In the struggle itself, the spirit is strengthened; to the extent that lapsos struggle, their spirits are not weak" (291). So in a way this interesting book is an apology for lapsed vegetarians. "The opposite of a polemic is what I intended in this book: enough diatribes have been written already" (285). In this intention, the author succeeds. At the same time, however, Aronson extols the virtues of veganism throughout the book. While this apparent ambivalence may leave some readers confused or frustrated, the author is quite comfortable with it. "I wrote this book as a peace offering, to soften the debate, to erase lines of demarcation, to trace ambiguity and nuance, and to suggest that being a vegetarian should not be so easy. Reality is much too slippery for either consistency or consensus" (288). But while *some* aspects of reality are slippery in this sense, surely *other* aspects admit of much better traction, as I will discuss below.

The raw material for Aronson's study is gleaned from interviews of two dozen lapsed vegetarians. She claims that the stories of these lapsos are "parables for our age" (3). The book divides into a preface, an introduction, twenty chapters, a postface, the questionnaire she used to select her twenty-four lapsos in an appendix, endnotes, a select bibliography, brief biographies of the lapsos, an index of their names, and a paragraph about the author. Though there are interesting points in many of the twenty chapters, I will limit my comments to only a few.

In the introduction, Aronson describes the nature of her book and its rationale. "Because

philosophy and story are themselves opposed, in their coming together a new synthesis emerges, a philosophical anthropology in which ideas come alive" (4). She explains that "[b]ecause this is more than a book of arguments, it is less than a philosophy book; but because it is written by a philosopher, there is philosophy in it" (5). The latter inference, however, does not follow. Philosophers write poems, memos, and even love letters, none of which necessarily have "philosophy in them". Aronson's book, as it turns out, does have some philosophy in it, but it is never presented in the form of straightforward normative arguments, but rather as free-wheeling, often poetic reflections.

In Chapter One Aronson states the central *finding*—not contention, since that would betoken a polemic, nor thesis, since that would be defended by argument—of her book: "Vegetarianism is neither a diet nor a philosophy; it is a *philosophy of life*" (7). Aronson is both successful and artful at elucidating this view throughout the book. But her apparent misology is immediately evident in how she glosses this finding. "Philosophies of life are not rooted in propositions, but in people. To be a vegetarian is to live in a certain way, not to argue in a certain way. Vegetarianism is not constructed logically, but lived expansively" (7).

Aronson seems to see arguments about vegetarianism as games with which some philosophers amuse themselves. This emerges most explicitly in Chapter Fifteen (Reasons and Rationalizations). Here she describes reason as "the mind's yoga", and logic as "a good arbiter and a fair judge" (216), but she evidently does *not* consider philosophical argument a means of discovering truth. Aronson doubts that vegetarianism can be proved "right", but thinks vegetarians want to share vegetarianism because they want company. "We would feel less alone and more at home in the world if others shared our view of it" (217). But couldn't our desire to share our vegetarianism be motivated not merely by a yen for companionship but from recognition of it as a step in *moral progress*? Throughout the book Aronson refuses to explicitly judge vegetarianism to be a superior way of life, though it is hard to see how a way of life merely *different* from omnivorism could possibly inspire—as Aronson often claims—unless it were somehow *better,* i.e. higher or healthier or wiser or spiritually purer.

Aronson claims that "[d]eductive arguments do not *take* us anywhere.... Facts... not formal arguments, guide us" (217). She insists that "[t]here is no philosophical argument which mandates... vegetarianism. We cannot argue anyone into it; we can only argue *about* it" (224). But here she over-generalizes. Aronson asserts that "only in lived experience can we find a living truth" (5), and thus I constitute a living counterexample as, I suspect, do many others. After learning about ancient Greek philosophical vegetarianism from Dombrowski[4], I happened upon, and was persuaded by, Singer's preference utilitarian arguments for vegetarianism[5]; both books are cited in Aronson's Select Bibliography. Argument—even philosophical argument—need not be combative, as Aronson fears. Many philosophy teachers may agree with Aronson that "most people do not follow arguments at all" (225), but if so, then this can be a motivation for educating those who at least may *want* to follow arguments rather than an excuse for abandoning philosophical argument and resorting to more suspect techniques of persuasion. Aronson writes that "if we try to argue others into peacefulness, we contribute to a violent world" (248), but here she should distinguish between arguing *against* someone in the sense of aggressive quarreling (eristic), and cooperating *with* someone by using arguments to search for the truth (dialectic).

The discussion in Chapter Seventeen (Morals and Moralizing) is more persuasive.

> Vegetarianism is a philosophy of life. As such, it is not so much the right thing to do as it is the living of ideals. It is neither a religion nor an ethic, but a species of idealism. If vegetarianism is the right thing to do, it becomes a demand rather than an inspiration. (Imagine a world where love were [sic] the law.) Most of us resist demands, but are hungry for inspiration. Sufficiently inspired, we may hunger for vegetarianism. ... We could argue people into meatlessness, perhaps, but not into vegetarianism. (247)

This is a valuable distinction to draw, and Aronson's remarks here are on the mark.

Parts of Chapter Eighteen (The Correctly Politic Vegetarian) were less persuasive. Here she

follows Brian Luke's position that it is political action against the meat industry that really matters, and not whether anti-meat activists are vegetarians or meat-eaters. This appears to be one of those issues in which Aronson sees reality as "too slippery" to admit of a simple consistency. But for political activists to persist in their habit of buying and eating factory farmed meat while protesting against the meat industry and "blocking a lorry carrying factory farmed animals" (257) strikes this reviewer as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy conflicts with moral integrity. As a philosopher sympathetic to virtue ethics, it is disappointing that Aronson does not see this.

In Chapter Twenty (An Appetite for Accommodation), Aronson arrives at an interesting, and rather Heraclitean view.

> Vegetarianism is a way of life; meatlessness is not; vegetarianism is a way of being of which avoiding meat is only part. More important than what we eat is how we eat. In a world which is dynamic, not static, we cannot know any "thing" until we know the "how" of it: the adverb is more important than the noun. All being is becoming; all is-ness, process; every "what" is a way. Vegetarianism is not a state or a thing, but an evolution; when it is not finished, it can flourish. (286)

She adds "[i]f we understand vegetarianism as a political movement or as 'the right thing to do', it loses its particularity; the wind gets knocked out of it; it becomes a stale subject for dry debate instead of a living option. ... When we understand vegetarianism as an individual *commitment*, we understand it for what it is" (288). Again, however, Aronson refuses to criticize the option of omnivorism *per se*. Instead, she remains conciliatory: "...the difference between vegetarianism and a philosophically articulated omnivorism may be almost negligible" (281).

A few comments on the style in which this unusual book is written are in order. Aronson indulges in plays on words on almost every page, and often several times per paragraph. While this playfulness is sometimes appealing, it is frequently distracting. First, two examples of cute wordplay: "Thus my decision not to eat meat is based on altruism; what I don't want to suffer, I

don't want for my supper" (127). "Mind, too, is as natural as matter; vegetarians merely make up their minds that animals matter" (101). Contrast these with two examples of clever wordplay: "Perhaps if we saw the animal as a whole thing, we would also see it as a holy thing; but we are as alienated from animal life as we are from animal death" (126). "Even when they are among us, animals are outsiders; that is why they end up inside us" (222). Unfortunately, the author's inexhaustible desire to pun whenever possible becomes tiresome. Consider this pair of quotations: "Would he have liked the deer? If he had met her, she might have become en-deering" (120–121). "The vegan zealot's life can be a meat-a-phor for violence, and hence incoherent at its deepest level" (240). While passages such as these come off lame, there are still others that are just plain silly. "We could have listened instead to Aristotle who although making mind most valuable, sees it and the body as indis-soul-uable" (144). "There is no philosophical argument which mandates (or womandates) vegetarianism" (224). "We might have discussed whether turning cats into vegans was a form of animal experimentation (a practice he would not defend) or whether boycotting (or girlcotting) by-products would negatively affect the industry as much as it would the cats" (238). A final wordplay that goes completely overboard occurs, ironically enough, in Chapter Six (Fish out of Water):

> ginseng instead of chicken wings; caffeine instead of calves, lean; goldenseal instead of golden fried eel; basil instead of braised veal; horseradish instead of horse with radish; marjoram instead of marinated ham. "I am, I am" going to get to fish—uppers instead of groupers. (85)

One might expect more restraint from a vegan.

Despite the relentless onslaught of attempts at clever wordplay, there is much that will delight in this book. The references tend to be somewhat idiosyncratic, yet I found this one—to Olaf Stapledon's *Last Men in London* published in 1920—to be particularly wonderful.

> Eating became at once a sin and an epitome of the divine power; for in eating does not the living body gather into itself lifeless matter to organize it, vitalize it? The mouth was, of course, never exposed to view. The awful member was concealed behind a little modesty apron, which was worn below the nose. (313)

This book is an enjoyable read. I recommend it to those who wish to explore the ambiguities of vegetarianism and the motivations of thoughtful lapsos.

William O. Stephens
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NOTES

1. John L. Hill, *The Case for Vegetarianism: Philosophy for a Small Planet* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) is only one example. See my review in *Environmental Ethics* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 221–224.
2. See Jordan Curnutt, "A New Argument for Vegetarianism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 153–172. Jeff Jordan and Jacqueline Brandner in "Friendship, Animals, and Vegetarianism" (unpublished) argue that since human beings can befriend dogs, and there is no morally relevant difference between dogs and pigs, cows, sheep, and other such animals, it is wrong to eat the latter since, by parity, dogs, as friends to humans, are not morally appropriate food for us.
3. Dan Egonsson, "Kant's vegetarianism," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 31 (1997): 473–483.
4. Daniel A. Dombrowski, *The Philosophy of Vegetarianism* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
5. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1993).

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