

# Vegetarianism in the Ancient World

Nathanael Fillmore, February 18, 2005

## 1 References

For HESIOD's description of the Golden Age, see *Works and Days* 109–201. For a fuller interpretation along the lines I give, see Dombrowski 1984: 19–21. In general, it might be noted, Dombrowski is an excellent resource for learning about ancient vegetarianism, from Hesiod all the way to Porphyry. Hausleiter 1935 is compendious, and according to Dombrowski (174) the only book devoted to vegetarianism in antiquity prior to Dombrowski's,—but only helpful if one can read German. More recent books on the history of vegetarianism include Spencer 1995.

EMPEDOCLES describes the Golden Age as follows: “Her [Aphrodite] they propitiated with holy images, with paintings of living creatures [shoot photos, not guns?], with perfumes of varied fragrance and sacrifices of pure myrrh and sweet-scented frankincense, throwing to the ground libations of yellow honey. Their altar was not drenched by the unspeakable slaughter of bulls, but this was held among men the greatest defilement—to tear out the life from noble limbs and eat them” (D.-K. fr. 128, trans. KRS 318). For more information on this and other vegetarian interpretations of the Golden Age see Dombrowski 1984: 21–34.

For PYTHAGORAS' views on transmigration, see KRS 219–220, 235–238 and the fragments discussed there. Pythagoras' quotation concerning a whipped dog, “Stop, do not beat it; for it is the soul of a friend that I recognized when I heard it giving tongue,” comes from Xenophanes (D.-K. fr. 7, trans. KRS 219). For more on Pythagoras, see Gorman 1979.

On EMPEDOCLES' metaphysics, see KRS 286–302, and on his ethics, see KRS 314–317. On the roots, see especially, “Hear first the four roots of all things: shining Zeus, life-bringing Hera, Aidoneus and Nestis who with her tears waters mortal springs,” identified as fire, air, earth, and water (D.-K. fr. 6, trans. KRS 286). On the forces and cosmic cycle: “And these things never cease their continual interchange, now through Love all coming together into one, now again each carried apart by the hatred of Strife” (D.-K. fr. 17, trans. KRS 287). On the cycle of birth and death: “Of all mortal things none has birth, nor any end in accursed death, but only mingling and interchange of what is mingled—birth is the name given to these by men” (D.-K. fr. 8, trans. KRS 291). On strifeful bloodshed as death's cause: “When anyone sins and pollutes his own limbs with bloodshed, who by his error makes false the oath he swore—spirits whose portion is long

life—for thrice ten thousand years he wanders apart from the blessed, being born throughout that time in all manner of forms of mortal things . . . of these I too am now one, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, having put my trust in raving Strife” (D.-K. fr. 115, trans. KRS 314–315). For a concise overview of Empedocles' life, metaphysics, biology, and ethics, see Schofield 2002.

On philosophers' silence about vegetarianism between Empedocles and Socrates, see Dombrowski 1984: 55. On SOCRATES' indifference to vegetarianism, see Dombrowski 55–57. Dombrowski 58–63 argues that PLATO advocated vegetarianism, at least as an ideal, but his argument is unconvincing, since it does not satisfactorily explain counterexamples like *Republic* 332c, which seem to condone meat-eating. For ARISTOTLE's view on meat-eating, see *Politics* 1.8 (trans. Jowett): “In like manner we may infer that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild, if not all at least the greater part of them, for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments.”

For an overview of THEOPHRASTUS' views on vegetarianism, see Huby 1998: §§5–6 and Spencer 1995. On Theophrastus' view as to meat-eating's origin and lack of continued justification, see Porphyry *On Abstinence* 2.12 (trans. Taylor 1988 [1823]: 52), which cites Theophrastus as follows: “Pestilence and war were the causes that introduced the necessity of eating [animals]. Since, therefore, we are supplied with fruits, what occasion is there to use the sacrifice of necessity?”

On the STOICS' Aristotelian view that animals, lacking a rational soul, exist primarily for the use of humans, see Passmore 1975: 198. On the EPI-CUREAN view that death is not unfortunate, so meat-eating is allowed, see Dombrowski 1984: 82–83. Note that Epicurus himself may have advised avoiding meat on prudential grounds, but in any case his followers largely ignored the advice (Dombrowski 82). For SENECA's advice to abstain from meat, see his *Moral Epistles* 60, 95, and 108.

PLUTARCH's views on vegetarianism can be found in *On the Eating of Flesh* (trans. Cherniss and Hembold: 1927). For his argument from the lack of necessity, see 1.2; for that from transmigration, see 2.3–5; for that from human anatomy, see 1.5; and for that from meat-eating restraint leading to human-killing restraint, see 1.7. A translation of PORPHYRY's *On Abstinence* can be found in Taylor 1988 [1823].

RUNDIN'S 1998 article arguing that Empedocles was motivated to advocate vegetarianism because he wanted to encourage sociopolitical change toward greater democracy is organized as follows: 22–25 discusses sacrifice; 25 discusses Rundin's first point directly in support of his thesis (that the biographical tradition says that Empedocles was a democrat); 25–29 discusses Rundin's second point (that Empedocles' extant fragments use vocabulary and phrases also associated with democracy); and 29–31 discusses Rundin's third point (that as an aristocrat, Empedocles may have had good reason to be involved in Acragan politics, and on the side of democracy).

Empedocles' quotations in support of Rundin's second point are as follows (cited on Rundin 26): the cosmos's roots "are all equal and of the same age" (D.-K. 31 B 17.27); "perception depends on the presence of [equal] roots in the perceiver [and] in the perceived" (D.-K. 31 B 109); and "blood has the four roots in the most equal proportions and, therefore, is the most important locus of thought" (D.-K. 31 A 86 10–100).

For ARISTOTLE'S doctrine of the mean, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6.4 1106a17 (trans. Irwin): "In everything continuous and divisible we can take more, less, and equal [*isos*], and each of them either in the object itself or relative to us; and the equal is some intermediate [i.e., mean] between excess and deficiency." For Aristotle's unfavorable opinion of democracy, see for example *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.10 1106a33–1161a9.

Empedocles' final quotation is from D.-K. fr. 137, trans. KRS 319.

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