

## The Fight for Plant Rights

### The Importance of animal rights has been hotly debated by freethinkers. But should we stop at animals? Or should we start elsewhere?

News that the plant liberation movement is spreading like a forest fire has checked criticism levelled at me for starting it. Some people ridiculed the movement as taking the craze for "liberation fronts" too far. Others have attacked me for distracting attention from causes they think more worthwhile, such as humanism or animal rights. The time has come to put the record straight.

The plant liberation front (or Veg Lib as it is popularly known) dates from the moment when I watched horrified as workmen cold-bloodedly felled a grove of majestic oak-trees to make way for a council housing estate. Other people objected to this on the ground of damage to amenity. I saw through their protest as a man-centred approach. Being living creatures, the trees had rights of their own. To fell them in this way, merely to make way for the housing of homeless people, struck me (if I may adopt the language used by Brigid Brophy in advocating *animal* rights, in *The Freethinker*, June 1978) as one of the most atrocious assaults ever committed by humans on fellow creatures of a different species. For all I knew, these mighty trees suffered bewilderment or even fear. I determined to act.

Now that I have researched the subject thoroughly I realise that there is an overwhelming case for Veg Lib. Man has closed his eyes to it for centuries, selfishly using the vegetable kingdom for his own ends. This period of wanton exploitation is nearing its close. Plants are fighting back! They are doing this through the medium of the spirits who inhabit them. Animists have known and feared these spirits for centuries. They act by impinging on human consciousness, making their wishes directly known to our minds. Nothing else can account for the amazing spread of Veg Lib.

The more refined among us, particularly the poets, have known for a long time about the souls of plants. In "The Sensitive Plant" Shelley wrote of the rose unveiling her glowing breast till "the soul of her beauty and love lay bare". That the love of plants could be returned by humans was recognized even by that gross man W. S. Gilbert, with his reference in *Patience* to "a sentimental passion of a vegetable fashion". He could see the purity of such love:

"Though the Philistines may jostle, you will rank as an apostle in the high aesthetic band,  
If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in your mediaeval hand.  
And everyone will say,  
As you walk your flowery way,  
If he's content with a vegetable love which would certainly not suit *me*,  
Why, what a most particularly pure young man this pure young man must be! "

Back in the seventeenth century the poet George Herbert wrote "I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree", while everyone knows the noble words of Joyce Kilmer:

"Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree."

To adapt a well-known phrase, What God has made let not man put asunder! Remember the revelation in Genesis that the source of the knowledge of good and evil is located not in man or any other animal, but in a *tree*.

Modern man wrongs the vegetable kingdom in innumerable ways. Purely for selfish pleasure, plants are kept potbound and stifled in centrally-heated rooms. Owners try to alleviate the plants' anxiety by talking to them. Some plant "experts" even hint that soothing conversation encourages growth (see "How to make your house plants die more slowly" by Percy Thrower). We are all aware of the wanton cruelties practised on helpless pot plants. I personally know of a case where a party goer stubbed out a cigarette on the leaf of a rubber-plant, whereupon the whole plant instantly wilted and died. In the.....

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.....face of that true story how can anyone say that plants lack feelings-even a soul?

Plants are subjected to the grossest indignities. Their growth is forced, to satisfy unnatural cravings for early rhubarb or hothouse tomatoes. They are fed on unpleasant fertilizers and sprayed with noxious chemicals. They are subjected to gross overcrowding. (Whoever first hailed as a benefactor the man who produced two blades of corn where one grew before has much to answer for.) Plant eugenics are interfered with by people who develop hybrids to line their own pockets. (Linnaeus would scarcely recognise the vegetable kingdom if he returned to earth today.) Living plants are uprooted and moved to new positions to gratify the whim of their "owners" (this even happens to mature trees). Hydrangeas suffer the crowning indignity of having their *colour* changed by soil additives. The list of abuses is endless.

Adopting the language of the defenders of animal rights, I say we should ask not what is the value of a mistreated plant's life to some human being, but what is its value to the plant? (answer: invaluable, because unique and irreplaceable). Echoing this, I say that the vegetable rights movement is taking off in tremendous moral force and is beginning to shake the public conscience. I uphold Veg Lib because I do not see how any secularist who agrees that evolution took place can find it in his conscience or his reason to do otherwise. Admittedly, so far as eating goes I have a thin time. Since I cannot be expected to support more than one liberation front at once, I eat meat freely (in other words I am a flesharian). Vitamin C I get from pills, so by nibbling the odd leaf blown down by the wind I get by.

There is a long way to go before Veg Lib triumphs and vegetation once more enjoys uninterrupted growth. There are hopeful signs however. Only this morning I received a pledge of support from the Ancient Order of Foresters, while the Mandrake Society have been a constant inspiration. Many teething problems remain. Demarcation talks with the Animal Liberation Front on whether insectivorous plants should be allowed to pursue their natural proclivities unchecked have been deadlocked for weeks. The Department of Health and Social Security are threatening us with an injunction over our attempts to restrain interference with the free growth of deadly nightshade. Several Veg Lib supporters have been successfully prosecuted under the Weeds Act for allowing noxious growths to spread from their property. These are just examples of our problems.

### **Rights of Cockroaches**

We are not in as much difficulty as the animal rights people however. For liberationists the working difference between "animals" and "plants" simply depends on whether there is the capacity for locomotion - a somewhat arbitrary distinction it is true. We are committed of course to the "universalist" approach. It would be presumptuous in the extreme for man to decide which species

deserved protection and which did not. The idea that all living creatures deserve equal respect for their life and identity gives rise to more difficulty however where there is capacity for locomotion than where there is not. Many of these difficulties are of course exaggerated by opponents - see for example the absurd fuss recently made over a plan to encourage the breeding of cockroaches. One newspaper correspondent had the bad taste to point out that cockroaches are carriers of harmful pathogenic organisms and are at home even in sewers, "where they are sustained on moisture and faeces" (*The Times*, 12 August 1978). Completely ignoring the inalienable right of the cockroach to live and multiply in its own way, this person went on to assert that it "defiles all forms of foodstuffs it comes into contact with by depositing its own disease-laden faeces on the surface. It is a serious health hazard." One more man-centred approach: not a word about the hazard to the health of cockroaches in the use of man-made pesticides!

Despite such obstructive attitudes, we liberationists are determined to stand firm and win through. After all, our reputation as humanists and secularists depends upon it.

Francis Bennion