

# Carnivorous vegetarianism:

## The ethics of eating carnivorous plants

I was still a teenager when I last seriously squared off with a carnivorous plant. An avid enthusiast, I convinced my father to help me build a hothouse at the bottom of the back garden, which I filled with Venus fly traps, pitcher plants and sundews. Glued to the television, I watched spellbound as rampaging giant leafy carnivores brought about the end of civilization as we know it in movies like *Day of the Triffids*. Thus inspired, I dreamed of becoming a brilliant genetic engineer and one day creating a hybrid big enough to eat my teachers. The consumption of ants, flies, moths, and rarely, rodents and small birds, by members of the kingdom that had for millennia suffered from the predatory appetites of animals, was a top 10 hit with my sense of poetic justice.

*Text: Andrew Knight*

*Drawing: George Hughes*

I nurtured my leafy charges with loving care, resisting the temptation to supplement their natural diets, which I knew would only lead to a premature death from overindulgence. Consequently it was with a certain fondness towards my former friends that I agreed to tackle the ethics of dining upon carnivorous plants, from a vegan perspective.

In order to examine the ethics of carnivorous vegetarianism one must first establish a reasonable definition of ethical conduct. Great philosophers and religious leaders throughout history have provided answers so lengthy and esoteric that it seems simpler to just ignore them. Instead let us examine the following simple “utilitarian” definition: the most ethical choice is that which achieves the greatest good for the greatest number. A commonsense understanding of “good” has always been sufficient for me; for example, the maximization of happiness and the minimization of suffering.

So, does the consumption of carnivorous plants result in greater good than the consumption of the non carnivorous variety? Well, on the face of it, there appears to be no significant difference. All plants lack a central nervous system, and, to the best of our knowledge, consequently possess minimal awareness of what are

termed “noxious stimuli”, such as being garnished with chili sauce and ground up by the teeth of a hungry human.

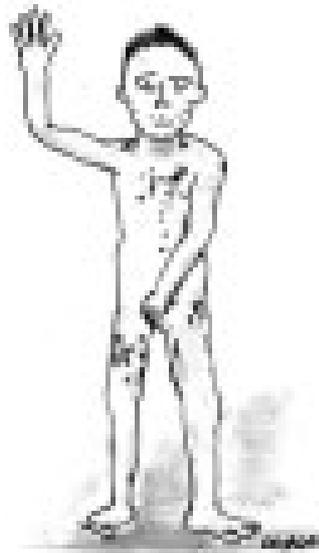
Unless, of course, the plants took their revenge by attempting to consume their consumers. After all, those alluring nectar traps and digestive secretions that prove so effective at ensnaring smaller animals would surely have some impact on larger ones too. Would the pitchers of carnivorous plants, filled with digestive juices, start to consume the stomachs of those dining upon them, followed thereafter by their torsos, legs, arms, necks and heads? Would that be serving the cause of the greater good? Clearly, it depends on the person consumed.

Undoubtedly most vegans would feel uncomfortable about consuming plants containing animal remains. But at least we could console ourselves with the knowledge that the consumption of each leafy carnivore would very likely prevent further deaths of numerous insects and other small animals. These animals do have central nervous systems, which doubtless go into spasms at the very thought of being drowned, digested or crushed by chlorophylled carnivores.

Critics who place cultural considerations above cruelty would defend the right of carnivorous plants to continue to hunt their prey, modern aids such as telescopic rifles and night scopes of course being disallowed.

However, those of us who disagree had best think twice before becoming too smug about our ethical superiority. It cannot be denied that as many sentient lives could be saved by devouring these leafy carnivores, it is but the merest fraction of those we could surely save by eating the most ferocious carnivores of all meaning, of course, the two-legged variety.

If we are honest about saving sentient lives and minimizing suffering we should all grab our knives and forks and head down to the local KFC to dine upon the customers. The nervous systems of those consumed would be minimally developed



in any case, and besides, we vegans could comfort ourselves with the impossibility of perfect vegetarianism in the real world. After all, even the non-carnivorous plants we consume include within them the flesh of decomposing animals hungrily sucked from the earth through their roots.

Nevertheless, on the balance of things, it seems reasonable to conclude that carnivorous vegetarianism constitutes the most ethical choice other than cannibalism. This spares

unknown numbers of small animals from a horrifying variety of gruesome deaths.

Unless, of course, the addition of delicacies such as chili sauce somehow created a combination so gastronomically irresistible, (and consequently profitable), that it resulted in vast, genetically-modified fields of carnivores just waiting to be unleashed in the event of an industrial mishap, to deliver the fall of civilization as we know it... Those species not yet wiped out by humanity would breathe a vast, collective sigh of relief. Unless, of course, the plants were not just partial to humans, and after all, given the choice, who would be?

And of course the method of killing would be crucial to determining the level of suffering involved. Would the plants humanely “euthanize” their victims with a quick shot of digestive sap into a peripheral vein, or would they cut their throats without the benefit of pre-stunning? Would giant Venus fly traps crush all male humans at one day of age, and would super-heated pitcher plants boil women alive once they are too old to breed and produce more “plant food”?

Perhaps the safest course is a pre-emptive strike before they can begin to develop such weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps the secret of Homeland Security lies in carnivorous vegetarianism. Perhaps for the sake of the National Interest we should show strength rather than weakness, fortitude rather than hesitation, and rapidly devour all of those suckers while we still can...

*Taken from: American vegan, 3/03*