To Anne

TASTE OR TABOO

DIETARY CHOICES IN ANTIQUITY

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CHAPTER TWO

VEGETARIANISM

It seems plausible that most people in the Graeco-Roman lands on the shores of the Mediterranean lived predominantly on a diet of vegetables and fruit. By this I mean not a diet from which animal flesh had been deliberately omitted, but one in which meat or fish would have been a rare occurrence owing to relative scarcity and sometimes elevated price. The terms meat and fish should be used with a measure of caution, but I shall look at each separately, regarding them as distinct and separate categories.[1]

If meat was in short supply, it seems reasonable to suppose that opportunities to eat it were avidly anticipated, at least by most people. However, there were individuals or groups who actively chose to pursue a diet free from the flesh of animals, notably followers of Pythagoras and Porphyry. It is not clear whether they also objected to products which derived from animals

(1) John Wilkins argues for the scholar to consider the separation between land and sea creatures in antiquity, as they each possess diverse and independent status: Wilkins (1993), 192. I am not sure whether the division is as bold and as clear-cut as Wilkins states. Puppies were sacrificed to Hecate; Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* LII; LXVIII (also for the sacrifice of dogs during the festival of the Lupercalia). Should one regard a hunting dog in antiquity as a wild or domesticated animal? It lives in close proximity to humans, so perhaps should not be regarded as wild. For Vernant, fish cannot be a part of the sacrificial ritual, as they are not a domestic animal: Vernant (1989), 37. See also Vernant (1991), 298–9: 'We know that in Greece wild beasts were not normally sacrificed. They were killed without scruple like enemies in the hunt. The meat, therefore, from this ritualized slaughter-sacrifice belongs exclusively to domestic species: pigs, goats, sheep and cattle'. On the other hand, Burkert sees importance in the area of biological difference: gods prefer large, warm-blooded animals: Burkert (1985), 59. If we accept Wilkins' categorization of marine life, then fish cannot be treated with meat as a single entity. They will need to be treated separately.

but didn't involve slaughter. Many modern foods have a substantial amount of additives, often of animal origin, demanding constant vigilance from the vegetarian. Animal-derived ancient additives included *garum*, a Roman sauce made from fermented fish innards.[2] Refusing this may have been particularly problematic as it was one of the principal methods of adding salt to foods. Honey may also have posed problems.[3]

Advocates of a vegetarian diet were a small cohort and were probably viewed as oddities or religious eccentrics, isolated, operating at the margins of society.[4] They may have even been regarded with suspicion and hostility, their beliefs perceived as a threat to established ideologies. Eating meat (and, by definition, not eating meat) had emotive connotations. The act of sacrifice to the god was integral to Graeco-Roman religion. This is not to say that the sacrificial offering always had to be an animal. Sometimes a beast was not available, or a choice was made to sacrifice some other item. Sometimes the rites of a particular god did not demand a blood sacrifice.[5] Pythagoras exhorted the women of Croton to sacrifice flat cakes, ground barley cakes and honeycombs in their religious rituals. He stipulated that the gods should not be honoured by slaughter and death.[6]

Animal sacrifice held immense symbolic importance, particularly for Greeks. The butchery of the animal and its division into offerings to the gods and what would be eaten by man made concrete the hierarchical triptych of god-man-animal. This ritual was a continual replaying and renewing of a covenant that existed between mortals and immortals.[7] A rejection of meat was, in effect, a gross act of impiety. Ancient religious ritual was a communal act in which men sought guidance or protection from the gods to ensure the continued survival and prosperity of the body politic (or at least protection from adversity and manifestations of divine malevolence). Dismissal of its significant ritual act (animal sacrifice) might be interpreted as a renunciation of the gods, even a betrayal of the whole community. Sacrificial rites were an essential method of ensuring group cohesion, with possible roots of the ritual

(2) Dalby (2003), 341.
(3) The exploitation of bees may not have been an issue if the honey were collected from the wild, rather than being the product of bee-keeping; Porph. *Abst.* I. 21. See Wilkins and Hill (2006), 160–161.
(4) Osborne (1995), 222.
(5) Iambl. *VP* 8.35. Iamblichus refers to the altar of Apollo on Delos 'which alone is unstained in blood'.
(6) Iambl. *VP* 11.54. For Greek bloodless sacrifice, see Bruit (1983).
(7) Hes. *Theog.* 535–565. Vernant in Detienne and Vernant (1989), 25.

lying in the practice of hunting.[8] Animal sacrifice involves the approximation of the wild in the domestic, and an expiation of a shared sense of shame about animal slaughter.[9] The act of animal sacrifice is the crucible for forging community bonds.[10]

In his natural animal state, man was thought a carnivore who, left to his own devices, would eagerly satisfy his desire for meat. In terms of the health benefits of eating meat, ancient thinkers were generally in favour. Few objections were raised about meat *per se*, and exceptions concerned the flesh of certain animals. Galen spends much time examining the species he knew were eaten throughout the empire.[11] His objections to the consumption of beasts such as camels and donkeys stem not only from questions of nutrition, but also from morality. The meat of camel and ass affect not just the body but the soul.[12]

There were others who believed man was not naturally carnivorous, that consumption of animal protein was, in fact, an aberration from vegetarian and fruitarian origins. To make sense of this, it is necessary to consider the two diverse ways in which Greek mythology explained the genesis and development of humanity. One exegesis regards the path of human history as progress from brutish and primordial roots, the other as an inexorable slide into degeneration from an idyllic state of bliss.[13] The first proposes that man was originally compelled to forage for food to survive. His diet was limited by his inability to utilize the flesh of animals by means of the transformative process of cooking with fire. It firmly rejects the idea that man's digestive system can process raw flesh.[14] For many in the ancient world, the consumption of raw meat would have conjured up mental associations with soldiers under siege conditions, forced by circumstance to eat almost anything. Alexander the Great's troops in pursuit of Bessus had to eat the raw flesh of camels and

(8) Burkert (1983), 35–48; (1985), 58.
(9) Gould (1985), 18: 'Walter Burkert...has pointed out how much of sacrificial ritual makes sense only by assuming a deep-seated sense of anxiety over the taking of animal life'.
(10) Burkert (1985), 58. See also Burkert (1983), 38 for the frequent rule that he who performs the sacrifice should abstain from eating.
(11) Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.660–742 K.
(12) Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.664 K.
(13) Dombrowski (1984a), 19. Compare this with the Hesiodic version, where man originally feasts with the gods; *Op.* 109–126.
(14) Hippoc. *De prisc. med.* 3.4. This is not entirely true. One may cite modern dishes such as beef carpaccio, steak tartare or sashimi to prove the contrary. Some nutritionists actually extol the virtues of a 'raw' diet.

pack animals.[15] Plutarch relates in his life of Brutus how shipwrecked sailors had to eat the sails and tackle of their ships.[16] It is Plutarch who makes the indigestibility of raw flesh for humans one of the foundations of his arguments against meat-eating. The inability to process a raw cadaver is combined with a lack of natural killing faculties such as sharp claws and teeth.[17] Man needs to alter the nature and structure of raw flesh before he is able (or willing) to consume it.[18]

The Promethean gift of fire presented mankind with the means to advance beyond these limitations. He was able to hunt, cook and eat meat. A crucial stage of man's development from primitive to civilized being – the discovery of fire – is intimately connected with the transformation of his diet from exclusively vegetarian to carnivorous. A comic fragment from *The Samothracians* of Athenion, preserved in Athenaeus, posits that primitive man existed in a state of cannibalism. The introduction of animal sacrifice and the subsequent roasting of the meat serves to lure man away from his diet of human flesh by offering something more appetizing in its place.[19]

Hesiod recounts an alternative history, where man is born into an utopia without pain or hardship.[20] The gods create and then destroy generations of men. Humanity is forced into a spiral of decline, becoming, as time passes, ever more distant from its simple origins. No longer is man able to pluck fruit freely from the trees. He must find other things to eat. Thus, here, humanity's degeneration is characterized (at least in part) by the adoption of a carnivorous diet. This type of myth in which human origins are linked with purity and simplicity, and an absence of hardship, is not unique to Greek culture.[21]

All this, of course, relates to the remote past: the foundation myths of Greek civilization; its creation by supernatural forces in distant times. The Romans, too, possessed their own myths. These were often, though not always, located within their own historical period, rather than some primeval era.[22] Romans liked to see their origins as peasant soldier/farmers, untainted by the corruption caused by the flow of wealth into the republic as Roman territories

(15) Ael. *VH.* 12. 37.
(16) Plut. *Brut.* 47.
(17) Plut. *De esu carn.* 994 F.
(18) Plut. *De esu carn.* 995 B.
(19) Fragment 1 Kassel and Austin; Ath. *Deip.* 660e–f.
(20) Hes. *Op.* 109–120.
(21) For Near Eastern predecessors of Hesiodic myth, see West (1969), 113–134.
(22) Purcell (2003), 341. I feel Purcell perhaps makes too much of this, and I feel uncomfortable with his dismissal of the role of Roman myth-making.

rapidly expanded in the course of the second century BC. If the agricultural writers are to be believed, this was emphatically a culture that ate meat.[23] Latin myths of agricultural simplicity and purity eulogize a period when mankind is already making use of the flesh of animals. This is not to say that the Roman writers were averse to making reference to a mythical idyll at the very inception of their civilization, from which man degenerates.[24]

Of course, there is a significant element of Greek cultural tradition that eulogized the qualities of the aggressive carnivore. The heroic warrior-caste described by Homer in the *Iliad*, for instance, seem to exist on a proto-Atkins diet almost exclusively of meat. It is clear that realism was not intended (as a portrait either of the time of the poem's composition or the supposed time of the poem's events). It seems a literary construct designed to separate the élite from the common herd. Meat represents a form of elevated diet, perhaps closer to the gods than to man.[25]

Animals and humans enjoyed an uncertain relationship in antiquity, at least as revealed in surviving texts.[26] Authors such as Porphyry and Plutarch, who made earnest attempts to argue for the impartial and equitable treatment of non-human animals, stand out as relatively marginalized. Platonic thought envisaged a strict hierarchy of existence, with man at the top and the creatures of the sea at the bottom.[27] Across the Graeco-Roman world, animals were generally not afforded the same treatment as humans. They were seen either as being closely related to the manner in which deities revealed themselves to men (the transformation of god into animate form, sometimes in the guise of wild animals, at others in the form of a domestic animal, such as a bull), or as things to be used: for the transportation of people or objects, for the pushing and pulling of farmyard machinery, for food and for skins.[28] They were treated as functional utensils.[29] Wild animals could be slaughtered in the arena as entertainment. This was not just for visceral pleasure, but made manifest

(23) Columella *Rust.* X. 1–3
(24) Verg. *Aen.* 8. 315–318.
(25) I shall discuss this further when I examine the role of fish (or lack of) in the diets of the Homeric heroes.
(26) See Gilhus (2006).
(27) Pl. *Ti.* 91d–92b; Gilhus (2006),86.
(28) In Aristotle's view, it was acceptable for humans to hunt animals as the latter are by nature intended for use by humans; Arist. *Pol.* 1.8 1256b 15–26. Also Sorabji (1993), 116–119.
(29) Despite being a work of fiction, one may imagine that the relentless physical beatings meted out to the central protagonist, Lucius, of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, transformed through a magic spell into an ass, was not untypical of the lot of the pack animal in antiquity.

the Roman construct of beast in submission to man.[30] A similar mentality is detected within Greek culture, particularly in the sphere of hunting.[31] Pitting one's wits against wild beasts could be viewed as a complementary activity to military training, sharpening instincts, reflexes and observational skills, as well as contributing to physical fitness and providing excitement and pleasure.[32]

Animals were sometimes held sacred, either being a god itself, or the terrestrial manifestation of some deity. The centre of animal worship was seen by the Greeks (as recounted by the historian Herodotus) to be Egypt.[33] Herodotus goes on to qualify this. Not all animals were regarded as sacred. He relates how humans mourned the death of dogs and cats, and how the death penalty was mandatory for those who killed an ibis or a hawk,[34] but he also draws to attention the ambiguous status of the crocodile.[35] It was worshipped in Thebes and at Lake Moeris, adorned with trinkets and tamed. When alive, they received special food; when they died, they were awarded lavish funerary rites and elaborate burial. However, in Elephantine they were hunted and eaten.[36] Hippopotami were sacred only in the province of Papremis and nowhere else.[37] Various animals that dwelt in the Nile were held in reverence, the river being hailed as a potent deity of fertility. Thus, Egyptians revered otters, the eel, the phoenix and various snakes and fish.[38]

The interesting point about these passages is not so much that they provide a snapshot of Egyptian social history, but that they offer a telling portrait of Greek cultural attitudes towards Egyptian religious practice.[39] Clement of Alexandria, writing more than five hundred years later than Herodotus, detects a continuity of attitude towards animals among Egyptians and much evidence of animal worship in his own time.[40] The Christian theologian, anxious to condemn pagan religious behaviour, is contemptuous of what

(30) In the arena, man too could be placed in this submissive posture, as in the case of condemned criminals, slaves, prisoners-of-war or Christians.
(31) Lonsdale (1979), 153.
(32) Sorabji (1993), 172.
(33) Hdt. II. 65. 2. See Gilhus (2006), 95–100.
(34) Hdt. II. 66–67; 65.5
(35) Hdt II. 69.1.
(36) Hdt. II. 69.1–3.
(37) Hdt. II. 71.
(38) Hdt. II. 72.
(39) Egypt is given as a particular example of a neighbouring culture which displays particular reverence for animals in a religious sense. One could also cite the Syrian attitude to fish; Lucian *Syr. D.*
(40) Clem. Al. *Protr.* II.34.

he perceives a primitive and superstitious awe of animals. Yet, he accuses the Greeks, who viewed themselves as less credulous than the Egyptians, of similar gullibility.[41] Clement gives examples of how Greek communities worship, for instance, ants and mice, as well as flies, doves and fishes.[42] This cultural similarity has intriguing implications for the vegetarian philosophy of Pythagoras. His biographers have maintained he spent time in Egypt studying esoteric doctrines.[43]

Some modern scholars see the marginalized remnants of archaic superstition in the animal worship practised in Greece.[44] It is difficult to say with certainty whether these animals were believed to be gods *per se*, or merely terrestrial manifestations of divinities (who could adopt many different guises).[45] Many are the myths that tell of immortal beings that revealing themselves in animal form. These episodes were sometimes of rape and impregnation, the divine seed the progenitor of demigods and heroes.[46] Zeus was a prime example of a god who fathered offspring by lying with mortals. As a bull, he slept with Europa.[47] From this coupling came Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon. He appeared as a swan to Leda, fathering Helen and Polydeuces, and as a satyr to lie with Antiope.[48] His disguise was not always animal. To the imprisoned Danae, he appeared as a shower of gold.[49] To Callisto, he revealed himself in the likeness of Artemis.[50] He also impersonated mortals. He presented himself to Alcmene as her own husband Amphitryon.[51] This gift of transformation was occasionally bestowed upon mortals, for instance Periclymnus, eldest son of Neleus, king of Pylos, who, thanks to his grandfather Poseidon, was able to metamorphose into such beasts as birds, ants, bees and snakes.[52] Scenes of forcible intercourse between god and mortal were to become, mimetically,

(41) Clem. Al. *Protr.* II.34.
(42) Clem. Al. *Protr.* II.34.
(43) Iambl. *VP* IV. 19. Much of what is related of the life of 'Pythagoras' must be treated as almost myth.
(44) Renehan (1981), 257. Also Burkert (1985), 182–189.
(45) See Gilhus (2006), particularly 78–92 on animal-human transformations, and 93–111 on animals in religion.
(46) See Burkert (1985), 119–179.
(47) Scholiast on Hom. *Il.* II. xii. 292. Also Apollod. *Bibl.* III.1.1. and J. G. Frazer's note (4) in Loeb edition (1921).
(48) Apollod. *Bibl.* III.10.7; Ov. *Met.* 6.111. Also Burkert (1985), 128–129.
(49) Apollod. *Bibl.* II.4.1.
(50) Ov. *Met.* 2.428–9.
(51) Hes. *Sc.* 35 ff.
(52) Scholiast on Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.156.

frequent staples of entertainment for spectators at the arena: the so-called 'fatal charades'.[53] The animals engaged in these mythical re-enactments were viewed differently by the spectators to those savaging condemned prisoners or fighting other beasts or humans. Their role in the mythical realm may have (briefly) elevated their status.

There was no homogeneous ancient ideology of what constituted the 'proper' way to treat or to conceptualize animals. It is likely that there was a rudimentary system of classification (a hierarchy) regarding the suitability of animals for sacrifice or slaughter.[54] Wilkins sees the selection as limited to domestic animals, but Parker sees a further subdivision, with a whole range that may or may not be eaten depending upon their 'social distance' from man.[55] And, just as there were differing and sometimes conflicting ideas about the correct way to treat and eat animals, so too there existed many diverse opinions as to why one should refrain from killing them.[56]

The pivotal figure when considering ancient vegetarianism is Pythagoras. The problem is that so much written about his life and teachings was composed hundreds of years after his death. Much is also highly contradictory and often constitutes nothing more than unsubstantiated rumour or blatant myth-making. There are no extant writings (it was claimed that he left none).[57] A great deal of our 'knowledge' of Pythagoras is derived from the biographies of Diogenes Laertius, Porphyry and Iamblichus, all writing in the third century AD. There are discrepancies in their texts as well as wild disagreement on some crucial points of fact. There is even confusion about his the exact identity. He appears to have shared his name with at least eight other significant individuals.[58] The greatest muddle arises from the fact that, despite his reputation for austerity and abstinence from animal flesh, some believed him to have passionately advocated its consumption for athletes.[59] Laertius does however admit that it is unlikely that Pythagoras the athletics trainer and Pythagoras the philosopher were the same person.[60]

(53) Kyle (1998), 9; 54–55.
(54) Wilkins (1993), 192.
(55) Parker (1983), 363–364.
(56) See Clark (2000), 8–15 for the arguments for vegetarianism advanced by Porphyry. Also Newmyer (2006) for discussions contained in Plutarch. Also Beer in Grumett and Muers (2008).
(57) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 6. Diogenes Laertius refutes this claim, maintaining that he wrote tracts on education, constitutional affairs and nature.
(58) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 46–47.
(59) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 12.
(60) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 13.

Pythagoras (*c.* 570–*c.* 495BC) was born on the island of Samos and moved later (perhaps after travelling the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt) to the southern Italian city of Croton. His intellectual achievements (think the Pythagorean theorem) were considerable, although the lack of any surviving writings make his contributions a matter of debate. Certainly his influence on later Greek thought was immense, especially on Plato. For a time, at the end of the sixth century BC, he also had political impact. His religious beliefs depended on the formation of clubs or associations of like-minded disciples and they facilitated the control of Pythagoras and Pythagoreans over Croton thus bringing the philosophy and cult into the mainstream of politics in Magna Graecia. This settled expression of Pythagoreanism did not last long (the philosopher himself was expelled from Croton and died, perhaps, up the coast in Metapontum) but his influence lived on. Important elements of his thought included numerology (still surfacing in modern Europe through secret societies such as the Freemasons and the Rosicrucians), the transmigration of souls and the formation of cultic groups (with many links to Orphic or Cretan mysteries) with extensive rules of conduct which involved, in one way or another, abstinence or asceticism.

The biographies disagree over the exact nature of the Pythagorean meat prohibition.[61] Some say he abstained from all flesh, others that he renounced only certain animals, still others offer a form of hierarchical arrangement of acceptable meats.[62] Diogenes Laertius specifies fish abstention, specifically red mullet and *melanouros*.[63] He then says that it was reported that Pythagoras did, in fact, consent to animal sacrifice, but only cocks, young goats and sucking pigs, never lambs.[64] He also reports the opinion of Aristoxenus that Pythagoras only abstained from oxen and rams.[65] There may be a way to navigate through this mire of dietary perplexity. It may be possible to say that Pythagoras advocated a vegetarian diet not for all, but only for some. Porphyry seems to have thought that the ascetic Pythagoras and the athletic trainer were the same person, and sees no contradiction in this.[66] For his part,

(61) See Dillon and Herschbell (1991) 6–14 for the Pythagorean biographical tradition.
(62) Iambl. *VP* 68. See Clark (1989), 28–29.
(63) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 19–21. Also Dillon and Herschbell (1991), 123, note 3.
(64) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 19–21.
(65) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 19–21. See Clark (1989), 98 for possible Aristoxenean bias: 'his preference appears to have been for an enlightened, intellectual P.'.
(66) Porph. *Abst.* I. 26. 2–3. He mentions that some reports state that Pythagorean religious sacrifice did, in fact, involve the killing of animals. Laertius also refers to this; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 20.

Porphyry maintains that his own arguments in favour of vegetarianism are not to be applied to the population *in toto*, excluding specifically those involved in manual labour.[67] He is at pains to stress that a meat-free diet was unsuitable for those engaged in strenuous physical work, or in a life that requires them to be politically active.

The most plausible explanation is that Pythagoras divided his followers into two categories, committed to his dietary regime to lesser and greater degrees. This was dependent upon the level of penetration by the disciple into the Pythagorean mysteries.[68] The *akousmatikoi* were those who followed the teachings of Pythagoras but not hook, line and sinker. Perhaps we could think of them as 'lay' followers. They are contrasted with the *mathēmatikoi* who pursued a path of far greater self-denial. The lay adherents of the cult, who would have lived perhaps in the community at large amongst non-believers (a Pythagorean diaspora, if you will), were permitted to eat a limited amount of meat, as part of animal sacrifice (although perhaps were required to undergo periods of abstinence). The inner core, more firmly devoted to the Pythagorean ideal, living together in a closed community, followed a diet that was policed more rigorously. Porphyry, and the Pythagoras of Iamblichus' account, did not intend nor expect vegetarianism to become a universal standard, and they were willing to accept that it was not a credo to which all should aspire. Only one particular group was urged to absolute abstinence, those engaged in intellectual activities.[69] Diet is explicitly linked to its effects on the cognitive processes. There is a recognition here that dietary requirements may vary from individual to individual, depending on their needs. Meat is acceptable, even efficacious, for the physical life. The contemplative existence requires a different regimen and meat may prove positively deleterious.

The decision whether to eat meat or to abstain denoted group hierarchical identities. Vegetarianism was not an absolute but a way of marking the depth of commitment and adherence to Pythagorean ideals. In spite of certain views of Pythagoreans as monolithically vegetarian, it looks as if there was fragmentation within the group itself.[70] Porphyry, too, sees vegetarianism as

(67) Porph. *Abst.* I. 27. 1. Clark notes the contrast between physical athletes and athletes of the soul; Clark (2000), 132, note 88.
(68) Dombrowski (1984a); Iambl. *VP* 108–109. Also Clark (1989), 47.
(69) Iambl. *VP* 68.
(70) Such inconsistencies are picked up by a number of comic writers, as is made clear by a number of fragments in Book IV of the *Deipnosophistae* 161–162; Antiphanes fr. 63; 87;158; 133; Alexis fr. 201;223; Aristophon fr. 9.

a tool of demarcation, to separate the intellectuals and the philosophers from the workers and the 'doers'.[71] If meat is an obstacle to clear thought, there is an implicit criticism of those who do not 'think clearly'. The intellectual asserts his superiority. This categorization, inclusion and exclusion have been explored by the German historian Walter Burkert. He sees the Pythagorean precepts (vegetarianism is one, a bean taboo is another) as systems of differentiation and of control. They were not susceptible to logical justification, but were coded for comprehension by those initiated into the cult. He also believes that such precepts are analogous to those found in earlier and contemporary mystery cults. Diet, in Burkert's view, is a crucial element of identity, certainly for the Pythagoreans.

The Pythagorean refusal to eat animal flesh hinges primarily upon the concept of purity.[72] A rigorous and unflinching commitment to purity is combined with the belief that animal sacrifice violated religious sentiments, which included the belief in *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of souls from one body to another, including the possibility of a human soul inhabiting that of an animal. Pythagoreans also believed that eating meat was harmful to human health. It is key that the emphasis was on justifications that were beneficial to man, rather than to animals. One should refrain from killing animals not because it is cruel and unjust, but because one may be inadvertently harming a friend or relative. Indeed, one may be in a similar position at some point in the future, in which case a prohibition on killing animals would protect oneself.[73] An animal is a potential house for a human soul, and to harm an animal is akin to damaging a human being. In fact, it may be cannibalism.

It was not just Pythagoreans that objected to meat on grounds of health. Porphyry presented (in order to refute them) commonly held ideas about meat-eating being good for physical health.[74] Plutarch also deplored the effect meat has on the body, asserting that while it may fatten the body, it enfeebles the soul and intellect.[75] Appetite should be restrained as an act of will. Hunger

(71) See page 42, note 92.
(72) Detienne in Detienne and Vernant (1989), 5. Compare this with Jewish food laws.
(73) Although this surely then is an argument for the *absolute* prohibition of animal killing, rather than just a code for a particular group.
(74) Porph. *Abst.* 15. Also Clark (2000), 129–130, note 62. Note the importance of mental, as well as physical health.
(75) Plut. *De esu carn.* 995 D–E. For a comic stereotype of gluttonous Boeotians, see Wilkins (2000), 98.

sharpens the mind and its satiation may serve to dull the wits. This view was echoed later by Clement of Alexandria.[76]

The ability of a restricted and meat-free diet to facilitate the cognitive processes has appeal to pagan and Christian traditions. The belief that the route to the divine is through the exercise of pure intellectual activity, unencumbered by the concerns of the body, is long-standing, and we may detect strains of it in such diverse thinkers as Plato, the Roman Stoics and Christian hermits.[77] Concerns with the affairs of the body were symptomatic of a growing feeling among certain philosophical schools of the untrustworthiness of sense perception. The senses diverted one's attention away from the realm of pure intellect, impeding its optimal functioning, and the beguiling temptations of bodily luxury were regarded as little more than a trap for the unwary that distracted from a contemplation of the divine.[78] Seneca saw a preoccupation with the training of the body as often inimical to mental well being. Simple exercise sufficed for the body and no more was deemed necessary.[79]

The argument ran that killing an animal was morally corrosive. It initiated a process that brutalized the soul of man. If one was willing to hurt or kill an animal, that person was more inclined to kill a person. Killing engenders killing, regardless of species.[80] It is precisely the point made by Plutarch.[81] By no means all in the ancient world believed killing to be wrong. The prevailing, dominant ideologies passionately espoused the military virtues and were

(76) Clem. Al. *Protr. Beb.*
(77) Pl. *Resp.* 372–373, where the 'body' of the state may become unhealthy through the ingestion of superfluous foods (including meat) by its citizens. For the views of Stoics such as Musonius Rufus and Seneca, see Wilkins and Hill (2006), 204–207. Clement of Alexandria urges the pious Christian to exercise restraint in food and drink; Clem. Al. *Protr. Beb.*
(78) The development of ascetic thought, particularly in Christian communities in the east in the next few centuries, led not just to the assumption that the health of the soul took precedence over that of the body, but to the ultimate rejection of the body as a corrupt vessel whose sexual urges and impulses towards sensory pleasure chained man to an evil and depraved terrestrial existence and kept him from the bliss of heaven. Asceticism eventually leads to the horror of the mystics locked away in solitude, steeped in the extremes of bodily putrefaction and decay. See Vandereycken, W., van Deth, R. (1994); Grimm (1995), (1996).
(79) Sen. *Ep.* XV.
(80) The argument seems to run that the practice of killing sets up within the human soul a tendency to that activity.
(81) Plut. *De esu carn.* 998 B–C. This passage has been used to suggest that Plutarch was influenced by Pythagorean doctrines; Newmyer refutes this; Newmyer (2006), 90–91.

suspicious of overt displays of militant pacifism. The defence of the state and the conquest of new territories were predicated on controlled violence and death.

The reasons so far offered for vegetarianism placed man at the centre of the discourse. Some authors at least recognized that there may be a justification that considered the rights and the interests of the animal. Plutarch made sustained and passionate pleas for the just and humane treatment of animals.[82] He sought to convince his audience that animals were far from the senseless creatures they were commonly portrayed. He was not, however, arguing against their use by man; some measure of animal husbandry was acceptable.[83] His arguments attempted to shock the reader out of his complacency. He talked of the shrieks and cries of animals begging not to be killed. Later, he spoke of the tortures inflicted upon animals to satisfy the appetites of gourmands. Some of the activities that he described may be alien to us: thrusting red-hot spits down the throats of pigs to emulsify the blood, jumping on the udders of pregnant sows to produce abortions. Others, such as force-feeding and housing in darkness, bring to mind modern methods of intensive factory farming.[84] Plutarch's views were prescient of modern campaigns against animal cruelty,[85] but they were certainly not part of the mainstream.

Ritual activities such as religious sacrifice enabled communities to achieve social cohesion. Rejection of them inevitably led to exclusion – political, social and religious. All well and good if this ostracism was seen as desirable. If vegetarianism was meant as an explicit statement of antagonism to traditional thought, a way of establishing a new identity that stood outside accepted ideological norms, this would not have been a problem. However, if hostility and suspicion from one's peer group was an unwanted consequence of a vegetarian diet, then identity itself would be called into question. The philosopher Seneca found himself facing such a quandary. If vegetarianism eventually became synonymous with Pythagoras and with a form of cranky asceticism that stood obstinately outside mainstream thought, it was also, in the eyes of Roman political authority, linked with foreign religious rites.

(82) The principal works are contained within the *Moralia*: *De Sollertia Animalium* (*On the Cleverness of Animals*), *Bruta Animalia Ratione Uti* (*Beasts are Rational*) and *De Esu Carnum* (*The Eating of Flesh*). For a discussion of these works, see Beer (2008), Newmyer (2006).
(83) Plut. *De soll. an.* 965B.
(84) Plut. *De esu carn.* 994 E; II 996 F.
(85) See Singer (1990).

Suetonius notes how Tiberius went as far as ordering the expulsion of all foreign cults from Rome.[86] In one of Seneca's letters, we find a discussion of a youthful passion for the teachings of Pythagoras.[87] He went as far as adopting a vegetarian diet, and he found it most congenial. However, this period of his life coincided with the Tiberian religious suppression, and vegetarianism was regarded as being a characteristic of foreign cults. In particular, it seemed to have been somehow conceived as integral to Jewish dietary laws.[88] He allows his father's fear of his being prosecuted to persuade him to renounce such a diet. Either Seneca's nerve failed him at the last moment, or he did not see vegetarianism as a particularly significant facet of his own philosophy.

Let us conclude this section by looking again at how vegetarianism had some potentially important implications for matters of identity. An individual or group could assume multiple identities. These may exist simultaneously. A Greek man was simultaneously Greek and Roman. Identity existed on both the micro and macro levels, and to a certain extent was fluid. Yet, for all this talk of fluidity, there were divisions and hierarchies in place in the Graeco-Roman world that were quite rigid. We may think of the Roman *cursus honorum*, ancient distinctions between the active and passive role in homosexual relationships, the separation between citizen and non-citizen, to be freeborn and to be a slave. The blurring or inversion of these boundaries could expose the fragility of constructed identities, inducing anxiety and threatening social stability. If one were to see ancient doctrines of vegetarianism in terms of similar anxieties about constructed identity and concepts of self-visualization, analogous currents may be discerned as being at play. The contemplation of the idea that animals should in some way receive consideration commensurate to that of humans in terms of rights to fair treatment (if not equal consideration) would have surely entailed a significant shift in both social attitudes and structures of political and economic power within societies. The issue hinges upon the question of marginality.[89] Animals are treated in a different way to human beings because, as may be argued by those in favour of meat-eating, they are not judged to experience as humans do. An animal on the receiving end of a physical blow makes noises and performs movements that, despite

(86) Suet. *Tib.* 36.
(87) Sen. *Ep.* CVIII.
(88) Also see Cohen, 1–45 in Cohen and Frerichs (1993) for the confusion that often seems to have arisen about Jewish behaviour and identity in the Diaspora.
(89) For discussion of Porphyry's use of this argument, see Dombrowski (1984b), 141–143. Also Singer (1990), 265.

being unintelligible to the human ear, may be interpreted as expressing some form of distress.[90] However, some may take a Cartesian view and consider that animals have no sense of anticipation: that is, the fear of impending pain and possible death, regret for future plans unfulfilled, grief for one's parents or offspring.[91]

If we concede that humans and animals possess differing levels of sentience, we should also acknowledge that human beings may experience different cognitive states.[92] I refer to those who are severely mentally disabled or newborn infants. Some would say that a well-trained dog or horse displays signs that it enjoys a richer cerebral existence than a small child or someone in a near vegetative state. This argument implies that if sentience is a guide to treatment, some animals should receive more consideration than some humans. In fact, in the ancient world, it does appear that Plutarch was fighting for a cause that had already in some senses been won. There did exist some parity of consideration between humans and animals. Unfortunately, it involved downgrading some humans to the level of animals, rather than elevating the latter up to the level of the former. Those who experienced degrees of social exclusion (slaves, foreigners) enjoyed a lowly status within the community, as did those who were stigmatized and rejected as non-conformities. The crippled and deformed were isolated figures, marked out as being cursed by the gods, and unwanted infants (particularly girls) were exposed to die. Domestic livestock and beasts trained for war could often be more valued, in terms of utility and aesthetics, than the 'dregs' of humankind.

It seems doubtful that a conscious and deliberate vegetarian credo was popular or widespread. It is likely that a significant role may be attributed to external cultural influence in the evolution of vegetarian ideology. The Pythagorean biographical tradition is hopelessly vague and confused and cannot be relied upon to provide accurate detail of the genesis of Pythagorean thought. It may be better to disregard the tales of the time the philosopher was supposed to have spent in study in Egypt.[93] Nonetheless, the possibility of cultural transmission from Egypt to the Greek territories may explain the Pythagorean attitudes to religion, the sacredness of animals, as well as food taboos such as those connected with beans. If Greek culture was not inclined

(90) Plut. *De esu carn.* 994 E.
(91) See Newmyer (2006), 66–75 for a discussion of this issue.
(92) Arist. *Hist. An.* 588a ff; Newmyer (2006), 10–47.
(93) Iambl. *VP* 19; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 3–4.

to acknowledge the possible source of these ideas, it may have been because of an amalgam of intellectual arrogance and unashamed xenophobia. The fact that those writing in imperial times were mainly writing in Greek invites the speculation that the authorities in Rome regarded this sort of dietary restriction as something peculiarly Greek. Its very foreignness immediately identified it as being slightly odd and untrustworthy.

To go beyond this hypothetical cycle of xenophobia, we may speculate that vegetarian ideas were banished into the intellectual wilderness for other reasons. Perhaps a rejection of meat was associated in people's minds with esoteric religions. Although eastern religions were to play an increasingly influential role in the spiritual life of the empire, those inclined to pay simple veneration to the *lares* and *penates*, or who offered prayers at the shrines of Jupiter or Apollo, may have shied away from the more extreme rituals of the cults of a Cybele.[94]

It is likely that thoughts about vegetarianism never entered the minds of the majority of the population. Unless religious taboos or legal sanctions prohibited it, it would seem strange if people who were forced to live on a subsistence diet through lack of resources, denied themselves from moral scruples a source of tasty and nutritious food.[95] Arguments for and against the eating of meat were between a small group of intellectuals who, by their own admission, saw it as an option for a limited number of people. However, if these ideas had received a wider airing, one may only conjecture as to how explosively revolutionary they may have been, and how they may have forced that society to indulge in an extended bout of self-reflection.

(94) The ritual castration of the male followers of Cybele, and the immersion in bull's blood that was known as the *taurobolium*; Catull. *Carmin.* 63; Burkert (1985), 177–179. Also Vermaseren (1977); Clark (2000), 122, note 9.
(95) Although perhaps one should consider the widespread poverty in the Indian subcontinent and the Hindu view of the inviolable nature of the cow.

CHAPTER THREE

BEANS

There are many factors which make the taboo against the broad or fava bean (*Vicia faba*) worth looking at in the wider context of dietary restriction in antiquity. The obscurity shrouding the origins of the taboo gave rise to diverse and contradictory hypotheses amongst ancient authors. Aristotle, Cicero and Plutarch are among those who sought to explain this bizarre custom. This ambiguity makes it an enticing topic. Recent studies in the field of medicine may help cast a new light upon the restriction, transforming what at first appears an obscure and small-scale dietary prohibition into a phenomenon that could have been a matter of life and death for a sizeable section of ancient communities.

The principal reason for the significance of the bean taboo is that pulses must have formed a substantial part of ancient diet. Scholars such as John Wilkins and Peter Garnsey point to factors that would have restricted the amount of meat eaten: the importance of animal sacrifice in ancient religious experience; the sheer economic waste of keeping livestock only to slaughter it. Fish was also a rare and expensive luxury, beyond the pockets of many. Both meat and fish were the subject of religious prohibitions. Egyptian priests had precepts that prohibited them from eating fish, although this did not extend to the whole population.[1] There are many references to the worship of the Syrian goddess known variously as Derceto, Astarte and Atargatis, to whom fish was sacred.[2] Lucian's *de Syria dea* deals extensively with the rites of this cult of Atargatis. There is mention of the fish taboo, and he refers to a lake

(1) Hooke (1961), 535; Plut. *De Is.. et Os.* 353C–D. Hdt. II.72.
(2) See Burkert (1983), 204–207; Gilhus (2006), 93.

near her temple where fish were raised.[3] Severe punishments were threatened to those who did not properly revere and care for the sacred fish.[4] As access to meat or fish is restricted, the predominant source of dietary protein was inevitably some form of legume or pulse.[5]

This was true for all social classes. The echoes of the *tragêmata* of a Greek *symposion*, attested by Athenaeus,[6] or the street-food of a Roman town,[7] are still to be found in the modern world. In supermarkets and delicatessens, alongside potato crisps and various types of nuts, may be found dried and salted chickpeas and broad beans. Pulses would undoubtedly have formed a central ingredient of the diet of both the rural and urban poor.[8] A refusal to eat beans may have had a significant impact on one's overall nutrition.

However, there were people who shunned broad beans. A bean taboo was frequently identified as one of the essential traits of Pythagoreans, along with physical characteristics such as untrimmed nails and flowing, unruly locks. An aversion to beans became a significant element of the stock caricature of this philosophical school.[9] Lucian talks of the typical Pythagorean in two works.[10]

The roots of bean prohibition appear to have been in Egypt, certainly this is the inference that we can draw from Herodotus' account.[11] Given the biographical tradition that Pythagoras spent time in Egypt, some have supposed the regulation to have been transported to the Greek-speaking world by Pythagoras himself.[12] However, if the practice did originate in Egypt, it seems more probable that it would have travelled by way of population migration or trade connections rather than through the actions of one individual in possession of nuggets of arcane wisdom. Also, one should not discount the possibility that a prejudice concerning bean usage may have existed over a geographically diverse area at the same time as, or even prior to the report by Herodotus. Burkert considers the possible influences of Orphism

(3) Lucian *Syr.* D. 45. There is also a reference in Xenophon to sacred fish, revered by the Syrians in the Chalus river; Xen. *An.* 1.4.9.
(4) Plut. *De superst.* 170D.
(5) Columella *Rust.* II. vii; Garnsey (1998), 243.
(6) Ath. *Deip.* II 54f; IV 138a (quoting Pl. *Resp.* 372c); IV, 139a.
(7) Mart. *Epi.* 1.103.
(8) Garnsey (1998), 219.
(9) Burkert (1972), 183.
(10) Lucian *Somn.; Vit. auct.*
(11) Hdt. II 37; Plut. *Quaest. conviv.* VIII.8.279; Gorman (1979), 22.
(12) Iambl. *VP* 19; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 3–4.

upon Pythagorean ideology.[13] Pausanias relates the tale that Demeter (the goddess of agriculture) presented the Pheneatians (inhabitants of the city of Pheneos near Corinth) with a number of legumes, but specifically excluded the broad bean.[14] Hence, the broad bean was one of the items of food that were regarded as unacceptable to initiates into the Eleusinian mysteries. This cult demanded a series of temporary fasts and abstinences.[15] Burkert cites other initiatory requirements for Greek mystery cults. They include dietary restrictions, the wearing (or avoidance) of particular items of clothing, and sexual tests and obligations. These appear to perform a purificatory function.[16] Burkert considers the possibility of the widespread occurrence of similar cultic rituals among different sects.[17]

If Burkert is correct, the Pythagorean rules were not an innovation, but comparable to those in place in other mystery cults.[18] They codified a pre-existing folk tradition. Burkert asserts that such practices supplied not only a means of binding together members of the group and excluding non-members, but were used to enforce control and to strengthen the position of the priestly leaders. If this model is correct, then the bean prohibition, whether based on fear and reverence of, or disgust for the legume, may be interpreted as a technique designed to strengthen systems of control and manipulation within the Pythagorean community, marking out the leader as a special individual, worthy of fealty.

It is perhaps worth considering the precise wording of the bean taboo as it has been transmitted. Empedocles and Callimachus, who were both cited by Aulus Gellius, used almost identical phrases for the maxim.[19] The fragment of Callimachus reads as follows:

> And withhold your hands from beans, a harmful food, I say, as Pythagoras ordered.[20]

(13) For the possible influences of Orphism upon Pythagorean ideology, see Burkert (1972), 125–133.
(14) Pausanias. 8.15.3; Flint-Hamilton (1999), 379.
(15) Burkert (1972), 177; Porphyry *Abst.* 4. 16: '[to abstain from] fish and beans and pomegranates and apples, and one who has contact with the marriage bed is equally polluted with those who have died'. Also Grmek (1983), 214. Similar restrictions were in place for another festival of Demeter, the Haloa; 358–363.
(16) Burkert (1972), 177–178.
(17) Burkert (1972), 178.
(18) See Burkert (1985), 276–304, in particular Eleusis; 285–290. Parker (1983); 358–363.
(19) Gell. *NA.* IV xi, 2; 9.
(20) Fr. 128, Sch; Gell. *NA.* IV xi, 2

Empedocles, named by Gellius as an adherent of Pythagoras, is quoted thus:

> Wretches, utter wretches, withhold your hands from beans. [21]

Ancient sources tended to divide into three camps on the matter of beans. The first saw the taboo as a technique that sought to facilitate the achievement of a state of purity. The next saw in the prohibition an allegorical message, a code designed to be tacitly understood to prevent other forms of behaviour. The third held the bean as a source of potential physiological and psychic disturbance.[22] In the Pythagorean biographical tradition, Iamblichus discussed some of the reasons that Pythagoreans eliminated specified foods from their diet: because they had unfortunate physical effects (flatulence, a distended stomach, drowsiness), or were deemed in some way sacred.[23]

This refusal to engage with beans appears to have extended far beyond questions of diet and cookery. Iamblichus told of an attempt by the fourth-century BC Syracusan tyrant Dionysius to apprehend certain followers of Pythagoras. He despatched his general Eurymenes to effect a capture:

> Therefore in Phalae, a rugged part of Tarentum, through which the Pythagoreans were scheduled to pass, Eurymenes insidiously concealed his troop; and when the unsuspecting Pythagoreans reached there about noon, the soldiers rushed upon them with shouts, after the manner of robbers. Disturbed and terrified at an attack so unexpected, at the superior number of their enemies, – the Pythagoreans amounting to no more than ten, – and being unarmed against regularly equipped soldiery, the Pythagoreans saw that they would inevitably be taken captive, so they decided that their only safety lay in flight, which they did not consider inadmissible to virtue. For they knew that according to right reason, fortitude is the art of avoiding as well as enduring. So they would have escaped, and their pursuit would have been given up by Eurymenes' soldiers, who were heavily armed, had their flight not led them up against a field sown with beans, which were already flowering.

(21) Fr. 141, Diehls; Gell. *NA.* IV xi, 9.
(22) Iambl. *VP* 24.106; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 8.24; Cic. *Div.* I. xxix. 62–63
(23) Iambl. *VP* 24.106 See Clark (1989), 24, note 61.

> Unwilling to violate their principle not to touch beans, they stood still, and driven to desperation turned, and attacked their pursuers with stones and sticks, and whatever they found to hand, till they had wounded many, and slain some. But (numbers told), and all the Pythagoreans were slain by the spearmen, as none of them would suffer himself to be taken captive, preferring death, according to the Pythagorean teachings.

In this context, Iamblichus chose to use the word 'touch', rather than anything associated with eating.[24]

Diogenes Laertius offered up two possible justifications for the taboo. Firstly, the physical effects of flatulence and stomach upsets,[25] later, that beans were one of a selection of foods that were taboo in order to achieve a state of ritual purity.[26] Seeking to achieve clarification, he invoked Aristotle's reasons for the prohibition. However, far from illuminating the problem, they only muddy the water. Aristotle suggested they resembled male genitals (the testicles), that they have 'a harmful nature', that they somehow have links with oligarchy and, in cryptic (and incomprehensible) summation, 'they are like the nature of the whole'.[27] It appears Aristotle had no clear notion as to why this dietary rule existed.[28] His hypotheses attempted to cover all areas and do not sit particularly well together. The linking of beans with oligarchy seems to indicate that Aristotle believed the bean taboo was, for Pythagoreans, a symbolic rejection of conventional political systems (in which beans were used as ballots in elections). He seems unsure whether the hostility was directed towards the bean *per se* or at some other entity, of which the bean was symbolic embodiment.[29]

Plutarch seems to have inclined towards the conjecture that the Pythagorean imperative originated from Egypt.[30] Cicero, however, thought the custom linked to the physical effects of the bean: flatulence has a disruptive

(24) Iambl. *VP* 31.191.
(25) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 8.24.
(26) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 8.33–34.
(27) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 8.34.
(28) See Burkert (1972), 183–184.
(29) For Aristotle on Pythagoreanism, see Philip (1963a), 251–265; (1963b), 185–198.
(30) Plut. *Quaest. conviv.* VIII.8.729. It seems that Plutarch was of the opinion that there may have existed other taboos concerning the bean, beyond its Egyptian influence, as elsewhere he asserts that abstention from legumes is a generic characteristic of all those occupying holy office; Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95.

effect upon sleep patterns and may be the source of neurological disturbance and hence unusual dreams. In this, he is in accord with Diogenes Laertius.[31]

In all probability, it would be unwise to suppose that the prohibition of beans had uniform characteristics across the Mediterranean world. Latin agricultural authors such as the elder Cato, Varro and Columella all related techniques of planting and harvesting the bean, which seems to imply that a taboo was not prevalent within their culture.[32] Galen, while acknowledging the flatulence, nonetheless praised the bean as nutritious and versatile, extensively used.[33] He notes that it was a regular feature of the diet of gladiators.[34] He also claimed that bean flour could act as an exfoliant and was effective in removing dirt from the skin.[35] He fails to mention any prohibition or taboo concerning the bean, and since he must have been aware of the custom, evidently felt it was of little importance or relevance (certainly from a medical viewpoint).

The elder Pliny was even more unstinting in his praise of this legume, drawing attention to its wide range of uses, including its addition to bread flour.[36] He did address himself to the issue of the Pythagorean rule, associating it with potential somatic disorders, particularly insomnia.[37] As with Aristotle, Pliny suggested other possible reasons, including the linking of beans with religious custom and its qualities as a talisman that could bring good fortune in the auction place.[38] Reverence for, or avoidance of, the bean was present not just within the confines of an esoteric doctrine, but within folklore and popular superstition.

Although all these varied opinions are voiced, they do seem at one in suggesting that there existed reservations about the broad bean, both at the level of folk wisdom and within the more restricted environs of quasi-mystical religious and political groups. However, even here there was much disagreement. Aulus Gellius, whilst duly recording the opinions of Callimachus and Empedocles, asserts that Aristoxenus, a pupil of Aristotle, believed that, far from being excluded from the diet, beans were, in fact, a

(31) Cic. *Div.* I. xxix. 62–63; Diog. Laert. *Pythag* 8.24. Kingsley (1995), 285.
(32) Cato *Agr.* XXXV.1; XXXVI.2; Varro *Rust.* XXXII.2; Collumella *Rust.* II.vii.
(33) Dioscor. *De mat. Med.* 2.127, who also commented upon its impact upon the dreaming process.
(34) Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.529 K.
(35) Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.530 K. For beans and pulses employed as beauty aids in antiquity, see Green (1979), 381–392.
(36) Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.117.
(37) Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.118.
(38) Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.119.

particular Pythagorean favourite.[39] Given that this runs counter to the general consensus (at least according to the extant material), some doubt has been cast on this Aristoxenian explanation.[40]

In addition, Gellius suggests that the misunderstanding is etymological. He maintained that people had misinterpreted the Empedoclean line, and that *kuamos* (bean) was in fact a synonym for testicles.[41] With this linguistic interpretation, the exhortation is to sexual, not dietary, abstinence. Plutarch also saw a connection with sex, attempting to link the flatulent qualities of beans with sexual desire.[42] Such a view presumes that the Pythagorean precepts should be understood as symbolic and allegorical. Gellius' interpretation of Empedocles seems compelling, and the modern critic Walter Burkert has posited that the word *kuamos* has other connotations that would tend to endorse this hypothesis.[43]

It could be argued that one of the principal functions of food prohibitions was to simplify diet.[44] Foods that are viewed as 'luxurious' may be discarded by the individual or community committed to a spiritual existence.[45] Learning to survive on basic foodstuffs could be an act of self-discipline and a rejection of the perceived frivolities of corporeal existence. However, this surely cannot apply to the broad bean, whose ubiquity and lowly status hardly made it a sybaritic delicacy. Rejection of the broad bean cannot have implied a rejection of luxury.[46] Those who may have viewed the Pythagorean community as a hermetically sealed patrician clique would surely have had their worst fears confirmed by the rejection of a staple food of the impoverished majority.

It seems too simple to dismiss the precept as a marker of social identity that was chosen arbitrarily. It may have been used as a way of forging and maintaining social cohesion; a pivot around which to stabilize the group identity in the face of a hostile or uncomprehending wider world. Yet this may be only half of the story. The evidence points to greater symbolic weight attached

(39) Gell. *NA.* IV.ii.4–5.
(40) I am grateful to Dr Peter van Nuffelen for pointing out the possible anti-Pythagorean stance of Aristoxenus. See Burkert (1972), 106–108 for Aristoxenus on Pythagoreanism.
(41) The association is derived from the verb *kuein*, 'to conceive', or, 'to impregnate'
(42) Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95.
(43) Burkert (1972), 176.
(44) Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 8.13.
(45) Wilkins and Hill (2006), 195; 204–207 for advocates of dietary restriction for the philosopher: for example, Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Plato.
(46) If anything, it seems to demonstrate a spurning of the food of the penurious peasantry.

to the broad bean by both Greeks and Romans (and other cultures, such as the Egyptians). The religious and cultural baggage surrounding this legume appears less apparent within Latin culture. Perhaps this is because we possess Latin texts that tend to assess the agricultural and nutritional value of the bean, rather than focusing upon its symbolic resonances. This in turn may be a Roman rejection of Greek practices, although this is unlikely. Clearly there existed a reverence for the potential supernatural qualities of the bean in Latin culture. The preponderance of material concerning the bean taboo in Greek texts may simply be an historical accident of survival. However it is not impossible that the imbalance between the two cultures concerning this particular legume may be explained by the way in which certain sections of ancient populations physically reacted to the broad bean.

Latin writers did investigate the mysteries of the taboo, but with an almost antiquarian interest. It was a problem upon which to exert the intellect and an enigma to be solved. Nevertheless, in certain contexts (mainly religious) a certain veneration surrounded the bean. This was not always manifested as avoidance; sometimes it was seen to act as a charm, or as an integral element of specific rituals and festivals, such as the Lemuria – when Romans exorcized ghosts and evil spirits from their homes (*lemures* are restless spirits). The spirits were propitiated with offerings of beans. It was certainly associated with death, and perhaps served as a marker not merely to separate and segregate social groups and individuals, as may have been the case with both the Pythagoreans and some mystery cults, but the boundaries between life and death. Beans may even have been viewed as a form of *memento mori*, a concrete reminder of human mortality. What both cultures appear to have shared was a sentiment that linked the bean with the souls of the dead. One of the reasons advanced by Plutarch (he offers up several) is that a bean prohibition may have been intimately linked with their use in sepulchral ritual.[47] The Pythagorean belief in *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of souls, meant that if beans potentially contained life, then consuming them was as much a transgression for Pythagoreans as the ingestion of animal flesh. It may have, taken to its logical extreme, been assumed to have been equivalent to cannibalism. The bean was clearly held to possess a supernatural link with death and decay,

(47) Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95. The elder Pliny notes a similar attitude: 'Varro et ob haec flaminem ea non vesci tradit et quoniam in flore eius litterae lugubres reperiantur': 'Varro relates that it is both for this reason that the priest does not eat it and because in its flower are discovered letters of mourning' (Plin. *NH.* XVIII.xxx.119).

and this ensured that it was treated with reverence and respect, or fearfully avoided (at least by some).

There may be another, and simpler, explanation for the association of the broad bean and death: beans might kill. Legumes are not innocuous: they contain a number of toxins.[48] Their dangers may be minimized or eliminated by preparatory processes such as soaking or boiling,[49] and it would seem likely, given the ubiquity and popularity of the broad bean in antiquity, that such stratagems were well known. Thus, some legumes have unpleasant, occasionally lethal side effects. Neolathyrism, for example, which may result in severe paralysis, is a possible consequence of eating vetch.[50] Ingestion of the broad bean may give rise to the medical condition known as favism (in brief, hemolytic anaemia or jaundice provoked by eating fava beans if the subject is deficient in the G6PD enzyme).[51] Favism is not a phenomenon that affects whole populations, merely those individuals lacking the enzyme (a hereditary condition). It affects some geographical areas more than others, not least Sicily and southern Italy,[52] and parts of Greece and North Africa.[53] The geographical spread is significant, and seems to indicate a split in the Graeco-Roman world.[54] The phenomenon of favism in these areas gives rise to speculation that the Pythagorean bean taboo was a tacit acknowledgement of an actual condition suffered by Pythagoras or some of his adherents.[55] The ban on consumption was a mechanism for survival by those whose life was seriously endangered by the broad bean.

The hypothesis is not unattractive. The prevalence of the enzyme deficiency amongst predominantly Greek-speaking populations may partially explain why the bean was never subject to much hostility or suspicion among Latin authors. The fact that favism has been detected in Egypt may be behind the Egyptian taboo on beans reported by Herodotus. However, the argument still does not entirely persuade. If the condition only affected certain people (and to differing degrees), how would one have been able to discern that it

(48) Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374; Garnsey (1999), 219; Grmek (1983), 239; Parker (1983), 365. Delwiche (1978), 566.
(49) Garnsey (1999), 220.
(50) Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374; Garnsey (1999), 219; Grmek (1983), 239; Parker (1983), 365.
(51) Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374.
(52) Parker (1983), 365.
(53) Grmek (1983), 229; 231; 240.
(54) Grmek (1983), 231.
(55) Grmek (1983), 239.

was the broad bean that was to blame for favistic symptoms? If many people would have been able to (and indeed did) eat broad beans on a regular basis with few ill effects, any condition arising from them would have been difficult to detect and isolate.[56] It also seems odd that if the Pythagoreans were aware of such serious symptoms, they did not refer to the dangers directly, instead choosing to shroud their warnings in allusive and allegorical language. The only observed physical effects were the bean's bloating and soporific qualities. There was no warning issued that bean consumption would perhaps result in death. It is not an explanation that is offered by later writers who would have been able to see the symptoms of favism for themselves. The obvious mystification experienced by later writers when attempting to justify the taboo makes it abundantly clear that death by broad bean was not an obvious way of explaining the taboo. Beans must have possessed a religious and cultural significance that transcended the medical facts.

If favism did exert an influence, it may have been at a subliminal level. The physiological effects of bean consumption (flatulence, bloating, disturbed sleep patterns) may have given warning of a more serious condition. Evidence for favism in antiquity may have been no more than anecdotal, or the remnants of folk wisdom, that have survived neither to us nor to the extant ancient authors. If favism manifested itself only sporadically, and only resulted in death in a small percentage of cases, it may have been viewed as a selective phenomenon, resulting from divine will.[57] If this is the case, it may provide an explanation for the manner in which they were regarded by ancient peoples, and the religious atmosphere surrounding them, although surely they cannot have been regarded with greater apprehension than plants that were genuinely and more consistently toxic to man.

Ultimately, it may be impossible to discern a coherent explanation for this form of dietary restriction. Beans' ambiguous status in Greek and Roman culture and their associations with death marked them out as an object of avoidance or as a hallowed element of religious ritual. Their principal significance seems to have been that they were a marker of Pythagorean identity, a motif immediately associated with this particular philosophical school. The vagaries of its origins elicited a number of responses in antiquity, some convincing, some less so. They all contribute to the bean's aura of mystery.

(56) Grmek (1983), 214.
(57) The wrath of the gods directed at those who had offended them or who had failed to perform the required propitiatory rites.