

On Vegetarianism

Measure in the relation between man and Nature: a Greek
critique of contemporary dietary ethics

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Samos 2026

1 Measure in the relation between man and Nature

The contemporary discussion on the relation between humans and animals often appears in two opposing forms. On the one hand lies the industrial exploitation of animals, where life is turned into a production unit. On the other hand appears the radical rejection of any use of animals, as expressed in veganism. Despite their apparent opposition, both these stances are born within the same historical environment, from the very same cause; and therefore they are the other side of the same coin: the alienation of the city-dweller from the direct experience of Nature.

Greek thought offers a different framework of understanding. Its central criterion is not an abstract principle, but measure. Measure does not simply mean avoidance of excess; it means the well-proportioned ratio within an order of things where every form of life has its place.

In the traditional rural world, the relation between man and animal is not organised as a relation of simple exploitation. The shepherd lives together with his flock. He knows each animal, shares in its birth and its illness, depends on it and cares for it. This relation is not an abstract moral stance but a daily coexistence. The animal is not merely a product; it is part of a shared cycle of life.

This form of coexistence differs radically both from industrial livestock farming and from the total rejection of animal use. The former turns the animal into an object of production, detaching it from its natural environment and from any personal relation with the human. The latter, reacting to this violence, attempts to restore justice through a universal prohibition. But this prohibition leads to another form of severance: it abolishes the relation instead of transforming and restoring it. While it appears as a reaction to the vulgarity of “animal as product”, in essence it constitutes

an acceptance of the cause. It says “this is how things are and I resist”. But it does not resist the causes, only their effects; it continues to be drawn by the absence of Nature within the big city, usually — though not always — rejecting any return to a semi-urban or non-urban environment.

The difficulty lies in the fact that vegan ethics is often formulated in universal terms. If any use of an animal is considered exploitation, then the only consistent solution is the complete removal of humans from any form of coexistence with “productive” animals. But such a position ignores the fact that many forms of life have developed historically through their relation with humans. Domesticated animals are not merely victims of a human practice; they too are products of a long coexistence.

Here a paradox appears. The ethics that seeks to protect animals can lead to the drastic reduction or even the extinction of many of the very species it wants to protect. If animal husbandry ceases entirely, large populations of domesticated species will cease to exist. The moral intention does not destroy animals through exploitation, but through the abolition of the relation. In the end it turns against them again, by a different path.

The problem becomes clearer if we examine the cultural context within which this ethics appears. In large cities, humans have no direct contact with the production of their food. The animal does not appear as a living being but as an anonymous product on the shelf. This alienation gives rise to two opposite reactions: on the one hand the extreme industrialisation of production, on the other hand the total moral rejection of it.

But both are responses to the same problem: the rupture of the relation between man and Nature.

The Greek idea of measure proposes a different direction. It asks neither for total domination over Nature nor for total withdrawal from it. It asks for a form of participation where human life is integrated into a cycle of mutual dependence. In this framework, the relation with animals is neither merely economic nor merely moral; it is ecological and existential.

The critique, therefore, should not be directed only at the consumption of meat or at abstinence from it. The essential question is how the overall relation between man and Nature is organised. When this relation turns either into pure exploitation or into total severance, then measure has already been lost.

The challenge of our age may not be to choose between meat and veganism, but to reconnect the human with the forms of life within which he lives. Where the relation becomes direct and concrete again, abstract oppositions begin to lose their intensity and measure can re-emerge.

2 The assimilation of ethics by the food system

As we know from veganism, contemporary ethical criticism of the exploitation of animals is often expressed through abstention from animal products. However, when this criticism enters the field of the mass food market, it encounters a mechanism that has proved particularly capable of absorbing and turning it into a new object of consumption. The food industry does not resist criticism; it turns it into a new market.

A characteristic example is plant-based milk and cheese substitutes. These products are presented as an alternative solution to animal foods. Yet their very structure reveals a different reality. Many so-called “almond drinks” contain a very small percentage of almonds. The rest of the product consists mainly of water, stabilisers, emulsifiers¹ and flavouring substances. Instead of being a natural form of food, it is a technological synthesis that imitates a taste experience.

The contrast becomes clearer if we compare this situation with a food such as cow’s milk. Milk is a product that is already produced complete within a living organism. Human intervention is usually limited to mild forms of processing such as pasteurisation and refrigeration. The short shelf life of the product is precisely an indication of this proximity to its natural form.

In contrast, plant-based substitutes designed to imitate milk or cheese are products of a different logic. The food industry uses techniques such as fat emulsification, the use of hydrocolloids, and artificial flavouring to reproduce textures and flavours reminiscent of animal products. Food thus ceases to be merely the processing of a natural product and becomes an artificial synthesis of a functional imitation.

This fact reveals a deeper paradox. The ethical desire to move away from the exploitation of animals can, within the framework of the contemporary market, lead to even greater dependence on the technological processing of food. The industrial logic does not change; only the raw material changes.

This phenomenon becomes even clearer when we examine the economic structure of the food market. Many of the large companies active in plant-based substitutes belong to multinational groups that are simultaneously active in the animal products industry. The company Alpro, for

¹Substances that achieve the uniform dispersion of fats in water, which under normal conditions does not occur because the fat would float on the water. A natural emulsifier is egg yolk, with which emulsification is achieved in mayonnaise (= a mixture of water and oil with egg yolk as emulsifier). Industry generally uses artificial emulsifiers.

example, is part of the Danone group, one of the largest dairy companies in the world. Thus the market for plant-based substitutes is not outside the food production system but inside the same economic mechanism.

The result is that the ethical choice easily turns into a new consumer segment of the market. The consumer does not simply abandon a product; they are invited to replace it with another that has been designed to perform the same culinary function. The critique of the exploitation of life is thus absorbed by the very industry that organises the mass production of food.

From the perspective of Greek thought, the problem that appears here concerns not only the relation with animals but also the relation with food itself. Food becomes increasingly removed from its natural origin and turns into a product of technological synthesis. Human art is no longer limited to cultivating or processing the fruits of Nature; it undertakes to reconstruct the very forms of food.

In this context, both industrial meat production and the industrial production of plant-based substitutes are different expressions of the same logic. In both cases, food is detached from the cycle of natural life and integrated into a system of large-scale processing.

Thus the critique cannot be limited only to the question of whether the food is animal or plant-based. The essential question is whether food remains part of a living relation with Nature or whether it turns into a pure product of industrial manufacture. Where the second tendency dominates, the ethical intention is absorbed by the very logic it sought to challenge.