

## Contextual Moral Vegetarianism\*

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In this [essay] I provide an example of a distinctively ecofeminist moral concern: our relations to what we are willing to count as food. Vegetarianism has been defended as a moral obligation that results from rights that nonhuman animals have in virtue of being sentient beings (Regan 1983, 330-53). However, a distinctively ecofeminist defense of moral vegetarianism is better expressed as a core concept in an ecofeminist ethic of care. One clear way of distinguishing the two approaches is that whereas the rights approach is not inherently contextual<sup>1</sup> (it is the response to the rights of all sentient beings), the caring-for approach responds to particular contexts and histories. It recognizes that the reasons for moral vegetarianism may differ by locale, by gender, as well as by class.

Moral vegetarianism is a fruitful issue for ecofeminists to explore in developing an ecological ethics because in judging the adequacy of an ethic by reference to its understanding of food one draws attention to precisely those aspects of daily experience that have often been regarded as "beneath" the interest of philosophy. Plato's remark in the *Gorgias* is typical of the dismissive attitude philosophers have usually had toward food. Pastry cooking, he says, is like rhetoric: both are mere "knacks" or "routines" designed to appeal to our bodily instincts rather than our intellects (Plato 1961, 245).

Plato's dismissive remark also points to something that feminists need to take very seriously, namely, that a distinctively feminist ethic, as Susan Bordo and others argue, should include the body as moral agent. Here too the experiences of women in patriarchal cultures are especially valuable because women, more than men, experience the effects of culturally sanctioned oppressive attitudes toward the appropriate shape of the body. Susan Bordo has argued that anorexia nervosa is a "psychopathology" made possible by Cartesian attitudes toward the body at a popular level. Anorexics typically feel alienation from their bodies and the hunger "it" feels. Bordo quotes one woman as saying she ate because "my stomach wanted it"; another dreamed of being "without a body." Anorexics want to achieve "absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh" (Bordo 1988, 94, 95; also see Chernin 1981). These attitudes toward the body have served to distort the deep sense in which human beings are embodied creatures; they have therefore further distorted our being as animals. To be a person, as distinct from an "animal," is to be disembodied.

This dynamic is vividly exposed by Carol Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Adams 1989, part 1). There are important connections through food between the oppression of women and the oppression of nonhuman animals. Typical of the wealth of evidence she presents are the following: the connection of women and animals through pornographic representations of women as "meat" ready to be carved up, for example in "snuff" films; the fact that language masks our true relationship with animals, making them "absent referents" by giving meat words positive connotations ("That's a meaty question;" "Where's the beef?") while disparaging nonflesh foods ("Don't watch so much TV! You'll turn into a vegetable"); men, athletes and soldiers in particular, are associated with red meat and activity ("To have muscle you need to eat muscle"), whereas women are associated with vegetables and passivity ("ladies' luncheons" typically offer dainty sandwiches with no red meat).

As a "contextual moral vegetarian," I cannot refer to an absolute moral rule that prohibits meat eating under all circumstances. There may be some contexts in which another response is appropriate. Though I am committed to moral vegetarianism, I cannot say that I would never

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<sup>1</sup> Regan calls the animal's right not to be killed a prima facie right that may be overridden. Nevertheless, his theory is not *inherently* contextualized.

kill an animal for food. Would I not kill an animal to provide food for my son if he were starving? Would I not generally prefer the death of a bear to the death of a loved one? I am sure I would. The point of a contextualist ethic is that one need not treat all interests equally as if one had no relationship to any of the parties.

Beyond personal contextual relations, geographical contexts may sometimes be relevant. The Ihalmiut, for example, whose frigid domain makes the growing of food impossible, do not have the option of vegetarian cuisine. The economy of their food practices, however, and their tradition of "thanking" the deer for giving its life are reflective of a serious, focused, compassionate attitude toward the "gift" of a meal.

In some cultures violence against nonhuman life is ritualized in such a way that one is present to the reality of one's food. The Japanese have a Shinto ceremony that pays respect to the insects that are killed during rice planting. Tibetans, who as Buddhists have not generally been drawn to vegetarianism, nevertheless give their own bodies back to the animals in an ultimate act of thanks by having their corpses hacked into pieces as food for the birds.<sup>2</sup> Cultures such as these have ways of expressing spiritually the idea "we are what we eat," even if they are not vegetarian.

If there is any context, on the other hand, in which moral vegetarianism is completely compelling as an expression of an ecological ethic of care, it is for economically well-off persons in technologically advanced countries. First, these are persons who have a choice of what food they want to eat; they have a choice of what they will count as food. Morality and ontology are closely connected here. It is one thing to inflict pain on animals when geography offers no other choice. But in the case of killing animals for human consumption where there is a choice, this practice inflicts pain that is completely unnecessary and avoidable. The injunction to care, considered as an issue of moral and political development, should be understood to include the injunction to eliminate needless suffering wherever possible, and particularly the suffering of those whose suffering is conceptually connected to one's own. It should not be understood as an injunction that includes the imperative to rethink what it means to be a person connected with the imperative to rethink the status of nonhuman animals. An ecofeminist perspective emphasizes that one's body is oneself, and that by inflicting violence needlessly, one's bodily self becomes a context for violence. One becomes violent by taking part in violent food practices. The ontological implication of a feminist ethic of care is that nonhuman animals should no longer count as food.

Second, most of the meat and dairy products in these countries do not come from mom-and-pop farms with little red barns. Factory farms are responsible for most of the 6 billion animals killed for food every year in the United States (Adams 1989, 6). It is curious that steroids are considered dangerous to athletes, but animals that have been genetically engineered and chemically induced to grow faster and come to market sooner are considered to be an entirely different issue. One would have to be hardened to know the conditions factory-farm animals live in and not feel disgust concerning their treatment.<sup>3</sup>

Third, much of the effect of the eating practices of persons in industrialized countries is felt in oppressed countries. Land owned by the wealthy that was once used to grow inexpensive crops for local people has been converted to the production of expensive products (beef) for export. Increased trade of food products with these countries is consistently the cause of increased starvation. In cultures where food preparation is primarily understood as women's work, starvation is primarily a women's issue. Food expresses who we are politically just as much as bodily. One need not be aware of the fact that one's food practices oppress others in order to be an oppressor.

From a woman's perspective, in particular, it makes sense to ask whether one should become a

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<sup>2</sup> This practice is also ecologically sound since it saves the enormous expense of firewood for cremation.

<sup>3</sup> See John Robbing (1987). It should be noted that in response to such knowledge some reflective nonvegetarians commit to eating range-grown chickens but not those grown in factory farms.

vegan, a vegetarian who, in addition to refraining from meat and fish, also refrains from eating eggs and dairy products. Since the consumption of eggs and milk have in common that they exploit the reproductive capacities of the female, vegetarianism is not a gender neutral issue.<sup>4</sup> To *choose one's diet* in a patriarchal culture is one way of politicizing an ethic of care. It marks a daily, bodily commitment to resist ideological pressures to conform to patriarchal standards, and to establishing contexts in which caring for can be nonabusive.

Just as there are gender-specific reasons for women's commitment to vegetarianism, for men in a patriarchal society moral vegetarianism can mark the decision to stand in solidarity with women. It also indicates a determination to resist ideological pressures to become a "real man." Real people do not need to eat "real food," as the American Beef Council would have us believe.

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this point to a conversation with Colman McCarthy.