The Social Construction of Edible Bodies and Humans as Predators[*]

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Are we predators or are we not? In an attempt to see ourselves as natural beings, some argue that humans are simply predators like some other animals. Vegetarianism is then seen to be unnatural while the carnivorism of other animals is made paradigmatic. Animal rights is criticized "for it does not understand that one species supporting or being supported by another is nature's way of sustaining life" (Ahlers 1990, 433). The deeper disanalogies with carnivorous animals remain unexamined because the notion of humans as predators is consonant with the idea that we need to eat meat. In fact, carnivorism is true for only about 20 percent of nonhuman animals. Can we really generalize from this experience and claim to know precisely what "nature's way" is, or can we extrapolate the role of humans according to this paradigm?
Some feminists have argued that the eating of animals is natural because we do not have the herbivore's double stomach or flat grinders and because chimpanzees eat meat and regard it as a treat (Kevles 1990). This argument from anatomy involves selective filtering. In fact, all primates are primarily herbivorous. Though some chimpanzees have been observed eating dead flesh—at the most, six times in a month—some never eat meat. Dead flesh constitutes less than 4 percent of chimpanzees' diet; many eat insects, and they do not eat dairy products (Barnard 1990). Does this sound like the diet of human beings?

Chimpanzees, like most carnivorous animals, are apparently far better suited to catching animals than are human beings. We are much slower than they. They have long-projecting canine teeth for tearing hide; all the hominoids lost their long-projecting canines 3.5 million years ago, apparently to allow more crushing action consistent with a diet of fruits, leaves, nuts, shoots, and legumes. If we do manage to get a hold of prey animals we cannot rip into their skin. It is true that chimpanzees act as if meat were a treat. When humans lived as foragers and when oil was rare, the flesh of dead animals was a good source of calories. It may be that the "treat" aspect of meat has to do with an ability to recognize dense sources of calories. However, we no longer have a need for such dense sources of calories as animal fat, since our problem is not lack of fat but rather too much fat.

When the argument is made that eating animals is natural, the presumption is that we must continue consuming animals because this is what we require to survive, to survive in a way consonant with living unimpeded by artificial cultural constraints that deprive us of the experience of our real selves. The paradigm of carnivorous animals provides the reassurance that eating animals is natural. But how do we know what is natural when it comes to eating, both because of the social construction of reality and the fact that our history indicates a very mixed message about eating animals? Some did; the majority did not, at least to any great degree.

The argument about what is natural—that is, according to one meaning of it, not culturally constructed, not artificial, but something that returns us to our true selves —appears in a different context that always arouses feminists' suspicions. It is often argued that women's subordination to men is natural. This argument attempts to deny social reality by appealing to the "natural." The "natural" predator argument ignores social construction as well. Since we eat corpses in a way quite differently from any other animals—dismembered, not freshly killed, not raw, and with other foods present—what makes it natural?

Meat is a cultural construct made to seem natural and inevitable. By the time the argument from analogy with carnivorous animals is made, the individual making such an argument has probably consumed animals since before the time she or he could talk. Rationalizations for consuming animals were probably offered when this individual at age four or five was

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discomfited upon discovering that meat came from dead animals. The taste of dead flesh preceded the rationalizations, and offered a strong foundation for believing the rationalizations to be true, and baby boomers faced the additional problem that as they grew up, meat and dairy products had been canonized as two of the four basic food groups. (This occurred in the 1950s and resulted from active lobbying by the dairy and beef industry. At the turn of the century there were twelve basic food groups.) Thus individuals have not only experienced the gratification of taste in eating animals but may truly believe what they have been told endlessly since childhood—that dead animals are necessary for human survival. The idea that meat eating is natural develops in this context. Ideology makes the artifact appear natural, predestined. In fact, the ideology itself disappears behind the facade that this is a "food" issue. We interact with individual animals daily if we eat them. However, this statement and its implications are repositioned so that the animal disappears and it is said that we are interacting with a form of food that has been named "meat." In *The Sexual Politics of Meat,* I call this conceptual process in which the animal disappears the structure of the absent referent. Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal and animals become absent referents. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food.

Animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them. The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity. The roast on the plate is disembodied from the pig who she or he once was. The absent referent also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present, perpetuating a means-ends hierarchy.

The absent referent results from and reinforces ideological captivity: partriarchal ideology establishes the cultural set of human/animal, creates criteria that posit the species difference as important in considering who may be means and who may be ends, and then indoctrinates us into believing that we need to eat animals. Simultaneously, the structure of the absent referent keeps animals absent from our understanding of patriarchal ideology and makes us resistant to having animals made present. This means that we continue to interpret animals from the perspective of human needs and interests: we see them as usable and consumable. Much of feminist discourse participates in this structure when failing to make animals visible. Ontology recapitulates ideology. In other words, ideology creates what appears to be ontological: if women are ontologized as sexual beings (or rapeable, as some feminists argue), animals are ontologized as carriers of meat. In ontologizing women and animals as objects, our language simultaneously eliminates the fact that someone else is acting as a subject/agent/perpetrator of violence. Sarah Hoagland demonstrates how this works: "John beat Mary," becomes "Mary was beaten by John," then "Mary was beaten," and finally, "women beaten," and thus "battered women" (Hoagland 1988, 17-18). Regarding violence against women and the creation of the term "battered women," Hoagland observes that "now something *men do to women* has become instead something that is a part *of women's nature.* And we lose consideration of John entirely."

The notion of the animal's body as edible occurs in a similar way and removes the agency of humans who buy dead animals to consume them: "Someone kills animals so that I can eat their corpses as meat," becomes "animals are killed to be eaten as meat," then "animals are meat," and finally "meat animals," thus "meat."

Something we do to animals has become instead something that is a part of animals' nature, and we lose consideration of our role entirely.

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