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**MANLY MEAT AND GENDERED EATING****Correcting Imbalance and Seeking Virtue***Christina Van Dyke*

Eating is a gendered act. In Western cultural mythology, men have rapacious appetites that cannot be easily satisfied; they require ‘substantial’ foods (like meat and potatoes) to keep up their strength and satisfy their hunger.<sup>1</sup> Hearty consumption demonstrates a man’s virility and reinforces his masculinity. Women, on the other hand, have appetites that can easily be satisfied with low-calorie, low-fat foods (like fruits, vegetables, and diet drinks); according to popular cultural myths, they live in constant danger of weight gain and loss of attractiveness if they indulge these minimal appetites. Furthermore, while men are encouraged to indulge and take pride in their appetites—whether it be for food, sex, or power—women are taught to tightly repress their hunger, focusing instead on satisfying the appetites of others.<sup>2</sup>

Food is also frequently gendered.<sup>3</sup> Meat, in particular, is construed as ‘male’ food, with nonfat yogurt, meatless salads, and other ‘light’ fare cast as ‘female.’<sup>4</sup> So strong is the connection of meat with men and male power, in fact, that feminist theorist Carol Adams calls meat *the* symbol of the patriarchy and argues that the struggle to overcome male oppression must include moving away from eating meat. “How [can] we overthrow patriarchal power while eating its symbol?” she asks. “Autonomous, antipatriarchal being is clearly vegetarian. To destabilize patriarchal consumption we must interrupt patriarchal meals of meat” (200).<sup>5</sup> Adams is hardly alone in taking this stance: Other prominent feminists such as Greta Gaard, Lori Gruen, Marti Kheel, and Catharine MacKinnon also argue that rejecting the consumption of animals and animal products is an important step in overcoming patriarchal structures and consequent environmental injustices.<sup>6</sup>

The ecofeminist argument for veganism is powerful. Meat consumption is a deeply gendered act that is closely tied to the systematic objectification of

women and nonhuman animals. Nevertheless, I have concerns about advocating veganism that involve its effectiveness in destabilizing patriarchal injustices. In particular, I am concerned that presenting veganism as *the* moral ideal might reinforce rather than alleviate the disordered status quo in gendered eating—that it might actually further disadvantage women in existing power structures. In this chapter, I explain these concerns, and I advocate a feminist account of ethical eating that treats dietary choices as moral choices insofar as they constitute an integral part of our relationships to ourselves and to others.<sup>7</sup> I argue that we should think of dietary choices in Aristotelian moral terms as a mean *relative to us*, falling on a continuum between the vice of doing injustice to ourselves, on the one hand, and the vice of doing injustice to others, on the other. On this view, what it is moral to eat for individuals is not a fixed ideal, but rather depends on particulars of our physiological, psychological, economic, cultural, and relational situations.

### Objectification and Linked Oppressions

The claim that women are consistently objectified in a morally problematic way is perhaps more widely accepted in feminist writing than any other single claim.<sup>8</sup> This objectification is often linked to a dualist framework that opposes, for example, rational to emotional, active to passive, subject to object, culture to nature, mind to body. As political theorist Carol Cohn observes,

in this symbolic system, human characteristics are dichotomized, divided into pairs of polar opposites that are supposedly mutually exclusive. . . . In each case, the first term of the “opposites” is associated with male, the second with female. And in each case, our society values the first over the second. (364)<sup>9</sup>

The negative consequences of perceiving woman as Other and Object have been seen as encompassing everything from sexual violence to eating disorders to persistent economic, legal, and political inequality.<sup>10</sup>

As numerous theorists have gone on to point out, moreover, women are alone neither in being objectified nor in being oppressed by that objectification. Adams, for instance, grounds her feminist-vegetarian critical theory on the observation that “women and animals are similarly positioned in a patriarchal world, as objects rather than subjects” (180).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the processes of learning to ignore the subjective presence of someone and to make use of a ‘someone’ as a ‘something’ are disturbingly parallel in the cases of women and animals. As Catharine MacKinnon describes this process,

women in male-dominated society are identified as nature, animalistic, and thereby denigrated, a maneuver that also defines animals’ relatively

lower rank in human society. Both are seen to lack properties that elevate men, those qualities by which men value themselves and define their status as human by distinction. (264)<sup>12</sup>

Men have been consistently advantaged in ways that allowed them to identify as, say, rational and active, and to code those qualities as the ‘positive’ qualities in an oppositional dualistic framework. In a position to ignore and/or subvert the self-identification and subjective experience of other groups, men came to view themselves as agents acting on and over the rest of the world. Over time, the stability of male domination has led to the systematic objectification of women, nonhuman animals, and the environment.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most stable features in this patriarchal system (across cultures and over time) is meat consumption as a sign of male power. But the issue does not involve merely the consumption of dead animal bodies. The use of animals for their products can also be seen as an act of male domination—especially dairy products and eggs, which must come from female bodies. As Adams puts it, “A corollary and prelude to animalized protein is *feminized protein*: milk and eggs . . . Female animals become oppressed by their femaleness . . . [Then] when their productiveness ends, they are butchered and become animalized protein” (91). The consumption not just of animals but also of their products thus appears to reinforce patterns of male oppression.

In this context, veganism has sometimes been promoted as an important act of protest. In particular, theorists who adopt a ‘linked oppressions’ model argue that sexism and speciesism are related in such a way that refraining from the consumption of animals and their products is a vital step in undercutting patterns of patriarchal power and benefitting women and nonhuman animals.<sup>14</sup> Rather than being treated as “independent, discrete forms of oppression,” the systemic disadvantaging of women and animals should be treated as a “bundled political problem” (Wykoff 2). According to this view, advocated by Adams, Gaard, Gruen, Kheel, and MacKinnon, among others, ignoring the interconnections between the oppression of women and nonhuman animals can lead to people advocating policies and behaviors that inadvertently exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem. Recognizing the link between these forms of oppression, on the other hand, allows us to advocate for positive change that affects everyone. As Jason Wykoff writes,

whenever two forms of oppression A and B are linked, it is *at least* likely, if not necessary, that the liberation of those who are oppressed through A will be accompanied by the liberation of those who are oppressed through B. (4)

In Adams’s words, “feminist-vegetarian activity declares that an alternative worldview exists, one which celebrates life rather than consuming death” (197).

### Idealism, Agency, and Eating

The valorization of the vegan lifestyle as a means of destabilizing patriarchal values often connects such a lifestyle with knowledge, life, and peace—and a meat-eating lifestyle with ignorance, death, and war. Adams, for instance, explicitly calls for “the positing of an ideal world composed of vegetarianism, pacifism, and feminism as opposed to a fallen world of women’s oppression, war, and meat eating” (133), and contrasts veganism as a “culture of life” that can (and should) replace the current phallogocentric, corpse-consuming “culture of death.” Although not essential to the strategy of destabilizing unjust patriarchal systems, the equation of veganism with such positive qualities is prevalent in many discussions of the topic.

This contrast is rhetorically effective in making veganism appealing. At the same time, it echoes the dualistic division of reality that opposes attributes of the transcendent, ‘pure’ mind, soul, or spirit to those of the immanent, corrupt body—the same dualism that has led to the consistent devaluation of the body, which has been associated with ignorance, death, and war since the time of Plato.<sup>15</sup> This dualism and its negative portrayal of the body has had particularly harmful consequences for women, however, who have been traditionally associated with the body and all its negative characteristics.<sup>16</sup>

The claim that feminists should transcend ‘the negative’ by refusing to eat bodies—to consume corruption and death—should not, then, be understood in separation from the broader cultural context of the association of women with bodies and all their attendant negative qualities. As Cohn argues,

this system of dichotomies is encoding many meanings that may be quite unrelated to male and female bodies. Yet once that first step is made—the association of each side of those lists with a gender—gender now becomes tied to many other kinds of cultural representations. (364)<sup>17</sup>

The association of bodies with ignorance, death, violence—and women—runs too deep to be ignored or easily subverted. In fact, taken in this context, the connection of veganism with qualities like knowledge, life, and peace in explicit contrast to their opposites runs the danger of underscoring rather than undermining the somatophobia (body loathing) that is one of the hallmarks of the patriarchy. This consequence should give pause to anyone who rejects the idea that female liberation should involve distancing oneself from or transcending one’s physicality.<sup>18</sup>

The dichotomy between male ‘oppressor’ and female and animal ‘oppressed,’ male ‘subject’ and female and animal ‘object’ that underlies much work in second-wave and eco-feminism is also subject to critique. First, the portrayal of men as agents who exercise domination over women and animals belies the much more complicated lived experience of most men, including those in privileged

positions.<sup>19</sup> Second, this dichotomy's emphasis on the parallel positionality of women and nonhuman animals masks important differences between how women and animals fare in the patriarchy. There is a disanalogy between the way that women are exploited as sex objects and animals are exploited for food, moreover, that proves crucial for both understanding and resisting the complex power dynamics of the patriarchy—namely, unlike the animals who are killed or exploited for their products, women are often enthusiastic participants in the systems that disadvantage them. Downplaying this difference ignores the subjectivity of women and the role they play in sustaining and perpetuating patriarchal structures.

Take, for example, the restaurant chain Hooters, whose gimmick is female servers in tight tank tops and short shorts, and whose slogan is an owl with breasts for eyes emblazoned with the phrase “More Than a Mouthful.” Adams sees this as an example of ‘anthropornography,’ where animals are objectified as edible beings in the same context that women are objectified as sexual beings. In her account, Beth Dixon observes, “Adams collapses the differences between animal intentionality and human intentionality” (190) in order to highlight the similarities between them.<sup>20</sup> Yet the objectified animals served up at the restaurant as burgers, wings, and such were given no say in the situation, whereas the objectified women who serve them actively chose that position. Competition among women for jobs as servers at Hooters tends to be fierce: For one thing, you can expect higher tips there than at most ‘family-friendly’ establishments. In general, women often gain tangible benefits from actively participating in their own objectification, including increased wages, social status, and self-confidence. The fact that the same system that confers these benefits also undercuts their possibilities in other areas makes those advantages no less real or desirable for those women.<sup>21</sup>

Adams, Gruen, Kheel, and others may well be right that sexism and speciesism are oppressions that are linked in significant ways.<sup>22</sup> My focus in this chapter is the more specific claim that rejecting the consumption of animals and animal products is an important (perhaps necessary) step in destabilizing this system. And—as Nancy Bauer, who has written extensively about feminism and the phenomenon of female self-objectification, demonstrates—attempts to change systems that don't take seriously the reasons that people participate in apparently harmful activities tend to fail or even backfire.<sup>23</sup> In this particular case, it is important not to ignore the agency of women who are involved in their objectification, or to treat them as victims of the patriarchy in the same way that animals who are used for their products and/or slaughtered for consumption are victims.

In addition, we need to be sensitive to the ways in which advocating veganism as a feminist ideal interacts with existing norms for women's eating and appetites. The refusal of adolescent women to eat—especially to eat meat—has sometimes been read by feminists as an empowered (if unconscious) opposition

to patriarchy. Susie Orbach, for instance, has argued that anorexia can be read as a feminist ‘hunger strike’; it silently protests the demand to repress female appetite by carrying it to its logical (and visibly harmful) extreme.<sup>24</sup> Observing that oppressed or marginalized groups often turn to nonverbal forms of protest in situations where verbal resistance can lead to recrimination, Carol Adams also discusses ‘meat phobia’ as a phenomenon that might symbolize young girls’ rejection of the phallocracy via their food choices. She suggests that these women can be seen as practicing feminism, “coding their criticism of the prevailing world order in the choice of female-identified foods” (175). On Adams’s account, where meat eating is “the” symbol of the patriarchy, the refusal to eat meat is likely to look like a refusal to participate in that system.

This interpretation of teenaged girls’ rejection of meat and animal products seems to me, however, worryingly disconnected from an understanding of how this refusal fits into broader cultural attitudes towards female appetite and consumption. The standard myth of female eating—which is exemplified in the lives of anorexics—effectively prohibits regular female consumption of ‘male-identified’ foods such as meat by linking it to weight gain and a corresponding loss of sexual attractiveness. (Adams herself points out that ‘female-identified’ foods are typically lower in calories, fat, and protein than ‘male-identified’ foods.) In this context, the act of ‘refusing the male order in food’ by rejecting meat, eggs, and dairy products is an act that *reinforces* existing cultural norms surrounding female consumption. For girls who rigidly conform to social norms of female eating and who deny themselves the food rich in protein and fat that their developing bodies require, “the protest collapses into its opposite and proclaims the utter capitulation of the subject to the contracted female world” (Bordo 176).<sup>25</sup> Women who display disordered attitudes towards physical embodiment and/or their own sexuality by avoiding male-identified foods seem to be participating in more than protesting the patriarchal status quo. Indeed, there is some concern in the medical community that at times “vegetarian diets may be selected to camouflage an existing eating disorder.”<sup>26</sup>

Women avoiding male-identified foods is the *norm* for sexist myths of gendered eating, not the exception. Women are meant to monitor their food consumption closely, feel guilty about consuming the ‘wrong’ foods, and satisfy their appetites primarily with fruits, vegetables, and grains. It is unclear how making veganism a moral ideal would destabilize these norms. For one thing, the women who participate in this protest will be indistinguishable from those who are simply participating in disordered patterns of gendered eating. Furthermore, on the global level, women in situations of food scarcity often allow (or encourage) men to consume what little meat is available, cooking and serving it to the adult males while depriving themselves—even if these women perform more physical labor daily than their male counterparts, and even if they are pregnant and/or lactating. These practices lead to a disproportionate number of women dying of starvation in famine situations.<sup>27</sup> Again, it is not

clear how advocating veganism as a specifically feminist moral ideal would undercut these realities.

The argument for feminist veganism must, I think, be taken in the larger context of these long-standing, deeply entrenched gendered eating norms. And, in this context, it is difficult to see how the act of feminists refraining from the consumption of animals and their products will destabilize the current system of objectification and oppression in the way that Adams et al. believe it will.

### Moral Ideals and Second-Class Citizens

To this point, I have concentrated on how the case for veganism as a feminist moral ideal interacts with existing norms of gendered eating. In this section, I turn to the question of how people fare on this account who cannot meet (or who struggle to meet) this ideal for physiological, economic, or other reasons. There are two common responses to these situations: The first is to grant an exception to the moral rule to those people; the second is to bite the bullet and claim that those people are forced to behave immorally—and accept that this is a regrettable consequence of some people's suboptimal situations. My worry with the first response is that the people who need these exceptions tend to be those already most disadvantaged by the current system, and that giving them moral excuses thus reinforces their status as 'second-class' citizens. My worry with the second is that it has the effect of rendering those already disadvantaged people *immoral* second-class citizens, and that we should object to a moral theory that turns disadvantage into immortality. My response to these concerns is not to reject the idea that dietary choices are moral choices, however, but rather to argue (in the following sections) for an account in which there is no 'one' ideal for ethical eating but rather individual ideals based on particulars of our situations.

The American Dietetic Association has judged that

appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets . . . are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes.<sup>28</sup>

That is, there are no blanket health considerations that rule out veganism as a potentially healthy diet for human beings. At the same time, it is vital for vegetarian or vegan diets to be "appropriately planned." As the same primary author of the ADA report (W. J. Craig) writes in another report specifically on the health consequences of vegan diets,

eliminating all animal products from the diet increases the risk of certain nutritional deficiencies. Micronutrients of special concern for the vegan

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include vitamins B-12 and D, calcium, and long-chain n-3 (omega-3) fatty acids. Unless vegans regularly consume foods that are fortified with these nutrients, appropriate supplements should be consumed. In some cases, iron and zinc status of vegans may also be of concern because of the limited bioavailability of these minerals.<sup>29</sup>

For our purposes, there are two things to note about these reports. First, the specific micronutrients at issue in a vegan diet—especially calcium, iron, and zinc—are ones that women are more ‘nutritionally vulnerable’ with respect to than men. And the extent to which women are nutritionally vulnerable with respect to these nutrients varies over their lifecycle (puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, perimenopause, menopause, post-menopause). This in no way implies that vegan diets are inappropriate for women. What it does mean is that women need to be more careful about their intake and absorption of these micronutrients on a vegan diet than men do. Second, whether women (and men) are in a position to put the time, money, energy, education, and other resources into adopting a healthy vegan diet depends on their individual situations. The ones who are most likely to be able to dedicate themselves to this lifestyle are people in situations of abundance and who are able to adopt this diet with relative physiological, psychological, economic, and social ease. The people most likely to be able to do this tend to be wealthy men in industrialized countries. Making veganism a moral ideal would require groups that are already economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged to exert a greater amount of time, energy, and resources to living a moral life than those who are already advantaged.

One response to this state of affairs is to grant those disadvantaged people moral ‘passes’ for being unable to live up to the moral ideal. Yet, in addition to being viewed as morally subpar by others, people who require excuses from the vegan moral ideal would also be likely to internalize their moral ‘failings’ in the form of feelings of guilt and inferiority, and to view those who can live up to that ideal as morally superior.

Imagine an analogous case in which a person, Devin, believes he has a moral obligation to give money to charity on a regular basis. Devin has, however, recently lost his job and is struggling to make ends meet—selling plasma just to pay rent and buy groceries. Most people are inclined to grant Devin an excuse from that moral obligation and to claim that his inability to meet that requirement does not compromise his moral character.

Now, imagine the effects of this exception from the perspective of both Devin and his community: First, even if Devin fully recognizes that he is not obligated in these circumstances to continue donating money to charity, if he has internalized this moral rule (and we’re supposing that he’s a sensitive moral agent who takes his obligation to donate money seriously) he is highly likely to struggle with feelings of inferiority and guilt for not being able to act in accordance with it. In addition, even if Devin’s community (which we’ll narrow just



to family, friends, and neighbors for simplicity's sake) recognizes that Devin is excused from the moral rule in these circumstances, they're still likely to judge him negatively (if, perhaps, unconsciously) for being unable to act in accordance with it—and, if they're able to meet that moral requirement, they're likely to view themselves as, in some sense, superior to Devin *even recognizing that he is not obligated to act in accordance with that rule*. The situation becomes exacerbated over time; if Devin continues to struggle financially over the space of years, or even decades, he is increasingly likely to judge himself negatively for failing to be able to give money to charity, and his community is increasingly likely to view Devin as a subpar moral agent in that respect—again, *even if* they believe that he is genuinely excused from charitable giving. Devin would, in practice, be reduced to a second-class moral citizen in this respect.<sup>30</sup>

The parallel to the issue of moral veganism should be clear. Regardless of how we believe the people granted those exceptions are entitled to feel, or what we believe the people who aren't granted such exceptions should believe about those who are excused from the moral rule, it seems almost certain that the actual fact of routinely excusing those groups of people from the vegan moral ideal would have the consequence of morally disadvantaging groups which are already disadvantaged in a number of other ways. This disadvantage is magnified by the fact that many of these people will require exceptions or excuses from the moral rule for the majority of their lives; their biological and/or socio-geopolitical circumstances will entail that they will *never* be able to function in society as ideal moral agents. Claiming that this fact shouldn't impact the way they view themselves or the way that others view them belies the realities of their situation.

Another response to the inequality of these moral demands is to argue that this disadvantage is a tragic result of unjust social structures, and to bite the bullet and claim that the people who are not able to meet the moral vegan ideal are morally subpar. The fact that certain unjust social structures force people to participate in immoral acts is presented as further motivation to change those harmful systems. This response seems even more problematic than the first, however. For one thing, it has an air of adding insult to injury. On this view, people who are for one reason or another unable to flourish (physiologically, psychologically, economically, etc.) on a vegan diet are not just second-class citizens: They are *immoral* second-class citizens that deserve our pity. This puts them in a category of moral disadvantage that would seem to build up rather than break down the various barriers between them and those who are morally privileged on this system.

I believe that we should, instead, think of dietary choices in terms of a mean *relative to us* that falls on a continuum between doing injustice to ourselves, on the one hand, and doing injustice to others, on the other. According to this view, whether it is morally correct for us to engage in or to abstain from eating animals and/or animal products will depend on particulars of our individual physiological, cultural, economic, and relational situations.

## Guiding Considerations

Several considerations guide the construction of my account. First, as I've already discussed, existing norms surrounding the consumption of meat are deeply gendered. Rather than overturning patterns of male domination, a more likely result of self-identified feminists—who are predominantly women—rejecting meat and animal products in favor of 'female-identified foods' is the further reinforcement of the current myths of male and female eating. As I've argued in detail elsewhere, more is at stake here than just what types of foods men and women eat: Patterns of meat-consumption are only one part of larger gendered patterns of appetite indulgence and repression that permeate Western culture.<sup>31</sup> Men are encouraged to indulge and take pride in their appetites for meat, for sex, and for power, and women are taught to tightly repress their appetites, focusing instead of satisfying the appetites of others. We should be extremely cautious in advising a group that is already predisposed towards harmful repression of appetite to further monitor and restrict its consumption.

Second, eating is a moral activity on my theory insofar as it necessarily involves acting in ways that exemplify a certain relationship both to oneself and to others. One of the most central (and frequent) activities in which we participate, eating is integrally involved in the shape of our lives, and in the shaping of our characters. Dietary choices—whether involving the consumption of animals and animal products or fair-trade practices and fossil fuel use in food production and distribution—are choices that directly impact human and nonhuman animal flourishing on both an individual and community level. My account treats as moral a wide range of attitudes and behaviors not usually thought of as such, but I consider that an advantage rather than a detriment to my theory. To put a complex point very simply, we tend to focus all of our moral attention, energy, and outrage on a very narrow range of activities; in order to counteract systemic injustice, we need to adopt a broader ethical outlook.

Third, the widespread factory farming practices in the current meat, dairy, and egg industries strike me as morally indefensible. Any reasonable theory of ethical eating should advocate the elimination of such practices. Not only does it necessitate the suffering of the 'farmed' animals, but it also harms local environments and contributes to imbalanced and unsustainable agricultural practices (monocropping for feed, the heavy use of pesticide in order to grow nonlocal plants, etc.). The same general difficulties face the factory farm dairy and egg industries. The main reason factory farming has become so prevalent in the last fifty years or so, however, is the increasing demand of the growing global population for meat. In large parts of the industrialized world, factory farmed meat and animal products are the only sort available and/or affordable to the non-wealthy who live in urban areas. 'Free-range' meat, milk, and eggs are, by and large, luxuries available only to the middle and upper classes, who thus gain the upper hand with respect to both moral and health considerations. Any concrete

steps towards eliminating factory farming, then, should also take into account negative effects such a move might have on the world's economically disadvantaged and seek to alleviate those effects.

In summary, an adequate feminist account of ethical eating should seek to change the disordered reality of current gendered eating patterns, treat dietary choices<sup>32</sup> as moral choices insofar as they constitute an integral part of our relationships to ourselves and to others, and advocate the end of factory farming practices in ways that don't further disadvantage the urban poor.

### Finding the Mean for Ethical Eating

The basic structure of my account is Aristotelian: I think of morality in terms of the actions, attitudes, desires, and beliefs involved in developing and maintaining a good moral character, understood in a robust and meaningful sense.<sup>33</sup> In practical terms, this means that the vast majority of one's everyday choices, actions, and desires—particularly those made on a regular or habitual basis—impact one's character in such a way as to make one either a better or worse moral agent.

I also advocate Aristotle's doctrine of the 'mean relative to us' with respect to moral virtues.<sup>34</sup> That is, I believe that Aristotle was correct in identifying virtue as a mean between two extremes—and that he was right in claiming that human beings do not share a common mean, but rather that where the moral mean falls for each person will be relative to us. In other words, what's virtuous for an individual person will depend (and vary) on their particular external circumstances, physical abilities and limitations, and so on. What's more, this mean can (and will) change as the person's circumstances change. To give a practical example, what bravery for me would look like in the face of an attempted mugging might be cowardly for my friend who's a fourth-degree black belt, and what bravery for her would look like in the same situation might be recklessness for me. It is vital to stress in this connection that it is not a matter of my being *less brave* than my friend, however, or of her being *more brave* than me. Rather, this moral theory maintains that we can both exemplify bravery through different actions—and that it would be morally wrong for either of us to act according to the other's mean.

With respect to the issue of ethical eating practices, then, I believe we should think of the moral mean as falling between the vice of doing injustice to oneself and the vice of doing injustice to others. In thinking about our dietary choices, we should take into consideration both what would facilitate our personal flourishing (physiologically, psychologically, economically, socially, etc.) and what would facilitate the flourishing of those (both human and nonhuman) in our broader communities.

The effects of disordered gendered norms of eating are highly relevant in this context of evaluation. Doing justice to oneself in this case will include, for example, proper respect for our own well-being, which includes viewing

ourselves as having equal moral worth with others. Women have, traditionally, been discouraged from viewing themselves in this way. Instead, they have been encouraged to and rewarded for placing the well-being of others ahead of their own, denying their appetites in favor of indulging the appetites of those around them. They have also been taught to fear and repress hunger and to feel constant shame for eating. It would not be surprising, then, if many women needed to move more towards ‘doing justice to oneself.’ At the same time, doing justice to others will involve respect for their well-being, which includes viewing others as having equal moral worth as ourselves. Men have, traditionally, been encouraged to indulge their appetites without full regard for the impact their actions have on others. It would not be surprising, then, if many men needed to move closer to ‘doing justice to others.’

On this account, we should treat all animals (ourselves and others, human and nonhuman) with equal respect and with concern for their flourishing as members of their natural kinds. Treating everyone with consideration for their flourishing will, however, entail a dramatic change in current relationships between human and nonhuman species. We would need to shift from a focus on maximizing the quantity and/or quality of the products we get from the animals we have domesticated for their milk, eggs, and such, to genuine concern for promoting their flourishing. Were we to make this shift, though, I do not believe that living in continued relationships with animals that also involve our consuming their products necessarily harms them. I find nothing inherently objectionable about the consumption of eggs, milk, and other dairy products, for instance, so long as the producing animals live in conditions that allow them to flourish as members of their natural kinds. This will, however, entail a *drastic* reduction in the amount of meat, dairy products, and eggs available for human consumption.

Indeed, one thing that seems certain—especially given the injustices of factory farming and the need to eliminate such practices—is that the mean for almost everyone who lives in wealthy, industrialized cultures will involve the reduction or complete elimination of meat and other animal products. In fact, it seems highly likely that the mean for those who are physiologically, psychologically, and economically able to flourish on diets that do not involve animal products will involve their doing so.

How this will play out in actual practice is complicated, however—and rightly so, for both our own lives and the way they intersect with the lives around us are highly complex. Take the case of Leah, who lives in a position of relative economic and social comfort, with a full-time career as a professional sociologist and primary responsibility for a young child. Leah is capable of flourishing on a vegan diet without compromising her physical, psychological, or economic health, and she possesses sufficient resources to educate herself on how best to live a vegan lifestyle without its consuming undue amounts of time and energy. At the same time, as primary caregiver for her child, Skye, Leah possesses the responsibility to guarantee that her daughter’s nutritional needs are met. As a

fast-growing girl with a serious allergy to soy and an aversion to beans, kale, and other leafy green vegetables, Skye is not likely to flourish on a vegan diet. Should Leah become a vegan but assume the burden of preparing meals for her daughter that include some animal products? Perhaps, in these circumstances, she should be vegetarian, meeting Skye's nutritional needs with eggs and dairy products while minimizing her own consumption of those products. What is important to note, in any event, is that only she will have access to the full amount of information that determines her mean.

Geographic considerations will also play a role in determining one's mean. If one lives in Southern California, for instance, where the growing season is extended, and one has a backyard suitable for growing vegetables and fruits, one's mean will likely be quite different from one who lives in downtown Cleveland. One's mean can also change with one's geographic and social circumstances. An individual from Maui whose mean in Hawaii is vegan might justly eat meat during an extended stay in rural Mongolia, for instance, while someone from Sierra Leone whose mean is omnivorous there might justly abstain from eating meat and significantly reduce or eliminate her consumption of dairy products when she moves to Tokyo.

My view can be seen as a version of moral contextualism. It differs in at least one important way from versions of contextualism such as Deane Curtin's, however.<sup>35</sup> Although Curtin advocates Contextual Moral Vegetarianism as one aspect of a broader program of nonviolence and does not present that program as a universal rule, Contextual Moral Vegetarianism still presents veganism as the ultimate moral ideal, even if not an appropriate lifestyle for everyone. But, as I argued earlier, this has the net effect of reducing those unable to meet the idea to second-class moral citizens. Thinking of moral ideals (in the plural) as variable according to individuals avoids this effect. What counts as properly ethical eating for an individual person depends on what the mean relative to that person is, whether that involves abstaining entirely from meat and animal products, eating dairy products and eggs but not meat, eating fish but not other animals or animal products, and so on.

Veganism is not uniquely privileged on my account. Although this will be seen by some as a serious flaw, in the context of current disordered gendered eating norms it has at least two distinct advantages. First, the immediate impact of a significant number of men becoming vegetarian or vegan would likely be to weaken that association of meat eating with men and masculinity. This weakening might well lead to a welcome shift in current myths of male and female eating, where the deeply entrenched identification of certain foods (such as meat) as masculine and other foods (such as salads and fruit) as feminine would gradually be deconstructed by actual practice.

Second, the fact that moral dietary choices can vary from individual to individual and from situation to situation should work to prevent any one particular diet from becoming privileged over another. We usually have no direct access

to the mean relative to another person, and we would not be entitled to draw definite conclusions about someone's moral character in that area without access to that person's mean. Ideally, one of the long-term consequences of putting this account of ethical eating into practice would be that it would reduce the morally loaded attitudes that we currently hold towards eating—and that significantly contribute to disordered eating. A woman's choice of an ice cream sundae would not, for instance, automatically generate negative judgments about her will power and/or health status; a man's choice of an Activia yogurt would not automatically generate negative judgments about his masculinity, since those around them would lack access to their means. In general, adopting a virtue-ethics approach to ethical eating would seriously undermine the rigid—and highly gendered—moral judgments that currently guide our thinking about what other people around us should or should not be eating.

This outcome seems deeply desirable to me. Our primary job as moral agents is not, after all, to police the behavior of those around us (except in the case of the very small number of people to whom we have special relations of accountability); it is to work as best we can to optimize the health of the relations we have both to ourselves and to our communities, to flourish as human beings individually and in relation to others.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. These myths are not meant to track actual lived experience. They convey norms against which we measure and judge our eating patterns and appetites, in the way that cultural myths about the American Dream and its 'self-made man' convey norms against which we measure and judge our work ethic and success levels.
2. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see my "Eating as a Gendered Act: Christianity, Feminism, and Reclaiming the Body," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. K. Clark (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2008).
3. See Carol Cohn's "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War," in *The Gendered Society Reader*, ed. M. Kimmel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) for a succinct discussion of how 'gendered discourse' impacts our experience of things like food.
4. A quick search on the internet turns up gems like Epic Mealtime's Christmas "Slaughterhouse" episode, where they construct a gingerbread-style house of meat, filled with Cheez Whiz, topped with bacon, and consumed with eggnog spiked with Jack Daniel's whiskey and bacon grease. The equation of women with low-calorie and fat foods is demonstrated, in contrast, by the 'Women Laughing Alone with Salad' tumblr, or the 'Target Women' episode on yogurt ("the official food of women").
5. Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum International, 1990; 10th anniv. ed., 2000).
6. See, e.g., Greta Gaard's "Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, and Nature*, ed. G. Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), which also contains Lori Gruen's "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection between Women and Animals"; see also Marti Kheel's "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 135–149, and "Vegetarianism and Ecofeminism: Toppling Patriarchy with a Fork," in *Food for Thought: The Debate over Eating Meat*, ed. S. F. Saponzitis (New York: Prometheus

- Books, 2004), 327–343; see also Catharine MacKinnon’s “Of Mice and Men: A Feminist Fragment on Animal Rights,” in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, ed. C. Sunstein and M. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
7. The idea that one has any real choice over what one eats is, of course, a presumption that comes from a position of wealth and resources. Nevertheless, even in cases where there is little to no range of foods from which to choose, there are likely to remain choices concerning how much to eat in relation to others, etc., that will be moral choices.
  8. The question of the means and consequences of this objectification is, on the other hand, more controversial. See Martha Nussbaum’s “Objectification,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (1995): 249–291, for a nuanced discussion of different forms that this can take, and for an argument that not all forms of objectification are morally objectionable.
  9. Cohn, “Wars, Wimps, and Women.”
  10. See, e.g., Simone de Beauvoir’s classic treatment of this topic in *The Second Sex* (translated and edited by H. M. Parshley, New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Andrea Dworkin’s discussion of objectification in “Occupation/Collaboration,” in *Intercourse: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 153–184; Catharine MacKinnon’s *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); and the introduction to Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), as well as her earlier *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
  11. I will be paying special attention to Adams’s *Sexual Politics of Meat* in this chapter, as it is both accessible and tremendously influential on current work in this field.
  12. MacKinnon, “Of Mice and Men.”
  13. That men have been systemically advantaged across cultures and time does not, of course, mean that all men have been engaged in a conscious effort to oppress or repress women and nonhuman animals. See part three of the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* for a discussion of power functions as an interaction of noncentralized forces that both produces and sustains positions of advantage and disadvantage. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
  14. See Jason Wykoff’s “Linking Sexism and Speciesism” (forthcoming in *Hypatia*) for a comprehensive and clear discussion of the ways in which oppressions can be linked, as well as a defense of the link between sexism and speciesism.
  15. See, e.g., Plato’s *Phaedo*, in which Socrates memorably states that
 

The body keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture . . . It fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions, and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body. Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord, and battles. (66b–d)

For a classic argument against essentialism in eco-feminism, see Jent Biehl’s *Finding Our Way. Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991).
  16. For a particularly trenchant analysis of this phenomenon, see the introduction to Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.
  17. Cohn, “Wars, Wimps, and Women.”
  18. For an excellent discussion of how somatophobia has functioned in feminist theories, see Elizabeth Spelman’s “Race & Gender: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought,” chapter five in *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, ed. E. Spelman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 114–132.
  19. See, e.g., Patrick Hopkins’s “Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities,” in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in the Light*

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- of Feminism*, ed. R. Strikwerda, P. D. Hopkins, and H. Brod (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), in which he explores the fragility of constructions of masculinity as essentially involving strength, confidence, and power. See also Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner's *Men's Lives*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2006), and Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Putnam, 1999).
20. Beth Dixon, "The Feminist Connection between Women and Animals," *Environmental Ethics* 18, no. 2 (1996): 181–194.
  21. This is one of Simone de Beauvoir's main explanations in *The Second Sex* for why woman remains Other in a society where she has economic and reproductive liberty: Man still sees woman as Other, and woman has internalized this position and often actively presents herself as Other. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*.
  22. Jason Wykoff, for instance, concludes that the link between sexism and speciesism is best thought of in terms of "what is common to the status of women and nonhuman animals under the law" (13)—namely, less-than-full consideration of their interests and institutionalized subordination. Wykoff, "Linking Sexism and Speciesism."
  23. See, e.g., Nancy Bauer's "LadyPower," *Opinionator* (blog), *New York Times*, June 20, 2010, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/lady-power/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/lady-power/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0), and "Beauvoir on the Allure of Self-Objectification," in *Feminist Metaphysics*, ed. C. Witt (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2011), 117–129. The results of Western feminists' attempts to end female genital cutting in African countries is a prime example of this sort of failure: Rather than the practice ending, it became more common in many areas where it had been declining, began to be carried out on younger girls, and took place more often in nonsterile settings (like hospitals) to avoid official sanction.
  24. See Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Random House, 1978 [vol. 1]; 1982 [vol. 2]). See also Kim Chernin's *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
  25. Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," in *Unbearable Weight*.
  26. W. J. Craig, A. R. Mangels, and the American Dietetic Association [ADA], "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 109, no. 7 (2009): 1266–1282. See also A. M. Bardone-Cone et al., "The Inter-Relationships between Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders among Females," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 112, no. 8 (2012): 1247–1252.
  27. See Lisa Leghorn and Mary Roodkowsky's *Who Really Starves? Women and World Hunger* (New York: Friendship Press, 1977).
  28. Craig, Mangels and the ADA, "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets." Abstract. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 109, no. 7 (2009): 1266–1282. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19562864>.
  29. W. J. Craig, "Health Effects of Vegan Diets." Abstract. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 89, no. 5 (2009): 1627S–1633S. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19279075>.
  30. The self-reports of soldiers returning from war (and their reception by their communities) support this claim. Passing over the Vietnam War as problematic for various reasons, interviews with soldiers from WWI and WWII demonstrate that, quite frequently, they struggled with serious feelings of guilt and moral failing for killing other human beings in battle—even when they recognized that they were excused from the general moral prohibition against killing.
  31. Van Dyke, "Eating as a Gendered Act."
  32. The idea that one has any real choice over what one eats is, of course, a presumption that comes from a position of wealth and resources. Nevertheless, even in cases where there is little to no range of foods from which to choose, there are likely to



remain choices concerning how much to eat in relation to others, etc., that will be moral choices.

33. I develop this account in more detail in my “Moral Babies, Metaphysical Bathwater” (forthcoming in a special edition of *Res Philosophica* on Virtue and the Emotions).
34. For Aristotle’s introduction and discussion of the concept of virtue as a mean relative to us, see Bk. II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, particularly 1107a, where he presents his full definition of virtue of character.
35. See Deane Curtin’s “Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care,” *Hyppatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 60–74.
36. This chapter was originally inspired by conversations with Sara Ferguson and Jeanette Bradley, to whom I owe thanks for their individual and collective wisdom on this and many other topics. The chapter has gone through a variety of transformations and been presented in a number of different places, including the University of Wyoming, the Ethics Club at the University of Colorado–Boulder, the Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, Calvin College Wake-Up Weekend, the underground program at the Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference, and the Philosophy of Religion reading group at Notre Dame. Each time, it has generated lively discussion and helpful feedback, and I thank those audiences—as well as those I may well be forgetting!—for their generous engagement. Further special thanks go to the editors of this volume for their comments.

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