



Hypatia, Inc.

A Defense of the Feminist-Vegetarian Connection

Author(s): Sheri Lucas

Source: *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 2005), pp. 150-177

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing](#) on behalf of [Hypatia, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810847>

Accessed: 26/07/2011 22:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=hypatiainc>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Hypatia, Inc. and *Blackwell Publishing* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Hypatia*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A Defense of the Feminist-Vegetarian Connection

SHERI LUCAS

Kathryn Paxton George's recent publication, Animal, Vegetable, or Woman? (2000), is the culmination of more than a decade's work and encompasses standard and original arguments against the feminist-vegetarian connection. This paper demonstrates that George's key arguments are deeply flawed, antithetical to basic feminist commitments, and beg the question against fundamental aspects of the debate. Those who do not accept the feminist-vegetarian connection should rethink their position or offer a non-question-begging defense of it.

Despite the goal of ending all forms of oppression, most feminists do not include the oppression of nonhuman animals within their praxis. This is not due to a lack of awareness. Standard arguments such as Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975/1990) and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) loudly proclaim that nonhuman animals are oppressed. The issue has also received notable attention within feminism. Here, the question of whether feminists should be vegetarians is paramount, as the eating of flesh is considered the chief cause of oppression to nonhuman animals.¹ It is the form of oppression that feminists are most apt to support and condone, especially in heavily industrialized countries.

Carol J. Adams published the first article on the feminist-vegetarian connection in 1975. Though there were few publications on this topic in the following decade, it became an issue of concern for many feminists. An Ecofeminist Task Force eventually formed and in 1990, urged the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) to recognize this connection by adopting a strict vegetarian menu for its future conferences (Gruen 1993, 89n66). From 1990 to the present, awareness of the feminist-vegetarian debate has increased through Adams's

The Sexual Politics of Meat (2000), Josephine Donovan's "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory" (1990), pertinent anthologies and monographs, and articles in such widely read feminist journals as *Signs* and *Hypatia*.²

Kathryn Paxton George's recent book, *Animal, Vegetable, or Woman? A Feminist Critique of Ethical Vegetarianism* (2000), is the culmination of more than a decade's work and encompasses standard and original arguments against the feminist-vegetarian connection. The lengthy and passionate debate preceding this book included several contenders—Adams, Donovan, Greta Gaard, Lori Gruen, Evelyn Pluhar, and Gary Varner—all of whom argued against George's position. Contrary to what this 6:1 ratio may suggest, opponents of George's position constitute a vocal provegetarian minority within the vast field of feminisms. The majority of feminists remain silent about possible reinforcements between the oppression of women and that of nonhuman animals. According to this silence, they disagree that nonhuman animals are oppressed, and are not convinced that (what many take to be) the oppression of nonhuman animals is inconsistent with feminism or antithetical to its goals.

This article defends the feminist-vegetarian connection against George's challenges. To begin, I describe the events that led George to denounce ethical vegetarianism and outline her arguments against it. These can be divided into two groups: central feminist arguments and global arguments. Following this exegesis, I show that her core arguments are far from cogent. George's central feminist challenges rely on a problematic principle of nonarbitrariness, equivocate between dietary and ethical vegetarianism, make unwarranted assumptions about human perspectives, appeal to odd claims about "authentic" diets, are based on outmoded science, and draw sexist inferences about the relationship between this science and the overall health prospects of women and men. George's global challenges rely on imperialistic assumptions, moot hypotheticals, and an unfounded theory of environmental degradation; correctly fault a base mode of judgment, but wrongly take it as intrinsic to ethical vegetarianism; and finally, along with her central feminist arguments, beg the question against the main issues of the debate.

Given these and other major flaws, the weight of George's arguments is nil. Convinced that she reduces ethical vegetarianism to absurdity, George ignores her opponents' main concerns. If she and others who disagree with the feminist-vegetarian connection want to defend themselves against the charge that they contribute to the oppression of billions of nonhuman animals—as I believe they should—they will respond to these concerns and offer better grounds for their contributions to the pain, suffering, and deaths of these beings.

GEORGE'S FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ETHICAL VEGETARIANISM

In 1986 George became a vegetarian after reading "the moral rights arguments of Tom Regan, Bernard Rollin and, to a lesser extent, Peter Singer" (2000, x). Of these, Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* best aroused her inclinations. It was just after reading his neo-Kantian arguments that George accepted ethical vegetarianism and chose to protest animal cruelty.³ During the next few years, George engaged in vegetarian activism by teaching courses about "the rights and welfare of animals" (x). By sharing the standard arguments with her students, George likely generated many new ethical vegetarians. Little did she know that she would regret her activism and "come to believe that these arguments serve the ruling, patriarchal class" (xi).

When George became an ethical vegetarian, her commitment to animal rights and flexible tastebuds made easy the transition to a vegetarian diet. "Even [her] husband," she notes, "gave up meat rather easily" (2000, x). While pleased that her husband followed suit, George worried about placing her then ten-year-old daughter on a vegetarian diet and omitting dairy products from her diet. Many ethical vegetarians forgo these and all other animal products. Though these "strict vegetarians" or "vegans" constitute a minority of vegetarians, ethical vegetarians often praise "the vegan lifestyle as most virtuous" (3).

After substantial research, George arrived at bleak conclusions about the safety of vegetarian diets for children. She found it difficult for vegetarian children, and extremely difficult for vegan children, to meet the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDAs)⁴ for several vitamins and minerals, including calcium, phosphorus, iron, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, and vitamins A, D, B₆, and B₁₂. She decided against putting her daughter on a vegetarian diet, let alone a vegan one. To deprive a child of essential vitamins and minerals, she contends, is wrong, as it puts the child at a "substantial risk of [being made] seriously worse off" (176).

Aware of these risks, parents who opt to put their children on vegetarian or vegan diets might try to meet their needs by "giving [them] artificial supplementation of all the vitamins and minerals listed above. But this also involves significant risk" (176). Determining the amount and kinds of supplementation required and accounting for interactions among supplements may "defeat even the scientist, much less the lay person" (176). And besides, most nutritionists discourage reliance on supplements and agree that "whole natural foods, including at least moderate amounts of meat and animal products" offer the best sources of vitamins and minerals (177).

Not only children, George's research showed, but most humans face significant health risks if they adopt vegetarian, or worse yet vegan, diets. Those at risk include nearly everyone who does not live in a wealthy industrialized country and is not an "adult [20–50-year-old] male, non-allergic, healthy, well-educated,

middle or upper class individual or a young adult non-allergic, healthy, well-educated, middle or upper class female unable to bear children" (179).⁵ For the sake of brevity, I will refer to this group as overprivileged men.⁶

George reported her findings in "So Animal a Human . . . ; or, the Moral Relevance of Being an Omnivore" (1990). Even if we grant that animals have rights, she argued, we should not praise ethical vegetarianism as a moral imperative or worthy social goal (172). This assumes that all or most humans can adopt vegetarian diets without risking their health. Support for this claim is not only lacking, she informed her readers, but empirical science proves that most humans "would be adversely affected nutritionally by strict vegetarian diets" (175). As they have a "basic interest" in consuming animal products, these humans "can claim that they are probably 'naturally omnivorous' and as such may assume the moral permissibility of eating some meat or using some animal products, even though some animals are made worse off" (183). Urging vegetarianism on these people treats them as *less* than equal to other species. They need not justify the value of ensuring their health, and so they do not require an excuse or defense to consume animal products. The expectation of these apologies assumes a universal rule for vegetarianism, which is unfounded as it can only apply to a minority of humans (179–80).

At best, George concluded, ethical vegetarianism is a "provisional duty" that "depends upon biological and situational facts" (179). Though most humans are entitled to meat and animal products, she urged compassion for the interest animals have "in not suffering and in living their lives in ways to which they are adaptively suited" (183).⁷ To enable the proper care of these beings, those permitted to use animal products "are permitted to eat only enough to ensure adequate nutrition and health, with a reasonable margin for safety" (178).

"ETHICAL" VEGETARIANISM: NEVER A DUTY

While attending Gary Varner's 1991 lecture, "Why Dairy Products Are Immoral," George "suddenly, and surprisingly . . . became incensed as [she] realized that women, children, and others were being forgotten in the argument for the 'vegan ideal' as the most virtuous diet" (2000, x). George's dissociation from ethical vegetarianism was thus complete. Refusing to condone a position in conflict with her feminism, she has since renounced the view that ethical vegetarianism might be a provisional moral duty.⁸

Developing the concerns roused by Varner's lecture, George secured the position she still maintains. According to this, ethical vegetarianism violates two necessary conditions of a feminist ethic. First, "no ethics can permit arbitrariness in its prescriptions and theories," and second, "any specifically feminist ethic must affirm the value of the female body" (2000, 15). Considering derivatives of this argument and the social goals of ethical vegetarians, George

found their ideals to reduce most humans to a moral underclass, exhibit cultural imperialism, and promote environmental decay.

As noted above, ethical vegetarians must affirm that vegetarian diets are compatible with health. George's post-1990 publications offer a more positive view on the safety of vegetarian and vegan diets,⁹ and from 1992 on she clearly states that nearly everyone can succeed on these diets in the proper circumstances. *However*, she adds, the proper circumstances include privileges enjoyed by a minority of humans: wealth, a high level of education by world standards, and access to a wide variety of plant foods, supplements, fortified foods, a registered dietitian, and medical care (1992, 218; 2000, 113).

George claims that most empirical research on vegetarian diets assumes access to these privileges and focuses on overprivileged men (2000, 10). Though this research proves that these men can meet their dietary needs on vegetarian diets with relative ease and may benefit from doing so, this finding cannot be applied to the rest of the human population; "there are *undisputed differences* in the nutritional requirements among women, men, children, the old, and those in other cultures" (x). The literature refers to children, women, the elderly, and many others as "nutritionally vulnerable" and indicates that they are more likely to suffer nutritional deficiencies on these diets than are overprivileged men. Unlike these men, and compounding this vulnerability, most humans cannot enjoy the privileges necessary to ensure health on plant-based diets. Given these factors, most humans face significant health risks if they adopt vegetarian diets or aim to live up to the "vegan ideal" (156).

Those who endorse ethical vegetarianism despite these risks must presume an "adult [20–50 year old] male physiological norm" and "ignore or dismiss . . . evidence of the shortcomings of these diets for other age groups and for many women" (3). Thus, according to George, the vegan ideal casts overprivileged men as "the" archetype of virtue and everyone else "as an *exception* rather than as a norm." To animate this supposed virtue, people in the third world must accept severe health risks that overprivileged men do not have to face (16). While most ethical vegetarians readily excuse those who eat meat or animal products because their health depends on it, their position implies that most humans must be excused or forgiven for having neither the fine physiology nor the wealthy, well-educated first world splendor of overprivileged men. Surely there is "something quite arrogant about excusing all of these people from attaining the [vegan] ideal: it supposes the rich are better. They are not. They are just luckier" (106).

If, rather than arbitrarily affirm the perspective of first world men, we use the perspectives of women, children, the elderly, or those in nonindustrialized countries to determine our ethical duties, "different kinds of assumptions will be made, and these will affect how we think about our bodies and our food" (129). Awake to these perspectives, we would not make ethical vegetarianism

a moral imperative or laud veganism as ideal. We would celebrate the value of the female body (and of all human bodies), and jettison “virtues” that endanger the health of girls and women (and others) (1994b, 429; 2000, 109).

Ethical vegetarians might respond that we can and should change the material reality of the world so that everyone can attain health on vegetarian or vegan diets. Three problems taint this response and goal. First, even in the most vegan-friendly of circumstances, women who accept this “ideal” must acknowledge that we are not well-suited for the paradigmatic diet. While most 20–50-year-old men could achieve health on vegan diets with relative ease, women and many others would have to improvise by resorting to “supplements, fortified foods, or eating in special ways” (2000, 129). By implication, even in a “perfect” world, “women, children, and seniors [must] fix, mend, or correct their imperfect bodies . . . to meet a vegan ideal that is much less burdensome for men” (129).

Since it is more difficult for women to achieve health on vegetarian diets, we will have to work harder than overprivileged men to meet our needs. Even then, more women will fail to thrive on these diets and will become sick or need excuses to consume meat or dairy products during nutritionally demanding times such as adolescence, pregnancy, and lactation (2, 97, 156). If we nod to ethical vegetarianism, we assume that female physiology is morally inadequate without artificial boosts, that virtue summons females to work harder than males, and that even then women are more apt to be moral failures. Rather than treat the bodies and potential of women and men as equal, this so-called ideal “affirms the idea of difference as a lack of being, of incomplete reality that negates the life and value of the feminine” (141).

Second, the goal of worldwide vegetarianism retains the value judgment that the context and physiology of overprivileged men is ideal. If we respect a diversity of people, cultures, contexts, and preferences, we would neither fancy a future in which all humans adapt to a diet best suited to first world men, nor condone an “ideal” that reduces most humans to second-class status because of factors they did not choose. We would respect the ability of people in other cultures and circumstances to realize their own moral relationships with animals, and we would forego the assumption that first worlders are the only people capable of this feat (115).

Third, ecofeminists and many other ethical vegetarians promote lifestyles that are compatible with environmental sustainability.¹⁰ Contrary to this goal,

exporting safe vegan or vegetarian diets to the rest of the developing world requires exporting our food system with its fortification of cereals and other foods, processing of foods like egg substitutes, calcium-fortified soy products, and so forth.

Fortification and food processing presuppose a complex industrialized food system, with research biochemistry, food processing plants, mines to produce supplements, quality control bureaucracies, food preservation techniques, refrigeration, shipping, and perhaps even chemical-dependent agriculture. (113–14)

According to George, this would commence an “ecofeminist dilemma”: the entire human population cannot enjoy health on vegetarian diets unless an environmentally dire spread of industrialization occurs (113).

Having reached this impasse, George finds the feminist-vegetarian connection wrought with internal contradictions and oppressive assumptions. She concludes that advocating ethical vegetarianism is inconsistent with feminism and affirms the moral permissibility of consuming meat and other animal products.

But still, George retains her censure of “cruelty, violence, and waste” and her belief that “raising and killing animals in conditions of frustration of natural behaviors or of pain and suffering is morally wrong” (163). Domesticated animals matter and should be empowered to enjoy their “species-specific behaviors.” Their lives “are not expendable and should not be regarded as worthless” she argues (144), but it is not all or nothing, as ethical vegetarians suggest. We can admit that most humans need animal products to ensure their health and deny that meeting this need requires the exploitation of animals. We can still gain valuable nutrition from chicken and eggs, for example, while modifying our desires “to reflect more accurately our *needs* rather than our preferences, and the reason to modify them is to make it possible to raise these chickens in conditions that permit them to *be chickens*” (144).

Even beyond meeting our needs, George adds, it should be permissible for “everyone to eat a certain small amount of meat, dairy products and other animal products as long as animals are well treated and killed as painlessly as possible” (165). This position overcomes the flaws of provisional duties and is most “egalitarian in its consideration of all members of the moral community” (10). Thus, provided animals are respected and no one’s health is put at risk, people should decide for themselves what they will eat based on their “context and preferences—anything from veganism to including small amounts of meat regularly” (165).

RESPONSES TO GEORGE’S CENTRAL FEMINIST CHALLENGES

I. DO NOT PERMIT ARBITRARINESS

Suppose George is right, and (1) it is notably more difficult for women, children, and many others to succeed on vegetarian, and especially vegan, diets than it is for overprivileged men, and (2) it is notably more difficult for members of

these “nutritionally vulnerable” groups to succeed on vegetarian, and especially vegan, diets than it is for them to succeed on semivegetarian diets. Siding with George, we can infer from these premises that ethical vegetarianism violates the following principle of nonarbitrariness, and is thus incompatible with a feminist ethics:

Requiring, by strength of moral prohibition (on any acceptable theory, traditional or feminist), some persons of female, young, or older body type to bear greater moral and/or health burdens than persons of adult male body type is unfair and discriminatory (*prima facie*). (1995, 244)

According to this *prima facie* principle, any (supposed) ethical duty that sets routine and systematic burdens on one group of people but not on another is *for this fact alone* discriminatory and arbitrary (2000, 78).

However plausible this principle may appear, several factors betray its ineptness for judging moral beliefs. First, it is hasty and tenuous to dismiss an ethical position simply because it requires members of one group to exert more effort than is required of members of another group. Morality often requires individuals to accept burdens that others do not have to bear. To borrow an example from Peter Singer (1972), if you come across a child who is drowning in a pool of mud and no one else is nearby, you are morally obliged to save the child. The sacrifice of getting your skirt or pants muddy and being late for a meeting does not override the far greater interests of the child, whose life is at stake. Likewise, if most members of a group are faced with burdens that most members of another group do not have to bear, and the burdens pale in comparison to what would occur if they do not accept them, they should accept the burdens. Charges of racism, sexism, classism, and so forth cannot be used as a trump in these cases.

Second, tabulations of moral burdens between groups are insufficient grounds to render a prospective moral duty arbitrary or discriminatory. Imagine someone were to present this unlovely argument: Crimes of violence are not immoral. Stacks of reputable scientific studies prove that compared to individuals with low testosterone levels, those with high testosterone levels are significantly more apt to commit violent crimes. While this propensity can be attenuated by environmental factors such as relatively high socioeconomic status and minimal exposure to violent and highly aggressive situations, these conditions are only accessible to an overprivileged minority of the world’s population. As men have higher levels of testosterone than women, it is more difficult for them to live up to a sanction against violent crimes, especially if they are of lower socioeconomic status. Thus, such a sanction puts unjust burdens on men and implies they are ill-suited for morality and must work harder than women to be fully virtuous. If, rather than arbitrarily assume an overprivileged and female-biased norm, we

adopt a broader and male perspective, we will affirm the value of male bodies and deny an ethic that denounces crimes of violence.¹¹

The conjunction of the principle of nonarbitrariness and findings of testosterone levels and violence does not generate the conclusion that either men are inherently inferior to women or violent crimes are morally permissible. We can concede that men are more prone to commit violent crimes and still affirm that it is to the *advantage* of males (and everyone else) that they (and everyone else) accept a moral sanction against violent crimes. We can interpret the extra burden placed on boys and men as *favoring* male physiology. A person who strains every nerve to lead a moral life may be considered more praiseworthy than a person who does so with little or no effort (Singer 1993, 42; Pluhar 1994, 78).

Third, George's use of the principle of nonarbitrariness rests on a problematic weigh-off of the (supposed) perspectives of various groups of humans. Barring oppressive perspectives, a standard precept in feminist theory is that it is not for feminists or anyone else to dictate to others what their perspectives are or should be. Nonetheless, George assumes "the" perspectives of entire groups of people by imposing her perspective of what constitutes an unjust burden. This assumption is unwarranted. Many people are, and it is possible that they should be, willing to undertake greater nutritional challenges than overprivileged men must bear. Women should be entitled and encouraged to determine their ethical perspectives without questioning whether a prospective duty requires more of them than of overprivileged men. To weigh "our" moral burdens against "theirs" in this way is peculiar. In stark contrast to George's stated goals, this test for arbitrariness takes "the" standpoint of overprivileged men as the referential determinant of our ethics. That is to say, it alleges: "If they don't have to do x, neither do we!"

Fourth, when George asks from whose perspective we could plausibly choose ethical vegetarianism, she does not include the perspectives of nonhuman animals. This is inconsistent with the project George sets for herself. She takes nonhuman animals to be members of the moral community and aims to develop an ethic that is "egalitarian in its consideration of all members of the moral community" (2000, 10). She takes "the sufferings of animals . . . as morally important as those of humans" (2) and aims to keep their "potential for suffering, harm, and mortality . . . at the center of moral concern" (12). Heeding these beliefs, it seems that those who can adopt vegetarian diets with relative ease should do so—especially in heavily industrialized countries where most of the available flesh, eggs, and milk products come from factory farms, to which George herself "emphatically object[s]" (1994b, 407). The animals involved "do not want to be so treated, and we know that. If we listen, we can hear them" (Donovan 1990, 375). Even if they were not subjected to factory farms or otherwise abused, "Why kill any animal when it's not necessary to do

so?" (Pojman 2000, 123–24). As the Buddhist verse has it, "All beings tremble before violence. / All fear death. / All love life" (Dhammapada 10). Mindful of the perspectives of nonhuman animals, the choice of taking supplements and learning new ways to eat is *not* arbitrary. These burdens are deliberately chosen and petty in comparison to the pain, suffering, and deaths the adoption of vegetarian or vegan diets would curtail.¹²

Fifth, and finally, an adequate understanding of ethical vegetarianism is a requisite prelude to determining whether it has been arbitrarily affirmed. Here are the definitions of ethical vegetarianism and veganism George provides:

The ideal proposed by ethical vegetarianism [is] to live without killing animals or causing them any suffering. Many who strive to live as ethical vegetarians adopt the vegan diet and lifestyle, using no flesh, eggs, milk, or other animal products. This is the "vegan ideal" and those who adopt it on moral grounds believe that it is the best, most virtuous way to live. . . . Part of the politics of the vegan ideal is that it should be possible for all people to adopt this lifestyle. (2000, 2)

Augmenting these definitions, George hints at the diverse and overlapping spiritual, feminist, compassionate, and environmental reasons that funnel people in the direction of ethical vegetarianism.

Despite these gleanings, George targets the accounts of vegetarianism and veganism in the above quote, which are incorrect and simplistic. For instance, George is wrong in her assertion that ethical vegetarians idealize the goal of never killing nonhuman animals or contributing the slightest amount of suffering to their lives. Ethical vegetarians are a diverse group and do not uniformly accept this Jain-like belief.¹³ They are more apt to espouse a less rigid ideal: we should aim to avoid causing *unnecessary* harm and suffering to nonhuman animals. This ideal can be and is interpreted along a wide continuum of beliefs. Ethical vegetarians disagree on many pertinent issues, including the circumstances in and extent to which pain, suffering, and slaughter are justifiable; the amount of effort that should be exerted in this endeavor; and the role of species membership in these determinations.

Though few ethical vegetarians are vegan, George's critique of ethical vegetarianism pinpoints veganism and "the vegan ideal." Here too her portrayals are mistaken. She presents vegans as (1) convinced that "the best, most virtuous way to live" entails abstinence from nonhuman animal foods, and (2) committed to the goal of enabling and persuading (nearly) the entire human population to adopt vegan diets. One suspects a straw person argument is being set up for ease of refutation. George should be aware that many vegans are not morally offended by the consumption of nonhuman animal products *per se*. In the debate preceding her book, for instance, Evelyn Pluhar—a vegan—noted that *if* nonhuman

animals are treated well, we can enjoy some of their milk and eggs, and no one should object “to such a mutually beneficial arrangement” (1992, 192).

George’s simplistic accounts of ethical vegetarianism and veganism lead to absolutist verdicts on the moral superiority of dietary practices: abstaining from flesh in the case of ethical vegetarianism, and abstaining from nonhuman animal foods in the case of veganism. It is not *ethical* vegetarianism or veganism, but these rigid dietary habits and the goal of spreading them—especially dietary veganism—across the globe that George attacks.

The reason George pinpoints “the vegan ideal” is her belief that the “major defenses” of ethical vegetarianism “elevate . . . and morally idealize . . . the vegan lifestyle as most virtuous” (2000, 2–3). What is this esteemed ideal? As with other ethical positions, it depends on whom you ask. What it is *not*, however—barring the stance of the most eccentric and extreme vegans—is the belief that consuming nonhuman animal products is evil and would be outlawed in an ideal world. Though I cannot offer a definitive account of *the* vegan ideal (as there is no such thing), I will propose a more charitable account of a vegan ideal that arises in the general literature on ethical vegetarianism and the more specific literature on the feminist-vegetarian connection.

Ethical vegetarians have a diverse history that dates at least as far back as Pythagoras (c. 580 B.C.E.–500 B.C.E.) in the West and to early advocates of Hinduism (c. 6500 B.C.E.), Jainism (c. 7 B.C.E.), Taoism (c. 6 B.C.E.), and Buddhism (c. 6 B.C.E.) in the East. For most ethical vegetarians, concern for nonhuman animals informs their abstinence from flesh, and in many cases, other nonhuman animal products.

While vegans share in the long history of ethical vegetarianism, the word *vegan* did not emerge until 1944. In her tellingly titled book *Being Vegan: Living With Conscience, Conviction, and Compassion*, Joanne Stepaniak recounts the origins of this word:

It was derived from the word *vegetarian* by taking the first three letters (veg) and the last two letters (an) because, as Donald Watson [founding member of The Vegan Society] explained, “veganism starts with vegetarianism and carries it through to its logical conclusion.” (2000, 1)

As understood by the first group of self-identified vegans, The Vegan Society, ethical vegetarianism encases the belief that to achieve a “reasonable and humane society” we must eliminate all forms of exploitation (Stepaniak 2000, 1). Had The Vegan Society formed during or after the new left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the goal of eliminating all forms of oppression would likely have eclipsed their focus on exploitation.

Advocates of the feminist-vegetarian connection (and many other ethical vegetarians) take this broad agenda, along with environmentalism, as the hub

of veganism. Thus akin to praxis opposing oppression, veganism is often indistinguishable from feminism, and those who aim to live up to a vegan ideal find that it permeates their lives. In addition to affecting what they eat, wear, and purchase, it affects how they interact with other humans, what they say and laugh at and refuse to say and laugh at, who and what they vote for, where they live and with whom, their engagement in political and charitable activities, their thoughts on parenting, what they do for a living, their relationships with other animals and the rest of nature, and so forth.

This is an ideal and a lofty one at that. It is not something that most of us are willing (or able) to take up *in toto*. But as Stepaniak stresses, "From its inception, veganism was defined as a philosophy and a way of living. It was never intended to be merely a diet. *Vegan* still today describes a lifestyle and belief system that revolves around a reverence for life" (1). Given the foregoing account of veganism, have we any reason to charge its devotees with parading a "might makes right" pseudo-ethic in homage to "the ruling, patriarchal class"? (2000, 115, xi).

Yes, in George's estimation, we do: science. She presents her argument as a refutation of "the facts" that uphold ethical vegetarianism; namely, that vegetarian and vegan diets can meet the needs of most humans without imposing undue burdens or risks (2000, 127). To show that support runs contrary to this claim, George presents herself as an authority on these diets.¹⁴ But she is not; she is a philosopher with training in genetics.

There is no reason to accept, and many reasons to dispel, George's rendition of the facts. For instance, though nutritionists indicate that "perspectives of vegetarian and vegan diets have shifted 180° over the course of a few short decades" (Davis and Melina 2000, 14), George does not incorporate up-to-date studies into her book. Most of the nutrition research she uses is from the mid to late 1980s, and none of it postdates 1994. Using this dated and often outmoded literature, George trots out "significant burdens and risks" of vegetarian and vegan diets as established facts. But her findings are contentious and were contentious long before her book was published.¹⁵

Gauged against the opinions of leading nutritional authorities, George's negative appraisal of vegetarian and vegan diets is unfair and alarmist. The nutrition literature does suggest that healthy vegan diets require more planning than healthy semivegetarian diets, but leading authorities do not present the former as significantly more complex or dependent on supplements and fortified foods than the latter. They do not present vegan diets as ill suited for most humans, but finely equipped for overprivileged men. They do not warn that many women, children, and others will become visibly (or otherwise) sick if they follow these diets with reasonable precautions,¹⁶ nor do they warn that women may need excuses to consume flesh or milk products during nutritionally demanding times such as pregnancy and lactation.¹⁷

George may respond that this dismissal of her research fails to take seriously her concerns about unsupplemented vegan diets and the contexts that make it difficult to achieve health on them. That vegans do not uphold absolutist prohibitions on nonhuman animal products depletes the oomph of this concern. Further grounds to quell any residual doubts emerge throughout this paper and should be evident as such.

II. AFFIRM THE VALUE OF THE FEMALE BODY

In George's view, ethical vegetarians devalue the female body and expect women to "live as if physiologically identical to men" (2000, 16). Achieving health on a vegan diet is much easier for overprivileged men than it is for most women, she argues, and by implication, women who want to live up to the "vegan ideal" must "fix, mend, or correct [our] imperfect bodies as necessary (by supplementation, fortified foods, or eating in special ways)" (129).

This is an odd way of thinking. Overprivileged male vegans are also advised to take B₁₂ supplements, consume fortified products, and follow other dietary guidelines. Staples of overprivileged omnivores are fortified to prevent nutritional deficiencies. Do those who use these products (or other interventions) to ensure their health have defective bodies? Do they disrespect their "essential" perfection and live "inauthentically"? Returning to the case in question, I do not see the moral relevance of the fact or supposition that generally speaking, women benefit from taking more supplements than men require; nor do I see why anyone would accept this as evidence of female inferiority.

Unlike ethical vegetarianism, George claims, her position affirms the value of the female body. But consider this scenario: A young vegan undergraduate student is a female and a feminist. She knows the basics of vegan nutrition and meets her needs by following "The New Four Food Groups" (PCRM 2003). She is proud of her action and feels she is making a difference; she has even convinced her partner and some friends to become vegan. She no longer feels guilty for consuming meat or supporting factory farms. Her actions are aligned to her emotions, her rational inclinations, and her burgeoning spiritual beliefs.

Now our student, let us call her Tanya, reads George's work and is told she is making a virtue of her own oppression (1994b, 429). Her supposed ideal is best suited to well-off and well-educated men who are 20–50 years of age. Her partner, who fits this category, can expect to succeed on her ideal with minimal risk; indeed, it will most likely benefit him. But, she is told, a vegan diet is not well suited to her physiology or that of the vegan children she dreams of someday having. She is "So Animal a Human," and must consider "The Moral Relevance of Being an Omnivore." To respect the bodies and contexts of those who are not overprivileged men, she must embrace quasi-ethical semivegetarianism. The thought of anyone eating "meat" in celebration of the female body makes her

queasy and ashamed. "If George's arguments are true," Tanya reflects, "there is something 'red in tooth and claw' about me of which my partner is spared. Since killing or harming any animal is an evil, and *my* body is best fed by the victims of this evil, while *his* body can thrive on a vegan diet with relative ease, perhaps his body is better than mine."

Why give steam to evaluations of the relative moral and physiological worth of female and male bodies? This pastime promotes oppressive thought processes and should be discouraged. If we affirm the equality of women and men, the question of which sex has the physiologically or morally superior body is superfluous (Tavris 1992). George would agree. But she believes her discussion worthwhile. She points to RDAs and informs "those who . . . want to understand the facts" (2000, 18) that, because of the different needs of the sexes, women are more apt to suffer nutritional deficiencies on vegetarian diets than are men. Hence, she alleges, "ethical vegetarianism presupposes a health ideal rooted in the positive reality of the adult male body and the inherent lack of the bodies of the others to measure up to that norm" (131). If ethical vegetarianism gains speed, she fears, "more women will suffer ill physical health and come to be seen as inferior to males. Or if they give up the moral ideal, they will be seen as inferior and less perfect than males" (156). Either disjunct of this Catch-22 will perpetuate the "false and unjust belief (or suspicion) that women . . . are *morally* weaker because they are *physically* weaker" (17).

Nutritionists agree that infants, women, and children "are at greater risk for nutritional deficiency than are adult males regardless of the diet chosen" (Mangels and Havala 1994, 118). Conceding this point, we may wonder how this increased risk affects overall health. Taking George's approach, we should expect to find that generally speaking, women, infants, children, and many others are weaker and less healthy than 20- to 50-year-old men.

But why gauge the overall health prospects of women and men by the statistical likelihood that members of each sex will develop nutritional deficiencies? This is *a* factor that influences health, but it is not the *only* factor. If we partake in a comparative analysis of male and female bodies, we should use more than one obscure desideratum. We should adopt a broader and more reasonable set of criteria, such as that advocated by Ashley Montagu:

If you function in such a way as to live longer, be more resistant, healthier, and behave in a manner generally calculated to enable you and your progeny to survive more efficiently than others who do not function as efficiently, then by the measure of our definition of superiority you are superior to others. (1977, 366)

With this as our standard, we can amass scientific studies and health and longevity statistics galore, all attesting to the fact that, irrespective of diet chosen, females have a significant health advantage over males. We could thus confess:

the “natural superiority of women is a biological fact, and a socially unacknowledged reality” (Montagu 1977, 374).

For too long, men have thought themselves physiologically superior to women. This illusion was sustained by hypnotically focusing on traits that favor their bodies over ours and silencing or distorting evidence that favors female bodies. Simply because men are usually bigger and more muscular than women, they thought themselves stronger, more resistant to diseases, hardier, and healthier. However fallacious, the myth inspired by the conflation of “big and strong” and “healthy and happy” is still burning. Why suggest a new conflation that arbitrarily favors men?

RESPONSES TO GEORGE’S GLOBAL CHALLENGES

I. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

George’s charge of cultural imperialism is derived from a broadened application of her central feminist arguments. Many of the above rebuttals can be used against it. Even so, this charge demands more attention; it is perhaps the most cited and robust challenge to the feminist-vegetarian connection.

Are Western feminists who promote ethical vegetarianism guilty of cultural imperialism? This question was raised at the 1990 NWSA Conference. The prevailing sentiment matched George’s charge of cultural imperialism. Most of the feminists present thought of ethical vegetarianism as “a white woman’s imposing her ‘dietary’ concerns on women of color” (Adams 1994, 123). A white woman’s imposing her dietary concerns? Ethical vegetarianism is idiosyncratic *in* the West, not *to* the West. In North America, vegetarians constitute roughly 5 percent of the population, and vegans less than 1 percent (Davis and Melina 2000, 12). In comparison, most of the non-Western human population is vegetarian or nearly so (Fox 1999, 183). While this is often of necessity rather than by choice, many of these vegetarians are morally committed to abstaining from flesh (Gupta 1986, 3).

The International Vegetarian Union has been “Promoting Vegetarianism Worldwide Since 1908” (IVU 2003). On their Web site is a map that marks the territories housing a branch of their association: Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, Russia, Latin America, and North America. The only unmarked land region is the North Pole. The billions of vegetarians dispersed throughout the continents, islands, and countries of the world are not following an ideal the West has developed and forced, coerced, or swayed them to follow. There is, as Donovan says, no reason to accept George’s charge that ethical vegetarianism “is the product of a wealthy society,” and harbors “class bias” against so-called less developed societies (1995; citing George 1994b, 408).

However thunderous our hubris, the West does not have a monopoly on ethical vegetarianism. To suggest otherwise silences the diversity of ethical vegetarians and suspiciously ignores Western traditions as though they are irrelevant to the feminist-vegetarian debate. But they *are* relevant. We have turkeys for thanksgiving, ice cream with our birthday cakes, “chicken soup for the soul,” and summertime barbeques. At our conferences, weddings, and cafeterias, in our lunch bags and homes, most of the foods we eat contain flesh, eggs, or milk products. To treat ethical vegetarianism as an ideal that Westerners want to force on the rest of the human population is to lose hold of reality. In reality, it is *we* who would have to change the most if humans became a vegetarian species. And it is *we* who would most disparage the loss of nonhuman animal foods. Most of the human population would not feel the pinch. They live it.

George could grant these points and still maintain that *our* advocacy of ethical vegetarianism comes from a privileged Western perspective—we are privileged Westerners, after all. Given the power and influence of the West, she is concerned that the threat of cultural imperialism holds with *any* value it embraces. If Westerners sanctify ethical vegetarianism, she argues, the rest of the human population would feel pressure to do the same. This would put most humans into a double bind that threatens their health and relegates them to a moral underclass.

Checked against reality and a charitable account of ethical vegetarianism, this is a flimsy rejoinder. As we have seen, most humans are already vegetarian or nearly so. The amount of flesh, milk products, or eggs consumed by those who cannot meet their needs through any other source “must constitute a minuscule portion of the total consumption of animal foods” (Francione 2000, 16). Affluent persons like us are the main consumers of these products. *We* are eating bologna and cheese and yogurt and steak. *We* have access to a wide range of foods and cannot claim that eating chicken’s flesh or drinking cow’s milk is essential for our health.

Rather than focus on those who are impoverished or live in quite different contexts than our own, we should “focus our reform efforts *on ourselves*” (Pluhar 1993; Varner 1994c, 15). Most ethical vegetarians agree that it would not be immoral to kill nonhuman animals “if our health depended on meat, as is the case in arctic climates and some ‘less developed’ cultures.”¹⁸ Those who consume flesh because they are “struggling to survive” do not flunk ethical vegetarianism; they “operate under a different set of ethical standards entirely” (Gaard 1993a, 298). As noted in response to George’s earlier work, “Nowhere has anyone issued a mandate for universal ethical vegetarianism” (Gaard and Gruen 1995, 238).

George might protest that her opponents still miss the point of her argument. She is not convinced that Gaard and Gruen, Varner, Adams, Pluhar, and other

ethical vegetarians advocate a contextual ideal. They present vegetarianism as a moral default position. This will not do, George argues, as it arbitrarily favors those who can safely abstain from flesh, and does not permit people of different cultures, circumstances, and ways of life to arrive at their own ways of forging moral relationships with nonhuman animals.

Might there be something to George's claim that her opponents advocate a noncontextual position? However wide the differences among ethical vegetarians, my experiences with them and their literature suggest that most of them *do* uphold a normative position—the one George was earlier quoted promoting:

Depending on context, eating small amounts of meat is appropriate, but limited by the moral considerations prohibiting cruelty, violence, and waste. Raising and killing animals in conditions of frustration of natural behaviors or of pain and suffering is morally wrong in any case. (2000, 163)

Evidently, George considers this prohibition free of cultural imperialism. If ethical vegetarians accept this norm rather than the rigid dietary one George attributes to them, the questions in need of answers are questions of interpretation. What does this moral limitation require of us? Does it ever entail vegetarianism or veganism? Can we abide by it while causing unnecessary harm to nonhuman animals? Before further discussing these unanswered questions and George's charge of cultural imperialism, I will refute the last two of her core arguments.

II. JUDGMENTAL VEGETARIANS AND THE *UNTERVEGAN* MAJORITY

If she and others promote contextual vegetarianism, George worries, those who are expected to be vegan may think of themselves (and be thought of by others) as the superiors of those who are not. Were anyone to have such a provisional duty, she argues, it would be overprivileged men. Those who are not expected to be vegetarians may aim to live up to this "ideal" and find themselves ill as a result. Or, they may lose status by consuming flesh, and be treated with less respect than they currently receive.

This argument expresses angst about a foul mode of judgment: those who have, and live up to, a provisional duty to be vegan may scorn those who do not as *untervegan* degenerates. They might do this, the anxiety builds, even if non-vegans were doing their best and enjoyed laudable relationships with nonhuman animals. This mode of judgment is unsettling and unfair. Ethical vegetarians who judge people in this way should readjust their standards. Those who do their best to act with compassion for others are living up to the core values of ethical vegetarianism; they deserve praise, respect, and congratulations.

While the mode of judgment that George links to ethical vegetarianism is repulsive, it is not a necessary or welcome part of ethical vegetarianism. Under such headings as “vegan diplomacy” and “vegan etiquette,” the virtues of not being rude and indignant to nonvegetarians are extolled in vegetarian books and websites (Davis and Melina 2000, 262–69; Stepaniak 2000, 94–101). We are reminded that most of us were once on the other side of the fork. We are told, and tell ourselves, that promoting our ideals with anger and hostility will likely add to rather than detract from the misery of the world—for both ourselves and the recipients of our rage.

This is easier preached than lived. And so, ethical vegetarians often appear to be (or are) indignant and hostile. While this is disturbing, it should be considered against the fact that feminists are also dismissed as self-righteous zealots who are angry with the world. What feminist cannot conjure an anecdote of responding to sexism with hostility, anger, or some other explosion of emotion? When we see this kind of response in the face and actions of other feminists, we should accept the possibility that their upset is warranted, even if they come across as misguided or offensive.¹⁹

In the argument we are discussing, George weaves a lot of yarn into an odd hypothetical: All else remaining the same, the Western status quo embraces veganism and measures the moral worth of nations and individuals by their ability to adopt vegan diets (and do so in good health). What nerve George assigns this would-be horde of ethical vegetarians! They retain their first world splendor and scorn the people they oppress for not achieving health on whatever dregs they manage to eat. It should go without saying that advocates of the *feminist-vegetarian* connection would condemn this elitist tyranny. Once again, ethical vegetarians are aware that morality extends beyond food choices. They do not praise or denounce humans the world over solely in virtue of what goes into their mouths. George’s focus on this “bogy of universal veganism” detracts attention from more compelling and realistic concerns (Fox 1999, 156–59).

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION: THE “ECOFEMINIST DILEMMA”

The goal of converting humans into a vegetarian species is, according to George, inconsistent with environmentalism. On her count, healthy vegetarian and vegan diets require access to fortified foods, supplements, a dietitian, and many other advantages. To make these available to all humans, she argues, the West would have to export our “industrialized” food system and its resultant environmental decay to the rest of the world.

This argument has many faults. First, though most humans are lactose intolerant and belong to cultures that have been predominantly vegetarian for centuries, George presents Western science and tools as necessary for achieving

health on vegetarian or vegan diets. The non-Western population has far more experience with these diets than we do. There must be several ways “we could learn more from them about vegetarian diets than they can from us” (Pluhar 1993, 194). In any event, the “presumption . . . that ‘the majority of the world’s population’ needs Western nutritional intervention smacks, frankly, of cultural imperialism” (Donovan 1995, 227).

Second, George gives little wind to health risks that would arise if most humans adopt flesh-eating, which is by far the leading cause of food poisoning (Gupta 1986, 79). Most of the world’s poorest humans are not experienced with the slaughter of animals for food, let alone the proper storage, cutting, preparing, and cooking of flesh. Many of these humans have low levels of education, which would increase the difficulty of teaching them safe handling procedures. They also lack the resources to safely preserve flesh. They have no refrigeration, no chemicals to treat the flesh, limited or inconsistent standards of sanitation, and in many cases, they cannot turn to the media to criticize the government or regulatory agencies for low safety standards (79).

Third, George overestimates the amount of fortification and supplementation necessary for health on vegetarian or vegan diets. The Farm, a spiritual community that was founded in Tennessee in 1971, is committed to “simple living and self-reliance” and has been the home of as many as 750 vegan adults and an equal number of vegan children at one time (Yntema and Beard 1999, 29–30). This group has been intensively studied by scientists interested in vegan nutrition. Over the years, they have learned how to meet their dietary needs with minimal reliance on industrialization. Here is how they do it: “Soy milk manufactured on the Farm is fortified with vitamins A, B-12, and D, and supplementation of vitamin B-12 is obtained through the use of fortified nutritional yeast” (Yntema and Beard 1999, 30). By importing these few supplements, vegans on The Farm, of whatever age or sex, are able to meet their needs while living in an environmentally sustainable way.

Others do well on vegan diets without nutritional assistance from a heavily industrialized food system. Consider the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico, the Hunza people in the Himalayas in Pakistani Kashmir, the Vilcamanmas who live in Ecuador, and the Abkhasians who live in Georgia (a former Soviet satellite state), Azerbaijan, and Armenia. These people thrive on vegan or nearly vegan diets, and are often celebrated as the healthiest, most enduring, and longest-living humans (Gupta 1986, 89–92).

Fourth, even if humans the world over do require products from a heavily “industrialized” society to achieve health on vegetarian diets, ensuring that everyone acquires these resources is not inconsistent with the goals of environmentalism. It does not require an *overall* increase in industrialization, but only an increase in *a few sectors*. Other sectors can and should be reduced, such as the military; the flesh, egg, and milk industries; space programs; the

automobile industry; the “beauty” and diet industries; and the industries that produce, package, sell, and then attempt to cure the preventable diseases caused by cigarettes, fast foods, junk foods, and alcohol.

Fifth, to use the world’s resources in an egalitarian and environmentally sustainable way, widespread vegetarianism is ideal.²⁰ Compared to vegetarian diets, omnivorous diets require significantly more water, land, and energy to produce the same amount of food, and create a greater amount of pollution and waste. Most humans who are poor—a sizeable percentage of all humans—are already vegetarian or nearly so. Chances are, they will have even *less* to eat and drink if they use their “precious land and water resources . . . only to produce the most expensive food thus to produce the most expensive diseases” (Campbell 1997). The relatively few humans who enjoy routine access to flesh, eggs, and milk products should consider the drain of resources and environmental decay caused by these privileges. They should take seriously “the fact that many people in developing nations, as well as in our own, are nutritionally deprived *precisely because of* capitalist control of meat production, world agriculture, and food distribution” (Fox 1999, 159).

BEGGING THE QUESTION

At this point, George could still maintain that promoting widespread vegetarianism is imperialistic and does not respect the ability of humans from diverse backgrounds and contexts to arrive at their own ways of forging moral relationships with other animals.

This rejoinder implies that it is permissible to kill nonhuman animals or otherwise harm them when there is no need to do so. Advocates of the feminist-vegetarian connection believe that it is (almost always) oppressive to kill nonhuman animals or subject them to unnecessary pain or suffering. Doing so not only lacks compassion, they argue, but is interconnected with and reinforces other forms of oppression. Like sexism, racism, and ableism, nonhuman animals are arbitrarily discriminated against when we deny their subjectivity, stereotype them, and use their differences as a warrant to abuse them for our benefit.

Though the above contains the germ of the feminist-vegetarian position, George begs the question against these challenges. Without argument, she asserts that “moralizing about meat-eating in other cultures is inconsistent with feminism” (2000, 9). Provided nonhuman animals live decent lives, she declares, we can kill them for food, even if we can get our nourishment elsewhere. Without explanation or defense of her delineations, she classes some nonhuman animals as “food animals” (11). If it is permissible to kill pigs, cows, and lambs for their flesh, can we do the same to dogs, pandas, and chimpanzees? If some species are off-limits, as humans undoubtedly are, what *morally relevant distinction* spares them from our dinner plates?²¹

George's answer to this question is wrapped in her words: "Animals should be empowered to realize their species natures, but humans need freedom to create their individual natures" (154). Thus, she maintains, comparing the oppression of women with that of nonhuman animals is "specious" (154). Though George takes this nature-creating ability as evidence that we must not harm or kill humans as we do other animals, she simply assumes that we are the only species who enjoy this trait and does not account for humans who cannot create their natures any more so than pigs or chickens.

If this trait is as significant as George attests, should we concede that it is also specious to compare the oppression of these humans to that of "normal" humans? This question belongs to the unfortunately labeled "argument from marginal cases."²² If we take the lack of certain traits to justify imposing harm on nonhuman animals, the argument goes, we should accept the moral permissibility of treating humans who lack these traits in the same way.²³ Otherwise, we are guilty of speciesism—arbitrarily privileging or harming a person because of her or his species.

Human or otherwise, whether we think some animals lack certain valuable traits, the goal of legitimately explaining why this (supposed) lack entitles us to cause them pain or kill them when there is no need to do so is, I dare say, beyond hopeless. Pointing to the differences of others to justify harming them is far removed from sound feminist thinking. No feminist worth the name would submit to arranging humans or others along a value-hierarchy and treating those with, say, less intelligence in ways that fail to respect their interests and feelings.

Despite these heavy concerns, George gives only indirect arguments to prove that it is permissible to needlessly harm or kill nonhuman animals. She aims to reduce ethical vegetarianism to absurdity by showing that it harbors oppressive consequences for most humans. Similarly styled arguments are often forwarded by those with power over others in attempts to continue oppression: *We* cannot abolish slavery because without slave labor the state would crumble. *We* cannot liberate women because patriarchy is necessary for social, familial, and political order. *We* cannot allow lesbian or gay marriages because this would corrupt the sanctity of marriage. Excepting those who utter such foul arguments as these, *reductio ad absurdum* appeals are no longer considered esteemed ways to justify (what is now known to be) the oppression of certain humans. Nor, for that matter, are any methods of persuasion acceptable means to this end.

In trying to reduce ethical vegetarianism to absurdity, George neither engages with advocates of the feminist-vegetarian connection on our terms, nor does she arrive at a middle ground that takes our perspectives seriously. Obviously, we believe it is legitimate to ask whether feminists from other cultures and contexts should be, or aim at becoming, vegetarians. Obviously, we do not consider our ethical beliefs specious. Each year, billions of nonhuman animals

are treated without regard for their ability to suffer deprivation, loneliness, and pain. This is our main concern. So that we can enjoy a tasty dinner and get what “Milk Gives,” they suffer empty, tortuous lives and conveyor belt deaths. This, we believe, is shameful, intolerable, and oppressive; supporting or condoning this abuse is immoral and antithetical to feminist goals if, and to the extent that, it can be reasonably avoided.

SIMPLE ANTICRUELTY

“Our grandchildren will ask us one day: Where were you during the Holocaust of the animals? What did you do against these horrifying crimes? We won’t be able to offer the same excuse for the second time, that we didn’t know” (Helmut Kaplan, cited by Patterson 2002, 221). George’s critique of ethical vegetarianism is deeply flawed. Her attempted *reductio* disregards the core challenges raised by advocates of the feminist-vegetarian connection. Since it fails, we are left without reason to accept her categorization of some nonhuman animals as “food animals” as anything other than arbitrary and oppressive. She does not prove that we are morally permitted to add to the pain, suffering, and death of nonhuman animals when there is no need to do so. It is my sincere hope that readers who find this permissible will aim to present a credible and non-question-begging account of oppression in defense of this thesis. I believe that the attempt will be unsuccessful, but revealing.

In the interim, consider that George advocates a moral limitation against violence, cruelty, and waste—which I have argued to be the motor of ethical vegetarianism—and accordingly concedes that “raising and killing animals in conditions of frustration of natural behaviors or of pain and suffering is morally wrong in any case” (2000, 163). In the West, nearly all of the available flesh, milk products, and eggs are the output of cruel, violent, and wasteful practices. Tellingly, George—the leading opponent of the feminist-vegetarian connection—is convinced that it takes no more than “a traditional, ‘common sense,’ anti-cruelty view [to] outlaw the kind of inhumane treatment that animals receive in intensive agricultural systems today” (2000, 68). Following this simple anticruelty view, we must avoid these products to the greatest extent possible and reasonable. For most readers of this paper, this requires the adoption of ethical vegetarianism, if not veganism.

NOTES

This paper is a refined version of the main arguments in my master’s thesis (Lucas 2002). Warm thanks are owed to Michael A. Fox, David Sztybel, Christine Overall, Maggie

Berg, Evelyn Pluhar, Matthew Harnaga, anonymous reviewers of this paper, and the Department of Philosophy at Queen's University.

1. In the United States, more than nine billion nonhuman animals are slaughtered for food each year (Dunayer 2001, 135). In Canada, the death toll is over half a billion each year, "or nearly 1.5 million per day" (Fox 1999, 76). Globally, the numbers are estimated at "31.1 billion each year," which breaks down to "85.2 million each day, 3.5 million each hour, 59,170 each minute" (Adams 1990/2000, dedication). More unsettling than the number of lives lost, "Only the tiniest fraction of [these] animals . . . were treated during their lives in ways that respected their interests" (Singer 2000, 70). On the maltreatment of nonhuman animals by the flesh, milk, and egg industries, see Davis 1996; Dunayer 2001, 125–48; Francione 2000, 9–22; Marcus 2002, 89–143; Robbins 1987, 48–145; 2001, 153–230.

2. See Adams 1991, 1994, 1995; Adams and Donovan 1996, 1999; Adams and Procter-Smith 1993; Donovan 1995; Dunayer 2001; Fox 1999; Gaard 1993a, 1993b, 1997; Gaard and Gruen 1995; George 1990, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1995, 2000; Kheel 1993; MacKinnon and McIntyre, 1995; Pluhar 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995; Plumwood 1990, 1999; Szybel 2000. For a more comprehensive list of relevant resources, see Adams and Donovan 1999, 353–61.

3. While outlining George's position, I will use her preferred word choices. They add to her argument by reinforcing the idea that humans are not animals and cannot rightly be categorized with them. For an engaging discussion of speciesist language, see Dunayer 2001.

4. The RDAs were established by the National Research Council of the United States National Academy of Sciences. As of 1997, the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences replaced the RDA system with a more complex Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) system, which better accounts for variations in nutritional needs due to factors such as age, sex, build, and pregnancy.

5. The reader may be baffled as to "why George does not expand the female criteria to include women who have *chosen* not to bear children" (Fox 1999, 212n17). George hints at a solution to this mystery in a later article: "Because women usually remain capable of childbearing for most of their adult lives, women may have different nutrient needs than men even when they are not gestating or lactating" (1994b, 419).

6. The group to which this term applies alters slightly throughout George's work. In her most recent work she delineates the group as follows: "Although most men age 20–50 in industrialized countries can choose to be vegetarians without significant risk or burdens, the same cannot be said for . . . infants, children, adolescents, gestating and lactating women, . . . some elderly people," and those who lack the necessary resources (2000, 79).

7. This conviction is expressed more explicitly in George's later articles, where she clarifies that she finds "moral rights theory . . . untenable," but "affirm[s] the value of equality [as] an important principle because of its association with impartiality and justice. Impartiality requires the moral person to judge based on the *morally relevant conditions*. . . . To be impartial we must give equal consideration to each being affected by our decisions" (1994c, 44–45).

8. One segue from this conviction occurred in 1992 as George defended what appears to be a diluted version of her 1990 argument. In response to criticisms made by

Evelyn Pluhar (1992), George argued that at best, veganism may be a provisional duty, but “even then one must be wary” (1992, 255).

9. Pluhar charges George with updating her stance on the safety of vegetarian and vegan diets between 1990 and 1992 without admitting the shortcomings of her earlier position (1993, 80n3). This is not true, George responded (unconvincingly, I think), though it would appear otherwise for someone who uses a well-off “first worlder” as a normative standard (1994c, 48).

10. In this paper, *ecofeminist* refers to ecofeminists who affirm the feminist-vegetarian connection. Though there are some exceptions, most “ecofeminists who include animals within their understanding of dominated nature” advocate ethical vegetarianism (Adams 1994, 110).

11. This example does not include differential health risks between groups of people, but it is an apt analogy to George’s position. She emphasizes that her main concern is not health risks, but differential burdens and the perspective from which we determine which burdens are acceptable (129).

12. In a lifetime, the average American consumes “43 pigs, 3 lambs, 11 cows, 4 ‘veal’ calves, 2,555 chickens and turkeys, and 861 fishes” (Adams 1990/2000, 78n1).

13. Taking perfect *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as the pinnacle of virtue, Jains are known to cautiously sweep the ground as they walk and wear cloth over their mouths to avoid killing or harming any living creature.

14. George briefly notes her lack of expertise in the field of nutrition (2000, x). Nonetheless, she presents herself as qualified to offer an authoritative literature review “to inform readers who may be current vegetarians or are considering this diet” (x), and counsel on vegetarian diets “to aid the concerned person who may be responsible for aging parents or young children” (2000, 18).

15. Years before the publication of *Animal, Vegetable, or Woman?* many challenges were made to George’s interpretation of the scientific literature (Pluhar 1992, 1993, 1994; Varner 1994a, 1994b; Adams 1995; Donovan 1995; Gaard and Gruen 1995). Nutritionists entered the debate and offered statements on the respective health risks of vegan and semivegetarian diets for women, children, and others (Dwyer and Loew 1994; Mangels and Havala 1994), none of which sanctioned or clearly defended George’s position.

16. George’s supposed concession to this point is undermined by a sleight of hand. She trades *reasonable* precautions for “careful planning” that is so difficult for most women, children, and others that it amounts to an unjust and “significant burden” that many will not be able to carry without becoming sick or taking breaks to consume flesh or milk products.

17. See ADA 1997; ADA and DC 2000; Barnard 1994, 1997; Davis and Melina 2000; Havala 1997; Klaper 1994, 1999; Langley 1995; Mangels and Havala 1994; Mark Messina and Virginia Messina 1996; Virginia Messina and Mark Messina 1996; PCRM 2003; Saunders 2003.

18. See Pojman 2000, 124; cf. Fox 1999, 177; Francione 2000, 16; Gaard and Gruen 1995, 238; Pluhar 1992, 210; Varner 1994c, 15.

19. This passage was inspired by Marilyn Frye 1983, 111–12.

20. See Cohen 1995; Jacobs 2003; Marcus 2002, 153–93; Pimentel 1993; Robbins 1987, 308–80; 2001, 231–304).

21. There may be concern that this way of thinking slips into rights talk and thus follows a patriarchal mode of reasoning. I disagree. To ascertain whether it is permissible to reduce certain animals to food items, we must ask if there are legitimate reasons for doing so and examine the (in)consistency of our emotional responses and ethical commitments.

22. On the strength of this argument in favor of animal liberation, see Pluhar 1995, 63–123.

23. Some opponents of animal liberation—such as A. V. Townsend and Peter Caruthers—concede this point and give indirect reasons to safeguard “marginal” humans from being “treated like animals.” While this makes their positions consistent, it does not make them appealing. Most of us are appalled by the claim that it is only indirectly immoral to cause unnecessary pain and suffering to “marginal” humans.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Carol J. 2000. *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. Tenth anniversary edition. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- . 1995. Comment on George’s Should feminists be vegetarians? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21 (1): 221–25.
- . 1994. *Neither man nor beast: Feminism and the defense of animals*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- . 1991. Ecofeminism and the eating of animals. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 6 (1): 125–45.
- . 1975. The oedible complex: Feminism and vegetarianism. In *The lesbian reader*, ed. Gina Covina and Laurel Galana. California: Amazon Press.
- Adams, Carol J., and Josephine Donovan, eds. 1996. *Beyond animal rights: A feminist caring ethic for the treatment of animals*. New York: Continuum.
- . 1995. *Animals & women: Feminist theoretical explorations*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Adams, Carol J., and Marjorie Procter-Smith. 1993. Taking life or “taking on life”? Table talk and animals. In *Ecofeminism and the sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams. New York: Continuum.
- American Dietetic Association (ADA). 1997. Vegetarian diets. ADA position paper. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 97 (11): 1317–21.
- American Dietetic Association and Dieticians of Canada (ADA and DC). 2000. *Manual of clinical dietetics*. 6th ed, Chicago: American Dietetic Association.
- Barnard, Neal. 1994. *Food for life: How the new four food groups can save your life*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Campbell, T. Colin. 1997. Associations of diet and disease: A comprehensive study of health characteristics in China. Paper presented at conference, *Unintended Social Consequences of Chinese Economic Reform*, jointly organized by the Harvard School of Public Health and the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, May 23–24, at Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Printed in T. Colin Campbell, Still more

- bull! *EarthSave*, <http://www.earthsave.org/morebull.htm> (accessed September 16, 2004).
- Cohen, Joel E. 1997. *Eat right, live longer: Using the natural power of foods to age-proof your body*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- . 1995. *How many people can the earth support?* New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Davis, Brenda, and Vesanto Melina. 2000. *Becoming vegan: The complete guide to adopting a healthy plant-based diet*. Summertown, Tenn.: Book Publishing Company.
- Davis, Karen. 1996. *Prisoned chickens, poisoned eggs: An inside look at the modern poultry industry*. Summertown, Tenn.: Book Publishing Company.
- Dhammapada: The sayings of the Buddha*. 1993. Trans. Thomas Byrom. Boston: Shambhala Pocket Classics.
- Donovan, Josephine. 1995. Comment on George's "Should feminists be vegetarians?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21 (1): 226–29.
- . 1990. Animal rights and feminist theory. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15 (2): 350–75.
- Dunayer, Joan. 2001. *Animal equality: Language and liberation*. Derwood, Md.: Ryce Publishing.
- Dwyer, Johanna, and Franklin M. Loew. 1994. Nutritional risks of vegan diets to women and children: Are they preventable? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 87–109.
- Fox, Michael Allen. 1999. *Deep vegetarianism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Francione, Gary. 2000. *Introduction to animal rights: Your child or the dog?* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. New York: Crossing Press.
- Gaard, Greta. 1997. *Ecological politics: Ecofeminists and the greens*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- . 1993a. Ecofeminism and Native American cultures: Pushing the limits of cultural imperialism? In *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature*, ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- , ed. 1993b. *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gaard, Greta, and Lori Gruen. 1995. Comment on George's Should feminists be vegetarians? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21 (1): 230–41.
- George, Kathryn Paxton. 2000. *Animal, vegetable, or woman? A feminist critique of ethical vegetarianism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- . 1995. Reply to Adams, Donovan, and Gaard and Gruen. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21 (1): 242–60.
- . 1994a. Discrimination and bias in the vegan ideal. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 19–28.
- . 1994b. Should feminists be vegetarians? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19 (2): 405–34.
- . 1994c. Use and abuse revisited: Response to Pluhar and Varner. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 41–76.

- . 1992. The use and abuse of scientific studies. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 5 (2): 217–33.
- . 1990. So animal a human . . . ; or, The moral relevance of being an omnivore. *Journal of Agricultural Ethics* 3 (2): 172–86.
- Gruen, Lori. 1993. Dismantling oppression: An analysis of the connection between women and animals. In *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature*, ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gupta, Surinder Nath. 1986. *Vegetarianism: A human imperative*. India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Havala, Suzanne. 1997. *The vegetarian food guide and nutrition counter*. New York: Berkley Books.
- International Vegetarian Union Home Page (IVU). 2003. <http://www.ivu.org> (accessed March 20, 2003).
- Jacobs, Lynn. 2003. *Waste of the west: Public lands ranching*. Tuscon: Lynn Jacobs, P.O. Box 5784, 1991. http://www.apnm.org/waste_of_west/index.htm (accessed February 1, 2003).
- Kheel, Marti. 1993. From heroic to holistic ethics: The ecofeminist challenge. In *Ecofeminism: women, animals, nature*, ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Klaper, Michael. 1999. *Vegan nutrition: Pure and simple*. 4th ed. Hawaii: Gentle World.
- . 1988. *Pregnancy, children, and the vegan diet*. Hawaii: Gentle World.
- Langley, Gill. 1995. *Vegan nutrition: A survey of research*. Oxford: The Vegan Society, 1988. 2d ed. London, U.K.: The Vegan Society.
- Lucas, Sheri Ann. 2002. Should feminists be vegetarians? A feminist defense of ethical vegetarianism. Master's thesis. Queen's University at Kingston.
- MacKinnon, Mary Heather, and Moni McIntyre, eds. 1995. *Readings in ecology and feminist theology*. Kansas: Sheed & Ward.
- Mangels, Ann Reed, and Suzanne Havala. 1994. Vegan diets for women, infants, and children. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 111–22.
- Marcus, Eric. 2002. *Vegan: The new ethics of eating*. 2nd. ed. New York: McBooks Press.
- Messina, Mark, and Virginia Messina. 1996. *The dietitian's guide to vegetarian diets: Issues and applications*. Gaithersburg, Md.: Aspen Publications.
- Messina, Virginia, and Mark Messina. 1996. *The vegetarian way: Total health for you and your family*. New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks.
- Montagu, Ashley. 1977. The intellectual and bodily superiority of women. In *History of ideas on woman: A source book*, ed. Rosemary Agonito. New York: Perigee Books.
- Patterson, Charles. 2002. *Eternal treblinka: Our treatment of animals and the holocaust*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM). 2003. Information about vegetarian diets. <http://www.pcrm.org/health/index.html> (accessed January 20, 2003).
- Pimentel, David, ed. 1993. *World soil erosion and conservation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pluhar, Evelyn. 1995. *Beyond prejudice: The moral significance of nonhuman animals*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- . 1994. Vegetarianism, morality, and science revisited. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 77–82.
- . 1993. On vegetarianism, morality, and science: A counter reply. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 6 (2): 185–213.
- . 1992. Who can be morally obligated to be a vegetarian? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 5 (2): 189–215.
- Plumwood, Val. 1999. Paths beyond human-centeredness: Lessons from liberation struggles. In *An invitation to environmental philosophy*, ed. Anthony Weston. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1990. *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. London: Routledge.
- Pojman, Louis P. 2000. *Global environmental ethics*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Regan, Tom. 1983. *The case for animal rights*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Robbins, John. 2001. *The food revolution: How your diet can help save your life and the world*. California: Conari Press.
- . 1987. *Diet for a new America*. Toronto: Stillpoint Publishing.
- Saunders, Kerrie K. 2003. *Vegan diet as chronic disease prevention: Evidence supporting the new four food groups*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Singer, Peter. 2000. *Writings on an ethical life*. New York: Harper Collins.
- . 1993. *Practical ethics*. 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1975/1990. *Animal liberation*. New York: Avon Books.
- . 1972. Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (Spring): 229–43.
- Stepaniak, Joanne. 2000. *Being vegan: Living with conscience, conviction, and compassion*. Los Angeles: Lowell House.
- Szybel, David. 2000. Empathy and rationality in ethics. Ph.D. Diss. University of Toronto.
- Tavris, Carol. 1992. *The mismeasure of woman: Why women are not the better sex, the inferior sex, or the opposite sex*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Varner, Gary E. 1994a. In defense of the vegan ideal: Rhetoric and bias in the nutrition literature. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* (7) 1: 29–40.
- . 1994b. Rejoinder to Kathryn Paxton George. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 83–86.
- . 1994c. What's wrong with animal by-products? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 7 (1): 7–17.
- . 1991. Why dairy products are immoral. Paper read at *Varieties of sustainability conference*, May, at University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Yntema, Sharon K., and Christine H. Beard. 1999. *New vegetarian baby: An entirely new, updated edition of the classic guide to raising your baby on the healthiest possible diet*. New York: McBooks Press.