

COMMUNITY AS MORE THAN HUMAN: VEGETARIANISM, ETHICS AND APORETIC DECISION

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Jacques Derrida made many provocative suggestions about our relationships with other animals in the few years before he passed away in 2004. A question that he did not pursue very far is one that I would want to ask him forever: What is your final position on vegetarianism? One of Derrida's enduring legacies is his assertion of the ethical imperative that we explore "eating well" or "determining the best, most respectful, most grateful and also most giving way of relating to the other and of relating the other to the self" (1995: 281-82). The urgent context of this imperative is the factory farm, which as Derrida argued, is the site of an unprecedented assertion of human biopower over other animals, and which buttresses a particularly imperious form of human subjectivity in the process.¹ However, to the disappointment of theorists from David Wood to Paola Cavalieri, Derrida refrained from endorsing vegetarianism as a means of eating well. His reticence is no doubt due to his wariness of ethical programs which as Cary Wolfe has argued "reduce[] ethics to the very antithesis of ethics by reducing the aporia of judgment in which the possibility of justice resides to the mechanical unfolding of a positivist calculation" (2003: 69). While it is crucial to keep such reductions in mind, I posit that Derrida was overhasty in his rejection of vegetarianism. I take as my central provocation Matthew Calarco's conclusion that Derrida's reticence to embrace vegetarianism is not what matters most. As he puts it,

¹ See especially: "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," pp. 392-95. Derrida argues that the factory farm represents the most potent symptom of the past two centuries' "regimentalization" and "industrialization" of our treatment of animals (ibid., 394). The effect of this relation, according to Derrida, cannot be underestimated: "[f]ar from appearing, simply, within what we continue to call the world, history, life, and so on, this unheard of relation to the animal or animals is so new that it should oblige us to worry all those concepts..." (ibid., 393). See also "Eating Well," for Derrida's claim that such a relation helps "install[] the virile figure at the determinative center of the subject" (280).

Derrida is not our pastor or physician, he should not serve as our guide to eating well. If Derrida is hesitant to openly declare that, for those who live in contemporary western, urban societies, vegetarianism is generally a more respectful way of relating to animals than meat eating is, then we should proceed without him. (2004: 197)

Instead, Calarco argues for continuing Derrida's work in the mode of countersignature—following Derrida according to the spirit of his work and not its letter, which often implies a certain *not*-following. In Calarco's words, to approach Derrida's work in countersignature is "to think through the *disjunction* of deconstruction and vegetarianism in order to bring deconstructive thinking to bear on the undisclosed anthropocentric and carnophallogocentric limits of the dominant discourses in animal ethics and vegetarianism" (ibid.).² In other words, if vegetarianism seems too ethically reductive sometimes, there is no need to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, as Derrida perhaps did in this particular instance. I say this is with all due respect of the fact that he so rarely *did* throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, maybe we can think vegetarianism *otherwise*, in ways that would *hold* more water—with Derrida, with ourselves and with other people who aim to be as thoughtful as possible about ethics.

Discourses of vegetarianism seem at times caught between two understandings of ethics: the rules-based program, and an aporetic approach. What do we mean by "aporetic," or, to refer back to Wolfe's designation of Derrida's approach to ethics, what do we mean by "the aporia of judgment in which the possibility of justice resides" (2003: 69)? An "aporia" refers to impossible yet necessary work, an ultimately unsolvable problem that we are nevertheless forced to confront and work through. With regard to

² "Carnophallogocentrism" is Derrida's term for expressing the sense of mastery over the other that forms a constitutive operation of modern subjectivity: "Authority and autonomy...are, through this schema, attributed to the man (homo and vir) rather than to the woman, and to the woman rather than to the animal...The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh" ("Eating Well," 280-81).

how an aporia helps us understand the work of ethics, and thereby justice, I think the clearest rendering is found in Derrida's "On Forgiveness." He explains in this text that if a notion about justice

falls into ruin as soon as it is deprived of its pole of absolute reference, namely its unconditional purity, it remains nonetheless inseparable from what is heterogenous to it, namely the order of conditions, repentance, transformation, as many things as allow it to inscribe itself in history, law, politics, existence itself. (2001: 44)

In other words, ethics is always already a negotiation—a contingent, contaminated negotiation. True ethics, I think Derrida would argue, can never rest in either the realm of ideal rules, or the compromised realm of our efforts to institute those rules, but emerges only in continual—and impossible, yet necessary—effort to bring the two realms into intercourse. Ethics is never done; the aporia propels us forever in our work between ideals of justice and their inherently messy realizations. As Derrida argues in "And Say the Animal Responded?," "casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one's own being-ethical, seems to me to be—and is perhaps what should forever remain—the unrescindable essence of ethics: decision and responsibility" (2003: 128).

Other aporetic features of our relationship with other animals make an aporetic approach to animal ethics particularly suitable, as well. Derrida often works with a Levinasian framework that emphasizes how the only hospitality to the other worthy of the name "hospitality," is one that does not presume any knowledge of the other. How could your decision to open your door to a stranger be contingent upon knowing what that stranger will be like? If you are certain of the stranger's attributes, he or she ceases to be a stranger, and you have ceased to be hospitable. This approach to ethics introduces a crucial counterpoint to common renderings of animal ethics that are premised in a

recognition of the animal other's level of cognition, for instance, or various other capacities. Derrida—along with so many of his Continental peers, such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy—is so painfully aware of what can happen when someone refuses or fails to recognize similarities in others that he deems any ethics based on recognition as woefully insufficient. This conclusion would seem tailor-made for rethinking animal ethics: our similarities with other animals are, based on my observations, fairly easy to disavow when they are apparent at all. Yet I assert that there is another level ofaporetic negotiation going on here as well. We cannot merely rest in our non-knowledge of the animal other: hospitality demands that we open the door to other animals, and this means remaining open to continually negotiating both our knowledge *and* our non-knowledge of the animal. It often seems that a philosophy which privileges non-knowledge too easily slips toward rejecting the possibility that we may obtain *any* knowledge about animals—a tendency we have seen in so many otherwise very thoughtful Continental philosophers, even Derrida. Neither knowledge nor non-knowledge is adequate: we need to continually negotiate between the two in order to be sufficiently ethically responsive to the needs of other animals.

It appears that Derrida's objection to vegetarianism, then, has to do with its seeming elision of the necessity for continual negotiation of responsibility and decision. For him, the narrative of vegetarianism appears to go like this: *We have discerned the truth, that it is wrong to eat animals, and we have set up a program based on that conclusion: just don't eat animals, and you will be ethical.* On this reading of vegetarianism, it makes sense that Derrida would claim that he cannot “believe in absolute ‘vegetarianism,’ nor in the ethical purity of its intentions” (Derrida and

Roudinesco 2004: 67). As David Wood argues, “Derrida’s ambivalence toward vegetarianism seems to rest on the restricted, cautious assessment of its significance; one which would allow vegetarians to buy good conscience on the cheap” (1999: 32). Moreover, for Derrida, vegetarianism seems to foreclose the dynamic of uncertainty so crucial to deconstruction in practical terms, in that it irrevocably rests at the calculation wing of the justice aporia. It not only represents an attempt to “change things in the no doubt rather naïve [*sic*] sense of calculated, deliberate and strategically controlled intervention” (2002: 236), but in doing so it falls out of the realm of responsible, continual, contingent decision altogether, and into a mere act of following a rule or program (*ibid.*, 251).

Worse, it seems Derrida is concerned that the righteousness exhibited by some vegetarians amounts to an appropriation of a similar kind of imperious sovereign human subjectivity to that which emerges on the factory farm. His well-known notorious imperative in “Eating Well” that we “sacrifice sacrifice” applies, he argues, both to classic carnophallogocentric meat eating subjects and to vegetarians. He argues in “Eating Well” that human meat eaters appropriate a certain form of mastery for themselves, thereby gaining a kind of subjectival purity, through their sacrifice—elimination, killing—of the animal other. He then asserts that “vegetarians, too, partake of animals, even of men” (Derrida 1995: 282). While this might seem a somewhat cryptic ascription to vegetarians—and one in which David Wood discerns an inappropriate conflation of symbolic and material sacrifice—I can see Derrida’s concern. I feel troubled, too, when I see a t-shirt that reads “I think, therefore I am a vegetarian.” Are we not perhaps setting up a dynamic wherein the vegetarian subject appropriates an

analogous purity for itself through its apparent mastery over the urge to participate in interspecies violence? — In other words, at times, it seems that the vegetarian can gain a sense of sovereign mastery through a claim to have “sacrificed” his or her complicity with violence, much as the meat-eating subject claims to have purged the self of his or her animality through sacrificing the animal. Derrida is rightfully worried, in my view, about a seemingly revolutionary ethics which instead “reproduce the philosophical and juridical machine thanks to which the exploitation of animal material for food, work, experimentation, etc., has been practiced” (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004: 65).

With this caveat in mind, perhaps we can better understand why Derrida might be skeptical about vegetarianism. But these problems do not exhaust the potential of the ethical practice of vegetarianism, a potential which, as I have already noted, exists within Derrida’s own orientation to ethics. To be sure, these problems do not characterize all extant practical forms of vegetarianism, either. Some recent Derridean criticism develops these threads of alternative possibilities. In *Zoographies*, Matthew Calarco asserts that any critically invigorated understanding of ethical vegetarianism must acknowledge that “no matter how rigorous one’s vegetarianism might be, there is simply no way to nourish oneself in advanced, industrial countries that does not involve harm to animal life (and human life as well) in direct and indirect forms” (2004: 134). In other words, vegetarianism does not have the right to claim that it has sacrificed and thus cleansed itself of complicity with violence. It shall have to be defined in a different way. In *This Is Not Sufficient*, Leonard Lawlor suggests that the continual negotiation of our ethical responsibility to other animals is constituted in naming them “properly.” As he explains, “[u]nconditionally, we must name properly each and every one of them, and to name

them properly we must call them as they call themselves. This proper nomination is the only way for us to change our relation to them into one of friendship” (2007: 104). Significant here, among many things, is the emphasis upon the contingencies that attend every encounter with every different animal. Again, a monolithic rules-based ethics that applies the same way in every encounter will be insufficient in this account. What results from this continuous naming process for Lawlor is, as we have been aiming for, a new vision of eating well: “Here, through the specific internalization of the name (and not the flesh of animals), we are able . . . to advocate a kind of vegetarianism that is compatible with a minimal carnivorism, but what I am really advocating is a kind of asceticism” (ibid., 105). Lawlor’s argument is complex, and it takes reading the whole book to grasp it fully, but the asceticism he is referring to is that in which one limits one’s imposition of oneself on the other as much as possible—as one might expect in a properly hospitable encounter. Moreover, while his emphasis upon naming the other in order to internalize the name might seem to reiterate Derrida’s point that vegetarians practice a symbolic sacrifice, I think that Lawlor is advocating something other than a form of vegetarian subjectival mastery. Indeed, he suggests that by “[l]etting them in, we are contaminated by them” (105). Thus, “naming” is an almost ironic instance of catechresis, or purposeful misnaming in order to rupture a process into new meaning: far from proving mastery as it so often implies, the process of naming for Lawlor is a function of shared vulnerability and mutual contamination (“contamination” constituting a similar kind of catechresis, I think). It is, as it were, as if we are stuck down in the trenches *with* the animals, forging and fumbling towards a vegetarian practice together. Certainly, here we are still co-implicated in violence: as Calarco notes, “*any* act of identification, naming, or relation is

a betrayal of and a violence toward the Other” (2008: 136). Therefore, Calarco argues that it will be necessary to articulate “an animal ethics that is impassioned by an ideal of maximum respect for animals and that structurally disallows complacency or good conscience of any sort” (*ibid.*).

So, what would this kind of vegetarianism look like in practical terms? I would like to propose that there is a potentially significant difference between a certain understanding of “vegetarianism,” (the refusal to eat meat) and a certain articulation of veganism (the effort to abstain as much as possible from the use or ingestion of any animal products). I would suggest that the former practice, the refusal to eat meat—what I am calling for my purposes here “vegetarianism”—most often roughly aligns itself with a program-oriented ethics. From the conclusion that eating animal flesh is wrong, for whatever reason, a practice emerges that describes itself in the mode of a rule: I will exclude meat from my diet. I am not, perhaps, as allergic as Derrida is to the notion of living life according to certain rules that I have considered, decided upon, and more or less abided by. And I don’t think this kind of vegetarianism is inherently bad. But I do agree with him that there are very real ethical dangers in adhering too strongly to rules-based ethics. Apart from all of the dangers I outlined along with Derrida in the first few pages of this paper, it is also important to think of the relativist implications such a practice might carry in the eyes of non-vegetarians. Reducing ethics to the “personal rules” of the idealized individual elides the imperative to find new ways to envision an ethical community which directly acknowledges our mutual vulnerability and mortality. Along these lines, I am thinking of Stanley Cavell, who posited recently that his ambivalent aversion to vegetarianism might stem from unsettling memories of his rabbi

accompanying a professed acceptance of other people's pork-eating with a conspiratorial shudder, prompting a conspiratorial laugh from his students. Cavell writes, "Both the smile and the laugh had a bad effect on me. Is absolute obedience to a mark of difference, merely *as* difference, a serious business or is it not?" (2008: 123). What we clearly need is an articulation of vegetarianism that is not about another mark of difference for the human subject, but that is instead more resolutely about continually striving to realize a form of justice in the human-animal relationship. Veganism might seem, to some, to be an unlikely candidate for such a project: many people, even vegans themselves, often interpret veganism as simply a more extreme program with more rules. Yet I suggest that its definition—abstaining as much as possible from the use or ingestion of any animal products—is perhaps inherently closer to an aporetic rendering of ethics. At least, we might begin articulating it that way. As I have already cited in Calarco's work, a refigured vegetarian practice will have to acknowledge the patent impossibility of completely purging ourselves of complicity with violence. Despite the Herculean efforts of some vegans, vegan practice inherently has an asymptotic relation to its ideal: that is, by definition it demands—makes necessary—a continual material and earthly *striving* for an ideal of justice that it will never fully meet. In short, there is more potential in the practice of veganism for a continued negotiation of justice, spurred by aporetic tension, than I think we have yet recognized or theorized.

In animal studies we continue to strive to make more palpable the potential for an ethical engagement with other animals. Perhaps a certain rendering of vegan practice might allow us to enact the respectful mix of distance and intimacy that makes ethical community across our many borders more possible.

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