COMMENTS AND REPLY

Comment on George's "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?"

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AS I PREPARED waffles this morning (whole wheat and buckwheat flour, soy "butter" milk, egg replacer, canola oil, and a little wheat germ), I reflected on Kathryn Paxton George's article "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?" (1994b). Why had it so failed to capture the vegetarianism that animates and enlarges my life and that of many feminists? Is the vegetarianism—both theory and nutritional experience—that she subjects to such microscopic analysis in any way the vegetarianism that I experience or theorize about?

It was while thinking about wheat germ and its nutritional benefits that I realized that she had succumbed to the same Cartesian dualism that she levies as a charge against theorists such as Tom Regan and Peter Singer. It is not my goal in what follows to defend either Regan or Singer, though it could be questioned whether George even presents their theories correctly. But why, after so many years of feminist criticism of liberal rights discourse and ecofeminist analysis of Regan and Singer, does George feel drawn to enter the debate about vegetarianism through yet another feminist critique of Regan and Singer? It is not as though it has not been done before. Indeed, it is not as though she herself had not done such a critique before, arguing in the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* (1990) many of the issues that now appear in her article in *Signs*. And as one respondent to that earlier essay observes, "If nutrition researchers really have neglected women, then it is unclear that their research can have *anything* reliable to say about women on vegan diets" (Varner 1994c).

As the waffles baked, I realized the inherent problem: like a good Cartesian, she reduces vegetarianism to some quantifiable nutritional resource that can be measured scientifically. The value-laden nature of nutritional studies cited for a feminist audience may or may not include the normativeness of eating animals. It is an interesting fact that we

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1995, vol. 21, no. 1]

simply do not know whether these are the presumptions of the researchers she cites; indeed, George structures her article so that this question does not immediately occur. But in fact there is no neutral observer to our culture's commitment to animal flesh: one either eats animals or one does not; and this will be true of the nutritionists on whom George hangs her case of vegetarianism discriminating against women and children as it is of everyone else.

While George feels she must drown us in empirical studies of vegetarianism, she offers no acknowledgment of this aspect of the epistemological problem regarding the value-ladenness of scientific studies. The question is, Whose knowledge will we accept? George wants us to accept her as a trustworthy conveyor of nutritional studies; these studies, she has determined, prove her point that vegan theories discriminate against women. But two questions arise: one, Are the empirical studies she uses reliable, and is she herself reliable in her citation of these empirical studies? and two, What sort of epistemological responsibility does she evidence in the article? As to the first question, others have responded to her about her interpretations of nutritional studies, and although she disingenuously elides the fact that such a debate has been ongoing now for several years by omitting any reference to her earlier article and the critical responses to it, let us acknowledge that her empirical data is not above debate.[1] Nutritionists, including Johanna Dwyer, whom she cites to bolster her argument, appear to support the position of those who argue that veganism is no more harmful than any other diet and that research on the vegan diet has drawn on samples of convenience and thus may not be representative of all vegans (see Dwyer and Loew 1994; Mangels and Havala 1994). As for question number two, what sort of epistemological responsibility she evidences in her *Signs* article, I will argue that here, too, she has been more disingenuous than responsible, more willing to elide citations that disagree with her than engage with vegetarianism—either as feminists theorize it or as it has been defined.

It is interesting that George develops her feminist case against vegetarianism by focusing on male theorists. Feminists who have theorized about vegetarianism are dismissed by some sort of Cartesian logic that prefers the "hard" arguments of Regan and Singer to the relational, embedded, experiential theoretical positions developed, for instance, in

[1] On this, see George 1994a, 1994c; Varner 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Pluhar 1992, 1993, and 1994. The specific volume of the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* that contains an extended debate on George's claims, and that appeared almost simultaneously with George's *Signs* article, had been in the planning since at least 1992, according to Varner's "Rejoinder," in which he refers to correspondence regarding a referee's comments on his "Vegan Ideal" article (referred to in his n. 3). Her silence in the *Signs* article on this debate that began with her 1990 article in which she proposed claims similar to the ones she argued in these pages in 1994 is, to say the least, curious.

Josephine Donovan's and my own writings. I was not influenced by Regan or Singer in becoming a vegetarian, nor do I cite Regan and Singer in my moral arguments. Donovan in an essay published in this journal (1990) offers critiques of Regan and Singer and provides an epistemological stance regarding the exploitation of animals: they do not want to be used, and if we consider their perspective, we know it. It may be easier to critique Regan and Singer for male bias than it is to encounter the field of ecofeminist writings on animals to see whether something different is being said about animals, ethics, and vegetarianism.

After George's article dismisses feminist theorists of vegetarianism with a theoretical sleight of hand, a judgment call that places us outside of her standard of what counts as a moral argument, we intrude barely, until the end, when suddenly the vegetarianism we advocate is some reactionary response to the exclusion of women from meat eating: we are supposedly making a "virtue of our own oppression"! To the contrary, we recognize the interlocking nature of the oppression of women and the other animals. Eating animals is one aspect of patriarchal violence; as we challenge this violence, we will not consume its victims.[2]

But is the vegetarianism we advocate the vegetarianism that George has adopted? Apparently not. From George's first footnote on, her definition of herself as a "practicing vegetarian" includes eating dead bodies. The use of such definition is defended by appeal to the *Berkeley Wellness Letter* (though a precise citation is not provided; see her n. 2), while a host of other established sources clearly indicate that vegetarianism excludes the eating of all dead bodies.

Following George's own empirical example, I decided to check out vegetarian books: How many of them actually deemed fish to be an item in a vegetarian diet? Consulting my seventy or so vegetarian cookbooks, including George's much-esteemed *Laurel's Kitchen,* I found no listing of fish in their indices. In fact, of all of my vegetarian cookbooks, the only ones that included fish were the two post–Mollie Katzen Moosewood cookbooks. And one offers a "Vegetarian Fish Sauce Substitute" (Moosewood Collective 1990, 603). Clearly, they do not presume that fish is vegetarian if they offer a vegetarian substitute for fish sauce.

The premise of George's article is the narrow focus on vegans, those who eat no animal products at all, yet the definition is widened to include those who eat some animals. Why such inconsistency? Should feminists be George's kind of so-called vegetarian? She does not tell us. All of the nutritional information she garners speaks not to her own nutritional stance at all.[3]

[2] See Adams 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Donovan 1990; Gaard 1993.

[3] Although it might be argued that George is honest rather than disingenuous about eating once-living beings, that misses the point: George calls herself a practicing vegetar-

If she finds Regan's argument amenable to eating dead fish, why then does she treat us to an extended examination of a diet she herself indicates is somehow not implicit in Regan's work? She wants to have it both ways: vegetarianism includes eating dead fish (and thus according to her ought not to pose nutritional hazards) or else vegetarianism excludes eating dead fish and thus she herself is not a vegetarian.

I submit that George is not a vegetarian, and that *Signs* erred in allowing into its pages this New Age definition of vegetarianism. As I write in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, "What is literally transpiring in the widening of the *meaning* of vegetarianism is the weakening of the *concept* of vegetarianism by including within it some living creatures who were killed to become food. . . . People who eat fishmeat and chickenmeat are not vegetarians; they are omnivores who do not eat red meat. Allowing those who are not vegetarians to call themselves vegetarians dismembers the word from its meaning and its history" (1990, 79). Indeed, hearing of "vegetarians" who eat fish is as laughable to vegetarians as hearing that we are in a "postfeminist era" is to feminists.

If George can get the working definition of practicing vegetarian so thoroughly wrong after years of research on the subject, what does this say about her epistemic responsibility? What else has been distorted? Ultimately, the question George's article leaves us with is whether male animal rights theory results in people who think they are being vegetarian because they eliminate mammals from their diet. For now, I will happily stick to my waffles and to the feminist-vegetarian theory that inspires this choice of food.

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ian while clearly following a diet that is not considered the diet of a practicing vegetarian by the overwhelming majority of sources I checked. Thus, she applies to herself a term that implicitly conveys an accompanying practice; if the practice is absent, the term is inappropriate. That she fails to acknowledge this discrepency is problematic.

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