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## Disgust Reactions to Meat Among Ethically and Health Motivated Vegetarians

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## **DISGUST REACTIONS TO MEAT AMONG ETHICALLY AND HEALTH MOTIVATED VEGETARIANS**

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Expressions of disgust at the idea of eating, handling, or even seeing meat have often been reported in studies of vegetarianism. Reasons for such reactions have rarely, however, been examined. Neither an ethical stance nor health concerns regarding meat consumption obviously indicate such a reaction. This article presents findings from research utilizing in-depth interviews with vegetarians variously motivated by ethical, health, and other concerns and with meat eaters. A clear difference was found in the sample regarding disgust reactions to meat between those who avoided meat consumption for ethical reasons and those who avoided it for reasons of health. Rather than concluding that avoidance of meat stems from revulsion or that revulsion is the consequence of avoidance of meat, the article concludes that meat is a substance that evokes, independently, both ethical concerns and feelings of revulsion and that the latter is heightened by the former.

**KEYWORDS** Diet, disgust, ethics, food, health, meat

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Meat commonly elicits expressions of disgust from those who avoid eating it. It is not uncommon to hear such sentiments expressed by vegetarians. Research into vegetarianism has often reported that expressions of disgust are frequent in interviews with them (Amato and Partridge, 1989, pp. 92–93; Beardsworth and Keil, 1992, pp. 273–274; Rozin, Markwith, and Stoess, 1997; MacNair, 1998). This aspect of vegetarianism has, however, received relatively little attention.

In particular, the question of how such sentiments are related to motives for vegetarianism has received only partial treatment. Rozin, Markwith, and Stoess (1997) found a clear correlation between the ethical motive and expression of disgust but do not suggest reasons for it. Similarly, although MacNair (1998) found that most of the vegetarians and vegans in her study considered meat repugnant, and that ethically motivated vegetarians were more likely to find it so than health-motivated vegetarians, no explanation of this is offered. Beardsworth and Keil (1992: 1997) consider that their findings in this respect are consistent with Twigg's analysis (1979) which, drawing upon ideas of Mary Douglas (1966), emphasizes the way anomalous and marginal things are perceived as powerful and dangerous. Meat, especially raw red meat and blood are anomalous and marginal between life and death and consequently tend to elicit a taboo reaction from some. Beardsworth and Keil also observe the tendency of vegetarian discourse to draw comparisons between the flesh of the animal and the human body and the deappetizing effects of this.

A moment's thought on the relation between sentiments of disgust and motives for vegetarianism readily reveals apparent incongruence. It is not immediately apparent why feelings of revulsion and disgust should arise from the ethical motivation expressed by most vegetarians, nor from health considerations—the other main motivation for vegetarianism. It is not easy to see why it is that the conviction that taking the life of an animal is wrong should in itself necessarily lead to, or be associated with, disgust at the thought of eating the animal or why the sight or even the thought of meat should elicit a disgust reaction. Some ethical vegetarians are not disgusted by cooked meat, miss not eating it, and some even crave it, especially bacon when they smell it cooking—"bacon nostalgia" as Beardsworth and Keil (1992, p. 274) put it. There are many things we avoid eating because we think they are unhealthy which do not elicit feelings of disgust; quite the opposite, in fact, if one considers such things as cream cakes, chocolate pudding and so on. The same point could be made regarding the less common motives for being vegetarian such as ecological

and developmental concerns. The only motive which would fit with such sentiments is the gustatory one.

A second neglected dimension of this aspect of vegetarianism is the actual nature and variability of the feelings and sentiments concerned. Beardsworth and Keil (1992) report considerable variation in the way respondents express such feelings and in the aspects or type of meat that elicits them, but they do so only very briefly. Their respondents either interpreted their feelings as physiological or psychological but more often were ambivalent about this. Some reported that it was the idea of physical ingestion of meat that disgusted them while for others it was not only this but the appearance and/or its tactile properties. For some it was red meat and blood in particular that was repulsive while for others it was the sight of the whole animal (for example, chickens) or the sight of the animal with the head remaining attached (for example, fish). Beyond these observations, however, Beardsworth and Keil offer nothing further that would explain them.

There would, then, seem to be a connection between ethically motivated avoidance of meat on the one hand and an aversion to it on the other. The relationship between this avoidance and aversion is puzzling. It is tempting to jump to the supposition that avoidance of meat may be due to an underlying aversion to it. On the other hand it could be that aversion is the consequence of avoidance—but only where the latter is associated with ethical concerns. We are faced with an intriguing question. What is the relationship between avoidance and aversion and how is it connected with an ethical stance?

What makes this a particularly intriguing issue is the fact that it has a highly reflective and cognitive aspect, namely, the ethical deliberations of many vegetarians on the one hand and, on the other, a highly emotive, spontaneous, reactive and unreflective aspect, namely, the disgust reaction. The issue thus offers a potential scenario for exploring the interplay between the ethical and the emotional in human behavior.

We can broadly categorize possible relationships between feelings of disgust and motive for meat avoidance into three types. Firstly, aversion leads to avoidance; secondly, avoidance leads to aversion; thirdly, each mutually acts upon the other; and finally, the relationship is not a causal one. Drawing upon a range of ideas that have been put forward concerning attitudes and practices relating to food, a range of possibilities for each of these can be envisaged.

## AVERSION LEADS TO AVOIDANCE

Firstly, avoidance might stem from negative emotions associated with meat because of certain characteristics of it. It is these negative emotions that are primary while the ethical motivation is seen as derivative in some way; for example, a rationalization. There are a number of variants of this possibility.

### Taboo and Pollution

The anomalous and ambivalent character of meat as neither living animal nor inert matter, as Twigg (1979) argues, renders it potent and dangerous. Here the emphasis is on power and danger and the polluting potential of meat.

A feature of things that are commonly tabooed is that they are anomalous with respect to categories and boundaries (Douglas, 1966). Anomalous things are tabooed either because they are seen as sacred or because they are seen as impure and polluting. Ambivalent emotions are felt towards things that are marginal in terms of taxonomic systems or that transgress important boundaries and such ambivalence often leads to these things being subject to taboo restrictions. Twigg, drawing upon such anthropological work, focuses, in her seminal articles on vegetarianism (1979, 1983), upon the anomalous and marginal nature of meat, especially red meat and the blood in it.

Twigg stresses the ambivalence generally felt towards meat and the symbolic power of blood. Meat is seen as a food that gives strength and vigor. It is associated with masculinity, forcefulness, aggression, muscularity, and athleticism. In its raw state, however, Twigg goes on to argue, meat is too potent and seen as dangerous. It must be cooked to reduce its potency to manageable proportions. Cooking transforms it, and it is particularly significant that this transformation removes its bloodiness. Vegetarians, however, taboo not just raw meat but all meat: for them it is still too dangerous and polluting a substance to ingest even when cooked. Twigg, then, interprets vegetarianism as a form of taboo behavior reflecting an underlying, and by implication, unconscious reaction to meat. She is silent, however, on the question of how this relates to their expressed motives of ethical and health concerns. Twigg's claim implies that these deeper underlying reactions to meat are rationalized in the case of ethical vegetarians in terms of rights, compassion for animals, identity between

the human and animal world, and so on. On the surface this seems problematically reductionist and, while not necessarily entailed, comes precariously close to saying that the moral beliefs of vegetarians are a mere rationalization of these deeper underlying emotions.

An alternative interpretation recognizes that a close relationship between the immoral and the repugnant is very common. Many things that we regard as morally wrong are, it is true, very tempting; naughty but nice. But there are many actions that we regard as both morally wrong and deeply repugnant—cannibalism for example. This may be because we are disgusted by what we consider to be grossly immoral but equally because we tend to regard what we find repugnant as also wrong. Repugnance and immorality are not necessarily distinct. Our language reveals this very clearly as using words that express repugnance for actions which are regarded as immoral; they are “dirty,” “filthy,” “disgusting,” “vile,” and “foul.” Such usage is not entirely metaphorical; we are literally disgusted by certain immoral acts. To be repelled by something due to feelings of disgust while simultaneously giving an account of the avoidance of that thing in terms of moral values is thus not incompatible nor a rationalization. It may be incomplete but it is not contradictory.

### Conditioned Response

Psychologists interested in the phenomenon of disgust (Rozin and Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley, 1993) distinguish between what they call the core emotion of disgust which they argue is closely related to oral ingestion of substances of animal origin including substances of human origin. This core emotion of disgust is then extended to include things that resemble or come to stand for things that are disgusting and to include things that have been in close association with such things. This process of extension is seen by these authors as a form of conditioned response.

Further extension of the disgust reaction occurs in relation to sexual conduct, hygiene, death, violations of the body envelope (surgery, gore) and what they call socio-moral violations (racism, deceit, betrayal). The latter are, they speculate, more likely to elicit disgust reactions if they suggest lack of normal human motivation—for example, killing in cold blood as opposed to the all-too-normal human propensity to take what does not belong to them.

This process of expansion of the disgust reaction is one, these authors suggest, which essentially serves to humanize our animal and bodily nature. Humans are animals that must eat, excrete, and procreate but their cultures have generally sought to distance the human from the animal by careful regulation of these activities. Humans are, also, like animals in their vulnerability to violations of their bodily envelopes and to death. Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin (1994) found, in devising a scale to measure individual differences in sensitivity to disgust, that overall scores correlated highly with scores on items dealing with death. Disgust, they suggest, is an emotion that operates as a defense against fear of death through banishing thoughts and experiences which remind us of our mortality. In general, then, disgust plays a central role in allowing humans to perceive themselves as distinct from animals and in masking their animal nature. It aids them in their desire not to share a range of properties which we actually do share with animals.

This would appear not to fit very well the disgust reaction we observe in vegetarianism, and especially of ethically motivated vegetarians. Rather than seeking to erect and maintain a clear boundary between the human and the animal, vegetarianism seeks to move this boundary to include other sentient creatures within the moral community. It is motivated by a sense of kinship and closeness with animals, of sameness and a feeling of identity.

Nor is the idea of extension of the core reaction to a wide range of things and circumstances, other than ingestion of substances of animal derivation, entirely credible. The processes involved are surely far more complex than this.

## **AVOIDANCE LEADS TO AVERSION**

In contrast to the view that avoidance of meat is the consequence of an aversion to it resulting from its own characteristics or what it symbolizes, it could be that it is avoidance of meat that leads to feelings of disgust and repugnance regarding it. They are the *consequence* of not eating it. The ethical motive is regarded as primary and the emotions of disgust derived from the practice of avoidance.

### **Habit and Custom**

Harris (1985) argues that it is not that we do not eat what disgusts us but that we are disgusted by what we do not eat (Harris, 1985). All societies

select a limited number of foods from the total range of possible foodstuffs they find in their environment. Harris provides, predictably, a materialist explanation of why certain potential foodstuffs are not utilized. The explanation is in terms of hunting-gathering strategies, or crop production strategies that concentrate effort and resources on certain foodstuffs in the most efficient and productive manner. These strategies are, to a large extent, determined by the relative costs and benefits of procuring or producing certain types of food. The outcome is that certain edible plants and animals are simply not eaten or used for food in certain societies. They may well be eaten in other societies. In short, food avoidances are a cultural matter and, consequently, highly variable across human cultures.

Harris then argues that whatever is not generally consumed in a society is often thought to be disgusting to eat. There is a general antipathy to ingesting anything that is not thought of as food. This is a universal human characteristic. If it is also an animal that has no other uses for humans it will be abominated, as in the case of the pig for Hebrews and Moslems. If, then, in a given society the process of socialization does not identify certain potential food items as food then the thought of eating such items will be regarded with considerable disgust. Harris explains the loathing that Europeans and Americans have for insects and the sense of revulsion at the idea of eating them in this way. Amato and Partridge provide another nice example of this:

An anthropologist once told us a story about an experience she had had while living in an island society. The traditional diet on this island consisted of plant foods and fish, but in recent years frozen mutton had been imported from Australia. One day a group of children asked her what this meat was, assuming it must have been some sort of fish. When explained that it was an animal and showed them a picture of a sheep, the children were horrified. To them, the thought of eating an animal that had fur was disgusting. (Amato and Partridge, 1989, p. 70)

Applying this to meat, it would be because vegetarians do not eat meat that they find it disgusting; they do not avoid eating meat because of prior feelings of repugnance. There would appear to be considerable merit in this argument. Once meat is eliminated from the diet, it may no longer be identified with food and the idea of eating it thus becomes



disgusting. Yet there are problems given what has been observed regarding the apparent connection between ethical vegetarianism and aversion. We would expect all vegetarians, whatever the motive for their dietary practice, to be equally likely to find meat repulsive.

## **MUTUAL INTERACTION BETWEEN AVOIDANCE AND AVERSION**

The relationship between disgust and the motive for avoidance might, however, not take the form of one being the basis of the other, but of mutual interaction.

Avoidance of meat opens up the possibility of realizing what meat actually is, the flesh of a dead animal, which leads to it being perceived in a different way—as something revolting which leads in turn to an intensified rejection of it. However, this would not account for the relationship between avoidance of meat for ethical reasons and aversion to it. It is an argument similar in certain respects to that of Harris and, therefore, open to the same objection. Also, the theory would only account for disgust at the idea of ingesting meat leaving unexplained feelings of disgust regarding the sight, touch, or smell of it.

## **A NONCAUSAL RELATIONSHIP**

If there are problems with all of the approaches outlined above to the relationship between avoidance of meat and aversion to it, it may be that this is because it is not a causal one. Such a view is implied by the analysis of Maurer (1995) who emphasizes the rhetorical use of the language of death in vegetarian discourse. This is closely related, as we have seen, to that of disgust.

### **Ideology**

In Maurer's analysis, the language of death is used metaphorically to indicate moral condemnation and/or ideologically to promote conversion to vegetarianism or to defend it against potential criticism. As a result, vegetarians become sensitized to those characteristics of meat that elicit the emotion of disgust. Maurer argues that in using the rhetoric of death to justify vegetarianism, negative and horrific images of and associations for meat are thereby generated, which in turn stimulates feelings of disgust.

In a rather similar vein, Rozin, Markwith, and Stoess (1997) interpret the emergence of the disgust reaction of vegetarians to meat as part of a process of moralization by which activities that were once morally neutral are rendered morally unacceptable, such as smoking in public places has tended to become in some contexts. They interpret the emergence of disgust reactions to meat in terms of the recruitment by vegetarians of an emotive and evaluative strategy, in the process moralizing the consumption of meat in order to support and internalize avoidance of it.

Some emphasis might, indeed, be placed upon the rhetoric and vocabulary of motives used by vegetarians and it is not unlikely that this sort of tactic is used by them, especially when they are subject to criticism and sometimes ridicule by meat eaters. In addition to the theme of death, those of disgust and horror are equally, if not more so, powerful symbols that can act either to legitimize the practice of vegetarianism in the face of potential criticism or to convert others to the way of thinking of the vegetarian. Philosophical and ethical arguments are probably not very effective in this respect. Gut feelings are far more powerful, if they can be induced, either to motivate or to rationalize. Vegetarian discourse is able to draw upon the processes involved in denying our animality and protecting ourselves against the fear of death to justify and motivate a moral stance. In many ways, this is reminiscent of Vic Turner's analysis of ritual (1964, 1965) in which the multivalent symbolism utilized in ritual often combines an emotive or orrectic dimension associated with deeply rooted emotions connected with natural and physiological processes on the one hand with a social, moral, and normative dimension on the other. The attributes of the first are transferred to the second such that the social order becomes saturated with emotion. In the same way, vegetarian discourse saturates the practice of slaughtering animals with the visceral emotions associated with animality and bodily products. In doing so, it is able to play upon what does appear to be a close and natural relationship between disgust and ingestion which makes the language of disgust particularly potent in this respect. It makes more sense in many ways to justify avoidance of animal bodies if they are seen as vile rather than as merely pathetic.

Yet it is difficult to accept that this could be the whole story. We need to ask why the use of this particular form of imagery and association is felt to be effective by those who use it. The argument rests upon the assumption that it is clearly a set of associations and related emotions that vegetarians themselves experience and feel and which, if they can

impart the same to others, will affect their attitudes and, perhaps, behavior. It further begs the question of the extent to which such images and associations might have been significant in the decision to eliminate meat from the diet in the first place. Finally, why would there be an association between the ethical stance of some vegetarians and the use of this sort of rhetoric?

## THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to explore the relationship between avoidance of and aversion to meat, and to test the hypothesis that there is a relationship between aversion and ethical motivation a research project was designed, using in-depth interview techniques, in order to investigate the qualitative nature of these feelings and sentiments and their relationship in the understanding of vegetarians themselves with their motives for being vegetarian and their broader beliefs and ideas relevant to their vegetarianism. It was also decided, for purposes of comparison, to interview meat eaters. A sense of "squeamishness," at least with regard to certain characteristics of meat (fat, gristle etc.), or with meat in a certain state (raw, oozing blood), or with certain forms of meat (offal), is sometimes expressed by meat eaters. There may be a potential aversion to meat even among those who routinely consume it—a potential that is suppressed or contained by socialization and habit for most people but released with full force in the case of some vegetarians.

An opportunistic/snowball sample of 47 vegetarians, including some vegans and 19 meat eaters were interviewed and the interviews recorded. The sample was obtained using multiple points of contact including advertising in a vegetarian magazine, among colleagues at the University of Reading, through personal contacts and through an organic food cooperative retail outlet.

A sample of this kind does not, clearly, allow generalization to the population of vegetarians since it is not a random sample of the population and not representative. The primary purpose of the study, however, was to gather largely qualitative data on the perceptions and understandings of vegetarians relating to reactions to the qualities and characteristics of meat and the element of disgust frequently exhibited in such reactions. A second key aim of the study was to examine, again largely through qualitative data, whether there were differences in this regard

between ethically motivated vegetarians and those whose motives were to do with health. In other words, does vegetarian discourse regarding meat, its associations, qualities and characteristics, differ between those who avoid its consumption for ethical reasons as opposed to those who avoid it for reasons of health. Consequently, no inferential statistics are presented here. However, where there is a clear quantitative difference in response between ethically motivated and health-oriented vegetarians this is reported descriptively.

The vegetarian sample included 1 fruitarian, 2 vegans, 30 lacto-ovo vegetarians, 2 lacto vegetarians, 10 fish-eating “vegetarians,” and two lapsed, lacto-ovo vegetarians, one of whom subsequently eliminated red meat from her diet. There were 18 men and 29 women from 15 to 65 in age with the modal age in the 41–50 range. They had been vegetarian from 3 to 56 years. They were predominantly well educated and middle class. This offered some degree of control over the class variable although vegetarianism does, in any case, appear to be a largely middle-class dietary preference. While motives were often multiple, 17 had originally adopted vegetarianism (or veganism) primarily for ethical reasons (either killing or treatment of animals or both), 10 primarily for reasons of health, 6 for both health and ethical reasons about equally, 5 primarily due to a dislike of meat, and 5 primarily for other reasons. Four had been brought up vegetarian.

Previous research has shown that when a vegetarian diet is adopted from a particular motive it is not unusual for further reasons to be added later on (Amato and Partridge, 1989; Beardsworth and Keil, 1992, 1993). This was the case with the sample used in this study. A large proportion had changed their motives either adding to or replacing their original motive. Twelve respondents (7 lacto-ovo/vegan/fruitarian and 5 fish eating) stated no change of motive over time. Sixteen (15 lacto-ovo and 1 fish eating) had added motives to their original motive.<sup>1</sup> Six (3 each of lacto-ovo/vegan/fruitarian and of fish eaters) had dropped an original motive. Three (all lacto-ovo) had both added one or more new motives and dropped others. Eight (7 lacto-ovo/vegan/fruitarian and 1 fish eating) had dropped their original motive(s) and acquired entirely new ones. Motives added and subtracted varied greatly. Very often health-oriented

<sup>1</sup>Those brought up vegetarian are all counted as having added one or motives to their original “motive.” In all but one case who disliked meat, they had come to adopt an ethical stance on meat eating.

vegetarians had come to accept the ethical arguments against eating meat or more had simply come to dislike it. Some of those originally motivated by ethical considerations had since changed their views about this but had come to believe that a vegetarian diet was healthier or, again, had developed a dislike of meat. Some simply retained the vegetarian diet from sheer habit. The picture is, therefore, quite a complex one.

All bar those who had been brought up vegetarian had previously eaten meat, in most cases extensively, and the majority had liked and enjoyed many, if not all, types of meat before becoming vegetarian. Some had never really liked or enjoyed it much and for them adopting a vegetarian diet was no sacrifice at all. Most were very or fairly strict about conforming to their diet. A few were rather lax in this respect either eating meat on occasions or not taking care to avoid meat derivatives such as gelatine, animal fats, and rennet.

Meat consumers were very similar to the vegetarians in educational background and class position; 13 were male and 6 female. They were somewhat more evenly spread with regard to age. Most were keen meat eaters consuming substantial amounts.

The length of interviews ranged between 30 and 90 min averaging for vegetarians about 60 min and for meat eaters about 40 min. The interviews were semi-structured allowing flexibility of topic order to facilitate as natural and articulated a discourse as possible. Vegetarians were asked about their motives for avoiding meat, whether these had changed over time, how they originally became vegetarian, and so on. In addition to their attitudes to and feelings about meat generally, they were asked about situations of exposure to meat they had experienced or what they thought their reactions might be should they encounter such situations. These included being given a meal containing meat, inadvertent ingestion of meat, having to purchase or handle meat, entering or seeing into a butcher's shop and so on. They were asked about their feelings regarding particular forms of meat, cuts of meat, type of animal, etc. Also, they were asked about their views on a number of issues relating to the taking of life, violence, and aggression; nuclear weapons, capital punishment, boxing, abortion, fox hunting, shooting, angling and fishing, and the genetic modification and use of animals for spare-parts surgery. A number of other topics were covered related to other research questions details of which it is not necessary to discuss here but which involve environmentalism, biotechnology, and broadly the issue of anthropocentric versus non-anthropocentric orientations.

## FINDINGS

### Repugnance

Rozin, Markwith, and Stoess (1997) found in their study of the role of disgust in the process of moralizing certain activities not previously seen as immoral that ethical vegetarians showed higher scores on their measure of disgust than did health-oriented vegetarians. The findings of the present study are entirely consistent with this.

For purposes of comparison of ethically motivated and health-motivated vegetarians, respondents whose stated original motivation included both ethical and health considerations are excluded. The ethical category thus includes all those respondents who stated that health was the sole primary original motivation plus all those who combined an ethical motivation with some other as long as this was neither health nor dislike of meat nor any other motivation such as economic, convenience, environmental, etc. Similarly, the health category in these comparisons includes all those who stated health as the sole primary original motivation plus all of those who combined health with some other motivation as long as this was neither ethical nor dislike of meat nor any other motivation. This reduces the total number in each category in the ethical/health comparisons to 17 and 10, respectively. Six respondents stated both ethical and health reasons for their original adoption of a vegetarian diet. Five stated dislike of meat but neither ethical nor health motives and these were placed in a separate category whether or not they combined dislike with any other motive other than ethical or health concerns. Finally, eight respondents stated other motives not including ethical, health, or dislike.

Meat was felt to be repugnant in some degree by all of the originally ethically motivated vegetarians and to be moderately or highly so by a majority of them (11). Expressions of repugnance were in many cases quite strident and intense. Those originally motivated primarily by health concerns were much less likely to find meat repulsive. Only one expressed such feelings fairly strongly and another to a moderate degree. In the first of these instances an ethical dimension to the motivation had emerged over time accompanied by a growing sense of aversion to meat and feelings of revulsion towards it. In a third case—a fish-eating “vegetarian”—the respondent had grown up not eating red meat at all and had an aversion to eating it before deciding to drop other forms of meat from her diet. Her avoidance of red meat was associated also with a rather

vague sense of sympathy for animals of a certain kind—in effect, mammals such as cows and pigs—and, therefore, mildly ethical.

In another case of non-ethically motivated vegetarianism where the development of a strong aversion to meat was reported, the respondent had adopted a vegetarian diet for the sake of convenience. Where the original motivation was dislike of meat, it was generally regarded as repugnant as it was in the case of the four respondents who had been brought up vegetarian. Three of the latter, in any case, came to accept the ethical arguments against eating meat when they became adult.

The development of aversion to meat and feelings of repugnance, then, was not something that all ethically motivated vegetarians experienced nor was it exclusively confined to ethically motivated vegetarians; but it did characterize most ethically motivated vegetarians and it was virtually absent or very weak among health-motivated vegetarians. It was also typical of those motivated by dislike of meat, as one might, perhaps, expect even if dislike of the taste or texture of meat does not necessarily mean that it is seen as disgusting.

### **A Horrid Sight to See**

A common reference made by those who felt repulsed by meat was to the sight of it in butcher's shops or supermarkets. One lacto-ovo vegetarian initially motivated by ethical and environmental reasons stated:

I think, I mean if I sort of walk past the butcher's or supermarket with raw meat on sale there's something about it that looks really nasty and because—I think, what I, I think, I regard it as dead—sort of dead flesh really and, which of course it is, and there's something, you know, it just sort of looks morbid and I think is that putrefication or?—but I know it's not. I know it's not putrefying but it still has that sort of feeling about it and I do sometimes think well could I put that into my mouth and into my body and then I know that I couldn't do it, because it just would be—it would be just—that physical act would be just too horrible. (LC1)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Letters and numbers after quotations from the interviews are used to identify individual respondents. LC stands for local contact, FC for customers of a local food co-operative, VM for readers of a vegetarian magazine, and SB for respondents found through snowball selection using multiple points of entry. This is the largest category since most respondents were selected in that way. ME stands for meat eater.

Another likened the meat in a butcher's shop to human flesh.

Um, I think it's, it's very unpleasant to have to look at it really and see carcasses hanging up in butchers, you know, in plain display, 'cos basically if you chopped up a human that's what it would look like, and if you could eat human meat it would be very similar. (SB19)

### **Avoidance Behavior**

The intensity of disgust felt by many ethically motivated vegetarians leads them to take avoidance actions of various sorts such as crossing the road in order not to have to walk past a butcher's shop window or taking a long detour around the supermarket aisles in order to avoid walking past the cabinets containing meat.

For example, one lacto-ovo vegetarian on the way to adopting veganism reported:

...the supermarket that I normally shop in it's not possible to walk a round without getting fairly close to where the meat is. Although I do walk partway down the aisle to what I want because a lot of the meat substitute products are next to the meat. So I walk down to the meat substitute products and then I walk back up the aisle rather than go down past the meat. So I do, as far as I can, avoid walking past it; I think more for the smell than the visual thing but I find both quite horrid and I do wish they had a separate section. Butchers' shops one doesn't come across in the way one used to. I do wish they had concealed windows like sex shops do so I don't really know what's going on in there. (SB1)

### **Human Analogies**

The association between meat and human flesh in one of the extracts quoted above was quite frequent in the interviews as the following extracts further illustrate:

Well you wouldn't really want a dead person lying on a table, so what's the difference between a dead person and a dead animal.



**Interviewer**

You think they're the same, much the same thing?

**Respondent**

Well they are when you get down to it. (SB20)

No, it's not the meat itself, it's a dead animal, it's a dead thing, it's a thing that's been killed and there it is, it's like seeing someone on a gibbet or something. (SB23)

**Types of and Parts of Animals**

As with Beardsworth and Keil's sample, the range of stimuli that elicited feelings of disgust and repugnance varied considerably. Beardsworth and Keil (1992) mention the appearance of red meat and where the animal is still recognizable in a relatively whole state.

The redness of certain types of meat was repugnant to many of the interviewees in the study. The following is a typical comment:

.... it doesn't look very nice, especially red meat with all the blood oozing through it. (SB21)

The main reason given for the feelings of repugnance that red rather than other types of meat elicited from many respondents was the fact that the redness was due to the blood in it, as the following quote illustrates:

I think I do sort of find it fairly unpleasant, sort of handling meat and particularly if it's quite sort of bloody and, um, again very meat looking. (SB15)

For many respondents it was sight of a whole animal or a large and clearly recognizable part of an animal that particularly evoked feelings of disgust. This might, in some cases, mean that chicken was particularly revolting; in others large cuts, the head still being attached, eyes and so on. As Amato and Partridge (1989) found, comparisons with the human body and human flesh were often made when discussing this as one of the

quotes above relating to seeing the contents of butcher's shops illustrates. Another comment was:

Well again, I suppose, the more similar it is to the human corpse, there you go, the more repellent it is. (SB11)

Other parts of animals which respondents often said elicited a disgust reaction in them were various types of offal.

Apart from the appearance of meat and the sight of butchered animals smell was very frequently mentioned as strongly repellent, especially of raw meat but sometimes also of meat cooking.

[In] Oxford market they are all hanging up. The smell of blood, dried blood—hung and stuffed—is really, is quite nauseating. I don't like that .... pieces of meat hanging around and I don't find the smell very appetizing at all. I think the whole thing is disgusting. (SB13)

The smell is awful, if I walk past a high street old fashioned butcher's with the sawdust on the floor and the pieces of raw meat hanging up in the window. The smell is—I have to exhale or stop breathing and hurry past quickly. The sickly sweet smell of the blood in the sawdust and that I really find revolting. (LC4)

Handling and preparing meat can be very difficult for some vegetarians because of its repulsive qualities which include the feel of it, its sliminess, as well as the blood content:

I do sort of find it fairly unpleasant, sort of handling meat and particularly if it's quite sort of bloody and, um, again, very meat looking. Um, and I'm not sure that I could, um, cook meat for other people and I haven't done that, um, for years either. (SB15)

Or because of the associations preparing meat arouses:

I don't think I could actually [handle] raw meat now ...it would be like doing a dissection on somebody. I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't like it.....No, I wouldn't like cutting through flesh; no, I wouldn't. (SB23)

## Rejection

When asked whether they would eat or refuse a meal containing meat in social circumstances where it was very difficult and embarrassing to do so, nearly every respondent, regardless of their motive for being vegetarian, said they would refuse to eat the meal.

One or two said they might find the social embarrassment too much to cope with and make themselves eat what was offered to them. One respondent who had lived for a time in Spain explained that there it was so rude to refuse food that she felt constrained to eat meat on occasions. Another respondent who had lapsed, for a variety of reasons, from lacto-ovo vegetarianism to eating fish reported a situation while travelling in the United States where social pressures overrode principles and partly precipitated the lapse into fish-eating.

In circumstances such as these, however, most respondents said they would not eat the food or eat only those parts of the meal that were not meat even if this would cause considerable embarrassment. For some it was virtually impossible for them to eat the meat.

I just find the idea of eating a dead animal just horrible. Even to be polite socially I just couldn't do it. If I went round to somebody's dinner and they didn't know I was vegetarian I could force my way through an omelette or something but I couldn't eat a sausage or a steak. I just couldn't. I would have to say look I'm sorry but I just can't eat this. (SB1)

I wouldn't no, no, um, um, I don't think in any circumstance I'd eat meat out of politeness or courtesy, um, and I always sort of make the effort to tell people that I am vegetarian before I—sort of you know to try and pre-empt that situation but, um, if that situation arises, I mean I wouldn't have any qualms about, you know, just eating nothing rather than eating meat if that's the only thing on offer. (SB6)

## Ingestion

Respondents were asked about the feelings and reactions to occasions when they had inadvertently eaten meat or how they might feel if they were to discover shortly afterwards that they had eaten something containing meat. A considerable proportion of the sample, about 15

respondents, expressed negative feelings about the experience. These ranged from unease, anxiety, anger, and guilt, through contamination and harm to discomfort, queasiness, deep revulsion, and even sickness as the following series of quotes illustrates.

I'd be, er, pissed off, actually, that, um, that sort of thing had happened. But I wouldn't make myself sick or anything. I'd just be a bit annoyed with myself. (SB2)

I think it would feel like a poison and maybe my system wouldn't cope with it. (LC2)

.... . I would probably feel a bit unclean for a couple of days. I might go on a fruit diet for a couple of days to clean myself out. (SB1)

Yes, um but I am fairly convinced that if I did knowingly—well if I actually forced myself to eat the stuff I'd probably throw it up immediately; that's for sure. (SB11)

No health-oriented vegetarians reported such feelings resulting from ingestion of meat. A few said that they had experienced or thought they would experience mild feelings of anxiety or some discomfort. On the whole, these were related to digestive concerns.

### **Disgust and Ethics**

The data, then, establish a close and strong connection between ethical vegetarianism and a disgust reaction to meat. While not universal among ethically motivated vegetarians few fail to develop such a reaction and for many it is quite intense. For some, even an indirect association with meat can make something or someone repulsive. The lacto-ovo vegetarian attempting to become vegan quoted above expressed this in a very striking way referring to her husband who was also close to adopting a fully vegan diet.

If one of us were suddenly to decide to become carnivore I think that would be a very significant strain on our relationship. Even if it was OK but not in the house, what you do at work or whatever. I would

actually find it very difficult to have physical relationship with a carnivore which is perhaps taking the disgust side of meat a little far but nevertheless that's how strongly I feel about it. (SB1)

As pointed out in the introduction, not all ethically motivated vegetarians retain this motivation over time, often changing their reasons for being vegetarian or giving up vegetarianism. It is significant that feelings of disgust and the behavior persist after initial ethical motivations have diminished or been relinquished. Interestingly, in the cases of two lapsed vegetarians interviewed in the study such feelings of repulsion disappeared when they returned to eating meat. One respondent returned to eating meat at her husband's instigation. He had gone along with the vegetarianism but covertly did not share her convictions and did not enjoy the diet. On announcing that he wished to return to having meat in his diet, she also decided to give up her vegetarianism and found that her feelings of revulsion evaporated.

The development of a disgust reaction to meat was, however, not something exclusive to ethically motivated vegetarians, as stated above. One respondent who had adopted a vegetarian diet for reasons of convenience—her husband had adopted a vegetarian diet for health reasons and she found it simply more convenient to cook and eat the same food as he—found that she developed an aversion to meat after about a year or so.

We didn't eat any meat at all from then on and within, I think, a year or so I just had an aversion to meat. I couldn't handle it; now I can't handle it. I can't smell it. Red meat especially, I find very repulsive. I can't walk by a butcher's. I can't bear the smell of it in the kitchen—um cooking in the kitchen at all. (SB3)

### **Unsqueamish Meat Eaters**

Feelings of repugnance regarding certain aspects of meat were not entirely absent among meat eaters although they were relatively uncommon and far less intense. One respondent said she found the sight of offal and handling it somewhat off-putting and another specifically mentioned kidneys as mildly repulsive. A third did not like seeing whole raw chickens because they were too obviously the carcass of a dead animal. One said that the bloodiness of raw meat was slightly discomforting. None of

the other respondents reported, when asked about such things, had any feelings of repugnance or discomfort at all. Even in the cases of the four who did, the feelings were clearly mild and of quite low intensity and related to very specific things.

Meat eaters were asked about their consumption of meat both in terms of frequency and the range and types of meat they regularly ate and about any strong dislikes in relation to types of meat. Most reported that they liked and quite often ate offal, especially liver and kidneys. A little less than half of those interviewed said they did not eat offal at all or did not eat either liver or kidneys. All stated that this was simply that they did not particularly like either its taste or texture or both. None said they avoided it because of "what it was" or because of any great repugnance for it. One said she could not cook it for such reasons but was quite happy to eat it.

Meat eaters were also asked about consumption of raw meat and fish or meat cooked very rare. None ate or had any taste for raw meat or fish but several preferred steak cooked very rare. Those who disliked it cooked this way nearly always gave reasons of taste, texture, toughness, and so on and there was little mention of redness and bloodiness or any such characteristic which would possibly make it off-putting.

Respondents were also asked about eating the flesh of certain animals not normally eaten in the UK such as horse, alligator, kangaroo, ostrich, dog, cat, monkey, rat, etc. Such questions were asked in order to investigate the idea that what is not normally eaten is repugnant regardless of its nutritional value and potential gustatory qualities (Harris, 1985). Many respondents had tried some of these, particularly ostrich, alligator, and kangaroo. Nearly all respondents who had never tried one or more of these said they would do so if the opportunity arose. Some found them quite palatable; others were less keen. Again, it was very largely taste and texture that made them less palatable than the more usual types of meat and there was no suggestion of any sense of repugnance as a result of what they were. In the case of horse meat, a few had eaten it and most said they would be prepared to try it. Five respondents, however, said they could not imagine eating it and would refuse to do so if offered it. Very few had tried the flesh of any of the other animals in the list above but most said they would be happy to try snake, monkey, and even rat. Two respondents balked at the idea of eating snake and two at the idea of eating monkey and two at the idea of eating rat. In these cases the reasons given included the fact that snakes were reptiles and reptiles were regarded as not edible, that rats are vermin and unclean, that monkeys

carry diseases such as AIDS, and so on. A large number of respondents, approximately half, said they could never bring themselves to eat cat or dog. Several others said they might possibly try it but were doubtful or might do so in the appropriate geographical and social context but not outside it. Only 6 or 7 said they would be happy to try the flesh of these animals.

Clearly, meat eaters are not much put off by the idea of eating almost any animal with the very marked exception of household pets and to some extent horses. There is, then, some rather weak support for the view that we find the idea of eating what we do not normally eat repugnant. But it is not so much the fact that it is unusual and not normally eaten as the idea that it is wholly inappropriate to treat it as food. Cats and dogs as household pets and horses, which in Britain have a special relationship with humans, are not, even potentially, food. Interestingly, one respondent stated she could not eat rabbit or duck because she had had both these as pets at one time. As Levi-Strauss points out, such animals are honorary human beings in the sense that they are effectively part of human society and culture rather than belonging to nature (Levi-Strauss, 1972; see also Harris, 1985). Some meat consumers are suspicious of reptiles and animals that are defined as vermin. Overall, the picture is one of meat eaters who are very robust in their readiness to eat a very wide range of animals and parts of animals and who show little of the sense of disgust that many vegetarians show towards meat. One particularly robust respondent even went so far as to say that he would very happily consume human flesh if there was nothing else to eat and that he could not really understand the taboo against cannibalism.

### **Development of Repugnance**

Amato and Partridge (1989) reported that a high proportion of their sample (82%), even former meat lovers, said that some time after having become vegetarian they felt they could no longer contemplate eating meat and that they now found the idea disgusting as well as the sight and smell of it (p. 92). Some vegetarian respondents in the present study reported that they felt unable to eat meat more or less as soon as the decision to become vegetarian was taken. For others, aversion to meat developed over time, sometimes almost imperceptibly so that it was

impossible for them to identify any particular point in time when such an aversion had taken hold.

It was quite common that such reactions to meat were suddenly noticed when unexpectedly confronted with meat. One respondent replied when asked about the development of such feelings:

Slowly over the course of several years. I only really start to notice it when I pass a butcher's shop and I think ughhh, no not nice. (VM3)

It may be that there is a tendency for feelings of disgust to intensify to the extent that the ethical concern is greater. One respondent who had adopted veganism after many years as a lacto-ovo vegetarian reported the following in relation to his feelings of revulsion:

It probably got worse since becoming a vegan. It's harder to cope with now than it was 20 years ago when I just getting into being a vegetarian. (LC4)

Another respondent who was moving increasingly towards a vegan diet when asked about any possible relationship between her ethical stance and her feelings of revulsion stated:

Yes, I think they are related. The more I think that it's morally wrong to eat meat the more it seems disgusting to do it. (SB1)

### **Perceived Reasons, Self-Understanding, and Puzzlement**

Respondents were generally not at all clear why such reactions should have developed—perhaps because they tended to develop rather imperceptibly. Few could offer any reasons for it. One respondent tentatively offered an explanation in terms of increased, or at least, of restored sensitivity.

It's grown up in the last three or four years I think. I don't think I was as sensitive to the smell before then, in possibly the same way as if you smoke and then you stop smoking after about 7 years you get your sense of smell back. (SB4)



On the other hand, when asked whether it might be the result of the emergence of greater sensitivity to the smell than before conversion to vegetarianism, one respondent was doubtful:

Maybe or maybe it's the association now that I really associate meat with being a dead body. So that smell is associated with a decomposing body really. (VM1)

While the association with death could lead to an increased sensitivity to smell the connection is clearly not a direct one. Nor could this explain the disgust reaction itself. What is interesting about this response is that once again the respondent herself tends to make a connection with disgust and death—an association that changes the meaning of the smell of meat for her and renders what was once unproblematic deeply offensive.

As noted above, however, most respondents could not give any coherent reason for the change in their attitudes to meat. A very common response when questioned about this was simply to restate their ethical position as if feelings of disgust were somehow the automatic product of a violation of an ethical principle. Also very common was the expression of considerable puzzlement at this aspect of their vegetarianism and their feelings and emotions relating to meat.

When asked why they thought they had reacted or would react in the ways described above, the replies often tended to stress beliefs rather than any physical properties of meat as such or physical effects they might experience as a result of eating it. Stress was typically placed upon the traits of animals as sentient, their similarity to human beings, the horror of killing them, their suffering, and so on. One respondent when asked about this said:

Oh I don't know, I just think this is a lump of a sentient being rather like myself, you know. (SB11)

Another replied:

It's the same as, um—its back to the moral issue of like killing things and having something, um, that was alive and, um, well an animal let's say, not forgetting that plants live as well. A conscious being, you know, has died and then passed through my system. To me that's

not a pleasant feeling. It's not something which I want to feel responsible for even though I haven't killed the animal. (LC2)

Another common response was to stress simply the thought or knowledge that the material consumed was of animal origin.

Um. I think it's probably a subconscious thing because I've not eaten meat for so long. And, I think it is just the thought of eating it. Because I associate meat so much with the animal itself and have done for so long that the thought of eating it—it's probably a subconscious thing that makes me feel a bit sick. (SB5)

There was sometimes a clear awareness that it was the idea of consuming meat that caused the reaction and that it was "psychological" in the sense that there was an awareness that no physiological basis existed for the feelings and that there was no obvious reason why ethical concerns or any other cognitive processes should produce such feelings. For example, one respondent reported that he had actually vomited on the two occasions he had inadvertently consumed meat and fish and clearly attributed this to psychological causes. Several respondents referred to it being the result simply of the thought of eating meat or having eaten it, as is apparent from some of the quotes above, recognizing the emotional and associative bases of their reaction.

However, understanding of the disgust reaction, either in the case of seeing, smelling, or handling meat as well as in the case of ingesting it, were, however, very variable in detail and rather vague. Some respondents confessed, that they had never really understood it or that having had the matter now brought to mind that they found themselves confused and bewildered and unable to explain it. Associations of death and that between animal and human flesh, were often made by way, to some extent, of explanation for the feelings of disgust reported by respondents. For the most part, however, respondents were rather puzzled by their own feelings of this kind, could not explain them, and even surprised to find that they felt them so strongly not having reflected much upon the matter prior to the interview. Quite striking, in fact, was the absence of any attempt to explain, account for, or rationalize feelings of disgust. Very often in qualitative interview data when apparent or potential contradictions arise in the respondents answers, he or she will attempt to reconcile them by constructing an account of some kind which removes or mitigates the contradiction.

The vegetarians in the present study, far from striving to construct coherence in their attitudes, tended to acknowledge a lack of it.

The following example from a respondent who quite clearly believed that her ethical stance underlay her disgust reaction to meat but who, nevertheless found it difficult to account for this, is quite typical:

I suppose just because it seems wrong to me and therefore it—doesn't seem to make much sense—but I think that must be the reasoning. Although I don't know how much reasoning when one walks past the meat counter in the supermarket; I just feel more and more revolted by it. Without necessarily analyzing the reason for it. (SB1)

## DISCUSSION

Given the nature of the sample used for this study it would be unwise to attempt too much by way of generalization concerning the relationships between primary motive for vegetarianism and feelings of disgust regarding meat; nevertheless, some interesting possibilities arise. Consistent with the finding of other studies it is largely the ethically motivated vegetarians that experience a sense of revulsion for meat and also those who dislike meat. Few health-motivated vegetarians in this sample experienced such feelings. Repugnance was hardly mentioned at all by those whose primary motive was other than ethical, gustatory, or health. This suggests perhaps that the emotions felt by ethically motivated vegetarians stem from similar sources as for those who avoid meat for gustatory reasons or aversion to it but more on this point below. At this point we need to ask to what extent the data reported above support or otherwise the various theoretical approaches that might be applied to the issue of the relationship between avoidance and aversion.

### The Taboo Theory

Twigg (1979, 1983) provides no empirical evidence for her claims regarding vegetarianism as taboo behavior, meat as anomalous, powerful, and polluting, etc. Data from the present study does not give much support to such claims. Twigg, of course, is speaking of very deep-seated dispositions rather than consciously held beliefs or immediate and expressible feelings and it may be that the type of data gathered in the interviews cannot reveal such things. On the other hand, it would be

surprising if no clues were to be found which might suggest the existence of such feelings. While one would not expect from such data explicit reference to ambivalent feelings about the power and danger of meat, especially red meat and of blood, it is likely that if such feelings exist they will show up in some way in what respondents say about meat and the aversion they have for it.

As we have seen, a number of respondents said that their aversion to meat was connected in particular to its redness and to blood and it does seem that blood is a powerful symbol with many of the connotations that Twigg identifies. Notions of pollution as such were, however, not particularly prominent in the responses of interviewees in the present study although several did report feeling a sense of contamination if they ate meat, inadvertently or otherwise. The majority of those who expressed feeling of disgust at the idea of eating meat did not, however, use the language of contamination and pollution. On the other hand, one might interpret the very frequent expressions of disgust and revulsion in relation to meat as expressing the same or a similar idea as that of pollution. There is perhaps some evidence here in support of Twigg's analysis. Against this it must be remembered that such ideas were most strongly expressed in relation to the sight, smell, and thought of handling meat and strongly associated with ideas of death, corpses, decay, and so on. These things are, indeed, in many, perhaps most, cultures' objects of taboo and ritual avoidance or are, at least, treated with a good deal of circumspection.

Crucial to Twigg's argument, however, is the act of ingesting meat and not just its appearance and the associated connotations. It is ingestion, and perhaps contact, that carries the idea of contamination and pollution. Sight and smell is more associated with notions of shock, alarm, and horror. While many vegetarians do express strong repugnance at the idea of ingesting meat, this is nearly always associated with ideas of death, slaughter, and such horrific connotations rather than with ideas of contamination and pollution.

Respondents were asked about their views on the question of whether meat in the diet promotes strength, vigor, and even possibly aggression and whether it is vital for those who expend great energy in work or sport. They were also invited to express their views on the opposite claim, sometimes made by vegetarians, that meat in the diet promotes lethargy and sluggishness due to its effects on the body, the difficulty of digesting it, and so on. There was very little support for either of these views or the general view that any particular component of diet

is likely to have any specific effects on behavioral characteristics or personality.

Only four respondents expressed any agreement at all with the idea that meat can make consumers of it aggressive. One respondent was prepared to entertain the idea that something that had died violently when consumed might impart aggressive characteristics to the consumer.

I wouldn't be too surprised actually by the idea that meat could make you more aggressive.... . I wouldn't be surprised in a way because you are eating something which itself is maybe generated from aggression, killing an animal. (SB2)

Another expressed the idea in terms of individual reactions to meat in their diet:

Maybe in some people it does, I mean maybe some people's biochemistry is such that chemicals that you find in meat—you don't know, maybe it does have an adverse reaction just like alcohol affects people differently. Um, so I wouldn't dismiss that [idea] at all. (SB28)

A third respondent expressed views that suggest he espoused the view that diet can and does affect personal characteristics, dispositions, and outlook in stating that he felt that since adopting a vegetarian diet he had personally felt less aggressive and more caring but even then was not certain that this was due to the properties of meat or the absence of it in his diet.

I feel different being a vegetarian.... I've become much less aggressive, uh, and much more concerned with social issues, um, and much more aware of them. Now I don't know how much of that is factor of growing older during the same period but, um, or how much is a factor reading literature connected to vegetarianism which tends to be very much in the green eco-warrior camp, um, but, um, I certainly feel much less aggressive and much more concerned with animal and human welfare. (VM3)

This respondent did not agree, however, with the idea that meat stimulated vigor, masculinity, and strength:

... when I gave up meat I found that I still had drive but it was a more relaxed drive; there wasn't so much anger behind everything. (VM3)

Apart from one other respondent who expressed the vague feeling that meat might possibly stimulate aggression but acknowledged that without any evidence for this whatsoever, he could only say that it was just a gut feeling, none of the remaining respondents entertained the idea at all that meat was associated with strength, vigor, and masculinity and rejected the idea outright that it promoted aggressiveness.<sup>3</sup> Several took the opposite view that meat tends to promote lethargy, but most were highly skeptical about this idea also.

The tenor of most vegetarians' discourse on the subject seemed entirely incompatible with Twigg's characterization of the vegetarian attitude to meat and its associations with respect to ideas of taboo and pollution. There may yet, however, be something in Twigg's point about the anomalous status of meat which leads some to avoid it. We might generalize this from meat to the animal itself. Animals can be seen as anomalous, situated as they are on the boundary between culture and nature, the human and the non-human, especially warm- and red-blooded mammals that copulate, give birth to live young which they suckle and which manifestly experience pain and suffering. Animals, and especially red-blooded mammals, are very like us but they are not human. Or to put it the other way round, we are very like them; we too are animals yet different from them (Leach, 1964; Tester, 1991).

Leach states that taboos define the self against the other. Vegetarianism can thus be seen, along with environmentalism with which it is increasingly connected, as being about defining the self, defining who one is, what sort of being one is, what it is to be human and the relationship one has with the nonhuman, the other. It can be seen as a statement that expresses ambivalence towards animals and their anomalous position in

<sup>3</sup>Rozin, Markwith, and Stoess (1997) found that ethical vegetarians tended to believe that eating meat can produce personality and behavioral effects. They devised a measure of such belief using three questions that asked whether respondents believed that meat made consumers behave more like animals, more aggressive and violent and, causes undesirable changes in people's personalities. Ethical vegetarians scored significantly higher than health vegetarians on this measure. The absolute proportions of the sample who actually agreed with the propositions presented to them which constituted the measure were, however, very small at around 1% of the sample. This actually lends support to the points made here.

a contemporary culture which no longer views animals as clearly part of nature against culture or which sees humans as set apart over and against nonhuman animals. The rise in vegetarianism would thus reflect the increasing attraction of a nonanthropocentric view of the animal world (Thomas, 1983).

There is some support for this view in the data, in particular with respect to the way vegetarians frequently likened meat and animal carcasses and parts to human bodies and human flesh. The greater revulsion expressed by some vegetarians at the sight of large cuts of meat, or of red meat in particular, of animal carcasses with the head still attached, and so on, was often associated with the idea that such things are more reminiscent of human bodies and, therefore, a reminder of the identity between humans and other animals, especially red-blooded mammals. The sight of such things elicits feelings of horror. Meat certainly does, for vegetarians, symbolize violence and to the extent that it does it stimulates feelings of horror.

The relationship between such horror, on the one hand, and feelings of revulsion and disgust, on the other is crucial and will be examined below.

### **The Habit Theory**

Clearly this fits the findings of the present study to some extent. Aversion to meat tended to be something that developed after the adoption of vegetarianism and frequently rather slowly and imperceptibly. There is undoubtedly an element of the sort of resistance to the ingestion of otherwise edible and nutritious substances not generally consumed in a culture in the tendency of vegetarians to exhibit the attitudes of repugnance that they do towards meat.

Yet this idea cannot be the whole story. It is not fully compatible with the picture that has emerged from the interview data in this study. While this idea is very promising, it fails to explain why only some vegetarians develop the disgust reaction and why ethical vegetarians in particular do so. The ethical dimension of vegetarianism is clearly implicated in the disgust reaction of some vegetarians to meat and its properties and in a way that is not accounted for by Harris' account.

Another significant finding of the present study that counts against Harris' argument is that meat eaters are not much put off by the idea of eating almost any animal with the very marked exception of household

pets and to some extent horses. Also, such support that there is in the data for the view that we find the idea of eating what we do not normally eat repugnant must be further qualified.

### **The Ideology Theory**

There is little support in the data for this approach. While some rhetorical use of language to justify vegetarianism occurred in the interviews, it was occasional and did not characterize or dominate the interaction or play a central role in the discourse. The use of this sort of rhetoric tends rather to be found in the vegetarian propaganda issued by various vegetarian groups who are highly motivated to convert others to their views. It is found in books written by militant and proselytizing vegetarians who wish to get a message across. It may be used in conversation by ordinary vegetarians in defending their dietary practices against critics. Those who participated in the interviews were overwhelmingly nonmilitant and uninterested in converting others. Most saw their vegetarianism as a personal lifestyle choice and had little or no desire to convert others to it. They were generally highly tolerant of meat eaters, and considered their dietary preference to be simply their personal choice. They tended to stress that their avoidance of meat expressed or derived from their desire not to participate in the system of meat production and consumption and to avoid complicity in a practice they personally saw as unethical but which they fully recognized others did not. There is very little sense, therefore, of this rhetorical use of language in the interview responses. The overwhelming impression is of very genuine and strongly felt repugnance and disgust. Such reactions were obviously very real and not rhetorical. The fact that many respondents were themselves very puzzled by such reactions reinforces this interpretation.

### **Dual Processes**

The relationship between disgust and the motive for avoidance might, however, be the result of each being the consequence of distinct and autonomous processes that both happen to operate in the case of meat. While many of the possibilities outlined above offer much towards an understanding of the disgust reaction of vegetarians, it is this last hypothesis it will be argued here, which is the most enlightening and with which the evidence is most compatible.



What this position suggests is that meat is for some vegetarians, particularly ethically motivated vegetarians, a symbol of both carnality *and* gross immorality or inhumanity simultaneously. These things come together in the substance of meat for vegetarians. Meat, unlike most other substances, is of a nature that makes it the focus of both sorts of process. In other words, two related, but nevertheless distinct, factors, underlie the relationship between disgust and avoidance in vegetarianism rather than it being that either disgust produces avoidance or that avoidance produces disgust. Meat as the product of violence towards sentient creatures is the object of ethical concern and conduct. Meat, at the same time, in its carnality and the associations this elicits, is an object of strong emotions involving disgust and horror. Underlying both processes is the sense that animals are seen as not essentially different from humans. Because they are not essentially different their slaughter is seen as inhuman and unethical and at the same time the product of that violence towards animals is a reminder of our own animal vulnerability to violation of our body envelopes and death. A foodstuff that is obtained only through acts which are considered unethical because of the harm and suffering caused to sentient creatures like ourselves is also one that acts as a powerful symbol of violence and death and which, therefore, elicits feelings of revulsion.

This might explain what might be called the element of horror in some vegetarian discourse. It is not just that meat for some vegetarians is disgusting stuff; it is horrific. This explains the frequent likening of meat to human flesh, of animal carcasses to human bodies. It explains the frequently more disgusting nature of whole animals and large cuts than of smaller and less recognizable cuts. It is not so much that they are disgusting, or not *only* that they are disgusting—they are horrific.

In the case of those vegetarians who are motivated not by ethical concerns but by a dislike of meat, it is probably the case that their vegetarianism reflects only one part of the complex involved in the case of ethical vegetarianism. They manifest the sensitivity to carnality to a greater degree than the average person. Even some meat eaters similarly find meat problematic but cope with this by ignoring its origins or shielding themselves as much as possible against the realization of what it really is. They do not express a feeling of horror but only of disgust. They are, perhaps, potential vegetarians who do not make the transition from meat-eating to vegetarianism.

## CONCLUSION

Through the qualitative data on the discourse of vegetarians in relation to meat as a substance discussed here, some light has hopefully been shed on what is otherwise a puzzling phenomenon. There is no obvious reason why ethically motivated vegetarians should demonstrate a disgust reaction to meat nor why those whose concern is with health should do so. Observing a relationship between avoidance of meat consumption and an aversion to it expressed in terms of disgust, revulsion, and horror, it would be easy to fall into the trap of assuming that avoidance of it is actually motivated by aversion to it. Such a view entails dismissal of the ethical stance as mere rationalization of the behavior. This is both problematic and contrary to the evidence from vegetarian discourse examined here. On the other hand, a more sophisticated but equally problematic conclusion might be to assume that avoidance of meat consumption leads to feelings of disgust and aversion towards it.

The analysis here has shown that neither of these interpretations is compatible with vegetarians' own perceptions and understandings as expressed in qualitative interview data. It has been shown that the relationship between avoidance of meat and aversion to it is more complex. It is significant that aversion to meat tends to be most clearly associated with an ethical stance against the consumption of meat rather than with health concerns. Two distinct processes are at work in producing this association between avoidance and aversion among ethically motivated vegetarians. One involves a genuinely ethical stance that leads some to avoid meat consumption. The other, as a consequence of this ethical stance entailing an identification between humans and animals, involves feelings of disgust, revulsion, and horror in the face of the products of violence and taking of life much like those felt in the face of taking human life and dismemberment of human bodies. This action of this dual set of processes accounts for the difference between ethically oriented and health-oriented vegetarians in their reactions to and sentiments regarding meat as a substance.

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