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Meet Them at the Plate

Reflections on the Eating of Animals and the Role of Education Therein

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Abstract

Using the author's own struggle to move toward a vegetarian diet as a backdrop, the article focuses in on the implications that one's disconnection from their food has upon their consumption choices. It aims to illuminate the troubling connection between the consumption of nonhuman animals and structures of violence, domination, and productification that pervade human society, and takes aim at the notion that direct action is the best means through which meat consumption may eventually be eliminated. The article contends that the critical animal educator must help to engage learners in inquiry and "empowering discourse" (DeLeon & Love, 2009) at the point where they are likeliest to be able to reflect critically upon the issue; it may be that the most radical approach, if one is to consider actual outcomes, is not direct action, but direct engagement of students in a critical consideration of their diets which may well affect their ambivalence to eating animals and lead to different choices about their consumption.



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Conflicted Omnivores

As someone who eats meat I have begun lately to grapple with the ethical issues I face in doing so. While I have wrestled with this inner conflict on and off for some time, it has been brought to the fore in my life as a result of having a partner who is a committed vegan. Unlike most academic writers on this subject, I am something of a latecomer to the notion that eating nonhuman animals is not, perhaps, an ethical act. But I am not alone in having to face this dawning question of whether it is ethical to eat animals. Indeed, the popularity of recently published books such as the *Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan, 2006), *Eating Animals* (Foer, 2009), and *The Face on Your Plate* (Masson, 2009), which speak to this issues from a number of vantages—the former two are ranked 25th and 95th on Amazon's list of bestselling books, respectively, as of this writing (Amazon.com, 2010)—suggest that there are a significant number of people who are at least willing to ask the questions: How do the choices I make about what I eat affect other living creatures? Do we have the right to kill animals because we think they're tasty? How does the meat we eat proceed from birth to burger? Is eating meat an unethical act? Is eating meat even healthy?"

While a critical audience, and certainly among those who are likeliest to speak to this issue, feel definitively about the issue, that is to say that eating animals is indeed an immoral act, most people living in countries affluent enough to have regular access to meat are not convinced, or at best they have yet to be convinced. Although this presents a problem for those looking to dismantle the mechanisms of slaughter, it also provides educators with an untapped opportunity to engage students in a critical evaluation of the issue of meat-eating as it relates to diet and domination; it is an opportunity to peel back the layers of habit, bias, misinformation, and disconnection that allow patterns meat consumption to persist unabated.

This article is meant to present a personal reflection, one belonging to a conflicted omnivore, which aims to elucidate the gradual process, and powerful influence, of ambivalence in the making of a vegan. To wit, it is my contention that many radical activists have traversed a gulf of understanding across which they can no longer recognize how anyone might question the verity of meat-eating's connection to domination and depravity. The challenge to their position lies not in their conclusions, but in the means through which to encourage people to cross-over. In order to do so, the movement must go beyond shedding light upon, and challenging, the issue through direct action, but must illuminate it as an issue worthy of further inspection to those who partake, directly or indirectly, in the consumption of other beings. To do so, educators must first meet them where they are; that is to say, at the plate.

A Personal Reflection

For my part I am ready to accept that I do not need to eat animals to sustain my health. It is becoming increasingly clear that meat consumption is not a healthful act. The connection between meat consumption and health problems is not, however, a new one (Robbins, 1987), but more recent iterations of this notion, such as Schlosser's (2001) *Fast Food Nation* and the *China Study* (Campbell & Campbell, 2006), among others (Messina & Burke, 1997), have redoubled the effort to have people call into question not simply the way in which a nonhuman animal becomes a food product, but also our 'conventional wisdom' about what animal proteins mean for our health. Indeed, ignoring the moral considerations momentarily, we still may have had it

wrong all along. We eat billions of pounds of animal flesh every year out of habit, desire, and misplaced notions of what constitutes healthy eating.

As a result, millions of animals are killed each year to feed us. According to the USDA (2009, Mar.) 34,364,900 cattle (not including calves) were slaughtered in 2008 in the United States alone, and cows represent only a fraction of our total meat consumption. By way of example, American consumption of meat is also responsible for the slaughter of 116.5 million pigs, 2.56 million sheep and lambs, nearly a million calves, 264 million turkeys and more than 9 billion chickens each year (USDA, 2009, Feb.). In addition animal agriculture exacts a troubling toll on the environment (“Counting,” 2007; Moore, 2009) and uses badly needed resources that could be used to feed and provide water for the world’s poor (Webster, 1994). It is an unsustainable model of agriculture (Pimentel & Pimentel, 2003).

While these facts are disconcerting, what is most striking personally is what little effectual impact they leave on me. I cannot help but wonder why, amid all of these considerations that should tear at the threads of my moral fabric, that it is the health argument against the consumption of meat that leaves the most lasting impact. Why, of all things, is this facet of the larger issue the most compelling basis for my reconsideration of my meat consuming ways? It would be altogether too easy to dismiss me as another thoughtless meat eater, that I am in the words of A.J.F. Webster (1994) a person who “is simply refusing to think” on the issue (p. 263). It would be equally convenient to argue that I am selfish and thus not compelled by how my meat consumption impacts the commons. Further, one could conclude that I am just another willing oppressor in a world where the majority of humans are content with their domination over nonhuman animals. I do not deny that at some level I am complicit through my actions in all of these conclusions; it may be that my conception of nonhuman animals as food has come about as a result of my own submission to domination by the prevailing paradigm, which normalizes their consumption (Foucault, 1975). It would, however, be a missed opportunity for the radical educator to dismiss and disregard me, and those like me, as lost causes. Instead, it should be the aim of the critical animal educator to foster the circumstances that give rise to one’s ambivalence about eating animals, to provoke the cognitive dissonance that can lead to effectual change. For me, my partner’s example was that opportunity; through her example I have been afforded the circumstances that have helped me to reconsider my actions.

I am increasingly convinced that I, like others who do or have recently but not longer consume meat, do so because meat arrives in our hands as a nearly ready-to-eat food, and not—in conceptual terms at least—as the flesh of another being who has died in order for me to devour a piece of it for my pleasure. As a society we are mentally disconnected, and geographically dislocated, from our food. It is easy for us not to think about what eating meat entails for the living beings slaughtered to feed us, the toll on the commons as a result of our choices, or indeed the effects on our own wellbeing, be it moral or corporeal. What is more, our own unwillingness to investigate these questions as adults has an impact on our children who may not even know that these questions exist to be asked in the first place. To my knowledge I was never once asked as a student to consider where my food came from; as far as that was concerned, I was certain I already knew the answer. Food comes from the supermarket—Duh! I was, and honestly must say I still am, completely disconnected from the source of my food, particularly the meat I consume.

Theoretical Framework

Derrida argued that humans are carnophallogocentric; he represents them as the consuming animal that thrives and remains virile as an outgrowth of their consumption and sacrifice of nature and the animal, human and nonhuman alike (Nancy, 1991; Wood 1999). Derrida is, however, hesitant to advocate vegetarianism inasmuch as it may serve only to “allow vegetarians to buy good conscience on the cheap” without significantly altering the carnophallogocentric nature of man (Wood, 1999, p. 32). Derrida argues, on the contrary that “violence of a sort, ‘eating [O]thers,’ is not an option but a general condition of life, and it would be a dangerous fanaticism (or quietism) to suppose otherwise” (Derrida as quoted in Wood, 1999, p. 31). Human relationships with, and dominance over, nonhuman animals is complex inasmuch as our power over animals doesn’t simply lead us to dominate them, but it also creates a reality where such dominance sacrosanct. Foucault (1977) pointed out that “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194). Hayak (1948), too, laid the claim that truth may be derived not from facts but out of theories that guide us to choose facts from which we construct reality. It is this reality that allows people to see our domination over nonhuman animals without problematizing it. It is clear that it is not enough to simply pull back the curtain to reveal the process by which nonhuman animals become food. Both Desmond (n.d.) and Wilson (2008) note that our concern for the way the foods industry works, much like my own, stems from our worries about the safety of our food and not out of consideration for the moral issues connected to it.

As Desmond (n.d.) illustrates, Sinclair’s *The Jungle* helped raise concern for the way in which meat got from cow to plate, but did nothing to spark questions about the morality of consuming them. Thus if information and familiarity alone were enough, one would assume that farmers and those who worked on family farms would be staunch vegetarians. The fact that this is not the case is revealing, and illuminates something of a paradox: Our disconnection from our food allows us to avoid problematizing the eating of animals, but becoming more closely connected to our food—raising one’s own animals for instance—may lead us to rationalize and normalize our consumption of them as part of a natural order.

In both of these cases, consumer and producer, there is a disconnection from the animal-as-animal. With the former, this disconnection is a functional one, allowing eaters of animals to remain (willfully) ignorant; whereas in the latter, the disconnection may largely be seen as an emotional one, whereby those closest to the violence against animals (as is the true of other forms of violence) become desensitized to it (Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, & Ramirez, 2001; Eron, 2001; Weersing, & Weisz, 2002). Rather than reconciling oneself to the violence involved in eating animals, it is easier to consider the nonhuman animal as an object in its preliminary phase of production for our consumption. Sandlin, Kahn, Darts, & Tavin, (2009) argued that consumption is omnipresent in our lives, and point to Sassatelli (2007), who in turn argued that there are broad social, political, and economic implications for this consumptive tendency in our lives. The omnipresence of this consumerist ideology is such that we create a reality where the animal is othered into oblivion. Thus, whether the farmer kills his own sow, or a consumer purchases their meat from the supermarket, the pig has been transformed into bacon on both of their breakfast plates.

For Derrida, the carnophallogocentrism of humans was insurmountable, but it is one that is permitted to continue because of our “epistemology of ignorance,” a tacit social agreement not

to know (Mills, 2007). Although this active ignorance certainly plays a role, Friedman (2010), offered a more forgiving picture: “With the limited time, intelligence, and logic at our disposal, ignorance is our natural state, one into which we are thrust by the limits of our minds when confronting the vastness of a world that we *would* prefer knowing, at least in all its germane details” (p. xvi). Further, he added that “when public-opinion researchers enumerate the shocking levels of factual ignorance displayed by members of the public, they are really cataloguing the haphazard and often incoherent theorizing in which we, the people engage in our capacity as amateur social scientists” (p. xi).

At the heart of this ignorance is a disconnected understanding of the moral implications of our food and the process by which it arrives for our consumption. At its best, this disconnection leads to an under-educated conception of food, and at worst, a mis-educated understanding of it. Students, for the most part, are not taught about food in schools, at least not in a critical way. Thus schooling finds itself at the locus of this educational blind spot; it represents the paradigm that is controlled by dominant forces in our society. As such, school often acts as an institution that reifies the existing belief system and promotes a submission to the rules of the established order (Althusser, 1970, *Reproduction of Labour-Power* section, para. 11). Indeed, Foucault (1975) argued that all learning entails submission, whether willingly or by force.

The yoke that is the miseducative function of food education, and the silence that surrounds it, is not exclusively the function of schooling. Although schools do represent one of the many loci of this dominant paradigmatic meme, it would be a mistake to consider them as monolithic, or to view them as containing the single-minded power of cultural reproduction (though this is often the case). The prevailing notion that meat is good for you, that ample animal protein is necessary for humans to stay healthy, that without meat one will end up unhealthy, anorexic, effete, is transmitted through a variety of cultural mediums, all which serve to benefit a very powerful interest—the meat-producing industry. It is, after all, in the interest of powerful economic forces to perpetuate the very ideas that feed this paradigmatic supremacy, regardless of their veracity (Foucault, 1980). Power, Foucault noted, is not simply a phenomenon that is enacted from the top down, but one that courses through the synapses of the social body. Like the human body, the social body is made up of many individual synapses: each teacher, student and administrator within the school acts as a “nodal point” in an interconnected nervous system (Lyotard, 1979). As Lyotard points out, “one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (p. 15).

Thus, schooling contains within its walls the potential liberation. Popper held that citizens were capable of identifying problems as well as solutions in social democracies, and not simply recipients of policy and ideology (Friedman, 2010), and one can help facilitate student empowerment by helping them to become creators rather than consumers of knowledge (Freire, 2006). “To study,” wrote Freire (1985), “is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them” (p. 4). Indeed, just as schools may act as a source of reproduction and domination, they may also represent the loci of change as individual actors within the school’s framework chose either to exercise their own power or concede it to existing dominant forces. Although the crux of this reversal of power lies in the practitioner’s awareness of, and willingness to claim, such power, the practitioner is not, as Levi-Strauss’ work illustrates, incapable of becoming “aware of

the implications of their own practices” and the cultural rituals and myths they reproduce (Belsey, 2002, p. 41). Such awareness can help to spark a shifting power dynamic capable of interrupting the dominant discourse.

Why this Matters

We are ignorant consumers of meat. Some of us have no desire to understand how one’s meat gets from animal to plate knowing that it might ‘ruin it’ for us. Others have no moral quandary with the either the means or the ends of the animal to food pipeline. Still others are blissfully unaware that there is a fuller picture to consider. Further, others may understand of the process by which meat becomes food, but still willingly deny the moral implications of that knowledge. As such, they have grown numb to the message of animal activists, whose message becomes lost on the people who most need to receive it. To many, nonhuman animals are just products for future meals. Thus, while the perspective which holds that humans have a rightful dominion over nonhuman animals is problematic in its own right, it should be of greater concern to us that our disconnection from the processes of rational domination over nonhuman animals facilitates their becoming mere objects for our consumption. Horkheimer’s (2004) assertion that instrumental rationality is harnessed in such a way that “its role in the domination of men and nature...has been made [its] sole criterion” is worth noting. He warns:

In the world of actions, we know it is disastrous to treat animals or human beings as though they were stocks and stones. Why should we suppose this treatment to be any less mistaken in the world of ideas? The more ideas have become automatic, instrumentalized, the less does anybody see in them thoughts with a meaning of their own.” (p. 15)

In a society where pig is pork, cow is beef, and sheep is mutton, our meat is an object of our culinary desires, not a piece of once-living being that has died for the satiation of that desire. These nonhuman animals, and the process by which they become euphemistically referent foods, are obscured; they are now “considered things....Language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production in modern society” (Horkheimer, 2004, 15). As such, it is easy for people to distance themselves from the tortuous prospects these beings-cum-products face in order that we might consume them. It would be naïve to suggest that if we simply shifted our view of nonhuman animals to one where their lives and deaths were subject to humane consideration, that humans would cease their cruelty toward others; but the opposite—our willingness to disregard animals as mere objects—leads to our capacity for guiltless violence against them (Schnurer, 2004).

This dynamic of violence is not, as Schnurer pointed out, unique to our treatment of nonhuman animals, but one that plays itself out in myriad aspects of the human experience. Human violence extends to our treatment of each other by way of genocide, human trafficking, rape, abuse, and to our treatment of the environment through a general sense that it is within our right to exercise dominion over other things and beings. Such violence is so commonplace in what it means to be human that we seem inured to it. We appear anesthetized to the violence we commit against nonhuman animals that are raised and slaughtered for our food. Whether we are

numb to it or not, we mustn't ignore the degree to which our violence in one sphere of experience seeps into all others; indeed they are all connected elements of a larger whole.

As a former history teacher, I am cognizant of the power of connection, as well as that of disconnection in the human experience. Disconnection leads to othering, which often uses the power within relationships for domination and subordination" (Canales, 2000, 19), dehumanization, delegitimization, and moral exclusion that are at the heart of intergroup violence (Castano & Kofta, 2009), whether human or nonhuman. Further, our disconnection from the violence that afflicts others allows us to brook wars and genocides across the globe, even as they are advertized before our eyes. It is altogether too easy for us to separate ourselves from it, to believe it is not real, or at least not as troubling as it may seem (e.g. What can I do about genocide in Rwanda, or Bosnia, or Sudan?). Part of our ability to move forward in our own lives is our willingness to look past the horror around us. But that same act, our willingness as human beings to turn a blind eye to atrocities that would stricken us with horror were we to see them in person, allowed the Holocaust and other such tragedies to occur. I don't draw this connection lightly; many people see these as qualitatively different somehow. Nevertheless, the same forces are at play in our willingness to ignore the suffering of living beings that have no control over their circumstances.

In her article, "A Tale of Two Holocausts," Davis (2004) argues that the methods of the Holocaust continue to be used even today in the form of factory farming. It is worth considering the implications for our treatment of nonhuman animals in this larger context. As she points out, the United States Holocaust Memorial lists among its reasons to teach the Holocaust that it "provides a context for exploring the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others"(USHMM, 2010). It also notes that one's "[s]ilence and indifference to the suffering of others...in any society can-however unintentionally- perpetuate the problems." This can be further exacerbated by social desensitization to violence, as was the case in many of the fascist states in the early twentieth century (Finchelstein, 2008). It is important that we allow learners to be able to identify such conditions and personal reactions to problems wherever they may appear; and in this case, it is difficult to disregard the similarities between the two acts of systematic violence. Simply put, it would be erroneous not to regard factory farming as an analogous part of the human experience to the Holocaust, regardless of how one may feel about the comparison.

There is, moreover, evidence to suggest that one's willingness to eat meat is related to the dispositions that may help to facilitate such systematic violence. In their study of the beliefs and values of meat eaters and vegetarians, Allan, Wilson, Ng, Dunne (2000) concluded that omnivores demonstrated a greater orientation towards right wing authoritarianism, which contrasted with negative correlations for vegetarians. Furthermore, meat eaters were more likely to value their rationalism, whereas vegetarians tended to emphasize their emotional states. They concluded: "Omnivores, who are more likely to subscribe to hierarchical domination, may be more prone to objectification, and one effect—or, at a minimum, co-variation—of objectification is increased emotional distance similar to that shown by omnivores" (p. 420). The same rationalism that justifies the slaughter of nonhuman animals also helped to give rise to Nazi extermination policies. As Roth (1980) pointed out, "[t]he dominating power of practical rationality, at least in its Holocaust dimensions, is a most significant consequence of the life of reason" (p. 71). Such are the consequences when rationality is employed without the temperance of empathy.

If what we seek as educators is to foster greater understanding and empathy, this emotional distancing and objectification of nonhuman animals is disconcerting. Contrary to promoting ethic of care and a socio-historical understanding of the “other” that social studies teachers are encouraged to foster (Barton & Levstik, 2004), the presence of such emotional distance toward these beings fosters instead circumstances where domination is permitted to continue without serious consideration of the consequences of such a mindset (Allan, Wilson, Ng, Dunne, 2000). What is more, from a position of empathetic consideration the issues of human and nonhuman domination are intimately connected and highly contextualized. For many people, the Holocaust, for all of its unspeakable horror committed by monsters (Lukacs, 1997) is a distant and terrible episode in human history. They lack the context with which to grapple with the “banality of evil” described by Hannah Arendt (1963), thus allowing it to occur with negligible resistance on the part of the German people.

But how does one resist the deadening of our wherewithal to counter rational domination? Indeed, “[h]ow,” asked Schnurer (2004), “do we overcome the mental categorizations that perpetuate injustice?”(p. 109); and how might educators, community activists, and others most effectively address the question of meat eating and its relation to the domination and objectification of nonhuman animals? For Schnurer, the answer lies in direct action. In his view it is organizations such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) which act both to sabotage the means by which animal slaughter is conducted and to document the conditions in which animals are kept and how they are treated. This serves both to make those who would profit from this suffering reconsider their actions and to elicit the sympathies of the wider public. Further, he acknowledges and rejects the possible objections to ALF’s aims, noting:

Some argue, however, that the wider community misses the ALF’s message, and that traditional methods of persuasion (protests, lobbying, leafleting) should be the focus of animal rights activism. The problem with this argument is that the wider community has the largest commitment to the system of meaning that holds animals under slavery. It is this very system of control that makes animal cruelty a ‘fact of life.’ Like the Polish citizens who willingly participated in the oppression of the Jews, the average person has no reason to step out of his or her comfort zone to challenge speciesism; he or she has not yet encountered the strong voice that requires respect and may prompt rethinking one’s relation to animals.” (p. 115)

One might also point to the success of Sea Shepherd’s tactics in the Antarctic in pressuring the Japanese to give up whaling. In much of the West, we do not eat whales and have long abandoned our willingness to engage in hunting and killing cetaceans, which we now consider noble and sentient creatures—a designation most people are certainly unwilling as a society to grant to food-animals. This is not the case in Japan, however, where stockpiles of whale meat not consumed by the general population are fed to school children; this is in spite of its toxic level of methyl mercury (McCurry, 2010; “Whalemeat”, 2007). Sea Shepherd has succeeded in significant reductions in the numbers of whales killed and brought back to Japan for consumption (Mulvaney, 2010), and most recently, their efforts have contributed to Japan’s recall of their whaling fleet entirely (Fackler, 2011). Additionally, the documentary, *The Cove* (2009), provides another poignant example; activists from the Ocean Preservation Society joined

up with the director Louis Psihoyos and Richard O'Barry (of *Flipper* fame who turned into a Dolphin freedom-fighter) to bring news to the world of the cruel and senseless slaughter of dolphins. Thousands of dolphins were killed and their toxic meat provided to school children, and packaged for public consumption as whalemeat in supermarkets (DuPré Pesman, Stevens, & Psihoyos, 2009). Subsequent testing of residents in Taiji, Japan resulted in levels of mercury in people high enough to cause nerve damage (Johnston, 2009).

The critically acclaimed film certainly succeeds in bringing these practices under the spotlight, but its critics have a point to make as well. Cox (2009) writes:

The film's [Japanese] spokespersons are certainly puzzled. Westerners, they point out, kill and eat cows. Easterners eat dolphins. What's the difference? As we know from the work of other film-makers, what happens on the west's [sic] factory farms doesn't look pretty on celluloid. Yet we don't seem to care very much about that. After all, cows aren't dolphins. (para. 6)

Thus, although there is an extent to which nonhuman animal activists are successful, Schurner may overestimate the extent to which such actions directly impact the view of the average meat eater. It seems that one's willingness to engage in the struggle against inhumane treatment of nonhuman animals is connected to one's (un)willingness to engage in eating them. According to Becker, Kals, and Fröhlich (2004), the more one consumes "conventionally produced meat, the less they are willing to engage in improvements of the general situation of meat production" (p. 149). Thus such activism, while important, is not likely to provide the impact necessary to change the patterns of thought or actions among those who contribute most to the problem of animal slaughter. Further still, Lowe and Ginsberg (2002) point out that of those who adopt vegan lifestyles, only a minority—26 percent—do so out of a shocked sensibility. To put this number into perspective, a 2006 Harris poll estimates that those who never eat the flesh of animals make up only 2.3 percent of the U.S. population and that the percentage of vegans who reject the consumption of any animal derived food is little more than half of that number—1.4 percent (Stahler, 2006). Thus while direct action is an important element in raising awareness, it is arguably ineffectual when one considers the beliefs and actions of a general public at large.

Such actions succeed in drawing attention to the issue, but do little to engage people in process of considering their personal connection to the matter they aim to illuminate. If the aim of radical animal educators is to end the eating animals ultimately, then it behooves them to consider the effectiveness of the means they use to affect this end. They must ask themselves how they can best help students unveil their personal connection with the whole process. To do so provides an avenue by which to approach and consider our consumption of nonhuman animals; in fact, their personal attachment to their diet may offer a more direct means of fostering empathy, self-critique, and ultimately a reframing of their position on eating animals. What's more, this consideration may also help to open up gateway for them to connect with and reflect upon events and circumstances that are too removed by distance or time, or that are too abstract for them to grapple with sufficiently. In my experience, affording our students with the opportunity for reflection, deliberation, and thoughtful consideration of issues that ask them to do more than wrestle with the intellectual merits of arguments is far more effective than teacher directed moralizing.

As such it may be that Snaza's (2004) argument for dropping the framework of animal rights as the main thrust of this movement is worthy of further consideration. The notion, to put

it glibly, that cows or other nonhuman animals are (equal to) people simply doesn't hold much water for the people who partake in their consumption. To most humans, nonhuman animals, and particularly those that we eat, are qualitatively different creatures and thus not deserving of the same rights or even the same consideration that we often cannot even seem to grant to humans in the first place. This may help to explain why the shock value campaigns of organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are not more effective. Moreover, the notion that direct action is an effective approach to counter the consumption of meat flies in the face of evidence (Lowe's and Ginsberg's, 2002).

This is not to say that the work of Sea Shepherd, ALF, and PETA is unworthy. On the contrary, they play an important role in drawing people's attention to issues of animal cruelty and domination of human over nonhuman animals. Further, their actions do succeed in providing the "catalytic experiences" which may be central to one's decision to shift to veganism in some cases (McDonald, 2000, p. 8), even if this is may not true for the majority of those who choose to pursue vegan and vegetarian lifestyles. Further, these organizations provide a rich emotional landscape through which to navigate the pitfalls of deliberative rationalism. Yet, MacDonald also acknowledges that one's openness to this orientation is of critical importance for such a shift to occur. Thus, as Ayers points out:

[Activism] has no value in itself....Everything depends on the truth of the state of affairs exposed, described, opposed—does the action resist unjust hurt, unnecessary suffering, avoidable pain? Does the action embody or at least provide a space for change? Did it educate others? This last question is the standard by which activism is gauged: while there is no way to be certain in advance it is nonetheless essential to raise in the aftermath: Did the action inform, illuminate, alter, or expand our collective consciousness? Did it educate both participants and witnesses? Did it build a broader community? (p. 111)

So while the actions of animal activist organizations capture those who are open to their message, they may do little to shift the widely held somatic view of nonhuman animals who continue to be viewed as animated shanks, ribs, chops, blades, and rumps to the meat eating public; they fail to contribute effectively to the wider public's understanding of what the "big deal" is.

Meeting them at the Plate

I feel secure in arguing that most people approach their consumption of meat not out of malice, but from a position of ignorance. Few, if any, people are likely to be eating a hamburger because they believe that the cow had it coming. On the contrary, people tend to believe that meat is an essential part of a healthy diet, without which a person cannot remain healthy. In their study on factors influencing meat consumption in Australia, Lea and Worsley (2001) found that meat eaters shared concerns about remaining healthy as vegetarians more than that they were convinced of the healthfulness of meat itself. Furthermore, the people in this study showed a considerable lack of knowledge about healthy vegetarian diets. However, if educated about their food choices, people demonstrate a willingness to change their consumption patterns when they are convinced of the health benefits of moving away from at least some meats (Richardson, 1994; Baker, Thompson, & Palmer-Barnes, 2002). Still, people have only so much capacity to

make the cognitive leaps necessary to make significant changes in their worldviews. Such shifts, as with other forms of learning, require appropriate scaffolding, without which they cannot make such a leap (Vygotsky, 1978). It may be necessary for critical education in this field to begin in a place that does not feel very ‘radical’. But as McNair (2001) pointed out:

Some people find that simply breaking the firm idea that something is not a meal if it does not have a meat, poultry, fish, egg, or dairy component is a major achievement. It may be a necessary step before any further progress is made. Fewer animals would be put under factory farming and slaughterhouse conditions if large numbers of people simply had vegan meals once a week. Those who are doing this once a week are more likely to be persuaded to do so twice a week than those who are not. Having a vegetarian meal is not nearly as intimidating an idea as transforming one’s whole diet. It does, however, make the transformation more likely later. (p. 68)

Thus, if we are to make progress in challenging people to reconsider their meat consumption, critical animal educators need to meet them where they are—that is to say that they must meet them at the plate. There is growing evidence to suggest that the ranks of so-called *flexitarians*—made up of uncommitted vegetarians and conflicted omnivores who want to eat more ethically, but who are not yet ready to give up meat—are growing (McDonough, 2009; Johnston & Baumann, 2009). It is incumbent upon critical animal educators to foster this emerging cognitive dissonance, to provide the opportunities for people to think critically about the contradictory messages and feelings they may have about eating meat. Members of the Frankfurt School, credited as the early progenitors of critical theory, emphasized the importance of such critical thinking. Giroux (2009) writes that “its members argued that it was in the contradictions of society that one could begin to develop forms of social inquiry that analyzed the distinction between what is and what should be” (p. 28).

As adults we take for granted that meat is part of a balanced diet, or at least satisfied with precedent, either historical or personal, for continuing to believe this is so. While it is true to an extent that our ancestors ate meat when it was available to them, this is not a particularly convincing argument for continuing to do so. It would be laughable to consider the violent and genocidal lives of our Cro-Magnon ancestors as the measure of right-action in any other sphere of life (Diamond, 1992; Tattersall, 1995). Neither, moreover, is personal precedent a convincing line of reasoning, as individuals tend to be poor authorities when it comes to objectively healthy diets, revealing strong biases toward their own (Povey, Wellens, & Conner, 2001).

More to the point, when this sort of reasoning represents the punctuating point of the mainstream argument for continuing to consume vast quantities of meat, there is clearly something excluded. Derrida’s work demonstrates how the privileging of an idea often relies on excluding the other in order to maintain its’ primacy (Sarup, 1988). When this is the case, it is clearly necessary to subject how nonhuman animals become food, as well as our willingness to consume them, to a critical lens; we must begin to deconstruct the idea that nonhuman animals are meant to be food for humans. The use of deconstruction, a persistent effort at self-critique, and an unwillingness to become complacent with one’s own view of the world are essential to avoiding the “narcissistic and conformist tendencies” of thought (Papastephanou, 2004). Papastephanou asserted further that “traditions and ideas must be revisited and reworked, communicated and debated, entangled and disentangled” in order for us to work through the dissonance created by antithetical views of the world (p. 376). If people are not asked to engage

in such inquiry as children and young adults, what impetus is likely to compel them to do so as adults? Without a conscious effort to engage people in critical self-reflection in relation to their meat consumption, few are likely to follow this inquiry through on their own (Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002), much less arrive at a place where they can question the speciesism behind our claim to dominance over these animals (Best, 2009).

This engagement is essential, if not always immediate in effecting change. If it does little more than create a question-mark in the heads of young people, their ambivalence may be enough. A study by Berndsen and Pligt (2004) demonstrated that one's increased ambivalence to the consumption of meat was directly related to one's "intentions to reduce future meat consumption" (p. 75). Thus, while veganism sometimes comes about as a result of a person's perception that a vegan lifestyle is morally more coherent given their views of animal rights and other related concerns (McDonald, 2000), others give up meat because they no longer see a meat-eating diet as one that is healthy for them. A point of interest that is worth considering is that in both cases, one's feeling of disgust toward meat grow over time as a result, rather than as a cause, of their decision to no longer eat meat (Fessler, Arguello, Mekdara, & Macias, 2003). I, too, am beginning to experience this phenomenon as I eschew meat for increasingly substantial periods of time. Thus, effectuating change in people's attitudes toward meat eating in terms of their diets, may have more long lasting impacts upon their actual meat consumption patterns than one-off shock campaigns that aim to upset their moral compass.

Whether approaching the issue of meat consumption ethically or nutritionally, a critical investigation of these issues is necessary to dispel the misconceptions people may have. It is in this way that classrooms have the potential to foster empowering discourse which may help children to challenge commonly held, if erroneous, sensibilities (DeLeon & Love, 2009) in order to arrive at their own conclusions based on reasoned consideration of the issue. While Hess (2009) argues that learning to participate in enlightened discourse with controversial issues is necessary in order to foster vibrant democratic practice, many activists are skeptical of the deliberative democratic approach (D'Arcy, 2007; McDonald, 2000; Young, 2003; Humphrey & Stears, 2006). They argue that deliberation does not adequately account for the necessity of egalitarian direct action in challenging entrenched power structures, which controversial and contentious debate may not address. Such arguments are valid critiques, which reveal the limits of the deliberative model, but children do not, I would argue, constitute the bulwark of entrenched power.

As such, direct action and confrontation may represent important forms of engagement that are most effectively utilized elsewhere. Instead, schools may be used to initiate discussions and explorations of issues connected to meat eating specifically, but also to a broader understanding of where our food comes from and whether it is healthy to consume it; in so doing, the deliberative process may provide learners with the foundation to begin making better food choices. To claim this process to be a magical formula is to propose something of a educative nostrum; indeed McDonald's (2000) conclusion that deliberation appeared to play little role in one's choice to become vegan, owing perhaps to the fact that there was little opportunity for it, illuminates the fact that education is an uncertain enterprise; people are not always willing participants in deliberation or in the deconstruction of their comfortable realities.

This is a situation we must be willing to accept in a democratic society. And although critical animal educators feel passionately about the sanctity of the lives of nonhuman animals, there is a totalitarian violence, too, in forcing one's own ideology upon students, which

denigrates the spirit of democratic deliberation with all of its inherent uncertainty. I, for one, am not willing to force my students to be free of their own critically reasoned conclusions (Rousseau, 1968). It is in this same vein that I have concerns about activist shock value campaigns; although playing a useful role in raising awareness and providing an emotional context for deliberation to take place, they, too, can be power-laden acts of violence against the students activists hope to affect. We must be willing to ask of ourselves whether our counter-narrative is simply inverting the hierarchy, while leaving it intact. The aim must not be simply to reverse it, but to result in “a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself” (Derrida, 1978, p. 81). Put another way, as critical educators, do we want people to stop eating animals because they ascribe to a newly ascendant, and newly imposed paradigm? Or, do we want this to happen as a result of a zeitgeist that eschews the domination of humans over nonhuman animals? In the end the result is the same, but the latter contains within it the seeds of so much more.

In much the same way, deliberation should not be seen as an exercise in pontification, nor as the conquest of words and ideas. Hess’s (2009) work indicates that deliberation for the sake of fostering understanding and developing one’s thinking around an issue, and not for winning, leads to a more tolerant and constructive learning environments. This has important implications for democratic society as a whole. Thus, rather than downplaying the importance of deliberation, it is arguably the case that providing the space and opportunity for deliberative engagement with the issue fosters an important dialogue that may effectuate change. Accepting as it does that deliberative engagement is not a panacea—some will continue to choose to eat meat—it may further support and validate the propensity for people to make the choice to eschew meat, one that might not be available to them otherwise. Furthermore, the space for dialogue allows the critical educator to explode erroneous beliefs surrounding the issues of meat eating and veganism. Perhaps most importantly, however, is that such discussions serve to promote a wider understanding of issues connected to the consumption of nonhuman animals which students may know very little about: speciesism, domination, environmental degradation, health, animal rights, socio-economic inequity, and so forth. Create such room in schools to allow for the deliberation of these issues may help to inspire student-led action, and for educators to utilize their “teaching as a tool for action in order to challenge the status quo and change the position of animals in human society” (Pedersen, 2010a, p.45).

Concluding Remarks

Schools are necessarily limited by the extent to which they are cultural and political institutions that are subject to dominant economic and political forces. This may be evinced by the extent to which schools today are dispensaries of troublingly unhealthy food choices. Even while schools cannot be located outside of ideology, they are important nodal points that can serve as institutions of empowerment, critical engagement, and transformation for students, teachers, and parents. As chef and health activist, Jaime Oliver, argued, we must “make school food an integral part of the school curriculum. Don’t just keep the food in the cafeteria, use it throughout the school to help kids to learn about where their food comes from; what fresh quality ingredients look and taste like; how to cook for themselves and their families; that food is fun!” (Oliver, 2010, 13). It would be a mistake to argue that they are ideologically neutral, but they are nevertheless promising sites for mediating clashes of ideology and deliberation of controversy in democratic society. Moreover, the work of Pedersen (2010b) has demonstrated that “the

delimitations of education in conceptualizing human-nonhuman animal relations are not fixed: they are, rather, dynamic, elastic, and as unpredictable as education itself” (p. 14).

Thus deliberation of this particularly controversial issue may act to initiate learners into the complex, value-laden, and artificially constructed context that they must learn to navigate in order to make critically informed food choices. If we are to help empower our students to subvert the powerful ideological forces which lead us to view nonhuman animals as products, we must provide the space to allow learners to grapple with these complexities and to begin to critically evaluate their own beliefs about meat consumption. To do so may well lead to greater ambivalence about eating animals and provide new motivation to resist the temptations of the flesh. More importantly, however, it establishes habits of mind that may help our students to question and challenge, rather than submitting to, the established order. To do so equips them with the critical epistemological tools necessary to deconstruct, and creatively reconstruct, their reality, rather than exist as passive recipients of ideology. Perhaps in this way, students and teachers may free themselves from Derrida’s insurmountable carnophallogocentric drive, and to transform our understanding of nonhuman animals from products back into living beings. To leave such an integral part of our existence behind a shroud of ignorance is to commit a double injustice. We deprive our students of the knowledge necessary to overcome their disconnection from, and to make conscientious decisions about, what they eat in ways that nurtures their health, conscience, and understanding of the human and nonhuman condition; and it also permits the many ancillary consequences of our meat consumption to continue unchecked and unnoticed.

My own struggle to move toward a diet that eschews the flesh of nonhuman animals in the face of inertia and social pressure helps to underscore the importance of activating the means by which learners can reflect upon the matter thoroughly and critically. It is unthinkable to me that we might forgo the opportunity to engage learners where they are, to meet them at the plate as an entrée into richer more critical discourses in favor of actions that appear more radical; to do so would be shortsighted to say the least. Rather, the critical educator should embrace deliberation and critical reflection as part of their repertoire for addressing the issue of meat eating. We must engage learners in the investigation of the issues connected to eating animals and provide for them the tools and opportunities, to reflect critically upon it, to deconstruct it, to help to instigate the overthrow of a dominant and violent paradigm that has proven to be unhealthy to humans, detrimental to the commons, and deadly to nonhuman animals. Sandlin, Kahn, Darts, and Tavin (2009) help us to see through several cases that “a critical pedagogy of consumption ignites the imagination, helps learners to envision and realize new ways of being outside of the commodity’s grip, and encourages learners to become active creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients” (p. 120). Our connection to, and engagement with, this issue is at once fundamentally important to the human condition, thoroughly consistent with the philosophical disposition of the critical educator, and holds long-term promise for shifting the way people think about their consumption of nonhuman animals.

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