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

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THE ANSWER TO Kathryn Paxton George's question, "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?" is "Yes"—her arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.

The gist of George's position is (here I condense her points two and three [1994b, 407]) that "traditional Western moral theory" (throughout George dubiously collapses rights theory and utilitarianism into a composite liberal, modernist ethic) entails generic prescriptions that can be faulted for failing to pay attention to relevant differences among entities being judged or considered (413). In this George follows the by-now standard postmodernist feminist critiques of modernist, Kantian, Enlightenment theory: it elides the realities of women and, therefore, is unacceptable from a feminist point of view. With this I have no quarrel.

The crux of her argument, however, lies in the idea that ethical vegetarian theory, presumably because it is rooted, she claims, in "traditional Western moral theory," elides the physiological differences between men and women in constructing its ethical ideal—in short, relying on a "male physiological norm" (415).

This thesis is wrong on several counts. First, much ethical vegetarian theory is rooted not in Western rights/utilitarian theory but rather in other sources (Hindu concepts such as *ahimsā*, e.g., are familiar foundational ideas for most Western vegetarians). Second, despite George's disclaimers (414, n. 21; 421), her premise relies on the misapprehension—the so-called naturalistic fallacy—that one constructs ethical ideals upon empirical "norms." (The word *norm* itself suggests how arbitrary and socially constructed such alleged physiologies are, which is an important reason why they cannot be the basis for ethical construction.) But, third, aside from this flawed premise, even if we grant that dietary ethics are a special case and ought to reflect physiological "norms," George's argument is not persuasive. And the reason is that the facts do not support it.

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Signs readers should be aware of a series of articles, principally by Evelyn Pluhar, that have appeared in the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* refuting George's nutritional claims, nearly point for point (Pluhar 1992, 1994; Varner 1994).¹ George neglected to mention these refutations in her *Signs* article. George's basic claim—that "ethical vegetarianism actually discriminates against women, infants, children, adolescents, some of the elderly, other races and ethnicities, and those living in other cultures" (1994b, 406)—is simply not supported by current nutritional information. Even Johanna T. Dwyer, George's main source, concludes in "Nutritional Consequences of Vegetarianism" (1991), a recent authoritative survey of the subject, that, "with appropriate attention to nutritional needs, the health consequences of vegetarianism itself are neutral and in some respects may even be positive" (86).

Strangely, George seems to have endorsed this position in a 1992 article, in which she acknowledges that vegetarian diets hold no risk for any group, which modifies her earlier claim that such a diet is injurious to certain groups (a position she reverts to in the 1994 *Signs* article [1994b] unless it was written earlier and therefore reflects a position she no longer holds). In her 1992 article, George states: "These [vegetarian and vegan] diets are safe for the groups in question when the diets are well-planned." George cautions, however, in an aside that "'well-planned' requires access to a high level of education, health monitoring, and supplementation—something which is unavailable to . . . the majority of the world's population" (George 1992, 218, as cited in Pluhar 1993, 6). The presumption, however, that "the majority of the world's population" needs Western nutritional intervention smacks, frankly, of cultural imperialism.

Nor is there any evidence to sustain one of George's further contentions, that vegetarianism "is the product of a wealthy society," reflecting "class bias" against "'less developed' societies" (1994b, 408). In fact, most non-Western diets are largely vegetarian (perhaps by virtue of necessity): consider Chinese, Indian, and African traditional cuisines. If anything, it is meat-eating that is a Western norm that "development" has imposed upon non-Western nations, reflecting again a characteristically Western cultural imperialism.

George's implication that vegetarianism "causes" a lowered life expectancy in Third World countries is a classic, textbook case of faulty logic. She states, for example, that, "in India, a largely vegetarian society, life expectancy for females is 55.67 years and for males 55.40 years" (1994b, 421). Her faulty inference notwithstanding, there is no proven connection between a vegetarian diet and lowered life expectancies.

¹ George has counterattacked in George 1992, 1994a, and 1994c. Pluhar, however, claims that George's response "is based upon numerous distortions, omissions, and false charges" (Pluhar 1993, abstract).

George allows a similarly faulty inference—again the kind of logic textbooks warn against—in her misleading suggestion that a valid analogy can be drawn between the proven link between smoking and lung cancer and a purported link between a vegetarian diet and a similar harm: “Some persons will indeed be harmed by vegetarian diets. Identifying which individuals is no more possible than saying with certainty which smokers will get lung cancer” (1994b, 420, n. 32). George’s point here is that probability statistics do not predict who will be harmed by a specific practice, but in making this point she relies upon the invalid assumption that a comparable degree of probable causality exists between smoking and getting cancer, on the one hand, and vegetarianism and experiencing serious harm, on the other. While numerous studies have proven a causal relationship between smoking and cancer, none have shown a causal effect between vegetarianism and cancer or, indeed, any other serious disease. In fact, rather the reverse is becoming evident: there is considerable evidence of a correlation between a meat-based diet and cancer, heart disease, and other health problems. In both of these instances, George’s logic is at best misleading. At worst, it suggests willful distortion.

Finally, nowhere in the nutritional literature is there convincing evidence for George’s claim that vegetarianism is more suited to men or that it somehow injures women. On the contrary, some evidence suggests that vegetarianism may be in certain respects a more healthy diet (for all) than one that includes meat (see Dwyer 1991). Even veganism has been adjudged healthy by nutritionists; the latest authoritative articles on the subject (Dwyer and Loew 1994; Mangels and Havala 1994) state that while “infants, children, adolescents, and pregnant and lactating women have . . . special needs . . . vegan diets can be safely used by these groups if foods, and in some instances supplements, are selected which provide a healthful and nutritionally adequate diet. . . . In many instances vegan diets offer health benefits” (Mangels and Havala 1994, 111).

Happily, therefore, the facts suggest that one need not espouse a “self-sacrificial pacifism” (George 1994b, 422, n. 35) in adopting vegetarianism. I and others have argued elsewhere that feminism must take a stand against animal suffering and exploitation, including human consumption of meat; I will not repeat these arguments here (see Donovan 1990; Adams 1990, 1991; Gaard 1993). George’s contention that such a position is self-contradictory because it entails damage to women is rooted in incorrect data and faulty interpretive inferences and, therefore, does not challenge our contention that, yes, feminists should be vegetarians.

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