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

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WHILE FEMINISTS, ACTIVISTS, and environmentalists around the world are acknowledging the social and political implications of overconsumption, it is shocking to find that *Signs,* one of the leading academic feminist journals in the United States, would publish an essay so lacking in this awareness. Yet Kathryn Paxton George's "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?" (1994) exhibits a startling lack of awareness—not just about consumption but also about nutritional data, feminist critiques of science, ecofeminist arguments surrounding vegetarianism, and feminist ethical theory generally.

Content: The nutritional data

In her article, George's aim is to establish that "because the nutritional claims are mistaken, the primary support for ethical vegetarianism is removed" (1994, 422).[1] She cites studies that she believes establish the dangers of a vegetarian diet particularly for consumers whose marginalized status should be of interest to feminists: "infants, children, adolescents, gestating and lactating women, some elderly people, and many people living in cultural and environmental circumstances that are not dependent on industrialized agriculture and high-tech society" (415). Here we will present data that raises questions about many of George's nutritional claims. In the next section we will raise feminist concerns with George's methods.

[1] The categories of "vegetarianism" as defined by George are not universally accepted. For our purposes, we would like to clarify that by *vegetarian* we mean a diet excluding all dead animals of any type but including milk and eggs; by *vegan* we mean a plant-based diet that excludes dead animals and animal products alike. Defining as vegetarian a diet that includes fish or that includes only "a little fish and chicken, but no red meat" as George does (*pescovegetarian* and *semi-vegetarian,* respectively) is not only offensive to vegetarians, but more centrally, for purposes of argument, expands the definition of *vegetarian* to such a degree that it is meaningless.

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Here are some of the claims George makes to support her argument against ethical vegetarianism:

1. Claims for ethical vegetarianism have been based on a male physiological norm.
2. Vegan infants may have diets "too low in energy and too high in bulk" and therefore may lack sufficient quantities of vitamins D and B_{12}, iron, calcium, and zinc.
3. Lactating vegans and infants alike have special nutritional needs for D, B_{12}, and zinc that cannot be met through plant-based sources; hence, supplementation of vitamins D and B_{12} is recommended for pregnant women and supplementation of zinc for children.
4. Inadequacy of calcium is thought to be linked to osteoporosis, and since the calcium in plant sources is poorly available, milk is still considered the best source of this important nutrient.
5. Poor absorption of non heme (meat) iron sources is thought by some to be a primary cause of iron deficiency. This deficiency is particularly relevant for women, as two-thirds of women and children in developing nations are thought to suffer from iron deficiency.

While there are studies to support these claims, what George fails to mention is that all of them are currently being disputed.

For example, in the May 1994 issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* one finds the proceedings of a symposium on vegetarian nutrition that was held in the summer of 1992. As if in response to George's criticism that all studies of vegetarian nutrition are based on male norms, the volume contains numerous studies on the nutritional needs of pregnant and lactating vegetarians as well as infants and children.[2] Space does not permit us to report extensively on the findings of the symposium, but there are a number of points worth highlighting.[3]

According to one study, the best source of vitamin D is environmental rather than dietary: hence, supplemental vitamin D is needed more by pregnant women living in northern climates or other areas that do not receive sufficient sunlight exposure (Specker 1994, S1183). Moreover, since the vitamin D content of human milk is low, the nursing infant's vitamin D status is likewise determined by his or her exposure to sunshine (Specker 1994, S1183). And while calcium is surely essential to nursing infants, this study found that "milk calcium concentrations were unaffected by maternal calcium intake" (Specker 1994, S1184). For the lactating mothers, it was found that "there is an hormonal response to a

[2] See Gibson 1994; Reed et al. 1994; Sanders and Reddy 1994; Specker 1994; Weaver and Plawecki 1994.

[3] We recommend that anyone interested in the nutritional data read the original sources for themselves.

low-calcium diet and to lactation that theoretically may increase the efficiency of calcium absorption" (Specker 1994, S1183). Finally, vitamin B_{12} supplements were recommended for vegetarian women, since vitamin B_{12} deficiency often results in severe neurological damage for breast-fed infants.

Another study on "vegetarian diets and children" reported that because the hazards of vegetarian diets have been identified—iron deficiency anemia, vitamin B_{12} deficiency, rickets, and a bulky diet that can restrict energy intake in the first few years of life—these known pitfalls are easily avoided (Sanders and Reddy 1994, S1179). Drawing on studies of traditional vegetarian populations in Asia (i.e., Hindus), Indian populations in the United Kingdom, and predominantly white populations such as Seventh-Day Adventists, commune-dwelling vegetarians, and ethical vegetarians in the United States, this study's findings were carefully contextualized in terms of race, class, and nationality. Because those vegetarian children (primarily Westerners) whose diet and lifestyle included whole-meal bread, soy products, vitamin-fortified cereals, and plenty of sunshine were able to ensure sufficient to high intakes of iron, vitamins B_{12}, C, and D, these researchers concluded that "there is no doubt that a properly selected vegetarian diet can meet all the requirements of growing children" (Sanders and Reddy 1994, S1176).

Other studies found that adequate and available sources of calcium could be obtained through a vegetarian diet (Reed et al. 1994; Weaver and Plawecki 1994). Weaver and Plawecki found that calcium intake alone was not the sole factor controlling the adequate levels of calcium: "Meat eating has been hypothesized to increase calcium requirements because of increased metabolic acid production due to sulfur-containing amino acids, which leads to increased urinary calcium losses and bone resorption" (1994, S1239). Apparently "fiber does not appear to negatively affect calcium absorption" (1994, S1239). Like other researchers attending the symposium, these authors were careful to contextualize their findings in terms of race, class, and gender.

The iron status of vegetarians was also reported to be not only adequate but healthy as well. One researcher noted that, whereas iron stores in women are usually lower than in men, "the body compensates for low iron stores by substantially increasing iron absorption above the amount that occurs when iron stores are adequate" (Craig 1994, S1233). Moreover, "children who consume a balanced lactoovovegetarian or vegan diet have an iron status similar to children who are omnivores" (Craig 1994, S1235). In fact, "the total dietary iron intake of vegetarians who follow a balanced diet has been reported to be higher than that of nonvegetarians" (Craig 1994, S1235). As this researcher noted, "Because milk is not a good source of iron and the iron in egg has a low bioavailability, vegans who follow a well-balanced diet should not be considered

to be at any additional risk regarding their iron status. In fact, some studies report that vegans consume amounts of dietary iron that are well above recommended dietary allowances . . . and high quantities of fruits and vegetables rich in vitamin C" (Craig 1994, S1235). No doubt, iron supplements during pregnancy are a good choice for women on all types of diets, but as this researcher concluded, "the risk of iron deficiency is not different from that for people who eat a nonvegetarian diet" (Craig 1994, S1236).

Finally, the need for zinc as well as other minerals such as copper, manganese, and selenium is apparent for all diets. One researcher found that "vegetarian diets do not necessarily compromise the zinc status of most vegetarian adults" (Gibson 1994, S1230). For pregnant women taking large doses of nonheme iron supplements, however, additional zinc supplements may be advisable, since nonheme iron has been shown to inhibit zinc absorption (S1228–S1229). Growing vegetarian children may also requre zinc supplements, "presumably because of childrens' very high zinc requirements for growth and their bodies' failure to adapt to vegetarian diets with increased absorption of trace elements" (S1230). For the other trace minerals, vegetarian diets were found to be more than adequate. This study found that "intakes of copper and manganese . . . tend to be higher in vegetarians than in omnivores" and that in North America, "cereal products are frequently the major sources of selenium in both vegetarian and omnivorous diets" (Gibson, S1224).

In addition to these findings that directly oppose George's claims, researchers found numerous health advantages to a vegetarian diet. One study of vegetarian and nonvegetarian women found that nonvegetarian women reported "more overnight hospitalizations and surgeries," more chemical allergy, drug allergy, bee-sting allergy, and hayfever (Knutsen 1994). Other studies found that vegetarian diets can play an important role in reducing most human cancers, particularly breast and colon cancers (Beecher 1994; Frentzel-Beyme and Chang-Claude 1994; Willett 1994). Even the ever-popular fear about protein intake was allayed, for researchers found that while "estimates of protein intake among vegetarians are typically lower than for nonvegetarians . . . for both groups, protein intakes exceeded the RDA" (Weaver and Plawecki 1994, S1238).

In the autumn following the symposium on vegetarian nutrition, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) issued the following position statement: "It is the position of the American Dietetic Association that vegetarian diets are healthful and nutritionally adequate when appropriately planned" (1993, 1317).[4] A three-page report summarizing the ADA's rationale described the health advantages of a vegetarian diet (i.e., lower

[4] The ADA position was adopted on October 18, 1987, and reaffirmed on September 12, 1992. The update will be in effect until October 1997.

mortality rates from heart disease or cancers, lower rates of hypertension) and the nutritional adequacy of a vegetarian diet. Specifically, it noted that "calcium deficiency in vegetarians is rare, and there is little evidence to show that calcium intakes below the Recommended Dietary Allowance cause major health problems in the vegetarian population" (1993, 1318). Moreover, the high U.S. recommendations for calcium are "designed to compensate for the calciuric effect of high intakes of animal protein"; as vegetarians absorb and retain more calcium from foods than do nonvegetarians, the recommendations for calcium intake are significantly lower for populations consuming a more plant-based diet (1993, 1318).

Because these studies explicitly do not controvert the nutritional bases for vegetarianism as George has claimed, one is led to resolve this apparent conflict of "facts" by asking methodological questions about the researchers' biases and the fundamental assumptions that shaped the way that research questions were framed and interpretations were made. In this area, one can turn to feminist theory about science, which "can help to explain why some problems are selected for inquiry rather than others, what counts as a reasonable hypothesis, whose observations will get to count as evidence, [and] why some theories get accepted by the scientific [or feminist] community but not others" (Harding 1989, 281).

Methodology: The feminist context

Feminist philosophers of science have critiqued male bias masquerading as objectivity in science (Keller 1984; Haraway 1988; Harding 1989, 1991; Longino 1989; Birke 1991a, 1991b). This bias enters scientific inquiry at many levels: at the level of determining who will conduct research and who will be studied; at the level of formulating questions; at the level of assessing the adequacy of methods used to answer questions; and at the level of interpreting data (Gruen 1990). A central project of feminist philosophers of science is to reveal such bias and to "work to undermine the fit of science with the dominant modes of exploitation and oppression, and to create sciences that have emancipatory purposes, projects, and modes of research" (Harding 1989, 281). The science George cites actually functions to support dominant patterns of overconsumption. But George does not critique the methodology of science; rather, she focuses only on its perceived failure to include women.

Such a focus is well within the mainstream of feminist empiricism, and George is right to point out that too many studies of diet and nutrition assume a male norm; however, she is wrong to ignore the studies that do not fit her thesis. Moreover, her uncritical acceptance of the findings that do fit her hypothesis means she must virtually ignore those feminist

critiques of science that address the role of bias. Not only does this selective ignorance harm her choice of sources, it also mars her argument.

For example, the focus question of her study is, "What are the potential risks of a vegetarian diet?" In answer, she finds seven groups for whom such a diet would entail some element of risk. What she does not ask, however, is what the benefits of such a diet might be, whether for white males or for the seven "at risk" groups. Nor does she ask the more obvious question, "What are the potential risks of an animal-based diet?" Had she asked this question, she might have found that those risks include a variety of cancers, hypertension, heart disease, and other illnesses. Or she might have found, as did Johanna Dwyer (George's main source for nutritional data), that all diets have risks and benefits, and concluded with Dwyer that "many different eating patterns can sustain good health, including those with moderate amounts of meat, without meat, with some animal foods, and with no animal foods, provided that careful selections are made and that needs for nutrients and other beneficial substances such as fiber are met" (Dwyer 1994, S1260). Because many well-planned diets are capable of meeting basic nutritional requirements, our dietary choices can be used to enact our ethical and political positions, as so many ethical vegetarians have argued (Robbins 1987; Adams 1990, 1991; Rifkin 1992).

But George does not acknowledge the findings, the logic, or the data of those arguments. Rather, George's focus on the "risks" of vegetarianism is an appeal to fear.[5] As Dwyer notes, "Concerns about vegetarian diets have traditionally centered around issues of *not getting enough*, rather than *getting too much*" (1994, S1257; emphasis ours). Why would this fear suddenly seem familiar? It is a fear uniquely suited to a Western

[5] George's arguments often slip from logic to insinuation. For example, in her discussion of vegetarian foods, she writes that both her daughter and her husband "dislike vegetables intensely, and there is very little I can do to change their dietary preferences. In my experience, ethical vegetarians usually brush off such concerns as trivial matters of convenience and taste, easily altered by a little education" (1994, 417). In this section, George insinuates that vegetarian food tastes bad but that vegetarians take the moral high ground and eat it anyway. Food preferences are genetic, she argues. The question here is not whether this is true, but to what extent it is true. George's description of dietary preference verges on genetic predeterminism. Moreover, implying that a vegetarian diet will be a tasteless diet invokes the cultural assumption that ethics is boring, flavorless, and hence the ethical diet must likewise be boring as well; of course, the implication also plays upon fear (of dietary dullness), and fear is the motivating force in George's essay. Another example of insinuation replacing logic appears in George's footnote on the risks one may encounter on a vegetarian diet, wherein she writes, "Identifying which individuals [will indeed be harmed by vegetarian diets] is no more possible than saying with certainty which smokers will get lung cancer" (1994, 420 n. 32). It is fairly elementary to observe that, unlike smokers, vegetarians make choices intended to promote health—their own health, the health of other animals, the health of the world's hungry, the health of the earth itself. Comparing the risks of a vegetarian diet to the risks of smoking is not only a false analogy; strategically, it is another appeal to fear.

cultural and economic context, where the members of nations are no longer primarily "citizens" but consumers, where the economic model is one of endless growth, where "man's needs are limitless" and "more is always better." As feminist philosophers of science have forcefully argued, the institution and practice of science cannot be considered apart from the cultural context in which it develops. Because George ignores this feminist insight, she fails to ask questions about the context of consumption under which the work she cites is conducted and within which her claims are made.

And George ignores other contexts as well. For example, she claims that in Third World countries, females are at a greater risk than males for iron deficiency (1994, 417); what she ignores is the well-known fact that, around the world, it is the men and boys who eat the first and most foods, while the girls and women eat last and least (Gaard and Gruen 1993). As a result of sexism globally, often it is women and girls who are not only iron deficient but who are also the first to starve to death. Suggesting that these problems are dietary rather than political is utterly acontextual, another form of privatizing the political that feminists have criticized for decades.

In addition, George largely ignores the contexts of race and class. For example, while she acknowledges in a footnote that a majority of the world's population is lactose intolerant, she nonetheless maintains that "milk is still recommended as the best source of calcium," and the article itself continues on apace, as if a nod of acknowledgment to this qualification were sufficient (1994, 416, n. 26). However, the qualification that the value of milk as a source of calcium "may be largely confined to Caucasians" deserves more than a footnote (416, n. 26) as "up to 70 percent of the world's population" is lactose intolerant. What this acknowledgment suggests is that George's data, unless otherwise noted, applies to or is based on a white norm. As even George realizes that centuries of a particular diet predisposes various groups to digest and utilize nutrients differently, relegating race to a footnote is a serious methodological (and political) error. Remarkably, the supposedly nonfeminist nutritionists contributing to the ADA symposium on vegetarian nutrition are more consistent than George in qualifying their data in terms of race, class, and gender.

The final context that George ignores is the context of feminist and ecofeminist vegetarian ethical theory. After dismissing in one paragraph a handful of feminists with the unsupported assertion that "the historical, cultural, and psychological links that feminists have made with vegetarianism have not been developed as a well-integrated feminist ethical ideal" (406), George spends roughly nine pages incorrectly discussing the work

of two male animal rights philosophers, Tom Regan and Peter Singer.[6] George criticizes the universal nature of Singer's and Regan's arguments, as feminists and ecofeminists have done before her. Curiously, George simultaneously criticizes feminist vegetarianism for failing to provide a systematic universal ethic. As one of the central contributions of feminist ethics has been an ongoing critique of the patriarchal nature of universalizing ethical standards across various contexts such as gender, race, and class, George's criticisms are paradoxical at best. In a mainstream journal, one might expect this cavalier attitude toward feminist theory—but not in a leading journal of the academic feminist movement. The feminist vegetarian theory of Carol Adams (1990, 1991, 1993), the review of cultural feminism's advocacy of animal rights by Josephine Donovan (1990), and the numerous articles by Marti Kheel (1985, 1987–88, 1993), Linda Birke (1991a, 1991b), and many others are dismissed in a single sentence. Entire issues of journals as well as several anthologies on ecofeminism receive not a word (i.e. , Collard and Contrucci 1989; Diamond and Orenstein 1990; Gaard 1993). Not only do these omissions and contradictions constitute "bad feminism" but, more simply, they make the foundation for bad theory.

From faulty premises, one can only build unsound arguments. As George virtually ignores the entire body of feminist vegetarian discourse, it is no surprise that she misrepresents our message. Unfortunately, while the sources that would have saved her from such egregious errors are cited in her article, their content and logic seem to escape her.[7]

For example, in "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," Karen Warren (1990) articulates eight boundary conditions of a feminist ethic, and in doing so provides many ecofeminists with tools for theory building. Among Warren's boundary conditions is the condition that a feminist ethic must be contextual, that it must value local knowledge over universalized rules. Similarly, in another article cited by George, Deane

[6] One of us (Gruen) discussed at length these mistaken interpretations of Singer and Regan with George at an institute on Ethics and Agricultural Biotechnology, held at Iowa State University in May 1993. The debate, titled "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?" took place during the time that George was revising her essay for *Signs*.

[7] George asserts that "any specifically feminist ethic must affirm the general goodness of the female body" (408). Not only have feminist vegetarian theorists affirmed that goodness, they have also shown the ways that female bodies are exploited and oppressed across the boundaries of race, class, and species (Spiegel 1988; Gruen 1993; Mies and Shiva 1993). Female reproduction is the object of scientific control for women of privilege (white or middle class), oppressed women (poor women, women of color), female bovines (through lactation and the loss of their infants for veal), and female chickens (through the theft of their eggs and the cruelty of factory farming). For a critique of the way that feminist theory, by basing its analysis on the human/animal dichotomy, perpetuates the very dualist thinking it purports to reject, see Birke 1991a, 1991b.

Curtin (1991) advances a theory for "contextual moral vegetarianism," a sophisticated strategy for making ethical dietary decisions that take into account one's race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other contextual variables. While feminist vegetarians and ecofeminists have deplored the abuse of animals in factory farming, hunting, fur ranching, and laboratory experimentation, and the environmental degradation of deforestation, soil contamination, water and air pollution brought about by cattle ranching, nowhere has anyone issued a mandate for universal ethical vegetarianism. To suggest, for example, that indigenous Aleutians must now grow broccoli because some academic ecofeminist has decided such behavior is the moral high ground is patently absurd. Yet this kind of absurdity is precisely what George is opposing. It is a straw woman argument, a slanderous misrepresentation of some very intelligent and passionate feminist theory.[8]

George also misunderstands feminist ethics when she casts the ethical decision of diet in terms of conflicting interests (429). Traditionally, feminist ethics has developed from an awareness that women make decisions based on an individual's responsibilities in relationships as well as an individual's rights. Ecofeminists approach ethical decisions by looking at relationships and by challenging the structure of the ethical narrative itself, asking, "How did this conflict begin? why is this relationship conflictual?" (Kheel 1993). Framing the narrative of dietary choices in terms of conflicting interests, George invokes the patriarchal model of the zero-sum competition, in which women's nutritional gains are predicated on the loss of countless animals' lives. Rejecting zero-sum thinking, ecofeminists argue that a vegetarian diet is healthful for many humans, the earth, the world's hungry, and the animals themselves. It is a meal to which everyone is invited.

By focusing on the (largely unproblematized) scientific "facts" of individual diets, George loses sight of the context in which dietary and ethical decisions are made. For feminist vegetarians, our dietary choices are made on the basis of both rights and responsibilities: our right to a healthy diet, and our responsibilities based on our relationships to all life on earth. These relationships—to other humans, other animals, the earth, and our immediate cultural, economic, and political environments—shape the context in which our dietary choices are made. Once again, the attention to the contexts of our food choices was expressed at the American Dietary Association's symposium: in fact, the lead article of the journal's supplement, after the preface, was an essay titled, "An Opinion on the Global Impact of Meat Consumption." In this essay, author Stephen

[8] It may also be yet another strike in the feminist backlash against ecofeminism (see Gaard 1994).

Lewis discusses meat consumption in the context of Third World debt, distortion of local economies, trading patterns, the environment, women and children, health care, and infant mortality. "There is enough food in this world, especially grain, to feed everyone if it is properly distributed," writes Lewis (1994, S1101). The questions of diet, economics, politics, and environment are interlinked and must be addressed together, but none of these questions will be resolved without an awareness of gender: "Unless gender equity can be achieved so that 52% of human kind are not forever discriminated against, then all the issues set out in this paper will be fundamentally undermined" (Lewis 1994, S1102). This is the kind of contextual awareness needed in a feminist essay. It is an awareness found in many papers from the symposium on vegetarian nutrition. Sadly, it is not an awareness found in the essay by Kathryn Paxton George.

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