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## M/C Journal, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2014) - 'taste'

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### Tasting the Ethical: Vegetarianism as Modern Re-Enchantment

[Nicholas Hookway](#) | [Volume 17](#) | [Issue 1](#) | [March 2014](#) | ['taste'](#)

#### Introduction

There is, as Andrew Rowan dubs it, a “constant paradox” in the way we treat, relate to, and consume animals in our everyday lives (Arluke and Sanders 4). This paper examines this paradox in relation to the rise of vegetarianism as a new taste and consumer culture in the West. The first part of the paper, drawing upon Bourdieu, argues that vegetarian “taste” is fundamentally a social practice linked to class and gender. It then offers a preliminary theoretical sketch of the sociological drivers and consequences of vegetarianism in late-modernity, drawing on social theory. Having established the theoretical framework, the second part of the paper turns to an empirical analysis of the moral motivations and experiences of a selection of Australian bloggers. The key argument is that the bloggers narrate vegetarianism as a taste practice that entangles self-care with a larger assemblage of non-human responsibility that works to re-enchant a demoralised consumer modernity.

#### Vegetarianism as Taste Practice

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier”, Pierre Bourdieu famously claimed (xxix). Bourdieu demonstrated the classificatory power of taste not only in relation to music, home décor, and art but also in relation to food. Taste, for Bourdieu, is a social process by which people actively communicate social position through classification of the judgements and preferences of both themselves and others. For example, he highlighted how the working-class dislike for fish was part of a wider class system of dispositions where the middle-class favour “the light, the refined and the delicate” defined in negation of working-class taste for “the heavy, the fat and the coarse” (182–83).

How then do we read vegetarianism as a taste practice? First, we need to take Bourdieu’s point that vegetarianism is not simply an expression of personal preference, but is a social practice that articulates identity, group membership, and systems of cultural distinction. Bourdieu, while not writing about vegetarianism, did link meat eating to masculine and working-class displays of embodied strength and power—“warrior food”, as Nietzsche called it (Bennett 141). Meat, Bourdieu wrote, was “nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigour, blood, and health is the dish for men” (190).

On this reading, meat avoidance can be located as part of a middle-class taste for the “light” and the “healthy” but also a rejection of working-class and masculine food taste practices. Vegetarianism, like buying fair-trade, organic, and eco-friendly, might be theorised as a symbolic device for enacting middle-class displays of cultural distinction based on claims to moral purity and virtue. On the gender front, female vegetarians conform to taste trends for middle-class women—light, not fattening, and healthy—whereas for men, vegetarianism is linked to the rejection of “hegemonic” masculinity and patriarchy (Bourdieu; Connell). Empirical research partially lends support to this depiction, showing that vegetarianism is predominantly practiced by female, middle-class,

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university-qualified professionals working in service-sector or white-collar occupations (RealEat; Keane and Willetts).

This kind of Bourdieuan analysis is important in drawing attention to the social configurations of vegetarianism as a taste practice. It, however, misses the ethical substance of vegetarianism and the wider social and cultural changes that are driving its growth in the West. The following section addresses this gap.

### Theorising Vegetarianism

Adrian Franklin explains the growth of vegetarianism in the last part of the 20th century as part of a process of “de-centring” human-animal relations in conditions of late-modernity. Franklin suggests that vegetarianism is part of a wider social and cultural shift where animals make new types of moral claims on humans as they form closer and more intimate emotional bonds. He argues that in the context of widespread feelings of moral decline and disorder, animals are constructed as morally pure and innocent, and humans morally blameworthy and destructive (Franklin 196). From this perspective, vegetarianism is less about an ethical regards for animals but more about what animals reveal about human moral worlds: the reflections are less about an ethical consideration of the “Other” and more about a moral consideration of “ourselves” (Franklin 196). A sticker plastered on the door of my local vegetarian café encapsulates this perspective: it reads, “humans are the real pests.”

Unlike Bourdieu and Franklin, Tester is important in moving from a narrow focus on what humans “do” with animals as symbolic or communicative acts to the ethical significance of vegetarianism. Tester makes a critical distinction between the “ethical” and “lifestyle” vegetarian. In Tester’s terms, the “lifestyle” vegetarian avoids meat for health and well-being reasons while the “ethical” vegetarian is concerned for the ethical treatment of animals. The “lifestyle” vegetarian is problematic for Tester due to “the *being* of the ethical conduct of life” being substituted for “the *doing* of the consumer” (218). Vegetarianism becomes emptied of moral meaning as it turns into big business marked by the growth of a multi-billion dollar faux meat industry, trendy vegetarian restaurants, lifestyle converts, and celebrity endorsements. In “lifestyle” mode, Tester argues, vegetarian concern for animal cruelty, slaughter, and death is colonised by a narcissistic concern for slimming, youth, and health—for the promotion of a contented consumer self (Humphery).

Although Tester highlights the ethical substance of vegetarianism and the challenges it faces in a consumer world, like the rest of the accounts, it tends to be anthropocentric. Animals tend to speak solely to human worlds, ignoring the vitality and “distributed agency” (Bennett 38) of the non-human. The non-human animal tends to be construed as a passive and inert resource existing solely for human intentionality, rather than acknowledging their “vital power” and “liveliness” outside human agendas (133).

Bennett claims that eating highlights the inseparability of humans and edible matter, and the capacity for both human and nonhuman bodies to effect social and political change. She proposes that through a greater sense of ourselves as entwined with, and part of, nature as physical entities, we can enchant the world and become energised as co-participants. Here vegetarianism can be understood as part of recognition of the “assemblage” of human and non-human actions, where self, body, nature and planet become mutually constituting and supportive. Vegetarian taste is not just about middle-class concerns for distinction, but an ethics of the non-human.

What does vegetarianism as an ethical taste practice look like “on the ground”? What are the moral motivations for becoming vegetarian, and how is this understood and experienced? What roles do lifestyle and ethical motivations play in vegetarian eating behaviours? In the following section, I turn to a selection of Australian bloggers to make a modest contribution to understanding these questions in the contemporary Australian context. The bloggers are taken from a wider

study that analysed 44 urban Australian blogs as part of a project on everyday Australian moralities. The blogs were sampled from the blog hosting website LiveJournal (LJ) between 2006 and 2007. Blog usernames used have been fictionalised to maintain anonymity.

Specifically, I focus on a selection of three blog case studies: Universal\_cloak, a 32-year-old female artistic designer from Melbourne, Starbright, a 28-year-old female student from Brisbane, and Snig, a 25-year-old male paramedic from Melbourne. The bloggers are a representative selection from a wider sample of blog writing on vegetarianism and human-animal relations. The blog narratives complicate Tester's simplistic distinction between the "ethical" and "lifestyle" vegetarian, articulating vegetarianism as form of ethical practice that works to morally enchant the world in a dialogue between self-improvement, personal well-being, and ethical relationships with animals and the planet (Taylor).

### **Vegetarianism in Practice: "Positive for Me, Positive for Others"**

Universal\_cloak writes how "being hippy—wearing hippy clothes, eating healthy organic food and being full of positive energy" makes her "feel healthier [...] like I'm doing a better thing for the world (society in particular) [...] like I'm doing something good". Being "authentic" to a "hippy" identity—"being true to herself"—is connected for Universal\_cloak to a wider concern for the non-human—for animals, nature, and the planet. An important component of this link between self-fulfilment and "doing a better thing for the world" is not eating the "corpses of animals." Universal\_cloak describes this in detail, at the same time underlining the environmental dimensions of her vegetarianism:

I feel sick to my stomach to think that an animal dies so I can eat. Why is it any different to feel the same way that people are abused, tortured and killed, that eco-systems are ravaged and torn up and irreversibly damaged, just so I can have the choice of four kinds of marinated tuna in a can? So I can have two newsagents to choose from? So I can have Alice Cooper iron-on patches, miniature plastic bowling pins, disposable cameras, instant oats, microwavable popcorn, extra-soft, quilted and fucking fragranced toilet paper? McDonalds fucking everywhere [...] ugh, I can't take it. I need to go to bed. No wonder depression is on the rise—we have a kingdom of putrid revulsion to look down upon.

Vegetarianism figures for Universal\_cloak as a form of ethical consumption that enables resistance to feelings of modern demoralisation, to the feeling of being "swallowed up by the great hulky polluted monster, with ads and consumer shit everywhere around you." For Universal\_cloak, vegetarianism works to both critique and re-enchant modernity: a way of saying "she doesn't agree with the modern world" but also building a "better world around herself." She writes that following her "ideal diet" of "fair-trade, veg-o, organic and local" and not "white bread and processed meat" gives her a strong sense of "staving off her fear that I'm fucking up the planet". Universal\_cloak locates vegetarianism within an assemblage of self-interest, nutritional advantage, ecological sustainability, and anti-consumerism (Bennett).

Universal\_cloak, as Tester distinguishes, is neither a straightforward "lifestyle vegetarian" or "ethical vegetarian" (218), neither avoiding meat-eating solely because of reasons to do with health, well-being, and risk avoidance or due to an ethical regard for the *being* of animals. Universal\_cloak shows up Tester's critique on two fronts. First, she highlights how vegetarianism comes alive in an assemblage that includes not only the needs of the non-human animal but also the materiality of food production, marketing, consumerism, and issues of ecological unsustainability. Universal\_Cloak's practice reflects a wider "greening of the 'vegetarian assemblage'." As an advertisement on the *Australian Vegetarian Society's* website states: "reduce your eco footprint—GO VEGO."

Secondly, Universal\_cloak underscores how Tester is bound to an overly pessimistic reading of contemporary lifestyle cultures of well-being or

self-improvement. Tester reads the “lifestyle vegetarian,” focused on well-being and health, as morally inferior. In contrast, *Universal\_cloak* reveals how vegetarianism built around a culture of self-improvement—being true to her “hippy” identity—connects her to a larger web of interacting material flows and forces constituted between self, body, non-human animals, and planetary concern. As Bennett argues, recognising the entanglement of self within a larger assemblage of the non-human means that self-interest is refashioned as ecological and interconnected (119).

Starbright, a 28-year-old woman from Brisbane and newly practising Buddhist, further captures the expansion of self-interest within the larger aggregate of ecological and non-human concern. Picking up a copy of Peter Singer’s call to arms *Animal Liberation* in a second-hand bookshop while travelling in Laos, Starbright describes how she initially decided to make “a firm decision to stick to vegetarianism.” Now a devoted vegan, Starbright abstains from eating and using “anything that comes from an animal”, including clothing and footwear (e.g., wool, silk, and leather), food sources such as eggs, milk, honey or cochineal (red dye from beetles) and cosmetic products that may either contain animal derivatives or have been tested on animals.

While requiring rigorous discipline and regulation of the self—a kind of secular version of Weber’s Protestant ascetic—Starbright depicts her decision to become vegan as being “one of the easiest and most rewarding changes I’ve made in my life.” In explaining this, Starbright, in a manner similar to that of *Universal\_cloak*, invokes the interconnections between humans and ecological and animal life as the basis of her moral motivation. She writes: “I’m just another well-informed individual who has discovered the virtues of not eating meat, like being environmentally and ethically aware.” Starbright positions her choice not to eat meat as both an ethical and political act, which compounds to improve the lives of both human and non-human animals:

If I don’t support the meat industry, I make a tiny dent in the consumption rate. Others around me take on vegetarianism, and the effect increases. Others eat less meat around me, and the dent gets slightly bigger [...] Less grazing land needed means less environmental destruction as well. Less crops to feed the animals as well.

Veganism is a “rewarding change” not only because “its good to reduce suffering” but also because it is “positive to [her] health”, that she is “happier now” and she “get[s] a positive feeling out of it.” Starbright adds: “it just makes me happy, and it reduces the suffering in the world—that’s the main reason I do it.” Vegetarianism enables Starbright to engage in clearly defined morally “good works,” where there is mutual reinforcement of the “feel-good factor” (Franklin 36) between personal wellbeing and “care for the Other” (Bauman 8): “it just seems positive for me, and positive for others.” This is a form of care not perpetuating a human centred approach, which Bennett (88) warns against, but one that recognises the entanglement of human lives with non-human lives—where humans are called upon to recognise that the plight of animals and the environment is also our own plight.

Snig similarly places his practice of vegetarianism within a dialectic of self-fulfilment and interconnection with the non-human world. For him, vegetarianism is about maintaining what he refers to as “internal balance,” enabling him to avoid “over-filling” his “physical needs” bucket at the expense of his “emotional bucket.” Snig believes that much of the “physical or psychic illness, unhappiness and dissatisfaction” experienced in the contemporary West is due to an “over-filling” or “over-satisfaction of one at the expense of another.” Accordingly, he advocates the “positive effects” of “filling the emotional bucket” by “doing good works” which downplay the negative psychological consequences of an “excess of sex but no romantic love” and an “excess of shallow entertainment but no deeper intellectual life.” Snig writes:

If you put yourself in a position where you have a greater capacity to do good works, the path to do so becomes easier. But if you're hopelessly mired in your own filth, any benefit you do to the world will be by accident. If you're so locked up in your tiny little world of tv-fast-food-boring job, you can't see what the big wide world has to offer, and what you have to offer it. Step outside and it can become much clearer.

Similar to *Universal\_cloak*, there is an emphasis in Snig's blog on how "doing good works" (which includes vegetarianism, alongside working as a paramedic, living in small flat in the city, and volunteering on conservation projects) enables a kind of moral renewal in a perceived demoralised consumer modernity. Abstaining from eating meat—sometimes alone, but often in conjunction with a range of other eco-friendly acts—works as a way of distancing oneself, of "stepping outside," from the excess and waste of modernity and a practical way of "doing good," of "trying to make a better world."

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed vegetarianism as a contemporary taste and consumer practice. Drawing upon Bourdieu, the first part argued that it is important to recognise vegetarianism as a taste practice with distinct social configurations that are classed and gendered. Vegetarianism is linked to taste as a vehicle of *distinction*, making and reinforcing social divisions and distance. In such an analysis, Vegetarianism aligns with feminine and middle-class notions of food as "light, healthy and non-fattening" and for men can figure as a rejection of dominant forms of masculinity.

It was argued that while Bourdieu is useful for highlighting the social dimensions of taste, this form of analysis underplays the ethical substance of vegetarianism and the wider drivers of change in contemporary human-animal relations. Here the paper drew upon the work of Franklin, Tester, and Bennett. The first two authors underline the tensions between ethics, consumerism, and lifestyle in late-modernity while Bennett highlights the distribution of agency across human/non-human "assemblages." This theoretical background was used as a framework to investigate blogged accounts of vegetarianism.

The bloggers highlight how vegetarianism works as a moral space for performing "good works" and re-enchanting a demoralised consumer modernity. In *Universal\_cloak's* words, vegetarianism serves as a way of saying "you don't agree with the modern world". Critiquing Tester's distinction between the "lifestyle" and "ethical" vegetarian, the bloggers show how vegetarianism/veganism is constituted in a complex assemblage between health, personal well-being, animal, and environmental concerns. Drawing upon Bennett, it was suggested that vegetarianism emerges as part of a refashioning of self-interest where concerns for self and personal wellbeing are articulated within wider concerns for nature, animals and the planet.

This paper raises bigger questions concerning how animals enter into human lives as "particular" Others in conditions of growing human-animal closeness. For example, to what extent will responsibility for and with the non-human grow and how will this impact upon meat eating in the West? Will vegetarianism flourish as part of contemporary middle-class taste trends toward "green," "healthy," and "organic" consumption? The question remains whether vegetarianism will primarily be an expression of middle-class distinction or part of a genuine ecological sensibility where the non-human—both animal and planetary—play a significant role in the working out of moral sensibilities. Perhaps *Universal\_cloak's* practice of vegetarianism provides an important model, where contemporary concern for self-fulfilment, health, and wellbeing are articulated within a large assemblage of interdependence and connection with animals, nature and the environment. The recent UN recommendation to either reduce meat-intake or adopt a plant-based diet to minimise carbon emissions (Steinfeld et al.) suggests that the nexus between human animal and environmental responsibility is and

nexus between human, animal, and environmental responsibility is, and will continue to be, central to everyday moral negotiation in late-modernity.

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