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Research Report

Disgust sensitivity and meat consumption: a test of an emotivist account of moral vegetarianism

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Abstract

Emotivist perspectives on moral reasoning hold that emotional reactions precede propositional reasoning. Published findings indicate that, compared with health vegetarians, those who avoid meat on moral grounds are more disgusted by meat [Psychol. Sci. 8 (1997) 67]. If, as per emotivist perspectives, such disgust precedes moral rationales for meat avoidance, then the personality trait of disgust sensitivity should generally be inversely related to meat eating. We surveyed 945 adults regarding meat consumption, reasons for meat avoidance, and disgust sensitivity. Contrary to the emotivist prediction, (a) meat consumption was positively correlated with disgust sensitivity, and (b) individuals who reported avoiding meat for moral reasons were not more sensitive to disgust than those who avoided meat for other reasons. We conclude that moral vegetarianism conforms to traditional explanations of moral reasoning, i.e. moral vegetarians' disgust reactions to meat are caused by, rather than causal of, their moral beliefs.

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Introduction

Behavioral scientists have long been interested in the relationship between moral beliefs and emotions. Traditional views of moral reasoning (e.g. Kohlberg, 1984; Kurtines & Gewirtz, 1991; Lapsley, 1996; Turiel, 1983) hold that moral positions are adopted as a result of strictly cognitive processes, with emotions then following in the wake of newly held ideas. In contrast, a growing perspective views complex propositional reasoning as often the consequence, rather than the cause, of emotional responses to the world (cf. Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Damasio, 1994; Fessler & Navarrete, 2003; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001). The domain of food is one that is typically rich in cultural and personal meanings and is often associated with powerful emotions (Barkow et al., 2001; Bourdieu, 1984; Rozin, 1999; Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999a; Simoons, 1994). Accordingly, this area provides a potentially productive avenue for investigating the direction of causality in the relationship between beliefs and emotions.

Over the last three decades, moral vegetarianism has become increasingly common in the West. Moral

vegetarianism is distinguished from health vegetarianism by virtue of differing justifications of meat avoidance. While health vegetarians avoid meat simply because they believe it is unhealthy, Western moral vegetarians typically link meat consumption to cruelty, environmental degradation, and a variety of political concerns (Adams, 2000; Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997; cf. Adams, 2000).¹ Moral vegetarians thus view meat avoidance as a moral imperative and, in contrast to health vegetarians, are upset by others' meat consumption (Rozin et al., 1997). Importantly, the vast majority of moral vegetarians adopt this perspective sometime during adolescence or adulthood (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). Moral vegetarianism is thus distinctly different from that large class of beliefs and practices which are acquired through redundant exposure during childhood, a process likely to lead individuals to experience the given ideas as 'transparent' such that it is difficult or impossible to imagine alternatives (cf. Levy, 1973). Western moral vegetarians are acutely aware that they are rejecting the beliefs of the majority culture (Back & Glasgow, 1981; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Dwyer, Mayer, Dowd, Kandel, & Mayer, 1974). Because relevant aspects of experience and

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¹ For information useful in judging the scientific validity of these positions, see A.D.A. (1997), Webster (1994).

behavior are likely to be neither subtle nor difficult to uncover, moral vegetarianism thus constitutes a promising target for the exploration of moral reasoning.

Comparing moral vegetarians and health vegetarians, Rozin et al. (1997) report that moral vegetarians find meat more disgusting (see also Jabs et al., 1998). Disgust is a multifaceted emotion encompassing both a primitive element focusing on revulsion at the prospect of oral incorporation of offensive objects (or similar exposure to contaminants [Curtis & Biran, 2001], termed core disgust, and symbolically mediated rejections of immoral or polluting objects, behaviors, or persons, termed socio-moral disgust (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999c). Consistent with traditional approaches to moral reasoning and emotion, Rozin et al. assert that moral vegetarians find meat more disgusting because, having adopted an anti-meat stance on philosophical and ethical grounds, they then (consciously or unconsciously) link meat eating with powerful emotions that provide additional motivational force to their position (see also Rozin & Singh, 1999). In short, the authors claim that conceptualizing meat eating as immoral creates both an opportunity and an incentive to view meat as disgusting. In contrast to this traditionalist view, an emotivist approach to moral reasoning reverses the causal arrow in this explanation: it is possible that, for many moral vegetarians, meat avoidance is initially motivated by disgust, and the moral stance constitutes a post hoc justification of this emotional response (cf. Haidt et al., 1993; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). A variety of findings provide indirect support for this possibility.

Circumstantial evidence indicating that disgust precedes, rather than follows, conversion to moral vegetarianism

Contact with or exposure to animals, death, and body envelope violations are three of the strongest elicitors of disgust (Angyal, 1941; Fallon & Rozin, 1983; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994; Rozin et al., 1993; Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, & Dunlop, 1999b). Modern methods of processing, packaging, cooking, and presenting meat remove reminders of the whole animal and eliminate, disguise, or mitigate cues that meat is in fact muscle from the interior of a once-living creature (cf. Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Fiddes, 1991, 87–96). Moral vegetarians frequently report a history of highly charged encounters with such normally muted meat-related cues prior to ‘turning vegetarian’, and there are hints that the road to moral vegetarianism may often begin with a disgust response to specific features of meat (cf. Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Jabs et al., 1998; Janda & Trocchia, 2001; Kubberod, Ueland, Tronstad, & Risvik, 2002; Santos & Booth, 1996; Ritson, cited in Simoons, 1994, 11). For example, despite the fact that the logic of moral vegetarianism applies equally to the consumption of any

sort of flesh, in Western populations meat avoidance often begins with red meat (typically beef), then progresses to other meats (Kenyon & Barker, 1998; Santos & Booth, 1996).² Blood is a powerful stimulus, and the avoidance of red meat frequently stems from revulsion at the presence of blood (Kenyon & Barker, 1998; Santos & Booth, 1996)—indeed, even those who eat red meat may be disgusted by bloody meat (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Chagnon, 1997, 101, 102; Fiddes 1991, 89, 90; Kenyon & Barker, 1998; Kubberod et al., 2002; Twigg, 1979; Santos & Booth, 1996). Pork, poultry, and fish only appear white once the blood has been drained from the tissue, a transformation that artificially alters the meat’s evocative power. Although modern meat marketing reduces disgust-eliciting cues, such features are still more salient in red meat than in other animal products, hence the sequence of meats avoided in the early stages of vegetarianism could reflect the relative availability of disgust stimuli.

The demography of vegetarianism provides additional evidence in support of the possibility that the practice begins with a disgust response to meat. Among Western vegetarians, women greatly outnumber men (Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1997; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998), and even non-vegetarian Western women eat considerably less meat than men as a proportion of the diet (Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Fraser, Welch, Luben, Bingham, & Day, 2000; Perl, Mandic, Primorac, Klapec, & Perl, 1998; Richardson, Shepherd, & Elliman, 1993). Correspondingly, in the US, Japan, Indonesia, and the Netherlands women and girls exhibit lower thresholds for the elicitation of disgust (Druschel & Sherman, 1999; Haidt et al., 1994; Koukounas & McCabe, 1997; Oppliger & Zillmann, 1997; Quigley, Sherman, & Sherman, 1997; first author’s field notes; J. Haidt personal communication).³ In a sample of New York college students, Mooney and Walbourn (2001) found that, among women, those who avoid meat express significantly greater disgust toward it than those who do not avoid meat, but no such difference exists between male meat-avoiders and male meat eaters. Kubberod et al. (2002) found that Norwegian women are in general more likely to express disgust toward meat than are men, a pattern that is duplicated in the ethnographic literature: Simoons (1994, 323) summarizes two cases of acculturation, the Siberian Yukaghir and the Hawaiian Japanese, in which men adopted novel meat foods while women resisted, expressing revulsion (but see also Pliner & Pelchat, 1991). Similarly, Auger (2000) explains the large number of idiosyncratic ‘personal [meat] taboos’ possessed by women in the Ituri

² Unpublished data indicate that the road to vegetarianism sometimes begins with avoidance of meat from young animals, behavior which does not fit easily into the disgust-as-motive pattern (P. Rozin, personal communication).

³ For a discussion of the possible biological factors underlying the sex difference in disgust as it relates to meat eating, see Fessler (2001).

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