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“I am a Vegetarian”: Reflections on a Way of Being

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Abstract

Employing a qualitative method adapted from phenomenological psychology, the paper presents a socio-psychological portrait of a vegetarian. Descriptives are a product of the author’s reflection on (dialogue with) empirical findings and published personal accounts, interviews, and case studies. The paper provides evidence for the hypothesis that vegetarianism is a way of being. This way of experiencing and living in the world is associated with particular forms of relationship to self, to other animals and nature, and to other people. The achievement of this way of being, particularly in the interpersonal sphere, comprises an initial, a transitional, and a crystallizing phase of development. The paper frames contrasts between vegetarianism and carnism through the phenomena of the presence of an absence and the absent referent, respectively.

Keywords

vegetarianism, qualitative analysis, phenomenology, absent referent

Giehl (1975), Aronson (1996), Fox (1999), McDonald (2000), Evers (2001), Maurer (2002), and Hirschler (2009) have all suggested that, beyond the adoption of a particular dietary regimen, the psychology of vegetarianism involves a particular way of being or experiencing the world. As the review of literature will establish, there are many variants in dietary restriction and in motivations for adopting such diets, as indicated by the tongue-in-cheek retort, “I am an ovo- lacto- pesco- pollo-vegetarian,” and by restricted nonhuman-animal (hereafter, “animal”) product diets that range from vegan to flexivore. Differences between, say, an ovo-lacto vegetarian and a vegan will need to be described. However, in this study, my focus is on the provision of a generic description of the experience of being a vegetarian. Variations are largely addressed in the context of the process of becoming vegetarian—from an initial phase in which an individual explores the possibility of vegetarianism to one in which he or she makes a commitment to a vegetarian lifestyle.

Joy (2010) makes the case that people who eat meat, whom she calls “carnists,” have implicitly adopted an ideology, a foundational set of beliefs that distinguishes them from vegetarians. In concert with and complementing this idea, the thesis of this study is that vegetarians have not only adopted a particular ideology but, more broadly, a particular way of experiencing and living in the world. This way of living or being is more than an implicit set of ideas and more than the behaviors of following a particular diet, although it includes these. Given the hypothesis that vegetarianism is a way of being, it follows that we might be able to locate people who do not or no longer keep to a vegetarian diet (“lapsed vegetarians”) but are experiencing the world in ways similar to vegetarians who do and, conversely, people whose eating behavior is vegetarian but are not vegetarian in the way they live in the world.

Adopting a method from phenomenological psychology (van den Berg, 1972), I frame the description in terms of major aspects of a vegetarian's experience—relation to self, to nonhuman animals and the natural world, and to other humans. The resulting generalized account hopefully will provide a foundation for the description of sub-types of vegetarian experience as well as hypotheses for more conventional empirical research.

Method

The variant of phenomenological psychology used here combines the descriptive empirical phenomenology associated with Giorgi and the Duquesne school of phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985) and with the lifeworld approach popularized by Dahlberg, (Dahlberg K., Dahlberg, H., & Nystrom, 2008). Following Pollio, Evers (2001) employs a different variant of the phenomenological method applied to the experience of being a vegetarian.¹ As readers of this journal may not be familiar with phenomenological methods in the social sciences, I will provide a brief overview. As distinguished from quantitative methods, the goal of qualitative approaches is to provide a veridical description of a phenomenon rather than a causal explanation. That description may be limited to demographic variables, such as gender, class, education, and occupation. However, phenomenological qualitative approaches focus on quality in the sense of how one experiences something—on how one is experiencing the world from moment to moment. It places special emphasis on experiencing that is pre-reflective and pre-linguistic, that is, how we experience the world before we step back, reflect on, and put words to our experience. For example, the phenomenologist is more interested in describing lived- or felt-time than clock-time—for example, how the journey to a destination may be experienced as taking longer than the return home. The resulting account is experientially thick (Geertz, 1973, pp. 6-7) and, as such, is likely to evoke in the reader his or her lived experience of the phenomenon under discussion. In fact, the degree of that evocativeness provides a form of validation as the reader can check it against his or her own experience and/or others experience of the target phenomenon.

Typically, a phenomenologically oriented investigator implements some or all of the following steps:

1. identifying a phenomenon of interest (e.g., being criminally victimized, Wertz, 1985),
2. reflecting on his or her own lived experience of that phenomenon,
3. dialoguing that initial reflection with a close and repeated reading of both the qualitative and quantitative literature,
4. dialoguing the revised reflection with the protocols resulting from interviewing people who have experienced the target phenomenon,
5. varying the phenomenon imaginatively to ascertain its limits and differences from related phenomenon (e.g., the experience of grief from the experience of sadness, melancholia, apathy . . .), and
6. providing a generalized descriptive account of the constitutive features of the target phenomenon as-lived.

A critical feature distinguishing a phenomenological method from other qualitative methods of content analysis (e.g., grounded theory, Glaser & Stone, 1967) is the use of reflection and the related term, "dialogue." In the phenomenological literature, "reflection" refers to the act of explicating one's own implicit experience, including that experience as it is informed by reading relevant accounts of the target phenomenon. It is predicated on the observation that much of our experiencing (our immediate, moment to moment experience of the world) is implicit, not yet in words, and that "focusing" on that only "felt meaning" can "call forth" or generate its explication (Gendlin's terms, 1962). Dialogue refers to the act of letting different descriptive accounts evoke common and variant aspects of the phenomenon as-lived.

Through this process each successive description informs the present sense of the phenomenon which then can be explicated anew.

The investigatory stance in traditional content analysis relies on tallying the frequency of instances of a variable aspect and common explicating themes through a process of inference in which the investigator adopts an objective or external posture, attempting to keep his or her own sense of the phenomenon in abeyance. In sharp contrast, the phenomenologically oriented investigator allows, really, requires, the developing description to dialogue with the lived sense of the phenomenon. In fact, the evocative power or resonance of the description with the implicit experience is a primary criterion of its validity. Any current account is a function of the degree to which that explication calls forth a "recognition feeling" (Gendlin, 1962, p. 104). The target phenomenon is situationally and contextually contingent and so continually changing. Any current description becomes a relevant account that can inform other investigators as they reflect on their sense of the phenomenon.

In the present study, I began with a reflection on my own experience of being a vegetarian. In the late 60s, I began becoming a vegetarian, following the typical course of following an increasingly restrictive diet, and I became a vegan in the early 90s. I then read and reread the considerable literature on the history (Spencer, 1993), philosophy (Fox, 1999), and sociology/psychology of vegetarianism (Amato & Partridge, 1989), allowing it to dialogue with my initial reflections on my own experience. This latter literature consists of empirical findings in the traditional sense, as well as anecdotal and personal accounts and case studies. Finally, I varied the evolving account to delimit its boundaries and clarify which features are constitutive or definitive. For example, a related and often correlative phenomenon is the experience of being an animal activist, a topic which I investigated earlier (Shapiro, 1996). In this current study, I also looked at former vegetarians (Aronson, 1996), and, for contrast, to carnists.

So, from a traditional social science perspective, some of the descriptives are based on empirical findings and some are anecdotal, usually quotes or summaries from published personal accounts, interviews, or case studies.

Literature Review

A recent Gallop poll found that adult vegetarians in the United States as compared to carnists are more often female, single, and liberal (Newport, 2012). Haddad and Tanzman (2003) found that younger people are more likely to be vegetarian than older people, with the highest percentage of self-defined vegetarians who reported no meat consumption in the 20-29 and the lowest in the 60-69 year age groups. Educational level describes a U-shaped curve, higher in group of high school graduates, dipping for college graduates, and rising again for post-graduate school sample (Newport, 2012). Based on their survey of 320 vegetarians, Amato and Partridge (2002) describe vegetarians as more likely to be female (71%, p. 33), middle class (pp. 32-33), and non-religious or followers of non-mainstream Western faiths (pp. 40-44). Paul and Serpell (1993) found that vegetarians are more likely to have had companion animals as children (p. 327).

Turning to more psychological attributes, major motivations for people becoming vegetarians are concerns for health and for animal welfare (Maurer, 2001, p. 64; Cooper, 1985, p. 522). Typically, people indicate that more than one motivation was involved and that motivations changed during the process of becoming a vegetarian (Maurer, 2001, p. 4). From their survey and interviews, Amato and Partridge identified 11 motives, with "concern over animal suffering or belief in animal rights (67%) and concern about personal health (38%) most often cited (1989, p. 34). For some, health benefits and animal welfare are part of a broader concern for personal development. In a study of vegans, McDonald (2000) found that individuals who became vegan felt more connection to both animals (based on the common

experience of pain) and to nature (2000, p. 16). Vegetarians are more likely to be introverted (Cooper, Wise, & Mann, 1985; Bobic, Cvijetic, Baric, & Satalic, 2012). However, a study of Scandinavian adolescents showed no difference between “low meat eaters” (seldom or never eaten in past 12 months) in various interpersonal and social activities (Larsson, Klock, Astrom, Haugejorden, & Johnsson, 2002, p. 193)

Another finding in the literature is that individuals typically achieve a stable vegetarian diet through a series of progressively restrictive diets (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). I examine how these phases of becoming a committed vegetarian are implicated in the development of the vegetarian’s experience of the world.

In her seminal work on relationships between the linked oppressions of speciesism and sexism, Adams (1990, pp. 40-45) introduces the important concept of “absent referent” in which an actual animal or animal part is present or explicitly referenced in a text or picture but the observer does not sense or feel or register that presence or reference. The nonhuman animal is absent in the sense that he or she is forgotten or passed over—for example, when a sexist man declares he is a “breast man,” he only apparently is referring to a certain nonhuman animal or animal body part for the animal referent no longer comes to mind. I expect to find a contrasting phenomenon, described below, in the vegetarian way of experiencing nonhuman animals—the “presence” of animals when they are absent.

Results

These results are the product of many iterations of the author’s reflection on (dialogue with) empirical findings and published personal accounts, interviews, and case studies. The description is predominantly in experientially thick terms, often using the first person. However, I also include reflections on the general structure of the vegetarians’ experience. Both of these forms are intended to evoke (and can be validated to the degree to which they evoke) the reader’s own sense of being vegetarian. Finally, for clarity and context, I occasionally discuss some of the literature in its own, more objectivistic terms.

The results lend themselves to a narrative account best framed in two ways: (1) the ways vegetarians relate to self, nonhuman animals and nature, and other people, and (2) the phases of becoming vegetarian. The account focuses on vegetarians for whom animal suffering is or becomes an issue through the process of becoming vegetarian.

For clarity, first I present a contrast between vegetarians and non-vegetarians in the setting that most concretely shows their differences—the dinner table.

For the vegetarian, no animals (or animal parts) other than humans are actually present at the dinner table, but there is a sense in which animals are experienced as present. For the carnist, many animal parts are actually present, but animals are experientially absent—they are not acknowledged, posited, or attended to.

Animals are “present as absent” for the vegetarian. She is clearly aware of not eating animals and, more critically, of the animals not eaten. She has a sense, for example, that the mock chicken is standing in for a real chicken. An example from another context clarifies this apparent paradox: You are missing someone—a companion has died or left you—and you sense their absence as you pass by their now empty favorite chair. You poignantly feel their presence, but they are present-as-absent. For the vegetarian, although there are no animals or animal parts on the table, the presence of animals is sensed or felt as, precisely, not there—as absent. The difference between the bereft person of my example and the vegetarian is that the latter is glad. The presence of the absence of animals is being celebrated. In fact, he or she may imagine (and may share those imaginings with others at the table) an animal or

animals that he or she is not eating—those animals alive and enjoying life. Often a “mock meat” or “meat substitute” explicitly marks the erasure of those present-as-absent animals.

By contrast, for the carnist animals are an absent referent. Although there are actual animals or animal parts present (cow, chicken, shrimp), these animals are not psychologically present. The actually present animal is forgotten, as it is experienced as something to-be-eaten. Even when he or she responds to the waiter’s conventional query—“How’s the chicken?”—the carnist has less sense of an animal, living or dead. The response does not refer to the flesh of a corpse, a formerly living animal. Rather, it refers to the experience of the product of a certain cuisine—juicy, tender, or nicely presented.

For the vegetarian the meatless dinner evokes the presence of living animals; while for the carnist, the meaty offering (the real fleshy thing) fails to evoke any such image or thought or feeling.

Using this as a touchstone, I describe vegetarians’ relationship to (1) self, (2) other animals and nature, and (3) other people, organized by the typical phases that make up the transition from carnism to vegetarianism. For the phenomenologist, these are major components of a way of being (or, to use the technical term, “being-in-the-world”). Way of being, then, is an inclusive term that refers to all aspects of an individual’s experience and the typical forms of experiencing. It includes but is not limited to ideology, identity, and habitual behaviors. Lifestyle is close but connotes superficial aspects of living. World view is broader but is also largely limited to lifestyle, at least as defined by McDonald—“the new perspective that guides the vegan’s lifestyle” (2000, p. 6). Again, the phenomenologist attempts to provide an experientially thick description of a way of being—a way that evokes and captures how a vegetarian experiences the world.

Relationship to Self

Our views of self are a complex set of features that continually and usually implicitly inform our everyday experience, including our experience of others and, in turn, others views of us. By contrast, our explicit identity refers to the terms we use to present our self to other people: “I am a vegetarian” (compare Evers, 2001, p. 42). I present myself this way in many contexts, almost as often as I identify myself by my profession or institutional affiliation and, for many of us, as an attribute closely associated with our professional identity. “I work for Animals and Society Institute and, yes, I am a vegetarian.” When I say “I am a vegetarian,” I mean much more than I do not eat animals or animal products, as in some cases quickly and in others only eventually becomes clear to my listeners.

One of the primary ways I identify myself as a vegetarian is by reference to my lifestyle in the broadest sense of that term—the way I live virtually every facet of my life. By contrast, non-vegetarians do not introduce themselves as carnists. Although their chosen diet may be consistent with an ideology (carnism), that set of values and beliefs is not central to their view of self and is not how they explicitly present themselves. This is not to say that tacit or concealed meanings of eating meat do not connect to aspects of self and that, when the issue of meat-eating is raised, some carnists will readily present their carnism as part of their identification, for example, as a member of the dominant species (Fiddes, 1991).

The self-concept of a fully developed and committed vegetarian (see the “crystallization phase” below) provides coherence to his or her interests and motives. Her self-concept as a vegetarian is seamless, as her interests and motives are all of a piece. There are a range of interests that typically key on personal development (health or spiritual growth), social improvement (social justice), and animal or environmental advocacy. These interests and motives often change in the phases of becoming vegetarian. For example, the interest in personal development often shifts to concern about the treatment of animals and to engaged social activism.

The different interests and motives also have implications for psychological well-being and each has negative as well as positive trajectories. The primary identification as vegetarian can lead to a sense of meaning and purpose or to a sense of marginalization and alienation. The interest in health can have the positive effect of increased physical and psychological well-being or can lead to a preoccupation with one's own body and food or with a dogmatic concern with purity for self and others (viz., the "vegan police").

Relationship to Animals and Nature

Interest in and concern about animals is a critical part of the daily life of vegetarians. As I have shown, in settings where there are no (or, arguably, should not be) animals, for the vegetarian they are present-as-absent—at the dinner table but, as well in other settings in which vegetarians avoid collusion in the exploitation of animals, e.g., patronizing a circus without animals (Cirque de Soleil). Finally, vegetarians are aware of the provenance of the many products that have involved animals and animal by-products (e.g., cosmetics tested on animals). Even in their residence in a largely denatured, urbanized, and suburbanized world, animals and nature are a pervasive part of the lives of vegetarians.

The underlying experience is a strong sense of connectedness to nonhuman animals. For many the connection extends beyond domesticated animals to include animals in the wild and to nature generally. It is also part of their self-concept—"I am a person who feels a strong connection to other living things." Common corollaries are a recognition and appreciation of the interdependence of living things, a sense of the shared world, of membership in an inter-species community.

For some, the sense of connectedness relates to spiritual interests and motives and reverberates with aspects of the history of vegetarianism (Spencer, 1993; Fox, 1999). Until modern times, vegetarianism in the West was often referred to as Pythagoreanism. Along with other ancients, Pythagoras held a view that radically dissolved boundaries between species, inter-mingling them at the level of their souls. Panpsychism is the belief that all living beings have souls and that these souls transfer from one being to another at the death of the body (transmigration).

The contemporary vegetarian often retains this sense of a close relation among all living beings, whether they share the living space of their home; pass through the yards, alleyways, and parks; or are appreciated but largely invisible in their own wild domains.

Closely related to the connectedness of humans to animals and nature, the vegetarian more likely empathizes with animals. To empathize is to apprehend another being's experience—to look at the world from his or her point of view. Recent evidence from neuroscience shows that this capacity is hard-wired in humans and many other species of animals ("mirror neuron"; Rizzolatti, Fogasi, & Gallese, 2006). In many situations and before we reflect on it, our experience often mirrors that of another being, as when "I feel your pain." Part of the process of socialization is learning which classes of beings society deem appropriate objects of empathy. We are taught not to empathize with the billions of animals represented by the chicken breasts and pork chops in their cellophane wrappers. As I will show below, part of the development of the vegetarian way of being is a form of de-education—relearning the empathic response to those classes of beings that, mainstream views teach us, do not have or have only an impoverished experience of the world (Heidegger, 1961, p. 185), or a world not accessible to us through empathy (Nagel, 1974). Von Uexkull (2010) and Abram (1996) provide descriptions of ways of reconnecting to animals and nature.

Through empathizing with animals, we can directly experience those aspects we have in common—the capacities to feel, to form relationships, to be frustrated in the effort of doing something, and to suffer.

Empathy, in turn, promotes identification. To identify is to incorporate some aspect of another being as part of self. While undoubtedly the psychological basis for it, the vegetarian's identification with some aspect of animals is not a modern form of animism or totemism. It simply means that as part of the self-concept of a vegetarian there is, for example, an enhanced sense of the vulnerability of one's body—having incorporated that vulnerability found in all animals (Acampora, 2006, pp. 79-80).

Several contrasts may be drawn to contextualize this psychology of contemporary vegetarians' relationship to animals. The history of the species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, moves from a largely vegetarian diet, to scavenging an occasional meat carcass, to hunting, and, finally, to the domestication of animals and the current practice of a more meat-centered diet. The history of the visibility of animals on the dinner table follows a reverse trajectory, as the whole boar or pig with apple in mouth became, first, a slice of meat thinly covered by gravy and, then, the disappearing act of the meat casserole. The latter relative invisibility of animals allowed the actual animal to be forgotten—to become an absent referent. The final contrast: the carnist's relationship to the animals on the dinner table and, with some notable exceptions to other animals, is one of disconnectedness and separateness. Ironically, although literally incorporating animals, he does not incorporate them psychologically.

Relationships to Other People

I organize the description of vegetarians' interpersonal relationships into three phases—initial, transitional, and crystallized (compare Evers, 2001, pp. 117- 144). Consistent with my thesis that vegetarianism is a way of being, it follows that the simple act of a change in diet is typically only the starting point of its development, and, as I have suggested, is not necessarily coterminous with that behavior. I describe the phases through which a vegetarian's statement of identity—"I am a vegetarian"—actually reflects the stable and robust achievement of that identity. As with most talk of phases or developmental stages, time periods, order, and phase completion are all variable.

Initial Phase

The incipient vegetarian has become mindful of what she is eating and its provenance. She makes or re-makes the formerly denied connection between the meat on her plate and the life and death of once-living animals. In my terms, she recovers the absent referent (cf. Evers, 2001, p. 117).

The initial phase, then, involves a growing critical awareness. Adams describes the ability to "live with attention" (Adams, 2000, p. 43). Although aware that he is eating an animal that suffered and was killed, the meat-eater stops the thought. At least the great majority of contemporary meat-eaters do not allow themselves to live with or to continue to attend to that awareness. The incipient vegetarian stays with the thought and attends to the images and feelings that accompany it. More than just intellectual, mindful eating requires a readiness to allow and to own the emotional impact of that knowledge. The inconsistency between the suffering and the consumption now bothers and evokes a shock of recognition that is emotional as well as intellectual. McDonald (2000, p. 6) and, following her, Hirschler (2011, pp. 161-162) describe something similar with the term "catalytic experience." Sometimes the shock of recognition occurs in a single dramatic moment as a kind of conversion experience:

... I just looked at that bone and suddenly felt sick. Everything had come together: the realization that what I eat affects the world, the knowledge that there were people out there who did not in fact eat animals, and the sudden understanding that a piece of meat was in fact a piece of a dead animal. (Towns, 2001, p. 111)

It is a disruptive moment that involves breaking away from what she has traditionally and unquestioningly practiced. As with most moments of change, there are feelings of both exhilaration and threat. For this

reason, the decision to exclude animal flesh from her diet is typically taken (and most effectively taken) by an individual who is psychologically ready for such a change. This kind of readiness is a common feature of many stages of development, most clearly in the emergence of cognitive advances such as “reading readiness” (O’Neil, Perez, & Baker, 2014). But here the readiness has a broader and more complex psychological basis. Major psychological and life-style change often is a mix of self-confidence with a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. The individual is dissatisfied and secure enough to take the risks that are inherent in most change.

Amato and Partridge (1989) found that for 39% of the people in their sample of vegetarians report that education was a major factor in their readiness to go vegetarian (p. 64). Through their reading on the topic, these individuals are convinced that the arguments for vegetarianism are powerful enough to support their decision. An equal number of people (40%) perceive the support of their friends as a major part of their readiness (p. 63).

Beyond gaining the practical knowledge of how to purchase and prepare a vegetarian diet, the vegetarian faces a major task in the interpersonal realm. Although many have support from vegetarian friends, for most, both family and work relationships are far from supportive. Much of the work of the initial phase of becoming a vegetarian involves adjusting to social relationships with meat-eaters. Although the view of vegetarians changes with time and we have seen major shifts in attitudes in the United States and Western Europe in recent years, meat-eaters still occupy the mainstream cultural position and relegate vegetarians to the periphery with other marginal out-groups such as political dissidents and social misfits (McDonald, 2000, p. 17; Rogers, 2008). Although now dated, in their 1989 study, Amato and Partridge found that 65% of vegetarians report negative reaction from people (p. 185). The initial presentation as a vegetarian involves a jolt to established social relationships that can be likened to “coming out of the closet.” Similar to other groups that are the objects of discrimination, vegetarianism is relatively visible. It is closer to gender and race than to sexual orientation. The boss invites his incipient vegetarian employee to lunch at the local seafood restaurant. “You are not going to eat the fish? That’s the specialty of the house!” “I don’t eat fish; I have nothing but respect for fish.” Such a response is not conducive to maintaining or furthering a good professional relationship, as it is necessarily at odds with others’ positions.

Again, the dinner table is a focal point in which the social burden of the initial phase of vegetarianism plays out. The etymology of the term “companion” (con=with; pain=bread; eating bread with) shows that eating together is an important vehicle of establishing and maintaining close relationships. It is a focus of many important family and holiday gatherings. Many vegetarians have their Thanksgiving dinner stories in which the introduction of the demand for vegetarian fare presented a major challenge to the continuation of familial relationships.

The act of becoming a vegetarian is an implicit criticism of an important aspect of the practices of non-vegetarians. The vegetarian’s experience of the presence of the absence of animals is a continual challenge to the carnist’s maintenance of the animal as absent referent. The connections the vegetarian has made and the inconsistencies of which she has become deeply aware are those that carnists do not acknowledge. Her challenge to the carnists puts them in a defensive position. But since she is in the minority, both in the group and with respect to mainstream cultural beliefs, they often respond counteroffensively, putting the incipient vegetarian on the defensive. So we have a tense social situation with mutual charges and counter-charges: Can it be wrong to eat meat if an animal or animal parts are as ubiquitous as the fork and knife; can it be right to eat meat if the conditions under which they live and die are deplorable?

In this initial phase, while there is some psychological readiness, a vegetarian is not yet ready to deal with the interpersonal challenge, as illustrated by the example of the response to the boss. Even on the practical and logistical level, her own repertoire is in its early stages of development. She does not know enough about how to help non-vegetarians prepare food for her. More critically, she is not ready to respond in a constructive way to the patronizing and often mildly hostile tone with which the query—"I don't know what to make for you"—is presented.

The vegetarian in this initial phase has not yet developed the self-defining story that is critical to the achievement of a robust identity as a vegetarian—a task of the transitional phase to which I now turn.

Transitional Phase

Finding a balance between establishing and maintaining the distinctiveness of being a vegetarian and integrating into the mainstream carnist community— between "I am a vegetarian" and "I am just one of the guys"—is a long-term project and challenge. Given the association between social relations and eating, it is not surprising that nearly half of a sample of vegetarians refuse to date carnists (Amato & Partridge, 1989, p. 205). Eighty-five percent of people in mixed marriages (one vegetarian and one carnist) report some problems around this issue (Amato & Partridge, 1989, p. 213).

How a person presents herself or himself to other people is a primary context for both the maintenance and development of one's self-concept. In recent years, social scientists have demonstrated that a key component of self-presentation is one's self-description (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). Post-modernist adherents state it radically: I am the story I tell about myself. Narrative-based psychotherapies take advantage of this by working with people with poor self-concepts and low esteem to reconstruct their autobiography (White & Epston, 1990).

Although the development and refinement of a self-defining story is a lifelong task, it is a major challenge during periods of significant life-change, such as becoming a vegetarian. The story must be a unified narrative and yet have enough variants to work in the many different social contexts of everyday life from the intimate to the casual to the professional. It typically includes an origin story. For example,

I became ill last year and went to the doctor and read the literature on the diagnosed illness and, it turns out, the illness is related to a high fat and high cholesterol diet, so I decided to stop eating meat and I began to realize that there were other benefits both for myself and animals and the environment. . . . (Shapiro, 2004)

At least implicitly, the story necessarily includes a value-based rationale for not eating meat. Constructing this part of the story in such a way that it allows the continuation of a supporting social and professional life is a difficult hurdle. As I have discussed, non-vegetarians will often respond counter-offensively, probing for inconsistencies in a position that the vegetarian has not yet fully developed and making for a tense social situation with mutual provocations and defensiveness.

The vegetarian needs to develop context-specific ways of telling the story and responding to challenges to it. For many, this requires changes in the way they formerly interacted. For examples, a flippant or aggressive style might need to give way to a less strident style; a dogmatic presentation might need to be more flexible. The story is working when, instead of people saying, "I don't know what to give you to eat," they say, "please tell me how you made that wonderful vegetarian soup."

Ironically, at this point well into the transitional phase, the self-defining story, the evolving forms of social interaction, and actual eating behavior become mutually reinforcing. If she were tempted to order a meatball sub for lunch, it would be a social problem for a vegetarian both in her vegetarian and meat-

eating relationships. The dynamic here is analogous to that of the recovering alcoholic when he elicits the following response—“You really don’t want to have that drink.”

As indicated in the review of literature, many individuals become vegetarian in stages consisting of adopting a progressively more restrictive diet. The interpersonal dynamics are part of what impels this process—“hmm, how come it’s ok for you to eat eggs and cheese, but not chicken or beef”? However, it is further pushed by the tension between the absent referent and the presence of the absence phenomena. Now more aware of the nature of egg production, the ovo- vegetarian can no longer maintain the absent referent posture of denying the presence of the animal implicit in this animal byproduct. Some become vegans and the presence of the liberated “egg-laying chickens” is acknowledged and celebrated. Others remain ovo-vegetarians, adjusting their story to justify the position—“I just eat free-range eggs.” While no longer in denial, for them, the presence of the absence of these relatively well-cared for animals is part of a rationalized position.

Crystallization Phase

In this last phase, the vegetarian has established a position that includes stable views of self, relationships to other people, and views of nature and other animals. The stability is relative as each “achievement” has associated liabilities or problems as well as assets. As I will discuss, there is a subpopulation of people who, even having reached this stage, abandon a vegetarian diet and with it, and to varying degrees, a vegetarian way of being.

In terms of self-concept, the vegetarian is comfortable and secure in her new self—Hirschler (2011) refers to “psychological comfort” as characteristic of the vegan’s worldview (p. 164). She even has some pride in it for the identity is one she has freely chosen and at some risk to herself. There is a sense of self-control, agency, and empowerment. She no longer perceives, as she did in earlier phases, the move to vegetarianism as largely a denial of self. Far from a narrowing of its possibilities through a self-imposed regimen of dietary constraint, she feels liberated from the taken-for-granted norms of what a person should be and do.

Of course, this view of self, like any other, can ossify and rigidify. The critical awareness becomes a dogmatic position, a fixed notion of self. It is also prone to becoming a sense of self-righteousness—“I am better than others as I see what others do not see or, worse, see but fail to act on.”

The vegetarian whose position is crystallized is comfortable saying to others, “I am a vegetarian” and, more, “I like being a vegetarian.” She likes being able to so identify herself to others; but she does so in the natural course of interaction, without the press of having a social agenda. Interactions with non-vegetarians are now less likely to get caught up in a cycle of offense, defense, and counteroffense. In its place are constructive learning moments and the injection of vegetarian interests into relevant settings, such as the workplace lunchroom.

Beyond these modest presentations of a vegetarian agenda, being a vegetarian provides, for many, a center of their life, and, for some, a foundational life project—an organizing purpose for living. For them, vegetarianism is a cause with a strong moral (Maurer, 2002, pp. 117-130) component. The critical awareness of the initial phase now is in the service of a commitment for change and provides a directedness to their actions. With respect to relationships to other people, they have a sense of belonging to a like-minded community. Maurer distinguishes between vegetarians motivated by animal welfare concerns who focus on their own personal development and, to the degree that they proselytize others do so on an individual level; and, on the other hand, those who articulate an institutional critique of meat production and employ more traditional, progressive political strategies for change (pp. 4-5).

These two approaches to social change, personal and institutional or political, share the general view of the world and other animals that I described earlier—the relative importance of animals and the environment, the sense of the interconnectedness of all living beings, and an inclination to empathize and identify with those beings.

Nickell and Herzog (1996) found that members of the animal protection movement are more likely to be idealists, defined, somewhat idiosyncratically, as holding a positive view of the world and its potential development. I would expect that most vegetarians, particularly those more politically oriented, share these views.

However, there are negative possibilities or pitfalls in these world-views which have their counterparts in relationships to people. The pitfalls to which the more politically-minded are vulnerable are described in the literature on the sociology and politics of the animal protection movement (Herzog, 1993; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992): isolation, cynicism, marginalization, and reliance on tactics outside conventional political means (Nocella & Best, 2004). Those who emphasize personal development can narrow their focus to their own dietary regimen—the purchase, preparation, and consumption of the right foods. The interest in influencing others becomes limited to policing rules of party membership—“you don’t eat honey, do you?”

Conclusions

Millions of people do not eat meat or have greatly restricted consumption of meat because they do not have reliable or regular access to it. I don’t think anyone would refer to these impoverished people as vegetarians. In any case, clearly they are not vegetarians in the terms of this paper, which provides some confirmation of the thesis: vegetarianism is a way of being, not simply a form of diet.

Another class of people that adopt a vegetarian diet do so for a limited time and then revert to carnism (Herzog, 2010, pp. 200-201). The reasons these people become “lapsed” vegetarians (Aronson, 1996, p. 4) are many and help us to rehearse some of the findings of the present study. Many of them initially were motivated to adopt a vegetarian diet for its health benefits and eventually find that motive insufficient to maintain the move. For some, a vegetarian diet is not found to be or perceived to be healthful. Some are discouraged by the lack of social support from family, friends, and professionals. Others are put off by their view that vegetarians are morally smug or self-righteous. Even for those whose initial motive was ethical, it may become morally acceptable to eat flesh from animals that are treated well—for example, free-range chickens.

From the point of view of the present thesis, that vegetarianism is a way of being, I would argue that some of these lapsed vegetarians never got past the initial phase. They adopted a vegetarian diet but did not achieve a vegetarian way of being. However, from Aronson’s (1996) descriptions of 24 lapsed vegetarians, it is clear that a significant portion of them did achieve a vegetarian way of being. More strikingly, and in support of my thesis, they retained that way of being as lapsed vegetarians. Aronson addressed this possibility by distinguishing between “doing” and “being” (p. 13). Her answer to her titular question (To eat flesh they are willing: Are their spirits weak?) is that many of them retain their spiritual strength. They retain the connectedness, empathy, and identification with animals and the natural world. Whether this is hypocrisy or a respectful and considered recognition of human limitations is a topic for further research.

Finally, it is helpful to compare my findings to those other investigators who examined the phenomenon of “being vegetarian.” Of these, some limited their study to vegans (McDonald, 2000; McNair, 2001; Hirschler, 2009), while one targeted animal rights activists (Herzog, 1993). As my method involved reading and reflecting on the existing literature and accounts of the experience of being vegetarian,

commonalities cannot be taken as validation. Suffice to say that there were many areas of overlap—the major task of changes in identity, some idea of a sudden awareness of animal suffering (“catalytic experience,” McDonald, 2000, pp. 8-10), changes in motivation during the phases, and the mixed interpersonal experience of “burden and blessing” (Hirschler, 2009, p. 164). These areas of overlap were also reported in Herzog’s (1993) study of animal rights activists.

In terms of additions and differences, both McDonald and McNair include the importance of education in the early phases of becoming vegetarian— both learning arguments in defense of eating vegetarian and the practical knowledge necessary to maintain that diet. While I agree with this feature, I did not give it much weight in this paper because of my focus on psychological issues, such as identity and interpersonal dynamics. Regarding these more psychological aspects of experience, McDonald (2000) described a progression in some vegans: a moment of sudden awareness followed by a period of “repression” in which there is no shift in diet, and a later moment of recognition in which a vegetarian diet is adopted (2000; pp. 10-11). I think this is a possible variant but not a necessary one. Further, it is problematic what repression refers to as an aspect of experience. As discussed in the “initial phase,” an important factor in the process of becoming a vegetarian is psychological readiness—that moment when the person feels enough self-confidence to not only acknowledge but to act on an area of dissatisfaction in their life.

In his study of animal rights activists, Herzog (1993) only included subjects who had had a major change in lifestyle or worldview and who were “fundamentalists,” rather than “welfarists” or “pragmatists” (p. 105). Although they varied in which came first, the activism or the adoption of a vegetarian diet, all of the 23 subjects were also vegetarians (1993, p. 110). A number of features in Herzog’s account of this strongly dedicated group of activists are not found in the present account. Many of the activists are preoccupied (“obsessed,” p. 106) with the plight of animals and are concerned with the purity and consistency of their views and practices regarding animals (p. 109). They also have a strong “sense of moral superiority” (p. 114). A final difference, they have an “intense desire to spread the message” (p. 112). Further research on the similarities and differences between these two overlapping ways of being is needed.

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¹ I am indebted to Evers's dissertation for a number of the ideas developed in the present paper. Regrettably, Evers is not planning to publish her work (personal communication, September 14, 2012).