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The Ethical and Aesthetic Defense of Animal Analogs: A Reply to Turner

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***Abstract:** Susan M. Turner (2005) has argued that the use of animal analogs ought to be considered categorically unethical on deontological, or rights-grounds, and that some but not all animal analogs are unethical on utilitarian grounds. I claim, on the contrary, that the use of most, if not all animal analogs can be justified from both the utilitarian and animal rights perspectives. Indeed, I believe that a convincing case is to be made for the thesis that animal analogs ought to be promoted actively, on ethical grounds. I hold this to be true of both food and clothing replacement analogs, although I agree with Turner's categorical condemnation of secondhand animal skin. I also hold that the general question of the preference for animal analogs over their original flesh and skin-based inspirations raises important questions about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. I examine these in sympathy with the moderate aestheticist claims that some degree of distinction between these two spheres of value is desirable, and that the sublimation of powerful and problematical urges is normally preferable to their suppression.*

Introduction

Susan M. Turner^[1] raises several interesting questions surrounding the consumption and display of what I will henceforth term “animal analogs”—products that simulate the perceptual properties of animal-based commodities. These products can be divided into two categories: food analogs e.g. seitan and tofu, and clothing analogs, mainly synthetic fur and synthetic leather. The justifying reasons for their use are variable, and one of the primary sets of justifications is ethical. By that I mean the desire, for reasons of taste or aesthetics, to continue using products with perceptual

qualities (e.g. a look, feel, smell and/or taste) similar to animal-based commodities without causing animal suffering, rights violations, or slaughter. Other sets of reasons for using animal analogs include, in the case of food analogs, their alleged greater healthfulness and their compliance with other systems of dietary law. Lower cost is sometimes a third reason, in the case of clothing analogs. Neither the first nor the third of these reasons will figure in this piece, but the second will receive brief attention. The focus in this article will be the use of animal analogs for primarily ethical reasons, and the interface between ethics and aesthetics that their use highlights.

My central thesis is to claim, *contra* Turner, that the manufacture and consumption of animal analogs is certainly justified. Indeed, I would wish to claim that such products, if they decrease the manufacture and consumption of their animal-based inspirations, are valuable commodities for satisfying strong human preferences while reducing animal deaths and suffering. I want to maintain that this claim can be upheld on the two principal approaches to defending animal welfare examined by Turner: the rights and utilitarian perspectives. I will also argue that morally controversial *simulacra* or representations of the aesthetic and perceptual qualities of sentient beings should not be normally subject to a stern moralism in aesthetics that denies any autonomy to the creative production and consumption of artefacts. It seems apparent that the arts, including applied arts like food as well as fashion design and production, can either diminish suffering greatly and/or provide a sort of sublimation for powerful but ethically dubious desires. Therefore, as disagreeable as the perceptual properties of some analogical artefacts may be to some, their benefits as simulacra ought to take precedence in their ethical evaluation. I hope that Turner's

thought-provoking piece as well as this article will help to stimulate further examination of this under-discussed issue.

Rights, Utility, and Consequences

I would like to begin by examining what I take to be several of the fundamental claims and arguments in Turner's piece, focussing on what I see as some key aspects of her reading of both the rights and utilitarian implications of using animal-based commodities and their analogs. Although it would be beyond the parameters of this piece to offer a general elaboration and justification of my own views on animals and ethics, I will come clean philosophically here in the interests of clarifying my vantage point. I am sympathetic to a virtue-based approach to ethics, with an attendant notion of rights linked to species-characteristic levels of consciousness and allowing for degrees of moral complexity.

I take this perspective on the animals issue to be broadly anthropocentric, non-absolutist, and a form of non-utilitarian consequentialism.^[2] By that I mean that our attitudes and beliefs about animals are to be situated in the context of our overall social practices, and that rights are not absolutes that are unconnected to behavioural consequences. The assessment of consequences is best accomplished, in my view, not by an aggregative analysis of choice, but by a combination of empirical study and the exercise of the virtue of practical wisdom to interpret it well.

Furthermore, this perspective implies that creatures are to be seen as morally considerable to the extent their species manifests consciousness and mental complexity, and some ought to be seen in some circumstances as more considerable than others. All of the animals simulated in analogs are vertebrates and are therefore likely to possess some degree of mental complexity and consciousness.^[3] Such animals, e.g. cows, pigs, foxes, and chickens can be spared death and much suffering by replacing their dominant forms of use with morally acceptable ones.

Turner claims that from a deontological or right-based perspective, the wearing of realistic clothing animal analogs or thriftshop leatherwear is no better, morally, than wearing synthetic alternatives.^[4] I take this to be one of her central claims, and I disagree with it for two reasons. Firstly, because of the ontological distinction between animal-based commodities and their simulacra. Secondly, because of the importance of setting an example in our actual consumer choices.

On the first point, it is precisely because I take vertebrate animals to possess at least basic rights not to be harmed unnecessarily that I hold animal analogs to be a far preferable choice to their natural inspirations. It is by no means clear that animals have, as Turner suggests, a right not to be represented as resources.^[5] A non-absolutist approach to rights of the sort I would wish to defend allows us to view them as linked to their bearer's most fundamental interests without rigidity. It may very well be the case that the most fundamental rights of some animals i.e. the right not to be caused to suffer unnecessarily or to be killed, are best maintained by allowing for the sublimation of our strong desires for the products of their suffering and death. Furthermore, this sublimation through the use of animal analogs may be more

effective in satisfying human aesthetic preferences than a third option, which is to use *neither* analogs nor their animal inspirations. Doing so may not sit well with deontological absolutists, or rights purists, but this is where a modest consequentialism has a role to play.

Without compromising the most fundamental of rights, it would serve us well to consider the plausibility that people will convert to vegetarianism if well-designed analogs were more widely available, and actively promoted. Also to be contemplated is the likelihood of people being less inclined to think that converting to a vegetarian diet would cause them to “miss out”, if some of their favourite pleasures could be satisfied in the future by the use of analogs.^[6] Turner denies this likelihood explicitly,^[7] claiming that food analogs in particular are more likely to lead to backsliding than to maintaining a vegetarian diet because of the intractability of eating habits. I suspect that there is no empirical data on this matter either way, and it would be of social-scientific and philosophical interest to provide it in the form of a controlled study.

On the second point, that of setting an example in one’s ethical and consumer choices, there is much to be said about the value of individuals, however much in the minority, explaining to those around them why they have purchased product *x* rather than product *y*. This has been a cornerstone of environmentalist thinking for some time, and it applies to ethical issues in general. As members of mass societies, we cannot reach all of our fellow citizens. However, consumer choice can be a powerful symbolic and economic factor in either converting others to one’s perspective, or at least generating valuable discussion of its justifications within one’s own social circle.

Because of this fact, I think that from a consequentialist perspective, whether utilitarian or non-utilitarian, used or thriftshop leather remains problematical. It is likely that vegetarians will stand accused of hypocrisy in wearing such animal-based commodities, and that it will open them up to various ad hominem attacks in debates and discussions.^[8]

The Moral and Aesthetic Properties of Animal Analogs

What counts primarily in ethical evaluation, in my view, is *what things are*, not what they *resemble*. In this sense, there is a critical link to be made between ontology and ethics, regardless of one's preferred decision procedure. Keeping this distinction in mind will clarify the distinction between the ethical and aesthetic evaluation of commodities, both of which are important in human life. Although there are some extreme cases in which we ought to give pride of place to ethical evaluation over aesthetic evaluation,^[9] this need not imply a refusal to recognize the real and distinct value of aesthetic preference in human life. Attempting to accommodate these two realms of value to each other is an important project in its own right. This is a question that extends well beyond the question of animal analogs into the debate in aesthetics between moralists and aestheticists.

Briefly, I take my own position on these issues to be a moderate form of aestheticism. By that designation, I mean to claim some degree of separation between aesthetic and ethical judgments and values, rather than a sternly moralistic and potentially censorial approach to the arts. The latter approach would condemn or even seek to prohibit artefacts and simulacra that might offend the moral principles held by

their potential percipients. Moderate aestheticism does not imply that it would always be wrong to ban a given artefact or type of artefact on moral grounds, merely that this is not justified *prima facie*, and that the burden of proof lies squarely with the critic who must show that it is very likely to produce great harm. It also takes aesthetic value to be fundamental to human life, and manifested in a wide range of our practices and habits. Prohibiting or renouncing a source of aesthetic appreciation may be at times justified, but doing so would involve a more than minor sacrifice to our quality of life. Valued artefacts in the fine and applied arts are products of human creativity and expressiveness. In the case of the applied arts, they are a response to human wants and needs for both functionality and perceptual qualities, some of them aesthetic. As such, they are not to be repressed lightly.

Sublimation and Strong Human Preferences

Humans have been using animal-based commodities for millennia and animal analogs for many centuries. The oldest animal analogs known in history are the recipes to be found in Buddhist cookbooks that date back to medieval China.^[10] These venerable substitutes for meat^[11] were promoted in order to reduce the suffering and deaths of countless animals in the production of meat, long before the formulation of theories in defense of animal welfare by Western philosophers. They continue to be featured prominently in Chinese and Buddhist vegetarian restaurants around the world.

Much more recent are synthetic substitutes for fur—they were first produced en masse in the mid to late 1940s^[12], and have continued to be sold ever since. They have

attracted some attention in recent years, due to the decision of some fashion models not to display and promote animal fur while continuing to work with synthetics. Although the original motivation for the development of these synthetics was likely economic, given the generally high cost of animal fur commodities, they are now consumed widely as a morally preferable substitute for their natural counterparts.

The common feature of all these animal analogs is their widespread appeal as ethically preferable substitutes for animal-based commodities that require the pain and deaths of numerous creatures. The fact that they resemble their original inspirations, sometimes to a striking degree, is due in part to the aesthetic preferences of their consumers for e.g. the taste of chicken and the look of leather. In some cases it is also due to these consumers' legitimate desire not to miss aspects of their cultural and social practices. It is hard to overestimate the power of cultural and deeply ingrained lifestyle habits and practices on our behaviour. These habits and practices might include gastronomical activities such as participating in a neighbourhood barbecue or having a snack at a sporting event, or fashion choices such as dressing appropriately for a professional meeting at which canvas sneakers would not be considered appropriate attire.

On the issue of fashion, the philosophical implications of clothing raise a number of separate and interesting issues.^[13] The importance of fashion tends to be underestimated by many academics. This is, I suspect, due to both the lack of a formal dress code in this sphere of work, and to a widespread belief that it is trivial and linked to luxury and frivolity. However, in many social environments, for better or worse, dress codes are considered important. Consider the case indicated above of a

professional meeting in the corporate sector. Although some companies are casual in their approach to office attire, others are far more formal and conservative. In such environments, allowances may or may not be made for conscientious dissent in one's overall style of presentation. It should be granted that a certain number of people will be justified in choosing to make their careers in such areas, for reasons related to interest and ability. It would therefore be unreasonable to insist that they violate their local dress codes unnecessarily, and thereby potentially damage their careers. Clothing analogs are an ethical and presentable alternative.

Consider as well the case of certain professionals, such as police officers who must be in uniform while on duty. If part of their uniform consists of black leather shoes of a certain texture and appearance, then these can be duplicated quite easily with synthetic materials. Similar considerations apply to a wide range of occupations, such as fire fighters, hospital orderlies, airline pilots and military personnel. Such codes have been challenged on religious grounds,^[14] but not always successfully, and to much stress and unwanted publicity on the part of the plaintiffs. So, a further benefit of clothing animal analogs is their desirability for ethical vegetarians who must satisfy uniform dress code requirements, as well as the satisfaction of their subjective clothing preferences.

Concerning food preferences, whether for reasons of culture and/or evolution, most humans have a strong liking for the taste, appearance and texture of meat.^[15] I am inclined to believe that this is primarily a matter of social conditioning, but that does not eliminate the undeniable fact that meat has always been and will likely remain one of the most common choices for nourishment in most societies and

cultures. One might take the defiant and radical attitude that this should be considered a massive moral error and that it is universally required to consume nothing that resembles meat, or animal skin. I take this to be Turner's view when she states of what she terms "the primitive pleasure" of animal-based commodities and the defenses of their animal analogs:

It is not, one might argue, merely the look or touch or feel or taste or smell of these items that produces the effect. These properties can be more or less reproduced with current technology. Arguably, the very knowledge of what they are contributes an essential element to the entire experience. ...the possibility should nevertheless be considered by vegetarians who put up such defenses [that] they are post-hoc attempts to justify acting on the same desire nonvegetarians putatively act on to consume, in one way or another, animal flesh."

And in footnote ten, attached to this statement, we read:

...strict vegetarians in particular would want to *maintain rational control* of any such motives or desires. (My italics).^[16]

Or, one might attempt to *sublimate*^[17] these powerful desires and preferences in an ethically desirable manner. This would involve a frank recognition of the powerful attractions of meat and animal skin without indulging them in what ought to be considered an unethical fashion. Rather, on this account, the basic desires and preferences are to be channelled into ethically acceptable activities, involving a replacement of the original stimulus or inspiration with well-designed analogs. It is their verisimilitude itself that commends them to the ethically conscious consumer.

A key implication of the advocacy of sublimation is the belief that it is often better to divert urges and preferences than to suppress them. Squeamishness about our most basic and powerful desires will neither improve our ethics nor our minds, given the likely fact that a sudden dissociation between pleasure and meat eating on the part of a huge majority of humanity is a utopian goal. It is thus preferable to advocate animal analogs as an acceptable substitute than to either maintain the status quo, provide a

less attractive substitute, or to deny a powerful and near universal attraction. I believe that the same ought to be said concerning the unlikelihood of a similar dissociation between beauty, and fur and leather. Fake meat can be tasty and fake fur and leather can be enticing, without violating any creature's rights or welfare. It is their perceptual and aesthetic qualities that provide the thrills, not knowing that they are the products of a slaughterhouse. If anything, one might wonder what the effect upon consumers would be if the grim origins of their animal-based commodities were to be made *plainer* to them. ...

Relatedly, an analogy might be drawn to kosher meat analogs that taste, look, and feel rather like pork. Many rabbinical authorities would not hesitate to certify them kosher, even though they resemble the flesh of an animal prohibited in Orthodox Judaism.^[18] This would seem the correct attitude, in that it involves giving priority to substance over form in respecting dietary laws. The same approach is taken by Chinese and other Buddhists in their acceptance and consumption of mock meat.

To further illustrate the value of sublimation, consider a very improbable future event in which a sort of International Paintball Competition (IPC) would come to serve as a substitute for warfare. This would be different in form from the Olympic Games, which were originally conceived in part as a replacement for war when they were revived in the 1890s by Pierre De Coubertin. The difference here is the obviously far greater resemblance of paintball to the real activity of shooting people on the battlefield. Let us assume further that where the Olympics failed dismally to sublimate our desire to do violence to others, IPC would succeed. The very logical possibility of such an obviously desirable substitution to the suffering and slaughter of

war raises a question: why would one not wish to encourage an analogous replacement of animal analogs for animal-based commodities, in order to reduce animal suffering and slaughter? As to the critic of IPC who might reply that people are not beings to be shot in any way, I would be tempted to reply: “Better IPC than World War III”.

A useful comparison might also be drawn to the use of software simulacra of eviscerated animals in simulating dissection. Here strikingly realistic images, likely based on original animal models, are offered as analogs to the real thing i.e. killing and eviscerating live animals. Given the importance of learning anatomy in medical and other life science education, is it wrong to display virtually identical simulacra of their exposed viscera in order to replace the original animals? The search for analogs and alternatives to *in vivo* models is an important activity of the anti-vivisectionist movement, and the potential for saving countless animal lives would seem worth bracketing residual concerns about the original source of software images in simulated dissections.^[19] A similar concern about animal life ought to be manifested in other areas of human activity, and animal analogs have a role to play there as well.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to explore the implications of using animal analogs for food and clothing, using Susan Turner’s 2005 article on the topic as a springboard for general discussion. This has led to a defense of replacing animal-based commodities with aesthetically valuable analogs so as to sublimate some of our most basic desires effectively, and without violating the fundamental rights of their animal

inspirations. Given a reasonable degree of consequentialism, along with a respect for the lives and well-being of vertebrate animals, it is important that alternatives to animal-based commodities be found. Furthermore, because we are creatures of habit and practice, as well as aesthetically discriminating beings, such alternatives ought to be both readily incorporable into our ways of life and attractively designed. These alternatives are likely to be most effective as replacements if they allow for the sublimation rather than the repression of some of our most basic and deeply ingrained desires and preferences, in the pursuit of a more humane and wise relationship between humanity and the animal world. Coming to terms with ourselves sometimes involves recognizing controversial desires and tendencies that are perennial, and are not likely to change in the foreseeable future. Animal analogs have a role to play in doing so in a manner that is both aesthetically commendable and ethically blameless.

^[1] Turner, S.M. (2005). 'Beyond Viande: The Ethics of Faux Flesh, Fake Fur and Thriftshop Leather'. *Beyond the Species*, V. (Summer 2005).

^[2] I have been influenced in my thinking on this issue by authors such as Cora Diamond, Mary Midgley, and Mary-Ann Warren.

^[3] See e.g. Dawkins, M.S. (1980) *Animal Suffering* (New York: Springer), and Griffith, D (1994) *Animal Minds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

^[4] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

^[5] *Id.*, p. 3.

^[6] This has been an important factor in my own use of animal analogs, although I would not wish to generalize here without sociological data .

^[7] *Id.*, p. 7.

^[8] Of course such attacks remain rhetorical and potentially fallacious e.g. “You call yourself a vegetarian, but your shoes tell a different story.” Depending upon one’s reasons for vegetarianism, the wearing of animal-based clothing may or may not be inconsistent. If one’s justification is strictly ethical, then some real attention to clothing would seem obligatory, whatever one thinks about clothing analogs.

^[9] For example, at least temporary censorship can be justified if a given work of art or design can be shown to be a violation of law and/or an imminent and unjustified threat to public security. Consider the case of an artist who would inscribe the stolen names and addresses of people in a witness protection program on a canvas, to be hung in a museum with the title: “How Long Will They Last?”

^[10] See Spencer, C. (2004) *Vegetarianism: A History*, Chapter Seven and Appendix One (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows).

^[11] They are sometimes known as “mock meat”, e.g. “mock duck”, in English.

^[12] “Fur”. Article on The History Channel Website: www.channel.co.uk

^[13] Here I can merely note that an examination of the philosophy of fashion would involve looking at its ethical, cultural, and semiotic dimensions. In particular, what are attempting *to say*, by dressing consistently in a particular manner?

^[14] As in the examples of the wearing of Sikh turbans by officers in Canada’s RCMP, and the Jewish skullcap in the U.S. military in a number of cases since the 1980s.

^[15] On historic and philosophical claims concerning the origins of meat-eating, see Kass, L.R. (1999) *The Hungry Soul*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) Chapter Three. As is the case with many ancient human practices, the full story will likely never be known with certainty, remaining shrouded in antiquity.

^[16] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

^[17] The notion of sublimation was first developed extensively in psychoanalytical theory, although its use need not imply an acceptance of that general perspective. In his original treatment of sublimation as a defense mechanism, Freud may very well have been influenced by Nietzsche. For a classic psychoanalytic source, see Freud S. (1905) *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Available online at the Gutenberg Project under the title “Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex” (1910 edition. Introduction by Putnam, J.P. , www.gutenbergproject.org/files/14969/14969.txt

^[18] If they contain neither meat nor dairy (if they are pareve, in Jewish terminology), then under traditional Jewish law they are to be classified as kosher, regardless of their appearance and taste. Although some kosher-keeping Jews might find animal analogs of prohibited animals such as pork and shrimp *unappealing* as products, they remain nonetheless *acceptable*. This, like the Chinese Buddhist case, involves a desirable separation between ethics and aesthetics in setting the outer parameters of dietary laws.

^[19] For a variety of articles discussing promising alternatives to in vivo research, see *AV Magazine*, Volume CXIII, Number 2, Spring 2005.