

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

www.cla.calpoly.edu/bts/

Issue V

August 2005

Beyond Viande: The Ethics of Faux Flesh, Fake Fur and Thriftshop Leather

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Abstract: *Moral debate over vegetarianism forms the backdrop to a preliminary consideration of the questions: Is it ethical to produce, sell and eat faux meat? Is it ethical to produce, sell and wear fake animal skin? Is it ethical to sell or wear secondhand or thriftshop genuine animal skin? If vegetarianism is morally required, the question of just what uses of nonhuman animals are ethical or unethical and on what grounds is always on tap. In this piece, I examine the above questions in light of deontological then utilitarian reasons for vegetarianism. I conclude deontological or animal rights grounds entail the moral condemnation of faux meat and fake and secondhand animal skin. I conclude utilitarian or animal welfare grounds entail, with some qualification, the moral acceptability of faux meat and fake animal skin but the clear moral unacceptability of secondhand animal skin.*

"Without courts of law, men would devour each other."

-quoted by Pufendorf in *On the Duty of Man and Citizen*, Book II Chapter 5

Introduction

Vegetarianism is the practice of refusing all mammal and fish flesh in one's diet.

Some vegetarians go further, becoming vegan, by refusing to eat all animal products, including all dairy products and all products of animals. A friend of one of my daughters, a particularly strict vegan, does not eat honey. Besides observing these food restrictions, many, perhaps most, vegetarians deny themselves garments, footwear, accessories, etc., whose production requires the death of an animal. But ethical choices in the apparel area are somewhat less

clear than they are in the case of food. Some vegetarians I know think it is okay to buy or wear secondhand or vintage leather, for example.

Returning to the case of food, there seems to be little resistance among vegetarians to the practice of producing, selling or eating 'tofu chicken' nuggets, 'garden beef' burgers or veggie salami slices. "Veat" is the latest faux meat product on the market boasting the sort of juiciness meat has but which most faux meat products lack. Based on my own experience, the boast is legitimate. My vegetarian children and I recently had a *very* 'traditional' Christmas dinner. The faux meat section of even the most discerning organic or health food grocery store is becoming a veritable doppelganger for the traditional meat counter.

It may be premature to assume the moral correctness of vegetarianism.¹ However, in what follows, I am going to assume, but not argue, it is wrong to use animals in ways which violate their rights or require they suffer or die when this is avoidable. As such, my argument will pose a practical challenge to vegetarians though a merely academic one to those who reject vegetarianism as a moral position. Assuming then, the moral correctness of vegetarianism, it seems to me there arises an interesting and potentially important question regarding the ethics of faux meat and second hand animal products. Is there something morally wrong with producing, selling or eating faux meat, wearing fake leather or fake fur garments or wearing thriftshop leather or fur? For the most part, I will treat the otherwise separate activities of producing, selling and using (eating, wearing) together.

There are numerous types of reasons offered to support vegetarianism. Foremost among them are the utilitarian ones Peter Singer gives us in *Animal Liberation* and deontological ones advanced by animal rights theorists such as Tom Regan in *The Case for Animal Rights*. According to Singer, if there are nonanimal food and apparel options, one ought to develop and choose them based on the fact choosing animal options results, directly or indirectly, in a net balance of unnecessary suffering.² Regan agrees with Singer's conclusion but, rejecting his utilitarianism, argues since there are no nonquestion begging grounds upon which to deny nonhuman animals the right not to be regarded or treated as mere resources, humans have no moral right to kill nonhuman animals for food and clothing.³

In what follows, I begin by analysing the faux meat question using these two main types of moral reasoning then follow with an analysis of the fake and thriftshop skin question. I conclude both utilitarian and deontological vegetarians should condemn the use of vintage or secondhand or thriftshop leather and fur apparel. But they will disagree when it comes to faux meat and fake fur, etc.. Utilitarian vegetarians should only condemn the production and consumption of such products if it turns out their use or ingestion tends to convert more vegetarians to or back to meat eating and wearing animal skin than meat eaters and animal skin wearers to vegetarianism. Deontological vegetarians, on the other hand, should condemn all production, sale and use of faux and fake animal products.⁴

Faux Meat?

At first glance, the answer to the faux meat question seems simple enough. On neither of the grounds cited above - not on Singer's utilitarian grounds nor on Regan's rights-based grounds - does the production, sale or consumption of faux meat appear morally problematic. In the first case, since faux meat contains no meat, it counts as a nonanimal alternative to eating animal flesh. Not a single animal is killed or otherwise harmed in its production. And since no animal is killed or otherwise harmed in its production, one can certainly argue, in the second case, no animal's rights are violated in the production, sale or consumption of faux meat.

These arguments need to be subjected to critical scrutiny, however. Let's start with the deontological or rights-based defense of faux meat. It appears to assume the only relevant right when it comes to faux meat is the right, say, to security of the person. Again, assuming the rights-based case for vegetarianism is a good one, there are no nonquestion begging grounds for denying nonhuman animals personhood status. If a human being's right not to be slaughtered for his or her meat is derived from a basic right to security of the person (a plausible hypothesis), then, granting the same derived right to nonhuman animals, we may not slaughter them for this purpose either. Since faux meat does not involve the slaughter of any animal, no animal's right not to be slaughtered based on its right to security of the person is violated.

However, if nonhuman animals have the same basic rights human ones do, then all nonhuman animals have a basic right to autonomy and so not to be

represented as a mere resource. We will avoid the absurd consequences of the more immoderate versions of the animal rights position and take it in its best light. No, nonhuman animals do not have to be given access to voting booths. Yes, they do have to be left to live out their existences according to their natures in a manner consistent with the same consideration human animals give to one another.

It is this right to autonomy, however, that seems to raise a problem for the rights-based defense of faux meat consumption. Suppose that next to the faux nonhuman animal meat section at your local market was a faux human animal meat section. Breaded digits, Thai thighs, etc.. It does not take much business sense to realize the marketing error of such a sales gimmick. However, this is hardly the point here. A rights-based theorist could argue it is wrong to produce, sell or eat faux human animal meat because in and of itself, this threatens the autonomy rights of human beings. It does so by representing human beings as mere resources and in a manner which cannot be rescued, if any such representation can, by appeal to artistic freedom.

Much the same argument could be made against Internet pedophiles who construct pornographic images of children from photographs taken then manipulated from online clothing catalogues or other perfectly innocent pictures of children floating around in the public domain. These pedophiles could argue, granting adequate precautions to prevent identification, no actual child is being harmed or interfered with in any way in the production and consumption of this material. And even if one objected tampering with a child's likeness in this

manner harms that child in some way, the pedophile can respond by using completely fabricated photographic images. Nevertheless, the argument can be made given the logic and nonartistic intent of such material it represents children as a mere sexual resource and as such, the material itself can be considered immoral.

So, based on an analogy with the creative Internet pedophile, it seems faux meat, from the point of view of rights-based vegetarianism, is morally problematic. By *producing* and *selling* tofu which has the taste, texture and appearance of regular nonhuman animal meat, we are participating in the nonartistic representation of nonhuman animals as mere resources. Assuming vegetarianism is morally correct on deontological grounds, such acts must be morally wrong. Things are somewhat less clear when it comes to *eating* faux meat however. Would it be immoral for a deontological vegetarian who is repulsed by the thought of eating meat, to *eat* faux meat?⁵ You would have a hard time showing such a person is endorsing the representation of animals as a mere resource. However, since it would be impossible to eat faux meat unless it had been produced, doing so would require something immoral. My understanding of deontology tells me this is a logically unacceptable result. If eating faux meat is moral then producing it must be moral as well. But on deontological grounds, producing faux meat is immoral. Therefore eating it must also be immoral on deontological grounds even though the consumer may not be endorsing a representation of non-human animals as mere resources.

Now what about Singer? From a utilitarian point of view, how does faux meat rate? Again, it seems on the surface at least, faux meat fares well under Singer. Singer is concerned with whether a practice causes actual suffering. So even if faux meat represents animals as mere resources, that does not make it wrong to produce, sell or eat faux meat. Nevertheless, as a consequentialist, Singer would have to dig a little deeper. What are the possible consequences to all those concerned of producing, selling and eating faux meat?

We need some social science here -- social science which is currently unavailable to my knowledge. We need to know if there is a tendency for vegetarians who eat faux meat to lapse as a result. Also, we would need to know if there is a greater chance a meat eater will consider becoming vegetarian when there are faux meat options available. If the overall result is more conversions back to meat than to vegetarianism, then faux meat will be morally problematic according to a utilitarian like Singer. If there is no difference or more vegetarian conversions, then faux meat might be off the utilitarian hook.

So it looks like if you are a rights based vegetarian, there is no moral room for faux meat. Not only should you not eat it, you should morally condemn its production, sale and consumption. On the other hand, if you are a utilitarian vegetarian, the jury is out until the social science comes in. Nevertheless, if, as a utilitarian faux meat eating vegetarian, you find yourself more tempted by real meat then, unless you are sure of your ability to resist this urge, you should stop eating the faux variety. Also, from a utilitarian point of view, the lack of social science on this question should be remedied. If, indeed, the tendency of the

proliferation of faux meat products is to increase the likelihood of back to meat conversions, the production, sale and consumption of faux meat should be rejected as immoral. I suspect, however, the reverse is true and as such, there is no utilitarian problem with faux meat.

Fake Fur and Thriftshop Leather?

The apparel question is like and unlike the food question. Thriftshop leather is not fake animal skin, though there is an animal skin question here (I am including fake fur in what follows.) Fake leather has been a fashion staple practically since the invention of plastics. Research and development has brought it closer and closer to the 'real thing.' Today, fake leathers are virtually indistinguishable from the genuine article in terms of look and feel (fake fur has further to go). What differences remain seem mostly in how the two behave over time. Genuine leather becomes softer and changes its colour somewhat as it ages and absorbs the wearer's own skin oils. Genuine leather also smells different. These differences may be contingent on the state of fake leather technology but I think it is safe to assume, so long as no sea change in social attitudes towards using animals in this way occurs, there will always be a market for the real thing.

The thriftshop leather question, on the other hand, is about whether it is morally acceptable to wear real albeit *old* animal skin or other animal products. Another of my daughters has argued since the purchase of thriftshop leather, unlike the purchase of new leather, does not contribute in any way to the slaughter of more nonhuman animals, there is no ethical problem with buying or

wearing it. This argument seems to rely on the assumption of a Japanese style 'just in time' product manufacture and distribution system "where parts and raw materials are delivered just before they are needed" together with the assumption of a "zero inventory" approach according to which "buffer stocks represented costs that could be eliminated."⁶ Apparently, The Gap is a 'just in time' outfit where information on sales is directed immediately from the till to a computer system which re-orders the sold item. Clearly, these items are not delivered one by one but the system as a whole is significantly more responsive to the actual movement of stock than more traditional buffer stock approaches.

While there is arguably less waste with a 'just in time' system, there is also potential for a greater sense of individual responsibility for the death of an animal via the purchase of a new leather garment. Buying vintage or secondhand leather, the argument might go, since it is not a trigger in such a system, does not have the same consequences. No more animals are killed for their skin when you buy secondhand leather garments and as such, doing so is morally unproblematic. This argument appears to have some merit.

Another argument in defense of buying and wearing secondhand leather sometimes heard is since the beast is *long* dead, there's nothing wrong with wearing its skin. This second argument is, of course, unpersuasive. Just how long the animal in question has been dead seems moot, if only on the grounds the actual time any piece of leather, new or old, has been off its host is virtually impossible to determine. In any case, even with new garments, the skins

themselves are likely to have been off the animal a long time. This argument also fails to indicate *why* the age of the skins is ethically important.

Following from the deontological argument against eating faux meat, it is morally problematic on animal rights based grounds to wear fake leather. And assuming vegetarianism is correct on deontological grounds, it is also morally wrong to use vintage or secondhand leather. Whether more animals are killed or not is irrelevant. Fake leather represents animals as a mere resource. Genuine leather, regardless of its age, requires treating an actual animal as a mere resource. But is it morally worse to wear real leather, new or secondhand than fake? Intuitively, it does seem worse. However deontological reasoning does not allow for degrees of immorality. So, counterintuitively, buying and wearing fake leather is just as immoral, on deontological grounds, as buying and wearing new and secondhand leather. All are equally guilty of regarding animals as mere resources and arguably not works of art in the sense required by a principle of artistic freedom. Also, producing, selling and eating real meat, on this reasoning, is as but not more immoral than producing, selling and eating faux meat.

The longstanding niche occupied by fake leather (and fake fur) in the fashion industry sets the wearable skin question apart from the edible flesh question. Perhaps it is just this fact -- that fake skin has been around such a long time and is so much a part of our lives -- that tends to make even strict vegans and others made uneasy by faux meat, morally indifferent to it. Secondhand leather, on the other hand, seems to invite the very same moral worries eating

meat and wearing new leather does. How might a utilitarian like Singer respond to the fake and secondhand leather question?

Singer would likely respond to the fake leather question in the same way he would respond to the faux meat question. It seems less likely conversions from fake leather to or back to real, new leather will occur than conversions back to Oscar Meyer as a result of eating tofu hot dogs. I'm not sure why this seems the case though it may have something to do with eating habits being harder to change than choices about what sort of clothing to wear.⁷ As for conversions from real to fake skin, there seems reason to suppose that, as fake skin technology continues to improve, its lower price compared to genuine leather or fur might tend to convert 'skinophiles' to the fake product. If these speculations are borne out, it follows the production and use of fake skin goods might be morally recommended according to Singer's utilitarian argument against the use of nonhuman animals for such purposes.

I'm uneasy, however, with the assumption made in the 'just in time' argument that no harm of the sort with which Singer is concerned is done when someone wears a vintage or secondhand leather jacket, for instance. What if, given a particularly cool old leather jacket, the wearer causes others to want one, others who may not realize the jacket is old? Wearing leather, according to this concern, is a form of advertising or promoting the wearing of leather regardless of the age or provenance of the garment. Since utilitarians are not concerned with motives and only indirectly with intentions, the fact the wearer of secondhand leather is not motivated by a desire to promote the wearing of

animal skin and does not intend this result is irrelevant to the morality of doing so. If the consequences of doing so include the successful promotion of genuine leather garments, then there is going to be an ethical concern here. Especially since there are alternatives available, my guess is Singer would come down against the use of secondhand animal skin. These reasons, of course, might also work to undermine a utilitarian's defense of fake leather (insofar as it may be visually indistinguishable from the real thing) but I leave others to pursue that worry.

Conclusion

What might explain the allure of animal products? The marketing of edible flesh and wearable animal skin seems to rely on a desire to sensuously revel in the carcass of a fresh kill. Here is a stunning excerpt from A. F. Byatt's *Babel Tower* in illustration:

Frederica feels a perverse desire to defend the picture, which has always given her a frisson of terror, disgust, and then pleasure of some kind. She looks at it, the faun bound to the tree, his pelt at his feet, his lips drawn back from his pointed teeth, his whole body glistening dark red with the gouts of blood that are about to burst forth into fountains. His anatomy is lovingly accurate; his bloody muscles fold over his shoulder-blades and belly.

"It is about art. And pain--"

"I know that," says Raphael, as though her simplicity is contemptible. "But it is wrong. It is bad....something in ourselves we should recognize and turn away from."⁸

There appears to be, for lack of a better term, a primitive pleasure, albeit one all but the most hedonistic moralities caution against indulging, in grabbing bare handed and sinking one's teeth into a juicy charbroiled T-bone or a succulent,

zesty drumstick. There is that familiar look of ecstasy on the face of someone who's just been wrapped up in a brand new luxurious pelt. And of course, one cannot ignore the sexual jubilation of those with a proclivity for the sleekness of skin tight, black leather bras, chaps, etc.. It is not, one might argue, merely the look or touch or feel or taste or smell of these items which 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.

Mill famously wrote in *On Liberty*, "No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize, that as a thinker, it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead."⁹ I suspect deontological vegetarians who condone faux meat and utilitarian vegetarians who condone vintage and secondhand leather have failed in this duty. My daughter would likely respond by noting she has no aspiration to be a great thinker. But the possibility should nevertheless be considered by vegetarians who put up such defenses 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.¹⁰

To sum up, I have argued based on the sort of deontological reasoning relied on by animal rights theorists, the production, sale and consumption of all faux meat products, all fake animal skin products and all secondhand animal skin products are as immoral as the production, sale and consumption of animals for their skin and flesh. I have also argued, based on the sort of vegetarianism recommended by Singer's utilitarian argument, that granting the production, sale

and consumption of faux meat does *not* lead to more conversions to or back to real meat than to the faux variety, there is no moral problem with faux meat products. However, I have argued when it comes to fake leather and fur, the utilitarian vegetarian should have the same position he or she has on faux meat but should reject the practice of purchasing or wearing vintage or secondhand leather and fur on some of the same grounds he or she objects to the wearing or use of new leather or other animal skin goods.

Notes

¹ Westra, L. (1989) 'Ecology and Animals: Is There a Joint Ethic of Respect?', *Environmental Ethics*, 11, pp. 215-230 and as discussed in Taylor, A. (1999) *Magpies, Monkeys, and Morals* (Peterborough: Broadview Press), pp. 118-120.

² Singer, P. (1990) *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York Review of Books).

³ Regan, T. (1983) *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

⁴ Utilitarians and deontologists each come in different flavours. I am running the risk of overgeneralizing here in order to simplify the structure of my argument. I leave a more fine grained moral analysis of the question the argument explores to others.

⁵ I thank Angus Taylor for bringing this question to my attention as well as for his other comments and suggestions.

⁶ Morgan, G. (1997) *Images of Organizations*, 2nd ed. (California: Sage Publications), pp. 218-219.

⁷ Angus Taylor offered this suggestion. We tend not to think of clothing choices in terms of 'habits.' However, phenomenologically, I find my choice to wear turtleneck (pardon the pun) sweaters close to if not 'habitual.' So I am not entirely satisfied with Prof. Taylor's explanation.

⁸ Byatt, A.S. (1996) *Babel Tower* (New York: Random House), p.250.

⁹ Mill, J.S. (1972) *On Liberty* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd.), p. 94 (Chapter II).

¹⁰ I may be accused here of committing a genetic fallacy. In my defense I would argue I have neither claimed that the pre-existence of such a desire nor even its presence as a motive would cause the act to be immoral. Rather my assumption is strict vegetarians in particular would want to maintain rational control of any such motives or desires.

