

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Arguing for Vegetarianism: (symbolic) ingestion and the (inevitable) absent referent — intersecting Jacques Derrida and Carol J. Adams

ABSTRACT

In this paper I draw together the notion of the absent referent as proposed by Carol J. Adams, and the notions of literal and symbolical sacrifice by eating the other — or ingestion — advanced by Jacques Derrida, to characterize how animals are commonly perceived, which ultimately forbids productive arguments for vegetarianism. I discuss animals as being literally and definitionally absent referents, and I argue, informed by Derrida's philosophy, that it is impossible to aim at turning them into present referents without reinforcing symbolic ingestion by linking symbolic ingestion to epistemic appropriation or conceptualization. With this, I highlight the ethical importance of discussing symbolic ingestion in animal philosophy.

MARIANA ALMEIDA PEREIRA
University of Coimbra

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Arguing for vegetarianism constitutes a major part of philosophical and casual discussions led by individuals who believe in the immorality of consuming, exploiting, and objectifying nonhuman animals. However, it is much too common that the arguments conveyed in those discussions bring about no practical consequences, that is, change in beliefs and attitudes on the part of the non-vegetarian audience. Even when the argument is sound, there seems to be a persistent resistance in changing one's perspective on the piece of an animal's body on one's plate that rests there to be ingested. It appears that the connection between the abstract concept of 'animal' (or 'cow', 'pig', etc.) and the piece of meat on the plate is at fault, forbidding any change in the belief system of the omnivore. Carol J. Adams argues that the reason for this is the fact that the animal, as a singular individual, is absent — making her an absent referent —, leading the author to believe that the referent should be made present to enforce the connection, in omnivores, between meat and animals. Furthermore, both Adams and Jacques Derrida allude to a real and a symbolic violence (sacrifice or ingestion) inflicted on animals. While I think the absent referent is a useful notion to understand the way animals are perceived, it is also a key notion in epistemic relations which, as I will show, is founded on symbolic violence. Therefore, the animal referent in epistemic relations is absent and should continue to be considered as absent if there is to be a change in relations between humans and animals, that is, if symbolic and real ingestion is to end.

The Absent Referent and Symbolic Ingestion

Evidently, Adams' notion of the absent referent aids in shedding light into why it is that the linkage between 'animal' and 'meat' does not hold for the non-vegetarian. Animals, as individuals, are the absent referents in any discussion about meat

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eating, because meat is not an animal — by virtue of its terminology: a cow is an individual animal with an interior life; however, as a consumed good, it is beef or a burger; the same with a pig who turns into pork once made into an object of ingestion, and the list goes on. As Adams says, “through butchering, animals become absent referents” (Adams 2015, 20). There are three main ways in which animals become absent referents, according to Adams: 1) literally, since they are killed to bring about the existence of meat; 2) definitionally, considering once there is meat, and not an animal, the way of talking about meat drastically changes in comparison to the way of talking about animals (for instance, a cow has a mother, and a relationship with her mother, but beef does not; a pig was once a baby, but pork does not go through infancy); 3) metaphorically, inasmuch as animals’ experiences are appropriated by humans to describe their own experiences. In terms of being metaphorically absent, the very pertinent example advanced by Adams, which intersects vegetarianism and feminism, is the way in which an abused woman might say “«I felt like a piece of meat»” (Adams 2015, 21). Feeling like a piece of meat, as enunciated by a woman, can mean that the woman went through an experience of objectification, through which her status as an individual self was put at risk, and even violated, by another individual. In simpler words, the woman was seen as an object of ingestion (visual consumption, for example), just as meat is an object of ingestion. Of course, with this metaphorical use of the animal’s experience of being turned into meat the animal’s experience is completely erased. There is not an indication of the relation between the killing (and priorly, objectification) of one animal and the act of turning that animal into meat, making the animal absolutely absent. Likewise, I think there is also an issue with the usage of the phrase ‘felt like a piece of meat’, since it also eliminates the *sui generis* phenomenological experience

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of being a woman within a phallogocentric society, substituting it for another violating experience, that of the animals who are turned into meat. Concerning the absent referent, I will focus on the two first ways. Reading Adams alongside Derrida (especially Derrida & Nancy 1991) proves helpful in the matter at hands: while animals are literally turned into absent referents by being killed, as said by Adams, Derrida advances the similar idea when speaking of the ingestion of the other (the way human beings literally sacrifice other animals); and, while definitionally animals are made absent, erased from the discourse, and forced to give up their place for a discourse on culinary tactics and terms, Derrida's notion of symbolic sacrifice applies to any other (human or nonhuman) who is objectified and turned into an object, that is a referent to the question 'what?', deprived of a phenomenological experience, that is, an individual who is conceptually sacrificed by one's desire of exhaustively defining and ultimately knowing her. Furthermore, definitional violence not only forbids the way one talks about the animal as an individual in her bodily characteristics or phenomenological experiences, it also forbids the way one perceives and speaks of the death that has brought about meat: in the sense that "the putting to death of the animal (...) is not a murder" (Derrida & Nancy 1991, 115) — while kicking a companion dog to death might be considered murder, killing an animal for food, turning a cow into beef, is not considered murder in our carno-phallogocentric society.

Before continuing, I would like to draw attention to, and clarify, the close relation between Derrida's notion of a carno-phallogocentric philosophy and Adams' work on the intersection between vegetarianism and feminism, which justifies and should incite further scholarly work on the association of both thinkers, despite their theoretical differences. Derrida consid-

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ers that western philosophy is centred on the privilege of reason and speech (logocentric), masculinity and virility (phallogocentric) and sacrifice (carnocentric), arguing that all those terms implicate one another (for further discussion see Derrida 2008): that is to say that there cannot be a non-sacrificial philosophy if it centres itself around the privilege of reason, and so on. Similarly, Adams extensively ties violence against animals and violence against women together in her insightful book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. In other words, both Derrida and Adams accept that there is a connection between a sacrificial thought frame and a misogynistic one, affirming that the violence sprouted is inflicted both on nonhuman animals and women. As Adams says, animals are womanized and women and animalized — the underlying impetus being the privilege of human males and the subordination of human females and nonhuman animals.

Going back to the main discussion; I understand that definitional violence can be problematized when linked to epistemic relations understood as epistemic appropriation. Indeed, speaking of definitional violence implies the understanding of a violent definition; in this case, the definition is not in itself violent — that is, due to the fact that it is defining someone, a being — but it is violent since it wrongfully defines a being: through definitional violence, a cow might be defined as beef, making the cow absent regarding the definition and substituted by the referent ‘beef’. This is precisely what Adams is calling attention to. However, I propose that when animals are not definitionally sacrificed, that is, when they are defined as animals, they are still being sacrificed through epistemic appropriation. In an epistemic relation, a subject necessarily addresses an object aiming at appropriating it for definitional purposes. By definition, an epistemic relation is established

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between a subject and an object; that means that even if the knowing subject approaches another subject (human or non-human), by virtue of the relation established, the latter subject will be made into an object. That is to say that through an epistemic relation an object-turned subject is appropriated to be objectively defined to be known. Meanwhile, while objects can be exhaustively defined (a chair can be exhaustively defined through a combination of discourses such as chemical, physical, geometrical, etc.), a subject even when approached as an object — that is, even when the intention of the knowing subject is to exhaustively define the object-turned subject — can never be appropriately or exhaustively defined. By virtue of the subject's interior or phenomenological life, she resists any attempt of appropriation. Surely one can try to objectively describe a subject, appealing to her size, personality traits, biological composition, etc.; however, there is always something that is beyond this objectifying discourse, and that is the phenomenological experience of the subject. What is more, there can be no denying that animals do experience their lives, which is to say that they have an interior or phenomenological life; for this reason, animals too are subjects who are violently turned into objects even when the definitional discourse has for a referent an animal and not a piece of meat. Violence here is exercised through the intention of making an animal being into a referent, in other words, into an object to which an objective description corresponds. With this said, making animals present referents in a definitional discourse, as advanced by Adams to overcome definitional violence sacrifice, does not seem so different from epistemic appropriation or symbolic sacrifice: in both actions there is the intention of objectively appropriating a being who cannot be objectively appropriated. Evidently, in both actions the phenomenological life of the animal is ignored and erased, to objectively capture her as a referent of a

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definition; concerning violence, then, it does not matter if said definition is pointing to 'meat' as a referent (in the case of definitional violence) or to 'animal' as a referent (in the case of a 'correct' definition), because both actions are violent attempts to conceptualize someone.

Furthermore, the relation between literal sacrifice and symbolic sacrifice or ingestion (as in, epistemic appropriation) appears to me to be of a logical nature. I propose that literally turning animals into absent referents (killing them) logically presupposes a symbolic sacrifice, otherwise individuals would not maintain their meat consumption: it appears like the animal's literal absence can be explained through symbolic sacrifice, which makes any pro-vegetarian discourse impossible to make sense within a theoretical framework which from the beginning objectively conceptualizes animals. This could be a key to understand how arguments pro-vegetarianism usually fail to influence practical changes. In addition, it reverses the logic in Adams' argument: she states that "animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them" (Adams 2015, 21), meaning that after killing an animal, language "mystifies" (Adams 2015, 21) the animal's dead body by calling it something like 'meat', so that afterwards the consumer will willingly participate in a practice whose violence is shadowed. However, I think objectifying language works priorly to that, enabling the butchering of the animal by reinforcing a certain perception of animals as being objects, which ultimately means that meat eaters would still tranquilly participate in the violent act of eating animals even if they called a piece of dead body present in their plate 'animal', or 'cow', or 'pig'.

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A passage by Adams appears relevant to deliver this idea; she says “the absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present” (Adams 2015, 21). The understanding here is that the corpse on one’s plate is not a corpse in virtue of two reasons: firstly, the animal’s dead body is not fully present, but solely a part of her body is (a leg, or a fragment of her stomach, etc.), disabling the correct perception of a piece of meat as a part of an individual’s body; secondly, the animal’s dead body is not a corpse by the way language is used, as previously stated, transforming a pig into pork, or a cow into beef. The animal, as an animal being, that is, as an individual, is then absent. But I understand that this absence is permitted by language before the butchering of the animal, by the conceptual apparatus through which linguistic beings think, which eliminates any phenomenological experience of the animal who was killed to bring about meat. Thus, this symbolic sacrifice has more to do with the will of making the animal an object, that is a present referent, than the contrary. While ‘beef’ can be exhaustively defined (as an object of consumption with so and so physical, nutritional, and chemical characteristics), ‘cow’ — if we are to respect the inaccessible interior life of any individual cow — cannot be exhaustively defined, in virtue of the individual’s phenomenological experience which makes her a singular individual. What is more, presence, or being present, is a prerequisite of any epistemic relation; the object presents itself to the knowing subject in all its finite characteristics. Thus, ‘beef’ can be a present referent to an objective description, but ‘cow’ cannot be a present referent. I will draw more on this later.

The animal ceases to be a singularity when the discourse about her becomes an objectifying discourse on her capacity to become an object of knowledge (symbolic sacrifice), and evi-

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dently it escalates making the discourse appeal to the animal as a consumed good, appeal to her nutritional value for human beings, appeal to her life as being there to be manipulated by humans and to her fate as being in human hands, etc. (literal sacrifice). Clearly, this sort of discourse happens before the actual killing of the animal: before a pig is killed and turned into a piece of pork on a plate, she is already perceived as an object because she is spoken of and conceptualized as something and not someone, in other words, as an object to be identified and ingested. It is well known that before being killed, animals are kept in dire conditions. Thus, an animal's singularity ceases to exist long before she becomes a piece of meat on a plate but begins when language authorizes a certain perception of her which then authorizes her industrial breeding, and her killing, which evidently can only happen through the way language aids her objectification, her symbolic sacrifice.

To be specific, it appears that the killing of nonhuman animals, that is to say, their literal absence, is enabled by their symbolic killing as subjects or singularities, in other words, their symbolic sacrifice; if so, there is a logical priority of symbolic killing over literal killing. This understanding is informed by Derrida's notion of the text, which underlines the influence of language in shaping the way we act in the world; when Derrida states that "there is no outside-text" (Derrida 1997, 158) he is precisely advancing this impossibility of thought about reality that is not constituted by language. If thought is constituted by language and actions derive from thoughts, then actions are constituted by language as well. Reality, in this sense, is textual. To illustrate: if one had only three concepts for colours (blue, yellow, and red, for example) then the whole spectrum of colours would be conceptually divided, for said person, into three colours, blue, yellow, and red. That person's colour real-

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ity is different than that of someone whose concepts for colours include five concepts (for instance, blue, yellow, red, pink, and green). If someone else pointed at a green jacket and asked what colour it is, the first person would probably say it is blue (given the proximity in the spectrum between blue and green, and given their available concepts). Language, then, shapes what humans think and how they approach their reality: people hold concepts for cows, pigs, ducks, etc., alongside concepts like meat, beef or pork, but the way human beings relate to animals is already violently marked by their conceptual understanding of animals as referents to concepts like 'cow' or 'pig' or even the overarching concept of 'animal'. Having concepts like 'cow' or 'pig' and using them thinking that through that an actual individual cow or an actual individual pig is made a present referent demonstrates a perception of animals as identifiable objects and objects of ingestion. 'Cow' and 'beef', in this sense, both act as violent concepts which aim to delineate and absolutely grasp a living singular individual. Through this, despite 'cow' being used to grasp the living individual, this symbolic sacrifice which attempts to conceptualize the singular animal is already informed by the same framework which enables 'beef' to even exist, that is, which enables the killing and literal ingestion of a cow. That is so because the dominant theoretical frame is one that prioritizes the epistemic relation (by calling western philosophy logocentric, Derrida is also calling attention to this; logocentrism is also about the privilege of the (human) subject as a knowing subject, e.g., the cartesian cogito), reinforcing the perspective of those animals as objects, and its set of concepts is one that reinforces that perception, forbidding the establishment of a connection between an animal as a being with a life — as a singular individual, who phenomenologically experiences her own life — and the animal who will soon be made literally absent through butchering and be put

into a plate. The same happens with animals who are not usually eaten, but explored for labor like donkeys, or explored for entertainment like elephants. Humans' understanding of these animals as phenomenological beings is overshadowed by the hegemonic understanding of them as objects, turning natural their usage and abuse.

The Violence of Turning Animals into Present Referents

Consequently, ingestion — or, to use Derrida's term, eating — begins when one sees oneself as a knowing subject, epistemically appropriating others, trying to understand them, objectively describe them and identify them. Therefore, animals are already, in the carno-phallogocentric society, objects whose end is to serve the human beings' experience of ingestion, in other words, the literal and symbolic act of eating. To make present the animal whose corpse lays on the plate, Adams appeals (Adams 2015, 71) to argue for vegetarianism with someone over a meal of meat, which would hopefully disclose the absent animal in the flesh being consumed. While it is true that conversations around vegetarianism over a meal can turn uncomfortable for the meat eater, proving some triumph in turning present the absent body of the animal — perhaps because it suggests a bloody image of butchering — it does not seem like enough to convince a meat eater to stop eating meat and start seeing animals as singularities. Any vegetarian who has experienced this sort of exchange has empirically confirmed the veracity of this failure. And this failure will be maintained for as long as the symbolic sacrifice, or symbolic ingestion, of animals is not highlighted and deconstructed. Accordingly, the maintenance of this symbolic sacrifice is also aided by this will of making present the absent referent, since that is a prerequisite of any epistemic relation: the objective description can

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be linked to its referent which is the object being described; the referent is present when the link is maintained, however, if there can be no link between an objective description and what it tries to describe, there is an absent referent — in other words, the description does not correspond to anything in the world. When trying to describe a singular being — a human or a non-human animal — any objective description fails, given the actual non-object status of the individual, making the referent an absent one. In this war against symbolic and real sacrifice, the absent referent should not, then, be considered present.

Although it is true that the real animal is absent to bring about meat, it is not true that the animal, when present, is conceptualized in a different manner from the way meat is conceptualized. That is to say that if meat is described in such a way as to ignore its origins (the previous butchering of an animal) and the violence inherent to it, so are animals perceived and defined as beings with such and such characteristics, beings who can be defined by science and can be grasped and understood by humans. Symbolic ingestion or sacrifice is patent in both understandings of meat and of animals. Any attempt at objectively describing an animal, as if she were an object like a desk or a notebook, is already a violent act of ingestion: she is reduced to an object without an interior phenomenological life which in truth can never be objectively captured. There needs to be a shift in the way human beings perceive other animals, which implicates a change in the way human beings establish relations with animals; violence begins with conceptualization and permits animal consumption.

Beginning to illustrate a way of shifting this paradigm, Derrida hints at a new way humans should approach others to avoid objectively appropriating them:

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... one must begin to identify with the other, who is to be assimilated, interiorized... something one can never do absolutely without addressing oneself to the other and without absolutely limiting understanding itself, the identifying appropriation (Derrida 1991, 115).

This is what Derrida calls 'eating well', which points to a possible morally good way of eating the other; while it might be inevitable that one eats/ingests an individual — there is always the temptation to objectify the other individual —, there should be a conscious effort to 1) see the other as an absolute other, which demands to 2) limit this impetus to understand, to describe, to objectify. Respectfully limiting one's understanding of the other, and in this case the other animal, means stopping symbolic sacrifice, which erases the other's phenomenological experience and which, in turn, converts the other into an object. Thus, by looking at the animal and seeing in her an ungraspable interiority — after all, the animal looks back, she holds a point of view just like the human looking at her — the possibility of limiting symbolic sacrifice, or symbolic ingestion, opens up. However, and to restate what I have been discussing, one can only proceed to this part if one acknowledges the symbolic ingestion's part in the myriad of real violent practices towards animals. Otherwise, arguments pro-vegetarianism will always remain inconsequential; the animal's dead body will remain an object of consumption even if, as Adams suggests, the argument is accompanied by a plate of flesh, because ultimately the textual reality is still one that objectifies nonhuman animals. Calling a piece of pork 'pig' will not resonate with an omnivore inasmuch as the omnivore's perception of reality is one marked by this violent textual experience which establishes, in the first

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place, that a pig is already a ‘thing’ to define and consume, that is, to symbolically and literally sacrifice or ingest. To harvest practical consequences, before arguing for vegetarianism and appealing to animal’s sentience, capacities to form emotional bonds, etc., there needs to be an effort in changing the theoretical framework that engulfs those discourses, by showing how in any discourse there is the tendency to symbolically ingest the other, even before the other is butchered.

Moreover, if Adams aims at making present the absent referent, I argue that the radical impossibility of making the absent referent present should be welcomed. Afterall, symbolic sacrifice rests on the will of knowing, of understanding, the other: turning the other into something — rather than someone — knowable, identifiable, and describable. Only through this can real sacrifice be justified. However, the other is always that singular individual whose interior experience surpasses the grasp of the knowing subject; her phenomenological life exceeds objective concepts. This applies to both human and nonhuman animals. Arguing for the impossibility of knowing the other is the same as saying that the other will always remain an absent referent of any descriptive sentence. In other words: an individual cow can never be the referent of any descriptive sentence, since herself as an individual who holds a phenomenological experience always exceeds and resists any attempt at objectively grasping her. The referent in any epistemic relation between two singular individuals is inevitably absent, but that does not mean that arguing for ethical changes in the way we interact with nonhuman animals is condemned; rather, accepting the impossibility of knowing the (human and nonhuman) other leads to an understanding of the need for an urgent shift in our relations: rather than epistemic, our relations should be first of all ethical, relations of openness between individual sin-

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gularities, rather than relations between knowing subjects and objects. This means, following Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas 1969), that it does not matter who the other is — her characteristics — for two reasons: firstly, characterizing the other will always fail to accommodate the other as a phenomenological individual, as I have been showing; and secondly, a true ethical relation leans not on the possibility of conceptually grasping the other, but on the possibility of unconditionally responding to the other who is in suffering. Not knowing who the other is means that the other remains a stranger, and so too the ethical other can be an animal, for it does not matter, there is no need to know, the species of the other.

Above all, I want to highlight the urgent need of considering the ingestion as a twofold experience which carries an enormous ethical importance. Literally ingesting an animal implies her prior butchering; similarly, symbolically ingesting an animal equals to symbolically killing her as a singular individual which enables a false perception of her as an object to conceptually appropriate and to use and eat, thus enabling her literal killing. Ingestion, then, carries more than the actual act of eating, but also the act of trying to capture the other's phenomenological experience and erasing it, for the sake of permitting her objectification. The symbolic experience of ingesting can therefore be said to be a violent act of ingesting the other's phenomenological experience; that is, a usurpation of one's interior life. Indeed, in this sense eating does not commence at the table and likewise the ethics of eating does not commence when choosing what to eat or when thinking about the immorality of eating animals, but it commences prior to that, when problematizing the conceptualization of other animals as an act that could exhaust the animal's being.

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Evidently, it is clear that when Adams is appealing to the urgency of making animals present referents, she is pointing to the urgency of disclosing that meat is only brought about through the violent death of an animal, a living singular individual — with this disclosure, meat would start to appear, to the meat eater, as what it really is: a dead body. Despite this, I am bringing attention to the fact that making animals present referents will not change perspectives, since humans' perspective on animals is conditioned by a textual matrix that privileges the knowing subject — to whom objects are present — who grasps the animal and exhausts her life in objective descriptions. Given this, animal ethics or discourses pro-vegetarianism ought to take into serious consideration philosophical discussions on subjectivity and epistemic subjects, since there lays the justification for the primacy of epistemic relations, hence, the primacy of symbolic ingestion.

To conclude, when Adams states that “one does not eat meat without the death of an animal” (Adams 2015, 21), I would add that one does not eat meat without the symbolic sacrifice of an animal — while the literal absence (death) of the animal is imperial to bring about meat, so is the theoretical framework, and its set of concepts, that conceptualizes animals as definable and knowable objects, as present referents, erasing their phenomenological lives, and enabling the omnivore's refusal in adopting a vegetarian diet.

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