ABSTRACT
In this paper, I bring together the work of Cora Diamond and Christine Korsgaard to describe two distinctions about what “eating animals” entails which are often confused in conversations or arguments against meat-based diets and try to show how both distinctions, on their own lights, ultimately support a concern for all fellow creatures, regardless of species or other biological categories. The distinctions in question are: the distinction between moral and nonmoral actions, presumptions about which serve to define whether or not particular topics (like meat consumption) deserve moral consideration whatsoever, and the distinction between moral and immoral actions, about which suppositions bear on both reflexive and considered moral judgments to inform agents in making meaningful normative decisions.

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A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes.

– Wendell Berry (1990, 151)

I. Introduction

In the final scene of Titus Andronicus, the emperor of Rome calls for his stepsons to face the title character after Titus accuses them of brutally assaulting his daughter; laughing, Titus reveals that he has already murdered the rapists and baked their bodies into the pie that their mother is eating. Although Shakespeare does not specify Tamora's response to learning this horrible secret — she, Titus, and Saturninus all die within the next three lines of dialogue — theatrical portrayals of this dark epiphany are, understandably, emotional and overwrought. Cannibalism of any stripe is a significant moral crime; the familial ties in this particular recipe only serve to sharpen that point.

Why is this so? Why can anthropophagy be portrayed and its depravity taken for granted? The moment that the Queen of the Goths realizes that the meat in her mouth is actually human flesh is a shocking peripeteia with powerful force that — notably — neither receives nor needs explanation. The Bard knew that his audience would understand the weight of this wrong in the absence of exposition or argument: simply perceiving an act of cannibalism as such is taken to be sufficient for its immorality to be recognized.

In this way, cannibalism offers a useful contrast study for analyzing moral intuitions about meat consumption, particularly amongst nonreflective diners. Seemingly, according to
some, such conceptions are hopelessly confused: many opponents of speciesism, for example, decry “the belief system that conditions us to eat [only] certain animals” and lambaste such inconsistency as illogical “carnism” (Joy, 2010, 30). In what follows, I develop a line of thinking from Cora Diamond (1978) regarding the construction of the moral community to consider why Tamora’s gruesome gestalt shift about the flesh on her tongue is not only unsettling, but seemingly sensible: as Diamond says, “beyond all the natter about ‘speciesism’ and equality and the rest, there is a difference between human beings and animals which is being ignored” (468). Crucially, as I will argue, this difference need not rest in the identification of some intrinsic property in virtue of which humans possess inherent value: if this is true, then Diamond’s category of “fellow creatures” may well cross multiple species boundaries. So, in line with the recent pragmatic turn in animal ethics (as exemplified by Sebo (2022), Fischer (2019), Leenaert (2019), Kasperbauer (2018), Holdier (2016a), and others), I submit that a consideration of commonplace moral psychology about ordinary practices like eating habits can suggest more fruitful avenues for crafting arguments which successfully provoke change in actual meat consumption habits akin to Tamora’s own disgusted gestalt shift.

As Korsgaard did first with the concept of ‘goodness’ (1995), I describe two distinctions about what “eating animals” entails which are often confused in conversations or arguments aimed against meat-based diets and try to show how both distinctions, on their own lights, ultimately support a concern for all fellow creatures, regardless of species or other biological categories. Cultivating an appreciation for how assumptions about these distinctions function in ordinary moral thinking can serve to better provoke the desired perceptual shift about what prop-
erly constitutes a meal. The distinctions in question are: the distinction between moral and nonmoral actions, presumptions about which serve to define whether or not particular topics (like meat consumption) deserve moral consideration whatsoever, and the distinction between moral and immoral actions, about which suppositions bear on both reflexive and considered moral judgments, meaningfully informing how agents make meaningful normative decisions.

II. Eating “Animals”

For many people unabused by a course of academic philosophy, the difference between Tamora thinking that the meat in her mouth was from, say, a cow and her realization that it is, in fact, human is plain: whereas she thought she was eating an animal, she instead learns that she is eating a human — here understood as a contrast class to “animal.” As already stated, the consumption of human meat is taken to be an action that necessarily lacks goodness; in contrast, the consumption of nonhuman meat is not typically judged to possess goodness (rather than aesthetic or practical value), but is often taken to be a nonmoral practice that does not merit moral analysis whatsoever. Consequently, arguments about the moral (dis)value of eating nonhuman meat are seen as akin to arguments about what numbers smell like: they exemplify a category error.

Nevertheless, on the commonplace assumption, some explanation is still required for the wrongness of cannibalism and, typically, the species distinction alone is taken as sufficient to justify the desired moral judgment. Such a determination might depend on a principle such as the following:

**CUT**: A cut of meat \(X\) sourced from a human who died peacefully of natural causes is, ceteris paribus,
morally worse to eat than a cut of meat ($Y$) sourced from the corpse of any other creature.

Importantly, CUT exemplifies what Irvine (1989) describes as “passive” cannibalism insofar as it does not involve the active murder of a human to facilitate the procurement of the meat in question. Throughout what follows, all references to “cannibalism” will be to passive cannibalism of this sort.

Of course, CUT is blatantly speciesist, grounded as it is simply on the biological origin of the cutlet (Ryder 2010). Consequently, a rejection of speciesism — for any of the myriad reasons extant in the literature, such as Horta (2010) and Singer (1993) — would seem to undermine any defense of CUT. This is roughly the tactic taken by Irvine who argues that the relevant differences between humans and nonhuman animals in matters of their death and consumption “are not that great — and certainly not great enough to justify the disparity between our moral views concerning people and our moral views concerning cows” (1989, 16). A similar assumption lurks behind projects like those of Wisnewiski (2004) and Shand (2010), both of whom consider and reject a spate of arguments for cannibalism’s immorality; as Shand points out, “if it is thought moral to kill animals for meat, then it is hard to see what arguments would be left...that could be used as moral objections” to killing a particular species of animal for meat (517). In each case, parity of reasoning suggests that, in the absence of speciesist convictions, meat eaters must also be willing to fully countenance cannibalistic meat consumption. If one wishes to decry both cannibalism and speciesism, then they must likewise give up eating nonhuman animals.
However, Diamond (1978) points out that speciesist considerations alone are insufficient for explaining actual human practices regarding nonhuman animals: to treat the moral/immoral distinction about “eating animals” as simply mapping onto the human/nonhuman distinction would be to elide the myriad ways that the fuzzy boundary between the species is culturally broached — such as in the case of beloved companion animals. Though the literature is scant, there exists some evidence that inter-species concern (specifically for dogs) sometimes outweighs intra-species worries: for example, Levin, Arluke, and Irvine (2017) unexpectedly discovered that test subjects reported higher concerns for the well-being of both puppies and adult dogs in comparison to adult humans. Similarly, Greenbaume’s (2004) analysis of the anthropomorphic socialization of canines suggests a robust moral concern for at least some nonhuman animals, even amongst meat-eaters.

Diamond explains this by arguing that, in fact, the issue that people have with eating a companion animal is a conceptual, not moral, problem: “people who ate their pets would not have pets in the same sense of that term” (1978, 469). In one sense, this is the inconsistency targeted by Joy (2010) as irrational carnism: whereas a perspective framed by speciesism might find preferential treatment for nonhuman species illogical, Diamond’s approach allows for a more flexible recognition of in-group members that is not constrained by biological categories. In fact, Diamond goes a step further to define ‘human being’ as a concept which is, in part, constituted by culturally defined dietary practices: “We learn what a human being is in — among other ways — sitting at a table where WE eat THEM. We are around the table and they are on it” (1978, 470). Given a certain degree of historical continuity about the kinds of creatures typically positioned relative to the table, Diamond
can easily maintain distinctions between creatures of any species on functional or habitual grounds.

Importantly, such an approach also frees Diamond from needing to defend the "intrinsic value" of human beings as a moral category distinct from nonhuman animals, thereby sidestepping standard anti-speciesist arguments; in effect, this means that Diamond could defend **CUT** on *etiological* rather than *essentialist* grounds. What I mean by this is that identifying a difference between $X$ and $Y$ need not come down to a matter of membership classes defined by intrinsic properties of creatures at all, but could instead be borne as an extrinsic relation of token individuals within social contexts *even while recognizing* species distinctions; as Diamond explains, "we fail to distinguish between ‘the difference between animals and people’ and ‘the differences between animals and people’...it is clear that we form the idea of this difference, create the concept of the difference, knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities" (470, emphasis added; see also Segerdahl (2014, 136–38)). So, $X$’s origin in a being who cannot properly be seen as "food" is sufficient to distinguish it from $Y$’s origin in a being who properly can be so seen. Consider a modified version of **CUT**:

**CUT***: A cut of meat ($A$) sourced from a companion animal who died peacefully of natural causes is, ceteris paribus, morally worse to eat than a cut of meat ($B$) sourced from the corpse of other nonhuman creatures.

I take it that Diamond could distinguish between $A$ and $B$ in precisely the same way that she could distinguish between $X$ and $Y$ and for roughly the same reasons.
Diamond’s approach shares a family resemblance to the Aristotelian program proposed by Lu (2013). Although Aristotle was clear about cannibalism’s brutality (in Book VII, Chapter 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1148b20), he also posits — as an illustration of his metaphysical views — that a dead finger is not truly a finger, since the essence of a living body includes being alive (in Book VII of *Metaphysics*, 1035b20), what Cohen (2003) dubs the “Severed-Hand Principle.” Developing this line of thought, Lu argues that human corpses nevertheless retain a “residual humanity” whereby the corpse unavoidably “reflects the value of the living human person because the corpse reflects the form of a living person” (453–54). Lu therefore concludes that cannibalism is immoral precisely because “it always involves treating something that is ‘not-food’ as if it were ‘food’” (457).

Altogether, then, one reason why people might resist moral argumentation about meat consumption is because they frame the discussion as a *nonmoral* matter to begin with: attempts to analyze the morality of a seemingly-nonmoral topic would appear somewhere between sanctimonious and confused. Put differently, for some meat-eaters, the ethicist’s argument for animal liberation is not, strictly speaking, *false* because it is seen simply as *nonsense* — on such a view, animals are, with only scant exceptions, not the kind of thing that can “liberated” in the first place. Appreciating this moral/nonmoral distinction about “eating animals” allows one to better construct an anti-carnist conversational common ground without a need for, say, recognizing the foundational immorality of essentialist (and speciesist) preferences for *homo sapiens*. Because many speciesist people (who, as Greenbaume (2004) discusses, nevertheless love their “fur-babies”) might explicitly reject such presuppositions, interlocuting defenders of animal rights and/
or welfare can discursively focus their attention to the actual fundamental point of contention: the perceived semantic contradictions of presumed consumable/nonconsumable categories.

III. “Eating” Animals

The other distinction about “eating animals” that can pose difficulties for the meaningful uptake of arguments against meat-eating concerns the curious role that food plays for human beings: namely how, unlike other creatures, we include food as a significant element of how we should live. In ways unlike other creatures, what we eat matters to us for reasons that surpass nutritional concerns and our dietary habits are suffused with normative assumptions; not only are humans “rational animals,” as Aristotle said, but we are “eating animals” as well.

Consider the prevalence of cannibalism amongst nonhuman animal populations: when a praying mantis eats her mate, a spadefoot toad tadpole swallows its brethren, or a swarm of Mormon crickets consumes one of its own stragglers, none of them seemingly exhibit qualms or second thoughts about their snack (Schutt, 2017). In the summer of 2019, patrons at a German zoo were shocked to learn that Kigali, a lioness who had recently given birth to two cubs, had killed and eaten both her children the previous evening (Dixon, 2019). In a similar way, caretakers at Washington D.C.’s National Zoo were forced to intervene in the labor of Khali, a resident sloth bear, after she consumed two of her three children mid-birth (Stromberg, 2014). Though not standard, cannibalism is far from unheard of in nonhuman contexts; indeed, only homo sapiens seem to recognize a problem with consuming their own kind. And while “human animals alone recognize moral limits” is unsurprising,
it does suggest that reflexive condemnations of anthropophagic behavior are not simply biological predispositions — again, cannibalism and other dietary practices offer interesting case studies for moral reasoning.

As eating animals, humans take care to craft and enjoy what we eat in ways that surpass simple concerns of nutritional sustenance: food is an inextricable element of our cultural identities and, as such, is laden with all manner of normative and aesthetic properties. Philosophers in the fields of food ethics and aesthetics demonstrate convincingly how “à chacun son goût” (“to each their own [taste]”) is the beginning, not the end, of an argument (Korsmeyer, 1999; Liao and Meskin, 2018). Consequently, terms like ‘food’ and ‘cuisine’ might exemplify another form of what Bernard Williams first called “thick moral concepts” — terms which simultaneously contribute both descriptive and evaluative content to the semantics of a sentence (Vayrynen, 2019). Certainly this is what underlies Cid Jurado’s concept of cultural semiosis whereby a simple “nutritive substance” accumulates the cultural baggage to properly be considered “food,” that is “when it is perceived by people to have cultural value, acquiring a transcendent, moral purpose and a symbolic meaning” (2016, 47). Indeed, insofar as humans possess the capacity to conceptualize food in this way, our understanding of ‘food’ is often nestled inside the core of our identity-constructing practices.

Consequently, arguments aimed at convincing someone to become a vegetarian are, in effect, seeking to force a reconceptualization not only of the culinary object on someone’s plate, but of a complex, interlocking web of associations and definitions about many (potentially quite personal) topics. It is one thing to assess the validity and soundness of an argu-
ment against deer hunting; it is quite another for a deer hunter (who likely holds a panoply of affective, conative, social, and otherwise meaningful attitudes associated with deer hunting) to even consider giving up their *practice* of deer hunting — such a choice is not merely a matter of rationally accepting the conclusion of an argument, but involves a deep re-gestalting of how a hunter views both themselves and their world.

This may well be why writings which imaginatively *demonstrate* the immorality of meat consumption (rather than analytically proving it) experience greater cultural uptake and, anecdotally, appear more successful at promoting genuine behavioral change than do arguments with carefully numbered premises: I have in mind cases like the infamous basement of Fred the Chocolate Lover (Norcross, 2004) or Jonathan Safran Foer’s reflections on his grandmother’s cooking (2009; see also Fischer, 2019). A similarly structured defense can be made for video footage of the abusive realities of factory farming conditions, even if such footage is attained illicitly or illegally. While some might think that such stories go beyond the proper boundaries of a thought experiment to become emotionally manipulative parables, we might instead consider them as creative philosophical avenues that target our complex, often inchoate and ineffable (but, nevertheless, cognitively fundamental) characterizations of “food,” rather than merely our affirmed concepts of morality. As the defenders of both moral perception (Werner, 2017) and aesthetic-moral philosophy (Holdier, 2016b) have argued, just as the horror of Tamora’s unwitting cannibalism needs no explanation, the goal of moral argumentation should be to simply help someone see the moral truth of the matter, making salient the reasons to shift axes on the normative plane of disagreement.
IV. Fellow Creatures as Extrinsic Final Goods

Taken together, the two distinctions about eating animals — the moral/nonmoral distinction about which substances properly count as “food” and the moral/im moral distinction about how lives should be lived in toto — come together in how we treat what Diamond calls our “fellow creatures.” Although a fellow creature is made of flesh and, consequently, could be eaten, it does not properly count as ‘food,’ but rather is

...a being in a certain boat, as it were, of whom it makes sense to say that, among other things, that it goes off into Time’s enormous Nought, and which may be sought as company. (1978, 474)

To Diamond, the recognition of such companionship is grounded, first and foremost, in “our conception of human life” for we first understand particular humans as our fellow creatures and then expand our sense of such relationality to encompass particular nonhumans as well. However we frame a life worth living, insofar as others are involved, then we can properly recognize that their lives are worth living as well.

In a similar way, Christine Korsgaard also describes nonhuman animals as fellow creatures, explaining that, by this, she means “we are related in something like the way that children of the same family are, just as we would be if we were all children of the same parental god” (2018, 4). By this, Korsgaard expressly does not mean to identify some inherent moral property shared by both humans and nonhuman animals such that all are intrinsically valuable — rather, it is the case that all creatures are extrinsically valuable as ends-in-themselves (64). Eschewing intrinsic value theories (such as those defended by Seidman (2022), McShane (2017), or Zimmerman (2001)),

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Korsgaard points out elsewhere that things often derive their value from an external source and remain, nevertheless, good in a non-instrumental sense: the goodness is simply “relative to the desires and interests of people” (1996, 262). To say that a painting locked away from view is valuable but, given its situation, not good for anyone is to recognize that the painting’s goodness depends on certain conditions external to the painting itself; when those conditions obtain, the painting does not magically become intrinsically good, but remains extrinsically good (264). And since the aesthetic experiences provoked by the painting are “the condition under which its value as an end is realized,” not simply the end of a causal chain precipitated by the painting as a separate event, the painting has value as a final (not instrumental) good (265).

In a similar way, fellow creatures — and their activities — can possess extrinsic value in virtue of human agents conferring value on the world; insofar as I act in ways that I take to be valuable, I must (upon pain of irrationality) recognize that any creature in my situation who acts similarly is to be judged as similarly valuable. Notably, this means that a nonhuman creature need not understand that her life has value in order for her life to be recognized as valuable nonetheless: as Korsgaard puts it, in a passage worth quoting at length:

I have no other reason for taking my [own] end to be good absolutely, than the fact that it is good for me. So I am deciding to treat my ends as good absolutely, simply because I am a creature with a final good. From there all we have to do is generalize: that principle requires that we should take the ends of beings who have a final good to be absolutely valuable (2018, 144).
Insofar as fellow creatures derive their value from being in “the same boat” (in Diamond’s words) with human creatures who can identify final goods as such, we must recognize that those final goods are not constrained by species boundaries.

But this is not to say that the extrinsic value of token individuals is, in all cases, identical. Given that relational ties are an additional method for the conferral of extrinsic value, I can sensibly discriminate between token individuals with whom I share relationships and those with whom I do not: certainly, for example, when I consider the value of my wife and children, in addition to the value I recognize vis-a-vis their humanity, I additionally perceive a rich value complex borne from the fact that they are my family.

The wrongness of cannibalism, then, on this sort of account, is a matter of violating the collection of final goods packaged within the life of the individual being eaten. In much the same way that a painting can be violated (when it is damaged — particularly intentionally damaged), a similar story can be told for a human corpse — thereby accommodating Diamond’s insistence on the extant prohibition of even passive cannibalism (1978, 467). So, too, in the case of eating all other fellow creatures — in the same way and for the same reasons. Given the richer batch of relational ties that humans share simply in virtue of being human, we can nevertheless maintain a discrimination between the eating of human and nonhuman meat without recourse to the essentialist doctrines of speciesism.

So, even when debates become hampered by semantic confusion about “eating animals,” Korsgaard’s framework offers a route to ground a moral judgment nonetheless: it is for both moral and rational reasons that nonhuman animals should not
be categorized as “food” — and it is precisely in our role as the “eating animals” that we can both confer and see this value in our fellow creatures. Both the moral/nonmoral and moral/immoral distinctions about animal consumption can be accommodated within a broadly Korsgaardian perspective. Moreover, thanks to the prolific ways in which we form social and relational connections, Korsgaard’s recognition of extrinsic final goods as a category of value can preserve the functional (but not essential) primacy of human relationships which Diamond was concerned to defend.

In this way, we return to the table where Tamora, Queen of the Goths, discovers that Titus Andronicus has tricked her into eating her dead children: whereas she always had good reason, upon reflection, to realize that her subjective self-valuing should have led her to similarly value the particular animals she thought she was eating, her discovery that her final meal was actually human meat entailed the sudden realization that she was violating clear fellow creatures — a truth only amplified by the additional relational connections she shared with the particular people on whose bodies she had chewed. Told differently, Tamora’s horrible epiphany is a story in three parts: her initial realization that she was not only (1) participating in a morally assessable act, but (2) in a morally wrong act which (3) was especially horrendous given the identities of the particular victims and her relationship with them.

But, rather than present a logical argument that all this is so, Shakespeare has his characters reveal the dark truth with aesthetic flair, opting for the far more captivating technique on which we often rely in ordinary moral reasoning: perception. Midway through the play, Titus warns his son, “Why, foolish Lucius, dost thou not perceive that Rome is but a wilderness of
tigers? Tigers must prey, and Rome affords no prey but me and mine” (*Titus Andronicus*, Act III, Scene 1). By the end of *Titus Andronicus*, Lucius, together with each member of the audience, has seen just how right — and wrong — his father was.

**Bibliography**


