

# The vegetarian option: varieties, conversions, motives and careers

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## Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study of the dietary beliefs and practices of a 'snowball sample' of seventy-six vegetarians and vegans. The dynamics of the process of conversion are examined, along with respondents' accounts of their motives and of the impact of their dietary stance upon their relationships with kin, friends and colleagues. The study's findings, which appear to indicate the central importance of ethical considerations for this particular response group, are set in the context of broader debates concerning the sociological dimensions of the selection or avoidance of specific food items.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to offer a contribution to the analysis of the cultural and sociological factors which influence patterns of food selection and food avoidance. The specific focus is contemporary vegetarianism, a complex of inter-related beliefs, attitudes and nutritional practices which has to date received comparatively little attention from social scientists. Vegetarians in western cultures, in most instances, are not life-long practitioners but converts. They are individuals who have subjected more traditional foodways to critical scrutiny, and subsequently made a deliberate decision to change their eating habits, sometimes in a radical fashion. Such individuals represent particularly valuable respondents, in that their dietary practices have been established as a result of more or less explicit processes of reflection, as opposed to having been received uncritically from their culture's repertoire of customary foodways. The study of vegetarianism in particular, and

of patterns of food selection and avoidance in general, provides an opportunity to gain important insights into one of the most basic and compelling aspects of human activity: the satisfaction of the body's ever pressing nutritional demands within a given cultural, economic and ecological framework.

### **The analysis of the social dimensions of food and eating**

Food-related issues represent a relatively under-developed area within sociology (Murcott, 1988a; Gofton, 1986) despite the fact that such issues could, and indeed should, represent a potentially valuable area of development for the discipline (Beardsworth and Keil, 1990). Interestingly, social historians have devoted some attention to this area, notable examples being Drummond and Wilbraham (1957), Oddy and Miller (1976), Johnston (1977), Driver (1983), Burnett (1989) and Levenstein (1988). There is, of course, a well developed body of work in social anthropology dealing with food and nutrition, a comprehensive review of which is provided by Messer (1984). A particularly important strain in the social anthropological analysis of foodways appears in the work of Lévi-Strauss (1970, 1973, 1978), with its attempt to decipher nutritional practice and nutritional myth, which are both seen as susceptible to structural and semiotic analysis. This semiotic approach is taken up in Douglas (1972) in her analysis of foodways as codes, the messages encoded being patterns of social relations. In a later work (Douglas, 1984), the same author directs attention towards the importance of understanding the food combination conventions, meal formats and patterns of social inclusion and exclusion encoded in given sets of foodways. A current running counter to this approach is found in the work of Harris (1978, 1985) who argues that analysing foodways as systems of signs cannot in itself provide a full understanding of patterns of selection and avoidance, which are also grounded in crucial economic and ecological processes.

Relevant sociological contributions to the field have included studies of the household organisation of food provision in relation to conventional notions of the constitution of acceptable meals, and in relation to such factors as age, gender, and the structure of patriarchal relations within the family (Delphy, 1979, Murcott, 1982, Kerr and Charles, 1986, Charles and Kerr, 1988). Closely connected to such work is the analysis provided by Calnan and

Cant (1990) of the contrasts in food consumption patterns in middle class and working class households. Nicod (1980) provides a bridge between social anthropological and sociological concerns in his examination of food as a communication medium. Mennell (1985), in presenting a detailed cross-cultural comparison of eating and taste in England and France, draws upon the framework provided by Elias (1978, 1982) to put forward the important concept of the progressive 'civilizing' of appetite. The dynamics of appetite, and the relationship between these dynamics and conceptions of body, self and moral worth figure centrally in the ethnographic research reported in Murcott (1988b).

Within the expanding body of literature selectively outlined above, historical, social anthropological and sociological, there exists a range of theoretical and empirical resources which can be brought to bear upon the issue of contemporary vegetarianism. These relate in particular to the symbolic and semiotic aspects of food selection and avoidance, to the economic and material foundations of food choice, to the household organisation of food preparation and consumption, and to the shifting bases of the social formation of appetite.

Although Atkinson (1980, 1983) has examined in some detail the closely related issue of the symbolic significance of health foods, there is comparatively little material available from the social sciences focused directly on the specific issue of vegetarianism. The following section examines such material as does exist, and draws upon additional relevant sources.

### **Studies of vegetarianism**

Some idea of the proportion of vegetarians in the British population is available from data produced by commercially sponsored research. A series of surveys carried out by Social Surveys [Gallup] Ltd (1990) indicates a consistent rise in the number of individuals who define themselves as vegetarian. The 1990 survey, involving a stratified sample of 4,162 respondents aged 16 and over, produced an estimate of 3.7 per cent for the proportion of self-defined vegetarians. This represents an increase of 23 per cent since the previous survey in 1988, and a 76 per cent increase over the estimate produced by the first survey in 1984, when the estimated proportion was 2.1 per cent. In fact, the combined group of vegetarians plus red meat avoiders was 10.0

per cent, compared with 8.5 per cent in 1988, and 4.0 per cent in 1984.

There also appears to be a significant gender element in the results, in that women are more likely to be meat avoiders. Thus in the 1990 survey 12.8 per cent of female respondents claimed to eat meat rarely or not at all (the 1984 figure was 4.8 per cent) whereas 7.1 per cent of male respondents made this claim (the 1984 figure being 3.3 per cent). The class dimension of the results is by no means consistent. The C1 group in the 1990 results showed the highest rate of vegetarianism (5.5 per cent), followed by the AB group (4.5 per cent), then the DE group (2.9 per cent) and finally the CE group at 2.5 per cent.

Gallup estimates of the percentage of vegetarians in the population are supported by the results of a study carried out by MORI in 1989. A representative quota sample of 1,997 adults aged eighteen and over in 204 constituency points around Britain was interviewed. This study produced an estimate of 3 per cent for the proportion of respondents currently vegetarian. When questioned concerning motives, 61 per cent of vegetarians mentioned dislike of intensive animal rearing methods, 58 per cent indicated they found animal slaughter for food morally unacceptable, 49 per cent mentioned health reasons, and 38 per cent indicated a dislike of the taste or texture of meat products (MORI/*Sunday Times* 1989).

Given the above estimates, it seems likely that there are over one million practising adult vegetarians in Britain. Little detailed knowledge is available concerning their motives, tastes and experiences, despite the fact that there is a substantial body of literature on the psychological and nutritional dimensions of vegetarianism (see Kuffner, 1988). Numerous polemical works presenting the case for vegetarianism have been published (e.g. Wynne-Tyson, 1975). Indeed, as Thomas (1983) points out, virtually all the standard arguments in favour of vegetarianism have been in circulation in Britain since the end of the eighteenth century. One of the few relevant academic studies is Simoons (1961), which provides a wide ranging analysis of flesh food prohibitions such as the rejection of pork by Islam and Judaism, taboos relating to the slaughter of cattle and the consumption of beef among Hindus in India, and the strict vegetarianism associated with Jainism. In addition, Barkas (1975) discusses not only the bases of Indian beef prohibitions in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, but also the vegetarian elements in the thought of Ancient Greece and in Judeo-Christian ethics. In addition, she

traces the development of vegetarian thought through the Renaissance, and the emergence of vegetarianism as a coherent movement in Britain with the founding of the Vegetarian Society.

Perhaps the best developed and most detailed academic work in this area is to be found within philosophy. Such work deserves attention in this context insofar as it contains the clearest statements available which articulate the idea of vegetarianism as a moral imperative, an idea which occurs repeatedly in the transcript data generated by this study. Indeed Tester (1991) has argued that notions of animals' rights in Western, urbanised societies, rather than stating something conclusive about *animals*, consist of statements about what actions *human* individuals might rightly take, for example in relation to such issues as dietary choices (Tester 1991: 196). However, concern with ethical vegetarianism is a theme with a long pedigree, a theme with its roots in Antiquity in the arguments of the Pythagoreans and the thought of Plato, Plutarch and Porphyry (Dombrowski, 1985). One of the most influential recent expositions of the concept of ethical vegetarianism is to be found in Singer (1976). Singer rejects the Cartesian view of animals as mere automata and attacks what he sees as the 'speciesism' inherent in the view that animals can be legitimately exploited for the benefit of humans. Midgley (1983), like Singer, also rejects the Judeo-Christian and Rationalist views which exclude animals from moral consideration and draws similar parallels between speciesism and racism and sexism. She suggests that the boundaries of moral consideration have progressively advanced, and must come to the point where they cross the barrier between species.

The preference utilitarianism adopted by Singer is rejected by Regan (1984), who argues that if we accept the proposition that moral agents have inherent value, it would be arbitrary to deny inherent value to moral patients (eg certain categories of animals). From this assertion he derives the principle that animals which have inherent value should have that value respected, which would in effect rule out their use as sources of food for humans. The respect principle, he suggests, obviates the need to use potentially difficult notions of animals rights. Clark (1984) is similarly cautious of the assertion that animals have rights, but argues that nevertheless they can still suffer wrongs at the hands of humans. Humans are seen as part of a community of living things for which they, as intelligent beings, bear a special responsibility of stewardship. However, these arguments in favour of ethical

vegetarianism in particular and against the exploitation of animals in general (in connection with the latter see also Brown, 1988 and Serpell, 1986) are by no means unanimously accepted within philosophy, and have given rise to serious criticism (eg Townsend, 1979), and to attempts at refutation (eg Frey, 1983).

Little attention has been directed towards vegetarianism by social scientists, although it is touched upon indirectly by Harris (1985). Harris asserts that vegetarianism in the strict sense (ie veganism) is a rare phenomenon likely always to be unpopular and short lived. Most vegetarians, he points out, consume animal products like eggs and milk based foods. Given what he sees as an inherent human disposition to consume meat, Harris points out that the concept of 'meat hunger' is a widespread element in human cultures. He estimates that less than 1 per cent of the world's population voluntarily forego the consumption of meat, and of that one per cent, the proportion of vegans is less than one in ten. In contrast, Adams (1990) analyses vegetarianism from a feminist perspective, arguing that the violence against animals entailed in meat eating and violence directed against women are inextricably linked to each other by 'a structure of overlapping but absent referents . . .' (Adams, 1990: 42). Meat is seen as a symbol of patriarchy, its consumption being bound up with the creation and expression of male power. Significantly, Adams argues, a process of 'false naming' serves to obscure the connection between innocuously labelled food items and the absent referent of the dead animal whose dismembered body provided them. Vegetarians, on the other hand, may deliberately violate these linguistic conventions in order to bring back into view this unwelcome linkage. From this point of view, vegetarianism (in the strict form advocated by Adams) can represent an assertion of female autonomy in the face of male domination, precisely because of the close identification between meat consumption and male power.

One of the few examples of a specifically sociological analysis focused directly upon vegetarianism is provided by Twigg (1979). Her interest centres upon the development of vegetarian ideas from the early nineteenth century onwards in the United Kingdom, where vegetarianism as a formal movement first emerged. She suggests that vegetarian beliefs contain certain recurrent themes which emerge from their basic structure, a structure which represents an inversion of the conventional hierarchy of foods, which has red meat at its pinnacle, the most desired form of nutrition. In contrast, red meat with its high blood content is seen

as the main focus of vegetarian revulsion. Blood is seen as symbolically associated with aggression, strength, virility and sexuality, and eating this becomes a way of ingesting 'animal' nature. Thus the avoidance of red meat (and, progressively, of other flesh foods) is conceived of as a way of controlling and reducing animal passions. In this connection Twigg notes the historical connection between vegetarianism and ideas of sexual abstinence and the subduing of the body in favour of the spirit. Yet in modern vegetarianism, she argues, there arises a contradiction, since in it there exists a strong emphasis on the maintenance of physical health and the wellbeing of the body through 'natural' eating patterns. Yet vegetarians' view of 'nature' is an ambiguous one, given the often violent and exploitative features of relations between and within species. This ambiguity is dealt with by moralizing nature itself. The natural world is re-conceptualised in terms of harmony, and animal imagery stresses gentleness and innocence. This harmonized view of nature is then used as a yardstick against which to measure the inadequacies of human society.

An additional element of the basic structure is the notion of purity, with vegetable foods seen as 'vibrant' with life, whereas meat is seen as dead food, and hence ingesting meat is synonymous with ingesting death. For these reasons, then, the inversion of the conventional food hierarchy is presented as central to vegetarian beliefs. In a later paper (Twigg, 1983), the same author develops these arguments further, and lays out in more detail the conventional food hierarchy and its vegetarian inversion. In addition, she elaborates vegetarianism's stress on the values of wholeness and rawness, with grains and nuts, for example, conceived of as 'full of life'. Thus vegetarian beliefs suggest that it may be feasible literally to ingest vitality through foods which have been made available with the minimum of processing and cultural interference. This theme is itself closely linked to the idea put forward by Atkinson (1980) that the symbolic significance of health foods is related to a positive valuation of what is natural and unprocessed, and a negative valuation of the products of highly developed food technologies.

In addition to the analysis offered by Twigg, some empirical evidence concerning the motives, practices and beliefs of vegetarians is available from a study carried out in the USA (Dwyer *et al.*, 1974). This study examined a group of 100 young adults who had converted to vegetarianism after adolescence. On the basis of their

findings Dwyer *et al.* were able to distinguish between 'joiners', whose vegetarianism was associated with membership of some relevant group or network, and 'loners' whose vegetarianism was more individualistic. The authors also distinguished between those respondents whose food avoidances were 'circumscribed' and those avoidances were 'far reaching'. Overall, 34 per cent of their respondents whose food avoidances were 'circumscribed' and those whose avoidances were 'far reaching'. Overall, 34 per cent of their respondents (for animal welfare), and 14 per cent referred to metaphysical concerns (eg a desire for 'spiritual balance'). Over half the group had only circumscribed avoidances, although the authors report that the minority with far-reaching avoidances did present some problems in relation to dietary inadequacies and weight loss. On the whole, the loners appeared to isolate diet from other aspects of daily life, whereas the joiners were more likely to refer to ecological issues, and more likely to see their eating patterns as part of a set of spiritual beliefs which put them outside the mainstream of society.

From this type of focused empirical study, and from Twigg's more extensive examination of the historical and conceptual roots of vegetarianism, it is feasible to draw out a number of broad themes. For example: vegetarianism itself is a nutritionally diverse set of practices (Dwyer *et al.*'s distinction between circumscribed and far reaching avoidances recognizes this fact); the motivations behind vegetarianism are also diverse (moral, health-related, ecological, spiritual, etc.); vegetarianism's rejection of meat (especially red meat) may be associated with an inversion of the conventional hierarchy of foods, and appears to reflect a deep seated ambivalence concerning the consumption of flesh and blood; vegetarianism in some senses embraces the concept of 'nature' and values the 'natural', and yet this embrace is a somewhat paradoxical one.

### **The design of the study**

The themes outlined above appear to warrant further investigation, preferably in a manner which allows for a more richly detailed examination of motivations and experiences than is apparent in the study by Dwyer *et al.* To this end, the study reported here was conceived as an exclusively qualitative one, whose aim was to accumulate a substantial body of verbatim material covering the

beliefs and choices of practising vegetarians. It was decided to focus upon adults (ie aged 16 or over) who defined themselves as vegetarians. The decision to accept self-definitions in this way was based upon a recognition of the wide variations in the content of vegetarian diets, and upon the fact that the aim was to capture and to document a wide spread of attitudes and motives. It was also decided to exclude ethnic minorities in which some form of vegetarianism was an element of customary or religious practice, since the primary concern of the study was to examine the experiences of respondents who had undergone a process of reflection and conversion.

The identification and recruitment of suitable respondents for such a study inevitably pose considerable problems. The drawing of a simple random sample in order to ensure statistical representativeness is clearly impossible in that it is not feasible to enumerate the total United Kingdom population of self-defined vegetarians. The construction of stratified samples is also likely to be difficult given the relative rarity of vegetarians in general, and of vegans in particular (the MORI survey discussed above, for example, did not come across a single vegan in a quota sample of 1,997 adults). For these reasons it was concluded that the only practicable mode of tracing suitable respondents would be through the use of 'snowball' sampling techniques. Quite clearly, such techniques cannot possibly claim to produce a statistically representative sample, since they rely upon the social contacts between individuals to trace additional respondents. However, as Coleman (1970) has pointed out, the fact that such techniques in effect tap existing social networks should not necessarily be seen as a methodological weakness. Rather than treating respondents as atomistically conceived components of a formal survey, the explicitly qualitative research undertaken here treats respondents as members of a relatively loose and fluid network of individuals linked by a number of important shared ideas. The response group, therefore, is treated as an 'outcropping' of data in the sense this term is used by Webb *et al.* (1973).

Given the qualitative approach of the study, relatively unstructured interviews were employed, the interviews being guided by an inventory of issues which were to be covered in each session. As the interview programme progressed, respondents themselves raised additional or complementary issues, and these form an integral part of the study's findings. In other words, the interview programme was not based upon a set of relatively rigid pre-determined

questions and prompts. Rather, the open-ended, discursive nature of the interviews permitted an iterative process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier respondents could be taken up and presented to later respondents. Certainly, one of the most important contributions of this approach was to highlight the significance of the complex connotations of the whole concept of 'meat'. Later respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their personal view of these connotations. The programme was, therefore, explicitly developmental, and quite deliberately did not seek to subject each respondent to a standardized pattern of directive interrogation.

Between October 1987 and February 1989 a total of 76 respondents were questioned in the course of 73 interviews (3 interview sessions were with married couples). The geographic spread of the interviews was limited to the East Midlands, no regional comparisons being attempted. All interviews (apart from a small number of pilot sessions) were taped and fully transcribed, generating several hundred thousand words of transcript material. Analysis of the data involved assembling extracts from transcripts under thematic headings devised in the course of processing the material, in order that respondents' own verbatim accounts could be employed as the primary vehicle for the presentation of the project's results.

### **The findings of the study**

The findings discussed below are organized under the topic areas used in the analysis, although constraints on space dictate that only a limited selection of these topics and a small fraction of the transcript data can be presented here.

#### *Respondents' characteristics*

Given that the response group does not constitute a sample in any statistical sense, but rather an amalgam of a number of clusters of interlinked respondents, some overall summary of its actual composition is required. Although this could not be aimed for specifically, in fact the response group exhibits a very even balance between the sexes, with 39 female and 37 male interviewees. The age distribution of the group showed a marked clustering in the categories 26–30 years (19 respondents) and 31–35 years (17

respondents). The category 16–20 years contained 4 respondents, 21–25 years 14 respondents, and 36–40 years 9 respondents. There was a total of 13 respondents aged 41 or over.

Certainly the most marked effect of the use of snowball contacts was the high level of educational attainment within the response group. No less than 32 of the respondents had been educated to degree level or above, and only 10 had no formal qualifications of any kind. This educational profile is reflected in the occupational breakdown of the group. In all, 23 respondents held various grades of professional or managerial jobs, including lecturer, teacher, librarian, training manager, social worker and probation officer. Outside this single largest category there was a wide occupational spread including white collar workers, skilled and semi-skilled manual workers, and individuals either permanently or temporarily outside the formal occupational structure (housewives, retired or unemployed individuals, and students). The types of households in which respondents were situated showed considerable variation, although only 15 respondents were located in elementary families complete with dependent children. The majority of respondents were without dependent children and were either married, cohabiting or sharing accommodation with individuals with whom they had no ties of kinship.

### *Types of vegetarianism*

In nutritional terms the notion of vegetarianism covers a very varied set of dietary practices. Figure 1 lays out a typology of forms of vegetarianism ranged along a scale from least strict to most strict, and indicates the number of respondents adhering to each type. At the least strict end, some individuals may on occasions consume meat (usually white, more unusually red) and yet still think of themselves as vegetarian. As we move along the scale, those who occasionally or routinely eat fish may also be self-defined vegetarians. The next category, the consumption of eggs, is a common feature of vegetarian diets, as is the one following that, the consumption of dairy products like milk, cheese and yogurt. The next step allows only the consumption of dairy products which do not contain ingredients derived from slaughtered animals (eg rennet free cheese), and the final step, equated with veganism, permits the consumption of no animal products (although this prohibition in itself may be applied with varying degrees of strictness). It should be noted that, in general, individuals will feel

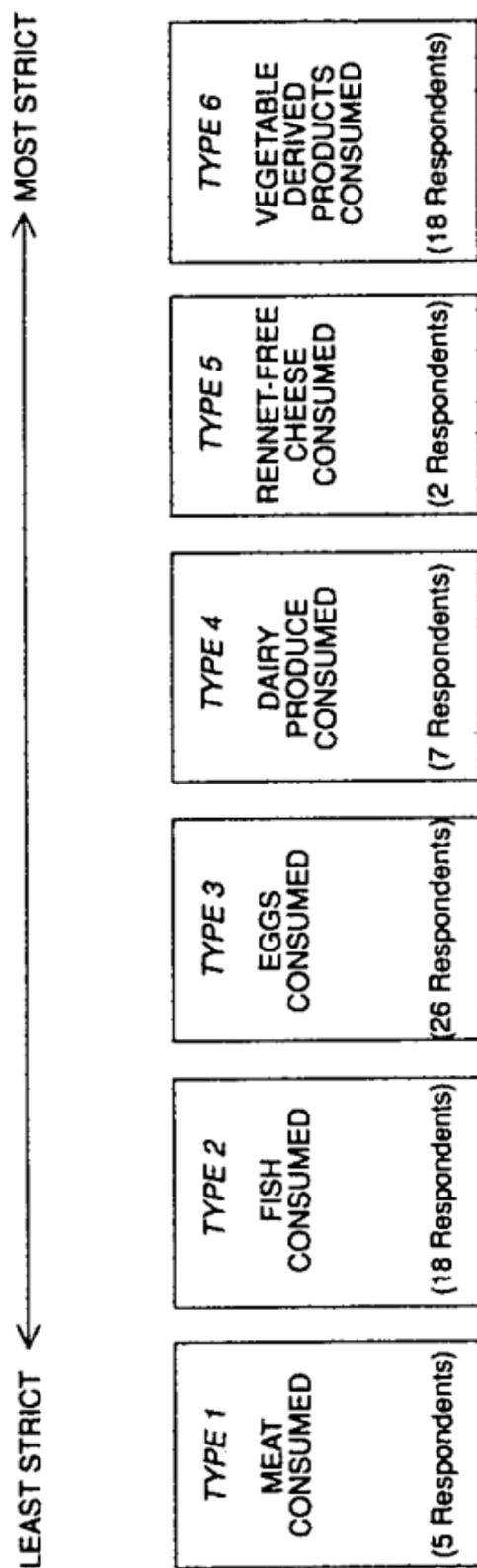


Figure 1: A typology of forms of vegetarianism

free to consume those food items permitted by stances on the scale to the *right* of their own, but will exclude or avoid food items to the *left*.

While it may seem contradictory for individuals to consume meat and regard themselves as vegetarian, in the cases which came to light meat was consumed only rarely, and in particular circumstances. For example:

'Over the last few years I have . . . stopped eating meat altogether unless it is some sort of social function where it is going to be extremely embarrassing for the other person, ie on occasion being invited by somebody I don't know very well to their house and then finding they've prepared meat, and I would eat it . . .'. (Does that occur very often?). 'Very rarely now. But on the odd occasion, yes . . . my principles aren't strong enough to make a social upset'. (Female, Type 1)

A substantial number of respondents were prepared to accept fish as either an occasional or a regular feature of their diet, since fish did not appear to have the same connotations for them as meat itself. Of course, others reject all forms of flesh, while retaining both eggs and dairy products in the diet. A number of respondents avoided eggs, but continued to use dairy products, although such an option was a relatively unusual one in this particular group of interviewees. At the right hand end of the scale, where individuals avoided all animal products, several respondents did point out that the vegan option was by no means a straightforward one to put into practice:

'We try to be total vegans. That's very difficult. To be a total vegan you can't – it's just a question of, right, we don't eat meat, milk, eggs and cheese. We look at additives . . . We try and find out – look at the small print on the label, and then we try and research that, and work out whether that comes from animals; is animal-derived or plant-derived. Our washing-up liquid, our washing powders . . . cosmetics, toiletries, are all, when available, . . . vegan, by definition of the Vegan Society'. (Male, Type 6)

Veganism, itself, then, is a stance with gradations of strictness, some vegans extending their avoidances to include items like

animal derived food additives, honey and non-food items like cosmetics.

In identifying types of vegetarianism in this way, it is important to note that membership of such categories is not fixed. Individuals may move along the scale, some reaching a point at which they come to rest, some striving to move further to the right, and others regressing and slipping back to the left, even to the extent of dropping out of vegetarianism altogether. Indeed, the MORI poll already discussed, which reported the proportion of vegetarians in its sample as 3 per cent, also indicated that a further 2 per cent of the sample had previously been vegetarian and had lapsed (MORI/*Sunday Times*, 1989).

Some of those who had succeeded in maintaining a relatively strict stance, for example by adopting some form of veganism, retained a relatively tolerant attitude towards those still to the left of them on the scale. In contrast, other vegans regarded any position which fell short of their own as unacceptable:

'I mean, to me, if you're going to do a thing, do it properly. This is why I would rather be vegan – choose to be vegan, rather than lacto-vegetarian. Lacto-vegetarianism to me, is a bit of a fudge . . . from all points of view'. (Male, Type 6)

### *The process of conversion*

The processes through which individuals are converted to vegetarianism, or indeed convert themselves, are clearly linked to the idiosyncrasies of personal biography. However, a number of significant underlying features could be detected in respondents' descriptions, features which made it feasible to distinguish two main types of conversion 'career'. The first type appears to involve a relatively gradual process of change, as the individual's ideas evolve, and vague dislikes and misgivings (in some cases reaching back into childhood) take shape and become more pressing:

'What led up to that, speaking for myself, it was because I grew up on a farm . . . mainly pigs, sheep and some cattle. Not as intensive as some farm practices I've seen, but all the same not what I would call fair on the animals, and so I think I got to the point where I was beginning to think quite seriously about how unnecessary that was and how much I disapproved of it, and it coincided with that partly for economic reasons I found myself

that I was eating less meat anyway, and it was sort of a gradual process, and the two things came together, and I found myself almost entirely eating non-meat food all the time . . . ' (Male, Type 3)

In several instances, moving out of the family home meant that the individual could break with the foodways imposed by parents, and make the move towards vegetarianism they may have aspired to for some time.

However, in the case of the second type of conversion the change was clearly a much more abrupt one, and frequently triggered by a 'conversion experience' which respondents could usually recall in considerable detail. Such experiences were commonly associated with distress or disgust, and could lead to a sudden change in eating patterns. For example, one respondent's first step on the road to vegetarianism involved a graphically recalled experience of revulsion on eating bacon:

'I was cooking breakfast which was a cup of tea and a bacon cob . . . And that morning the smell of bacon was quite off-putting . . . And then, I was eating the cob, and I'd just taken a bite of it . . . and then, the next bite, the rind wasn't cooked properly. And the rind stayed in my mouth, and came off the meat, and sort of dangled from – from the corner of my mouth. And I – heaved, and put the cob down, and that was the end'. (Male, Type 4)

The above respondent immediately gave up red meat, and then progressively excluded all meat from his diet:

'I'd slowly, slowly, and slowly got it into my head that it was flesh that I was eating, and it was more off-putting by the week, or the month . . . that I was chewing flesh . . . I was beginning to recognise what it was I was eating. And – it was flesh . . . it was something that had been living, and it had blood running through it, and – and a heart pumping it round . . . '

Particularly significant here is the way in which meat is recognised, emotionally as well as rationally, as part of a once living creature and hence reconceptualized as 'flesh', thus bringing what Adams (1990) would see as the absent referent of the donor animal back into view. Such a reconceptualization itself implies a disturbing and previously unacknowledged kinship between the substance of

the interviewee's own body and the contents of his breakfast. Such experiences may lead to relatively rapid changes in eating patterns, sometimes literally from one day to the next, although sometimes spread over a few weeks or months. However, for other respondents, vividly recalled experiences of revulsion that occurred much earlier in life may have had a rather more subtle effect, creating or reinforcing attitudes which later set the scene for a move into vegetarianism. For example, one respondent graphically described how seeing the remnants of animal slaughter on a friend's farm initiated the rethinking her attitude to meat.

If witnessing at first hand some of the normally concealed aspects of animal husbandry can affect attitudes, then witnessing such realities indirectly, through the mass media, can also have a dramatic effect. Television appears to be a particularly powerful medium in this connection, and several respondents were able to identify specific documentary programmes that had influenced them. For example:

'The Animals Film on Channel 4, when it first started, was the first. I watched that. Well, I watched half of it, and it just made me feel so upset, and sick, that I just couldn't watch the rest of it at the time . . . There was myself and another person watching it, and he watched the rest of it. And he turned vegetarian as well, at the same time'. (Female, Type 6).

Respondents also reported being influenced directly through their primary relationships with kin, spouse or friends and acquaintances. The influence exerted by relatives was sometimes a rather unexpected one. For example, one interviewee reported being propelled into vegetarianism by her young daughter's decision to avoid meat:

'It was my daughter, when she was much younger: she went by the abattoir at ——. She was just amazed. She didn't know what she was eating before. When she saw the animals going in, I couldn't lie. I had to tell her that they were — you know — it's lamb . . . and she started then. She wouldn't eat. I must admit, I used to say you ought to eat that, and then I thought: why? because I do agree with her . . . so it started like that'. (Female, Type 3).

### Motivations

For the purposes of the present discussion it is convenient to identify four broad types of motivation which are embedded in the transcript data: *moral*, *health-related*, *gustatory* and *ecological*. In the great majority of instances, respondents had no hesitation in identifying their primary motivation in ways which could be classified quite readily under these headings. A total of 43 interviewees indicated that moral motivations for them were primary, health-related motivations were given priority by 13, gustatory preferences (related to the taste or texture of meat) were given priority by 9, and for one respondent ecological concerns were paramount. Only 10 respondents weighted two or more motivations equally. Interestingly, although it had been assumed that cost might be an important factor behind the adoption of a vegetarian diet, this did not appear to be a particularly significant motivation in itself. Indeed, respondents were divided as to whether a vegetarian diet was necessarily cheaper than one which includes meat, since so much depended upon the actual food items purchased and the dishes prepared.

Certainly for this group of respondents moral motives, in various guises, appeared to be the primary ones. Not surprisingly, such concerns were usually related to issues of animal welfare and animal suffering, often closely linked to the idea that the exploitation of animals for food is ethically unacceptable:

'I think it's the needless exploitation of other creatures. And I think modern farming conditions take away respect for animals, and that's what I don't like about it'. (Female, Type 4)

Indeed, some respondents explicitly employed conceptions of 'rights' and 'duty' when expounding such arguments. For example:

'... animals do have rights, I'm sure of that . . . and they have a right not to be exploited by man, the same as people do . . . I mean, I don't put animals above people . . . but having said all that, I think animals have their life to lead, and why should they be exploited, because they're a lesser being? . . . So in a way I think we've got a duty, you know, to protect them'. (Male, Type 6)

The idea that physical suffering imposed on animals reared and slaughtered for food was morally unjustifiable was the central

theme for morally motivated interviewees, although in some cases there were other dimensions to respondents' moral considerations, for example related to a sense of concern for human welfare as well as the welfare of animals. This most commonly took the form of the argument that vegetarianism represents a more 'efficient' mode of nutrition than husbandry based on the feeding of grain to animals, grain which could be used to feed humans directly:

'... the reason that people are starving is because we feed the food to intensively reared animals rather than human beings. I mean, if that isn't wickedness, I don't know what wickedness is'.  
(Male, Type 6).

Thus vegetarianism is presented as a moral obligation towards those whose dietary standards are dangerously low. This type of argument, based as it is upon ideas concerning the efficient and equitable production and distribution of food resources, is closely related to ecological motives, which may themselves have moral undertones. Thus respondents combined moral arguments concerning inequities in global food supply with ecological concerns about, for example, forest clearance for cattle ranching purposes. Constantly recurring in the accounts of those respondents who identified ecological motives was the idea that vegetarianism offered an ecologically sounder mode of nutrition which could offer long term sustainability:

'... there's so much written now about what ecological good sense it makes from the point of view of world resources. Everyone knows the argument about how many pounds of vegetation it takes for a cow to produce one pound of protein... I think it's something that ought to be considered, as part of a process of ensuring that children, and children's children, and so on, are going to have somewhere reasonable to live, in a century's time. Things like the greenhouse effect. It's caused not only by aerosol cans, but it's caused by cutting down rain forest, so they can graze animals, and things like this. It is important'.  
(Male, Type 3)

Such ecological concerns, while they have clear moral connections, do also contain an element of long term self-interest. On the other hand, health related motives are clearly directed by more

immediate self-interest. This is made perfectly clear by the following interviewee:

'You see, I'm not sort of vegetarian in terms of, not to exploit the poor children, or the poor animal. I look at it in terms of how harmful, and how good, is it for our bodies'. (Male, Type 2)

Interestingly, those respondents who placed considerable emphasis on health issues tended to assert the harmful nature of meat rather than extol the virtues of vegetarian staples.

Primarily gustatory motives were expressed less frequently, although for individuals who simply did not enjoy eating meat, and preferred to avoid it largely on gustatory grounds, calling oneself a vegetarian could be a convenient way of communicating one's preferences to others without appearing to be awkward or eccentric:

'I've just told myself that I don't really like meat, so what's the point of eating it? . . . I remember thinking, if I go for a meal, and I tell them that I don't like pork chops, and I don't like roast beef, I could go through quite a lot of food I don't like, and it makes me sound ridiculous . . . If I say I'm vegetarian, it makes life a lot easier, so I think because I didn't want to sound really faddy, then I decided I would say I was vegetarian'. (Female, Type 2)

However, motivations are not static entities, and may undergo significant changes as each individual's unique vegetarian career unfolds over time. Issues once regarded as important may slip down the individual's personal agenda, and others once subsidiary, irrelevant or unknown may move upwards. One interviewee had originally moved into vegetarianism for health reasons, but by the time he was interviewed the environment and animal rights were his main priorities. However, another respondent had experienced a very different shift in his motivation, his initial concern with animal welfare giving way to a preoccupation with his own health. Thus, understanding and analysing motivations is clearly made more complex by the fact that they are, in many cases, subject to modification and development, with new concerns either replacing or overlaying old ones. Similarly, complexities are also introduced by the ways in which logically separable motivations may in practice be combined and interlocked. For the majority of

respondents the pattern was similar: a principal motive could be identified (as already indicated that was most often a moral one) and then subsidiary motives could be cited, motives which usually complemented or reinforced the dominant one. Thus a primarily health-motivated interviewee might refer approvingly to the ethical or environmental case for vegetarianism. Similarly, a morally motivated interviewee might cite what were seen as the health advantages of his/her diet. However, it is by no means always the case that the various motivations are seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing. In one instance, for example, a contradiction between the demands of healthy eating and moral eating was suggested:

'I mean, I still believe that probably a mainly vegetarian diet with fish and white meat is probably the healthier diet than a pure vegetarian diet . . . certainly, than lacto-vegetarian, when you tend to eat dairy food more than you should. So on health grounds I'd probably say fish and white meat . . . would be healthier. But on ethical grounds, I decided I wanted to be consistent. I could no more kill a fish than I could slaughter a cow or a pig, you know'. (Male, Type 3)

### *Nutritional beliefs*

As might reasonably be anticipated given the diversity of forms of vegetarianism and motivations present within the response group, attitudes towards food, and patterns of nutritional belief or knowledge, varied enormously between respondents. While some speakers expressed a high level of interest in food, deriving great enjoyment from eating, others regarded it simply as 'fuel' for the body and had little interest in gustatory pleasures. Concern about the safety or purity of food was also variable, ranging from high levels of reported anxiety concerning additives, bacteria etc., to a robust indifference to such issues, although the latter position does represent a minority view in this group. Similarly, while many individuals saw themselves as knowledgeable on nutritional topics, and clearly went to considerable lengths to seek out information, others admitted to knowing relatively little about the technicalities of nutrition. However, from this diversity, three clear and coherent themes did emerge, which for the purposes of presentation can be labelled conveniently as the *anti-meat theme*, the *pro-meat theme*, and the *pro-vegetarian theme*.

The anti-meat theme may involve a view of meat as nutritionally over-rated, unhygienic and potentially hazardous. Not surprisingly, it leads some respondents to assert that it is simply not an appropriate food for humans. Indeed, this argument may be presented in terms of an assertion that humans are not physically adapted to meat consumption:

'... I heard something about the fact that the human body isn't physically built to eat meat, with the length of the intestines and that. But, you know on meat eaters the... intestinal tract is that much shorter... it passes straight the way through... And I don't think we were ever really meant to eat meat in the first place... ' (Male, Type 5)

Interestingly, shortly after offering this view of the process of meat digestion, the same interviewee voiced the idea, put forward by several other respondents, that the consumption of meat was likely to arouse 'animal instincts' in humans:

'I think there's definitely a link, it does arouse the animal instinct in people... I don't know, perhaps it just triggers something off... it's difficult to say. I definitely would say that people who ate meat were more aggressive'.

An important component in the anti-meat theme is the strong sense of revulsion towards meat reported by many respondents, a revulsion which appears to confirm the arguments put forward by Twigg (1983: 22) concerning the latent disgust associated with certain animal products (see also Murcott 1986: 114-17 and Gofton 1986: 130-1). For some, this revulsion appeared to have its origins in childhood, with clearly recalled distaste for meat and meat products. In other instances, respondents reported that even though they now found meat repulsive and quite unacceptable in gustatory terms, that had not always been the case. However, it was sometimes difficult for respondents to decide whether their distaste for meat was physiological or psychological in origin, but eating meat was reported by a number of respondents as producing distinct sensations of discomfort. This distaste also appeared to be associated with a dislike of the actual appearance and tactile properties of meat. For some interviewees, the appearance of red meat like beef was particularly distressing, whereas, for others, products which were still recognizable as the

processed form of entire animals (like whole chickens or fish, particularly where the latter retained heads, eyes and fins) were seen as especially repellent. The potency of the anti-meat theme as it emerges in the transcript data is demonstrated very clearly in respondents' description of the connotations that the word meat itself carries for them. The imagery is often powerful and disturbing:

'Meat to me means just slaughter and blood and all the rest of it. I mean, it's all dressed up to look so beautiful with all roast potatoes around it, but people don't see it, or don't want to see what it really is . . . it is a misery'. (Male, Type 6)

In addition, respondents were also prepared to point to the identity between 'meat' and 'bodies':

'I call it dead flesh! I mean, when I'm having little jokes with people . . . I tend to call it dead flesh. – I just think it's, it's like carcasses, and I hate the smell of dried blood and I really, I just hate the thought of cleavers like being smashed into bodies'. (Female, Type 2)

In such expressions of the negative connotations of meat there is contained a profoundly disconcerting comparison between the body of the food animal and the body of its consumer, a comparison which can clearly produce a potent 'de-appetizing' effect!

Running counter to these ideas concerning the general undesirability of meat is a less emphatic, more rarely expressed 'pro-meat' theme. Perhaps one of the most striking findings to emerge from this section of the study was that the smell and taste of bacon was very frequently recalled with wistful nostalgia. No other meat product was mentioned so consistently or so often. Surprisingly, this 'bacon nostalgia' was mentioned by individuals who were decidedly 'anti-meat', as well as by those who adopted a less clear-cut stance. Some individuals were even prepared to accept the idea that meat was of considerable nutritional value, and that removing it from the diet raised the danger of deficiencies for vegetarians who lack the required nutritional knowledge to avoid such problems. This view, however, was an unusual one, the argument being put forward by others that the idea of meat as an indispensable source of crucial nutrients was outmoded. However, more specifically, meat was acknowledged as the primary source of

vitamin B12, although many respondents professed to be unconcerned about the possibility of B12 deficiency in their diet. Others were less confident about such possibilities and did take steps to consume what they saw as the necessary supplements.

A small proportion of those interviewed retained an ambivalent view of meat, in some senses repulsed by it, yet at the same time experiencing cravings for it:

'... You kind of walk past a MacDonald's or a Wimpy and you think, you know, I could really fancy a hamburger. And you perhaps go in with your friends, and they're eating, and you think, you know, I could really fancy one of them. But you don't ... I don't think I could – sometimes I really think, yes, I really could eat a bacon sandwich, or something like that'. (Female, Type 3)

The third motif identified, the 'pro-vegetarian' theme, is one which extols the virtues of a vegetarian diet for its own sake, rather than arguing for vegetarianism on the basis of a rejection of meat. An important strand in this theme is this notion of variety. Vegetarian diets are seen as more varied and therefore more appealing than meat based dishes:

'One of the most difficult things is to make people realise what I eat is probably – holds a much greater variety than they do. I mean, they think you must have a really limited diet, whereas I eat a much wider variety of food than I could ever have done if I hadn't [been] vegan'. (Female, Type 6)

Superficially, it appears paradoxical to argue, as the above respondent seems to be doing, that actually excluding a whole class of items from one's diet leads to an increase in variety. This paradox is resolved, however, once it is recognized that many vegetarians are highly critical of what they see as the regimented conformity of traditional meat-based meals. A meat-based diet is seen as one which is restricted by tradition to a relatively small number of well established formulae. The process of becoming vegetarian requires the individual to look beyond these conventions. This very act is seen as leading to innovation, creativity and variety, which are contrasted with the conformity of conventional patterns of eating. This innovatory stance may lead vegetarians routinely to violate the principles of what the respondents interviewed

by Charles and Kerr (1988) describe approvingly as the 'proper meal'.

Another important element in the pro-vegetarian theme is the argument that vegetarian foods are nutritionally preferable to meat. In addition, it is argued that vegetable foods are also superior in a gustatory sense, and while providing a sense of fullness and satisfaction, do not weigh heavily on the digestive system. Taste and texture, too, are seen as superior to meat based dishes. Just as meat tended to imply strongly negative connotations for respondents, concepts like 'fruit' and 'vegetable' tended to elicit positive reactions, although rather less frequently and in a more muted form than might have been anticipated on the basis of the analysis of the ideological underpinnings of 'wholefoods' consumption put forward by Atkinson (1980, 1983), or on the basis of the analysis of vegetarian food symbolism advanced by Twigg (1983: 28).

### *Social relations*

Eating patterns are such a fundamentally important part of everyday life, in symbolic and expressive as well as nutritional terms, that changing them may have significant effects on social relationships. This applies most obviously to the relationships within the elementary family, for example between parents and children. Relations with wider kin and in-laws may also be affected, as indeed may relations with friends and colleagues. The changes in dietary choice and nutritional beliefs associated with a move to vegetarianism may elicit sympathy and support on the one hand, or on the other criticism, bewilderment or even outright hostility. Nowhere was this contrast between acceptance and hostility more marked than in the evidence which emerged concerning parents' reactions to an individual's adoption of vegetarian beliefs and practices. For some parents, their offspring's conversion to vegetarianism was simply something that was to be accepted, although not necessarily actively supported and encouraged. In other instances, parents did not simply accept the decision, but went some way in supporting it and accommodating to it:

'My mum never cooks meat, and she never does anything that's got animal fat in. And she always goes out of her way to prepare a vegetarian meal . . . If it's a Sunday, we have Sunday lunch but

she'll do a nut roast as well and make separate gravy and separate roast potatoes. So she's really good like that'. (Female, Type 3)

One interviewee's parents were equally accommodating in preparing special dishes when their son visited them, but in this instance their attitude was also one of concern about his nutritional wellbeing:

'They got a bit concerned . . . I have a good relationship with my family, you see. My mother and father are very understanding and supportive of everything I do, everything. But . . . there was a time when I lost a lot of weight, and they thought, you know, I'm quite concerned, are you sure you're eating enough?' (Male, Type 5)

Where parents were divided in their reaction to their son's or daughter's move to vegetarianism, it was usually the mother who was the more sympathetic. The following description is typical:

'And my parents reacted quite well, especially my mother. She particularly went out of her way to cook nice things for us. I think my father was a bit surprised, to say the least, especially being a farmer anyway. I think he's sort of resigned to the fact a little, but he can't really understand it'. (Male, Type 3)

While many respondents had received support from their parents, or at least acceptance of their stance, a minority had experienced more negative reactions, ranging from mild criticisms to serious displays of resentment or opposition. The more minor tensions, generated by parents' belief that their offspring are acting rather oddly, could be dismissed by respondents quite readily. However, because vegetarianism may involve a rejection of the food provided by parents, it may on occasions be interpreted as a rejection of the parents themselves. This feeling of rejection may lead a parent to express overt resentment, or, indeed, to put intense emotional pressure on the wayward offspring to conform to parental foodways, and hence symbolically, to reaffirm his or her allegiance:

'My father is . . . a very good cook, and he feels that, you know, it's just his way of showing affection is to give people food. He just can't conceive of the possibility of not eating meat. He gets

quite upset about it . . . well, I think he feels . . . I am rejecting him in some way because I am rejecting his rump steak. And actually once a couple of years ago he was going . . . into hospital for a very serious operation, and he thought he was going to die. And he went out and bought these steaks, and I said, look, I don't really want to eat it. And he got really upset and said, look, do this for me, you are never going to see me again. You've got to eat this steak. So I ate it and had indigestion for about two weeks'. (Female, Type 2)

In the case of married individuals, the response of parents-in-law may also be significant in terms of relationships within the family. In some cases these responses proved to be sympathetic. More common, however, were reports of tension and opposition. Such strains seemed to occur particularly in situations where in-laws were visited and provided meals, and in at least one instance this tension became so intense that it led to the avoidance of the reciprocal provision of meals altogether. Perhaps the settings in which intra-familial tensions became most pronounced were the kinds of gatherings where family identity and solidarity are, ideally, celebrated and re-asserted. Discordant notes in such a situation seemed to be particularly unwelcome. One respondent described in detail the tension generated when she refused ham offered to her by her mother at a party to celebrate her grandmother's 90th birthday. Another reported how, at her parents' silver wedding anniversary celebration, she was provided with food in a plastic box separate from that of the other guests. However, it appears to be at Christmas that these tensions are at their most acute, given that this festival is of particular importance to the maintenance of family identity, and is linked to comparatively stable and well established conventions governing the food to be consumed. These tensions can arise when vegetarians visit their own or their spouse's family for Christmas or, indeed, when relatives visit a vegetarian household:

'We're very close, in proximity, to Fred's [respondent's husband] mother. And we have the usual annual row at the moment, about Christmas, in that she is expecting to be invited for Christmas . . . and I don't really want the chicken row, as I call it . . . she came last Christmas, and she actually arrived with her own chicken . . . ready cooked, and sat there at the table saying how lovely and fresh it was, and how wonderful it was,

and a lovely, lovely dinner . . . she's done that to me every year . . . so now we're at the stage where Fred is going to have Christmas with his mum, and I'm going to have Christmas with my brother'. (Female, Type 2)

Despite the fact that tensions within the family appear to be relatively common, little evidence was found to suggest that the adoption of vegetarianism creates strains between spouses. Three interviews were carried out with married couples where both partners were vegetarian or vegan. As might be expected, a high level of agreement between such spouses was evident. Indeed, couples often appeared to unite in the face of opposition from parents, in-laws or siblings. Even in cases where the respondent's spouse was not vegetarian, the usual reaction was one of acceptance and support. However, one female vegan respondent did assert that many women are deterred from attempting to move towards vegetarianism because of their husband's unwillingness to co-operate and the consequent need to cook separately. There is a possibility, therefore, that the apparent lack of conjugal conflict over vegetarianism is due in part to the fact that, for wives in particular, a spouse's disapproval may effectively deter any attempt to make such a change in dietary practice. This would seem particularly likely if we bear in mind the argument put forward by Charles and Kerr (1988) that it is the husband's tastes which shape the food consumption patterns, at least in elementary family households.

Outside the individual's network of relatives and in-laws, problems may also be encountered with the reactions of friends, for example, when visiting and being offered food. Tensions may be at their worst, however, when unrelated individuals are sharing accommodation, and hence pushed into sustained proximity to each other. One vegan respondent, an undergraduate, described the strain of constant questioning from her room-mates in a hall of residence:

'I had some trouble with room-mates in the first year . . . the first couple of days you have to keep reminding people not to put milk in the tea and things like that, and they just settle down – but with these people it was just an absolute crescendo. And after about a term with them, there was hardly a day that could go by and they'd say, why don't you [drink] milk, and why don't you eat meat? And I'd just keep explaining and explaining – but

it was just hopeless really. I moved out in the end . . .'.  
(Female, Type 6)

Where friends adopt a more tolerant or supportive view, it may even be the case that they are encouraged to experiment with vegetarian food themselves. Furthermore, respondents also provided evidence of a tendency for networks of vegetarian friendships to develop, so that tension is avoided by interacting mainly with the like-minded, particularly in the case of invitations to share meals.

Interviewees experienced considerable variation in reactions from their colleagues at work. On occasions a vegetarian might become the focus of considerable hostility, and such hostility might even extend to attempting to put pressure on the individual concerned to capitulate and eat meat:

'They always seem to try and make you eat [meat] . . . It's like if they've won something. If they could get you to eat a ham sandwich, it would be like they'd won a victory . . . and it puts me on the defensive, so, of course, I dig my heels in'. (Female, Type 2)

In contrast, one respondent reported that he felt his colleagues admired him for giving up meat. Similarly, a computer training instructor reported that in her work group no less than half her colleagues were prepared to eat vegetarian food themselves, and thus her own vegetarian diet was never called into question. Indeed, when asked to assess whether or not their dietary practices were coming to be seen as more acceptable and unremarkable by non-vegetarians, respondents in the main supported this idea.

Of course, the move into vegetarianism requires the individual not only to cope with and respond to the reactions of others, but also to consider the way in which these newly adopted dietary practices will be presented to relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. As might be expected, there was a considerable degree of variability as to the stance adopted, ranged along a continuum with self-effacing reticence at one end, and an assertively evangelical attitude at the other. Several respondents considered that one's position is essentially a question of personal choice which had to be accepted without argument. Such views may lead some individuals quite deliberately to avoid discussing the topic of vegetarianism, although in at least one case, such avoidance was related to the wish to avoid being seen as odd or eccentric.

There were respondents who, if non-vegetarians enquired about their views and eating habits, were prepared to make these known, while not being prepared to go further and seek actively to convert. However, from being prepared to discuss vegetarianism, it is but a short step to encouraging others to take it up. Such encouragement may be deliberately oblique or expressed in terms of practical advice on nutrition and the preparation of vegetarian food, or may involve the device of inviting friends for a vegetarian meal. Attempts at conversion by such indirect means may be effective, as in the case of a female interviewee who had changed the eating patterns of her husband and her mother by her example. It was by no means the case, however, that all interviewees interested in converting others restricted themselves to subtle or indirect means. Some were ready to tackle the issue directly and to use shock tactics on friends and, indeed, on the public at large. For example, a vegan couple used the supermarket meat display as a setting in which to put over their message:

'... every time we walk down Death Aisle at Sainsbury's – we refer to it as Death Aisle – ... we sort of make loud comments about all the dead animals, and all the corpses ... they're laying in the freezers. And it does make people look, and listen ... occasionally you see ... it dawns on someone's face, that they're not looking at a joint of beef, they're looking at a part of a dead animal that's been hacked off ... from the point of view of going round the supermarket, with corpses everywhere ... it's an opportunity – to protest, I suppose – an opportunity to educate'. (Male, Type 6)

Sustained attempts to convert others, however, may involve some costs to the would-be evangelist, not least of which is the tedium of constantly repeated explanations of pro-vegetarian arguments. Indeed, faced with frequent reactions of indifference to his expositions' one vegan had moved away from an actively evangelical stance, since, as he put it:

'I think it's a bit like banging your head against a brick wall'.  
(Male, Type 6)

### *Dilemmas*

For the majority of those who took part in the study the moral dimension of vegetarianism was its most important aspect. Indeed some morally motivated respondents had gone as far as direct involvement in animal rights activism, although the majority of respondents were clearly opposed to such methods. Although moving along the vegetarian scale can be seen as one way to make a contribution to the reduction of animal suffering, some crucial moral dilemmas do persist. One obvious problem for the morally sensitive consumer of dairy products is that the dairy industry itself involves animal slaughter, of elderly and unproductive cows, and of surplus males. Similarly, egg production entails the slaughter of unproductive hens, and unwanted males. Indeed, the use of a broad range of products which are derived from animals poses problems for the morally aware, a range which goes beyond food items:

'The moral contradiction is, quite simply, in eating eggs, in wearing leather shoes, in using feathered shuttlecocks when I play badminton, I am exploiting animals. This very probably or possibly involves some cruelty, involves some unnecessary slaughter. I fool myself by saying that the leather is a by-product of the animals'. (Male, Type 3)

The question of the use of leather, mentioned above, troubled many, particularly in relation to shoes, where the general view appeared to be that synthetic materials did not usually prove to be satisfactory substitutes. From the interview data it is clear that vegetarians are often challenged by others on their use of leather, and accused of inconsistency. This may cause some vegetarians to develop misgivings about their moral stance, and to play down that aspect of their views. However, in the face of such criticism from non-vegetarians, there are those who put up a much more robust defence. Faced with charges of logical inconsistency relating to his use of leather shoes, the following interviewee noted that the beliefs and practices of his critics would not necessarily stand up to the same kind of scrutiny:

'I'm not aware that any of these would think that their way of life was logical, but they seem to want my shoes to be logical! I

found this a bit peevish, in that I wasn't in any sense attempting to impose my views on them'. (Male, Type 3)

There appeared to be a sense among vegetarians who use eggs and/or dairy products, and indeed other animal products, that the exclusion of *all* animal derived items would be impractical. Even a vegan respondent, whose avoidance of animal products was extremely meticulous, pointed out that for purely practical reasons, perfect veganism and a totally harmless diet were impossibilities:

'... you cannot be perfectly vegan if you take into account all the ways that the human race uses animals. It's impossible to be perfectly harmless... But I try not to wear leather, and I don't wear fur or wool... and I try to steer clear of drugs, anything that could have been tested on animals... Well, the longer you live the more things you find out aren't vegan, like E numbers... a lot of them come from animal sources... and then there are lots of other products that are used in everyday life that come from slaughterhouses'. (Female, Type 6)

Such finely tuned awareness, however, was by no means the norm. Some interviewees did perceive the ethical problems involved in the use of those animal products consumed by vegetarians, but these misgivings were not necessarily thought through fully, or were rationalized in order to neutralize them:

'I don't mind drinking milk because although a cow is milked in a pretty bad way – well, I don't really know... how unpleasant it is. But the milk has to come away from the cow anyway, so I justify myself in having milk for that...'. (Female, Type 3)

The remarks of this respondent serve to illustrate the somewhat precarious moral position of vegetarians who continue to consume animal products, a position which some respondents admitted they deliberately avoided subjecting to too careful scrutiny.

### **Explaining contemporary vegetarianism**

The findings which have been presented above reveal the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the motivations which propel

individuals into vegetarianism, as well as the underlying features of the conversion experience itself, be it abrupt and dramatic, or gradual and premeditated. The variety of nutritional beliefs also emerges, as well as the impact that moving into vegetarianism has upon the individual's relationships within his or her various social networks.

Much of what emerges from the transcript data parallels the analyses of vegetarianism discussed in the section headed studies of vegetarianism. Such connections include the strong emphasis on moral motivations, linking directly with the ethical arguments of Singer (1976), Midgley (1983), Regan (1984) and Clark (1984). Connections with the work of Twigg (1979, 1983) are also apparent, in that there is clear evidence of an inversion of the 'conventional' food hierarchy with red meat at its pinnacle. The findings reported by Dwyer *et al.* (1974) also find an echo in the transcript material, in that they illustrate the range of variation in patterns of exclusion from 'circumscribed' to 'far reaching'. In addition, there are graphic examples of what Adams (1990) describes as the willingness of vegetarians to violate the linguistic conventions which mask the origins and nature of meat by maintaining the position of the donor animal as absent referent.

Given its complex nature, it is possible to identify many strands within contemporary vegetarianism. From a philosophical standpoint it would appear to represent a progressive extension of moral concern to embrace animals conceived of as moral patients. Additionally, vegetarianism can be conceptualized as a challenge to the dominant 'food ideology' (Charles and Kerr, 1988: 4) of western culture. Vegetarianism may also represent an expression of ecological and environmental concern, and an attempt to translate concern into action in terms of modified food choices. It may involve a quest for improved health and physical wellbeing, or represent a spiritual or political stance, or indeed a feminist statement against patriarchal dominance if the analysis offered by Adams is accepted.

Significant as each of these stands might be in a global sense, however, there is one unifying theme which commands particular attention in attempting to explain the genesis of contemporary vegetarian beliefs and practices as represented in the transcript material generated by this study. That theme is the deep seated ambivalence which is located within the very act of eating. In Figure 2 the ambivalence of food is laid out in terms of three sets

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
1. Food is required for vigour energy, and health.	Food can introduce illness and disease.
2. Food provides gustatory pleasure, satiety, etc.	Food can produce gustatory displeasure, dyspepsia, nausea, vomiting.
3. Food is required for continuation of life	Food entails the death of the organisms consumed

Figure 2: *Food ambivalence*

of oppositions. Each of these oppositions represents a paradox which is potentially a source of tension and anxiety. Such paradoxes are clearly related to the examples of classificatory ambiguity discussed in the work of authors like Douglas (1966) and Leach (1976). Yet the anxiety these paradoxes generate is not simply the outcome of the disquiet produced by a taxonomically awkward object. It is an anxiety rooted in deep-seated existential ambiguities which in the mundane proceedings of everyday life can normally be avoided or left unexamined.

In certain circumstances vegetarianism may represent one response to a situation in which such anxiety moves into the foreground of attention, providing an acceptable device for managing or assuaging its effects. Thus opposition 1 can be seen as the basis of health motivations among vegetarians. Opposition 2 may produce concerns about the palatability or digestibility of food, and is related to gustatory motives which arise from attempts to avoid food items which produce alimentary distress. Opposition 3 may give rise to guilt concerning the demise of food animals, a guilt which can be seen as the foundation of moral motives. Such guilt emerges from the sense that it is immoral to impose on an animal what is the ultimate catastrophe for oneself – death.

The third opposition, arguably, gives rise to potentially the most severe form of nutritional anxiety. However, as is the case for the other two oppositions, culture can provide protective mechanisms. Once meat is recognized as flesh like the human consumer's own flesh, then the sight of fragments of a dismembered animal, or an oven-ready 'whole' animal, represents an all too evocative vision

of that consumer's own animal origins, and ultimate physical dissolution. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) have pointed out, perhaps the single most important service provided by the symbolic universes which they see as the most potent of cultural formations is located in their 'terror-assuaging character' (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 119). Symbolic universes provide the framework within which the reality of everyday life can be legitimated as the paramount reality, and terror in the face of death kept at bay. The institutional order provides a day-to-day shield from the potentially paralysing recognition of mortality, and authors like Adams (1990) and Twigg (1983) have gone some way in describing the cultural and linguistic mechanisms involved.

In hunting-gathering societies myth and ritual may be used to protect the individual from guilt and anxiety related to the use of animals for food (Serpell, 1986). In settled agricultural societies domestic animals are conceptualized as entities provided for the use of humans by supernatural licence, thus circumventing guilt related to slaughter. The Judeo-Christian tradition provides a prime example of this approach (Midgley, 1983). Alternatively, in such societies animal slaughter is concealed and given over to pariah groups (Harris, 1985). However, in modern societies secularization has largely eroded the religious shielding surrounding slaughter. Currently, the killing and processing of food animals are events which are removed from public contemplation by the physical shielding provided by the walls of the specialized abattoir or processing plant. Indeed, Elias (1978: 120, 1982: 299) has argued that this increasing level of concealment is itself associated with the 'advance in the threshold of repugnance brought about by the civilizing process', an advance which Fieldhouse (1986: 142) suggests may entail the rejection of meat as a foodstuff as its next logical step. Thus, while consumers normally only encounter food animals as sanitized, packaged commodities ready for cooking and consumption, or as occasionally glimpsed denizens of pasture, sty or coop, some individuals may find that the institutional or physical shields which protect them from confronting the origins of meat are all too easy to circumvent, or are torn down by some unwelcome glimpse of one of the 'back regions' (Goffman, 1969) of animal husbandry. In addition, current science-derived views of food-related disease risks may raise doubts concerning the health implications of meat consumption (Beardsworth, 1990). Moving to the right along the vegetarian scale can thus be seen as an attempt to re-establish a state of gustatory equilibrium, or to achieve a

sense of confidence about one's present and future health, or to regain a sense of one's moral worthiness and hence 'peace of mind' (a phrase used repeatedly by respondents describing the personal benefits of vegetarianism). For some respondents the achievement of one or more of these outcomes can be realized through meat avoidance alone. For a minority, however, the moral issues raised by the use of eggs and dairy products, or of by-products of animal slaughter, entail a move further along the scale towards veganism. For a few, even veganism cannot provide complete peace of mind, and totally blameless food consumption comes to be seen as literally unattainable.

However, if vegetarianism is to be seen as one response to food related anxieties, there remains the challenge of describing the cultural and economic conditions in which such an option can become widely available and acceptable. Such an analysis does demand a modicum of conceptual and terminological innovation. Lévi-Strauss, for example, uses the term *gusteme* to refer to the basic elements of a food system, employing an analogy with the phonemes of language (Lévi-Strauss, 1968: 86). However, the term *aliment* can be employed to refer to any basic item recognized as edible in a given culture. This more general term is useful in that it does not carry the structuralist implications of the food system/grammar/language analogy which Douglas points out is of limited heuristic utility (Douglas, 1984: 28). Thus the *alimentary totality* of a given society consists of the sum total of aliments available at a specified time. Additionally, the term *menu* can be employed to refer to those sets of principles which guide the selection of aliments from the totality. This usage of the term menu differs from that of Douglas (1984: 28-9) who uses it more narrowly in connection with the standardized patterns of dishes she terms 'meal formats'.

Sets of menu principles can clearly take many forms. For example, *traditional menus* might be identified, drawing their prescriptions from customary practice. In addition, *moral menus* can be seen as deriving their selection criteria from ethical precepts, whereas *rational menus* are derived from explicit measurement or calculation and may be related to scientific (or quasi-scientific) bodies of knowledge and practice which seek to achieve specific outcomes like weight loss and the treatment or avoidance of disease (see Turner, 1982, on the medical rationalization of diet). This multi-faceted concept of menu, in effect, offers a complementary perspective to the analysis of 'taste' developed by

Bourdieu (1984), and to the analysis by Douglas and Isherwood (1980) of the ways in which primary production sector or 'staple' goods like food can be used to mark social differences.

Within menus, we would expect to observe systematic *menu differentiation*, in that categories defined in terms of age, gender, caste or class would be required or constrained to make characteristically different selections from the range of aliments available. In societies in which social change is relatively slow, menus, cuisines and patterns of differentiation represent largely taken for granted aspects of everyday life, their assumptions accepted as natural and unremarkable. Indeed, in such circumstances, the heavy sedimentations of traditional belief and practice that make the individual's own food options appear normal and unproblematic, are likely to make those of other cultural groups appear at best exotic and at worst emetic.

However, in more rapidly changing societies it becomes increasingly unlikely that menu differentiation will occur only within one 'master' menu, largely co-terminous with the culture's alimentary totality. Rather, the exercise of choice between menus becomes a possibility, in that individuals may be in a position to reflect and actively to choose between principles of selection. In this sense, such societies are characterized by *menu pluralism*, with many menus (some of which may fall into the menu categories discussed above) competing for attention and acceptance. Menu pluralism provides the conditions for the possibility of switching between alternative menus, although such opportunities will inevitably be constrained by cultural, situational and economic factors. This pluralistic setting is itself the product of an extensive range of inter-related factors. These include the de-localisation of food supply as a result of innovations in storage and transportation, the industrialisation and intensification of agricultural production, rising volumes of international trade, and the introduction of novel foodways through immigrant influxes. Such factors have combined to produce a massive expansion in the alimentary totalities of complex societies (and, incidentally, have thus given rise to the variety of choice so highly valued by the study's respondents). Additional powerful influences include the globalisation of taste and gustatory experience induced by widespread international travel and tourism, the avalanche of food-related information generated by the mass media, the efforts of food producers, processors and retailers to generate demand for new food products, and, not least, steadily rising real incomes.

Of course, it is unlikely that the diet of any one individual will be assembled from only one menu. Given the fluidity inherent in menu pluralism, it is feasible for idiosyncratic combinations of menu principles to be assembled. In such circumstances, the resort to vegetarianism as a response to moral, health or gustatory concerns becomes an increasingly feasible option. Minority foodways are likely to proliferate and be received with steadily increasing tolerance (the great majority of the study's respondents reporting significant increases in the level of public acceptance of their dietary practices over the course of their adherence to vegetarianism). In this sense, the patterns of contemporary vegetarianism documented in this study can be seen as examples of shifts away from traditional menu principles towards menus in which moral or rational criteria play a much more explicit part.

## **Conclusions**

It may well be correct, as Harris (1985) argues, that voluntary veganism among humans will always be the practice of a very small minority. However, less strict forms of voluntary vegetarianism, which permit the continued use of a limited range of animal products, have become a measurable mass phenomenon in Britain. What data we have suggest that a million or more adults are involved, and that this number may well increase in the near future.

Harris also argues that we must be wary of over-emphasizing the symbolic and semiotic significance of particular foodways at the expense of a clear understanding of the balance of practical costs and benefits involved. This leads him to be critical of Lévi-Strauss's dictum that food must, above all, be 'good to think'. Before food can be good to think, Harris maintains, it must first be, literally, good to eat, in nutritional and economic terms. It would appear that the qualitative evidence presented in this paper would encourage the view, in relation to vegetarians at least, that food must above all be good to think, on the basis of a number of quite specific criteria. If it is not, it will be rejected as unsuitable. Yet Harris's concerns with the practicalities of what is good to eat is also clearly of relevance. The conditions in which contemporary voluntary vegetarianism can flourish are located not only in a cultural climate of nutritional pluralism. They also rest on the economic foundations of an affluent, consumer-orientated economy

which can draw upon a vast array of food items, freed by the channels of international trade from the narrow limits of locality, climate and season.

If the practices of vegetarianism and veganism are indeed formed in part by the need for food to be good to think, there are factors here which go beyond the semiotic concerns of, for example, Lévi-Strauss and Douglas. Such perspectives see food related beliefs and practices as encoding and enshrining wider patterns of social relations, and yet food can be good (or bad) to think in another, equally significant fashion. Eating is a process charged with tantalizing ambivalence: it provides life, but at the expense of the death of other living organisms; it provides vigour, but may lead to disease; it provides pleasure, but may lead to disgust or nausea. As has been argued above, each of these three paradoxes gives rise to its own characteristic form of nutritional anxiety.

For the study's respondents, the adoption of vegetarianism, in whatever form is appropriate to each individual's unique concerns and predicament, would seem to be at root an exercise in the management of anxiety. To present such an argument is not to suggest that this is the *sole* import of the contemporary vegetarian option. However, for a significant segment of the population it appears to represent a viable device for re-establishing some degree of peace of mind when contemplating some of the darker implications of the carefully arranged message on the dinner plate.

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