

Veganism and Living Well

Christopher Ciocchetti

Accepted: 11 December 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

Abstract I argue that many philosophical arguments for veganism underestimate what is at stake for humans who give up eating animal products. By saying all that's at stake for humans is taste and characterizing taste in simplistic terms, they underestimate the reasonable resistance that arguments for veganism will meet. Taste, they believe, is trivial. Omnivores, particular those that I label "meaningful omnivores," disagree. They believe that eating meat provides a more meaningful meal, though just how this works proves elusive. Meaningful omnivores could find little in the philosophical literature to help them clarify and support their position until recently. A few philosophers have argued that our culinary practices involve something more significant than taste. I categorize these arguments into three kinds. They either argue that culinary practices are a form of artistic achievement, that our diet forms part of our identity, or that a specific diet facilitates honest engagement with the world. Each of these arguments connects some aspect of our culinary practices to living a meaningful life. I examine each argument to see if it can defend the meaningful omnivore's position. In the end, I conclude that it cannot. Nonetheless, this argument has significant implications for the animal welfare movement. Given the intense suffering caused by contemporary animal agriculture, concern for meaning is not sufficient to justify eating meat and often dairy. Concern for meaning does, however, require that we look for ways to preserve and extend culinary traditions while making them more humane.

Keywords (4–6) Veganism · Vegetarianism · Fine arts · Aesthetics · Identity · Nature

C. Ciocchetti (✉)
Philosophy Department, Centenary College of Louisiana, 2911 Centenary Blvd.,
Shreveport, LA 71104, USA
e-mail: cciocchetti@centenary.edu

I can vouch for “essential.” I can vouch for “omnivore.” My brain and body crave meat with my salad. In fact, I think I might die without it. For sure, I’d go crazy. But, personally, I don’t know about “evil.” I’ll own it: There’s a part of me that *likes* to kill. When I do what I do with a hatchet and a chicken, I feel like crap, and I feel like God. I feel alive and in love and closer than ever to death. So I guess that is, for me, mixed feelings, yes. And the mix itself is welcome and intensely gratifying. In fact, it’s almost too much. Too swirly, too soupy. I can tell you that the part of this swirl which seems “good,” as opposed to “evil,” has absolutely nothing to do with foiling the chicken industry or saving the environment or taking personal responsibility for my role in the food chain. It has to do with getting a little bloody and gross, like the complicated, hungry animal that I am.

From L.E. Leone (2008) in Slate, “There Will Be Chicken Blood.” Author of “Cheap Eats” for the San Francisco Bay Guardian.

Leone makes this argument at the end of a short piece lamenting how Michael Pollan inspired urban farmers struggle with killing their chickens. They want to eat responsibly, see a whole host of problems with modern, industrial agriculture, and so they get some chickens. Leone’s article points out that urban farmers are unprepared for how “bloody and gross” farming is. Though they know all about the evils of industrial farming, there’s something these urban farmers don’t understand, and whatever this is explains both why Leone would go crazy without meat and why we are essentially omnivores. At least, according to Leone.

My intention here is to examine this argument carefully. I must admit that I was initially dismissive. Taken literally, Leone’s claims are implausible to say the least. Would she literally go crazy without meat? That doesn’t seem sane or healthy to begin with. Her fascination with killing chickens could make her seem psychopathic rather than a functional model of human excellence. The process she describes seems far from essential. To me, her gratification seems perverse. Nonetheless, I think there’s something to the claims she’s making. In this paper, I’ll examine the conflict between two different approaches to our diets. These two positions focus our attention on a particular aspect of the debate between vegans and omnivores. They’re not exhaustive. Any “all things considered” decision will have to take more into account than I’ll address here.

The first position I’ll call the “moral vegan.” It’s a familiar view. It includes both a diet and a justification for that diet. Moral vegans don’t eat animal products of any sort because of the morally objectionable practices of current animal agriculture and they argue that we should move towards a food production system that doesn’t depend on animal agriculture. Without taking a stand on the past or the appropriate diet for people who don’t have ready access to adequate vegan food, moral vegans aim to transform current eating habits for moral reasons. These reasons are often mixed, including concern for the environment, workers’ welfare, and the animals involved. Concern for one’s health or a dislike of meat is not sufficient to be a moral vegan.

The second approach is that of the “meaningful omnivore.” This is also a diet with a justification. The meaningful omnivore eats meat and animal products along

with the foods available to a moral vegan. Meaningful omnivores don't usually claim that animals aren't morally important. In fact, they focus on our relationship with the animals we typically consume for food. They argue that the right kind of relationship with animals is necessary for, or at least contributes to, a meaningful life. This relationship involves caring for the animals, seeing they are well-treated during their lives, *and* killing and eating them. In practice, authors often give moral arguments as they make the case for becoming a meaningful omnivore and they should. After all, it's possible that raising, killing, and eating animals is morally prohibited even though it is a fundamental part of a meaningful life for many people. Nonetheless, we can assess their arguments more easily if we distinguish the lines of argument that focus on what makes life worth living and how to live well from those focused on our obligations to others or even to ourselves. Typically, meaningful omnivores see "family farms" as the best place for meaningful human-animal relationships.¹ Family farms aren't just owned by an individual family. Families can own large, industrial farms. The idea is that a small group of people who know each other well work all aspects of the farm without being directly accountable to anyone else. Michael Pollan made Joe Saltin's Polyface Farm famous as an example of the kind of farm that meaningful omnivores have in mind ("Animals Place"; *Omnivore's Dilemma* Part III). Meaningful omnivores represent these farms as a better, more meaningful form of life, where people weave work, family, shared values, and food production, and consumption into a meaningful, coherent whole. Meaningful omnivores can acknowledge the costs of eating meat—environmental damage, disease, pain, and suffering for the animals—but they argue that these costs are necessary for some greater good. The good isn't moral. It isn't that more animals are saved than would be under a vegan diet.² The good is a meaningful form of life.

While much has been written about the justifications for moral veganism, the reasoning behind the position of the meaningful omnivore remains obscure. In what follows, I'll make the best argument I can for the meaningful omnivore's position. I'll examine how eating thoughtfully can be part of living well by offering meaningful aesthetic experience, a connection with the world, and helping us live as certain kinds of people. What we eat shapes who we are, what we experience, and how we interact with others. I won't have time to defend many of the particulars about how lives gain meaning, the nature of identity, or aesthetic experience. In each case, I'll focus on what would best support the meaningful omnivore's position. I'll end by critically examining this argument to determine whether it supports the meaningful omnivore's position and its implications for moral veganism.

¹ DeGrazia (2009) draws a useful distinction between factory farms and family farms, which I'm using here (150–153).

² Davis (2003) argues that a diet including the flesh of large herbivores will cause fewer animal deaths than a vegan diet; however, Andy Lamey raises some serious objections to his argument. While meaningful omnivores often appeal to arguments like Davis's, I interpret them as offering reasons that eating meat is permissible, thereby removing a significant objection to the meaningful omnivore's position. Davis, however, argues that eating large herbivores is morally required regardless of whether we accept the meaningful omnivore's argument or not.

Aesthetics and Food

I'll take it to be uncontroversial that positive aesthetic experiences are part of a well-lived life (though little is really uncontroversial in this area). A person who cannot appreciate art is missing out. People who dedicate large parts of their lives to art don't seem to be wasting their lives. By art, we typically mean sculpture, music, and the kinds of things one finds offered for contemplation on the walls of museums, but not the kinds of things offered for consumption in the dining area. Claiming that food is an important source of aesthetic experience, parallel to the appreciation of music or painting, generates a lot more controversy. Historically, Western philosophers have looked down on people who were obsessed with food.³ They were menial sorts, ruled by their bodies and not their minds. The sense of taste was thought inferior to sight and hearing. It was thought too simple, too animal, to basic to be the source of especially valuable aesthetic experience. Of course, if that's true, then the aesthetic qualities of food won't offer much support for the meaningful omnivore's position. Typically, moral vegans have accepted this dismal view of food and aesthetics. Taste just isn't that important. By accepting this view, they make their argument easier. If it's not true, then vegans might be missing out on something important, and there's reason to think it's not true.

In *Making Sense of Taste*, Korsmeyer (2002) defends an aesthetic theory that might be more helpful to the meaningful omnivore. She argues that the fine arts and the culinary arts don't share the same history, the meaning of food is "inordinately" context dependent, and so food aesthetics isn't as well-articulated. The culinary arts are better understood as a minor, decorative, functional, or applied arts rather than a traditional fine art (143–44). If food and cooking were classified as a fine art, it might lend more support to the meaningful omnivore's case, but Korsmeyer, even though she's one of the most vigorous, philosophically informed defenders of the aesthetic value of food, rejects the idea. Nonetheless, Korsmeyer offers a strong argument for taking the aesthetic value of food seriously. To make her case, Korsmeyer relies on Nelson Goodman's symbolic aesthetic theory, one that emphasizes the role of cognitive content in generating aesthetic experience. Korsmeyer argues that, per Goodman's theory, food can represent, express, and exemplify (118–136). Representational food is actually quite common. Consider gummy bears. Surely, a large part of the attraction depends on what these represent. A meaningful omnivore such as Leone would surely note that meat dishes can represent as well. Consider something Leone can't live without: chicken. Fried chicken is a food with a long and varied history and so it might represent different things to different people. Nearly all cultures offer some variation of the dish. In the American South, it's particularly associated with African-Americans, sometimes in disparaging ways and sometimes as a source of pride.⁴ Either way, we cannot deny the strong representational quality of this food. During segregation, blacks struggled

³ Carolyn Korsmeyer offers an interesting account of this history (Chap. 1 and 2).

⁴ From a historical point of view, African-American cooks has offered many more significant contributions. In fact, the entry on "African American Foodways" in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* doesn't mention fried chicken at all.

to find restaurants where they were allowed to eat. Black day laborers could travel miles from home in search of work. Chickens required little maintenance so many of the poorest farmers could keep a flock. Fried chicken doesn't require refrigeration so the laborers could wrap a fried chicken in a newspaper and set off looking for work. Since this food was eaten publicly, its visibility to the white population may have spawned the association. While the association generated controversy when used to celebrate Black History Month (see Schiavocampo 2010), a creative chef might use the food as a positive representation of resourcefulness and resistance to oppression. Perhaps the chicken would be presented in a particular way, say, wrapped in newspaper for a picnic, to highlight this feature or be served on a special occasion. Given the power that this symbol has, the representation would have to be carefully framed, and would likely provoke debate in any case, but the representative power of this food can't be denied. Like with the fine arts, food can represent and do so in ways that heighten one's aesthetic experience.

As Korsmeyer points out, food can also exemplify. Though any dish provides multiple flavors, a particular flavor might be highlighted and used to exemplify that kind of flavor. An apple might exemplify tart flavor, especially when contrasted with the sweetness of raisins. Likewise, a meaningful omnivore might argue that meat can exemplify. Fried chicken could exemplify a certain crispy-fried flavor. Roasted chicken would, no doubt, emphasize a different set of flavors. Food isn't entirely about one's sense of taste. Color, texture, and temperature matter, so there are many different ways a particular food might exemplify specific aesthetic qualities.

Food can also express. Goodman describes this particular aesthetic mode as "metaphorical exemplification" since the object need not actually have the quality it expresses. Korsmeyer points out that the apple given to Snow White by the evil queen expresses a sinister intention, though the apple itself needn't be sinister (116). This dimension of aesthetic experience requires a "merger of discovery and emotional response" (117). Emotions have a cognitive dimension and this kind of exemplification plays on that cognitive dimension and encourages the viewer, listener, or taster to linger over experience. Food can obviously express in this way as well. As fried chicken can represent the struggle of black laborers in the American South, serving and eating fried chicken can express solidarity. Rather than the sinister of the evil queen's apple, fried chicken might express thrift and resilience in the face of injustice. Often, it will depend on the earlier symbolic functions to express effectively.

Taken together, eating offers an opportunity for valuable aesthetic experience. The symbolic aspects of food may not be as carefully articulated as they are for the traditional fine arts. Often people do just eat. I'd venture to guess that most fried chicken is eaten with little to no awareness of what the food might represent, express or exemplify. While these aspects might invite one to linger and contemplate, most people don't. Food is capable of providing us with a meaningful aesthetic experience, and learning to appreciate this aspect of food seems a plausible part of a well-lived life. The importance of aesthetic as food lends support to the meaningful omnivore's case.

Engagement with the World

One of the common stereotypes of vegans is that they are out of touch with the world.⁵ Meaningful omnivores usually don't attribute this feature to just vegans. They often believe that most people are out of touch with the realities of food production, but then moral vegans often believe this as well. The difference lies in what each group believes would happen if we became more aware of where our animals products came from. Moral vegans argue that more people would become vegans. Meaningful omnivores, on the other, think that we might treat our animals better but that we'd also, in Leone's words, become aware of the "complicated, hungry animal[s]" we are. We'd be more in touch with the biological realities that shape our lives. While eating sustains life, it also emphasizes death. Food is temporary. The experience is fleeting. Nearly all food comes from once living matter, and for many people, animals died to provide their meal. Some way of preparing food emphasize this fact. Keuhn (2004), in his essay "Dining on Fido," offers several examples of the interplay. To take one, jumping sushi is made from a living fish so quickly that the nerves still twitch (238). It would be difficult to eat this sushi without considering the thin line between life and death. Other preparations hide the relationships by processing the food. The contrast between chicken nuggets and fried chicken is clear. Food becomes a point for what Keuhn calls "engagement with the world" because, through food, we engage with material that's temporary and changing while at the same time necessary for our lives and recurring in regular, natural patterns. If the world is thought of as a transitory place with repeating patterns of change, if nature is thought of as an ecosystem where life feeds off death, then food can be an ideal means for engaging with the world and participating in this natural process.

The value of this kind of engagement is debatable. Philosophers have long condemned an obsession with food as beneath them precisely because it's so transitory and animalistic. It was just this association that led them to argue that taste was less appropriate for aesthetic experience than sight or hearing. In "In Vino Veritas," Kierkegaard (1988) describes the diners as living badly because what they yearn for passes way as soon as they've consumed it (28–29). Elizabeth Telfer makes a similar claim, arguing that, since food is destroyed when it's eaten, it's more transient than even a music performance, which can, in principle, be recorded (59). Leone and other meaningful omnivores couldn't disagree more. For the meaningful omnivore, eating jumping sushi or fried chicken offers a more meaningful experience than chicken nuggets precisely because one is aware that one is eating an animal. The close relationship between life and death is highlighted. Furthermore, this kind of eating is more honest. By obscuring the relationship between chicken nuggets and chickens, this kind of processed food hides reality. Similarly, meaningful omnivores criticize moral vegans as out-of-touch. They'll often point out that producing vegan food kills some animals, at minimum by a loss of habitat. In this way, they see both a vegan diet and a diet of processed food as

⁵ Michael Pollan dismissively describes moral veganism as "parochial," "urban," and he describes it's advocates as people who have "lost contact with the natural world" ("Animal's Place").

dishonest attempts to hide realities from ourselves. Regardless of how we eat, we live as animals in a complex, messy ecosystem. Meaningful omnivores engage this reality honestly and directly, finding meaning in the pain and the pleasure involved. Other diets conceal this fact and leave us divorced from the reality of our lives. Living well, then, requires engaging the world and living in a way that's in touch with reality, and our diets form a significant part of our engagement with the world.

Identity

Food historian Belasco (2008) argues that food choices can be understood by looking at three dimensions: responsibility, convenience, and identity. This shouldn't be surprising. While moral vegans focus on responsibility, identity still plays a large role. For many people, it can outweigh even convenience. Most people won't eat what they don't know and what doesn't fit the kind of person that they are. Though technically edible, they won't even see it as food. It's inappropriate and therefore off-limits. Of course, identity isn't only negative, telling us what not to eat. Identity creates expectations about what to eat, when to do it, how it should be served, and so on. Identity can help give our lives meaning as well. Our lives matter, to us and to those around us, because we have a particular identities. Events gain significance for individuals because of the identity of that individual. The extent to which societies limit or shape our identities is hotly debated, but, in each case, living well requires successful choice between significant options that carry their specific meanings due to the identities we have.

Two aspects of identity are important for our purposes here, both noted by Appiah (2005) in *The Ethics of Identity*, but they are common to many accounts of identity and, as I will argue, crucial for lending weight to the meaningful omnivore's argument. First, identity takes us beyond mere preferences (See Appiah Chap. 5). Because of our particular identities, certain desires are more significant. For someone who merely runs for exercise, losing the desire to run isn't important. Perhaps he can find another way to get exercise, perhaps the overall goal of better health will overcome his decreased interest in running and he will continue anyway. Either way, the desire is just a desire because it's not part of his identity. For a triathlete, losing interest in running matters more. Just like the ordinary runner, she might push through and run anyway, pursuing a larger goal that matters more, but losing the desire to run means something different in her case. She's lost interest in something fundamental to who she is. Her identity implies that she should run, and that she should enjoy running. As she feels her interest decrease, she'll face a deeper question about how she wants to live and who she is. Identities give preferences a kind of significance that they lack on their own and can thereby give them more weight than they would otherwise have. When asked why she continues to run, she might respond, "because I'm a triathlete." When asked for a reason for acting on one's desire, one can cite one's identity. It offers a stronger reason for acting on one's desires rather than mere preference alone.

In addition to adding significance to our preferences, our identities are not entirely up to us. In part, they depend on what Appiah calls "the social scriptorium"

(21–23). Each of us finds ourselves in a world where certain identities are available to us and others are not. To some degree, the social world offers us a “script,” really more like a broad outline, for how to live as a particular kind of person. We can modify it, of course, but we can’t just erase it and start over. We can’t just will significance. Significance comes from the interplay between the script and how we live it. Our choices, though, must work with the material we’re given. A person cannot take on the identity of a triathlete in a society without bicycles or that doesn’t value this kind of athletic activity. One needs a culture that supports triathlons, both materially and by having certain ideas about what triathletes do and the significance of this kind of activity. Any individual can bring her own style to the activity or integrate this identity with the others. She can’t, however, just invent a whole new “script” and have it make sense or lend significance to her life. We can modify any identity that we have to some degree, but the significance of our lives depends on the particular histories of significant lives that shape our identity and our social world. Combining these two points, we find that the significance of some of our preferences isn’t up to us. The significance goes beyond our mere desire, since it’s part of our identity, and, in some cases, we can’t change that significance at will. Identities provide a somewhat fixed point from which to evaluate the meaningfulness of our lives.

Taken together, I think these two claims clarify some of the more mysterious parts of the meaningful omnivores argument. When they describe eating meat as somehow highly significant, their actual descriptions can be opaque. They invoke evolutionary heritage (Pollan 2002 “Animal’s Place”; *Omnivore’s Dilemma* 314) or participating in an archaic diet (Cahoone 2009 pp. 82–84). Keuhn’s conception of engagement with the world describes something similar. Leone justifies killing chickens and even justifies taking pleasure in killing chickens because it makes her feel like the animal she is. It’s difficult to know what these mean. “Evolutionary heritage” seems too broad to be meaningful. Humans have many evolutionary ancestors so “evolutionary heritage” doesn’t seem to limit us much. Eating insects would seem to fit the bill as well, if not better, than the flesh that meaningful omnivores mean to defend. “Heritage” may imply that the food has been continuously eaten by our ancestors. One or two exceptions won’t violate this rule. So, we can rule out more possible food sources but a great many remain. Given what we know about the diets of our nearest living evolutionary relatives, insects still satisfy this requirement. Insects also form part of an archaic diet and eating insects would be consistent with the animals that we are. In fact, in some parts of the world, humans still eat insects regularly, but meaningful omnivores aren’t tempted. Is this just an inconsistency on their part? Are they cherry-picking our history and our animal nature or can we find a more principled way to draw this distinction?

If we interpret our diets and their meaning as part of our identities, and accept that the meaning of these dietary choices aren’t up to us, then we can interpret these claims in a more plausible way. Many identities involve eating meat, and not just macho identities, but ethnic identities and particularly the identities of people who are part of farming families. Many culinary traditions are off-limits for people who reject meat. This isn’t a natural fact given to us by our animal nature. Far too much is naturally edible. Instead, some foods express aspects of our identity within our

cultural context, or, as Appiah would put it, according to our social script. Raising, killing, and eating one's own chickens expresses a certain identity within this cultural context. We could interpret it in a number of ways. It expresses a certain animal nature, an evolutionary history, or an archaic diet. It could also express certain cultural connections or personal family history. Leone's preference for this kind of chicken is more than a mere desire. It forms part of who she is. Were she to give up killing and eating her own chicken, she'd lose something of more significance than a frustrated preference. For this reason, meaningful omnivores can be concerned about the humane treatment of animals, but still maintain that veganism requires a substantial loss for human beings.

These points could each be understood separately and weighed against the reasons we have for not eating meat. If aesthetic experience matters for living well, and food can be a valuable source of aesthetic experience, then moral vegans don't have access to a number of valuable aesthetic experiences. That is, it's harder for them to live well on this score. If being engaged with the world requires an honest, clear-eyed assessment of the transitoriness of the world and our interaction with it, then moral vegans have a harder time living well because their diet obscures the relationship between eating and death. Moral vegans have a harder time recognizing that animals are killed in the process of creating their food and, by refusing meat, they don't directly participate in the interaction between life and death. Finally, moral veganism can undermine the significance of certain kinds of lives. Many traditional diets incorporate meat and animal agriculture. Moral veganism would require an impossibly radical revision of the social scripts that make choices significant, and, even if it were possible, the first two points suggest that it would be undesirable to revise our identities to become moral vegans.

The points, however, beg to be understood together. Eating doesn't just provide an aesthetic experience. A dish represents, expresses, and exemplifies a particular significance for people with a particular identity. It's this aesthetic experience that vividly conveys the particular meaning of meat for meaningful omnivores. Given their identities and the social "scripts" that they have to work with, meaningful omnivores interpret the taste, the substance, and whole experience of eating meat as connecting them with their evolutionary history, their animal nature, or an archaic diet. In the process, the experience recalls the connection with nature and the transitoriness of life. A taste for meat, then, isn't just another preference we might have or a minor interest we might satisfy. It's integrated into aesthetic experience that has rich, meaningful content and can make one's life go significantly better, at least, in the meaningful omnivore's view.

Evaluating the Position

I've laid out what I take to be the strongest argument for the meaningful omnivore's position, but the question remains: how strong is it? How far can these arguments take the meaningful omnivore's position? I don't think they can take it very far. To be successful, we'd have to make some implausible assumptions. Working through these assumptions, though, we can see that the points that meaningful omnivores

make have significant implications for how moral vegans might live better and it can help us understand the values that underlie reasonable resistance to vegetarianism. In the end, however, the meaningful omnivore's arguments add little to the case for eating meat.

First, while all aesthetic experience and engagement with the world might be part of living well, it's implausible to say that they're the whole of it. That is, someone's life might go better if they were more receptive to positive aesthetic experience and if they sought more of them out, but no one would claim that a person's life isn't worth living simply because she has few positive aesthetic experiences and doesn't seek to cultivate her capacity to appreciate art. A great scientist might live better if she occasionally left the lab to enjoy some art, but no one can convincingly claim that she didn't live reasonably well without much artistic experience. Likewise, contemplation of the transitoriness of life, engagement with the world in Glenn Kheun's sense, might improve a life, but it's hard to think that someone who otherwise lives well (perhaps producing great works of art) has a meaningless life because he never seriously engaged the world in this way. In *The Weight of Things*, Kazez (2007) distinguishes between an "A" list and a "B" list (63, 146–48). The "A" list includes anything that is necessary for living well. The "B" list includes optional items that can improve a life. According to Kazez, beauty belongs on the "B" list while the kind of engagement with the world that Kheun identifies doesn't even make either list. Proposing that beauty and engagement with the world belong on something like the "A" list would be controversial at best. Identity seems the exception. It's at least plausible to claim that some kind of identity is necessary to give our lives significance.

Second, eating meat isn't necessary for any of the activities mentioned above. People have enjoyable vegan meals that offer complex representations, expressions, and exemplification. That is, vegan meals can provide aesthetic experience. Korsmeyer's own example of the apple makes this clear. Perhaps the range of possibilities is reduced, the history of vegan food is different, which affects the meaning of these foods, but the vegan range is large and it's growing all the time. Similarly, growing tomatoes can highlight the transitoriness of life. Eating seasonally is feasible in many places, and one only need to do it occasionally to engage with the world. Perhaps meat has an advantage here, but it seems unlikely. Plants have life cycles too. Identity might be the most important one here, since the previous objection left it untouched. Any plausible account of identity must note that our identities are complex and somewhat flexible. The guidelines they offer give choices their significance, but they don't determine them and they don't even fix the meaning of decisions beyond contestation. While people debate how much flexibility there is, flexibility is undeniable. For people who have the realistic option of being moral vegans, there is enough flexibility that they could reinterpret their identity in such a way that eating meat was no longer essential to who they are (if it ever was essential). Any of the identities, even the identity of the family farmer, is open to reinterpretation and has undergone significant reinterpretation. Family farms adopt new technologies, gender roles have changed, and we can still think of them as having, at least, a descendent of that identity. Moving away from eating animals as the defining feature to something else: the location, the buildings, a vegetable

crop, relationships with other families, and so on. And this is an extreme case. For most people, the food they eat forms a part of their identity but only a small part. Other aspects are much more important.

This flexibly, however, raises an important issue, though it doesn't have the significance that the meaningful omnivore requires. The history of our eating habits provides a context for meaningful eating. Both the aesthetic representations, expressions, and exemplifications depend on a history of using food in specific ways and therefore interpreting the food as having a particular meaning. When people understand meat to provide contact with reality and engagement with the world, they do so because of a history of looking at meat in a particular way. Identity, of course, affects both of these. Observant Hindus are unlikely to see beef as a way to engage with reality. Most Americans would struggle to interpret dog meat as anything but cruel and unnecessary. The social "script" can't be rewritten instantly in either case. Any change must begin from where the individuals in question are. They may require significant time to develop new ways of interpreting food out of the old ones. Growing tomatoes can bring you in touch with the transitoriness of the world, but, unless your culture already supports that interpretation, it may take some time to experience it that way. You'll need to attend to the changes, learn about them, and interpret them with others to develop a new interpretation. Insofar as the meaningful omnivore's argument depends on the meaning our food can provide us, they provide a useful warning about the pace and nature of change. We shouldn't expect people to be able to give up meaningful foods without working to develop replacements. Something would be lost if we didn't try to extend the older interpretations to new, vegan food. This fact lends additional support to vegan meat replacements and provide us with reason to develop "vegetarian meat" (i.e., cultured meat grown without using an animal) as described by Dancy and Patrick (2008). While this technology could be used to create "traditional food," e.g., cultured meat with the same taste and texture as actual chicken breasts, innovative cooks can approach new food technology as an artists might approach a new medium.⁶ The new dishes they create won't satisfy a traditionalist, but this possibility serves as a useful reminder that positive aesthetic experiences often challenge us by finding new ways to represent, exemplify, and express. Even so, giving up meat isn't just giving up a minor preference. It requires giving up something that may have been part of living a meaningful life; however, meat's relationship with living a meaningful life can change so, at best, these points affect the nature and pace of change, and can't provide a reason to resist changing to a vegan diet.

These points undermine the thrust of the meaningful omnivore's arguments, and they do so without getting into an argument about how morality and meaning relate. We don't need to settle the question of whether an action's moral status trumps its meaningfulness, whether meaningfulness derives from morality, or whether meaningfulness can justify being less than completely moral. Since the relationship between morality and a meaningful life is controversial, avoiding this issue strengthens my argument. It's compatible with any of those views. Meaningful

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing out this possibility.

eating is available to moral vegans. Being an omnivore is one way of eating meaningfully, but no more than that, which means that the meaningfulness of eating meat can't justify imposing harms on animals. Where things are equal for the animals, and a vegan diet would impose as much harm on animals as an omnivorous one, then perhaps the meaningful omnivore has a case. When and where all things are equal in this sense is difficult to determine, but it's clearly a different argument—one about the harms animals suffer—so I'll leave that for another time.

We should consider one last possibility. Even if when vegan and omnivorous diets impose similar harms on animals, moral vegans might live better than meaningful omnivores if they pay attention to aesthetics, engagement with the world, and identity. Creative transformations of previously omnivorous identities add a new layer of meaningfulness. A well-developed vegan cooking tradition can offer new and interesting aesthetic experiences, and it certainly can offer an interesting engagement with the world. Terry (2009)'s recently published *Vegan Soul Kitchen* offers a wonderful example of the kind of food I have in mind. Terry takes a culinary tradition of the American South, and transforms it. He's faithful to the tradition in some respects, using familiar flavors and techniques, and introduces new ingredients and techniques in other places (tempeh, for example). I have argued that this is more than just clever marketing. This kind of new aesthetic experience helps us live better by modifying a particular identity, offering new aesthetic experience, and bringing us in touch with the world in a different way. Likewise, the synthetic meat-substitutes might be seen as a less-bold transformation, allowing some continuity with previous traditions. Lacto-ovo vegetarian diets can be seen in this light as well, a less-bold transformation but one that prevents the kind of disruptive break that meaningful omnivores fear.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for their helpful comments.

References

- Appiah, K. (2005). *The ethics of identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Belasco, W. (2008). *Food: The key concepts*. New York: Berg Publishers.
- Cahoone, L. (2009). Hunting as a moral good. *Environmental Values*, 18(1), 67–89.
- Dancy, A., & Patrick, H. (2008). Vegetarian meat: Could technology save animals and satisfy meat eaters? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 21, 579–596.
- Davis, S. (2003). The least harm principle may require that humans consume a diet containing large herbivores, not a vegan diet. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 16, 387–394.
- DeGrazia, D. (2009). Moral vegetarianism from a very broad basis. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 6, 143–165.
- Harris, J. (2007). African American foodways. In J. T. Edge (Ed.), *The new encyclopedia of southern culture: Foodways* (pp. 15–18). Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press.
- Kazez, J. (2007). *The weight of things: Philosophy and the good life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Keuhn, G. (2004). Dining on Fido. In E. McKenna & A. Light (Eds.), *Animal pragmatism* (pp. 228–247). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1988). "In Vino Veritas". A recollection related by William Afham. In H. Hong & E. Hong (Eds.), *Stages on life's way* (pp. 7–86). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Korsmeyer, C. (2002). *Making sense of taste: Food and philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Lamey, A. (2007). Food fight! Davis versus Regan on the ethics of eating beef. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 38(2), 331–348.
- Leone, L.E. (2008) There will be chicken blood. *Slate*. <http://www.slate.com/id/2192934>. Accessed August 1 2010.
- Pollan, M. (2002) “*An animal’s place*”. New York Times Magazine.
- Pollan, M. (2006). *Omnivore’s Dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Schiavocampo, M. (2010) Cook defends fried chicken choice for black history month menu. *The Grio*. <http://www.thegrio.com/news/nbc-cook-defends-fried-chicken-choice-for-black-history-month.php>. Accessed August 1 2010.
- Telfer, E. (1996). *Food for thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Terry, B. (2009). *Vegan Soul Kitchen*. Philadelphia: De Capo Press.