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Forbidden Foods: Does Loving Pets Make It Easier To Eat Meat?

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Forbidden Foods: Does Loving Pets Make It Easier To Eat Meat?

A new theory of meat taboos

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A recent article on food taboos got me thinking about how living with pets affects our beliefs about eating meat.The article was by James Serpell, one of the most insightful and creative minds in anthrozoology. In it, he offered a new perspective on why we eat some animals and not others. Take for example, Biblical food taboos. The books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus indicate that it is perfectly ok to eat ox, sheep, goats, fish with scales, grasshoppers, and most birds. Woe be it, however, unto those who chow down on pig, camel, rabbit, frog, osprey, emu, moles, snails, and "all winged swarming things." Arbitrary food prohibitions are common in human cultures, and anthropologists have long wondered why so many societies ban forms of flesh that are perfectly edible. The origins of some food taboos seem obvious. Americans find the idea of a dog-meat sandwich horrifying because we consider pets our friends and family members. But most food taboos are not so easily explained.

Before I describe Serpell's new theory of meat taboos, keep in mind a few facts about food rules:

-Food taboos vary widely. Rats are delicious in west Africa, but disgusting in West Virginia.

-Taboos against eating forms of meat are six times more common than prohibitions against other types of food (see here).

-Food taboos can change surprisingly rapidly. Among the Tharu people of Nepal, it only took 12 years for water buffalo meat to shift from yucky to yummy.

- Cultural differences in the food avoidances also occur in other species. Bush pigs are relished by chimpanzees at Gombe but, for no obvious reason, are not on the menu of Taï Forest chimps (see here).

Food Taboos: Biological Functions or Cultural Symbols?

Some anthropologists believe that food taboos evolve because they have health benefits or they function as ecological adaptations. Prohibitions against eating pork, for example, might protect against trichinosis or they may have developed because pigs and people competed for food. These functional theories, however, don't explain why taboos often seem so random. An alternative explanation is that is that a species' flesh is tabooed for symbolic reasons. Examples include prohibitions against eating creatures that are hard to categorize (aquatic animals that don't have scales or fins) or animals associated with ancestral spirits (totems).

Does Meat = Murder?

Serpell's innovative twist on this debate is to propose that meat taboos arose because they helped hunters cope with the guilt that comes from killing animals. Here is the gist of his argument. By 40,000 years ago, our ancestors had made a cognitive quantum leap that resulted in a trait psychologists call "having a theory of mind." It is the ability to imagine what other people are thinking. The capacity to metaphorically put yourself in another person's shoes evolved to facilitate social interactions. However, having a theory of mind also produced the tendency towards anthropomorphism and the ability to empathize with other animals.

This trait came in handy. Hunters who could think like their prey were more likely to bring home the proverbial bacon. The bad news was that empathizing with the creature that you were about to kill produced guilt in the hunter. In his 1996 book, In the Company of Animals, Serpell writes, *"Highly anthropomorphic perceptions of animal provide hunting peoples with a*

framework of understanding, identifying with, and anticipating the behavior or their prey...But they also generate moral conflict because if they are believed to be essentially the same as persons or kinsmen, then killing them constitutes murder and eating them is the equivalent of cannibalism."

I think he is right. Indeed, our modern moral conflicts over the consumption of flesh may be rooted in the dilemma Serpell cogently identified in our ancestors.

Pets, Primordial Guilt and Food Taboos

In his new essay, Serpell extends this logic to meat taboos. He argues that in cultures where some species are totems, meat taboos serve as mechanisms for relieving the angst that comes with killing animals for food. In these societies, a few totemic species are assigned special status and given special consideration. The psychological payoff is that by making a few species strictly off limits, the rest of the animal kingdom becomes fair game.So in return for not killing turtles, hunters get free reign to slaughter buffalo. A very sweet deal.

The most interesting aspects of Serpell's theory, however, are his conjectures on the roles of pets in modern society. He suggests that the love, affection, and money we lavish on our companion animals represent "symbolic atonements" for the pain and suffering we inflict on the billions of animals we eat. He writes, "*Perhaps, in addition to their other social functions, pet animals have become the modern equivalents of guardian spirits and neo-totems whose "sacred" status now gives us a psychological license to devour their less fortunate brethren*." Wow.

Do Pets Reduce or Enhance Meat-Eating Guilt?

A forbidden food

However, I think the Pets-Absolve-Meat-Eating Theory is testable. If Serpell is correct, I would predict that:

(a) because vegetarians don't need to atone for their dietary sins, they would be less likely to own pets than meat-eaters, and

(b) the more meat people eat, the more deeply they will be attached to their pets and the more money they will spend on them.

OK, I admit that I don't have any actual data that would allow me to test these hypotheses. But I doubt that either of them is true. If anything, I suspect that vegetarians (and particularly people who are vegetarians for ethical reasons) are more likely to have pets and more likely to dote on the animals in their lives. Indeed, it may be the case that pets make us feel more guilty about eating animals rather than less guilty.

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For other posts in this series on the human-meat relationship, see
Why Are There So Few Vegetarians
Having Your Dog And Eating It Too
Eating Disorders: The Dark Side of Vegetarian