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Eating as a Self-Shaping Activity: The Case of Young Women's Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders

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Abstract

This paper contends that eating shapes the self; that is, our practices and understandings of eating can cultivate, reinforce, or diminish important aspects of the self, including agency, values, capacities, affects, and self-understandings. I argue that these self-shaping effects should be included in our ethical analyses and evaluations of eating. I make a case for this claim through an analysis and critique of the hypothesis that young women's vegetarianism is a risk, sign, or "cover" for eating disorders or disordered eating. After outlining the relevant empirical literature, I suggest that the evidence for this hypothesis is inconclusive. Given this uncertainty, we should consider the risks of making a mistake when accepting or rejecting this understanding of young women's eating. I argue that these risks importantly include negative effects on the self, such as damage to moral and epistemic agency. Along with other potential consequences of mistakenly accepting the hypothesis, these effects give us reason to reject it pending more conclusive research. Overall, this paper offers a philosophical intervention into the debate over the relationship between vegetarianism and eating disorders while illustrating the ethical importance and relevance of eating as a self-shaping activity.

Keywords: food ethics, eating, vegetarianism, eating disorders, disordered eating, dieting, agency, self, young women, weight-loss

That *what* we eat matters ethically is, perhaps, a trivial claim. It is an unquestioned assumption at the center of much public conversation and academic debate about food ethics, grounding discussions about why, exactly, eating free-range chickens, leafy greens, or non-fair trade chocolate matters, how much it matters, and what we as individuals or collectives are obliged to do about it. But it is not just *what* we eat that matters ethically; it is also *how* we eat and how we *understand* that eating. In this paper, I argue that one reason why our practices and understandings of eating are ethically important is because they shape the self. By *shape the self* I mean that they can cultivate, reinforce, or diminish important aspects of the self, including an eater's agency, values, capacities, affects, and self-understandings. Though it has

been largely overlooked in food ethics, I contend that this self-shaping power of eating is ethically significant and should be included in analyses and evaluations of eating.

I make a case for these claims through an analysis and critique of what I call the "Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis." This hypothesis, put forward in a body of empirical diet research, is based on apparent correlations between adolescent girls' and young women's vegetarianism and disordered eating or clinical eating disorders. It posits that vegetarianism in these groups should be understood as a potential risk, sign, or "cover" for dangerous pathological eating. Rates of eating disorders and disordered eating are high in these populations and are difficult to identify, especially early on when intervention would be most effective (Le Grange and Loeb 2007; Jones and Brown 2016). If vegetarianism is related to eating disorders as the literature suggests, this gives clinicians and families a promising sign or flag for further investigation and intervention and could help prevent a great deal of suffering.

However, the evidence in support of the hypothesis is inconclusive. Some studies report conflicting findings, and critics have raised methodological concerns about the research, undermining the validity of its conclusions. I suggest that this uncertainty is not simply an academic matter to be left aside pending further research. Drawing on the concept of inductive risk, I contend that incorrectly accepting or rejecting the hypothesis, including implicit rejection through inaction, can have ethically significant consequences. If we reject the hypothesis and are wrong to do so, we may miss or delay diagnoses of disordered eating and eating disorders, leading to suffering and even deaths that might otherwise have been avoided. If we accept the hypothesis but we are wrong to do so, the implications are more varied. Some track traditional ethical concerns; for example, acceptance might discourage people from becoming vegetarian, and more meat-eating may mean increased environmental destruction and suffering of nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse workers. My focus will be on the implications that follow from the ways that eating shapes the self. Drawing from feminist work on narrative agency and identity, I argue that wrongly accepting the hypothesis can damage the moral and epistemic agency of young women and girls. I then build on feminist critiques of weight-loss dieting and Foucauldian work on eating to suggest that the self-shaping effects of what I call "ethical vegetarianism" give us additional reasons to be cautious of discouraging it.

While I take the risks of disordered eating and eating disorders very seriously, my analysis gives us reason to reject the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis pending more conclusive research. My overall goal, however, is to show that recognizing eating as a self-shaping activity illuminates ethically significant outcomes that should factor into our analysis and decision-making. Without considering these effects on the self we cannot make a fully informed and responsible

choice to reject or accept the hypothesis. Therefore, in addition to intervening in the debate over the relationship between vegetarianism and eating disorders, this paper aims to illustrate the ethical importance and relevance of eating as a self-shaping activity. I will begin with an in-depth look at the hypothesis itself and then turn to my analysis and critique.

1. The Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders Hypothesis

Since the 1980s, a growing body of research suggests that, for young women and adolescent girls, vegetarianism is correlated with disordered eating or clinical eating disorders (Kadambari, Gowers, and Crisp 1986; O'Connor et al. 1987; Worsley and Skrzypiec 1997; Neumark-Sztainer et al. 1997; Gilbody, Kirk, and Hill 1999; Martins, Pliner, and O'Connor 1999; Lindeman, Stark, and Latvala 2000; Sullivan and Damani 2000; Perry et al. 2001, 2002; McLean and Barr 2003; Klopp, Heiss, and Smith 2003; Baş, Karabudak, and Kiziltan 2005; Curtis and Comer 2006; Trautmann et al. 2008; Robinson-O'Brien et al. 2009; Bardone-Cone et al. 2012; Zuromski et al. 2015). Studies characterize this correlation in different ways, with some suggesting that vegetarianism is a sign of or risk for these eating behaviours and attitudes (Perry et al. 2001; Klopp, Heiss, and Smith 2003; Trautmann et al. 2008; Robinson-O'Brien et al. 2009; Bardone-Cone et al. 2012), and some asserting that girls and young women may use vegetarianism to conceal their disordered eating from others (Martins, Pliner, and O'Connor 1999; Sullivan and Damani 2000; Klopp, Heiss, and Smith 2003; Robinson-O'Brien et al. 2009; Zuromski et al. 2015). While there are important and interesting questions to be asked about each of these possibilities,[1] for the purposes of this paper, I will group them together under this general claim: there is some important link between vegetarianism in young women and adolescent girls and eating disorders and/or disordered eating. I call this the "Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis," or "VED hypothesis" for short.

By "eating disorders," I mean clinical eating disorders as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association 2013), including disorders like anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Eating disorders are associated with some of the "highest levels of medical and social disability of any psychiatric disorder" (Klump et al. 2009, 100), and can be lethal; anorexia nervosa in particular has one of the highest mortality rates of any psychiatric disorder (Klump et al. 2009, 100; Smink, van Hoeken, and Hoek 2012, 411). "Disordered eating" refers to abnormal and damaging eating attitudes and behaviours that may overlap with clinical eating disorders but do not warrant a

[1] Whether this link takes the form of a risk, cover, or sign are distinct possibilities suggested by the literature, but they are generally not disentangled (Curtis and Comer 2006; Martins, Pliner, and O'Connor 1999).

diagnosis (Seitz 2018; Anderson 2018). Disordered eating may not rise to the level of a clinical disorder but can nonetheless have a significantly negative impact on health and well-being. While eating disorders and disordered eating can affect anyone at any age, they are in general more common in women and girls than in men and boys (National Eating Disorders Association 2017; Striegel-Moore et al. 2009; Hoek and van Hoeken 2003), and many forms of disordered eating and eating disorders develop during adolescence and in young adulthood (Le Grange and Loeb 2007).[2]

Evidence for the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis includes correlations between vegetarianism in young women and girls and diagnosed clinical eating disorders or their features. Early studies of individuals with diagnosed clinical eating disorders showed high rates of vegetarianism within this population (Kadambari, Gowers, and Crisp 1986; O'Connor et al. 1987). More recent work that focused on broader populations suggests that women with a history of an eating disorder are more likely to be or have been vegetarian than those without such a history (Bardone-Cone et al. 2012). One study found that adolescent and young women vegetarians are at greatest risk for binge eating with loss of control relative to nonvegetarians (Robinson-O'Brien et al. 2009, 654), and according to another study, women vegetarians reported more abnormal eating attitudes and had significantly higher scores for three out of the five fundamental aspects of anorexia

[2] While almost all the studies discussed in this paper focused on young women and adolescent girls, men and boys are also affected by eating disorders and disordered eating (Striegel-Moore et al. 2009; Muise, Stein, and Arbess 2003; Strother et al. 2012; National Eating Disorders Association 2018). It should also be noted that the studies discussed in this paper did not report whether participants were cis or trans, nor did they report on sexuality. Trans individuals may have higher rates of eating disorders and disordered eating compared to cisgender people (Diemer et al. 2015). While sexuality does not appear to have a significant effect on the rates of eating disorders and disordered eating among cis women, cis gay and bisexual men have higher rates of disordered eating and eating disorders than heterosexual men (Calzo et al. 2017; Feldman and Meyer 2007; McClain and Peebles 2016), and one recent study suggests that sexual and gender minorities in general experience more severe eating disorder symptoms than their cisgender heterosexual counterparts (Mensinger et al. 2020). Most but not all of the studies discussed here noted the race of study participants, and among those, the majority of participants were white/Caucasian. There is a prevalent stereotype that eating disorders and disordered eating do not affect Black girls and women or women and girls of colour (National Eating Disorders Association 2018). However, Black women and girls and women and girls of colour do experience eating disorders and disordered eating, and lower rates of diagnosed clinical disorders in these populations may be due to underdiagnosis (Gordon et al. 2006).

nervosa than nonvegetarian women (Lindeman, Stark, and Latvala 2000). Studies have also found correlations between vegetarian diets and dietary restraint (Gilbody, Kirk, and Hill 1999; McLean and Barr 2003; Martins, Pliner, and O'Connor 1999), a commonly used marker for disordered eating. Restraint is sometimes defined as "conscious monitoring of food intake for weight control purposes" (Curtis and Comer 2006, 92), and may also refer to restricted eating behaviours (Heatherton et al. 1988).

Perry and colleagues found that most adolescent vegetarians reported that the primary motivation for their diet was weight control or weight loss (Perry et al. 2002, 436; see also Trautmann et al. 2008). Weight-loss dieting is a central risk factor for eating disorders in any population (Golden et al. 2016), but this finding offers specific support for the VED hypothesis given that vegetarians with a history of a clinical eating disorder were likely to be motivated by weight loss whereas those without an eating disorder history were not (Bardone-Cone et al. 2012).

Support for the "vegetarianism as a cover story" piece of the VED hypothesis comes from studies finding that vegetarians reported higher levels of dietary restraint than nonvegetarians but also claimed that they were not motivated by weight loss or control. Researchers surmise that disordered eaters may therefore be using vegetarianism as a socially acceptable means of food avoidance (Lindeman, Stark, and Latvala 2000, 162–63; Martins, Pliner, and O'Connor 1999). As Sullivan and Damani (2000, 265) put it: "Vegetarianism does provide the perfect alibi for dietary restriction, and might therefore be a logical starting point for individuals who wish to seriously limit their food intake." Some researchers speculate that adolescents in particular may use vegetarianism as a way to hide disordered eating from their parents and guardians, whereas young women who are away from home and have more control over their own eating may have other, potentially healthy motivations to eat a vegetarian diet (Forestell, Spaeth, and Kane 2012, 324; Robinson-O'Brien et al. 2009; Fisak et al. 2006, 199).

Taken together, this evidence supports the claim that there is some significant connection between vegetarianism in young women and girls and disordered eating attitudes and behaviours—a connection that many researchers claim warrants action on the parts of clinicians, parents, and caregivers. While some researchers are careful to note that the data do not suggest vegetarian diets *are* eating disorders or cause them (Perry et al. 2002, 436), many caution practitioners and parents to attend to adolescents and young women who express interest in or "experiment with" vegetarianism. Some authors emphasize the importance of interrogating girls' and young women's *motivations* for vegetarianism in light of the finding that being motivated by weight loss seems to increase the likelihood of disordered eating or eating disorders: for example, "When an adolescent begins a vegetarian diet or expresses interest in making this dietary choice, a close examination of his or her general eating attitude is warranted" (Bardone-Cone et al. 2012, 1250–51), and

"When guiding adolescent and young adult vegetarians in proper nutrition and meal planning, it may also be important to investigate an individual's motives for choosing a vegetarian diet" (Robinson-O'Brien et al. 2009, 655). But because some vegetarians may be using vegetarianism as a cover for their disordered eating, their reported motivations may not be trustworthy. Zuromski and colleagues suggest that intentions may be irrelevant: "Though individuals may endorse motivations for vegetarianism unrelated to disordered eating, this behavior may still functionally be related to eating pathology" (Zuromski et al. 2015, 26). Therefore, additional monitoring and surveillance of eating may be warranted to ascertain what is *really* going on with this vegetarian eating (Perry et al. 2002, 436).

1.1. An Uncertain Hypothesis

Not all the studies on this topic support the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis. Some found that nonvegetarians had higher rates of disordered attitudes and behaviours than vegetarians or vegans (Heiss, Coffino, and Hormes 2017; Janelle and Barr 1995), while others found no remarkable differences between these groups (Fisak et al. 2006). And some compelling critical work suggests that much of the literature suffers from significant methodological issues, providing reason to doubt their findings. For example, the definition of vegetarianism used in the literature is not only inconsistent but often extremely broad. Many of the studies include semivegetarians—that is, people who eat chicken and/or fish—alongside stricter vegetarians who do not eat any animal flesh at all. Ostensibly because of small sample sizes, these different types of vegetarians are often lumped together, and in fact several studies' samples of vegetarians are comprised of a majority of semivegetarians (Worsley and Skrzypiec 1997; Gilbody, Kirk, and Hill 1999; Perry et al. 2002; Klopp, Heiss, and Smith 2003; Dean 2014).

We might wonder if semivegetarians are properly considered vegetarians at all. Laura Wright (2015, 104) insists that "one can no more be semivegetarian than one can be semipregnant." Ontological concerns about the category aside, the characterization of semivegetarians as vegetarians may skew study results (Curtis and Comer 2006, 92; Heiss, Coffino, and Hormes 2017, 130; see also Forestell 2018). Heiss, Coffino, and Hormes (2017, 130) suggest that studies that report higher levels of eating disorder symptoms among vegetarians typically group all vegetarians together, including semivegetarians. And some research that studied semivegetarians separately suggests that correlations between vegetarianism and restrictive eating may be particular to semivegetarians alone.[3] For example, one study found

[3] Perry et al. found that true vegetarians were at lower risk for "unhealthy and extreme weight control behaviors" than semivegetarians, though they found that vegetarians overall were at higher risk than omnivores (Perry et al. 2001). This study

semivegetarians to have higher indicators of disordered eating than any other group (Timko, Hormes, and Chubski 2012), while another found that semivegetarians were more cognitively restrained—that is, they engaged in more conscious monitoring of their eating with the intention to restrict—than both omnivores and strict vegetarians (Forestell, Spaeth, and Kane 2012, 323).

Another methodological issue is the appropriateness of measures of eating-disordered attitudes and behaviours. Measures of dietary restraint may be inappropriate for studying vegetarian populations in contexts where vegetarianism is uncommon and meat is considered an essential feature of most meals.[4] Timko, Hormes, and Chubski (2012, 983) suggest that the presence of restraint in these vegetarians—which would include most if not all of the populations in the studies under discussion—might be an artifact of removing meat from their diet in a meat-eating culture rather than an indication of disordered eating.[5] For example, one study of vegans and omnivores used two different tools to measure dietary restraint. One tool, the Eating Disorder Examination-Questionnaire, showed that vegans had generally healthier behaviours and attitudes than omnivores, but the other tool, the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire, showed the opposite (Heiss, Coffino, and Hormes 2017, 134). The authors suggest that the latter tool could be artificially inflating vegan scores by using questions like, "Do you watch exactly what you eat?" to indicate restraint. But this question would also capture the attentiveness often necessary for vegans to ensure that they do not eat foods that contain animal products when living in an omnivorous society—similar to the ways that someone with an allergy to or intolerance for common ingredients needs to be attentive to what they are eating at all times.[6]

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was unique in that it included data on vegetarian male adolescents, finding that they were particularly at risk for these weight control behaviours.

[4] Wright (2015, 100) argues that the nonnormative nature of veganism in US culture leads to its construction as "deviant," which encourages its association with pathological eating behaviours: "Veganism—as the most 'severe' form of vegetarianism—is rendered disordered by virtue of the rhetoric that constructs it, quite simply because in a culture that is so fixated on a meat-based diet as standard, the language of deviance is the only language available with which to render nonnormative dietary choices."

[5] The majority of studies were done in the United States, with a few in England, Canada, and Australia, and one each in Sweden and Turkey.

[6] One recent paper on links between celiac disease and disordered eating (Tokatly Latzer et al. 2020) flags the inaptness of certain questions on the Eating Attitudes Test 26 for those with celiac disease (e.g., "I avoid food with high carbohydrate content" and "I engage in dieting behavior").

The authors of another study note that one commonly used tool, the Eating Attitudes Test, straightforwardly asks respondents if they "enjoy eating meat," and that negative responses are "intended to indicate dietary restraint" (Fisak et al. 2006, 199). However, not all the findings in support of the VED hypothesis are subject to this critique: McLean and Barr (2003) updated the Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire (TFEQ) to avoid such straightforwardly problematic issues, and they still found that those with high levels of dietary restraint were more likely to be vegetarian.

These mixed findings and methodological problems produce considerable uncertainty about the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis. We have a situation of *inductive risk*. Due to the nature of inductive logic, we can never be entirely certain about the truth or falsity of a given hypothesis. However much evidence of whatever quality we have in support of a hypothesis, there is always a risk of error: we might accept a false hypothesis or reject a true one. While inductive risk is at play in the acceptance or rejection of any claim, there is a particularly high risk of an error when the evidence is so uncertain. According to Heather Douglas (2000, 562), Carl Hempel argues that given this risk of error, proper inductive reasoning requires that we assign value to the possible outcomes of an error and factor these evaluations in to our decision of whether to accept or reject the hypothesis.

In some cases, the values used to weight these outcomes will be epistemic values, such as consistency with established theory, empirical adequacy, and a wide predictive scope (Douglas 2013). But in situations where the outcomes of an error include *nonepistemic* consequences—that is, practical or ethical consequences such as use of resources or harms—we must use nonepistemic values to weight these consequences. As Douglas (2000, 559) explains, failure to do so means that our reasoning will be "flawed and incomplete."[7]

In this case, if we were scientists, we could do more research and try to get better data that would help us move forward with more confidence. Indeed, many of the studies' authors call for this considering the mixed findings in the literature. In the meantime, however, we—especially family members, health care providers, and others in care relationships with young women and girls—must decide to accept or reject the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis. This is because incorrectly accepting or rejecting the VED hypothesis, including implicit rejection through inaction, can have significant ethical implications. We need to lay out these

[7] There is debate about the nature of the distinction between epistemic and nonepistemic values and their role regarding inductive risk (Elliott and McKaughan 2014; Elliott 2011, 2017; Steel 2010, 2013; Elliott and Steel 2017; Elliott and Richards 2017; Hicks, Magnus, and Wright 2020), though I do not take it to impact my argument here.

implications so that we can evaluate them and incorporate those evaluations into our decision-making process.

If we reject the VED hypothesis but it is actually true, we may delay diagnoses or miss cases of eating disorders and disordered eating that would otherwise be caught, and the well-being and lives of girls and young women could be at risk. This is a very bad outcome. But what if the VED hypothesis is false and we treat it as true? The remainder of this paper will address this question in detail. I begin with some considerations based on more traditional characterizations of the ethical importance of eating and then turn to those that follow from the ways eating shapes the self.

2. The Risks of a False Positive

One common way to think about the ethical importance of eating is that eating has ethically relevant effects on the animals that are used for or to produce food, food workers and producers, and the environment. Call this an "Eating Affects Others" perspective.[8] Many people think that vegetarianism has better effects than omnivorism on others because, for example, eating mainly or only plants produces less suffering of nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse workers, and less damage to the environment.[9] Some ecofeminists also argue that meat-eating enacts or reinforces various interlocking forms of domination including sexism, racism, and speciesism, while vegetarianism or veganism can combat them (Gaard 2002).

With these concerns in mind, we might worry that one of the potential effects of wrongly accepting the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis is that eaters may be directly or indirectly discouraged from becoming or remaining vegetarian.[10]

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[8] This name is intentionally vague, as there are many ways to think about how eating affects others, which effects matter ethically, how the effects should be weighted, and so on; we might take a utilitarian approach, a deontological one, or an ecofeminist approach, to name a few. For the purposes of this argument, we just need the general claim that eating can have ethically relevant effects on others, where others is construed broadly to include the environment.

[9] See Doggett's (2018) "Moral Vegetarianism" for various examples of this view.

[10] Someone might object that accepting the VED hypothesis should not lead anyone to actively prevent a woman or girl from eating a vegetarian diet because the research does not suggest that vegetarianism *causes* eating disorders or is one itself. However, many people fail to distinguish correlation and causation, which could motivate them to intervene in young women and girls' vegetarian diets out of fear that vegetarianism is, or could lead to, disordered eating or eating disorders. And there is some speculation within the research that vegetarianism serves as a form of restriction that may enable disordered eating. Gilbody, Kirk, and Hill (1990, 90) suggest that vegetarianism's "rules" and categorization of foods as permissible and

For instance, if the VED hypothesis is accepted, vegetarianism would be associated with pathological eating, making it less appealing to anyone who might otherwise consider it, but perhaps especially to those already at risk of eating disorders.[11] Parents might refuse to support or even allow their child's vegetarianism out of fear that the diet enables or could lead to an eating disorder. Fewer vegetarians could mean more harm to nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse workers, could cause more damage to the environment, and may undermine resistance to various forms of oppression.

Another common way to think about the ethical importance of eating is from an "Eating Autonomy" perspective. On this view there are many values or goods in eating and multiple legitimate ways of ranking those values, but what is most important about eating is that it offers us the opportunity to exercise autonomy understood as the freedom to act—and eat—without undue interference (Resnik 2010).[12] Girls and young women could be autonomously pursuing any number of values with their vegetarian eating, including care for animals, concern for the environment or their health, ecofeminist values, or the desire to be unique or different from their families. If the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorder hypothesis was wrongly accepted, it is possible that some families and medical professionals may intervene on young women and girls' eating and discourage or even prevent them from pursuing a vegetarian diet because of the association with disordered eating. But this could violate young women and girls' autonomy.

Finally, consider a "Valuable Eating Experiences" account of eating. As Anne Barnhill and colleagues argue, eating can be an exercise of autonomy and valuable for that reason, but a food experience can also have hedonic, cultural, or other value regardless of the autonomous nature of that eating (Barnhill et al. 2014). Some food experiences may even be *more* valuable when they are not autonomous (Barnhill et

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nonpermissible may be used to enable and justify food avoidance, preventing recovery from disordered eating, while Zuromski et al. (2015) suggest that vegetarianism can be linked to disordered eating even if the eater herself does not realize that. Therefore, while preventing young women and girls from eating vegetarian may not be entirely justified by the VED hypothesis, it is a plausible outcome.

[11] Or, if as Wright suggests, vegetarianism is already associated with deviant pathological eating in omnivorous cultures like the United States (Wright 2015, 100), the association would be all the stronger.

[12] The account of freedom deployed by Resnik in the cited article is extremely narrow, as critics like Gostin (2010) point out. Nevertheless, something like Resnik's view is central to public debate about food ethics in the United States and so is worth considering here.

al. 2014, 197); for instance, the pleasure of eating several pieces of cheesecake while watching *Golden Girls* reruns may be in part constituted by the fact it is "mindless," or otherwise lacking in the criteria generally assumed to be necessary for autonomous choice. Vegetarian eating may offer valuable experiences that could be lost if young women and girls are discouraged from eating that way. Such eating could offer the pleasures of being unique or rebelling against one's family or mainstream culture, of experimenting with new foods and cuisines, or the social value of connecting to new communities through vegetarian clubs or online communities.[13] This value could be incidental to the autonomous choices of the eater: not something she actively or consciously pursues, but nonetheless valuable. In short, if wrongly accepting the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis discourages or prevents young women and girls from vegetarian eating, then it could deprive them of valuable eating experiences.

2.1. Eating as a Self-Shaping Activity: Damage to Agency

Each of these perspectives captures something important about what is ethically at stake with a false positive. But eating is not only a way to autonomously pursue values or create valuable experiences, nor is it simply a way of affecting other humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment. It is also a way of *shaping the self*.[14] How we eat, and how we understand that eating, can cultivate, reinforce, or diminish particular aspects of the self. I will illustrate this by drawing out two ways that a false positive could negatively shape the self: the first focuses on the potential effects of a false positive on moral and epistemic agency, and the second on potential effects on the self more broadly, including affects, capacities, and self-understandings.

I hold that there is a productive, constructive relationship between eating and agency, by which I mean the ability to be in command of and responsible for one's life, choices, and actions (Kukla 2014). Eating is not just an opportunity for eaters to exercise their freedom; practices of eating and ways of understanding eating actually shape, and can enhance or undermine, agency.

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[13] Even in omnivorous contexts like the United States, vegetarianism may not always be an act of rebellion against one's family. For example, immigrants to the United States from predominantly vegetarian cultures or regions like India might rebel against their families by eating meat. Thanks to Mabel Gergan for this point.

[14] The term "self" is not clearly defined within philosophy (Olson 2021). I use it here in a broad sense to refer to something more than personal identity over time and as including but not limited to self-understandings, affects, capacities, values, and moral and epistemic agency.

This claim relies on an understanding of agency, and autonomy in general, as relational. Agency is developed within and depends on certain relationships and social conditions. Agency requires certain capacities, including the capacity to reflect on one's own motivations and to change them if desired (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 13), and the development and exercise of such capacities depends on certain relationships. It is not just the existence of these relationships that matters but also their content or quality. It is particularly important that others perceive an agent as competent and treat them as such, creating space and opportunities, and offering necessary support for the exercise and development of their agency. It is also crucial to have a sense of oneself as a competent and worthy agent (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 20–21).

Hilde Lindemann (2014) argues that social narratives can shape agency, in part by influencing perceptions of self and others as competent or incompetent agents. As Nabina Liebow (2016) shows, narratives may also shape agency by characterizing a particular group as good, bad, normal, or deviant agents. I contend that narratives about eating and eaters influence how we understand ourselves and how others treat us in ways that affect our agency. Crucially, these understandings can *damage* agency, undermining capacities, opportunities, and understandings central to constructing and maintaining command of and responsibility for one's life, choices, and actions, and to being understood as a morally "good" or "normal" agent.

There are two narratives at work in the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis that are potentially damaging to agency. First, and most generally, is the narrative that young women and girl vegetarians are potentially disordered eaters or have eating disorders. Call this the "Eating Pathology" narrative. This narrative implies that young women and girls' vegetarian eating is not the result of a free choice or an expression of their agency, but that their eating agency is compromised by pathology, or by distorted beliefs and perceptions associated with that pathology. This makes them proper objects of concern, medical analysis, and possible intervention. This is especially the case for those women and girls motivated by weight loss or weight control.

The second narrative is that because vegetarianism may be used as a "cover," young women and adolescent girls may be untrustworthy reporters about their eating motivations. Not only may their agency be compromised by pathology, but their reported reasons for eating as they do cannot be trusted. Call this the "Untrustworthiness" narrative.

I suggest these narratives can damage agency in four different ways.[15] Before explaining each in turn, I want to clarify what I mean by "damage to agency."

[15] I first articulated this four-part analysis of damage to agency in "Eating Identities, 'Unhealthy' Eaters, and Damaged Agency" (Dean 2018).

Following Alisa Bierria (2014), I want to avoid the implication that those who are subject to damaging narratives do not have agency or have less agency than others. The damage I identify may be primarily understood as obstacles to particular avenues for developing, exercising, and maintaining agency in general and to what is socially understood as "good" agency in particular. The obstacles I identify specifically block eaters' ability to exercise, develop, and maintain agency through eating—a path of particular importance in contemporary social contexts which, as we will discuss further, place a great deal of significance on how and what a person eats.[16]

Deprivation of Opportunity

First, the Eating Pathology narrative can lead to "deprivation of opportunity" (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 51); specifically, opportunities to self-direct one's own eating. Having some control over what and how you eat, and having others recognize and respect your choices as an expression of your agency, is an important arena for the development and exercise of agency. It is a basic way to express preferences, values, and identity, and to be recognized as the kind of person who can do so. But the Eating Pathology narrative can justify depriving young women and girls of this control. If concerned parents or other caregivers associate vegetarianism itself with disordered eating, they may not buy or prepare vegetarian meals, meaning girls and young women would have to purchase and prepare their own food, something they may not have the resources, opportunity, or know-how to do. Parents and caregivers may encourage or insist that young women and girls eat meat. They may also take general control over young women and girls' eating to try to circumvent disordered behaviours, depriving young women and girls of opportunities to eat vegetarian and more generally make their own food choices.

Infiltrated Consciousness

When a young woman or girl is treated as a pathological or incompetent eater, someone who cannot be trusted to make safe, responsible decisions about her own eating, she may internalize that narrative, leading to the second type of damage to agency: "infiltrated consciousness" (Lindemann Nelson 2001, 51). Young women and girls may come to believe that their eating choices are contaminated by pathology, and that they should not be trusted to direct their own eating. This self-understanding justifies the limits, constraints, and controls that others might place on their eating. Young women and girls may also internalize the association between vegetarianism

[16] As I understand it, there may be cases where someone's agency is diminished, but those subject to damaging narratives often find ways to navigate around these obstacles using what Bierria (2014, 140) calls "insurgent agency." The obstacles are nonetheless problematic and constraining. For more on this point, see Khader (2020).

and disordered eating, making the diet itself seem risky and less attractive, even if it would reflect their values, interests, or concerns. Internalizing these views about oneself and about vegetarianism as a diet may mean that young women and girls are not able to express their preferences or live out their values through eating because they take that option off the table "from the inside."

Distorted Action and Damage to Epistemic Agency

The third way that the Eating Pathology and Untrustworthiness narratives might damage agency is by distorting the meaning of young women and girls' eating. Such *distorted action* is possible because the social meaning of our actions is not entirely authored by us. Those who observe our actions interpret the meaning of those actions, and they become, as Alisa Bierria (2014, 131) calls it, "*social* authors" of those actions. These observers draw from social resources including narratives to help them interpret actions. When those resources include damaging narratives, then the actions can be distorted: no matter what the actor intended to do, her action gets read as the result of her damaged identity.

Young women and girls may eat vegetarian out of care for animals, the environment, or health, or they may do so to be different, to distinguish themselves from their families or friends, or to connect with other vegetarians. They may take their own vegetarian eating to express any of these motivations, concerns, and cares. But the Eating Pathology narrative can contribute to reading that eating as nothing more than disordered eating, nothing more than an expression of pathology.

As Bierria (2014, 131) points out, someone whose actions are misread can deploy various strategies to try to correct that misreading. One way for young women and girls to trigger reevaluation of their vegetarian eating is for them to explain why they choose to eat that way and what vegetarianism means to them. Since some of the researchers encourage parents and clinicians to ask them about their motivations, this opens up an opportunity for young women and girls to correct misreadings of their eating.

But the opportunity for reevaluation is highly constrained by the Untrustworthiness narrative, especially for adolescents. No matter what adolescent girls say about their reasons for avoiding meat, this narrative frames it as a possible lie or, as Zuromski and colleagues suggest, a form of self-deception (Zuromski et al. 2015). In this way, the Untrustworthiness narrative effectively undermines the *epistemic credibility* of young women and adolescent girls; that is, it undermines their status as epistemic agents, and specifically as knowers of and reporters on their own intentions and motivations.

There are at least three forms this epistemic damage could take. The first is testimonial injustice. This type of epistemic harm occurs when "a speaker suffers a credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice (perhaps arising from an identity

stereotype) on the hearer's part" (McKinnon 2016, 438). The Untrustworthiness narrative could unjustifiably *lower* young women and girls' credibility as reporters of their own motivations, casting doubt on whether their reports about their eating are accurate. This is why monitoring and surveillance of their eating is recommended to gather further evidence in support of or against their testimony.

The Untrustworthiness narrative may also lead to "testimonial quieting" (Dotson 2011). In this case, the narrative would not simply lower the credibility of a young woman or girl but would disqualify her as a knower. As Kristie Dotson (2011, 242) explains, "The problem of testimonial quieting occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower. A speaker needs an audience to identify, or at least recognize, her as a knower in order to offer testimony." In such a case, nothing a young woman or girl says about her eating counts as evidence about the status of that eating: "Her utterance is ignored entirely. It's as if she didn't speak at all" (McKinnon 2016, 442). If her credibility is obliterated in this way, then monitoring and surveillance of her eating provide the only available evidence as to whether that eating is disordered.

This second type of harm seems less likely than the first, given researchers' insistence on asking young women and girls about their motivations. Such a request would be nonsensical if young women and girls were considered to have no testimonial credibility whatsoever. However, considering Zuromski and colleagues' suggestion that vegetarian eating can be pathological *regardless* of the intentions of the eater, it is a possible outcome. Testimonial quieting may be particularly likely if the Untrustworthiness narrative is amplified by sexist or ageist narratives about young women and girls being deceptive, unreliable, or flawed knowers in general.

The third possible form of epistemic harm is testimonial smothering. Dotson (2011, 244) explains that smothering "occurs because the speaker perceives one's immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony." One common feature of situations of testimonial smothering is that the "content of the testimony must be unsafe and risky" (244). Thanks to the Eating Pathology narrative, young women and girls telling others—especially those with authority over them—that they are vegetarian, or even interested in vegetarianism, can be risky; it can lead to increased surveillance, medical interventions, and the loss of opportunities to make their own food choices. To avoid these outcomes, young women and girls may remain silent about their eating or be highly selective about what they share with others, especially those in authority positions like parents or medical professionals. Disabled or chronically ill girls and women who may already be subject to high levels of medical surveillance, and Black girls and women who may distrust medical professionals given the prevalence of medical racism, may be particularly affected by testimonial smothering.

In sum, the Untrustworthiness narrative frames whatever a young woman or girl says as lies or self-deception. Recognizing that she may not be believed or listened to and that she runs the risk of being characterized as both a pathological eater and an untrustworthy reporter, she may not say anything at all. This deprives her of the chance to correct misreadings of her eating. Thus the Untrustworthiness narrative makes it difficult for young women and, especially, adolescent girls to prompt reinterpretation of their vegetarian eating, which in turn makes it hard to avoid distorted actions.

Distorted actions are interwoven with forms of damage to agency that I have already mentioned. For instance, they can feed back into infiltrated consciousness, undermining an agent's understanding of her own actions and intentions. If everyone takes my attempts to show care for animals to be covert attempts to diet, I might start to question my own capacities as a knower and doubt that I know my own motivations. This might undermine my confidence in my ability to eat in a way that reflects my values and intentions. Distorted actions can also lead into the final type of damage to agency: *blocked and inapt identities*.

Blocked and Inapt Identities

One of the reasons distorted actions are damaging is because of the link between actions and identities. We can self-identify in certain ways, but many identities also require social recognition (Lindemann 2014, 4): relevant others have to acknowledge us as that kind of person and treat us accordingly for us to inhabit that identity. Because social recognition of identities depends in part on how others interpret our actions, distorted actions can lead to blocked identities. If the actions that would enable social recognition of an identity are distorted, then the actor may be prevented from fully inhabiting this identity.[17]

Whatever identities vegetarian eating might enable for other people, those identities may be blocked for girls and young women because their eating is interpreted as disordered. Young women and girls' ability to prompt reinterpretation of that eating, and thereby open up the possibility to inhabit those identities, may also be blocked. Instead of gaining social recognition as a morally conscious person, animal activist, environmentalist, rebel, ecofeminist, or someone who is just curious about different ways to eat, a girl or young woman who eats vegetarian may be read as a disordered or pathological eater. In this way, distorted actions may also enable the conferral of inapt or inappropriate identities; in this case, as a disordered eater.

[17] Note as well that deprivation of opportunity also contributes to blocked identities by literally preventing the sorts of actions that would enable social recognition as such and such a sort of person.

Eating identities are loaded with moral content. In US and Canadian contexts, a dominant way of understanding food choice is as an issue of willpower and self-control, and willpower and self-control are widely understood as central to being a good moral agent in general. Being a "bad eater" can therefore reflect on one's moral character. So when a young woman or adolescent girl vegetarian is understood as just another disordered eater rather than a caring, morally conscious person, someone who is curious about food, or someone who is competent and in control of her eating as much as anyone, this can not only compromise and damage her agency with regard to her eating but also undermine the self-understanding and social recognition essential to developing, maintaining, and exercising robust agency in general. It can undermine a young woman or girl's ability to understand herself and be recognized as someone who directs her own life and is responsible for her choices and, in so doing, undermine her actual ability and capacity to do just that. In sexist and misogynistic contexts where young women and girls already face many challenges to the development and exercise of their agency, this can be a significant form of harm.

2.2. Eating as a Self-Shaping Activity: How Ethical Vegetarianism Can Shape Selves

In addition to shaping agency, narratives about eaters and eating and the actual practice of eating can shape other aspects of the self, such as affects, values, capacities, and self-understandings. While we sometimes eat with the aim of shaping these bits of our selves—we may diet to tame our appetites, eat mindfully to cultivate feelings of calm, or partake in wine or food tastings to develop our capacities for pleasure—my suggestion is that all eating, whether it purposefully aims to change the self or not, can have self-shaping effects.

As mentioned earlier, one possible outcome of wrongly accepting the VED hypothesis is that concerned family members, health professionals, and others might directly or indirectly discourage young women and girls from eating a vegetarian diet. Associating the diet with a harmful pathology may have this effect, as may making vegetarian women and girls objects of concern, interrogation, and surveillance. I have outlined some possible impacts of having fewer vegetarians on nonhuman animals, the environment, and some food workers, as well as on various forms of oppression. But discouraging women and girls from trying or maintaining vegetarianism can also have an impact on selves.

There are several points to be explored here: what are the self-shaping effects of having one's diet be the source of medical, familial, and public scrutiny? Of eating differently from one's family, friends, classmates, or coworkers? What is the impact on the self if young women and girls never try or quickly abandon vegetarianism? While all these questions are worth pursuing, here I will focus on the last one. I suggest that one common form of vegetarianism—what I call "ethical vegetarianism" to encompass vegan and vegetarian diets motivated by ethical concerns about

nonhuman animals, the environment, and/or slaughterhouse workers—can be a valuable way to shape oneself through eating. Discouraging or preventing young women and girls from eating this way raises a roadblock to an avenue for the development of good, or at least relatively good, sorts of selves. This gives us another reason to be wary about wrongly accepting the VED hypothesis.

Before I offer support for this claim, it is important to be clear about its limits. I argue that ethical vegetarianism can shape "relatively" good selves in contrast to what some claim is a prevalent way of eating for young women and girls: weight-loss dieting (McVey, Tweed, and Blackmore 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2011; Mendes et al. 2014; Slof-Op 't Landt et al. 2017; Field et al. 2010). While weight-loss dieting can be practiced in different ways, some of which could have neutral or positive effects on the self, feminist critiques suggest that it does not tend to do so. As I will detail momentarily, whether to secure a particular appearance or for health, weight-loss dieting can have very negative effects on the self. My claim is that ethical vegetarianism has more promising self-shaping effects than this.

However, I am not suggesting that vegetarianism always has good self-shaping effects. Some vegetarians and vegans practice their eating in the pursuit of purity, which can cultivate moral smugness and an inability to recognize the ethical importance of context, such as systemic racism (this is particularly an issue amongst white vegans) (Harp 2018; Bailey 2007; Shotwell 2016; Dean 2014). I am also not suggesting that wrongly accepting the VED hypothesis would, on its own, render vegetarianism an unattractive option for young women and girls. In generally omnivorous contexts like the United States and Canada, vegetarianism is more popular with white women and girls than with Black and/or Indigenous women and girls and many other women and girls of colour for a variety of reasons, including the racism of many white vegans just noted (Harp 2018; Bailey 2007; Taylor 2010; Dunham 2010; Loyd-Paige 2010). Adding the spectre of eating disorders to these reasons may not have a significant effect on the appeal of vegetarianism to members of these groups, though it may make it more difficult for those who are interested in vegetarianism despite it all. Finally, vegetarianism and weight-loss dieting are not necessarily mutually exclusive. People can and sometimes do practice vegetarianism as a weight-loss diet—see, for example, *Skinny Bitch* (Freedman and Barnouin 2005). Nonetheless, I hold that ethical vegetarianism often offers a positive self-shaping alternative to weight-loss dieting for many young women and girls, and that discouraging them from exploring and potentially benefitting from it would be a negative outcome of wrongly accepting the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis.

The Weight-Loss Dieting Self

Feminist critiques of weight-loss dieting have detailed a variety of ways that this sort of eating can negatively shape aspects of the self, including capacities, self-understandings, and affects. Consider, for instance, the way that many weight-loss diets require constant and detail-oriented attention to food and eating, and to desires and feelings that affect eating like cravings, boredom, and hunger. This constant self-surveillance is supposed to enable the dieter to stay on track with her diet despite the unruliness of her body and unpredictability of her environment. But the imperative to pay attention in all these ways encourages and requires the development of certain capacities, such as the capacity to attend to oneself for long periods of time, ignore hunger, balance eating in relation to exercise, and so on. It is labour-intensive, ongoing work. The substantial time, attention, money, and energy that dieting takes can "divert women's energy away from participating equally in their private, social, and public lives" (Isaacs 2018, 576).[18]

Critics also point out that the constant self-surveillance and attention required by most diets can cultivate a form of self-centeredness and self-preoccupation (Bartky 1990, 73) and "encourages obsession with food, weight, [and] exercise" (Isaacs 2018, 581). As Lisa Schwartzman (2015, 93–94) argues, spending so much time and energy attending in this way can lead dieters to center their self-worth in their eating. This intense valuing of eating is reinforced by the development of dieting-related capacities. As Sandra Bartky (1990, 77) points out, our self-understanding as valuable and competent individuals is caught up in our skills. We become invested in the capacities we have developed, and become attached to their continued use and development, even if we would have been better off not acquiring them in the first place.

The constant threat (and likely eventuality) of failing at one's diet, combined with the high stakes of failure, can create significant anxiety (Isaacs 2018, 576). Narratives about eating and self-control mean that the nearly inevitable (and repeated) failure to stay on a diet is blamed on the dieter herself and her lack of self-

[18] The development of certain dieting capacities may also directly preclude acquiring others. For example, learning to ignore or respond with antagonism toward hunger may make dieters lose (or never gain) the ability to perceive and respond to hunger and other bodily desires in less antagonistic ways (Schwartzman 2015). According to intuitive-eating proponents, the inability to perceive and respond appropriately to hunger is one of the central reasons that mainstream diets do not work (Tribole and Resch 2012).

control, rather than on the project or the tools. Therefore, she may experience herself as a shameful failure each time her diet does not work.[19]

Dieting may also cultivate an inability to enjoy food and eating and an antagonistic relationship to alimentary pleasures. From a weight loss perspective, food that tastes good is often framed as unhealthy and fattening. Taking pleasure in these foods is risky, as it could lead to overeating, binging, or falling off the diet wagon entirely. Welsh (2011) argues that dieting highly restricts dieters' access to pleasure. She suggests that this can result in a life deprived of pleasure, especially for people for whom food pleasures are "available and affordable" whereas pleasures considered "healthy" and therefore acceptable are not.

Cressida Heyes (2007) emphasizes that dieting may produce some positive affects; there can be pleasure in losing weight and in social recognition for doing so, and in the mastery and exercise of skills and capacities built up through dieting. Dieting can also develop certain valuable capacities like goal-setting and awareness of the embodied effects of certain ways of eating and drinking (Heyes 2007, 67), as well as the ability to take pleasure in foods they had not previously been able to enjoy, like raw vegetables (86). However, the ability to enjoy vegetables aside, Heyes argues that the pleasures of dieting are largely contingent upon the continuation of, and success at, this largely impossible task (79). This affective economy serves to further reinforce commitment to the dieting project.

In sum, these critiques suggest that weight-loss dieting can produce a self preoccupied with weight, body, and food, and antagonistic toward its own body, desires, and alimentary pleasures. It can produce a self deeply invested in an impossible project premised on personal flaws and failures and characterized by overwhelmingly negative affects. While weight-loss dieting may also produce some valuable capacities and pleasures—which go some way to explaining its enduring appeal—overall its effects on the self are quite negative. And what is troubling about these selves extends beyond the individual: the dieting self that may be so preoccupied or isolated by shame and failure that it cannot recognize, acknowledge, or combat forms of oppression and inequality, including patriarchy (Bartky 1990) and unjust global food systems that create the localized abundance that makes dieting seem necessary, while others do not have enough to eat (Isaacs 2018).

Ethical Vegetarian Selves

Ethical vegetarian eating can shape the self in different and relatively better ways than weight-loss dieting. My argument here is inspired by Foucauldian analyses

[19] As Bartky (1990, 71–72) argues, for some women, dieting is motivated by a preexisting failure of one's body to be properly feminine, which can contribute to a sense of oneself as inherently deficient.

of vegetarianism which suggest, in different terms, that such a diet can be a way of shaping valuable selves (Taylor 2010; Tanke 2007; Dean 2014).[20] This sort of vegetarianism produces different, and in some respects better, selves than weight-loss dieting because it reframes what good eating is and therefore requires different practices to eat well. These practices can have less-deleterious effects on the self than those associated with weight-loss dieting.

Ethical vegetarianism does not demand a focus on body, appetite, and desires but instead draws attention to something outside the self: animal welfare, the environment, or slaughterhouse workers' well-being. The aim of the eating is not to achieve a certain bodily state—whether that be a particular weight, body size, or health status—but is to be morally good or ethically responsible. This goodness and responsibility is not primarily defined in terms of mastering one's cravings, desires, or appetites but is most importantly about engaging in eating that does less harm to or shows appropriate respect toward animals, the environment, and/or certain food producers. Good eating is therefore not primarily defined in relation to its effects on the body, or how well one has negotiated appetite, cravings, or temptation, but is understood as eating that does less harm or shows appropriate respect to entities other than oneself (Dean 2014).

This framing of good eating means that ethical vegetarianism does not require the constant attention to self that weight-loss dieting demands, and therefore it seems less likely to produce the self-absorption and self-preoccupation cultivated by weight-loss dieting. That said, in contexts where vegetarian food is not readily available, avoiding meat and animal products would require attention, investigation, and work, which could cultivate a preoccupation with food. As discussed earlier, this may be what compromises dietary-restriction measures in research on vegetarians. However, in contexts where vegetarian food is easily accessed or the eater has established a settled way of eating in her day-to-day life, this effect seems unlikely.

The way ethical vegetarianism frames good eating also means that it does not require the renunciation of desires or appetites, except insofar as one might have cravings for animal products. That is certainly a possibility, especially with new vegetarians, and as Cole points out, there is a general assumption that vegetarianism does require significant self-denial (Cole 2008, 708; see also Wright 2015). However, struggling with and mastering cravings is a less central aspect of this way of eating

[20] In contrast to these earlier works, my aim here is to suggest that vegetarianism can be a way of shaping the self whether that is the eater's goal or not, and that it can have measurable effects on the self that can be judged without recourse to the Foucauldian concept of normalization. While I find the critiques based on normalization compelling, there are insights to be had here that do not require that particular conceptual framework.

compared to weight-loss dieting. There is research showing that some vegetarians experience abstention from meat as "no sacrifice at all" (Malcolm Hamilton, quoted in Cole 2008, 709), and that vegetarian diets are actually more diverse than omnivorous ones (Cole 2008, 711). Ethical vegetarianism would therefore be less likely to produce an antagonistic relationship with desires, appetite, and one's body.

Relatedly, ethical vegetarianism is not antagonistic to food pleasure in the way that weight-loss dieting tends to be. From an ethical vegetarian perspective, while pleasure in food should not override ethical concerns, it is not antithetical to good food. Despite mainstream characterizations of vegetarian diets as ascetic (Cole 2008), good vegetarian food can taste good. Cole (2008, 711–12) suggests that vegetarianism might actually increase ability to take pleasure in food compared to omnivorous diets. This is one way in which ethical vegetarianism allows more space for pleasure in eating than weight-loss dieting does, and another reason ethical vegetarianism is likely to cultivate less antagonism toward cravings, appetite, and desires than weight-loss dieting.

Because eating well is not premised on keeping hunger and appetite in check, ethical vegetarianism may also be less anxiety-provoking than weight-loss dieting. When eating well requires mastery of desires, there is a regular, repeated risk of failure, multiple times a day. With ethical vegetarianism, there may be less of a struggle to eat well with each meal or each day or each hunger pang, less of a risk that you will ruin your diet at each moment. That said, the stakes of failure are quite high with ethical vegetarianism: if you fail, you fail to be a morally good person. This can contribute to anxiety about eating well in contexts where finding adequate vegetarian food is a challenge or in families or communities that are unsupportive or antagonistic toward vegetarianism. However, in cases where vegetarian food is readily available and those around the eater are supportive or at least neutral toward vegetarianism, the prospect of failing to eat well—and especially regular, repeated failure—is much less common with vegetarianism than with weight-loss dieting. In these contexts, ethical vegetarianism is less likely to cultivate a sense of being a shameful failure. In addition, ethical vegetarianism is not generally premised on being a personal failure, in contrast to the way weight-loss dieting is often premised on a bodily failure to conform to health or beauty norms. It may be framed as more of a positive, active, creative way of working to be a good person and build an ethical life (Taylor 2010) rather than as eating that attempts to ameliorate some flaw.

For these reasons, I suggest that ethical vegetarianism can shape a self that is in important ways better than one shaped by weight-loss dieting. This is not to say that it is unequivocally positive: in contexts where vegetarian food is not readily available it may cultivate a preoccupation with food, and in unsupportive contexts it may create anxiety, a sense of failure, and antagonism toward others. However, generally speaking, the practice of ethical vegetarianism can shape a self that is less

self-absorbed, less antagonistic toward desires and appetite, less anxious about eating, and less characterized by a feeling of failure than weight-loss dieting. It can shape a self that is open to taking pleasure in food. And in contrast to the self-absorption and preoccupation cultivated by weight-loss dieting, it may also shape an attentiveness to and consideration of ethical reasons such as our obligations to other living creatures or the environment as relevant to eating choices.

Insofar as a false positive could undermine ethical vegetarianism as a viable option for young women and girls, then, it can deprive them of a potentially valuable means of self-shaping. While there are other structured ways of eating that may also have neutral or positive effects on the self—intuitive eating (Tribole and Resch 2012) is an interesting possibility, for example—ethical vegetarianism is a well-established way to eat even within generally omnivorous contexts, like Canada and the United States. There are active online and in-person communities and resources for becoming vegetarian and sustaining a vegetarian diet, and this kind of support and community is important to maintaining a practice that is out of the norm in this way (see McWhorter 1999, 197). If accepting the VED hypothesis would discourage young women and girls from experimenting with this promising form of self-shaping, then our ethical evaluation should take this into consideration.

3. Back to the Hypothesis

I have suggested that wrongly accepting the Vegetarianism and Eating Disorders hypothesis may result in a variety of bad outcomes. It risks reducing the number of vegetarians, thereby increasing harms to nonhuman animals, the environment, and slaughterhouse workers, and undermining efforts to combat oppression. It may result in violations of the eating autonomy of young women and girls and deprive them of valuable eating experiences. I have argued that a false positive may also have negative effects on the self: specifically, on the agency of young women and girls—and it may discourage them from a promising means of self-shaping through eating.

The risk of delaying diagnoses or missing cases of eating disorders that otherwise might be caught and treated is significant. Eating disorders and disordered eating are misery-making and can be fatal. But the risk of undermining young women and girls' agency in a society that is often unsupportive or even hostile to women and girls' self-determination is also significant. So too—though perhaps less directly—is discouraging young women and girls from a valuable means of self-shaping through eating when the prominent alternative is so pernicious. I think that these considerations provide good reason to reject the VED hypothesis, pending further conclusive research. Whatever choice we make, the key is that making an informed, rational decision to accept or reject the hypothesis depends on having a comprehensive picture of eating's ethical importance. I hope to have shown that

along with more traditional considerations such as eating's impact on others and its implications for autonomy and valuable eating experiences, this comprehensive picture must include eating's self-shaping effects.

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