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School sucks for non-human animals

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Kindergarten

Mrs. Gladstone perched on the edge of the desk. Our class fanned around her feet on the floor necks cocked upward. During sharing circle Mrs. Gladstone always shared something first.

“Guess what I had for dinner last night?”

“Spaghetti?”

“No.”

“Dairy Queen?”

“No.” Mrs. Gladstone leaned forward, “You’ll never guess so I’ll tell you. I had frog’s legs!”

“Gross!” We squealed, chortled, and squirmed.

“Don’t be silly, frog’s legs are delicious and just like eating chicken legs!”

Sharing circle continued but I wasn’t listening anymore. I dwelled on frog legs and chicken legs and Mrs. Gladstone’s legs.

Sharing circle was a productive pedagogical exercise that day: I learned how simile worked (although I didn’t know the term simile until years later). I learned that I lived in a culture that slaughtered and ate animals (and amphibians!) and that my teacher enjoyed this activity and derived a peculiar pleasure in normalizing it for our class (I didn’t know the term normalize yet, but I felt and fought its affects). I learned that humans live by sucking the lives out of other animals.

I went home and told my parents I would never eat meat again.

Grade 1

In Grade 1 our school celebrated “Hamburger Day” when McDonald’s delivered hamburgers for each student at lunchtime, provided that each student’s parents had paid the \$1.50 fee and filled out the consent form. I’m not sure how this played out for poorer students.

I didn’t eat cows so my mother wrote a note asking if the school could order French fries instead for me. Mrs. Butcher (her real name!) thought that might

cause trouble as other students would also want fries so I had to opt out of Hamburger Day. I wanted to stay at school for lunch with my friends so my mother delivered a sandwich and fries for me. My classmates saw the fries and as Mrs. Butcher suspected, they whined.

“What would she do if she was stranded on a deserted island? Would she eat meat?” Mrs. Butcher asked my mother.

“She’s not on a deserted island and neither are you,” my mother said.

Lunch was a productive pedagogical exercise that day: I learned about thought experiments (although I didn’t know the term thought experiment until many years later). I learned about subtext (although I didn’t know the term subtext until many years later). I learned again that although school can be an expansive place where students are exposed to both new ideas and stark truths about injustices within the established order of our society, at the same moment those same injustices are systematically normalized for the sake of convenience: Mrs. Butcher would have had an easier time at lunch that day if I had just eaten the dead cow like everyone else.

A situational ethics?

I’ve revisited Mrs. Butcher’s desert island thought experiment often. Many teachers since Mrs. Butcher have asked me something similar at lunchtime, or on school trips and a surprising number of friends and colleagues have also posed it. I do enjoy thought experiments, and my answer to the question changes. Sometimes I say, “I’d eat your pet dog.” Sometimes I say, “I’d eat you.” Last time when I answered that I would eat the enquirer, I was scoffed at and called “unethical.” But would it be *unethical* to eat my teacher or colleague if we were stranded on a deserted island? I’m not sure. Would it be unethical for me to eat the flesh of factory-enlaved, tortured, and murdered non-human animals today for lunch because it’s convenient, “tasty,” and socially normalized? Yes.

Ingesting vegetable matter instead of flesh is an ethical choice that continues to arise in my life. Unsurprisingly, in the decades since Mrs. Gladstone’s kindergarten class, I haven’t been required to consume flesh or blood for a meal due to lack of vegetables. Continuous access to plant-based foods is part of a social-material network that gives rise to my menu choices. Yet, when coupled with desert-island thought experiments, I also see how something as basic as deciding what to eat for lunch is an illustration of material emergence of ethics in a given moment.

Karen Barad (2007) outlines her notion of *onto-ethico-epistemology* wherein being-ethics-knowledge are not pre-determined but rather emerge through interaction. Given certain conditions an ethic will become determinate (in my case my knowledge of animal welfare and nutrition, available food stuffs, taste, social-cultural norms give rise to an ethical stance on meat consumption). In this view an ethic isn’t an essential ideal but a situational, ongoing endeavor. And I think it’s more of an orientation than a destination: I may have the unsavory opportunity to

eat a non-human animal (or a human animal!) if my access to vegetables disappears. But for now, happily, I don't need to eat anybody for lunch in the canteen of the school I'm working in.

School still sucks for animals though

After thinking back through my years in primary school, speculating on desert island lunches, and glancing at the school canteen's menu choice (curry chicken on chips today) I realize that our prevailing social-cultural doxa continues to view non-human animals as commodities reared, chopped up, and served up for humans as if we are superior beings. It sucks that schools remain institutions that normalize mass-slaughter and consumption of body-parts for the sake of convenience and taste.

Of course I recognize that animals and humans are different from each other but I see the differences in degree rather than kind. Many scholars talk about how it sucks to be a human animal in the neo-liberal era, but I imagine it's a lot worse to be a non-human animal. I can speculate on how much it sucks because I learned how to do thought experiments in Grade 1.

Contributor

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