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**Should Whiteheadians Be Vegetarians? A Critical Analysis of the
Thoughts of Whitehead, Birch, Cobb, and McDaniel**

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Abstract. This article addresses the question whether Whiteheadians should be vegetarians in two ways. First, I question whether Whitehead should have been a vegetarian to be consistent, arguing that his omnivorous diet was inconsistent with his own philosophy. Second, I evaluate the works of three distinguished Whiteheadian philosophers on the ethics of vegetarianism. I argue that Charles Birch, John Cobb, and Jay McDaniel have prioritised animals justifiably over other organisms, yet that Birch and Cobb fail to do justice to the lives of other animals, and that the account provided by McDaniel fails to provide a convincing argument for minimal moral vegetarianism.

Key words: animals, ethics, process thought, vegetarianism, veganism.

Should Whiteheadians Be Vegetarians? A Critical Analysis of the Thoughts of Whitehead, Birch, Cobb, and McDaniel

Introduction

A number of thinkers have been inspired by the philosophy of the English philosopher Alfred Whitehead (1861-1947) to develop their ideas about environmental and animal ethics. The issue I am concerned with here is the moral basis of vegetarianism. The aim of this article is to explore and critically evaluate the views of Whitehead and three distinguished Whiteheadian scholars who have written on the ethics of vegetarianism. I start by examining Whitehead's views on this issue.

Was Whitehead a vegetarian?

Whitehead did not accept reductionist materialism. This is the view that reality is a collection of objects that are unable to change themselves, that are determined entirely by external forces. Neither did he agree to dualism, or the view that reality is constituted by two distinctly different categories of things, namely purely material objects and purely mental subjects. Opposing both ontologies, Whitehead conceived of reality as a collection of organisms. This way of thinking about reality has now become known as process thought or the philosophy of organism. The names that Whitehead (1978, p. 18) used to describe these organisms are 'actual occasions', 'actual entities', and 'drops of experience'. He used the word 'actual' to emphasise the ever-changing nature of the process of reality, in accordance with his view that, rather than endure, entities pop into existence and pass away in the blink of an eye. The

things which we perceive as enduring (e.g. a human person) are in reality spatio-temporal societies of actual entities. Whitehead thought that there are two basic ways in which these societies could be organised. Either they would be 'democracies' or aggregates, if they lacked a dominant occasion exerting central control over the subordinate actual occasions (e.g., stones), or they would be 'societies with regnant occasions'. For example, a human being is a society with a presiding or regnant occasion, the human mind, which exerts some central control over the whole human organism (Whitehead, 1978, p. 99-109).¹ He also thought that each presently existing actual entity is determined, to some degree, by past actual entities in what he called that entity's 'prehension' ('taking account of' or 'feeling'), and each present actual entity is itself, by virtue of its own creativity, determining, to some degree, the feelings of future actual entities. In this way, each actual entity is internally related to its past (because the past can influence the present) and externally related to its future (because the future cannot influence the present). He referred to the determined aspect as the actual entity's physical pole and to the determining aspect as its mental pole. Although Whitehead thought that the relative strengths of these poles may vary significantly when different actual entities are compared, both poles would nevertheless be present in all of them: 'The most complete concrete fact is dipolar, physical and mental. But ... the proportion of importance, as shared between the two poles, may vary from negligibility to dominance of either pole' (Whitehead, 1930, p. 104-105). Pete Gunter (2000, p. 214) has summarised this worldview as one wherein all 'happenings are suffused with mind: that is, with some level of awareness, however vague or flickering'. Indeed, Whitehead thought that different

organisms possess different grades or intensities of experience. Although he placed human experiences at the top, he also distinguished 'higher animals', providing the example of birds, from 'lower forms of animal life', providing the examples of insects (which would have 'some central control'), worms, and jellyfish (which would be 'very little centralized'), as well as from vegetation (Whitehead, 1978, p. 107-108; Whitehead, 1938, p. 3-4).

Although Whitehead (1938, p. 4) hardly addressed the question of what the moral relevance might be of his view that there are different grades of organisms, at one point he wrote that 'the higher animals ... rightly claim our love and tenderness'. It must be asked whether this view can be consistent with the likelihood that Whitehead neither abstained from eating 'higher animals' nor committed himself to vegetarianism at any stage of his life.² One particular paragraph in his work raises doubt as to whether Whitehead was consistent with his philosophy, given that he did not commit himself to vegetarianism. The relevant paragraph is found in his 'Process and Reality', where Whitehead makes a few remarks that bear on food ethics. After writing that living organisms are dissolved 'into somewhat simpler social elements' when they are eaten, Whitehead (1978, p. 105) proceeds with the idea that that which is used as food is 'robbed of something'. I presume that what Whitehead meant here is that living organisms die when they are used as food by other organisms, a process whereby more complex organisms are reduced to the simpler organisms out of which they are composed. Whitehead (1978, p. 105) then proceeds by writing that this is where 'morals become acute' because 'the robber requires justification'. Unless all forms of eating require a justification - an unlikely interpretation given that life would not be

possible without eating - this remark only makes sense provided a distinction can be made (under particular circumstances) between two categories of organisms, those that one can justifiably eat and those that one ought not eat. Although Whitehead did not state explicitly which categories he had in mind, he wrote: 'The living society may, or may not, be a higher type of organism than the food which it disintegrates' (Whitehead, 1978, p. 105). The example that Whitehead provided of such a living society is an animal.

To put things simply: Whitehead (1978, p. 108; 1933, p. 264) recognised that there are animals who eat other animals as well as animals who eat plants (and animals who eat both), in accordance with his view that most animals are higher organisms with presiding occasions compared to plants, which he thought of as democracies (Whitehead, 1978, p. 107; Whitehead, 1933, p. 264). The fact that Whitehead talks about 'morals' in this context indicates that he thought that the choice of what to eat becomes a moral issue when the feeding living society happens to be a moral agent. This suggests that Whitehead thought that, given the existence of a moral choice (under a given set of helpful circumstances) between eating what he considered to be relatively high organisms and eating relatively low organisms, preference must be given to the latter, at least in situations where eating the higher organisms would be preceded by their destruction for that purpose. This follows from the fact that it is hard to see why anyone would require a 'justification' if the choice of what to eat would not matter morally. Although Whitehead may have considered many other moral issues in relation to food choice, what is clear from this paragraph is that his line of thought would have committed Whitehead to a vegetarian diet, at least if we can

assume that adequate alternative foodstuffs were available to him at acceptable ecological and social costs and that consuming animals who had not been killed in order to be eaten (e.g., the victims who are killed by human traffic) would not have been a serious practical option in Whitehead's time. So we can only speculate as to why Whitehead chose not to adopt such a diet.

Whiteheadian developments

A number of process thinkers have contributed to the growing field of animal ethics. Here I engage with the works of three renowned Whiteheadian scholars, Charles Birch, John Cobb, and Jay McDaniel, to address whether they share Whitehead's belief that people should, where possible, be vegetarians and to explore whether their views on this issue survive ethical scrutiny. Two questions are crucial in this inquiry. First, should animals be granted greater moral significance than plants, and if so, on what basis? Second, should humans who can have adequate and secure diets without unacceptably high social or ecological costs have a prima facie duty merely to refrain from inflicting pain upon animals, or should they also grant them a prima facie right to life? If we have only the former obligation, some might claim that it would still be possible to kill animals painlessly, and that there is no reason why we should not do so. If we have the latter obligation, however, a case could be made for what I define as 'minimal moral vegetarianism'. This position holds that the consumption of animals should be allowed only if either of two conditions applies. The first condition is that no adequate and secure alternative foodstuffs could be made available without unacceptably high ecological or social costs. The second is that only animals who are killed

accidentally, or who die naturally, or animals who are killed for the satisfaction of their interests (so-called mercy killings) are eaten.³

Should plants be granted less moral significance?

With regard to the first question, most process thinkers hold the view that plants should be given less moral significance than animals. Jay McDaniel (1989, p. 69), for example, argues that ‘a plant cell’s aim to survive – much less to survive with satisfaction – does not seem to be as great as that of a porpoise’s interest in surviving with satisfaction’, and that therefore ‘instrumental considerations being equal, it is more problematic to take the life of a porpoise than a simple plant’.

A first assumption McDaniel (1989, p. 78) shares with Whitehead is that a plant is what Whitehead (1933, p. 264) called a ‘democracy’, which is why McDaniel speaks of a ‘plant cell’s aim’ rather than a plant’s aim as a whole. McDaniel doubts that most plants have a presiding occasion, a point that seems obvious in light of the fact that plants lack some sort of brain that many animals have. However, this could be questioned. Because plants are integrated systems with specialised parts (stem, leaves, roots, etc.), it is plausible that they possess a dominant center of activity that presides over all subordinate centers of activity (or ‘occasions’), in ways similar to the ways in which many animals can exert some degree of central control. Therefore, not only the cells that compose it but also the plant as a whole may possess an ‘aim to survive’. In fairness, McDaniel (1989, p. 79) concedes that this might be the case for some plants where he claims that ‘more complex plants such as angiosperms’ may ‘have the beginnings of a psyche’. Although more

complex plants may well have more developed capacities for integration compared with more simple plants, it is my view that the latter may also have a center of awareness coordinating the activities between their different parts. The possibility that a plant may survive splitting need not exclude the possibility that a controlling agent may be present with some awareness of the parts that constitute it and that it provides some unity to its different parts.⁴

The second assumption McDaniel makes is that a plant's – or to be more precise, a plant cell's – aim to survive is not as great as that of a porpoise's, and he makes a more general distinction between plants and animals in this respect. However, some plants have remarkable regenerative powers. Tomato growers, for example, know that tomato plants (or some of their parts) that have been severed from their roots can still regenerate. This suggests that plants may well have strong aims to survive. In spite of the fact that Whitehead (1978, p. 176) did not think that plants were individuals in the same sense as animals, he held the view that all actual entities have subjective aims, and he even appeared to acknowledge that plants aim at survival when he wrote that they 'exhibit modes of behaviour towards self-preservation'. If the ability to imagine future scenarios is considered to be a necessary condition for an organism to have an aim, it might be concluded that a plant does not have an aim in this sense of the word. Yet in that case, nonhuman (henceforth, 'other') animals might not have aims either, at least if what has been called the 'Bischoff-Köhler hypothesis' is accepted, or the hypothesis that other animals 'are unable to anticipate future (motivational) states' (Mendl & Paul, 2008, p. 370).⁵ On the other hand, if the word 'aim' is taken to be something much more basic, plants as well as animals could be

said to have aims. A plant could be said to aim at sunlight, and the human body could be said to aim at breathing, where neither requires conscious planning. So what is the difference between a plant's aim and the aim of an animal? Perhaps it is just that animals have greater control over their aims, rather than greater aims (for example, at survival) as such. The different parts that compose animals are generally more specialised compared to the parts that compose plants, and greater ability is required to coordinate these parts. Therefore, animals may need greater awareness to fulfill their aims. Although McDaniel's view that the 'aim to survive' is weaker in plants than in animals could be questioned, he may be right that plants are less concerned about or interested in 'surviving with satisfaction'. This need not be taken to imply that other animals are aware of the fact that they are trying to survive. Rather, their interests in survival could be understood in terms of their abilities to experience sadness and joy (or satisfaction) associated with either the lack or the presence of suitable survival conditions.

McDaniel's view that different organisms have different capacities to experience satisfaction is shared by many process philosophers. Although Whitehead (1933, p. 325) spoke of differences in intensities of feeling which he associated with 'strength of beauty', Charles Birch and John Cobb (1984, p. 145) have used the notion of different degrees of 'richness of experience', a concept borrowed from the biologist Waddington (1960, p. 204), who used it in a different context (namely, to express his belief that 'the general anagenesis of evolution is towards ... richness of experience'). Although little is said on how these capacities can be graded, these authors also agree that these differences are morally relevant. This enables me to respond to the first

question: These process philosophers think that, notwithstanding instrumental considerations, animals (or to be precise, all animals with relatively greater capacities for richness of experience) deserve more moral significance than plants, given that relative moral significance must be determined by relative strengths in capacities for richness of experience.

Does preferring animals over plants require vegetarianism?

Some readers may think that this has also provided the answer to the question of whether Whiteheadians should be vegetarians: If animals with capacities for rich experiences deserve more moral significance than plants, one might be tempted to think that consuming such animals must be prohibited, at least if the assumption is made that their consumption would be bound up inextricably with their being killed in order to be eaten.

This assumption, however, is flawed. Although it might be agreed that animals deserve more moral significance than plants and that animals therefore should not be killed intentionally, some may not object to the eating of animals who have been killed unintentionally, for example those who were killed accidentally by vehicles (those who are frequently referred to by the abstract name of 'road kill'). Unlike the time in which Whitehead lived, when there was far less traffic on most roads in comparison to today, these traffic casualties might secure a steady supply of animal bodies for those animal eaters who lived or traveled in the 'right' places. The possibility that animal bodies might be available to those who consume them without the need to kill them for this purpose has received little attention from process thinkers, which

might stem from the correct assumption that, for most animal eaters, animals are, de facto, killed in order to be eaten, rather than victims of road accidents.

However, process thinkers have also developed arguments to justify the conclusion that the fact that animals should be given greater moral significance need not result in a moral commitment to minimal moral vegetarianism. This takes us to the second issue identified previously, the question of whether the attribution of greater moral significance to animals than to plants must result merely in a prima facie duty to refrain from inflicting pain on them or also in a prima facie duty not to kill them in order to eat them.

How do Birch and Cobb justify the killing of certain animals for food?

On this issue, Birch and Cobb take the most traditional view. In their co-authored book with the title 'The Liberation of Life', Birch and Cobb (1984) endorse neither a prima facie duty to refrain from inflicting pain on animals nor a prima facie attribution of a right not to be eaten that would demand minimal moral vegetarianism. Their concern is primarily with making sure that the suffering endured by the animals humans eat is canceled out by the amount of pleasure animal products provide. Birch and Cobb (Birch & Cobb, 1984, p. 156) agree with Jan Narveson's (1977, p. 173) total utility version of hedonic utilitarianism, or the view that 'raising animals for food can be justified if "the amount of pleasure which humans derive per pound of animal flesh exceeds the amount of discomfort and pain per pound which are inflicted on animals in the process".' If animals can be kept in good conditions as well as be killed without feeling too much pain, Birch and Cobb would not object to their being reared and killed for human consumption. Their view that this is morally

justified would seem to gather strength in a world wherein there is no shortage of gourmands claiming to derive a great deal of gustatory pleasures from eating animals.

This, however, is not the full story. Birch and Cobb also make the point that not all animals are appropriate candidates for human consumption. They distinguish between two categories of animals, choosing chickens to exemplify one, and choosing porpoises and chimpanzees to represent the other (Birch & Cobb, 1984, p. 159-160; Cobb, 2001, p. 117). Birch and Cobb (1984, p. 160) object to the killing of porpoises and chimpanzees for food because 'there are indications of an individuality resembling our own and of social relations which lead to grieving for the dead'. This is contrasted with 'the chicken's case' where the 'element of uniqueness' would be 'trivial'. They add that a chicken would not be 'pervasively affected by the anticipation of its death' and might suffer as much when she dies in old age as the amount she might suffer while undergoing a 'violent death earlier in life'. Furthermore, they purport that a chicken's death would not cause 'grief' in other chickens (Birch & Cobb, 1984, p. 159). These views are put forward to support their view that as long as chickens are killed without being made to suffer too much and are replaced by other chickens, no value would be lost, which would not be a good justification for the killing (for food) of a different category of animals, including chimpanzees and porpoises.

I have problems with this theory for a number of reasons. The crucial issue is that it is not clear why a distinction between two categories of other animals is made. One could argue that, provided animals such as chimpanzees and porpoises are killed relatively painlessly and replaced by

other animals with similar capacities for richness of experience, it is not clear why Birch and Cobb's theory would object to their being killed. Birch and Cobb might object that this ignores the fact that these animals suffer in ways other animals do not because of their capacities to anticipate their own deaths. The counterargument is that this need not mean that killing these animals for food would necessarily be problematic (even when good food alternatives are available), provided that one has made sure that death is not anticipated and occurs suddenly. Moreover, it must be questioned whether other animals can anticipate their own deaths. If this refers to something like the (typical) human capacity to anticipate death, it would presuppose the existence of the ability to reflect on one's own mortality. If what Warwick Fox (2006, p. 207-245) claims in a recent book is right, namely that no other animals possess this ability, a negative answer must be given.

Should Birch and Cobb agree that other animals may not be able to anticipate death, they might still argue that the distinction can be justified by the fact that only some animals are able to grieve over the deaths of other animals. Yet the view that this applies only to the narrow selection of species identified by Birch and Cobb has been contested by Dombrowski (1988, p. 83), who provides a few examples (baboons, dogs, cows, pigs), including the example of 'veal calves' who would cause 'nothing short of grief in the mothers' after being separated from them. It must be asked, however, whether these feelings are adequately interpreted as instances of grieving. If the capacity to grieve presupposes the capacity to think about a situation in the past ('my mother was present') and to compare this with a situation in the present ('my mother is not present'), it must be doubted whether other

animals can grieve. According to José Bermúdez (2003), non-linguistic organisms cannot have thoughts about thoughts (because thoughts must have linguistic vehicles to be the objects of further thoughts), and therefore would not be able to entertain thoughts about the past either. Bermúdez (2003, p. 180) argues that ‘thinking about temporal relations ... requires being able to think about the possibility of propositions being true or false at different times’, and therefore is inextricably linked with the ability of linguistic organisms to grasp the meaning of truth-functional operators. In other words, an organism must be able to grasp that a particular proposition can be true at one time (it has been the case that ‘my mother is present’) and false at another time (it is not the case that ‘my mother is present’). If Bermúdez is right, focusing on the capacity to grieve would separate human animals from all other animals.

On the other hand, if we understand the capacity to grieve as a more general capacity to suffer the emotional pain that Dombrowski claims many other animals suffer after being separated from others, Birch and Cobb might be forced to enlarge the category to which chimpanzees and porpoises belong considerably. Research carried out with western scrub jays, for example, provides evidence for the view that these animals might be able to re-live experiences, thus possessing episodic memories (Clayton & Dickinson, 1998). These birds were found to be able to use information about the locations and times at which they had cached different food types to make subsequent retrieval decisions. Although this does not establish that these jays have conscious memories of past experiences, so that they would be able to – in the words of Mendl and Paul (2008, p. 375) – ‘ruminate on past

events', this need not exclude the possibility that, like western scrub jays, a wide range of other animals might be influenced by events that happened in the past both in their behavior and in their experience. Mendl and Paul (2008, p. 376) refer to research carried out with amnesic human patients which shows that, even in the absence of conscious memories, such patients manage to 'discriminate appropriately between people with whom they have had staged positive or negative encounters'. On this basis, they write that, even if the assumption is made that other animals are unable 'to travel mentally in time and recall the events episodically' they might 'still be capable of experiencing the emotional components of traumatic events' (Mendl & Paul, 2008, p. 375). If we understand grief in terms of a general feeling of sadness associated with a past event that involved an animal being separated from another animal, it can be concluded that Birch and Cobb might have been too restrictive in limiting the existence of these kinds of feelings to their narrow selection of animals.

A further question is why it would be morally wrong, at least *prima facie*, to kill for food those animals who may be able to grieve, in either the general sense or the more restrictive sense, whereas it would be fine to kill other animals for food, provided humans derive sufficient pleasure from eating them. Birch and Cobb do not provide an answer to this question separately or together in their joint work. Rather, they seek to ground the distinction between the two categories of animals also in the claim that only some animals are unique. This theme is repeated in one of Cobb's (2004, p. 18) more recent writings, where he claims that humans are 'much more fully individuated' compared to deer. However, it is not clear why some animals, for

example chickens, should lack uniqueness. The word 'unique' is defined in the dictionary as 'without a like' and is derived from the Latin word 'unus', meaning 'one' (Schwarz et al., 1994). In view of this definition, it would seem to me to be clear that chickens are unities. It does not seem right to conceive of a chicken as being a part of a larger whole that one might call 'chickenhood', or to say that the concept of 'a chicken' is in fact a plural noun for the different things that compose a chicken. Birch and Cobb might be tempted to conclude that chickens are not unique on the basis of the view that chickens might look very similar to one another to the untrained eye. However, although identical human twins also may look very similar to one another, it would be wrong to deny that they are unique individuals on the basis of the fact that they resemble one another. Likewise, I believe it would be wrong to deny chickens or deer individuality on the basis of the view that they look like species members. Although many human beings may find it difficult to observe differences between other animals and to imagine that they might have different characters, I do not think that this should be used to ground the view that animals are not individuals. The fact that animals can mobilise their body parts in a synchronised way to pursue particular objectives should provide us with sufficient evidence to conclude that they are individuals.⁶

Apart from the question of whether other animals are individuals, Birch and Cobb also seem to attach moral significance to whether an animal possesses 'an individuality resembling our own'. This is confirmed elsewhere by Cobb (2001, p. 117), where he writes that whether an animal shows 'similarity to human beings' matters morally, clarifying at the same time that

this is not 'the only basis of valuing other species'. It is not clear what the nature of this similarity should be, and what other bases might be relevant. Regarding the nature of this similarity, we could, for example, distinguish between physiological and cognitive similarity. When we compare monkeys and dolphins, for example, the former may be more similar to humans physiologically, but the latter may be more similar cognitively. Cobb himself actually uses monkeys and dolphins as examples to make the point that species such as dolphins - whom he considers to be more dissimilar to humans - should not necessarily be less valuable. Therefore, a clearer articulation of the nature of morally relevant degrees of similarity and of the relative importance of similarity in relation to other values would have been a welcome addition to their account of animal ethics. For our present purposes, however, it is sufficient to conclude that Birch and Cobb fail to provide an answer to the question of why the killing for food of those animals who are more dissimilar (in all respects), yet not of those who are more similar to humans, should be regarded as acceptable in situations where humans do not need to engage in that killing.

One response to this problem would be to relocate animals similar to humans to the tier of animals who legitimately can be killed for food in most circumstances, so that only human animals remain in the other tier. Although this option is not favored by Birch and Cobb, someone who is inspired by their account and who is not convinced by the moral relevance of the capacity to grieve could nevertheless focus on the question of whether one's death would cause grief in others, another issue that has gained Birch and Cobb's attention. However, this attempt to use the importance that Birch and Cobb

appear to give to whether one's death is grieved by others to ground a distinction between human and other animals is not without its problems either. One problem with this view is that not all human deaths are bemoaned by others. If the assumption is made that even humans whose deaths are not bewailed by others have a prima facie right not to be killed, the prima facie right not to be killed cannot be determined by whether one's death would be grieved by others.⁷ Another problem is that humans can be affected negatively by the death of any animal, irrespective of whether the animal in question happens to be human. Those who keep companion animals, for example, may grieve the deaths of their companions. Therefore, someone who attaches moral significance to the question of whether one's death would be grieved by others would be obliged to take on board not only humans but also some other animals. And if only loved animals would make it into the top tier, it must be asked whether this would be fair to animals who are not loved by humans or, for example, to companion animals whose owners die. In my view, it would fail to do them justice.

In conclusion, Birch and Cobb have failed to establish that there are two tiers of animals, where it would normally be acceptable to kill animals belonging to one tier, but not animals in the other tier. Although I agree with their view that animals' ability to feel pain matters morally and that – to use Cobb's own words – we should not 'turn our backs upon their suffering with indifference', I find the view that we should be justified to 'turn our backs' provided that the interests most other animals have are deemed to be outweighed by the pleasures humans derive from eating their bodies difficult to reconcile with any view that might plausibly be held by those whom Cobb

(1990, p. 271-272) has referred to as those 'few brave souls' who 'talk about ... animal rights'.

McDaniel on vegetarianism

Although Birch and Cobb provide a negative answer to the question of whether we should support minimal moral vegetarianism, a positive answer appears to be given by Jay McDaniel (1989, p. 71) who writes that 'Christians in industrial societies whose lives do not depend on the eating of meat can and should choose vegetarianism', at least if McDaniel regards this to be a moral duty also for those who are not Christians. However, because McDaniel (1989, p. 71) proceeds by relating his 'boycott' of the 'meat industry' to 'the appalling conditions under which most animals are raised for food and transported to slaughter', it must be asked whether he would support such a boycott if these 'conditions' were better than they in fact are. In other words, does McDaniel object to the killing of some animals for food only because of the ways in which animals are treated in the process or also because he believes that some animals have a prima facie right to life that should not be taken away from them by humans 'whose lives' do not 'depend' on consuming animals?

McDaniel appears to value both positions, at least with some qualification. Although he seems to be especially concerned with the well-being of factory farmed animals who may have – in McDaniel's (1989, p. 22, 112) words – 'almost no opportunities for quality existence', he is also concerned with the killing of some animals, at least as long as 'human survival' does not depend on it: 'in slaughtering certain animals we violate

their interests in surviving with some degree of satisfaction'. This statement, however, may not imply that he grants to all animals a prima facie right not to be killed for food, given that he applies the notion of 'interests' only to 'animals with advanced nervous systems' (McDaniel, 1989, p. 22). This claim raises many questions, not in the least how 'advanced' an animal's nervous system should be, why the possession of such a nervous system should be important, and whether the notion of 'interests' could also be applied to animals who lack such nervous systems. These are issues to be explored in another article.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown that there is one paragraph in Whitehead's work where he implies minimal moral vegetarianism, yet there is no evidence to suggest that Whitehead ever committed to adopting a vegetarian diet. I have also argued that Whiteheadian philosophers generally ground a moral distinction between plants and animals in Whitehead's view that there are higher and lower grades of experience in nature. Although I question the view that plants are mere 'democracies', I embrace the view adopted by the Whiteheadian philosophers whose work I engaged with here that a morally relevant distinction must be made between plants and animals. In addressing whether the recognition of this distinction implies a prima facie duty merely to refrain from inflicting suffering on other animals or a duty to adopt minimal moral vegetarianism, I have explored the works of Birch, Cobb, and McDaniel on this issue. Because Birch and Cobb's views are unconvincing and because McDaniel's account leaves many questions unanswered, I shall engage critically with the works of other Whiteheadian philosophers who have

discussed the ethics of vegetarianism in an ensuing article in order to develop my own position on Whitehead's minimal moral vegetarianism.

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Notes

¹ Another example is provided to illustrate the difference between 'democracies' and 'societies with regnant occasions'. When water molecules are poured into a glass, we can speak of a democracy or an aggregate: No higher organism is formed. The experiences of the collection of molecules coincide with the experiences of the different molecules. When water molecules are parts of a living cell, by contrast, they are part of a higher organism with its own experience that does not coincide with the experiences of the molecules that compose it. The cell as a whole has a regnant occasion that unifies and structures the subordinate occasions. It is not a democracy. The more widely used term for 'society with a regnant occasion' is Hartshorne's (1972) notion of a 'compound individual.'

² Although I have no evidence to believe that Whitehead was a vegetarian at any stage of his life, I would be grateful to receive evidence that he might have been.

³ It must be emphasised that minimal moral vegetarianism is a moral position, rather than a label to describe what people eat. Although further work is needed to define what would qualify as 'unacceptably high ecological or social costs', I provide two examples here of what may and may not be considered 'unacceptably high'. If the Inuit living in polar regions, for example, made the claim that they must eat animals because the costs of importing alternative foods would be unacceptably high, this seems to me to be acceptable. If the English made the claim that the ecological or social costs of eating alternative foods would be unacceptably high, this does not seem to be acceptable.

⁴ Although the issue of whether plants have presiding occasions deserves more discussion than I can give to it here, I do not like to exclude the possibility that they might have them. Whatever may be the case, what Clare Palmer (1998, p. 89) claims in the context of discussing Whitehead's views on the issue, namely that the fact 'that cuttings can be taken from a plant in a way impossible with higher organisms demonstrates its lack of centralization', is a non sequitur.

⁵ I agree with Linzey (2009, p. 45) where he makes the point that the term 'nonhuman' may not be appropriate to refer to other animals as it is rather odd that we refer to other animals by what they are not. Without qualification, however, the term 'other animals' is not without ambiguity.

⁶ Incidentally, Birch and Cobb's inability to regard some animals as individuals illustrates a wider societal lack of empirical knowledge concerning the lives of other animals, which has been problematised by Ariel Tsovel (2006). Tsovel argues that the inability to perceive some degree of similarity between ourselves and chickens, which she considers to be necessary for the development of an empathic relationship, is hampered by the fact that virtually all people are deeply alienated from the lives of chickens. This is attributed to many things, including the division of labour, the propagation of fantastic images portraying the 'reality' of farming, and the use of scientific approaches to study the lives of other animals, which objectify and generalise from the lives of the individuals involved.

⁷ Elsewhere, Birch (1990, p. 65-66) expresses disagreement with the view that it would be appropriate to dispose of companion animals who are no longer wanted.

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