The moralization of eating behavior. Gendered cognitive and behavioral strategies

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Abstract

Eating is an essential part of our lives, but its moral implications are rarely investigated. The present paper reviews current psychological trends regarding this topic. Existing academic literature and its implications for future research are discussed. The first part of the review concerns the macro level of analysis, looking at humans’ symbolic relationship with food throughout history. The second part focuses on the individual level of analysis, referring to current psychological investigations, currently focused on three key domains: moral decision-making strategies and adaptations, gender as a moral choice moderator, and social and personality correlates.

Keywords: morality; cognitive dissonance; gender; food; meat; vegetarianism; moral disengagement

1. Introduction

Perhaps because morality is a latent variable, moral psychologists commonly operationalize it in an abstract manner, according to traditional philosophical thought. Therefore, moral psychology is a blooming field of research (Haidt, 2007), but its practical implications are rather narrow in scope. For instance, Kohlberg created the moral dilemma vignette methodology based on abstruse ethical paradoxes, lose-lose scenarios where either choice is costly and morally defendable. He also assumed that moral decisions are the result of conscious rational processes. Thus, moral psychology often interprets moral behavior as exceptional and profoundly intellectualized, despite the contention that ethics are a customary part of life (e.g., Walker, Frimer, & Dunlop, 2010).

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The present paper takes the latter stance on moral issues, namely that they are prevalent in quotidian situations. Authentic moral situations, unlike previously studied moral dilemmas, have several distinctive characteristics: implicit connotations, a win-lose scenario, and varied, flexible resolutions. Specifically, most moral circumstances lead to implicit, automatic choices. They generally pit a morally defendable choice against a self-serving choice, in a win-lose scenario (e.g. tipping versus keeping the change, or giving up a bus seat versus staying in one’s seat). Likewise, true moral issues are rarely dichotomous, most often providing a variety of adjustable solutions.

The topic of eating behavior was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it is a common activity for all people, to such a degree that it is rarely subject to rigorous inquiry. Secondly, the research areas that consider eating a popular topic for investigation – medicine, or clinical and health psychology – adopt a narrow approach that views eating only as a biological necessity, seldom considering its sociocultural and moral implications. Nonetheless, recent research about this topic has given rise to several interesting research questions, which have yet to be addressed with a robust and structured methodological approach. Can eating behavior be viewed from an ethical perspective?

2. Cultural evolution and the religious moralization of meat

From an evolutionary perspective, Rozin (2002) argues that, because the human species is generalist and omnivorous, it can easily adapt to a wide variety of trophic niches. This biological predisposition explains the large individual and cultural variability in food preference. However, a flexible dietary pattern places humans at greater risk of food poisoning, which is why cultural regulation is necessary, through moralization (Rozin, 1999; Rozin, 2002). When a preference becomes a value, through the process of moralization, it gains certain psychosocial attributes: higher identity centrality, stronger emotional and motivational salience, stronger cross-generational transmission, and institutional and financial support (Rozin, 1999).

Moralization facilitates mechanisms of transgenerational learning: memetic (Heylighen, 1998) and cultural (Skinner, 1981) selection propagate the fittest informational content, namely axiological information, and the behaviors that offer the largest rewards, such as institutional and social enforcement.

Ancestral gastronomic practices are strongly bonded with religion and tradition (Baumeister, 2011), providing an empirical argument for the cultural selection of eating behaviors. Food goes beyond necessary physiological practice and is often endowed with symbolic and even moral meaning. To illustrate, the world’s oldest religions, Hinduism, and Buddhism, traditionally abstain from meat (Preece, 2008). Another argument in favor of the strong cultural regulation and propagation of food-related mores can be found in Fessler & Navarrete’s (2003) cross-cultural comparison of food taboos. The authors found that all cultures have an ambivalent attitude toward animal food products, viewed as both highly prized and proscribed. This ambivalence could be due to cultural evolution, as Fessler & Navarrete claim. Since these commodities were both a rich source of desired nutrients and a dangerous wellspring of contaminating pathogens, tradition selected the most adaptive behaviors, in accordance with their dualistic nutritional value (Fessler & Navarrete, 2003). Eating meat was permitted only under strict circumstances.

3. Individual cognitive and behavioral approaches

Social sciences have been examining our complex symbolic relationship with food. Although it is not a familiar topic for mainstream psychological research (Rozin, 2007), recent research is outlining several other novel areas of gastronomical and ethical importance, such as the question of animal rights and their welfare (Dawkins, 1990), the degree to which they possess sentience, globalization and cultural independence (Tester, 1999), sustainability and the need for organic farming practices (Dagevos & Voordouw, 2013; Henning, 2011), and health (Key, Davey & Appleby, 1999; Sabaté, 2003). Of these multifarious scientific approaches to eating, the present article focuses on a single aspect. The following sections explore the psychology of humans’ ambivalent relationship with food animals.

3.1. The moral dissonance in eating behavior

In current secular Western thought, gastronomical moral issues are different from those of ancient religious traditions. The present case of eating behavior moralization is caused by the ‘meat paradox’ (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam & Radke, 2012), which is an instance of cognitive dissonance. A conflict between one’s own eating
behaviors, which are dependent on animal suffering and death in factory farms, and one’s cognitions regarding the life rights and welfare of non-human animals (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam & Radke, 2012; Ferguson, 2004), is at the heart of this incongruence.

This paradox is inherent to modern society. The dominant cultural mindset centers meals around certain animal species’ meat (Sobal, 2005), such as chickens and pigs. Simultaneously, it upholds the rights of other animal species, such as cats and dogs. This arbitrary and conflicting status quo offers no alternative to these socially acceptable diets, insofar as it is empowered by gastronomic normativity (Boyle, 2003) and a strong tradition of instrumental animal use (Knight, Nunkoosing, Vrij & Cherryman, 2003).

3.2. Dissonance reduction through moral disengagement

Behavioral and cognitive strategies can reduce cognitive dissonance. In the case of the ‘meat paradox’, behavioral options include homestead farming, adopting a meat-free (vegetarian) diet, or excluding animal products entirely (vegan). These are uncommon choices in most developed countries.

Most people conform to the culturally dominant eating pattern, further compelled by sensory gratification. They resolve or partly diminish the cognitive dissonance by morally disengaging from their plates. The literature lists several direct and indirect cognitive strategies, used as defense mechanisms against mental discomfort (Ruby, 2008; Veilleux, 2014). Direct strategies include labeling certain species as livestock (Herzog, 1988) and degradation of the animals’ psychological abilities, namely cognitions (Mameli & Bortolotti, 2006) and secondary emotions (Bilewicz, Imhoff & Drogosz, 2011). Labeling and dehumanization reduce the subjects’ ability to suffer (Bratanova, Loughnan & Bastian, 2011) and their moral rights (Loughnan, Haslam & Bastian, 2010). Indirect strategies include dissociating meat from the animal it belonged to and ignoring or repressing knowledge of gastronomically motivated animal cruelty (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam & Radke, 2012).

3.3. Behavioral strategies: possible correlates and moderators

Gastronomical deviance provokes hostility and alienation (Crain, 2009). Health is considered a weighty ethical issue, which can justify restrictive eating patterns (e.g. as a weight management strategy). However, moral vegetarianism is socially disapproved, because it violates traditional norms (Beardsworth & Keil, 1993). Often times, ethical vegetarians choose to disguise their motives, citing reasons such as food allergies, in order to circumvent uncomfortable mealtime debate.

Gender stereotypes and social norms lead to men and women having different relationships with food (Arganini, Saba, Comitato, Virgili & Turrini, 2012). Furthermore, they are affected differently, if they to choose a vegetarian diet. More specifically, men are discriminated against by vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike, which may explain why two thirds of vegetarians are women. Ruby & Heine (2011) showed that both men and women judge vegetarian men as more virtuous, but also as more feminine than omnivores. Another potential explanation is that men tend to have less positive attitudes regarding animals in general (Kavanagh, Signal & Taylor, 2013).

Discrimination is also aimed at vegetarian women (Young, Mizzau, Mai, Sirisegaram & Wilson, 2009). Merriman’s (2010) qualitative study found that male family members had the strongest negative reaction toward their kinswomen’s dietary change, whereas the family’s reaction toward recently vegetarian men was favorable, or at most neutral. Merriman claims that these different reactions may be explained by a paternalistic mindset, where women are seen as the ones responsible for shopping and preparing the food, but men decide what would be an appropriate meal. Indirect evidence may support this perspective, such as quantitative studies that assessed men and women’s attitudes toward food. Beardsworth et al. (2002) showed that women are both more aware of the health, environmental, and welfare implications of their food choices, as well as commonly responsible for food purchase and preparation; despite this, they are more likely to give in to social pressure when it comes to food choice.

These qualitative and quantitative studies bring apparently contradicting results. Further studies are required, in order to clarify ethical vegetarianism correlates and determinants.
3.4. Cognitive strategies and personality correlates

Cognitive dissonance reduction strategies are also influenced by gender. Men preferentially employ direct defenses, while women utilize indirect defenses (Rothgerber, 2013). The reason for this gendered strategy is yet unknown.

A closer look at moral disengagement strategies (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996) may show that they are the same processes, whether used to justify mistreatment of animals or fellow humans. A few studies examined the disturbing implications of this tentative conclusion. The use of cognitive defenses to minimize the impact of eating meat was unsurprisingly found to be negatively correlated with empathy toward other animals. However, it had the same relationship with reference to empathy toward humans (Knight, Nunkoosing, Vrij & Cherryman, 2003), especially toward marginalized out-groups (Bastian, Costello, Loughnan & Hodson, 2012). Moral disengagement from animal suffering was also correlated with indifference with regard to human cruelty and violence (Vollum, Buffington-Vollum & Longmire, 2004) and dehumanization (Marcu, Lyons & Hegarty, 2007).

4. Conclusions

Although moral psychology is becoming a popular area of research, there is a dearth of empirical investigation into quotidian moral behaviors. The present theoretical review outlines current methodologies, highlighting unanswered research questions about food ethics. The first part of the review adopts a systemic approach to eating behavior, examining dietary more propagation through tradition and religion. Many of the aforementioned cultural mechanisms deserve further inquiry. Particularly, memetic and cultural evolution are often mentioned by social scientists, but are difficult to operationalize and test empirically. Therefore, further research in this area is needed. The role of morality in social regulation is also a topic for future investigation.

The second part of the paper, aimed at the individual level of analysis, investigates cognitive and behavioral strategies which lead to certain dietary patterns. Researchers often assume that the ‘meat paradox’ is present, at least on some level, in all persons. However, before conducting studies about the implications of defenses and coping mechanisms, a necessary first step would be to test this assumption. Moreover, on the subject of gender and food moralization, most psychological research is qualitative, and results seem contradicting. Integrating qualitative results and developing further quantitative methodologies would help to explain the reasons behind behavioral and cognitive dissonance reduction strategies. Last but not least, strategies of moral disengagement from food animals, such as dehumanization, are correlated with moral disengagement regarding other humans. However, current results are preliminary and speculative, warranting further research on this topic.

To conclude, the psychological study of ethical vegetarianism is in its infancy, but shows much promise, due to novel interest in the topic. Since it is a relatively new area of interest, qualitative research methodology can help to elucidate the field (Knight et al.). It may provide researchers with new divergent viewpoints on the subject matter, especially considering the small proportion of vegetarians by comparison to the general population, which limits the validity of quantitative approaches. There is also much interdisciplinary attention regarding this topic, which can provide interesting research directions, original perspectives and intriguing hypotheses. However, quantitative approaches are still limited in scope. Valid and validated methods and instruments are yet to be developed. Future inquiries may also shed light on analogous processes, such as the creation of human rights and welfare standards, the process of human dehumanization, and the ethical bases of gender differences in food preference.
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