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The Vegetarian's Dilemma: Do Fish Qualify as Meat?

New research shows how vegetarians who eat fish avoid cognitive dissonance.

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John Cleese, a co-founder of the British comedy sketch group Monty Python, once quipped “*If God did not intend for us to eat animals, why did he make them out of meat?*”

But are all animals made of meat? According to the 19th-century anthropologist Peter Lund Simmonds, the answer is yes. In his delightful 1859 treatise [*The Curiosities of Food or the Dainties and Delicacies of Different Nations Obtained for the Animal Kingdom*](#), Simmonds described over a thousand forms of edible animal flesh. Among these delicacies were pickled elephant toes, baked coffee rats, and the tongues of sea lions.

My grandson Ryland, however, does not share this view. When he was 5-years old, I tried to convince him that because we are animals, humans are also made of meat. When he said, “That’s not true, Grandpa!” I asked him to make a list of creatures he did think were comprised of meat and a list of animals that were not. He placed cows, pigs, chickens, and, for some reason, monkeys (with the exception of Curious George) in the meat category. Dogs, cats, elephants, chimpanzees, and Big Bird, however, fell into the “not meat” group.

My little exercise in moral thinking with Ryland was done for fun. But the question of which animals we think of as meat is ethically important as well as psychologically interesting. For example, [studies](#) have found that 60% of people who identify as vegetarians eat some form of animal flesh nearly every day. Fish is particularly problematic. My friend Doris is a professional dietician. She considers herself a vegetarian yet she cheerfully eats fish. Once, when I pressed her on this, she quickly responded, “I don’t eat anything that has a face.” And Virginia Morell, author of [Animal Wise](#), has a vegetarian pal who says it is okay to salmon “because they eat their own babies.”

They are not unusual. In [a 2002 study](#), 41% of vegetarians admitted that they sometimes consumed fish. This line of thinking even applies to some vegans. When Bill Clinton explained

to a CNN interviewer how much his health has improved since he became a vegan, he casually slipped in, "Now I try to eat salmon once a week."

Fish-Eating Vegetarians?

People who eat fish but not other forms of animal flesh are referred to as "[pescatarians](#)." Dozens of studies have examined the psychology of vegetarianism. (For reviews, see [here](#) and [here](#).) No investigations, however, have focused on people who consume fish but not mammals or birds, until now. UCLA psychologists Daniel Rosenfeld and Janet Tomiyama recently reported the results of the first research on the attitudes, motivations, and identities of pescatarians in the *Journal of Health Psychology*. (You can read the full text of their article [here](#).)

Their paper described the results of two studies. In the first, Rosenfeld and Tomiyama compared the motivations and attitudes of pescatarians versus strict vegetarians. They recruited 104 pescatarians and 135 strict vegetarians through MTurk, Amazon's on-line research subject pool. The participants completed a survey that assessed: their diets, the degree they felt humans deserve more ethical concern than other animals, whether their food choices were motivated more by ethical or health concerns, their rating of the health benefits of eating fish, and the degree they believed fish could feel pain.

They found that, like Bill Clinton and my friend Doris, 37% of the pescatarians in their sample claimed to be vegetarians or vegans even though they ate fish. Further, when compared to strict vegetarians, the pescatarians:

- Tended to emphasize the importance of health in their dietary decisions rather than ethical concerns for the treatment of animals.
- Were more likely to think fish is an important component of a healthy [diet](#).
- Were more likely to believe that humans deserve more moral concern than other species.
- And were less likely to think fish could feel pain.

Resolving the Fish-Eating Vegetarian Paradox

In their second study, Rosenfeld and Tomiyama surveyed 251 pescatarians, also recruited through the MTurk subject pool. Their primary interest was to explore differences in the "dietary identities" of pescatarians who think of themselves as vegetarians and pescatarians who do not. But they also tacked on the question, "Do you consider fish to be a type of meat?"

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Shockingly, nearly half of the subjects (41%) did not believe that fish were made of meat. Further, the pescatarians who denied, for example, that a chunk of raw tuna served in sushi bar is meat were twice as likely to claim they were vegetarians as were pescatarians who did consider fish a type of meat.

Rosenfeld and Tomiyama wrote, "*One reason as to why many pescatarians paradoxically consume animal flesh yet consider themselves vegetarian is that they simply do not view fish as meat... We speculate that viewing fish as distinct from other meat may be a strategy for*

reducing the [cognitive dissonance](#) and threats to one's moral [self-concept](#) one might feel from viewing oneself as a meat-eater.”

The Difficulty of Thinking Straight About Fish

In their first study, the UCLA researchers reported that pescatarians tended to deny the existence of mental states in fish. This finding is not surprising. Indeed, it is consistent with other research showing that the [denial](#) of mind in animals is commonly used to avoid the cognitive dissonance that inherent in the human proclivity to both love animals and love to eat them. Psychologists refer to this situation as [“the meat paradox.”](#)

But in their second study, Rosenfeld and Tomiyama found that nearly half of fish-eating vegetarians concocted an additional mental mechanism to avoid feeling guilty about their dietary proclivities. They simply deny that fish are made of meat.

By the way, now 9-years old, Ryland recently told me that he has changed his mind and that, because we are animals, humans are made of meat. His 4 year-old brother Hudson, however, is not convinced.

* * * *

Postscript: In her essay, [The Ethical Case for Eating Oysters and Mussels](#), the evolutionary psychologist Diana Fleischman makes a convincing case that is perfectly okay for vegans to consume the flesh of bivalves.

References

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