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By mrsouth@gmail.com, Thu, June 02, 2011

B.R. Myers is the most articulate anti-meat scold at The Atlantic, but James McWilliams is the most prolific. His recent contribution to the food debate, "Foodies vs. Darwin: How Meat Eaters Ignore Science," starts off like a less interesting version of Myers' "[The Moral Crusade Against Foodies](#)," with finger wags aplenty at food writers who care more about gustatory pleasure and supporting humane animal farming than grumpy asceticism and vegan abolitionism.

Fortunately, McWilliams escapes Myers' shadow later in the article when he brings up evolution, something that McWilliams claims meat eaters clearly ignore if we persist in dining on the bodies of other animal beings despite our familiarity of the original *Animal Liberation*, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. McWilliams writes:

*"Nature," Aristotle wrote in Politics, "has made all animals for the sake of man." For Christians, of course, that role belonged to God.*

*But Darwin and Mendel, with their theories of evolution and genetics, put an end to this self-serving fantasy of dominion. They did so not only by scientifically situating humans in the same category as non-humans (animals), but by undermining the assumption that humans, as Waldau puts it, are "the pinnacle of and reason for creation." Today, enlightened neo-Darwinists embrace the idea that shared genetic heritage—and often profoundly similar genetic structure—between humans and non-human species confirms the interrelatedness and continuum of all animal life. And this, as I see it, changes everything.*

*When humans and non-human animals are part of a continuum, rather than qualitatively distinct forms of life, human meat-eaters confront a serious quandary. It becomes incumbent upon us to forge a contemporary justification for carnivorous behavior. Aristotle and Genesis will no longer do. By undermining the long-held basis of inherent human superiority over non-human animals, the science of evolution obliterated the framework within which thoughtful carnivores long justified their behavior. As it now stands, human meat-eaters, unless they reject modern science, support the killing of non-human animals without the slightest intellectual or ethical grounding.*

McWilliams conveniently glosses over the fact that Darwin wasn't a vegan. But maybe that's okay. Jesus wasn't a Christian either.

Nevertheless, I think it's McWilliams who is misreading Darwin, not meat eaters. In *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin said, "I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed." If Darwin was right, this means — according to McWilliams' premise — that it is morally wrong to eat anything at all.

And according to a study called [The common ancestry of life](#): "A formal demonstration of the Universal Common Ancestry hypothesis has not been achieved and is unlikely to be feasible in principle. Nevertheless, the evidence in support of this hypothesis provided by comparative genomics is overwhelming."

Morally, then, we should not eat. Unless we ignore science.

McWilliams' point hinges on a premise that he accepts as a given and never defends. He fails to explain what our genetic

similarities to other lifeforms has to do with whether or not we can eat them. At least when animal rights philosophers credit sentience as the morally relevant factor, they're being specific. But not only does McWilliams never explain why shared genetic heritage and structural genetic similarities demands veganism, he also never tells us how similar is similar enough to grant admission into our moral sphere.

Since we might possibly share a genetic heritage with all life on the planet, it's no good to look at that to determine what we can eat. Unless McWilliams wants to clarify that he means the most recent genetic ancestors. But does that mean that we can't eat chimpanzees but can eat bonobo chimps? Better for him to steer clear of that one and see if structural genetic similarities can mandate veganism.

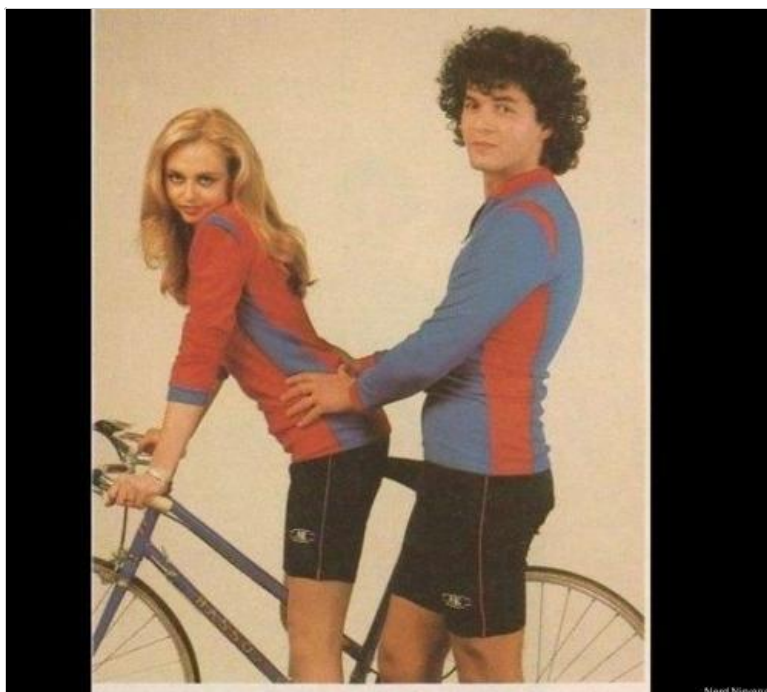
McWilliams says that we need a new justification for eating animals now that we know we are on a genetic continuum with them. But of course we are on a genetic continuum with plants too. For instance, according to the Stanford School of Medicine, [we have 15 percent of our genes in common with mustard grass](#). McWilliams has unwittingly given ammo to defensive omnivores who like to shout, "What about plants?!" The task for McWilliams, then, is to define just exactly where on this genetic continuum we can start eating.

Naturally, any number that he picks will be arbitrary and self-serving. Hint: He needs to figure out the highest percentage of genes we have in common with any vegan food and then say that everything more similar to us than that is what we can't eat.

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