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Kristeva and Food

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Abject and food; Abjection and food; Animality;
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Introduction

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva discusses food prohibitions in the context of developing a general theory of abjection. There, she defines the abject as what defies categorization and thereby inspires both horror and fascination. As she describes it, abjection is an essential part of psychic development and necessary for weaning a child from its dependence on its mother's body. She also argues that abjection is part of the process of becoming a human being. If on the level of the individual abjection is necessary for separating from the maternal body, on the level of the social, abjection is necessary for separating from the animal. Both of these separations involve eating and prohibitions against eating. In terms of the maternal body, the infant is weaned off of breast milk. In terms of the social, the infant learns that it is not an animal and therefore must

abstain from incestuous, cannibalistic, or murderous urges. In an important sense, one becomes human by eating other animals rather than one's kin. This distinction between kin and food is elemental in how an individual conceives of herself in relation to others and the world, particularly the world of nonhuman animals.

The Notion of Abjection

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* analyzes powerful fantasies of eating and devouring associated with both animals and women, particularly mothers. The first half of *Powers of Horror*, which sets out the theory of abjection, could be read as an account of the essential link between animal and mother in the constitution of the human psyche. As Kristeva describes it, abjection is the result of the return of repressed ambiguity or ambivalence inherent in the "fragile" boundaries between maternal body and infant on the personal level and animals and human on the social level. The abject, so to speak, is neither fish nor fowl; but rather, it is the in-between that resists categorization. This is why it provokes both fear and fascination.

The Oral Stage in Psychic Development

On the level of the infant, these fears revolve around the oral phase with biting, eating, and devouring. Kristeva argues that fear, especially

in children who have animal phobias, hides an aggression, which at the earliest stages is an oral aggression related to both food and speech (1980, p. 39). The child feels aggression in response to its fear both of the loss of maternal satisfaction and of paternal prohibition against its closeness with the maternal body. She argues that the child responds to both deprivation and prohibition with aggressive impulses, which in the case of the maternal body may literally include the urge to bite or devour to incorporate the maternal body in order to hold on to it (cf. 1980, p. 39). In the case of animal phobia, the child's own aggressive instincts are projected onto something outside of itself, an animal, as a shield not only against the deprivation and prohibition exercised toward it by its parents but also against its own violent impulses, most particularly the urges to bite and eat. At this stage, these impulses revolve around incorporation as an attempt to devour and thereby possess the parental (not yet) love object.

The Good and the Bad Breast

For Kristeva, there is an inherent connection between eating and other forms of assimilation, including the assimilation of love and of language. In the beginning, all of these forms of assimilation come through the mouth. For the infant, the mouth is the first center of bodily cathexis associated with pleasure, deprivation, and language acquisition. Words, like breast milk and its food, pass through its mouth. Kristeva interprets the phobic fantasies of being bitten, eaten, or devoured by a scary animal as a projection of its own aggressive drives, particularly the urge to bite, eat, or devour the maternal body. Following Melanie Klein, Kristeva identifies the infant's earliest desires to bite, eat, or devour in relation to the mother rather than the father; originally, the infant's ambivalence is directed toward her. In Kleinian terminology, the mother's breast is split into the good and the bad breast. The bad breast threatens to turn on the infant and bite or devour him: the maternal breast bites back. Kristeva extends this Kleinian thesis

with her theory of the abject mother, who appears as both fascinating and threatening to her child.

Phobia, then, represents the failure of introjection of what is incorporated through the mouth, both maternal breast and paternal words (1980, p. 40). The precocious child does not yet have the linguistic or symbolic competence to properly displace the thing by substituting words, so it displaces by inverting its own impulses to bite and eat onto a telegraphic symbol like the phobic animal. This child may have a facility with, and fascination for, words, but its logorrhea does not effectively stop up the empty mouth deprived of the maternal breast.

Abjection and the Maternal Body

For Kristeva, fear of animals is correlative to fear of maternity. On the level of the social, this power is the mother's generative power (1980, p. 77); on the level of the individual, this power is the mother's authority over the infant's body and its satisfaction. Both collectively and individually, infants depend upon the maternal body (and animals) for continued life, especially nourishment; and this dependence is repressed through a process of abjection in order for the group or individual to assert its independence and fortify the boundaries of its identity. Kristeva interprets prohibitions against incest and contact with mothers or women, particularly during menses – symbol of women's fertility and generative powers – as attempts to regulate their power, what she calls “a loathing of defilement as protection against the poorly controlled power of mothers” (1980, p. 77).

Prohibitions Against Cannibalism and Incest

Relying on anthropological literature, Kristeva maintains that in cultures where population growth is needed for survival, prohibitions against contact with the maternal body, namely, incest and cannibalism, are relaxed (1980, p. 78). These anthropological accounts lead her to ask

“Is that parallel [between concerns for over – population and prohibitions] sufficient to suggest that defilement reveals, at the same time as an attempt to throttle matrilineality, an attempt at separating the speaking being from his body in order that the latter accede to the status of clean and proper body, that is to say, non-assimilable, uneatable, abject?” (1980, p. 78). She goes on to suggest that fear of the generative power of the mother not only makes her body abject and uneatable but also makes all bodies abject and uneatable. She says “I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother” (1980, p. 79; parentheses in the original).

The body becomes inedible, not literal flesh and blood that like animals’ can be consumed, but rather metaphorical flesh and blood, which is to say, kin – fellow man, brother. In other words, giving up the literal consumption of flesh and blood produces and is produced by the metaphorical notion of flesh and blood as kinship. Humans don’t eat their kin. In terms of animals, the circular logic runs as follows: if humans eat animals, they are not kin; animals aren’t kin, so humans eat them. Because their flesh and blood is literally consumed, they are not metaphorical flesh and blood and vice versa; because they are not metaphorical flesh and blood, they are literal flesh and blood in terms of what humans eat.

Kinship by Marriage or Meals?

Given Kristeva’s analysis of the structural relation between the mother and the animal in the process of abjection and identity formation, it’s important to ask why the taboo against eating the abject maternal body does not also apply to eating the abject animal body. We might ask why the taboo against eating the abject maternal body does not also apply to eating the abject animal body. On Kristeva’s analysis, the social struggle against the abject is a battle of the sexes over whether paternal or maternal power will triumph; it is a battle between patriarchal and matriarchal social formations. Behind these

struggles, however, lay the animals. Even while discussing the power struggle between masculine and feminine or paternal and maternal, Kristeva returns to the animal. She asks whether food loathing or prohibitions against certain foods, particularly animal flesh and animal products, are a matter of marriage or of meals.

Following this line of thought, which comes from the anthropologist Célestin Bouglé, and combining it with the theories of anthropologists Louis Dumont and Mary Douglas, Kristeva argues that loathing or revulsion must be explained in terms of an opposition between pure and impure, which is imposed upon or displaces sexual difference. The opposition between pure and impure allows for the substitution of rituals of purification for sacrifice. Both rituals of sacrifice and rituals of purification, however, revolve around killing and eating animals. Kristeva traces the origins of religion, particularly religious taboos; and she finds the mother and maternal body behind all such taboos. In the transition from rituals of sacrifice to rituals of purification, one thing remains the same, the abjection of the maternal body.

Biblical Food Prohibitions

The role of the maternal body in relation to the animal is particularly poignant in Kristeva’s analysis of what she calls the “semiotics of biblical abomination” or the food prohibitions of the Old Testament (see 1980, Chap. 4). She argues that fear of the maternal body and its generative power and its authority over the bodily functions of children gives rise to food taboos involving mixing her body (or its symbolic equivalents) with the bodies of her children (or their symbolic equivalents). On the symbolic and imaginary levels, she interprets these food prohibitions as again revolving around the abjection of the maternal body. Literally, however, this abjection is played out on the bodies of animals and regulations about what parts of those creatures can and cannot be eaten and how. In this regard, all animal bodies become symbols for the maternal body and its relation to the bodies of children

(which is to say the maternal body of all, since all are born from a maternal body). Animal bodies become symbols for human bodies; and both our rituals of animal sacrifice and of purification involving eating only certain animals or animal parts harken back to the maternal bond.

Food Prohibitions and the Maternal Body

Although Kristeva identifies food prohibitions with border issues that relate humans to nonhuman animals, her analysis continually brings those issues back to the maternal body. She says: “When food appears as a polluting object, it does so as oral object only to the extent that orality signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body. Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human” (1980, p. 75). This passage suggests that the boundary with nonhuman animals “pollutes” the clean and proper borders of the human. On Kristeva’s analysis, however, this pollution turns out to be just another form of maternal contaminant. Her thesis is that “biblical impurity is permeated with the tradition of defilement; in that sense, it *points to* but does not *signify* an autonomous force that *can* be threatening for divine agency. Such a force is rooted historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject’s identity), in the cathexis of maternal function – mother, women, reproduction” (1980, p. 91). She argues that dietary prohibitions are aimed at the mother as the first source of nourishment and milk. These taboos are attempts to fortify precarious boundaries between the maternal body and the social and individual subject insofar as they are directed toward “intermixture, erasing of differences, threat to identity” (1980, p. 101). Biblical food prohibitions are aimed at separation and distinctions that avoid the ambiguity and mixing threatened by the maternal body. All food prohibitions, then, according to Kristeva, are symbolic regulations of the power of the maternal body.

Thou Shalt Not Seethe a Kid in His Mother’s Milk

For example, she maintains that the biblical command “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk” is a metaphorical prohibition against incest between mother and child symbolized by mixing its flesh with her milk (1980, p. 105). She concludes that biblical dietary prohibitions are “based upon the prohibition of incest” (1980, p. 105). All food taboos involving animals, on the symbolic level, are really prohibitions against contact with the maternal body. Kristeva even interprets the Eucharist in terms of the maternal body. Unlike Sigmund Freud who in *Totem and Taboo* describes the Eucharist as another ritualistic repetition of the totemic celebration of eating the father, Kristeva sees it as both a repetition and disavowal of the primal “object” of the urge to devour, the mother. She suggests that cannibalistic urges to eat the body of another are always disguised (or not so disguised) wishes to eat the mother (Freud 1913). On her account, every body recalls the maternal body, the first body encountered by the infant. The Eucharist brings together food and body in a ritualistic way that harkens back to cannibalism, symbolically repeating it as a way of preventing actual eating of bodies – except, as discussed earlier, the bodies of animals. Kristeva maintains that by bringing together body and bread, the Eucharist tames cannibalism: “By surreptitiously mingling the theme of ‘devouring’ with that of ‘satiating’, that narrative [the Eucharist] is a way of taming cannibalism. It invites a removal of guilt from the archaic relation to the first pre-object (ab-ject) of need: the mother” (1980, p. 118). It is noteworthy that in this passage, Kristeva talks of “taming” cannibalism as if it is an animal instinct that must be domesticated. Furthermore, she identifies both the urge to devour and satiation with the maternal body by insisting that the Eucharist is a purification ritual aimed at curbing and regulating incestuous and cannibalistic desires for the mother and the maternal body.

The Substitution of Mother for Animal

In her analysis of biblical dietary restrictions, she discusses at length taboos on various animals

and animal parts, but continually insists that these animals are stand-ins for the mother, much like Sigmund Freud who insists that the animals in animal phobias are representatives for the father. The process that Kristeva describes, however, is the metonymic slippage from milk and blood to maternal body rather than the metaphorical substitution of horse or wolf for paternal threats. Kristeva is concerned to distinguish the process of substitution or sacrifice identified by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* from the process of ritual purification involving dietary restrictions rather than killing and eating per se. In other words, dietary restrictions prevent the kind of murderous sacrifice of the primal horde whereby the animal becomes the father and vice versa. What Kristeva does not acknowledge is that animals are still killed and eaten even when purification rituals regulate that activity. The difference is one of emphasis. In purification rituals, the killing of animals is no longer a necessary part of the ritual (with some exceptions, e.g., Jewish kosher regulations on the bleeding of animals, which Kristeva interprets as again signaling the threat of blood, a metonym for menstrual blood). In all cases, however, animals are killed; only now their killing is not part of a ritual sacrifice but a regular part of domestic culinary practices, which involve various restrictions focused on how animal flesh is prepared. In other words, the killing of animals becomes domesticated.

Ritualistic Feasts and Dietary Prohibitions Prevent Violence

Kristeva sees the progression from ritual sacrifice to rituals of purification as a move away from violence and toward more sublimatory and therefore more humane forms of regulation; her analysis suggests that ritual sacrifice glorifies the violence of killing, while rituals of purification sublimate it. Yet, contra Kristeva, it could be argued that rituals of purification merely domesticate the killing of animals and allow for a radical disavowal of their slaughter to the point of creating factory farms, where mass

killing is hidden away from view rather than ritualized but extremely limited killing celebrated as animal sacrifice. Animals are no longer sacrificed because neither their lives nor their deaths have the symbolic value they did prior to domestication. Within psychoanalytic theory, their only symbolic value is either as a substitute for the father ala Freud or a stand-in for the mother ala Kristeva.

The Psychoanalytic Sacrifice of Animals for the Sake of Human Kinship

Moreover, the psychoanalytic domestication of animals itself forecloses not only the possibility of their wildness but also the possibility of their kinship with humans. They cannot replace mothers or father or sisters or brothers, but rather they must represent them or stand in for them. They must be either sacrificed instead of them – that is to say killed in their stead. Or, they must be regulated as a means of regulating ourselves. In either case, their value is defined entirely in terms of human relations and human exchange. Whether sacrificed or regulated, animals are killed or exchanged so that human society and human kinship is possible; and all of these accounts are based on, or presuppose, killing and eating animals. In this case, humans are not what they eat, and eating animals proves that they are not like them. Rather, humans become fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers on the basis of killing and eating animals. Symbolically, they bind individuals together as kin through the flesh and blood of their bodies and, at the same time, reassure that if humans can eat them, then humans are not animals. Literally, their death as animals makes it possible to live as humans.

Eating Separates Humans from God

Kristeva also describes the distinction between man and God as a dietary distinction. Man is not God because, unlike God, he/she is prohibited from eating certain foods. For example, in Genesis, God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of

Eden for eating from the tree of knowledge, but he does so before they can eat from the tree of life, which would make them immortal (cf. Kristeva 1980, p. 95). Kristeva points out that Adam's temptation is both a feminine and animal temptation – Eve is tempted by the serpent, and Adam is tempted by Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Kristeva interprets Genesis as reserving dominion over living beings for God and giving man the right to eat animals only after the flood and only then as an acknowledgment of his/her essential evil (1980, p. 96). At this point, temptations of the flesh become associated with both women and food, particularly meat eating. Temptations of the flesh can be interpreted as temptations arising from the flesh, from our so-called animal nature, or as temptations for flesh, as in the temptation to get “a piece of tail” either in the sense of women's flesh or in the sense of a rump roast. Kristeva reads this urge to kill and eat flesh as recognition of the death drive in its most primordial form, as the urge to devour (1980, p. 96). The prohibition against murder is no longer extended to killing and eating animals, but rather becomes displaced onto dietary prohibitions that prohibit eating carnivorous animals; man can eat only herbivorous animals and cannot eat or assimilate-incorporate rapacious animals or predatory animals that kill. This murderous nature is displaced onto the animals that one is not allowed to consume (cf. Kristeva 1980, p. 98).

Violence Toward Women and Toward Animals

Although her analysis of the death drive and the urge to devour in relation to killing and eating animals is an explicit acknowledgment of violence done to animals in order to shore up the boundaries of the notion of the human and of ourselves as nonanimals, again Kristeva presents it as more evidence that animals are stand-ins for the maternal body. Immediately following her discussion of the death drive in relation to devouring animals, she claims that biblical dietary prohibitions are

paralleled and founded in “the abomination provoked by the fertilizable or fertile feminine body (menses, childbirth)” (1980, p. 100). Kristeva's analysis not only makes explicit that abjection of the feminine and maternal body upon which the Western imaginary thrives and upon which man defines himself as clean and proper, but also it points to the inherent connection within this imaginary of animals and women, particularly mothers. What animals and mothers supposedly share is their connection to nature, and, as Kristeva says, “the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic” (1980, p. 102).

To acknowledge this debt, then, is not only to break the incest taboo by speaking of connectedness to the maternal (animal) body but also to stage the return of the repressed maternal, animal, and body. As many feminists have pointed out, within the Western imaginary, man constitutes himself as properly man against both the feminine and the animal. Kristeva's analysis makes a crucial contribution to psychoanalysis by revealing man's indebtedness and subsequent disavowal of both. She does so in part by complicating the maternal function, which she imbues with speech, law, and authority, attributes traditionally reserved for the paternal function and required for autonomy from the maternal body. Yet, what Kristeva's theory of abjection itself disavows, even while describing, is an indebtedness to animals, who metaphorically and literally nourish an individual's sense of self as human and as kin. The very notions of maternity or paternity, mother or father, that drive psychoanalytic theory are based on the displacement or condensation of these figures and animals. Whether it is Freud's father totem phobia or Kristeva's mother meal abject, the slippage between animals – specifically dead ones – and one's closest and most influential kin is formative of both social identity and individual identity. Moreover, on this account, non-violence toward other human animals is bought at the expense of violence toward nonhuman animals.

Summary

Whether it is Freud's father totem phobia or Kristeva's mother meal abject, the slippage between animals – specifically dead ones – and one's closest and most influential kin is formative of both social identity and individual identity. Moreover, on this account, nonviolence toward other human animals is bought at the expense of violence toward nonhuman animals.

Cross-References

► [You are What You Eat](#)

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