

# Veganism

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## 1. Introduction

Narrowly understood, veganism is the practice of excluding all animal products from one's diet, with the exception of human milk. More broadly, veganism is not only a food ethics, but it encompasses all other areas of life. As defined by the Vegan Society when it became an established charity in the UK in 1979, veganism is best understood as 'a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment' (Vegan Society 2016b).

The Vegan Society was founded in 1944 in Leicester by Donald Watson (1910–2005), his wife, Dorothy, and five other friends. But, like vegetarian principles, vegan principles have been around for much longer—for example, among adherents of Jainism who avoid doing any sort of harm to animals. Other famous vegan advocates, before the term was coined by Watson, were the British doctor William Lambe (1765–1848), who adopted a vegan diet based on health and ethical considerations, and the British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), who publicly objected to the consumption of **dairy** and **eggs**.

In a recent poll, it was estimated that there are at least 542,000 vegans in Britain, a steep increase from the 150,000 estimated in 2006 (Vegan Society 2016a). In the U.S, a recent study showed that 3.3 percent of the population declared to be vegetarian, half of which claim to be vegan—that is, around five million people (The Vegetarian Resource Group 2016).

There are two main moral justifications for veganism, both of which rely on a common assumption: that **sentience**, i.e. the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, is the necessary and sufficient trait to be morally considerable. (Although it is a disputed matter whether insects possess this trait or not, vegans tend to avoid the consumption of products such as honey or the use of products like silk, and generally oppose the idea of eating insects. Cf. McWilliams 2014.) In what follows, I present these two arguments and a third one which, although less popular, captures some core intuitions among vegans. I then present a challenge faced by veganism and two arguments that reject it as discriminatory, and briefly conclude.

## 2. Arguments for veganism

### 2.1 The argument against unnecessary suffering

Vegans and vegetarians coincide that the human interest in nourishment and gustatory pleasure derived from consuming nonhuman flesh is largely outweighed by the interests of nonhumans in not being subject to the conditions of **factory farms**. Moreover, vegans accept the most influential argument for **vegetarianism**, known as the **welfarist argument**. This could be summarized thus:

P1. It is morally wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to nonhuman animals.

P2. The production process of **meat** and of many other nonhuman animal products causes unnecessary suffering to nonhuman animals.

C: It is morally wrong to participate (as a producer, distributor, consumer, and so on and so forth) in the production process of meat and of many other nonhuman animal products.

The main complaint of vegans against vegetarians, however, is that the second, factual premise does not go far enough and should be replaced by the following one:

P2'. The production process of *all* animal products causes unnecessary suffering to nonhuman animals.

This leads to the following conclusion:

C': It is morally wrong to participate (as a producer, distributor, consumer, and so on and so forth) in the production process of *all* nonhuman animal products.

For vegans, endorsing the production process of some animal products (paradigmatically, free-range dairy and eggs) while banning others is misinformed at best and hypocritical at worst. It is misinformed at best, because it ignores the fact that even the most progressive animal-rearing practices inflict unnecessary suffering on the animals involved. For example, in **free-range farms**, male chicks and free-range laying hens who are no longer productive are routinely killed, and painful debeaking remains a standard procedure. It is hypocritical at worst, because it seeks to legitimize certain forms of animal rearing while condemning others, occluding the cruelty inherent to these practices.

Depending on how they interpret P2', vegans can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, *principled vegans* believe that it is simply not the case that the rearing of nonhuman animals for food can be done in a way that causes no suffering. It is therefore always impermissible to consume all animal products. On the other hand, *contingent vegans* believe that under current conditions it is morally wrong to consume all nonhuman animal products, but this is not inevitable and could change in the future—for instance, if our patterns of consumption and modes of production changed radically.

Among both groups, moreover, there is a subset who aspire not merely to change human diets into vegan diets, but to turn the whole natural world into a vegan world where suffering is insofar as possible eradicated. Along these lines, Jeff McMahan asks whether we should gradually get rid of **carnivorous species** in their entirety, given that they cause so much pain to others. McMahan's point is that, even if we are not *required* to prevent suffering among animals in the wild for which we are not responsible, we have a general moral *reason* to prevent it—so long as our acting on that reason does not bring about worse effects than those we could prevent, like massive ecosystemic imbalances and loss of biodiversity (McMahan 2010, his emphases). This position has been identified by some as a *reductio* against the ideals of veganism.

## 2.2 The argument against exploitation

This argument, also known as the *abolitionist argument*, runs as follows:

P1: It is morally wrong to treat sentient beings as property.

P2: Nonhuman animals are sentient beings.

P3: The production process of all nonhuman animal products requires treating them as property.

C: It is morally wrong to participate in any way (as a producer, distributor, consumer, and so on and so forth) in the production process of all nonhuman animal products.

Contra welfarists, who seek to improve the living conditions of farmed animals (for example, by advocating for larger cages for factory farm hens, by demanding that more **humane slaughter methods** be employed, etc.), abolitionists seek a total ban on nonhuman animal production which, for them, is synonymous with exploitation. As their name reveals, abolitionists regard their quest as analogous to the quest of those who rejected human slavery: just as the latter did not demand a better treatment for slaves, but the end of the institution as such, contemporary abolitionists do not wish to better regulate the meat and animal production industry, but fight to put a definitive end to it.

Gary Francione and Anna Charlton summarize abolitionism in six principles. First, there is no morally relevant trait that distinguishes humans from nonhumans that justifies treating the latter as property and, therefore, as having mere economic use for us. Just as treating humans as property is inconsistent with recognizing all humans as members of the moral community, treating nonhuman animals as property goes against their recognition as members of the moral community. All kinds of animal use, even *humane* ones, are thus unjustified. Second, if we recognize the right not to be treated as property, we must not seek to regulate, but plainly to abolish all institutionalized animal exploitation. It is morally wrong and practically ineffective to negotiate with factory farms *better terms and conditions* to promote animal welfare, because this will only result in them continuing to exploit nonhuman animals while making consumers more comfortable about their food choices. Third, veganism is the moral baseline for animal rights advocates, and vegan nonviolent education should be the cornerstone of animal rights advocacy. There is no third path between veganism and exploitation. Fourth, the only trait that matters to be morally considerable is sentience. Fifth, all forms of human discrimination, including speciesism, ought to be rejected. Sixth, nonviolence is the core principle of abolitionism (Francione and Charlton 2015).

Some radical abolitionists claim that at the core of their position is the idea that human and nonhuman animals are moral equals, and have a right not to be treated as resources of others. This is why killing animals for food is always wrong. In order for this idea to gain traction, two major assumptions over which most human cultures have been constructed over centuries need to be debunked: first, that human interests are more important than nonhuman interests; and that human lives are worth more than nonhuman lives. Let me present two of the most well-known arguments used to support these claims and the abolitionist's reply (Bernstein 2015). When it comes to interests, it has been typically argued that the interests of individuals who are claimed to possess rationality (i.e. humans) ought to count more than those of individuals who are claimed to lack such capacity (i.e. most nonhumans). It is not the case, however, that humans consistently act on this prescription. For one thing, we do not grant a higher moral status to humans with a higher degree of rationality; for another, we do grant moral status to humans who completely lack this capacity. This shows that **speciesism** (the term popularized by **Peter Singer** to refer to our unjustifiable bias toward members of our own species) determines our moral behavior. When it comes to the value of human lives vis-à-vis the lives of nonhumans, a stock argument in defense of giving more weight to the former comes from **John Stuart Mill**'s famous motto that 'it is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied' (Mill 2015, 124). Humans are claimed to feel both *higher* and *lower* pleasures, whereas nonhumans are claimed to feel only the latter. Among the higher pleasures that humans can feel are those connected to our future plans and projects. Nonhumans, by contrast, are always tied to their present situation.

In conclusion, our lives should be valued more than theirs. But this argument is problematic. To begin with, it is not obvious why a life fully engaged in the present ought to be deemed less worthy than one always anxious about future possibilities. Furthermore, if this were the case, we should then assign more value to the lives of humans whose life prospects are more sophisticated, but we don't—a further mark that what is at work behind these arguments is the speciesist's prejudice.

For some critics, one of the most troubling consequences of endorsing full-fledged abolitionism is that the number of farmed animals and also pets would radically diminish, eventually disappearing—the assumption being that any relationship between humans and domesticated nonhumans will necessarily be exploitative. The earth's landscape in an abolitionist utopia would thus be one of stark division and limited intercourse between humans and wild nonhuman animals, where domesticated nonhumans would have gone extinct (Wayne 2013 and Zamir 2004). Another focus of criticism refers to the second and third points mentioned by Francione and Chorlton. By denying the possibility of a morally acceptable third path between veganism and exploitation, abolitionists hinder rather than promote 'pro-animal strategic protest' that seeks to create better living conditions for farmed animals (Zamir 2004, 368). To the former charge, abolitionists may reply that more is not necessarily better, and that it is morally preferable to have a world with fewer, rather than more, lives that ought not to be lived. That domestication has been considered for centuries an acceptable practice is no justification for its continuation (the possibility of there being a lamb or pig raised for meat, but leading a flourishing, but short life is thus precluded). To the latter charge, meanwhile, abolitionists may respond that creating better conditions does not address the *real* problem, which is that the practice itself is wrong.

### 2.3 The argument against negative Global Health Impacts

While less mainstream, an innovative defense of veganism refers to the overwhelmingly negative Global Health Impacts (GHIs) associated with non-vegan diets. Starting from the assumption that health, holistically understood, is the most important moral value, Jan Deckers develops a moral theory based on duties to minimize negative Global Health Impacts (GHIs) or to maximize positive GHIs, where GHIs are a unit of measurement to evaluate the effects of our actions on the health of all biological organisms (Deckers 2011). These effects are *global* because the concept of health is holistic, encompassing all aspects conducive to flourishing; and because they take into account the consequences of our actions not only for our own health, but also for the health of other existing and not yet existing humans and nonhumans. The resulting prescription is *qualified moral veganism* which, while not setting a total ban on the consumption of animal products, maintains that vegan diets ought to be the default diets for the vast majority of the human population (Deckers 2016. For another version of veganism that tolerates exceptions, see McPherson 2016). To safeguard their psychological health, moreover, Deckers suggests that human moral agents should endorse *animalism*, defined as 'an interest in attributing greater moral significance to either dead or living animals than to other biological organisms', and compound it with *evolutionism*, 'an interest in attributing greater moral significance to those animals biologically closer to us' (Deckers 2016). Contra those wary of being accused of defending prejudices, Deckers happily acknowledges that keeping these will help to create overall positive GHIs (which is tantamount to saying that it would diminish negative ones), and should therefore be maintained. All these ideas should be realized by the Vegan Project, a political project that aims to pass laws that would authorize the consumption of nonhuman animal products only in a very limited range of cases (Deckers 2016, 2013).

Because of his holistic definition of health, Deckers' defense of qualified veganism highlights a moral

concern with the consumption of animals who die naturally or accidentally, an issue that has been largely overlooked by advocates of the first two arguments. It also encompasses two arguments for this dietary choice that are more popular among laymen than with philosophers. One is that qualified veganism is better for human health (**zoonoses**, or diseases transmitted from nonhumans to humans, being one major source of concern in relation to non-vegan diets). The other is that veganism is the best dietary choice if we care about the environment, i.e. if we care about the health of the planet as a whole. If the majority of the world population stopped consuming animal products, this would save enormous amounts of energy, soil and water; it would drastically diminish the pollution of air and watercourses with organic and industrial residues; and it would cut greenhouse gas emissions by 18 percent, more than the transport industry! (FAO 2006. See also **Vegetarianism**, where a similar argument is presented).

### 3. Arguments against veganism

#### 3.1 Does veganism really minimize harm?

Perhaps the main moral motivation for vegans who reject the consumption of all animal products because of the suffering involved in their creation is that, through their dietary choices, they believe themselves to be abiding by what the animals rights theorist, **Tom Regan**, calls the Minimize Harm Principle (MHP):

‘...whenever we find ourselves in a situation where all the options at hand will produce some harm to those who are innocent, we must choose that option that will result in the least total sum of harm’ (Regan 2004, 302).

That vegans actually realize this principle, however, has been questioned. As Steven Davis pointed out in a seminal article, given the large numbers of field animals killed by industrial farming, the MHP would seem to require following not a strictly vegan diet, but rather a diet that complemented plant-based food with pasture-fed free-range cattle and their derived products (Davis 2002). Davis’s proposal—succinctly characterized as the *burger vegan view*—might be nonetheless rejected by vegans on at least three different grounds (Lamey 2007). First, not only are Davis’s empirical data extremely limited for supporting the sweeping claim he makes; these data, based on barely two studies, also do not distinguish between animals killed by their **predators** as a result of the harvesting process (like mice killed by owls) and those directly killed by the agricultural machinery employed. By failing to make this distinction, Davis has either to acknowledge that predation in nature is a moral evil that has to be eliminated (a contentious position defended by a small subgroup of vegans, as shown above), or else do the maths again and accept that fewer animals are directly killed by a purely vegan regime than by a mixed regime such as that proposed by him. Second, livestock farms cause harms to humans that vegan farms don’t. Among such harms are the production of manure, which is a carrier of diseases such as *Escherichia coli*; a larger number of accidents among workers; dangerous jobs at slaughterhouses; and the contribution to global warming due to methane emissions (Lamey 2007, 340–41). These harms should also be taken into account. Third, Davis does not distinguish between accidental and deliberate harms, ignoring the fact that deaths caused by accident are standardly not deemed as wrong as deaths brought about deliberately. To this last point, Davis can of course reply that it is at least doubtful that deaths systematically caused by agricultural methods fit the definition of *accidental*; or, as he actually does, he can reply that deaths are deaths, no matter whether they are brought about intentionally or not (Davis 2002, 392).

If the moral relevance of the distinction between accidental and deliberate harms is rejected, a

different way to defend veganism against burger veganism is to remark that what is problematic about diets that include nonhuman animal products is that they use nonhumans merely as a bodily means for the non-vital ends of others—where being treated as a bodily means requires that its body is necessary to achieve the ends of others, it does not want to be treated in that way, and the loss of well-being when treated that way greatly exceeds the loss of well-being of the others when their ends are not met (Bruers 2015, 272–73). Because the agricultural systems behind vegan diets do not require using nonhumans as bodily means, they should be preferred. It could be counter-argued, however, that not only using nonhumans as bodily means, but also foreseeably harming them is morally problematic; and that, insofar as vegan agriculture foreseeably causes the deaths of thousands of mice, rats, opossums, rabbits and other small field animals, it is not without moral blemish.

Despite its problems, the burger vegan view must be taken seriously by vegans, insofar as it suggests a different trade-off for those who wish to comply with the MHP. Pointing out that there might be such a trade-off, however, does not go against veganism unless enough empirical evidence is gathered in its support. In the meantime, vegans can still claim that, in the face of epistemological uncertainty, abstaining from the consumption of all animal products seems like the least bad path to take if one is concerned with the minimization of unnecessary human and nonhuman suffering.

### 3.2 Meaningful omnivorism

A common critique against veganism, also leveled against vegetarianism, is that it severs our connection with the natural world and reinforces the anthropocentric paradigm, whereby we see ourselves as superior to all other beings. Dominique Lestel, for example, argues that to avoid eating meat and all other nonhuman animal products denies our own animality and is therefore a gesture of anthropocentric superiority. Contra Regan's dictum that we should avoid insofar as possible harming others (and that this should be reflected in our eating habits), Lestel's claim is that we should instead embrace the cruelty embedded in life: to eat meat and other nonhuman animal products is to celebrate our relationship with the latter (Lestel 2014). Not everything goes, of course: like other *meaningful omnivores* (see, for example, Pollan 2006), Lestel cautions against greedy meat-eaters as well as against unconcerned ones. Just like native groups like the Algonquin in North America used every single bit of their prey and thanked it, so should we turn meat-eating into a ceremony; and just like they did not take more than needed, so shouldn't we—which means rejecting contemporary Western *hypercarnivorism*.

### 3.3 A feminist critique

Veganism has also come under attack by some feminist writers who see it as a perpetuation of the Western androcentric paradigm where adult, middle-class males in industrialized countries are physiologically privileged to attain the moral ideal (George 1994). Those who cannot opt for veganism—because it might be nutritionally inadequate (like for babies, pregnant women and the elderly), culturally alien (like for the Inuit) or economically prohibitive (like for some urban poor)—are *excused* by vegan theorists. By routinely excusing what they consider to be morally wrong, however, critics point out that the latter end up systematically discriminating against the vast majority of the human population. Veganism should therefore not be considered as *the* morally correct dietary choice, but one choice among many others depending on individual and social circumstances.

## 4. Conclusion

Veganism is a growing dietary choice, especially popular among young urban dwellers in developed countries. I offered three main arguments as to why one may opt for veganism: to avoid the suffering of nonhuman animals; to avoid the exploitation and, therefore, rights violation, of nonhuman animals; and to diminish the amount of negative Global Health Impacts, i.e. to best keep one's individual health, and the health of human and nonhuman others. I have suggested, moreover, that vegans who wish to abide by the Minimize Harm Principle face a challenge: given the large numbers of animals who die because of current agricultural methods, it is an open question whether pure veganism (rather than, for instance, a mixed diet of country mice killed by the plow plus vegetables) should be the morally preferred option. I then pointed to two criticisms of veganism: first, that it further separates us from the natural world, and second, that it perpetuates the androcentric Western paradigm, where adult, middle-class urban males seem to be best fitted to attain this moral ideal. While the former seems arguable at least (insofar as it hinges on a contested conception of what is *natural* for humans), the latter partly relies on inconclusive empirical evidence (it is not clear that vegan diets are in fact nutritionally inadequate for babies, pregnant women and the elderly). All in all, the growing attention on the one hand toward what constitutes an ethical diet and, on the other hand, toward the moral status of nonhuman animals, suggests that veganism will become center stage in coming discussions of food ethics.<sup>1</sup>

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