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9 VEGANISM AS AN ASPIRATION

Lori Gruen
Robert C. Jones

How you cling to your purity, young man! [. . .] All right, stay pure! What good will it do? [. . .] Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk [. . .] Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood.

—HOEDERER FROM SARTE'S *DIRTY HANDS*

Introduction

Most people are now aware of the extreme suffering routinely experienced by animals raised for consumption in industrialized meat and dairy production facilities.¹ Undercover video of some of the most egregious forms of cruelty have made their way to the public. In response, the industry has begun promoting “ag-gag” legislation, anti-whistleblower laws that criminalize photographing or video recording inside these facilities. Despite desperate efforts to conceal how animals are treated, the cruel everyday practices found on factory farms and in slaughterhouses are no longer the industry’s dirty little secrets. Although there is increasing awareness of the horrible conditions that animals endure, the vast numbers and the extent to which these practices impact our shared world remain relatively obscure.

1. Much of this discussion draws on Gruen’s previous publications. See Gruen 2014 and 2011. We would like to thank Gunnar Theodor Eggertsson for important conversations that contributed to thinking about these issues. We would also like to acknowledge the generally instructive conversations that occurred at the Animals and Society and Wesleyan Animal Studies (ASI-WAS) Summer Fellowship Program in 2012, which helped us shape this chapter.

According to the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, roughly 1.02 billion cattle, 1.2 billion pigs, and 40 billion chickens worldwide are raised for food, most on factory farms (or what is referred to in the industry as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations—CAFOs). Most of these animals are confined indoors for their entire lives in areas that prevent them from moving around; they are denied species-typical social interactions, including raising young, who are removed at birth; and they are subjected to a variety of painful procedures—tails and ears are cut off and males are castrated without anesthesia, animals are branded with hot irons, birds have their beaks sliced off with hot knives, in the egg industry male chicks are ground up alive, and dairy cows are forcibly impregnated regularly to produce milk. Though the normal lifespan of a chicken is approximately 10 years, laying hens are “spent” and unable to produce eggs after just 2 years, at which time they are slaughtered. Broiler chickens are genetically modified so as to grow to “processing” weight in only 6 weeks, at which time they are sent to slaughter. Slaughter often doesn’t bring immediate relief from suffering as animals are shackled at the feet, hung upside down on a conveyor belt, and only occasionally are their throats slit cleanly enough that their deaths are instantaneous, leaving many to linger in pain, bleeding until they lose consciousness.

These numbers don’t include sentient beings who live in the sea. One source puts the number of marine animals killed for food in the United States alone at 51 billion (FFH, 2011). Common aquaculture procedures include taking animals out of their water environments, asphyxiating them in ice or in CO₂-saturated water, and cutting their gills.

As if the magnitude of animal suffering wasn’t enough to cause reasonable people to pause and consider the pain and death they contribute to in order to satisfy their personal tastes, industrialized food production is responsible for unprecedented damage to the environment, damage that harms humans and other animals. In the United States alone, the cattle, pork, and poultry industries produce nearly 1.4 billion tons of animal waste, 130 times the amount of waste produced by the entire human population of the United States (USSCANF, 1997). These wastes end up in our waterways and underground aquifers. In addition, the antibiotics fed to livestock produce antibiotic-resistant bacteria and resistance genes that make their way into ground and surface water, causing public health concerns. Most alarmingly, the UN conservatively estimates that roughly 18% of the total greenhouse gases emitted come from industrialized livestock production, more greenhouse gas emissions than all the transport on earth—planes, trains, and cars—combined (Steinfeld, et al., 2006).

The costs in terms of the violence, suffering, exploitation, domination, objectification, and commodification of animals for food, the destruction of the environment and the displacement of animals in the process, as well as costs to our own health and the health of the planet, call for immediate, effective, and decisive action at the personal, collective, and policy levels. We support ethical veganism as an empowering response to these atrocities. Ethical veganism is a commitment to try to abstain from consuming products derived from animals including meat, dairy, and eggs, as well as products derived from or containing animal products as an ingredient. In this chapter we discuss two different ways that people conceive of veganism,² veganism as a lifestyle or identity, and veganism as a goal. We argue that there are conceptual and practical problems with the former, explore arguments about whether either actually makes a difference, and optimistically conclude that veganism as an aspiration can.

Two Senses of “Vegan”

Many ethical vegans sincerely adopt veganism as a *lifestyle* as an expression of their commitment to ending the suffering that accompanies the commodification of sentient beings. Ethical vegans often see themselves in solidarity with one another in the struggle against cruelty and violence. Often the idea of veganism is accompanied by a sense that those practicing it have achieved a kind of ethical purity. Once one adopts a vegan lifestyle, she then has “clean hands” and may carry on her consumerism with a clear conscience, since no animals were harmed in the production of her vegan consumer goods. Sometimes seen as a kind of litmus test of one’s commitment to social justice for animals, veganism is often thought to be the “moral baseline” for those seeking to end the suffering and domination of other animals.

Though there are debates among vegans about questions of purity and commitment, there appears to be a growing public perception of vegans—that may be based in fact, prejudice, or more likely a combination of both—that vegans see themselves as better than and morally superior to non-vegans; that they can be “preachy,” and even annoying; that they often exhibit a kind of self-righteous zealotry, acting as the “vegan police” who promulgate veganism as the universal, one-and-only way to fight systemic violence against animals. Often these vegans are thought to judge non-vegans, including ovo-lacto vegetarians, as shirking their responsibility or being self-indulgent or simply cruel.

2. Other forms of veganism are discussed in the literature as well, for example, “veganarchism,” “boycott veganism,” and “engaged veganism.” See for example Dominick 1997 and Jenkins & Stănescu 2014.

This view, that the only ethical way to live is to adopt a vegan lifestyle, we call *Identity Veganism* (V_I). If followed strictly and universally, V_I is thought to keep one's hands clean. As the name implies, this sort of veganism is often thought of as an *identity*, and some people who would fall under V_I have even claimed that they are discriminated against as vegans. These vegans have an air of moral certitude and moral superiority. It was perhaps proponents of V_I that prompted philosopher Val Plumwood to describe vegans as "crusading [and] . . . aggressively ethnocentric, dismissing alternative and indigenous food practices and wisdom and demanding universal adherence to a western urban model of vegan practice in which human predation figures basically as a new version of original sin, going on to supplement this by a culturally familiar methodology of dispensing excuses and exemptions for those too frail to reach their exacting moral norms of carnivorous self" (2000, p. 286).

Of course, the V_I lifestyle we are describing comes in degrees. But there is another sort of veganism, what we will call *Aspirational Veganism* (V_A), that views veganism not as a lifestyle or identity, but rather as a type of practice, a process of doing the best one can to minimize violence, domination, and exploitation. On this view, veganism is an *aspiration*. V_A commits us to striving for a moral goal; V_A is something that one works at rather than something one is. Rather than seeing veganism as a kind of universal norm to be imposed as a moral imperative, on this view we should instead see veganism, as ecofeminist philosopher Marti Kheel suggests, as an invitation in response to the violence, exploitation, domination, objectification, and commodification that sentient beings endure in modern industrialized food production processes, part of a larger resistance to such harm and destruction (Kheel, 2004).

We don't think that every vegan is always either a V_I or V_A ; there is certainly some overlap here, and in different contexts someone who recognizes veganism as an aspiration may also express her commitments in ways that make it seem more like a lifestyle. Importantly, both types of vegans oppose the systematic cruelty toward and destruction of other animals. However, to see veganism as an aspiration is not to see veganism as *merely* an aspiration. To call oneself a vegan in the V_A sense while continuing consciously to act in ways that condone animal exploitation (for example, continuing to eat meat) would be to disingenuously appropriate the language of V_A and act in "bad faith." The focus of V_A is to imagine and earnestly try and actualize—to the best of one's ability—a world in which there is no animal exploitation, by working to minimize violence. While this is also a goal that V_I shares, to ascribe moral purity and clean hands to veganism is to make a category mistake. In the next section we discuss why we believe this to be the case.

Why Veganism Can Only Be an Aspiration

The belief that a rejection of industrialized livestock products allows one to avoid complicity in harming other animals is too simplistic and ignores the complex dynamics involved in the production of consumer goods of all kinds, global entanglements we engage with each time we purchase and consume food of all sorts. Vegan diets have "welfare footprints" in the form of widespread indirect harms to animals, harms often overlooked or obscured by advocates of V_I . Industrialized agriculture harms and kills a large number of sentient field animals in the production of fruits, vegetables, and grains produced for human (not livestock) consumption. As MacClellan notes, "large farm equipment used in the industrial agricultural production of staple crops such as wheat, corn, and soybeans harms many sentient field animals, including members of many species of rodents such as mice and voles, as well as rabbits and birds," not to mention reptiles and amphibians (forthcoming, p. 12).

Despite wanting it to be otherwise, vegan or not, we cannot live and avoid killing. Living today, even for vegans, involves participating unwittingly in the death of sentient individuals. For example, animal products are found in or used in the production of a great number of consumer goods including auto upholstery, beer, bread, candles, chewing gum, cosmetics, cranberry juice, deodorants, fertilizers, hairspray, house paint, lipstick, marshmallows, nail polish, plywood, perfume, photographic film, pickles, pillows, red lollipops, rubber, sauerkraut, shaving brushes, shaving cream, soap, soy cheese, sugar, surgical sutures, tennis rackets, transmission fluid, vitamin supplements, and wine.³ We can rail against the massive violence that is done to the huge number of living beings who did nothing to deserve their tragic fates, but neither our political commitments nor our moral outrage place us above the violent fray. All aspects of consumption in late capitalism involve harming others, human and nonhuman.

One of the most troubling examples is palm oil, a ubiquitous ingredient found in a large number of prepared "vegan" food products. Produced by clear-cutting, palm oil plantations in Southeast Asian countries such as Borneo and Sumatra have nearly wiped out remaining orangutan populations while harming members of many other endangered (and non-endangered) species. As demand for palm oil grows and as new plantations

3. There are other products too. This is part of a list published by PETA, <http://www.peta.org/living/beauty/animal-ingredients-list/>.

are developed in Africa, the destructive impact of palm oil may be greater than that of some products made directly from animal bodies or bodily excretions (Hawthorne, 2013).

Vegans have attended to the tragedy that farmed animals experience, but have generally paid less attention to the harms other animals suffer in the production of vegan foods. Thinking about consumption in a time of climate change may provide a clearer way to understand the ripples of responsibility. Though it is hard to calculate the direct harms to humans and other animals from greenhouse gas emissions attributable to the agricultural sector, it is impossible not to contribute to these harms and still eat (Gruen and Loo, 2014). To be sure, vegan diets are less harmful than those that include animal products, but vegan diets are by no means “emissions neutral,” and this is just one dimension upon which humans, vegan and non-vegan, negatively impact the earth and other animals. If we picture our responsibilities as a web, with direct harms at the center, vegans are certainly closer to the periphery than those who consume animal bodies, who kill animals, and who directly profit from the death of other animals, but vegans are still a part of the web, and not, as many practitioners of V_1 seem to believe, beyond reproach.

Living necessitates dying and, controversially, killing. We can't live without killing others or, at best, letting them die. When we live with companion animals, for example, other animals will have to die, most obviously to feed those animals. Even if they are vegan, dogs and cats will kill and eat other animals if they get a chance. And when we deny them that opportunity, it becomes more obvious how problematic our power over them is. If we are all vegan, growing plants to feed ourselves and other animals involves killing some other animals. Even if some vegans can practice “veganic” farming, that is, carefully growing plants in such a way as to not harm or displace the animals who live on the land while growing enough food to share with the “denizens” that may raid the fields—the vast majority of us cannot afford to create food in this way (Gruen, 2014).

Given this, veganism can be but an aspiration, and imagining oneself to be V_1 is an illusion.

“Humane” Killing

One might wonder whether aspiring to V_A condones purchasing locally raised animals who are “humanely” killed. Given that we are always implicated in the deaths of other animals, perhaps this recognition is what motivates young, affluent (mostly white) “students” with sizable disposable incomes to spend

\$15,000 to enroll in courses like the twelve week “full-immersion” butchery program at Fleisher’s Grass-Fed and Organic Meats in New York. Upon graduation, students are guaranteed to be able to butcher a lamb, pig, and steer. Tuition includes knives, “butcher’s armor,” and a copy of Fleisher’s *The Butcher’s Guide To Well-Raised Meat*. Students are also encouraged to read Michael Pollan, Joel Salatin, *The River Cottage Cookbook*, and *The Niman Ranch Cookbook*. Such do-it-yourself (DIY) “craft” butchery classes can be found in many other “foodie-friendly” cities such as Philadelphia and San Francisco. Underlying this booming alternative food movement is an increased awareness of the destructive nature of industrialized meat production, coupled with a sentimental nostalgia for a time when a majority of Americans were farmers and crafts persons living closer to the rhythms of the natural world. Described as locavorism, compassionate carnivorousism, the sustainable meat movement, the humane meat movement, the happy meat movement, the nose-to-tail food movement, and the conscientious omnivore movement, these alternative food movements market themselves as “free range,” “grass-fed,” “organic,” “natural,” or “cage-free,” all of which are thought to stand in for “humane.”

Since it is difficult to deny the cruelty involved in industrial animal production, it is promising to learn that there are growing numbers of people who are wary of participating directly in agribusiness. The possibility of “happy meat” may seem to offer an ethical alternative to the cruelty of the factory farm, ensuring happier lives and “humane deaths” for animals destined to become meat. An interview with Joshua Applestone, owner of Fleisher’s Grass-Fed and Organic Meats, exemplifies this core tenet of the “humane” meat movement:

Q: You were [a vegetarian]. What caused you to become [an omnivore]?

JOSH: After about 6 months of running Fleisher’s it was our bacon that put me back on a meat-eating track. My vegan/vegetarianism was an outgrowth of my beliefs about how horrible the factory-farmed meat industry is. Once I really knew where my meat was coming from and how these animals were treated and slaughtered I could feel comfortable eating meat again (Applestone, 2011).

Measured against the vast majority of consumers who are completely disconnected from the suffering they cause when they buy neatly shrink-wrapped cuts of meat, compassionate carnivores deserve some praise. Yet despite their supposed concern for the well-being of animals, relatively little attention has been paid to the actual treatment of animals on “local” farms.

Sadly, animals in smaller operations sometimes suffer more acutely than animals raised in factory farms due to lack of consistent veterinary care, given that such care is expensive and time-consuming for small farmers. Bohanec (2014) argues that when it comes to “humane” versus factory-farmed meat, the similarities outweigh the differences. For example, so-called “cage-free” eggs come from hens who, like hens raised on factory farms, experience overcrowding, debeaking, and a terrifying slaughter. So-called “organic” dairy products come from cows who are artificially inseminated and kept pregnant their entire lives. Their calves are removed at birth, where male calves are sent to auction for use as veal or beef. “Humane” meat comes from animals that, as on factory farms, experience tail docking, ear notching, castration, tooth-filing, and de-horning, all without anesthesia.

And slaughter is often done in the same way it is for animals reared more intensively. An overwhelming majority of animals raised on local farms are sent to industrial slaughterhouses, killed alongside their kin raised in industrial operations. A small minority of pasture-based farmers take pains to ensure that the animals they raise are killed with respect. Tim Young, for example, found a processor an hour from his Nature’s Harmony Farm that kills 9 cows a day, compared to the 400 an hour killed in large processing plants. Slowing down the killing process minimizes fear and helps to ensure that pain is minimized. When possible, Tim is present as the cows are killed. As he puts it, he wants to “be there to look each one of my animals in the eyes so that they can at least have a familiar face.” It is also his way of paying his last respects (Gruen, 2011).⁴

In order to avoid forcing animals to endure the terror of transport to slaughter, another small group of farmers is hiring “mobile slaughterhouses” that come to the farm to kill and process the animals. These Mobile Slaughter Units (MSUs) are USDA-approved slaughterhouses-on-wheels that travel to small farms, slaughtering animals on-site. One of these mobile units, owned by Lopez Community Land Trust in Washington, is a specially equipped, refrigerated trailer that is pulled to the farm by a diesel truck. After killing the animals (5–9 cows per day), the unit then drives the carcasses to a facility where they are cut into portions.⁵ Elizabeth Poett, who operates an organic ranch in Rancho San Julian, California, is proud to use

4. <http://www.naturesharmonyfarm.com/grass-fed-meat-farm-blog/2008/2/21/local-meat-processor.html>.

5. Etter 2008.

an MSU. According to Poett, the MSU provides each of her 600 cattle with “more noble deaths and cut[s] out the need for a long final slog in the back of a trailer to a far-off killing floor. It’s a dream to be able to run this beef business like I’ve been able to do it with the mobile harvest unit. I sleep better at night” (Adelman, 2009).⁶

Though MSUs slaughter fewer animals, they share more in common with industrial “processing” facilities than one might imagine. Animals are stunned with a captive bolt gun (or a firearm), sometimes taking two or three shots to render the animal unconscious. The animal’s throat is then slit and the body hung to bleed out, be disemboweled, and dismembered (Bohanec, 2013).

Those who aren’t ready to forgo consuming animals but who are uncomfortable with industrialized animal production often romanticize the connection they imagine they make to the dead animals they consume. Being involved in every step of production, including slaughter, creates a type of deep involvement that they can promote as laudable in an age when so much consumption is the result of various kinds of alienation. For many “compassionate carnivores,” killing and eating animals is justified by their sense of respect for the connection they develop with the food they eat, where personally involving oneself in the death of an animal seems to provide a more direct and ethical way of eating, one that honors the subjects of slaughter while they are being consumed. Killing the animals one raises is thought to generate a sense of humility and remind people of our interdependence with other animals.

But this connection may be more rhetorical than genuine. One backyard chicken farmer who wanted to kill her rooster named Arlene describes her experience killing and preparing Arlene’s body for consumption as being “as messy and mundane as cleaning the gutters.”⁷

Indeed, slaughter often requires creating distance, not connectedness. Original Country Girl, a DIY butcher who, in giving advice to fellow DIY butchers on her blog, writes:

The best advice is to always maintain a distance between you, and those intended for your dinner plate. This makes the butchering much

6. Regardless of size, meat producers commonly employ the term “harvest” to refer to the slaughter, disembowelment, and dismemberment (also known collectively as “preparation”) of “livestock” and “poultry” (chickens are not considered livestock).

7. As cited in Gruen 2011 <http://www.doublex.com/section/life/what-i-learned-when-i-killed-chicken>.

easier if the animal is nothing more than “the black chicken” or “the grey and white goose.” You can care for your critters in a humane and respectful way without allowing attachments to form. Rule number one is to never give *it* a name. Some people can get by with ironic names like the . . . “Christmas Dinner . . .” but for others even this can cause trouble later on. If you know you’re soft-hearted don’t do it. Clean the pen, feed good feed, and tend any wounds but don’t get too close. No names, no handfed treats, and no special treatment for any one individual animal (McWilliams, 2011, emphasis added).

Katie Gillespie characterizes this as “connected disconnection.” She writes, “[a]ll of the justifications for DIY slaughter . . . are enlisted to conceal what the process really does. DIY slaughter connects participants to the violence against the animal, and not to the animal him/herself. This ‘connection’ is a wholly false connection” (2011, p. 120).

Gruen (2011) argues that the problem with “humane farming” as well as industrial farming is that it relies on putting animals in the category of the edible, stripping them of their individual personalities and interests and viewing them as food. Being cruel to animals by causing them to suffer in factory farms is certainly objectionable. But animals have interests beyond suffering that matter as well—being allowed to live their lives with their family members and not being killed simply to satisfy someone else’s culinary desires are some of those other interests. Even if other animals are raised “humanely,” these interests are violated when they are slaughtered.

Edible Entanglements

Imagine how human interactions might be different if we saw each other as edible. If we allowed for the humane rearing of some humans for occasional consumption, this could lead to a breakdown in respect for one another and for humanity as a whole. We can already get a glimpse of the level of violence and disrespect that befalls those who are categorized as “disposable.”⁸ Being categorized as edible, in industrial societies, renders beings as consumable commodities. When we allow certain “things” to be bought and sold on the

market, we change the relationships we have and how we think of those relationships. We humans understand ourselves as not in the category of the edible, and this understanding, in part, shapes how we construct our relations with each other and the ways of life we share. If we now think of our bodies and other people’s bodies as food, the value of our bodies and ourselves changes.

In response, it might be argued that since both human and nonhuman animals are, as a matter of fact, consumable, the problem is not that we ontologize animals as food, but that we ontologize animals as *meat*. Plumwood argues that refusing to allow sentient beings—including humans—to be categorized as edible leads to a rejection of ecological embodiment, since all embodied beings are food for some creature or another. Plumwood advocates a distinction between food and meat, where “meat” represents reductionism, domination, alienation, and commodification, while “food” suggests an acknowledgment of our ecological selves. As Plumwood puts it, “no being should be treated reductionistically as meat, but we are all edible (food), and humans are food as much as other animals, contrary to deeply entrenched beliefs and concepts of human identity in the west” (Plumwood, 2000, p. 295). To blind ourselves to this truth further distances and disconnects us from our ecological entanglements.

But Plumwood conflates the fact that we are all consumable with the fact that we categorize some bodies as “edible” and others as “non-edible.” The fact that Plumwood almost became a crocodile’s supper⁹ and that all of us could be consumed as “prey” in certain contexts is an important recognition of our vulnerability. But this recognition is distinct from the social categorization of certain others as edible. To aspire to be vegan is not to deny ecological entanglement, but to suggest a reconceptualization of animals in their living bodies as fellow creatures with whom we can be in empathetic relationship and for whom we must have deeper respect (Gruen, 2015). V_A can provide a connection to other animals and the workings of nature by encouraging us to recognize the ways that our choices have far-reaching impacts.

While V_A might avoid the charge that it disconnects humans from the workings of nature, it is often argued that V_A is just one way, among many,

8. Police shooting of black men along with mass incarceration rates in the United States, and the slaughter of genetically ill-suited zoo animals at European zoos are prominent examples of the dangers of categorizing others as “disposable.”

9. To read the horrifying details of her near-fatal encounter with a crocodile, see Plumwood (1996).

to honor our environmental entanglements. Even vegans, so the argument goes, cannot escape the cycle of industrialized violence and destruction of animals and their habitats. For example, one can exclude “animal products” from one’s diet while including foods like tofu—made from soybeans, produced by Monsanto, using unsustainable, environmentally destructive monoculture practices—and still call herself a “vegan.” Therefore, though caring, compassionate people have good reason to engage ethically with animals, there is no compelling reason to privilege veganism over other ways of being an ethical consumer. Protesting GMOs, spreading the word about the devastating impacts of palm oil production, or working to help forest animals whose habitats are being destroyed for raw materials used in the manufacture of cell phones are all just as important as going vegan.¹⁰

But one needn’t choose to either try to forgo the products of direct violence on the one hand or critically engage and resist industrial capitalism and its wide-reaching destruction on the other. Though the means of production of vegan foodstuffs certainly deserves scrutiny and vegans should be concerned about the intersecting oppressions that food production currently entails, this does not undercut the need for V_A as an ethical response to violence against animals. One can *both* forgo environmentally destructive products that may also involve human servitude or exploitation and also refrain from consuming animal bodies. Though veganism is one way among many of engaging ethically with animals, it does not follow that those who are well positioned to act should not do all they can to further their goal of ending violence when those actions don’t compromise achieving comparable morally worthy ends.¹¹

Human beings are always entangled in violence and killing, but there are different responses to these complex entanglements. While there is too much violence globally, much of it, like violence against animals, is systematic. Individual choices and actions in the face of such mass destruction may not appear to do much immediately to stop the violence, but this recognition shouldn’t obscure responsibilities to avoid causing harm. Individual animals are victims of mass killing and we humans are, arguably, complicit in their suffering and exploitation.

10. For a more thorough discussion of this argument and its weaknesses, see Warkentin (2012).

11. It is also important to note that eating plant-based foods is not a deprivation and is healthier and delicious!

Complicity and Impotence

Just how responsible we are in causing suffering and harm to other animals when we consume their bodies produced in the industrialized system and what difference we might make as individuals, one way or the other, has increasingly been the topic of discussion.¹² One common argument used to reject veganism is that individually, we can’t make any difference at all. If V_I rests on a category mistake, V_A rests on a goal that is impossible for anyone to reach.

Consider the context in which one might refrain from eating animals—it is usually when one decides to walk past the animal’s carcass in the frozen-food case or the deli section of the local supermarket or butcher where animals are already dead. When one orders a chicken burrito at Chipotle rather than the tofu sofrita, the chickens aren’t slaughtered-to-order, so buying the tofu doesn’t save any particular chicken’s life. The animal bodies in the supermarket or at the restaurant were killed days or weeks before any consumer even thought about purchasing them. Not purchasing a chicken burrito at the particular moment you are at Chipotle would have absolutely no effect either way on whether chickens suffer and die in food production, so refraining from purchasing that chicken prevents no harm.¹³ Agribusiness seems to be too massive to respond to the behavior of individual consumers.¹⁴

Further, consider the case of leftovers. Suppose your housemate brings home leftover chicken. The chicken is already dead and already cooked. Your housemate does not want to eat the rest of his meal. If you do not eat it, the meal will be thrown away. It’s hard to see how your eating this leftover chicken could, in any way, add to the harm and misery of factory-farmed chickens, or fail to prevent further violence against such sentient beings. Since animals suffer no matter what you do, why not order or eat the chicken? With regard to individual actions of individual consumers, it seems veganism, particularly as an aspiration, is useless as a response to violence, exploitation, and domination.

12. See also Kagan (2011).

13. There is a related debate about group complicity, that is the immorality of even purchasing vegan food in restaurants or stores where animal products are also sold that we can’t take up here. See Martin (2015).

14. For a nice overview of this causal impotence objection, see Bass (n.d.)

This contradicts the claim some vegans make that by forgoing products of cruelty, they save 95 animals every year.¹⁵ Presumably they mean that an estimated 95 animals will not be born to become someone's meal. But these 95 indeterminate individuals aren't benefited by not being brought into existence. If you cannot harm or save a non-existent being, it seems no one is saved by not eating animals. In addition, as the number of people who opt out of animal consumption continues to increase, so too does the number of animals killed for food globally; there doesn't even appear to be a correlation between the overall number of animals killed for food and actual individual decisions to abstain from consuming animals. Given all of this, it seems that V_A is illusory. To do what one can to refrain from consuming products that require the suffering and death of other animals amounts to doing nothing to save animals who are suffering and dying.

But how is it possible that individual actions have no impact when it is clear that if everybody abstained, it would make a very large difference? Of course, animals would be spared lives of misery if people ceased consuming animal products, yet it appears that no particular animals would be spared lives of misery if *I as an individual* ceased consuming animal products. As Shelly Kagan puts it:

it seems to be the case that whether or not I buy a chicken makes no difference at all to how many chickens are ordered by the store—and thus no difference in the lives of any chickens. To be sure, when hundreds of thousands of us each buy a chicken this week, this does make a difference—for if several hundred thousand fewer chickens were sold this week, the chicken industry would dramatically reduce the number of chickens it tortures. Thus the overall result of everyone's buying chickens is bad. But for all that, it seems true that it makes no difference at all whether or not I buy a chicken; even if I don't buy one, the results are no better (Kagan, 2011, p. 110–111).

But how can I make no difference if together we can make a difference? If collective action will have causal impact, then at least *some* individual instances must have causal impact. Collective action is not a particularly mysterious metaphysical category; it is some combination of individual actions that can

15. See for example the book, *Ninety-Five: Meeting America's Farmed Animals in Stories and Photographs*, edited and published by No Voice Unheard, 2010. See also PETA (2010).

have a variety of impacts. In some instances a perceptible harmful result emerges from actions that lead to seemingly imperceptible harms. Usually, analyses of these types of situations reveal that though seemingly imperceptible, there is nonetheless some very small impact that, when combined with the very small impacts of other consumers, results in harm. In the cases we are talking about, this seems an unsatisfying way of answering the question, given that the animals are already dead before I even formulate an intention to purchase their bodies. Eating or not eating a dead animal doesn't causally contribute to any animal's death.

But it may be that my action serves as a "trigger" or "threshold."¹⁶ Suppose that the butcher only makes a call to order more chickens when the 100th chicken breast is purchased or the poultry industry only reduces production when a threshold of 10,000 people stop purchasing chicken. It may seem that if you are not the one who purchases the 100th chicken breast or are not the 10,000th person who gave up chicken products, your refraining from such purchases makes no difference. However, your refraining affects the timing of slaughter or the cessation of slaughter. This is an impact, even if it is not a direct impact on any particular individual. So buying or not buying animal bodies *does* make a difference. Further, no matter what the causal impact of your refraining from consuming animal products, what is certain is that your not going vegan is practically certain to delay any threshold event happening and therefore practically certain to result in excess animal suffering (Norcross, 2004).

Recognizing one's complicity in a system of violence and deciding to stand against it by refusing, as far as is possible, to participate in or directly benefit from that system also, importantly, has effects on others. Many who work

16. Kagan describes a triggering event in this way:

Presumably it works something like this: there are, perhaps, 25 chickens in a given crate of chickens. So the butcher looks to see when 25 chickens have been sold, so as to order 25 more. (Perhaps he starts the day with 30 chickens, and when he gets down to only 5 left, he orders another 25—so as never to run out. But he must throw away the excess chickens at the end of the day before they spoil, so he cannot simply start out with thousands of chickens and pay no attention at all to how many are sold.)

Here, then, it makes no difference to the butcher whether 7, 13, or 23 chickens have been sold. But when 25 have been sold this triggers the call to the chicken farm, and 25 more chickens are killed, and another 25 eggs are hatched to be raised and tortured. Thus, as a first approximation, we can say that only the 25th purchaser of a chicken makes a difference. It is this purchase that triggers the reaction from the butcher, this purchase that results in more chicken suffering.

toward veganism influence others to do so, and they in turn can influence others, and so on. This kind of role modeling may be understood as a species of the broader phenomenon of *social contagion* in which an action of a particular type makes another action of that type more likely. Thus veganism increases the probability that others will become vegan, which increases the probability that the collective action of the aggregate more quickly brings about a reduction in the number of animals produced for food and other consumer goods, decreasing animal suffering and bringing about a decrease in violence, exploitation, and domination (Almassi, 2011).

In contrast, private actions like eating the leftover chicken when no one else is around (or will ever witness or even find out about it) could increase the chance that one may, in the future, eat more chicken. An internal, private permission is generated and it may expand to other, less private, contexts. Veganism urges us to conceptualize chicken or pig bodies, for example, as “not food,” much the way we in the United States think of dog bodies as “not food.” As people begin to view the corpses of others as inedible, the probability that they will want to consume “leftover” bodies is lowered. Someone aspiring to be the kind of person who acts to minimize suffering and oppression, wherever and whenever they can, will thus adopt strategies that will stabilize their ability to act on their aspiration and refrain from consuming animal products even in private.¹⁷

Conclusion

People are looking for alternatives to the systemic, industrialized violence animals suffer in order to become dinner. Though veganism remains an empowering response to this violence, vegans need to remain realistic about the ethical entanglements that accompany life in consumer culture. To believe, as some do, that veganism is an identity or lifestyle that gives one “clean hands” is to believe a myth. In contexts like ours, veganism can only be an aspiration. But even as an aspiration, veganism can make a difference in changing systematic cruelty and domination.

17. Interestingly, when considering that role-modeling behavior can have both positive and negative aspects and recognize that some “negatively contagious” actions (so-called “backfire” role-modeling) can affect others’ behavior such that it increases the probability that an observer will engage in behaviors *opposite* to the role-modeler, we have further evidence against V_1 . If advocates of V_1 are perceived as preachy, self-righteous zealots (the “negative contagion”), then the effect of V_1 may very well be to push non-vegans *away* from veganism and toward meat consumption.

Abstaining from the use of all animal products is virtually impossible for most consumers in industrialized societies. Coming to think of veganism as an aspiration is coming to terms with the complicated impacts of our choices and relationships with nonhuman animals and the environment. Because it is non-idealized, V_A forges a particularly empowering and grounded form of individual political commitment, fostering a deeper understanding of intersecting injustices and oppressions. In our experience, discussing veganism not as an identity or lifestyle but as an aspiration allows for meaningful discussions about the ways the objectification and commodification of sentient beings are morally problematic. Relatedly, in avoiding the rhetoric of moral purity or superiority, V_A increases the likelihood that non-vegans will be open to embracing the nonviolence that grounds veganism. Recognizing the kind of impact aspiring to veganism can have may strengthen one’s ability to respond to the system of violence and improve the lives of all beings.

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