

Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach

...and Abolition Means Veganism!

Veganism: Just Another Way of Reducing Suffering or a Fundamental Principle of Justice & Nonviolence?

Dear Colleagues:

It is important to understand that there are significant differences among those who regard themselves as vegans.

One important difference is between those who maintain that veganism is merely a way of reducing suffering, and those who maintain that it is a fundamental commitment to justice, nonviolence, and a recognition of the moral personhood of nonhuman animals.

The difference between these two groups is not merely a matter of abstract theory—it has profound practical consequences.

The prevailing position on veganism among new welfarists is that veganism is a way—*one way*—of reducing suffering. Understood in this way, veganism is no different than cage-free eggs or meat produced from a slaughterhouse designed by [PETA-award winner Temple Grandin](#). These are, new welfarists claim, all just ways of reducing suffering. If X chooses to reduce suffering by being a vegan, great; if Y chooses to reduce suffering by eating cage-free eggs, great. If X decides to reduce suffering on Monday by eating no animal products and on Tuesday by eating “humanely” produced animal products, that’s fine. To maintain that, as a moral matter, X should be a vegan on Monday and Tuesday and every other day is “absolutist,” “fundamentalist,” or “fanatical.”

People like Peter Singer, and groups like “Vegan” Outreach and PETA maintain this position. For example, [Singer](#) maintains that being a “conscientious omnivore” is a “[defensible ethical position](#).” He claims that being a consistent vegan is “[fanatical](#).” Singer labels himself a “[flexible vegan](#)” who will be non-vegan when it is convenient. He mentions eating free-range eggs and dairy. He talks about the “[luxury](#)” of eating meat and other products from animals who have been well treated, in his view, and killed “humanely.” PETA [claims](#) that adherence to veganism as a matter of principle is a matter of “personal purity,” “narcissistic cultural fad,” and “fanatical obsession.” “Vegan” Outreach makes the [emphasis on suffering](#) clear and downplays the use of animals in claiming

that veganism:

is not an end in itself. It is not a dogma or religion, nor a list of forbidden ingredients or immutable laws—it is only a tool for opposing cruelty and reducing suffering.

A [fundamental assumption](#) of the new welfarist position is that killing animals does not per se inflict a harm on them. Animals do not care *that* we use and kill them; they only care about *how* we treat them and kill them. As long as they don't suffer too much, animals are indifferent to our using them. They have no interest in continued existence.

It is this thinking that has led to the [“happy” meat/animal products movement](#), which has been the most serious setback in the struggle for justice for nonhumans in decades. It is this thinking that leads [PETA](#) and [Singer](#) to maintain that we may have a moral obligation *not* to be vegan in situations in which others will be annoyed or disconcerted by insistence on veganism.

I reject this view. I believe that it is speciesist to maintain that nonhumans must have minds similar to human minds in order to have an interest in continued existence. Any sentient being has an interest in continued life in that she prefers, wants, or desires to remain alive.

We can no more justify using nonhumans as human resources than we can justify human slavery. Animal use and slavery have at least one important point in common: both institutions treat sentient beings exclusively as resources of others. That cannot be justified with respect to humans; it cannot be justified with respect to nonhumans—*however “humanely”* we treat them.

The abolitionist approach sees veganism as the application of the principle of abolition to the life of the individual. It is our personal expression that we embrace the moral personhood of all sentient beings and we reject the status of nonhumans as chattel property. Veganism is an essential part of our commitment to nonviolence.

Veganism is not just a way of reducing suffering; it is what justice for nonhumans requires at the very least. It is not the last step in our journey to reject the moral schizophrenia that characterizes the human/nonhuman relationship; it is the *first* step. If animals have any moral significance, then we cannot eat, wear, or use them. A vegan is not a vegan only on Mondays, or only when it is convenient. *A vegan is a vegan all the time.* I would no more not be vegan just because my being vegan made someone else uncomfortable than I would remain silent if someone told a racist joke or harassed a woman because to object would make the perpetrator uncomfortable.

It is no more “absolutist” or “fanatical” to be a consistent vegan as it is to be consistent in one's rejection of rape or pedophilia. Indeed, to characterize consistent veganism as “absolutist” is itself speciesist precisely because

we would not so characterize our complete rejection of fundamental forms of human exploitation.

If you are not vegan, go vegan. It really is easy. It is better for our health and reduces the violence that we do to ourselves. It is better for the planet and reduces the harm that we do to the home of sentient beings and to the ecosystems that sustain all life. But, most importantly, it's the morally right thing to do. We all say we reject violence. Let's take what we say seriously. Let's take an important step to reduce violence in the world starting with what we put in our mouths or on our bodies.

And remember, it's not an impossibility: [THE WORLD IS VEGAN! If you want it.](#)

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