

Why Does the IVA Not Engage in Reform Work?

The International Vegan Association has a simple mandate: to promote the idea that we should stop using animals and, accordingly, to persuade people to become vegan.

Our organization holds that, at the very least, we owe it to other sentient beings not to breed, control, kill, or otherwise harm them when we have clear alternatives to doing so. Since we have easy alternatives to using animals for food, clothing, personal care products, transportation, entertainment, and so on, we believe that it is wrong to continue using animals for these purposes. We are focused on creating a social movement of conscientious, kind, and outspoken vegans who will educate the world about ending animal use. Our focus is exclusively on education.

Some groups share our values and long-term goals but spend their time and resources attempting to improve the way that animals are used. For example, many groups work to increase the amount of room given to animals on factory farms, to promote methods of killing animals that cause less suffering, to ban certain forms of mutilation that seem most heinous, and so on. These groups generally have laudable motivations. In some cases, a group pursues a welfare reform because they believe that the reform would be a small step in the direction of ending all animal use or because they believe that the reform would help to make the world more accepting of the animal rights position. In other cases, a group pursues a welfare reform simply because they are trying to reduce the horrible suffering endured by animals.

We passionately share the desire to stop animal use and to end the suffering that animals endure. But the International Vegan Association does not support or participate in reform work. We agree with Professor Gary Francione's seminal arguments, according to which the prevailing political, social, and legal structures prevent welfare reform work from either genuinely benefiting today's animals or helping to move us toward ending animal use. We will not here rehearse all of Francione's arguments concerning animals' property status and the structure of the legal system, as they are [widely available elsewhere](#). To put it bluntly: we think that welfare reform doesn't work. The International Vegan Association is an abolitionist organization, in the sense that we focus exclusively on the abolition of animal use and refuse to engage in welfare reform campaigning.

But more important than our belief that welfare reforms don't work is our conviction that public education can be revolutionary. Instead of engaging in welfare campaigns, we focus our resources on educating people about the underlying moral issues. Our mandate is to educate the public about animals' interests and needs, and to talk to people about why they ought to become vegan. We believe that the quickest and most effective way to bring about the end of widespread animal use is to do consciousness-raising work that leads individuals to abstain from participating in animal use.

Although Professor Francione's detailed research has convinced many thousands of people, not everyone has accepted that animal rights advocates should stop engaging in welfare

reform work. Some advocates who are supportive of reform work are critical of groups (like the IVA) who choose to focus exclusively on education. We need to address those advocates.

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In recent years, a lot of time has been spent debating whether there have been *any* successful welfare reforms—whether there have been *any* regulatory efforts that have improved animals’ lives or otherwise made a positive contribution to the movement. The debates have a well-rehearsed structure. First, a supporter of welfare work offers an example of a welfare reform (normally outside of the North America) that appears to help animals and which was brought about due to the efforts of animal advocates. In response, the abolitionist questions whether the reform does or will actually help any animals. The abolitionist notes that a tremendous number of welfare reforms are never enacted, are repealed, or are never followed. But even setting these concerns aside, the abolitionist asks: are any animals’ lives appreciably better, from the standpoint of the animals themselves, if the reform is in place? The welfarist and the abolitionist may disagree about the answer to this question. The abolitionist points out that a minor treatment modification within a lifetime of confinement and suffering is all but meaningless to the well-being of the animals in question. The reformist says that welfare changes make animals’ lives go better, even if only slightly.

As this issue partly depends on empirical considerations, agreement is rarely reached. At this point, the focus of the debate often changes. For the sake of argument, the abolitionist critic reminds the reformist that even if the reform had made some animals’ lives marginally better in some small way, this would not begin to show that animal rights advocates should have pursued the reform. The abolitionist has a number of concerns in mind. To name just a few: (i) the reform, in the absence of uncompromising vegan education, is likely to make consumers feel better about using animals, (ii) the reform is likely to reinforce the idea that animals are ultimately just economic commodities, making it even more difficult to achieve real gains in the future, (iii) the reform might have come about just the same (or perhaps even sooner) if we had all advocated for veganism and watched industry react to our demands, (iv) the reform takes precious energy, time and money away from promising pursuits that would not be undertaken without us, and so on.

The defender of reform work retorts that these are not points that can be definitively proven: we cannot know with certainty that the reform in question misguides consumers, or hinders the future of our movement, or could have been brought about through other means, or squanders resources. To the abolitionist, this response seems like a refusal to accept common sense.

The debate about the reform in question normally trails off at this point. The proponent of the welfare reform is left saying “well, it was better than nothing” and the abolitionist is left saying “no, it really wasn’t.”

The International Vegan Association, and many other abolitionists, would be happy to move beyond this typical back-and-forth dialogue. In our view, the question “Is it really *impossible* for there to be a worthwhile welfare reform?” is not a helpful or progressive one. If the proponent of welfare reform will maintain her position unless it can be proven that worthwhile welfare reform efforts are impossible, then the discussion is bound to be fruitless. Although there is no history of worthwhile reform work, and although reform work is flawed by design, there is no way to prove that there could never, under any circumstances, be a valuable welfare reform campaign. Indeed, Professor Francione has never aspired to show that worthwhile welfare work is in-principle impossible, as if a positive welfarist effort would violate the fundamental laws of nature. Instead, his research demonstrates that there are massive and systematic barriers to meaningful welfare reform and that these barriers make spending time and money on welfare reform unwise. This is the only proof we need to look in a different direction.

The progressive question is not “Is it really impossible for there to be a worthwhile welfare reform?” but rather “What is the best way forward?” Francione’s research paints a picture that could not be clearer: welfare reforms are not the way forward. Few people have even attempted to challenge Francione’s findings holistically. It is telling that proponents of welfare reform are forced to seek out and selectively defend highly specific instances of reform work from the many thousands of reformist campaigns and measures undertaken in recent decades. And the fact that they can offer only a shaky defense of these cherry-picked examples is cause for deep skepticism.

The International Vegan Association believes that building a transformative social movement is the best way forward. We do not focus on education only because we believe that welfare reforms are defective (though we do believe that). Instead, we focus on education because we believe that consciousness-raising educational work can and will change the world. The International Vegan Association is built out of volunteers who believe that all animal use is wrong regardless of how “humanely” it is done and who are committed to unequivocally spreading that message. We believe that we must strike at the moral roots of the problem, that we must set the terms of the public discussion, and that we must help to show others that we should all stop using animals. We have a positive and ambitious agenda.

So, to return to the titular question of this article (“Why does the IVA not engage in reform work?”), we have a simple answer. When we reflect on how to take our movement forward and what role we should play in our movement, our conclusion simply has nothing to do with modifying the way that animals are treated.