

Veganism

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Vegans charge moral vegetarians¹ with inconsistency: if eating animals is a participation in a wrong practice, consuming eggs and dairy products is likewise wrong because it is a cooperation with systematic exploitation. Vegans say that even the more humane parts of the contemporary dairy and egg industry rely on immoral practices, and that therefore moral vegetarianism is too small a step in the right direction. According to vegans, moral vegetarians have conceded that animals are not means; that human pleasure cannot override animal suffering and death; that some industries ought to be banned; and that all this carries practical implications as to their own actions. Yet they stop short of a full realization of what speciesist culture involves and what living a moral life in such an environment requires. Moral vegans distinguish themselves from moral vegetarians in accepting the practical prescriptions of altogether avoiding benefiting from animal exploitation, not just of avoiding benefiting from the killing. Vegans take the killing to be merely one aspect of the systematic exploitation of animals.

If it is wrong to kill an entity of a particular kind, it is probably wrong to exploit it. And if it is wrong to benefit from the entity killed, it seems wrong to benefit from that entity being exploited. The moral logic of veganism appears sound. The viability of moral vegetarianism depends on the ability to establish a meaningful difference between animal-derived “products” which they boycott, and those that they consume. Moral vegetarians agree that the egg and dairy industry has to be radically reformed. The difference between vegans and vegetarians does not then relate to the premise that exploitation exists. The difference concerns the practical conclusion drawn from the premise: some moral vegans say that no production of eggs and dairy can be unexploitive (call these “vegans”), while others hold on to a more provisional position: *given* that animals are heavily exploited in such industries, one’s hopes for reform are beside the moral point (call these “tentative vegans”). Tentative vegans agree that eggs and dairy products can be produced without exploitation. Yet they cannot see how it can be justified to cooperate with such practices as a consumer given their present immoral nature.

Moral vegetarians will probably purchase eggs and dairy products from sources that boast of morally progressive breeding conditions (morally progressive steps obviously do not constitute morally acceptable conditions). Buying products from manufacturers that maintain free-roaming animals is surely a step forward.² But vegans and vegetarians will agree that it is not enough. The space allowed for captive animals is only one of many features

that constitute the exploitive nature of such breeding. It is easier for a manufacturer to meet the requirement for space than, say, avoiding practices that turn the animals into overworked, living factories that “manufacture” much more than they would have done naturally. Free-roaming laying hens are exploited if they are killed when they become “unproductive” or if the breeding facility kills day-old unproductive male chicks while allowing their sisters to free-range (or if it buys its hens from hatching facilities that kill male chicks). Debeaking, a painful procedure, which is widely practiced with regard to non-free-roaming as well as free-roaming hens (at least where I live, even the free-roaming hens are debeaked) also spoils the image of “free-roaming” animals as creatures that live their lives without painful intervention by humans motivated by financial gain. Should one cooperate with an industry, which, even at its moral best, employs standards that disrespect entities that have moral standing according to vegetarians?

Right or wrong, the vegan–vegetarian debate concerns a very small group of philosophers. More are interested in the internal coherence of moral vegetarianism. Yet pro-animal authors many times opt to leave vague the specific practical prescriptions that their work implies. The reason for this openness is that given the present negligible impact of pro-animal protest, it seems strategically wise not to quibble over details. Animals gain more from those that write on their behalf if these do not try to overzealously embarrass people who are willing to make only partial concessions to the pro-animal cause. Vagueness may be strategically wise, but it carries a price as one is upholding an ideal that is not fully explained. Apart from deciding whether veganism or vegetarianism is the more persuasive opposition to current animal-related practice, this essay explores the justification of the way by which vegetarians draw the limits of their protest. I will argue that vegetarianism is a better regulative ideal and a better form of pro-animal strategic protest compared to veganism. I begin by arguing against veganism. I shall then turn to tentative veganism.

I

Pro-animal action partly depends on how one envisages ideal relations between humans and nonhumans. “Stop all coercion and violence,” such is the most extreme pro-animal position imaginable. According to this position, usage and killing of whatever kind are to stop. Pets are also out, as having them involves limiting their movement and may affect other wild animals. Regulative beliefs of this kind will surely prescribe moral veganism. A less extreme position allows pets in the regulative ideal, but bans raising animals for meat, milk, and eggs regardless of the conditions in which this is done. This too implies moral veganism. A second notch down is the ideal that regulates moral vegetarianism: here animals are never killed for their flesh, but they are maintained as pets, or for eggs and milk. Moral vegetarianism is consistent with eating animals that die on their own (scavenging) or using their hides after they die. Euthanasia is also practiced, and is considered justified so long as it is done for the animal’s own welfare, rather than for the purpose of using its body later.³ I will now argue that moral veganism of both kinds

is a bad ideal both for humans and for animals. To do so, I intend to consider pets first, since *if* our attitude to them can be morally vindicated, such can function as a regulative ideal for other human–animal relations.

Well-kept pets are a source of joy to their owners, live a much better life than they would have lived in the wild, and, as far as I can tell, pay a small price for such conditions. A petless world is bad for cats and dogs, an overwhelming number of which would not survive out of human care. It is bad for humans, since they lose a large source of happiness, and it is bad for the animal welfare cause, as strong relations with pets start many people off on the track of thinking morally about animals. Acts against the will of pets can be condemned as coercive only if we anthropocize pets into autonomous individuals. But it seems to me that the more adequate organizing moral framework through which pets are to be understood is quasi-paternalistic: pets resemble children, though unlike children, who enter a temporary paternalistic relation with a guardian, pets remain in a permanent paternalistic relationship. The relationship is not fully paternalistic, since, unlike children, one is not merely a guardian acting with their interests in mind, but one is also acting with the interest of preserving the relationship as such. Many morally problematic invasive owner actions such as limiting movement, spaying or declawing are conceptualized (and sometimes justified) in this light. One is sometimes acting on behalf of the animal (a neutered cat lives much longer), but one is also acting on behalf of the relationship: one cannot, for example, keep a cat and its litter, or one cannot maintain one's cat and one's baby when the former is not declawed and the latter develops a habit of pulling hairy things. Justified owner actions with regard to pets are thus either an action directly on behalf of the pet, or an action in the interest of maintaining the relationship between owner and pet, a relationship which is itself an overall good for the pet. This obviously does not determine which action can legitimately be perceived as justified so as to maintain the relationship (e.g., cutting the vocal cords of a parrot or a dog because it disturbs its owner is immoral, even if it does benefit the relationship by enabling the animal to continue living with its owner). And this question—which invasive actions are justified for the sake of the owner–pet relationship—is the most important question within small animal veterinary ethics.

The most reasonable pro-animal answer to this question is utilitarian: examining overall utility for animals.⁴ Some invasive actions merely benefit the pet (e.g., vaccination). Some benefit the owner and cause pain and possible complications to the pet without substantial benefits to the animal (e.g., tail-docking and ear-cropping). Some involve loss to the pet, which it need not necessarily experience as a loss (spaying, neutering). Given a paternalistic framework, the first kind is unproblematically moral. The second is unproblematically immoral. The moral status of the third kind is complex. Humans would not be spayed and neutered even if such gives them longer lives, and so longevity does not trump the loss of sexual and procreational capacities. On the other hand, conceiving of human–human action solely through paternalistic terms is already immoral. Moreover, unlike pets, the idea that some actions are justified morally since they enable the owner–pet relationship to exist is also foreign to human–human action.

Unlike human children, who would grow up and could decide for themselves whether they wish to lose their sexual abilities so as to live longer, pets can never have such autonomy. We make the decision for them. Is it the right decision? I think that it is for four reasons that concern the particular pet's welfare as well as the welfare of other pets. First, as said, such actions promote the pet's own longevity. Second, no evidence suggests that the pet conceives of its postoperative state as a loss. Third, many people will not have pets if this meant taking responsibility for many potential offsprings. Fourth, without spaying and neutering, we will have many more abandoned pets that have miserable lives, and spread contagious diseases among their species and others.

Invasive actions that benefit the pet are justified through a paternalistic framework or through assuming that the pet-owner relationship is valuable and beneficial for pets. Muting a parrot or a dog (unlike parrots, dogs are routinely muted in some countries), tail-docking or ear-trimming cannot obviously be excused through such means. Euthanazing pets is usually conceptualized as an action on their behalf, and when this is the case, the action is justified. Declawing is problematic: owners that ask for declawing many times will not keep their animals otherwise. Such declawing can then benefit the pet. But sometimes the request for the (painful) procedure stems from owner irresponsibility, not realizing the implication of having a pet of a specific kind. If the person asking for the procedure does so because Kitty destroys her beloved sofa, there is a sense in which she should have foreseen this when she took responsibility for a cat. Unlike spaying or neutering, here Kitty does not gain anything by the procedure. And so, there is reason for a veterinarian not to cooperate with this request. In an ideal world, no owner who cares that much for her sofa will take a cat. The veterinarian ought to urge the owner to withdraw her request. If, however, the owner insists and there is a strong possibility that the cat will be abandoned if the procedure will not be conducted if the veterinarian turns away the customer, it is overall better for the cat to be declawed and so, the veterinarian should perform the procedure. The overall utility of simply outlawing declawing for animals (as is the case in San Francisco, where such legislation seems very close) is thus unclear. For the same utilitarian considerations, maiming animals so as to have them as pets, or actions that violate what they are (wing-trimming in birds, caging birds) have nothing to do with the animal's own welfare. As far as I can tell, such actions do seem to be a loss to the animal, and they do seem to be experienced as such. Unlike cats, dogs, and horses, birds in the wild lead better lives than caged ones. Caging a bird appears to me to be in the same category of socially isolating a dog or a chimpanzee: a violation of what that animal is. The greater safety that they gain does not justify the losses birds like parrots pay for sharing their lives with humans. The same argument applies to attempts to keep wild animals as pets: most are better off in the wild.

Pets can of course be maltreated, and veterinarians ought not be idealized, as financial incentives sometimes turn them into tools that satisfy any whim an owner may express. Nor do I mean to shortcut the problematic nature of disconnecting animals from members of their own species. Some

pets are loners (cats); others learn to treat humans as their pack (dogs). Disconnection, in such cases, does not appear problematic. The situation with regard to simian helpers of handicapped humans is less clear. Pro-animal utopia will probably involve some reform of pet husbandry, training, and medicine. But such reform will not be radical. Pets benefit from leading lives with humans, and the price they pay is small in comparison. Small animal husbandry looks like a reasonable exchange: pets do lose through this relationship, but they get to lead safe and comfortable lives, and they die when they are old or sick. The alternative of a petless world, does not strike me as morally superior or overall better for animals. Here then, is a model of human–animal relationship which, although we call all the shots (saying what seems “reasonable,” “acceptable,” “plausible exchange,” etc.), is morally justified on utilitarian grounds; a model in which the overall good is determined in relation to all the entities concerned, even when it does prescribe invasive actions and curtailing the animal’s freedom.

II

Pets show that human–animal relations need not be exploitive. Cows, sheep, and chickens are not pets and people have them for different reasons than those that lead them to take cats and dogs. People wish to use farm animals. Use need not be exploitive, and if our relations with pets present a nonexploitive regulative ideal, the ability to have a nonexploitive relationship with farm animals depends, in part, on the ability to import elements from our relations to pets into the world of farm animal husbandry.

Before asking how such an ideal can be worked out, I need to specify what is bad about the vegan alternative. If eggs and milk cannot be had without exploitation, a pro-animal ideal state means that laying hens and cows will either disappear or be maintained in small numbers in specially created reserves. Quantitatively, such a world is bad for these animals, as less of them would exist. The argument is familiar, but it has usually been made by meat-eaters against vegetarians, not by vegetarians against vegans. And so, I need to say why considerations of the value of a lived life can be legitimately employed by vegetarians in this dispute.⁵ Philosophers will also worry about the plausibility of arguing from the projected benefits of nonexistent entities: in what sense can a world that does not include a particular cow be bad for “it” (for the nonexistent cow) relative to a world in which “it” will exist? Doubtful too, is the underlying assumption that more lives are better than few. After all, the quantitative argument against veganism is not that vegetarianism will enable a species to remain in existence (vegan utopia could preserve some farm animals), but that more members of that species will exist. And this emphasis on more-is-better is suspect.

Here are my reasons against these dismissals. Begin with the projected benefits of nonexistent entities. Those who say that such moves are meaningless reject a standpoint of a yet nonexistent entity that benefits or loses. Ruling out such a standpoint is surely plausible, but it does not follow that judgments regarding projected benefits of nonexistent entities are meaningless. When we say that a yet nonexistent entity gains by our actions—e.g.,

claiming that future generations benefit from particular ecological steps that are taken now; or leaving an inheritance to a yet unborn grandchild; or feeling gratitude to a parent for giving us life—we do not rely on an already existing perspective of these future generations, or future grandchildren or rely on a comparison with a “preexisting us” that has benefited by receiving the gift of life. Such statements do not exemplify meaningless metaphysical blunder, because they are predicated on a conditional projection: a yet nonexistent entity, *if it would exist*, will benefit or lose through a present action. The conditional nature of the judgment is why I cannot harm an entity by not bringing it into the world (I do not harm another future child of mine by not bringing it into the world). *Ex hypothesi* such entities can be harmed neither now nor in the future since they do not and will not exist. At the same time such entities would benefit should I bring them into the world. I can also harm them, should I bring them into some kinds of life. It is thus consistent to say that a vegan utopia will not harm the farm animals that will not exist, but a vegetarian utopia will be a benefit to these, yet nonexistent entities. My comparative judgment that the vegetarian utopia is better than the vegan one does not, then, rely on the present perspective of the nonexistent animals, but on the future ones who will be grateful to discover that vegetarians rather than vegans won the day (we are, recall, discussing perfect worlds).

Turning to the why-suppose-that-more-is-necessarily-better objection, vegans will argue that a vegan utopia is still an overall good because it will reduce the number of lives that should not be lived. This was always the argument made against advocates of meat-eating, who taunted vegetarians by saying that should vegetarianism win the day, less animals would exist, ergo, eating meat is an overall good for animals. The vegetarian counterargument is that appealing to quantity is never enough, as life’s value is not exhausted by its worth in relation to the living entity itself, and relates too, to determining whether such a life should be lived (vegetarians thus do not subscribe to the more-is-better claim). But if mere existence is not enough for vegans or for vegetarians, why should vegans accept the vegetarian claim that their alternative is better for animals than the vegan one?

The question whether some lives should be lived can itself be partly determined by qualitative aspects: a life of perpetual torture or exploitation should not be lived. But like the quantitative dimension (i.e., whether entities do or do not exist), the qualitative aspect too does not exhaust the matter: it may be the case that a pleasant life should not be lived if it ends in a way that is immoral. Call this the “teleological” dimension of the value of a life. We usually do not bring lives into the world with a plan, at least not for humans. Yet some plans constitute a misrecognition of what having a life means. Say, someone brings me into the world for fifteen pleasant years, planning to euthanize me painlessly when these are over. Again, from an internal perspective, such a life is better than no life at all, and unlike being brought into the world so as to be a prostituted child, here such existence is qualitatively unproblematic. Still, no one would be justified in bringing people into the world with this purpose in mind.

The issue is not merely one of violating rights that are, let us assume, exclusive to humans. Such lives, human or nonhuman, should not be lived

(to take a nonhuman example, say someone breeds dogs just to have the chance to painlessly euthanize young puppies). Teleological violations of life's value can then be temporal. Accidental or natural premature death is sad for humans and nonhumans, but it is not immoral. But instituting a practice in which premature death is intended for the born entity is a violation of what having a life means, and so it cannot be excused through the entity's gain by living. Teleological violations can also relate to manners of exploitation, and this need not be linked with a qualitatively negative experience. The film *Matrix* depicts a world in which human beings are brought into the world and lead monitored illusory lives from start to finish that can be pleasant, solely for the production of energy that their bodies produce. Such living is better than not living: but it is not hard to imagine someone saying that such a life should not be lived.

III

Benefiting or harming a future life is, then, determined by three dimensions: the quantitative (i.e., whether there is or there isn't such a life), the qualitative (the nature of the future existence in terms of suffering vs. pleasure), and the teleological (whether a purpose projected onto the future life manifests a wrong vision regarding what having a life means). The three dimensions help us determine when the argument regarding benefiting animals by bringing them into existence is acceptable, and when it is a self-serving rationalization. Vegans and vegetarians tell meat-eaters that eating flesh as means of helping animals to exist is a self-serving rationalization. Vegans level the same charge against ovo-lacto vegetarians who claim that their choice promotes a better world for animals.

The tripartite division of life's value enables seeing why meat-eaters are indeed rationalizing, and why vegetarians are right. Any animal-related practice should be evaluated in terms of whether the lives it brings into the world should be lived. Having pets is continuous with quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and does not constitute a teleological violation of life's value, and so is an overall good for pets. Stuffing geese cannot be excused through saying that they get to live, since such lives are qualitatively unbearable. Breeding cows so as to kill them when they are a year or two old is a violation of what having a life means even when they do get to live pleasant lives (some calves do). On the other hand, shearing and milking sheep do not prevent them from having a qualitatively valuable life and so, here, the quantitative dimension does have weight: bringing such animals into the world can be an overall good for them. The same applies to taking eggs from hens and milk from cows, if these are kept in good conditions.

Reforming current exploitive farm-animal husbandry so as to turn such lives into qualitatively desirable lives is not limited to providing reasonable space for the animals. Avoiding killing animals when they are over their productive period probably implies that eggs and milk will be more expensive than they are today. (On the other hand, a pro-animal ideal state will also be one in which many more of these sources of protein will be consumed. Greater demand may compensate farmers for endorsing less economical breeding

practices.) As for regulating the birth of “unproductive” male offspring in poultry and cows, here, differential artificial insemination, which already exists technically, can create both an economical and a moral predifferentiation of livestock without killing. I see nothing against the practice of enhancing the animal’s diet so as to make it more profitable, as this need not cause suffering. As for artificially induced consecutive pregnancies in cows, there is no reason to think that this practice harms the cow (women that have many children do not appear to live shorter or to suffer from long-term deficiencies).⁶ Like pets, such animals can be euthanized when they are old or sick, and then (here I deviate from some moral vegetarians) no moral objection stands in the way of eating them or using their hides. The difference between eating the flesh of such animals and objectionable eating of animals is that here the killing is a benefit to the animal, whereas animals that are routinely slaughtered for food today are killed for the pleasure of those who eat them.

A vegetarian ideal can, then, be envisaged. One in which animals are used, but are not exploited, and such coexistence is an overall good for those animals which get to exist, lead a qualitatively reasonable existence, and are not violated in ways that misrecognize life’s value. Pigs or turkeys will have to be artificially preserved in small numbers, as there will remain no financial incentive to breed them. But the rest can coexist with humans in morally acceptable ways.

IV

Veganism is a position according to which people ought to be vegans both now and in an ideal state. “Tentative veganism,” on the other hand, holds that *given* present exploitation, one ought to be a vegan until things begin to radically improve. Veganism, I claim, is flawed, as it is predicated on an ideal, which is bad for animals and humans, as it requires the latter to give up milk and eggs. How about tentative veganism? From a perspective that attributes a significant moral status to animals, consuming eggs and milk is to participate and financially support a currently exploitive practice, much like purchasing products that rely on slave labor. Tentative vegans will accuse moral vegetarians that they act in bad faith, analogously to someone who objects to slavery yet continues to benefit from cheap products that depend on slave farms. That these products can, in principle, be produced in nonexploitive ways does not change present facts. Cooperating with present exploitive practice is still wrong.

One reply on behalf of vegetarians here can be found in Hare,⁷ and I heard it from Eddy Zemach: selective consumption, rather than a total ban, allows pro-animal people to financially support institutions that take steps in the right direction. Banning dairy and eggs means that one sees no difference between breeders that try to create better conditions and those that merely exploit the animals. Since present pro-animal actions are to be partly evaluated in relation to the degree in which they promote the right end state, tentative veganism is counterproductive in comparison to selective vegetarian consumption (which basically means supporting products that rely on free-roaming animals).

The plausibility of this antivegan argument depends on how substantial the “step” in the right direction really is: if a slave farm allows its slaves to have longer breaks, and to roam freely for some hours, this is no likely justification for purchasing its products rather than those of slave farms that do not maintain such progressive conditions. The very fact of slavery is too horrible to be excused by such improvements, and so consumer cooperation with such farms is wrong. Vegetarians can, here, object by claiming that the disanalogy between slave farms and farm animals is that slavery is wrong under any conditions, whereas farm animals, if the previous sections of this essay make sense, can be raised in morally acceptable ways. Unlike human slavery—regarding which selective consumption makes little sense as one does not wish to promote the existence of enlightened slave farms—supporting moral progress here through selective consumption can bring about a welcome change.

But tentative vegans can press the vegetarian position further through analogies to practices that, unlike slavery, are not essentially objectionable, though are still practices with which one should not cooperate. Child labor is an example. Selective child labor is widely accepted as an honorable way for kids to make extra pocket money. Say, that in a given society, child labor is practiced in its more exploitive forms. Say, two groups oppose this: one refuses to buy any products that depend on child labor, while the other tries to justify selective purchasing. Members of the second group buy only from factories that, unlike other factories, allow the children to have a break in the middle of the workday. Unlike slavery (and like farm-animal husbandry), here there is no problem with child labor as such. But claiming to support progress through selective consumption still seems too flimsy an opposition.

The problem is clear: the Hare–Zemach argument on behalf of promoting moral change through selective consumption cannot always work. Sometimes it sounds too weak, even a self-serving rationalization. How to determine when this argument can be justifiably used and when it is no more than an evasion? Distinguishing in a principled way when one should altogether ban practices or promote their better forms through selective participation can appeal to several factors. First, there is the magnitude of the step taken in the right direction and the type and substance of the moral recognition that it involves. Allowing working children to have a break or a cup of tea as part of a long working day does not constitute a recognition of the exploitive nature of the practice. It is thus too meager a step forward. On the other hand, free-roaming animals do manifest a substantial recognition regarding animal welfare, the most substantial of which is refusing to perceive animals as tools, as well as a willingness to pay an economic price for an unexploitive breeding practice. Since free-roaming farms still kill unproductive animals and unproductive male offspring, one should not confuse such farms and nonexploitive breeding. But they do take a substantial step forward.

Second, there are considerations of effectiveness relative to the overall goals of pro-animal protest. Overdemanding strategic moves will decrease the number of protestors and thus decrease the overall effect of the protest.

Veganism is a much more difficult lifestyle than ovo-lacto vegetarianism and raises many more nutritional concerns, especially when one is making dietary decisions not only for oneself. Prudentially, animal welfare will lose many potential advocates if nothing less than highly demanding personal measures are made. Ergo: evaluated as a form of protest against existing conditions, tentative veganism is counterproductive to animal welfare.

The problem with this last antivegan argument is that the same criticism can be made against vegetarians by “demi-vegetarians” (people who eat meat only rarely). Demi-vegetarians will claim that vegetarianism demands too much and is counterproductive relative to their own milder form of protest. But the difference between eating flesh and eating eggs is that both vegetarians and tentative vegans agree that the latter is essentially moral, whereas the former is not. “Essential” here means that for vegetarians, unlike eating eggs, under no conditions is it moral to kill an animal for the purpose of eating it when nutritional alternatives are available. Demi-vegetarianism is thus perhaps strategically prudential, but, like occasional molesting, it is an occasional participation in a morally wrong act and is hence unjustified, whereas vegetarians that eat eggs and dairy selectively participate in a move forward.

Against this, tentative vegans will say that eating eggs may not be “essentially” wrong, but exploitation is an essential wrong, and that participating as a consumer with acts of lesser exploitation is still essentially wrong. To return to the analogy with slavery, abolitionism too, no doubt, appeared overdemanding, but that cannot be a plausible objection to it. Doing the right thing is sometimes tough. Tentative vegans and vegetarians thus diverge radically in the way they describe consumption of free-roaming animal derived products, and both seem to be correct: buying and eating such products can be described either as supporting reform or as supporting fig-leaf exploitation, and nothing in the actions themselves favors one of these descriptions. This descriptive, or hermeneutic dimension of the debate, strikes me as unfruitful, because nothing in the act turns one of these competing descriptions into a misdescription. On the other hand, the *political* considerations that underlie which of these descriptions one should prefer lead to a less aporetic stance. Political reform movements have faced the problem of cooperating with partial, nonsatisfactory reform steps many times. Feminism shows, for example, how step-by-step cooperation with partial improvements paved the way to radical reform. Urging women not to vote in the first election in which they were allowed to do so on the basis of protesting against the patriarchal system as such or because women were not yet themselves candidates would have been wrong for the feminist cause. Recognition of the imperfection of an improvement does not necessarily entail banning cooperation. Rather, it manifests an appreciation of slow change and the need to persist in supporting moves forward. To conclude, against the tentative vegan’s claim that vegetarians participate in an exploitive practice when they eat products that are derived from free-roaming animals, vegetarians say, first, that nothing in the consumption makes the vegan description of it more reasonable than the vegetarian one. Second, political considerations make the vegetarian description of selective-consumption as promoting progress preferable to the overly purist stance of the vegan.

I asked how to formulate the distinction between legitimate as opposed to illegitimate cooperation with progressive yet still exploitive practices. The first condition was the size of the step taken by the progressive institution, that is, whether it manifests a substantial or a trivial moral recognition. The second was the strategic benefits of cooperation versus noncooperation assessed in relation to the overall political goal. A third condition concerned the magnitude of the loss experienced by the exploited entity as part of obtaining a particular product from it. If eggs had to be ripped out of the hen's body through a painful procedure, eating eggs would involve one with immoral cooperation. By eating such eggs, one would in effect, be commissioning someone else to do the painful harvesting. Such is the case with eating flesh, but not with milk or eggs. The animals do not appear to be harmed. Cooperating as a consumer with the particular "service" provided by the animal is thus categorically different from cooperating with services that do involve loss or pain.

True, farm-animal husbandry involves painful procedures (debeaking in poultry and horn removal in cows). Hens are debeaked to reduce cannibalism. Sometimes it is said that the crowded conditions cause cannibalism,⁸ but a breeder of free-roaming hens whom I talked with, told me that cannibalism does not appear to depend on space, as his free-roaming hens can still peck each other to death. He believes that debeaking positively benefits the hens. Reforming farm-animal husbandry in the vegetarian utopia will look carefully into these practices, seeking alternative methods of achieving their goals with less suffering. As far as present conditions are concerned, we can say this: to the extent that debeaking or horn removal prevents injury to other farm animals, such actions become as legitimate as spaying and neutering pets: a price such animals pay for coexistence with humans. We are, again, "calling the shots," and this will repel those who read into these animals notions like autonomy. But calling the shots here seems beneficial to these animals.

V

Vegetarians are required to look for less exploitive products. How tough is this requirement? Are vegetarians obligated to go to any length or cost to obtain free-roaming products (in terms of cost, such products can cost up to two or three times more than ordinary products; in terms of accessibility, milk from free-roaming cows is very hard to find)? Need they always prefer restaurants that use such products, no matter how inferior these may be to others? Can they buy and eat eggs and dairy products that do not come from free-roaming animals?

"Cooperation" with practices in this matter boils down to buying and to eating. These do not necessarily go together as one can buy products for someone else to eat, and eat products that someone else bought. Begin with the buying part. If one insists on buying the cheapest eggs and dairy products, one is commissioning someone else to produce in the most economically efficient ways, and this can mean commissioning exploitation. Vegetarians are obligated to support products that present moral progress even if these cost more.⁹

How about purchasing and eating products that are not derived from free-roaming animals? I have, up to now, claimed that much of the force of vegetarianism in opposition to veganism involves the capacity to influence production through selective consumption. Does this mean that vegetarians can never purchase products taken from non-free-roaming animals? I think that it does not, and that vegetarians can fall short of ideal selective consumption. The justification for this relates to the third condition above: taking eggs or milk does not create suffering and loss. Participating here is accordingly categorically different than participating in acts that do involve a harm being done. Vegetarians are obligated to a policy of conscious and selective purchasing, and to give moral production practices a chance even if these turn out to be more expensive. But the obligation to seek ways to minimize and eliminate exploitation does not extend to a complete ban.

Buying products that are not derived from free-roaming animals if alternatives are implausibly difficult to obtain is excusable. Participating is no more than “excusable” as consuming products that rely on exploitive practice can never be plain “fine.” Nor is it just plain “fine” to buy products derived from free-roaming animals (vegans do make a substantial moral point). But all this means no more than that the obligation to obtain such products is substantial. “Excusable” is a term which will be suspicious only to those who assume that protest is of an all or nothing nature (e.g., if one opposes some actions done by the army of one’s country one ought to refuse to be drafted; if one opposes some actions taken by one’s government, one ought to morally evade tax paying, etc.). But why should we suppose that protest has this all or nothing character?

Boycotting products, the taking of which does not create suffering, seems extreme. Deciding whether an act of protest is or is not extreme is not arbitrary. Everyone will agree that some types of pro-animal protest are extreme (not talking to meat-eaters; not letting one’s children play with the children of a farm-owner; leaving one’s town because a new abattoir has been opened). Determining what makes for “reasonable” protest is not mysterious, and involves straightforward considerations. Morally informed consumer actions have to retain some plausible relation with the suffering involved. The considerations that determine what makes for plausible protest include: effectiveness, the ideal being envisaged, the need to balance one’s morals with other goals, whether the specific sphere of action involved is one in which nothing less than doing the best will do, whether the act turns one’s protest into an antisocial eccentric act thus diminishing the political force of one’s ideological agenda, and so on.

In focusing on suffering and loss as the important moral factors, in focusing on promoting morally better farm-animal husbandry through selective purchasing, vegetarians maintain a plausible relationship between their protest and their consumption. To conclude: there are limits to what is required of vegetarians. The best a moral vegetarian can do is to eat only products that come from free-roaming breeding. Buying and eating other products is still excusable.

This essay grew out of an electronic debate between Stan Godlovitch, Eddy M. Zemach, and myself. I am grateful to both for allowing me to initially eavesdrop on their discussion regarding the relative merits and faults of veganism versus vegetarianism, and for then taking up these issues with me. I have allowed myself to be influenced by various arguments ping-ponged in that debate. Yet I suspect that both Godlovitch and Zemach will lament the fact that I have not been influenced enough. I would also like to thank Orit Zamir, D.V.M., for patiently answering my questions concerning aspects of veterinary practice.

Notes

- ¹The labels “vegan” and “vegetarian” in this essay apply only to moral vegans and moral vegetarians where the distinguishing feature between these is consumption of ovo-lacto products (sometimes the ban extends to honey). I will ignore vegans and vegetarians for whom these are merely dietary choices that relate to healthy living.
- ²John Webster challenges this claim. He claims that free-roaming breeding is ideal only for a very small number of hens, not in commercial units. His evidence is that about half of the birds in commercial free-roaming units elect not to leave the house (*Animal Welfare: A Cool Eye Towards Eden*, Oxford: Blackwell Science Ltd, 1994, 158). Webster’s evidence does not support his conclusion: even if birds opt to stay in, that does not imply that such breeding is as bad as battery cages. But I agree with Webster that free-roaming facilities will probably not be the last word should poultry husbandry be reformed.
- ³The tripartite distinction I am now drawing pertains only to eating animals or eating what they “produce.” I will not try to map onto these three orientations attitudes to other aspects of animal welfare, such as one’s attitude to zoos, aquatic zoos, hunting, fishing, or vivisection. Some transitive relations exist between these aspects, for example, moral vegans and moral vegetarians will surely oppose hunting. Fish are a disputed category within vegetarian literature, so the implications for fishing are less obvious, as are one’s attitude to zoos and the use of animals in product testing or research.
- ⁴I am not a utilitarian, and do not consider that the following endorsement of a utilitarian consideration in evaluating competing courses of action in one domain of moral life necessitates adopting a utilitarian position. My remarks above should trouble only those who oppose any use of utilitarian considerations.
- ⁵Leahy (*Against Liberation: Putting Animals in Perspective*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991), Scruton (*Animal Rights and Wrongs*, 3rd ed., London: Metro Books, 2000), and Hare (“Why I Am Only a Demi-Vegetarian,” in *Essays on Bioethics*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1993, 219–36) have used this argument in the past against vegetarians. In my “Killing for Pleasure” (forthcoming), I argue at length against this claim as a justification of eating meat. Here, I shall claim that it is a plausible move against veganism. I shall also say why I think one can consistently reject this argument as a justification of eating meat, and accept it as an argument against veganism.
- ⁶I have been unable to find an official assessment here. Dairy cows are the ones that get impregnated, and these are slaughtered when they are young (usually aged 4–6) when their milk production decreases. Such cows are impregnated throughout their lives, but since they do not live a full life, data supporting the damages of consecutive pregnancies is hard to find.
- ⁷Hare, “Why I Am Only a Demi-Vegetarian.”
- ⁸*The Vegetarian Handbook: The Guide to Living a Vegetarian Lifestyle*, ed. J. Bowler (Altrincham: The Vegetarian Society UK Ltd., 1990), 20.
- ⁹How much more? This question is not merely economical, but is also social. If free-roaming breeding yields products that are out of the reach of many, such will violate a different moral principle, namely, that a moral lifestyle cannot depend on a high income.

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