

Vegetarianism First?

The Conventional Wisdom—and Why It’s Wrong

“Discussing veganism with people who are omnivores is too difficult. You have to start with vegetarianism.”

Every vegan has heard this notion expressed many, many times; indeed, it passes for conventional wisdom among those of us who take animal ethics seriously.

I would like to suggest that the conventional wisdom on this matter is wrong and that we should educate everyone, including and particularly omnivores, about veganism and should never promote vegetarianism as morally preferable to being an omnivore.

There is no morally significant distinction between flesh and other animal products. Animals used in dairy are generally kept alive longer than those used for meat, are treated every bit as badly if not worse, and end up in the same slaughterhouse. Moreover, the slaughter of animals for meat and the dairy industry are inextricably intertwined in that there would be no veal industry without the dairy industry and dairy cows are all slaughtered and consumed.

I have said many times that if I were forced to choose between eating a steak or drinking milk and I was to make the decision solely on the basis of suffering, I would choose the steak. To promote vegetarianism rather than veganism is similar to—and as nonsensical as—promoting eating the meat from spotted cows rather than the meat from cows without spots.

When we promote this artificial distinction, it is even more difficult for someone who gives up flesh to go vegan because she sees no reason to. As often as I have heard animal advocates urge that we should promote vegetarianism rather than veganism, I have heard vegans say that they remained vegetarians for many years before going vegan because they believed that they were being “compassionate” and acting morally, and were discharging their moral obligations to animals by not eating flesh but eating dairy products.

We should never present flesh as somehow morally distinguishable from dairy. To the extent it

is morally wrong to eat flesh, it is as morally wrong—and possibly more morally wrong—to consume dairy.

How do we raise the issue of veganism?

Animal advocates often ask me: how do we raise the issue of veganism with omnivores without having them turn us off at the outset?

It’s easier than you think. As a general matter, it is almost always easier to have a discussion with someone if that person does not feel that you are judging her in a negative way and if you engage the thinking processes of the other person.

So it is always preferable to discuss the matter of veganism in a non-judgmental way. Remember that to most people, eating flesh or dairy and using animal products such as leather, wool, and silk, is as normal as breathing air or drinking water. A person who consumes dairy or uses animal products is not necessarily or usually what a recent and unpopular American president labeled an “evil doer.”

The most effective way to get someone to “get” veganism is to demonstrate how it fits with what she already believes. You can do this in a number of ways. Here’s an actual example of an exchange, lightly edited, that I had recently on a live chat program:

“Do you agree with the notion that it is wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering or death on animals?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We could have an interesting discussion about the fine points of “necessity,” but would you agree that it is wrong to inflict suffering and death on animals for reasons of pleasure, amusement, or convenience?”

“No brainer. Sure. I really objected when it was revealed that [American football player] Michael Vick was involved with fighting dogs. I think it’s barbaric to do that.”

“Why?”

“It’s obvious. It’s wrong to make animals suffer and die for our amusement.”

“Do you eat meat or cheese or drink milk?”

“Yes, I do not eat much beef because I know it’s bad for you but I eat pork, chicken, and fish. And I love cheese and ice cream.”

“What is the difference between what you’re doing and what Michael Vick did?”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Well, Michael Vick imposed suffering and death on animals because he enjoyed the results. Those of us who eat meat and dairy impose suffering and death on animals because we enjoy the results. We just pay someone else to do the dirty work.”

“But surely there’s a difference.”

“What is that difference? You don’t need to eat animal products. Indeed, many mainstream health care professionals agree that animal products are detrimental to human health. And animal agriculture is unquestionably an ecological nightmare. The best justification that we have for inflicting pain, suffering, and death on more than 56 billion animals annually, not counting fish, is that they taste good.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

We had another follow-up chat about the treatment of cows in the production of dairy. Three days later, the person involved in this exchange wrote to tell me that she had decided to become vegan.

Incremental steps

I am often asked what to say to a person who expresses agreement with the moral theory of veganism but says that she cannot go vegan right away.

First of all, I always emphasize that it is easy to go vegan. I very consciously reject the notion promoted by many animal advocates that veganism is difficult. It’s easy. I have been a vegan for 27 years now. It was more difficult when I started but it was not that difficult, even in 1982. In 2009, it’s a breeze. And if you want to eat healthily and avoid prepared foods, it’s even easier.

Second, I *never* encourage anyone to eat cage-free

eggs or “happy meat” or organic milk, etc. First of all, all of these animals are tortured. Although animals who are supposedly raised in “free-range” circumstances, or whose products are advertised as “organic,” are raised in conditions that *may* be *slightly* less brutal than the normal factory farm, they are all still tortured. I will never portray these products as anything but what they are: gimmicks that are intended to make humans feel more comfortable about consuming nonhumans.

Third, I encourage those who really are unwilling to go vegan immediately to follow the “Vegan 1-2-3” plan. This introduces veganism in three stages. The person goes vegan for breakfast for some period of time (a few weeks, a month). She sees how easy it is and how delicious and satisfying a vegan breakfast is. She then goes vegan for lunch for some period of time, and then for dinner, and then she’s vegan.

Although I think that the Vegan 1-2-3 plan is preferable to eating “happy” meat or dairy, I never concede that eating animal products is ever morally right. I always want to be clear that veganism is the only position that makes sense if you take animal interests seriously. The other person is always clear that even if she is not ready to go vegan immediately, nothing short of veganism will discharge the important moral obligation involved.

Conclusion

Donald Watson, who founded The Vegan Society in 1944 and who lived a healthy, active life until passing on in 2005, maintained that dairy products, such as milk, eggs, and cheese, were every bit as cruel and exploitive of sentient animal life as was slaughtering animals for their flesh: “The unquestionable cruelty associated with the production of dairy produce has made it clear that lacto-vegetarianism is but a half-way house between flesh-eating and a truly humane, civilised diet, and we think, therefore, that during our life on earth we should try to evolve sufficiently to make the ‘full journey.’” He also avoided wearing leather, wool or silk and used a fork, rather than a spade in his gardening to avoid killing worms.

Let us instill in others the reverence for life that Donald Watson had and that he passed on to us.