

Some Comments on Vegetarianism as a “Gateway” to Veganism

As a result of my comments (here, on Facebook, and on the Podcast Commentary), I have been inundated with private messages that all have the same themes: (1) “but many vegans started off as vegetarians”; and (2) “advocating veganism is elitist.”

As for whether many vegans started off as vegetarians, let me say this clearly: That is not the point.

First, the relevant question is whether vegetarianism is a meaningful moral position. That is, can we draw a meaningful moral distinction between flesh and other animal products? If, as I maintain, we cannot, then we should not promote vegetarianism any more than we should promote as morally meaningful eating red veal over white veal, cage-free eggs over battery eggs, etc. If all of these products are immoral, then we ought to be clear and honest and say so.

Animal products other than flesh often involve more suffering and death than does flesh. For example, animals used for dairy are kept alive longer, treated worse (including, but not limited to, having their babies taken and killed for veal), and all dairy animals end up in the same slaughterhouse as animals used for meat. The vegetarian who continues to consume dairy is still complicit in animal suffering and death. What is the moral justification for promoting continued complicity in suffering and death? Indeed, if the vegetarian increases her intake of dairy, as many do, she may be responsible for more suffering and death than before she became a vegetarian.

Second, the observation that many vegans started as vegetarians, even if true, begs the question as to why that is the case. Many people maintain that they did not go vegan sooner precisely because of the emphasis on the moral desirability of vegetarianism advocated by large animal organizations. Promoting vegetarianism actually impedes going vegan.

It is clear: if you explain that there is no distinction between flesh and other animal products and why we should go vegan, and the person with whom you are talking cares about the issue, she will either (1) go vegan immediately; or (2) go vegan in stages; or (3) not go vegan and adopt some version of vegetarianism (or “happy” meat/product consumption). But she will at least understand that veganism is the aspiration toward which to work. She will understand that the line between flesh and other products is entirely arbitrary. If you maintain that going vegetarian is morally meaningful and that there is a distinction between flesh and other animal products, then you increase the chances that her

progress toward veganism will be impeded.

In other words, you do not need to advocate vegetarianism. It is completely unnecessary, morally meaningless, and, as a practical matter, it impedes the transition to veganism.

As for the supposed “elitism” of veganism, I continue to find that comment bewildering.

Is there anything more elitist than believing that people are too stupid to understand the argument against animal exploitation and the lack of any meaningful distinction between flesh and dairy?

Is there anything more elitist than promoting the idea that it is morally acceptable to eat dairy, eggs, or other animal products and to continue the exploitation of the most vulnerable?

We would never label as “elitist” advocacy for a complete ban on rape (even though rape is, has been, and will continue to be a frequent occurrence in a patriarchal world). But when it comes to animals, advocacy of a complete ban on consumption and use is regarded as elitist.

What distinguishes the two situations?

That’s a rhetorical question. The answer is clear: species.

I am sorry that I cannot respond to all the private emails and Facebook messages. But I have said this as clearly as I can. I have no artistic ability and cannot draw pictures.

Go vegan. It’s easy; it’s better for your health; it’s better for the planet; and, most importantly, it’s the morally right thing to do.

And please remember: violence is the problem; it is not any part of the solution. Abolition, veganism, and non-violence are all different aspects of the same concept.

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