

Veganism: Why Not

an anarchist perspective

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Proponents of an ideology typically fail to distinguish between those who have not yet encountered the new ideas they offer, and those who have absorbed these ideas and moved on. The very point of an ideology is that you're not meant to move on from it; however every ideology, at the very best, has only been a resting point in an onward theoretical journey.

Anarchism, I would argue (perhaps simply because I don't wish to move on from it), is more a body of thought, a legacy and tradition of revolt aiming towards total freedom from all coercive authority. Its various ideologies—syndicalism, primitivism—have constituted resting points, while a few guiding principles have remained permanent, but by no means ahistorical.

It would be a mistake to critique veganism as an ideology, or as a body of thought and tradition of practice, because there do not even exist any vague guiding principles that all or nearly all vegans share. A great many vegans do not believe it is absolutely wrong to kill other animals for food, and an increasing number do not believe in animal liberation in any radical sense of the term.

Veganism can only be fairly critiqued as an intersectionality, a minimal practice of abstinence that for a variety of reasons very different people choose to identify as an important common ground. For many, the motive is social, to signal belonging to a group or completion of a trend, justified on the grounds of health or ethics. For others, the motive is revolutionary, to develop that minimal practice of abstinence into a maximal practice that might seek, among other things, animal rights, animal liberation, or the abolition of all domination and exploitation.

As such, this critique of veganism is not at all directed against particular diets or lifestyles that could be described as vegan. It is rather directed at the very intersectionality that people choose to identify as an important common ground—based on the argument that there actually is no common ground there—and at the motives and beliefs behind that identification.

The New Thing

The rate at which veganism is being promoted by hipsters, NGOs, and—increasingly—businesses, leaves no room for doubt that capitalism, the perennial opponent of animal liberation, to say the least, has become the new best friend of veganism. Of course, capitalism also buddied up with the feminist movement, and only the stupidest anarchists took that as a reason not to fight patriarchy. However, the fight against patriarchy and the feminist movement are not necessarily the same thing; there have also been intelligent critiques of particular feminist movements as the best form of struggle against patriarchy, which, regardless of their validity, have made for healthy debate. Likewise, fighting the exploitation of animals and veganism are not the same thing, and the question of whether the latter is useful for the former is also necessary to debate.

It is vital to note that green capitalism is becoming the predominant strategy to allow Capital to survive what may be the biggest crisis it has ever created. Veganism plays a demonstrable role in greening capitalism. Every vegan who has ever spouted a statistic about the amount of water used to produce a pound of beef or the amount of methane emitted by the world's sheep is actively supporting capitalism by participating in a great smoke screen which hides the true nature of how the present economic system actually functions. All talk of efficiency is coming out of the mouth of Capital itself. Historically, capitalism has needed an ever growing population, although in the future it may find a way out of this obligation. But for the meantime, capitalists

must find a way to feed a larger population on less, and in the wealthy metropolis, veganism provides the perfect solution.

As stated in the introduction, veganism in its totality is not an ideology or a tradition of struggle; it only exists as these things for a minority of those who identify as vegans. In its totality, veganism is only the identity of those who choose it. Because veganism exists as a chosen common ground between those who struggle for animal liberation and those who are actively working to save capitalism, not to mention to vacate any struggle they come in contact with of its radical content, it could only be justified if it inarguably were the only way to coherently live and fight for anarchist ideals. This, I will argue presently, is not the case. (One could also counterargue that veganism is potentially useful as a common ground if it serves subversively as a sort of gateway drug into more radical politics. Given the self-evident facts that more people are turned away by veganism than attracted to it, and that those who are attracted to it tend to be wealthier and hipper, veganism makes for a simultaneously uninviting and anemic gatekeeper.)

Animal Rights

Animal rights is a common objective for those vegans whose motivations are ethical, and not only based in health or fashion. I don't know why these people hate other animals so much that they would wish rights on them, but I imagine their malice stems from an ignorance of the meaning of rights, of the policing of living relations in a legal framework, of the democratic project. Because a propensity towards democracy is one of the most common strategic and theoretical faults among anarchists at this time, one must again skeptically question the selection of this common ground that breeds so many vices. Because the animal rights agenda is so naïve and reformist, I will subsequently focus on the framework of animal liberation, in an attempt to avoid creating an easy-to-demolish strawman.

Thou shalt not kill

One of multiple ethical justifications for veganism argues that a vegan lifestyle is the only coherent realization of the moral truth that it is wrong to kill other animals. If the moral prohibition against killing is not coming directly from pacifism or Christianity, it can only base itself on an analogy with the fundamental anarchist prohibition against domination: killing is a form of domination, and thus it is contrary to anarchism, except possibly in cases of self-defense. The analogy is a flagrantly false one. Though Authority has long flaunted its legitimate ability to kill, annihilation of its subjects has always been a last resort, and this last resort is always taken in order to educate the living. Domination is only successful when the subject is kept alive so its activity can be disciplined and exploited: there's got to be something to dominate.

There's nothing un-anarchist about killing a king, because kings are not a type of people whom anarchists wish to dominate at the end of the day. Rather, kings and other authorities constitute a political project of domination, and killing them is a rejection of their project, a demonstration that their control is imperfect, and an invitation to more acts of rebellion and disorder that will end, if successful, not with more subjects, but with no subjects, and therefore no domination.

Killing need not be an act of negation, either. It can also be the foundation of a relationship. The lion is not the king of the jungle (nor is it even a typical member of a jungle ecosystem,

to get pedantic). The predator does not dominate the prey, nor does it negate them. It enters into a relationship with them, and this relationship is mutual—or in other words, of a sort that anarchists should find interesting and potentially inspiring. Many animal liberationists have human exceptionalism so ingrained, they actually reproduce the -ism they are combating, (this at least they would have in common with other identity politicians). If human morality must stand above natural relations such as the one between predator and prey, then it is hypocrisy to talk of speciesism; we could only talk of salvation. And if we then shift the terrain of the argument to point out that the natural relation of predator and prey is absent in industrial food production, we would be dishonest to not also admit that we have no coherent moral qualm against killing for food, merely a contextual rejection of killing as an industry. But this would make us luddites at heart, not vegans.

Speaking from the gut for a moment, I find the moral against killing to be utterly repulsive. I think it's a disgusting disconnection from the natural world and our animal selves. Killing can be a beautiful thing. It can also be a tool in the service of domination. It is not simply and inherently one or the other.

A prohibition against killing seems to be just the idea of rights in disguise. The right to life is meaningless without a political authority to enforce it and to engage in the project of engineering the very meaning of life. A right to life could also be safeguarded by a shared community ethos, but such a community determination would be powerless against the realities of nature (unlike the State, which has the capacity to reengineer nature). And nature knows no rights; once it gives us life, it only guarantees us the certainty of death. The Western tragic ideal, which is inextricable from the capitalist war against nature, presents death as a bad thing, and apparently so do some vegans, but to the rest of us, this only appears as philosophical immaturity.

One could, in counterargument, make a distinction between death by natural causes and death by killing, but this only increases a separation between humans and other animal species. If human ethics and the behavior of other animals exist in completely separate spheres, then it becomes impossible to talk about animal liberation without “liberation” taking on an entirely Christian or colonial meaning (such as the “liberation of Iraq”). If a human killing for food is not natural, then we have nothing in common with other animals, in which case the only honest vegan discourse would be one of “charity towards defenseless animals.” Of course, “natural” is a sophistic and often manipulated category anyways, but let's remember that this line of argument begins with a vegan attempt to separate “natural” and “cultural” forms of eating.

Having thus alienated us from nature, a vegan could make the irrefutable argument that we have the choice whether or not to kill other animals for food, but this reasoning is circular, resting again on the assumption that killing other animals is wrong and should be avoided if possible. (They may tack on a multicultural, demeaning, and victimistic exception for hunter-gatherers, poor people with limited food access, and others who “don't have a choice”). It would be more logically coherent to argue, also irrefutably, that eating anything is a choice, and given human involvement in so many world problems, we should stop eating altogether.

Which brings up the question of eating plants. It's unfortunate that so many facetious jackasses, when they first hear about this weird thing called vegetarianism, think they're being so clever when they ask why it's okay to eat plants if it's not okay to eat animals, because there is actually an important point to be made here.

The consensus view on why it's okay to eat plants and not animals is because plants do not have central nervous systems (although neither do several members of the animal kingdom) and

therefore can feel no pain. There are a number of things wrong with this argument. First of all, it is not falsifiable and not empirical (in the best possible sense of this term) to assert that plants do not feel. A great many cultures that have an infinitely better track record—than the consumer culture that birthed veganism—in living as a respectful part of their ecosystem and not exploiting animals insist that all living things have personhood. And within the skeptical and mechanistic confines of Western science, there are also a number of indications, on the level of organic electrical activity for example, that plants interact with their environment in a way that could encompass feeling. They inarguably display rejection or attraction to different stimuli, depending on the consequence of those stimuli for their wellbeing.

On the other hand, if a complex central nervous system is the sole basis, in human beings, for the capacity to feel pain, there are a great many animals with such simple nervous systems that it would be hard to believe they could feel anything more than attraction or repulsion to different stimuli. Exactly why a living being should be valued based on what comes down to its supposed similarity to human beings is something that vegans should have to explain.

If it is domination to kill, why do we respect animals and not plants? If it is wrong to cause pain, why do we give animals the benefit of the doubt, and give other living things the short shrift when in neither case is it certain if or what they feel? Is our only criterion their similarity to us? Could the advanced ethical arguments of veganism be little more complex than those PETA posters that always champion cute puppies, and never crabs or cockroaches?

In any case, the downward extension of the right not to feel pain to those creatures most similar to ourselves (but only similar to us in a mechanical understanding of ourselves) closely mirrors the extension of democratic rights from an elite to the majority of humankind. This extension was not a gradual sequence of delayed charity but a violent process that incorporated the new citizens into the rationalistic Cartesian conception of man; rights were a trojan horse for a more detailed domination. Vegan morality, in other words, constitutes another alienation from nature; to prevent killing or the infliction of pain, human society would have to remove all remnants of ecosystem relations from our food production, producing human and natural spheres that ideally do not touch at all.

This alienation is most obvious in the bizarre aversion to pain expressed by some ethical vegans. Rather than constructing a sensible ethical framework, in which it is simply wrong to lock up another living thing or to enforce coercive non-reciprocal relationships with other living things, the veganism which is based on a prohibition of killing permits the contradiction of killing plants by elaborating an immorality of the causing of pain. (As a side note regarding non-reciprocal relationships, it is important to recognize the centrality of coercion in order to distinguish between non-reciprocal Authority and non-reciprocal parasites, the latter inhabiting an important ecosystemic niche).

I find it hard to understand someone who does not comprehend that pain is natural, necessary, and good. When we inflict pain on others, our faculties of sympathy provoke a conflict within us, and such conflict is also good, because it makes us think and question what we're doing, whether it's necessary, and whether there's also an element of the beautiful in it. Evolving to eat animals and also to feel sympathy, our biology saddles us with a choice. Either we form an intimate relationship with that which we eat, understand it as a privilege to accompany the other creature in its last moments, and look forward to the day when we will also be killed and eaten; or we avoid this difficult process by forming an ideology so we know that what we are doing, a priori, is right, and therefore not a cause for conflict, sympathy, or doubt. The depersonalization

and degradation of animals that accompanies ideas of human supremacy is one such ideology that accomplishes an end run around emotional conflict. Veganism, which extends human supremacy downwards to include the whole of the animal kingdom and depersonalizes the rest of the natural world, is another. With both the loud, proud meat-eaters and the vegans, the effect is the same: to not have to feel sympathy or respect for the living beings which you must kill in order to survive.

From Boycott to Insurrection

A great many vegans do not believe that it is fundamentally wrong to kill for food, but they understand the shamefulness of locking living beings up in cages, and therefore of the meat industry. As long as the meat industry exists, they want no part of it. Maybe they see their veganism as a boycott of the industry, which, along with other tactics, will bring it down, or maybe it is simply a coherent emotional response. More likely to approve of freganism, this type of vegan will say that they might eat meat if they lived in a healthy, ecologically sustainable society, but within industrial society they consider it impermissible. It is important to distinguish between these two types of radical vegans—those who think it is absolutely wrong to eat meat and those who think it is situationally wrong, leaving aside for now non-evangelical vegans who see veganism as a choice befitting their particular struggle—because the moral vegans will often respond to criticisms of vegan ethics with arguments based on the tenets of situational vegans, confusing the distinction between the specific context they use rhetorically, and the absolute ethics they use it to defend. For example, a typical response to the first version of this article deliberately conflated the two arguments, dodging the ethical criticism of veganism by falsely painting it as an ethical apology for the factory system of food production. As can clearly be seen in the preceding section, the ethical criticism is based in the possibility of a healthy, ecological, non-industrial relationship with our food. In this section, the struggle against industrial food production is taken as a given, and the only criticism made against veganism in this respect regards its efficacy in challenging and undermining this industry.

While they can be counted on to be less manipulative than moral vegans, practical vegans generally obscure the true functioning of capitalism and thus hinder the struggle against animal exploitation and ecocide, two phenomena which cannot be viewed entirely separately, even though animal rights, and certain versions of animal liberation, highlight the former at the expense of the latter.

Although it seeks to be strategic in nature, practical veganism creates a false understanding of capitalism and a false sense of moral purity or superiority, both of which are fatal to the struggle against domination.

In the first place, true veganism is impossible for anyone who lives within capitalist society. Most fruits and vegetables are pollinated with bees or wasps, many of which are commercially farmed. A substantial proportion of fields are fertilized with manure or slurry from industrial meat farms. The commercial alternative to this, generally, is chemical fertilizer, which constitutes mining and the destruction of the oceans: is veganism in this case any kind of step forward? (Or, to use another example, when a friend asked me to hand her her jacket, which, she self-righteously pointed out, was not made from animal skin, her sense of superiority was quickly deflated when I said, “Here’s your jacket made from petroleum products.”)

It goes further than this. Imagine a vegan vertical monopoly that produces food, from start to finish, without bees, without manure, and hell, let's pretend they even use organic fertilizers and pesticides, and don't use giant tractors that crush moles, insects, and other animal life. Only rich people would be able to afford this food, but regardless of the final price, all profit made from the buying and selling of this food represents a return on investment, a cash flow that a diverse web of banks, insurance companies, and investors turn right around and put into other industries—the weapons industry, clothing manufacture, vivisection, adventure tourism, prosthetic devices, turkey factories, cobalt mining, student loans, it doesn't matter.

Let's put this more concretely. Every single vegan restaurant in the world, as long as they meet the minimum definition of a restaurant (selling food) supports the meat industry, because in industrial civilization, there is no meat industry and vegetable industry, there is only Capital, expanding at the expense of everything else.

The vegan argument against stealing meat is indicative: if you steal meat, the supermarket may lose money, but they will order more meat product to replace their stock, so more meat will be consumed. However, it is the profit made by the supermarket that is reinvested primarily in food distribution of all kinds, and secondarily in all other industries imaginable. What's good for veganism, in this case—buying vegetables and not stealing meat—is good for capitalism, bad for the planet, bad for animals. Ethical consumption of any kind is a mirage. All consumption fuels Capital and hurts the planet. Stealing meat is better for animals than buying vegetables from a supermarket, but both stealing and buying are a dead end as long as we don't dismantle the industrial civilization that is destroying the Earth and exploiting or liquidating all its inhabitants.

Not only is there no modern example of an effective boycott against an entire product category as opposed to a single brand, the very idea of better consumer choices represents how environmental movements of various stripes have aided capitalism.

When the reformist environmentalists of the '80s promoted responsible consumerism (e.g. *101 Things You Can Do to Save the Planet*), they played their part in increasing domestic electricity efficiency in the US. This increase in efficiency enabled a decrease in prices, which allowed an increase in total electricity consumption, and all the accompanying consequences for the environment. Within a market economy, a decrease in meat consumption could lead to a decrease in meat prices, which would lead to a net increase in meat consumption as those segments of the population not yet won over by veganism take advantage of the drop in prices.

Some mythical vegan movement that became large enough to cause a collapse in the meat industry through boycotts and accompanying sabotage would find itself in a dead end, having promoted a change in capitalism that would allow greater efficiency in world food production, a higher world population, and the destruction of ecosystems on a greater scale. The alienation from nature would reach its logical conclusion: most animals would be freed from their cages, but they'd be fucked all the same.

Not only does veganism encourage an ignorance of market mechanisms, it also conflates consumption with agency and thus promotes a fundamental democratic myth. People are held responsible for what they buy and consume, and therefore the consumer arena is portrayed as one of free choice, rather than a violently imposed role. All the violence and domination of the capitalist system is ingrained in the role of the consumer, in every corner of a society based on the production, buying and selling of commodities. Except for the most skilled of evaders, and the inhabitants of a few remote jungle and mountain regions (all of whom base their antiauthoritarian subsistence strategies in part on hunting), it is impossible to opt out of capitalism. A vegan

lifestyle in no way damages capitalism, ends ecocide or animal exploitation, or severs one's material connections to even just the animal industry, given the interlaced nature of industrial society. Assuming that veganism has anything to do with animal liberation would be like calling an anarchist a hypocrite for having a job, driving on state highways, going to a hospital, or occasionally opting to follow the law. The exploitation of animals and the destruction of the environment are hardwired into the present system. What matters is that we fight this system. What we eat and what we buy or don't buy in the meantime are choices whose only ramifications are personal.

The nature of industrial society is completely missed when we see agency in consumer choices. As long as we take care of ourselves and our comrades, how we survive the blackmails of capitalism is unimportant. The only thing that matters are our attacks against the existing system. Political veganism is an exercise in irrelevance.

It is no coincidence that many of those anarchists who reconquered the ability to feed themselves—rewilding, scavenging, or setting up farms—were among the first to abandon veganism. They had left consumerism behind, inasmuch as they could, and were coming in contact again with natural realities, and reciprocal relationships that don't fit into easy ethical frameworks.

The Healthiest Diet

Before I point out some common vegan health misinformation, it's only fair to point out the lies on the other side. The most common scientific argument I've ever heard against the universal applicability of a vegan diet states that people of certain blood types need to eat meat in order to survive. I looked it up, and the study is thoroughly discredited, and it was flimsy to begin with. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, the dairy industry propaganda that milk is good for your bones is also false; broccoli, in fact, is much better. But a lot of research and a determination not to be suckered by fables from either side has led me to the conclusion that not everyone can be healthy on a vegan diet. Most of all, personal experience and the experiences of friends has corroborated that conclusion.

To the best of my knowledge, the following facts are solid, and rarely mentioned by those vegans who ply the supposed health advantages of their diet:

- humans evolved on an omnivorous diet;
- different people need different amounts of various nutrients, such as iron and B12;
- some people have lower or higher absorption rates of these nutrients;
- dietary pills are often an unreliable source of nutrients, not only because they are generally produced by profit-interested companies, but also because humans evolved to absorb their nutrients from food and not from pills (in the case of iron, dietary pills and "iron-fortified" foods contain the inferior non-heme iron from plant sources);
- heme iron, which is only found in animal sources, has an absorption rate of between 20% and 35% whereas the non-heme iron found in plant sources has an absorption rate of between 2% and 20%;

- absorption rates of heme iron is always high, whereas absorption rates of non-heme iron are affected by other dietary elements (animal protein and Vitamin C raise non-heme absorption rates, soy proteins and the phytic acid found in leafy greens lowers the non-heme absorption rates);
- unabsorbed iron, whether from pills or non-heme iron, damages cell tissue and causes health problems;
- lack of iron or especially B12 can build up over time and take years to manifest in health problems, but when such problems arise they can be gravely serious;
- there are no vegan foods that are naturally high in iron;
- zinc, another important mineral, is lacking in many vegetarian diets, and is also blocked by the phytic acid in leafy greens;
- B12 is not found in plant sources, a B12 deficiency is extremely dangerous but it can take 5–20 years to manifest, and its symptoms are masked by the folic acid which abounds in vegan diets;
- vegan B12 can only be reliably gotten in certain brands of nutritional yeast, although some people's bodies reject the yeast, or in pills or artificially fortified foods, which often have low absorption rates. (For myth-busting regarding vegan foods that are supposedly high in iron, or the argument that humans are naturally vegetarian, see the appendix).

It follows from the above facts that some people, provided they are extremely conscientious about their diet, can live healthily and happily on a vegan diet. A few will feel bad on such a diet from the get go. And a larger group, after a matter of years, will become increasingly unhealthy and even develop anemia or other conditions. A friend of mine who had never accepted my arguments against veganism finally ended ten years of veganism only after her body demanded it of her. She had developed anemia, a severe shortage of B12, and depression, and was feeling so bad that she was becoming suicidal. The arrogant, cultish commentary of, "if you're not a vegan now you never were," simply doesn't apply to her. She's someone who is extremely dedicated to animal liberation, who has put her freedom and her body on the line, who has always been conscientious about her diet. In the first few years, she did great with a vegan diet, but after long enough she caused herself health problems that she could no longer ignore. Her case is more dramatic than most, but it's probable that a lot of the time, what appears to be the loss of motivation to maintain a diet is related to the general loss of motivation that accompanies anemia or a B12 shortage. Other times it's just the case that people are listening to their bodies without realizing that's what they're doing.

Regardless, when we hear someone tell us that a vegan diet can work for anyone, and if we gave up on it it's because of a personal failing, we know in our bones and in our guts that this is just ideological authoritarianism. When we weren't eating meat, we experienced it the same way when some jerk told us we had to eat animals. Eating, ultimately, constitutes a very personal relationship. A sure way to make an enemy is to devalue their diet. Which again raises the question of the strategic common ground constituted by veganism. Looking at vegans as a whole, and at anarchists as a whole, with whom do we feel more affinity?

The supposed health benefits of veganism are not as simple as they are often presented. Many of the studies cited by vegans to their favour do not actually measure a strictly vegan diet, but mix vegans in with those who eat very little in the way of animal products (i.e. the studies will ask respondents if they eat meat “less than once a week, two or three times a week, once a day” and so on). Once there are more vegan capitalists, such studies will surely find their funding (it won’t be long now), but until recently, the scientific establishment hasn’t been so interested in reifying veganism as a category so much as comparing relative amounts of different food groups in a diet. These studies are also affected by the fact that vegans and vegetarians tend to be more health conscious and wealthier, meaning that regardless of the meat question, they’re putting higher quality food in their bodies.

The arguments about meat consumption being bad for the heart are complicated, but vegan interventions in these arguments have tended towards simplification. High cholesterol in the blood can be bad for the heart, and meat is astronomically higher in cholesterol. However, the body is not a machine you pour ingredients into. There is no strong connection between cholesterol in the diet and cholesterol in the blood stream. Furthermore, cholesterol is an important nutrient. Some studies have suggested that animal fats trigger cholesterol build-up in the bloodstream, but other studies point out that the former conflate saturated fats from animal sources with trans fats, which come from processed vegetable oils and abound in many vegan diets. There is a general consensus on the harmfulness of trans fats, and a multiplicity of studies that allege some health risks and some health benefits from animal fats. What seems to be undisputable is that there are many benefits from animal fats, and all of the health risks are neutralized by sufficient physical exercise and enough fiber in the diet. On the other hand, someone who does not lead an active life and has little access to fresh food should not eat red meat, although baked, boiled, or raw fish will generally improve their health.

An undisputed fact is that in the countries with the longest life expectancy, and generally also those with high rates of heart health, people tend to eat moderate to high amounts of animal fats, but very low amounts of processed foods.

As far as the heart goes, what is most certain is that fiber is good for it. There’s no point beating around the bush: meat has no fiber. But if meat is not crowding plants out of one’s diet, it probably isn’t bad for your heart, and no study I’m aware of has demonstrated that meat in moderate quantities is bad if it is accompanied by lots of fiber and exercise. In other words, by most accounts, a diet based on fruits, vegetables, and meat is healthier for most people than a diet based on fruits, vegetables, and grains.

But the heart is not the only organ in the body. What I’ve never heard a vegan mention are the studies documenting the negative health consequences of a diet lacking animal fats, such as higher rates of depression, fatigue, and violent death. Nor do many vegan websites mention that soy is toxic when unfermented (nearly all commercial tofu, and all TVP, is unfermented). Only tempeh and authentic bean curd pass this hurdle. As for seitan, though it is not a soy product, the gluten it is made from is bad for a comparable percentage of the population as the cow milk which vegans often demonize. Soy dust is also an allergen that increases asthma rates, particularly in port cities where rainforest soy is unloaded and sent to market.

Given the moralistic weight of the concept of the “natural,” it is no surprise that some vegans have alleged meat consumption to be unnatural for humans. The fossil record, the diets of the most closely related primates, the length of our intestines, and our ability to digest raw meat all

point to an omnivorous diet going back to the beginning of the species. The specific allegations regarding evolution are debunked in detail in the appendix.

Religious Tendencies

The almost systematic presence of misinformation in specifically vegan circles indicates a religious quality to veganism. Many vegans consistently formulate their lifestyle as part of a dedicated struggle for liberation, but those who are exempt from the critique of dogmatism should still be asked why they choose to create common ground with those vegans who are moralistic and manipulative.

Dogmatism is in many ways reinforced by the very construction of veganism. Veganism creates a righteous in-group on the basis of an illusion of purity. Many of us have had the frustrating experience of arguing with vegans who go in circles, claiming that they do not support the meat industry even after they are forced to acknowledge that all industries are interconnected; we are reminded of arguing with Christians whose every proof comes back to the bible, or more precisely, their desire to believe in it.

The fact that the idea of purity or non-responsibility does not square with how capitalism actually functions, and thus a vegan diet does nothing to materially attack the structural causes of animal exploitation cannot be accepted, because the actual meaning of veganism, as such, is the embrace of the illusion of purity, the entering of the in-group.

The existence of this in-group can also be seen in the place of vegetarians on the moral hierarchy. Any well read vegan knows that, within their own logic of responsibility, a vegetarian is just as responsible as a meat eater for animal exploitation, because the production of eggs or dairy is integrated with meat production, in that morally direct way they find somehow more visible than, say, the integration of the transport industry with meat production. However, the vegan who is prone to judge or proselytize (who is not every vegan, and perhaps not even the majority, but a common enough figure) will place the vegetarian who consumes milk daily higher up on the moral scale than the omnivore who eats homegrown fruits and vegetables and eats meat once a week.

Another religious feature of veganism can be found in its concept of liberation or solidarity. The vegan model is remarkably similar to the militant Christian charity of the abolitionists, given the fact that they are speaking in the name of beings who do not speak for themselves, and building solidarity with allies who will never criticize or demand anything of them (in the case of the abolitionists, the ideal of the mute slave was not a reality but a desired condition reinforced by the general lack of direct communication between the abolitionists in the North and the slaves in the South). Clearly, many animals struggle against being locked up, and nature in general throws down walls and erodes boundaries. But veganism, in the minority occasions when it is accompanied by actions for animal liberation, imposes an ethical space on the animal kingdom that other animals had no hand (paw?) in creating. Veganism refuses the possibility of learning from other animals—for me a precondition for real solidarity, but evidently not for them—by rejecting the development of an ethical framework in which we all depend on each other and sometimes eat each other, as in the animal world. On the vegan sanctuary farms, do they put the rescued foxes in with the rescued chickens? And if they feed the rescued dogs and cats meat instead of

tofu, is it okay because they're just animals, but we've risen above that kind of behavior? Such an attitude crosses the line between ally and savior.

Go Omnivore

There are innumerable ways for omnivorous anarchists to live coherently and formulate a diet that realizes their struggle for total liberation in their daily life. Necessarily, this great diversity of diets would have one point in common: the recognition that, because capitalism is a coercive and totalizing imposition, purity is neither desirable nor possible, thus what a person eats should not model an ideal but highlight a conflict.

This could take the form of scavenging or stealing to feed oneself. Both of these activities cultivate low intensity illegality and thus antagonism with the dominant system. And both, if they are realized within an expansive anarchist practice, suggest possibilities for elevating tactics and moving towards collective action. In the former case, one can sabotage trash compactors and other capitalist techniques of enclosing an inadvertently created commons (the trash). In the latter case, one can organize proletarian shopping or supermarket raids.

In places with easier access to physical space, such as rural areas or decaying urban areas, one can seize land to create gardens and farms and promote the self-organization of our own food supply. This tends to work better, and enable a fuller realization of anarchist ideals, if it is modeled on an ecosystem rather than a factory, which means gardens and farms with animals. Depending on the scale this could include bees, fish, chickens, goats, and more. Such projects will pose the difficult but necessary challenge of figuring out a mutual and respectful relationship among all the species that live off the farm; planning from within rather than from above, learning how to listen to the other beings that use the farm and allow them to impact the plans; and adapting new norms for dealing with the emotional conflict we should feel when we kill other living beings.

In places where we have contact with wilderness, we can—as many people are doing now—relearn many important skills related to feeding ourselves. If this is truly done not as a hobby but as the realization of a desire for liberation, it will necessarily entail conflict with the State and interrupt state narratives of progress and citizenship. Where indigenous peoples continue to practice their traditional forms of food production, they almost always find themselves in conflict with the State.

And then there's another take entirely, in which neither our diet nor anything else about our lives is purported to be consistent with our ideals. It's a possibility that veganism seems to miss entirely, and it goes like this: many of us are poor. We eat whatever we can get from the dumpster, steal when the security guard isn't looking, or buy what we can on a shitty wage. There is no dietary option in this world that satisfies us, not in the expensive eco-friendly supermarket, not in the cheap bulk section of a discount store that may or may not exist in our neighborhood, and certainly not in the permaculture farm outside of our city where the escapist hippies spend all their time feeding themselves while the world goes to shit.

We eat whatever food we can, sucking down the poisons of this shitty world, just to live another day and gain another opportunity to wreak destruction, to attack, to destroy a small piece of what degrades us. Cannibalism is the norm in our world. We eat our fellow animals, raised in extermination camp conditions, we wear clothes made by fellow workers in sweatshops, we breathe air so polluted it gives us cancer, we walk down streets paved with petroleum byproduct,

and we're forced to spend a large part of our time exploiting and betraying ourselves. None of this is a choice, just a reflection of the fact that we live in hell. Until the present social order is destroyed and all of the cages and prisons opened and razed, the only choice we acknowledge is negation. Unlike the naïve vegan novice out to change the world, we don't kid ourselves into thinking we can live our ideals. That's exactly why we're at war.

If we seek to realize our struggle in our diet, abandoning veganism creates more possibilities for self-organization of food, a mutual relationship with our environment, bioregional flexibility and sensitivity, and anticivilizational ethics. If we reject the totality of this society or lack access to an autonomous space for maneuver, the only thing that matters is attacking the existent and sustaining ourselves in the meantime. In either case, an omnivorous diet makes sense.

Stay Vegan

There is a major operative difference between the statements "I don't eat any animal products" and "I am vegan." All identity, on some level, is a political choice. The strategy behind the identity of veganism is poorly thought out. The practice of not eating animal products, on the other hand, may have a number of justifications.

I don't care to convince anyone to abandon a vegan lifestyle. There are plenty of good reasons to live that way, though the only ones I can think of are strictly subjective: some people feel healthier on a vegan diet; some people find it emotionally easier or more sensible to struggle for animal liberation if nothing they eat once had a face; some people do not want to put anything in their bodies that lived a tortured life, and veganism serves as an effective psychological barrier against some of the worst atrocities of capitalism, even if practically speaking it makes no difference in ending those atrocities or one's material connection to them.

What I intend with this article is to indignantly reject the much-tossed-around argument that it is incoherent for anarchists to eat meat, and morally superior for them to be vegans. I want to reach people who are dedicated to the principles behind veganism but whose bodies are suffering from the diet, to emphasize that it doesn't work for everybody. I want to attack an ethical framework I find immature and overly civilized. And most of all I want to contribute to an end to the days when veganism is the norm in collective anarchist spaces, and anyone who does not follow this lifestyle is marginalized in every social center, at every conference. There are a great many reasons against generalized veganism. There is no reason why those of us who have already passed through veganism and out the other side should be closeted in common anarchist spaces, or treated as less dedicated in the struggle for the end of all forms of domination.

Against consumer society, against civilization, until no one has to live in a cage!

Appendix: Two pseudo-scientific manipulations typical of vegan ideology

<http://www.vegsource.com/news/2009/11/the-comparative-anatomy-of-eating.html>

According to a report published on vegsource.com, "we can look at mammalian carnivores, herbivores (plant-eaters) and omnivores to see which anatomical and physiological features are associated with each kind of diet. Then we can look at human anatomy and physiology to see in which

group we belong.” Subsequently, they compare and contrast physiological features common to carnivorous and herbivorous mammals, using the following headings: “Oral Cavity,” “Stomach and Small Intestine” and “Colon.”

Framing the bulk of the article as a comparison between carnivores and herbivores, they make descriptions of these two classes of mammals that clearly show more similarities between humans and herbivores. For example, they describe the oral cavity of carnivores as a “wide mouth opening in relation to their head size. This confers obvious advantages in developing the forces used in seizing, killing and dismembering prey”, as though non-vegans had ever argued that humans are evolutionarily predisposed to catching and dismembering prey with our mouths.

After setting the stage and predisposing the reader to see similarities between humans and herbivores, they include a section heading, “What About Omnivores,” as though this were an afterthought, when in fact the dominant theory is that humans are omnivores, and there is no credible countertheory that humans evolved as carnivores (notwithstanding early anthropologists’ overemphasis on hunting vis-a-vis gathering).

But rather than discussing omnivores as a class, as they do with carnivores, the study authors arbitrarily pick bears as a stand-in for all omnivores, despite the great evolutionary distance between hominids and bears, and despite, in their own admission, the fact that “Bears are classified as carnivores” and “bears exhibit anatomical features consistent with a carnivorous diet”. If they were interested in honestly assessing the facts and establishing arguments that approached the truth, they would have used one of the many omnivorous primates as a comparison. But if they had compared humans with an omnivorous primate, they would have undermined their own ideological necessities and disproven their thesis. By ignoring the many omnivores that capture prey with their hands, or in the case of hominids and some other primates, with tools, the vegan ideologues behind this study can carry out a number of falsifications. Still talking about bears, now in reference to their stronger but less mobile carnivorous jaws (very different from the hominid jaw), they say: “A given species cannot adopt the weaker but more mobile and efficient herbivore-style [jaw] joint until it has committed to an essentially plant-food diet lest it risk jaw dislocation, death and ultimately, extinction.” What they hope the reader is too dull-witted or ideologically blinded to consider is the possibility of a species that evolved to catch prey with fore-limbs and tools, and thus could also sport the weaker but more adaptable jaw-type without risk of dislocation.

They accomplish this crass manipulation with an excessively simplified, edited version of “evolutionary theory”, according to which, they claim, “carnivore gut structure is more primitive than herbivorous adaptations. Thus, an omnivore might be expected to be a carnivore which shows some gastrointestinal tract adaptations to an herbivorous diet.” This assumes a very simple, unilineal evolutionary pathway, which flies in the face of all credible evolutionary theory and finds a home instead with only the most dogmatic Social Darwinism. They’re hoping to hoodwink us into considering omnivores as a middle ground in the evolution towards herbivores (who can then be presented as the most advanced, the most *progressive*). The only fact this presentation rests on is the theory that the first mammalian herbivores evolved from carnivores, with a pass through omnivorism.

But evolution is much more complex than a single, unilineal pathway; it is closer to an infinite lace of loops moving constantly into new niches, in which “forward” and “backward” lose all their meaning. A species in an animal family that has evolved towards herbivorism could just

as easily evolve back to omnivorism as stay herbivorous. This is probably what happened in the case of many primates, including hominids.

By not including a description of primate omnivores, the article can portray many omnivorous features of the human stomach, intestinal tract, and colon as being fundamentally herbivorous. But the key fact regarding the relative length of the small intestine in humans has to be manipulated outright in order to square with their theory. Among omnivores, the small intestine is between 6 and 8 times the length of the body, whereas in herbivores it is between 12 and 20 times the length of the body. With humans, this ratio measures out at 8, fully within the omnivorous range. Yet the dogmatic vegans claim a ratio of 10 to 11, (which is still closer to most omnivores than to most herbivores). How do they get this figure? In the article we read that “Our small intestine averages 22 to 30 feet in length. Human body size is measured from the top of the head to end of the spine and averages between two to three feet in length in normal-sized individuals.”

To start with, two feet from the top of the head to the bottom of the spine is not a dimension most people would consider “normal,” unless we were talking about children, and it’s surprising that they can get away with making such claims to a vegan audience. More obscure is the assertion of an average length of 30 feet for the small intestine. In a broad range of medical publications and popular educational materials, the average I found was 6–7 meters, or 19–22 feet. Where did the authors of this study get their figure, which allows them to allege a statistic that props up their theory? One can only guess; however, on Wikipedia I encountered the factoid that the small intestine sometimes measures 50% longer in autopsy. Perhaps they found the measurement that would give them the statistic they so desperately needed by substituting in the length of the intestine of a cadaver. By getting a high end average of 30 feet for the intestine, and rounding down the female average height by a few inches to get two feet for body length, they could manufacture the statistic of a ratio of 10 or 11, which would appear to be closer to the herbivore range than the omnivore range. But given the source for this statistical manipulation, the only “natural” vegetarian would be a dead one.

Clearly, the authors of the article cited are more interested in miseducating people, and the many vegans and vegetarians who have cited it are evidently more interested in justifying their own a priori dogmas than in doing the minimum of research and critical thinking necessary to evaluate their factual foundations. In the face of conflicting facts, they simply pick the ones they like the best.

* * *

Vegan websites arguing the health benefits of their diet often proclaim lentils, for example, to be high in iron; however a serving of lentils only contains 6.6 milligrams of iron whereas a serving of chicken liver contains 12.8 milligrams of iron, and the iron in the lentils has an absorption rate as much as ten times lower—in other words the lentils will provide your body with only 30% to 5% as much absorbable iron as the chicken. Any honest assessment would describe lentils as at best a mediocre source of iron. Soybeans are also named as being especially high in iron, which they are, for a plant source, but I haven’t read any vegan propaganda that mentions how soy proteins inhibit plant iron absorption.

The website “Vegetarian Research Group” (in a report published on many other vegan and vegetarian websites as well) manipulatively compares the best vegan sources of iron with the mediocre or poor omnivorous sources of iron (e.g. hamburger, milk), and their comparison is

milligrams of iron/calories, another manipulation considering that an omnivorous meal is much higher in calories than a vegan one. A hundred calories of chicken is just a few bites, whereas a hundred calories of spinach is enough to choke on (about a pound, or a heaping plate full). They include vegan foods that are artificially iron-fortified without mentioning that artificial dietary iron has a low absorption rate. The former website also claims that vegan diets have the added advantage of being high in Vitamin C, which increases iron absorption. This claim is dishonest on two points. Omnivorous diets can also be just as high in Vitamin C. Secondly, vitamin C only boosts the absorption of non-heme iron. Heme iron always has superior absorption rates: the iron from animal sources will be absorbed by your body just as well without vitamin C. Even with vitamin C, non-heme iron absorption rates are still inferior. And because animal protein also increases the absorption rate of non-heme iron, health conscious omnivores will make better use of their plant-source iron than vegans will.

To get a sense of how widespread this vegan misinformation is, over the last months I asked about a dozen acquaintances to name a vegan food source that is high in iron. Every single one named spinach. The only way to portray spinach as an iron-rich food is to use the completely misleading statistic of milligrams per calorie rather than milligrams per serving, and to suppress all the information regarding absorption rates. On the one hand, vegan websites are unanimous in proclaiming that it is easy to get enough iron on a vegan diet, and on the other hand they are suppressing or manipulating the information that their followers need in order to get enough iron.

These websites also fail to mention that, at least according to the American Dietetic Association, iron needs for vegetarians are 1.8 times higher than for non-vegetarians. The only site where I found this statistic was one dedicated to athletic trainers who now have increasing amounts of vegetarian clients. In other words, the further away from political veganism one gets, the more accurate the information. [American Dietetic Association (ADA). 2003. Position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada: Vegetarian diets. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 103 (6), 748–65.] It's also interesting to note that according to the ADA study, "most" vegetarians can meet their iron needs. On a political vegan website, the fact that a minority of people cannot would be covered up.

Speaking of minorities, I recently spoke with a vegetarian friend who told me she overcame her anemia by following her gut, ignoring her doctor, and switching to a vegetarian diet. Quickly, her iron levels rose to healthy amounts. Interestingly, she told me of a friend of hers who had to eat a largely carnivorous diet because she was allergic to most plant-based proteins. What these two stories reflect is that the language of averages conveyed by the statistics do not contain human realities. Every body is different, and every body has different needs. Most people will get more iron with an omnivorous diet, whereas a few people will have the opposite experience. Any kind of dietary absolutism based on the needs of the majority constitutes a form of oppression.

Many vegan websites hail spinach and other leafy greens as great sources of iron, without mentioning that the phytic acid contained therein inhibits iron absorption. Hilariously, a website for people with a blood disorder that leads to a dangerous overabsorption of iron recommends exactly these foods to help people keep their iron down: "Spinach, kale, romaine lettuce and other leafy green vegetables should make up a major part of a low-iron diet. Many of these vegetables contain chemicals that inhibit the absorption of iron." http://www.ehow.com/info_8418917_ironfree-diets.html

This kind of dishonest, ideological sleight of hand would only be annoying if they weren't playing with people's health. If they have solid ethical arguments for veganism, why would they even need to make health-based arguments, especially when doing so seems to require dishonesty? If people are considering veganism for ethical reasons, other vegans should encourage them while being honest about the health risks as well as the health benefits. An honest evaluation of strengths as well as weaknesses is one of the principal distinctions between a struggle and an ideology or religion. The most dogmatic of vegans do not pass this test.

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Peter Gelderloos
Veganism: Why Not
an anarchist perspective
2011

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That's why it is illogical to dismiss veganism by saying "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism." If inflicting serious harm for trivial reasons is wrong, then there is no ethical consumption of animals, for taste or habit, in any system. But that's not the reality. Every pig, cow, and chicken is a subject with a personality, just as much as the dogs or cats we love. Can we see ourselves gnawing a dog's leg, and then casually brushing it off by saying "but migrant workers were exploited for corn, so it's all the same?" For the many people who have asked me why I'm not vegan, and how I can possibly not be vegan as an environmental activist and someone who respects all species, I simply want to summarize why I'm not vegan. The idea of veganism is to not kill animals and to not make animals suffer or be cruel to them. Because veganism is not the natural diet of humankind. Anatomically and biochemically we are omnivores. No palaeoanthropologist has ever identified a vegan or vegetarian human ancestor. Now think of why you are not tempted to get on all fours and start chewing on the grass on the lawn. Why do you think we are drawn to the butchered animal sizzling over the heat while we are not drawn to get on all the grass on the lawn. Why not eating before a workout could be better for your health. A study published in the American Journal of Physiology by researchers at the University of Bath found you might be likely to burn more fat if you have not eaten first. Getty Images/iStockphoto. Food and drink news. Why you crave bad food when you're tired. Researchers at Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University in Chicago recently presented their results of a study looking into the effects of sleep deprivation upon high-caloric food consumption.