

Why You Should Go Vegan Immediately

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1 Introduction

This essay argues for ethical veganism. This is the position that the consumption of animals is not justified from an ethical perspective and therefore individuals should boycott the animal agriculture industry. This is not an argument against the consumption of meat only, a non-total reduction in consumption, or for higher welfare standards on farms and slaughterhouses. We argue that those without extreme extenuating circumstances¹ should be completely eliminating all animal products from their diet and lifestyle². Only arguments concerning ethics will be presented here, although there are many other strong reasons for veganism outside of this scope.

Engaging with this essay is not an academic exercise. It is not something to be read and then moved on from, and at the end the reader will need to make an important decision about who they are as a person and what their future lifestyle will be. This is not a topic to stick your head in the sand about. The reader is encouraged to take notes of arguments they believe they can counter as this will be useful when reflecting afterwards on whether they can refute the main claim of the essay.

Before we begin we outline the position being argued against. The main reasons to be non-vegan are the taste pleasure experienced by eating products derived from animal sources, the nutritional convenience of an unrestricted diet, and the social convenience of fitting in with everyone else in. We claim that these reasons are not sufficiently strong to justify the treatment of animals that support a non-vegan lifestyle. We look at these reasons closer in subsection 4.2, but for now the reader is invited to keep these points in mind and compare them with each presented argument.

There are often two stages in becoming an ethical vegan. The first is to be intellectually convinced, where it is understood that one should go vegan but one may not be ready to make the transition. The second is being emotionally convinced, where one believes they have no choice but to go vegan if they are to continue considering themselves an ethical person. These are covered in sections 2 and 3 respectively, followed by a discussion on some common counter-arguments in section 4.

2 Philosophical Arguments

This section aims to show that the difference in how we treat humans and non-human animals is not justified. We aim to show that the gap is far smaller than what is currently accepted, and that the moral worth of non-human animals is sufficiently high to significantly change how we treat them. This is not a philosophy 101 course and it is assumed that the reader does not need convincing of the claim that humans have moral worth and that human suffering is bad as a result. We argue that this should be extended to the claim that suffering is bad, including the suffering of non-human animals.

We will define the moral worth of an entity as how much weight that entity deserves in decisions about morality. Consider a spectrum with a rock at 0% and humans at 100%. We can agree that it would be morally indifferent to hit a rock with a hammer, and morally reprehensible to bludgeon a human with a hammer. We do not believe the rock has any moral interests that need to be considered. Some have argued that animals function as mindless automata like a mechanical devices, and therefore animals are morally equivalent to rocks. We nip this objection in the bud by dismissing it out of hand because this belief is patently ridiculous.

¹Such circumstances include those with many allergies or significant dietary requirements where veganism is not accessible within reason, those on desert island with no other choice, inuit fisherpeople, and so on.

²Sometimes this cannot be practically avoided, for example, UK bank notes and most batteries contain animal products. For convenience we will not list these obvious exclusions when using “all”.

2.1 Name the Trait

We claim that the only morally relevant traits are the ability to experience pain and pleasure. We give some examples of other traits that appear relevant and demonstrate why these do not align with our moral intuitions. The challenge is to find a morally relevant trait that separates.

As a trivial example to show how the argument goes, suppose we were to claim that the reason human suffering was bad was because we had prehensile digits. We could consider a human with no hands and all agree that mercilessly torturing such a person would be a bad thing. From this we conclude that the moral worth of humans is not dependent on having prehensile digits.

The goal will be to identify the trait that separates humans from animals. Some claim the trait is the ability to reason, although we can find severely intellectually disabled humans with lower reasoning abilities than pigs, crows, or even a smart chicken. We are not about to claim that those with profound intellectual disabilities can be treated with wanton abandon. We still believe that bludgeoning such a person to death would be morally reprehensible, therefore we go the other way and conclude that a being does not need to have the ability to reason to have moral worth.

Other proposed traits include understanding one's self as a being that has a past, present, and future, having an internal thought process, having the ability to communicate with others, and many more. For all of these it is relatively simply to find or construct examples of humans that do not possess such a trait and non-human animals that do. We challenge the reader to find such a trait or combinations of traits, and keep in mind that its presence will need to explain the chasm that we put between humans and non-human animals in terms of moral worth.

The only trait that one may find is belonging to the species of *homo sapiens*. It certainly satisfies the conditions that all humans possess it and that all non-humans do not. To argue that this is a morally relevant trait that explains the difference between humans and non-humans would need to be demonstrated however, which appears very difficult without simply begging the question. It has also kicked the can down the road as we can ask what trait about this species in particular makes it so special. Some proponents would argue it is not arbitrary as this is the species that we belong to, and the next subsection discusses the flaws in this way of thinking.

2.2 Speciesism

Speciesism is the prejudice towards the moral interests of your own species simply because they are your own species. This is very similar to many other prejudices such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. In this subsection we look at how the same reasoning we use to explain why these prejudices are bad can be used to explain why speciesism is bad. In other words, we argue that rejecting speciesism undermines our belief that bigotry is bad.

Why do we choose not to be racist? During the times of slavery, some abolitionist pointed out many black people had achieved great things and showed significant intelligence, and therefore they deserved better treatment (such as not being enslaved). Even if this was not the case, we all accept that slavery would not have been justified. The colour of one's skin is not morally relevant, and those of all races experience pain and suffering similarly. If there is a human trapped in a burning building, we do not need to ask, "What race are they?", in order to determine whether to save them or not.

Consider instead a general entity trapped in a burning building. What questions about the nature of this entity do we need to ask to determine whether to save it or not? We posit the only question relevant to the moral interests of the entity is whether it can feel pleasure and pain, either physical and mental. This is such a trait where if a human completely lacked it then it would be hard to argue why bludgeoning them with a hammer would be bad for them³. Any physical sensations experienced

³If they did not possess such abilities at the time but may do in the future, such as someone in a coma, you could easily argue you have harmed them by doing this. Arguments about the effects on others could not be used to argue why

would be viewed neutrally. They would have no desires that would be denied. No negative thoughts about the experience at all. It would be as if a rock was bludgeoned.

Determining how and to what extent non-human animals experience pain is a long and scientific endeavour but the consensus is that they do, perhaps with the exception of things like sponges and bivalves. Chickens, pigs, cows, and sheep are closely related to humans enough to have a similar physiology and nervous system, and it is not a great leap to believe they have a similar experience of pain and pleasure. Even mental pains and pleasures that we typically associate with humans are observed in non-human animals, for example a hamster having a taste preference for different foods.

Given this, how can we justify being speciesist, while also believing that we should not be racist, sexist, and homophobic? Our argument for the latter are that race, sex, and sexual orientation are not morally relevant and do not excuse different treatment. It is all based in suffering being bad, and the only way these arguments do not extend apply to non-human animals is if we arbitrarily restrict ourselves to human suffering. Compare this to a racist who restricts themselves to only caring about the suffering of white people as a way of justifying causing harm to non-white people. Try and find an argument against them that would not extend to non-human animals.

If there was a burning building with a human and a chicken trapped inside, I would not expect anyone to run in and save the chicken. Even if there were multiple chickens, there are still strong arguments to prefer to save the human. Accepting speciesism as a form of bigotry does not commit you saving the chickens. For example, you could make arguments based on the greater capacity for suffering of humans, the larger emotional impact their loss would have on others, or the denial of more pleasure they would have had if they continued living to name a few.

It is important to remember during this discussion that we are very rarely comparing human lives to non-human lives, and instead are comparing human taste buds to non-human lives. To conclude that we should not farm animals for food using the practices that we do, we do not need to argue that non-human animals have the same moral worth as humans, we do not even need to argue that they are close. Once we remove the bias of speciesism and weigh up the moral interests impartially, we can make fairer and better justified decisions about how to treat non-human animals.

2.3 The Veil of Ignorance

Consider yourself existing among the aether and you are about to enter into the world as some other entity. You could be rich or poor, male or female, human or non-human animal, or even a tree or a chair. This choice will be completely random. What kind of society would you like to be born into?

This is a modified version of John Rawls's veil of ignorance argument which he posed as a way of designing a just and egalitarian society. If a world had a handful of extremely privileged people and everyone else lived in poverty, it would be extremely risky to enter into it randomly as you would likely end up a poor person. It would be preferable to enter into a world where there was a far lower chance of living a life of luxury, but you were very likely to have a modest yet reasonable standard of living. The thought experiment encourages us to remove our biases and think about the bigger picture.

Let us consider our original question. If you were born into the world as a chair, you would be indifferent. Chairs are not sentient, they have no consciousness or thought process, and no moral interests. You would not even be aware of your existence and would therefore necessarily be indifferent to everything, including your destruction. Behind the veil of ignorance about to enter the world you would thus not be worried about being born a chair in a society that kicks, punches, and otherwise abuses chairs. We can apply this logic easily to all non-sentient things that do not experience suffering.

Now suppose you are born into the world as a factory-farmed chicken. It is safe to say that this is not an existence you want. It is a life without a single moment of happiness and is characterised by torture

an action would be bad for them either.

and suffering. Before you write off this world as one you would not want to be born into, consider the fact that you could be born into this world as a human where you would have the opportunity to experience eating chicken. There are around 400 factory-farmed chickens born per person born - do you take the risk? Does the chance of being able to eat chicken not entice you?

We posit that given the choice, any sane person behind the veil of ignorance would choose to enter a world populated by vegans where factory farming did not exist instead. Someone could respond to this by claiming they were not born as a factory-farmed chicken so it does not matter. This would be the same person born into the top 0.001% while everyone else lived in poverty saying that the poverty did not matter as they were born rich. To take this view is to admit you either do not understand the argument or you do not care about the world being fair and egalitarian. If we do not want the world to be a postcode lottery then we should not listen to such people when it comes to designing society.

3 Emotional Arguments

It can be easy to dismiss veganism as not necessary to follow, even if you are philosophically convinced that it is the morally correct action. This section aims to counter that and demonstrate that this is not an issue that can be swept under the rug. These are the reasons why you should care.

3.1 View on Historical Atrocities

If you were born 250 years ago, would you have supported slavery? Most of us would like to think that we would not, but in fact you almost certainly would have. The same can be said for other great societal atrocities such as stoning gay people to death and the being complicit with the holocaust. This is because it was the case for most people at the time and you are not some special bastion of moral behaviour who has no blind spots.

If you disagree that you would have been fine with slavery then you are saying you would recognise the moral crime of your time, would deviate from the societal norm, and thus not participate. This is exactly what veganism is now - a recognition that our treatment of animals is a moral crime, and a refusal to participate or support those practices. You may not have been born during a time where you could take a meaningful stance against the slave trade, but you can take a meaningful stance against animal agriculture. Given this, if you are non-vegan then you do not have a leg to stand on to claim that things would have been different during slavery.

This should make you uncomfortable. It is strange to picture us being complicit with such atrocities, but it is exactly the position you are in as a non-vegan. Surprisingly, many people accept that they would have supported slavery and other moral atrocities if they lived in the appropriate era. Are you comfortable with your moral behaviour being dictated by what is accepted by society in the time period you happen to live in. This would mean that the only reason you are not raping or murdering others is because it is looked down upon and you have been conditioned by society not to do these things.

3.2 The Right Side of History

Currently we look back on the slave trade in confusion and disgust. It is hard to comprehend how people could have done such things and that they must have been moral monsters. We believe that we are enlightened now and have got things pretty much sorted on the morality front. This is wrong.

The people of the future will look at us in exactly the same way we look at those during the slave trade. They will ask how almost all members of society could support such egregious moral atrocities. They will want to explain it by thinking that surely the way animals were treated was a secret kept behind closed doors. But it is not a secret, we are aware of what is happening in factory farms and yet actively choose to continue supporting the animal products industry. We are participating and benefiting from one of the largest campaigns of oppression in history.

In the future it is inevitable that our current time will be looked down on as a dark era of humanity.

We need to ask whether we want to be on the right side of history or whether we wanted to be lumped in with the people who stoned gay people or kept slaves, and labelled as savages from a more primitive time. The choice of whether we are to be counted among the oppressors or not is ours to make.

3.3 Oppression

Do you claim to be against oppression, or do you need to add qualifiers? If someone claimed to be against oppression simultaneously believed that gingers were an inferior slave race where any subjugation was fair game, we would disagree with their claim. “Oppression is justified as long as those being oppressed possess particular immutable characteristics of my choosing” - this is the view taken by Nazis, assorted hateful lunatics, and also necessarily non-vegans.

Consider the most systemically oppressed human group in western society, for example transgender lesbians of colour who are also poor, disabled, and ugly. How many people think it is acceptable to keep such people in cages or harvest their flesh and secretions? Maybe 5% as a conservative upper bound? How many think it is acceptable or even actively fund the continuation of the same treatment of non-human animals? It is about 99%. Non-human animals are so oppressed that the non-vegan does not even recognise them as an oppressed group.

Most recognise that the oppression faced by many humans in our society is completely unacceptable, but their treatment does not even belong on the same scale as the treatment of non-human animals. If someone were to use a microaggression against a human we would call them out on it. If someone were to throw a pig into a cage and lower it into a gas chamber, we would pay them for their trouble (in exchange for some of its flesh of course, what a sane transaction). We are not being consistent with our treatment of oppression.

Throughout history, oppressed groups have had some opportunity to fight for their liberation despite having very little systemic power. Non-human animals, however, do not have this opportunity. They rely solely on their own oppressors to choose to stop oppressing. They have no voice, no way to organise, and they have almost no freedom, making this the least fair fight for liberation ever. If you are non-vegan then you are one of the oppressors and are complicit in this.

3.4 Accountability and Distance

One of the biggest reasons why it is emotionally easy to be non-vegan is because we are separated from the brutal aspects of animal agriculture. This subsection aims to reduce that separation and make clear how accountable a non-vegan is.

Would you stab a pig to death if that was the only way of getting pork? Imagine you are in the meat aisle of a shop and someone ushers you onto a tarpauline, hands you a knife, and presents a tied-up pig. You would feel far more uncomfortable doing this over picking up a packet of meat from the shelves. Even if you arrived at the meat aisle and had to request someone to stab the pig to death on your behalf, you would still feel uncomfortable even though the blood would not literally be on your hands.

The path between you and the factory farm may be indirect, but when you pay for animal products you are commissioning someone to inflict extreme suffering on animals. Imagine giving someone an oral instruction for each stage of the process. For example, “I want you to stick your arm up the cows arse to hold its cervix in place, and then with the other arm, inject semen into the cervix in order to forcibly impregnate the cow against its will”. This is something that will necessarily happen to feed a non-vegan’s consumption of cow-derived products⁴. Just because you do not need to say the words, it does not mean that it is not happening on your behalf.

Someone may counter that these situations are very different to what actually happens and therefore it is an unfair comparison. Distance between the location of purchase and the location of slaughter is

⁴Almost all factory-farmed cows are impregnated this way.

morally irrelevant, but how does the shared accountability change things? The situation is a lot closer to 20 people collectively requesting the pig to be slaughtered. This argument does not work because if a person eats one pig's worth of pork then on average they would have commissioned a pig to death.

The police officer loading people onto trains in the Holocaust could also claim they played a small part and that the outcome would have been the same if they had refused. We do not take this defense of shared accountability seriously as this only implies that we should not blame the entirety of the Holocaust on them but they still share some blame for participating. We also note that if almost all the police officers had refused to participate then this would have significantly hindered logistics. Collective action is powerful and collectives are made of individuals.

4 Counter Arguments

4.1 Futility

It is easy to say that going vegan will not make a difference, and this subsection aims to defeat this argument from futility. We will show that it is not futile and that we should be vegan even if it is futile.

Given that there are around 70 billion chickens tortured and killed each year, if we prevent the suffering of one then we have lowered this count by about 0.000000001%. To use this as an argument that we should not care is to misunderstand percentages. You could use a near identical argument to show that torturing 100 people for 20 years is not that bad as you only affect 0.000001% of humans. This reasoning is easy to fall into when there is space between you and the animals you are commissioning the torture of.

The individual is worth caring about, even if they are a small part of the total suffering. Suppose someone were to torture you and a passerby said, "eh, me intervening would be futile to the total amount of suffering, therefore I won't". You would not accept this argument. We accept that the torture of x individuals is worth stopping. If we then start torturing a further $999x$ individuals then we should still care about reducing the torture of those x . If the number of beings who are suffering gets bigger, why would this change how important it is to reduce the suffering of an individual?

Even if our efforts are futile, there is still a case for acting out of principle. Suppose you go to a dinner party with a friend. The friend had not done their own cooking however, and instead had kidnapped someone, locked them in the kitchen, and beat them until they complied and prepared the meal. Would you eat this meal? If you do not eat it then all the suffering endured by the enslaved person in the kitchen would be for nothing. Given that the food is already there, you could argue you are not causing additional suffering by eating the meal.

However, the action of eating the meal would show support to the idea that slavery is acceptable as you would implicitly be agreeing with the actions of your friend. Your friend planned to use slavery to do the legwork for the dinner party and you would be going along with that plan. This example demonstrates that we already understand the motivation for doing something out of principle even when it is less than logical. Veganism is often similar - it is the refusal to support inflicting extreme suffering.

4.2 The Cost of Veganism

We have spent a lot of time looking at the cost of not going vegan, now let us consider in more detail what we lose by going vegan.

The main disadvantage is that you will no longer experience some taste pleasures. This is not to say you will not experience any taste pleasure as there are many meals that are vegan or adaptable into being vegan that taste just as good as a non-vegan meal. You will still be able to enjoy many of the foods you love, just not all of them. Is the experience of eating a beef burger so much better than the experience of eating a plant-based burger that it is worth commissioning a lifetime of immeasurable suffering on a pig for?

The other main cost is convenience as a plant-based diet is less nutritionally convenient than being non-vegan. When transitioning you will likely need to plan your meals to ensure you are getting everything you need. Getting all the protein necessary for a healthy may be harder than before, and you will likely need to take a B12 supplement. You will need to check labels when buying an item for the first time, and sometimes even search the internet.

The third most common reason I have heard against going vegan is the social cost. At restaurants there may be a very limited choice, for example at a steakhouse, and this can make eating out with friends harder. Some people say they fear social ostracisation and losing friends due to the negative perception of veganism. Personally I would rather not be friends with people who would abandon the friendship because I refuse to fund mass torture and slaughter.

Together these three points cover almost all of the downsides of going vegan. Millions of people willingly go vegan and lead healthy and fulfilling lives. After some time being vegan you will have a new palate and will not need to plan your nutrition or check labels. You will not miss the foods you used to have, as attested to by the vegan community. After a while it is very easy to be vegan, and the main regret of people who live a vegan lifestyle is that they did not go vegan sooner.

4.3 High Welfare Farms

Those who claim they only buy your animal products from high-welfare places are almost certainly wrong. In this subsection we demonstrate why such “ethical” consumption of animal products is almost certainly not the case.

We see pictures of sheep frolicking in fields on packaging and posters but this is only how the tiniest minority of animals are raised. 99% of all meat comes from factory farms in the US so less than 1% actually do buy exclusively from high-welfare places on average. Secondly, many products have animal-derived ingredients and it is not easy to determine where they came from or what the welfare standards are.

Thirdly, high welfare is hard to verify. There are certificates and labels such as Red Tractor and RSPCA approved but these are almost meaningless. Many of these organisations are run by farmers and large animal products monopolies who have a vested interest in ethical-washing their practices and do not hold farms to account. Investigations into almost all farms approved by these groups have been found to be significantly in breach of standards and often even the law.

Many terms such as “free range” have a far looser legal definition than one would hope for, and other commonly used terms have no regulations over their use. Chickens must not be kept denser than 13 per square meter (about the size of a sheet of A4 paper), but this number only reduces to 9 per square meter for free range. Neither of these are enforced, and many free range chickens never go outside in practice. All pork can legally be labelled “free range” in the UK and the EU, independent of what conditions the pigs are kept in. There is a significant effort by animal products manufacturers to keep people in the dark about how animal products are produced and the lawmakers are on their side.

4.4 Humane Methods of Death and Farming

In discussions about veganism, how animals are killed is often used as an example of a moral wrong. Some argue that everything would be fine if we used more humane methods of slaughter. In this subsection we argue that this is both not true and a distraction. We also counter some objections of the 1% of people from the previous subsection who actually do buy from “ethical” farms and claim they do not need to go vegan.

A lot of the narrative and media about animal welfare focuses on shocking treatment, such as male chicks being thrown into a macerator or cows having their throats slit. Death is used as an example of a moral wrong because it is simple, clear cut, and evokes strong emotions, however the chick in the macerator is in fact one of the lucky ones. The time animals spend in the slaughterhouse is brief and

almost all of their suffering occurs in factory farms where they are raised. Even if all animals were killed via lethal injection in a relaxing environment, the suffering over their lifetime is barely reduced.

On farms where animals are kept in fields there are still many abuses of animals. Examples include tail docking of sheep, forced impregnation, and separating calves from their mothers. Even a farm that used the most ethical practices would be problematic as the animals would still be treated as commodities. What ethical standards would we demand of a human farm before we deemed it morally acceptable? For a less extreme example that avoids objections of sapience, would we accept a dog farm in the western world?

Such hypothetical ultra-humane farms would also be completely impractical. The price would be extortionate and there would be nowhere near enough land or labour for it to be feasible on a large scale. Meat made from insects is also suggested as a low carbon and more ethical method of farming. This would be using animal products out of stubbornness and it is unfathomable that an insect burger would be preferable over a plant-based burger. Suggesting these as solutions serves only as a distraction and cannot be taken seriously. These farms should only be entertained as an option for the select few with extreme dietary requirements who have no other option in an otherwise vegan world.

5 Conclusion

Not covered here is the evidence of the suffering and all the other reasons for veganism outside of ethical veganism. Here we signpost and summarise those points.

The suffering cannot be understood without seeing it, and if you do not feel comfortable watching a documentary on factory farming then the point has already been made. Keep in mind while watching that the footage is not cherry-picked and that almost all people willingly fund such suffering and demand it continues. It would be hard to find any justification for what is inflicted on animals in factory farms, yet the non-vegan must argue that taste pleasure and nutritional convenience alone are sufficient.

As an example of the conditions in factory farms, farmers can only spend brief moments inside the large shed where animals are kept. There is so much ammonia in the air that eye and respiratory problems are still a high risk for them even with these precautions. The animals get no respite from this environment. Below is a list of documentaries and we ask the reader to watch one of them.

- Dominion:
- Land of Hope and Glory:
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Each of the following reasons would be enough on their own to justify going vegan.

- Climate change: The animal products industry is one of the biggest causes of climate change, and going vegan is one of the highest impact changes you can make to lower your carbon footprint.
- Pollution: The animal products industry is also responsible for a significant portion of air and water pollution.
- Ocean plastic: More than half of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (three times the size of France) is from fishing nets. The fishing industry is responsible for a large portion of ocean plastic.
- Deforestation: Clearing room for animals or crops to feed the animals is the leading cause of deforestation due to poor land per calorie efficiency.
- Biodiversity: The animal agriculture industry is the leading cause of species loss.
- Unsustainability: The earth would need to be three times larger if everyone were to eat the diet of the average American. We already have enough land allocated for food to feed everyone on Earth if they were vegan.

- Zoonotic diseases: Thousands of animals in one place in terrible conditions is a perfect storm for creating zoonotic diseases.
- Antibiotic resistance: a significant proportion of all antibiotics are used by the animal agriculture industry.

The actual reason non-vegans are not already vegan is that they were raised as a non-vegan in a predominantly non-vegan society. Similarly, most Christians are Christian because they were born into a Christian family in a predominantly Christian society. They did not reason their way into religion in the same way that non-vegans did not reason their way into non-veganism. As atheists we can recognise the absurdity in Christianity, but a non-vegan born in a non-vegan world does not see the absurdity in non-veganism. In this essay we ask the reader to question the default view of society and judge whether it stands up.

You will not beat the argument for veganism on the facts and logic. There are simply too many strong reasons for it, and the negative impact on your life is not enough to counteract them outside of people with extremely restrictive dietary requirements. Upon reading this and watching a documentary of life in factory farms you will no longer be able to claim ignorance. There will be several choices:

- The Unlucky: Be born with dozens of allergies and intolerances (this probably is not you).
- The Gymnast: Somehow argue against all the arguments for veganism (good luck).
- The Moron: Claim you are correct without countering any arguments. You will not be able to claim to follow the science or rational argument, and you will be no better than the MAGAs.
- The Scumbag: Accept that you should go vegan but continue funding torture and slaughter.
- The Complicit: Accept that it is all very bad, but that you going vegan will not change anything.
- The Enlightened: Go vegan.