

Vegan Bingo

The book



Where do you get your protein?



I could never give up cheese



Where would all the cows go?



Mmmm bacon...



Hitler was vegetarian



Plants have feelings



We have canine teeth



What about backyard chickens?



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Where do you get your protein?

Also common: Where do you get your iron?. Or an obscure trace element that they didn't know about a couple of weeks ago.



Short Answer

When you mention you are vegan, some people suddenly turn into an amateur nutritionist. Almost all nutrients come from plants, and humans can just get them directly without needing an animal to suffer in between. Healthy vegans don't just remove animal products from their diet, they replace them with extra nuts, beans, seeds, lentils, peas, seitan, tempeh, tofu and other plant-derived foods high in protein.

Long Answer

At a party many years ago an 8-year-old was bringing around snacks. I declined what he offered to me, but told him I'd be interested if they had vegan options. He then asked me where I get my protein from. When something is so deep in the culture that it is in the head of children, it makes you wonder how it got there.

Why do people ask about protein in particular? B12 for instance is actually hard to get from plants alone, so sensible vegans take a daily supplement, but we are rarely asked about B12. A hint about where the protein question

derives is the gender of the people who usually ask it. Protein is associated with strength, muscular development and masculinity.

Meat being gendered has a long history in the human psyche, most hunter-gatherer societies had gendered divisions of labour, with men often taking on more hunting duties. Like many evolutionary human tendencies, this is seen as something to exploit by the marketing industry. There has been a sustained effort to further the association between men and meat eating in order to sell more animal products. Typical of this were the high rotation “Feed the man meat” advertisements on Australian television, which revealingly showed a father reading the newspaper at the table with the children whilst the mother brought the heated-up leg of a lamb in from the kitchen. Meat is a high-profit product, in many places a luxury, and animal farming often benefits from government subsidies and cheap land. They are an industry with the resources to push their narrative, especially one we might be predetermined by our evolution to accept. Studies show even female vegetarians see men who don’t eat meat as less masculine (though they omit to say whether the female vegetarians thought that was a good or bad thing). There is a sexual politics to meat, masculinity and especially toxic masculinity is aligned with the killing of animals for food.

Meat and dairy industry propaganda reach far more people than any unbiased nutritional advice. They have long used their financial and political sway to ensure a dominant voice on government nutritional panels, and have been repeatedly successful in watering down attempts to make national eating guidelines more plant-based. They need to maintain this propaganda war because nutritional science is often not on their side. There is no study that shows protein deficiency in people following a plant-based diet, or indeed

in any population, that eats enough calories. National eating guidelines cannot completely ignore science and have thus been incrementally becoming more plant-friendly, especially in recognising plant-derived sources of protein.

Still what Dietitians think, I've had elite medical professionals from other fields ask me where I get my protein from. Unfortunately, most medical professionals don't get adequate nutritional training and are as susceptible to the unquestioned ideas laying around in the culture as everyone else. Looking at what the peak nutritional bodies in the world say, we find similar things to the position of the American Dietetic Association:

appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes.

People who ask about protein rarely know how much protein we need, how much is in different plant foods, or how many high-profile athletes follow a vegan diet. There's no shame in this, we aren't born knowing such things, but it would seem reasonable to investigate them before you go around doling out nutritional advice to other people.

Finally there is a serious point here, we should take note of the words "appropriately planned" from the American Dietetic Society quote above. Vegan diets aren't a magic bullet, like all diets they can be unhealthy if done the wrong way. A vegan diet is different to the one many of us grew up eating, so there might be some adjustment needed,

particularly if they grew up in a family following a meat-centric diet. Healthy vegans don't just remove things from their diets, there is a whole world of ingredients, particularly the incredible variety of beans and legumes, which they add. Vegans don't need to worry as much about fibre, antioxidants, healthy fats, vitamin C and the other goodies fruits, vegetables and plant protein sources are loaded with but they do need to ensure they have adequate sources of things like B12, calcium, vitamin D and omega 3s.

In the end though we should be getting our nutritional advice from qualified dietitians, not friends, family, random people, social media or even Vegan Bingo. A great investment in life is to book a couple of sessions with a nutritionist who understands plant-based diets, to make sure the core of your diet is helping maintain your long-term physical and mental health. Healthy food is a gift we can give ourselves that will reverberate out into the world and our life, as Hippocrates said, "Let thy food be thy medicine".

I could never give up cheese



Also common: You won't need any other alternative statements because you'll hear this one repeatedly.

Short Answer

Cheese is defined by three things, fat, salt and cruelty to animals. You can get the first two from many other places, and reduce the third at the same time.

Long Answer

The statement "I could never give up cheese" implies a silent unacknowledged second part "no matter how cruel and destructive it is". Hopefully, this is untrue though, if people knew about the taken babies, bereaved mothers, swollen udders, castration, confinement, veal production and environmental degradation of dairy production they might find the moral courage to change.

To turn cows into milk machines involves a lot of cruelty. Cows produce the most milk when they are pregnant and in their younger fertile years. As soon as they can breed, cows are annually impregnated either by a device wielded by a farm hand (how they procure bull semen is a whole other story) or are impregnated in something the industry nicknames "the rape rack" where cows are restrained to be mounted by a bull. Half of the calves born will be male,

creating millions of unwanted calves. They must be taken from their mothers, some at just a couple of days, to ensure the calves don't drink their mother's milk, which of course is a product to be sold to. The pain of this separation between mother and child is well documented in heartbreaking videos online, distraught mothers running behind a tractor taking away yet another child, whilst the mother and the calf vocalise their pain and grief. Male "Bobby" calves enter the veal trade, where they are raised in crates or sheds to ensure they get minimal exercise or eat anything which might toughen their flesh. Instead of their mother's milk, they are fed on formula composed largely of whey protein, a byproduct of milk production. They are soon slaughtered, often when just days old, but sometimes after a few months. The female calves will go on to suffer in turn, having their horns removed without anaesthetic, repeated pregnancies with calf separation, the lameness and over-sized udders caused by being bred as machines to produce ever more milk, mastitis from over milking, and ending with transport to the slaughterhouse when their prime years of fertility pass and they are less productive, usually between 4 to 7 years of age, when they can live 2 or 3 times longer.

The dairy industry is also one of the most environmentally destructive food industries on our planet for the amount of nutrition it produces, negatively contributing to deforestation, species extinction, climate change, air quality and water pollution.

The majority of people in the world have lactose malabsorption and find giving dairy up makes them feel better. Far from being naturally delicious, eventually after giving up dairy you lose the taste for it and will find it pretty unpleasant.

So with plenty of reasons to give up dairy, how do you actually do it? Cheese can also be replaced by anything with some fat in it, that's what people are really after anyway, avocado, various nut butters, tahini and there's a reason vegans tend to eat so much hummous ;) If they don't do it for you there are plant-based versions of most dairy products which are getting better and more varied all the time. Milk has so many plant-based options, oat, hemp, almond, cashew, soy, rice and blends are all popular, and then there are many styles, with light and creamy, specialised barista versions, you really can't fail to find some you like. Soy is probably the most complete nutritionally, but personally, I find oat is my favourite in drinks. For yoghurt, coconut is generally the best alternative, but like milk, there are a vast number of alternatives and you should just try them and figure out which one you prefer.

Positive changes in life can be hard, getting to bed earlier, exercising every day, loving people enough, keeping money from corrupting our political systems, etc. Giving up dairy is actually pretty easy, so why not take this rare quick win for the cows, their calves, human health and the environment? It is literally as easy as saying a different word when you order coffee, maybe even asking them which plant-based milk they recommend. At your store, you just need to reach for something from a slightly different part of the shelf. Don't think of it as giving up cheese, think of it as giving up cruelty.

Where would all the cows go?

Also common: What about all the farmers? What about all the nice open fields in the countryside?



Short Answer

It should come as little surprise that intensive livestock farming is intensively controlled. Livestock breeding is highly artificial and responds to the laws of supply and demand. If people stop eating animals, farmers would breed fewer of them. It may be interesting to think about “what if we just stopped eating animals?” but this is unfortunately unlikely to happen, it is more likely to be a gradual transition with plenty of opportunity for society to adjust.

Long Answer

Sometimes people say things that make you realise how divorced from the reality of modern industrial farming most people are. Breeding animals is big business, strictly controlled by farmers, governments and corporations to maximise profits. Insemination is highly artificial, bloodlines and genetics are completely controlled. Some animals like turkeys have had their bodies so warped by selective breeding they are no longer capable of propagating naturally. Many farm animals live with a body that outgrows the ability of their skeleton and internal organs to support them, it is perhaps a mercy for many when we slaughter them at such a young age but be better for them not to be

bred to mostly suffer. If we are worried about being overrun by freed farm animals, we need to stop paying to bring them into the world.

Of course it's not a well-thought-through question as it is unlikely that a change to a vegan world will happen overnight. People give up things gradually, ideas often spread slowly among societies and vegans aren't near a position enabling us to legislate the end of cruelty in farming tomorrow. Our dairy and meat-eating, often paradoxically self-proclaimed "animal-loving", friends needn't worry. They can become vegans without losing sleep over the thought of creatures wandering free to live life according to their own desires. The real nightmare surrounds the hook, cage, brand, barbed wire, whip, electric prod, slaughterhouse and other tools of animal oppression.

As for what will happen to the jobs of the current farmers, butchers, slaughterhouse workers and others in the livestock industry, some of the same applies. The change will happen gradually. People will transition to other work and products, just like so many changes for the better in industries and technologies have happened in the past. People still need to eat, the market will adapt to whatever other things they choose, and as is often the case there may be some transitional support required. Slave owners were often compensated when slavery was abolished, we look at that as unjust now but it was perhaps necessary to move forward in the society of its time. If fewer people are needed to grow our food or live unpleasant lives killing animals day after day in sheds hidden from the rest of society, then that's probably a good thing. More people can be freed for the many other functions that could improve our society.

As for all the open fields in the countryside, people may have grown accustomed to its current state, but we have

made a desolation and called it peace. We rarely think about the story of who and what lived there before and how they were removed or dispossessed. These were productive ecosystems, not monocultures but bustling with life in endless forms, integrating millions of years of evolutionary wisdom in their subtle balance. At least some of the workers freed from animal production industries could find meaningful work rewilding and restoring the places we have so denuded, giving the native flora and fauna a chance to return. The benefits of rewilding these places would be many. Livestock farming, and the crops grown to feed them, cover a huge percentage of the earth's surface. This is why the UN and other agencies have pointed out that livestock farming is one of the primary causes of species extinction, deforestation, water pollution, air pollution and most other environmental problems. This monopolisation of the land threatens not just non-humans, much of the land of dispossessed poor and indigenous people was taken to farm high-profit livestock by privileged elites or colonisers. The already large carbon footprint of livestock farming quoted by bodies like the UN completely does not include the positive carbon benefits of restoring millions of acres of natural habitat.

The countryside of cleared fields surrounded by fences and barbed wire needs to be rethought. What does that barbed wire say about the lives of the animals who live there and our relationship with them? We are living through the Anthropocene, a term that acknowledges the effect humans and the livestock we breed have on the living systems of the world. We have abused our ever-growing power to diminish the natural world we share. Chickens alone are two-thirds of the mass of all species of birds. Humans and their livestock comprise 96% of the mass of terrestrial species, with all wild species crowded into the remaining 4% and many of them

diminishing or disappearing. We have utilised our intelligence and organisational abilities to create a tyranny.

Our religions and philosophies have centred around human supremacy in the world, and we see this reflected in the way we live, the things we consume and the technology we create. Removing our foot from the neck of nature is not about changing the world so much as it is about helping it restore itself to its recent past, allowing it to breathe. Finding a way to reintegrate human civilisation into the natural world seems to be the only path forward for humanity that is not built on the oppression of everything else that lives. Everything we know about the positive effects of spending time in nature for human well-being also tells us that as nature restores itself we will have a more beautiful and fulfilling life as well.

A new world awaits if we can shake off the habits and ideas of the past to imagine a more equitable relationship between us and the other species who share our world. We should respect that all life has its own evolutionary paths separate from ours. We should stop believing that simply having the power to control the lives of other animals gives us any right to do so, especially when it is so evident we do not have the collective maturity to responsibly wield that power. The livestock industry is a symptom of our myopia, and we should only celebrate its gradual replacement because it will reflect a wider ethical progression for our species.

Mmmm bacon...

Also common: "Steak" is almost as common. Anything unhealthy from the toxic masculinity menu.



Short Answer

Sometimes a joke, especially one that people laugh at for ideological reasons, tells us something about the character of the person telling it or laughing at it, and usually it isn't good. Laughter is complex, it can be innocent, but it can also be used to show status or declare our participation in a mob. One of the most important things any of us can do in life is not be a member of those mobs.

Long Answer

There are some good jokes that make light of veganism, like any joke the best of them are clever, unique and unexpected. This attempt at a joke has none of these qualities. It is repeatedly said, well beyond anyone's tolerance for boredom, generally with a pretence that the person saying it just thought of it themselves. It is highly unlikely, however, that anyone repeating "Mmmm Bacon" has ever added an original thought to the culture. The reason it gets less funny with repetition is partly that it was never funny in the first place. 99% of the people who say it are immature males, along with 100% of those who laugh at it, make of that what you will.

Of course laughter is complex, people often laugh at things not because they are funny but because they want to laugh for performative reasons. It often even sounds fake, a jarring echo from a hollow soul, like someone read in a book what a laugh was and is trying it out. Laughing at the misfortunes of others is correlated with psychopathy and other destructive and self-destructive personality traits. We can argue about what things are OK to joke about, and I personally like a bit of schadenfreude, but jokes that have victims need to hold to a higher standard. Humour, even dark humour, should make the world a better place. Empty grasping for attention by people being offended because they are not interesting enough to be funny is not doing anything for the world.

In psychological terms there is something called a cold joke. It's been witnessed in atrocities towards humans for centuries. Those perpetrating immoral acts use fake humour to try to avoid the psychological ramifications of something disturbing they are participating in. They bond with other damaged souls, with the same insincerity and toxic emotion that will probably define all of the relationships in their lives. If billions of creatures living, suffering and dying in factory farms and slaughterhouses mean nothing to a person, we might ponder how capable they are of true connection with any other consciousnesses. We must pity them because connection is one of life's greatest gifts.

Pigs, cows, chickens etc, we see something of ourselves when we look into their eyes. These are thinking, and feeling beings we share evolutionary kinship with, who seek to be happy as we do. More animals suffer and die in our industrial prison system every week than all humans who have been killed in wars during our bloody history. We need to do something more about this reality than psychological

avoidance, whether through the fake humour of toxic masculinity or just the turning away of most other people.

For most of history, people lived closely with wild animals. They knew that they had family and relationships of their own, they knew they were intelligent, and they respected them, even if they needed to kill them to survive. Those who, from hundreds of miles away, pay for this terrible industry run for profit, with hands stained by the blood of it, should at least start by encouraging others to show animals respect. Those animals in lightless sheds, in cages, lined up for their turn in slaughterhouses, they are not nothing. These lives and deaths we don't see, that according to our whims can be terrible or bearable, imprisoned or free, these lives mean something

We can start making the world better for the life in it by changing our relationship with animals, especially farmed animals. Or you know, people could say something cruel and offensive and pretend it's a joke. People have that choice, but it is such a small, barren, ugly choice, in a world full of so many expansive, challenging, beautiful possibilities, with so many kind and great deeds to be done. If it wasn't for my thoughts of the victims, I might even just laugh at these people.

Hitler was vegetarian

Also common: Pol Pot, Charles Manson, anyone who clearly was a terrible human being.



Short Answer

People should be more informed about the atrocities of history and respectful to their victims than to use them for ideological purposes. It is perversely ironic to use evil involving mass killing to justify such vast unnecessary mass killing. Veganism is about compassion for all animals, including humans, anyone acting or saying otherwise hasn't understood its full message.

Long Answer

None of these people are claimed to be vegan, but we still hear this so let's go. We should first acknowledge that most evil people will have eaten vegetables at some point in their lives, maybe even a lot of vegetables. We also acknowledge the statistical likelihood that some of the many millions of people who have been vegetarian will have been terrible people. That a plant-based diet or philosophy in any way caused these people to be terrible is more of a stretch.

Tolstoy said vegetarianism shows someone's pursuit of moral perfection is sincere. This probably needs an update to "veganism", and it sounds nice but not everyone gives up eating meat for ethics or the pursuit of morality. Health,

religion, spirituality, culture, digestion issues, allergies and even impressing a hot vegan friend are all pretty common. Most people are ethical in some areas but have moral blind spots in others, so we need to know more about someone than one trait. Families in India have abstained from meat for centuries, but it's doubtful every single person they produced was some sort of Gandhian figure. Vegetarians and vegans are regular flawed people, trying to figure out this life as they go along like everyone else.

Now let's add to the millions of wasted words talking about Hitler. He ate meat until he was almost 50, by which time he had taken over Germany and was having people killed and put in concentration camps. It was 1942, well into the war, before he ever identified as a vegetarian. So the claim is on shaky ground straight away, if we think his diet was in any way related to his crimes, it is not his late vegetarianism we should be looking at. He had long-term stomach problems, and some say doctors put him on a mostly vegetarian diet around 1937, though Herman Hess said he made exceptions for things like liver dumplings. Even later on, people apparently unafraid of the consequences of crossing Hitler snuck meat into his food right to his end, and if he noticed he would complain about it hurting his stomach. His chef claimed she used animal broth in cooking for him and his dietitian claims to have snuck bone marrow into his food. So how much he was actually vegetarian or motivated by ethics is hard to tell. Hitler did show some concern for animals, liked dogs and the Nazis did enact laws against animal cruelty, but if people were just pure evil history would be a lot simpler. The Nazis also had social programmes and helped poor people, so although the Nazis as a collective were incomprehensibly vile, not every single thing they did was, as they say even a stopped clock can be right twice a day.

On to Pol Pot and his murderous regime. This was relatively recent, the people who cooked for him are still alive, and they say he ate all sorts of things, fish, cobra, boar etc. An official who knew him seemed to say he was a vegetarian, but who knows what they were basing that on? As an aside, we must understand that many people get confused about what the word vegetarian means, especially in the past. A relevant passage talking about Hitler's diet from the New York Times in 1937 says "It is well known that Hitler is a vegetarian" which they then follow with "he occasionally relishes a slice of ham and relieves the tediousness of his diet with such delicacies as caviar". Studies show that even today many people, especially older people, get confused when asked to define vegan or vegetarian. Diet surveys have had to be amended because of the poor understanding of vegetarian and vegan. For instance, after surveys ask people if they are vegetarian or vegan, they then ask "When was the last time you ate chicken?" to try to make sure people mean what we usually ascribe to the word. Anyway, Pol Pot doesn't seem to have been vegetarian either, so another blight on the meat eaters of the world it seems.

Finally Charles Manson, the Internet has failed me here. A lot of slightly unhinged websites gleefully assert he was and a couple of better-hinged ones as well, though none of them provides any evidence. Still, although he hated hippies and thought they were weak, he dressed like one so maybe he ate like one. Will mark this one as inconclusive for now.

So what motivates the repetition of this claim about Hitler etc to people who don't eat meat? Some people seem to have a need to pre-emptively attack a vegan because they imagine being judged, almost like there is a conversation already in their head that a vegan unknowingly steps into. People want status, including moral status, but changing or earning it can be inconvenient, by for instance swapping a

few ingredients in their diet. So they are left in an uncomfortable state, and this is what's called cognitive dissonance. To avoid change without having a troubled conscience they need to find intellectual justifications for their present behaviour. So you get "Hitler was a bad person, Hitler was a vegetarian, vegetarians are bad people"; Aristotle wouldn't have thought much of this syllogism but any logic, even poor logic will do for someone looking for any available exit from a moral quandary.

It is also poor statistics, you can't make widespread inferences about a group of people from cherry-picked examples. Even if Hitler and Pol Pot actually were ethical vegetarians, what about Mao Tse Tung, Joseph Stalin, Talat Pasha, Suharto, Saddam Hussein, Atilla the Hun, Genghis Khan, Nero, Caligula, King Leopold, Idi Amin, Vlad the Impaler and of course the vast, vast majority of Nazis who were all meat-eaters.

Given the scale of animal suffering at human hands, the billions huddled in factory farms, their bodies altered to be efficient production machines and the many wild species of the world in retreat or facing extinction, how can it be argued this is not a moral spot on which we need to shine some light? People should think carefully before engaging in knee-jerk reactions against people arguing for a different relationship between humans and non-humans to the one they have been brought up to accept. Even if you think they are wrong, is having compassion, maybe even too much compassion for other species more terrible than the problem it is confronting? This is not to say that vegans who lack empathy for people should get a free pass to be rude or inconsiderate. Veganism when properly understood is about compassion and consideration for all that can suffer, and this should include humans.

Plants have feelings

Also common: Carrots scream when you cut them. Growing plants kills more animals than livestock production.



Short Answer

Things that don't have a central nervous system don't warrant the same levels of ethical concern as things that do have a central nervous system. Eating animals who are fed with plant food is inefficient and ends up requiring a lot more plants to feed people. Whether you are concerned about the suffering of plants or animals, then the simplest thing to do is to eat more plants.

Long Answer

Unfortunately people who say things like this aren't next-level compassionate souls, they are usually even less likely than most people to care about plants, forests and ecosystems than they do non-human animals. What they are doing is trying to maintain a moral high ground which conveniently doesn't require them to make any personal change. The ethical life philosophers have been debating for centuries didn't need careful thinking and reflection, we just need to follow what these meat eaters have always done unthinkingly and out of habit, and justify it after the fact with ideas we hear along the way. Living ethically is unfortunately rarely so simple and we should question our

habits and cultural frames of reference, following truth where it leads especially when it is inconvenient for us. We should hold justifying things like the terrible lives and slaughter of sentient beings to a high ethical and philosophical bar.

Most of the animals we eat are herbivores, fed from the same farming system that we use to feed humans. Something like a third of the grain eaten in the world, and a higher percentage in developed countries, is used to feed livestock. Animals, especially larger ones, are inefficient converters of plant foods into edible human protein. Eating animals fed on grain means many more plants are used to feed us than if we just ate plants directly. The same follows for the animals killed as a byproduct of growing those plants.

Plants don't have a central nervous system so evolutionarily it's not very useful to feel pain if you can't do something in response to it like run away. Plant biology is many and varied, there is a lot to be said here but such nuances might be lost on anyone belligerent enough to ask this question, still, we should try to assume the best. Consistent with evolutionary theory there aren't distinct, easily identifiable separate kingdoms of plants and animals, it is very much a continuum, a web of interrelated life. We do need to ask ourselves where we draw the line and on what basis we do so. People who take animal suffering as seriously as we do sometimes think eating simple creatures like oysters and mussels, or eating honey is OK ethically. Vegans wouldn't do this, but we generally have greater respect for people who have thought things through and made ethically motivated changes than those who unconsciously accepted whatever line the people they grew up among did. For many societies in human history cannibalism, slavery, oppression of religions, minorities, races, and many other things we now

think are unethical were cultural norms, questioning the accepted norms we were raised with is a requisite part of living ethically.

Darwin and the best biologists since have understood that our common evolutionary heritage expresses itself in us, we share much of our sentience with other beings. In understanding how we should treat other beings ethically we need to discuss levels of self-awareness, the ability to suffer, the presence of a central nervous system, and the best science should be our guide. This philosophy is called sentientism, that all animal's interests deserve consideration according to their level of sentience. This is opposed to speciesism, which treats all non-human life as having lesser worth, not because of their innate capabilities, but purely because they are not human.

Humans are a powerful, often destructive force on the processes of life in our world, and modern technology only increases this. As our collective footprint upon the world grows it is ever more urgent that we reconsider our philosophies and ways of living as they relate to the non-human world. We need to continually re-evaluate our moral framework, and carefully consider where we draw our moral lines and what our obligations are to the other beings who share our world.

Other life is here with us, not for us, it has its own evolutionary story that is not bound up in subservience to humanity. If we do find that plants have high levels of sentience, we will have to re-evaluate our positions and find another way to sustain ourselves ethically. We might make mistakes and we always act with limited knowledge and information but history teaches us that it is ethically safest to err on the side of compassion.

We have canine teeth

Also common: Meat eating caused human brains to grow. Our eyes are forward looking like a carnivore.



Short Answer

Justifying killing sentient creatures for pleasure should never be done lightly, and it should require an understanding of comparative biology slightly more advanced than that of a mediaeval peasant. Look at any carnivorous mammal's teeth, then look at a herbivorous mammal, then look at ours, end of the story. Evolutionarily humans were at best opportunistic omnivores, the fact that we have "canine" teeth is of little more relevance than the fact we have things called an Achilles heel or Adam's apple.

Long Answer

Reality is often a problem for people who profess things that they don't really know about. The Greek philosopher Aristotle was one of the greatest minds in history, so much so he was just called "the philosopher" for centuries, suffered from this as much as anyone. He wrote that women had fewer teeth than men did. Of course, if he had taken the time to look in the mouth of more than one or two women, he would have realised this was ridiculous. The same thing can be said about the idea that canine teeth are evidence we are meat eaters, just look at the teeth of a carnivore or a

herbivore, and think again. Human teeth are so overwhelmingly, obviously similar to herbivores, that it is hard to understand anyone bringing this up as an argument for human meat eating. Still, there is that word canine, which people clearly don't think very far beyond.

"Canine" is the name given to a couple of our teeth which are also called eye teeth, or even cuspids by people who really know what they are doing. Lots of animals who eat various diets have canine teeth, antelopes, deer, camels, horses, boars, seals and walruses. Human canine teeth look rather lame compared to some of our completely herbivorous relatives. Highland gorillas for instance have fierce canine teeth, but other than the occasional insect, they live on plants. Canine teeth are used for dominance displays, fighting, gripping and tearing all sorts of food, often plants. Indeed even dogs are pretty omnivorous partly because they have lived with us for so long, but unlike our teeth, theirs do actually betray carnivorous origins.

Human teeth being mostly herbivorous teeth tell us something about the role of meat in our evolutionary diet. Like our closest ape relatives during our evolution, we lived primarily on plants. Some of our closest relatives such as chimpanzees eat meat, but it is an incidental part of their diet. It's likely we were the same, and this is consistent with the cliché of nutritionists telling us to eat more fruits and vegetables.

As for the idea that meat eating was responsible for developing larger brains, it is an idea some people want to believe but there isn't solid evidence for it. Obviously, any additional source of nutrients would be helpful, especially in hard times, but beyond theories, there is nothing clear in the research on this. Far more compelling as an explanation is our harnessing of fire, that our brain development was

aided by the additional food sources and nutrients that cooking unlocked, especially plant starches. Looking back on prehistoric times isn't easy in any case, maybe we'll have more knowledge in the future but for now, rash claims are unwarranted, especially ones being used to justify modern humanity's terrible treatment of animals.

Forward-facing eyes is a strange one but it comes up. We have two separate eyes to enable depth perception just like most animals. The theory is that for prey species eyes are wider apart, to allow better peripheral vision to see attackers. So far so good, where it gets muddled is in people thinking that if you don't have eyes on the sides of your head, that makes you a carnivore. Again we return to Aristotle's problem, just look at the actual world. Starting with our ape cousins we could list many species which have forward-facing eyes and are primarily or solely herbivores, or ones that have eyes on the sides of their heads and are carnivores. Eye placement is clearly no clear evolutionary sign of a single thing.

Overall the science in respect of human anatomy and our evolutionary diet is pretty clear, though we have been omnivores for many hundreds of thousands of years our anatomy is predominantly that of a herbivore. We have opportunistically supplemented our diet with meat with some theories based on our digestion saying we might have been scavengers, but it wasn't the main part of our diet. There is clearly a reason dietitians keep telling us to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Most of us now live in an environment where many types of food are superabundant. Nutritional science tells us we can live healthily on a variety of different diets, vegan included and that most people would benefit from moving more towards a whole food, plant-based diet. Using our biology as

a justification for our treatment of animals is not consistent with modern science. Once you strip away the urban myths, you are left with a simple fact. It is up to our conscience to decide what, or who, we eat.

What about backyard chickens?

Also common: What if animals were farmed humanely? My uncle has a farm...



Short Answer

On average a chicken in the backyard of a family is going to have a better life than one in a factory farm, almost certainly if the factory farm uses intensive confinement. Like other factory-farmed animals though, they have been bred as production machines and a small bird just can't lay hundreds of eggs a year and be healthy.

Long Answer

The sheer amount of meat people eat, the prices they want to pay and the number of people eating it has led directly to the industrial factory farm, one of the cruellest inventions of humankind. To meaningfully reduce the suffering of animals in farms, people will have to be far more conscious about what they eat, eat fewer animals and pay more for them. People talk about more humane farms as a “drop-in” alternative, but they simply couldn’t hope to approach the scale. For all that talk about more humane animal farming, few consumers are consistent in supporting them. Why people who eat meat regularly bring up humane farming so often in discussion remains a mystery. It's like their fantasies about humane animal farming creep into the real world just enough to absolve their conscience about what is actually

going on in the factory farms they are making more profitable at every meal. There are many things we could do and many fantasies we can have but ultimately it is what we do in the real world that counts morally.

Backyard farming has emotional appeal, it tries to replicate the stories we tell children about how animals are farmed. The same stories are often replicated on the outside of the packaging of animal products, the smiling, happy pig on some grass, the rooster crowing to greet the morning sun whilst standing on a fence. Inside the packaging is the dismembered corpse of a prematurely slaughtered animal that often only ever glimpsed the sun between bars or in the truck on the way to the slaughterhouse. Roosters of course rarely get even that far, suffocated in bags, or ground up alive soon after being born. Pigs, cows, large fish, none of these fit into the backyard farmer ideal, but then backyard farming is more about bucolic fantasies than any serious solution to the widespread suffering of farm animals.

So back to the poor chicken, two-thirds of the total bird mass in the world are chickens on factory farms and they are perhaps the most abused animals on earth. If you are thinking of re-homing an animal from a factory farm that would otherwise go to slaughter, whilst a noble idea, it comes with various health and sometimes mental issues for the birds. The modern factory-farmed hen has not been bred with its welfare in mind, it has been bred by large corporations as a profit-making machine. Wild chickens laid one or two dozen eggs split into two clutches each year. The modern factory-farmed chicken has been bred to lay an egg every day. This takes a terrible toll on their small bodies, leeching calcium and other vital nutrients. Animal sanctuaries that take in hens from factory farms often put them on hormones to slow down egg production and give their bodies a chance to heal, though apparently, this isn't a

healthy long-term solution either. Chickens will live up to 10 years naturally, but egg-laying factory-farmed chickens are killed at younger than two years old because to use industry jargon reminiscent of machines "their production falls rapidly" at this stage, in other words, their reproductive systems and bodies are spent. The brothers of these egg-laying hens have almost all been killed as chicks, generally by grinding up alive or suffocating/gassing and note these are the recommended "more humane" ways of killing them as opposed to letting them die of dehydration or putting them in garbage bins alive. In backyard farming they still have the problem with too many male birds, so they are usually grown until they start to mature, from 3 to 4 months, and are then slaughtered to eat. Female birds will live long after their egg-laying starts to slow down, and are also generally slaughtered by backyard farmers as this starts to happen. So backyard farming can alleviate the confinement and cages, but not the slaughter and much of the suffering. I guess it just depends on how much you really need eggs, or can just eat something else?

Factory farms and slaughterhouses are terrible places, and that is even with some oversight by the government and the occasional activist breaking in and documenting conditions in them. The unregulated, unseen nature of backyard farming can lead to more painful deaths, neglect, lower standards of care and hidden abuse. Suffering does exist on a scale, however. If we make assumptions that people would care more about the animals if they raised them, maybe even treat them as part of the family as they often do their pets, it would mean an improvement in animal welfare.

Backyard farming is not going to make much of a dent in the factory farm system though while people continue to consume as they do. The average home would need hundreds of animals to sustain the current levels of

slaughter, hardly possible in the suburban houses and apartments billions of people live in. The historically unprecedented amount of animal products wealthy humans eat can only be fed by the industrial factory farm. There are also all the animal products already in products people buy, the food they purchase at restaurants and cafes, and the meals they have with friends and family. Monitoring all of this to ensure it is ethically produced gets so complicated it is probably easier to just be vegan.

Taking a sentient being's freedom away, using its body for profit and production, and prematurely killing them will always be a form of oppression. If this were all humans were capable of surviving on, if we really needed these products to be healthy then maybe kinder oppression would be the best relationship with non-human animals we could hope for. Many millions of people who have gone vegan and are living happy, healthy lives say otherwise. Another world is possible in the relationship between humans and non-humans.

Animals are not on this earth for us, they are here with us.

Why eat things resembling meat?

Also common: Asking whether any given vegan alternative is made of tofu...



Short Answer

We can answer this but first, why aren't meat eaters eating things resembling animal parts? A rissole, a burger pattie, a sausage, a bolognese, none of them exist in nature. If animal flesh is so naturally delicious to humans, why aren't there raw flesh restaurants everywhere giving it to them straight? Instead, animal flesh is sold after cooking, spicing, marinating, saucing and often even changing the texture.

Long Answer

Whilst we are talking about co-option, it's interesting that the word meat didn't use to mean animal flesh, it just meant substantial food. Before refrigeration and factory farming consuming animal products in the quantities now common was unrealisable for the average person, especially those living in cities. Looking at most cultural cuisines you will see this, historically they were primarily plant-based and only became meat-heavy relatively recently.

So we should acknowledge most animal products do not look like animal products. I don't want to spoil any childhood delusions, but fish don't actually have fingers. Cheese, butter, sausages, milk and burgers, all go through a

production process that changes them significantly from their natural state. What we like is cooking, combining, mixing, shaping, flavouring and cleverly creating different culinary experiences.

Take the communion wafer of modern consumerism, the Big Mac, is that really defined by being made of animals? People focus mentally on the animal products in a burger, like many other meals, when they are often just a portion of the total calories. In your average fast food hamburger, the patty itself often has grains, flavours, herbs, spices, vegetables such as onions, flours or breadcrumbs, colourings and often preservatives. After the flesh is minced to change the texture, has things added to it to change the flavour, it is then burnt to further change the texture and flavour, it is then encased in bread, tomato, lettuce, pickle, onions, maybe sliced beetroot if you are in Australia and then smothered with mayonnaise, mustards or sauces. Often the meat is less than a fifth of the end product which doesn't in any way resemble, or even taste like the animal flesh in the patty would have naturally. If vegans replace that part of the burger with some plant-based protein source we still get a pretty similar end experience.

Almost every animal product has a similar story, processed, cooked, flavoured and spiced, the actual taste of the original animal product is masked. What people who go vegan often realise is that it wasn't the taste of meat that added much to food, it was their use as an ingredient in a meal, the texture, the fat content and the protein. These can all be replaced with other things with similar properties, and if we then add all those same spices and flavours and cook it in the same way, we end up with something that ticks the pleasure boxes for us.

When it comes to what we replace animal protein with, we have a wide array, not just tofu. Beans and lentils are the easiest drop-in replacements, but there are also nuts, seeds, grains, mushrooms, seitan, soy derivatives and other alternatives from the wide and diverse plant kingdom. There are also lots of commercially made products that are designed to be easy drop-in replacements for animal products in a meal. These vegan alternatives are getting better and more varied all the time as veganism grows and becomes more commercially profitable. People often prejudge plant-based food as boring, but plenty of blind studies have shown people like the taste of plant-based alternatives, so it's more of a mental shift many people need to make. It is a new way of eating for many though, so as we all did when growing up and learnt what foods we liked, we need to experiment with different plant-based options, and figure out the things we like and don't like from the ever-increasing number of options out there.

Ultimately people who ask this are missing the point. It is oppression and violence that we oppose, not a particular ingredient's texture, shape or flavour. Many vegans avoid products resembling animal foods because they have uncomfortable connotations for them, and that is their right. Others are happy eating anything so long as they aren't contributing to factory farming, and that is cool too. Both are ethical choices and surely that's the important thing, not the arbitrary shape or flavour of what people eat. People who get upset about the aesthetics of what vegans eat would do much more good in the world if they were to channel their energy into thinking about the ethics of what they eat.

Meat eating is natural

Also common: Killing and death are part of nature. What about the food chain?



Short Answer

There is too much suffering in the world. Think of all the terrible things that happen in nature, the terrible things beings have done to each other down through the centuries. Are they something we should continue because we might be able to call them natural, perpetuating the sometimes brutal potential of our universe? Or would the world be a better place if we tried to move beyond them? We should not chain ourselves to the past. Whether something has been done for a long time or could be called natural is irrelevant to whether it is necessary, just or compassionate.

Long Answer

As much as humans have long wished for an ordered, moral universe, one that makes sense, the laws which govern the universe we actually have are mathematical and amoral. Good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people, all governed by the elegant but soulless laws of physics. We made up things like karma, heaven and hell to shield ourselves from the unpalatable truth that the control we have over our lives and fate is limited. Hard work, intelligence and diligence are all potent factors in deciding what sort of life we will have, but luck is the card

that can come in and overrule them all. It would be nice if the universe had some sort of innate justice, so long as we agreed with the laws governing that justice, but it does not.

Science and philosophy have long known this, and hence there is something called "The naturalistic fallacy". To say something is natural and consider this a moral or intellectual defence of it is not enough. Massive outbreaks of deadly diseases used to be common; to intervene with modern medicine is not necessarily natural, but it is surely the most moral action available. Cannibalism, slavery, warfare, oppression and all manner of atrocities have long and common histories in human society. We could claim they are natural but if so is that any valid ethical defence of them? Should a murderer be able to use the defence in a court of law "But people have always murdered each other"? If not then why should this be applied to every other member of the animal kingdom?

We make advances in society in fields such as law, justice, democracy, modern medicine and philosophy not by appeals to what is natural but what is right. The ethics of our treatment of animals should not be any different. If we can be healthy by eating a diet that doesn't oppress billions of other creatures, should we continue their oppression because we have labelled it natural? Is the fact that we have always treated animals badly any valid excuse for foregoing moral progress?

A respect for nature is obviously a good and important thing, especially given the limits of our knowledge, and our poor history of intervening in natural systems. But to call the modern diet "natural", or the factory farming system "natural" is to render the word meaningless. It is almost a cold joke to call it natural when one of the primary drivers of the destruction of the natural world is the modern animal

farming system. People who only eat wild animals they have hunted with their own hands might be able to make the claim that they are doing something natural, but that sort of system is never going to feed billions of people meat twice a day. The way we eat meat requires an unnatural system. We have turned our back on the wild which we fear, long ago breaking the food chain and jettisoning our place in any sort of cycle consistent with the evolutionary system. The unnatural, destructive animal confinement system of barbed wire, cages and slaughterhouses, the pasture which covers huge swathes of our planet is one of the first things we need to transcend if our species wants to reclaim any sort of positive, compatible relationship with the natural world.

Some things are both natural and good, such as the freedom and joy that every sentient being desires. Taking that from them needlessly, when we have such abundance, when we can choose to eat a thousand different things, needs a better justification than that it is a habit we don't care enough to change.

Killing, death, whatever evils there are in nature, in being human we have some power to reduce them. Pointing to the natural world to justify our actions is a denial of agency and personal responsibility. We could have a very different relationship with the natural world and bring healing to it, making it a kinder place for more beings. We can have a reverence for the evolutionary systems of life without using them as an excuse to ignore our selfishness and moral failings, for our limited circle of compassion. We create some part of the world by each act of living, the question which then confronts our conscience is what sort of world are we using our life energy to contribute to?

What can you eat?

Also common: Oh you are vegan, that must be hard. Veganism is too expensive.



Short Answer

Anyone who thinks the millions of people who eat a vegan diet are all wasting away to nothing, clearly hasn't met enough vegans. Most vegans will tell you they eat a greater variety of food as a vegan than they did before. Vegans come in all shapes and sizes, from slim to voluptuous, athletic to wiry, and pudgy to powerful, because veganism is about compassion, not purity or denial.

Long Answer

Google tells me there are 20,000 plants that people eat. Well the first result did, the second said 200,000, the next 300,000, the next 80,000. Luckily for our purposes, the exact number is not important, so let's just say it is clearly a lot. There are foods you have never heard of that people eat regularly in other countries, some you might really love if you tried them. We all eat a pretty limited subset of foods available in the world and assume there isn't that much else, but even in our own societies, there are people, especially from different cultures, eating many unfamiliar foods to us.

When you tell someone you are vegan, they picture their own diet with a handful of things removed, things that are often the psychological centre of their meals. To be fair this is what some vegans initially do, and they often don't thrive because it becomes a diet of lack and self-denial that isn't healthy or interesting. People who thrive on a vegan diet educate themselves on what to add to their diet to make sure it is nutritionally complete or optimal for their palate, lifestyle and goals.

Healthy veganism embraces a slightly different food pyramid. We leave the fruits, vegetables and whole grains that are the essential foundation of any healthy diet. We remove the animal products but don't stop there, we replace them with a wide variety of other plant-based foods. People eating the sort of diet peak nutritional organisations recommend are probably already eating a mostly plant-based diet. A healthy vegan diet just replaces animal products with things like nuts, seeds, beans, legumes, grains, fungi, tofu, tempeh, mushrooms, and seitan. Milk is a good example of the variety vegans have in replacing an animal product, instead of just one sort we have soy, almond, macadamia, cashew, oat, rice, hemp, quinoa, coconut and more. Almost every animal product also has a commercial plant-based version these days too, plant-based cheeses, marshmallows, milk chocolate (a lot of dark choc has always been vegan), condensed milk, mayonnaise, yoghurt, haggis, black pudding, bacon, you get the idea. A diet reliant on these products would be expensive, but eating them regularly rather than cheaper whole foods isn't nutritionally optimal anyway. Eat beans, not beings as we say!

There will be some who identify as junk-food vegans that will roll their eyes at some of the health discussions above and say they went vegan for the animals, not their health.

They tend to centre their diet on plant-based meats and dairy products and essentially haven't changed the shape of their diet after going vegan. This is still better for the planet and animals and eases the transition from being non-vegan, but it misses out on potential health benefits and costs more.

Sources of vegan protein are also some of the cheapest things you can feed yourself on, beans, legumes and grains. Tofu and tempeh, staples for many communities, are competitively priced compared with animal products. One of the healthiest diets ever studied, a Whole-foods Plant-Based Diet, can also be one of the cheapest. If you are willing to invest a little more time in cooking it can be a win for your pocket, the animals, and your health.

The thought of being vegan may seem hard, but most vegans will tell you that once they made the change it becomes just as automatic as their previous habits. Most of us eat the same dishes regularly, frequent the same restaurants and buy the same general list of items at the supermarket. Once you find a handful of good regular dishes, you are most of the way there. A good starter list would include a curry, a stir-fry, a bolognese sauce, a burger patty and a couple of good soups such as minestrone or red lentil. Whether you are just starting to cook, or are a foodie, there is an infinite world of vegan blogs, video tutorials, meal plans, shopping tips and recipe suggestions out there. A good place to start finding out what vegans eat is to do an Internet search for your favourite dishes followed by "vegan", then get in the kitchen and start experimenting!

The same goes for finding vegan and vegan-friendly restaurants and places to eat out. Try typing in "Vegan restaurants in" followed by wherever you happen to be and you'll see an ever-growing list of places in most major cities.

If you are a traveller or want to make your life even easier download the free Happy Cow mobile application or visit their website. A community of people around the world contribute to maintaining lists of local restaurants, stores and more with photos, ratings and reviews. You can also start giving back to the vegan movement, by adding your own reviews and restaurants you've found and updating any which need it.

Habits can be powerful things, they stop us from living our best life, or they can help us maintain it. Moments of transition in our lives are thus pregnant with possibilities, for positive or negative transformation. If you are wondering what vegans eat, do some research, deepen your knowledge, and give yourself the best chance of making it a permanent and positive change for you, the environment and the animals who share this world with us.

I don't eat much meat

Also common: Telling you they ate a vegetarian meal recently.



Short Answer

When someone says "I don't eat much meat", vegans can't help hearing "I don't kill many animals". It's better than the alternative of course, but we think about the animals in the factory farms and slaughterhouses hidden beneath such a statement. Forgive us if we don't seem as happy as people would like about such statements, most of us appreciate someone trying and making positive steps.

Long Answer

This is a positive statement, actually not eating much meat can be better on many levels, health, environmental and animal suffering, than the standard meat-centric diet. The only problem is that too often those who say this aren't 100% in touch with reality. They often eat meat every day, for lunch and dinner, regularly adding bacon to breakfast, if they have something without meat it usually involves eggs or dairy products. Perhaps they eat more chicken and fish than they used to, or perhaps they are having smaller portions, it's hard to tell, but it still often equates to a lot of meat.

Not eating a lot of meat paradoxically doesn't mean eating fewer animals, depending on what, or who, you are eating. Chickens, some of the most abused animals in the farming system, are tiny relative to a cow or pig. That's why so many billions of them are living terrible lives in factory farms. The treatment of fish, who range in size but are often small, is exemplified by the fact that they aren't even counted, just measured in tonnes. Someone can eat many smaller fish in one sitting. There is no regard for them as sentient individuals, people misguidedly think that they don't feel pain, despite what modern science says about the question. If not eating much meat means switching your diet from large animals to smaller animals, it also means more animals in factory farms, crushed in nets, suffocated, impaled with hooks or harried into slaughterhouses.

Someone saying they are eating a healthier diet, or the more environmentally friendly diet, by switching to chickens means more animals suffering. This is why vegans might not be as excited as you hoped for when you tell us you don't eat much meat. There's also the whole dairy industry, which is an environmental and animal-suffering disaster on par with the rest of the industry. People who care about animals or the planet can't just swap beef for chicken or more cheese, but should swap them with beans, tofu, seitan, nuts, seeds, lentils and with the growing number of plant-derived alternatives.

Our ideas of what a normal diet is are culturally shaped. Most people predominantly eat the way their parents did, for no better reason than that's what their parents did. The fact that someone eats less meat than their parents, relative or friend, or chooses white meats instead of red meat, is a relative, not an absolute statistic. Average meat consumption is still very high according to most peak dietary bodies, which is why they consistently encourage

people to reduce their meat consumption, to eat more fruits, vegetables, beans etc. Those same peak dietary bodies also point out that you can be just as healthy following a vegan diet as any other well-planned diet. There is no physiological need to eat meat, it is a choice, one we can change if we want to tread more lightly on the world.

OK so we want to acknowledge some people really don't eat much meat. If someone has many more days without meat than otherwise, or only eats meat at occasional social gatherings, then they might be able to claim to be not eating much meat. To everyone else saying this, we want to acknowledge that you are making personal progress, but we can't help noticing you still eat a lot of animals, and we aren't quite ready to roll out the red carpet for you.

For the animals who live and die in agribusiness systems before ending up in packaging, bred to be a product that someone uses and discards with no more thought to it than any other product; for our collective ecosystems suffering from deforestation, water and air pollution; for the wild animals of the world who are under constant existential pressure from the land wasted on animal farming; for poor communities whose grain is sent to feed animals the wealthy consume; the optimal amount of animals we need to eat is none.

But what about people?

Also common: Some people care more about animals than they do people.



Short Answer

This is a false dichotomy, we can care about both. Surveys consistently find vegans are more likely than other members of the community to care about human rights and the environment. Now, only do we not have to choose one over the other, but we are better for not making the choice. The intellectual and moral progression of the oppressor is bound to the liberation of those they oppress.

Long Answer

The premise of this statement is that there is some sort of fixed hierarchy of suffering, humans and everything else beneath. Whilst any humans suffer apparently we shouldn't concern ourselves with the suffering of billions of non-humans. No evidence is given as to why such a choice should be made, nor is likely to be given because the best science shows that the ability to suffer is shared by all sentient beings and that people who care about non-human animals have a circle of compassion which embraces humans more fully.

We can care about many things, the environment, our friends and families, people in poverty and the suffering of

animals without diminishing any of them. Indeed, there is much to be said for fostering moral consistency within ourselves. As Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".

Teaching universal compassion helps all who can suffer because we feel on an instinctive level that injustice towards humans and non-human animals are directly related.

A plant-based diet obviously reduces the number of animals suffering through slaughter and lives in factory farms, but it reverberates out in many other ways. Livestock's inconvenient long shadow is its involvement in almost every environmental problem from local to a global scale, covering as it does over half of the arable surface of the earth. Air pollution, water quality, land degradation, species extinction, deforestation, invasive species, climate change, and the way we farm animals is one of the primary drivers of the destructive Anthropocene. Only 3% of land animal mass is now wild creatures, with the other 97% being humans and their livestock. Two-thirds of the mass of birds in the world are now farmed chickens. The many billions of livestock animals consume many times enough grain to feed the remaining food-poor regions of the world. A plant-based world would feed more people with less land. Almost all the communicable diseases that have plagued humanity throughout history have been a result of our contact with animals, from colds and flu to the black death, ebola and AIDs.

There is so much to be said about the positive effects on humanity of progressing beyond eating animals. It is not about choosing one species over the other, it is about a reverence for our world and collective progress. Switching to a more compassionate diet that can be at least as healthy

as our current diet will also ensure the health of life on earth. It has been said ethics is like a muscle that goes stronger with use, a habit we can easily fall into or out of. We should be encouraging compassion in all spheres of life, not playing one being off against each other. Many of the great thinkers of the past have seen the moral connection between our treatment of humans and non-humans:

Whilst there are slaughterhouses, there will still be
battlefields
- Tolstoy

Until we stop harming all other living beings, we are still
savages
— Thomas Edison

We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of
animals
— Immanuel Kant

If you have men who will exclude any of god's creatures
from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have
men who will deal likewise with their fellow men
— St Francis of Assisi

By killing, man suppresses in himself, unnecessarily, the
highest spiritual capacity, that of sympathy and pity
towards living creatures like himself
— Leo Tolstoy

While we ourselves are the living graves of murdered
beasts, how can we expect any ideal conditions on this
earth?
— George Bernard Shaw

For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each
other

— Pythagoras

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated

— Mahatma Gandhi

Until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace

— Albert Schweitzer

The self-serving idea that humans are in a different moral sphere to other animals is a pre-Darwinian conception of ourselves which has both destructive and cruel consequences. Modern science shows that we are relatives in the same family tree, the vast majority of our biology predates modern humans. Our shared evolutionary nature means that much of the human emotional, intellectual and physical experience of existence is shared to some degree by other sentient life, especially those with higher levels of sentience. We who know what it is to suffer should extend our consideration to those who share that ability, appropriate to their sentience.

To look into the eyes of a dog, a cow, or a child is to see something of ourselves looking back into our eyes and wondering about us, experiencing this existence. Many animals share with us this magical spark of consciousness, to arbitrarily diminish or extinguish that spark because they do not share our specific identity is an injustice. Just as suffering is not unique to humans, neither should the expression of our compassion be.

We are all earthlings, here sharing this experience of existence together. The great power we hold collectively over the lives of the other species of this world means the moral choices we make should be deeply thought through.

Ignoring the ramifications of our power just because other sentient creatures are another species leads inevitably to suffering and injustice. Trying to live an ethical life is difficult, it asks much of us, but if we make mistakes in our moral thinking, let us err on the side of compassion.

You can't eat that

Also common: Can you eat bread? Or some other thing they wrongly assume isn't usually vegan.



Short Answer

From the perspective of an animal-product heavy diet, veganism may seem like self-denial; that vegans can't eat many things that people consider the centre of their diet. Vegans see aligning our consumption with our ideals as the opposite of self-denial. Veganism is connecting with our compassion, of engaging with a world beyond social circles and status. Abstaining from a handful of ingredients is of little importance compared to restoring our relationship with the non-human world.

Long Answer

It is interesting that people usually frame our avoidance of animal products with the word "can't". It sounds as if it is not a voluntary choice, but more like an allergy or a religious duty. It's only a word of course, probably used with little thought, but it grates a little to the ear. Veganism is very much active, about ongoing thoughtful choices rather than about purity or blind adherence to a set of rules.

Some people fully embrace this way of thinking, that compassion is not a personal stance or label, but it is about

the tangible effects we are having in the world. These people call themselves freegans. Freegans will only personally buy vegan products but will eat animal products that would otherwise go to waste, such as those thrown away by businesses because they reach an arbitrary “best before” date etc. Environmentally and ethically freegans see little good in throwing away something that already exists in the world when all the misery and resource expenditure has been done. Many vegans are profoundly in agreement with this ethically, but the idea of eating an animal product feels similar to them that perhaps eating a human product might feel to others; it’s unnecessary and provokes a disgust response.

Then there are ostro-vegans. These are people who consider only sentience - the level of conscious awareness and ability to experience things like pleasure and pain that an individual has - in their consideration of what can be ethically consumed. The terms plant and animal seem very clear in our minds, but as is consistent with the evolutionary reality that animals evolved from plants, there are a wide range of creatures at almost every level of sentience. Ostro-vegans delve into this blurry line between plants and animals. Do creatures that can’t move and don’t appear to have any of the internal wiring needed for consciousness such as clams and mussels require the same moral consideration as clearly sentient beings such as pigs, chickens, cows and tuna? It is an interesting discussion, and again many vegans are sympathetic to this logic, even if it is somewhat irrelevant to them because they are happily following a purely vegan diet and don’t feel like they lack anything.

There is a semi-official definition of veganism given by the original Vegan Society based in England:

"Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms, it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals."

Officially the Vegan Society doesn't currently consider honey vegan, however, this wasn't always the case and they have actually gone back and forth on this at least once over their history. It's possible more humane techniques of farming bees in the future might change this again, or technology might give us the ability to make cheaper, biologically indistinguishable honey by other means. Veganism should not make the same mistake that some religions have, of fixing their morality at a point of time that becomes ever less relevant as the world around them changes.

Cultured meat, precision fermentation and pretty convincing "mock meats", all make the idea of what is and is not an animal product more nuanced. As corporations that profit from factory farming diversify into the growing vegan market as well, it complicates things further. People not immersed in the ethical considerations around veganism often speak quite clumsily about it, "can" and "can't", but there are few sharp lines in ethics.

Veganism should be about making the world better, not moral purity. There are some occasions where eating an animal product will probably have little effect on the life of an animal somewhere. Especially if we accidentally eat something, it is not really that ethically relevant, what we do

99.9% of the time is what matters. But as much as veganism should be practical, it is also a personal statement about where you stand in the ideological world. There is much to be said for displaying ethical consistency, for not appearing hypocritical, of seeming to ask of others things you don't always do yourself. Whatever label you present to others, freegan, ostro vegan, vegan, or some other, whether you ask for it or not you are now a representative of that idea in the world. Whilst it is good to make clear what we aspire to ethically, we should also be clear to express our limitations, flaws and weaknesses, and no doubt this will create much more empathy with and connection to others as we try to communicate our message.

Finally, the second point is about people thinking vegans can't eat things that are usually vegan but not labelled as such. I've had bread, pasta, avocado and peanut butter...I guess it does have butter in the name. This partly shows how little people are engaged in their diet, they just accept what they are served up, what their parents served up and don't really know what is in the foods they eat much less their repercussions on the world. If someone is open to discussion, it is a good chance to open their mind, especially to the fact that the basis of most people's diets is already mostly vegan. This is especially true if they are eating healthily. However, to some people it is an opportunity to argue, and to the waitress who served us in West End all those years ago, you may work at an Italian restaurant and think you are an authority on the matter but pasta can definitely be, and dried pasta usually is, vegan.

I'd love to be vegan, but...

Also common: I was vegan/vegetarian but..



Short Answer

Many people consider diet solely an individual choice, ignoring the power of our collective choices that make the world. The factory farming industry overruns and degrades much of the arable earth whilst causing animal suffering and a host of other problems. When someone explains why they can't be vegan, they often minimise the reality of animal farming or offer some idealised version of it. There is too much suffering in the world and reducing our usage of animal products reduces our contribution to this unfortunate reality. Veganism is a powerful, positive step most of us can take towards a kinder, healthier and more beautiful world.

Long Answer

The more mainstream veganism becomes and society begins to understand some of the multitudes of reasons for being vegan, the more we hear people say "I would like to be vegan, but...". People who have been vegan for a while remember conversations used to mainly involve explaining what veganism or even vegetarianism is. I've personally had to spell out the word countless times. People being familiar with the term, let alone having engaged with or considered veganism, is a positive sign that veganism has entered the mainstream consciousness.

Still, maybe on some level, it is easier to forgive someone not embracing a concept they weren't aware of than someone who is aware of it and has for some reason rejected it. It can be a little emotional for a vegan to hear. In this world of minds closed to change, of selfishness celebrated as personal empowerment, it can spark hope when someone expresses that they are even open to positive change. A passionate vegan's pulse might quicken a little seeing this glimmer of hope for animals and the environment. Maybe, if we can just say the right thing, we can do some powerful good for animals and the world.

Hope is often a double-edged sword. A vegan advocate will want to launch into a conversation to help the person over any hurdles they have, to understand if they need more cooking tips, ideas for eating out, nutritional information or an understanding of the philosophy of animal rights. If we misjudge the moment or our tone these conversations can come across as preachy or "salesy". We might forget that people rarely change their beliefs during a single conversation, no matter how well constructed. Changes to deeply held beliefs often happen gradually, a journey to a new vision constructed step by step, and the decisions to change most often happen in moments of quiet reflection with our own souls. Having a detailed answer for every question, because you have heard a hundred times before, drowning a person in facts rather than help, and ignoring their unique complex emotional reality, can all be counterproductive. We need to have the conversation the person is open to, that helps them change, not the one we have rehearsed in our minds, which might have changed us.

Communication is hard, partly because people are so unique, often so very different from us as to be like another species. Some people will judge a discussion by its rationality, they are best reached via a clear coherent

argument and too much emotion will make them feel they are being manipulated. Others are more sensitive to the interpersonal aspects of a conversation, too little emotion might come off as cold, facts aren't inconsequential but empathising with animals is more likely to resonate with them. People have different life experiences, cultures, sensitivities, levels of trauma and tolerance for difficult topics. People have psychological defence mechanisms and many will instinctively turn away from discussions or depictions of animal suffering, perhaps as reminders of pain or trauma they have experienced. People are also at different stages of knowledge about issues and varying openness to change. Some people need to know how, others why. For some, we must start at basics and introduce ideas, helping them see that another world is necessary or even possible. Blundering into a system without understanding it is usually a mistake, especially in systems as complex as human lives. When someone says they can't be vegan, we have to start by listening and learning, and perhaps focus not on convincing them, but on how we might help them.

One place many passionate vegans can be short-sighted is in their attitude towards people who used to be vegan. "You were never really vegan" is the cliched comment made in these cases. This way of thinking ignores many realities. The most obvious is that people often need a couple of attempts at making life changes, even ones they believe in. People's motivations also vary. Not everyone becomes vegan for animal rights or from a reverence for the non-human world. Some come to it for health, or because they were in a relationship or social circle that made it easy for them to be vegan. The attrition rate of vegans, especially those who aren't motivated by ethical considerations, is high. Sometimes our movement focuses too much on getting people to become vegan and doesn't do enough work on

helping already existing vegans to be happy, healthy and educated. It's usually easier to conform in life, people have a deep need for social connection, and not all social circles are as tolerant of veganism as they should be. People have a deep need for connection with others, and as vegans, we need to think about how we are helping foster community that helps people make ethical choices without negative social ramifications.

With health, a lot of vegans (often new vegans) promote unrealistic claims for the vegan diet, literally that you will never get sick, or become immune to viruses, they don't even advocate taking a B12 supplement. Not only are these simply empirically untrue, but promoting veganism as a miracle cure can lead to disappointment and disillusionment in people who come to it with that motivation. The highest nutritional bodies in the world reaffirm that a well-planned vegan diet is consistent with good health at all life stages, and may bring some benefits, but the evidence that it is a panacea simply isn't there. It is enough for most vegans, given all the environmental and animal suffering benefits, that we can also be healthy on a vegan diet, maybe even healthier if we plan it well. Selling people anything more might give us one more temporary vegan whilst setting them up for potential long-term disappointment.

So yes, most people can be vegan and we know many people who become vegan only wish they had done it sooner, but we have to accept people's emotional realities. We all also wish we were exercising regularly, sleeping more, and learning an instrument. The fact that we aren't all living our best lives is not always a moral failing, but a reflection of the fact that we have many competing priorities for our energy in a world that doesn't always make positive change easy. Be kind, and give people space. If you have a choice between winning an argument or giving a

positive impression of veganism, choose the latter, for the animals.

Also common:

Short Answer

Long Answer