

20 Anti-Vegan Arguments and Replies

in

La pensée végétarienne: 50 regards sur la condition animale

Presses Universitaires de France, 2020

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January 12, 2023

Introduction

As arguments against veganism are too numerous to address adequately in an essay of this length, this entry briefly addresses just twenty anti-vegan arguments, some quite familiar, some novel. The arguments are divided into conceptual arguments and empirical arguments. Broadly speaking, conceptual arguments involve a philosophical analysis of ideas, concepts, or ethical principles and the logical relations between them, whereas empirical arguments rely primarily on real-world factual content.

Central to both types of arguments is the notion of logical consistency. All arguments—especially moral arguments—strive for logical consistency. Inconsistent beliefs, taken together, form a contradiction. Contradictions in our moral beliefs are bad. Further, being consistent in the way we treat others is at the heart of impartiality and fairness, concepts central to ethical deliberation and practice. For example, a leading argument for legalizing same-sex marriage has been that if heterosexuals can marry the person they love, then persons of the same sex should be free to do so as well, clearly an appeal to consistency.

When it comes to arguments surrounding the moral and legal status of nonhuman animals, what is at stake is not merely the theoretical coherence of our beliefs, but the suffering and death of the 60,000 sentient beings who were slaughtered since you began reading this entry, and those victims who follow them every minute of every day. For these reasons, formulating adequate rejoinders to anti-vegan arguments is more than an academic exercise, it is indispensable to a sound theoretical foundation for animal liberation.

Conceptual Arguments Against Veganism

1. Veganism is racist, colonialist, and imperialist

Veganism facilitates a hierarchy of power relations that prioritizes the beliefs and ethical practices of some racialized or cultural groups (e.g., White European vegans) and marginalizes the ethical and cultural practices of certain other groups (e.g., persons of

color (POC) in, say, the Global South). In other words, demanding that everyone across the globe adopt vegan practice is a form of cultural imperialism and colonialism.

Reply:

First, marshaling cultural reasons to justify harming sentient beings ignores the fact that nonhuman animals themselves possess moral status, a manifestation of speciesism. (Jones, 2015) What appears as a conflict between two groups—vegans versus anti-vegan POC—actually involves an inter-community conflict between vegans, anti-vegan POC, and nonhuman animals. (Gruen, 2001) Second, such arguments ignore the growing and robust literature on and by vegans of color. (Ko, 2019) There is nothing *conceptually* racist, colonialist, or imperialist about veganism.

2. Veganism is classist and elitist (as manifested in “vegan privilege”)

Veganism assumes affluence and “first-world” privilege which encourages self-righteousness and condescension towards non-vegans.

Reply:

First, critical animal studies scholars argue persuasively that animal liberation and human liberation intersect as “one struggle,” seeing veganism as a commitment to minimizing violence against all—human or nonhuman—sentient animal life. (Jenkins & Stănescu, 2014) When seen as a movement that conjunctively challenges the exploitation of non-human animals, poor and marginalized humans, and the environment, veganism in fact opposes elitism.

Second, a vegan diet is not inherently costly, does not require expensive and exotic ingredients, and is possible for people of various income levels. Third, humans *qua* humans themselves constitute a dominant class. It is speciesism, not veganism, that expresses the interests of a dominant class. (Sanbonmatsu, 2011) Ignoring the exploitation of nonhuman animals is itself an expression of human supremacy in the form of *speciesist privilege*.

3. Veganism is exterminist

If everyone adopted a vegan diet, domesticated animals would be consigned to “crated heritage collections or just plain extermination as kinds and as individuals.” (Haraway, 2013, p. 80) To assume that one cannot eat without killing others is “to pretend innocence and transcendence or final peace.” (Haraway, 2013, p. 295)

Reply:

Rather than being “exterminist”, an ethically and politically motivated veganism—whose objective is to enable and promote meaningful life, creating conditions for all animals to lead fulfilling lives and flourish as self-determining subjects—is the *opposite* of exterminist. (Weisberg, 2009) While it is not entirely possible to survive and avoid killing, or to eat without harming other sentient beings, vegans in fact kill fewer sentient beings than those who fail to attend to other animals.

4. Diet is a personal choice

The matter of eating animals is a matter of personal choice, and matters of personal choice are not moral issues, so the matter of eating animals is not a moral issue. But rather than respecting such choices, vegans try and force their views on others, disrespecting people and their personal choices.

Reply:

True, one's diet is a kind of personal choice. In fact, with rare exception (e.g., coercion), every action that we perform is in a sense a personal choice. However, a crucial conceptual and ethical distinction exists between two different senses of the term. One type of personal choice—let's call it personal choice₁—involves matters of taste that have little-to-no effect on others (e.g., whether I prefer staring at a cloud over wondering at a blade of grass). A second type of personal choice—personal choice₂—involves actions (like consumer behavior) that may *appear* from our own perspectives to involve personal choice₁, but which actually have grave causal moral implications, effects that sometimes may be invisible to us.

Some choices we make are immoral. Some choices have victims. The choice to consume animal products may appear to be a case of personal choice₁, but in fact, it is a choice that involves a sentient victim. Thus, the choice to eat animals is not a case of personal choice₁, but rather a case of personal choice₂. Seeing animal food choices as instances of personal choice₂ is a necessary step in assimilating nonhuman animals into the moral community. (Grillo, 2012) The billions of animals kept in bondage and slaughtered each year would surely welcome the opportunity to exercise their personal choice, and if granted their choice would prefer to live out their lives without human-inflicted exploitation and violence. Animals are forced onto the killing floor against their will. Any notion of choice has been removed for them. Morality itself is centered mostly around other-regarding acts. Unless we are hedonistic solipsistic narcissists, the personal choice defense holds no sway. The inclusion of a victim removes any possibility of moral justification.

5. Food animals are specifically bred/exist to be eaten

Food animals like cows, pigs, and chickens—animals that an overwhelmingly vast majority of us choose to eat—exist for the purpose of being turned into food. Breeding animals for purposes that serve human utility is not immoral.

Reply:

Everyone would agree that breeding humans for the purpose of slavery is immoral, despite the fact that (a) some people throughout history believed that some kinds of humans exist for this purpose, and (b) slaves can function to serve human utility. But if breeding animals for human utility is not immoral, then there must be some morally relevant difference between human and nonhuman animals that justifies this asymmetry in treatment. In what might that difference consist? Species membership? How can a biological category generate moral status? Why is species the decisive factor and not, say, genus? How about cognitive abilities?

Though it is true that most humans possess cognitive abilities that permit moral reflection and deliberation, and the formulation of moral principles, *not all humans do*. Like humans, a vast majority of nonhuman animals bred as food are cognitively complex, socially sophisticated, experiential beings who can suffer and die painful deaths. These capacities create interests in their lives that *matter to them*, interests that confer moral status. Breeding animals for purposes of human utility can never alone justify the subjection of nonhuman animals. Many dogs used in dog fighting are bred specifically for that purpose, but that fact alone could never make dog fighting moral. And neither can the breeding of nonhuman animals as food morally justify eating them.

6. Consuming nonhuman animals is legal

Practices like dog or cock fighting are illegal in most places whereas ranches and slaughterhouses are lawful practices. If consuming animals were immoral, it would be illegal.

Reply:

Legality does not imply morality. There are plenty of actions that are illegal but not immoral, and plenty of actions that are immoral but not illegal. Violating my parking meter may be illegal, but clearly it is not immoral. Likewise, cheating on a committed romantic partner may be immoral, but not illegal. In fact, throughout history marital rape, human slavery, and child abuse were legal, yet clearly none of these practices and institutions are moral. Just because a practice is legal does not mean that it is also morally acceptable. The fact that consuming animal products is legal says absolutely nothing about its morality.

7. Consuming animal products is a tradition

Eating meat is a tradition, and traditions are important to maintain. In this case, the tradition of consuming animals trumps an animal's right to life.

Reply:

The tradition argument commits the genetic fallacy. The *genetic fallacy* occurs when we try to justify a claim or practice on the basis of its origin or its history rather than its current meaning or context. There are plenty of human cultural practices that involve very old traditions that are ethically questionable if not outright immoral.

Some traditions such as Female Genital Mutilation, include the removal of young girls' clitoral hood, clitoral glans, and inner labia—all without anesthesia. Other traditions such as the annual Yulin Dog Meat Festival celebrate the slaughter and consumption of up to 10,000 dogs over the course of a week. To argue that practices such as these are justified by tradition is to reason fallaciously.

8. Other animals eat animals

Animals eat other animals. If given the opportunity, a bear would eat me, so how could it then be immoral for me to eat a bear?

Reply:

Implicit in this argument is the belief that we are justified in basing human morality on the actions of nonhuman animals. But that view ignores a critical distinction between moral agents and moral patients. *Moral agents* are beings who possess the ability to make moral distinctions, deliberate in making moral decisions, and freely choose (or fail to choose) to act morally. Moral agents are subject to moral obligations and may be held morally accountable for their actions, that is, they may be held morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for their actions. Most adult humans are moral agents. By contrast, *moral patients* are beings who lack the ability to morally deliberate and act on the results of those deliberations. Unlike moral agents, moral patients cannot be held blameworthy for their actions, even in cases where a moral patient causes significant harm to another. Paradigm cases of moral patients include young children, humans suffering from severe dementia, and all nonhuman animals.

Basing morality on the actions of moral patients—beings who lack the ability for ethical deliberation—is to disregard capacities that make most humans moral agents in the

first place. Why would we ever base our morality on the actions of animals like lions who are consistently documented as doing things that we would never find acceptable in human society? How does the fact that a wild cheetah kills and eats an impala justify our going to the supermarket and buying and eating a steak? Further, many wild predators are obligate carnivores, i.e., they must eat flesh to survive. Humans are not. In the absence of physiological necessity, the ethical justification for the consumption of animal products proceeds on shaky moral grounds.

9. Consuming animal products is natural

Consuming meat and other animal products is natural. Meat is written into our biology. It's what we naturally crave, and it is what our species evolved to eat. Just look at our canine teeth. Eating meat provided selective advantage to humans. In fact, if our ancestors had not eaten meat, *Homo sapiens* would not be in existence today.

Reply:

This argument shares similarities to the tradition argument, however, the “natural” argument usually includes a biological component. That said, (a) disentangling the relationship between the concept of the *natural* and the notion of ethical acceptability, and (b) exploring the archaeological-empirical claims of the argument are crucial to its dismantling.

With regard to (a), relying on nature in such contexts exhibits the appeal to nature fallacy wherein it is assumed that what is natural must be good, and what is unnatural must be bad. However, whether or not a practice or a product is “natural” is irrelevant to its biological or moral goodness. Few advocates of this argument would argue that because tuberculosis is “natural” it is good. Perhaps a proponent of this argument would reply that unlike tuberculosis, meat eating provided humans with selective advantage. Though quite controversial, some biologists argue that rape among human beings is a behavioral adaptation that may have provided selective advantage. (Thornhill & Palmer, 2001) Were this the case, it surely would not follow that rape would be moral. Likewise, to argue that eating meat *is* morally acceptable simply because it is “natural” has no bearing on how we *should* behave.

With regard to (b), biologically and physiologically, human bodies are more closely aligned with the physiologies of herbivorous animals. Our intestines are about three times longer than the average omnivore, while the hydrochloric acid in our stomachs is comparatively weaker than that of carnivores or omnivores. Also, many herbivorous animals have canine teeth. The canines of *Homo sapiens* are relatively flat and incapable of tearing through tough animal skin, while our jaws grind side-to-side when we chew, like the jaws of herbivorous animals. Upon close inspection, the argument from nature fails.

10. The circle of life argument

Consuming animals is just part of the food chain. It is the circle of life. Everyone who is born must one day die. Life and death are integral to the food chain. It's a symbiotic and harmonious process. Eating animals helps maintain and form ecosystems, ensuring that population sizes are kept in equilibrium.

Reply:

The “circle of life” argument shares similarities to the “natural” argument, except it usually valorizes ecosystems, the “natural order” of things, and biological equilibrium while

diminishing the lives of individual sentient nonhuman beings. The fact is that the overwhelming majority of human practices involving nonhuman food animals has little to do with the so-called “circle of life”. We selectively breed animals, genetically modify them, artificially inseminate and forcibly impregnate them, take their newborns from them, mutilate them, exploit them for what they naturally produce for their own species, and load them onto trucks and take them to slaughterhouses where we hang them upside down, cut their throats, and bleed them to death. These ubiquitous practices have nothing to do with any “natural order” or “circle of life”.

Empirical Arguments Against Veganism

11. What about plants?

Plants are alive. A shift to veganism would mean that we would have to feed the planet with plant foods which would entail more plant deaths.

Reply:

There are two ways to read the plants argument, neither of which is successful. One interpretation of the plants argument assumes that vegans become vegans because they believe that life is in some sense sacrosanct and that killing is wrong. But for a vast majority of vegans, it is not that killing *qua* killing is wrong, but rather that the killing of *sentient beings* is what is wrong. Veganism is not predicated on the belief that life is in and of itself inviolable, but rather that the lives of sentient beings should not be violated. This is why vegans can kill and eat carrots without being morally inconsistent. Being vegan is not about preserving life per se; it's about decreasing the suffering and death of sentient beings.

Another version of the plants argument holds that there is some evidence that plants are sentient (Gagliano, 2018). If true, this fact alone could upend veganism. Or so the argument goes. In reality, our best biology tells us that plants are not in fact conscious or sentient. They lack all the requisite organ systems to be sentient, e.g., a central nervous system, brain, or nociceptors. However, even if it turns out that plants really are sentient, reducing the suffering and death of sentient beings (including plants) would call for a vegan diet since more plants are killed in meat production than in the production of vegan food stuffs. As counterintuitive as that may seem, since the animals we eat are fed plants in the forms of grains, and since they require massive amounts of grains to meet market weight, more plants are required for an omnivorous diet than a vegan one. If plants are sentient and we truly care about the suffering and death of sentient plants, it is better to minimize plant usage by feeding them directly to humans rather than feeding many more plants to animals.

12. The no waste argument

What about Native Americans? They pray to the animals after killing them, and they use every part of the animals' bodies. It isn't wrong for us to kill animals so long as we do so “respectfully” and don't waste any parts.

Reply:

There are many troubling aspects to the no waste argument regarding Native Americans. First, there is no monolithic Native American culture. Second, there is sound physical

evidence that some First Nations peoples did not in fact use “every part” of the animals they hunted and killed. (Brink, 2008) Further, these kinds of portrayals risk proliferating noble savage myths. Third, there is something suspect about appropriating a false image of practices engaged in by another set of cultures and communities to justify one’s own depraved practices in a completely different society, namely, industrialized late capitalist society.

But putting aside those concerns, it makes little sense to the individual animals themselves that we “respect” their bodies after we kill them. Animals don’t care what we do with their bodies after their deaths; they care about staying alive. If we’ve already killed an animal, what we do afterward fails to justify the act in the first place.

13. The land use argument

If we ended animal agriculture, where would the land come from to grow all the new crops we would need? Veganism would lead to an ecological apocalypse.

Reply:

As noted in the reply to the ‘What about plants?’ argument, since a vast majority of plants are grown to feed livestock, a vegan diet requires less, not more, land. (Poore & Nemecek, 2018) Of all diets studied, the carrying capacity of agricultural land is in fact maximized by a vegan diet. (Peters et al., 2016)

14. The food industry collapse argument

If we ended animal agriculture, what would happen to all the food industry workers? Veganism would lead to an economic disaster.

Reply:

A massive switch to a vegan diet would not cause job loss but rather the creation of new kinds of jobs. Gone would be the trauma experienced by slaughterhouse workers as they transition from jobs that involve the killing of helpless animals to jobs in a kinder food production system that does not require such psychologically taxing practices. Further, industry would re-tool, and the ubiquity of plants-based diets would spawn new industries, creating jobs in the plant-based food industry. Currently, plant-based foods are a booming business. For example, U.S. dollar sales of plant-based foods grew 11% in 2019 and 29% since 2018. (SPINS, 2020)

15. The extinction/overpopulation argument

If we stopped eating meat, what would become of all the farm animals? They may go extinct. Or perhaps they would reproduce at numbers that would cause an overpopulation of farmed animals.

Reply:

If everyone went vegan, there would no longer be reason to breed farmed animals and their population numbers would decrease dramatically. Farmed animals like pigs, chickens, and cows could then exist in sanctuaries where they could be properly cared for. In a vegan world, farmed animals would neither go extinct nor overpopulate.

16. The nutritional necessity argument

Animal products are nutritionally necessary to a healthful diet. We need animal protein to grow healthy muscles.

Reply:

The American Dietetic Association, the British Dietetic Association, the British National Health Service, and the Dieticians Association of Australia all agree that well-planned vegan diets are healthful and nutritionally adequate. Additionally, many massively muscled mammals are herbivores, while numerous world-class athletes flourish on a vegan diet. The position of the American Dietetic Association is that vegan diets “may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.” (Melina, Craig, & Levin, 2016, p. 1970) Research links the consumption of animal products with heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes. (Melina et al., 2016) Animal products are neither necessary to nor associated with human health.

17. The argument from vegetarianism

Animals don't die in the production of dairy and eggs, so there is no reason to go completely vegan. Surely being an ovo-lacto vegetarian is enough, especially if you purchase only free-range eggs and organic milk.

Reply:

Being mammals, cows produce milk only when they're pregnant, thus dairy cows are kept constantly pregnant and are artificially inseminated by highly invasive means. Once a cow gives birth, if the calf is male, he is either killed at the farm or sold to the veal industry for meat. If the calf is female, then she, too, will endure the same future as her mother. In either case, calves are taken from their mothers soon after birth, causing great distress to the mother cows and calves. Cows—whose natural lifespan is about 20 years—are bred to produce 26 to 38 liters of milk per day, a volume so demanding that after only about six years, their rate of milk-production wanes and they become unprofitable, at which point they are sent to slaughter. These practices are standard practices whether or not the milk is “organic”. Dairy is literally a byproduct of the meat industry.

Since only hens can lay eggs, female chicks are separated at birth from male chicks, each sent their separate ways on coldly efficient conveyor belts. Considered useless by the industry, male chicks are killed at the hatchery by being macerated alive, drowned, or suffocated. Females are painfully de-beaked and sent off to farms where they will lay more than 300 eggs per year. (Wild hens produce only about 15-20 eggs per year). Once hens stop producing eggs at a profitable rate (at around two years of age), they are sent to slaughter. The natural lifespan of a chicken is about eight years. This process happens on all egg farms, whether or not they are “free-range”. Clearly, vegetarianism directly supports industries that cause great suffering and death to cows and chickens.

18. Causal Impotence

Going vegan doesn't make a difference. Markets like the chicken market are too massive to be sensitive to the purchasing behaviors of any single consumer. An individual consumer's choice to refrain from the purchase or consumption of animal products makes no difference whatsoever in decreasing the number of animals suffering and dying in industrialized production facilities. In this sense, individual consumers are causally impotent and so going vegan does absolutely nothing to decrease animal suffering and death.

Reply:

As a matter of fact, supply chains that connect individual farmers to consumers are surprisingly responsive and reliable. The checkout procedures of large, modern grocery

stores actually track the sale of each product and automatically order replacements from the parent companies. In fact, current information technology allows firms to track sales in detail, down to individual transactions. In addition, these companies track the rates of orders to optimize shipping and refrigeration times and to minimize waste, while large distributors actually know the rates at which chickens are purchased throughout their network. (McMullen & Halteman, 2019) If this is true, then there exists some threshold-decrease point in sales such that when a market reaches this threshold, such an event will, in fact, trigger a reduction in production. (Kagan, 2011) So, it turns out that being vegan actually can make a difference to the number of farmed animals produced or slaughtered.

Further, many vegans influence others who, in turn, influence others, and so on. This kind of role modeling may be understood as a species of the broader phenomenon of *social contagion* in which an action of a particular type makes another action of that type more likely. Thus, veganism can increase the probability that others become vegan, which increases the probability that the collective action of the aggregate more quickly brings about a reduction in the number of animals produced for food and other consumer goods, decreasing animal suffering and death.

19. Animals are killed in crop harvest

More field animals die in crop cultivation and harvest than pasture grazing by cattle. If vegans really cared about reducing harm to animals, they would choose an omnivorous not vegan diet.

Reply:

In a 2003 paper, “animal science” researcher Steven Davis argues that mechanized harvesting kills more animals per hectare than cattle grazing, concluding that if we are truly concerned about causing the least amount of harm to animals, then we are morally obligated to consume a diet containing both plants and ruminant (particularly cattle) animal products. (Davis, 2003) That same year, a thorough and detailed rebuttal by economist Gaverick Matheny exposed the flaws in Davis’s calculations and demonstrated that the average omnivore who eats “ethically raised” pasture-grazed beef causes five times the number of small field animal deaths than the average vegan diet. (Matheny, 2003) Other studies have only bolstered Matheny’s conclusions. (Katkari, 2015) Yet, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the belief that a vegan diet kills more field animals than an omnivorous diet remains tenaciously resistant to falsification in the popular culture.

20. It’s impossible to be vegan

Even if a vegan diet kills less field animals than an omnivorous diet, some field animals will die when harvesting crops that end up as vegan food stuffs. Vegans (like the rest of us) kill insects when they drive, bacteria when they take antibiotics, and harm orangutans through habitat destruction when consuming palm oil, a substance ubiquitous in vegan food products. So, no matter how hard you try, vegan or non-vegan, you can’t escape harming and killing animals.

Reply:

Anyone—including vegans—who believes that abstaining from the consumption of animal products liberates one from complicity in harming other animals is either naive, uninformed, or willfully ignorant. Vegan or not, we cannot live and avoid harming and killing sentient beings. Animal products are found in or used in the production of a great

number of consumer goods including beer, bread, house paint, lipstick, and transmission fluid, to name just a few. However, at its foundation, ethical veganism never was about ethical purity, but rather about *harm reduction*. Donald Watson, founder of The Vegan Society, defined veganism as “a 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.” (emphasis mine). The ‘veganism is impossible’ argument is a straw man. No one ever said that veganism is about total and absolute nonmalfeasance. For these reasons, veganism can be only but an aspiration. Imagining oneself to be otherwise is an illusion. (Gruen & Jones, 2015)

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