

# How Should Vegans Live?

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I look at the significant portion of vegans who are vegan because they care about harm to animals. I investigate what lifestyle is in fact consistent with caring about harm to animals, which I begin by calling consistent veganism. I argue that the lifestyle that consistently follows from this underlying conviction behind many people's veganism is in fact distinct from a vegan lifestyle.



Ethical vegans make a concerted lifestyle choice based on ethical—rather than, say, dietary—concerns. But what are the ethical concerns that lead them to practise veganism? In this essay, I focus exclusively on that significant portion of vegans who believe consuming foods that contain animal products to be wrong *because they care about harm to animals*, perhaps insofar as they have rights, perhaps just because they are sentient beings who can suffer, or perhaps for some other reason.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the essay, I take this conviction as a given, that is, I do not evaluate it, but instead investigate what lifestyle is in fact consistent with caring about harm to animals, which I will begin by calling *consistent veganism*. I argue that the lifestyle that consistently follows from this underlying conviction behind many people's veganism is in fact distinct from a vegan lifestyle.

Let us also begin by interpreting veganism in the way that many vegans—and most who are aware of veganism—would: a vegan consumes a diet containing no animal products. In conceiving of veganism in terms of what a diet *contains*, there seems to be an intuition about the moral relevance of *directness*, according to which it

1. One may interpret 'harm' in different ways. The deontologist can read harm as denoting the violating of rights or snubbing of duties, and consequentialists can interpret 'harm' in terms of the good.

matters how direct the harm caused by the consumption of the food is with regards to the consumption of the food. On this intuition, eating a piece of meat is worse than eating a certain amount of apples grown with pesticides that causes the same amount of harm, because the harm in the first case seems to be more directly related to the consumption of the food than in the second case.<sup>2</sup> Harm from the pesticides seems to be a side-effect of eating the food, whereas the death of the animal for meat seems to be a means to the eating food. Even if we grant this intuition to be a good in this case, it is not good in the case where the harm is greater from the apples than from the meat. To eat the apples in this case is to not put one's care about harm to animals first, which means going against the only thing that should motivate a consistent vegan.<sup>3</sup> Here, our intuition about the amount of harm caused is what seems to matter; if what we care about is harm to animals, then we should cause less rather than more harm to animals, and therefore, from the moral point of view, it seems that it is better to eat the meat than the apples. Let the conviction in this intuition be called the 'less-is-best' thesis. Therefore, the intuition about the directness of the harm is only potentially relevant in situations where one has to choose between alternatives that cause the same amount of harm, or in situations where one does not know which causes more harm. The rest of the time, it seems that consistent vegans should not care about the directness of the harm, but instead care only about causing less rather than more harm to animals. This requires an awareness of harm that extends further than relatively common considerations noted by vegans regarding animal products being used in the production process for—but not being contained in—foodstuffs like alcoholic drinks. Caring about harm to animals means caring about, less directly, accidental harm to (usually very small) animals from the harvesting process, and from products that have a significant carbon footprint, and thereby contribute to (and worsen) climate change, which is already starting to lead to countless deaths and harm to animals worldwide.

However, caring about harm to animals cannot plausibly require consistent vegans to cause no harm at all to animals. If it did, then in light of the last two examples given above, it seems it would require consistent veganism to be a particularly ascetic kind of prehistoric or Robinson Crusoe-type lifestyle, which would clearly be far too demanding. In fact, it is probably the case that one cannot live without

2. Let us assume that the apples and meat are of the same nutritional value to control for any intuitions about preserving one's health.

3. Let us assume, for the sake of simplicity, that caring about harm to animals is the only ethical concern that consistent vegans have.

causing harm to animals due to the trade-off in welfare between other animals who are harmed by one's own consumption, and oneself (an animal) who is harmed if one cannot consume what one needs to survive. But it is definitely the case that all humans could not survive if no harm to other animals could be caused; this means that either human animals or non-human animals will be harmed regardless of how we live. We could not all be morally obligated to live in such a way that we could not in fact all live. Therefore, due to this argument and due to such a lifestyle being over-demanding, there are two sufficient arguments for why causing some harm to animals is morally permissible.

If it is the case that causing some harm to animals is morally permissible, then there is no clear reason why there should be a categorical difference in the moral status of acts—such as impermissibility, permissibility, and obligation—with regards to how they harm animals, apart from when these categorical differences arise only from vast differences in the amount of harm caused by different acts. So, for example, shooting a vast number of animals merely for the pleasure of sport may well be impermissible, but only insofar as it causes a much greater amount of harm than alternative acts that one could reasonably do instead of hunting. It seems that the most reasonable position, then, which is in line with the less-is-best thesis, is that the morality of harm to animals is best viewed on a continuum on which causing less harm to animals is morally better and causing more harm to animals is morally worse, where the difference in morality is linked only to the difference in the amount of harm to animals.

Hitherto, I have said that it seems to be the case that consistent vegans care about causing less rather than more harm to animals. However, I claim that the less-is-best thesis should in fact be interpreted as having a wider application than merely harm *caused by* our actions or life lived. One's care for animals should be further-reaching: rather than merely caring about harm one causes, a consistent vegan should care about acting or living in a way that leads to less rather than more harm to animals. The latter includes a concern about harm caused by others that one can prevent, which the former excludes as it is not harm caused by oneself.

The impact of social interaction on people's lifestyles is an important way in which consistent vegans can act or live in a way that leads to less rather than more harm to animals. That nearly all vegans are in fact vegans because they were previously introduced to vegan ideas by others—rather than coming by them and becoming vegan through sheer introspection—is testimony to the impact of social inter-

action on people's lifestyles, which in turn can be more or less harmful to animals. Consistent vegans have the potential to build a broad social movement that encourages many others to lead lives that cause less harm to animals. But in order to do this, consistent vegans will have to persuade those who do not care about harm to animals (or let care about harm to animals impact their lifestyle) to lead a different kind of lifestyle, and if this recommended lifestyle is too demanding, many will reject it or simply not change, meaning that these people will continue to harm animals. If these people are more likely to make lifestyle changes if the lifestyle suggested to them is less demanding, which for many—and probably a vast majority—will be the case, then consistent vegans could bring about less harm to animals if they try to persuade these people to live lifestyles that optimally satisfy the trade-off between demandingness and personal<sup>4</sup> harm to animals. This lifestyle that consistent vegans should attempt to persuade others to follow I shall call environmentalism.

Why 'environmentalism'? And what is the content of environmentalism? Care about harm to animals can be framed in terms of care for the environment, as the environment is partially—and in a morally important way—constituted by animals. This can be easily—and I believe quite intuitively—communicated to those who do care about harm to animals, and those who do not are likely to be more swayed by arguments that are framed in terms of concern for the environment than for animals; concern for oneself, one's loved ones, and one's species—things that most people care greatly about—may be more easily read into the former than the latter, especially in light of impending climate change. Environmentalism, then, is the set of lifestyles that seek to reduce harm done to the environment (which is conceived in terms of harm to animals for consistent vegans)—as this matters morally for environmentalists—regardless of which sphere of life this reduction of harm comes from. Be it rational or not, ascribing the title and social institution of 'environmentalist' to one's life will, for many, make them more likely to lead a life that is more in line with caring about harm to animals; people often attach themselves to these titles, as the dogmatic behaviour of many vegans shows. Moreover, environmentalism can be practised to a more or less radical—and thus moral—extent. Some may prefer to reduce total harm to animals by a given amount by making the sacrifice of having a vegan diet, but not compromising on their regular car journey to work, or perhaps by

4. 'Personal' here refers to the impact of one's lifestyle on harm to animals apart from the impact on harm to animals one has through affecting others' lifestyles. This impact on others' lifestyles is factored in to the notion of demandingness: the lower the demandingness of the lifestyle suggested, the greater the 'multiplier effect' of take-up of the lifestyle by others.

opting out of what for them may be uncomfortable proselytising, whilst others may find taking on the latter two easier than maintaining the strict vegan diet (that they perhaps used to have). Some may reduce total harm by an even greater amount—and hence lead a morally better lifestyle—by having a vegan diet *and* by refraining from harmful transport *and* by actively suggesting environmentalism to others. As an environmentalist may begin by making very small changes, one can be welcomed into a social movement and be eased in to making further lifestyle changes over time, rather than being put off by the strictness of veganism or the antagonism typical of some vegans. Environmentalism has the great advantage of making it easier for the many who cannot face the idea of never eating animal products again to live more ethically-driven lives.

It follows from all this, then, that consistent vegans should be (especially stringent) environmentalists. For the given impact they have on the total harm to animals, it does not matter if this comes from a totally vegan diet. In fact, to be fixated on dietary purity to the neglect of other spheres of one's life—in the way that many vegans are—is to contradict a care about harms to animals. With this care given, what matters is lowering the level of harm to animals, regardless of how this harm is done.

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