



# **Vegatopia**

## **The future of convenience and compassion in a post-speciesist world**

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### **Introduction**

In this talk, what I want to do is advance a theory of **ethical veganism** that is informed by Foucault's outline of ethics contained in *The Use of Pleasure* (1992: 25-32). By doing so I want to suggest some ways in which ethical veganism is utopian. I should stress that I'm coming from a utopian studies tradition in which utopian thought is conceived of as having a beneficent transformative function, both for society and for the person. I am NOT using 'utopia' as a dismissive, pejorative term.

I'm going to argue that ethical veganism is a mode of relationship with an aspect of the self, mediated through dietary and other practices. The value of veganism viewed in this way is its efficacy in furthering a particular moral value – that of posthumanist (thanks Tom Osborne) and posthuman compassion. By posthumanist I'm flagging up a refusal of any reductionist claims to know the truth of human nature, in order that we might have the opportunity to create our 'natures' in relation to moral values of our choosing. In this case, that centres on a refusal to subscribe to discourses that naturalise the consumption of animal products in such a way as to place that consumption at the centre of what it means to be human. By posthuman I want to signal that that strategic discursive refusal can usefully be extended to nonhuman animals, and that all animals, human and nonhuman, can benefit from a generalisation of the moral value of compassion.



So, what I'm going to do today is address three questions: firstly what is meant by 'veganism', and especially 'ethical veganism'; then briefly outline the ethical framework given by Foucault; then explain how veganism interpreted in light of this relates to the utopian moral value of posthumanist/posthuman compassion. That value, I'm suggesting, is opposed to the some of the dominant values of western culture, which I'm glossing as 'convenience' in this talk. By convenience I mean the drive towards providing the most expedient meeting of what are presumed to be fundamental human needs, and which are therefore immune from moral reflection: fast food and the mechanisation of farming are emblematic of this process. This paper has, as is the nature of these things, mutated a little since its first conception, so I'm not going to spend time talking explicitly about the role of convenience in ecological sustainability discourses – 'green' energy, transport and so on. But what is implicit in what I'm saying is that veganism poses a challenge to convenience wherever it resides – I hope to go back to 'targeting' sustainability discourses another time.

### **What is veganism?**

The UK Vegan Society defines veganism as: 'a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as possible and practical, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose. In dietary terms it refers to the practice of dispensing with all animal produce – including meat, fish, poultry, eggs, animal milks, honey, and their derivatives.' (Toms, 2005: 39).

According to a 2001 Food Standard Agency survey, about 0.4% of the UK population describe themselves as 'vegan' (that translates to about 250,000 people), and about 5% as vegetarian (Vegan Society, 2005: 9). The word 'vegan' was coined by Donald Watson, the founder of the Vegan Society, in 1944 (Watson died last year, aged 95). It takes the beginning and end of the word 'vegetarian', because for Watson, veganism represented a journey – if one starts from the compassionate relationship to other animals that vegetarianism represents, one is led to veganism as the logical conclusion as one recognises the animal suffering

inherent in, for instance, the dairy industry. In other words, veganism acknowledges and asserts that it is impossible to routinely make use of animal products without exploiting, harming and/or killing nonhuman and human animals. I don't want to spend time today debating the distinctions between vegetarianism and veganism, but what I do want to stress is that my argument depends on the view that veganism is a process, not a conclusive and fixed position. This is implied in the Vegan Society definition in fact – 'purity' in terms of not directly or indirectly inflicting *any* suffering is an impossibility. More on this later.

There are a couple of interesting phrases in the definition that I'd also like to flag up: '**seeks to exclude**' and '**practice of dispensing with**'. Both of these suggest that veganism involves discarding societal norms (exploiting animals), and also that it involves divesting oneself of the (by implication) unnecessary corporeal wants for animal products. However, this statement could also be read as an acknowledgement that veganism involves losing something, rather than gaining something. I'll come back to this discursive problem later. For now, this is a good statement of the practical position of vegans, especially in terms of an attitude to consumption, but it doesn't say anything about 'why vegan?'

### **Why vegan?**

Writing on veganism tends to assert that there are two sets of reasons for individuals adopting a vegan lifestyle, and therefore two broad 'camps' of vegans:

- 'Health vegans'
- 'Ethical vegans'

The former, it is argued, are dietary vegans primarily because they believe they will personally benefit:

- Through being protected from various diseases

- From having an increased likelihood of an extended lifespan<sup>1</sup>
- From having an enhanced general sense of well-being

There is an implication, which may or may not be stated, that there is something selfish or flaky about the health vegan, that if they could be persuaded that meat could be made as healthy as a vegan diet, that their veganism would soon collapse.

I think this is a slight misreading of the health vegan position though – it is also an **ethical** position in so far as it asserts the value of living a life that is healthy, i.e. free of debilitating and life-shortening disease as far as is possible, that is, it at least suggests a compassionate attitude towards the self. It is also doubtful whether ‘ethical vegans’ would deny that there are personal health benefits that flow from their lifestyle decisions. However, the limitation with health veganism is that there is no logical reason why it should extend beyond individual diet, in fact it could be counter-productive to the value of veganism in furthering a moral value of compassion if it is narrowly conceived as a turning inward, or as a purely ascetic practice. It is not at all clear how real this distinction is, as there is very little research in this area as far as I can tell. One study seems to suggest that perceived health benefits may be more salient factors for vegetarians not eating meat than they are for vegans not consuming any animal products (Povey et al. 2001: 20). For the latter, an understanding of their diet as ‘humane’ seems to be the most compelling reason for veganism. So:-

### **What is an ‘ethical vegan’?**

The most vivid definition of ethical veganism I’ve found comes from a petition by Jerry Friedman, an IT worker, to the Californian Supreme Court over a case of vegan discrimination in the workplace<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the research evidence does suggest that people following a balanced vegan diet do live longer, and are less prone to various cancers, heart disease, and so on. Not all vegans do benefit from these potential advantages, for a variety of reasons, not least the lack of access to adequate nutritional information. However, the benefits of not consuming animal products in themselves mean that even the nutritionally ignorant vegan is no worse off than the average (informed or ignorant) omnivore in terms of overall mortality, they just tend to die of different things. For more on these issues see Walsh (2003).



‘Ethical Veganism extends beyond trivial dietary preferences. Diet is merely a small part of observing a non-exploitive relationship with the people and animals of this world. Ethical Veganism is a relational lens through which to view the world ... [he goes on to quote and expand on the Vegan Society definition given earlier] ...There is a common ethical principle shared by all Vegans which is a reverence for life and desire to live with, as opposed to depending upon, the other species of the planet.’ (Friedman, cited in Soifer, 2004: 1710).

Continuing my running discursive commentary, I’d just like to draw attention to the phrases ‘**observing a non-exploitive relationship**’ and ‘**desire to live with**’ in Friedman’s petition. Both of these make a moral advance on the Vegan Society definition. The first asserts an alternative norm – a self-conscious non-exploitive relationship in place of a rejection of exploitation as such. The latter does not necessarily involve any form of relationship beyond that of ignoring. The second asserts a positive new desire for inter-species community in place of the earlier simple revolt against the desire for animal products.

Ethical veganism therefore follows in a long tradition of **utopian thought** that is concerned to expose ‘invented needs’ (what William Morris called ‘sham wants’ in *News From Nowhere*) and substitute either the ‘real’ needs that have been hitherto submerged, or assert that ‘needs’ are malleable and can be reforged in more humane forms.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly for my argument, Friedman’s statement suggests that veganism can be about gaining, not losing something, about inventing something and not destroying something. Again, I’ll come back to this when I get on to discussing Foucault’s outline of ethics shortly. Now I want to consider some of the reasons for ethical veganism.

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<sup>2</sup> Friedman had been sacked after refusing a mumps vaccination that had been grown in chicken embryos – his job involved no contact with the public in any capacity. He lost the case due to an idiosyncratic interpretation of what constitutes a ‘religious creed’ by the courts.

<sup>3</sup> My PhD thesis was utopian in this sense: asserting that the human ‘need’ for work was a fiction and that without its dominance we could be free to invent new purposes to our lives.

## Reasons for ethical veganism

There are a number of key arguments and beliefs that are central to ethical veganism, all of which have a long history in ethical vegan thought, and all of which may be present to some degree in a given vegan individual, but with different emphases. I've illustrated some of them here (this is by no means an exhaustive list) with a pithy quote, which I've chosen to illustrate the long history of ethical vegan thought (even though it lacked a name. Even vegetarianism is a modern construct – the UK Vegetarian Society was established in 1847. Hitherto, in deference to his huge influence on the history of vegetarian and vegan philosophy, 'the Pythagorean diet' would have communicated the same sensibility).

- A concern to **minimise as far as possible the harm caused** to nonhuman animals, motivated by a belief that it is wrong to inflict needless suffering. Alcott (1848): 'flesh eating induces moral blindness through dulled sensibility to suffering' (1999: 83). Romain Rolland (1904-1912): 'The continual endeavour of man should be to lessen the sum of suffering and cruelty: this is the first duty of humanity.' (1999: 135).
- A desire to promote and defend '**animal rights**'. For example Peter Singer's discussion of 'interests' argues against making hard and fast human-nonhuman distinctions on the basis of supposed intrinsic differences in capacities (1995). Moore: 'Every being is an end. In other words, every being is to be taken into account in determining the ends of conduct' (1999: 133). Therefore, 'The only consistent attitude... is the attitude of universal gentleness and humanity.' (1999: 134).
- An **anti-Speciesist** belief that human and nonhuman animals share more in common than they differ. Pythagoras argued for 'a fraternal alliance through the community of life' (1999: 15). Anna Kingsford (19<sup>th</sup> century) that 'The essential of true justice is the

sense of solidarity' with all creatures (1999: 112). Mandeville (1723) argued against the 'tyranny of custom' which 'blinds humans to the horrors of butchery by reinforcing the orthodox belief that humans are unquestioningly superior to other species and hence can do with them as they will' (1999: 49).

- An argument that animal exploitation conflicts with **ecological sustainability** for instance through its contribution to global warming, to deforestation, to soil erosion, to desertification, to river and coastal pollution, to declining biodiversity, to fresh water scarcity, and so on. Plutarch put it like this: 'you who live now, what madness, what frenzy drives you to the pollution of shedding blood, you who have such a superfluity of necessities? Why slander the earth by implying that she cannot support you?' (1999: 28). Shelley in 1813 wrote, 'The monopolizing eater of animal flesh would no longer destroy his constitution by devouring an acre at a meal' (1999: 73).
- A belief in the possibility of **eliminating or ameliorating global hunger** through vegan agriculture, which is vastly more efficient than animal farming in terms of the amount of food produced. Jon Wynne-Tyson: 'It is not an oversimplification to say that if we abandoned the grossly wasteful habit of eating our plants via the bodies of animals, there need be no starving people in the world today.' (1999: 233). Lappé (1982) puts it thus: 'one third of all the value of all raw materials consumed for all purposes in the United States is consumed in livestock foods'; 'our livestock consume 10 times the grain that we Americans eat directly and they outweigh the human population of our country four to one.' (1999: 210). Although political problems of distribution remain, the generalisation of compassion that veganism fosters make those political problems more soluble in the utopian imagination.

- A concern for the **brutalising effects on other humans** of their role in animal exploitation. This includes direct impacts on those involved in the slaughter industry (as Schlosser discusses at length in *Fast Food Nation*, 2002), but also more subtle arguments about the **moral damage** caused by consumption of animal products and complicity in their exploitation. Alphonse de Lamartine (19<sup>th</sup> century): ‘these immolations, these sanguinary appetites, this sight of palpitating flesh, are calculated to brutalize the instincts of the heart and make them ferocious’ (1999: 78). Henry Salt (1914) drew attention to the class brutality that overlay the brutality of slaughter, the delegation of cruelty to the lower classes (a tragic irony given the date of this speech): ‘He [the ‘gentleman’] has first employed a slaughterman... to convert a beautiful living creature into a hideous carcase, to be displayed with other carcasses in that ugliest product of civilisation, a butcher’s shop’ (1999: 121-122).
- A belief that it is not ‘natural’ to eat meat and other animal products. As Wynne-Tyson (1979) puts it, ‘The symbiosis that could and should exist between man [*sic*] and his environment depends upon our adoption of a dietary system in keeping with our physiological structure’ (1999: 237), or a denial of the discourse that meat eating is ‘natural’. Porphyry: ‘the human craving for meat and its attendant slaughter of animals is an irrational enslavement to the desire for frivolous pleasure at the expense of sentient creatures’ (1999: 36).

These beliefs are opposed to an analogous set held, perhaps more tacitly, by consumers of animal products, which might include (and again this is by no means exhaustive):

- A belief that eating dead animals and appropriating the products of female animal reproductive cycles – lactation and egg laying – is ‘natural’ for humans. Adams: ‘Since we eat animals – dismembered, not freshly killed, not raw, and with other foods present – what makes it natural?’ (1999: 249).
- A belief that the above is healthy for humans. Note the desperation of adverts even for processed oddities like cheese strings that try to convince us that they are a useful source of calcium for children and are therefore ‘healthy’!
- A belief that nonhuman animal suffering is insignificant. In contrast, Singer argues that ‘all creatures capable of suffering equally deserve moral consideration’ (1999: 165).
- A belief that humans are qualitatively distinct from and superior to all other forms of animal life. Tom Regan (1975) comments: ‘the “intuition of the unique intrinsic worth of being human” would be the last recourse of men [sic] who, having found no good reason to believe that human beings have an unique intrinsic worth, would go on believing that they do anyhow’ (1999: 156).
- A belief that the taste of food is subjective and personal rather than a social construct. In response, Adams asserts that ‘ideological structures redefine the objects of oppression in order to neutralize the possibility of moral condemnation’ (1999: 247).
- A belief that aesthetic judgments of taste are more significant than any moral considerations about food production, or the suffering of human and nonhuman animals involved in its production. Moore’s commentary on this view in 1907 was that humans ‘have become the butchers of the universe’, ‘colossal pedants, proclaiming themselves the pets and specials of creation, and teaching each other that other races are mere things to furnish pasture and pastime for them’ (1999: 129).

I want to argue that the linking theme between all **of the arguments that comprise ethical veganism is compassion**: compassion for human and nonhuman animals and compassion for ‘the planet’. And these are of course inextricably linked. By contrast, the linking theme of beliefs that legitimate the consumption of animal products is one of speciesism with strong tendencies towards hierarchical individualism. It is the relative moral value of each position that interests me, not the rightness or wrongness of particular beliefs. However, seeing as I’m coming from a Foucauldian framework, it should be obvious that questions of what is or isn’t ‘natural’ for humans to eat are especially uninteresting, except for what they reveal about moral discourses that surround food. Either set of beliefs could be analysed with the theoretical framework I’m using today, but today I’m interested in relating some of these aspects of ethical veganism to that framework.

### **Foucault: The ethical fourfold**

Roughly speaking, when I refer to ‘**morality**’ in this paper, I’m thinking about external codes of right conduct, while when referring to ‘**ethics**’ I’m thinking of how one conducts oneself in relation to views of what is right and wrong. So, morality is kind of ‘out there’, perhaps enshrined in laws, sacred texts, rule books, cultural and subcultural norms and so on. What relationship we have with these kinds of resources is what I mean by ethics. Foucault differentiates between morality and ethics thus: ‘in what we call morals, there is the effective behaviour of people, there are the codes, and there is this kind of relationship to oneself... [ethics]’ (1983: 265). In *The Use of Pleasure* (1992: 25-6) Foucault restates this distinction as a sensitivity to the difference between a moral code and the extent to which people actually adhere to that code.

Ethics are analysed by Foucault in terms of a fourfold process, dealing respectively with ‘**ethical substance, mode of subjectivation, ethical work, and telos**’ (Rabinow, 2000: xxvi). I want to briefly sketch now how veganism could be mapped onto this schema. That means that I’m asserting that



veganism exists as a coherent moral doctrine with which one can enter into a relationship. (Of course this is not unique to veganism, it is obviously true of ethical vegetarianism or of other varieties of diet that exclude particular categories of foodstuff).

### **The ethical substance of veganism**

The ethical substance is defined by Foucault as 'the way that the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct [sic]' (1992: 26). For an ethical vegan, I want to argue that this requires a re-evaluation both of corporeal desires and also those symbolic elements of identity that are 'fed' by eating practices. In fact (except for those lucky people who have been raised as lifelong vegans), veganism requires, perhaps for the first time in any thoroughgoing way, a process of reflection on what we eat, how it is produced, who produces it, where it comes from, what it means and so on.

I'm suggesting that for most omnivores most of the time, food is a taken-for-granted fact of life. As Moore put it in 1907, 'Moral practice and understanding... have been *inherited, not reasoned out*' (1999: 127). By that I mean that multiple moral codes are unconsciously resourced every time we eat a meal. There are multiple aspects of the self that are constituted in relation to what we eat and how we eat it. Some of them include our sense of ourselves as pleasure-oriented beings, as gastronomic aesthetes, but also (as Bourdieu pointed out in *Distinction*, 1998) as having particular identities of class or gender and so on. What we eat is always a moral issue – that is, there are moral codes about what it is and isn't right for 'a person like us' to consume, but these moral issues tend to be obscured by sedimented layers of tradition and the historical reproduction of culture and identity. This means that they are substantially unavailable for critical thought, and therefore for resistance as well – they seem 'natural'.

To dwell on the gender issue for a moment, Carol Adams points to the mythic equation of a form of patriarchal masculinity and meat consumption:



'[M]en are strong, men need to be strong, thus men need meat. The literal evocation of male power is found in meat.' (2004: 43). Unfortunately, and in the face of the evidence, this belief persists and is endlessly reproduced in discourses about red-blooded masculinity, in the effeminacy of eating vegetables and so on. For more on this, I can't recommend Adams' book highly enough (*The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 2004). It is a tour de force exposé of the intimate connections between meat-eating, patriarchy and racism – superior beings (white middle class European men) eat a lot of dead animals, inferior beings (non-white working-class female colonized) eat plants.

Given an awareness of the historical and persistent relationship between meat eating and male domination, veganism is an opportunity to literally incorporate **resistance to patriarchy** through one's decisions about what to eat – refusing meat is in some ways refusing a patriarchal version of masculinity. Curtin argues that veganism amongst men can be a mark of feminist solidarity, and a 'determination to resist ideological pressures to become a "real man"' (1999: 245).

Veganism also **challenges taken for granted bodily pleasures and aesthetic judgements of taste**. Confrontation with the brutal realities of the industrialized insemination, confinement, torture, slaughter and dismemberment of nonhuman animals forces one to make conscious decisions about whether the products of that process still taste good, or whether they stick in the throat. Meat eating is therefore illuminated as a moral choice by a moral discourse of veganism. From a vegan perspective, using animal products involves the **consumption of the products of violence**, and therefore of complicity with violence. Curtin argues from an ecofeminist perspective that, in opposition to the tradition of Cartesian mind-body dualism, 'one's body is oneself, and that by inflicting violence needlessly, one's bodily self becomes a context for violence' (1999: 244). Veganism demands that compassion become an integral part of our decisions about what we eat. In other words, questions of taste and aesthetics

become explicitly moralized, they lose their apparent sovereignty and separation from moral thought.

In practice, veganism can be a great liberator of aesthetic and bodily pleasures through eating. Veganism is, still, **inconvenient** in relation to omnivorous or vegetarian diets, in other words you are forced to become a pretty good cook because you can't rely on widely available convenience food in supermarkets, fast-food chains and other restaurants. The result can be the opening up of a whole new world of gustatory pleasures that tend to be obscured in what Schlosser famously termed the *Fast Food Nations* of the west.

In summary, a moral discourse of veganism demands that issues of taste and identity in relation to food become explicitly moralised, aspects of self that were taken for granted become made available for ethical reflection. Hitherto 'innocent' pleasures of eating become problematic, but problematic in ways that enhance our capacity to extend an attitude of compassion beyond what is usual.

### **The mode of ethical relationship towards veganism**

The second part of the ethical fourfold is glossed by Rabinow as 'self-stylization or form giving' (2000: xxx), and is described by Foucault as 'the way in which an individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it into practice' (1992: 27).

Friedman's definition of ethical veganism discussed earlier gives us an example of one such 'relation to the rule' – one of **establishing compassionate inter-species relationships**. As Adams writes, many people are led towards veganism through a direct experience of a transformative relationship with another animal. This seems to be what's happened to Derrida in his reflections on his cat for instance (2002). But the extension of compassion to nonhuman animals need not be derived from this kind of direct experience of course. My own experience was the other way around, beginning from compassion towards other humans and recognizing the incompatibility of justifying my own consumption of animal products with a desire to not cause

needless suffering to other people. I think that this stimulus to my compassionate sensibilities has facilitated a subsequent growth of compassion towards nonhuman animals which I didn't have before.

Whatever the biographical route, this kind of recognition of the moral component of relationships with nonhuman animals can be generalized as an obligation to refrain as far as possible from direct or indirect complicity with *uncompassionate* relations with nonhuman animals, and beyond that to actively foster compassionate relationships with nonhuman animals. So, by relating those aspects of self that are concerned with food – our sense of experiencing corporeal and aesthetic enjoyment from consumption – to an interest in minimizing suffering, veganism, once again, more thoroughly moralizes our behaviour.

This imperative to **reflect on our relationships** with other animals once again illuminates what is forgotten or repressed about the relationship that consuming animal products engenders with nonhuman animals. Every meal that includes animal products is also an example of an interaction with a nonhuman animal, an interaction characterized by absolute domination, of a paradox of absolute intimacy and absolute distance. Think about the symbolic importance of the fork. Whoever holds the fork in hand controls the meal of her/his choice. The implement facilitates the further dismemberment of muscle tissue, internal organs, subcutaneous fat, skin, cartilage, bone and so on. The fork is the implement that compensates for the fact that most dead animals are not easily consumed by human beings. Before they become edible and palatable to humans most animals have to be subjected to a number of processes that transform them into 'food' that is susceptible to the power of the fork (As Shelley put it, 'It is only by softening and disguising dead flesh by culinary preparation, that it is rendered susceptible of mastication or digestion' (1999: 69)): killing, draining of blood, dismemberment, the application of heat, immersion in boiling water, the addition of innumerable plant and mineral materials to alter the flavour and aroma of the corpse. Even prior to these processes, the corpses are already the outcome of centuries of genetic manipulation, altered diets and rearing practices,

and not least discursive construction as ‘food animals’ in distinction to ‘wild’ or ‘pet’ animals. Schleifer argues that ‘Domestication itself is an unnatural process, a method of enslaving animals and subjecting their life processes to our will.’ (1999: 230). What an enormous effort of human imagination and civilization has been necessary to get a turkey twizzler onto a plate. No wonder then that animal products enjoy the status of the food of the dominators and simple plants are the food of the subjugated primitive. Where is the art in plucking an apple from a tree and eating it? It is barbaric is it not?

This rhetoric is indicative of a way of relating to veganism as a moral discourse – it makes hitherto mundane realities of food production and consumption suddenly appear shocking and revolting to a generalized compassionate sensibility. That is, **what are commonly taken to be aesthetic issues are revealed as moral choices**, but substantially moral choices that have already been made for us, by our meat eating culture, our parents, our catering industry, our meat and dairy advertising industry and its attendant lobbyists on ‘nutrition’ and health. Aesthetics is a mask for a hidden morality. This mode of relating to the moral discourse of veganism therefore invites behavioural changes that we can describe as ‘ethical practice’, as opposed to a more passive immersion in a hidden, sedimented, moral discourse of the ‘naturalness’ of animal consumption.

### **Veganism as ethical practice**

What Foucault calls ‘ethical work’, is termed ‘critical activity’ by Rabinow (2000: xxxiii). As the last section showed, a relationship between aspects of self and veganism demands criticism of previously taken for granted behaviour and beliefs. Foucault discusses ‘the work that one performs to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour’ and asks ‘What are the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects?’ (1992: 26).

Being a vegan demands some pretty obvious work, in terms of **relearning how to shop for food**, how to cook, educating oneself about nutrition, being more thoughtful about organizing one's time so that you can prepare food for the day ahead given the lack of available 'convenience food', developing patience in supermarkets so that you can scan ingredients lists of breakfast cereals or packets of biscuits and so on. I don't want to minimize the work involved in these practices – they are after all what make a lot of people shy away from veganism as 'too difficult'. Again, I'd make to point out that, not only is it pretty easy when we get into the habit, but also that they can be liberating practices in that they can set you free from depending on what an anonymous manufacturer or caterer has decided should be available – typically a very narrow range of dull options. As Goldsmith put it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, once free of the ossification of taste brought on by eating animals, we can 'distinguish every element with the utmost precision; a stream untested before is new luxury, a change of air is a new banquet, too refined for Western imaginations to conceive' (1999: 62).

There are also interesting questions raised here about the compatibility of any ethic that is demanding of one's time in a long-hours work culture in which all bodily functions are to be ministered to with the utmost of **convenience** and the minimum of thought. But beyond these issues of how in practice to sustain being a vegan in a non-vegan environment, there are vexed questions about **how to relate to non-vegans**:

- How to respond to the inevitable questions, jokes, and in some cases downright hostility that you will experience?
- How to cope with changing relationships with family, partners and friends, especially given the challenge to the central role of food as symbolic of nurturing (and compassionate) relationships between humans?

- To what extent is one obligated to proselytize veganism? To what extent is one obligated to keep quiet when the consumption practices of others are morally offensive?
- To what extent is one obligated to be a 'good representative' of veganism?

Sadly I don't have easy answers to any of these questions, but again, the value of them is that, in common with many other marginal moral standpoints, they all give pause for reflection and re-evaluation of what is typically taken for granted. They are also questions that one re-confronts every day, which means that the moral value of relating compassionately to others is always at the forefront of one's thinking. For instance, a tricky path is negotiated in tempering or channeling the inevitable sense of outrage that rises every time one confronts an anthropomorphic billboard or TV advert for some or other dairy product fronted by an all-singing all-dancing cartoon cow. The fact that these examples of ethical work become ceaseless, everyday features of vegan experience is important in considering the telos of ethical veganism.

### **The telos of ethical veganism**

Last is the 'telos' of ethics (Rabinow, 2000: xxxviii), the valued end result to be achieved through ethical work. As Foucault describes it, 'a moral action... aims... to the establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual... to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject' (1992: 28). However, the word telos is a bit misleading, in that it shouldn't preclude ethics being a matter of process rather than the achievement of moral perfection. As Foucault himself puts it:

...self-formation as an "ethical subject"... [is] a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself [*sic*] (1992: 28).

I want to argue that ethical veganism is a process, not a conclusive and fixed position. For instance, I'm perpetually 'veganising' myself, and that process will only stop when I'm dead. The mode of being that is the vegan moral goal is unachievable in practice.

However, there is a value to viewing veganism as a form of identity politics: self-defining as a vegan does usually entail some estrangement from the norms of our culture, but also in many cases from family and friends who find it difficult to cope with or to understand, and therefore having a well defined vegan community, including having online resources, clubs and organisations to be a part of, as well as personal relationships with other vegans, are all invaluable sustaining resources for a lot of vegans. As Benjamin Zephaniah puts it: 'Being a vegan in school made me feel quite special even though it was difficult sometimes, but I did feel as if I belonged to a very special tribe, a tribe that was not defined by colour, race, nationality, or religion' (2002: 12). But there are some obvious dangers (all of which Zephaniah avoids I should point out!) of policing the boundaries of a tribal veganism with holier than thou attitudes to non-vegans, of adopting an attitude of moral superiority, and ultimately of using that claim to moral superiority as a legitimisation for oppositional activities that allow vegans to be demonised and marginalised. I think the current hostile atmosphere towards animal rights activists has been fed by these kinds of actions, most famously the recent grave-robbing case.

More broadly, the value of generalised compassion that I've been arguing is central to ethical veganism is ill-served by setting up veganism as an exclusive club. An ethic of veganisation is more hospitable, and more compassionate to those who may struggle with hostile attitudes, with entrenched habits and so on, but whose compassionate sensibilities have been aroused by contact with a moral discourse of veganism. Recognising that vegan purity is unobtainable is also a valuable ward against lapsing into moral complacency. If societal norms (patriarchy, racism, ageism, homophobia and so on) are all characterised by, among other things, a lack of compassion, then ethical veganism, if it does indeed

generalise compassion, makes reproducing these ways of thinking and being much more difficult. Not only does it become a glaring inconsistency to personally hold some or other uncompassionate prejudice when one is an ethical vegan, but it also provides a motivation, perhaps an obligation, to challenge other sites where compassion is sacrificed.

## Conclusion

I started out by asserting that utopian thought is about personal and societal transformation, the process of imagining and working towards bringing into being a better future. When considering veganism as utopian, it is crucial that it has the characteristic of an *ongoing process*. This prevents the habitual anti-utopian argument being made that the utopian is incapable of 'pleasing everybody'. Veganism imagines people transformed into more compassionate beings, and can and does, I believe, transform those that make an ethical commitment to it.

There is a more persuasive charge against a view of utopia as process – that this avoids the necessity to ever fully describe and detail where it is we are trying to get to in our transformative practices. A Foucauldian response might be that utopia is in any case unimaginable, or indescribable, and to attempt to imagine a post-speciesist society from our speciesist position would in itself be doing violence to the unknowable capacities of imagination that can and will be fostered by the ongoing process of veganisation.

However, I have been asserting throughout this paper, sometimes tacitly, that the generalising of compassion that is at the centre of ethical veganism is in opposition to a dominant value of convenience. In fact, it negates convenience when convenience is interpreted as the marginalisation of moral considerations, of pause for thought and reflection, as being too time consuming. Harriet Schleifer (1985) argues that 'meat has become a symbol for status... it is universally related to wealth, and its absence from the diet is regarded as voluntary or involuntary privation' (1999: 224). Ethical veganism contains the



challenge that eating meat (and other animal products) is moral privation, a stunting of compassionate sensibilities, a form of ethical impoverishment. The enhancement of practical culinary skills that often accompanies veganism also offers the promise of an enhancement of sensual pleasures of consumption, in contradistinction to the bland monolith of fast food giants and processed convenience food.

I have been slightly dodging the utopian challenge here though – I do want to end, not with abstract arguments about morality, but with a concrete image of how moral choices might transform our landscapes, something that we can all picture, a glimpse of **Vegatopia** that I hope some of you find as attractive as I do:

‘What is required is a change from traditional agriculture to intensive horticulture, with careful composting of all wastes with plant materials to keep the land in good heart without animal manure or artificial fertilizers. The landscape of a vegan world would show small fields of cereals, fruits, vegetables and compost-producing plants surrounded by shelter-belts of fruit and nut-bearing trees. Hill slopes and other areas unsuitable for cultivation would be used for trees of all types, as a renewable source of fuel and raw material for many purposes, as well as for their function in maintaining the environment. One-sixth to one-third of an acre per head would be required for the vegan diet. Even in densely populated England, which has nearly an acre for each inhabitant, wide areas would be left for wild life and recreation.’  
(The Vegan Society, cited in Wynne-Tyson, 1999: 238).

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