

Dear Leftist Critics of Veganism

Veganism is Not Ableist or Classist

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The discourse surrounding veganism and nonhuman animal rights issues, particularly in social media and other online spaces, often elicits impassioned and intense debate. Though there are far fewer vegans than nonvegans in these spaces (and throughout the world), veganism itself has made its way into the mainstream in recent years.

Possibly in response to this perceived acceptance and push for more rights and acknowledgment for nonhuman animals in society, a vocal majority of nonvegans commonly attempts to counteract the growing vocal minority of vegans using many different arguments at their disposal.

One of the most prevalent criticisms of veganism by Leftists, and the criticism that will be the focus in this article, is that they believe veganism is ableist, classist, and/or inaccessible to many people. This argument is extremely powerful because it makes the claim that veganism is not the “best” option for most people in this society as some people would not be able to take part due to disabilities, poverty, and/or access to health and lifestyle necessities. But, does veganism really prevent and exclude people this way? Does this particular claim accurately represent veganism?

One of the most interesting and infuriating aspects of my advocacy involving veganism and Leftist politics, including the advocacy I do on the Facebook page that I manage, Veganarchist Memes: Breaking Leftist Speciesism, is that so much of the pushback I see against veganism and nonhuman animal liberation is from other Leftists — socialists, communists, progressives, and even anarchists.

There are varying degrees of similarity and difference between these groups, but many of them can, at the very least, agree that they are fighting against oppression — whether it is classism, racism, sexism, transphobia, ageism, ableism, or a combination of all of these forms of oppression and others.

Leftists are in a constant fight against worldwide systemic and individual oppression in many different forms — so, why is it that so many Leftists reject such an idea as having an ethical obligation to end the oppression of nonhuman animals by avoiding using and exploiting them unnecessarily?

The counterarguments to veganism can be discursive in nature and range from topics that include health concerns of plant-based diets, the science involved in nonhuman animal consciousness, how nonhuman animal issues are to be situated within and alongside other social justice

struggles, and many others. But, one of the most common arguments used by Leftists is that veganism is “ableist and classist.” And to many of the Leftists making this argument, any kind of theory or praxis that is both against systemic human oppression and that would also envision a world in which nonhuman animals are liberated from human control stops dead.

For these critics of veganism, addressing disability rights and poverty must take precedence over concerns for nonhuman animals because they insist that ability and class can be barriers to veganism, thus making veganism a privilege for people who do not face those types of obstacles. However, fighting against the oppression of humans and nonhuman animals does not have to be mutually exclusive. This notion of veganism being exclusive and privileged is a misunderstanding of the fundamentals and nuances that have always been at the roots of veganism.

One important misunderstanding that is featured prominently in the media and that is propagated by many nonvegans and vegans alike is the conflation of “veganism” and a “plant-based diet.” A plant-based diet, simply meaning a diet mostly or completely comprised of plants, is not necessarily a stance on social justice of any form; plant-based dieters often adopt such a diet for a variety of reasons, ranging from concerns about nonhuman animal welfare, to health, and to the environmental impacts of diets that rely heavily on the consumption of nonhuman animals.

Make no mistake, though: veganism does entail, among many other things, alterations to and a critical look at food production and consumption. But, veganism also involves much more than just what people consume — wearing alternatives to wool, leather, and silk; not participating in or attending forms of “entertainment” that involve nonhuman animal use, such as rodeos, zoos, aquariums, dogfights, etc.; and being against nonhuman animal experimentation.

The official definition by The Vegan Society (the first official vegan society in the world) defines 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.”

Unfortunately, the part of that definition that many Leftists latch onto in order to criticize veganism as “ableist and classist” is the avoidance of nonhuman animals for food and clothing because, to them, that leaves out people that potentially have disabilities or are struggling under poverty that may prevent them from thriving on or affording a completely plant-based diet.

This criticism would be well founded if veganism inherently prevented some disabled or poor people from being in the community. The vegan community is diverse and has some extremely problematic groups within it, and there are other groups and individuals within veganism that do not hold this exclusionary view.

It is important to also look within the definition of veganism by The Vegan Society to find a critical phrase that can shine light on the error of the principal criticism of veganism by many Leftists: the phrase “...as far as is possible and practicable...” This small but important aspect of the definition shows how flexible and nuanced the concept of veganism is to the real world differences between individual humans.

Even during some of the initial talks and meetings by The Vegan Society as early as 1951, membership in the organization included the acknowledgment,

“Membership in the society is available to all who wish to see the object achieved and who undertake to live as closely to the ideal as personal circumstances permit (emphasis added) [...] The door is thus widely opened, and the Society welcomes all who feel able to support it.”

So, while on the surface of public debate over veganism's usefulness and necessity, it may be interpreted by nonvegans and also many vegans that veganism is a rigid philosophy that ignores the inequalities and differences among humans. However, it is clear that the history and development of veganism have kept the movement open and inclusive to anyone that desires and seeks the liberation of nonhuman animals from human domination and subjugation.

The "desert island" scenario is used often against vegans as a "Gotcha!" counterargument, by which a vegan is posed with the question, "Well, if you were stranded on a desert island, with no vegan food, would you eat animals?" It should be obvious after reading the definition of veganism that the "desert island" scenario would be included in the phrase "as far as is possible and practicable."

If a person genuinely has no choice in their survival, besides consuming nonhuman animals, then they have a moral "excuse." In other words, it should not be considered akin to wanton abuse and cruelty to consume "products" made from nonhuman animals when there are no other options.

This "desert island" scenario and its resultant necessities can easily be paralleled to similar "survival" situations, such as when people must take certain medications that contain nonhuman animal "products" like gelatin and use nonhuman animal experimentation in their research, as well as in situations outside of some people's control wherein a particular disability or lack of access or funds would prevent a person from thriving on a completely plant-based diet.

All vegans do not hold this view, but it is a view that many Leftist vegans share because of an understanding of the complex, interweaving history of both human and nonhuman animal oppressions, as well as the belief in the necessity of dismantling and replacing capitalism because of its inherent effect of further marginalizing vulnerable groups (human and nonhuman animal).

As a final point, it is crucial to understand that ethical guidelines contain an understood formula of "ought implies can" — in other words, no one has an ethical obligation to do something that they cannot do. It is unreasonable to expect people to carry out and adhere to ethical behaviors if it is beyond their capabilities to do so.

With regard to veganism, this formula certainly applies to those people that cannot afford, access, or thrive on a fully plant-based diet. It does not, however, exempt those people from every obligation to nonhuman animals; only the practices and behaviors that they genuinely cannot survive without.

It should now be abundantly clear that the widespread concept from Leftists about veganism being inherently "ableist and classist" is a misinterpretation of the obligations of vegan ideas. To fully understand and capture the concepts of veganism, one must authentically appreciate the nuances and diversity of opinions within such a broad community.

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