

Beyond Hatred

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Is being vegan hard?

It is a question which we are all, I'm sure, asked on a fairly regular basis, generally by people who cannot conceive of a meal unaccompanied by a lump of burned flesh. And indeed it is one which, if you are anything like me, you ask of yourself from time to time.

From a practical perspective, the answer must surely be no. Food, clothing, household products, all can be purchased easily enough, if not from the supermarket then from health food shops and online stores selling everything from staples to snacks. Of course, there is also the matter of will power. Meat tastes good, or at least, I remember it doing so, and I still dream on occasion of bacon, whilst my wife has been known to drool at the scent of stilton. But all it takes is a moment's consideration as to the origin of these foods, and the prospect of eating them becomes simply unthinkable. So even here, the answer is no, it isn't hard to be vegan.

And yet despite this, despite the practicalities of veganism being easy enough to overcome, for me I would still have to answer that yes, being a vegan is hard. And it is hard not because of the need to avoid animal products, but because of other people who are not vegan. Bluntly put, it is hard for me not to hate non-vegans.

Like most of us, I think, I became vegan in order to attempt to reduce the suffering of animals. And as an animal suffers no matter who kills it or tortures it for its produce, then it is just as bad for someone else to consume meat or animal products as it is for me to do so. Given which, how then to deal with the fact that friends and family, neighbours and work colleagues, indeed nearly everyone I know, thinks nothing – often quite literally – of causing animals to suffer? If I feel so strongly that it is wrong, how to not condemn them for this, how not to hate them?

There is a Christian adage that urges us to hate the sin but love the sinner. And perhaps one should seek to follow this advice. But if the sinner knowingly, deliberately, repeatedly, sins, if what is so important to us – the welfare of other animals – matters nothing to them, then how can one feel love for them? And whilst for Christians there may be the comfort, if that is the right word, of knowing that in the end the sinner will be called to account for their actions, for atheists and agnostics that comfort is denied us. And even for those who do believe in some kind of divine justice, that does not alter the fact that the animals have still suffered.

Yet if it is understandable to feel this hatred, justifiable even, it cannot, surely, be good for us to do so. Granted, anger might get me out of bed at some unholy hour of the morning to attend a lecture on animal rights, or provide me with impetus enough to write letters and sign petitions of an evening instead of watching television. But as forms of motivations go, anger and hate are hardly the most healthy.

So what is the alternative? How to forgive when forgiveness is not sought; how not to hate? This is something I must admit to having struggled with for some time. But I begin to wonder if the answer might not lie in what, for many of us, is central to why we became vegan in the first place: our empathy for other animals, our understanding that they are like us, that they feel and they suffer like us. But animals of other species kill, and not always just for food. (Indeed, animals of other species steal, deceive, bully, rape, and do many things that we might find unacceptable.) Yet we forgive them this, or rather, we do not even think that their actions require forgiveness. And if we do not hate them, why do we hate people for doing the same things?

Because people are not governed by instincts. Because people have the freedom to decide not to kill, to decide not to cause suffering. Well, yes, ostensibly, since after all, we as vegans have all chosen to do just that. But with so much pressure on people to eat meat and consume animal products, pressure consciously and unconsciously applied by society and by tradition and by our own inherited instincts, can people always be said to have that freedom? Is it not possible to argue instead that if a person really is free not to eat animal products, which is to say in other words that if they can not only see it is wrong to do so but also possess sufficient strength of will to act upon that belief, then they will by definition do so, for if they do not then they do not in fact have that required freedom and empathy and will? In which case are those people who are not vegan in fact no more to blame, though no less to blame, than other animals who kill? Is it not to apply dual standards to excuse an animal for acting according to its instincts – both genetically and culturally acquired – but not a human? And if so, and we do not hate the animal, how can we then hate the man?

Which is not to say, I hasten to add, that we should consider it acceptable for people to eat meat and animal products, or that we should not continue to try and persuade them to become vegan, to work towards a vegan society and world. But rather it is to acknowledge that what we are doing is in fact seeking to alter the environment and instincts that influence and indeed cause them to eat animal products. To resort to another Christian saying, we must forgive them, for they know not what they do.

So is it easy to be vegan? No. But with enough work, enough perseverance, enough time spent trying to educate others, I hope that it might one day become so. And replying to the tired old question yet again the next time someone asks, well, that's as good a place to start as any.