

## So You Think You're Vegan?!

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Most people know what veganism is. Even my dictionary knows: a vegan is 'a person who does not eat or use animal products' (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

And yet, put a group of vegans in the same room, and sooner or later a discussion will begin about what it means to be a vegan. Are you a vegan if you still wear your old leather belt? Are you a vegan if you eat eggs that your rescue hens have laid? What if you eat a meal a friend has carefully prepared thinking that it is vegan, but which you discover contains honey? Are you a vegan if you took medicine containing an animal product when you were ill?

A strict vegan will be quick to say no. Vegans do not eat or use animal products, so if you do so, you are not a vegan. End of story. But if this is the case then it raises the question, who is a vegan? Is there really anyone out there who has not, at one time or another, knowingly or accidentally, used or consumed an animal product? I doubt it. The sad truth is that it is simply not possible to live in a modern Western society as a perfect vegan. So does this mean that there are no vegans on this planet?

Of course not.

Let us turn instead to the Vegan Society's definition of veganism:

'Veganism may be defined 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.'

There are, I believe, two things that are very important to note in this definition.

Firstly, it accepts that it is not possible to avoid animal products entirely. Veganism 'seeks to exclude': it is an attempt to exclude animal products, it is not the act of flawlessly doing so. It wasn't possible to avoid animal products entirely when the vegan movement began, and it isn't now. So if, on occasion, we find that we have consumed something containing an animal product, or need to take a medicine containing an animal product, this is no reason to give in to feelings of guilt, or consider ourselves no longer a vegan as a result.

And secondly, the definition places emphasis not on dogmatic adherence to the avoidance of all animal products for its own sake, but in order to avoid exploitation of animals. And it is this aim of avoiding exploitation of animals that is of primary importance. Of course, most of the time, the way in which we can best avoid animals being exploited for our benefit is to avoid animal products. But consider again one of the examples I gave at the start of this article: A friend, knowing that you are vegan, spends time and effort preparing what they think is a vegan meal for a dinner party. Unfortunately, it contains honey, which they had not realised was not vegan.

So you have two options available to you. You can refuse to eat the meal, thereby maintaining your veganism. All right, so you offend your friend, leaving them with the impression that vegans are ungrateful and fanatical, and of the opinion that they won't bother making the effort in future. Or you can thank them for their thoughtfulness, eat the meal in the knowledge that everyone else is enjoying a virtually vegan meal whereas, had you not have been present, they would have been eating meat, and perhaps, if the opportunity arises, point out that honey is not actually strictly

vegan, opening up the opportunity to talk about veganism to people who might not otherwise have considered it.

Personally, I know which option would seem to most 'reduce the exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals'.

Similar reasoning, with the emphasis on minimising cruelty to animals, can be applied to the other examples I mentioned. Personally I would probably not eat an egg laid by a rescue hen, since to do so would promote the idea that it is acceptable to eat eggs, which in general causes harm to animals. And similarly, I would not wear even a second-hand leather belt as it promotes the idea that it is acceptable to wear leather. But I am aware that there are reasonable counter-arguments which say that is better to eat the egg than let it go to waste, and it is better for people to use old leather products than throw them away. However, although there is not always an easy answer, what is clear is that if, in these instances, through your decision you are attempting to 'reduce the exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals', you are acting as a vegan.

Veganism is an attempt to minimise animal cruelty through avoiding animal products. It is not possible to always avoid all animal products, and there may even be circumstances where one could argue that it is better not to do so. But in my opinion that does not mean that if one does, knowingly or accidentally, occasionally use an animal product, then one is no longer a vegan. I think an appropriate analogy can be found through comparison to religion. A person may still call themselves a Christian even if, on occasion, they sin. And a person is still a vegan if, on occasion, circumstances force them to consume an animal product.

For in the final reckoning, the root of veganism lies not in avoiding of animal products: that is simply a result of veganism. The essence of veganism is the attempt to 'reduce the exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals'. That is what is important.

*Note: This article considers veganism to be synonymous with ethical veganism. I am aware that there are those who are vegan only for health reasons, and for those people, other definitions of veganism might be held as being of paramount importance.*