

VEGANISM AND BETRAYAL

di Silvia Caprioglio Panizza

University of Pardubice/University College Dublin

silvia.capriogliopanizza@ucd.ie - silvia.capriogliopanizza@upce.cz

One of the most common, and most obvious, reasons for ethical veganism is to save animal lives and reduce suffering. This reason is based on broadly consequentialist thinking: animal consumption causes suffering and death; reducing the demand will reduce the number of animals bred and raised for exploitation and slaughter.

There are well known intermediaries along this causal chain, as the great majority of consumers of animal products rely on others to bring the animal, their parts or products, to their table. On a large market, this means that a single vegan will make a very small difference to the scale of production. Vegans therefore rely on a critical mass, actual and hoped for, to achieve the practical outcome of reducing suffering and death. Even just one animal spared (meaning not brought into the world to be used and killed throughout her short life) is a significant achievement, for each animal brought into the world in this way loses everything.

But there are cases in which even the contribution of a larger group cannot achieve this aim, and these are the situations in which justifications for a vegan diet – for it is still and typically the case that it is the vegan who is called to justify her practice, presumably because of her divergence from the norm – take a different and not fully explored turn. These are situations in which whether one consumes or not the steak, cheese, or egg in question will not have any impact whatsoever on the production or any existing animal. Someone is about to throw away a piece of cheese, for instance, and offers it to you. Eating it will make no practical difference, in fact, it will reduce waste of what is, biologically at least, an edible item. Consequentialist considerations about saving a life do not work here.

One answer can be that refusing to eat animal products, even without any expected short-term consequence for the animal, can signal to others the existence of a different way of living alongside animals, one where we do not consider them and the products of their bodies,

something to eat. It can also have the practical effect of a protest, to show others that not everyone considers widespread consumer practices to be just ‘the norm’. This may be true, and it may, in some cases, achieve the desired effect, perhaps even increasing the number of vegans. But let’s push the example further, and say there is no one around. Will you eat that piece of cheese?

Based on considerations about the consequences, some have argued in favour of ‘freeganism’, the practice of eating anything as long as one is not paying for it, therefore not fuelling the animal production market. Even from a consequentialist perspective, this merely economic argument forgets about the impact one can have on others by maintaining a consistent lifestyle. But this rebuttal does not capture what is odd about the practice of freeganism. What is odd about the freegan solution is not only that it does have consequences, but that people who refuse to consume animals by objecting to their reification and death, a refusal in turn based on the value of those animals, would agree to put the products of animals’ suffering and death into their mouths.

To be true, the cases where veganism has no impact at all outside of the one practicing it are rare, but it can be illuminating to reflect on them to bring out something more general about veganism and its relation to animal value.

One possible way to explain the reasons for sticking to vegan practices in cases where they make little or no material difference is appeal to virtue. Philosophers like Carlo Alvaro (2019) have proposed that being vegan means practicing a set of virtues. From this, we can derive the idea that refusing to eat a piece of animal product (or wear it, as clothing or cosmetic, or utilize it in similar ways) is based on the individual’s sense of integrity. The explanation, so far, is not fully satisfying. While virtues are traits that belong to us, they are based on patterns of behaviour, feeling, and thinking that are good for something in the world. What is the integrity of the vegan, in this case, based on?

I want to suggest a reason for not taking part in the consumption of animals which, besides explaining these marginal cases, extends further and in fact contributes to the larger reason for veganism as such. The reason for not consuming animal products, regardless of the magnitude of the impact, is that doing so would be a betrayal: a betrayal of the animal who had to endure physical and mental pain, or whose life was untimely ended, for making said ‘product’.

Now the concept of betrayal is more typically invoked in relation to trust, as Steven Cooke (2019) does in arguing that we betray animals by establishing a relationship with them and then

leading them to slaughter. That kind of betrayal is based upon mutuality, on a trust that is built together and then broken by one party. The betrayal I have in mind requires no mutual relationship. And yet I still want to claim both that it is a betrayal, and that it is a betrayal not so much of ourselves but *of them* – of her, or him, of that specific individual, or group of individuals, whose lives ended in the production of this piece of cheese. The concept holds even though in such cases we normally do not know these individuals in their particularity. I don't know if the cow who produced the milk that went into this cheese had a black spot on her chest or how swollen her udder was; if the calf that was taken from her cried loudly or was shaking at the moment of separation; if he was very scared or allowed himself to be handled trustingly; I don't know exactly how old the cow was when it was decided she was 'spent' and then sent to slaughter, whether she was 4.5, 5 or 6 years old. I know there was a cow more or less like that, a calf more or less like that, who went through something like that, and that's enough.

I am, it seems, invoking a concept of betrayal that looks very different from the one philosophers usually employ. It lacks mutuality, it lacks trust, and it lacks specificity. It's not a betrayal of some commitment, but a betrayal of someone. The someone may be an individual or a group. These individuals may not be specified in the mind of the betrayer, but they do exist in their specificity. What kind of betrayal is this?

I think, prior to raising all these difficulties for myself, that the concept of betrayal I used to talk about eating something that was produced through someone else's suffering and enslavement did not ring to foreign to you, the reader. We understand betrayal in the absence of anyone being harmed by it, and in the absence of anyone who may feel betrayed. We talk about betraying the memory of our deceased ones if we do things that would be offensive to them, although they'll never know. We also – and this comes closer to what I have in mind – talk about betraying groups of people who have suffered atrocities if we forget, minimise, or raise sceptical questions about what was done to them.

Betrayal requires the sense of a bond that can be broken, and something for that bond to rest on. In this case, I want to suggest that the bond that the vegan individual in question has with the animal lies on her knowledge of what was done to the animal, her recognition of the fact that the animal's life, which was taken, and the animal's suffering matter, and hence a sense of respect for that animal, her life and struggles and her end. Eating the product of such suffering does not harm the animal in any direct way, but it does break the respect that we have for what

the animal was, what she went through. Partaking in the product of the animal's misery amounts to denying that her suffering and life mattered, even if they are no longer there.

Regardless of the consequences, eating an 'animal product' means participating in a specific practice. In this case, it is a practice— no matter how widespread – that, on the one hand, routinely causes suffering and death to animals, and on the other, is grounded on an implicit denial of the intrinsic value of the animal's lives and of the relative importance of the quality of their experience compared to largely less severe human experiences. Hence, participating in this practice means implicitly assenting to both. That is why it counts as a betrayal of the animal's life and suffering, even without material consequences.

References:

Alvaro, C. (2019) *Ethical Veganism, Virtue Ethics, and the Great Soul*. London: Lexington.

Steve Cooke, S. (2019) 'Betraying Animals'. *The Journal of Ethics* 23 (2):183-200.