

Fall 10-16-2017

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## Recommended Citation

Alvaro, Carlo. "Veganism as a Virtue: How compassion and fairness show us what is virtuous about veganism." *Future of Food: Journal on Food, Agriculture and Society* 5.2 (2017): 16-26.

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# Veganism as a Virtue: How compassion and fairness show us what is virtuous about veganism

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## Data of the article

First received : 20 June 2017 | Last revision received : 07 September 2017

Accepted : 8 September 2017 | Published online : 16 October 2017

URN: nbn:de:hebis: 34-2017072653143

## Key words

Veganism,  
Virtue Ethics, Compassion,  
Fairness

## Abstract

With millions of animals brought into existence and raised for food every year, their negative impact upon the environment and the staggering growth in the number of chronic diseases caused by meat and dairy diets make a global move toward ethical veganism imperative. Typically, utilitarians and deontologists have led this discussion. The purpose of this paper is to propose a virtuous approach to ethical veganism. Virtue ethics can be used to construct a defense of ethical veganism by relying on the virtues of compassion and fairness. Exercising these values in our relations with animals involves acknowledging their moral value, thus seeing that they are not our property or our food. It is important to emphasize that this argument applies only to well-developed societies that need not rely upon animals as sources of food, clothing, and various by-products.

## Introduction

Veganism is the moral attitude according to which we should avoid using animals as sources of food, clothing and by-products, such as eggs, dairy products, honey, leather, fur, silk, wool, cosmetics, and soaps derived from animals. Some vegans additionally claim we should categorically avoid products tested on animals; I call this view "absolute veganism." Here, I will not defend such a view. I will attempt to defend veganism as a way that promotes a more humane and caring world. Such a view acknowledges that we are not perfect, but believes that we have a responsibility to try our best to avoid using animals.

Both utilitarians and deontologists have made us question our treatment of animals. However, millions of animals are still being exploited. The reason is very complex, but the beginning of an explanation is that the wrong advocates for animals have been leading the discussion. Singer, Regan, and like-minded philosophers have to be given credit for bringing the discussion to light and urg-

ing us to question the morality of our relationship with animals. However, their essentialist approach has serious limitations that has caused a delay in acceptance. Their arguments, which rely upon utilitarian calculations of overall preferences (Singer, 1975; Singer, 1980; Singer, 1993), rights (Regan, 2004) and duties (Korsgaard, 2004; Korsgaard, 2009), have been incapable of motivating us to accept the abolition of factory farming, hunting, and animal experimentation.

Regan and others rely on conceptions of rights and duties that are flawed. Regan argues that we should focus on the similarities rather than the differences between animals and ourselves. Both Regan and Singer, though they propose different ethical accounts, share the idea that there is no morally relevant difference between animals and humans that could justify animal exploitation. Therefore, Regan argues that because animals are subject to a life like humans, in the sense that they feel and have desires and a variety of experiences just like us,

Citation (APA):

Alvaro, C. (2017). Veganism as a Virtue: How Compassion and Fairness Show Us What is Virtuous About Veganism, *Future of Food: Journal on Food, Agriculture and Society*, 5(2), 16-26



and because they can be harmed just like humans, they also have a value that should be respected. The difficulty with these types of arguments is that the symmetry they propose between human and non-human animals is questionable. Perhaps it is a form of anthropomorphism to argue that our experiences are similar to those of animals in a way that is relevant to morality. As a matter of fact, many people find this symmetry argument unconvincing, and are unmoved toward veganism. The trouble is that, while it is true that animals suffer, this is not, by itself, enough to show that humans and animals are relevantly similar so that human and animal suffering should have equal moral importance.

Consequently, a number of contemporary philosophers have emphasized the importance of a virtuous character and acquiring the virtues over obeying moral prescriptions derived from universal principles or duty. However, the discussion of how a virtuous character leads to embracing ethical veganism has not yet been properly considered. Husthouse (2006; 2011) illustrates how we can account for the ethical treatment of nonhuman animals through an appeal to virtue ethics. She claims that starting with the question of moral status is not correct in the animal ethics discussion. Rather, we should begin by morally questioning the attitudes that underlie the use and abuse of non-human animals. When we do so, we often find that we act viciously. Thus, if one is committed to living a virtuous life, he or she will change his or her attitudes toward the use of animals. Abbate (2014) entertains the idea that virtue ethics, rather than utilitarianism, duty, or rights, is the appropriate framework for developing an animal liberation ethic. Her claim is that utilitarianism is overly permissive because it permits the harming of animals for trivial reasons, so long as interests are maximized. On the other hand, deontological theory is too restrictive, since the prohibition on harming non-human animals would make moral agents incapable of responding to moral tragedies that, at times, require that some animals be harmed in order to prevent more harm. Virtue ethics has a wealth of insights that could motivate people to become vegans, yet virtue ethicists have never offered a virtuous defense of ethical veganism. My thesis is that the acquisition of the virtues of compassion and fairness may make us see what is virtuous about ethical veganism. However, it is important to understand that my argument applies to those who live in affluent societies, who have an abundance of readily available plant-based food. I will not, therefore, say anything about those societies that have no other alternatives but to rely upon animals as sources of sustenance. To show why a virtuous approach is preferable, I shall first examine Korsgaard's duty view and Singer's preference utilitarianism to show their shortcomings.

### Korsgaard: A Neo Kantian View

To begin with a duty approach, Korsgaard's lecture "Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals" (2004) attempts to show how Kantian ethics can grant moral duties toward animals. She argues that if Kant had been consistent, he would have realized that animals are in a sense ends-in-themselves. The problem is that Kant's ethical system is rather strict because, accordingly, only agents that have a rational nature can constrain us morally. By rational nature, Kant refers to "...our capacity to govern ourselves by autonomous rational choice" (Korsgaard, 2004, p. 3). Humans are rational creatures who form what Kant calls the "Kingdom of Ends." In the Kingdom of Ends, each individual is autonomous and capable of creating and understanding moral laws. Consequently, we humans have a duty to treat all members of our Kingdom with respect. Unfortunately, animals are not moral agents because they are not rational in a way that they could ever govern themselves by autonomous rational choice. Therefore, in terms of Kantian ethics, this means that we do not have any moral duties to them, at least directly.

Kant's view is an argument "from the capacity to obligate, or the lack of that capacity, to the assignment of a certain kind of value" (Korsgaard, 2004, p.16-17). In other words, Kant does not want to say that animals have no value at all, but rather that they are not capable of obligating us to respect moral laws. With regard to the question of whether animals are in fact capable of placing us under moral obligations, Korsgaard thinks that they are, though it appears to be the contrary. Korsgaard's thesis is that "...despite appearances, and despite what he himself thought, Kant's argument reveals the ground of our obligations to the other animals" (Korsgaard, 2004, p. 5). Korsgaard argues that Kant conflates two conceptions of "end-in-itself." One is the source of normative claims recognized by all rational agents, and the other sense is someone who is able to give force to a claim by participation in morality. Surely animals cannot be ends-in-themselves in the second sense, because they lack rationality and autonomy; they do not participate in morality. However, it does not follow that non-human animals cannot be ends-in-themselves in the first sense: as the sources of normative claims. It does not follow, Korsgaard says, that "there is no sense in which they can obligate us." (Korsgaard, 2004, p. 21) There is, in fact, a sense in which animals obligate us.

We take ourselves and our interests to be the source of morality. But we do not value our interests only because they are the interests of autonomous rational beings. Being autonomous and rational allows me to legislate against what is bad for me and others like me. However, I



do not legislate, for example, against being lied to, being injured, being cheated on, etc., only because I am an autonomous and a rational being, but also—perhaps most importantly—because bad things assault my animal nature. In other words, “we object to pain and torture or injury because they are bad for us as animal beings” (Korsgaard, 2004, p. 28). In fact, Kant holds that respect for our rational nature involves respecting our animal nature. This is the ground for his arguments about our duties to ourselves, our self-preservation, the enjoyment of food, and sex. In Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1997), the section entitled “A Human Being’s Duty to Himself as an Animal Being” (p. 421-428) discusses duties to ourselves as animal beings with respect to our animal nature, not rationality. He covers the duties not to commit suicide, not to maim or disfigure oneself, not to masturbate, and not to indulge in excessive consumption of food or drink. In *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant (2001) argues that our animal nature is one of three “original predispositions to good in human nature” (p.74). Thus, for Korsgaard, our autonomous nature is not the only source of normative claims. Besides our autonomous nature, we derive normative value from our animal nature.

The duties we owe to ourselves arise from the natural fact that many things can be objectively good or bad for us, for example, pain and suffering. Thus, while it is true that animals are not self-legislative beings capable of imposing laws upon us, it does not follow that we owe no moral duties directly to them. In fact, animals, like us, are beings for whom things can be good or bad. Therefore, Kant is mistaken because he does not recognize this. As Korsgaard puts it, “...human incentives are simply the same as those of the other animals” (Korsgaard, 2004, p. 32). She also reminds us that Kant does not believe that humans are magnificently unique in the sense that their nature is transcendental unlike animals (Korsgaard, 2004, p. 33). Humans are not morally superior in this sense for Kant. Rather, humans are able to legislate that the things that are good for us are the source of normative claims. This is certainly one sense in which humans are ends-in-themselves; the other sense is that they have an animal nature. Thus, animal nature is an end-in-itself—and it follows that we have direct duties to other animals.

For Korsgaard, Kant was wrong about claiming that only rational beings can place us under moral obligation. However, I doubt that Korsgaard’s attempt is successful. Korsgaard’s success in showing that we have direct duties to animals on Kantian grounds hinges on the question of whether Kant in fact overlooked the implications of his own principle. I do not think it is clear that Kant would concede that having an animal nature is morally important, because when we legislate against things that assault us, we in fact make laws against them

because they assault our animal nature. Kant may argue that having an animal nature may be a sufficient condition for having direct duties to other rational beings, but not a necessary condition. Our animal nature is, after all, “attached” to a rational nature, whereas animals (according to Kant) are completely devoid of a rational nature—and that is why they cannot put us under moral obligation, i.e., we do not have direct moral duties to them.

Korsgaard’s view on our duties towards animals fails as a moral theory in favor of animals because her view is ultimately concerned with notions of obligation and right conduct. The problem is her conception of morality as a set of universal and authoritative norms by which all moral agents are categorically obligated to follow. Korsgaard argues in an interview with Schaubroeck (2009),

Morality assigns us purposes, it is our moral duty to help those in need for its own sake—not to help those in need for something else. We are creatures who adopt our purposes—they are not given to us by our desires, and that means we need principles to guide their adoption. (p. 55)

To show why Korsgaard’s moral outlook about our treatment of animals fails, I want to consider Stocker’s criticism of duty-based theories. Stocker (1976) goes directly to the heart of the problem as he writes,

These theories [referring to Kantian and utilitarian ethics] are, thus, doubly defective. As ethical theories, they fail by making it impossible for a person to achieve the good in an integrated way. As theories of the mind, of reasons and motives, of human life and activity, they fail, not only by putting us in a position that is psychologically uncomfortable, difficult, or even untenable, but also by making us and our lives essentially fragmented and incoherent. (p. 455)

As Stocker points out, a theory that emphasizes duty leads us to moral schizophrenia. Imagine that you are in a hospital, recovering from an illness. Your friend, Smith, comes in to visit you, and this makes you happy. However, you find out that Smith is unenthusiastic about visiting you. In fact, he’d rather be somewhere else. He came to see you not because he has a desire to see you or he loves you and he is concerned about your health, but rather, as it turns out, because he is a deontologist who is committed to acting out of duty, regardless of how he feels about a certain action. Now think about this moral outlook when applied to the treatment of animals. Such a moral view asks us to respect animals because we should recognize that we have certain moral duties toward them. Such a theory of supposed duties is neither able to convince many, nor to motivate those who might be convinced. It appears clear that duty ap-



proaches distort our view of morality because they focus on duty rather than the individual themselves.

### Utilitarianism and Unreasonable Demands

Having considered a duty view, I shall now consider preference utilitarianism. Singer's preference utilitarianism takes the right action to be the one whose consequences promote the preferences of beings that have preferences, namely, sentient beings. Singer uses his preference utilitarianism to show that humans have a moral obligation to stop raising animals for food and stop using animals as subjects for scientific research. His ideas are mainly found in *Animal Liberation* (1975) and *Practical Ethics* (1993). These two works, among others by Singer, have played a vital role in shaping the contemporary animal rights movement and the philosophy of vegetarianism.

According to preference utilitarianism, the right action, rather than calculating pleasure against pain, is one that promotes the best interests of the greatest number. Based on this ethical view, Singer (1980) claims that "applying the principle of utility to our present situation—especially the methods now used to rear animals for food and the variety of foods available to us—leads to the conclusion that we ought to be vegetarians" (p. 137). But is it true that utilitarianism makes a strong demand of us to become vegetarians and to shun animal exploitation? In what follows, I want to show that utilitarianism is not a viable moral system to claim and support the rights of animals and does not lead necessarily to vegetarianism; in fact, that utilitarianism does not underwrite concern about the welfare of animals at all.

A statement that Singer (1993) makes in the early pages of his *Practical Ethics* adroitly captures his view:

The way of thinking I have outlined is a form of utilitarianism. It differs from classical utilitarianism in that 'best consequences' is understood as meaning what, on balance, furthers the interests of those affected, rather than merely what increases pleasure and reduces pain. (It has, however, been suggested that classical utilitarians like Bentham and John Stuart Mill used 'pleasure' and 'pain' in a broad sense that allowed them to include achieving what one desired as a 'pleasure' and the reverse as a 'pain'). (p. 14)

While for Kant, rationality is the locus of morality, according to utilitarianism, sentience is the starting point of moral consideration, the special characteristic that confers upon a being moral worth. As explained by Singer (1993),

If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—in so far as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being. (p. 15)

For utilitarians, if a being can feel pain and pleasure, it is a sentient and moral agent, and consequently it counts morally. Therefore, what this means is that not only humans are moral agents worthy of moral consideration, but many animals, as well.

Diamond (1978) makes a valuable point about Singer's approach. She points out that Singer's position contains "fundamental confusion about moral relations between people and people and between people and animals" (p. 466). She says that the analogies used in these types of arguments are not clear at all, and thus it is difficult to see how they move from consideration of human preferences to consideration of animal preferences. Moreover, the argument prevents us from seeing what is really important in our relations with other people and with animals. What's fundamentally wrong with this kind of argument is that it begins by asking the wrong question: What grounds do we have to claim that humans have certain rights while animals do not? For it asks why we don't kill people or inflict suffering on them, while we are willing to do just that to animals. Diamond (1978) argues, "This is a totally wrong way of beginning the discussion, because it ignores certain quite central facts—facts which, if attended to, would make it clear that rights are not what is crucial" (p. 467).

We do not eat people (typically), but not because of utilitarian principles, i.e., because they have preferences, and they prefer not to be eaten. Rather we don't eat people simply because we do not regard them as food. Even if people wouldn't mind being eaten, and they died in accidents, and human flesh were delicious and nutritious, we would still not eat them. But then it seems that Singer's argument is uneven, because it suggests that we do not maltreat other human beings or animals because they have preferences by virtue of their being sentient. However, if the analogy holds for animals, and demands that we not eat them or experiment on them because doing so may deprive them of their preferences, thus negatively affect aggregative utility, then this principle should also hold for humans. Namely, eating people would turn out not to be permissible because it deprives humans of their preferences. But again, this is clearly not the reason we do not eat people. Anyone who argues this way, Diamond (1978) says, "runs a risk of leaving altogether out of his discussion those fundamental fea-





tures of our relationship to other human beings which are involved in our not eating them.” (p. 467)

My objections to Singer’s moral approach are, by and large, in line with Diamond’s, though it seems to me that there is even more to be said on the topic than Diamonds and others have said. While utilitarianism is theoretically appealing, I want to propose that no one really lives this way. Suppose a person dear to you is hopelessly ill. As a utilitarian, it might turn out, upon calculation, that you should let her die so as to maximize utility by using the money and care required to look after her to diminish the suffering of many others. In the 1999 profile by Michael Specter featured in *The New Yorker*, Singer makes it very clear what he thinks about such a situation, as he states, “The notion that human life is sacred just because it’s human life is medieval.” Regarding the hopelessly ill, he states, “The person that used to be there is gone. It doesn’t matter how sad it makes us. All I am saying is that it’s time to stop pretending that the world is not the way we know it to be” (p. 55). Singer argues that the idea that human life is sacred is obsolete. But what are the results of approaching morality this way?

Highly rational and impersonal theories do not help us understand the moral worth of humans and animals. In fact, when an individual close to us is very ill, our response is seldom controlled by the rational, preference-calculating, utilitarian principles, but rather by our virtue. As Donovan (2006) writes, “sympathy, empathy, and compassion [are] relevant ethical and epistemological sources for human treatment of nonhuman animals” (p. 306). The calculations that utilitarianism makes, while theoretically attractive, hardly apply in real life. About this issue, Williams says,

You can’t make these calculations and comparisons in real life. It’s bluff... One of the reasons his [Singer’s] approach is so popular is that it reduces all moral puzzlement to a formula. You remove puzzlement and doubt and conflict of values, and it’s in the scientific spirit. People seem to think it will all add up, but it never does, because humans never do. (Specter, 1999, p. 55)

The last words of the above citation, “because humans never do” are crucial: morality conceived as a formula fails because abstract reasoning cannot capture the moral complexity of humanity. Moral puzzlements require more than formulas; they require attentiveness, love, care, and a conception of human beings as intrinsically valuable. In *Practical Ethics*, Singer (1993) writes, “ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer

from a theoretical defect” (p. 2). It would seem, then, that if utilitarians are sincere in their desire to propose a moral view that is noble in theory and good in practice, they must abandon their view that calculation of utility is all we require if we wish to deal with moral issues. Thus, I argue, utilitarianism is not a viable ethical theory that can be applied to the question of our treatment of animals because it ignores our love for, and relationship with, animals and people, at the expense of satisfying preferences or happiness for the greatest number.

### Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics (VE) maintains that our moral experience and our relation with others are too complex, too nuanced, and too textured to be captured and understood by a set of principles or rational calculation. When we theorize, we detach ourselves from our moral experience and our moral feelings. In the Greek myth, Procrustes offered his bed to guests who wanted to spend the night. If the guests were too long for the bed, Procrustes would chop off their legs; and if they were too short, he would stretch them so that they could fit. Deontology and utilitarianism have done to morality what Procrustes used to do to his guests. VE, therefore, believes that the correct way to understand and approach morality is to consider each situation and determine what the appropriate moral approach should be and which action should be carried out. Most importantly, VE recognizes that people’s motives, character, and reasons for acting in certain ways are more important than any theory that claims to give moral directions. In other words, if people are honest, fair, compassionate, just, and more, by virtue of their characters, they will do what is right, for the right reason, in a given circumstance.

VE emphasizes the kind of person one is. There are important factors in morality: whether an intention is right, whether one is following the correct rule, or whether the consequences of action are good. But these factors are not primary. What is primary is whether the individual’s actions are expressions of good character. When we help a friend, for example, we do so out of friendship and not for the sake of it. According to VE, if you are my friend, I help you because I like you and care about you and take pleasure in helping you, and not because I think that I have a moral duty to help you or because it turns out that my helping you will maximize overall utility. This aspect of VE is one of the main points of disagreement between VE and non-aretaic moral theories. VE regards a virtuous individual as someone who has the virtues; virtues have morally right desires built in. In Book II.1 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1990) discusses the question of how one acquires moral virtues, “the virtues . . . we acquire by



having first put them into action" (II.2.1103a30). This is possible because the capacity for virtue is innate, but has to be brought to a fully developed state through practice. For example, it is by repeatedly performing generous acts that one develops the virtue of generosity; it is by repeatedly refusing to indulge one's appetite that one develops the virtue of temperance. However, not every generous or temperate act is virtuous. If I spend my entire paycheck to buy a friend a car or if I refrain from eating all together, or I eat far too much, then I am not doing what is virtuous. Also, consider courage: being courageous is not to lack fear, but to perform in spite of fear. But if I express my courage by robbing a bank, I am not exercising my courage in a way that is virtuous. Why? Simply because robbing a bank is an action proceeding from a vice that goes against other virtues, such as justice. According to VE, the best ways to promote social cooperation and harmony is for people to acquire a good, reliable character. Rules by themselves may give guidelines, but they cannot make people good. Consequences of our actions are important, but without good intentions, we are not likely to produce greater total satisfaction than other theories try to achieve by detached theorizing.

### **How Compassion and Fairness Make Us Understand What is Virtuous about Veganism**

People use animals for food, clothing, cosmetics, scientific research, and many other purposes. Unbeknown to many our relationship with animals is cruel and immoral. The reality is that we bring into existence and raise millions of animals in cages, feed them poisons and chemicals, cut them into pieces of various shapes and forms, cook them, and consume their flesh. All this happens before our eyes without our realizing its viciousness. As I will argue, morality is about having a noble character. What we do to animals, anyway we word it or try to justify, is ignoble.

I believe that virtue ethics may lead us to the conclusion that those who live in affluent societies, who enjoy an abundance of plant-based foods, should become vegans. VE does this by showing the necessity to have, among many others virtues, compassion and fairness, both of which enable a sensitivity to unnecessary cruelty and suffering. If one acquires these virtues, he will be compassionate, sensitive to cruelty, resist injustice, and possibly see that veganism is a virtuous practice. The practices of eating animals and using them in various aspects of our lives often entail vices, such as intemperance, cruelty, injustice, and lack of compassion and empathy. I am not suggesting that there are absolute rights and wrongs; that is not the project of virtue ethics. The main characteristic of the virtuous person is that he

or she does the best thing in a situation, all things considered. But if virtue ethics is correct in saying that what is important in morality are a good moral character and acting out of virtue, rather than worry about duty or the way to reduce the total amount of suffering in the world, what are the virtues that illuminate our understanding that veganism is a virtuous practice? Although many virtues could be appealed to, I want to consider, in particular, the virtue of compassion and the virtue of fairness.

### **Compassion**

Compassion is a virtue rooted in love; it is a deep concern about the pain of the sufferer, with the hope of alleviating it and that some positive good will emerge from the sufferer's unfortunate situation. In fact, compassion is also a deep concern for others' happiness and joy. Helping others who are suffering is very important; it is what a compassionate person does. But it is equally important to take positive action to increase or maintain others' happiness. Since animals are capable of suffering or living a pleasant life, a compassionate individual would avoid practices that cause pain to animals and also would try to maintain their happiness. A true virtue, after all, strives to produce a good life for us and for others. A compassionate individual feels sympathy for those who suffer. Sympathy is an important moral feeling because it allows us to respond to something unfortunate or unpleasant happening to others. When an elderly person is entering a building, a sympathetic person will hold the door for him. When an animal is hurt, the sympathetic person will offer help. But most importantly, a compassionate person has empathy. Empathy is related to sympathy, but goes deeper in that it "recognizes connection with an understanding of the circumstances of the other" (Gruen, 2014, p. 45). An empathetic individual tries to understand thoroughly the situation and circumstances of others and cares about their well-being. These 'others' may be close to us or far away, other humans or non-human animals. Empathy enables us to extend our love to victims of some natural catastrophe, for example, who may live on the other side of the world. In the case of our treatment of non-human animals, the compassionate individual has empathy for them and tries to understand what matters for them. Thus, a compassionate individual understands that animals exist for their own benefit and do not desire to die or to be turned into food or spend their existence inside a cage. A compassionate individual, therefore, will not merely try to alleviate the pain of an animal who, for instance, is about to be slaughtered by caressing him or by giving him a tranquillizer or by making his death as quick as possible. This would not be the full expression of compassion. Rather, a compassionate, empathetic individual also recognizes that animals do not only wish to avoid pain, but also wish to survive and flourish. Consequent-



ly, by definition, a compassionate person would oppose all forms of animal exploitation. But just like other virtues, compassion seems to lie between two excesses. One way, for example, an individual would be too compassionate is by putting his own well-being at risk. For example, it would be a form of excess of compassion if one refused to wash his hands to protect germs, or if he denied food to his children to feed strangers, or allowed rats to take over his apartment. On the other hand, one would not be compassionate enough if he deliberately killed animals for fun, or just for the sake of it; or, having an abundance of food, he refused to share it with others in need. In the present case, veganism is the idea that animals do not belong to us and thus they are not food or property. Considering that humans can thrive on a vegan diet, and considering that the animals that people eat are domesticated farm animals, the compassionate individual will avoid eating those animals or any other practice that involves animal by-products.

A person may be thought to be compassionate because she cares about humans and animals within her own circle. For example, many people consider themselves compassionate individuals and animal lovers. However, their compassion is limited to the people around them and their pets; the limit of their compassion is evinced by the fact that they may eat meat. This attitude is not, however, a virtuous one. Compassion must be consistently extended to all animals and people outside one's moral circle. The failure to extend compassion to all animals—not just to companions—creates an incompleteness of the virtue. For VE, it is not sufficient to be compassionate only in some instances (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 14). Therefore, one may not claim to be compassionate in the complete sense of the virtue if one's actions are directed only toward humans or a restricted circle of animals. One must be thoroughly and consistently compassionate toward all beings. One is not truly compassionate by simply refraining from directly being cruel to or directly exploiting animals. One must also not be party to the exploitation of animals; he must not purchase leather, fur, meat, or choose to remain ignorant or inactive by shrugging it off and saying that he cannot do anything about it.

Since an important component of compassion is empathy, a compassionate individual recognizes and appreciates the unique characteristics and needs of everything and everyone. When we are attentive to the needs of others, and thus realize that the lives of people, and of many animals, are important to them, we are moved to value their lives and happiness and we desire to relieve their suffering and to further their happiness. Therefore, compassion makes us understand that veganism is a virtuous practice.

### **Fairness**

It seems that virtually all people who care about morality want to be or strive to be fair. But what does that mean? If we stand in a long line and one person tries to cut into the line, we say it's unfair. Exploiting people is unfair. Hurting a child intentionally is unfair. Hurting a dog is unfair. The fair-minded individual acts out of justice to ensure that everyone receives what he or she deserves. Treating others fairly means ensuring that they receive the deserved reward or punishment. A fair individual does not exploit others for his own benefit; he tries to be impartial by treating others equally. If exploiting humans or causing suffering to them is wrong, but it is not considered wrong in the case of animals, this is not impartial. The fair individual is fair to all individuals regardless of their skin color, nationality, height, age, species, and so on. Eating and using animals causes countless animals to suffer and be killed for trivial reasons, such as taste, fashion, and amusement. In affluent societies, where food is abundant and we have no need to use animals for food or clothing, our treatment of animals is, by definition, especially unfair.

We cause animals to suffer because we use them. Animals experience the world. They are individuals. They don't want to be used by us, but rather enjoy their existence the same way we want to enjoy ours. And once again, consider that to have good lives, we don't need to use animals for food or other purposes; that eating animals and their by-products can be bad for our health; and that intensive livestock production can harm the environment. It follows that tradition, convenience, and taste are not good reasons to use animals, even 'humanely.' If we are consistently fair, we will not merely try to ameliorate their living conditions, but rather avoid exploiting them in the first place. Using their bodies, their skin, their milk, their fur, or their eggs is unfair. Also, using some animals but not others is unfair. In Western societies, dogs, cats, some birds, and some fish are considered pets; but other birds, fish, cows, and pigs, are considered food. Of course, being a pet does not entail that an animal is treated well. The vast majority of pets are also treated callously. However, the only way to be fair is not to use animals at all. Again, this does not mean that we should endanger our health by allowing lice to proliferate in our hair or cockroaches in our apartments. Because VE does not require moral absolutes, it is consistent with fairness that we should not intentionally destroy or harm other living beings; but, by the same token, it would not be fair to allow other organisms to harm us. In the case of lice, for example, if possible, one should try to remove them without harming them. Shaving one's hair seems to be a fair compromise. Thus, fairness entails that we should not exploit or intentionally hurt or kill, which means going vegan. Therefore, fairness also shows that veganism





is a virtuous practice and lifestyle.

### Where We Draw the Line

A skeptic of the idea that we should all become vegans may point out that being virtuous does not guarantee that we embrace veganism. One may ask, "But where do we draw the line?" Veganism, as I see it, is the idea that animals do not belong to us. This implies that using them is immoral. But which animals are we talking about? All animals? All insects? Where do we draw the line of respect for animals? These questions seem to me to make sense in a context of an ethic that emphasizes universal rules or one that proposes a common denominator for respecting animals, such as sentience, as the locus of morality. The point of VE is not to draw lines because, as I have explained, VE is a moral approach that deemphasizes universal rules and consequences and focuses instead on the character of the agent. An agent who has a consistently benevolent, compassionate, temperate, and just character will always behave in ways that are benevolent, compassionate, temperate, and just. He or she will always act well. Conversely, an agent who is not virtuous will have to rely upon and follow universal rules or prescriptions derived from some utilitarian calculus; but there is no guarantee that the agent will be willing to act according to those rules or that the agent will be satisfied by his required actions. When we approach morality from virtue, we are asked to take into account the relevant facts of a given situation, rather than abstracting those facts. In other words, a utilitarian, for example, may propose that in our dealings with animals, we give equal consideration to all those beings that have preferences. The utilitarian, then, may draw a line and declare that, because a fetus or a mosquito are not the kinds of beings whose preferences could be satisfied or frustrated, we cast them outside the moral community. Kantian ethics is another perfect example of this. According to Kant, the so-called line has to be drawn in accordance with rationality; and since animals are not rational, we have no direct moral duty to them.

VE sees the issue differently. A compassionate individual, for example, is concerned about the well-being of all living things. He respects all creatures because all have a dignity and deserve moral respect. For a virtuous individual, it is not the case that only certain beings have moral worth, while others are absolutely worthless or irrelevant. This is an attitude embedded in the virtues. A virtuous individual respects insects in that he does not kill them intentionally or take pleasure out of torturing or killing them. Since he also respects nature, he will not destroy plants needlessly or pollute waters. At the same

time, VE is consistent in its approach because it does not categorically prohibit killing animals who threaten our lives or insects that, for example, might infest our homes. In such circumstances, a virtuous individual is morally consistent. With regard to veganism, considering that we can conduct our lives without using animals for food, clothing, or other purposes, exploiting them is inconsistent with the virtues.

VE leads to ethical veganism because the virtuous person is compassionate and fair, which entails the avoidance or reduction of violence humans perpetrate against other living beings. It is a more nuanced attitude than simply drawing lines. Rather, it is an approach that invites us to fine-tune our dietary practices in keeping with the philosophical and moral considerations of what all living beings are, what they are capable of, and what our relation to them is and should be. Returning to the idea of compassion, I argued that a compassionate individual is concerned about the well-being of all living things. He or she respects all creatures because all have a dignity and deserve moral respect. So, one may object that since plants are also exploited and used as food, it would seem to follow that a virtuous individual would also avoid eating them.<sup>1</sup> In other words, why is eating plants compassionate but eating animal by-products is not? I think the answer starts by considering that the actions of a virtuous individual are measured according to the given circumstances. Compassion is applied in different degrees according to the particular living organism. This means that while a compassionate individual has moral respect for all living things, the degree of respect is different for different beings and different situations.

Considering the cognitive capacities that animals have, and considering the horrendous practices required to turn animals into food, it is reasonable to say that a compassionate individual avoids using animals because it causes pain and suffering to them. In this case, a compassionate individual may consistently eat plants but avoid eating animals and their by-products because using plants does not require those painful practices that I outlined above. It might turn out that plants have certain important cognitive capacities, that they are sentient; but it is reasonable to say that it is more compassionate to use them than to exploit animals who exhibit a higher degree of sentience and conscious experience of the world. Namely, unlike plants, animals are social creatures possessing cognitive capacities, by virtue of which they experience the world. We see that they are not mere objects but beings that experience feelings of fear and joy, and have relationships with friends and with their own offspring.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of plant ethics, see Marder (2013)



### **Plants are alive and feel pain, too.**

Why vegans eat plants. Granted, plants are living organisms. A compassionate individual, then, must make a choice between eating animals and their by-products or eating plants. The compassionate approach is to choose to use those organisms that are less likely to be morally disrespected. For plants, “being alive” is different from that of animals in a way that makes it difficult to see in what sense it could be said that we wrong or disrespect a plant by eating it. Rice, mangoes, beans, bananas, lettuce, or broccoli do not seem to have conscious experiences or to be concerned about their existence. It is very unlikely that they enjoy life and the company of their parents and friends, like animals and people do.

Furthermore, the most important aspect of VE as it relates to the question of whether plants can feel pain, and whether veganism is a compassionate moral position is this: VE concerns organisms that are alive, but it also concerns nature. It is not the case that a virtuous individual would have no moral feelings or respect for mountains and water, but only for living and breathing organisms. This is a mistaken conception of VE. As Murdoch (1970) argues, “The moral life... is something that goes on continually, not something that switches off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial” (p. 8). The virtuous individual is respectful of all things—mountains, rivers, and the whole of nature. His eating choices are informed by virtue and his actions are always appropriate in relation to the good of not only himself, but also nature as a whole. Therefore, vegans eat plants because it is consistent with compassion and fairness to do so. It would be uncompassionate and unfair, for example, to deliberately damage or destroy plants. But the fact is that plants give us a vast variety of fruits that can be eaten without being imprisoned or tortured, disrespected, killed, or separated from family and friends. These considerations make us realize that there are degrees of moral respect toward different forms of life. The degree of compassion that we have for a cow need not be the same as that we have for a mango. Therefore, a compassionate individual should avoid using animals and their by-products because exploiting animals causes them a great degree of suffering. By using their milk, eggs, or labor, we disrespect them. Animal by-products are typically obtained through practices that make them suffer or disrespect them. But in the case of plants, although they are living organisms, our using them does not require the same cruel practices that inflict pain upon animals.

### **Conclusion**

I want to conclude this discussion by once again pointing out that veganism, as I have defined it, is an expres-

sion of virtue. That is to say, veganism is the moral idea of avoiding using animal as a source of food, clothing, and more, whenever there are readily available alternatives. As I mentioned at the outset, my argument applies to those of us who have the fortune to live in affluent societies that enjoy an abundance of plant-based food and alternatives to wool, leather, and other animal-based by-products. Such circumstances, I believe, demand that we apply compassion and fairness to our relationship with animals. I am not suggesting that there are absolute rights and wrongs. The main characteristic of the virtuous person is that she does the best thing in a situation, all things considered. There are possible circumstances in which a virtuous character is compatible with using animals. Such circumstances might include, for example, a population that has no other means of sustenance but animals, or a lifeboat hypothetical, i.e., a situation in which a person or a group of people are stranded on a desert island with no food other than animals. Perhaps an important implication is that affluent societies applying VE should help less developed countries move toward veganism. For example, consider that some of these populations do have plant food, but do not use it. As Oppenlander (2013) notes in *Food Choice and Sustainability*,

In Ethiopia, over 40 percent of the population is considered hungry or starving, yet the country has 50 million cattle (one of the largest herds in the world), as well as almost 50 million sheep and goats, and 35 million chickens, unnecessarily consuming the food, land and water...

Much of their resource use must be focused on these cattle. Instead of using their food, water, topsoil, and massive amounts of land and energy to raise livestock, Ethiopia, for instance, could grow teff, an ancient and quite nutritious grain grown in that country for the past 20,000 to 30,000 years. Teff... is high in protein, with an excellent amino acid profile, is high in fiber and calcium, (1 cup of teff provides more calcium than a cup of milk), and is a rich source of boron, copper, phosphorus, zinc, and iron. Seventy percent of all Ethiopia’s cattle are raised pastorally in the highlands of their country, where less than 100 pounds of meat and a few gallons of milk are produced per acre of land used. Researchers have found that teff can be grown in those same areas by the same farmers at a yield of 2,000 to 3,000 pounds per acre, with more sustainable growing techniques employed and no water irrigation — teff has been shown to grow well in water-stressed areas and it is pest resistant. (p. 175-178)

There are other regions of the world where inhabitants



can import food staples, thus avoid relying on animals for food. An example often used is the Inuit, who inhabit the arctic regions of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Not having fields suitable to grow food for all their meals, the Inuit traditionally ate only fish and seal meat. But nowadays, the Inuit live in communities with stores, schools, and modern buildings. Modern Inuit import food grown elsewhere and buy it in local stores. In fact, according to the Inuit Cultural Online Resource (n.d.), "Expensive food [is] bought at the local Co-op or Northern store, or shipped up from the south."

My contribution to the discussion of our moral responsibility toward animals is to provide a vision of a moral lifestyle, rather than a moral theory, that motivates us internally to become vegans. I proposed a view of morality according to which we acquire and develop important moral virtues, particularly the virtues of compassion and fairness, through paying attention to the lives of animals. Much work still needs to be done on the application of virtue/care ethics to eating with regard to our relationships with animals and with regard to the environment, public health and human rights. This paper is a starting point for the arduous work of defending ethical veganism. I have demonstrated how virtue ethics leads to ethical veganism. VE has much to say about how we apply attention, care, and virtue to animals' experiences of well-being, to recognizing that we are in a relationship with them and the only consistent moral response is veganism.

With regard to our treatment of animals, many virtues are important, though I propose that two in particular, compassion and fairness, enable us to see what is morally virtuous about veganism. Veganism is a worldview that wants us to realize that animals are not our property or our food; so, we should not use them in any way. Compassion and fairness show that an individual endowed with these two virtues thoroughly understands the suffering of animals and tries to alleviate their suffering. Our current behavior, i.e., eating animals and using their by-products, causes unnecessary pain to animals. One cannot be, for example, a compassionate racist or a fair rapist. As compassion is rooted in love, one who is truly compassionate will act out of love. There is nothing loving about racism or participating in the slaughtering and suffering of millions of animals. By the same token, one is not fair-minded if he is fair only to a restricted group of people or to his country, species, race, etc. Being fair means treating all equally. With regard to our treatment of non-human animals and our environment, a compassionate individual, by the very definition of compassion, desires to avoid pain because he is interested in others' well-being. Veganism, then, may be an expression of

compassion. The compassionate individual refuses to take part in a practice centered on animal exploitation. Fairness also entails veganism, because the fair-minded behave in a way that is consistently just. It is unfair to treat certain animals with respect and not others, and it is unfair to turn animals into food for the sake of taste, tradition, or just because we can, when those animals do not wish to become food. Therefore, using animals as food, even if they are treated 'humanely,' is inconsistent with fairness and with compassion. Thus, virtue ethics can show us that veganism is a virtuous practice that should be embraced by most if not all people.

### Acknowledgements

The author thanks the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

### Conflict of Interests

The author hereby declares that there are no conflicts of interests.

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