

The Vegan Story

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The first thing I would like to do is draw your attention to the title of this talk — The Vegan Story. I have called it that, because I wanted to underline the manner in which I am going to try to approach the subject. What I am hoping to do is just what the title suggests: to tell a story; the story of what veganism is, what it sets out to do, and why it sets out to do what it does.

In the course of the story I shall put before you certain facts and certain considerations, but I shall not — at least, not consciously — try either to convert anyone or to conduct any propaganda.

Just in case there may be some of you who feel that this is perhaps a somewhat spiritless approach, I would like to explain that to my way of thinking, it is the right approach.

For while I regard the spread of information, the free flow of information, as being vital to the growth of new ideas, I do not regard it as any part of my duty to try to be consciously persuasive. I think you will probably agree with me that a man should settle upon his way of life as the result of inward conviction, and not as the result of outward persuasive pressure.

With that preamble, let us begin the Vegan Story. And in doing so, we must put first things first; that is, we must know what we are talking about. Fortunately, the word “veganism” has a precise and simple meaning. It means: the doctrine that man should live without exploiting animals. Because the question of definition is so obviously an important one, I am going to ask you to be kind enough to commit it to memory, so that when we use the word “veganism” we shall all be thinking of the same thing. Veganism then, is the doctrine that man should live without exploiting animals.

This definition is written, in exactly those words, in the constitution of the Vegan Society, so that no-one joins the Society as either a full member or an associate without knowing exactly what he is supporting.

It is important to notice that one of the results of this definition is that it makes veganism a principle. It is, of course, a principle from which certain practices naturally flow — but it is *in itself* a principle, and not a set a practices.

A further point to notice is that this principle, this doctrine, is concerned with one matter only.

A big matter, it is true, but a clearly defined one: the matter of the right relationship between man and the animals.

What it says in effect is this: it says that the relationship generally accepted by the world at large is a very imperfect one. It says in effect that we shall not do away with the many wrongs done to animals, nor shall we do away with the harm which results to the soul of man, until we alter that relationship.

It is necessary, therefore, to look at the present relationship between man and the animals and to ask what is wrong with it.

What is wrong, according to veganism, may be summarised into one word: exploitation.

If we look clearly and simply at this relationship we can see that it is almost entirely — not quite, but almost entirely — based from man's side of the fence upon the idea that he has a moral right to use animals for his own purposes.

Again, if we look clearly at this question of relationship, we can also see that broadly speaking there are two ways in which we may regard the animals: (1) as creatures to exploit; (2) as creatures to love.

If we want to understand veganism, if we want to assess its value, we are bound to examine at least briefly these two broad views of the relationship between man and the animals.

First, let us look at the majority view, the view that animals are here for our use, and that we have a moral right to use them for our own ends, provided that we reduce hardship and suffering to the minimum compatible with what we require of them.

This view is held by the majority of people quite automatically. For example, farmers talk quite casually about “growing more bacon,” just as you or I might talk about “growing more cabbages.”

Again, the majority view is that we have the moral right to use animals for labour. To the majority view there is no fundamental questioning of our right to harness horses, bullocks, camels, and so on, and make them work to *our* orders and *our* requirements.

In practice, of course, there are considerable variations in the manner in which men do in fact use animals. These variations stretch from the comparatively harmless to the downright cruel. But the really important thing, it seems to me, is to notice the *direction* in which the doctrine of exploitation takes us.

If we wish to illustrate this direction, we might quote vivisection perhaps; or the fact that work in the slaughterhouse often blunts the finer feelings of the men who work there.

Another point we are bound to notice is that there are some exploitations in which suffering to animals is inherent. That is to say, that if we abolished the suffering, we would automatically abolish that particular form of exploitation. Once again vivisection is an obvious example. Another is dairy farming, principally because of the necessity of separating the baby calf from its mother.

It is hardly possible to escape the conclusion that when man decided he had a moral right to exploit animals, he quite inevitably opened the door to a new and *man-made* form of suffering, much of which ends only in one form of slaughterhouse or another.

There is, however, yet another aspect which arises from this question of exploitation, and it is an aspect which by no means receives the attention it deserves. I refer to the aspect by which man harms himself.

When there is interaction between two or more entities, the effects of the interaction are not confined to one entity only, but each is in some way affected. What, then, is the effect upon *man* of the interaction which he has created between himself and the animals?

The effect upon man cannot differ as to its essential nature from the nature of the interaction itself. That is perhaps a rather complicated way of saying something which was said much more simply long, long ago: as we sow, we reap.

What *do* we sow? What *do* we do to animals?

We breed them in millions in order to slaughter them for food.

We exploit their sex functions in order to make them yield milk. We then take the baby calf from its mother so that we and not it may have the milk. Often, we then kill the baby calf and we eat it as veal. When its mother is worn out as the result of one unnatural pregnancy after another we kill her, too, and we eat her as beef.

We hunt animals for fun. We vivisect them. We castrate and harness them.

What kind of relationship *can* it be, whose symbols include the whip and the bit and the harness and the slaughterer's knife?

If these are the things we sow, then these, too, are the things we reap. The form in which our harvest comes to us outwardly may be seen in some of our diseases, in much of our imperfect health, and possible also in some of the violence between man and man.

But the form in which our harvest comes to us inwardly can be nothing less than a restraint upon our own spiritual evolution. For just as a balloon is prevented from rising so long as it is pinned to earth by its cable or the weight of its ballast, so also is the soul of man held down by the chains and the ballast which constitute the demands of his own lower nature. This aspect of the relationship between man and the animals is one which requires more thought perhaps than some of the more obvious aspects, but I believe it is one of the most serious of all the varying results of living according to the doctrine of exploitation.

We tend to forget for example, that one of the most stringent tests of the character of a man, and hence of his ability to rise higher, is how he behaves toward those over whom he possesses power. When he meets the world of the animals he comes up against this test in its most acid form; for it will not be denied that animals cannot successfully resist his will.

Instead of living toward them with love and understanding, which one would expect from a compassionate heart and an enlightened mind, he lives toward them as an overlord, in many instances as a parasite, and often he is the cause of considerable suffering to them.

All of this arises because he begins by assuming the moral right of exploitation. There lies the crux of the whole matter, and there, too, lies the only place at which we may, if we will, effect a reconciliation. Until we do effect such a reconciliation, we shall go on reaping what we sow. Until we learn that the fruit of human happiness cannot grow upon the tree of exploitation, so long will the pain and suffering which we inflict upon our lesser brethren return like boomerangs upon our own heads.

So much for the first and majority view — the view that we have the right to use animals for our own ends.

The second view, as I earlier remarked, is to regard the animals as creatures to love.

Now it seems to me to be self-evident that when we love, we do no exploit. In the moment of love, there can be no thought of exploiting that which we love.

It also seems to me to be self-evident that love is free. No-one can force love; no-one can bind it with restrictive covenants. Love and freedom go hand in hand.

If, therefore, we accept in principle that it is better to love than to exploit; if, stumble and fail at various points as we may, we still believe it is better to keep our eyes on the goal of love — what, then, should we do about the animals? Surely the answer is clarity itself: set them free!

And that is precisely what veganism wants to do. It wants to set the animals free; free from exploitation by man, just as in the last century Lincoln, Wilberforce and the other pioneers sought to set free the human slaves.

Veganism is essentially a doctrine of freedom. It seeks to free the animals from bondage to man and man from bondage to a false belief — the false belief that he has the moral right to use animals for his own ends.

It is, of course, a proper question, after we have decided what is right in principle, to ask how such freedom may be brought about. Clearly, the change-over from the practices which arise from exploitation to those which would arise from love will be an enormous undertaking. One has only to think for a moment of the immense ramifications of animal exploitation, and it becomes evident at once that the change-over can come only in stages. We must take the most urgent steps first, and the others gradually as we come to them in order of urgency.

One of the first steps is to develop alternatives to those products of animal origin which most men believe to be necessary to their well-being. That is why at the present time the emphasis in the vegan movement is upon food and commodities. Here is where we may see the relationship between the vegan and the vegetarian. For the vegan diet is one which does not rest in any way upon exploiting animals; in other words, it is vegetarian in the strictest possible sense, excluding eggs and dairy produce as well as flesh. The vegetarian diet, in this strict sense, is one of the many practices which flow from the vegan principle.

But, as I have indicated, veganism is a general principle which if adopted would result in many changes as well as changes in diet. It would, for example, result in the abolition of vivisection, of hunting, and all other forms of exploiting animals. And while we are agreed

that in practice it can be adopted only gradually, nevertheless there is one thing that can be done now and all the time: the spreading of the belief that animal emancipation is not merely a worthwhile cause, but one which cannot be indefinitely postponed.

This belief must seem as revolutionary to the present generation as did the emancipation of the human slaves to an earlier generation. But revolutionary or not, I believe that ultimately it is inevitable; that is, if we are ever to live truly in peace upon the earth. For surely it is to say the least illogical to pray to a Heavenly Father for peace and goodwill among men, and at the same time to conduct an unholy war against our lesser brethren.

Hitherto, the idea that we have a moral right to exploit animals has been almost universally accepted. But part of the upward progress of man depends upon his ability to see the false in that which has hitherto been regarded as true. For when we see the false as the false, then it drops away from us, and other bondage is gone.

It is the true, and not the false, which liberates. The false cannot lead to freedom, it cannot lead to love.

For this reason alone, it seems to me, this young movement whose goal it is to set the animals free has its feet upon a true, if a long and arduous road.

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