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The Ruthless Morality of Veganism

For as long as veganism has existed, so has its critics. It has been the cause of innumerable arguments and discussions online, it has been the face of comedy routines and the subject of dozens of TED Talks, but every discussion comes down to the same argument: is veganism more ethical than eating meat? There is certainly sufficient evidence to back up either side of the argument, and there does not seem to be a concrete answer. While for many years, I believed that veganism was not as ethical as was commonly claimed, after significant research, I now believe the opposite: veganism is not only beneficial to the environment, it should be more widespread. That’s not to say that everyone should convert to veganism – there still exist tribes in Africa and other places worldwide that depend on meat for their diet – I only mean to say that if one *can* afford to be more aware of the problem, they ought to take it into consideration. I believe this issue to be important because as we head into a future with limited resources, we must find a way to help preserve the environment as well as care for the ever-increasing population of the planet.

Let’s begin with a basic understanding of exactly what it means to be vegan. Vegans believe it is unethical and immoral to take the life of any living creature, nor to consume any byproduct of such an animal. Not only do vegans not eat meat or fish, they do not eat dairy or eggs, and they refuse to wear products that originate from animals, like leather and wool. Instead of a steak, vegans may find their dinner in the form of an eggplant burger, or something made from a meat-substitute, like soy or tofu. But if the whole point of veganism is to be more ethical and lower your carbon footprint, they also should be aware of the dangers of eating such foods.

The process of growing meat substitutes, while seemingly helpful, is actually receiving well-deserved criticism. In South American countries like Peru and Bolivia, trees are being cut down at an alarming rate to create fields for crops like soy and quinoa, a new-age “superfood” but also an extremely water-intensive crop. Additionally, the exportation of crops like this has caused high demand and, therefore, increased prices. This means that it is cheaper for Bolivians to purchase and consume imported foods, especially ones that contribute to higher rates of obesity. In other words, as Americans begin to eat healthier, it is at the expense of South American children who are beginning to eat more and more unhealthily. And quinoa is not the only culprit. As The Guardian mentions in an article from 2013, some non-governmental organizations “report that asparagus labourers toil in sub-standard conditions and cannot afford to feed their children” (Blythman). In fact, asparagus is one of the most harmful vegetables for the environment. According to a report by National Geographic, for every kilogram of asparagus that is harvested and shipped to the United States, 8.9 kilograms of carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere (Haspel). This is even higher than pork and veal, which cause 6.87 and 7.8 kilograms of CO2 respectively. Why? Because the vegetable is mainly grown in South America and China and goes bad so quickly, it must be transported by plane, which omits CO2 in incomparable amounts.

One other argument against veganism is that it lacks nutrients in which omnivorous diets are rich. Vegan diets see a general deficit in Vitamins C, D, and B12, all very helpful to keep a person healthy. For example, Vitamin B12 helps prevent anemia in adults and Vitamin C aids in the repair of muscle and heal wounds. That being said, there is still a source of these vitamins in vegetables, just in a much lower amount. Additionally, diets that include meat provide a great source of iron and zinc, in much greater quantities than those found in vegan diets.

With all this said, I believe, as do many others, that going vegan is beneficial to both local and global environments, though it may not be the right choice for everyone, as previously mentioned. Regardless, it is important to remember that the pros of veganism heavily outweigh the cons of the diet. Yes, the harvest of asparagus is harmful to the environment with its 8.9 kilograms of CO2. But when that number is compared to the effect that lamb and beef have, it seemingly pales in comparison. For example, every kilogram of usable lamb meat comes at a cost of 22.9 kilograms of CO2. What’s more, every kilogram of beef that is served in America has put out a staggering 26.45 kilograms of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Further, the amount of methane that cow farms omit, as well as the greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere from processing plants, simply adds to the deterioration of the environment caused by this omnivorous diet.

As far as health goes, vegan diets are anything but detrimental. Numerous studies have shown and proved that diets high in vegetable and other natural foods are extremely high in antioxidants, especially blackberries which give 5.7mmol of antioxidants per serving, followed by walnuts, strawberries, and cranberries. (“Heart Beat”). As stated in the study, “[o]f the 50 food products highest in antioxidant concentrations, 13 were spices, 8 were in the fruit and vegetables category, 5 were berries, 5 were chocolate-based, 5 were breakfast cereals, and 4 were nuts or seeds” (Halvorsen, et al.). So if you’re looking for a reason to consume more red wine and dark chocolate, this is your sign. And while it is true that meat diets are high in iron and zinc, they are also very high in saturated fats and cholesterol, things that aren’t even worth thinking about for vegans. This is because cholesterol is only found in animal products like chicken, beef, and dairy products that are rich in fat. However, I will cede the fact that this also reduces the levels of HDLs (High-Density Lipoproteins) which help to keep the heart healthy by removing unnecessary LDLs (Low-Density Lipoproteins). People who follow vegan diets and eat little to no red meat also avoid the risks and negative effects of the meat, specifically heart disease.

And to continue further, I mentioned earlier that vegetable-rich diets certainly lack some vitamins, specifically C, D, and B12. While that is true and undoubtedly a negative aspect to the vegan diet, it is not completely impossible to find those nutrients. For example, Vitamin B12 is found in cereals like oats and grains. Grains and various legumes are relatively good sources of Zinc, and protein can easily be found in high amounts of beans, nuts, grains, etc. Additionally, anyone who is struggling to reach the daily recommended amount of some vitamin, pills and supplements exist for that very reason and are a simple alternative to eating meat for its nutrients. HDLs can be supplemented by Omega-3 supplements, like fish oil pills or vegan-friendly flax seed products. Many vegans will find it necessary to take extra amounts of some vitamins that are rarely found in vegan diets, most critically, vitamin B12 to help prevent anemia in both adolescents and adults alike.

In conclusion, while there is valid reason to criticize some aspects of the morality of the vegan diet, I truly feel that the pros significantly outweigh the cons. There is lack of support for the claim that vegan diets have no better effect on the environment than omnivorous diets do. Not to mention, there are numerous health benefits to a vegan diet, most notably the severely decreased risk of heart disease that comes with a diet rich in red meat like beef and pork. Furthermore, those types of meat are heavily impacting the atmosphere with the amount of greenhouse gases that are emitted during growth and processing of the animals. However, I will concede in the fact that vegan diets provide ethical dilemmas when it comes to growing the crops. If we are able to find a way to sustainably farm some of the grains and vegetables that are commonly found in vegan diets, it would certainly go a long way. And while neither side of the argument is perfect, there is always room for personal improvement. Those who say they could never give up meat can learn to buy organic, sustainably raised meat, or learn to love the taste of some meat substitutes. Vegans can also improve their impact by buying at local farmers markets and supporting small farmers, helping to decrease the distance between farm and plate. In general, I think we can all learn from renowned foodie Michael Pollan and his book “In Defense of Food,” where he gives this advice:

“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” (Pollan).

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