

Foul-Mouthed Veganism

From [Roger Yates, On Human Relations with Other Sentient Beings](#)

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Animal rights is a demand. It does not beg people to “not be cruel” to other animals, nor does it beg for “mercy.” To my dying day, I will contend that whoever came up with the group name of “Mercy for Animals” is an absolute monster. Well, perhaps monster is too strong. There must be another name, equally damning. Ah, yes, of course: welfarist.



The march to create a vegan movement that resembles the RSPCA (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) continues apace – or so it seems to me.

Social movement theory warns us that, once social movements grow, their core values may be placed in danger. Is this happening to the vegan social movement? Has it already happened?

All I hear now are foul-mouthed vegans using the dread c-word. *Cruelty* this, *cruelty* that, *cruelty* the other. I’m heartily sick of the damn word!

This welfarist language is now largely dominant in the vegan movement. On platforms such as TikTok, cruelty is about the only word one sees or hears in relation to what humans do to other animals. I see advocates frequently saying things such as, “veganism is a stance against animal cruelty.” Ask a modern-day vegan why using other animals is wrong and most will reply suggesting that animal use is “cruel.” We seem to have lost the ability, to the extent that we ever had it, to make the case for animal rights, so we rely on moral shocks laced with welfarist language.

Never likely to say, or even think about saying, that all animal use is a rights violation, we’ve ended up saying that all animal use is uniformly *cruel*. Of course, much of it is cruel but, as animal rights philosopher Tom Regan points out, cruelty levels are not the *fundamental* wrong.

This welfarist focus has led to vegan “influencers” saying that veganism is about “reducing animal suffering,” “abolishing the *worst forms* of animal abuse,” and getting into debates with slaughterhouse owners about the percentage of times the stunning of other animals fails. Reducing suffering, tackling worst cases, improving slaughterhouse practices. This is exactly what the RSPCA is concerned with.

This is what the British Vegan Society says veganism is

"Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals."

This is the definition of veganism that most vegans appear to use, although it seems that most do not include even the first sentence in full. Instead, they tend to end at the phrase, "...and cruelty to, animals." When they talk about the meaning of veganism, the phrase "exploitation of" tends to disappear, as does, often, the word "philosophy."

By the way modern-day vegans talk about veganism, they seem happiest with the idea that the definition of veganism reads: "Veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of cruelty to animals." Exactly the way the RSPCA sees the world.

Of course, the growing contingent of "animals only" vegans apparently *andabsolutely* hate the reference in the full definition to benefitting humans, so that never gets mentioned.

This means, of course, that many modern-day vegans are totally out of step with the way veganism was thought of by the people who began the vegan social movement and who, indeed, coined the word. The vegan movement's founders saw themselves engaged in a collective cause to bring about the moral evolution of humanity for the benefit of all sentient life - and the planet.

The full definition I've cited above came about between the years 1979 and 1988. I regard it as a weaker statement about the meaning of veganism than those that went before. However, this definition does include the word "exploitation" (in the sense of – at the very least - the human exploitation of other animals). That word was favoured by the movement's founders; the very word that many vegan newbies reject.

Moreover, the word "exploitation" comes before the word "cruelty," even in the 1979-1988 definition, not that anyone would know by the way vegans talk nowadays.

What social movement theory warns us about – *a process of moderation* – is occurring within the vegan social movement it seems to me. Essentially, a once-radical, even revolutionary, idea is being neutered by welfarist moderates, and to such an extent that even the grassroots is now using traditional welfare language to describe vegan aims.

Cultural Speciesism

The human use of other animals – and the attitudes that support such use – is a *structural* matter. The values of speciesism are embedded into the very fabric of society. The use of other animals is institutionalised. It is not the case that the vegan movement is faced by a few cruel individuals who do cruel things to other animals. The problem is much *deeper* than that, sadly, and that means the problem is much harder to fight against. We are fighting against cultural speciesism.

What all vegans need to appreciate – and I would venture to suggest, the newer vegans the most – is that the ideology of animal welfarism is part and parcel of cultural speciesism. Cultural speciesism and animal welfarism are values that are generationally transmitted in society through the processes of socialisation.

In other words, generations of humans are brought up to believe a set of interrelated values. The basic idea is that animal use is not wrong because animal use can be (and largely is) done in a non-cruel way and it is animal cruelty – when it occurs - that is wrong. We are all, by and large, taught “don’t be cruel” as children. However, “don’t be cruel,” and “cannot use” (cannot eat, wear, own, test upon, etc.) are not connected in the general cultural imagination.

It may be the case that vegans see a direct link between “don’t be cruel” and veganism but that is not the way cultural speciesism informed by animal welfarism sees it at all. There was outrage in vegan circles recently when the RSPCA was “exposed” for not being a vegan organisation. Of course it is not a vegan organisation! Never has been, and never pretended to be. What many vegans appear to have done is see the word “cruelty” in the “Prevention of Cruelty to Animals” name and simply assumed their anti-cruelty position implies veganism.

There is no such linkage in people’s minds, nor in the culture that directs those minds. What “don’t be cruel to animals” means is what we all are taught through socialisation. Don’t kick your cat or dog (animal property) but that has *nothing to do* (culturally) with eating fishes and chickens. The RSPCA are far more likely to say this than “go vegan.”

Of course, vegans may argue that they are trying to effect cultural speciesism – which is true – and to create a strong linkage between “don’t be cruel” and veganism. If vegans take that line, their disadvantage is based in the reality that such conversations occur within the dominant paradigm: speciesism informed by welfarism, and articulated by traditional animal welfare groups such as the RSPCA.

I contend that discourse within the dominant welfarist paradigm is likely to *prevent* people from thinking about veganism. Why should they think of veganism if all they are asked is *not to be cruel* to other animals, a value they already agree with? The dominant view about eating other animals, for example, is that, while consuming them is not a moral issue, being cruel to them is. Therefore, and all vegans know this, people explore ideas like “free-range” and “humane” farming, seeking out that thing their culture has *promised* them: non-cruel animal use. They know that non-cruel use is possible and “out there” somewhere, it is simply an issue of finding it. The “it” is not veganism.

I suggest that a clearer and an unequivocally more direct line to veganism comes from the philosophy of animal rights, not through the messy corridors of institutionalised animal welfarism. Animal rights *demand*s that other animals are regarded as rights bearers and demands respect for that status. It says that, when humans use other animals for any purpose, they commit violations of other animals’ rights.

As I suggest, animal rights is a *demand*. It does not beg people to “not be cruel” to other animals, nor does it beg for “mercy.” To my dying day, I will contend that whoever came up with the group name of “Mercy for Animals” is an absolute monster. Well, perhaps monster is too strong. There must be another name, equally damning. Ah, yes, of course: welfarist.