

To Err Is Human(e)

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i.

While there are some excellent exceptions to the rule of factory farming ... (selling ethically raised meats, eggs, and dairy), being a veg*n in Virginia is an important way to avoid benefiting from the suffering of animals—directly or indirectly.*1

This is a terrible thing to say about animal agriculture. Not only dangerous and harmful, but just blatantly wrong as well.

Now, you are probably anticipating, perhaps almost reflexively at this point, one of my cutting assaults on the myriad problems contained, both explicitly and implicitly, in this quotation—a mildly abusive disabusing of any notion that there can be any such thing as “ethically raised” animal products, based on biology, history, and my experiences rescuing animals from any number of farming situations.

And you are right. But there’s a catch:

I wrote this.

This utterly shameful utterance is mine, and not from distant times before I was vegan and while I still held fanciful notions that animals and animal products were ours to eat. No, I was vegan when I wrote this in 2010...

One of the problems with writing is that at some future point you may find yourself performing a retrospective, either by will or by force. Sometimes that can be illuminating, sometimes it can be a foray into the warmth and fuzziness of nostalgia, and sometimes that can instigate a moment of growth. Sometimes it can also be fucking painful, filled with embarrassment and dismay that you could ever have believed—let alone stated—such nonsense.

I had occasion recently to look back at some old blog posts and articles of mine dealing with animal agriculture, and I found myself thoroughly appalled at sentiments like these, which betrayed not only a lack of consistency with my own then-professed vegan ethics, and not merely an easy acceptance of animal exploitation and consumption as societal givens, but also a pervasively ridiculous lack of understanding of the very animals I was attempting, so I thought, to defend.

All of this, while still forcing me to shake my head in disbelief (I'm doing so as I type, mind you), is in a certain degree explicable. Don't get me wrong: my viscera scream out at the inexplicable attempt by anyone to talk about "ethical" animal products *in earnest*, and it makes this entire trip down memory lane rather agonizing. Still, it is by no means an aberration of how we, generally, both vegans and non-vegans, deal with basically every instance in which the interests of non-humans and the whimsies of humans collide: we get what we want and find ways to make ourselves feel better about hurting others in the process.

I don't mean that as a cop out. I don't want to walk down this lane, but I believe it is both instructive and illustrative of just how easy it is to be vegan without also committing to an anti-speciesist fight for liberation and the end of oppression, and thus not really getting at the root causes of why we oppress other animals.

In other words, there is no lack of examples of vegans hedging their bets when discussing veganism and animal rights, wanting to "stop cruelty to animals" and to "choose compassion" whilst simultaneously being terrified of offending, angering, or otherwise disturbing their interlocutors—or, even worse, not actually believing that animals deserve autonomy, not nicer management. This is one reason why "factory farming" is such a useful bogey in the realm of debate: vegans can avoid stepping over the "extremist" line by allowing all sorts of exploitation, as long as the meat (or milk or

eggs or whatever) isn't from a "factory farm"; and, without having to stop enjoying meat (or milk or eggs and so on), a non-vegan can list the many reasons why and methods by which they DO NOT support "factory farming." Isn't that great? We *all* get to enjoy the low-hanging fruit!

ii.



Life with (rescued) chickens...

Because I'm feeling masochistic (when aren't I?), let's consider another example of my mistaken prior arguments:

The lack of widespread, reliable protection for farmed animals makes it an ethical imperative that we become conscientious consumers of animal products. Unless we buy direct from the farmer, how can we be sure we are not paying for factory-farmed animals. Even if we don't opt for the most humane step of going vegan, and so refusing to turn animals into mere commodities, we

*can become vegetarian. Or if we do use animal products, we can shop compassionately, researching the producers of them.*2*

Sigh.

There's a lot to unpack here, but the central issue is a mindset that feeds the Humane Myth—and shows how vegans perpetuate the Humane Myth constantly. There's almost a grudgingly fleeting effort to broach the possibility of veganism as the only acceptable response to animal exploitation, and it gets lost in the distracting gesticulations that seek to steer people away from “factory farming” rather than from what matters: the systemic oppression of non-human beings.

This example is so useful, and damning, because of how visibly ethics—which demand considerations of justice and autonomy of other beings, regardless of species—are buried under the miasma of “humane” exploitation. Indeed, “humane” is a particularly revealing device in this case because it is so clear that it's all about us, about *humans*, and not about *other animals*. The fact that “humane” elicits a spontaneous overflow of feeling that something is approximating humanness is exactly why it's so problematic: calling exploitation “humane” is only possible when it's really about us, and what we want, and what serves our ends. In fact, “human” plus “e” does not equal “happy animals.”

Thus, it is irrelevant how much we know about a farmer or a farm, just as it is irrelevant where, how, and by what methods or with what intentions a non-human animal was born, raised, used, and killed. These are all trappings of human solipsism, a speciesist selfishness that allows us to believe that treating another being, who isn't like us, sort of like us, means we can pretend they aren't being meaningfully harmed by our actions. Because of our privilege as humans who benefit from a system of domination, we are able to pick and choose what aspects of *their* experience *we* want to trouble ourselves with...a mental prestidigitation that is absolutely necessary for us to perform in order to even conceptualize the word “humane” in regards to animal agriculture.

And that's exactly what I was doing, which I see so clearly now provided more than enough material for anyone to believe they can find a way to eat animals and still be a swell human(e).

Fuck.

iii.



Godric was found with a necrotic food, probably from a tether wrapped around his leg, which required amputation.

In the ensuing eight years since I wrote those terrible things, a lot has happened. Marriage, animal rescues, a move, and being battered about by the tide of public awareness. Also many new family members have come, and gone—so many individuals who have made me understand what it means to care enough for someone else that your own self-interest seems less of a scream and more of a whisper.

And loss. So much loss.

I feel very little for the person I was back then, with that mindset: no anger, no sympathy, nothing really beyond shame at what I said. If I'm to be honest, I think it best he is a thing of the past, and I don't have to deal with him much anymore. Perhaps you're thinking that I should extend some compassion to the him who was me. Perhaps you're right. I won't, however, though you are welcome to.

Reading my own words, I feel as if I've betrayed every animal who is living and has lived with us here, as family...the time and context of that other person-I-was don't matter. All that matters is how seriously wrong I was.

So what I needed then is not compassion but a good talking to, a firm nudge towards the fact that all forms of animal exploitation are inherently unethical and irrevocably harmful because they happen most significantly in the biology of these beings, not just on the farm or in the slaughterhouse. Even more, I needed to meet those individuals who actually endure the violence of domestication and exploitation, to experience for myself who they are and what their lives are like and how trivial the supposed distinctions are between one method of animal farming and another, between one species and another. Even more still, I needed to feel how priceless they are in order to understand the absurd offensiveness of how little we value them. For therein lies the strongest rebuttal to all my bullshit about ethically raised this and conscientiously consumed that. All my human(e) hot air is revealed to be nonsense in the face of their fates as beings bred to be consumed by us.

My wife and I have rescued hundreds of animals in the ensuing years, and every one of them has meant something deeply to us. Every time we lose someone, I get another peek behind the curtain of the Humane Myth, and I see yet another way human actions have harmed these beings under human oppression. I see all the things we could not save them from: reproductive diseases, compromised immune systems and pathogens waiting to pounce, hormonal imbalances, muscular and skeletal abnormalities, injuries, negligence, cruelty, apathy...all for the convenience and pleasure of humans. I also see all the ways in which "sanctuary" is as much about giving dignity to them in death as it is about giving them an opportunity to experience life, and letting loss inform how you live with the ones you still have: the loss of loved ones brings with it the cruelest and most unforgiving insights into what they suffer at human hands.

What I wish for my then-self is not a vague and coddling compassion, no, but that I had been able to know before opening my mouth the individuals whom I have known since then. How they live both under and despite human domination is more than sufficient an argument for us to stop harming them, and really all we need to do to see this is to shift our focus from ourselves and onto them.

Quotation Sources:

*1: <https://insteadof.com/blog/virginia-license-plates-vegetarian-vegan/> (2010)

*2: <http://hopeful-ink.blogspot.com/2010/12/cruelty-of-factory-farming-by-justin.html> (2010)



Frost (at top) was dumped in a state park and was sleeping on a parking sign in the cold, rainy winter weather when I caught him.