

Time to Get Serious

Rethinking Our Relationship with Non-Humans

[**Homo Sapiens**] Humans belong to the animal kingdom. We are vertebrates, mammals, primates, and great apes. We inhabit earth alongside millions of *non-human* animal species.

[**Relationship Overview**] Non-human animals are generally seen as *things* or *resources* that we may freely *dominate* and *manage*. Legally, domesticated non-humans are *property*, which authorizes industry to consider them *commodities*. Humans *use* non-human animals to satisfy wants and needs that run the gamut from *food* and *clothing...* to *entertainment, sports, companionship, experimentation, transportation, draft (pulling), and education*. Additionally, *byproducts* of the slaughterhouse are found within various commercial items. Though perhaps impossible to conceive, humans exploit *billions* of lives. For example, this year in America, over 9 billion chickens will be purposefully brought into existence and later slaughtered – primarily so people can eat their muscles, skin, and internal organs.

[**On Breaking Away**] Non-human exploitation pervades society; it is deeply entrenched. Participation is mainstream and non-controversial, so exploitive conduct is accepted rather uncritically. This dynamic helps in establishing *social pressure*, which weighs heavily on the entire population. Resistance, perhaps even from our friends and family, should be expected any time we decide to leave the status quo behind. Our *consciences* must guide us.

[**Prevalent Concerns**] Nearly *everyone* believes we are obligated to behave *humanely*, which underlies widespread opposition to *unnecessary suffering*. ~~ Imagine that you enter my apartment and witness something ghastly: my hand with a knife, bloodied because I am mutilating several caged dogs. To justify this torture, I describe the enjoyment it brings me. ~~ Such an explanation is unacceptable because the dogs' suffering is obviously unnecessary. Discussions about the definition of "necessary" could last forever, but whatever the criteria... necessity cannot possibly be met or satisfied merely by *pleasure, amusement, convenience, tradition, and/or culture*. These factors are not ethically sound defenses for *any* behavior. For example, we would not approve human slavery on grounds of convenience, tradition, or culture. Nor would we support human rape that provides pleasure or amusement for rapists. Yet these are the five justifications upholding over 99% of non-human use. Our relationship with other animals invariably generates mild suffering *at least*. Predominantly, it guarantees *horrendous* suffering. ~~ Because we can easily thrive without "meat", bird eggs, and inter-species milk consumption... most objections to unnecessary suffering ring hollow.

[**Frequent Hypothetical**] Imagine that on consecutive days, you pass a burning house. Each house contains two trapped strangers, and is near collapse. There is time to rescue just *one* individual. Monday: human child or elderly human. Tuesday: human child or canine. On both days, you elect to save the human child. ~~ Assuming popular agreement with these decisions, what daily guidance can we draw from them? *None*. They simply reveal criteria to resolve ethical dilemmas during *extreme and rare* situations. But to favor children at such times, does not suggest that canines and elderly people are exploitable resources.

[Conflicting Facets] People love dogs, cats, and many other non-human species we have taken from nature and domesticated to near total dependency. These companions are seen as sophisticated individuals who cherish their own lives. Meanwhile, domesticates like sheep and pigs, *no less sophisticated*, are regarded as *means* to clothing or food. Whereas pets are deemed *inherently* valuable, equivalent animals are valued strictly *relative* to us.

[Vital Distinction] Better treatment is certainly *always* preferable to worse treatment. However, when we focus on the *treatment* of non-humans, we ignore their underlying *use*.

[Drawing the Line] Sentient beings have these complementary traits: 1} Self-awareness. 2} Preferences and desires. 3} The ability to feel pain and experience pleasure. ~ ~ Plants are alive, but not sentient. Whether or not worms and gnats are fully sentient... cows, chickens, goats, fish, and rabbits unquestionably are. Sentient beings have basic interests: 1} Freedom from arbitrarily imposed death and violence. 2} Freedom from all forms of subjugation. ~ ~ Genuine fulfillment is impossible without the reliable safeguard of basic interests.

[The Paradigm Shift] Now is the time to get serious – *with ourselves*. By nurturing and extending our empathy for non-human animals, we begin to question the moral legitimacy of using them for *no good reason*. Vegans embrace alternatives to exploitation, and respect the basic interests of *sentient* non-humans. Veganism is everyday activism *within* the individual. Conscientious non-participation stems from the marriage of behavior and belief.

[Alternatives Overview] We have the diverse and bountiful plant kingdom available to supply food, clothing, and personal care. We have *each-other* for sports and companionship. Games, books, movies, and music offer entertainment. Machines and our *own* bodies allow transportation and draft. Education can embody hope and liberty, not violence and coercion. Scientists can reassess the few experiments not *already* known to be superfluous.

[Ovo-Lacto Vegetarians] Acquiring eggs and milk *requires* violating the basic interests of chickens and cows. When “production” has decreased, following miserable lives of toiling endlessly for humans, all “dairy cows” and “layer hens” are slaughtered for “meat”.

[Recurrent Questions] Q1} “Where do vegans get their protein?” A1} There are vegan bodybuilders and athletes. Sufficient calorie intake will generally provide adequate protein. Plant based diets can *easily* deliver all 9 essential amino acids. Popular notions about protein have been manipulated by industries that reap profits from exaggerated requirements. Q2} “How about the fact that I could *never* give up cheese?” A2} Absolutely anyone can eliminate cheese from their diet. It demands recognizing what cheese stands for, and the exploration of *delicious* new foods. Q3} “What if my preferred religious text can contradict veganism?” A3} There are vegans of every faith. Religious texts are written by humans, who integrate cultural norms. Passages can support patriarchy, human slavery, and other vile practices.

[Important Tools] 1} Investigating what any given food, product, or behavior actually *represents* – beyond its meaning *to us*. 2} Confronting the internal conflict and discomfort we often experience during exposure to new ideas. 3} Disavowing past actions, and focusing on personal growth. 4} Appreciating our potential for wonderful transformations.

[Final Thoughts] Adjustments of our relationship with non-humans completely *miss the point*. Each vegan represents an incremental step toward days *without* a direct relationship. Veganism is the *lived* affirmation of a far more benevolent and principled future.