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Defending Veganism, Defending Animal Rights

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You have dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Granted, these animals do not have all the desires we humans have; granted, they do not comprehend everything we humans comprehend; nevertheless, we and they do have some of the same desires and do comprehend some of the same things. The desires for food and water, shelter and companionship, freedom of movement and avoidance of pain.

— from Earthlings

There really can be no doubt that the world would be a better place if people stopped consuming what we have come to disrespectfully refer to as ‘animal products.’ Though this may sound simplistic and perhaps overly idealistic, it is almost certainly true. For starters, there would be less suffering and less pollution in the world. There is no denying that. Also, people would be healthier, and fewer resources would be wasted. We know that our consumption of meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy has dire ecological consequences, and the needless suffering inflicted on billions of sentient beings because of our acquired taste for their flesh and their glandular secretions is morally insane. If the animal foods industry really is one of the main causes of so many of the world’s most disastrous problems (climate change, pollution, deforestation)—which it undoubtedly is—, why support it? Knowing that most people in most circumstances (at least in the context of Western civilization) can live well without animal foods, wouldn’t it be more reasonable and more moral to withdraw our support of this vile industry altogether?

The number of people who answer this last question with a decisive “yes” and act accordingly has grown immensely over the past few decades. This is moral progress. How is it moral progress? Because it shows that people’s moral circles, that is, the number of living beings whose wellbeing they take into consideration when making moral decisions, is expanding. Evolutionarily, only our own wellbeing and that of our immediate kin, i.e., of those individuals with whom we share most of our genes, should really concern us (as is the case in a vast number of animal species). However, due to the evolutionary necessity of reciprocal altruism in our growing social communities, we learned to include strangers in our moral reasoning as well, and, as a result, our ability to emphasize with others gradually increased. Our sense of morality evolved with us—here, I include cultural evolution as well—as we advanced from tribes to civilizations (with some time-lag). Today, things like racism, antisemitism, and xenophobia, for instance, are considered morally reprehensible in civilized thought, while they were totally acceptable only a century ago. Through moral reasoning, most people have learned to overcome their innate fear of that which they don’t know and to make common cause with complete strangers, which is a necessary precondition for any civil society to function.¹ But what about other species? More and more people seem to realize that nonhuman animals suffer just like humans do, and they feel increasingly uncomfortable being complicit in the manufacturing of needless animal suffering; they want nothing to do with the animal foods industry. However, these people are still a tiny minority. It appears as though the vast majority of humans still don’t care about animals and their wellbeing (except their pets’, which reflects an absurd moral

¹ It could be argued that the dog-eat-dog competitiveness of modern-day capitalism has reversed this process. However, I disagree with Adorno’s aphorism that “There is no right life in the wrong one”; altruism and compassion are key to human and animal flourishing even under capitalism.

- *Animal Liberation and Social Revolution* by Brian A. Dominick. A vegan perspective on anarchism or indeed an anarchist perspective on veganism.
- *Nailing Descartes to the Wall: Animal rights, veganism, and punk culture.*
- *Eat Like it Matters: Food choice, nutrition and wellbeing in a capitalist food system.*
- *The Anarchist Cookbook.* Not that one! This is an American recipe book about veganism and politics.
- *Another Dinner is Possible.* The vegan cookbook that includes a lot more than just recipes.

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double-standard). Eating certain animals is considered normal almost everywhere in the world. But that doesn't mean that it's moral to do so.

Be that as it may, the wellbeing of nonhuman animals has become a real moral issue. Secular morality is concerned with the flourishing and the suffering of sentient beings, and there really is no denying that the animals humans eat are sentient beings. They have real emotions and they suffer in much the same way as we do (which is different from merely reacting to stimuli). Therefore, their wellbeing should be morally relevant to us. It has even become a political issue: the question of animal rights. Should animals have rights? If we answer this question in the affirmative, legislative steps must be taken to implement and defend these rights. If morality is the foundation of politics, our ultimate political goal should be to minimise the suffering and maximize the flourishing of sentient beings. we have to ask ourselves: what is best for everyone, including nonhuman animals? There are right and wrong answers and different approaches to these questions, but the first and most important step is to even ask them.

Veganism not only asks these questions; it is also an attempt to find solutions to the moral and ecological problems caused by the animal foods industry. As such, it has been criticized and dismissed as 'too extreme' by ordinary citizens (while the brutal slaughter of billions of sentient beings is considered normal), as 'classist' by lefties (as if the 'lower' classes were incapable of making moral choices), as a break with tradition by right-wingers (as if that were in itself a moral argument), as 'reformist' by radical anarchists (as if reform were pointless), and as 'unnatural' by primitivists (as if moral progress were incompatible with human nature). Now that veganism has finally reached the mainstream, much of the criticism against it seems to come from the Far Left where some people consider it a politically irrelevant lifestyle choice reserved for the better-off and the privileged. Are they right? I for one don't think so. I think

they're creating a false dichotomy with working-class omnivores on the one side and middle-to-upper-class vegans on the other. Furthermore, I believe that even in those cases where privilege does play a role, there is a significant moral difference between actions that reinforce privilege and actions that utilize privilege. Veganism is the latter. These choices count. In the coming pages, I will explain why I think so, and I will do so responding to arguments from the other side. These arguments are taken from Peter Gelderloos's pamphlet *Veganism: Why Not* (whose title is, unjustifiably, missing its question mark). Gelderloos is also the author of *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. His arguments against veganism are representative of an attitude sometimes found in radical leftist and anarchist circles, particularly of the anti civilization variety, which makes dealing with them more interesting and perhaps more relevant than some moron saying, "If God didn't want us to eat animals he wouldn't have made them so tasty." Nevertheless, I believe they are just as false and only slightly harder to debunk.

Peter Gelderloos subtitles his critique of veganism "an anarchist perspective." What does this mean in his case? Well, for one thing it means that in his view the capitalist system, being the root cause of all domination and exploitation, is the enemy that people should really be fighting; veganism, he argues, only attacks one specific industry (and insufficiently so), not the system as a whole. Thus, the vegan cause is in its entirety tantamount to tilting at a straw man. Further, he believes that veganism promotes the 'green-washing' of capitalism by supporting its basic structures due to its focus on ethical consumerism (a contradiction in terms?) and mild reformism. In Gelderloos's view, which can be characterized both as anti-civilizational and as utopian, the goal we should all be working towards is the downfall of Western civilization, rather than reassessing and changing our dietary habits and lifestyles. Only then can we live in harmony with nature, whatever that means.

of calcium and protein than dairy—without the health risks associated with dairy- consumption).

To accuse vegans of the same immoral practices, as Gelderloos seems to do, is really rich; it's cynical, and it testifies to a lack of a sense of proportion. Who has currently more pull in this society, the meat and dairy industry or the vegan lobby? We need only look at the billboards that line streets and the answer immediately leaps to the eye. The same lack of a sense of proportion is reflected in the following assertion: "Any kind of dietary absolutism based on the needs of the majority constitutes a form of oppression" (Gelderloos 29). How? Nobody's forcing anyone to go vegan at gunpoint, are they? And what absolutism? This is about free, reason-based choices. If stating the truth—to the best of one's knowledge and supported by the best evidence one can find—is a form of oppression, then what's there left to say? Besides, what could be more absolutist than Gelderloos's anti-civ anarchism? He has basically decided that the downfall of Western civilization would be best for everybody without asking anyone. Are we supposed to keep the facts that we learn to ourselves just because somebody might not like them? That's hardly an effective way to make progress of any kind, moral or otherwise.

Backmatter

This booklet is primarily a response to the booklet by Peter Gelderloos called *Veganism: Why Not - An Anarchist Perspective*. Other titles that promote veganism from a more anarchist point of view include;

- *The Vegan's Guide to People Arguing with Vegans* by Cubesville. An entertaining and useful zine.

In his final blow against veganism, Gelderloos accuses vegans of dishonesty, wondering, “If they have solid ethical arguments for veganism, why would they even need to make health-based arguments, especially when doing so requires dishonesty?” (29). As evidence, he presents “two pseudo-scientific manipulations typical of vegan ideology” (24), one about humans being natural herbivores and one about the health benefits of a vegan diet. While it’s debatable (and to a large degree irrelevant to the present discussion) which diet we evolved on and how certain aspects of our biology should thus be interpreted (our flat molars, our side swinging jaw, our long, herbivore like intestines, etc.), it is undoubtable that a varied vegan diet is vastly superior to most people’s current diets in terms of health as well as ethics. I have shown that there are numerous solid moral arguments in support of veganism and virtually none against it. And who said vegans were immune to confirmation bias? Of course they will, like most people, cite the studies that support their views (if they sound reasonable); its up to the other side to prove them wrong (if they can).

Studies supporting pro-vegan arguments (in terms of ethics, health, and environment) are easy to find, because they’re legion. And its not just vegan-friendly scientists who conduct them. Many of the studies supporting claims about the alleged health benefits of meat and dairy, on the other hand, are subsidized and commissioned by...yes, the meat and dairy industry. Let’s face it: we have been lied to methodically out of greed for profit, and we have lied to ourselves out of convenience. If anything deserves to be called a conspiracy, this is it. The intentional spreading of misinformation by a purely profit-driven meat and dairy industry and its political supporters at the expense of the animals, the environment, and human health has been taking place on an incredibly large scale for many decades (just take the whole “drink milk” campaign; we know now that there are many better sources

In my mind, there are a couple of things wrong with this view. For starters, it is based on a fallacy—let’s call it the ‘utopian fallacy’—shared by most self proclaimed ‘revolutionary’ movements from fascism to communism. These movements posit that by ridding the world of that which they identify as the thing that prevents them from realizing their idea of a utopian society (international Jewry, the bourgeoisie— whatever it is) and by completely dismantling the present social order, humanity (or a certain group of people) will be free at last. Of course, they are the ones who get to decide what ‘free’ means (to Gelderloos it seems to mean ‘free from civilization nal restraints’). Dissenters are persecuted as ‘race traitors’ by the Far Right or as ‘reactionaries’ by the Far Left. As history has taught us, this is a dangerous approach because once you allow yourself to believe that everyone’s salvation depends on the implementation of your utopian ideas, anything goes.

There is usually no place for reformism, individualism, and moral progress in utopian revolutionary movements, which is why they often clash with more lifestyle-oriented approaches, such as veganism. The latter is based on reform, individual choice, and gradual moral progress. Instead of realistic goals, the focus shifts towards an often ill-defined and virtually unattainable ideal (What exactly does ‘total communism’ mean, for instance? What would happen to the mentally and physically challenged, to the elderly, etc if civilization actually broke down?), promising paradise on earth. It seems the more impalpable the utopia in question is, the more it appeals to certain people. The utopian mentality seems to be this: let’s talk about the details after the revolution. Often, there is also a quasi-eschatological element to such ideologies; their adherents tend to paint scenarios in which humanity faces its final battle or is on the brink of an inevitable revolution. They often point to events that they interpret as the writings on the wall foretelling the downfall of ‘the system’ (e.g., the banking

crisis of 2008). In such scenarios, the idea of moral progress and step by step improvement makes absolutely no sense, of course—to the contrary, it delays the much needed and much anticipated conflict/revolution. Luckily, however, there is no reason to believe that any of that is actually true. End-time fantasies are probably as old as humanity itself. All they do is get in the way of actual progress.

I'm obviously not saying that people should not fight against oppression and despotism, nor am I suggesting that domination is a social necessity. All I'm saying is that the complete annihilation of liberal democracy and Western civilization is, at best, a questionable project. Besides, who can guarantee that a huge scale revolution would actually make the world a better place? Optimism is good and important, of course, but we must remain rational enough to consider the possibility that we might end up worse off. ISIS are showing us right now how infinitely less desirable our lot could be—as did the fascist and communist regimes of the 20th century. To willfully ignore these possibilities, these worst-case scenarios, is careless, irrational, and ill advised. The worst case scenario in the case of veganism, on the other hand, is a greener, cleaner form of capitalism with less net suffering. What's more, it's civil society, liberal democracy, and the rule of law that grants us the rights and freedoms we enjoy—which is to say, we grant them to each other—, protecting us from the less favorable elements of our own nature (however imperfectly). Veganism suggests that we expand the circle of beneficiaries of our civilizational achievements. That is not to say that we shouldn't seek to find even better solutions.

In this pamphlet, Gelderloos identifies veganism as a pseudo-ideology. “The very point of an ideology,” the author states, “is that you're not meant to move on from it (5).” And many vegans, he claims, “fail to distinguish between those who have not yet encountered the new ideas they offer, and those who have absorbed these ideas and moves on.”

I really don't know what Gelderloos means when he says that “abandoning veganism creates more possibilities for selforganization of food, a mutual relationship with our environment, bioregional flexibility and sensitivity, and anticivilization ethics” (22). Apart from the fact that “anti-civilization ethics”—whatever that means—appear to be a questionable project, how does veganism interfere with any of the goals Gelderloos lists here? If anything, it can be seen as a way to accomplish them. Should civilization actually break down and people be forced to live as primitive nomads or even huntergatherers again, I'm happy to reconsider omnivorism. Until then, up the vegans! There are billions of animals suffering and dying needlessly right now. Gelderloos's hope for some kind of post-civilizational utopia will not improve their lot in the slightest. He conveniently postpones actual solution until after the collapse of capitalism. Veganism, on the other hand, may not be so convenient, but at least it tries to tackle the problem of animal suffering in the here and now—where it happens.

Needless to say, Gelderloos sees it rather differently: “[Veganism] makes no difference in ending those atrocities or one material connection to them” (23). As we have seen, his main argument is that all aspects of the capitalist marketplace are inextricably interconnected. I have commented on this particular view and the humble effect that the vegan community has had on the way society at large relates to animals and to the consequent animal suffering. That community, however, is growing rapidly and its impact is increasing noticeably— and increasingly noticeable. What's more, there is no logical connection between an idea's political clout and its validity or justness. The only things that really matter in this debate are sound arguments and moral values based on evidence, empathy, and logic. I'm convinced that these things make more of a difference than Gelderloos's anti-civilization approach.

foxes in with the rescued chickens?” he wonders. cynically (21), “And if they feed the rescued dogs and cats meat instead of tofu, is it okay because they’re just animals [...]?” (my emphasis). What is he talking about?! Gelderloos seems to have no understanding or simply doesn’t think much of accountability, moral reasoning, and freedom of choice, things that are more or less unique to our species. Foxes will be foxes. Humans aren’t foxes.

It comes as no surprise that Gelderloos suggests omnivorous “scavenging or stealing” (21) as viable alternatives to consumer veganism. Having engaged in both these practices (but remaining vegan throughout most of my shoplifter/dumpster-diver career¹⁵, I’m not really opposed to either one of them though, for a number of reasons, I don’t shoplift or dumpster-diver anymore). If you do shoplift, it’s important to know who you’re stealing from. There’s an obvious moral difference between stealing from a mom-and-pop store and a multinational supermarket chain. However, the fact of the matter is that the precondition for any of these practices to be possible in the first place is the existence of exactly the kind of consumer culture Gelderloos wants to overthrow. Thus, these activities, which, according to Gelderloos, “cultivate low intensity illegality and thus antagonism with the dormant system” aren’t real solutions to the complex problems we face today; they are neither viable nor sustainable (while veganism is). In the case of shoplifting, the “antagonism with the dominant system” that Gelderloos praises is likely to become an antagonism to your potential allies in the struggle for freedom and justice, alienating them from your cause.

¹⁵ For a brief period of time, c. 2004, I would eat dumpstered cheese and non vegan pastry, a habit I soon laid off as I realized that there were many other reasons not to eat products made from animal secretions aside from being opposed to the commercial exploitation of animals. I don’t think it’s possible, for instance, to respect a sentient being and at the same time devour it.

However, veganism is not an ideology “because there do not even exist any vague guiding principles that all of nearly all vegans have.” If you got the impression that these statements contradict each other, it’s because they do. Anyway, let’s consider them each on their own. The guiding principle of veganism is the refection of animal source foods and other so-called ‘animal products’ for moral, environmental, or health reasons. Their’s pretty straightforward. Of course, not all vegans do it for the same reason, as Gelderloos points out, but they do all follow—by definition—this one guiding principle. Does this make veganism and ideology? I would say no. It makes it a practice that is an expression of a number of different, sometimes even conflicting, worldviews. It is exactly this “intersectionality that people choose to identify as an important common ground” that Gelderloos critiques. He calls it “a minimal practice of abstinence.” Well, for most people, completely changing their diets and lifestyles is not a minimal practice; it’s a big step that completely changes the way they relate to eating, to the production of food, to their bodies, and, last but not least, to non human animals. For many, it entails a fundamental change of thinking, And change of mind is a prerequisite for real change. Consider, by analogy, slavery (disclaimer: comparing one thing with another is not the same as saying that they are literally the same; of course slavery is not the same as animal husbandry, but there are ways in which they are comparable). The idea that somebody can literally own another person seems ludicrous to most modern people, but only 150 years or so ago that wasn’t the case. What it took for slavery to be abolished, that is, for moral progress to be made, was, initially, a change of thinking which was brought about by people writing about and campaigning against the evils of slavery—and by people eventually giving up slave-owning.

As for the ways in which veganism may seem like an ideology (according to Gelderloos), I would say that the real conflict here is between dogmatism and critical thinking I completely

agree that any serious vegan critique of our relationship with animals, food, and nature must be open to criticism and should not “fail to distinguish between those who have not yet encountered the new ideas they offer, and those who have absorbed these ideas and moved on.” It absolutely makes sense to consider people’s personal narratives—to a degree. If we wish to make moral progress, we must aim to avoid moral relativism. Moreover, I would counter that arguments for veganism are either valid or they’re not, and it doesn’t really matter whether the meat-eater faced with these arguments is an ex-vegan or has never even thought about it. What would we think of somebody who said, hypothetically, “I used to be an abolitionist but now I support slavery, and therefore your arguments against slavery do not apply to me anymore”? We would probably arrive at the conclusion that they have lost their ability to reason honestly. Whether or not a practice is morally reprehensible is not determined by people’s personal narratives.

On the cover of Gelderloos’s pamphlet, we see a vast soya field. The message is clear: vegans eat huge amounts of soya products, and growing huge amounts of soya requires intensive farming. However, the author (if the image was indeed chosen by him) seems to forget that a) soya is in virtually everything these days, not just tofu and soymilk, and that b) most soya is grown for animal feed. It therefore seems perfectly logical to assume that meat eaters actually consume more soya than vegans. Also, what real alternatives are there to growing food that way (that is, in big fields) given that billions of people must be fed and that a significant portion of them live in big cities, the cultural centers of the world (not just because capitalism forces them to, but because they want to), where they can’t just grow all the food they need?

Realistically, humanity is unlikely to ever return to its pre-civilized, pre-urban state where we all hunted, gathered, or grew our own food—nor would such a regression be desirable; let’s face it: a significant decimation of the world’s

cept that the impact of my veganism on the animal exploitation industry is relatively small. (It seems safe to presume that in a totally free market economy without any state protectionism—agriculture in general and the meat and dairy industry in particular are heavily protected by the state—the impact of veganism would be more immediate.)

But that’s because only a small number of people are actually vegan. If the majority (or at least a sizable minority) went vegan, our impact would be considerably greater. My point is this: the problem does not lie with veganism per se, but with the small number of vegans out there. Therefore, we invite everybody to join our little “in-group”; let’s make a change together.

There’s more: “Veganism refuses the possibility of learning from other animals—for me a precondition for real solidarity, but evidently not for them [vegans]—by rejecting the development of an ethical framework in which we all depend on each other and sometimes eat each other, as in the animal world” (20–21). The whole reason humans have created societies and civilizations is so we don’t have to live by the law of the jungle anymore. And that’s a good thing! What Gelderloos is suggesting is a dog-eat-dog society, if ‘society’ is even the right word here. I don’t think the (non-human) animal kingdom, which is almost entirely based on hierarchies, immediate drive satisfaction, and survival of the fittest, is a good model for human societies at all. Being a great admirer of Charles Darwin, I find Social Darwinism downright appalling—as every decent human being should!

It completely runs counter to most people’s idea of fairness and solidarity, which can easily be extended to include other species as well. Besides, what’s there to learn from other animals in moral terms? For the most part, they just do what they’re born to do, unable to choose otherwise. We, on the other hand, have a choice, a choice Gelderloos refuses to recognize. “On the vegan sanctuary farms, do they put the rescued

be such a great idea (you'd be lucky to live past your 20s). Fortunately, we don't have to. We have proper houses, clothes, and medicine; and most of us are free to make both healthy and moral choices as far as our diets are concerned.

Gelderloos's next argument is an incredibly low blow. He compares veganism to religion, calling it "moralistic and manipulative" (19). "Veganism creates a righteous in-group on the basis of an illusion of purity," he writes. What is he talking about? While I can see that some vegans may come across as preachy, there is nothing in veganism that would amount to religious dogmatism; there's nothing you have to take on faith, that is, to believe on bad evidence, in order to become a vegan. As an idea, veganism is entirely based on scepticism and secular morality (see above). Of course vegans believe (based on scientific evidence and for sound ethical reasons) that their diet is superior to other diets; otherwise they wouldn't have made the decision to go vegan in the first place. That's what making a decision is. Open-mindedness is not the same as relativism. If an idea is supported by better evidence and causes less harm than other, competing ideas, then it's a better idea. Veganism is better for the environment and the animals and almost certainly healthier than the average Western diet. That's not a dogma; that's a fact.

"The fact that the idea of purity or non-responsibility does not square with how capitalism actually functions," Gelderloos goes on to say (20), "and thus a vegan diet does nothing to materially attack the structural causes of animal exploitation cannot be accepted [by vegans], because the actual meaning of veganism, as such, is the embrace of the illusion of purity, the entering of the in-group." Before dealing with Gelderloos's accusations of sectarianism, let me say this: The cause of animal exploitation is people consuming and abusing animals, not capitalism. People exploited animals before capitalism, and if nobody consumed animals they wouldn't be exploited under capitalism. I, as a vegan, have no "illusions of purity" and I ac-

population would be a prerequisite for anti-civilization anarcho-primitivism (or a consequence of it). Furthermore, it would mean that nearly all of our achievements in science and culture would be lost. Sure, our destructive impact on the planet would be curbed, but who are the millions who are doomed to die, and who are the ones who get to live? I personally don't consider a scenario in which most of the world's population has been wiped out to be a great starting point for any constructive approach to dealing with the problems we currently face. What's more, primitive pre-state societies (past and present) are known to be more violent than modern democracies.² Surely we can find more reasonable ways to achieve a better relationship between humanity and the rest of the world, even, or especially, in the context of Western civilization. The more we reduce our dependency on animal foods, for instance, the smaller the amounts of land, water, and energy needed to feed us, and the smaller our CO2 emission and environmental impact; not to mention all the needless suffering inflicted on animals on our farms and in our slaughterhouses.

Needless to say, Gelderloos does not see it that way. In fact, he would probably accuse me of "actively supporting capitalism" because "All talk of efficiency is coming out of the mouth of Capital itself" (6), as though efficient resource management were an invention of capitalism and not one of the basics of almost every species' survival techniques. He moreover asserts that "Veganism plays a demonstrable role in greening capitalism." The same could be said about solar energy and other advances made to reduce our ecological footprint. These things make sense because natural resources are limited and because pollution is a real problem—and a pressing one at that. We

² Cf. Michael Shermer, *The Moral Arc: How Reason and Science Lead Humanity toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom* and Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*.

don't have the luxury to wait until 'after the revolution' to solve these issues. The climate is changing rapidly, it's happening now, and it's happening fast (and the 'animal products' industry has been identified as one of the world's greatest polluters and one of the major contributors to global warming). But according to Gelderloos's logic, improvements don't have any real value as long as capitalism reigns—to the contrary, they only delay its downfall. It follows that more pollution and more suffering would be good because that would expedite the collapse of capitalism. I believe it's time to face the fact that capitalism is not going away, at least not any time soon. I grant that 'green capitalism' can't be our ultimate goal, but it's a tremendous improvement to the current version of capitalism in which animals are tortured in their billions to satisfy our lust for dead flesh; a practice that wastes energy, lives, and resources on an unimaginable scale. To put all our eggs in one basket, as it were, and hope for 'the revolution' to come would be irresponsible. And what about all the problems caused not by capitalism but by the fact that humans are imperfect by nature?

Gelderloos then goes on to say, somewhat tautologically, that "veganism is only the identity of those who choose it. Because [it] exists as a common ground between those who struggle for animal liberation and those who are actively working to save capitalism." I find this dichotomy to be incredibly simplistic and, ultimately, false. Capitalism is not the only system in which animals are exploited, held captive, or mistreated. And isn't it a sign of moral progress when even those in favor of capitalism, an amoral (that is, not even immoral) economic system, recognize that animals have interests worth protecting and that exploiting them is not only ecologically unsustainable but also cruel? Gelderloos, who concedes that veganism may serve "as a sort of gateway drug into more radical politics" (7), is half-right when he says that "fighting the exploitation of animals and veganism are not the same thing." They are, however,

and are low-income earners. What's more, serious scientific studies do control for other lifestyle factors as well.

It's indeed quite interesting that Gelderloos, who is obviously concerned about the accuracy of studies that may not control for income, health consciousness, and lifestyle, should state the following (his point being that animal fats are healthy). "An undisputed fact is that in the countries with the longest life expectancy, and generally also those with high rates of heart health, people tend to eat moderate to high amounts of animal fats, but very low amounts of processed food" (18). This assertion is vague at best. There is obviously a difference between moderate and high amounts of animal fats, and, as Gelderloos himself has pointed out, other factors besides nutrition are crucial too when it comes to health and life expectancy. Gelderloos adds that telling people about the health advantages of a vegan diet is a form of "ideological authoritarianism" (17), whatever that means.

The debate about what's natural for people to eat is old and boring. Gelderloos brings it up again: "The fossil record, the diets of the most closely related primates, the length of our intestines, and our ability to digest raw meat all point to an omnivorous diet going back to the beginning of our species" (19). Of course we could also interpret our biology differently; e.g., we could say that our long intestines are starkly different from the very short ones of carnivorous animals and so forth; it could also be argued that only herbivorous mammals can move their underjaws sideways—as can we. But that's beside the point. Let's say we're biological omnivores (we are definitely not carnivores). What does that mean? Well, it means that we can eat all sorts of things (though I'm not so sure we're supposed to eat raw meat). What it doesn't mean is that we must eat meat, eggs, or dairy to survive. However, we must eat plants. Though we are indeed very closely related to chimps, we are not chimps. We aren't our distant ancestors either. If you want to live like them, be my guest, but I doubt that would

benefits of a vegan diet far outweigh the health problems it is sometimes said to have caused. For meat and dairy-heavy diets, it's the other way around. You can be a healthy vegan or an unhealthy one, depending on what you actually eat, but there is no reason to believe that veganism per se causes heart problems—to the contrary. Gelderloos lists things like anemia, vitamin B12 and iron deficiencies, depression, and even suicidal tendencies as some of the health risks associated with veganism. I'm not aware of any hard evidence that would back up such claims; studies linking serious health risks to meat and dairy consumption, on the other hand, are legion.¹⁴ But Gelderloos solely focuses on “the studies documenting the negative health consequences of a diet lacking animal fats” (without citing a single one) that he has “never heard a vegan mention” (19). Is lack of animal fats really something we should be concerned about in a society where the exact opposite is causing health problems on a pandemic scale?

I certainly don't want to downplay the importance of diet when it comes to health, but there are so many other factors at play as well: genetic predispositions, environment, lifestyle, etc. Gelderloos knows this and therefore doesn't trust the many studies that say that vegetarians and vegans tend to be healthier as “These studies are also affected by the fact that vegans and vegetarians tend to be more health conscious and wealthier, meaning that regardless of the meat question, they're putting higher quality food in their bodies” (18). Though I generally agree with this statement, I vehemently refute the prejudice that vegans “tend to be [...] wealthier” than omnivores (the nerve!). Sure, there is a lot of upper-class veganism now because it's trendy, but most vegans I know (most of them supremely healthy long-term vegans) come from working-to middle-class backgrounds

¹⁴ Cf. <http://www.pcrm.org/health/cancer-resources/diet-cancer/facts/meat-consumption-and-cancer-risk>.

two sides of the same coin. The latter is an important first step towards the former, because it's only when we no longer regard certain animals—just imagine the outrage if people did to puppies what they do to piglets—as a mere food source that the necessary conditions for their liberation are fulfilled. Why are they being exploited? Because we eat them. How do we sanction and justify their suffering? By eating them. It really is that simple. It's true that our capitalist industrial society has taken this exploitation to a whole new level, but the crux of the matter remains the same regardless of what economic system is currently in place. Needless suffering—and here comes my own tautology—is needless; it's needless because it can be avoided.

Next, Gelderloos takes on the idea of animal rights, an “agenda [that is] so naive and reformist” (7). He adds that instead of animal rights he will “focus on [...] animal liberation” so as to “avoid creating an easy-to-demolish strawman.” He means the concept of rights in general. It's only a straw man, however, if we subscribe to Gelderloos's view of rights, which, frankly, isn't very convincing at all.

He equates rights with and condemns them as “the policing of living relations in a legal framework,” claiming (in a rather smug tone) not to “know why [animal rights advocates] hate other animals so much that they would wish rights on them.” Gelderloos seems to come from a position where it is assumed that rights are something restrictive rather than something liberating; that they are merely an expression of power and domination; those who have power assume the authority to grant rights to the disenfranchised masses; or, in other words, rights necessitate hierarchies and power imbalances. It follows that a system based on domination must be in place for rights to even exist. I disagree. The rule of law, that is, “the legal principle that law should govern a nation, as opposed to being governed by arbitrary decisions of individual government officials” (source: Wikipedia), is, at least in principle, the opposite of what Gelder-

loos is describing. Rights are a matter of negotiation and moral reasoning—and they are tremendously useful in our day-to-day lives. They protect us from despotism and various forms of infringement. Animal rights are meant to protect animals in much the same way.

Gelderloos is right about one thing, though: there are no natural rights (page 9: “[...] nature knows no rights”). The idea that rights can somehow be found by observing nature is known as the ‘naturalistic fallacy.’ Rights are an abstract human invention derived from the necessary evolutionary tradeoff between the pursuit of individual self-interests (on the most basic level, all creatures aspire to pass on their individual genes³) and communal life (which benefits all parties involved). The idea of equal rights is definitely one of the greatest achievements of modern civilized society. The thing is that rights need to be asserted and negotiated, and animals can’t do that for themselves, which is why people have to do it for them.⁴ (Incidentally, human toddlers can’t assert their rights for themselves either but most people would agree that they should have rights.) But as we expand our moral circle, we can apply our own categories of dignity, wellbeing, and freedom to other animals as well and, based on scientific facts

³ Genes are always ‘selfish’; paradoxically, it is this ‘selfishness’ that promotes altruism in certain species (e.g., humans). When I say “all creatures” I mainly (but not exclusively) mean vertebrates. The situation is different for ants, bees, and other eusocial animals where there’s almost no genetic variation among the individual members of the colony and therefore no individualism; the colony acts like a communist superorganism (which is what prompted the biologist E.O. Wilson to say this about Marxism: “Wonderful idea. Wrong species.”)

⁴ An alpha male’s ‘right’ (among wolves, say) to feed before everyone else gets their turn and to mate with whichever female he fancies is, of course, not what we mean when we talk about animal rights. Real rights cannot be claimed or asserted by force, and it would be unwise to apply the law of the jungle to human societies. Rights are meant to protect individuals against injustices and to protect their interests as long as these interests do not conflict with those of others.

mass production possible (and necessary) in the first place? What’s more, by making this particular point, Gelderloos concedes that there is something wrong with meat consumption. Be that as it may, to Gelderloos, who doesn’t believe in the power of consumer choices, it’s all the same anyway. “What we eat and what we buy or don’t buy in the meantime [that is, until we overthrow the system] are choices whose only ramifications are personal. [...] Political veganism is an exercise in irrelevance” (15). Is it? Boycott, howsoever ineffective, certainly has more of an impact than Gelderloos’s approach, which is to “dismantle the industrial civilization that is destroying the Earth.” Veganism is not irrelevant because it fundamentally changes the way we relate both to our food and to other animals. The world is changing, and our species is evolving— and veganism is (or should be) a part of that.

Next, Gelderloos tackles the health issue, his main point being “not everyone can be healthy on a vegan diet” (15). Well, that can be said of any diet. However, it’s rather safe to say that virtually no-one can be healthy on a carnivorous diet. It’s true that certain Inuit populations cover almost all of their nutritional needs by eating fish, whales, caribous, and seals (though not exclusively), but that doesn’t mean that they are particularly healthy. In Canada, for instance, their life expectancy is significantly lower than that of the non-Inuit population,¹² and many of them die from coronary artery disease and cerebrovascular strokes,¹³ which are diseases associated with meat-heavy diets. At any rate, the Inuit diet is an extreme diet caused by extreme conditions. Most of us don’t live under such conditions.

I don’t want to get into the whole medical studies thing, though. People can do their own research. There are plenty of studies out there, most of which point to veganism being a very healthy diet. Suffice it to say, in Western societies the health

¹² Source Statistics Canada (www.statcan.gc.ca).

¹³ Source: Wikipedia (“Inuit diet”).

the trees and eat the fruit they bare) and these insects actually deserve to be called reciprocal.

As far as fertilizers are concerned, let me say this: 1) a large portion of the fields that need fertilizing are used to grow animal feed; the less meat and dairy is consumed, the less fertilizer is needed 2) chemical fertilizers (and pesticides) are used almost everywhere in modern agriculture despite there being plenty of manure and slurry (which, by the way, are not so easy on the soil, the groundwater, human health, and the environment either); and 'chemical' doesn't necessarily mean 'toxic' 3) human waste solids and other alternatives to the excrements of (factory-farmed) cows and pigs (e.g., compost) would probably work just as well.

Gelderloos seems to be deeply concerned about the environmental impact of vegan products in general which is ludicrous (and inconsistent with some of the points he made earlier). He tells us an anecdote about a friend of his taking him to hand her her 'leather' jacket, smugly pointing out that it was "not made of animal skin" (13). As he handed it to her, he replied. "'Here's your jacket made from petroleum products.'" This "quickly deflated" her "sense of superiority," Gelderloos reports. It also represents a misconception common among carnist apologists. Products made from animals are not more natural or better for the environment than their cruelty-free alternatives—to the contrary—; we only need to consider the chemical-intense process of tanning animal skin to make leather, for instance, especially when it's done on an industrial scale.

Gelderloos then claims that "Within a market economy a decrease in meat consumption could lead to a decrease of meat prices, which would lead to a net increase in meat consumption as those segments of the population not yet won over by veganism take advantage of the drop in prices" (14). I'm no economics expert, but isn't it the industrial mass production of so-called animal products that makes them so obscenely cheap right now? And isn't it mass consumption that makes

known about their neurological makeup and their ability to suffer, to be happy and unhappy, negotiate which rights they should have. Animal rights activists assert these rights on behalf of those who cannot speak because they feel morally obliged to do so—and rightly so. One common reason for this is that they empathize with the animals suffering at our hands; another is that animals are at our mercy, which means that our decisions directly affect their wellbeing. To realize this and to act accordingly is moral progress. And again, the first step here is to stop reducing sentient beings to sources of protein.

The title of the next section in Gelderloos's pamphlet reads "Thou shalt not kill" (a reference to the Biblical Decalogue). It is an attempt to refute the notion "that it is wrong to kill other animals" (7). Well, for starters, not all vegans think that killing an animal is wrong, but many do. They find it unethical to kill a sentient being when other perfectly nutritious food sources are available. (I happen to belong to that group.) Why? Because we have the ability to put ourselves in our potential victims' shoes (or hooves). This represents one of the bases of secular morality known as the interchangeable perspective. It is best summed up in the so-called Golden Rule: don't treat others in ways that you wouldn't want to be treated.⁵ Another term for this idea is 'the ethic of reciprocity' The animal that is killed fears death in much the same way as we do; it really, really doesn't want to die. If anything is innate in all species of animal, then it's that we do not want to die. We all know this to be true, and yet most people still consider it perfectly normal to kill and torture animals by the billion. We have a highly evolved moral sense, and we can reflect on our actions like no other animal. It follows that we have more freedom to choose the ways in

⁵ I chose the negative formulation of the Golden Rule over the positive one (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) because I think the latter is flawed; others may not enjoy the same things you enjoy, but they will very likely seek to avoid the same things (suffering, misery, death, etc.).

which we want to relate to our fellow creatures — and with that freedom come responsibility and accountability.⁶

“If the moral prohibition against killing is not coming directly from pacifism or Christianity,” writes Gelderloos, “it can only base itself on an analogy with the fundamental anarchist prohibition of domination” (7). I have just shown that you don’t have to be a pacifist, a Christian, or an anarchist to arrive at the conclusion that killing (not to speak of torturing) an animal that poses no immediate threat to you for food is immoral, provided there are other food sources available. Be that as it may, Gelderloos points out that killing and domination are not the same thing because “Domination is only successful when the subject is kept alive so its activity can be disciplined and exploited” (8). Correct. But doesn’t that quite accurately describe what we do to our ‘livestock’? We discipline or break) and exploit them—before we kill them and then repeal the process with their offspring, and so on. That’s why vegans don’t just refuse to consume meat but anything that comes from an animal. I grant that what we’re dealing with here may, strictly speaking, not be domination, but it sure as hell is exploitation. Besides, killing does play a crucial part in domination; it’s the threat (and occasional use) of violence that keeps the suppressed subjects in line.

Nothing could have prepared me for what Gelderloos posits next: “Killing need not be an act of negation, either. It can also be the foundation of a relationship [...] and this relationship is mutual” (8). He even speaks of a “reciprocal relationship” in this context (15). There seems to be some confusion over the meaning of the words ‘mutual’ and ‘reciprocal’ here. However we define them, it should be absolutely dear that the act of killing is, in almost all cases, the antithesis to

⁶ I should add that I don’t think that we have absolute freedom because we, too, are animals, but it is self-evident and completely indisputable that we have more freedom of choice than, say, a slug or even a chimp.

cance here; pollination hardly qualifies as exploitation], many of which are commercially farmed. A substantial portion of fields are fertilized with manure or slurry from industrial meat farms.” The only alternative to the latter, he asserts, are chemical fertilizers. Okay, first of all, to be vegan means you don’t eat or use anything that comes from an animal, as far as is possible and practicable (cf. British Vegan Society), which can be done in any society with sufficient resources. Secondly, I don’t think any sincere vegan is unaware of the fact that when they buy vegetables from a supermarket they support the whole supermarket chain not just the vegetable section of their local branch (although supermarkets tend to stuck up on the stuff people actually buy, not on non sellers). At any rate, veganism is definitely a step in the right direction, and changes that last always come about gradually.

Yes, it’s all connected. But does that say anything about the moral wrongness of the brutal exploitation and mass slaughtering of animals? Does it devalue one’s decision not to participate in such cruel and unsustainable practices? And is it not relevant that the vegan sections in supermarkets have expanded to a point where there ate now all-vegan supermarkets? What does this say about our consumer behavior and our attitude towards food, the environment, and ‘farm animals’? Is there really no moral difference between buying the corpse of a tortured chicken and buying chickpeas, even when it’s from the same store? I would argue that there quite clearly is, but I would also concede that that difference is even bigger when said chickpeas come from an organic small-scale farm that has no connection to the meat, egg, or dairy industry. However, for most people, the supermarket is where they get their food from. As for the bees and wasps that pollenate plants (which they would continue to do even if humans went extinct): unlike Gelderloos’s aforementioned examples, the relationship between fruit trees (and, by extension, the humans who plant

because all change starts with a change of perspective, and veganism requires and entails a fundamental change of perspective as far as our food choices and their consequences on the environment, ourselves, and other animals are concerned. Ideas rule the world, and there's nothing "more powerful than an idea whose time has come," as Victor Hugo put it.

Communities often form around ideas. The vegan community is just one example. People start to educate themselves, get together, and exchange experiences. Most importantly, however, they bring these ideas into the public arena, sharing them with a growing number of potentially likeminded people. If their arguments are convincing, this may result in more and more subscribers. Such idea-based communities may even turn into full-on social movements, changing even more people's perspectives and gaining more influence, and so on. In a free market economy, the marketplace has to react to changes in consumer behavior: shops stock up on vegan alternatives and vegan restaurants spring up in our cities. That's a good thing because it makes it easier for more people to change their minds about the presumed necessity of 'animal products' and discover veganism. In terms of animal rights, this may consequently create a moral atmosphere—an air of acceptance, if you will—that allows radical animal liberationists to operate more safely because the ideals they fight for are well understood and supported by a considerable portion of the general public. Plus, it puts pressure on political decision makers to also consider the interests of non human animals (or at least those of their potential voters). I grant that there is quite a bit of idealism in this view, but it's still more realistic than Gelderloos's approach. Down with Western civilization —and then what?

Gelderloos seems to be on to something when he writes "true veganism is impossible for anyone who lives within capitalist society" (13). He explains: "Most fruits and vegetables are pollinated with bees and wasps [as if that had any signifi-

both these concepts. No victim voluntarily enters into a deadly 'relationship'—if anything, it spends most of its energy trying to avoid doing so—, nor does it benefit from such a relationship in any way, shape, or form—because it will end up dead. I wonder if Gelderloos would use the same terms if the situation were reversed. The concept of speciesism, too, seems to cause some confusion: "If human morality must stand above natural relations such as the one between predator and prey, then it is hypocrisy to talk of speciesism" (8). How so? Speciesism means that people discriminate between members of different species of animal—between a cow and a dog, say⁷—based purely on species membership (rather than looking at the facts, e.g., that their intelligence, their emotional capacity, and their ability to suffer are virtually the same as a toddler's). Of course "human morality must stand above natural relations such as the one between predator and prey"—that's the whole point of it! Besides, our moral sense is just as natural as a predator's hunting instinct, and the same is true of our ability to refine and recalibrate it (e.g., torture and capital punishment have been on the decline for centuries).

As for Gelderloos's assertion that "Killing need not be an act of negation"; no it's not an act of negation, nor is it, in political terms, an act of domination. What it is, is an act of complete objectification; in fact, it's the ultimate act of objectification; it's total, absolute, and final. Nothing expresses disregard and disrespect for another being's desires and interests, for its individuality, more clearly than killing it (euthanasia is the obvious exception). By killing animals, we turn them into objects of our desire. Lions have no choice but to kill—but we do. It is this choice that makes all the difference and the killing of an animal a matter of ethics and morality. Plus, we have

⁷ The psychologist Melanie Joy calls the psychology behind this kind of discrimination carnism. I recommend her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*.

the ability to put ourselves in other living beings' shoes; we are capable of empathy. Not making use of that ability is, to a large extent, a choice (of course we are also victims of the traditions and belief systems we grow up in, but, ultimately, we are the ones reinforcing and perpetuating these narratives in our own lives). I really don't think that there is such a thing as 'respectful killing,' let alone 'humane slaughter.' Not only are such notions complete myths created and perpetuated to justify animal slaughter; they are contradictions in terms.

Gelderloos even goes one step further: "[...] I find the moral against killing to be utterly repulsive. I think it's a disgusting disconnection from the natural world and our animal selves. Killing can be a beautiful thing" (8). Needless to say my jaw dropped when I read this. What's so shocking about this view is that it completely ignores the victim's interests (speaking of reciprocity...). It even portrays the violation of another being's most basic interest (survival) as an act from which pleasure is to be derived. I'm sorry, but this borders on psychopathy. "The right to life," Gelderloos goes on to argue, "is meaningless without a political authority to enforce it." Is it? Isn't it something we can all agree on based on how we would feel if we were to suddenly find ourselves on the other side of the equation? That is to say, there is of course no such thing as a natural or 'God-given' right to life per se—that's not how the world works—, but the right not to be murdered at random is absolutely essential for any civilized community to work. It's a social contract that we enter into for our own good. And it indisputably makes life better for all of us.⁸ Here's a suggestion: let's apply this right more generously and also grant it to non-human animals.

⁸ If you're going to object that people wouldn't murder each other if it weren't for capitalism let me stop you right there. People have always killed each other. The rate of violence has actually gone down over the past few centuries and decades (cf. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*).

an animal. Besides, what's natural about buying a hot dog? And what about our own nature? We're natural beings, biological survival machines; we have sexual, social, and moral instincts, we compete for status, territory, and sexual partners. By necessity (and almost by definition), "human and natural spheres" will always "touch." However, natural selection also gave us a highly developed brain that allows us to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, to reassess and reconsider our decisions and behaviorisms, to make fairly accurate predictions about the future, to understand natural phenomena and our own origins, to develop moral concepts such as fairness and justice, to empathize with others beyond the limits of kinship, to grant each other rights and liberties, to become civilized, to transcend things like racism, sexism, homophobia, and perhaps even speciesism. Looked at in this light, the state of nature that Gelderloos would like to see humanity regress to is actually not natural at all and, in my mind, not desirable. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously—and I believe rightly—described it: "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death: and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."¹¹

Needless to say, Gelderloos finds the whole idea of ethical consumerism, that is, informed consumers boycotting unethical products and buying more ethically sourced ones instead, ludicrous (he refers to it as "a kind of mirage" and "a fundamental democratic myth")—and to a certain extent, he's right.

The interconnectedness of modern markets, "the interlaced nature of industrial [sic] society," makes it next to impossible to 'vote with our money' in a way that would bring about significant changes. However, ethical consumerism still makes sense

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on the other hand, believed that "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains." There's a bit of truth in both positions, but I'm leaning more towards Hobbes's.

systems experience reality and to base our moral choices on a scientific understanding of these similarities (and differences).

What's wrong with pain? Well, for one thing, it's quite unpleasant. But pain is also useful. It protects us from serious harm by making us move away from, avoid, or attack whatever causes it. But what if we can't do anything about it? Pain ceases to be useful, we suffer needlessly.¹⁰ "I find it hard to understand someone," writes Gelderloos, "who does not comprehend that pain is natural, necessary, and good." Yes, but it's only necessary and good because we are programmed to avoid it (thus protecting ourselves from further harm). In and of itself, it has no value (unless you're a masochist), Pain is generally undesirable. Knowing that other animals' capacity to feel pain is similar to ours and that they do not want to suffer either renders it deeply immoral to deliberately inflict pain on them, especially when we can avoid it. This realization has absolutely nothing to do with what Gelderloos refers to as "alienation from nature," "human supremacy" or the "depersonalization and degradation of animals"—on the contrary. We understand that similar creatures suffer in similar ways and that their suffering is nothing we ourselves would wish to experience. We are all (except for sociopaths) capable of mentally putting ourselves in the shoes of others (the interchangeable perspective approach), of emphasizing with our fellow vertebrates; let's not pretend we're not.

Gelderloos fears that ethical veganism produces "human and natural spheres that ideally do not touch at all" (11). Is violence against animals really the only way in which a meaningful interaction with nature is possible? I'm sure every reader can think of at least one instance where they interacted with the natural world without killing or milking

¹⁰ As it says in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "Of pain you could wish only one thing: that it should stop. Nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain."

Gelderloos then goes on to say that "The Western tragic ideal, which is inextricable from the capitalist war against nature, presents death as a bad thing, and apparently so do some vegans, but to the rest of us [?], this only appears as philosophical immaturity" (9). What we have here is both a romanticization of nature and a glorification of death. Apparently, Gelderloos regards any form of civilized morality as a "disconnection from the natural world," especially as far as "the moral against killing" is concerned. Veganism, he claims, "alienate[s] us from nature" because it "attempt[s] to separate 'natural' from 'cultural' forms of eating." Well, by the same logic, almost exactly the same can be said about technology, medicine, clothing, housing, etc. These things are good for us, but they are also cultural and therefore unnatural. But 'natural' doesn't automatically mean 'good.' Rape is completely natural, for instance. Does that make it "a beautiful thing" too?

Nature is cruel and value-free. Is that really what we want for our communities? I doubt it. Moreover, human culture is an expression of our nature, which is to say, it helps us deal with the human condition, with our 'thrownness,' as the philosopher Martin Heidegger put it. We are equipped with reason, a strong sense of empathy, and with the knowledge that all our efforts to protect our lives will ultimately fail. But in the meantime we are essentially free to create our own meanings and values. Advanced morals are an essential part of being human, and moral progress is crucial for cultural, societal, and civilizational progress. And no, the idea that "death is a bad thing" is not a "Western tragic ideal." It's pretty much universal, actually. That's why humans invented religion: as a delusional attempt to overcome death, to become immortal.

For the individual, death is almost always "a bad thing", it's the ultimate disaster. Again: no living organism wants to die; that's the whole point of being a living organism (well, that and procreating). Sure, death is, in some sense, a part of life—lots

of bad things are. But does that mean we shouldn't try to avoid it?

Gelderloos doesn't believe in this kind of choice, of course. He even ridicules the idea: "It would be more logically coherent to argue, also irrefutably, that eating anything is a choice, and given human involvement in so many world problems, we should stop eating altogether." Really? Is starving ourselves to death really the only alternative to raping the earth and torturing animals? Again, Gelderloos creates a false dichotomy. Our goal has to be to live well while doing the least harm possible, that is, to reduce the net suffering and generally improve the quality of life on this planet. We all need to eat organic matter (breatharianism is not really an option, is it?).

I think that's understood. But it makes a big ecological and moral difference whether we eat plant matter or cows.

Gelderloos correctly concludes that this "brings up the question of eating plants." The main argument as to why it's okay to eat plants but not animals, he says, is that the former don't possess central nervousness "and therefore can feel no pain" (10). He truthfully objects that "neither do several members of the animal kingdom" (such as clams). So what? Most of the animals eaten by humans, especially mammals, have highly developed nervous systems and advanced emotional and social lives. Clams are not really the issue here. I would argue that there is a continuum of moral responsibility depending on a species' degree of sentience and its ability to feel pain, fear, stress, and other, more complex emotions. Gelderloos's view, it seems, is infected with moral relativism, a terrible disease mostly found on the Left (unfortunately).

In this context, Gelderloos raises the question of personhood. I believe that it is rational to grant highly developed animals the legal status of non-human persons, but the idea Gelderloos defends, namely that "all living things have personhood," is the purest relativism. Differences matter. It's true that we know very little about the lives of plants, but it should

be obvious that an avocado is fundamentally different from a pig. The difference between pigs and humans, on the other hand, is tiny (in terms of biology). They truly are our cousins. But Gelderloos argues that "[...] plants interact with their environment in a way that could encompass feeling. They invariably display rejection or attraction to different stimuli, depending on the consequence of those stimuli for their wellbeing." Yes, they are alive (what Gelderloos describes are the minimal requirements for something to qualify as a living being), but that's not the same as being sentient (that is, being able to experience the world subjectively). At any rate, the sheer amount of plants we need to kill to feed animals before we can consume their flesh, milk, or eggs renders the discussion whether or not it is morally sound to eat plants but not animals pointless. If you want to save plants, go vegan!

"Exactly why a living being should be valued based on what comes down to its supposed similarity to human beings is something that vegans should have to explain," states Gelderloos. Okay, here we go: Concepts such as happiness, suffering, freedom, and captivity make no sense except in the context of sentience and consciousness, which are developmental stages that require a certain kind of nervous system, namely the kind that is governed by a brain. The more highly developed the brain, the greater the possible range of happiness and suffering.⁹ To say that plants feel no pain is not the same as to say that they do not react to stimuli, or that they aren't alive, but if we want to talk about pleasure and pain in a way that is actually meaningful and useful in this debate, we have to understand these things as features of central nervousness and consciousness. It is only rational to appreciate the similar ways in which animals with similar brains and nervous

⁹ A counterargument here could be that sometimes not understanding the reason why we suffer makes it worse. I would argue, however, that it takes a certain degree of self-awareness to truly suffer.