

In Search of Veganism—2

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Let My Creatures Go!

The present stage in the development of The Vegan Society is characterized by a centering of attention upon the implications of the question, “What is veganism?”

This is an attempt to discover the principle whose label is “veganism,” and to suggest a tentative form of words which as a short definition closely describes it. It should be held in mind that the views expressed are the writer's, and in no way commit the Society or any other member.

The letter in *The Vegetarian Messenger* of July, 1943, which started the correspondence culminating in the founding of The Vegan Society in November, 1944, was concerned with the moral and compassionate case against the use of dairy produce by vegetarians. Of the first twenty-five members of The Vegan Society it was written, “So far as we are aware, every member of our group has discarded the use of dairy produce for humanitarian reasons. ... We will not accept that adequate nutrition need violate conscience.”*

Vegan thought developed rapidly. Commodities manufactured from animals joined food from animals as being “non-vegan.” There was an early tendency to get at the roots of the relationship between man and the animals, to deal with a cause rather than its almost uncountable symptoms. *There is no evidence that veganism was fundamentally concerned with anything other than the man-plus-animal relationship.*

In the earlier article, quotations from the first numbers of *The Vegan News* indicated that the nature of this relationship was veganism's paramount concern. Other literature reinforces this view. “An Address on Veganism” (Donald Watson, 1947), contains phrases such as the following: “...the right approach to the problem of animal emancipation” ... “to be true emancipators of animals” ... “The vegan renounces the superstition that continued human existence depends upon the exploitation of these creatures,” and “The time has come for us boldly to renounce the idea that we have the right to exploit animals.” Similar ideas are embodied in the “Manifesto” on veganism and other writings. The thread that runs through the literature on this point is a conviction that for the sake of both man and his fellow creatures, the animals must one day be freed from his exploitations.

If vegan thought was running true, veganism is therefore a movement of reform. If this is accepted, it is but one step in simple logic to assert that The Vegan Society is at the earliest

* “The Vegan News,” No. 1, November, 1944. Described as “The quarterly journal of the non-dairy vegetarians.”

possible moment in duty bound to define veganism, and so state the over-all reform it wishes to see achieved. It is equally in duty bound to *confine its basic energies to pursuing that reform*. The position in which the Society finds itself — without any constitutionally agreed over-all purpose binding upon its members — is accounted for solely by the nature of its development to date. In this sense, the Society is still in a state of pre-natal growth. But this is not satisfactory as a permanency, for undefined reform is a contradiction in terms.

It is possible to subtract from the foregoing a number of observations which lead to a definition: (1) veganism is a reform; (2) the impelling element is compassion for animals arising out of the treatment meted out to them by man; (3) its fundamental concern is with the meeting point between the world of man and the world of the animals; (4) its existence presupposes maladjustment at that point; (5) its purpose must be the correction of that maladjustment; (6) the maladjustment is intimately connected with man's use of animals — more precisely, with his habit of acting as a parasite upon living creatures who cannot successfully resist his will. Any definition of veganism must contain these six observations and violate none of them.

A form of words which meets these requirements is that veganism is the principle of the abolition of the exploitation of animals by man. The positive aspect of this negative (non-exploitation) approach is the granting of freedom — in one word, *emancipation*. Veganism may therefore be defined as “*the principle of the emancipation of the animals from exploitation by man.*”*

But although such a definition satisfies the observations set out above, it is essential to discover whether it meets the requirements of wisdom as well as logic. It must therefore be measured against a general philosophical argument. The broad demand which wisdom makes upon a man is that he shall free himself from the chains which bind him to his less noble desires and inhibit his ascent to higher standpoints, wider vision, and consequent happiness. There are a number of tests by which his efforts to free himself may be judged, and one of the most stringent is his conduct towards those *over whom he has power*. It is applied in an acute form at the point where his world meets the world of the animals, for over them he has dominion.

His conduct at this point reveals tendencies which are strongly self-indulgent at the expense of the creatures. There is a widespread failure to understand that animals have rights *relatively* equal to his. His exploitations result in a needless curtailment of natural freedom over a wide front and *inevitably end in one sort of slaughter house or another*. This is true of all his exploitations, from the backyard hen to the great beef and dairy herds. (Although some horses end their days in “homes of rest,” this could apply to a few only. Most are killed for commodities, feeding stuffs or human consumption. Again, worn-out cows from the dairy herds are not pensioned off in clover fields).

The full indictment against exploitation — the traffic in flesh, hunting, trapping, vivisection, and so on and on — need not be stated here. What must be faced, however, is the undoubted fact that apart from granting to animals the right — and the facilities — to go back to nature, no solvent exists for the conditions which the indictment reveals.

* Emancipation: the state of being set free. Exploitation: the act of using for selfish purposes. Animals: sentient animate creatures other than man.

Because emancipation would at one and the same moment release the animals from bondage and man from being their parasite, because by putting it into effect man would free himself from some of the chains which bind him to his less noble desires, it fulfils the demands of wisdom as well as logic. There are also at least three further striking indications that this is so. The first two emerge from a broad view of the general trend of human evolution. A movement to emancipate animals may be seen to be following naturally and historically upon the movement to emancipate human slaves. It thus possesses the aesthetic and significant attribute of evolutionary continuity. Secondly, it is far from being outside the bounds of probability that the “wrong turning” taken by man somewhere in his evolution was the enslavement (“domestication”) of animals, a proposition abundantly argued by the American writer, Henry Bailey Stevens.* Thirdly, emancipation goes straight to the cancer at the heart of the existing man-animal relationship, and would remove at one stroke the single cause from which *all* the sorry symptoms arise.

A point which should perhaps be made clear at once is that emancipation of the animals does not mean their extinction. On the contrary, it means a return to their own freely-discovered place within nature — a return to balance, sanity, and naturalness. For some animals this may well be one of companionship with man, for man is part of nature. For some it may be a return to wilder life. For many it would mean a gradual end to the abnormal shapes, functions and diseases which “domestication” has artificially manufactured out of original wild types. For all it would mean an end of excessive and unnatural breeding. The ancient bondage at the hand of man would at last be over.

It remains to be said that if as a Society we become satisfied that emancipation is our purpose, and if, as we must, we then insert that discovery into our written Constitution, it will not mean that we cannot continue to take a lively interest in such things as scientific or symbiotic trends in diet, in compost gardening and soil management, and many other related matters. But it will mean that like Kipling's ship we shall have “found ourselves.” We shall have discovered our destiny. The crystallisation spoken of in the earlier article will have taken place, and the thrust of our efforts will be guided and concentrated into a purposeful drive toward the shining, if still distant, star of a major world reform.

Derived from issuu.com/vegan_society/docs/the-vegan-autumn-1949
Prepared June 2014 by Nathan Schneider of candidhominid.com

* “The Recovery of Culture.” Henry Bailey Stevens, with foreword by Gerald Heard. Harper and Brothers, New York, 1949.