

The Weight of Veganism,
by Corey Wrenn

Corey Wrenn is an adjunct professor in the Liberal Arts Department at Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design in Denver, Colorado, and an instructor in the Sociology Department at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

After having been vegetarian since I was thirteen, I went vegan at age seventeen, back when my metabolism was high and weight was never an issue. I am five feet, nine inches, and at the time, I was a slender 130 pounds. Perhaps it was the “Freshman 15,” or the fact that I was consuming more carbohydrates than I had previously been, but by the end of college, I was up to 145. And, now that I’m getting close to thirty, I’ve been hovering between 155 and 160, and my brother jokingly asks if I’m pregnant. So I never really equated veganism with eating disorders; such a notion was opposite to my own experience.

However, in graduate school, I befriended another student who was “vegan.” By this time, animal-rights activism had become central to my life and my research, and I found that my friend and I were often butting heads. If she was vegan, why did she just buy those leather boots? Why was she still using nonvegan makeup? Both of us being single, we often went to the bars together on the weekends. But there was something not quite right about my friend: within a couple of hours, she would become so heavily intoxicated that she had trouble standing. Before I knew it, I would have to walk her home, making sure she didn’t fall down (which she often did) and that she was safe. I suspected it was because she was a petite woman and the alcohol got to her quickly.

However, one night after the bars closed, we stopped by a 7-Eleven to buy snacks for the walk home. I got a bag of potato chips, but my friend got a

taquito. A taquito? Well, the truth had come out. She wasn’t vegan for ethical reasons, she was vegan, as she put it, to manage her weight. This meant she “cheated” from time to time. And the reason she would get so dangerously drunk on our excursions? She was running many miles every day and also starving herself. Many of those nights, her only calorie intake would be shots of liquor and pints of beer.

I am very aware of the stereotypes against vegans: we are supposed to be pale, thin, and sickly. When I am accused of such, I often jokingly grab my gut and give it a wobble, “Do I look malnourished to you?” It usually gets a laugh. But I was seriously never aware of any eating disorder associated with veganism until my experiences with my friend and later my research into vegan and vegetarian literature. Looking back on those experiences today, my perspective is distinctly more critical.

Considering that our animal-rights movement invests so much of its resources and claims making into pushing veganism as a means of achieving a healthy and attractive weight, it really is no surprise to me that some might adopt veganism for the wrong reasons. When groups like PETA, which is the face of animal rights, post billboards near Florida beaches depicting overweight women and exclaiming, “Save the whales!” body image absolutely becomes the central issue. Nothing good can come of promoting veganism through the ridicule of women’s bodies. Alternatively, when PETA insists on promoting its messages through the display of naked, sexualized female bodies, again, veganism is associated with an unrealistic body image that can seemingly be achieved if one simply goes vegan.

So while I often counter criticisms about the inadequacies of the vegan diet by assuring the querent, “I actually *gained* weight after going vegan!” I do have to consider how modern media images of sexualized, thin, youthful women are impacting a generation of women who feel they need to achieve that ideal. When groups like PETA promote veganism as a means of achieving it, I really have cause for concern. While veganism, for me, is completely unrelated to healthy living and diet (I am an ethical abolitionist vegan), I really cannot rule out the role of mainstream animal-rights organizations in actively manipulating female insecurities to promote their message. Not only was it dangerous for my friend, but it is disastrous to womankind in general. But also, a serious call for equality and justice is being lost in the message. Objectifying women in hopes of ending the objectification of nonhumans can only fail. It can only cause more suffering. Veganism is deeply rooted in ethical considerations for vulnerable populations, but this is silenced in distractions from women’s advocates and nutritionists. This recent body image co-optation, actively cultivated by manipulative animal-rights organizations and supported by naive and desperate young women, is unfortunate indeed.