

Can We "Have Our Cow and Eat Her, Too?"

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In this post-debate blog, RAC member Dr Corey Wrenn defends the vegan abolitionist perspective.

On Friday 15 November 2022, I participated in a debate on how to achieve a vegan world with my good colleague and philosopher, Josh Milburn. Milburn makes the case that, in order to reduce animal suffering, some concessions should be made from the vegan abolitionist position. This includes the perpetuation of animal-based foodways that include oysters, insects, and other species with less understood degrees of sentience. Some domesticated species, for that matter, should be maintained for human purposes, provided these animals are provided with a good quality of life. According to Milburn, perhaps it is not really necessary to liberate other animals in a vegan world. Sentience matters, but only for some species and only to an extent when determining the life outcomes for non-human animals.

My response can be boiled down to the following:

The weaponisation of science and naturalism to rank the worth of marginalised groups, dictate their moral worth, and control their lives (usually in highly exploitative ways) is a classic project of Western, white supremacist patriarchal colonial conquest. The entitlement to other living beings, both in reality and symbolically, should be challenged.

Science

Fish, for instance, are often believed not to be sentient, when more and more research demonstrates that they are. Even for so-called "higher" species, such as cows and pigs, it was not until the European Union's 2009 Lisbon Treaty that they were recognised as sentient. Many people outside of policymaking and academia, for that matter, remain unconvinced that animals other than humans, cats, and dogs have full sentience.

Despite all the good science has offered society, there remain a number of limitations that must be considered with regard to morality. The sentience of non-human animals is still under debate, such that using sentience as a determining factor in non-human animals' right to life and liberty is problematic.

Interpretations of sentience, for that matter, are deeply cultural and not always in line with objective data or even common sense.

For the most vulnerable of species, insects and molluscs, their sentience remains majorly under-researched. Their use in vivisection suggests a degree of shared sentience, however. We also know that many insect species like bees and ants live communally and exhibit prosocial behaviour, which indicate a higher level of cognition than is usually attributed to them. With trillions of lives on the line in the burgeoning insect protein industry, extreme caution is needed.

Feminism

Indeed, the sentience and cognitive life of women, people of colour, people with disabilities, queer folks, and other marginalised human groups has been (and continues to be) devalued, underappreciated, and used as a rationale for commodification and unequal treatment. Feminism would thus underscore the problem of employing science and able-bodied norms as means for determining who matters.

The notion that bodies of any species could be controlled for the benefit of the privileged is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian patriarchal tradition. Evidence can be found in the use of rationality as a weapon of destruction and the deployment of Western ideas of difference and categorisation to justify violence. The archaic macho idea that animal sacrifice is needed to maintain and protect a society is also evidence of this tradition. Patriarchy manufactures a sense of inevitable conflict; feminism reminds us that we can identify communal, life-affirming means to care for one another irrespective of differences. The highly masculinised and Westernised institution of science is not necessary to determine whose lives are worthy.

Feminism would also take issue with Milburn's desire to perpetuate domestication for human industries. Some animals, he argues, can be treated as workers with some form of labour rights. But can domesticated (or "domesecrated" in the words of sociologist David Nibert) species truly consent? And who designs the contract? Women, let us recall, were offered a similar deal by the patriarchy: stay bound, obedient, and hard-working in the domestic sphere, and men will provide the food, shelter, and security. The deal was hardly a fair one. Domesticity brought with it dependency, lowered status, and heightened vulnerability to male violence. It is a contract generations of feminists have been struggling to break.

Domestication itself is a form of psychological and corporal control. It creates a cognitive dependency by eliminating a species' ability to survive outside of human institutions. Dogs will lick the hand of their vivisector as they are sliced open, so extreme is their human-manufactured psychological loyalty. Horses will continue to pull carts or carry riders to the point of collapse. Cows will walk of their own volition through pools of blood straight into the killing chute.

Domestication creates a physical dependency by manipulating bodies to serve human needs, manipulations that reduce the quality and length of life for nonhumans. Chickens will fall victim to debilitating and lethal reproductive problems, for instance, no matter how "kind" their living arrangements. Pigs, turkeys, and other animals have been so genetically altered that, if allowed to live beyond the age at which the "meat" industry usually kills them, they will begin to collapse under their own weight, hooves splitting, bones fracturing, etc.

Domestication is the worst kind of violence.

Common Sense

Although "common sense" can often reflect the interests of those in power, I do think that there is a core, intuitive understanding that other living beings have an interest in what happens to them and desire to experience pleasure, well-being, and freedom. They have a basic desire to avoid suffering and death as well I really don't need science or feminism to tell me that. Domestication, insect farming, and lab-grown meat kill. These systems rely on violence and are shaped by a logic of oppression. Although capitalist enterprises and masculine norms may argue otherwise, killing other animals or symbolically oppressing them to satiate human wants is not necessary.

A wide variety of plant-based foods is already in existence, much of which successfully mimics the flavour and texture of flesh. Unlike lab-grown meat, no one is intentionally killed to create vegan alternatives. It is also worth remembering that plant-based eating is the diet of the global majority, or at least it was. The large-scale switch to animal agriculture is a direct consequence of Western Colonialism. This act of global violence was not only responsible for spreading speciesism, but also in destroying ecosystems, subjugating peoples of the world, disrupting traditional foodways, and introducing Western disease-promoting diets. Animal proteins derived from laboratories or insect farms will not circumvent this bodily violence on peoples living in the wake of colonial terrorism. Neither will the perpetuation of domestication, which is nothing more than the perpetuation of the idea that bodies can be controlled for their own good by a more powerful group (which inevitably stands to benefit from that control).

Food, culture and taste are malleable. Foodways have shifted dramatically with colonisation, modernisation, globalisation, and Westernisation. Only in recent years has animal protein become a major part of the human diet (even in Western cultures, animal protein only started to be heavily consumed in the late 20th century). Eating animals is only a recent cultural turn. It can be reversed. Why not focus on popularising low-violence foods instead of aggravating a new modern trend that causes so much suffering for non-human animals?

I suspect that these high-tech solutions popularised by Milburn and other welfare advocates pander to Capitalism and the powers that be. Capitalism may dazzle academics, activists, and charities with the funding it can provide for compromised anti-vegan positions, but it will never be at the heart of a vegan revolution. Only when the anti-speciesism movement begins to challenge the ubiquity of Capitalism in our movement strategies and seriously invest in promoting veganism as an ethic and practice will progress be made.

This article was reposted from Dr Corey Wrenn's blog with permission. You can access the original blog [here](#).

Dr Josh Milburn is also a member of the Research Advisory Committee. His forthcoming book, which details the arguments that Corey has responded to in this blog, is available [here](#).

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