Being a bad vegan

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\section*{Abstract}

According to The Betoota Advocate (Parker), a CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) paper has recently established that “it takes roughly seven minutes on average for a vegan to tell you that they’re vegan” (qtd. in Harrington et al. 135). For such a statement to have currency as a joke means that it is grounded in a shared experience of being vegan on the one hand, and of encountering vegans on the other. Why should vegans feel such a need to justify themselves? I recognise the observation as being true of me, and this article is one way to explore this perspective: writing to find out what I currently only intuit. As Richardson notes (516), writing is “a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable” (qtd. in Wall 151).

Autoethnography, the qualitative research methodology used for this article, is etymologically derived from Greek to indicate a process for exploring the self (ethnos—nation, tribe, people, class) using a shared, understood, approach ("graphy" from graphia, writing). It relies upon critical engagement with the personal and the cultural "ethnos" —the "tribe," "nation," "people," "class") using a shared, understood, approach ("graphy" from graphia, writing). It relies upon critical engagement with the personal and the cultural. Autoethnographic investigation (Riggins; Sparkes) reported here interrogates the experience of "being judged" as a vegan: firstly, by myself; secondly, by other vegans; and ultimately by the wider society. As Ellis notes, autoethnography is "research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection" (xii).

Introspection is important because researchers’ stories of their observations are interwoven with self-reflexive critique and analysis: "Illustrative materials are meant to give a sense of what the observed world is really like, while the researcher’s interpretations are meant to represent a more detached conceptualization of that reality" (Strauss and Corbin 22). Leaving aside Gans’s view that this form of enquiry represents the "climax of the preoccupation with self […] an autobiography written by sociologists" (542), an autoethnography generally has the added advantage of protecting against Glendon and Stanton’s concern that interpretive studies "are often of too short a duration to be able to provide sufficiently large samples of behaviour" (209). In my case, I have twelve years of experience of identifying as a vegan to draw upon.

My experience is that being vegan is a contested activity with a significant range of variation that partly reflects the different initial motivations for adopting this increasingly mainstream identity. Greenbaum notes that "ethical vegans differentiate between those who ‘eat’ vegan (health vegans) and those who ‘live’ vegan (ethical vegans)"; going on to suggest that these differences create "hierarchies and boundaries between vegans" (131). As Greenbaum acknowledges, there is sometimes a need to balance competing priorities: "an environmental vegan […] may purchase leather products over polyvinyl chloride (PVC), thinking that leather is a better choice for the environment" (130). Harrington et al. similarly critique vegan motivations as encompassing "a selfish pursuit for those who cared for other beings (animals)" to "a concern about impacts that affect all humans (environment), and an interest mostly in the self (individual health …)" (144). Wright identifies a fourth group of vegans: those searching for a means of dietary inclusivity (2). I have known Orthodox Jewish households that have adopted veganism because it is compatible with keeping Kosher, while some strict Hindus are vegan and some observant Muslims may also follow suit, to avoid meat that is not Halal certified.

\section*{The Challenge of the Everyday}

Although my initial vegan promptings were firmly at the selfish end of an altruism spectrum, my experience is that motivation is not static. Being a vegan for any reason increasingly primes awareness of more altruistic motivations "at the intersection of a diversity of concerns […] promoting" a spread and expansion of meaning to view food choices holistically (Harrington et al. 144). Even so, everyday life offers a range of temptations and challenges that require constant juggling and, sometimes, a string of justifications: to oneself, and to others. I identify as a bit of a bad vegan, and not simply because I embrace the possibility that "honey is a gray area" (Greenbaum, quoting her participant Jason, 139). I’m also flexible around wine, for example, and don’t ask too many questions about whether the wine I drink is made using milk, or egg-shells or even (yuk!) fish bladders. The point is, there are an infinite number of acid tests as to what constitutes "a real vegan," encouraging introspection (4). This aligns with Singer and Mason’s argument, however, that vegans should avoid worrying about "trivial infractions of the ethical guidelines […] Personal purity isn’t really the issue. Not supporting animal abuse – and persuading others not to support it – is. Giving people the impression that it is virtually impossible to be vegan doesn’t help animals at all" (Singer and Mason 258–9).

If I were to accept a definition of non-vegan, possibly because I have a leather band among other infractions, that would feel inauthentic. The term "vegan" helpfully labels my approach to food and drink. Others also find it useful as a shorthand for dietary preferences (except for the small but significant minority who muddle veganism with being gluten free). From the point of view of dietary prohibitions I’m a particularly strict vegan, apart from honey. I know people who make exceptions for line-caught fish, or the eggs from garden-roaming happy chooks, but I don’t. I increasingly understand the perspectives of those who have a more radical conception of veganism than I do, however: whose vision and understanding is that "behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meal takes. The ‘absent referent’ is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product […] keeping” something from being serves as having been someone" (Adams 14). The concept of the global suffering of animals inherent in the figures: “31.1 billion each year, 85.2 million each day, 3.5 million each hour, 59,170 each minute” (Adams dedication) is appalling; as well as being an under-representation of the current situation since the globe has had almost two further decades of population growth and rising living standards.

Whatever the motivations, it’s easy to imagine that the different branches of veganism have more in common than divides them. Being a vegan of any kind helps someone identify with other variations upon the theme. For example, even though my views on animal rights did not motivate my choice to become vegan, once I stopped eating meat, other things naturally came to mind: to be a vegan, I needed to be aware of the suffering animals go through, the most extraordinary atrocities on a global scale in treating animals as disposable commodities without rights or feelings. The large-scale production of what we like to term “meat eating justification”, reflecting a 1992 United States study that showed, of all people reporting that they were vegetarian, 68% were women and 32% men (Adams’s work links the unthinking, normative exploitation of animals to the unthinking, normative exploitation of women, a situation so aligned that it is often expressed through the use of a common metaphor: “meat” becomes a term to express women’s oppression, used equally by patriarchy and feminists, who say that women are becoming “meat”. (2002, 39). Rothgerber further interrogates the relationship between masculinity and meat by exploring gender in relation to strategies for “meat eating justification”, reflecting a 1992 United States study that showed, of all people reporting that they were vegetarian, 68% were women and 32% men (Smart, 1995). Rothgerber’s argument is that:

Following a vegetarian diet or deliberately reducing meat intake violates the spirit of Western hegemonic masculinity, with its socially prescribed norms of stoicism, practicality, seeking dominance, and being powerful, strong, tough, robust and invulnerable […] Such individuals have cast aside a relatively hidden role privilege—the freedom and ability to eat without criticism and scrutiny, something that studies have shown women lack. (371)
Noting that "to raise concerns about the injustices of factory farming and to feel compelled by them would seem emotional, weak and sensitive—feminine characteristics" (366), Rothberger sets the scene for me to note two items of popular culture which achieved cut-through in my personal life. The evidence for this is, in terms of all the pro-vegan materials I encounter, these were two of a small number that I shared on social media. In line with Rothberger’s observations, both are oppositional to hegemonic masculinity:

one represents a feminised, mother and child exchange that captures the moment when a child realises the "absent referent" of the dead animal in the octopus on his plate—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Srl0J3xa29E;

while the other is a sentimentalised and sympathetic recording of cattle luxuriating in their first taste of pastureland after a long period of confinement—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huT5_:Boy_U.

Seeing cows behaving like pets does call attention to the artificial distinction between “companion animals” and other animals. As Cole and Stewart note, “the naming of other animals is useful for human beings, while it is dangerous, and frequently lethal, for other animals. This is because the words we use to name other animals are saturated with common sense knowledge claims about those animals that legitimate their habitual use for humans” (13). Thus a cat, in Western culture, has a very different life trajectory to a cow. Adams notes the contrary case where the companion animal is used as a referent for a threatened human:

Child sexual abusers often use threats and/or violence against companion animals to achieve compliance from their victims. Batterers harm or kill a companion animal as a warning to their partner that she could be next; as a way of further separating her from meaningfulness; to demonstrate his power and her powerlessness. (Adams 57)

For children who are still at a stage where animals are creatures of fascination and potential friends, who may be growing up with Charlotte’s Web (White) or Peter Rabbit (Potter), the mental gymnastics of suspending identification with these fellow creatures are harder because empathy and imagination are more active and the ingrained habit of eating without thinking has not had so long to develop. Indeed, children often understand domestic animals as “members of the family”, as illustrated by an interview with Kani, a 10-year-old participant in one of my research projects. “In the absence of her extended family overseas, Kani adds her pets to [the list of] those with whom she shares her family life: ‘And my mum and my uncle and then our cat Dobby. I named it [for Harry Potter’s house elf] …and the goldfish. The goldfish are Twinkle, Glitter, Glow and Bobby’” (Green and Stevenson). Such perceptions may well filter through to children having a different understanding of animals-as-food, even though Cole and Stewart note that “children enter into an adult culture habituated to [the] banal conceptualization of other animals according to their [dis]utilities” (21).

Evidence-Based Veganism

Those M/C Journal readers who know me personally will understand that one reason why I embrace the "bad vegan" label, is that I’m no more obviously a pin-up for healthy veganism than I am for ethical or environmental veganism. In particular, my BMI (Body Mass Index) is significantly outside the "healthy" range. Even so, I attribute a dramatic change in my capacity for stamina-based activity to my embrace of veganism. A high-speed recap of the evidence would include: in 2009 I embarked on a 12km Great Southern Run (revisited in 2014, and 2017); in 2014 I cycled from Surfers Paradise to Noosa—embarrassingly less successfully than in my 2009 venture, but even so; in 2016 I completed the Oxfarm 50km in 24 hours (plus a half hour, if I’m honest); and in 2017 I completed the 227km Portuguese Camino; in 2018 I jogged an average of over 3km per day, every day, up until 20 September... Apart from indicating that I live an extremely fortunate life, these activities seem to me to demonstrate that becoming vegan in 2007 has conferred a huge health benefit. In particular, I cannot identify similar metamorphoses in the lives of my 50-to-60-something year-old empty-nester friends. My most notable physical feat pre-veganism was the irregular completion of Perth’s annual 12km City-to-Surf fun run. Although I’m a vegan for health reasons, I didn’t suddenly wake up one day and decide that this was now my future: I had to be coaxed and cajoled into looking at my food preferences very differently. This process entailed my enrolling in a night school-type evening course, the Coronary Health Improvement Program: 16 x 3 hour sessions over eight weeks. Its sibling course is now available online as the Evidence-Based Veganism produced by Campbell and Campbell, which, in 2015, was awarded the prestigious Dr. Sander P. Wolffenbuttel Award for Excellence in Evidence-Based Medicine for their "exceptional efforts to provide evidence-based information on nutrition and physical activity" (2015). Despite the incredible circulation that this information has achieved, the number of participants who adhere to the recommendations is still extremely low. This is because the evidence on which the recommendations are based is often complex and difficult to interpret. The Campbell’s book is a clear and accessible guide to the evidence, and provides a strong argument for the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. The book concludes with a call to action, urging readers to make the necessary changes in their own lives in order to improve their health and that of their families.

References


Singer, Peter, and Jim Mason. The Ethics of What We Eat. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company.


