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Personal Purity vs. Effective Advocacy

Now I'd like to talk about a few of the things that animal advocates often do wrong.

The number one thing that we do wrong—and I am speaking from many years of doing this myself—is that we place personal purity ahead of being as effective as possible for animals. We lose sight of the fact that veganism is not an end in and of itself but rather a means of ending cruelty to animals. Being vegan is not about being perfect and causing no cruelty at all—it's about decreasing suffering as effectively as possible.

We all know this, but it bears repeating: At some level, everything we consume harms some animals. Every non-organic thing we eat involves pesticides that kill birds and other small animals. Organic foods use animal fertilizer. Harvesting vegan foods kills and displaces animals. Bike tires and even "vegan" shoes contain some small amount of animal product. We could all go out into the woods and live on nuts and berries as "Level 5 Vegans," but ultimately, that would be far less effective than living where we could influence others to adopt a vegan diet as well.

Animals don't need your purity, or else it would make sense to go live in a cabin in the woods, causing as little harm as possible. What the animals need is your advocacy—and they need for it to be as effective and influential as possible.

Ultimately veganism can't just be about us, or it will become just one more narcissistic cultural fad. Veganism must be about helping animals.

So the issue of personal purity becomes one of basic math: Adopting a vegan diet means you're not supporting the torment and slaughter of dozens of animals every single year. Helping just one more person to go vegan will save twice as many animals. But the reverse is also true: If you do something that prevents another person from adopting a vegan diet, if your example puts up a barrier where you might have built a bridge, that hurts animals—so then it becomes anti-vegan, if vegan means helping animals.

We all know that the number one reason why people don't go vegan is that they don't think it's convenient enough, and we all know people whose reason for not going vegan is that they "can't" give up cheese or ice cream. But instead of making it easier for them to help animals, we often make it more difficult. Instead of encouraging them to stop eating all other animal products besides cheese or ice cream, we preach to them about the oppression of dairy cows. Then we go on about how we don't eat sugar or a veggie burger because of the bun, even though a tiny bit of butter flavor in a bun contributes to significantly less suffering than any non-organic fruit or vegetable does or a plastic bottle or about 100 other things that most of us use. **Our fanatical obsession with ingredients not only obscures the animals' suffering—which was virtually non-existent for that tiny modicum of ingredient—but also nearly guarantees that those around us are not going to make any change at all. So, we've preserved our personal purity, but we've hurt animals—and that's anti-vegan.**

Always, always, always remember: Veganism isn't a dogma. Veganism is about stopping suffering. Let me say that again, as an 18-year vegan: **Veganism is not a list of ingredients or a set of rules. Being vegan is about doing our best to help animals. So it requires thought, not a checklist.**

So if you're at a holiday party with meat-eaters and you're talking about how you can't eat the bread because you don't know what's in it, or you're at a restaurant and there's a veggie burger on the menu but you give the server the third degree about the ingredients or about how it was cooked, you are forgetting the essence of being vegan. You've just made veganism seem difficult by creating barriers to the others at the table who might have otherwise considered the plight of animals. In this situation, others are unlikely to want to ask about your diet, and they're even less likely to think of it as something they might consider. Look at the big picture, and you'll see that your pursuit of purity in that instance does significantly more harm to animals than consuming that tiny bit of animal product! Remember that if just one of those people follows your example, you can save hundreds of animals! And if just one of them might have become a vegan but decides not to because of your example, the reverse is true: You are hurting animals.

If you're worried about what you're going to eat in a restaurant, call ahead and figure out what meets your standards, and then order it with gusto. If you're worried about what you're going to eat at the office party, get on the catering committee, or just bring along some great vegan food. But please, never, never make it seem like being concerned about animal suffering is a chore, because, of course, it's not. [Read more.](#)

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