

2. in which we get all AR on you

Okay? Cool. Now, let's talk about Simon the Sadist.

Simon the Sadist

In his book *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog*, Gary Francione proposes a stunning hypothetical that illustrates the problems with the way we view animals in our culture[1]. To take Francione's hypothetical, imagine there's a nasty bastard named Simon the Sadist who gets off on torturing a dog by burning the dog with a blowtorch. Now, as a non-facetious question, ask yourself: is there anything wrong with this? If you're like us, you can't say "hell yeah!" quickly enough. Anyone with any conscience whatsoever can see that there's plenty wrong with this scenario. As far as we can tell, Simon is subjecting a dog to horrible torture, and it is clear the dog suffers for this torture. It squeals in pain, it recoils, and it pulls away. Were we to ask Simon why he was torturing the dog, his only response would be that he enjoys doing it, and that it gives him great pleasure.

This seems objectionable to most reasonable people. Here's a whack-job who's torturing dogs because he feels like it and enjoys it. Beyond that, he can't really give us any other reason. We're going to venture a guess and say that you don't have to be a vegan to find this deeply problematic. But why do we find it so very problematic? If asked, most people would say the dog feels pain, and would agree that he should not be subjected to undue pain. The dog knows he's being tortured and has every interest in not being tortured. Seems pretty clear, right? In the end, most of us would simply say there's no need for it.

In addition, most people would likely extend this kind of thinking outward to other animals as well. Most folks would say that we shouldn't blowtorch cows or pigs or chickens or anything else either; and when we see these kinds of animal abuse cases, we're usually completely shocked by them. This kind of blatant torture and death feels unnecessary to us, because we understand that at some level animals

vegan freak

suffer. Most people—whether vegan or not—would understand these kinds of problems and object to them⁴.

If most people can agree these things hold in principle, then how can most people eat meat, dairy, and eggs in practice? If we can agree animals should not face undue suffering for our pleasure, how can we justify killing animals for meat? As many vegans demonstrate, it is completely feasible to live a healthy and vital life without animal products of any kind. Considering we can live quite well without animal products, our consumption of them cannot be chalked up to anything but preference and tradition. And if we truly have an interest in keeping animals free from suffering, our preference for meat is no more valid than Simon's preference for blowtorching animals. Period.

Despite this, somehow we're in a place where we see killing, dismembering, and consuming animals as okay, and blowtorching as "bad." Where we see blowtorching as capricious, we see our desire for the by-products of animal exploitation as "tradition" and "the natural way." Yes, it may be "tradition" to eat meat, but it is also "tradition" in some parts of the country to exclude women from certain jobs, to deny gay people the same rights as straights, and to discriminate against people of color. As for the "natural way" argument, how come we never hear anyone talking of "the natural way" when bears eat infants (as recently happened in New York State), or when crocodiles bite people? Also, what is so "natural" about going to a grocery store and buying a bloody hunk of flesh wrapped in Styrofoam and plastic?

At this point, some of you out there may object to this whole hypothetical by arguing that Simon is in fact torturing animals, while the animals used for our food are not explicitly tortured. True enough, animals are not routinely blowtorched on their way to the average meat eater's plate. Nevertheless, they are, variously, de-beaked, castrated, and de-horned—without the aid of anesthetics—as routine parts of meat,

⁴. As an interesting note, in the real world Simon would be charged with animal abuse, unless he worked in a slaughterhouse, in which case he's "just doing his job." (thanks to Dan Peyser for this observation)

2. in which we get all AR on you

dairy, and egg production. This says nothing of the completely deplorable conditions farm animals live in, often with limited space, light, and fresh air. To take just the example of egg-laying hens, chickens are often crammed into a tiny cage, and not allowed to move outside of that cage until they go to slaughter [2]. Chickens must also have their beaks removed so they do not consume themselves and one another from the psychological stress of their confinement. In addition, male chicks, considered useless to the egg industry, are routinely discarded in dumpsters, suffocated, crushed, or ground up—*alive*. Treatment of living animals aside, don't forget that animals are frequently slaughtered by having their throats slit, while chained by the ankle and hanging upside down. Though part of modern slaughter methods includes incapacitating the animals, this incapacitation is not always effective. In short, contemporary agricultural production practices subject animals to conditions that essentially enslave the animals to our whims. We may not explicitly blowtorch animals in food production, but the other methods used aren't much better. And why? Because people like the taste of eggs, dairy, and meat. There's simply no other reason.

Yes, ovo-lacto vegetarians, you heard us right. We included eggs and dairy there. Some of you borderline vegan folks might imagine (as we once did) that by abstaining from meat, you're abstaining from the death involved in animal agriculture. Unfortunately, this couldn't be further from the truth. The moment dairy cows stop being productive enough or stop being able to get pregnant, they're turned into cheap ground beef and other products. It is important to remember that veal production directly relies on the dairy industry as well. When a cow gives birth to a male, there isn't much dairy farmers can do with them, so they're sold as veal calves. When egg-laying chickens get too old and don't lay enough eggs, they're turned into meat as well. There's no magical pasture where Bessy goes after her "long" life as a milker; there's no special hen house for the older birds. They're simply put to death and eaten. Though it is nice and comforting to imagine otherwise, *by consuming dairy and eggs, you are directly supporting the slaughter of animals* (even if you don't eat the animal yourself). This applies to free range

vegan freak

and organic stuff too, so you can't escape that way either. If you believe there's no justification for animal suffering, if you wouldn't see the justification in making another being suffer *simply for your pleasure*, you must consider the impact of dairy and eggs, even if you *really* like eggs and *really* like dairy products.

We say this not to offend borderline- or almost-vegan readers, but to drive home the point that one must truly balance one's desire for the products of animal exploitation with the knowledge that animals are literally tortured and killed for these desires. Gary Francione's hypothetical asks us directly to consider the differences. Just as we can live without torturing animals, we can live without meat, dairy, and eggs. In both cases, there's nothing more pressing than our own desire when it comes down to it. Is our desire for animal products enough to justify the fact that in the time it took you to read this sentence about 500 animals were killed for food[1]? Is it enough to justify the slaughter of more than 8 billion animals a year in the United States alone[1]?

Speciesism

You have to say this: there's something fascinating about a culture that can have such deep moral contradictions. On the one hand, we look at Simon as though he's sick and twisted, and on the other, we consume animals gleefully, with little thought of the miserable conditions they endure. At one level, we can do this because we're at a comfortable distance from the production of our food, so we really don't have to think about the torture involved in getting animal products to our plates. The system that delivers animal products is structured such that we don't have the opportunity to see the vast amounts of suffering it involves. If this suffering was routinely on display, we suspect many, many more people would become vegans—and this is likely why some states are increasing the penalties for shooting unauthorized video in agricultural operations. Nevertheless, we aren't encouraged to think about where our food comes from, and for many of us, that's just fine, thank you very much.