

Murder: A Benign Extravagance?

George Monbiot and the limitations of anthropocentric veganism

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George Monbiot, a prominent public figure in the environmental movement, recently wrote an article in the 'Comment is free' section of *The Guardian*, entitled 'I was wrong about veganism. Let them eat meat – but farm it properly' (Monbiot, 2010). In itself, newspaper articles undermining or ridiculing veganism are nothing unusual, in fact, it is rare to find veganism, or vegans, treated at all seriously in the media.¹ Monbiot's article is noteworthy for two reasons though. Firstly, in 2002, also in *The Guardian*, he had apparently endorsed veganism: '...it now seems plain that it's [veganism] the only ethical response to what is arguably the world's most urgent social justice issue' (Monbiot, 2002). Secondly, Monbiot does take veganism seriously to the extent of challenging some of the core environmental and social justice arguments used in its favour. Viewed in this light, Monbiot's u-turn deserves attention, and a considered response. However, as I explain in this article, by ignoring ethical questions about exploiting and killing other animals, Monbiot has never advocated veganism in the sense that vegans ourselves understand it.

Credit where credit is due

The inspiration for Monbiot's change of mind is a new book *Meat: A Benign Extravagance* (2010) by Simon Fairlie, editor of *The Land* magazine and himself a noted campaigner on food issues. As Monbiot notes, Fairlie himself credits vegans for 'initiating and widening the debate and persuading us to look at animals in different ways' (2010: 3). Both Monbiot and Fairlie are critical of industrialized 'factory farming' of animals on environmental grounds, and both advocate a sizeable reduction in the present levels of consumption of animal 'products' in order to more effectively address world hunger. Of course opposition to industrialized animal exploitation is common ground with veganism, but Fairlie's book goes on to critique some pro-vegan claims. For instance Fairlie questions the argument that directly eating plants is always a more efficient way of feeding humans than eating animals who have been fed plants, which on the face of it is an affront to vegan common sense. There is no space to examine these and other of Fairlie's claims in detail here,² but of course to the extent that his analysis can provide a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the environmental impacts of exploiting farmed animals, that can only be welcomed. No lasting service is done to the cause of veganism by using inaccurate or out of date evidence. However, it's worth noting that Fairlie's own research, published in *The Land* magazine in 2007/8, suggests that 'the UK could feed more humans on a well-planned vegan diet than an organic meat-based diet - using similar areas of arable land, and freeing up current pasture for other vital sustainable purposes such as biofuels, fibre and habitat re-creation' (Vegan Society, 2010) – a point which Monbiot also noted in a 2008 *Guardian* article. In this light, it's striking that Monbiot chose 'I was wrong about veganism'

¹ The extent of anti-vegan bias in UK newspapers is explored in detail in a forthcoming academic paper (Cole and Morgan, 2011) which is briefly summarized in an article in *The Vegan* (Cole and Morgan, 2009).

² Elsewhere (Cole, 2010) I examine some similar arguments made by Fairlie in a 2008 article in *The Ecologist* magazine.

as the title of his 2010 article, rather than continuing to focus on what he, and Fairlie, still seem to view as the most serious problem in food production: the industrialized farming of animals. Why?

With friends like these...?

The reason for Monbiot's (and Fairlie's) attacks on veganism may be found in the fact that, despite what Fairlie writes, they actually do not look at animals 'in different ways' as a result of the influence of veganism. There is very little evidence that either writer has given serious consideration to arguments for the rights of nonhuman animals not to be exploited, confined, separated from their kin, and killed, all of which are routine practices in both the intensive systems they criticise, and the extensive systems they eulogise. Fairlie writes that, '... I do have views about the ethics of killings animals and animal welfare, but as far as possible I have tried to keep them out of this book' (2010: 3). Evidently, Fairlie has failed to keep his views the ethics of killing animals out of the book given its title!³

Monbiot's use of language is also revealing in this respect. In his 2002 article, 'Why vegans were right all along', he described some of the violent abuses that are commonplace in factory farming (and which have recently received renewed publicity through Animal Aid's undercover investigation of slaughterhouses and Viva's filming of the slaughter of male chicks in the egg industry). However, by the time of his 2008 article, entitled 'The pleasures of the flesh', Monbiot had become equivocal about veganism, apparently as a result of his self-confessed failure to adhere to a plant-based diet:

'...I cannot advocate a diet I am incapable of following. I tried it for about 18 months, lost two stone, went as white as bone and felt that I was losing my mind. I know a few healthy-looking vegans and I admire them immensely. But after almost every talk I give, I am pestered by swarms of vegans demanding that I adopt their lifestyle. I cannot help noticing that in most cases their skin has turned a fascinating pearl grey' (Monbiot, 2008).

Monbiot then, switched from apparently advocating veganism in 2002 to ridiculing and insulting vegans in 2008 (even though he still wrote that a 'vegan Britain could make a massive contribution to global food stocks'), seemingly as a way to explain away his unfortunate personal experience. Probably many vegans reading this would take pity on George and want to offer him a good vegan meal, or direct him to a vegan buddy or mentoring scheme to help him out, but the more serious point is that Monbiot's writing reveals a very common pattern of denying uncomfortable truths that trouble the conscience. The 2002 article adds weight to this interpretation. Monbiot wrote: '[a]s a meat-eater, I've long found it convenient to categorise veganism as a response to animal suffering or a health fad'. In effect, this is testimony to his own powers of denial – his capacity to disregard 'animal suffering' as irrelevant to his personal ethical responsibilities, and to dismiss veganism as a marginal eccentricity.

³But Fairlie has succeeded in avoiding *and* misrepresenting animal rights in his book, neglecting to even mention key thinkers such as Tom Regan (author of *The Case for Animal Rights*), while wrongly describing Peter Singer as an 'animal rights philosopher'.

The evidence of compassion for farmed animals in the 2002 article had been considerably toned down by 2008, amounting only to a brief allusion to factory farming: '[p]igs and chickens feed more efficiently, but unless they are free range you encounter another ethical issue: the monstrous conditions in which they are kept'. By the 2010 article, Monbiot described animals in machine-like term, as 'convertors' of plant protein into meat: '[c]attle are excellent converters of grass but terrible converters of concentrated feed. The feed would have been much better used to make pork.' In place of compassion, Monbiot now writes contemptuously about farmed animals as if they are nothing more than waste disposal units or food-in-waiting: 'pigs, in the meantime, have been forbidden in many parts of the rich world from doing what they do best: converting waste into meat.' This is not only contemptuous (pigs, sentient individuals with complex emotional lives of their own, are 'best' at *being pigs*), but is an example of how Monbiot writes about animals and selects arguments in a way that support his *personal choice* not to follow a vegan diet, and thereby appease his conscience. In the example of the last quotation, Monbiot uses the technique of 'victim-blaming' to deny his own responsibility for exploitation, by making the absurd insinuation that pigs are being forcibly prevented from fulfilling their preferred destiny – to clear up our mess and to be killed and butchered for the privilege.

Monbiot's rejection of veganism therefore depends on ignoring debates about animal rights. But because he never confronted these ethical questions in the first place, even in the apparent 2002 endorsement of veganism, his series of *Guardian* articles taken as a whole gives good reason to distrust his pose as a lapsed vegan advocate. In the 2010 article, Monbiot is comfortable making casual use of slaughter metaphors - 'a new book is an abattoir for dodgy arguments'; '[h]e [Fairlie] goes on to butcher a herd of sacred cows'. No one who took the rights of other animals seriously would consider this kind of weak humour to be appropriate. In conclusion to his 2010 article Monbiot writes, '[b]ut if we were to adopt it [Fairlie's ideal], we could eat meat, milk and eggs (albeit much less) with a clean conscience. By keeping out of the debate over how livestock should be kept, those of us who have advocated veganism have allowed the champions of cruel, destructive, famine-inducing meat farming to prevail. It's time we got stuck in.' To put it bluntly, Monbiot has *never* advocated veganism, as he claims, because he has never recognized that, at its heart, veganism is a rejection of the exploitation and violence that is inherent to any system of animal farming, and it does not, and did not, stand or fall on anthropocentric arguments about efficient methods of food production. And, as The Vegan Society pointed out in a press release response to Monbiot, 'most vegans have been 'stuck in' - actively arguing against the cruel practices of the global food destruction system called 'animal farming' - all along'.

While the environmental and food security debate is of course an important one, the problem with Monbiot's rhetoric is that it distorts public perception of what veganism is about, and therefore further obscures ethical debates about the confining and killing of other animals. It's important to stress that Monbiot claims that '...we could eat meat, milk and eggs ... with a clean conscience'. At the level of his own psychology, Monbiot might be comforted by this projection of his own decision to eat meat, milk and eggs onto others, conjuring up an imaginary community of like-minded followers who are also unwilling to confront the ethics of killing. But, to the extent that Monbiot has a position of authority and influence in public discourse, the danger is that his message tells an audience who might have some sympathy with veganism that they can safely forget about it.

If Monbiot, Fairlie and others are allowed to frame the ethical issues purely in anthropocentric terms, plus lip service in the direction of animal welfare (but no consideration of animal rights), the result is that they excuse themselves from justifying, or even explaining, why it is ok for them, or for others on their behalf, to confine and kill innocent, sentient animals. Evidence of this risk coming to fruition came in a recent *Daily Mail* article, based on an extended interview with Fairlie about his new book, which ran under the headline ‘Carnivores rejoice! Eating meat is good for the planet (and that’s according to a militant vegan)’. The article includes a celebratory account of Monbiot’s rejection of veganism: ‘the environmental campaigner George Monbiot has done a U-turn and announced that he was wrong to promote veganism as an answer to the planet’s woes’. In fact, from reading the article, it turns out that the ‘militant vegan’ it refers to can only be George Monbiot.

Some lessons might be drawn from the unfortunate saga of Monbiot’s flirtation with veganism. Firstly, the *Daily Mail* article shows the risk of the vegan movement aligning too closely with seductive allies who, from time to time, say or write things that support our case, but without ever taking seriously the holistic case for veganism, and especially animal rights (it’s worth noting that, as well as ignoring animal rights, both Monbiot and Fairlie express disinterest in the human health case for plant-based diets). Monbiot does not, and has never, spoken for the vegan movement,⁴ and to describe him as a ‘militant vegan’ is laughable, though this is the fault of lazy sensationalist journalism by the *Daily Mail* rather than Monbiot himself. Secondly, it illustrates the naiveté of Monbiot in his choice of headline. If his goal is an overall reduction in meat consumption, he ought to still encourage veganism, as it’s unrealistic to expect a universal reduction to the same lower level of consumption across an entire population, and there are clearly many meat-eaters who will seize on any excuse, ‘rejoice’, and go on eating as much meat as they ever did. Finally, it illustrates that the authority to define the meaning of veganism ought never to be ceded to non-vegans who will skew that meaning to suit their own purposes. The onus should always be on the non-vegan society to confront, explain and account for, the billions of innocent lives it claims year after year. Monbiot’s writing unfortunately makes it easier for non-vegans to go on shirking that responsibility. The title of this article, ‘Murder: A Benign Extravagance?’ was deliberately chosen to be provocative, to match the provocation of both Monbiot’s ‘I was wrong about veganism’ and of course, to paraphrase Fairlie’s *Meat: A Benign Extravagance*. From a vegan perspective, Fairlie’s choice of ‘benign extravagance’ as a subtitle for his book is not only misleading, but grotesque. There is nothing benign about murder.

While I’ve been very critical of Monbiot’s writing here, the way in which he denies and obscures the core ethical challenge of veganism only goes to illustrate the way in which we are all encouraged by our society to ignore the brutal truths behind the ‘production’ of meat. Vegans tend to see meat clearly for what it is – the result of the deliberate killing and dismembering of innocent victims of a trivial human taste preference for their flesh, the violent transformation of *someone* into *something*. Most vegans have to overcome a lifelong process of indoctrination that tells us to ignore this fact, or when we cannot ignore it, to dismiss it as morally insignificant. If George Monbiot could do the same, he would be most welcome as a fellow advocate for veganism.

⁴ There is no space here to go into detail, but Fairlie also displays fundamental misunderstandings of veganism in his book, for instance citing PETA’s \$1m prize for the commercial production of ‘in vitro meat’ as evidence for the ‘secret longing of some vegans’ for meat.

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