

Post Ethic

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2009

"I used to think the world was round."

How many times have you heard someone say "I used to be vegan"? Odds are if you are vegan you are hearing this statement with more frequency than the average omnivore. I suspect it has a lot to do with people wanting to relate the idea that they are open minded, or to create some kind of bond with their vegan brethren. In some cases it may be a defensive tactic, a way of proving that they have not been trumped in their capacity for ethical motivation. Vegans themselves react very differently to the statement depending on their reasons and ethical frameworks. Some commend those who dabble in veganism, sensing the importance of people being open to trying new things, even if they don't "stick." Some wish the word "vegan" didn't exist at all, that the label itself alienates and distinguishes some people from what should be a universal principle of compassion. Some just hate it, with vocal chords itching with the urge to shout "Shut up! That doesn't make any sense!" But there is an explanation for all this variety regarding the use of the v-word. It's only 65 years old.

The word "vegan" was coined in 1944 by Donald Watson in response to the broadening of the term "vegetarian" to include the eating of dairy products. Everyone has their own reason for going vegan, but today those reasons are much more broad than they were at the beginning. We have learned much more about human health in relation to diet in the past 65 years and there are many compelling reasons to abstain from animal products altogether to reap those benefits. Also since the birth of the word, agriculture has gone through greater changes than it had in hundreds of years before it. Adopting a vegan diet in response to environmental concerns has been proven to make a greater difference than driving an electric car, or not driving at all could make. So today exist a number of self-identifying vegans who can defend their choice without so much as mentioning the brutality of factory farming.

Luckily we are not in any need of an etymologist to find the original definition of the word as it was defined when it was created:

The word "veganism" denotes a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude — as far as is possible and practical — all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.

Clearly the original context of the word was meant to identify the plight of animals and a sense of responsibility to abstain from causing unnecessary suffering to them. One must conclude then that holding such a value would lead to the adoption of certain practices, in this case dietary. That would mean that the choices vegans make in what they eat is a reaction to their principles. To think of it in a different way, turning the water off while you brush your teeth is a practice of environmentalists, but it wouldn't be accurate to say that turning off the water while you brush your teeth makes you an environmentalist. Likewise, abstaining from animal products is a practice of vegans, but would you call someone who orders a garden salad (assuming they are using a vegan dressing, of course) a vegan? If it were that simple you might be able to say that all people are essentially vegan 90% of every day, and only "not vegan" when they are in the act of consuming an animal product. If this were the the case you could say that a person is vegan whenever they go to sleep, as easily as you could argue that a person is a feminist (even if they are waking storms of misogyny in the daytime) when they go to sleep since they are not discriminating between sexes as they get their Z's on. I think we can agree then that "vegan" has at least a little more to it than not chewing meat.

If the definition of veganism were to be understood as a principle and ethical value, the statement "I used to be vegan" would also mean something different. It would essentially be interpreted more as "I used to care about the suffering of farm animals." To learn about veganism as an issue regarding compassion and not simply as a diet or a trend would be a more demanding action. And not demanding in that it would require a person to alter their eating habits, but demanding in that it would require them to think about stuff.

If the statement "I used to be vegan" is in any way offensive to you it is most likely because you think of veganism as an ethical obligation and responsibility. If that were the way that everyone understood veganism then saying "I used to be vegan" would not be a statement that would establish a connection or understanding, and rather would be a confrontation. If veganism were, and I believe it is, about ideals, than it would vibe the same way as saying "I used to be a feminist," or "I used to be in favor of civil rights."

The only explanation I can come up with for encountering so many "I used to be" vegans is that they never actually were vegan. Not anymore so than all those people who aren't consuming animals while they are eating a salad or sleeping. When people claim to have been vegan they in all probability do not mean to say that they at one point recognized the pointless suffering of farm animals, the fact that humans do not actually need to eat animals to live a healthy life, and that abstaining from animal derived products was the logical conclusion. It'll take the reappropriation of the word to identify ethics and convictions, and until then vegans (the ethical kind) will undoubtedly be annoyed and confused by the statement of "used to be's. But if we can strive to clearly define the term then the phrase "I used to be vegan" could one day be as acceptable as saying "I used to think the world was round."

Posted by dan dunbar at 9:30 AM

2 comments:

 **missxlollyx** said...
you never fail to surprise me...i think this blog is amazing :)
[September 23, 2009 12:28 PM](#)

 **Mylène Ouellet** said...
Excellent piece! I look forward to reading more!
[September 23, 2009 3:23 PM](#)

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- ▼ 2009 (3)
 - ▶ October (1)
 - ▼ September (2)
 - ["I used to think the world was round."](#)
 - [Is Our Food Making Us Sick?](#)