

# Vegan FAQs

Everything you wanted to know about vegans, and have probably asked. This is a group of people who have come together to share their unique perspective on the different questions we as vegans hear on a regular basis. No two responses will ever be exactly the same.

→ → → 07 APRIL, 2008

## "Since I can't prove to myself that they feel pain, I should treat them as if they don't feel pain."

Posted by Gary  
This is a selfish, oppressor-centric viewpoint. The more moral stance is:

"If there is more than a remote chance that they feel pain, I should treat them as if they feel pain."

As pointed out in the comments in the previous post, the argument shown in this post's title is sometimes used by people who want to exploit bees for their honey.

Since bees are sentient, avoid danger, possess memories, make choices, learn about their environment, communicate with each other in fairly sophisticated ways, and appear to have interests that they pursue, there is more than a remote chance that they feel pain. They may also derive pleasure from gathering nectar, or from discovering a meadow of newly-opened blooms and leading their hive members to it. They may have a will to live; they certainly take measures to escape from harm.

When considering whether our non-essential, easily avoidable actions may cause pain to other beings, the benefit of the doubt should go to the most vulnerable, the ones who have the most to lose, the ones who would be forced to make deep sacrifices because of our demands.

Consider that:

- Most marine biologists now agree that fish feel pain; 50 years ago that was not the case. (Recent studies also show that fish have individual personalities, use tools, play games, and have long-term memories.)

- Two or three generations ago, a majority of scientists thought that non-humans were incapable of emotion; that position has been completely overturned.

- In the 19th century, when the animal experimentation industry started, researchers claimed that animals were automatons; the animals' screams in response to being tortured were merely mechanical sounds.

- Only in the last 10-15 years have scientists in any number concluded that chickens, with far smaller and simpler brains than humans, not only have impressive cognitive skills and a sense of the past and future, but a rich emotional life.

- Recent scientific research supports suspicions that lobsters, crabs, and other crustaceans feel pain.

We have consistently underestimated animals' sentience and, particularly, their capacity for suffering and experiencing emotional states.

Some humility would be in order.

(Actually, I suspect that our intuition about animal sentience has been fairly on target throughout the ages; it's our science and reasoning on this matter that has been deficient, or blatantly self-serving.)

Suppose we assume that bees feel pain and we're wrong. What is the cost? Honey in our tea and on our toast. An indulgence. A pleasantry. Agave nectar and other sweeteners are excellent substitutes. In other words, the cost is trivial.

Suppose, on the other hand, we assume that bees don't feel pain (perhaps because the notion suits us) and we're wrong. What's the cost? Widespread infliction of pain on helpless beings, for no good reason. And possibly an irrecoverable deficit in our moral obligations to fellow sentients.

But our relationships with animals, and with other beings who are less powerful than us, are more than utilitarian equations. By developing compassion and empathy for individuals across a vast spectrum of species, we foster peace - both inner and outer. We cultivate harmony and goodwill. We rejoice in our kinship with the sentient creatures with whom we share the earth. We become allies, partners, and friends with animals, not oppressors and dominators. Our hearts are gladdened not by extracting resources from them, but by seeing them thrive, and helping them fulfill their goals. Their satisfaction is our happiness. We have no desire to exploit them or steal from them, or to look for excuses for doing so.

Living in peace with our nonhuman neighbors provides benefits that are profound, mutual, and non-violent. Enslaving nonhumans for their flesh, reproductive capabilities, or bodily functions provides superficial, fleeting benefits that are extracted at the expense of the enslaved, and that produce inner turmoil and less-than-honest self-dialog in the enslavers.

The assertion that victims of our exploitation do not feel pain is a defense mechanism. It is a self-protective, weak rationalization to control and plunder for pleasure. Spreading our compassion as widely as possible, following the golden rule to the best of our ability - basically, living according to our deepest morals - rids us of exploitative desires and the need to conjure up justifications for morally questionable behaviors.

at [Monday, April 07, 2008](#)

Labels: [sentience](#), [What about honey?](#), [Where do you draw the line?](#)

### 4 comments:

[Alex](#) said...

I wrote a similar post about other insects, spiders, etc.:

<http://www.not-quiteright.net/tvg/2008/04/insects-count-too.html>

This is a very well argued post! Your brief historical discussion was interesting.

[14/4/08 1:44 PM](#)

[Gary](#) said...

Alex - that post is beautiful. I like how, toward the end of the post, you focus on the humans, the persons who, out of thoughtlessness, expediency, myopia, habit, lack of empathy, or some other reason, choose to kill rather than consider the most profound interests of their tiniest victims. You ask, appropriately: What does it say about us? The transgression begins in our own hearts.

[15/4/08 12:27 AM](#)

[Alex](#) said...

Thank you for the compliment Gary.

"The transgression begins in our own hearts," indeed.

[15/4/08 10:31 AM](#)

[Moriah](#) said...

Beautifully and eloquently said!

[28/11/08 12:44 AM](#)

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### Who We Are

We are vegans, from all over the planet, with unique perspectives on life. We come from different countries, races, socioeconomic conditions, ages, and viewpoints. Aside from our commitment to helping animals, we are all as unique and varied as the animals we care for.

Daily, we get endless streams of questions about our veganism. Here we hope to share the way we did respond, the way we would have wished that we'd responded, or the way we should respond in future! Rather than linking to a bunch of websites written by other people, whose rhetoric we may or may not fully agree with, we'd rather share our voices, and do it in our own terms!

### Contributors

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### Labels

- [addicted to cheese](#) (1)
- [All the vegans I've ever seen are pale thin and sickly](#) (1)
- [already dead](#) (1)
- [Animal Rights](#) (3)
- [Animals for Dinner?](#) (2)
- [are you still vegan?](#) (1)
- [But dairy and eggs don't actually harm animals right?](#) (1)
- [But I like X too much](#) (2)
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