

Cody Kindred

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Destigmatizing Veganism

“I don’t look down on non-vegans, nor do I think I’m a better person because I live a vegan lifestyle. I do, however, aim to educate people on why I personally chose to go vegan.”

(Piovano) An opinion piece I read by The Breeze journalist Maddy Piovano titled “Veganism is the ideal diet” no doubt was an interesting article, discussing why veganism is the best diet anyone could have and its benefits to the environment. While I wish she could’ve gone into more detail on how having a vegan diet has a positive effect on the human body, she does bring up an interesting and (admittedly) common point at the beginning of her article that vegans are often stereotyped as angry, aggressive activists. This rhetoric got me to think why veganism is stigmatized. Why does the mere mention of veganism leave these non-vegans scoffing as if it’s a practice that’s somehow taboo? More importantly, do vegans place this stigma on themselves?

As most people know, a vegan lifestyle consists of a purely plant-based diet. Not to be confused with being a vegetarian, as you not only must not consume meat, but also fish, eggs, and dairy products. Depending on whom you ask, vegans choose this lifestyle for different reasons. Some may have chosen to become vegan as a means to cleanse their bodies of toxins and strengthen their immune systems from harmful, potentially deadly diseases such as cancer to live a healthier body. Others may have chosen to become vegan as an indirect way of protesting

against animal agriculture and preserve the environment. There are also those who are vegan due to religion reasons. (Markowski) Regardless of why they chose this lifestyle, it is apparent that they're doing it for their own benefits. In fact, the reason why the aforementioned journalist Maddy Piovano went vegan was because of a documentary she was recommended to watch titled "Earthlings", a movie about our dependence on animals for economic purposes. This challenged her perspective on the kinds of food she eats and made the decision to stick with a plant-based diet from that point on.

This now begs the question: if vegans are choosing this lifestyle for what they think it right for them, why are they often stigmatized by non-vegans for it as Piovano state they are in her article? Why should it be their business what they eat? One reason I can tell you is that it's an unorthodox thing to think about. I mean, eating nothing but only vegetables (and fruits)?! Pfft! Of course, this may be a rather ignorant assumption (even as a non-vegan myself); meat, as polarizing as the food is, does provide some benefits for the body, especially non-processed meat. According to an article from Ace Fitness by Justin Robinson, some of the benefits of consuming meat includes protein for stronger skin and bones, iron for producing healthy red blood cells, vitamin B-12, which helps the body with digestion and can even help maintain a healthy heart. There are even those who choose to become a pescatarian, eating mainly fish, which has its own benefits such as lower risks of cancer, Alzheimer's, and more. (Brophy) Of course, one can argue that you can receive these same benefits just by eating a meal consisting of kale or spinach, or that they eat what they eat because...well, it tastes good to them. The point is that we consciously or unconsciously make the decision what food we put into our mouths.

No group is without their extremists, and unfortunately, veganism isn't an exception to this. Vegan extremists are the kind of people who will force their beliefs and ideals onto other people using hate speech, berating meat-eaters, and even resorting to violence; basically the "aggressive activists" Piovano was referring to. One case of extreme veganism happened in February 2018 in Northumberland, U.K. where a trainee farmer claim that she and her family had received death threats from activists. Other U.K. farmers stated they experienced the same. They even went as far as to show videos of slaughterhouse workers mistreating animals to them in order to perpetuate their beliefs onto them (Gate). It's easy to generalize a specific group as "awful" because of how much they've done more bad than good, but in this case, I think it's hard to really blame the non-vegans for having this mindset; that's all vegans are nothing but loud, annoying, outspoken individuals who can't just be civil for once.

To further this stigma, there is also the "animal rights" organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animal), who have been the subject of controversy for as long as they were founded in 1980. PETA is known notoriously for their radical veganism and animal rights morals, from forcing people to stop eating meat through fear-mongering, lying about details to align with their ideas. Often, they even go through the effort of creating video game parodies based on Super Mario and Pokemon — innocent and harmless franchises — in an attempt to indoctrinate children into agreeing with their radical ideas (*Wikipedia*).

One of their bigger controversies happened just recently as of the time this writing. On late February 2019, Google honored the 57th birthday of the late animal conversationalist Steve Irwin with their occasional Google Doodle, a slideshow featuring illustrations of some of his memorable traits. PETA was somehow offended at this and took to Twitter to show their disdain

with this tweet: “#SteveIrwin was killed while harassing a ray; he dangled his baby while feeding a crocodile & wrestled wild animals who were minding their own business. Today’s #GoogleDoodle sends a dangerous, fawning message. Wild animals are entitled to be left alone in their natural habitats”. PETA was immediately and inevitably called out by the public, with many defending Irwin as someone who loved animals and praising him for educating about rare animals. (Miller) Their attitude and demeanor towards the situation they’ve set up for themselves adopts some of the traits vegans are often stigmatized for: preachy, outspoken, in-your-face, pretentious, condescending, and even conveying misinformation to justify themselves. These are the kind of people Piovano referred to in her article.

Veganism is a lifestyle that promotes and provides a healthy way of living. The stigmatization is something that I don’t particularly agree with, but I can see why people have this preconceived bias that sees them as the people I mentioned throughout this essay. Likewise, if vegans want to spread the good it has to offer, then I think the one thing they should is simply just to talk about it in a civil manner. Talking about veganism with someone or through any form of media civilly is the much safer and relatively inconsequential alternative. The fact is, humans have always eaten meat as far long as when we were made on this earth. Humans used to hunt animals in the Neolithic era as a means of survival, thus eating meat has always been in our genes. For that reason, as well as other hereditary and inherent reasons, I don’t agree with looking down on someone nowadays for eating meat. If anything, that’s probably going to cause that person to eat more meats. Simply talking with them about their dietary choices (in this case, veganism) may persuade them to actually follow their beliefs with enough convincing. How you approach this subject with people makes a huge difference.

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