Vegans in America:
A Cultural Study of Food, Identity, and Community

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PREFACE

As a lifelong vegetarian and animal rights advocate, I have strived to live a lifestyle that incorporates my ethics into my diet, clothing, cosmetic products, and everyday consumer choices. I experienced some mild teasing in elementary school regarding my vegetarian diet, and when I became vegan in high school the verbal jabs at my ethical beliefs grew stronger and harsher. I have had numerous conversations with like-minded vegan friends and family members about being teased or feeling marginalized by our society at large.

I observed that other kids at school who were of a different ethnic background or religious sect did not experience the same teasing I did, or at least not openly. I saw the similarities between my ethical beliefs and other people’s religious beliefs, and how we all demonstrate our moral beliefs in our everyday lives. Whether it is attending church, temple, mosque, praying, wearing ceremonial robes, following a particular diet, abstaining from alcohol, or abstaining from using technology, human beings relate to others and express their personal beliefs by the actions they take in their day to day lives. My few vegan friends and I could not understand why we were being mocked for our beliefs, while other people who followed a particular diet for religious reasons were not. We could not understand why people felt compelled to tease us when we believed we were following an ethical philosophy and living an ethical life. Why is it acceptable – some might say understandable – to mock vegans in American society but not acceptable to mock people’s religious views? I was inspired to conduct this study because I am interested in examining the social consequences of veganism. How do ethical vegans identify themselves in a nation that is mostly non-vegan? How do similar experiences of
marginalization unite vegans or how do they create a barrier between vegans and non-vegans? How does a clear sense of identity and community affect vegans’ perceptions and interactions with others?

The goal of this study is to examine the ways in which people construct community and individual identity through food choices. I chose to study vegans because they have a distinct philosophy that guides their eating practices and ultimately connects and contributes to their identity. As a whole, veganism has had a rapid growth in the United States since the 2000s. A recent study conducted by Harris Interactive and commissioned by the Vegetarian Resource Group reports the number of vegans and vegetarians in the United States has doubled since 2009 (http://www.idablog.org/u-s-vegan-population-doubles-in-only-two-years/). According to the Vegetarian Resource Group, approximately 2% of the United States population considers themselves vegan (http://www.idablog.org/u-s-vegan-population-doubles-in-only-two-years/).

This study seeks to explore themes of religion, community, activism, and how food plays a role in creating identity and community. Ethical vegans share a common philosophy and a common experience of being marginalized within American society. Examining the many facets of the vegan communities in the United States can help us understand the importance of building community, and the importance of a shared experience in relation to diet. It is important to study ethical veganism because it is a rapidly growing social movement, and activists participating in the vegan movement believe that a vegan diet and lifestyle can improve the world and make it a more compassionate and sustainable place to live. Ethical vegans are eager to demonstrate that a vegan philosophy is a crucial, morally progressive step towards a peaceful and just
civilization. It is for this reason that it is important to understand the vegan movement in American society.

This summer, I was fortunate enough to be a student in the Justice Brandeis Semester: Ethnographic Fieldwork program instructed by Professor Elizabeth Ferry. This project seeks to investigate further into my fieldwork and research I conducted over the summer through JBS. Although my JBS project was focused on vegan parenting and how vegan parents create community through the criticism of non-vegans, I was able to utilize the in depth interviews, participant observation, and research I conducted over the past summer. My fieldwork for this study included further investigation into other ethical notions of eating practices, and research into the animal rights movement. In total, I conducted twenty-five interviews with people who consider themselves ethical vegans. The interviews lasted about one hour and I asked my informants questions about why they decided to become vegan, what sort of social stigmas they encountered as vegans, how they negotiate criticism from others, and how their primary social circle has effected their views on veganism and ethical eating.

Along with one-on-one interviews, I was able to conduct participant observation at Boston Vegan Association meetings and events, vegan restaurants, activist gatherings hosted by the Massachusetts Animal Rights Coalition, vegan brunch groups, and events held by the Boston Vegan Meetup group. I was even able to conduct participant observation at my job, since I work at a vegetarian restaurant with a vegan bakery.

This project documents the social pressures vegans face in the United States as morally autonomous individuals, and as a vegan community. By focusing on the ethical vegan communities in the United States, this study aids in answering anthropological
questions regarding how food choices affect people’s perception of self and morality, how and why people create community, and what the social boundaries are for certain communities. This project aims to explore the connection between ethical eating and the notion of moral independence among communities created in the face of ethical difference.

After interviewing all twenty-five participants, and after spending many hours researching and discussing veganism with other college students, and a copious amount of time conducting participant observation, it became clear to me that the majority of vegans feel they are often marginalized or discriminated against when it comes to their food habits. I found that the ways in which individual vegans respond to criticism about their food choices or moral beliefs, depends greatly on the communities in which they surround themselves. For example, the subjects who had been vegan for over five years and who surrounded themselves with other vegan friends and activists, were more positive, hopeful, and pleasant in their responses. The subjects who had been vegan for less than five years and who were not involved in any vegan or animal rights groups came off as much more negative in their responses. I attribute this apparent negativity and loneliness to the absence of people who share similar ethical values.

This consistent pattern in my interviews relates to anthropological questions of how the presence or absence of community shapes the psychological state of an individual. How does community affect one’s perception of self and personhood? How does it affect perception of one’s morals? Why is it important socially and psychologically for vegans to surround themselves with other vegans? What is the reason behind vegans feeling marginalized in American society? By studying vegans in
the United States, we can better understand the social and psychological factors for creating community and how one’s community affects the perceptions of identity and personhood. Studying the vegan culture in the United States will help us better understand the issue of moral autonomy as it relates to the social boundaries between omnivores and vegans.
CHAPTER 1

You are what you eat. This popular adage conveys that one’s body is literally composed of the elements one consumes. It also implies that physical and mental health are greatly affected, and in fact defined by the foods one chooses to ingest. Philosopher Roland Barthes points out, “When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies” (Barthes 1997: 29). Food choices serve as a device of communication; consuming – or not consuming – certain foods can demonstrate individual, group, or national identity. Barthes continues, “No doubt, food is, anthropologically speaking (though very much in the abstract), the first need; but ever since man has stopped living off wild berries, this need has become highly structured. Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food” (Barthes 1997: 30).

Along with communicating identity, food can further create values of personhood and moral identity. Anthropologist Andrew Buckser claims, “While culturally constructed, food must be consumed physically by individuals; thus eating always involves an individual choice about connection with a group. In most cultures, moreover, many social activities revolve around food, placing the individual activity of consumption in a group context” (Buckser 1999: 192). Food choices are one of the most important and powerful symbols demonstrating individual and group ethics and moral identity.

The creed “You are what you eat” has been given more weight in the past thirty to forty years and is not only associated with the specific foods one eats, but additionally the
ethics behind one’s dietary choices. Dietary choices can be associated with religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam; and they can also be associated with particular philosophies or lifestyles. For example, the practice of consuming no animal products, a vegan diet, is associated with a moral philosophy regarding animal rights.

This chapter explores numerous eating practices in the United States such as the Slow Food movement, locavorism, and keeping kosher, and compares them with veganism. Veganism is distinguished from other food ideologies because there is a distinct animal rights philosophy and activism associated with veganism that applies to other aspects of everyday life, not just diet. Annie is a 32-year-old ethical vegan who works for an animal protection organization in California. When I ask her what veganism means to her, she replies, “Being vegan to me means just being the most conscious and peaceful. Being vegan is crucial. I don’t think that I would have any drive in my life or any direction if I wasn’t vegan… being vegan is just so crucial to the survival on this planet… And once you’re a true vegan, if you’re a true vegan, you should be an activist.” Annie’s statement implies that one is not truly, completely vegan until one contributes to the animal rights movement and actively works to promote veganism and prevent animal suffering. These statements reveal that veganism goes beyond dietary practices and influences all other actions and consumer choices in a “true vegan’s” life.

In this chapter and in this study as a whole, I have focused on three main subgroups of veganism. The first group consists of individuals who choose veganism for ethical reasons, meaning they believe it is morally wrong to harm animals, and therefore
choose not to eat them. I will refer to this group as “ethical vegans.” The second group consists of individuals who identify themselves as “punk” and are also vegan for ethical reasons, but who may practice veganism in a different way from ethical vegans. The third group consists of individuals who identify as straightedge vegans, meaning they are vegans who do not drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or partake in drugs. It is important to acknowledge that there are a great number of people who are vegan solely for health reasons. For health-conscious people following a vegan diet, animal-free products and animal activism are not necessarily included in their moral philosophies. This study does not focus on “health vegans” because they do not follow a vegan philosophy, rather, they follow a vegan diet purely for the health benefits. Being vegan for one’s own health is not rooted in an animal rights philosophy as ethical, punk, and straightedge veganism is.

In November of 1944, Donald Watson and six other ethical vegetarians met in a pub to discuss the formation of a subgroup of the Vegetarian Society of London. Watson and his colleagues were considered “nondairy vegetarians,” meaning they were ethical vegetarians who also chose not to consume dairy products or eggs. Watson invented the term “vegan” by piecing together the first three letters and the last two letters of “vegetarian.” He claimed this was an appropriate term because, “veganism starts with vegetarianism and carries it through to its logical conclusion” (Preece 2008: 298).

Watson was assuming that any true animal rights activist would not harm or use animals

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1 I struggled with finding an appropriate name for this group of vegans. I need a concrete term for this group because I will be referring to them and differentiating between various subgroups of vegans throughout my thesis. I chose the term “ethical vegan” because it was a noticeable pattern for my interview subjects to claim they were vegan for “ethical reasons.” There are also other articles, blogs, and websites that use this same term. This term is not meant to imply that punks and straightedge individuals are not vegan for ethical reasons. “Ethical” refers to the greater difference between ethical vegans and people who are vegan only for health reasons.
in any way. His statement about the term “vegan” speaks to the people who are vegetarian for humane reasons, who are inconsistent in their actions in that they still accept the use of some animal products. Watson points out the hypocrisy in standing up for animal rights while continuing to partake in the exploitation of animals. The goals of the newly created Vegan Society were to “abolish man’s dependence on animals, with its inevitable cruelty and slaughter, and to create instead a more reasonable and humane order of society” (Preece 2008: 298). This required humans to eat fruits, nuts, vegetables, grains, and other products not produced from animals.

Today the Vegan Society in the United Kingdom has expanded to hundreds of thousands of members, has a magazine published quarterly called “The Vegan,” has eleven people working on the board, and provides vegans in the UK and all over the world with helpful resources on veganism. The principle goal of the Vegan Society is to promote “ways of living free from animal products for the benefit of people, animals, and the environment” (http://www.vegansociety.com/default.aspx).

In the 1960s there was a surge in the animals rights movement and a rise in vegetarianism and veganism. The 1960s was a notorious decade of war protests and promoting peace. Along with advocating for a more peaceful world, many people adopted a vegetarian lifestyle because they believed that this diet aligned with such notions. A small group of academic philosophers began meeting regularly to discuss the promotion of animal rights. One of the philosophers was Peter Singer, currently a Princeton professor who went on to write Animal Liberation, one of the most influential books in the animal rights movement.
Singer and his other animal rights associates, including Stanly and Rosalind Godlovitch, John Harris, Richard D. Ryder, and Steven Clark, believe that it was not possible to care about animal welfare and animal rights, while still eating animals. For this reason they advocate a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle.

As the animal rights movement expanded and gained more prominence in North America, books such as Animal Liberation, The Food Revolution, Diet for a Small Planet, Diet for a New America, and Eating Animals became more widely popular. Every one of my interview subjects who became vegetarian or vegan in the 1970s and 1980s note Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* as the most influential literature that helped them adopt a vegan lifestyle. Alternatively, most of my interview subjects who became vegan in the 1990s or later state that films and documentaries had the greatest influence on their veganism rather than books. The most commonly mentioned films in my interviews were *Forks over Knives, Vegucated, Peaceable Kingdom,* and *Earthlings.*

One of the moral theories in the animal rights movement is the idea of ending, or at least not partaking in speciesism. Peter Singer coined the term “speciesism” by comparing the notions of racism and sexism to the treatment of certain species of animals. Singer claims that the fundamental issue in animal rights philosophy is the question of “whether the interests of nonhuman animals should be considered similarly or differently from the way we consider human interests” (Finsen and Finsen 1994: 180-181). Singer’s considered belief is that any living being who possesses the capacity to suffer or emote should have their interests considered (Finsen and Finsen 1994: 181). Essentially, “there is no rational basis for distinguishing interests along species lines” (Finsen and Finsen 1994: 181). Singer’s argument against speciesism specifically refers
to arguments against racism and sexism. For example, Singer states that the “discrimination against blacks and women involves making distinctions along lines that are morally irrelevant…” (Finsen and Finsen 1994: 181). Singer does not claim that all species are equal in all capacities or capabilities, but that they should be treated with equal moral consideration; just as all human beings should be treated with equal moral consideration regardless of their gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. The crucial lesson in his argument against speciesism is that a “commitment to equality is the belief that such differences… are morally irrelevant to how we should treat other human beings: each human being deserves to have his or her interests taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other human being” (Finsen and Finsen 1994: 181). This is the basic principle that objects to sexism and racism, and Singer believes it applies to the treatment of species as well. Anti-speciesism is at the core belief of veganism, and almost all of my interview subjects stated their position against speciesism in their interviews.

For vegans, their dietary practice is a social statement that reflects their beliefs about causing no harm to any living being. Veganism is more than a statement or diet, however; it is a philosophy that encompasses one’s entire life and dictates that one eliminate all animal products such as leather, fur, wool, and beauty products that have been tested on animals or that use animal byproducts. Veganism is a lifestyle that attempts to communicate and participate in creating a more peaceful world by not eating, wearing, or using the body of another being. Ethical vegans hold their diet and lifestyle as the most ethical way of life because they believe they are reducing the amount of
suffering in the world and causing the least amount of harm to living beings and the planet.

Veganism is an important topic of study because as Elizabeth Cherry notes in her article discussing social movements, “vegans represent a new form of social movement that is not based on legislation or identity politics, but instead is based on everyday practices in one’s life” (Cherry 2006: 156). Cherry argues that the act of living a vegan lifestyle can alter personal identity as well as collective group identity. The goal of the ethical vegan community is not to create a collective identity, but rather to effect change in society for the benefit of humans, animals, and the planet.

**Slow Food**

The Slow Food movement began in Northern Italy in the 1980s and migrated to the United States around 2000. The basic principle of Slow Food is to encourage consumers to slow down, appreciate every bite, and enjoy the company with whom they are dining. Slow Food emphasizes the quality, not the quantity of a meal (Paxson 2005: 14). In 2002, the Slow Food USA director, Patrick Martins, stated, “We are not a protest organization… Most protest organizations have a short life span. We are a celebration organization. We protest by eating good food” (Paxson 2005: 15). The Slow Food movement is in no way intended to criticize other dietary habits, but instead celebrates its own mode of eating (Paxson 2005: 15).

One of the obvious aspects of Slow Food, is the promotion of self-control. Controlling one’s intake of food, and the knowledge and appreciation of one’s food is highly valued in the Slow Food movement. In Western societies, a thin, active body is
considered the most desirable, and most beautiful. A person’s slim shape implies that they have the necessary self-control to resist over-indulging in their intake of food, and therefore it is assumed that they have a good, moral quality. Paxson claims that being fit and healthy “is the ethical framework of biomedicine, where individuals are held morally responsible for their health and overweight, supposedly the outcome of out-of-control eating, is read as an indication of moral sloppiness” (Paxson 2005: 17). According to Western notions of beauty, food choices and how one consumes food is directly linked to their morality.

The Slow Food movement emphasizes self-control and treats it as an ethical way of eating. Rather than promoting self-control for “narcissistic” reasons, Slow Food identifies an ethical relationship between “self and convivial others, between self and cultural heritage, between self and biodiverse environment” (Paxson 2005: 17). In the movement, ethical eating is associated with purchasing food from local farmers, small-scale restaurants instead of national chains, and fully appreciating of what is lying on the plate, which can only be enjoyed at a slow pace.

In some respect, self-control is highly emphasized and valued within the vegan lifestyle. A person who decides to live by their vegan philosophy must have self-control. In the United States, where staple meals are made up of dead animals sprinkled with cheese, vegans must have the self-control to consciously abstain from eating the standard foods.

Slow Food can be considered an ethical eating practice because the ultimate goal is to better the lives of small-scale farmers and restaurants, the environment, and most importantly the consumer. The ethics of veganism differ from the ethics of Slow Food
because veganism focuses primarily on saving the lives of non-humans, while Slow Food intends to better the lives of humans and human interaction in our societies. Slow Food is a countercultural movement aimed at defying the fast-paced industrialized life in first world nations. The Slow Food movement intends to make people more aware of the resources used for their food and how people’s food choices effect the environment. Through education about food resources, the aim of Slow Food is to encourage people to be active in economically and socially supporting their community.

**Locavorism**

One dietary practice that has a similar ethic to Slow Food is locavorism. A locavore is an individual who is committed to only eating food that is produced within their local region. Locavores purchase their food from local farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs (CSA), grocery coops, and super market chains that sell locally produced items, such as Whole Foods or New Leaf. Locavores believe that eating only locally produced food is the most ethical eating practice because it supports local farmers and businesses in their communities (Rudy 2012: 26). Locavores also claim that small, local farms are more likely to grow food organically and less likely to use harmful pesticides. Therefore, locavores are aiding the environment by not supporting farmers or companies that use chemicals that pollute the air, soil, and water (Rudy 2012: 27). Locavores further believe that they are making a positive impact on the environment by not paying for food that has to be shipped long distances to get to the supermarket. They are not contributing to the profit of those businesses and therefore not contributing to fossil fuel and gas emissions of trucks carrying food (Rudy 2012: 27).
In terms of health, locavores believe that locally grown food is fresher and more healthful than typical supermarket food, which is usually sprayed with chemical fertilizers and pesticides to keep food looking fresh after the long transport from the farm to the store. By eliminating the extensive transport, locavores need not worry about the need to preserve the food over long distances. Locally grown food, however, does not always mean zero chemicals, as it depends on the region, the climate, and the particular farm (Rudy 2012: 28).

Choosing to buy and eat locally produced goods also allows locavores to feel more connected with their community and with the earth. In this sense, locavorism and the Slow Food movement go hand-in-hand in terms of core philosophies. Both emphasize eating food from local producers and having as much knowledge as possible about where one’s food came from (Rudy 2012: 28). People believe that Slow Food and locavorism are ethical food habits because they are concerned with consumer knowledge of food and the environmental and economic impact of one’s food purchases.

Veganism is similar to Slow Food and locavorism in that it too emphasizes the importance of knowledge of one’s food sources. Veganism differs greatly, however, because the core philosophy is to eliminate all animal products out of compassion for the animals, whereas Slow Food and locavorism do not object to locally raised and slaughtered livestock (Rudy 2012: 28). Locavores may even object to certain practices of veganism because many vegans choose to purchase tofu, vegan meats, vegan milk and cheese, and other less popular items in supermarkets. Since such products are not staple foods of most grocery stores, vegans may be purchasing items that require shipping across long distances, which contributes to air pollution and does not support locally
based farmers. Essentially, even if an individual locavore cares for the wellbeing of animals, he or she would opt to eat a locally slaughtered pig rather than pay for tofu or vegan meat substitute because they believe it is contributing to environmental degradation.

**Kosher**

Another example of an ethical practice of eating is keeping kosher. Many religious Jews across the world follow a kosher diet, meaning they only consumer certain animals and there are specific rules and prayers associated with certain meals. Kashrut is the body of Jewish religious text that dictates the dietary restrictions of Judaism. From “kashrut” comes the more common term “kosher” which describes food that meets kashrut standards. There are numerous different sects of Judaism and varying levels of kosher. Some of the standard rules of eating kosher include not eating any products from pig, not eating meat and dairy together on the same plate, and not eating any types of shellfish. Depending on one’s practice of Judaism, one can follow extremely strict dietary laws, such as only eating meat that has been slaughtered in a certain, ritualistic way, or one can be more lenient in one’s practices.

There has been no obvious religious justification for the specifics of the laws of kashrut. Some Jews follow a kosher diet simply because it is written in the Torah and therefore must be observed. Others have tried to seek answers within the Torah about why and how kashrut laws came to be. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, for example, suggests in his book *To Be a Jew* that kashrut laws are meant as a test and a “call to holiness” (Donin 1991: 35). Donin states, “The ability to distinguish between right and
wrong, good and evil, pure and defiled, the sacred and the profane, is very important in Judaism. Imposing rules on what you can and cannot eat ingrains that kind of self-control, requiring us to learn to control even our most basic, primal instincts” (Donin 1991: 46). Donin also claims the point of kashrut law is to remind Jews of their Judaism and to maintain their connect with God. The laws of kashrut morph the “simple act of eating into a religious ritual” (Donin 1991: 97). Observing a kosher diet reinforces one’s identity as a Jew and maintains a connection with God and one’s ancestors who also kept kosher.

The Torah specifically states that any land mammal that has cloven hooves and chews cud is allowed to be eaten, all others are forbidden (Douglas 1966: 53). This means that camels, rabbits, and pigs are all off limits since they do not posses both of these qualities. For sea creatures, only animals that have fins and scales are permitted. Shellfish are not kosher because they are considered “bottom-feeders” (Douglas 1966: 54). Birds are apparently allowed in one’s diet as long as they are not scavengers or birds of prey, although rabbis and Jewish scholars were left to guess about this specific criterion since the Torah does not provide any indication as to why only certain birds are kosher. Reptiles, rodents, amphibians, and insects are all forbidden, according to kashrut law. Jews must not eat animals that died of natural causes or who were killed by other animals (Douglas 1966: 53).

It is assumed, but not necessarily proven, that kashrut laws are specified in the Torah because God did not want humans to consume unclean, bad, dirty meat. The classification of certain species as “scavengers” or “bottom-feeders” implies that they are
not fit for human consumption. Therefore, for most Jews, entire species of animals carry a negative, unclean, impure connotations (Douglas 1966: 63).

Another important aspect of making meat kosher is the ritual slaughtering process known as shechitah. Shechitah is supposed to be a humane slaughter, starting with a fast, deep cut across the throat of the animals using a blade. There is not supposed to be any unevenness in the cut. Then the cut is left to drain and the animal left to die from blood loss. According to the Torah, this method causes the least amount of pain and eventually the animal will fall unconscious within minutes, therefore it is considered more humane than other methods of slaughter. Jews who keep kosher believe they are following an ethical diet because the Torah describes it as such, and because the way the animals are slaughtered is considered humane. Ethical vegans argue, however, that humane slaughter does not exist (Francione 1996: 11). Ethical vegans believe that every being “possesses equal inherent value, and this status entitles them to be treated with respect” (Francione 1996: 17). Therefore, harming an individual or ending a life, no matter how the procedure is carried out, is morally unjust.

Draining the blood is important in shechitah because the Torah specifically prohibits the consumption of blood (Masoudi, 1993: 672). This is the only kashrut law that is given a reason in the Torah. It is believed that the life and soul of the animal is contained within the blood. But this applies only to the blood of birds and mammals, not to fish. Therefore it is not necessary to remove all the blood from fish before eating them. There are also forbidden fats and nerves of certain animals, which are removed in the butchering process.
It is possible that Jews also feel a sense of obligation to keep kosher because it is commonly believed that a kosher diet reinforces Jews’ ideal of “right and wrong, good and evil, pure and defiled, the sacred and the profane” (Donin 1991: 46). Defining the difference between species as edible and non-edible demonstrates Jews’ commitment to their religion and to God, while also highlighting the differences between Jews and non-Jews. Keeping a kosher diet is important for individuals in maintaining a sense of religion, ethnicity, and identity.

Andrew Buckser is a cultural anthropologist who conducted ethnographic research in Copenhagen on Jewish identity in the 1990s. Buckser found that observing kashrut laws and keeping a kosher diet reflected and often interfered with many Danish Jews’ sense of identity as Danes and as Jews. Buckser acknowledges that food and dietary restrictions are culturally constructed. He states:

Food must be consumed physically by individuals; thus eating always involves an individual choice about connection with a group. In most cultures, moreover, many social activities revolve around food, placing the individual activity of consumption in a group context. Consequently, food becomes one of the most important symbolic media for expressing ideas of group and individual in societies where the relationship of group to individual is particularly problematic (Buckser 1999: 192).

Following a kosher diet affirms a connection to Judaism for Danish Jews, but a kosher diet can also interfere with their identity as Danes. For example, pork is the staple meat of Denmark, and many traditional Danish dishes require a combination of meat and dairy, which clearly does not fit with the kosher diet. Although there is very limited
racial tension for Jews in Denmark, the differences between traditional foods highlights the historical ethnic and social otherness that Jews have historically experienced (Buckser 1999: 196). Jews who choose to keep kosher are faced with a dilemma when they attend a festival or meal with other people who do not keep kosher. Buckser notes that, “on the one hand, eating represents a palpable transgression of Jewish law; on the other, refusal to eat violates guest etiquette and attracts notice” (Buckser 1999: 196).

Vegans experience a similar dilemma and pattern of social outcast. Since the population of vegans in the United States is only about 2%, vegans frequently must deal with non-vegan-friendly social gatherings. Much like the kosher Jews in Denmark, vegans appear at dinner parties with a stigma already attached to them. The ethical vegan will not be eating any animal by products and thus points to his or herself as an outsider, someone who is not completely included in the festivities due to their moral decisions. Buckser notes, “Jews who insist on keeping kosher tend to find themselves singled out on social occasions. They attend not merely as guests but as Jews, a different category of person with different needs and customs, a status reaffirmed with each successive course. Blending in with the rest of the group, being simply a Dane among other Danes, cannot coexist with a forthright observance of Jewish dietary rules” (Buckser 1999: 197). To be singled out or treated differently can be an isolating experience for both Danish Jews and American vegans. Due to the psychological distress or sadness this exclusion can cause, some Danish Jews resort to tweaking the rules: some Jews only keep kosher at home but will break kosher laws in public (Buckser 1999: 197). For an ethical vegan, this is not an option since it goes against their personal moral beliefs, which they feel they must uphold
for the benefit of the animals. If they broke their veganism in public in order to fit in, they would not be considered vegan.

According to my informants, vegans feel they are required to stand by their ethical convictions because it is the morally right thing to do for the animals, but also for the betterment of humanity. If an ethical vegan were to ease up on their veganism at a party for example, their argument for animal rights would be cast aside and they would not be taken seriously. This sense of obligation to act as a role model, and obligation to stand for animal rights seems to differ from some Jews’ sense of obligation to God and their religious faith, since they are willing to bend the kosher rules in order to fit in Danish society. Perhaps the sense of obligation comes from the duty many vegans feel to act on behalf of the animals, whereas a person’s religion is more about the individual’s relationship with their faith. Buckser states that no matter how one approaches it, “eating with non-Jews requires a delineation of the relationship between Danish and Jewish identity. The nature of that relationship is a permanent focus of disagreement and contention within the Jewish community, and it represents a central concern for the self-identity of most individual Danish Jews” (Buckser 1999: 198).

Veganism differs from the practice of keeping kosher because it dictates that all animals have a right to life and therefore humans should not harm or eat them. The laws of kashrut dictate that certain animals must not be eaten in order to maintain Jewish values and identity, and the animals that are eaten must be killed in a certain way in order for them to be acceptable to eat them. I will discuss kosher practices further in chapter two as I explore the relationship between religious eating practices and veganism.
Punk

The term and the culture of “punk” appeared in the late 1970s in Great Britain and the United States, and it was largely based in the new musical genre of punk and hardcore. British bands like The Clash and The Sex Pistols scream rather than sing messages about government corruption and fighting social standards. In the mid 1980s, punk transformed from being a harmless youth counterculture to a highly politicized anti-establishment movement (Sylvestre 2009: 93). This shift was mostly due to economic hardships and extreme social constraints experienced by the youth in Great Britain, and the U.S. punk culture quickly followed a similar shift (Sylvestre 2009: 93). Now being punk requires, “a commitment to resist capitalism, conformity, exploitation, and oppression (racism, sexism, speciesism, etc.). It [punk] was, and is, a rejection of mainstream culture with its supposed mindless focus of work, profit, consumption/materialism, and the suppression of the individual” (Sylvestre 2009: 93).

Punks object to the practice and notion of the objectification of nature (Clark 2008: 413). One way many punks express their contempt for this phenomenon is by living a vegan lifestyle. Veganism is not a required feature among the punk community, but it fits nicely with the anti-government, anti-speciesism, anti-objectification philosophy. Punk veganism is usually rooted in animal rights ethics but has an added element of the renunciation of oppression and compliance with societal standards.

Another punk ideology surrounding food focuses on the natural food markets. High-priced natural food stores like Whole Foods, Staff of Life, and New Leaf sell the types of foods that punks consider ethical. But the fact that the products are being sold inside an expensive, corporate, commercialized store is in direct contrast with punk
ideology (Clark 2008: 418). In an attempt to avoid paying large corporations for punk-approved foods, punks will steal food from natural food markets or go “dumpster diving” and eat discarded food. Stealing is a risky activity that boldly underscores punk ideology. Refusal to pay for their food ensures that a corrupt institution is not profiting from their money. And eating from a dumpster is a statement meant to demonstrate the wrongful wasting of foods. Anthropologist Dylan Clark claims, “Punk food attempts to break free from the fetishism of food as a commodity… By bathing corporate food in a dumpster or by stealing natural foods from an upscale grocery store, punk food is, in a sense, de commodified, stripped of its alienating qualities, and restored to a kind of pure use-value as bodily sustenance” (Clark 2008: 413). The acts of stealing and retrieving food from grimy dumpsters, practices which would appall most Americans, demonstrates punks’ commitment to their moral beliefs. These risky acts support punk ideas of personhood and identity.

Punk subculture prescribes that one seek food that is “more ‘raw’: i.e., closer to its wild, organic, uncultured state… the degree to which food is processed, sterilized, brand named, and fetishized is the degree to which it is corrupted, distanced from nature, and ‘cooked’” (Clark 2008: 416). The belief that food has been corrupted by the government, FDA, and large corporations prescribes that punks avoid commercialized food. They are avoiding the food as a product of political corruption, and further believe that by consuming the commercialized food, they too would be corrupting themselves by following the crowd, according to punk cultural standards.

As Julie Sylvestre notes in her study on punk culture, punks are social actors who are living in the world they envision, “conceiving the intangible out of the tangible, that
is, producing symbols and meanings from food, Punks conscientiously transcend everyday thought and discourse through dietary practice. Veganism becomes a place for Punks to express and implement an ideology of critique against oppression” (Sylvestre 2009: 94). Punk and ethical veganism share a common ideology that integrates into one’s lifestyle, not only one’s diet. I will explore punk veganism further in chapter three where I discuss punk and straightedge veganism philosophies.

**Straightedge**

The straightedge movement emerged as a subculture of punk culture in the 1980s. Beginning on the East Coast of the United States, straightedge was a social response to the excessive drinking, drug abuse, violence, and promiscuous sex associated with the punk subculture (Haenfler 2004: 409). One of the defining features of straightedge culture is the “clean-living” ideology; straightedge people do not put any “toxins” into their bodies (Haenfler 2004: 409). While straightedgers, or sXers, agree with the political and social activism punks generally stand for, sXers abstain from all alcohol, illegal drugs, tobacco, and excessive, unsafe sex (Haenfler 2004: 409). I will use the term sXe interchangeably with “straightedge,” as this is how straightedge people identify themselves. The term xVx refers to straightedge vegans.

The “X” is the iconic symbol of the straightedge movement. In the 1980s bar and club owners began drawing Xs on people’s hands who were under 21 years old so that the bartender would know not to serve them any alcoholic beverages. When the X became a signal that a person was underage and therefore not allowed to drink alcohol, straightedgers would purposefully draw Xs on their hands as a symbol of their
commitment to straightedge and clean living. This simple symbol held a negative connotation for most underage teens because it publicly displayed their age and their lack of alcohol. But within the sXe community the X united people across the world and communicated “a common set of values and experiences (Haenfler 2004: 415).

Many sXers also follow a vegan diet and vegan lifestyle. As with punk veganism, straightedge veganism, originates as animal rights philosophy but the culture and social standards surrounding sXe veganism is extremely different.

Much like the Slow Food movement, the straight edge diet emphasizes self-control. sXers purify their bodies and therefore their minds by excluding the “toxins” that most people, especially teenagers and punks pour into their bodies, which sXers believed ruin one’s physical health and mental happiness (Haenfler 2004: 417). Besides feeling healthier in their dietary choices, eliminating these toxins also improves sXers confidence. Haenfler states:

By labeling themselves as more “authentic” than their peers who used alcohol and drugs, sXers created an easy way to distinguish themselves. They experienced a feeling of uniqueness, self-confidence, and sometimes superiority by rejecting the typical teenage life. Refusing alcohol and drugs symbolized refusing the “popular” clique altogether as well as the perceived nihilism of punks, hippies, and skinheads (Haenfler 2004: 417).

Straightedge veganism is rooted in a culture of aggression. Hardcore and sXe bands are the most influential cultural factors within the sXe movement. Much like punk music, sXe music involves loud guitars and screaming lyrics about government corruption and
control. xVx bands such as Earth Crisis and Trial have a similar sound but the lyrics contain messages of animal liberation, ending animal and human oppression, ending environmental destruction, and of course living a clean, vegan lifestyle. It is clear that straightedge veganism is fostered in a drastically different social environment from that of ethical vegans. I will explore xVx more in depth in chapter three when I investigate punk and straightedge notions and practices of veganism.

Veganism is considered an ethical eating practice because it emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the rights and wellbeing of all creatures. The vegan philosophy considers all living creatures’ right to life. Ethical veganism is different from other eating practices in the United States because it not only requires dietary restrictions from animal products, it also requires a vegan lifestyle, restricting animal products from all aspects of one’s life. In the next chapters I will discuss the social marginalization that vegans face as morally autonomous individuals, and how community support plays a crucial role in the vegan movement. I will explore differing philosophies and practices of veganism among the straightedge, punk, and animal rights subgroups, and I will determine how activism plays an important role in all three communities.
CHAPTER 2

Although vegans follow the same diet and the same core philosophy, all vegans approach their veganism from a unique perspective. And while straightedge and punk vegans agree with the overall vegan philosophy, they approach veganism and practice it in distinctly different ways. What does veganism mean to individuals and how do people arrive at the conclusion that veganism is an ethical way of life? This chapter explores the different ways in which ethical vegans, punk vegans, and straightedge vegans approach veganism and how these different communities interact. How and why does veganism play a role in these distinctive alternative subcultures? This chapter also examines gender stigmas and gender disparities within the vegan movements and how they contribute to notions of identity and personhood.

Every one of my informants first became vegetarian before they became vegan. Most of them eliminated animals from their diets when they were in middle school or high school. Tracy, for example, is a 32-year-old woman who grew up in Northern California and attended UC Davis to study animal science. She currently works for a farm animal protection organization. As I sat down at the community kitchen table in Tracy’s office, I was not expecting to hear her emotional story about how she decided to become a vegan. Tracy decided to become vegetarian when she was thirteen because she did not want animals to be harmed in any way. She remained vegetarian all through high school and in college until she took a course where she was required to work at an “animal facility” located on the UC Davis campus. Tracy signed up to work at the school’s dairy facility, which was an obvious choice for her since she had always felt a
special connection with cows. This is Tracy’s powerful story about becoming vegan while working on the dairy farm:

I would wake up at 3am on Fridays and milk cows for three hours. And my favorite part, of course, was afterwards when I could go out on the dirt lot and just be with the cows. I just love how curious and engaging they are. One day one of the cows was giving birth and she was having a really hard time. The interns helped her give birth, so I got to be involved with that. I was actually the one who got to pull the calf out. And it was really gross but also amazing. I knew what happened to the dairy calves after this, it’s not like I cognitively didn’t know that. But when they took the calf away the mom was so weak and so exhausted, and yet she still tried to get up and she just made this scream. She was screaming for her baby. And that was, in that space between the calf and the cow, when I realized I contribute to that. That’s where my milk comes from.

This experience was so powerful for Tracy that she stopped drinking milk that day. She saw the suffering both the baby and mother cow experienced when being separated and she realized that she was contributing to the suffering by purchasing milk. Tracy says that after doing more research on the dairy and egg industries she stopped consuming all animal products over the course of a week. She states, “I don’t think many people have epiphanies like that, but I think I was just ready for my epiphany. It was really that moment of seeing what my actions contribute to, it was such immense suffering and I didn’t have to be a part of that and I didn’t want to be a part of that ever again.”
Annie is a 31-year-old ethical vegan who has been vegan for eight years and works with Tracy at the same animal protection organization. Annie is originally from Texas and grew up in a family who consumes and even raises animals for meat. Like Tracy, Annie states that her reasons for becoming vegan were inspired by her connection and love for animals. She worked for companion animal protection organizations, and says she is a “staunch anti-declaw advocate.” Annie was doing some research online about de-clawing when she came across an article describing the de-beaking process that egg-laying hens are forced to undergo. Egg-laying hens are housed in enormous warehouses on factory farms and are bred with the specific purpose to produce eggs. Their beaks are removed with a metal machine at approximately one week old, so that the hens can live together in wire cages and not attack one another with their sharp beaks. The de-beaking process is extremely painful and traumatic for the hens. Annie immediately saw a connection between de-clawing companion animals and de-beaking chickens. Annie says reading this article “pretty much started it all. I immediately gave up all chicken products... It just seemed so bad to me that people would do that just because they thought it was ok. So the little leghorns, the little egg-laying hens are what turned me vegan.” Later in the interview Annie states, “I credit my veganism to the hens and my activism to the cows.” Annie gives credit to the animals for encouraging her veganism because she views their lives and their experiences as something of value, and she clearly sympathizes with the animals. She was inspired by specific species to become an activist and to advocate a vegan lifestyle.

Many of my interview subjects cited specific books and films as being the most influential factors in their veganism. *Earthling, Forks Over Knives, Peaceable Kingdom,*
and *Vegucated*, are the documentaries mentioned most often. Brian, a 22-year-old student who has only been fully vegan for one year, stated that *Earthlings* was an affective film that opened his eyes to the horrors of the factory farming industry. Brian said that he has always liked animals, but the fact that he was eating them, “slipped from my consciousness.” Since watching *Earthlings*, Brian says, “I knew it [going vegan] was the right thing to do but it took me some time to really think things through.”

Carolyn is a 25-year-old ethical vegan from Wisconsin who has been vegan for ten years. She has worked for a farm animal rescue group in Southern California ever since she graduated from college, and she has traveled through Central and South America while maintaining a vegan lifestyle. Carolyn first became vegetarian when she was eight years old after a memorable family trip to Hawaii. Carolyn was playing on the sand when she saw a pig being prepared for a luau. Carolyn recalls, “I saw the whole pig laid out in stereotypical luau style, you know, apple in the mouth, legs tied together, and I was so horrified. That was probably the first time that I had ever been confronted with the fact that I was eating animals. I got so upset and I was like ‘I can’t eat animals anymore.’” Carolyn decided to be vegetarian when she was eight, and then later committed to being a vegan when she was fifteen. She had no influence from her parents or other friends or family, and she felt alone in her moral beliefs for several years until she was a young adult. Carolyn began doing more research into the egg and dairy industries in high school, and she watched the film produced by PETA called *Meet Your Meat*. Carolyn recalls, “I just sobbed through the entire thing. It’s all undercover footage of factory farms, and that just did it for me. I was sobbing downstairs and I went upstairs and told my parents I want to be vegan.” For Carolyn, seeing the dead pig in Hawaii and
watching undercover film footage of factory farms made her reconsider her diet and her ideas of compassion and justice for all animals. She says, “For me it’s all about the animals. My veganism was never a diet thing or a way to be healthy, those are just added benefits. I just didn’t want to eat or harm animals anymore.”

Diane is a 64-year-old woman who has been vegan for over 25 years, and is the founder and director of a farm animal rescue organization in Northern California. Diane became vegetarian in 1975 after reading Peter Singer’s book *Animal Liberation*. After approximately ten years of being vegetarian Diane says that the transition from vegetarianism to veganism was an obvious one. Diane says, “If I’m not eating the flesh for ethical reasons, how can I justify consuming their milk and eggs when they are still suffering?” Diane admits that her switch to veganism was a gradual process. She says, “There wasn’t a big ‘Aha!’ moment. It was really a slow process, unfortunately.” Diane says “unfortunately” because she is embarrassed that she did not make the transition to veganism quickly. Acknowledging that it is “unfortunate” that Diane’s process was gradual reveals her remorse and guilt. Diane is frustrated with herself for not exhibiting more self-control and thus not becoming vegan sooner. Diane’s guilt, however, is rooted in compassion rather than will power or self-control. Diane feels that she was participating in a harmful practice for too long before completely committing to the ethical life she lives now. She does not feel guilt for her own sake, she feels guilty for being a participant in a devastating production like factory farming, and for causing undue suffering towards the animals.

According to my interviews, ethical vegans approach veganism from an emotional standpoint. They relate to the pain and suffering of animals, and therefore
follow a vegan philosophy because they believe it is the most compassionate choice for the animals. They may also have opinions about how a vegan lifestyle benefits the environment or personal human health, but their primary reason for becoming vegan is to act compassionately towards all living beings.

There is a significant difference between the ways in which ethical vegans approach veganism, and the ways punks and straightedgers approach veganism. Punk and straightedge vegans often approach veganism from a political standpoint, inspired by hardcore punk music. As described in chapter two, punk culture appeared in Great Britain and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Punk culture was greatly influenced by hardcore music, which has a reputation for being loud, rambunctious, “screamer” music. Instead of following a melodic singing line, a singer in a punk band typically screams and shouts lyrics, while the entire audience dances and pushes each other in a mosh pit.

Punk culture emphasizes going against the mainstream of society. And following a vegan philosophy and lifestyle is definitely not following the mainstream of American society. Punks who practice veganism “adhere to an ideology of anarchism, animal and human rights, ecological well being, etc. Punks do not practice what they call “yuppie” Veganism, that is, dietary choices from high-end grocers at high-end prices. Instead, desirable food is that which is considered discarded food (day old or ripened food whose fate is the trash) or what one may scrounge from store dumpsters” (Sylvestre 2009: 95). By accepting society’s “rejects,” punks make a very bold statement about their own marginality and their own rejection of the mainstream. (Sylvestre, 2009: 95). Due to their anti-establishment, anti-mainstream philosophies, many punks live a vegan life in
order to protest against the exploitation of animals and in order to not participate in an oppressive operation such as factory farming.

It is common practice among punks to rummage through dumpsters to find their next meal, also known as “dumpster diving.” Punks prefer to eat out of garbage cans and dumpsters in order to make a statement and not contribute financially to a large food corporation. Some vegan punks admit that they will eat animal products if they are taken from a dumpster. These vegan punks have dubbed themselves “freegans,” meaning they will only eat animal products if they are found free in a dumpster. Freegans still consider themselves vegan, even though they occasionally consume free animal products. As long as freegans do not monetarily contribute to the oppressive institution of factory farming, they feel it is morally justified to consume discarded, non-vegan food.

Other punk and straightedge vegans disagree with the freegan philosophy. The fact that freegans are putting animal products into their bodies completely negates their veganism, according to other vegans. Zach is a vegan straightedge in his twenties who works for a farm animal rescue sanctuary in California. As Zach puts it, “Freegans are a fucking joke. Veganism is the idea that the animals are not ours to use in any sort of way. They exist for their own purposes. Whether or not they’re alive or dead they’re not ours to use. You’re not going to cut up somebody’s grandmother because you found her dead because it’s disrespectful and it’s disgusting. So the same thing goes for other animals.”

Zach is originally from Virginia and he has been vegan for six years. He first became vegetarian in high school because he had vague notions that the factory farming industry is, “kind of fucked up, we probably shouldn’t eat animals.” After being
vegetarian for a few months Zach did some further research about the meat industry and says he realized, “if I’m going to take any sort of moral stance on eliminating animals from my diet then I have to go vegan. Because otherwise it’s just really shallow.”

Zach’s primary exposure to veganism came through music. He says the most influential bands for him were Earth Crisis, Minor Threat, and Seven Generations. All of these bands are “vegan straightedge bands,” meaning they were formed by people who live a vegan straightedge lifestyle (xVx), and the content of their songs broadcasts these beliefs. xVx bands spread their vegan straightedge doctrine of beliefs through lyrics like “animals are not ours to exploit” and “the hunters will be hunted” and “it is not your right to control an individual.” As part of my research I listened to some Earth Crisis, Trial, Seven Generations, and Propagandhi albums. I was perplexed by the lyrics which promoted world peace and respecting all individuals, while being shouted from angst-ridden, irate men. Some of my favorite lyrics come from Seven Generation’s song titled “Ritual:” “There is not one second of this inhumanity that is righteous, necessary or excusable. Every single instance, every animal murdered in terror is an act of cruelty without beauty … every meal that comes at the price of a life is complicity in a holocaust that is beyond all comparison…” (Seven Generations 2008). These lyrics portray similar sentiments that ethical vegans agree with, however the mode of expression emphasizes anger at the factory farming system in the United States, as well as frustration with others who do not respect all life.

I was also happy to discover that vegan sXe bands not only promote veganism through their music, they also promote anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic sentiments. For instance, in Seven Generation’s song titled “Vanguard,” the music quiets
in the middle of the song and the lead singer proclaims, “It is not your right to deceive and abuse women. It is not your right to control an individual. It is not your right to treat a human being as an object to satisfy your selfish lust. [yelling] This is not your right.” The angry, hyper-masculine style of music appears to be using intimidation tactics to motivate people into being compassionate towards all humans and animals.

Danny is a 32-year-old straightedge vegan, who received his Masters degree in child psychology and currently works as a psychologist in a school system in California. He too credits straightedge bands like Earth Crisis, Trial, and Propagandhi as being the strongest influences in his becoming vegan. After becoming vegetarian in high school for ethical and health reasons, Danny was introduced to the straightedge movement when he was fourteen and immediately felt drawn to the ideology of living an alcohol and drug-free life. Along with his integration into the sXe movement in his hometown, Danny was introduced to sXe bands who promoted a vegan philosophy. Danny was a member of an animal rights group on his college campus, and after a group trip to an animal rescue sanctuary where he interacted with many farmed animals, he committed to becoming vegan and has been vegan for over thirteen years.

One of Danny’s favorite vegan straightedge songs is titled “Nailing Descartes to the Wall” (Rene Descartes was a philosopher who was a staunch proponent of using animals for human benefit.) The song is written by a vegan sXe band called Propagandhi, and some of the angst-filled lyrics include:

I’m not ashamed of my recurring dreams about me and a gun and a different species (hint: starts with “h” and rhymes with “Neumans”), of
carnage strewn about the stockyards, the factories and farms. Still I know as well as anyone that it does less good than harm to be this honest with a conscience eased by lies. But you cannot deny that meat is still murder. Dairy is still rape. And I’m still as stupid as anyone, but I know my mistakes. I have recognized one form of oppression, now I recognize the rest. And life is too short to make another’s shorter – animal liberation now! (Propagandhi 1996).

These specific lyrics along with other vegan sXe anthems are full of images depicting hunters, vivisectionists, and fishermen, being harmed or hunted down. These are blatantly enraged statements about serving violent justice to those who have caused harm to others.

The hyper-masculine nature of the punk and straightedge movements led me to explore gender roles in different vegan communities. Out of my twenty-five subjects, ten were male and fifteen were female. There appears to be no conclusive study revealing the exact percentages of male and female vegans in the United States. All statistics and all of my interviewees agree, however, that the population of female vegans is much larger than the population of male vegans. VeganBits.com is an informational website dedicated to health data, population statistics, vegan recipes, and product reviews as they relate to veganism. According to the site, of the vegan population in the United States there are approximately 78% female vegans and 22% male vegans.

A common social stigma regarding veganism and gender is that women choose to be vegan because they are highly emotional. It is often believed that women care for animals and feel compassion toward them, therefore more women than men choose to be
vegan. Ethical male vegans are presumed to be overly sensitive, weak, or feminine. If a man purposefully chooses to avoid animal products in his diet, he must be womanly because, as one subject quotes, “real men eat meat.” There are even common slang terms in English that refer to a man’s penis as his “meat” or his “beef.” If a man consciously chooses not to consume meat, he does not have meat in his body and therefore he must not be a manly, sexual being.

One ethical vegan I interviewed was a 26-year-old named Stacy, who was raised in a vegan household. Her parents became vegetarians when they were in college, and they became vegan two years after Stacy was born. Stacy currently manages a vegan restaurant in Boston and she is studying library science. Stacy says that whenever she tells people that her entire immediate family is vegan, often the first thing people ask is, “Your whole family? Even your dad?!” People are always surprised to learn Stacy’s father is vegan by choice. They cannot believe a man would ever willfully choose not to consume meat.

Max is a Boston-native in his thirties who has been an ethical vegan for over seven years. He was inspired by one of his vegetarian friend in high school to re-think his relationship with animals, and after doing some research on ethics and diet he came to the conclusion that veganism was the most ethical way of living. When I interviewed Max in July of 2012 he had been employed as an audio engineer and was currently working as a bartender at a popular bar in Boston. I interviewed Max in a small restaurant in Boston, which he had suggested because of the delicious vegan options. He said that this specific restaurant used separate grills to cook the meat dishes and the vegan dishes separately, which he clearly appreciated. It was important for Max, as it is for
many ethical vegans, to know that his animal-free food would not be touched or contaminated with the flesh of another body.

When he first transitioned into veganism Max experienced very little resistance or criticism from friends and family because “I did not talk about it, I just did it. But now that I’ve been vegan for longer I’m more vocal and open about it, so I hear more criticism.” One of the primary criticisms Max hears about his veganism relates to gender and being a male ethical vegan. In terms of gender stigmas, Max states that according to American culture, “for men it’s all about being alpha. Guys ‘aren’t allowed’ to be gay, vegetarian, or vegan. Those are the three biggest things.” The fact that Max places male vegans on the same level as homosexual males reveals the type of teasing or criticism Max and other male vegans can experience. According to American societal standards, eliminating meat from a man’s diet eliminates his masculinity.

Max continues to describe his experience as a vegan male, and he relates manhood to fishing. He says that, “When a father wants to teach his son how to be a man, he will take his son fishing.” Max says this in a matter-of-fact but disgusted tone, as if he cannot comprehend why or how fishing qualifies as a rite of passage for a young boy.

The rite of passage of fishing pertains to control. A father teaches his adolescent son how to control his environment by sitting quietly, calmly on a boat, while also controlling a living being’s life in his hands. When a fish latches on to a fishing hook thinking it is food, the boy – or whoever is fishing – is told to “reel it in.” Physically pulling the fish to oneself is at once controlling one’s own physical body and strength, and controlling another beings’ body by pulling them in. Then, after one has presumably
caught an impressively-sized fish, there is an obligatory photograph taken of the fisherman with his “catch.” The next step in the ritual is often to mount the photo or the fish itself on a wall in the home for all guests to see and admire. It is a visual symbolic display of masculinity.

The phenomenon of creating power or control is also present in diet and dietary restrictions. In American society, male dominance over other males and other species is highly valued. Fishing, hunting, and consuming animals are regarded as manly, masculine activities. For females, however, the power they seek revolves around restricting intake of food. As I mentioned in chapter one, people, women especially, are viewed as healthy individuals of sound mind and body if they are considered thin. For both men and women, control and power is something to be valued. However, men value control over another living being, whereas women value control over their own minds and their own bodies.

Abe was the first vegan parent I interviewed. Abe is a 51-year-old man who has been vegan for over 34 years, and he and his wife raised their two children vegan as well. Abe received his doctoral degree in biology from Harvard University and is now a professor of biology in New York. Abe raised his son and daughter vegan at a time when veganism was not as popular or well-known as it is today. Abe’s daughter continues to be vegan and plans on raising her family vegan as well, but Abe’s son has reverted to vegetarianism. As Abe puts it, “he [Abe’s son] went through a rebellious streak.” Abe’s son began eating meat in high school but has since become “mostly vegetarian.” Abe has come to accept his son’s decision to stop being vegan, although it appears it was a
difficult change for Abe. He acknowledges that it is more difficult for boys to be vegan than for girls and says, “It’s all about being manly.”

Abe’s daughter, Kelly, is a Brandeis graduate who now works for the New England Vegetarian Society. Kelly comments on the hardships of growing up as the only vegan child in her school and her neighborhood. Kelly states that growing up vegan was “really different. I had to develop a really tough skin. Other kids in school never really respected my beliefs or my eating habits, but I learned not to be bothered by other people’s opinions. It took a long time to learn that though.”

Kelly states that when she was younger, her peers focused on Kelly’s different food choices, rather than the philosophy behind her food choices. She says, “It was sometimes hard going to school and knowing that I would be the only kid with faux meat or soymilk or something and knowing that I would have to face lots of questions and criticisms from kids. I especially felt left out at birthday parties because of the cake and sweets.” Even though she was making a conscious choice about her veganism, Kelly still felt excluded, since she could not fully participate in the birthday parties of her peers. They were not purposefully excluding her, but because they were not baking vegan cakes at the birthday parties, Kelly was not able to fully partake in the happy festivities. At the same time, however, Kelly was rejecting the non-vegan community and non-vegan philosophy by not consuming cake.

Although she frequently felt marginalized at school, Kelly says that she is lucky because it is easier being a vegan female than a vegan male. Kelly saw her brother teased much more than she was, and she remembers the most common insults being, “sissy” and “girly.” She says, “It’s not macho or masculine to care about animals.” Kelly knows that
her brother had a harsher middle school and high school experience than she did, due to his veganism.

It made sense to Kelly when her brother started eating meat and dairy products, but it was emotionally painful for both her and her parents. Kelly credits her parents and says that they tried not to pester her brother or make him feel guilty about his decision, but she knows it was difficult for them to watch their son go against their values. When I interviewed Abe over the phone, he seems to have accepted his son’s decision, but it is clear that it is a difficult subject. Abe recalls how he himself was criticized in high school and he states he had lots of arguments with people about food, health, and animal rights. Abe believes that it is easier for young girls to be vegan because “they tend to make less of being ostracized for diet… Girls are more likely to be dieting.” He believes that since girls are more likely to be interested or invested in their diet, they are less likely to be made fun of or feel bullied for being vegan. Abe assumes that, for his son, it was the combination of feeling bullied and feeling that he was not masculine enough that made him decide to change his vegan diet.

John is an 80-year-old vegan who received his degree in clinical psychology and is now a professor at Berklee College of Music. He has been vegan for 47 years and is very active in the animal rights movement, sitting on the boards of several animal protection organizations. John shares Abe’s experience in raising two vegan children, and he too observed his son reject the vegan lifestyle.

John and his wife, Carol, raised their two children completely vegan. Their daughter Sabrina is now 22-years-old and still follows a vegan philosophy. I sat down to interview John, Carol, and Sabrina all together in their home in Boston. The Victorian-
style home is cozy and adorned with colorful artwork, rugs, vases of flowers, and pictures of family on the wall. Two canaries in the kitchen jumped about and chirped to each other during the interview, while their dog was lying underneath the table at my feet. The family’s love for animals is apparent in the artwork displayed in the home and the various species present in the rooms.

Carol decided to be vegan after reading John Robbins’ book Diet for a New America in 1987 and has remained vegan for 25 years. It was a natural decision for John and Carol to raise their children in a vegan home, since they both believed it to be the most ethical way of life. Carol says she and John would receive lots of questions from other parents because they did not understand the vegan philosophy, but she never felt marginalized or discriminated against in any way.

John and Carol’s son, like Abe’s son, began eating meat in high school and has gone back and forth between being vegetarian and omnivore for the past ten years. John says that his son was concerned about the amount of estrogen in soy-based food products. John’s son received some teasing in school for being vegan because he was perceived as “not manly enough, not masculine.” While he was being teased in school, there was a nation-wide rumor that soy products contained an excess amount of estrogen. John’s son did not wish to be viewed as feminine and since soy products are ingredients in many meat and dairy replacements, he feared he would psychologically and physically begin to feel the side effects of the estrogen. Therefore, he decided to start eating animal products. As John puts it, “he just needed to do his own thing. We don’t really talk about the subject of diet. We just don’t ask anymore.” When I inquired further about their son’s dietary change, John and Carol both quickly changed the subject.
It is apparent to me that this is a sensitive topic in their family. They appear to be hurt by their son’s decision. This is an exceptionally difficult change for John and Carol because they feel their son is abandoning them and all the ethical philosophies they instilled in their children. He is rejecting his parents’ vegan life and moral beliefs, which is hurtful to John and Carol, furthermore, he is harming other living beings by consuming them and contributing to an oppressive institution. John and Carol clearly feel a mixture of rejection, and sorrow for the animals. Yet they still attempt to understand and accept their son’s decisions.

These parents’ reactions to their children ending their veganism are parallel to the reactions of many parents whose children decide to start following veganism. Parents might feel emotionally hurt or rejected when their child decides to adopt a lifestyle different from their own because it creates a drift between parent and child. Annie, whom I introduced at the beginning of the chapter, states that switching to a vegan lifestyle connotes the idea that “the parents did not raise their child properly, or that the parent is less morally aware than the child.” Annie notes that it can be especially hurtful to the parent if they do not agree with the moral stance their child is taking. Annie’s parents do not necessarily disapprove of her vegan philosophy, but they do not accommodate her as she wishes they would, which can cause tension in the household and in the parent/child relationship.

All of the punk and sXe vegans I interviewed and conversed with were male. There are no specific statistics, but in my personal experience the ratio of male and female vegans in the punk and sXe communities seems to contradict the ratio in the ethical vegan community. My informants attribute this gender difference to the macho
culture associated with punk and sXe cultures. My sXe informants describe nasty fights and brawls they witnessed at sXe music shows. They emphasize the hyper-masculine and macho stigma that is attached to the punk and sXe movements, even though many sXe vegan bands promote compassion and respect towards all beings. Danny believes the machismo culture surrounding sXe helped him avoid the typical gender stigmas regarding veganism. Danny states, “I got into this from a very, very aggressive place and I think that helped a lot of guys kind of get into it and not have to really worry about that stigma of being weak. You know I’m listening to music where people are like screaming ‘hunters will be hunted, blood spilled for blood’ and talking about shooting vivisectionists in the street.” Danny laughs and jokingly says, “That’s a very different place to be approaching veganism from, right?” Danny is correct. Approaching veganism from an aggressive, anarchistic perspective establishes people, especially men, in a position of masculinity. In general, punk and straightedge vegans experience less criticism or marginalization based on gender, due to their aggressive approach.

Carol mentioned an important aspect of gender disparities in vegan communities. She agreed that it is socially more difficult for males to be vegan than for females. She noted, however, that although men are in the minority in most ethical vegan communities, they are often the people in positions of power. I investigated further into Carol’s claim and found that approximately 68% of the prominent animal advocacy groups in the United States today are founded or currently directed by men. Although men are a minority in the population of ethical vegans, they still occupy positions of leadership and power.
CHAPTER 3

In July of 2012, I interviewed a college student in her 20s named Rachel, who told me a story about informing an acquaintance that she is vegan. The first thing the acquaintance asked was, “Oh, “do you judge people who aren’t vegan?” Rachel was completely stunned and caught off guard by this question. The acquaintance was insinuating that because Rachel was vegan she somehow felt superior to non-vegans. Why was this the first question this person felt compelled to ask? The question seemed to be directed at Rachel’s morality; did she feel morally superior in her veganism? Or was she immorally inclined to judge those who are not vegan? This is an example of the type of comments and situations that many vegans deal with regularly.

After interviewing 25 subjects, it is apparent that most vegans experience some degree of questioning about their veganism, whether it is about food choices or moral choices. This chapter explores the specific types of marginalization that vegans face in the United States. I focus on different stigmas about veganism, the practice of comparing veganism to religion, and how vegans deal with criticism.

When I ask what the most common questions are that my subjects receive regarding their veganism, the majority of them respond in a frustrated tone, “Where do you get your protein? Where do you get your calcium? Don’t you miss cheese? Can you eat chocolate cake?” According to my interview subjects, vegans are frequently questioned about their health, their use of vitamins or supplements, and specific foods they can and cannot eat. Most of them have come to resent the repeated questions about protein, calcium, cheese, and chocolate.
It can be frustrating and even embarrassing for some vegans who are consistently questioned about specific vegan food. For example, Taylor is a college student from Philadelphia studying political science, and she has been vegan for three years. Taylor’s family was supportive in her decision to be vegan, and her mother even began eating mostly vegan meals alongside Taylor. Taylor is comfortable with her veganism at home, but she is the only vegan in her group of friends at college, which can be frustrating for Taylor. She states that she feels she is constantly under a microscope at meals and parties. She wishes people would not monitor her food so closely, although she understands that she is an anomaly in a group of omnivores. Taylor expresses her embarrassment when she attends a birthday party or family gathering and she brings her own food because that way the hosts will not have to cater to her vegan diet. Taylor states:

I don’t want to be a burden on my friends or family so I tell them “don’t worry about me. I’m always able to find something, or I can just bring my own food.” So I don’t want to be the vegan girl that everyone always has to cater to. But at the same time, that means that I have to bring my own food which immediately makes me different, like “that girl,” and it just highlights my veganism, which nobody agrees with or really understands. I feel the stares and I hear the questions “what is that? Why do you eat that?” So then literally every party I go to I wind up explaining why I’m vegan or getting into a stupid debate about animal rights and factory farming and why I don’t think it’s right. So then no matter what I do I’m “the animal lover who thinks she’s too good for our food.”
Taylor is frustrated at the lack of understanding and acceptance from her friends. She feels left out at social gatherings because her friends will not provide her with enough vegan food to eat, so she resorts to bringing her own food, which separates her even further from her friends. Taylor is put in almost the same exact situation as Danish Jews, as mentioned in chapter one. Food plays an important role in communicating who we are as people, what we like and dislike, and even our moral values. As we saw in chapter one, Danish Jews are obligated to keep kosher in accordance with their faith, but also feel compelled to take part in Danish cuisine in accordance with their national identity. When Taylor cannot partake in the food at parties, it is as if she feels excluded from the rest of the party. She cannot enjoy the same food as everybody else and thus feels disconnected from the others.

As introduced in the previous chapter, John is a healthy 80-year-old college professor who has been vegan for 47 years. He remarked that he will often hear skeptical questions about the taste of meat or dairy replacements. John said he is understanding, but still slightly offended when people turn up their nose at vegan substitutes he eats such as vegan burgers or vegan cheese. When people scoff at John’s food choices, he feels they are essentially scoffing at his moral convictions. John states he feels that the questions are often phrased in a horrified tone: “What is that you are eating?!?” John usually replies to these questions with a simple phrase: “If it didn’t taste good I wouldn’t eat it. And eating something that doesn’t come from a living creature tastes good with my morals.”

I discovered a pattern in my interviews and research indicating people who had been vegan for less than five years were more negative and defensive about their
experiences and felt particularly marginalized. I also found people who did not have any close vegan friends or family members had a similar negative tone in their interviews. The newer vegans and the vegans who did not have support from other vegans felt marginalized and alone in their beliefs.

The majority of my informants had been vegan for over five years, and most of them purposefully surrounded themselves with like-minded people by becoming vegan with a friend or spouse, or by joining an animal advocacy organization. The informants who were vegan for five years or more all cited negative experiences they had due to feeling marginalized in society, however they recounted these stories with a light tone. These informants were able to brush aside feelings of exclusion because they had a consistent support network of other vegans. The informants who had been vegan for five years or less spoke more vehemently and with more frustration, most likely because they had a feeling of constant exclusion.

John notes that it is easier to defend the food he eats rather than the morals behind it. It is easy to show skeptics that he has been a healthy vegan for almost 50 years and is still a healthy, active octogenarian. “Telling people where I get calcium is easy,” John says, “but trying to convey the importance and the ethics behind the vegan diet can cause more friction and defensiveness on both the vegan and non-vegan sides of the argument.” Essentially John and my other vegan subjects agree that it’s easy to convince people one is living a healthy vegan lifestyle, but it is more difficult to convince people one is living a more ethical life.

One of the more emotional interviews was with a woman named Marie who works for a human rights organization and has been vegan for six years. Marie emailed
me over the summer to say she was interested in participating in my study. She found out about my project from someone at the Massachusetts Animal Rights Coalition (MARC). I met Marie in a noisy coffee shop in Boston to conduct the interview. Marie has a husband and a fourteen-year-old daughter, both of whom are not vegan. Her decision to be vegan has created a major conflict between her daughter and herself. Marie did not know any other vegans when she decided to align her diet with a vegan philosophy. She was inspired to go vegan when she saw undercover video footage of cows and pigs living in factory farms. Although Marie’s conscience was affected by the videos, her family’s was not.

When Marie first became vegan, she was the butt of many jokes among her family and friends. Her family would make little jabs like “What are you eating for dinner? Rabbit food? Or is it grass tonight?” Now that Marie has been a healthy vegan for over six years though, the jokes are getting tiresome. For not only are they mocking her food choices, but they are mocking her moral choices for being vegan. And since her reasons for being vegan are purely ethical, to reduce the amount of suffering in the world and to save animals from unnecessary harm or death, it is as if the lives of the animals themselves are being mocked.

While Marie’s family and friends usually keep the jabbing light hearted, one of her neighbors is extremely insensitive. Marie says,

He’ll start talking about a pig roast he went to and he’ll say things right in front of me thinking it’s funny but it’s really not. You know the comments about eating grass or rabbit food is different. This neighbor will say, ‘Oh you know I had a great burger the other day. You should
have been there.’ That’s hostile. That’s not just… light. So there’s unwarranted hostility. I never said anything to him about how I feel about veganism and animals. Just learning that I don’t eat animals opens up a door for him to mock me.

To Marie, there is a distinct emotional difference between making fun of one’s food and making fun of one’s beliefs, even though these things usually go hand-in-hand for ethical vegans.

Marie has an especially emotionally draining experience dealing with her omnivore family and friends. Marie states, “it’s a very charged friendship with people who are not vegan. You have a constant subtext going on: ‘you’re such a bad person, you’re eating an animal, you think you’re humane, you think you’re a progressive type person, but you will never be that. You will not be an enlightened, humane human being until you stop eating meat.”

One particularly difficult friendship is with a woman named Karen, who is the mother of Marie’s daughter’s best friend. It is difficult for Marie to feel “totally herself” with Karen. The two have had numerous arguments over Marie’s veganism. Marie says she and Karen once “had this huge blow up and I said, ‘you know, I’m having a really hard time coping with you not being at least vegetarian.’” Marie feels she cannot fully express her moral views around Karen because there is tension between them surrounding Marie’s veganism. Marie is saddened by this tension because it means that her friend does not appreciate or respect her veganism, while Marie feels resentful of her friend’s disrespect. At the same time, Marie cannot fully respect Karen as long as Karen continues to consume animals, and Karen in turn is resentful of Marie’s disapproval of
her omnivore diet. There continues a vicious cycle of both friends feeling not fully accepted by the other.

Marie cites an example of her friends going out to dinner that demonstrates the tension between Karen and herself. She states that when they go out to dinner none of her friends ever suggest a vegetarian or vegan restaurant so as to respect Marie’s ethical veganism. Instead, her friends will decide on a restaurant and say, “let’s see if we can find something for Marie at this restaurant,’ or ‘what can Marie eat,’ or ‘I’m checking out the menu to make sure there’s something for you Marie.” Marie is upset by this common occurrence for two reasons. First of all, she does not understand why her friends refuse to put aside their “omnivore desires just for one meal and eat at a delicious, healthful, and cruelty-free vegan-friendly restaurant. It really hurts me to see dead animals on the plates of my friends.” The fact that her friends eat meat in front of her indicates to Marie that they do not share her moral philosophies, and they do not respect her choice to follow her own moral philosophies.

The second reason why Marie is upset by her friends eating at non-vegan-friendly restaurants, is because it puts her in a position of being “the burden.” When her friends look at a restaurant’s menu to search for vegan options for Marie, she feels she is a burden on them because they have to worry about her veganism. She uses this term “burden” just as Taylor did. Also like Taylor, Marie does not want her moral and dietary differences highlighted, and she does not want her friends to resent her for being vegan. She does not want her friends to resent her for following her moral perspectives and living a vegan lifestyle. Marie looks down at the table and quietly says, “Whether it is or not, you feel that it’s burdensome. Or when I go to somebody’s house for dinner, that’s
why I would always bring my own food.” Marie is facing a similar dilemma as Jewish Danes. If she does not want to be burdensome to her hosts, she will bring her own vegan food and mark herself as different or an outsider. This is an identical experience many Jewish Danes face, due to their kosher diets as described in chapter one.

It is important to note that Marie is the only vegan in her family and in her group of friends. It is apparent that, much like Taylor, she feels alone and separated from her friends because of her ethical veganism. Marie and Taylor are rejecting their omnivore community. In my research, I found that people who are surrounded by omnivore friends and family, those who do not have a supportive network of vegans feel extremely excluded, defensive, and marginalized. Solitary vegans tend to be more irate with people who are not vegan; they cannot understand why others do not acknowledge or respond to the immense animal suffering. People who have been vegan for more than five years, or people who have surrounded themselves with other like-minded ethical vegans, tend to be less defensive in the interviews and less frustrated with people who are not vegan. Perhaps this is because people who have been vegan longer and who have a vegan community feel they are accepted and understood within this community, or perhaps it is because they have been living vegan lifestyles for a longer amount of time and therefore are more comfortable expressing their views. I found in my interviews that people who practice veganism mostly alone, usually those who have been vegan for under five years, do not feel understood or accepted wherever they go.

Feeling outcast or misunderstood can be especially frustrating and emotionally difficult for vegans when dealing with close friends and family. I ask each of my interviewees if they believe their friends and family fully understand their convictions
and their reasons for becoming vegan. Taylor’s joking response is echoed in many of my interviews, when she says, “Well obviously they don’t get it or else they would be vegan too.” In my interviews, most ethical vegans express disappointment in their friends and family for not demonstrating the same level of compassion as they believe they are demonstrating.

As introduced in chapter two, Zach has been a vegan straightedge for six years and he currently works at a farm animal rescue sanctuary in California. When I ask Zach how he feels about his family’s lack of understanding regarding his veganism, he replies:

I think there’s absolutely a disconnect. There are very few people that I was close with before [I became vegan] that I’m still close with. And those are the people who I feel the most amount of anguish that they’re not vegan. And of course I still love them but they continue to do this awful awful awful thing. And I love them and I know they’re intelligent people, I know they’re kind people. They are capable of making this connection and understanding it, but it’s warped. So for friends and family who aren’t vegan or even sober for that matter, they see it as an excess amount of compassion versus a necessary amount, which is how I see it.

It is difficult for Zach, and all of my other informants to accept the ethical gap they feel between themselves and non-vegan family and friends. For this reason, Zach and other long-term vegans find it necessary to create a community with others who share a vegan philosophy.

Religion
Some vegans find it helpful to relate veganism to religion. Over half of my interview subjects claim to use religion as a tool to help explain their moral convictions to their friends and family who do not understand the vegan philosophy. Audrey is a middle-aged woman living in Boston, who has been vegan for three years. She currently runs a small research firm and plans on going to law school to study animal rights law. Audrey ultimately wants to run a private practice and work on pro bono cases for the animals; that way, she says more cases will come up and more cases can be addressed. When I ask Audrey how her family reacted when she told them she decided to be vegan, she says that it was difficult for them to understand, but relating her veganism to religion helped.

Audrey purposefully relates her vegan choices to Jewish kosher choices. She recalls numerous family gatherings where her family members questioned her vegan lifestyle. “They would always say, ‘oh come on, you can eat this chicken salad,’ or ‘what’s one little brownie?’ It’s like they thought I could end my veganism for this one food at this one family event.” Although Audrey was not raised in a religious family, they are ethnically and culturally Jewish. In order to deal with the criticism she received from her family members, Audrey resorted to telling them that veganism is similar to keeping kosher. “For some reason that got to them,” Audrey stated, “they finally started realizing ‘oh, you can’t eat this chicken salad.’” Audrey heard less criticism from her family for her veganism when she related her moral choices to religious moral and dietary choices.

It is unclear exactly why her family eased their criticism. Perhaps it is because they personally identified with Jewish traditions and therefore they better understood
Audrey’s dietary strictness when it was related to keeping kosher. It is also possible, as Audrey acknowledges, that her family left her dietary choices alone because religion is a sensitive topic amongst Audrey’s family and in the United States in general. Once it was compared with kosher practices, there was an element of religion attached to Audrey’s veganism. Perhaps her family felt uncomfortable criticizing her veganism because they felt it would be akin to criticizing a person’s religion. In the United States there is a culture of sensitivity and caution when it comes to the topic of religion. It is not socially acceptable or respectful to purposefully degrade somebody’s religious beliefs or practices.

Frank Furedi’s book titled On Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence, investigates the social implications of leading a life morally different from the majority of the population. He specifically examines the social stigma of those who are considered outsiders in their religious practices, cultural rituals, and food habits, and discusses the ways in which they form communities with each other. In a nation like the United States, which prides itself on cultural diversity and promotes religious tolerance, it seems that moral independence is in a separate category of “cultural diversity,” and is exceptionally poorly tolerated. Furedi finds that, “A new ethos of intolerance towards the choices that people wish to make about how to conduct their lives is closely linked to the downgrading of the value of moral autonomy” (Furedi 2011:135). Furedi argues that the concept of moral autonomy has decreased in importance in the United States, and that people are not likely “to have the independence to develop ideas consistent with their self-interest” (Furedi 2011:130). A person who chooses not to eat animal products is morally different from the majority of Americans, and Furedi suggests that this practice
of moral autonomy is highly undervalued and marginalized. In this chapter I will be
discussing the ways in which vegans feel marginalized and how they negotiate their
personal ethics in the face of marginalization.

Taylor states that when someone asks about her veganism, she will often respond
with, “It’s like a religion to me because it’s what I believe is right, but my veganism is
not affiliated with any particular religion.” People are more likely to understand the
moral intent behind a religion, and maybe even the dietary restrictions of particular
religions. Taylor says people are also less likely to make fun of people’s religious
differences than their dietary differences, since that would be insensitive and rude.
Taylor asks, “but why shouldn’t it be considered rude when someone makes fun of my
veganism or my beliefs behind it?!?” Taylor claims that making fun of her veganism is
not only making fun of her and her choices, but she feels it is making fun of the suffering
animals. Taylor says, “factory farmed animals are among the most abused beings on this
Earth, and the fact that people will joke and poke fun at them and me makes me
physically pained and angry.”

The notion of keeping Kosher was mentioned in a number of interviews. Some of
my subjects were raised in a Jewish home and were familiar with the food restriction in
place in Judaism. Audrey states in an appalled voice, “What’s the difference?! If I tell
someone I don’t eat pigs because I believe it is morally wrong suddenly I’m the object of
ridicule. But if I tell you I don’t eat pigs because I keep Kosher, everybody shuts up and
let’s me do my thing.” Since religion is a sensitive and charged subject, people are more
inclined to be more tolerant of the religious beliefs of others.
Approximately 65% of my interview subjects agree with Audrey’s position that veganism is comparable to a religion because it is a moral philosophy and lifestyle that demonstrates one’s personal beliefs. And since people are not always familiar with vegan philosophy, ethical vegans find it helpful to relate veganism to religion to help others understand their convictions. The other 35% of my subjects stated that they disagree with this notion and some of them purposefully avoided relating their ethical veganism with religion.

Chloe is a 53-year-old ethical vegan who lives in Northern California. She works for a nonprofit animal rescue organization and teaches acting and film classes to elementary school children. Chloe claims that her veganism is like a religion to her, but she was reluctant to make that comparison. Chloe has never been a religious person, and she worries about any negative connotations religion might conjure up for some people. She feels that veganism and the ethics behind it are more tangible than any religion. She says that most religions are based on faith and belief in God or spirits or something supernatural that humans cannot see. The practice of veganism is based on the belief that one should treat all living things with respect and reduce the amount of suffering in the world by not harming or killing animals for food. “To me,” Chloe says, “that is a way more tangible thing. Veganism should not be compared with religion because it’s something you can see, it’s real, it exists here, its not about some guy up in the sky… Comparing veganism to religion might make it a more accessible concept for people who are not familiar with veganism, but for me it is much more than that.” For Chloe, physically seeing the animals and understanding their treatment in factory farming
facilities is a much more accessible concept and therefore she prefers not to equate her veganism to a religion.

Zach is also not religious, and he emphasizes the importance of not comparing veganism to a religion. He says that he agrees that equating the two might help people understand his seriousness about his veganism, but ultimately he thinks it is misleading. Zach states:

Religions tend to be a set of beliefs solidified and formulated through faith and not a whole lot of tangible evidence… you know the case for it is all there and its all very factual you just have to decide whether or not you care. And I know that’s a personal thing but for me morality dictates that I care, but that doesn’t change the case for it you know? Animals are getting abused, and needlessly killed. That’s all real and happening as we speak. It has nothing to do with faith or beliefs, it just has to do with how strong your level of empathy and compassion is.

Zach wants people to understand that his moral beliefs and his veganism are as serious as any religious beliefs, but they hold more weight for him personally because his beliefs are not based on faith. And contrary to Audrey’s thoughts, Zach prefers to intentionally make the distinction between “cannot” and “will not.” Audrey preferred for her relatives to understand that she cannot consume any animal products as it would go against her vegan philosophy. But Zach intends to relay to people that he will not consume animal products for the same reasons. Zach comments, “If somebody asks ‘can you eat this?’ it’s like… ‘well yeah I can but I’m not an asshole so I’m not going to. I don’t want to.’”
There is an important ethical difference between the words “cannot” and “will not.” “Cannot” suggests zero agency in this decision. It suggests that ethical vegans do not consume meat or dairy products because they are abiding by the rules of some moral code. They are respecting and obeying the proverbial vegan tenants. Whereas “will not” connotes an active choice in not consuming animal products, and it demonstrates awareness about the meaning and implications behind a vegan diet and lifestyle.

Danny repeats the notion that veganism is more concrete and tangible than religion. As I mentioned previously, Danny is a 32-year-old straightedge vegan who has been vegan for over thirteen years. Danny almost identically echoes Zach’s example of people inquiring what he can and cannot eat. For example, Danny says, “one thing that my family does is they’ll say at like family gatherings ‘oh you can’t eat this, you can’t eat that’ and that’s kind of like the religious view right? You believe this and therefore you can’t do this. And I often correct them and say ‘well actually I can eat that, but I choose not to.’ This [veganism] is an active decision for me. This is a choice that I am making.”

Emphasizing the point that he chooses not to eat certain things at the dinner table is important to both Danny and Zach because it conveys their agency in their personal moral beliefs. Danny also notes that his choice to be vegan is a moral choice but furthermore, “it is an active choice against something.” What Danny, Zach, and most ethical vegans are actively protesting is the idea that animals are meant to be used by humans, and the practice of harming and killing innocent creatures. Ethical vegans actively make a statement of their beliefs by choosing not to consume animal products. Living a vegan lifestyle is not something Danny or any ethical vegan does passively but actively, and Danny values that distinction.
Conclusion

On April 26, 2013, I was fortunate enough to attend a lecture given by Peter Singer at Boston University. His lecture was titled “Animal Rights: Past, Present, and Future,” as he was celebrating the 40th anniversary of the publishing of his book Animal Liberation. The event was free and open to the public, and it was sponsored by the Boston University Vegetarian Society. The audience included mostly BU students and about twenty adults who were invested in animal rights, many of whom I knew because I had interviewed them for my thesis. The audience looked on adoringly at Singer due to his celebrity status in the animal rights movement. At the beginning of the lecture, the president of the BU Vegetarian Society gave a short introduction and announced that Singer had decided to donate his speaking fee, a total of $10,000. He split the donation equally between the BU Vegetarian Society and another local animal rights education organization.

The almost-full auditorium provided a beacon of hope for one audience member in her 50s. Brenda was one of my informants whom I interviewed over the summer and I had not seen her since our interview in July. I spoke with Brenda after the talk and when I asked her what she thought of the lecture she said, “I was surprised there were so many young people! I was so happy to see so many young faces, it really gave me hope for the future of the animals.” Meeting other vegans and animal rights advocates is important to Brenda because it reinforces a sense of community and gives her hope that the movement is growing. Seeing so many people she did not know, especially so many young people, gave her the encouragement that more people are trying to instill change and cause less
suffering for the animals. It is gatherings such as this that call ethical, punk, and straightedge vegans together to unite as one solid animal liberation frontier.

The general feeling in the auditorium that night was a feeling of comradery, understanding, and encouragement. The feeling one gets while standing in a room full of people who share your same ethical beliefs is overwhelmingly wonderful. For vegans, there is a true sense of community when they are with other vegans. Rachel, one of my younger interviewees I introduced in chapter three, relates it to meeting someone from your hometown. She says, “It’s like when you meet someone across the world and they happen to be from your hometown. Once you realize you come form the same place, it’s an instant connection and you start swapping stories about certain places or people and you are able to fully express where you’re from and why you are the way you are to that person, simply because you are from the same place.” This comparison is appropriate because it denotes the sentiment that ethical vegans immediately feel a connection with each other based on shared experiences of being marginalized for their moral choices. The community that ethical, punk, and straightedge vegans construct for themselves is crucial for the development of vegans’ moral identity, their sense of purpose and personhood, and to the survival of the vegan and animal rights movements.

My initial project focused on the conflicts vegan parents face in trying to pass on their beliefs and culture to the next generation. It soon became apparent that the vegan culture itself required more explanation, detail, and understanding, hence, this became the main topic of my thesis. I decided to study ideas of identity and community of three different vegan sects, and there is still much more to be learned from the vegan community at large. This project has laid the groundwork for future studies about
veganism such as the original topic I planned on pursuing, namely how a small minority culture passes on it’s moral beliefs to the next generation.

Through this study I have learned that there are significant cultural distinctions, even within a small subculture such as vegans. There are varying ideologies and practices associated with health vegans, ethical, vegans, punk vegans, and straightedge vegans. What veganism means to people differs from individual to individual, but all vegans share a common belief that to use or harm animals in any way is unjust. Vegans create identity through the foods they choose to consume, and more importantly not consume, and through the ethical beliefs behind their dietary practices. Vegans create community identity through the shared experiences of being socially marginalized in a society that emphasizes manliness, power, control, and the consumption of meat.


Paxson, Heather. "Slow Food in a Fat Society: Satisfying Ethical Appetites."


