

**PLANTING IDEAS: A MORAL AND ECONOMIC CASE FOR
VEGANISM WITHIN DEGRWOTH**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores veganism through moral and economic perspectives, beginning with an analysis of three major normative ethics theories: utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and virtue ethics. While each of them provides reasons to reduce animal harm, I argue that they all fail to demand full veganism, due to the fundamental assumption of moral hierarchy between humans and animals. This limitation calls for a rethinking of the traditional ethical frameworks. I apply Karen Barad's flat ontology from her book "Meeting the Universe Halfway" to veganism and argue that veganism then demands us to re-examine and change our relationship with non-humans to one that does not commodify them, treats them with equal moral worth, and allows their lives to flourish. I consider what this means for other species such as plants and rocks. Then I argue that for veganism to be more than a dietary restriction, we must transform our current socio-economic system. I propose that the goals of veganism align with degrowth, a socio-economic movement that challenges capitalism's imperative of endless growth and instead seeks to build a world centered around care, sustainability, and justice. I argue that degrowth provides the necessary conditions for veganism to work, and conversely degrowth must address animal agriculture and speciesism to achieve its promise of 'good life for all'. By situating veganism in the degrowth framework, I show that the two need each other to imagine and transform a just and more livable world for all beings.

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INTRODUCTION

When people hear the term ‘veganism’, most of them think of a diet, a restriction, a trend, or a lifestyle choice. Yet, this understanding of it only scratches the surface. One of the fundamental definitions of veganism, given by Leslie J Cross in 1949, is that veganism means “to seek an end to the use of animals by man for food, commodities, work, hunting, vivisection, and by all other uses involving exploitation of animal life by man” (The Vegan Society, n.d.). Veganism is a philosophy, a way of seeing the world, a political movement that brings together people from all kinds of contexts with the goal not only to end animal suffering, but to rethink our relationship with animals and our deeply rooted practices of exploitation and commodification.

While it is difficult to know for certain how many animals are suffering around the world, some organizations have attempted to approximate it based on the best available data. Our World in Data estimates that globally 74% of land animals used for food are kept in factory farms. That is around 23 billion animals at any given moment being bred, tortured, mutilated, separated from their offspring, confined in a tiny space, slaughtered (Anthis & Anthis, 2019). If we count farmed fish, the number of animals kept in intensive farming systems jumps to an estimated 111 billion. To put that in perspective, that’s roughly as many beings as the total number of humans that have ever lived (Ritchie, 2023). We have reached a point where animal lives do not matter, and it has gotten out of hand. It is not enough to reduce our animal product consumption. To put an end to this suffering we must change the way we think about and relate to animals.

But how do we view animals when we consider them to be moral agents? In the first part of my thesis, I analyze the arguments traditional normative ethics theories (utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, virtue ethics) make for veganism. I conclude that they are insufficient because they

are centered around humans and view the human as the dominant species, enforcing a moral hierarchy between humans and non-humans. While normative ethics compels us to reduce harm on animals, it does not prevent us from viewing animals as subjects to us humans and commodifying, owning, and killing them. Because of this, in part two, I turn to physicist and philosopher Karen Barad's flat ontology. In her book "Meeting the universe halfway" she proposes an ethico-onto-epistemological framework of agential realism, which considers all beings as entangled with each other and part of the same process of becoming. There is no hierarchy between species and there is no one assigning moral worth to the other. Her theory challenges the dualism of humans and non-humans and urges us to rethink our relationships with all matter. I argue that within her framework, veganism is how we should change our relationships with animals. In the third chapter of my thesis, I turn to how our economic system currently is and how veganism cannot succeed in its goals within it. The last part of my thesis proposes degrowth as a framework within which veganism can thrive and in the same way, adopting veganism will help degrowth fulfill its promises of a just and convivial world.

1. NORMATIVE ETHICS ON VEGANISM

In this chapter, I critically examine three normative ethics theories, namely, utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and virtue ethics to assess whether they provide sufficient moral foundation for veganism. I argue that while each theory provides reasons to do less harm to animals, they all fail to demand full veganism. This is because the normative theories assume hierarchy between species, putting humans above other of animals, which is an assumption that must be fundamentally rethought.

1.1 Utilitarianism

In “An Introduction to the “Principles of Morals and Legislation”, Jeremy Bentham defines utilitarianism as the moral theory that actions are right insofar as they promote happiness and wrong insofar as they increase pain. Happiness, more specifically, is in his definition pleasure and the absence of pain (Bentham, 1907, ch. 1). What determines the moral value of agents for utilitarians, such as Bentham and Peter Singer, is their capacity to suffer rather than their cognitive abilities. In the same book Bentham famously says “The question is not Can they reason? Or Can they talk? but Can they suffer?” (ch.18, 122n) Singer further develops this line of thinking in *Animal Liberation* (1975) where he argues that failing to account for the suffering of animals is a form of speciesism, which he defines as a bias in favor of one’s own species and against the interests of others, like racism or sexism. From a utilitarian perspective, species membership is morally irrelevant. What matters is the capacity to suffer. Thus, Singer concludes that our current treatment of animals in food systems is not only cruel but unjustifiable on moral grounds (Peter Singer, 1975, ch.1).

Despite going against speciesism, Singer's argument, and utilitarianism in general, only go as far as calling for vegetarianism or the abolition of factory farming, rather than for full veganism. Let's take the life of Jeremy Baa-ntham the sheep as an example. According to utilitarianism, Baa-ntham can experience pain and suffering, even though they are a sheep, so we should not put Baa-ntham in a factory farm and torture him. But what if Baa-ntham is owned by a nice farmer who promises that he will take good care of him for his whole life, but would still use Baa-ntham's milk and wool to make products and sell them? It seems like utilitarianism has no problem with that because Baa-ntham wouldn't be feeling any pain. In fact, they might even have a good life. Similarly, it would be morally permissible for the farmer to kill Baa-ntham and eat their meat if Baa-ntham was slaughtered painlessly.

Since the core of the utilitarian concern is that we should avoid animals' suffering, the problem becomes how animals should be treated rather than should they be used at all. Utilitarianism permits the consumption of animal products if the animals are given good lives and are killed painlessly and without suffering. Farming practices that meet these conditions can be morally justified if they avoid suffering and increase happiness. This view, however, supports that animals exist to be used by humans, as long as they are treated well. We consider Baa-ntham's happiness, but we do not consider them as a being with agency, relationships and meaning beyond what we humans can perceive and measure. This is how utilitarianism pre-supposes human superiority. It is permissible for us to own animals and use them for our pleasure, even take their lives, because we can and as long as we provide them a life that we deem to be good.

1.2 Kantian deontology

A completely different approach to the vegan question would be deontology, most famously developed by Immanuel Kant. For Kantians, unlike utilitarians, the subject matter of ethics is

how we treat each other. A key idea for Kant is that we must treat others not merely as means to an end, but always also as ends in themselves (Kant et al., 1998, 4:228 - 4:229). However, Kant believes that we do not owe any moral consideration to animals because they are not rational and the only beings who have moral worth "in themselves" are rational agents: humans (Immanuel Kant & Infield Louis, 1930, p. 239). He does also argue, however, that we should not treat animals with cruelty and that if they have worked for us, we should be grateful to them. This is not because he recognizes any moral standing but rather because he thinks that we owe it to ourselves to treat them with kindness (p. 240). Contemporary Kantian philosopher Christine Korsgaard has challenged Kant's strict boundary between rational and non-rational beings. In *Fellow Creatures* (2018), Korsgaard argues that animals should also be treated as ends in themselves because what matters is not rationality but the fact that they can experience goodness and badness for themselves (Korsgaard, 2018, 2.1.8). To humans, rationality matters because we are rational creatures, to animals who are non-rational it does not matter. But animals still have goods for themselves. Their lives can go well or badly from their own point of view, they have interests and desires. What makes any agent morally significant, according to Korsgaard, is having a final good. This means having those "valenced experiences", which she considers to be sentience (2.3.4), and them guiding the agent to their functional good, meaning the ability to promote their well-being and functioning through action (2.2.2). The way we evaluate if the agent has a final good is through empathy (2.1.9).

Let's take the friendly cow Imoonuel Kant to illustrate Korsgaard's view. Picture Imoonuel standing in a sunny pasture, calmly grazing on fresh grass. Imoonuel is eating the grass because it feels good and fulfills their natural needs. This is a final good for Imoonuel because it is something they chose, something that contributes to their well-being, and something that matters from Imoonuel's perspective. Our empathy is what makes us recognize the grazing as a final good for Imoonuel. That is how we judge their moral relevance.

It is worth noting that a key difference between utilitarianism and the way Korsgaard interprets Kantian deontology is that the core of the latter is how an individual human treats an individual animal. It is not about numbers and consequences. It is a question whether you are eating an animal's meat and their products extracted from them in a way that goes against their good (12.3.3).

According to this view, if Imoonuel the cow was a product from a factory farm that you chose to eat, it would be wrong of you. You are choosing to treat Imoonuel as an end to your means, not as end in themselves. You are consuming products made from Imoonuel in ways that did not consider what is good for them. Imoonuel was tortured and exploited. However, just like in Baa-ntham's case, what if Imoonuel was owned by the same nice farmer? And the nice farmer allowed Imoonuel to graze some grass because the farmer realizes it is a good for Imoonuel to do so. The farmer provides what they deem through empathy to be a good life for Imoonuel and once again it seems like there's nothing telling us to not consume dairy products, let's say, made from Imoonuel.

This argument is not strong enough to show that we have moral obligation to be vegan. It seems that, for Korsgaard, the only problem with humane farming is the short life the animal could have in the farm, meaning if Imoonuel was killed before their natural life came to an end, because that would not be a good for them. If we use empathy, we will not consider that a good life should be forced to end sooner to be used for food. But in providing a good long life while using Imoonuel's milk in the meantime, the farmer acknowledges that Imoonuel has goods and treats him accordingly. So, this would permit consuming animal products as long as they are extracted in a way that is consistent with their good, offering a good life to the animal and treating them with respect. Additionally, her framework begins from human rational moral agents who grant recognition to others, meaning that animals gain moral standing because we

grant it to them through empathy, not because they are inherently morally valuable, reinforcing the moral hierarchy between humans and non-humans.

1.3 Virtue ethics

Rosalind Hursthouse, a prominent virtue ethicist, argues that our treatment of animals reflects our moral character. In her essay "Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals", she suggests that factory farming or consuming animal products without necessity exhibits vices such as cruelty, callousness, and self-indulgence. Even when we do not directly harm animals, we are complicit in practices that do (Hursthouse, 2022). From this perspective, veganism can be seen not only as a lifestyle choice but as a moral expression of compassion, temperance, and humility — virtues that enable us to treat sentient beings with care rather than convenience.

Yet, despite this promising foundation, virtue ethics does not necessarily yield a clear moral requirement to be vegan. If animals are treated “humanely,” the framework may permit consuming their products, especially if this does not visibly conflict with a virtuous character. Let’s consider one last animal, Henistotle the chicken. If Henistotle was put in a factory farm and we used their meat or eggs to make dinner for ourselves, we will be part of the cruel practices Henistotle was put through, according to Hursthouse (p 143). Therefore, we would be practicing something that a virtuous person would not. But if Henistotle is a chicken belonging to the nice farmer, would we be practicing in any cruelty? Would be doing something that is not considered virtuous? We have no incentive not to eat Henistotle’s eggs, if the nice farmer takes good care of them.

The emphasis remains on the agent’s character traits rather than on categorical moral obligations to animals. Thus, virtue ethics may criticize factory farming, but still fall short of

demanding full veganism. The struggles of the animals are only considered for the sake of humans. How humans can be virtuous, what humans consider virtuous, and how we treat animals so that humans practice virtuous characteristics. All these questions are centered around us humans. We are the ones that matter, the superior ones, according to this view. Animals are something secondary that we treat in certain ways so that we can be virtuous.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined three major normative ethical frameworks and their implications for the moral status of animals and the ethical case for veganism. While each of these theories provides strong arguments against factory farming and unnecessary animal suffering, they ultimately fail to demand full veganism. Utilitarianism focuses on minimizing suffering, which permits animal use if done “humanely.” Deontology, even in Korsgaard’s revised form, still frames moral standing as something granted by rational humans and permits animal use if consistent with their good. Virtue ethics centers moral character but allows for animal consumption if it aligns with a compassionate or temperate lifestyle.

What unites these frameworks is their reliance on human-centered moral reasoning that preserves a hierarchy between humans and animals. Utilitarianism allows us to use animals in whatever way we want, as long as we do it painlessly; Kantian deontology allows us to use animals, as long as we treat them as ends in themselves and is based on humans deciding what is a good for animals through human empathy; virtue ethics is entirely centered around human virtuous traits. They do not question the foundational assumption that animals can be used, but rather how they should be used. This limited moral scope points to a deeper issue: the conceptual boundaries and relational categories through which these theories understand animals, humans, and ethics itself. To fully rethink the ethics of nonhumans and veganism we

may need to move beyond normative moral theories entirely and adopt a framework that challenges the separations between subject and object, human and animal, ethical and ontological.

2. KAREN BARAD'S FLAT ONTOLOGY

In the previous chapter I examined the major normative ethics theories and found that while each provides compelling reasons to reduce harm towards animals, none stand for moral obligation for veganism. This is because all of them are ultimately grounded in human-centric ways to measure moral worth: through rationality, sentience, good or virtue defined by human standards. How animals are considered in our world is through human values and to the extent that they serve humans.

In this chapter, I will explore Karen Barad's posthuman ethical framework that challenges the underlying metaphysical assumptions of normative ethics based on her book "Meeting the Universe Halfway" (2007). Barad's theory of agential realism, developed at the intersection of quantum physics, feminism, and philosophy, offers an alternative to representational thinking. Rather than conceiving of individuals, be they human or animal, as separate entities with fixed properties who interact from a distance, Barad argues that all beings emerge through intra-action: the dynamic and ongoing entanglement of matter and meaning. Within this framework, ethics is not a matter of applying principles to discrete moral subjects, but of acknowledging and taking responsibility for the ways we are already entangled with others.

By moving beyond human exceptionalism and representational moral categories, Barad's approach enables a more profound ethical stance toward non-human animals that can support a deeper, ontological commitment to veganism. In the following, I will outline the key aspects of Barad's agential realist ethics, contrast them with the assumptions of normative moral theory, and consider their implications for how we think about animals, consumption, and responsibility.

2.1 Representationalism and agential realism

In her book, Karen Barad begins by critiquing representationalism which she defines as “the belief in ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing” (Barad, 2007, p. 46). While this view has been challenged in both quantum theory and social philosophy, Barad argues that the logic of separability which is the assumption that subjects and objects are fundamentally distinct, continues to structure much of our thinking, including in science and ethics (p. 28).

In representationalism, there are two ontologically separate entities: the representation and the represented. There is also a third element: the act of representing, which is assumed to take place from a distance, outside of what is being observed. Knowledge, in this view, comes from standing apart from the world, observing it, and then constructing a representation of it. Barad’s critique resonates with certain strands of metaethical constructivism, which also reject the idea of moral truths as reflections of an independent moral reality. Constructivists argue that normative truths are not discovered but are instead the outcomes of rational deliberation processes (Bagnoli, 2024). As Barad notes, many critical traditions, including social constructivism, have challenged representationalism but often retain its underlying structure by presupposing discrete entities (Barad, 2007, p. 28). Constructivism still retains a three-place relation: constructor, a constructed entity, a building block for the constructed entity (Goswick, n.d.). However, Barad’s agential realism extends beyond this by challenging the very notion of pre-existing entities. She posits that entities do not precede their interactions; instead, they emerge through “intra-actions,” emphasizing the entangled nature of existence. This ontological stance suggests that knowledge and being are co-constitutive, dissolving the traditional boundaries between subject and object.

Drawing from Judith Butler and Foucault, Barad argues that the process of representation is not neutral. It participates in constituting the very subjects it claims to reflect through language, norms, categories, and discursive practices (p. 57). What Barad proposes are performative approaches as an alternative to representationalism. She uses Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to introduce this way of viewing the world (pp. 51 – 62). Butler argues that gender is not an attribute or essence that a pre-gendered subject possesses. Instead, the subject is brought into being by the repeated performance of gender norms over time. There is no stable, pre-existing subject who performs gender but rather their gender is constituted through repeated acts, social expectations, and discursive regimes. The performance does not reflect a pre-existing identity, but rather it is a process through which that identity comes into being.

Barad builds on Butler's theory and extends it beyond gender, arguing that matter itself is performatively constituted. "A performative account makes an abrupt break from representationalism that requires a rethinking of the nature of a host of fundamental notions such as being, identity, matter, discourse, causality, dynamics, and agency, to name a few." (p. 49) That is, all beings and bodies, humans, and non-humans, come to matter through particular practices, interactions, and material-discursive arrangements. Performative understanding of the world comes from "a direct material engagement with the world" (p. 49) rather than being an observer from aside. This understanding is also not just acknowledging that we are in the world but rather that we are part of the world's becoming.

What follows is her agential realist framework which is built upon Bohr's physics-philosophy. A key part is the concept of "intra-action", as opposed to interaction. 'Interaction' assumes that there are two separate agencies that exist before they interact with each other. But for Barad the agencies come into existence through intra-actions. What are the basic units of reality, according to her, are not independent objects but rather "phenomena" that come about from the

intra-acting and are “dynamic topological reconfigurings/ entanglements/ relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world” (p. 141) So in Barad’s view, you as a person are not a fixed entity but part of a complex web of intra-action processes that produce the phenomenon of “you”. Your boundaries, identity, and sense of being are created through these ongoing intra-actions with the world. Your existence as a person is entangled with multiple agencies: your bodily processes, cultural practices, linguistic interactions, and material surroundings. Instead of being separate from these, you are made by them, and in turn, you participate in re-shaping them.

Barad’s theory shares a lot with some traditional metaphysical frameworks such as monism. This view is dated back to Parmenides and argues that reality is made up of one concrete object called “the One” from which everything else is derived (Epstein, 2024). Similarly, holism which is related mainly to Hegel and part of social ontology sees societies as ontologically primary and unified entities and individuals as products of them (Epstein, 2024). According to Hegel, to be a self involves viewing oneself as an individual which depends on interacting with others. The products of society cannot fully exist independently because their identity and meaning depends on the whole. Barad agrees with holism that entities are interconnected and emerge through relations, however, she rejects the distinction of a whole and its parts. For Barad there are no parts of which reality is built or parts which are dependent on the whole. Everything is collapsed into one, similarly to monism and holism, but there is nothing primary or pre-existing, hence why her ontology is flat. Instead, what reality consists of are phenomena. As Barad puts it “Reality is composed not of things in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena” (p. 140). Space, time, and matter not something given but are intra-actively produced (p. 234). Intra-actions are what makes matter to be in a process of becoming which is constantly repeated in a way that changes it and keeps becoming different. This does not happen within a set of time or space, but temporality and spatiality are produced and also reconfigured in what phenomena are.

Agency is not an attribute to be possessed by someone or something, it is also not something to be granted. Barad's understanding of agency is that it is an enactment within intra-activity. This enactment is one of constant change of relations between space-time-mattering. Through the intra-active process of agency, we can change our relationships with things as they are becoming and choose what should matter (p. 178).

Barad's agential realism has significant ethical implications. Because phenomena are constituted through intra-action, the boundaries we draw between self and other, human and nonhuman, subject and object are not naturally given but enacted through specific material-discursive practices. These "agential cuts" (p. 140) are not innocent; they determine who or what is recognized as a subject, whose suffering counts, and who is excluded. Barad calls for a form of ethics grounded in 'responsibility' which is the capacity to respond to and within the world we are a part of, which cannot be restricted to humans.

2.2 Implications for veganism

"All real living is meeting. And each meeting matters."
Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007

As explored in the previous chapter, the traditional ethical theories approach morality in a human-centric way. They rely on the conception of the subject as detached, rational evaluator who bestows moral worth on others from a distance. Even when non-human animals are morally considered, they are measured against human standards of sentience, rationality, or utility. This sustains hierarchy in which humans remain dominant and agency is a privilege to be granted, not a process in the world.

Barad's agential realism disrupts this model. It asks us not to determine who "deserves" moral consideration, but to question the very practices through which some lives come to matter, and others do not. In this framework, beings are not ontologically separate entities who interact

from a distance, but they are always already entangled. Their existence and meaning emerge through intra-actions, and the boundaries that separate “human” from “animal” are not natural facts but effects of specific material-discursive cuts (p. 148).

Within her framework then we are no longer thinking how rational or conscious the animal is and determining if they deserve rights based on that, but we are questioning what cuts we are enacting when we consume animal products. Animal agriculture is not just a practice of using animals. It is a sustained material-discursive process that performs animals as edible, as ownable, as other. Through everyday practices like breeding, packaging, buying, eating, we continually re-enact an agential cut that positions human life as central and animal life as disposable. Veganism, then, is not simply a personal choice or moral rule. It is a reconfiguration of how we relate, materially and ethically, to the world, both human and non-human.

According to Barad, ethics is “about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (p. 393). Refusing to participate in a system of commodification of animals through veganism is a mode of responsibility, as well as accountability, for the agential cuts. Barad’s view is about recognizing that the fact that we see animals as commodities and as others is not because of how reality is but because of particular intra-actions, and about reconfiguring them. It is unacceptable to own, exploit and treat humans as resources. In the Baradian view of no ontological difference between humans and non-humans, then animals should not be owned, bred, exploited, or killed, because it would reinforce hierarchies Barad wishes to undo.

Unlike traditional ethics, this theory also explains why “humane” animal agriculture remains problematic. The harm is not only in the suffering, though that is present, but in the way the system materially enacts and sustains the view of animals as consumable. It is a form of

representationalism in practice. Animals are turned into signs of “product,” “resource,” “meat,” and this naming participates in their continued exclusion from ethical relationality.

Veganism becomes, then, not just a dietary preference but an ontological-ethical commitment to refusing the agential cuts that render some lives not only consumable but commodifiable: lives to be milked, owned, bred, or sold. Instead of placing the human in the center of moral judgement it seeks to undo the central role of the human a system of domination. So, in our previous examples with Baa-ntham the sheep, Imoonuel the cow, Henistotle the chicken, and the nice farmer, they are entangled together. It is through the ongoing intra-actions that their identities are constituted. The agential cuts are making the boundaries between the farmer and the animals. It is through the way the farmer acts that animals become subordinate to the human. This distinction is not because of any inherent properties. As I have explained, fundamentally the ontology between the farmer and the animals is flat, but the intra-actions create agential cuts which we are supposed to reconfigure, which veganism aims to do.

2.3 Implications for plants, rocks, and others

Before proceeding to the next part of my thesis, I want to explore a possible objection to how I implement Barad’s theory to how we treat animals. I understand Barad’s flat ontology in a way that erases all hierarchy between humans and non-humans because of our entanglements with everyone. I argue that we should become vegan based on that, because this is how to reconfigure our intra-actions with them. But then what is to say that instead of eating animals and animal products it is better to eat plants and plant products? If plants have the exact same moral value as humans and animals and we are supposed to treat animals with the responsibility of being vegan, why then can we choose to commodify and eat plants instead of animals?

Firstly, it is important to clarify that Barad's rejection of ontological hierarchy does not mean all beings are the same or that we must treat all matter identically. Entanglement does not erase difference, but it asks us to engage with difference without domination. But those differences are not pre-given categories such as sentience, rationality, species membership. The difference are how beings come to matter through specific-intra actions. Ethical responsibility, in her view, arises not from abstract traits like sentience but from the situated material-discursive entanglements we participate in and help sustain. We shift the focus from one trait of being to our relationships with the being. Our current intra-actions with animals through commodification are unethical entanglements that we must actively reconfigure. Choosing to eat plants instead of animals is not about treating plants as less valuable, but about responding differently to the specific ways in which our relationships with animals have been structured through domination and exploitation.

If those differences are not based on sentience and rationality, then why is it more permissible to commodify plants instead of not animals? The commodification and exploitation of plants is still an ethical issue. All species matter, including humans. So, we must reconfigure our relationships with all matter grounded in responsibility, that works for everyone. I believe that we cannot achieve this within our current system of capitalism that organizes our relationships through ownership, extraction, and profit (I will discuss this in the next chapter). The violence done to plants and to entire ecosystems is the same capitalist system that allows us to turn animals into products. If we move away from a capitalist system of exploitation, ownership, and profit, we would be able to reconfigure our entanglements with plants in a way that we do not commodify them and we do not assign them lesser value than we assign to animals, but we engage with them as participants in shared processes of nourishment where eating does not imply commodification, but reflects a reconfigured relationality grounded in responsibility.

It seems that if we move from capitalism to a system that is not based on commodification and exploitation, it would be fine for the nice farmer to be in an entanglement with Baa-ntham the sheep, Imoonuel the cow, Henistotle the chicken in such way that eating them does not imply commodification, but reflects a reconfigured relationality grounded in responsibility. However, many domesticated animals used in farming like sheep, cows, and chickens have been bred over centuries for human use, resulting in a material-discursive entanglement that naturalizes their commodification. To continue to eat them, even under “ethical” conditions, is to reaffirm this entangled history of domination. Ethical responsibility demands we take seriously the pasts that shape our present material possibilities. In contrast, it is materially possible to cultivate plants without reproducing relations of domination. One can imagine systems where plants are engaged as co-beings, where their flourishing is not hindered by human consumption but enhanced by reciprocal care. Eating plants, in such contexts, can reflect a reconfigured relationality that is not based on commodification or hierarchy.

Barad’s framework holds for beings such as rocks, water and others used as resources for humans that have been commodified through our intra-actions. For Barad these beings are part of the same flat ontology, they also matter and there is no hierarchical difference between humans, animals, plants, rocks, and others. I believe the way to reconfigure our relationships with them for their existence to flourish we must move away from capitalism and use a framework such as degrowth as including veganism. I will discuss such a framework in the upcoming chapters.

3. VEGANISM WITHIN CAPITALISM

In the previous chapters I have examined veganism through the perspective of normative ethics and Karen Barad's post humanist ethico-onto-epistemological framework of agential realism. I argued that traditional ethics does not provide a strong reason to be vegan. However, changing the way we view the world with a performative approach rather than representationalist one, viewing matter as entangled through the constant process of intra-action and becoming, urges us to reconfigure the space-time-matterings through responsibility. Being vegan in this view is a way to rethink the agential cuts of animal commodification and create relationships with non-humans that deconstruct systems of exploitation, violence, and human domination.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that capitalism, which is a system rooted in exploitation, violence, and human domination, is fundamentally incompatible with veganism, which seeks to dismantle those same structures.

I will argue that capitalism undermines veganism for the following reasons:

- Capitalism is built on violence, hierarchy, commodification, ownership, and profit.
- Capitalism co-opts veganism to participate, enable and reinforce the same systems veganism aims to dismantle.
- Capitalism makes it hard or even impossible for some to have such dietary restriction, because of people's social positions within the system.

3.1 Fundamentals of capitalism

“Capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is *a way of organizing nature.*”

Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 2015

Capitalism is not simply an economic model. It is a way of organizing life, relationships to both other humans and non-humans, organizing our relationship with nature, as Moore argues, which we are a part of, not separate from (Moore, 2015, p. 4). Unfortunately, historically capitalism has been created using violence and is fundamentally structured around commodification, ownership, hierarchy, and the pursuit of profit. In *Capital*, Marx makes the argument that capitalism is unjust because of its unjust origins. He explains that the starting point of the capitalism mode of production is what he names “primitive accumulation”. This is a process of acquiring land and labor through systems of appropriation, enclosure, violence, robbery (Marx, n.d., ch. 26 - 27). Private accumulation not only made it possible to create capitalism through the surplus labor, but it also set an example of how labor is to be managed: through exploitation and class division.

This system does not merely include violence and exploitation. It requires them. The need for endless growth, expansion, and profit maximization drives the enclosure of land, the commodification of animals, the destruction of ecosystems, and the devaluation of non-productive life. Moore calls this the “cheapening of life,” where capitalism systematically turns life into an expendable resource to fuel accumulation (Moore, 2015, p. 83).

Within this structure, veganism cannot achieve its goal of reconfiguring the relationships with non-humans. The values of veganism are the opposite of capitalism. They are ontologically incompatible. The capitalistic system poses a threat to veganism of becoming an individual depoliticized lifestyle, absorbed by the structure it seeks to resist.

3.2 Reinforcing structures of oppression

While capitalism relies on the oppression of humans and non-humans, its true power lies in the ability to maintain and intensify these structures. Veganism, when understood not only as a dietary preference but as a political project that resists systems of domination, becomes deeply threatening to capitalist logic. However, the system of capitalism has evolved precisely to co-opt counter-movements and turn them into market opportunities. For example, capitalism responds to the vegan movement is by incorporating ‘green’ alternatives such as clothes, plastic-free products and plant-based substitutes to meat and dairy products. At first glance, this might seem like a step closer to a vegan food system based on all the good things minus the bad. But at the end of the day, the progress these alternatives make is overshadowed by their participation in the broader system. As Carol J. Adams argues in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, the commodification of plant-based diets often mirrors the systems it aims to oppose. It is abstracting suffering, obscuring exploitation, and reinforcing consumption as a moral good (Adams, 2000).

Moreover, vegan products are produced within global supply chains that depend on precarious labor, frequently by racialized and migrant workers subjected to hazardous, low-paid, and often undocumented conditions. As Amie Breeze Harper notes in her essay, both animals and laborers are rendered invisible and interchangeable in industrial food systems, sustaining a framework of disposability and domination (Harper, 2010). "Cruelty-free" labeling, then, masks not only animal harm but also human suffering. Instead of challenging the root structures of oppression, the commodified form of veganism often reinforces them, creating a sense of moral achievement without confronting capitalist relations of power. The very language of “alternatives” within the system suggests that the system itself remains intact.

As Karen Barad's theory of intra-action helps illuminate, these acts of violence are not isolated or additive but co-constitutive. Rather than viewing harm to animals and humans as separate injustices occurring in the same space, Barad's ontology of entanglement reminds us that ethical and material relations are always already intertwined (Barad, 2007). The suffering of the migrant worker and the slaughtered animal are not merely connected, rather they emerge from the same capitalist apparatus that differentially values life, labor, and flesh. This understanding urges us to move beyond single-issue frameworks and toward a relational ethics that urges us to think about a solution to both human and non-human suffering.

3.3 The trap of capitalism

The commodification of veganism also creates a classed and racialized barrier to entry, reproducing exclusions that mirror broader social inequalities. Plant-based products, especially those marketed as organic or sustainable often come at a price inaccessible to low-income communities. Rather than promoting liberation, these goods are sold as lifestyle upgrades, often aimed at white consumers. In this way, capitalism reshapes veganism into a symbol of privilege and distinction rather than solidarity or justice. This reinforces what Harper (2010) describes as the "post-racial" framing of mainstream veganism, where anti-oppression roots are stripped away, and veganism is rebranded as a color-blind, apolitical consumer identity. In this form, veganism is no longer a challenge to power but a product. This depoliticization is especially harmful because it alienates those most affected by intersecting forms of oppression. In this way, instead of addressing systemic violence, capitalism asks individuals to navigate a hostile system on their own, locating moral responsibility in consumption rather than structural change. In doing so, capitalism traps veganism in the very framework it aims to resist.

3.4 Conclusion

Veganism is a movement that aims to dismantle systems of dominations that commodify, exploit, and hierarchize life. In contrast, capitalism is a system built upon precisely these mechanisms. While veganism seeks to reconfigure our relationships with non-human life and challenge structures of violence, capitalism absorbs such resistance by transforming it into consumable lifestyle choices. As a result, rather than disrupting the system, mainstream veganism often becomes stripped of its political content, marketed to the privileged, and complicit in new forms of human and non-human suffering.

Karen Barad's theory of agential realism reminds us that ethics is not a matter of making the right choices among pre-existing options, but of being entangled in the world in ways that call us to respond. Ethical responsibility, in this view, is not about individual consumption but about participating in the reconfiguration of the material-discursive apparatuses that sustain violence. This view urges us to seek ways to attend to what produces suffering for all matter: human and non-human, animals and workers, ecosystems and societies.

If veganism is to maintain its critical force, it must resist being reduced to a consumer identity and instead reclaim its entangled, relational, and collective dimensions. It must refuse the capitalist logic of abstraction, purity, and commodification, and root itself in a broader politics of liberation. This means going against racism, ableism, classism, environmental destruction, and all forms of exploitation. Dismantling capitalism is not a separate project from veganism, but a necessary part of what a meaningful, ethical veganism must entail.

4. VEGANISM WITHIN DEGROWTH

As I have shown in the last chapter, the purpose of veganism and its underlying objectives cannot succeed under our current system of capitalism. Within that system which controls all our lives, how we intra-act with each other, with non-humans and the world, veganism cannot achieve its ethical goals. Instead of resisting it, veganism becomes part of capitalism and its exploitative and oppressive practices. We must reconfigure our socio-economic system in order to dismantle those structures. Adopting a vegan lifestyle by itself is not enough.

In this chapter, I propose degrowth as a framework of transformation in which veganism can prevail. I explore how the two concepts can work together to achieve a reconfiguring of the space-time-mattering in a way that deals with both the agential cut of animal commodification and exploitation, as well as the human, reimagining a way we could live life with responsibility (in Karan Barad's terms towards).

4.1 A short introduction to degrowth

Every degrowth researcher, lecturer, or activist I have had the pleasure to talk to or listen to a lecture by, begins their introduction by prefacing that degrowth has many different definitions and dimensions. However, one part I feel unites them and all of them use is 'a good life for all'.

What degrowth challenges is the myth of "decoupling", which is the 'hope' that we can keep developing and growing our economic system while we somehow manage to lower our energy consumption and environmental impact by inventing and implementing new technology. Decoupling is driven by the desire to keep going quicker and quicker with the idea of 'sustainable' or 'green' growth. It has been proven that the idea of enjoying both economic

growth and avoiding environmental degradation is not possible and decoupling is unlikely to ever happen (Parrique et al., 2019). Degrowth criticizes this view and argues that end of economic growth is necessary and inevitable. Otherwise, we would destroy the planet we live in and ourselves in the process. Growth is not bringing fulfilling lives to all anymore, it is leading us towards a dead end. Degrowth addresses the next steps of what and how we can create new economic and social models in a way that makes sure everyone's basic needs are met and in a way that everyone can enjoy the world we live in (Liegey & Nelson, 2020).

Degrowth begins with what Liegey & Nelson call “decolonizing our growth imaginaries” (p. 12), which is rethinking the ways our society is structured and opening our consciousness to a possibility of creating a new world. It is about realizing how capitalism works in the way that it reinforces structures of oppression and exploitation and constituting a rigid way of life based on private property, wealth accumulation, and inequalities. In a way, degrowth is doing what Karen Barad is asking us to do: reconfigure our intra-actions with space-time-mattering, which must happen not only through rethinking but by actual intra-actions.

Unfortunately, there is no step-by-step guide of degrowth that guarantees instant societal transformation. Degrowth is an on-going process, much like Karen Barad describes existence. What the movement requires is ‘doing’. Liegey & Nelson outline four main spheres in which the degrowth movement works: the individual, collective, resistance, and the degrowth project spheres (ch. 3). Degrowth is about adopting its practices on an individual level, but then continuing this adoption in community spaces, such as your university, workplace, farms. What is important is being part of a network of communities, fostering relationships with each other. Resisting capitalism is focused on activist action, reclaiming public spaces, and opening spaces for discussion and debates, through academia and political engagement. An essential part of degrowth is that it should happen through co-constructing shared vision. It is organized in a non-hierarchical way, because degrowth believes that to change the system, we should not

repeat the same structures that led us here. What is important is the co-opting I discussed in the previous chapter. Degrowth is making it a point to be self-aware and conscious about the decisions they make and what slogans they use in order to avoid that.

4.2 How veganism and degrowth can work together

Degrowth opens space to radically rethink how we want to live together. And this is exactly where veganism comes in not only as a diet, but as a political and ethical refusal. Both degrowth and veganism are trying, in their own ways, to undo the violence that capitalism normalizes. They ask, in different but related languages: how do we stop living at the expense of others? How do we shift from extraction and domination to care, interdependence, and repair?

Both movements should work together to achieve their common goals. I do not think degrowth can succeed without including veganism in its movement. It is not possible to move toward a more frugal, sustainable, and convivial life if we keep billions of animals in systems of suffering, if we keep cutting down forests, polluting water, emitting carbon, and forcing people into the violence of working in slaughterhouses just to keep the industrial meat machine going. As I've argued, humane farming is not enough to transform the system because it sustains the idea of animal commodification and hierarchy between species. In that way, degrowth without veganism will keep mirroring the hierarchical structures of capitalism. Even if degrowth manages to achieve its ideal, if non-humans are not included then it is not really 'a good life for everyone'.

Karen Barad's framework remind us that we are not just living alongside others but that we are intra-acting, constantly becoming with the world around us. Our actions ripple, entangle, and co-constitute. When we think about transforming our economies, we also must think about transforming our relationships not only with other humans, but with animals, ecosystems, land,

and time. Degrowth asks us to slow down. Veganism asks us to listen differently. Both are about breaking the habits of capitalist violence and building a more careful, more collective, more alive future for everyone.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been a (short) journey from normative ethics to quantum physics and metaethics, through capitalism and degrowth, with veganism leading the way. We have identified the problems of animal suffering and systems of exploitations, but what are we supposed to do in the face of them?

I have analyzed what normative ethics theories, namely utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and virtue ethics, have to say about veganism and concluded that all of them give reasons for reducing animal harm and putting an end to animal farming. However, they do not tell us why we should be vegan or that we should be vegan at all. This is not because there is no good reason to be vegan, but because these moral theories are centered around humans as the moral agents. Humans are the ones assigning moral worth to others by human standards, upholding moral hierarchy between species. With this I turn to Karen Barad to find that we must reconfigure our relationships towards non-humans because there is no inherent hierarchy between us. We are all part of the process of becoming of the world and we have the power to make it good for everyone. By being vegan, we no longer treat animals as commodities, as something we can own, breed, sell, eat, and kill.

Philosophy is not enough. For genuine reconfiguration of our relationships, we must consult not just ethics but also the economic processes that underlie the commodification of animals and other non-humans. Capitalism enables and reinforces systems of exploitation through its unjust origins and powerful grasp over the architecture of our relationships. Degrowth offers a framework that aims to dismantle those unjust systems. Combining it with veganism and Karen Barad's view would foster a truly responsible process of reconfiguration of our entanglements so that we keep becoming part of a world worth living in.

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