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Veganism as political solidarity: Beyond 'ethical veganism'

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Veganism is commonly described as the attempt to avoid, as far as possible, the exploitation and consumption of animals and animal products. While some people choose the plant-based diet associated with veganism for health or other self-interested reasons, the majority of philosophical work on the topic has been devoted to discussion of the *ethical* justification of veganism (i.e., to 'ethical veganism'). Some argue that it is a moral imperative if we take the rights or interests of animals seriously (e.g., Francione & Charlton, 2013; Mason & Singer, 1980). Others regard it as a necessity if we are to live up to our duties to live as sustainably as possible (Fox, 2000), or to minimize public health risks (Melina et al., 2016; Vyas, 2019; Walker et al., 2005). Still others hold that it is supported by religious and spiritual reasons (Kemmerer, 2012). These justifications are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

And yet, others have questioned whether moral concern for animals really does entail a vegan diet (Davis, 2003 (on field deaths), but cf. Fischer & Lamey, 2018; Fischer, 2019 (on backyard chickens); Lamey, 2019, chap. 9, and Reese, 2018 (on cultured meat); or Milburn, 2015 (on pet food)). Still others have questioned the link between veganism and sustainability (Mackenzie, 2020). Furthermore, a small minority dismiss veganism because they reject the idea of our having moral duties to animals (Hsiao, 2017); while others accept moral duties to animals, but regard veganism as either too demanding (Schwitzgebel & Rust, 2014), as having certain harmful consequences in its own right (Mackenzie, 2020), not leading causally to the desired effects (Harris & Galvin, 2012; Kahn, 2021) or, in turn, leading to moral overreach (Mills, 2019).

We argue that while these moral debates are important, they miss out a crucial feature of veganism: its *political* dimension. By referring to veganism as 'political' we primarily mean two

things: that it addresses routine harms created by social structures and systems for which members of a political community are responsible in virtue of their connection to them; and that it is a form of activism to be conducted collectively, in solidarity, with others.[1] In making our case, we offer what we call a 'normative reconstruction' of veganism: an account of veganism which draws on its real-world practice, while developing it in certain normatively desirable directions.[2] To be clear, then, our aim is not to provide a descriptive account aimed at capturing all existing practices of veganism. Instead, our normative reconstruction seeks to offer reasons for us (vegans and non-vegans alike) to recognize and embrace the *political* dimension of veganism. Crucially, this *political* account of veganism remains agnostic on questions concerning which ethical theory is true or what best explains the moral status of animals. Rather, it draws on the fact that support for the moral status of animals is widely accepted and now counts among the social values of most political communities, including those still exploiting animals systematically (Special Eurobarometer 442, n.d.; Jones et al., 2015; YouGov, 2019). In our view, an important role of veganism is thus not to vie for moral right(eous)ness, but to highlight the discrepancy between these values and our political practice. Indeed, we claim that for many vegans, the consumption and other choices they make need not follow from a fully worked-out ethical imperative. Instead, and drawing on the work of Scholz (2008), we argue that these are *acts of solidarity* with and on behalf of others to resist injustice. Furthermore, we claim that this is a useful and fruitful way for individuals to conceive of veganism for (at least) three reasons. First, and this is the case made in the first part of the paper, it conceives of veganism as a form of *activism*, thus connecting it explicitly with its primary political end: to resist and overturn the oppression of non-human animals. Second, and this is the claim of the second part of the paper, it alters and expands the way we should conceive of the commitments of vegans. These can be grouped into commitments to other vegans, to non-human animals, to non-vegans, and to the political goal of veganism itself. And finally, and this is a point suggested throughout the paper, it means that some of the ethical debates around our duties to be vegan are rather beside the point. Drawing on Iris Marion Young (2003), we see our duties to overturn animal oppression as *political* and grounded in our 'social connection' to the injustice. Fundamentally, then, in our view, veganism connects widespread commitments regarding the moral status of animals to a duty to work toward the political and institutional transformations required to create societies without animal oppression; and hence toward societies without the label 'veganism'. In other words, we regard veganism as a commitment to create societies in which individuals do not even need to consider whether they personally are morally obliged to avoid the exploitation and consumption of animals and animal products.

2 | FROM ETHICAL TO POLITICAL VEGANISM

Historically, 'solidarity' has not been closely associated with concern for the plight of animals, nor with activism on their behalf; and to our knowledge, until now it has not been linked to veganism in a comprehensive way.[3] Instead, solidarity is usually associated with the fight for *social justice*: to resist various forms of human oppression, to aid other humans when struck by misfortune, or to build institutions of mutual support like health care or pensions. Moreover, various sociological and philosophical accounts of solidarity have made it out to be a primarily humanistic concept (e.g., Wilde, 2013; see Scholz, 2008 for an overview of the debate). In part, this is because the plight of animals has usually not been considered a cause of social justice. But it is also because most thinkers require there to be some *political agency* from the beneficiaries of solidaristic actions, which, for the

purpose of this paper, we will accept to be lacking in non-human animals.[4] If the animals oppressed by humans do not stand in solidarity with one another, nor with the humans who act on their behalf, is there any way in which the concept can be meaningfully employed in animal activism?

We think it can, and demonstrate how through employment of social philosopher Sally Scholz's pioneering work on solidarity. In this section, we first introduce Scholz's understanding of political—as distinguished from social or civic—solidarity, as well as her distinction between solidarity 'with' and solidarity 'on behalf of' others. We will then show that veganism can and should be reconceptualised as a political fight for social justice and hence also as a solidaristic practice. The final section of this part asks how this reconceptualisation affects our moral duty to become vegan.

2.1 | Scholz's solidarities

In her work (Scholz, 2008), Scholz usefully identifies and distinguishes three forms of solidarity. 'Social solidarity' is the term she gives to those shared feelings of community which bind individuals together. As a descriptive term, whether those communities are morally good, bad or indifferent is unimportant—social solidarity may (or may not) exist among any group of individuals. 'Civic solidarity', on the other hand, refers to the institutional framework within a society to support vulnerable members within it. The primary examples of such civic solidarity are the welfare and healthcare systems that exist in many communities, and they are justified by a normative account of social justice and desert accepted by the wider community. Finally, 'political solidarity', which is the most important form of solidarity for this paper, refers to the shared commitment by a group of individuals to address and overturn some form of oppression, an example of an injustice that is "human in origin" (Scholz, 2008, pp. 54 & 205). It entails a range of subsidiary commitments, namely to join with others in activism, to victims, to the wider community, and to the goal. The main commitment is a candidate for acceptance by the wider community, and the related commitments are endorsed both by many but not necessarily all of those suffering from the oppression and by those who support them. The 'solidary group', then, usually consists of affected *and* affiliated individuals.

Though she mentions vegetarianism as an example in 2008, Scholz later (Scholz, 2013) claims that it is impossible to have political solidarity *with* the non-human world, including animals. While animals may be the victims of oppression, they are unable to share in a commitment to overturn it. Presumably this is because animals lack the appropriate enculturation into, and conceptual understanding of, human politics to organize on behalf of one another with a view to overturning political institutions and seeking justice within them. For the purposes of this paper, we will agree with Scholz that this is currently the case. Importantly, though, this is not the end of the 'solidarity with animals' story for Scholz. She acknowledges that animal activists can and do have solidarity with each other. Moreover, she argues that solidarity *on behalf of* the oppressed animals whose lives they aim to improve is not just an option but may be 'a hallmark of recognizing our social solidarity' with these animals (Scholz, 2013, p. 82). While this is contingent upon the bonds that some humans have (or have not) formed with some animals, it is a clear acknowledgement that solidarity need not be anthropocentric. Furthermore, this understanding need not be paternalistic either if animals' perspectives feed into this activism in meaningful ways (more on this in Section 3.2).

2.2 | Overturning animal oppression as a cause of social justice

The key feature of Scholz's understanding of political solidarity, then, is that it entails a shared commitment to tackle a specific injustice that has an identifiable human cause.[5] For Scholz, political solidarity is a form of 'oppositional politics' (Scholz, 2008, p. 34). As such, it is not the same as a humanitarian commitment to help those in need due to, say, a natural disaster. Instead, to be in political solidarity is to identify and pledge to tackle with others some specific oppression caused by particular social actors, institutions and structures. We argue that many vegans share exactly this kind of commitment and that it is one which is faithful to the origins of veganism in the west, through the concern with animal exploitation expressed by Donald Watson, the co-founder of the Vegan Society in the UK (Potts & Armstrong, 2018, p. 395). To that extent, our normative reconstruction speaks to veganism's heritage. For while it is true that, today, the commitments of vegans can differ widely, a traditional motivation relates to tackling the exploitation and oppression of animals. Indeed, the Vegan Society defines veganism as a "... way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals ..." (The Vegan Society, n.d.). Furthermore, Deborah Kalte (2020, p. 11) has reviewed the empirical analysis of the motives and aims of vegans, and concluded that it "... demonstrates indeed that a vast majority of vegans is politically motivated and sees their vegan lifestyle as a means to induce change in society at large." Veganism, then, is not just a lifestyle choice or an identity, but a form of activism toward social and political change. Just as bell hooks avoids declaring 'I am a feminist' and prefers 'I advocate for feminism' to signal concern for the collective and not just for oneself, so vegans can be regarded as 'advocating for veganism' (see Scholz, 2008, p. 61), meaning that they are collectively agitating for an end to animal oppression.

Crucially, this commitment does admit disagreements about the precise meaning of 'animal oppression', its implications and the best strategies for tackling it (see for example Francione & Garner, 2010).[6] In this sense, veganism as resistance to animal oppression is just like any other social justice movement. But like other movements, veganism also has certain shared core concerns. These would seem to entail widely shared moral commitments: an acknowledgement that animals (at any rate those who are sentient or phenomenally conscious) have a worth of their own which cannot be reduced to their value to human beings; and that such worth entails that moral agents have certain duties toward them. But veganism as political solidarity bridges moral commitments with commitments of a decidedly political nature: duties that relate to tackling the routinized violence, death and other harms visited upon animals for human benefit in structures for which people are collectively responsible. Furthermore, while veganism takes particular aim at how animals are bred, held and slaughtered in industrialized animal agriculture, all areas of society in which such harms are perpetrated—in the biomedical and pharmaceutical sector, in the pet business, in zoos, circuses and sport, and so on—come within its remit too.

Of course, some might wonder if and how this commitment of vegans relates to *social justice*. Many regard veganism as driven by a personal *compassion* for animals, and thus quite different to a *political* commitment. By way of response, it is important to acknowledge that many political commitments can and do arise out of compassionate feelings.[7] However, the crucial factor in whether a commitment is political and a cause of social justice comes down to its focus on oppression caused by particular human social actors, institutions and structures. This is what differentiates a humanitarian concern for the victims of some unexpected weather event, say, from a commitment to hold a state to account for its failure to rescue, shelter and look after those same victims. While both may be grounded in compassion, it is the failure of state institutions which makes the latter commitment explicitly political.

In this light, our normative reconstruction of veganism is unequivocally political. For on our understanding, the primary concern of veganism is not with isolated acts of cruelty perpetrated against animals, or by the suffering, say, of a malnourished wild animal. Instead, it is with the routine and systemic harms which society visits upon animals. Put simply, veganism recognizes, confronts and seeks to overturn the *structures* and *systems* which support and facilitate the exploitation of animals (see Scholz, 2008, p. 194). It is for this reason that vegans choose to boycott the products which those systems of oppression produce (Dickstein et al. Forthcoming). Indeed, the personal rejection of such products represents an acknowledgment of their own 'social connection' to these wider systems of injustice (Young, 2003). For while it is corporations, political institutions, and economic and social structures rather than cruel individuals who primarily facilitate these harms against animals, we are all inevitably entwined with the oppressive practices which support them. In this light, it seems clear that the commitment to overturn animal oppression is both political and a commitment of social justice.

2.3 | Duties to be vegan: From moral to political

Understanding animal oppression as a social justice cause that calls for political solidarity has important implications for current ethical debates about veganism. Take, for example, the objection that veganism is 'futile' given that we can never completely disentangle ourselves from the exploitation of animals. Such critics often point to the harmful effects of vegan products: even vegetables are usually grown with cow manure and entail the death of animals through working the field; non-leather shoes can be made from non-biodegradable plastics with short life-spans; avocado production involves the use of migratory beekeeping; and so on (Gruen & Jones, 2015). But on a political understanding of veganism, there is no shame in failing to be 'morally pure'. The commitment is to join with others to tackle oppression in a way that makes the world a better, if never perfect, place. So, while it is true that negatively impacting some animals is unavoidable in the world in which we live, the world in which we live is not the one we must live with forever. Crucially, on our understanding, veganism is the attempt to join with others to move to a world without the routinized exploitation of animals.

Relatedly, arguments admonishing veganism because it is seen to entail supposedly absurd commitments to eradicate all animal suffering (think 'the problem of predation', think 'wild animal suffering') also miss the mark.[8] For on a politically solidaristic understanding of veganism, the commitment is to end injustices perpetrated by humans, not by other animals on other animals (if you can call that an injustice in the first place), nor those of a more metaphysical nature (if that is what you can call "calculated" offspring mortality). To reiterate, on our understanding, veganism is not about a claim to moral purity or perfection, but a commitment to overturning the oppression of animals by humans. Of course, there may well be other good reasons (whether moral, political or both) to tackle wild animal suffering which has not been caused by humans (Horta, 2017), but our claim is that they are not entailed by veganism as political solidarity.

But what of the view that veganism is 'causally impotent'? Here the objection is that one individual's dietary choices cannot change anything for animals (Budolfson, 2019; Harris & Galvin, 2012; Kahn, 2021). Such arguments reduce the practice to a question of the likely impact of one's own immediate personal choices. As such, these views often also conclude that there is little point in taking any individual action for collective gain, including, for example, casting a vote. After all, one particular ballot is highly unlikely to make any political difference (see Nefsky, 2019). While some (Norcross, 2020) have questioned whether such acts really are

causally impotent, a response grounded in our *social connection* to injustice offers a different approach. We argue that these acts should neither be assessed solely in terms of the costs and benefits to one individual, nor in terms of the likely impact from just one agent. For when we reframe these practices as *political* acts, performed in conjunction with others, their rationale makes much more sense. The relevant issue is not whether an individual has a duty to perform some specific act; rather, it is whether they should *join with others* to pursue some collective goal, such as tackling injustice (see Schlozman et al., 1995). Of course, some might object that this response leaves the original problem in place: why should any individual join with others to pursue such a goal when their own decision will not make any decisive difference to the success of the cause?

In our view, such a duty can be helpfully cashed out by Iris Marion Young's (2006) 'social connection model' of political responsibility. Put simply, any of us who is 'connected' to an injustice bears some responsibility for overturning it—even if we cannot and should not be 'blamed' for that injustice. To refuse to tackle animal oppression and leave the fight to others would be to renege on our social responsibilities (see Tuck, 2008). Young is keen to distinguish this understanding from 'liability' models of responsibility which seek to identify—and blame—individual perpetrators of injustice. For her (Young, 2003, p. 3) this neglects the realities of 'structural injustice': "... many harms, wrongs, and injustices have no isolatable perpetrator; they result from the participation of millions of people and institutions." Crucially, many structural injustices are sustained by routine, legal and normal social practices. The oppression of animals certainly seems to live up to Young's picture of structural injustice: their breeding and slaughter is routine, legal and subsidized by states, and our consumption of their flesh is socially 'normal', with diets that avoid such products requiring special labels (veganism, vegetarianism, etc.) to distinguish them (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). Furthermore, given the ways in which animal exploitation is so deeply embedded in our societies—animal ingredients can be found in everything from plastic bags, to make-up, to cars, to banknotes and so on—it is also clear that all of us have some connection and thus responsibility for it.

However, while such social connection might mean we all have a duty to overturn injustice in the abstract, what does this mean for any of us in reality? Again, Young's model is helpful here. She argues that each of our concrete duties can in part be determined by three factors (Young, 2003): our particular connection to the injustice, our power to do something about it, and our privilege (fleshed out by how much we have benefited from the injustices). In other words, the concrete duties that arise out of our abstract duty to overturn injustice against animals are differentiated. Powerful corporations who run and profit from industrial farming and the politicians who support and subsidize their work, for example, obviously have special and very demanding responsibilities to cease and redirect their resources and energies. Our duties as individuals will obviously differ from this, and since we also have different levels of connection, power and privilege, they will also differ from each other in various ways. And yet, Young is clear that where individuals have the power to do so, "joining in collective action with others" is an imperative (Young, 2003, p. 5). Furthermore, boycotts and consumer action—as well as more conventional 'state-centred activism'—are crucial ways of discharging one's responsibilities (Young, 2003, p. 6). On this basis, then, while we cannot point to any universal moral obligation to join with others in veganism, we can be confident that it is an imperative for those of us who are wealthy and privileged enough to not be unduly burdened by such activism, and who enjoy easy access to products (healthy food, medicines, clothes and more) which are not derived from animals.

But is not this social connection model impossibly demanding? For Scholz (2008, p. 254), no individual can be morally compelled to take up each and every cause of injustice given

the demandingness of the obligations that they entail (see also Mills, 2019 on veganism and 'moral overreach'). And in recent work on veganism, Bob Fischer (2019) arrives at a similar conclusion: people must have a reasonable amount of discretion in the moral projects that they pursue. It is certainly true that there is a lot of injustice in contemporary societies; and it is also true that requiring everyone to take up activism to tackle them all would be incredibly demanding. And yet, injustices do not just provide opportunities for us to pick certain goals in order to define our identities and ways of life; instead, and much more fundamentally, they entail individuals not receiving what they are owed. As such, they are particularly grave wrongs which *demand* collective and political responses (Miller, 2017). Hence, Rawls's claim (Rawls, 1999, pp. 293–294) that we each have a duty to maintain institutions of justice and build them where they do not exist should not be taken lightly—even though it is very demanding. Importantly, support for animal welfare and animal rights have become social values in the societies that still exploit animals (Special Eurobarometer 442, n.d.; Jones et al., 2015; YouGov, 2019). For these reasons, then, practices that lie at the heart of veganism—like the abstention from consuming animal products or the demands for animal-free and human relevant science—are not just duties for minorities with very particular conceptions of the good life.

3 | POLITICAL SOLIDARITY AND THE COMMITMENTS OF VEGANISM

So far, we have argued that veganism can be thought of as a form of political solidarity. Vegans share a commitment with each other and on behalf of animals to resist and overturn animal oppression. But solidarity is more than some shared theoretical commitment to tackling injustice. After all, we would not call a group of individuals who share the same political commitments but do nothing about them as 'in solidarity'. Indeed, many conceptualisations (Prainsack & Buyx, 2012, p. 346; Rippe, 1998, p. 356; Scholz, 2008, p. 11) understand solidarity to always entail certain positive duties to others. More specifically, Scholz argues (Scholz, 2008, p. 78) that when an individual enters into political solidarity with others, they make certain commitments to a range of others: to themselves; to other members of the solidary group; to wider society; and to the cause. In this section, we explore the various commitments of veganism as political solidarity, looking at both what vegans do, and should do, when acting in solidarity with one another on behalf of animals.

3.1 | The commitment to join with others in activism

The primary commitment of those who act in political solidarity is to fight some injustice. For Scholz (2008, p. 74), then, solidarity is not passive or individualistic: it is a commitment *to act with others* in relation to that injustice. She argues that this commitment not only transforms individuals, but also their actions. For example, she (Scholz, 2008, p. 74) points out how the act of consumption is transformed when it is tied to a solidaristic commitment: "In political solidarity, ordinary actions become political actions when they are done in a reflective manner that actively engages the commitment to a cause that challenges or resists a system perceived to be unjust or oppressive." In our view, this is an excellent description of what happens to the practice of eating only plant-based foods when combined with a commitment to tackling the oppression of

animals. Put simply, food consumption becomes a form of 'unconventional political participation' (Kalte, 2020); it becomes a form of *political activism*.

But as we have seen, for political solidarity to pertain, this activism cannot be carried out in isolation, but must occur in concert with others. This entails that individuals have certain obligations to each other as members of a solidary group. Perhaps the most obvious of these obligations is the continued commitment to the cause. For vegans, this undoubtedly means an *ongoing* undertaking to strive to avoid the exploitation and consumption of animals and animal products: for example, it is not something to undertake sporadically, or only on Mondays, or for the month of January. Importantly, vegans can take satisfaction from the fact that others share and live up to the ideals of the movement. But the obligations of mutual support can be cashed out in a variety of other ways as well: to offer help and understanding to those attempting (or struggling) to move to a plant-based diet; to share information about the availability of vegan products and support vegan businesses; to ask for vegan options in a restaurant when they are unavailable in the hope that the menu changes in the future; to support friends or colleagues if they are looking to change their careers to make a difference for animals; to offer help to those struggling with the emotional consequences of the awareness of animal oppression; and so on.

But Scholz (2008) also identifies further obligations between members of a solidary group: to coordinate efforts (86), to pool talents (85), to communicate with and listen to others (89), to avoid new forms of oppression (84), and to ensure that relationships between members reflect the values of the cause for which they are fighting (91). It is interesting to reflect on what this might mean for vegans. Clearly, Scholz believes that those in political solidarity have a strong obligation of *cooperation*. While there will not be a single list of duties of cooperation applicable to all vegans in all places, it seems right to suppose that joining together for marches, protests, leafletting campaigns, and other forms of activism can all play a role. An additional means by which vegans can cooperate is to establish and work for activist organizations which espouse veganism and explicitly oppose animal oppression. Such groups can allow for the pooling of talents and resources, as well as providing strategic direction for consciousness-raising and other forms of political pressure.

However, Scholz's account of the obligations owed between members also has important implications for the workings of these organizations. First and most obviously, these groups should aim to cooperate, rather than refuse to work with one another. And when groups have differences over very specific topics—whether that be vegan pet food or vaccines—efforts should be made to explore those divergent views while keeping their shared core commitment to overturning animal oppression in focus. As such, these groups should not see each other as rivals and attempt to undermine each other. Instead, they should aim to coordinate efforts, pool talents, share information and divide tasks. Furthermore, the relations within and between these organizations should espouse the justice they seek to achieve. In other words, they must do all that they can to avoid dominating hierarchies that so easily take hold in large institutions. There are also particular risks of exploitation and burn-out in activist organizations, relying as they do on individuals' passion and commitment to the cause. As such, it is crucial that organizations are alive to this prospect and ensure the well-being of those who work on their behalf. Finally, the kinds of campaigns that these groups conduct should avoid entrenching or creating other forms of oppression. This last obligation is particularly pertinent for animal rights groups such as PETA, who have frequently been criticized for their deliberatively provocative campaigns, which among other things have employed images of sexualized and brutalized women (Pennington, 2013).

3.2 | The commitment to victims

In addition to their commitments to each other, members of a solidary group also have positive obligations to the victims of the oppression they seek to overturn. Clearly, vegans are not themselves the main or intended beneficiaries of veganism. They are not the victims of the oppression they wish to end, even though they might live with some of these victims, have forms of social solidarity with them, and even suffer costs from their commitment (Horta, 2018). While this makes vegans different from many other solidary groups, where a large number of oppressed individuals constitute the cohort, it by no means undermines the fact that vegans stand in political solidarity with each other. For while the solidary group *may* contain members of the oppressed group, the two are distinct. This is why individuals can meaningfully stand in solidarity *with each other* even if they are committed to confronting injustices perpetrated against those in far-away countries, children, those with certain serious cognitive impairment, and others who have no idea about the action *on their behalf* (see Scholz, 2008, p. 58; Rippe, 1998, p. 358).

In relation to oppressed animals, then, humans who advocate for veganism are a privileged group. But they are also part oppressors; for as we have seen already, none of us can completely escape being implicated in animal exploitation in the existing societies in which we live. How does this affect vegans' relations with and obligations to animals? A simple answer would be to say that they should aim to reduce their involvement and connection with animal exploitation as far as possible; hence the boycotts and abstentions that vegans practice. But that only takes us so far. We also need to ask whether humans who advocate for veganism, as part of the privileged group, can really understand what animal exploitation is, and what its cessation demands. Does not committed and meaningful political activism on the part of the oppressed require the input and participation of those who are exploited? Just think, for example, of the problems with an all-white black political movement, or an all-male women's political movement. Without the involvement of members of the oppressed group, not only might the nature and form of the exploitation be misidentified, but the activism may simply end up entrenching privileges and hierarchies that it intends to overturn (Scholz, 2008, p. 162).

Scholz herself acknowledges such concerns, but responds to them by pointing out they do not eradicate the very real benefits to be gained by having the privileged involved within the solidary group. For she points out (Scholz, 2008, p. 158) that those who do not experience the oppression nevertheless have status, resources, skills and knowledge that are not only useful but sometimes also necessary to aid the efforts for social change. After all, political transformation requires engagement with the privileged class, and, to facilitate such engagement, it can make sense to have the privileged involved in the struggle. Furthermore, Scholz also points out that any solidary group must be reflexive and self-critical, meaning that a diversity of viewpoints is to be welcomed. Among these views, those of individuals detached from the experience of oppression itself can sometimes be useful. Of course, when it comes to veganism, *only* privileged humans have the capacity to identify the oppression of animals, and *only* privileged humans possess the necessary resources to overturn it. We thus have very good reason to believe that oppressed animals would welcome, subject to the conditions outlined below, this privileged group fighting on their behalf.

But how are the very real dangers of entrenching existing hierarchies and misidentifying exploitation to be avoided? These are important questions for vegans, and perhaps ones which have not been subject to as much consideration as they might. Scholz (2008, p. 182) argues that there is a duty on the part of members of the solidary group to come to understand the situation and experience of the oppressed: to be open and attentive and see the world through the eyes

of another (Scholz, 2008, p. 184). In other words, the commitment to tackle oppression should also be a commitment to understand the experience of oppression: experiences which are almost certainly likely to vary across different creatures and contexts. This requires something more from humans who advocate for veganism than particular dietary choices, and participation in protests, marches and other forms of activism. It also requires mutually beneficial engagement and communication with animals themselves across various contexts (Interspecies Internet, n.d.; Scotton, 2017). It is important to stress that in doing so, humans must be careful not to reproduce oppressive habits. Instead, they should be truly open to non-anthropocentric perspectives and concerns, interested in learning from other animals, and accepting of the fact that they might not be the centre of the animals' world. Where such engagement and communication suggest changes in social and political practices and norms, humans should be willing to work toward them.

This obviously entails some effort to go out and spend time with and learn from different types of animals, but it also requires 'bringing animals in' to environments and arenas where they have been historically excluded, upon the condition that that is beneficial to them. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) have persuasively argued that just as the physical 'presence' of other marginalized groups has helped to secure their status as equal members of our political communities, so can the same be true for animals. By seeing and welcoming animals in our cities, shops, schools, universities, libraries, churches, legislative assemblies, on public transport and so on, not only do we have more opportunities for engagement with and understanding of some of them, but we can also come to see them as normal fellow members of our societies. In this light, an important obligation of veganism must also be to encourage animals into these human-exclusive spaces, to accommodate their needs where they take up residence of their own accord (where feasible), and to lobby for changes in regulations where that is disallowed or inhibited. To be clear, this commitment requires much more than lobbying for 'pro-pet' laws which permit individuals to bring their dogs to cafes, bars, shops and so on. It is about redesigning our public spaces and landscapes so that they accommodate and facilitate the free movement of a wide range of different animals, with, again, the mutual benefit of such encounters and co-habitation being key.

3.3 | The commitment to the wider community

A commitment to act with others in order to overturn oppression also entails engagement beyond the solidary group and with the wider community. Members of a solidary group seeking to tackle some social injustice need to communicate with, educate and persuade non-members, and they need to transform the institutions of the societies in which they work. Some of the ways in which vegans do this is through 'consciousness-raising'—to join with others through various means to let people know about the oppression of animals and how it can be stopped. And consumption practices, including dietary choices, can have a powerful communicative effect according to Scholz (2008, p. 74): "Reflective consumerism is also a useful tool in educating and encouraging others to join a cause." When people see an individual refusing to consume animal products they can sometimes be moved to find out why—and in so doing to investigate not only the exploitation of animals in the food system, but also how some small acts, in conjunction with others, are attempting to overturn it (see Scholz, 2008, p. 75). Of course, this reaction to plant-based food choices is by no means universal—overt vegan consumerism can also lead to confusion, indignation, or shame. Indeed, feelings of shame can poison communication, whether between vegans and non-vegans or between vegans themselves (Joy & Leenaert, 2015). But the point here is that

such diets can be one useful tool in the effort of consciousness-raising. And this claim should not be taken to mean that adopting a plant-based diet is just a *symbol* of one's political commitment. When, for instance, consumers boycott pasta that is related to homophobia (Ramsey, 2013), there is nothing wrong with the pasta itself, as pasta is not inherently harmful to homosexuals: not buying it is simply a symbol of being opposed to homophobia. However, with products that you cannot obtain without quite literally connecting with the oppression of animals, the abstention is more than a signal that one is opposed to the injustice, it is an action targeted against it.

It is clear, then, that activism in political solidarity is often targeted at non-members and is inherently oppositional. But Scholz (2008, p. 67) is rightly keen to differentiate it from revolutionary violence. It is not revolutionary, she argues, because the aim is not to *completely* overturn the social system, but to draw on existing social values to challenge prevailing policies, practices and structures which are out of step with them. This is undoubtedly the case with veganism: the scale of animal exploitation is not only breathtaking but also completely out of kilter with the purported values of individuals and society. Again, opinion polls consistently show that citizens value animal welfare and even support animal rights (Special Eurobarometer 442, n.d.; Jones et al., 2015; YouGov, 2019). Polls like this might very well reflect some social desirability bias (Millum, 2019). But that strengthens rather than weakens the point: animal oppression is not in line with *socially acceptable* values. Many states also claim to recognize that animals are more than mere resources, either by formally declaring them as 'sentient beings', offering them constitutional protection, or legislating through animal welfare laws (Eisen & Stilt, 2016). The role of vegan activism, then, is to highlight this discrepancy. But this cannot be communicated through violence according to Scholz (Scholz, 2008, pp. 108–109), because it risks recreating some of the injustice it aims to alleviate, is often counterproductive, and can alienate members within the group.

So, while veganism is 'oppositional politics', it is the system under which a community is operating that should be challenged, not other people per se. Vegans must acknowledge that it is not "them (plus some animals)" versus the rest of the wider community. This is because other community members, even if not vegan, have different relations to the system in which they live: some actually oppose it morally (as indicated by the polls quoted above), yet fail to act on their convictions; others might be wilfully ignorant of it (Williams, 2008), but appreciative of systemic changes that reduce animal oppression; and again others might have vested interests in upholding animal oppression, but to varying degrees (a manufacturer of sausages will be more able to adapt to a new system, free of animal-oppression [e.g., by going plant-based], than a breeder of farmed or laboratory animals). Jean Harvey provides a useful response to such phenomena with the idea that one can be in solidarity with oppressors "against their oppression" (Harvey, 2007, p. 34). This implies that part of the commitment of vegans to the wider community should be to maintain and build relationships with those who are not yet in solidarity on behalf of other animals, as well as to offer a vision of 'just transitions' which will help those who might benefit from the oppressive system to join in its dismantling.

Fischer (2019, p. 162) concurs in arguing that one of the aims of vegan activism is to persuade others to oppose animal oppression. But due to previously discussed concerns about permitting discretion with regard to agents' moral projects, Fischer believes that not everyone has a duty to join in activism. As he puts it: "You can recognize that animals are morally important, and even that they are wrongly killed, without becoming a strict vegan." Much here depends on the notion of 'strictness'. But in our political conceptualisation, which does not vie for moral purity or superiority, recognition that certain legal and everyday agents, structures and institutions to which we are connected combine to facilitate enormous harms to billions of animals does require the

vast majority of us to advocate for veganism. One goal of vegan activism, then, is to make others aware of this oppression, but it also demands much more.

To explain, every activism has built into its own raison-d'être the hope to become superfluous by eventually eradicating the injustice that motivates it. Vegans cannot want to live in a world in which they have to be faced with non-vegans forever, because that would mean that animal oppression never ends. Similarly, feminists would much rather live in a world in which they did not have to fight gender discrimination, and human rights activists would be happy to be put out of business. Historically, societies have not moved forward on these issues by actually turning *everyone* into feminists and human rights activists, nor by instilling in everyone the aspiration to live in consonance with these goals. Rather, they have *transformed their political institutions*. And we suggest veganism should hope to become superfluous in that way, too. And for Scholz (2008, p. 79), it is *hope* that is crucial in political solidarity. For while other emotions are often associated with veganism (indignation (think PETA), shame (think conversations at the dinner table with non-vegans), pride (think the advances of animal-free science) and joy (think sanctuaries)), we believe that *hope* should take center-stage politically. These other morally important emotions can be contingent, but the focus on hope cannot: veganism must be about striving for social transformation which eradicates animal oppression, and ultimately veganism itself. This must be the ultimate political hope, rather than a society which simply better accommodates ethical vegans.

Practically, that means that a focus on consumerism and other forms of unconventional political participation is not enough. Because vegans must focus on a vision of institutional change, they must also be willing to embrace those *conventional* forms of political participation which might allow such transformations to take place. For while it is true that the ultimate political hope of vegan activism is radical societal transformation, it would be foolish to ignore how participation within existing institutions might help to facilitate such changes. Political and social progress in relation to the rights of workers, women, children, the differently abled, the LGBTQ+ community and more has of course been achieved through unconventional and confrontational forms of political activity—but conventional politics has played a role too. Existing institutions can be transformed from within, as well as from external pressure. As such, it makes sense for vegans to be alive to *all* of the political opportunities available to them, whether that be through advocating for the election of sympathetic representatives in established political parties, campaigning on behalf of explicitly 'pro-animal' parties, lobbying members of the legislature, applying pressure on any independent Ombudspersons or other governmental institutions charged with overseeing animal welfare, and so on. What is crucial to acknowledge is that the political vision which vegans hold onto is one which moves political solidarity in the direction of *civic solidarity*: that is, to establish the institutional frameworks and structures to eradicate animal oppression. Conventional as well as unconventional forms of political participation can be useful in making progress toward that vision.

3.4 | The commitment to the goal

In addition to the commitments to oneself, to fellow members, to the victims of oppression and to the wider community, members of a solidary group also have commitments to the goal for which they are fighting. In particular, Scholz argues (Scholz, 2008, pp. 94–99) that individuals have a duty to be self-critical and reflexive with regard to the cause to which they are committed. Such a commitment is obviously important in order to prevent that goal from 'stagnating' or becoming

a 'dead dogma' in the minds of activists. But it is important for at least two other reasons which have been touched upon previously but which are worth reiterating here. For one, while all in political solidarity with each other have a shared commitment to fight oppression, precisely what is required to further that goal will sometimes need to be specified depending on the context. As we have seen, our social connection to the injustice might place different responsibilities on different individuals. In addition, context may also alter the activist strategies that are best for discharging those responsibilities. Put simply, one of the important commitments of vegan advocates is to reflect on what their veganism requires of them.

Secondly, and relatedly, all social justice movements have some practices in their sights which they take as clearly and obviously oppressive, with others remaining more contested. Take the feminist movement: there is widespread acknowledgment that denying women the right to terminate pregnancy and have control over their own bodies is oppressive; whereas, the oppressive nature of some forms of sex work is much more contested. Similar divisions can be seen in activism targeted at the oppression of animals. Everyone in the movement acknowledges the brutality of industrialized farming, but it is much less clear whether such practices as pet-keeping, cellular agriculture or the consumption of bivalves could be classed as oppressive. Such disagreements are the inevitable features of any movement tackling oppression, and there is no way in which they can be eradicated or resolved to the satisfaction of all parties. As part of their commitment to the cause, then, humans who advocate for veganism have an obligation to not only reflect on that cause, its grounding and its implications, but to listen to and constructively engage with others in their group who may have a different interpretation of animal oppression.

But the commitment to reflect on the cause should not be construed as a solely 'inward-facing' enterprise; another important aspect of it is to look outward and consider its relationship with commitments to fight other forms of oppression. This can be construed as having two sides. Firstly, the commitment entails an effort to 'mainstream' the cause by reaching out to others who are tackling different forms of oppression. The idea here is to get these others not only to take the cause seriously, but to also consider it in their own work. For vegans, the aim would be to engage activists tackling misogyny, racism, homophobia and more to see the reality of animal oppression, and the ways in which these different oppressions are entangled. There is sometimes a reluctance among campaigners fighting for social justice to associate themselves with the fight against animal oppression. Perhaps this comes down to a fear that animals will somehow water down or undermine the cause for which they are fighting. As part of their 'consciousness-raising' activities, then, vegans need to show that society's treatment of animals genuinely counts as oppressive. In addition, it is also useful to expose how the injustices perpetrated against animals are intertwined with and facilitated by injustices against other groups, whether that be the exploitation of workers in slaughterhouses (Pachirat, 2013), the use of animalising insults ("bitch" or "cow" etc., Heuberger, 2007) to denigrate women (Dunayer, 1995), or the association of certain racial groups with animals (apes, monkeys) to question their humanity (Harper, 2010; Ko & Ko, 2017).

The intersectional nature of these oppressions leads us to the second side of the 'outward-facing' commitment to reflect on the cause. Just as activists working on non-animal causes must reflect on animal oppression, so vegans must reflect on these other oppressions. In part, and as we have seen already, this means avoiding attempts to further justice for animals in ways which entrench injustices for other groups (whether that be through using sexist imagery, allying with right-wing groups to attack persecuted minority groups, and so on.) But it also means reflecting on how various oppressions are connected, and the implications that has for the efforts to overturn animal oppression. That does not mean simply reducing all oppressions to one, seeing them

as having the same source, the same content, the same effects, and requiring the same efforts to overturn them. This would be to ignore the distinctive and particular nature of the injustices which different types of individuals face; it is one thing to see sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and speciesism as connected, but it is quite another to regard them *as the same thing*. If they were the same, then any gains in tackling one form of oppression would lead to gains in another. But we know that this is not how things work: just as animal activism can entrench the oppression of women, so can feminist activism entrench the oppression of animals.[9] What the commitment must be, then, is to employ 'parallel' thinking when tackling injustice; that is, when thinking about a particular site of oppression, to consider how various disadvantaged groups are affected or not. In the terminology of Claire Jean Kim (2015), the commitment must be to employ a 'multi-optic' lens when tackling oppression; not to conflate all injustices, but to reflect on the differential impacts on various groups of both any specific instance of oppression and the proposed efforts to tackle it.

4 | CONCLUSION

We hope to have shown that it can be useful and fruitful for individuals to think of veganism as political solidarity to resist animal oppression both on behalf of other animals and with other vegans. It is useful because it brings out and explains veganism's *political* dimension and reveals some interesting, novel and important concomitant commitments. It is fruitful because it moves beyond endless, sometimes moralistic, debates about what we as individuals should eat or do—debates which risk drawing attention away from animal oppression. Similarly, some debates about the ethical duty to go vegan (regarding those animals unintentionally harmed or killed, the causal impotence of individual actions, the impossibility of moral perfection etc.) are rather beside the point. The *political* duty is to overturn animal oppression which, while fuzzy at its conceptual boundaries, is a glaringly clear example of an injustice that is human in origin. One important way in which individuals can respond to that duty is by joining with others to advocate for veganism, and by hoping for—and allowing others to work toward—a vegan world; or rather, a world in which the very label 'vegan' becomes superfluous.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For other accounts which speak explicitly of veganism as a political strategy or movement, see Giroux and Larue (2019), Gruen and Jones (2015), Roeder (2021) and Dickstein et al. (Forthcoming). While they each make important contributions to a political reformulation of veganism, none of these accounts proposes the focus on solidarity that we develop in this paper.

[2] Dutkiewicz and Dickstein (2021) might object that the term *veganism* should be solely 'conduct-descriptive': i.e., only used to describe the practice of abstaining from the consumption of animal products. While we understand their calls for parsimony, we nevertheless take it for granted that it is important to understand *why* certain agents adopt particular practices, as well as *if they should*. Furthermore, our reconstruction of veganism

is faithful to the real-world understanding of veganism as a *normative endeavor* distinct from, say, the dietary practices of herbivorous animals.

[3] In animal studies circles, the language of 'solidarity' has been employed by individual scholars, like Coulter (2016, 2017) and Essen and Allen (2017), yet without talking about veganism per se. In practice, the term 'solidarity' has been used by the group Animal Rebellion, though in the context of, first, solidarity with Extinction Rebellion, and, second, solidarity with UK farmers.

[4] Note that we are only accepting this lack of political agency in animals for the purposes of this paper. It is not a debate we can nor need to engage with here. For important claims that animals do have such agency, see Meijer (2013) and Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011). For an alternative take which denies such agency, see Pepper (2021). For a view which sees 'more-than-human-solidarity' as something directed toward but not enacted by non-human others, see Rock and Degeling (2015).

[5] For the purposes of this paper we use the terms 'injustice' and 'social injustice' interchangeably.

[6] Contrast our view here with Dickstein et al. (Forthcoming) who see veganism as connected to 'total liberation'.

[7] Compassion for animals has been crucial in the formation of animal protection organizations such as the RSPCA, Albert Schweitzer Foundation or Compassion in World Farming and are still among the main forces that drive public support for such work. In addition, people, of course, have been, and still are, motivated and inspired by ineffable, sometimes quasi-religious feelings, that produce insights that can transcend public justification or rational explanation.

[8] These debates look at animal suffering tout court, and not just the forms of suffering that humans directly cause. Some conclude that people concerned with animal suffering might have much more to do than abstaining from consuming animal products or working toward the end of animal use in scientific experiments (e.g., Horta, 2010; MacMahan, 2015).

[9] See, for instance, how efforts to improve the livelihoods of women can negatively impact farm animals: https://www.hendrix-genetics.com/en/news/new-partnership-sees-sustainable-poultry-introduced-small-farmers-mozambique-and-zambia/ [17.11.2020].

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