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# The Tolerant Animal Advocate

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**Abstract:** One of the recurring problems of animal rights advocacy in recent years has been the difficulty of matching up such advocacy with the broadly liberal political environment in which it operates. Animal advocates may score high on compassion for the animal victims of injustice, but much lower when it comes to political compassion for opponents. Fairly or otherwise, those with a robust, partisan commitment to animal rights have secured a reputation for intolerance. So much so, that it may even be difficult to form a plausible picture of what tolerant animal advocacy would look like, without compromising the partisanship of advocates. This paper attempts to unify partisanship and tolerance within a picture of the tolerant animal advocate as someone whose agency is marked by at least two significant constraining features. Firstly, they will engage in negative appraisals of dietary practices, but will not ordinarily move from such appraisals to any overall judgment of the character of others. Hence, they will be in no position to hold that vegetarians or vegans are in some sense better people than meat eaters. Secondly, they will deploy charges of hypocrisy rarely and with caution.

**Keywords:** animal rights, tolerance, hypocrisy, partisanship, political compassion

What follows will be partly argument and partly an attempt to picture a certain kind of political agent: a tolerant animal advocate who sees what they take to be wrong but restricts their appraisal and condemnation. The approach (picturing an agent) emerges out of a conviction that, in philosophical ethics, we can easily lose sight of what it would be like to live by the norms and values that we advocate, and to do so over a sustained period of time. The agent in question will be one who engages in dissent but avoids routinely charging others with hypocrisy. They will accept that another's disagreement with their beliefs is not necessarily a character flaw, and their restraint in the judgment of others (or lack of any urge to treat

disagreement as an indication of deep moral flaw) emerges out of what we might call a sense of shared human predicament. Enthusiasts for the idea of a political world based around friends and enemies, rather than simply humans and other animals, should perhaps look away now (Schmitt 2007; Mouffe 2013). The world pictured here is not one where the routine agonisms of liberal democracy promote justice only when transformed into the antagonisms of personal attack. If asked, ‘Why do you act in the way that you do?’ any randomly chosen but tolerant animal advocate is unlikely to say, ‘because of a shared sense of human predicament.’ However, their response might be a placeholder for some similar idea.

In slightly different terms, the pictured agent will combine a strong partisanship with strong political compassion. The partisanship will concern animals. The compassion will concern a full range of other political agents, from direct opponents to those whose rival dietary practices differ marginally from some preferred form of vegetarianism or veganism. However, if the parts of the paper concerning intolerance ring true, they are more likely to do so in relation to vegan activists (or rather, a subset of the latter), rather than lacto-ovo vegetarians, given that a practice of compromise is built into dietary practice of the latter sort. Among vegans, the problems of tolerance and intolerance are posed in a sharper manner. Here, I declare an interest. I identify as a long-term vegan, but also accept that vegan activism, and online advocacy in particular, has something of a bad reputation (Khara 2018). Nor is the bad reputation entirely unearned. When celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain committed suicide in 2018, following mental health problems, his death was publicly welcomed and celebrated by some members of various vegan networks.<sup>1</sup> Bourdain had, at that point, faced years of hostility following a casual but polemical comment about vegetarians “and their Hezbollah-like splinter faction, the vegans” as a persistent irritant in his *Kitchen Confidential* (2000). The text was candid about food, and about the masochistic kitchen culture of the time. Commitment to the kitchen had to be shown through suffering and an irrational dedication. Nobody, including

Bourdain, came out looking like a hero and the comment was in keeping with the rest of the text. While commentators directly involved in food and catering adjusted, and did not take any sustained exception, the vegan comment lived on in blogs and online attacks for years afterward—long after Bourdain had moved on in his life, softening his attitude in later years. In 2018, during the final season of the long-running *Parts Unknown*, Bourdain travelled to Buddhist Bhutan with a friend from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and reflected upon suffering and the commonality of pain across humans and non-humans. The response to Bourdain from a segment of vegans continued, which gives us the outline of a familiar pattern. Once an individual has been targeted online, there is a high likelihood that they will remain targeted, with loyalty to cause shown through vehemence of hostility.

None of this concerns a default intolerance among vegans. Most engage in a dietary practice without any ongoing animal advocacy. If there happen to be a million vegans in a particular country, it is far from likely that there will be anything close to a million vegan activists. Nor is there some clearly unified vegan community. Veganism is constituted by a plurality with a multiplicity of identities. Even among activists—with overlapping organizations and more of a claim upon constituting a community—there are significantly different practices, and many (I will suggest ‘most’) vegan political agents would not dream of engaging in cyberbullying or online abuse. However, the welcoming of Bourdain’s suicide did not come out of the blue. A similar incident could happen tomorrow, and none of us would be surprised to find a large number of online posts, with a similar nature, from much the same groups of people, many of whom will also happily quote Gandhi and believe themselves to be practitioners of *ahimsa*—rather than being intolerant or failing in duties of compassion. As an identifying vegan, I will accept that intolerance (and associated failures of compassion) among a section of vegans is real, even if its extent is hard to gauge. From the inside, it may seem like a vocal minority is responsible. From the outside, those responsible may seem like the typical voice of veganism.

As a further clarification, the picture of compassionate agency that I will attempt to set out will have some features which are recognizably Gandhian, e.g., a requirement to avoid overestimation of our own standing by comparison with that of political opponents. But it will depart from other Gandhian commitments, e.g., by drawing upon the conceptual repertoire of Western liberal politics, rather than upon spiritualized notions of dissent such as *ahimsa* or *satyagraha*, and it will not try to mingle political claims with any sort of deep metaphysics. The compassion will also be directed towards political agents irrespective of whether or not they are victims of injustice or its perpetrators. (We are all, of course, both.) It will be treated as political because it occurs within the context of dissent concerning practices that are state-sanctioned and supported, and which are also an area of legitimate legal and ethical contention. This is a rough and ready account of what makes it political, but it is broadly consistent with any number of more specialized (non-essentialist and essentialist) theories about the nature of politics—theories about which I will remain officially neutral, beyond the minimal rejection of any friend-enemy account.

The approach differs from familiar attempts to treat the kind of compassion in question as political *because it is injustice directed*. The link to injustice shapes Nussbaum's (2013) approach but is set aside here. Our tolerant agent can respond compassionately to other agents who are, in some significant way, at fault. And this would not be at odds with the way that compassion ordinarily works. I will assume that a great deal of political compassion, including its most familiar instances in peace and reconciliation processes, is like this. It emerges not out of a sense that 'others have suffered unjustly,' but out of a sense that 'we have all suffered so much.' Accordingly, I will take it that there are many contexts in which we ought to respond compassionately to rivals and opponents, recognizing their frailties and vulnerabilities, rather than assisting only the victims of injustice, or directing our concern only towards the latter. This certainly does sound a little Gandhian, but without anything akin to his

strict rejection of incivility in all contexts of protest. With Candice Delmas (2020), I will assume that there is a place for ‘uncivil disobedience.’ However, its place is not everywhere. Partisanship is both unavoidable and potentially productive in societies that have the best features of liberal democracy, and there is an irreducibly agonistic dimension to politics within any reasonable approximation of a good society. However, this increases the risks of failures of political compassion, rather than excusing those failures. Partisanship and the regular agonisms of democracy may lead any of us into the dangers of a routine and counterproductive intolerance and into associated behaviors, up to, and including, welcoming the suicide of opponents with mental health issues—an act which is both a violation of civility and a demonstration of intolerance. (For simplicity, I will take it that intolerant agents tend towards incivility, even if incivility sometimes has other background causes.)

As a provisional story about the overall place of civility and incivility within dissent, their roles and standing (as justified or required) are fixed by considerations beyond those of legitimate cause. These considerations include agency, *who protests*, as well as *what the protest is about*. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, for example, has a better claim upon entitlement to outrage and to engage in uncivil disobedience than a predominantly white vegan movement which itself reproduces multiple problematic features of social inequalities. (For example, it is disproportionately female in composition but disproportionately male in leadership and in its best-known spokespersons.) Vegan networks are filled with people like me, who have strong convictions about animal harms, and also at least enough disposable income to focus strongly upon our opposition to animal harms as consumers. Most of us may not be wealthy, but we do live a good distance from anything that might count as genuine poverty. We are also in relatively little danger from law enforcement officers, even if we break the law. Accordingly, it would be odd to claim exactly the same entitlements in the form of our dissent that BLM activists can plausibly claim in theirs (should they wish to do so.) It does not

seem at all plausible to suggest that all protests and all protestors have precisely the same range of entitlements, irrespective of context, cause, and movement composition. There are, after all, ethical dimensions to dissent which go beyond those of picking the right side, and contexts within which compassion trumps partisanship. At the same time, none of this gives particular agents more reason to be involved in one movement rather than the other. Instead, it speaks to the situation of agents, like our tolerant animal advocate, who are engaged in animal advocacy, and vegan advocacy in particular. And it draws attention to the importance of a rudimentary form of self-knowledge. No amount of talk about intersectionality should make our tolerant animal advocate imagine that they are part of a single, interlocking, anti-racist-anti-speciesist bloc, with shared ethical and political entitlements enjoyed equally by all. (This does not, of course, rule out any appeal to the concept of intersectionality, but only an unhelpful yet tempting use of the concept.)

## **I. Picturing the Agent**

With these preliminaries dealt with, let us proceed to specify some of the more detailed commitments of our tolerant animal advocate:

1. The extension of rights discourse to include some idea of animal rights. But not necessarily one that is based upon sentience, nor upon an appraisal of autonomy rather than interests.
2. Partisan commitment to advancing the cause of animal rights, so that advocacy is not simply a private matter. However, they may often prefer to speak about justice, welfare, cruelty, or even love rather than rights. That is to say, their ethical discourse may be rich and pluralist. They may privilege particular concepts, but their animal advocacy will not reduce down to a single concept, and in this respect, it will resemble the ways in which we talk about why humans matter.

3. Tolerance for the expression of a large class of opposing views about the treatment of animals, and tolerance with regard to the more routine dietary practices of others. They will ungrudgingly break bread with meat eaters and may even (perhaps with a little more reluctance) buy meat products and/or cook such products for infirm or ill relatives or as part of their regular employment. Yet their attitude towards the consumption of such products will include a component of negative appraisal. They will view a vegetarian or vegan diet as the best default option, and this is a view that will be publicly and regularly expressed in some way.
4. A broadly pragmatic approach towards matters of ethics and politics. This is implied by what has already been said, but here it is made explicit.

Such an agent will routinely value civility in the public domain, even if they recognize that it cannot always be protected and that it does not outweigh everything else. They will value it, without thinking that politics must *always* conform to a principle that one should be civil in dealings with others. Appealing here to a routine valuing of civility, or a practice of civility, also has its difficulties, and it may be confused with some special virtue of civility, or some class-related notion of good manners or etiquette—neither of which capture what I have in mind.

It is tempting to situate our tolerant agent as politically liberal, or as someone of the left. However, beyond saying that they are a tolerant agent, the above specification will not actually tell us where they sit on any formal liberal-conservative or left-right spectrum. Animal advocacy has a complex relationship to familiar liberal and left traditions, rather than a straightforward one. Nor will the specification tell us whether or not the agent frowns when reading John Rawls or nods approvingly when reading Michael Sandel and Stanley Hauerwas. No philosophical theory or philosophical alignment needs to be pre-supposed. While



pragmatism and tolerance are often associated with the liberal tradition within political philosophy, our agent's pragmatism and tolerance need not emerge out of any special sympathy with liberal individualism as a methodology, nor out of any special account of political ontology. Again, it emerges out of a sense of shared human predicament, or a sense of solidarity with other members of the political community—a sense of sharing a common good, or the possibility that we might one day come to do so. They will be well-adapted to effective political practice within contemporary liberal democracy and will value key features of the latter, even if they are aware of its shortcomings, and aware also of the possibility that something better may one day come along. Indeed, such an awareness may itself be integral to their valuing of key features of liberal democracy, in the form of what is sometimes called 'social hope' (Rorty 1999).

This type of agent may also *not* be the only one with a claim upon being both tolerant and partisan about animal rights. It is a picture of such an agent, but not the only conceivable picture. The approach of picturing, i.e., setting out an example, allows for this plurality. There can be more than just one kind of agent, and they can likewise perform more than one role. Our agent will, however, have at least a good claim upon being both tolerant and partisan, and they may well be the kind of engaged agent in whom tolerance is most obvious. There is an element of idealization in the picture, but not too much. This is not a picture of political saintliness, or of exceptional accomplishment along the lines of Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. The agent's character is not exactly my own, or that of anyone we might readily think of, but we may aspire to be similar to such an agent with a genuine, lived commitment to tolerance and to partisanship of the sort described. And these things will not be entirely out of reach, or the perfectionist telos of ideal agency. However, they will come at a price. For example, part of aspiring to such a condition is acceptance of a certain level of moral perplexity and intermittent unease about how best to engage with others who do not share commitments such as (1) and (2) above. In

saying this, I am not seeking to valorize unease in its own right, but merely to recognize it. A level of tension in our commitments, and even cognitive dissonance, is integral to human agency, and a tolerant agent of the sort described will be in no position to deny the complexities of being human or to escape from them.

## **II. Tensions in the Picture**

Superficially, the four commitments of the tolerant advocate may seem to generate few tensions. A closer look will show that at least some tensions are unavoidable. Two in particular stand out. *First*, the commitment to animal rights, and to advancing such rights in a partisan way, goes hand in hand with a belief in the moral gravity of the harms that are done to animals through the food system and through comparable and related forms of animal use. Our agent will hold that what is done is wrong, and wrong in a deep way *that requires those who recognize the wrongness to speak out, even if the price of doing so can sometimes be a legitimate causing of offense*, and even at the expense of their own unease about causing such offense. Our agent is tolerant, but a tolerant agent is not necessarily one who always avoids giving offense, and the kind of agent described will almost certainly give offense on at least some occasions. Yet the manner of their doing so will not be through gratuitous personal attacks and is also unlikely to be through the embracing of familiar but problematic and routinely offensive analogies such as those between animal use and slavery, or between animal slaughter and the Holocaust. Embracing commitments (1) to (4) will incline them to reject these things, and not merely with regard to others' actions, but also with regard to their own actions. If, for instance, they prepare meat for an infirm relative, in line with (3), they will not feel that they are developing an affinity with Eichmann or with some lower-level functionary within the Nazi system. Otherwise, they would not help out in this way by preparing meat; it really would seem like participation in some manner of eternal Treblinka. Such food preparation need not be a preferred option, and

it may involve some unease, but it remains a thing that many vegans are routinely called upon to do at some point in their lives when they are placed in a care role, and especially in the role of primary carer for agents who may be less than fully cooperative. Nor need they believe in what we might call ‘strong species egalitarianism,’ i.e., species egalitarianism of the sort that drives such analogies by eliding over the differences between the vulnerabilities typical of humans and the vulnerabilities typical of different sorts of non-humans (Milligan 2015a).

Accordingly, given that they do not treat or regard others as Nazis in their dealings with animals, our tolerant agent is unlikely to believe that the harms of death (and the harms of being killed) are uniform for all sentient beings. They may have no theory at all about the harms of death, but if presented with a theory linking the harms of death with desires, they might accept that the harms of death vary significantly. That is to say, as harms which vary between different humans, vary for individual humans at different points in their life, and vary a good deal between different kinds of creatures. But even without a special theory about exactly how death harms any of us, an expectation of a cross-species uniformity in the harms of death may strike them as implausible. None of which in any way undermines the point that the harms of death and of killing will generally be accepted by them as harms of a serious sort—something to avoid for our own sake and something to avoid inflicting upon other beings. Nor need our tolerant animal advocate believe that the denial of certain kinds of liberties to humans and to non-humans is *equally* damaging to their chances of enjoying a good life. The outlook of this agent might, however, include acceptance of some weaker form of species egalitarianism in the sense that (with the possible exception of extreme, outlier cases) they may regard all rights bearers as equally entitled to have their rights respected or (more minimally) acknowledged, even if the rights themselves are not exactly the same. In line with (1), they may allow that such rights can reasonably differ because creaturely interests differ, and those rights are linked

to interests—in the manner of Feinberg (1980), Cochrane (2012), and Garner (2013)—as much as, if not more than, they are to sentience, in the manner of Regan (2004).

In line with such a weaker species egalitarianism, or with some practically equivalent view, violations of the rights of humans and of non-human animals will, in each case, be regarded as a matter of injustice. Given their partisanship, this tolerant agent will also see at least some cases of injustice towards animals as sufficiently disturbing to motivate public opposition and personal political engagement. An assumption here is that while we may, in some sense, oppose ‘all injustice,’ none of us is in a position to oppose each and every instance of it except in some notional sense. Saying that we oppose something can be very different from opposing it in any genuinely committed partisan way, and in a way that also avoids reproducing the thing opposed. Given their commitments, our agent cannot simply accept injustice towards animals as part of *the way the world is* and avoid confrontation out of concern for the feelings of others. They will be pulled in opposite directions about speaking out and about giving offense, depending upon occasion and context.

*Second*, while they might or might not give offense on any particular occasion, their attitude will always involve appraisal and an ethically based disapproval. Something about practices of meat-eating, or those who engage in them, will be evaluated in a critical manner. More precisely, their attitude will involve negative judgment tempered by political compassion; not simply a commitment to the idea that opponents are wrong, but a recognition that opponents are also vulnerable in ways that ought not to be exploited for momentary advantage, or personal satisfaction, or out of a felt psychological compulsion to make one’s views known irrespective of context and circumstance. Even so, after all these and other things are said, there will still be some unavoidable level of unfavorable assessment. Without straying too far into the nuances of toleration theory, toleration is about disapproval as well as the valuing of others. But what

exactly is disapproved of may not be altogether clear. And how such disapproval can manifest itself *without* becoming judgmental or moralistic is far from obvious. As a tolerant agent, they will try to avoid being either of these things: judging too much, too often, or in the wrong way. Yet, the likelihood of failure on at least some occasions may be high and acceptance of periodic failure may be the price of speaking out in a consistent way. Again, there is tension between commitments (1) to (4), possibly between the pragmatism of (4) and the partisanship of (2).

Disapproval may take other persons (humans, moral agents) as its object, and there are certainly many animal advocates who assume precisely this, i.e., that what we should disapprove of is the other person. What makes this awkward is that it involves a standpoint of superiority. Indeed, we may suspect that a good deal of hostility towards vegetarian, and especially vegan, diets on the part of meat eaters arises precisely because such practices are seen in this way, as a judgment about others with a sense of superiority built-in. They are seen as a way of saying ‘you are not the person that you ought to be,’ or even, ‘why not be a little more like me?’ This, of course, strikes home, because few of us happen to be the person that we think we ought to be, but few of us want to be like the people we are entangled in arguments with. Thoughts may drift here to online exchanges in which a curious sense of moral superiority does come through. Imagine a Facebook exchange in which our tolerant animal advocate affirms what they believe to be patently obvious, that ‘we are not better people than non-vegans.’ In response, another and rather different animal advocate types: ‘That makes no sense. How can a non-vegan be as good as a vegan?’ This may be the beginning of a long exchange. Or a short and unproductive one.

Suppose we are in the midst of such an exchange and point out that Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Jesus, the Prophet, Nelson Mandela, and Buddha, as well as the small army of our other moral exemplars, all knowingly consumed animal products, albeit with varying degrees of

awkwardness about doing so. Jesus enthusiastically, in the case of fish. Buddha, some time ago, in more ambivalent narratives, and Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama rather more recently. (So, this is not an issue of time.) Perhaps, as a result, we secure a formal acceptance that ‘we’ vegans or vegetarians are not better than ‘them.’ In our imagined Facebook exchange, the point is rejected, or duly accepted. But its acceptance does not last. Within days, perhaps hours, normal service resumes. The point at issue in the exchange is not just that exceptional non-vegans can be more morally admirable than vegans. (Which is a bit like being told that good Protestants are better than bad Catholics, a half-truth which is set out in a way that is laden with all manner of problems.) Getting someone to accept that none of us are as virtuous as Buddha or Nelson Mandela is a concession so trivial that, in its own right, is probably not worth winning. Rather, the deeper thought sitting behind such mismatched comparisons is that we would not think of any of these figures as better or worse by virtue of their diet alone. Vegetarianism would not have made Buddha or Jesus any better or worse than they were. When we want to know about Nelson Mandela, we do not build our account around his diet on Robben Island. The whole issue seems to be something apart. And what we see a little more clearly in these special cases is something that holds in everyday life too: dietary practice is not, in most cases, a good basis for any overall assessment of moral character.

We might, admittedly, imagine some utterly exceptional and appalling dietary practice, such as cannibalism in the city, or preferring one’s meat to be not just fresh or rare, but held down and screaming. This would tell us a great deal about who and what another person is. But such dietary practices are not what ordinarily confront us. Faced with a gourmet who likes his food to feel that it is being consumed, we would know all that we need to know. Faced with ordinary agents, we do not have enough information. Dietary practice alone can tell us something, but often it is not enough for a broader moral assessment to be made, even if we feel inclined to

make such an assessment. And often we do not. The picture of moral agents routinely judging everyone is not an attractive one.

The reasons why we do not ordinarily take dietary practice as an indication of character are, in turn, grounded in the historical depth of speciesism, by comparison with prejudices such as racism and even antisemitism (which have historically shallower roots). Speciesism, of the routine sort presupposed in meat-eating practices, may be inflected by modernity, but it also has roots that go all the way back to the very beginnings of civilization. Racism and antisemitism are, by contrast, such oddities, and rest upon such peculiarly contingent prejudices, that we may hope to eventually eradicate them at some future time. By contrast, speciesism looks like something that we might, at best, mitigate. Whether or not it can be entirely ended is much more of an open question. My hope is that it can, but my suspicion, for what it is worth, is that eradication may be beyond us. We are all implicated, to at least some small extent. To at least some extent, it is probably here to stay. Eradication might have to involve some generalized extinctionism (preventing domesticated animals from having offspring in order to avoid speciesist relations with humans), and this would itself be speciesist (they do not get to breed, but we do), and arguably wrong on other grounds (Persson 2008; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Familiar practices, such as taking racism and antisemitism as things that do bear on the character of those who hold such attitudes, but not ordinarily making assumptions about one's character based upon dietary practice alone, are sensitive to the significant differences between these prejudices, and to the apparently intractable depth of speciesism. The avoidance of character judgment is not justified by the triviality of animals, but by the importance of animals and the intractability of the problem.

Even so, dietary practice must surely fit *somewhere* into the evaluation of a life, and not just the terrible lives of terrible agents who have appalling or ghoulish diets. After all, even the

exemplary agents mentioned above have reflected upon food matters. At the risk of reworking their commitments into something like a virtue theory, several of them regarded ‘eating well’ as an integral part of ‘living well.’ Gandhi experimented briefly with veganism, and the attitude of the Buddha of the Pali Canon towards meat-eating is at least cautiously critical. (An offering of meat, accepted under an obligation to accept offerings, is linked to his death.) My thought is not, then, that dietary practice tells us nothing at all about a person’s overall sense of what is right and wrong. It may well go some distance towards expressing important aspects of who they are. It does so, for example, with religious dietary restrictions adhered to out of a sense of values rather than habit. And if my father suddenly decides to eat only fish, and not beef, on a Friday, this too says something about his understanding of Catholicism and current sense of what is important. But often a dietary practice tells us much less than we might want to know, and far less than a practice of urban cannibalism would tell us. Nor is there a direct correlation between specific practices and character traits expressed in many of those cases where some less direct correlation between the two clearly exists. One and the same dietary practice can express different things: puritanism, fear of contamination, a sense of group membership, elite entitlement, or even a conception of sexual prowess or its opposite, a ‘herbivore’ outlook (Morioka 2013). Given this, even when we know that something important is going on, our knowledge of dietary practice *alone* rarely extends well into global judgments about agents and their moral standing. This remains the case even if we believe that there *are* linkages between the consumption of animal products and great harms, and even if we believe that we might discern these linkages given enough further information about someone’s personal history and the prevailing social context.

Given this, there seems to be a good *prima facie* case for saying that the negative appraisal held by the tolerant animal advocate will focus primarily upon practices, rather than persons. Figuratively, to use an expression from Gandhi, it is the sins that may be abhorred rather than



sinners, who may still be loved (Gandhi 2007). Meat eaters will have to be flawed, to some degree, because of what they do, but not automatically *more* flawed than the tolerant agent. Recognition of this can be a matter of avoiding global judgments about character, in the absence of enough information, but also a matter of an awareness of shared complicity. That is to say, they may be aware that ethical commitments and associated dietary practices are not actually enough to remove us from the causal nexus of things. They do not create a vastly greater distance from socially embedded harms, and hence from complicity with such harms. We are all caught up in the processes that reproduce them. None of us has clean hands. None of us could have clean hands. Accordingly, if our tolerant animal advocate has some sense of these things, they *will* still make negative judgments (otherwise they would not be either partisan or tolerant), but there are also judgments that they will tend not to make. Or they will make them only with reluctance.

What this implies is that the full weight of their tolerance need not rest upon recognition of a common humanity, whatever its features, but may rest also upon something more contingent. Here, I pursue the very un-Gandhian thought that what legitimates the tolerant animal advocate's response, given terrible harm to other creatures, depends at least partly upon circumstances that might be other than they are. Under different conditions, our agent's response, that is, tolerance before meat eaters and those who otherwise consume animal products, would look saintlier (or simply mistaken) rather than reasonable. For example, the causal connection between the consumption of animal products and actual animal harms could be far more direct. The causal sequence could even be reversed, and the harms prevented through individual decisions about purchases and consumption. If meat eaters could save the life of an animal every time they chose not to eat meat, then vegans like myself would have more reason to question their character. If a tallyman walked behind each of us in supermarkets, adding up the body parts left *unpurchased*, and then making phone calls which resulted in

animals going into a happy retirement, there could very well be something badly wrong with meat buyers and meat eaters who continued to act as they do today. Under such circumstances, we would all have stronger reasons to make global judgments about others based upon diet, even if we did recognize a common humanity and a shared vulnerability. The tolerance of our animal advocate, their avoidance of premature judgments about the character of others, makes more sense than it might otherwise do because of an appreciation of the distance between individual decisions about consumption and the broader societal processes of animal harms that make decisions about consumption available.

A different way to put the point would be to say that our tolerant agent appreciates the difference between individual and social ethics, or (without appeal to a kind of ethical theory) that they do not conflate two significantly different questions: (1) ‘Should animal slaughter be ended?’ To which, all other things being equal, they would probably answer ‘Yes,’ at least within affluent liberal democratic societies; and (2) ‘What should any particular individual do while animal slaughter still continues?’, to which there may be no single correct answer that is at all likely to be universally applicable even within societies of our sort, given our varying individual circumstances. Any ethic which is well-adapted to conditions of liberal democracy will be sensitive to the ongoing tensions between the two. Again, our tolerant agent is not tension-free. The commitments (1) to (4) were not set up as an escape route from normal moral psychological constraints, or from the practical difficulties of knowing how to go on. As before and above, our tolerant agent will face difficulties in judging just how tolerant they can afford to be. They may feel no need or inclination to be unpleasant or puritanical in their relations with meat-consuming others. They may, as indicated, comfortably break bread with meat eaters in a way that none of us would happily do with murderers, rapists, or guards from concentration camps. Their pragmatism may also be such that they recognize themselves to be part of a small minority with a long and uphill task that is unlikely to be made any easier by the adoption of

any moralistic stance towards acquaintances, companions, and others in general. Yet a lingering intermittent worry is likely to remain: ‘Do I do enough?’, ‘Do I speak up often enough?’ While this need not be an ongoing neurotic fixation, it is at least likely to be one of the ordinary moral uncertainties that they live with.

### **III. Intolerant Animal Advocacy, and the Hypocrisy Charge**

My final way into an understanding of the tolerant animal advocate is to consider the opposite. Intolerance may help to fill out a picture of tolerance by helping us to understand the kind of thing that our tolerant animal advocate will tend to avoid. There may, however, be some concern that a discussion of intolerant animal advocates is self-defeating in light of what has gone before, given that it does involve an overall judgment of *their* character as intolerant. However, while dietary practice is not ordinarily a good basis for a global judgment of character, tolerance and intolerance are both closer to being such a guide. Tolerance and intolerance permeate character as a whole, just as racism and antisemitism do. Although the ways in which this is the case may also depend also upon contingencies, such as the prevalence of these things across some given society as a whole, and the extent to which any agent can reasonably be expected to break free of them. Notoriously, Abraham Lincoln’s tolerance was bound up with his commonplace (if eroding) racism, and his ability to act as he did *in spite of* holding background views that he could never quite move beyond (Horton 1994). However we situate his racism, his tolerance, as well as his rough and ready pragmatism, was part of who he was—the better part, and perhaps, in some sense, the greater part. Gandhi’s tolerance, likewise, was an important aspect of his character, and not just a localized quirk. So much so, that the areas of his life where tolerance broke down, and an intolerant puritanism broke through, stand out in sharp relief. Intolerance does seem to be relevant to appraisals of character. Any manner of attenuated intolerance, such that an agent might happen to be utterly

intolerant but otherwise at home in a liberal democratic, or simply pluralist, political environment, is difficult to envisage. In virtue theoretical terms, vices, as well as virtues, have their unity, their conceptual links, and causal relations. If and when we must make global judgments about others, knowledge about their tolerance or intolerance will provide us with something important to go on. There is, then, a risk of being judgmental, but nothing inherently self-defeating about an attempt to make sense of tolerant animal advocacy through the picturing of intolerant animal advocacy.

While such intolerance may take many forms, I will focus upon one of the more obvious, i.e., the over-deployment of charges of hypocrisy. In general terms, someone who is guilty of hypocrisy ‘does not practice what they preach,’ and the difference between the two—what they say and what they actually do—is striking rather than routine. What is at stake here is not our tendency to talk in idealized terms, while acting in less than idealized ways. It is also not the result of failures of articulation. An agent’s statements and actions might diverge radically because they are hopeless at expressing themselves, and because they regularly say things that they do not quite mean. A mismatch between words and deeds might then have nothing to do with hypocrisy, otherwise the inarticulate would all be hypocrites. When we charge someone with hypocrisy, we ordinarily assume that they know very well what they are saying, and that they intend to say it, but they do not personally live up to it. They advance *shared* ethical standards, standards which are supposed to apply to themselves as well as others, but then only criticize others for failing to meet the standards. Their criticisms reach outwards and are not ways of identifying a collective failure in which they too are implicated. Humility, not unlike a failure to express what we really mean, is not hypocrisy, at least on any regular understanding of what hypocrisy involves.

However, I am not seeking to make my case dependent upon a particular and narrow account of the concept. It should be able to accommodate any non-idiosyncratic account of the concept of hypocrisy that captures this main idea and does not become overloaded with too many other things. We can even accept that a socially embedded account of any virtues or vices will be a historical product, and hence liable to include various contingent things in addition to those matters that philosophical ethicists typically focus upon. I will be happy if a better formulation comes along and will allow that any proximate reformulation of what hypocrisy is may do just as well, provided that it is not too contrived or geared to partisan interests. Nobody should be in a position to define themselves out of the problem or to define others into it as a matter of partisan convenience.

When hypocrisy is understood along these lines, it does require that the target of the charge must *preach* something. (Literally or figuratively.) They must be a participant in public domain discussions and an advocate for one view over another. The more vocal a participant they are, and the more consistent their message on some contested point, the more purchase a charge of hypocrisy will have. This also suggests something other than a strictly binary approach. The charge of hypocrisy may hold *up to a point*, or *to some degree*.

When I refer to the overuse of the charge of hypocrisy, it brings into play various presuppositions about how often it might reasonably be deployed and the possibility of special cases. These presuppositions draw upon the familiar seminal discussions and usual suspects, such as Michael Walzer and Judith Shklar. Waltzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) stressed the constructive role of hypocrisy charges: heads of state and their key political supporters license wars to defend freedoms, justice, and rights, but then conduct these wars in ways that violate all three. Drawing attention to this gap between what is preached and what is practiced, and doing so through a charge of hypocrisy, surely has value. Shklar, in *Ordinary Vices* (1985),

argued that hypocrisy charges tend to be overused and are linked not so much to a justified exposure of political elites, but to various kinds of vocal and divisive puritanism. Such charges, if used as part of an ongoing ‘anti-hypocrisy,’ may easily underestimate the workaday inconsistencies of being a moral agent. Or they may give undue importance to the regular inconsistencies which emerge when agents engage in debate within the public (especially political) sphere. With Walzer, I want to accept that hypocrisy charges are important currency and that there is something to the idea of special entitlement when it comes to politicians and public figures. The fact that an agent makes public pronouncements or disseminates their opinions may justifiably lead other agents to hold them to standards beyond those normally applied to private agents. (Bourdain, for example, was fair game for at least some kinds of critique, but not the kind that we discussed at this article’s outset.) Overall, however, I have more sympathy with Shklar than Walzer. The finding of hypocrisy everywhere among political opponents is hostile to a rough and ready democratic pragmatism—hostile to (4) as well as to something presupposed in (1) to (3)—and it is liable to be damaging to a mutual recognition and acceptance of ordinary human flaws.

Just as worrying, it can serve to mask genuine instances of uncharacteristic failure to practice what is preached. For example, cases in which some heteronormative conception of Christian family values is used to disadvantage others by agents who turn out to be violating the same standards themselves—and doing so in some gratuitous way. (Perhaps weekly, and at a specially arranged place and time.) What is wrong here may turn out to be primarily or only the hypocrisy, and not necessarily the actions themselves. This case also illustrates why we need the concept of hypocrisy, or a concept which performs the same distinctive work. In such a case, we need some way to make sense of what has gone wrong. Had the agents in question not continued to preach, but merely engaged in the actions, there might have been nothing to criticize. I am tempted to say that, beyond various special domains of high office, and agents

who advance a special public image of moral rectitude, Shklar's picture of hypocrisy as a worryingly overused charge is convincing. However, I will remain officially neutral about it as an overall claim, because it is stronger than anything I need here, and endorse only a more limited version: *her picture of overuse fits well with animal rights advocacy*, and especially with intolerant forms of such advocacy.

An example based directly in animal advocacy may help to illustrate the point. The popular English comedian Ricky Gervais has, for a number of years, publicly condemned fox hunting and various sorts of animal harms. Yet Gervais is not a vegan or vegetarian, but a meat eater. Or, at least, he was not a vegan or vegetarian when he made most of his key public interventions of the past decade. A broadly pragmatic approach towards animal advocacy, along the lines of our tolerant animal advocate, is likely to cautiously welcome such allies, without presenting them as heroes or great moral exemplars. Gervais is not Gandhi, nor does he attempt to draw any such parallel. Perhaps we should not invest too much in them, out of fears of their future downfall, or simply out of reservations about celebrity culture and its many limitations. Even so, we might expect a cautious welcome for prominent public figures who are helping to promote an important message about a number of related issues such as the recreational hunting of species classified as vulnerable, and well on their way to being officially designated as endangered.

Gervais was at the forefront of criticism of hunting in 2015 when a recreational hunter lured a popular tourist attraction lion ('Cecil') out of a protected area in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe in order to kill him. For comparison, we might imagine the reaction if Alex the Lion, in the *Madagascar* film series, had been lured to his death in a similar fashion. However, not all animal rights advocates welcomed input from Gervais. He was repeatedly attacked by *both* pro-hunting bloggers and by a segment of animal rights advocates, and in much the same

terms, for hypocrisy. My aim here is to recognize the abuse, not to disseminate it further, and so at the risk of softening our sense of the problem, I will avoid reproducing details that may easily be found elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The segment of animal rights activists involved mostly identified as ‘abolitionists,’ basing their identity on a problematic analogy between the condition of animals and that of slaves in the antebellum South (Francione 1996). Their criticisms did not center around the problems of celebrity culture, or around the idea that comedians and television personalities might not be the best people to comment. Rather, they were based around the claim that Gervais was a hypocrite because he was not a vegan; the implication being that vegans were the only legitimate voice for animal advocacy in this and other cases. The conception of veganism brought into play in these criticisms also tended to be an extended one, marking out criteria for veganism in terms of adherence to abolitionism, rather than dietary practice alone. Generally, the conception of veganism in the relevant circles gets thickened, but concepts associated with compassion, e.g., *ahimsa*, tend to be thinned out, with their requirements becoming minimal.

My point in drawing upon this case, which is less stark and more mundane than the situation following Anthony Bourdain’s suicide, is certainly not that all those caught up in such things, or all self-identifying abolitionists, are intolerant. That seems unlikely, especially given a question mark over what the abolitionist label means to the many different agents who adopt it. Nor does the mere adherence to a theory, in and of itself, actually change who we are. Agents who are compassionate and tolerant to begin with are unlikely to suddenly lose these character traits simply because they choose to identify in one way or cite one set of arguments rather than another. However, those who levelled the charge online, like those who celebrated the suicide of Anthony Bourdain, do seem for the most part to have identified as abolitionists, rather than identifying with other traditions of animal rights activism. It does seem to be the dominant identity associated with conspicuous incidents of intolerance among advocates. And



this is something to which other abolitionists are sensitive, even objecting publicly to abusive online posts. In the Bourdain case, the most prominent abolitionist, Gary Francione, denounced those who had welcomed his death as, themselves, ‘misanthropic hypocrites,’ because they would not treat dead, non-vegan, relatives in the same way.<sup>3</sup> Abolitionism is a tradition in which ethics is understood in terms of a particularly strict set of universals. Whatever its other merits or faults, it is a tradition that understands veganism as a basic and universal requirement, and one within which the charge of hypocrisy sits ready to hand, rather than being held back for special cases. While it might be possible to picture a tolerant abolitionist, the picture of a tolerant animal advocate set out here is clearly *not* that of an abolitionist, but of a far more pragmatic agent.

In the Gervais case, a tolerant animal advocate of the sort pictured here would also be better placed, given that he was not actually a hypocrite—at least not in the sense set out above, and on the basis of anything that was publicly known. Gervais did not preach one thing but practice another. He did not promote anything like a universalizing ethic of animal rights, committed to viewing all animal life as equal. Even more obviously, he did not criticize the hunting of endangered species while still engaging in hunting. What he preached was a more limited form of animal protection, with special attention to at-risk species. This is a form of protection which he did not then personally violate. By contrast with his stated commitments, the hypocrisy charge presupposes that Gervais *simply must* have been committed to a series of background claims that those who made the charge happen to hold. Put a little more formally, if both of us insist that it is wrong to do something, but I do not share your reasons for thinking it wrong (reasons which also rule out various other things), then I cannot plausibly be charged with hypocrisy simply for failing to apply your reasons to these other things. They are, after all, your reasons and not mine. Under such circumstances, my position might then be wrong. It might even strike you as a case of bad reasoning. But it is not hypocritical. The overused hypocrisy

charge, in cases such as that of Gervais, involves attributing views to others that they simply do not have. Or else, it involves a conveniently idiosyncratic conception of what hypocrisy is, one that is a long distance from our regular understanding of the concept, but which seeks to piggy-back upon the role that it plays.

Accordingly, Gervais may well have been speciesist, in the sense of *unjustifiably* favoring some types of animals over others. But speciesism of this routine sort and hypocrisy, while both flaws, are simply not the same flaw. And, as indicated above, to say that someone is a speciesist, or has speciesist attitudes, simply does not reach far into their character. We are all, to some extent, like that. We may always be like that, to some extent. And this too is very different from saying that ‘we are all hypocrites.’ A move of the latter sort would devalue the currency, depriving us of the special disapproval which is an important part of the normative content of the charge of hypocrisy.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

What this amounts to is a picture of available agency. The tolerant agent described avoids questionable presuppositions of any special entitlement to incivility. Their incivility will be more incidental, and occasional. It is the kind of thing that happens when partisanship goes wrong, rather than something that is routinely structured into it. They will not have to overlook the gravity of animal harms when they break bread with meat eaters or over-estimate their own ability to establish a special distance from such harms. They will sometimes be torn about how to proceed, as agents are from time to time. But they will not live in a world where hypocrisy presses in, on all sides, and demands a response. What we do with such a picture is another matter. It is tempting to say something of the following sort: this approach may have a role to play in our evaluations of political agency, or in theory-building about the kind of animal ethics that is well adapted to our kind of political system. It will, for example, fit easily

within what are known as political turn approaches to animal ethics, i.e., approaches geared to the non-ideal circumstances of actual liberal democracies because they are shaped to what is politically realizable (Milligan 2015b; Cochrane, Garner and Sullivan 2018). A picture of tolerant agency, of the sort set out, may even be used to help with the relevant constraining, such that an ethical theory may be evaluated partly in terms of the kind of agency that it encourages or is consistent with. A theory of animal ethics which is at odds with political agency of the sort exercised by our tolerant agent will have a problem unless it is able to present a different, rival, and plausible picture of its own—one which is just as available, and just as true to our experience of what tolerance is like. This would be convenient for a political turn approach to animal ethics, but perhaps less convenient for an anti-reform or abolitionist approach. However, the convenience here is perhaps a little too convenient, and what I am tempted to say may be something that I should not say. The level of match-up with such a pragmatic ethic might well be simply the result of a certain pragmatism being built into the picture of agency itself. It fits well with a political turn approach because such an approach shapes the picture, as much as our regular ideas of tolerance do. The picturing of the tolerant agent would then be exactly what it seems to be, i.e., the articulation of a viewpoint.

## Notes

1. The hostile responses were widely discussed among vegan groups, and on relevant websites, e.g., the “Bearded Vegans” podcast, Number 137, <https://thecommentist.com/bearded-vegans/bv137/>
2. For abuse of Gervais from the animal rights side, see <http://www.truthaboutfur.com/blog/hypocrite-ricky-gervais/>. For an example of the charge from the pro-hunting side, see [http://huntergreen.org/conservation/the-hypocrisy-of-ricky-gervais-anti-hunting -crusade/](http://huntergreen.org/conservation/the-hypocrisy-of-ricky-gervais-anti-hunting-crusade/)
3. For Francione’s charge that those welcoming Bourdain’s death were themselves hypocrites, see <https://plantbasednews.org/culture/gary-l-francione-blasts-vile-vegan-posts-celebrating-suicide-of-anthony-bourdain/>

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