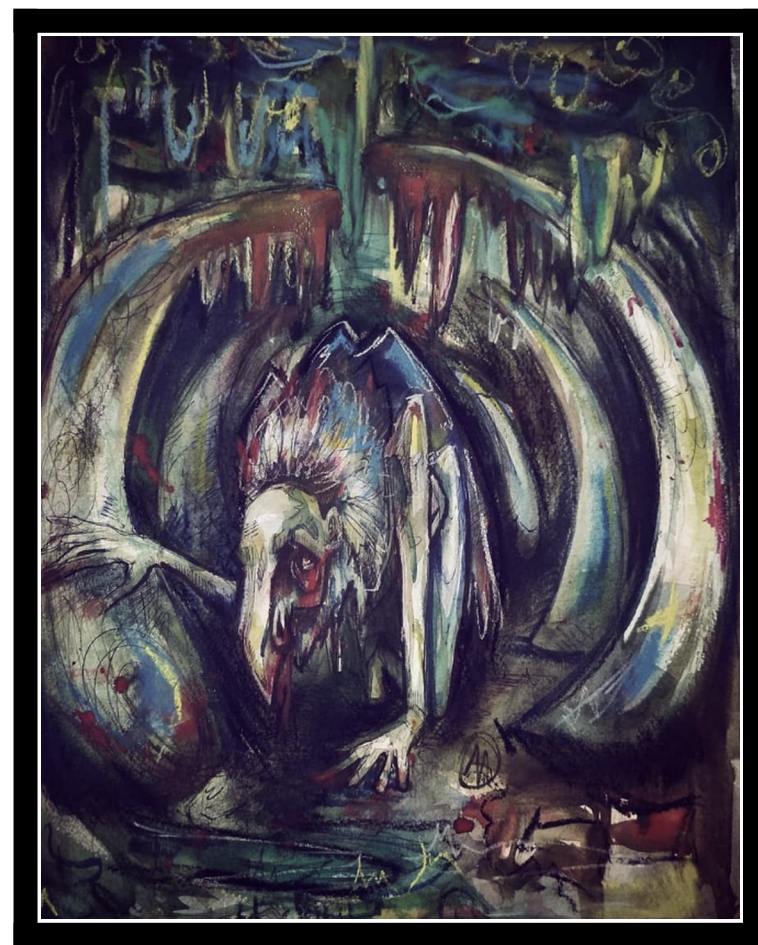




The eating disorder recovery industry is a potent example of how human supremacy perpetuates harm and immense suffering. Have you ever heard anyone say they cannot be vegan because they are in recovery from an eating disorder? It is a common refrain foisted upon us by practitioners and institutions that force their subjects to view individuals with vastly different morphologies as commodities rather than as individuals who an alienating and oppressive global food system has likewise harmed. The recovery narrative itself is a fantasy when it is seemingly impossible to escape a context of imposed power that tries to force us into becoming as small, manageable, and legible as possible by prescribing rigid identities and modalities. Rather than viewing them as neutral sources of food, we should develop compassion for and solidarity with the animals who, like ourselves, are repeatedly abused by profit-driven food systems and psychiatric institutions that only serve the interests of those who hold power.

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DISORDERLY CONDUCT



**Veganism, Eating Disorders,
and Captivity**

Luca Nicos

Maintaining that the “life energy enjoyed by the animals in complete freedom is sufficient to overcome the dangers posed by parasites,” ... in captivity, “this energy is broken, the animals give in to their fate, refuse food, and waste away.” In the end, the gorillas died of a deep sadness, even melancholy, stemming from their tragic realization of their destiny. (Rothfels, 2002, p. 1)

Food Refusal in Captivity

Fraught relationships with food often seem to be, at least to some degree, responses to captivity. At the start of 2016, a great white shark died from self-starvation just three days after being brought to a Japanese aquarium. This is not an isolated incident, as great white sharks often refuse to eat in confinement and frequently die as a result of refusing food in these conditions (Hopkins, 2016). Significant numbers of gorillas and chimpanzees in zoos have been known to regurgitate their food and reingest it (Langlois, 2018). Animals in captivity have also been known to eat items that are definitively not food, and sometimes have even eaten their own bodies, which is a behavior known as autophagy (Hediger, 1950). An isopod, which is usually an un-fussy, bottom-crawling, scavenger, also refused to eat after being brought to an aquarium. The creature, who was named No. 1, refused food for a total of 1,868 days and then finally died from starvation (Krulwich, 2014). Cases of animals in captivity overeating or undereating to a dangerous or even lethal extent, or developing otherwise abnormal eating behaviors, are widespread and well-documented. Individuals kept in artificial conditions with imposed dietary structures understandably develop ways of eating that are unheard of in the wild. Homo Sapien prisoners and political dissidents often go on hunger strikes while many people (and women in particular) confined by patriarchal Eurocentric oppression throughout history have used self-starvation as a language when their words have been suppressed and disregarded.

I do not believe in the pathologizing concept of eating disorders. I use this terminology only as a shorthand way of communicating the construction of people’s struggles with food and embodiment as they are understood at a shared, social level. I instead view these fraught relationships through a lens I refer to as Food System Alienation, which is a concept that suggests the nearly ubiquitous challenges people face around eating are largely a result of forced, systemic disconnection from their ecosystems, social systems, sources of nourishment, and their own bodies. I theorize that disconnection/alienation and a lack of autonomy are the core drivers of what we know as eating disorders.

be vegan because it involves restricting food in a way that would trigger their eating disorder, but I would like to move away from this narrative as well. Veganism does not involve restricting food but is rather about reconceptualizing what we consider to be food. It involves a paradigm shift under which we reconstruct animals not as commodities or food items, but rather as persons who, similarly to ourselves, have been harmed by the weaponization of existing food systems at the hands of State and corporate power structures. Combating food system alienation requires us to be intimately connected with our sources of nourishment and necessitates a recognition that our species is not the only one being fucked over by existing systems of power that demand violence and subjugation as central parts of enforcing normative consumption.

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What is rarely if ever discussed is the fact that so-called “eating disorders” are not a strictly human phenomenon. As I described at the beginning of this essay, individuals across species will often refuse food or develop other complicated relationships with food when deprived of their freedom and placed into captivity. Rather than a disorder it seems that food restriction is an unsurprising and possibly even inevitable response to existing in a condition in which self-determination seems unattainable. The eating disorder recovery world leaves this reality out of its narrative and constructs animal bodies as commodities rather than acknowledging other animals as unique individuals who, like ourselves, have been deeply harmed by oppressive and violent food systems that are predicated upon the exploitation and commodification of forced participants. Recognizing that the bodily liberation of other species is inherently connected to our own should lead us to recognize that not only is veganism a logical philosophy to adopt when fighting urges to manipulate food as a means to shrink, restrict, and numb out, but it can also play a key role in establishing a logically consistent ethic of body liberation that avoids playing into species-based oppression.

To some degree or another, we are all held captive by Capitalist, neoliberal food systems. Certain species such as cows, chickens, sheep, and fish are at the butt end of the hierarchy within food systems. Within our societies, individuals exist on spectra from person to property as well as from property owner to propertyless, and the more one is considered to be property or propertyless the less they are valued in most contemporary anthropocentric societies. Arbitrary morphological differences have long been used to justify ascribing greater or lesser worth to different individuals. A commitment to body liberation is incomplete and deeply alienated if it doesn't take species-based oppression into consideration. The same food systems that keep our minds and bodies imprisoned through the psychological warfare of diet culture try to tell us that our own food freedom is predicated upon the confinement, exploitation, and abuse of other animals. I do not believe that true body liberation is attainable without total insubordination against human supremacy and without deconstructing the arbitrary morphological differences that are used to justify the violent domination of those who are the most confined, oppressed, and silenced by the same systems of power that keep us sick, stuck, and obsessed.

Using veganism as an excuse to restrict food is a fucked up thing to do and it causes active harm to other animals by perpetuating the conflation of veganism and eating disorders. Instead, we should use veganism as a catalyst for getting stronger and healthier, and acting according to the world we want to live in. I know I don't want to live in a world where people are trapped and feel the need to shut down, numb out, and disappear, or one in which certain species are needlessly commodified, confined, and exploited. Many people say they cannot

The history of psychiatry reveals that Homo Sapiens are not the only animals that this field has sought to control and medicate without seeking to disrupt the underlying causes of our suffering. Many of the most popular psychopharmaceuticals were originally developed for nonhuman animals (Braitman, 2014). Prozac for pets and other psychiatric medications for captive animals now comprise a massive, multi-billion dollar industry. Homo Sapiens are now treating other animal species for conditions that our own species is largely responsible for causing. It is difficult to imagine that anyone who is truly free would have a desire to torture themselves to the point of emaciation or death.

The eating disorder recovery industry is a potent example of how human supremacy perpetuates harm and immense suffering. Have you ever heard anyone say they cannot be vegan because they are in recovery from an eating disorder? It is a common refrain foisted upon us by practitioners and institutions that force their subjects to view individuals with vastly different morphologies as commodities rather than as individuals who an alienating and oppressive global food system has likewise harmed. The recovery narrative itself is a fantasy when it is seemingly impossible to escape a context of imposed power that tries to force us into becoming as small, manageable, and legible as possible by prescribing rigid identities and modalities. Rather than viewing them as neutral sources of food, we should develop compassion for and solidarity with the animals who, like ourselves, are repeatedly abused by profit-driven food systems and psychiatric institutions that only serve the interests of those who hold power.

I was in inpatient and residential eating disorder treatment a total of five times over the course of about a decade. During almost all of these periods I was required to consume the bodies and secretions of individuals whom I had no desire to harm. To do so, I needed to dissociate from what I was eating and had to develop severe cognitive dissonance as a means to graduate from these treatment programs. I was even forced to sign a contract saying that if I tried to become vegan again I would immediately be placed back into inpatient eating disorder treatment. My refusal to view animals as food was viewed as a pathology. It was only after I was able to be vegan on my own terms that I was able to connect meaningfully with food and understand that my relationship with food and my body was a form of communicating my values and beliefs. I did not want to perpetuate the false notion in the eating disorder recovery world that veganism is inherently eating disordered, and my commitment to animal liberation surpassed my desire to enact a slow form of suicide through food restriction.

Systems of power rely on forced disconnection and the commodification or exploitation of bodies based on arbitrary differences as a means of enforcing subjugation and obedience. I realized that the same institutions forcing me to participate in industries I found violent and abhorrent did not care about my values or well-being, but rather used fear and intimidation to enforce conformity and participation in the consumer-oriented and heavily dissociative neoliberal diet.

Eating disorder recovery programs claim that these compulsions are about control, and seem to be oriented towards desensitizing their subjects to no longer having control over their own lives and on becoming productive members of society. I disagree with the control narrative and rather suggest that our struggles with food and embodiment are about autonomy. Control is about having the power to influence or regulate the behavior or emotions of oneself or others. Autonomy in this context is more specifically a state in which one is able to make decisions for themselves. The control narrative is often weaponized against patients in the eating disorder recovery system to suggest that they should become accustomed to not having any control and takes away their autonomy as an integral part of the treatment process. My alternate autonomy narrative proposes that every individual should have autonomy, that it is a key aspect of happiness and self-actualization, and it is a lack of autonomy that leads people to take extreme measures, such as self-starvation, to feel as though they are acting in a self-led way. I believe that part of the reason for the extremely high relapse rates amongst those who seek autonomy through their relationship with food and embodiment is the fact that the treatment process typically focuses on obedience under the guise of body positivity rather than on body liberation.

The insistence on the consumption of animals and their byproducts within the eating disorder recovery world is consistent with this system's disregard for bodily autonomy, with regard to both our own species and others. These processes are about imposing norms and creating productive citizens while forcibly normalizing existing power structures. The highly renowned Johns Hopkins Eating Disorders Program constructs eating disorders as behavioral issues and has a strict focus on altering the behaviors of their clients (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2015). When I was a patient in their program, they had no individual or group therapy and based their programming and blanket protocols on statistics rather than on individual narratives and experiences. They also mandated the Standard American Diet and would not let any of their patients be vegan or vegetarian. They pathologized people's aversions to animal suffering by claiming that a refusal to eat meat, dairy, or eggs was an excuse to restrict and inherently disordered.

The head of the program, Dr. Angela Guarda, a highly respected eating disorder researcher and practitioner, wrote an article about how people with eating disorders "perceive" that they are being coerced into treatment due to poor insight and judgment (Guarda et al., 2007). The article essentially justifies the use of coercion as a way to get people into treatment programs. This is an example of what I mean when I say that eating disorder treatment programs often entail a disregard for autonomy. Very few inpatient and residential treatment programs across the so-called United States of America allow their patients to be vegan or even vegetarian. Countless practitioners claim that veganism is typically a way of masking an eating disorder such as anorexia or orthorexia. Some people might use veganism as a way to restrict food, but the reality is far more complicated than the recovery world would suggest.

There is an interesting episode of the Recovery Talk Podcast about veganism, which perpetuates the idea that people should not be vegan in eating disorder recovery, but simultaneously has a somewhat more nuanced proposition regarding the relationship between veganism and eating disorders (Lee, 2022). The host of the podcast, Amalie Lee, suggests that one of the reasons why a disproportionately high number of people with eating disorders are vegan is because the population that holds these diagnoses tend to seek moral perfection. According to Lee's perspective, such people should try to let go of their moral rigidity. While I don't think people should agonize over every choice they make, I disagree with her stance in part because I do not view animals as food. I also disagree with her perspective because it is consistent with the highly disconnected framework of the eating disorder world that claims there are "no bad foods" even though our food systems are one of the biggest driving factors decimating global ecosystems and driving countless social problems. Attempting to apply a neutralizing framework to a system that is so devastating and destructive is delusional at best.

Foucault wrote about the development of monsters in literature as symbolic of abnormal sexual and alimentary appetites (Taylor, 2012). In *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault writes about a depressed man who spends his nights reading and who will not consume animal-based foods. His refusal to consume animal-based foods was considered a key component of his pathology and part of the man's prescribed treatment involved a diet full of meat, dairy, and eggs. Foucault proposed that since the French Revolution, controlling or normalizing people's behaviors pertaining to sex and food has been a core target of disciplinary power. Human supremacy and the normalization of the commodification of animals' bodies are key components of maintaining existing hierarchies within social power structures.