

Ethical veganism:

What it is and why it matters for social justice

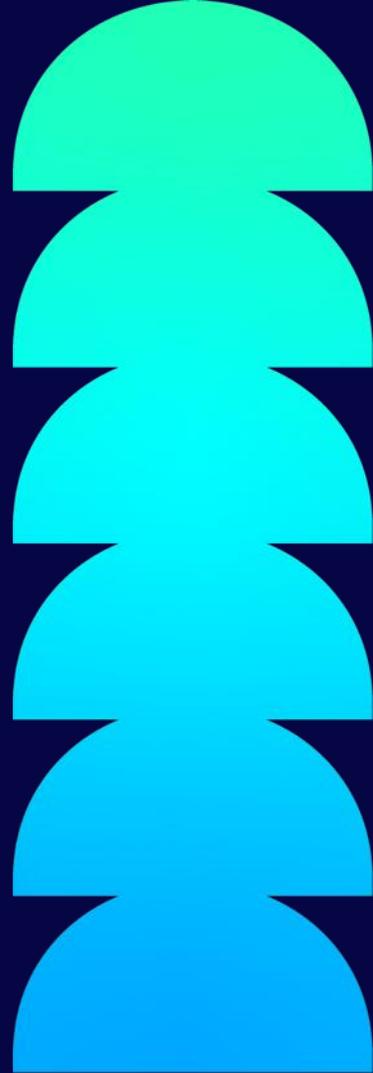
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Outline of this evening's talk

1. My vegan biography
2. What is (ethical) veganism?
3. What is social justice?
4. Social justice for (ethical) vegans
5. Speciesism: social injustice for other animals
6. Veganism and trans-species social justice

My vegan biography

- ✓ 1993/4: Became vegetarian
- ✓ 1995: Started studying (falling in love with!) sociology
- ✓ 2000: Vegan experiment ('Veganboy')
- ✓ 2000–2004 [PhD in sociology](#)
- ✓ 2005: Vegan for life (4th March, my 'vegan birthday')
- ✓ 2005: Identity flips over course of several weeks: vegan first, sociologist second
- ✓ 2006: First vegan academic presentations ('vegatopia')
- ✓ 2007: [First vegan sociology publication](#)
- ✓ 2008–2012: [Vegan Society](#) trustee: 2008–2012
- ✓ 2014: [Our Children and Other Animals](#) with Kate Stewart, published
- ✓ 2026: [Emerald Studies in Vegan Sociology](#) book series announced (co-editor with Kate)

What is (ethical) veganism?



**Video from Open Learn 'veganism' interactive: one of a pair
voiced by Benjamin Zephaniah.**

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k65EJLPY1UM>

What is (ethical) veganism?

Definitions

- › ‘Veganism may ... be defined as “the principle of the emancipation of the animals from exploitation by man’ (Cross, 1949, cited in Cole, 2014)
- › ‘Veganism is the doctrine that man should live without exploiting animals’ (The Vegan Society, 11th November 1950, cited in Cole, 2014)
- › “Veganism is a **philosophy and way of living** which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives **for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment**. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.” (The Vegan Society, 2026).

Ethical veganism: What the law says

Ethical veganism is philosophical belief, tribunal rules

"Religion or belief" is one of nine "protected characteristics" covered by the Equality Act 2010.

The judge Robin Postle ruled that ethical veganism qualifies as a philosophical belief under the Equality Act 2010 by satisfying several tests – including that it is worthy of respect in a democratic society, not incompatible with human dignity and not conflicting with the fundamental rights of others.

At the tribunal in Norwich on Friday, the judge said in his ruling that ethical veganism was "important" and "worthy" of respect in a democratic society.

He said: "I am satisfied overwhelmingly that ethical veganism does constitute a philosophical belief."

Reference



BBC (2020) 'Ethical veganism is philosophical belief, tribunal rules' [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50981359> (Accessed: 10 January 2026).

Ethical veganism: What the law says

The Public Sector Equality Duty

The Equality Act 2010 imposes a Public Sector Equality Duty on public bodies. This duty requires prisons to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Reference

Vegan Society, The (2022) 'Guide for vegan prisoners' [Online]. Available at: https://www.vegansociety.com/sites/default/files/uploads/downloads/C4E_Prison_12pp%20Booklet_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 10 January 2026).

What is social justice?

Access to social *justice* is inhibited by social *harms*

OU definition of social justice (DD212)

This term refers to the equality of things such as social, economic and political rights. Social justice is seen to be done when every citizen has equal access to these.

OU definition of social harm (DD212)

A concept used to show how various social problems (including but not limited to crime) can be understood to be shaped and influenced by a broader social context and the way in which we organise society.

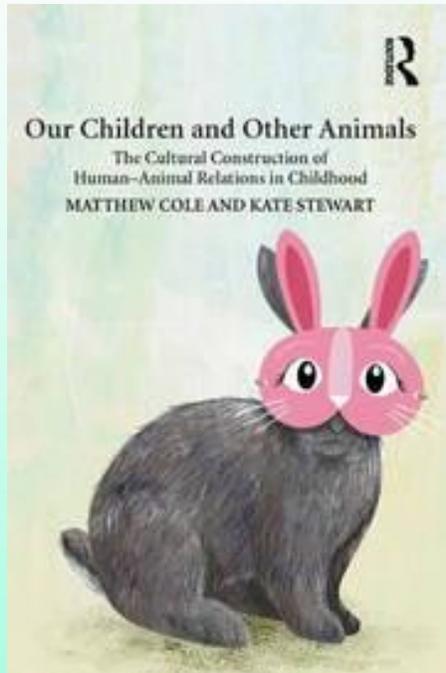
Social justice for (ethical) vegans

Access to social *justice* is inhibited by social *harms*

1. Ethical vegans theoretically protected from discrimination by The Equality Act
2. Vegans still subject to harmful stereotypes: [Vegaphobia](#)
3. Do social structures harm vegans because they are vegans?
'The menu of food made available to people in prison for both lunch and evening meal shall include as a minimum five options: one meat option, **one vegan option**, one vegetarian option, one halal option and one other option'
([MoJ Food In Prisons Policy Framework](#))
4. Please be kind (including to vegans 😊)

Speciesism: social injustice for other animals

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/veganism>

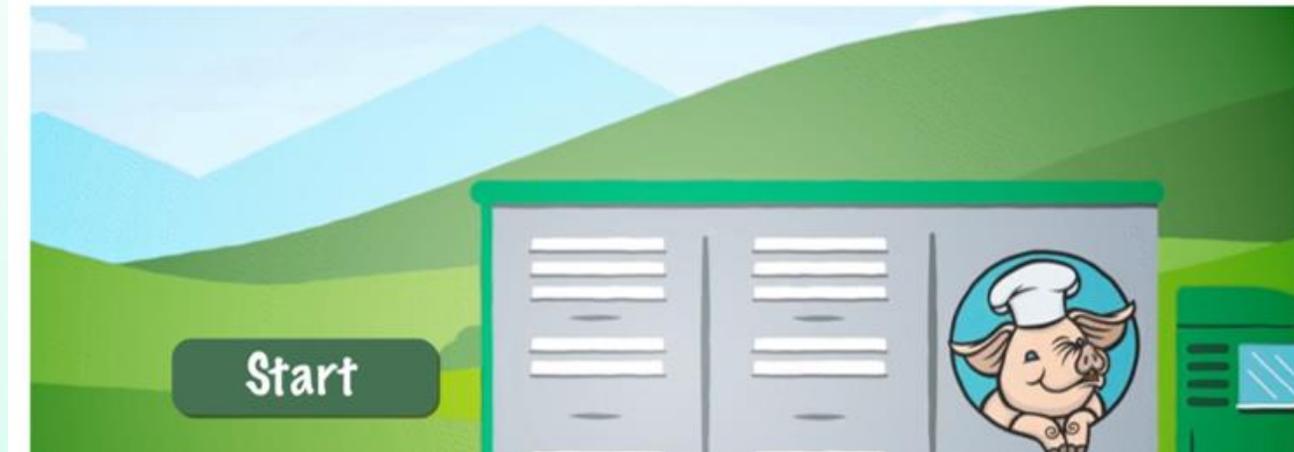


Veganism interactive

Updated Monday, 21st November 2022

Veganism has been big news in recent years, and that trend looks set to continue. Explore the rise of veganism in this interactive, you will learn about how veganism relates to speciesism, the historical background to the vegan movement, and more.

Find out more about The Open University's [Social Sciences qualifications](#).

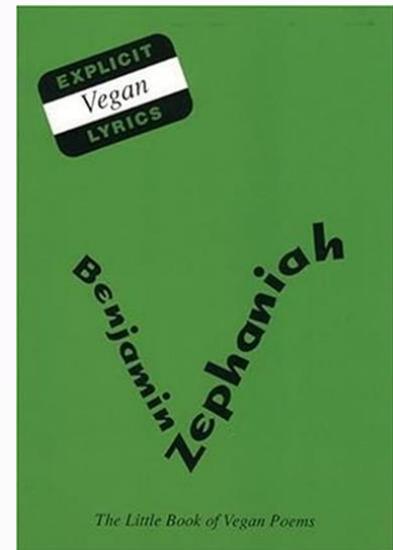


Reviews:

- ✓ 'A helpful interactive which explains and explores veganism and speciesism.'
- ✓ 'Would really like to see some more content in the future. A well balanced take on veganism.'
- ✓ 'BRILLIANT!'

Video from Open Learn 'veganism' interactive: one of a pair
voiced by Benjamin Zephaniah.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sji8mYXkUEM>



Speciesism: social injustice for other animals

Sanctuary Tales Open Learn mini-documentary



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Sanctuary Tales: Fighting Speciesism One Animal at a Time

Updated Friday, 29 March 2024

In this film about a Norfolk animal sanctuary, we meet some of the animals who live there and the people who care for them.

[Find out more about The Open University's Social Sciences qualifications.](#)

In this film, we reflect on some of the reasons why animal sanctuaries are needed. Other animals are often victims of neglect or harm, due to how humans perceive and use them, such as for food and clothing. Sanctuaries such as Hillside provide us with a unique insight into how animals can survive these difficult circumstances, and go on to live fulfilling lives, protected from further harm. Let's watch and reflect on how these inspiring individual stories can help us imagine a less harmful future for all other animals.

Sanctuary Tales: Fighting Speciesism One Animal... Copy link

Sanctuary Tales: Fighting Speciesism

Author

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Matthew joined The Open University as an Associate Lecturer in 2009, and was appointed a Lecturer In Criminology in 2019.

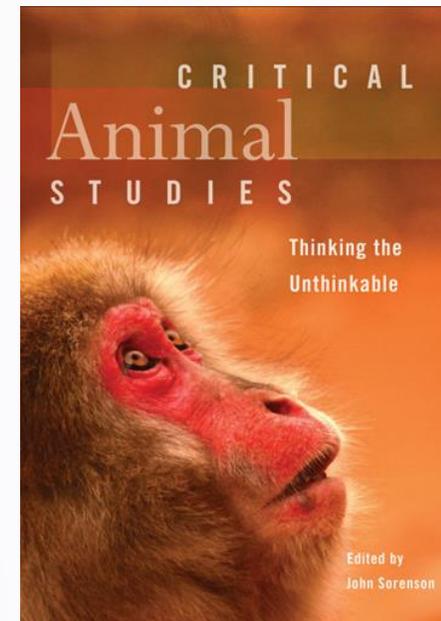
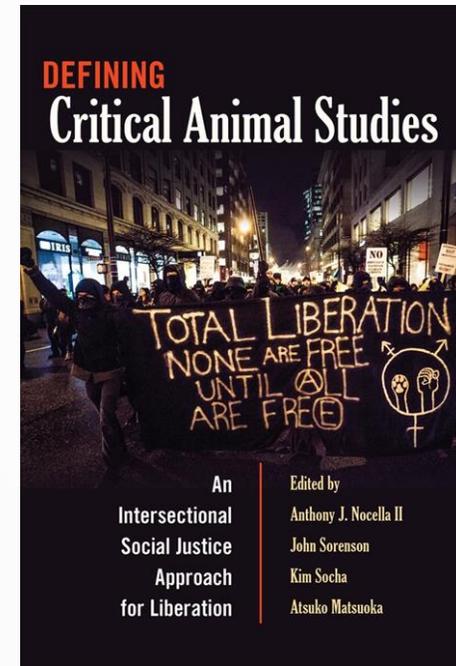
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Veganism and trans-species social justice

- ✧ Anti-speciesist
 - ✧ centres nonhuman animals' agency (not 'voiceless' but silenced)
 - ✧ humans *are animals*
- ✧ Veganism is linked to food justice
 - ✧ being able to live as a vegan
- ✧ Advocates for trans-species social justice
 - ✧ Trans-species social justice **expands** anthropocentric definitions to include: 'consideration of interests of **all animals (including humans)** in order to achieve institutional conditions free from oppression and domination' (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2018, p. 15).
- ✧ The goal is **total liberation** (Nocella et al., 2014)
 - ✧ None are free until all are free



Veganism and trans-species social justice

- Speciesism is interconnected with other 'isms'

Charles Victor
Alexander Peel
1869-1931

Big-game hunter,
photographer
and writer



When Charles Peel left school he went on a world tour. This was the start of his passion for big-game hunting.

Peel went hunting in Kenya, Uganda, Australia, America, China, India, Scotland and the Arctic. He donated many of his mounted specimens to this museum, including the elephant and giraffe which are on display. He also recorded his adventures in photographs and popular books.

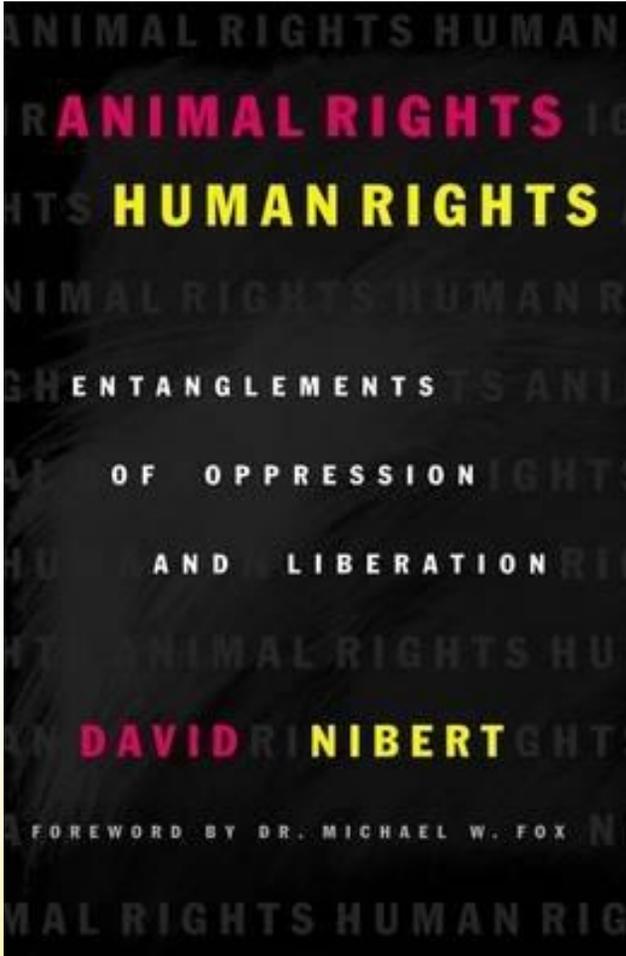
After a successful hunting trip through the bamboo forests of Kenya, he wrote proudly, "That night I had roasted elephant's heart for my Christmas dinner."

C. V. A. Peel and some of his trophies.

David Nibert

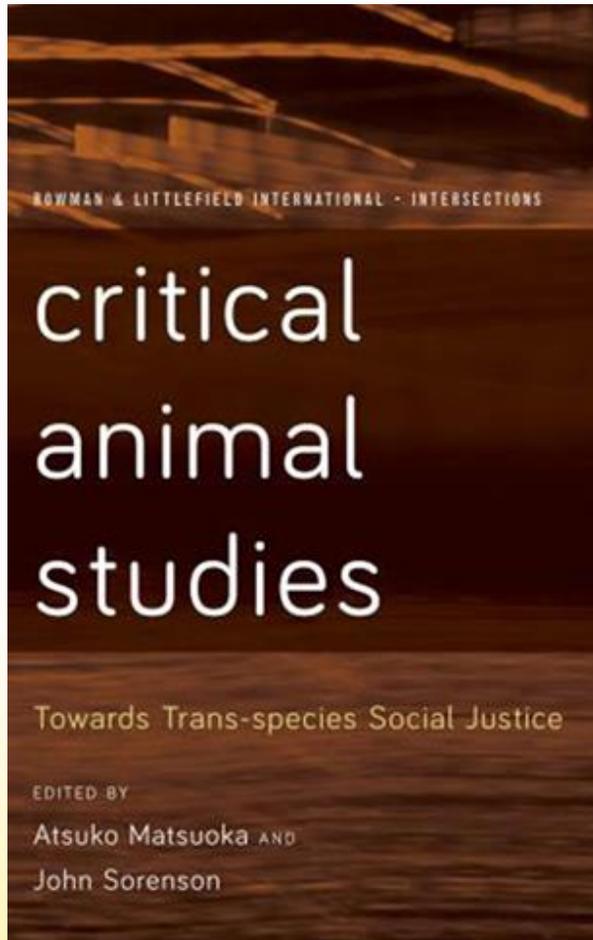
Animal Rights / Human Rights (2002)

- 🐮 Documents the imbrication of colonialism, racism, speciesism, Indigenous genocide, capitalism and the formation of the Animal-Industrial Complex (AIC)
- 🐮 Ongoing entangled oppression of nonhuman animals and racialised Others
 - 🐮 for example, low-waged migrant labourers working in slaughterhouses in unsafe conditions



Margaret Robinson

'The Roots of My Indigenous Veganism' (2018)



- ❦ Mi'kmaw woman, from *Eskike 'wakik* (Nova Scotia)
- ❦ Colonial animalising 'savage' discourses ('ignoble' or 'noble')
- ❦ Patriarchal coding of hunting/veganism as effeminacy
- ❦ Colonial 'freezing' of Indigenous cultures in the past
- ❦ Contests 'projecting of White imperialism onto vegans' (2018, p.324) that appropriates 'noble savage' excuse for 'meat'-eating
- ❦ Indigenous colonial economic oppression as barrier to Indigenous veganism
- ❦ Indigenous veganism rooted in Mi'kmaq stories of relating to nonhuman animals as persons
- ❦ 'At stake in the creation of an Indigenous veganism is the authority of Indigenous people to determine cultural authenticity for ourselves' (2018, p. 331)

References and further reading

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Thank you