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Climate Change and Justice

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Critical Reflection: PETA's Vision of Justice

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, is an international animals rights non-profit organization. PETA's website explains that its organization and members' primary goal is to oppose speciesism, which is a human supremacist "oppressive belief system in which those with power draw boundaries to justify using or excluding their fellow beings who are less powerful." (PETA Speciesism) PETA has been based in Norfolk Virginia since 1980 and is somewhat notorious for its extreme campaigns and stunts, including live public demonstrations of animal testing on humans. Because PETA's primary focus is on animal rights, much of its activism centers around the meat and fashion industry. Although climate change is not at the core of their argument against consuming animal-based products and food, PETA almost always addresses climate concerns as one of the reasons to make a complete shift away from consuming animal-based products. PETA promotes veganism as an appealing lifestyle choice to make for the sake of the human, animal, and earth's wellbeing, adding that "eating vegan foods rather than animal-based ones is the best way to reduce your carbon footprint." (Fight the Climate Crisis)

PETA frames veganism as a mitigative climate strategy that will drastically reduce the amount of resource depletion and greenhouse gas emissions. Realistically, veganism is both a mitigative and adaptive strategy since any kind of mass food production, which our world relies on, still has environmental consequences including transportation pollution, deforestation for land, pesticide usage, and more. PETA's focus on a shift away from using animals as food and fashion sources is effective for mitigating climate change partly because livestock uses and pollutes water at a much larger proportion than humans, but most importantly because of the greenhouse gas emissions that animals contribute to. Methane, a gas that livestock such as cows produces, is 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide at retaining heat in the atmosphere. Although methane stays in the atmosphere for a shorter time of 9 years, compared to that of carbon dioxide at 20 to 200 years, it is over 80 times as warming as carbon dioxide is, and is thus particularly problematic now as the world scrambles to keep rising global temperatures within 1.5 degrees celsius.

Unlike typical climate change activist groups that fight climate change mainly for human beings, PETA's fight for the environment focuses on animals rights in the meat, entertainment, fashion, and other industries. As evident through their mission statement and hopes of giving animals more rights, PETA values procedural justice. PETA brings justice to animals and human beings of the present and future generations. For animals, PETA works tirelessly to end animal cruelty across many industries, and part of its efforts in mitigating climate change go into exposing the animal cruelty that occurs in livestock in general. For milk and egg farms, they reveal the cruel and inhumane ways that female cows are repeatedly artificially impregnated to constantly produce milk, and how male chickens (who

do not lay eggs), are slaughtered to minimize the cost of keeping unproductive chicken alive. By exposing the profit-centered, vicious treatment of these animals, PETA discourages its audience from consuming products that necessitate cruelty. Because livestock contributes to just under 20% of all greenhouse gases that are released into the atmosphere, decreasing the number of animals used for human consumption is incredibly effective in preventing global warming. By slowly eliminating animal-consumption industries, PETA also brings justice to future generations of animals that could ideally live outside of the purpose of serving humans. PETA's push towards universal veganism benefits future generations of humans just as well as they do for animals. By reducing current animal consumption, and thus reducing current emissions that come from livestock, PETA recognizes the delayed symptoms of climate change and lowers the severity of future climate catastrophes.

PETA's strength as an organization that fights climate change is that it offers a new perspective on a reason to go vegan. When the primary concern of veganism is framed around averting a climate crisis, it becomes difficult for people to empathize with the severity of the problem. Particularly for the case of people from developed countries who live consumption-heavy lifestyles without experiencing the worst effects of climate change, going vegan does not seem like a consequential act that is worth the sacrifice of giving up meat. Despite the fact that the climate crisis is a global issue that holds dire consequences, regardless of socioeconomic status in the future, many people are simply unable to comprehend the contribution that an individual could make to such a vast problem. When PETA depicts veganism as a moral act, most humans reassess their ethical values as they recognize that the animals suffer in the same way that human beings are also capable of.

Seeing and understanding the cruelty that animals undergo for the sake of human consumption creates a much more concrete and visible way to save both animals and the earth, which makes veganism more compelling.

In order to more effectively spread their message on the legitimate climate and ethical implications of veganism, PETA must become a more reliable source of information and activism. Although PETA's campaigns usually attract public attention and thus raise awareness on topics such as the meat industry and the climate consequences, the activists often cause inexcusable disruptions to others such as attacking people who disagree. Because many of their demonstrations and actions are so radical in the eyes of people who are not as passionate about animal rights, PETA has created a large population of people who automatically dismiss the organization because of the extremism that people associate with PETA. By appropriately addressing counterarguments and focusing on creating campaigns that are more readily accepted by the public, PETA could patch the divide that they created for themselves that limits their circle of influence. (Media Fact Check) Although it is incredibly difficult for activism of any kind to reach all audiences, especially when the issues have political implications, PETA must establish itself as a more trustworthy source.

Sources

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