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ENG 110-G
4/17/19

What kind of person are you?

One doesn't typically think too in depth about what they want to eat for dinner. The typical process involves using their emotions to determine what food they are in the mood for, with little regard for the emotions of what they eat. David Foster Wallace examined this in his piece, "Consider The Lobster" where he addresses the topic of pain and suffering in the way lobsters are prepared, but also relates this to the animal kingdom in general. Lobsters are the only species humans buy and kill in their home and the typical method of doing so by boiling them alive. Wallace questions the morality of human beings in regards to eating habits and overall lifestyle and relationship with animals. Similar questions concerning morality and perspective arise in the articles "Animals Like Us" by Hal Herzog, and "Against Meat" by Jonathan Safran Foer. Herzog discusses the power of an individual's perspective and their ability to lie to themselves to justify their actions. Foer brings his life experience to light to discuss the complex moral system and how an individual's action may not match what they say or think. The ideas of morality and perspective brought up in Herzog's and Foer's piece help individuals formulate an answer to Wallace's essential question of whether or not it is morally okay for humans to boil lobsters alive, or kill animals in general for pleasure?

There are three answers to Wallace's question, one being justifying why it is okay to eat meat, option two being justifying cutting meat out of your diet, or option three not make a clear decision and continue to eat meat without thinking about the issue or having a justification as to why. Herzog uses the term created by philosopher Strachan Donnelley troubled middle to

describe the grey area, where one has not taken a clear stance, or their actions do not represent the view they believe. While these paths may be clear cut for a few individuals, others and struggle to develop opinions on the matter. The troubled middle, while morally questionable and confusing can not be justified due to the disconnect between individual thought and their actions, making people in the trouble middle ignorant and liars.

The moral complexity of this arises from the lack of knowledge on the subject of pain and suffering of not just lobsters, but all animals. There are two main criteria used to determine whether or not a living creature has the capacity to suffer, since humans can not relate their pain and suffering into animal terms. The first criteria is do the subjects have the “neurological hardware required for pain-experience”(Wallace 506). In humans the experience of pain comes from the cerebral cortex, but lobsters do not have this area because their nervous system is much simpler, similar to one of a grasshopper. However Wallace states, “pain reception is known to be a much older and more primitive system...the cerebral cortex is involved in what’s variously suffering, distress, or the emotional experience of pain.”(Wallace 504). Pain is still recognized, but the emotional aspect may not be completely there for the lobsters. However, a lobster’s reaction to being dropped in boiling water is, “The lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water”(Wallace 506), meeting criteria two which is animals demonstrating behaviors that humans associate with pain. While this criteria is put in place individuals have a different perspective on what behaviors we can associate with pain. We only can experience human pain and the emotions associated with humans, different species of animals have varying levels of neurological complexity and react to pain in many different ways. When judging whether a lobster or another creature is in pain, our own

perception of pain and our perspective of the animal determines whether it meets the criteria set by us. The discretion around perspective is highlighted by Hal Herzog.

In the article, “Animals Like Us” by Hal Herzog, perspective is uniquely altered by the individual’s mind to help justify their actions rather than facing the truth in front of them. Judith Black knew killing animals was wrong and became a vegetarian, or called herself a vegetarian. In Judith’s mind she could eat fish and still be a vegetarian. She believed there was a moral difference between eating chicken for example and eating salmon, but why is the life of one animal considered more than the life of another? Perspective and perception in Judith’s mind of animals, allow her to convince herself that one is more valuable than the other, but her decision changed once becoming married. Herzog states that ex-vegetarians, like Judith, outweigh vegetarians in the United states “by a ratio of three to one.”(Herzog 2). Judith was struggling in the troubled middle, trying to keep a good character and help herself sleep at night. Her love for seafood overpowered her conscience, causing Judith to feed into the lies she told herself. Once confronted though, Judith could no longer deny that what she has believed for fifteen years was false. The trouble middled area is for those who find themselves on the wrong side of the moral compass, but does this make you a liar?

In his article, “Against Meat”, Foer has complex morals giving him perplexing eating habits and dissociating his actions and beliefs. Foer like many other Americans was an on and off vegetarian for most of his life, and his wife had a similar history with food and he describes it as, “there were things she believed while lying in bed at night, and there were choices made at the breakfast table the next morning”(Foer 4). While him and wife may believe one thing, their actions do not necessarily match their beliefs, giving their morals little weight behind them. If

there is an issue you morally believe is wrong and your actions condone it, does that make you a man of your word? Foer later describes it as, “we became engaged and vegetarian...But only whenever we felt like it”(Foer 4). Foer and his wife spend a good portion of their lives in the troubled middle where they dip a toe into each pool of water, “we were vegetarians who from time to time ate meat”(Foer 4). Their whole perspective is one big oxymoron.

Herzog states, “ the trouble middle makes perfect sense because moral quagmires are inevitable in a species with a huge brain and a big heart”(Herzog 7), and while understanding his perspective, I continue to disagree. Since humans are so advanced we have the ability to feel remorse and the science to better understand those we share the world with, but have no way to communicate with. This knowledge is not available for other predator species, so we are the only species who struggle with knowing what happens and being able to express our emotions about it. Our access to knowledge is what created the troubled middle, we could easily be unaware of everything going on and never have to worry, but the burden of the things we do for something tasty is difficult to overcome. People can remain in the troubled middle, but I pose the same questions as David Foster Wallace did, “what ethical convictions have you worked out that permit you not just eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands...what makes it feel truly okay inside, to just dismiss the whole thing out of hand?(Wallace 510). While the trouble middle seems like ideal territory to avoid the problem, an individual can not knowingly go against their morals without a fabricated justification to help them sleep at night. Judith Black had to convince herself that fish were not animals in order to keep her “vegetarian” status. If she didn’t call herself a vegetarian she would have felt the guilt of killing animals, or if she was actually a vegetarian she would find herself wanting salmon or swordfish. Her conscience could rest

because her brain offered her a way out with the small lie she had to tell herself. This altered perspective causes controversy between what one believes and how one acts based on it.

To keep a clean conscience Americans are forced to feed themselves lies at the dinner table to justify the food they eat on a daily basis. Over generations people have become less and less involved in the process of making their own food that when they're forced to acknowledge what must be done to eat. Foer recognized this as a child when his babysitter had to explain to him the chicken he was eating was actually chicken. While this is a blatant example, Wallace implores this too when stating, "mammals seem to require euphemisms like 'beef' and 'pork' that help us separate the meat we eat from the living creature the meat once was"(Wallace 505). Humans do not associate the meat we eat to the animals it once was, because they can not take on the burden of the lives they are taking. The use of these terms and Foer's life experience are a perfect example as to why society today is ignorant to what is going on outside of their own bubble.

The saying ignorance is bliss never made much sense to me until writing this. You do not think about all of the repercussions your actions have, and everyone regardless is guilty of this. Whether it be with their own diet and cheating on what they believe is "right" or "healthy", or staying inside your American bubble and not looking at what is going in the world around us. Everyone wants it to get better, but no one is willing to put the effort in to change it. Humans are the only species who can, and have, greatly altered the world we share with billions of other people and millions of other species. The trouble middleers are all of us in some way or another and the end of life is inevitable, so would you rather die thinking you were a good person or knowing it.

Works Cited

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