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Consider the Animal: Perspective, Purpose, and the Troubled Middle

Upon arriving at the annual Gagnon-family reunion cookout, I consider the many options awaiting my consumption. A kitchen littered with entrées; meals as far as the eye can see. Franco-Canadian heritage dishes such as tourtière, cretons, a wide array of smoked meats, chômeur, and of course, poutine. Each carbohydrate-packed meal emanating with a rich, vivid scent, causing my stomach to grumble and my mouth to water excessively. I reach for the maple smoked bacon with gleaming eyes and eagerness.

“Absolutely not, Ethan. You know the rules.”

“But mom, it smells so good. Why not?”

“We don’t eat animals. Period.”

This was the story of my life until I turned 13. My parents raised me as a vegan, alongside their own dietary restrictions. My father grew up on a farm witnessing the perils of beautiful bovine creatures and innocent avian species being bred for one purpose: slaughter. Having been turned off by this process, he swore himself to a lifestyle of veganism in hopes to cleanse his past and repent for what his father had forced upon him. I have mixed feelings about the subject. As I’ve grown, experimented, and experienced, I can attest to the rampant and common cruelty animals are subjected to. However, I realize there is a connection between people and their culture in terms of food. For example, the annual Maine Lobster Festival brings in over 100,000 lobster lovers, connoisseurs, and families alike. David Foster Wallace describes this event and the critical morals and ethics surrounding it in *Consider the Lobster*. Jonathan Foer’s *Against Meat*

talks about the complexities of “right” and “wrong” with considerations of eating meat. *Animals Like Us* by Hal Herzog and NPR podcast “A Mortician Talks Openly About Death, And Wants You To, Too” delves into the topic of life, especially in animals, and the balance between the right time for death, morality, and acceptability of such. These are a taste of the topics I have found useful in finding common ground between eating meat and the lack thereof. Humans have always been conscientious about obtaining nutrition since our humble hunter-gatherer beginnings. These traditions have carried on far-and-wide, and respectfully so. Should we, non-animal eaters, consider those who choose to consume meat to the same degree we expect them to consider us? I think so.

Being considerate and aware of the actions you choose are different and sometimes independent of performing such actions. In the text *Against Meat*, the author Jonathan Foer explains his position on eating meat and his awareness of the fallacies behind it. “There was a gnawing (if only occasional and short-lived) dread that [his wife] was participating in something deeply wrong, and there was the acceptance of complexity and fallibility. Like me, she had intuitions that were very strong, but apparently not strong enough” (4). Foer has an awareness of the complexities surrounding meat consumption; however, he sparingly ate meat anyway. He goes on to talk about his belief that animal factory farms—that mass-produce meat products for “99% of US supermarkets” (6). —are a detrimental aspect to our society and environment. Yet, he chooses to consume meat because “it tastes good.” Foer and his wife, in the beginning of their marriage before raising their children, were cognizant of their choices to eat meat and the issues surrounding such, yet they continued to their own satisfaction. Their consideration for the matter was present, but the actions were independent and opposite of such. The case of Foer and his wife is perfectly framed in Hal Herzog’s “*Animals Like Us*” where we as humans find ourselves trapped in this “middle-ground” stance between not wanting to eat meat for moral and ethical

reasons, but participating in the action anyway for pleasure, social means, or not fully understanding the implications behind such. “Those of us in the troubled middle live in a complex moral universe. I eat meat—but not as much as I used to, and not veal. I oppose to testing the toxicity of oven cleaner and eye shadow on animals, but I would sacrifice a lot of mice to find a cure for cancer...” (5). Within this “troubled middle,” we find ourselves spinning between moral stances that make us feel as though we are choosing the right thing. The thing is, there is no perfect solution to this debacle. For those of us who are in the “troubled middle,” I’d say we’re doing just fine.

This brings the idea of what is “right” or “wrong” to light. Choosing to do something right or wrong falls completely under subjectivity to the beholder in question. So how do we determine whether something is right or wrong in the first place? Where do we draw the line? It depends. In the case of eating meat, I like how the author of “Animals Like Us,” Hal Herzog, explains how he navigates the definition of what an animal really is. “While it is obvious that dogs and cats and cows and pigs are animals, it was equally clear to Judith that fish were not. They just didn’t feel like animals to her” (1). Judith feels as though there are certain boundaries and guidelines to determine whether an organism is considered an animal or not. I can sympathize with and understand why Judith feels this way, among many other people. Additionally, David Foster Wallace in “Consider the Lobster” describes a living creature as having two criteria for experience of pain, “...how much of the neurological hardware required for pain-experience the animal comes equipped with—nociceptors, prostaglandins, neuronal opioid receptors, etc.” and “...whether the animal demonstrates behavior associated with pain” (506). Diving into the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, “animal” is defined in many ways including the inclusive, any multi-cellular lifeform, to just being a mammal, which is exclusive. It seems that there is no clear-cut definition for an animal, which causes people to have a sort of

disconnect when it comes to, perhaps, their diets and the morality of eating meat. I would feel much better about myself eating fish if the definition of an animal did not include such aquatic species. There are many holes within the definition of animal, as well. If you considered any multi-cellular lifeform as a factor towards what an animal is, you would have to avoid eating just about every type of agriculture. Surely a line must be drawn somewhere for a clearer, more concise definition. This broken definition has, in turn, become part of the problem when it comes to vegetarians and omnivores alike finding common ground to their arguments. Vegetarians feel as though they are doing the right thing by cutting meat out of their diets because of animal cruelty and welfare concerns. Omnivores feel as though there isn't much of a pertinent worry for such a dietary restriction. After all, humans have consumed meat for most of our history. Here's the caveat: neither of the two groups are right, nor are they wrong.

Death of an animal is the main concern of vegetarians in their fight to maintain being "right" in their diets, compared to an omnivore. Vegetarians argue that killing other animals for the sake of nutrition is unnecessary and inhumane, whereas others believe it's simply the way of life. Caitlin Doughty, a Californian mortician on a 2014 NPR podcast describes human death as beautiful and natural. "Death in its natural state can be very beautiful. When you think about a body that's died of natural causes – family taking care of it – all of that is very beautiful" (4 min). Although death for humans and other animals can be considered quite different societally, I feel as though they are very similar. The only thing that distinguishes between humans and animals would be perspective. Fellow human beings will consider the Homosapien organism to be the "top of the food chain" and superior to all over lifeforms. But that's a perspective. Think about even the most trivial of animals, such as bees. Without this tiny insect, plants would cease to be sufficiently pollinated. Most of these plants requiring bee trans-pollination are eaten by other animals who are, in turn, eaten by bigger animals. From my perspective, I would consider

bees to be the superior species. Yet, increasing populations and species of pollinating bees are dying off because of human activities. I'd consider that inhumane.

Having been raised into a life of strict veganism, I've experienced the difficulties between understanding the morality of animal death for human consumption, dietary balance for complete nutrition, and having others understand my lifestyle at such a young age. Becoming thirteen years old had given me the chance to experiment with the omnivorous diet and having tried many different types of meat. I felt as though I finally fit into the crowd. However, now I am a pescatarian. I choose to only eat fish and eggs, omitting the meat once again. Why? Because I like it. I'm not a strict animal activist, nor am I all for animal death for my pleasure. I simply enjoy my diet I was raised on. I do enjoy eating a nice turkey sandwich or bacon with my eggs in the morning, however I do feel a bit of guilt associated. This guilt is remedied by my own choices. I could sit and talk about my opinions on where I stand in this dietary spectrum all day, and how we really *don't* need to eat meat to survive, but that's my own prerogative. I remain impartial on the subject and thoroughly enjoy being a proud member of the troubled middle, and that's something you should consider.

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