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Reconsider the Lobster

People have long thought that animals may have a consciousness comparable to the human intellect. The study of animal consciousness and cognition is a relatively new field in science, but the question has been around for centuries. Some humans want to answer the question purely for the advancement of the field, but others want to know because they do not want to eat anything that has a consciousness like a human does. For whatever reason, animal cognition has fascinated humans for a long time. Many authors, journalists and essayists have tried to capture this conflict between do they or don't they in the past. Most well-known is David Foster Wallace and his *Consider the Lobster* essay. Others have followed, including Hal Herzog of *Utne Magazine* and Ross Andersen for *The Atlantic*. These authors have tried to capture the ethical dilemma of how we interact with animals in words so the rest of us can better understand. Animals are an important part of our society and life on Earth, but most people do not treat them that way.

In his controversial essay *Consider the Lobster*, David Foster Wallace asks the reader to do just that. He asks the reader to think critically and consider the way the lobster is treated in our society, like a commodity, when in reality it is a living, breathing animal. People have been

campaigning for decades for other humans to stop consuming meat and instead let the animals we eat live long and happy lives, running free. Wallace is no different. *Consider the Lobster* is an in depth look at the way we treat these animals that we claim to “love”. Wallace covers many different things in his essay, including the different ways that lobsters are killed for consumption. From boiling alive to plunging a knife between the eye stalks for a quicker kill, humans have tried nearly everything to justify eating these animals. Wallace tries to “humanize” lobsters in a way, stating “the lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water”. This quote eludes to the idea of lobsters having a consciousness and feeling pain like you or I would. An important question to ask when considering cooking lobster is do lobsters possess the “neurological hardware required for pain-experience”, as Wallace puts it himself. Supporting this idea later on in the essay, it is stated that “lobsters do not... appear to have the equipment for making or absorbing natural opioids”, meaning they are more susceptible to pain than humans are, because they have no way of mitigating it. This leads to the question of “why do we treat animals like this, for our own pleasure, when we know that it could be a painful experience for them”?

Humans see animals in strange ways. We love animals, we also kill and consume animals. Some people kill animals for fun, others keep animals as pets in cages that are too small to contain them. Hal Herzog, *author of Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat*, sums up the way we think of animals in one sentence... “The way we think about other species often defies logic”. In his article *Animals Like Us*, Herzog tells stories. His article provides plenty of anecdotal evidence about the strange way we interact with animals in our world. Herzog opens with three examples, Judith, Jim and Carolyn; Jim being the most interesting story.

Twenty-five-year-old Jim worked in a poultry research lab before graduate school and it prompted him to become a vegetarian. Becoming a vegetarian is great for the environment, and if one love animals; however, Jim took it a bit too far. See, Jim had a pet cockatiel. As he began to quit wearing leather shoes, went vegetarian and even convinced his girlfriend to give up meat with him, he began to question keeping his bird in a cage. After much deliberation, he decided to let her go. Jim says himself “I knew she wouldn’t survive, that she probably starved. I guess I was doing it for myself more than for her.” This is where Herzog’s argument about treating animals strangely gets interesting. Herzog’s argument seems to be “why would we eat animals if we claim to love them”, but Jim’s story opens up other questions. One question being, if Jim stopped eating meat to prevent harm from coming to animals, why would he release his domesticated cockatiel out into the wild, knowing she most likely would starve? How can one claim to love animals, yet still do something that will cause it harm, rather than rehoming the bird? This introduces the idea of the *Troubled Middle*.

The troubled middle is the idea that one can be truly in the middle of this argument. People who fall in the troubled middle may believe that harming animals is wrong, but still eat meat or support testing on animals for medical reasons. Herzog himself states, “Those of us in the troubled middle live in a complex moral universe” (Herzog, 2011); and he is correct. Jim’s story is a perfect example of the moral gray area that comes with the troubled middle; he just chose to let the bird go free, rather than keep her in a cage, though he knew it was not a good choice for her. Jim was stuck in the middle of not wanting to cause any harm to animals and not wanting his beloved pet to live her life trapped in a cage. David Foster Wallace could be seen as having similar views as Herzog and Jim, because he never quite takes a stance on the subject of

eating lobsters. It can be argued that DFW falls in the realm of the troubled middle, because he never tells those who have read *Consider the Lobster* that they should either listen to the arguments and cease lobster consumption, or that they should ignore the arguments and continue. Wallace clearly leans towards one side of the argument, due to his word choice most of the essay, but he still falls in the middle. Wallace states, "I haven't succeeded in working out any sort of personal ethical system in which the belief is truly defensible instead of just selfishly convenient." Many "middlers" can identify with this statement, as they just have not found a side that they agree with or maybe even don't have enough information one way or another to make up their minds. The middle is confusing to many people; why can't they just pick a side? In *Animals Like Us*, Herzog puts the confusion in a new perspective: "... the troubled middle makes perfect sense because moral quagmires are inevitable in a species with a huge brain and a big heard. They come with the territory." The troubled middle is a gray area where those who have no strong leaning one way or another find their home. However, not everyone falls into this category. Middlers on this issue think of animals in a gray area, but what about those whose views are clear?

Jainism is an ancient religion from India, with its followers numbering in the millions. The highest commandment of this religion is to cause no harm to any living thing; including animals, humans and even bugs. Jains believe that animals are conscious and, to varying extents, experience emotions similar to humans. In a piece from *The Atlantic*, Ross Anderson explores the world of the Jains and the way they treat animals. Anderson describes animal cognition and consciousness as having a "mythical sheen" around it, as it is a relatively new field in science. So recent, in fact, that he reports on how a magpie became the first animal to

pass the mirror test typically given to toddlers to determine whether they can recognize themselves yet. Anderson described it as, “the magpie’s neck was marked with a bright dot in a place that could be seen only in a mirror. When the magpie caught sight of its reflection, it immediately tried to check its neck.” (Anderson, 2019). The Jains have known since the dawn of their religion that animals are conscious, but it took the rest of the world’s scientific communities until 2008 to support the idea. Jains believe that all animals are conscious and that they should be treated as equal to humans.

Animals being equal to humans is a crazy thought to many people. David Foster Wallace may not have believed that animals were equal to people, but he certainly believed that we should treat animals like they are conscious. Hal Herzog would most likely agree, based on *Animals Like Us* and how he states, “the way we think about other species often defies logic.” (Herzog, 2011). There is a dichotomy between the two ways we think of animal consciousness; the Brain and the Mind. DFW’s argument about how lobsters are capable of feeling pain falls under the “brain”, meaning he focuses on the neurological components of consciousness, the faculties and functions of the brain itself. Herzog, and the Jains, focus more on the “mind”; meaning the conscious and cognitive life of animals, their likes, dislikes, experiences. However, this dichotomy is not helpful in understanding the animal mind, because one must consider both sides to get the full picture.

Animals always have and always will be a huge part of human’s lives. A lot of people believe that there is nothing wrong with the way we treat animals today; and many people see the relationship in many different ways. Most people fall into Herzog’s Troubled Middle, believing that the way we treat animals is strange, but not doing anything to change it. And there is

nothing wrong with that, unless it causes animals to become endangered or extinct; which it currently is. The planet is in danger and farming and eating meat is not helping the problem, but humans still do it. One might think that keeping a pet is wrong but letting the pet go is endangering it's life and rehoming the animal still means it is kept in a home. Animals are an important part of our society and life on Earth, but the way we treat them does not represent how crucial they are to our lives.

References

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