Wyatt Blackstone

Jesse Miller

English 110 H-5

April 28, 2019

Reconsidering the Lobster

What qualifies us to make the decisions whether it is just or not to kill an animal for food, or even put them through scientific experiments to advance human knowledge? Our perception of events and morals lead us to decide whether our actions are right or wrong, but everyone is influenced by different events in their life and no one’s morals are all the same. David Foster Wallace brings up these points in his essay “Consider the Lobster.” He discusses the Maine lobster festival and the concept behind killing, cooking, and the culture around eating animals.  He brings up many controversial topics including the fact that most people will boil the lobsters alive. These topics are also expanded upon in Hal Herzog’s essay, “Animals Like Us” where he discusses people’s interactions with animals when they are forces to go past their moral code to kill or experiment on the animals. Herzog also introduces and uses the term, “the troubled middle” (Herzog 7), that perfectly describes the internal conflict people experience when they are asked, or do, something that brings their morals into question. This concept of the troubled middle is shown perfectly in Jonathan Safran Foer’s paper, “Against Meat.” Foer discusses his internal struggle of becoming a vegetarian, afraid he will lose some of his family’s heritage and memories that comes from eating his grandmother’s dish (that has chicken in it). The topic of killing our animal counterparts to eat them inherently is an unpleasant thought that leaves us wondering the appropriate level of cruelty to be acceptable when it comes to preparing animals for food. I am able to accept my moral consequence, and have the lack of gilt, that comes from eating meat, but others are less fortunate.

The theological topics of killing and eating animals are also discussed in Hal Herzog’s article, “Animals Like Us”, where he discusses several stories of people’s experiences with animals that ultimately left them pondering why we treat animals the way we do. In article, it describes one of Herzog’s graduate school friends, Ron Neibor. Ron was studying how the brain reorganizes itself after injury. This required Ron to surgically destroy specific parts in the cat’s brains, let the cats heal, then go through a fairly gruesome process of decapitation and chipping away the skull to examine the brains. Throughout the experiment Ron had no issues until the end when he was required to kill the cats in order to examine the brains. When he was required to start killing the cats Ron had several personality changes. He displayed several signs of ‘moral injury’ such as changes in personality, outgoingness, and even drastic changes in his sleeping and eating habits. As stated by Herzog, “It took Ron several weeks to perfuse, [kill,] all the cats. His personality changed. A naturally cheerful and warm-hearted person, he became tense, withdrawn, shaky” (Herzog 5). This shows how badly this experience affected Ron. Other people had the morals to allow them to say and think that it was ok to kill several cats in order to advance the knowledge of brain injury for the human race, however, Ron could not think this way. This is also shown in Jonathan Foer’s paper “Against Meat” when he talked about the first time he truly realized he was eating meat when he was nine. Foer was eating dinner with his babysitter who was not eating the chicken with him. When he asked why she wasn’t eating the chicken, while in the middle of a discussion with her about not wanting to hurt any animals, she said “you know that chicken is chicken, right?” (Foer 2) This thought had alluded Foer until then, sparking his, soon to be, lifelong internal struggle of giving up his morals of hurting animals and eating meat. Not everyone has the same moral standards or has the ability to break down their morals for the “greater good,” whatever that may be. Ron and Foer are just an example of the impact and consequences that most people don’t think of when you sit down to eat a piece of steak or lobster. We, as humans, tend to purposely ignore topics that fall in this “troubled middle zone” so we do not have to think and contemplate our actions. But as seen in Herzog’s essay, ignorance doesn’t always work leaving us lost in what we believe is right or wrong.

David Foster Wallace’s essay also has a lot to say about Ron’s experience as well. Wallace discuses several facts about the Maine lobster festival and more relevantly the process and culture of cooking lobsters. One of the most contraindicating but interesting topic he brings up is the ethical consideration of cooking lobsters alive. He states, “the nervous system of a lobster is very simple and is in fact most similar to the nervous system of the grasshopper. It is decentralized with no brain. There is no cerebral cortex, which in humans is the area of the brain that gives the experience of pain” (Wallace 504). With this said lobsters experience no biological pain because they physically do not have the machinery in their body to experience pain. However, when they are dropped into the boiling pot of water, they still scratch the sides of the pot in a desperate attempt to escape their death. These two facts contraindicate each other leaving us wondering if we are inflicting unimaginable pain for the last minute of the lobster’s life before it dies. Most people ignore this, or some people even stab a long knife through the lobster’s head to kill it right before they boil the lobster. But no matter what you do you are still faced with the fact you are still possibly inflicting excruciating pain to and animal before its death to have a nice meal. This inflicts with many people’s morals, and right fully so, as you must determine for yourself how far you can go killing/cooking other animals for your food.

Our morals are not the only thing to consider when we talk about killing and using animals, and other living organisms, for food or experiments. We must also ask what gives us the innate right to play God and determine what deserves to live and die, and for what reason they die? Just because we have the power to kill the cow for our dinner doesn’t necessarily mean we should. A more exaggerated and drastic example of this is the nations’ governments and their nuclear warfare capabilities. Just because we can end millions of lives doesn’t mean we should, even over oil or political disputes. However, this still happens in the context of war. We still send thousands of troops to invade other countries, or in modern-day warfare send them to keep the peace or help overthrow governments that we see as bad but what makes them bad and us good? These questions are not a matter of right or wrong, fact or fiction, good or evil (in most cases of course). It is all determined by our perception of our world based on our past experiences and how we biologically interpret the stimulus we receive. Every bad guy is the good guy in his own perspective, we only have our social norms, religion, and cultural practices that guide us to what is right or wrong.

Another example of how different perceptions can affect a person’s belief is in “Against Meat” by Jonathan Safran Foer. Jonathan’s paper describes his relationship with his Grandmother who was a World War II survivor and had grown up in starvation. As stated by Foer, “my grandmother survived World War II barefoot, scavenging Eastern Europe for other people’s in edibles: rotting potatoes, discarded scraps of meat, skins and the bits that clung to the bones and pits” (Foer 1). Her perspective of food when she got older was very different than Jonathan Foer’s, who was soon to become a vegetarian. His grandmother saw any food as a gift saying, “no foods are bad for you. Sugars are great. Fats are tremendous. The fatter a child is, the fitter it is” (Foer 1,2). Jonathan didn’t see this concept the same way, he was torn between the taste of the food, relapsing several times after deciding to go vegetarian, and the fact that eating meat required to kill animals to eat them. Jonathans struggle continued several years until he had children and saw that it was more important to feed his children what he saw was right instead of what was easiest. One conversation Jonathan had with his grandmother gave him support in his decision. His grandmother was telling him one of her stories from her childhood. When she was starving to death a man gave her a piece of meat, pork. But she did not eat the meat because it was not kosher. Jonathan then asked his grandmother why she wouldn’t eat the piece of meat even if it was the only thing to save her life. She responded, “If nothing matters, there’s nothing to save” (Foer 8). What she meant by this is that if she gave up on her morals and values, there would be no reason to keep living. This gave Jonathan strength to continue his diet as a vegetarian and it is extremely relatable in our own personal lives. I eat meat and don’t think twice when I do. This concept would be appalling to a vegetarian, vegan, or any other group that does not eat meat. However, I can morally accept the consequence of eating the cow or chicken, but I would be opposed to testing harmful chemicals on animals for cosmetics (or for some other reason I would consider non-essential). It all boils down to our preset morals and perception.

Life and death are not as simple as black and white, or in any context simple. Why we kill and send animals through tremendous and awful experiments cannot be justified by any one person for the whole of humanity. There will always be people who are willing to sacrifice the rat, or cat to try to find new cures and treatment to diseases, while others will not ever be willing to accept those consequences. It all comes back to perspective and our morals. There is no right or wrong to these moral grey zone topics, there is only what you can accept based on what you believe and how you where raised.

Work Cited

Foer, Jonathan Safran. “Against Meat.” The New York Times Magazine, 7 October 2009, pp. 1-8.

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Wallace, David Foster. “Consider the Lobster.” December 2005, pp. 498-510.