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Professor Jesse Miller

English 110 H-5

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Considering ethical concerns invades the comfortable, familiar, one-sided atmosphere where humans so eagerly want to remain. When deciding the seemingly simple distinction between right and wrong, it rapidly turns into a multi-dimensional search, combing through facts, opinions, and all the in-betweens. The search can become long and relentless, and you continually hope for the answer to appear before you in flashing lights, but it never does. Therefore, certain issues act as philosophical tormentors, chipping away at one's sanity until ideas become a jumbled mess, more confusing than when you began. With the relentless and thankless task of debating ethics, should one be blamed for giving up on the task, whose ultimate goal is to decipher between right and wrong? More often than not people do not reach that goal. Instead, they are left stranded in what humans have called the troubled middle; a place in which indecisiveness is welcome, as parts of each side of the story take their grip on the confused state of the mind. It may be the nature of ethics itself that lead to this troubled middle, or perhaps the troubled middle is simply a state of being created by humans to ease their mind and provide an excuse to take a break from the uncomfortable decisions that ethics demands. As with most ethical debates, signs of the troubled middle arise in the David Foster Wallace essay "Consider the Lobster," the Jonathan Safran Foer article "Against Meat," and the Hal Herzog article "Animals Like Us." All of these articles in some way comment on certain aspects of the issue of whether or not eating meat is ethical, considering the brutal nature of killing animals. The

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troubled middle appears time and time again, in place of any concrete answer that ethics should have, to ease the selfish nature of humans who can only make it as far into debating ethical concerns until an uncomfortable or difficult situation presents itself.

The typically egocentric nature that humans are born with tends to be the force that drives much of their decisions especially in the realm of ethics. When first presented with an ethical concern, unbeknownst to the individual pondering the concern, one already knows which side of the argument that they would like to agree with despite being unaware of which side is morally correct. This is due to the egocentric ways telling them to choose the side most convenient for themselves. Even when the individual is presented with facts that prove otherwise and logically they have settled on what is morally right, they use any excuse to assure themselves that uncertainty still exists, allowing for more time in the indecisive and self-proclaimed morally acceptable time-out of the troubled middle. This is much of what David Foster Wallace centers his criticism on, as he discusses the way in which those who indulge in lobster clearly see the suffering of the lobster, yet refuse to admit with certainty that lobsters do in fact feel pain which allows them to continue the gruesome practices of killing and eating lobster with limited guilt. Wallace describes the self-motivated denial of the facts by explaining, “it takes a lot of intellectual gymnastics and behaviorist hairsplitting not too see struggling, thrashing, and lid clattering as just such pain-behavior.” (Wallace 506) As Wallace describes, even as lobsters cling to the side of a boiling pot, which could be considered the end all be all to the stem of the ethical concerns of eating lobster: whether or not they feel pain, our mind only works harder to find cracks in the argument that allow us to do as we please, rather than as we should. The twisted reasoning that Wallace decided as the way in which so many lobster enthusiasts are able to remain in the troubled middle, relates to the “intellectual gymnastics” or the frequent denial

Commented [2]: Natalie, your thesis is worded really well. You lead up to it very nicely and it makes your reader intrigued to read more.

Commented [3]: Yeah, I must say your thesis is extremely impressive. I'm hooked.

Commented [4]: This is extremely wordy, and I LOVE it. However, I'm not sure about other readers. Typically, when I get into a wordy bout of a paragraph, the reader tells me they trip up and become confused with what I'm trying to convey. Only a food-for-thought moment for you. Consider rewording? I'm not sure. Perhaps have Professor Miller read this excerpt.

Commented [5]: This is a minor suggestion, but I believe the period of the sentence comes after you use your end parentheses.

Commented [6]: Yes, Carolyn is correct.

that Jonathan Safran Foer used throughout the many years in which he was reluctantly and frequently failing to become a vegetarian. At one point in his ethical struggle Foer admitted, “I didn’t know the details of factory farming, but like most everyone, I knew the gist: it is miserable for the animals, the environment, farmers, public health, biodiversity, rural communities, global poverty and so on.” (Foer 3) It was never a question to Foer that the mass killing of animals was unethical, yet Foer found any excuses or other considerations to include in the debate, in order to remain in the troubled middle to fulfill his own want to consume meat. Both Wallace and Foer seem to understand that humans tend to complicate simple ethical debates with the knowledge that as long as contradictions in the argument exists they can classify themselves as being in the troubled middle, where they can remain undecided and still be able to do what they wish.

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The source of much of the uncomfortableness that comes out of ethical debates is not the initial black and white, right or wrong classifications that must be made, but it is often the actions or change in lifestyle that follows the debate that put people in an uncomfortable situation. Throughout “Consider the Lobster,” Wallace criticizes the thousands who attend the Maine Lobster Festival. It is quite possible that many who attend might read Wallace’s essay and agree that the cruel killing of lobsters is unethical and yet many would be even more uncomfortable if they had to give up the comradery, traditions, and delicious feasts associated with the festival. These reasons for hesitation are similar to the reasons why Foer was initially uncomfortable with the thought of becoming a vegetarian. Foer described his hesitations of changing his lifestyle by addressing the idea that, “changing what we eat and letting tastes fade from memory create a kind of cultural loss, a forgetting.” (Foer 5) Thinking of this possibility that he would lose some of his culture, traditions, and childhood memories by becoming a

Commented [7]: Both of your quotes do an excellent job of relating back to your topic sentence and overall idea of the paragraph, but I would suggest possibly elaborating a little bit on how they connect with one another.

Commented [8]: You could elaborate on the people that find the festivals a positive thing, since Wallace addresses that as well in his essay.

vegetarian put Foer in an uncomfortable position prompting for a prolonged visit in the troubled middle, battling between the logic of knowing that killing animals was wrong and his own emotions or egocentric need to fulfill his own wants. Many would argue that those reasons that Foer used for so long to justify eating meat and the reasons why so many remain faithful to the Maine Lobster Festival are valid reasons or contradictions that are truly worth taking into consideration rather than mere excuses. To this point, I would agree and admit that I those are some of my exact reasons for hesitation in making more own ethical decisions. For instance, despite being disturbed by many of the practices of killing animals, I do not think that I could ever stop eating meat as I would have a difficult time giving up all of my favorite meals which involve meat due to both the taste and the memories that they remind me of. Similar to Foer's difficulty giving up meals like his grandma's famous chicken and carrots, I could not imagine living the rest of my life without sharing turkey with my family on Thanksgiving and I would terribly miss the greasy juice of a burger dripping down my chin during our festive Fourth of July. Therefore, I have great respect for any person who is able to escape the troubled middle and change their actions based on the decisions they came to. However, I am in no way saying that the vast majority who cannot pull themselves from the troubled middle are selfish in particular, instead it is the egocentric ways of human nature itself that results in this tendency to allow self-driven reasons to be in conflict with, and often be more powerful than, reasons directed toward the benefit of others. In other words, human nature makes it easier to be selfish rather than selfless, and is perhaps the reason as to why the troubled middle exists, as it is a place where we can continue with our same unethical actions while still feeling as though we are fulfilling our duty as humans to contemplate ethical concerns.

Commented [9]: I believe the "I" doesn't need to be there, but I understand that you are trying to add this in as your personal experience. Maybe add "my own" in before saying ethical decisions.

Commented [10]: This would be a wonderful place to quote your Favorite Meal Essay. Maybe if even a small bit. I personally think it would meld so perfectly and give yourself more credibility to the argument.

Commented [11]: You do an excellent job transitioning from your own opinion to relating it back to the majority that you discussed earlier.

There are no guidelines for debating ideas as abstract and confusing as those that are part of ethical concerns. The process is one that is supposed to be an individualized, in-depth examination of one's own moral standards that should ultimately lead to the coveted answer of right or wrong. Despite this being an individualized process, so often people end up in the same location: the troubled middle. Every person has their own ideas, moral standards, past experiences and yet the troubled middle is where most retire their position after a long, answerless battle of debating ethical concerns. The small minority of people could be considered truly selfish, however, the vast majority of people are born with the innate self-driven moral compass that restricts their ability to come to a concrete answer in ethics.

Commented [12]: Natalie, this is a tremendous essay. I'm astounded by your writing style that I had the hardest time finding any issues at all. I feel as though we write very similarly, which made it easy to follow and understand. However, with higher writing comes a wordy individual. Consider reading through and having others read as well and ask them to point out wherever they had to slow down or reread because of the complexity of the words. I find this helps me with clarity and cohesiveness between arguments and throughout sentences. Otherwise, I'm frankly jealous and very proud to have read this. Very, very wonderful job.

Commented [13]: Natalie, overall your essay is fantastic! I think all of your transitions and topic sentences flow nicely with the organization of your paper, and relate back to your well-written thesis. The sources you highlight go together very well, but we are asked to consider if there are 3 text-on-text moments. I would suggest looking back through your work to see if you can fit these in. Great job!

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