I live in Westwood, Massachusetts, and attend Boston College High School in Dorchester. I have possessed an interest in philosophy throughout high school, and particularly enjoy reading the works of the existentialist philosophers (Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Nietzsche come to mind). I also enjoy Biology and Chemistry, and perform labs every month at Boston University. Community service for Westwood and the city of Boston is also important to me.
Hidden Animals and Ethical Consumerism

Animal ethics is a uniquely difficult undertaking because of the extensive amount of agents involved, the variety and need for classification of those agents, the nature of society, and, of course, humanity’s own natural bias due to both an intimate history with certain species and its position along the evolutionary tree. To truly answer Lana’s question regarding humanity’s proper role in respecting the rights of non-human animals, all natural human biases must be put aside.

The most important consideration in the classification of organisms for any ethical system ought to be whether or not those organisms are, as Tom Regan famously describes, experiencing subjects of life. An advanced ability to solve complex problems and the anatomical distinction of a neocortex may separate humans from animals, but the ability to feel pain and pleasure connects us in a far more relevant way. We would not, of course, tolerate the mistreatment of mentally handicapped people who have a mental acuity similar to some animals, as Peter Singer observes. Most people, regardless of culture or education, understand that, fundamentally, to cause (emotional, psychological, or physical) pain is inherently bad, and to promote feelings of pleasure (in a broad sense) is positive. Of course, the ways in which that pain or pleasure is distributed is an intense matter of debate among people who study ethics, but the point still stands - pain and pleasure remain at the core of ethics, and as such, organisms capable of experiencing these positive or negative feelings must remain, as humans do, in any ethical debate.

Unfortunately, this logic and empathy seems to be lost when discussing animals due to a natural tendency for dissimilarity and distance to suppress emotion. For example, if one were to see an injustice (i.e. an unnecessary infliction of pain) immediately before oneself, such as domestic violence, a natural inclination would be to stop that violence promptly because of an innate empathy that remains hardwired into the human brain. As situations become less immediate and involve individuals more dissimilar to ourselves - as an example, an upper class Christian child hearing of the poverty of rural Chinese farmers - empathy seems to lose depth. Because both location and social similarity are factors that affect the amount of empathy we feel, animals are a particularly difficult category to defend in a debate the public should be having. Animals are, of course, biologically unlike humans, and with the way society is structured in most industrialized areas, people feel disconnected from the products they buy, whether those
products are for consumption or beauty. This combination is particularly disastrous for animals because, although people without psychological disorders (like psychopathy or sociopathy) would recognize the horror of animal abuse if it occurred within their own homes, distance and specialization obscures the window through which we see the animals we indirectly affect through mindless consumerism.

Now that we recognize the moral value animals should hold as creatures capable of subjective experience despite distance and dissimilarity, we must decide which organisms, if not all, are to be given moral consideration. Fortunately, modern biology is selective in which organisms it deems physically capable of experiencing pain and pleasure - namely, those with nervous systems. While this conclusion significantly reduces the number of agents that must be considered from an ethical perspective, the sheer number of species, let alone the number of individual organisms, is staggering. To act in a way that favors each of these organisms appears to be a daunting task, and is one of Lana’s major reasons for skepticism toward animal ethics. How can we possibly have a discussion about animal ethics when the needs of these animals are so diverse and complicated? Just as Lana asks, “Where will this line of reasoning lead?” The answer to this question cannot be a resignation to inaction, but must instead be a calculated decision that balances the needs of humans with the needs of animals; as a species in a unique position of power, it would be irresponsible to let an overwhelming feeling of paralysis in the face of a daunting moral question incapacitate us. As previously mentioned, necessity, for both man and animal, must be given considerably more attention than luxury. Humanity’s use of animal testing for beauty products is problematic because it inflicts a great deal of harm on vast numbers of animals while marginally improving the lives of economic consumers and producers. As a contrast to the clear net negativity of these luxuries, scientific research, particularly medical, chemical, and biological research, quells countless years of suffering (albeit with some suffering inflicted upon lab animals).

The answer to Lana’s question, therefore, initially seems to be that products which provide a small benefit (essentially luxuries) to her, but harm animals, should not be purchased, while necessities (such as life-saving antibiotics) are acceptable. The issue, however, is slightly more complicated. When eating beef, for example, the cow has already been slaughtered, the meat has been cooked, and consuming that beef inflicts no pain upon an already-dead animal - the problem actually arises from supply and demand. If Lana were to buy ten pounds of chicken
per week at her local grocery store, the store will likely respond to that increased demand by increasing their supply, which in turn incentivizes a large factory farm to raise more chickens in horrific conditions. In this way, Lana, through her desire for the luxury of meat, is contributing to the unnecessary suffering of chickens as an economic actor who influences a company’s scale of production. The same model can be used for other sorts of luxuries, be they perfume, shampoo, conditioner, etc. However, a singular purchase of a cheeseburger or a bottle of shampoo is often insignificant to the scale of production of manufacturers, and therefore is often amoral, not necessarily immoral.

If Lana wants to reduce the suffering of animals, I would advise her to be a conscientious consumer. This would include significantly reducing the amount of animal products she consumes, particularly food and hygiene products whose methods of production and testing are particularly inhumane toward animals. Some research would be necessary to insure a company’s consideration for its animals’ rights, but a drastic change in her overall quality of life would not be necessary. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between types of farms, as not all farms are equally humane. Many large factory farms raise animals in horrific conditions that restrict movement, reduce light, promote unclean living environments, and tamper with animals’ natural diets. In stark contrast to these brutal establishments, however, there are farms that produce animal products on a smaller scale and less economically, but allow free movement around fields akin to an animal’s natural environment. These far more morally acceptable farms have products marked clearly to distinguish themselves to the ethical consumer, and make mindful consumerism relatively simple.

The vegan, of course, would attack the legitimacy of these claims, instead arguing that any animal product that inflicts suffering (or death) upon animals should not be purchased. In addition to the aforementioned response that highlights supply and demand over individual consumption, there is a natalist argument that an herbivorous, mindful consumer can be as moral as a vegan. The wholesale attack on farms that raise animals in humane conditions is unfounded because, when taken to its logical conclusion, it leads to a type of animal antinatalism. For example, if everyone were to suddenly become vegan, the need for animal farms would become obsolete, and the overall number of pigs, cows, chickens, etc., would sharply decline. If we were to deconstruct the statistics of this decrease in population, we would see that the amount of suffering from factory farms declines, but we would also see the well-being of animals in
humane farms diminish. If, however, rather than become vegan, the entire population of the world were to become mindful of the conditions of factory farming, purchasing products from farms whose mission is to raise animals in a natural environment and slaughter them quickly and painlessly late in life, net well-being of farm animals would increase. Rather than desolate the population of farm animals completely by lowering demand, ethical consumerism has the power to shift production toward a superior moral system. In a sense, the philosophy of veganism proposes a value judgement which asserts that it would be preferable for these animals not to exist (because a lack of demand results in a lack of supply) than to live naturally in humane farms.

Lana, now mindful of ethical consumerism, should be able to navigate stores with the intention to support just farms and manufacturers. This ability to “vote” via the economy is, in my opinion, an invaluable skill because of the current specialized structure of society. Individuals rarely rely on themselves or their families to physically kill and clean game for consumption, so knowledge of the methods of the producers is crucial. Animal ethics should, of course, be concerned with animal abuse, but because most people readily denounce abuse as blatantly immoral, the conversation of ethical consumerism is far more important. If we are to give ethical consideration to animals, as we clearly should, this consideration must extend to animals removed from our collective consciousness - animals which are the victims of unnecessary farm and factory abuse. Fortunately, a drastic change in humanity’s quality of life is not necessary to end the mistreatment of these cognizant beings.

Works Cited


Grace Passannante is a senior at Convent of the Sacred Heart in Greenwich, Connecticut. This year is Grace's first experience with a philosophy and thought class. She enjoys the ability to question reality, define morality, discuss existence, as well as write about and debate other controversial issues and topics. Grace also appreciates being able to connect philosophy with religion, as Sacred Heart is a Catholic School. Participating in a three-year independent science research class in high school has challenged Grace and opened up her eyes to a world of problem solving. This summer, as part of her independent science research project, Grace experienced the benefits of hands-on learning at the Congo Gorilla Forest in the Bronx Zoo where she studied how visitor behavior affects stereotypies (nervous ticks) in captive gorillas. Stereotypies include eating one's own dung or vomit, and scratching or picking at one's hair. After observation, collecting data, and concluding that loud or disruptive behavior of visitors can increase stereotypies in gorillas, Grace hopes to encourage the zoo to modify the designs of its exhibits and how it cares for the gorillas. Animal rights have always been important to Grace. By studying captive gorillas, she has made a meaningful contribution to improve the lives of these caged primates and she hopes to continue to make a difference and stand up for those who do not have a voice. This year Grace has also been very involved at school as Student Body President, Varsity Basketball Captain, and a member of the school choir, the Madrigals. Grace’s favorite classes are Senior Seminar in Philosophy and Thought, AP English and Literature, and AP Chemistry.
Animal rights is a complicated topic. Many people wonder whether or not they should kill, eat, or harm animals because they are unsure of how intelligent animals are, how much they can “think,” and whether or not their feelings will be hurt. Others do not think twice and simply treat animals however they want because they believe in the superiority of the human race. Called "speciesists," these people believe that humans are entitled to exploit and harm animals because animals are not members of the human species (Singer). However, according to “the principle of equal consideration of interests,” humans and animals are still equal in the sense that both species can experience suffering (Singer). Rather than focusing on whether or not an animal’s feelings will be hurt, people should focus on what is prevalent in every form of life: “the promotion of happiness, or pleasure, or the satisfaction of interests, and the avoidance of pain, or suffering, or frustration of interests” (Stanford). These desires to thrive give living creatures the motivation to complete the one task that all living things were given: to live. In *Natural Selection*, Darwin’s writes that “there must be a struggle for existence” (Darwin). His theory of Natural Selection suggests that beings preserve and accumulate “infinitesimally small inherited modifications, each profitable to the preserved being” in order to survive (Darwin). Since this theory applies to all living beings, the desire to survive and avoid suffering connects conscious beings. Although there is a difference in the intelligence levels of humans and non-humans, Peter Singer claims that, “any being that has an interest in not suffering deserves to have that interest taken into account…and a non-human who acts to avoid pain can be thought to have just such an interest” (Singer - Stanford). Although humans may be more mentally developed than dogs (due to a difference in internal structure and chemical make-up), both beings have the instinctual desire to live and both experience suffering when an obstacle prevents them from surviving, living, and procreating. Therefore, it is evident that for all living beings, “the desire to avoid pain…and spring[s] from our animal nature, not from our rational nature” (Korsgaard). Due to the common desires to live and avoid suffering, all living creatures are equal. As a result, the lives of non-human animals should have the same moral status as humans. However, when one being threatens the life of another, it is acceptable for the defender to kill the attacker in defense of his family, clan, and preservation of his life.

However, some may ask whether or not it is immoral to eat or harm an innocent plant if it is immoral to eat or harm an innocent animal. Although plants are forms of life and attempt to avoid suffering through evolutionary adaptation (just like humans and animals), they are not conscious beings with brains and therefore, they do not suffer. Instead, they only have the instinct to survive. It has been scientifically proven that humans have larger brains than most
non-humans and therefore are more intelligent. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin compares the mental powers of man and animals by describing a scale of mental abilities. He explains that “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals...certainty is one of degree and not of kind” (Darwin). He writes that “the lower animals, like man...feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery” and “more of the complex emotions are common to the higher animals and [humans]” (Darwin). Humans, unlike non-humans, have metacognition - the ability to think about thinking. The term is similar to the idea of “personhood,” Kant’s term that “makes a being valuable and thus morally considerable” (Stanford). In comparison to the attention of humans, the attention of animals as described by Korsgaard, “is fixed on the world...It is engaged in conscious activities, but it is not conscious of them” (Stanford). Therefore, animals and humans think differently and have different levels of intelligence. Since plants do not have a brain or a conscious, they do not have the same moral standing as humans or animals.

With survival comes inequality. Due to the order of the food chain and defensive instincts, some beings will kill others in order to survive. In certain conditions, it is moral to eat other beings in order to survive. Singer writes how “Eskimos...might be justified in claiming that their interest in surviving overrides that of the animals they kill” because they live in environments where animal meat is the only food available (Singer). In contrast, “citizens of industrialized societies can easily obtain an adequate diet without the use of animal flesh” (Singer). Therefore, like the Eskimos, it is acceptable to cause another being to suffer if the being’s suffering is absolutely necessary to another’s survival. However, when killing another being is not necessary for survival, it can be considered immoral. Although all beings are put on earth to coexist and live together, when resources are limited and survival becomes difficult, some beings must inflict harm or death on other beings in order to preserve or defend their own lives, their families, or their packs.

Lana’s dilemma of stepping on an ant on the sidewalk also brings up the morality of killing or inflicting suffering upon other living beings. Lana should not step on an ant on the sidewalk that is not causing her to physically suffer because it has done nothing wrong to her. Because Lana is an average human being, she would most likely not kill another innocent human being on purpose and cause it unwarranted suffering. Therefore, Lana should not step on an ant on the sidewalk because it has done nothing wrong to her. However, if Lana’s house is infested with termites that are eating away at the wood on her house’s foundation, she has the right to terminate the termites because they are threatening her and her family’s safety and survival. If the termites continue to eat away at Lana’s house, they can potentially cause her house to collapse, harming or killing Lana and her family. Therefore, the termites are
threatening Lana and her family’s ability to thrive and survive. As a result, Lana has the right (just like the Eskimos do for survival), to kill the termites according to her “jus naturale.” (Hobbes). According to Hobbes, Lana can morally kill the termites because of the liberty that she has to preserve her own life and do “anything which, in [her] own judgment and reason, [she] shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto” (Hobbes). One might think that Lana is treating the termites unfairly because they do not know that they are harming her, but the mentally ability of the termites, as mentioned previously, does not matter. It is the fact that they are potentially threatening Lana’s life, (whether they are aware of this or not), that gives Lana the right to kill them. Since the termites cannot be reasoned with, killing them is the only way for Lana to protect herself and her family. Although animals should be treated with the same moral status as humans, when one being threatens another’s ability to survive, the ability to kill and inflict harm and suffering on the attacker become moral.

Therefore, because humans should only kill non-humans for the purpose of self-preservation, Lana should become a moral vegetarian. Like her friends said, eating meat contributes to factory farming and unfair treatment and suffering of innocent animals. The meat of these animals is then transported to industrial cities where people have other options for food and do not need to eat meat in order to survive. Since animals have a moral standing based in their ability to suffer, Lana should not buy leather shoes or beauty products. In other words, Lana should not use any products that come from innocent animals that suffer, and she should become a vegan. As mentioned before, when walking on the sidewalk, Lana should be conscious of the small creatures around her and should be careful not to step on them. Because all beings experience suffering and have the instinctive desire to survive, the moral status of conscious non-human animals is equal to that of humans.
Work Cited


Will Youman is a junior at Conestoga High School. He is a member of Conestoga’s ethics team, as well as Conestoga’s environmental club “greening stoga task force”. He is also the junior class treasurer. He has a strong interest in ethics, as well as the environmental issues concerning the world today.
Animals: Subordinates or Equals?

In the past 100 or so years, throughout the United States and the entire world, a number of civil rights movements have allowed for a number of groups to be equivalent both legally and morally. Naturally, we have progressed to a point where we must ask: do non-human animals deserve rights as well? Do they deserve a moral status equivalent to that of humans? In a time when an increasing number of people are outraged with the way the developed world treats animals, more and more people speaking out on behalf of animal rights. Lana is one of these animal rights advocates, but she is not sure how to go about it. She acknowledges that there is an issue, what troubles her is deciding how to handle it. A sound analysis breaks down into three essential parts: deciding whether or not animals deserve moral consideration (which she has already done), deciding how to properly address a concern for animal rights, and then drawing a line for the severity of actions that must be taken to address this concern.

When determining the moral status of anything, the first question to be asked is, does this deserve moral consideration? According to Lori Gruen in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “to say that a being deserves moral consideration is to say that there is a moral claim that this being has on those who can recognize such claims.” The responsibility to define the boundaries of moral consideration falls on humans, given that morality is a human created concept and that we are the only animal holding the self-conscious capacity to justify. According to Gruen, many of the traits humans deem to be crucial dividing lines, like familial connection and emotion have been disproved as exclusively human, and are therefore not justifications for ascribing greater moral significance to humans. It is crucial for humans to recognize that both the physical and cognitive differences between humans and non-human animals are often differences of degree rather than differences of kind. By deciding that the mistreatment of animals is morally impermissible, Lana has already granted non-human animals moral consideration. In making this decision, Lana brings upon herself a new responsibility, to adhere to the moral standard she has set for herself.

Once it has been determined that non-human animals deserve moral consideration, the next questions become: “how far must these moral boundaries extend?” and “what steps must I actively take in order to follow this moral standard?” Some philosophers, namely Peter Singer, would argue that the boundaries should be defined by capacity for suffering. This line of thinking argues that discerning who holds what moral right should not be a matter of kind, rather, strength of interest. Singer argues that although this logic can be used to justify the use of animals for testing purposes because animals are incapable of comprehending the notion that they could be captured for testing, and therefore are not living in fear of it. Whereas, if humans were randomly kidnapped and used for the purposes of testing a prescription drug that could have adverse or harmful effects, the distinctly human anticipatory fear that would follow could be qualified as further suffering. However, Singer argues that if this logic is extended to justify testing on animals, then that same logic could be applied to babies, or the mentally handicapped. Therefore, if one is to follow the utilitarian principle of maximizing greatest benefit and minimizing suffering, and use this as justification for testing animals, one must acknowledge that these special categories of humans, who have an equal capacity for suffering, should be subject to testing as well. Therefore, I agree that pharmaceutical companies and other corporations who
test animals should be searching for and using alternatives. However, one must focus on raising the rights of animals rather than stripping people of their rights. Prescription drugs could have the benefit of possibly life saving effects and minimizing suffering. Utilitarianism allows Lana to draw a line and morally defend the consumption of a necessary prescription drug, but does not defend the consumption of another, unnecessary product that tests on animals.

When it comes to the line separating vegetarianism and veganism, Lana should thoroughly consider the significance and strength of her moral values. If Lana opposes factory farming and unfair treatment of animals, and she wishes to act on her opposition then whether it is the act of actually eating meat produced by this system or whether it is wearing parts of animals as a fashion statement, they are both products of the same system, and for Lana, it is not the consumption of animal meat that is her sole concern, but rather the treatment of animals under the industrial agriculture system. If she truly feels strongly about the cause, she should address her concerns by becoming a vegan in addition to becoming a vegetarian. If she feels unable to handle a drastic conversion to veganism but is comfortable with vegetarianism, is it morally irresponsible to advocate for a cause, while only taking partial action in furtherance of it? How far must Lana’s actions extend so that she is sufficiently addressing her concerns? How is it possible to compare the moral status of one non-human animal to another? How is it possible to decide which steps are necessary and which may be a step too far? If Lana’s primary concern is simply addressing the unfair treatment of animals in society, is walking without extreme attention to ants and other life that may be below one’s feet reckless and neglectful of non-human rights? Is destroying life forms that may be destructive to one’s health or the health of an ecosystem a step that should not be taken in order to properly consider the natural rights of living organisms?

In the prompt, the following question is asked: “Will she soon find herself not walking on the street for fear of stepping on an ant?” One can certainly address their moral concerns and adhere to an admirable moral standard without succumbing to such extreme caution. For a diminutive creature such as an ant, being accidentally crushed by a larger life form is nearly equivalent to as a result of a lightning bolt, or a volcano. Of course the scenario is more common for an ant, and its death is due to a living being, but it is a factor that is hardly in the control of the human or the ant. Life forms have a responsibility to defend themselves, and while it may be difficult or impossible for ants in such scenarios, it is not the responsibility of a larger being to constantly monitor their daily activity so as to preserve the lives of ants. That is not to say is acceptable to intentionally kill an ant, or that one should not avoid stepping on one if able. Rather, it is not the responsibility of a human to preserve their lives at all costs. To say that walking without extreme caution for any life form is immoral, would mean that human activity, like driving, would be immoral since it is not the safest possible form of human transportation for all other life forms. No one dies from bumping into another person on a sidewalk, but millions of humans and non-human animals die in car crashes every year. Does this make the act of driving immoral?

Given Lana’s beliefs, the most logical and moral course of action would be to become a vegan and to eliminate their use of leather and certain beauty products along with meat. If she does not want to eat meat because she is morally against the treatment of animals in industrial agriculture, then by that logic she should cease her consumption of products from the industry altogether, which extends
past just meat. However, any moral stand is better than no moral stand at all. If Lana believes
she can handle vegetarianism, but that veganism would be too vast a change in her life, she
should not let the fear of seeming hypocritical for not doing everything for her cause and only
taking a relatively moderate stand, prevent her from taking some lesser form of a moral stand.
When it comes to the question of how far this line of thinking could take her, Lana must think
realistically and understand her failure to take extreme precautions is not neglecting the moral
rights and consideration of non-human animals.