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Is it Okay to Wear my Down Vest?

While adventuring, hikers and mountaineers, skiers and others can experience some of the most intense weather Mother Nature has to offer. To survive, the proper equipment and good technique are necessary. This equipment can be constructed from many materials; some are synthetic and others, such as goose down, are natural. Immediately, one can raise moral questions based on the use of animal products, such as goose down, in technical clothing for outdoor adventures. It might be expected that these moral issues only affect a small niche of humans who are involved in intense outdoor activities. However, when one

considers that 98.9% of citizens in the State of Vermont participate in some outdoor activity (DeSisto, Schmidt, and Henzel 6) the number of down products used must be enormous, and this for one of the smallest states in the Union. This issue is pertinent, but overlooked.

Goose down is used for a variety of applications. It can be found in pillows, comforters, mittens, jackets, pants, and vests. However, there has been disagreement on whether or not it is ethical for humans to use animal products such as down. These issues involve disagreements over killing animals for food and to make material products. It also involves how the animals are treated while being raised and the methods used to kill them. There are many more details argued upon by people both for and against animal rights, and there is a wide range in what different people consider to be acceptable treatment of animals. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the ethical issues surrounding the use of animals for food or other products. These issues are drawn upon to conclude whether or not one ought not use down products. The essay is structured into three sections. The first section of this essay establishes that this issue warrants discussion due to the fact that certain rights ought to be extended to animals. With this established, examination of whether or not one ought not to use

down products begins. Finally, the essay concludes with some closing remarks.

Before discussion on whether or not one ought not wear down can begin, it is necessary to establish that this topic even needs to be discussed. This is be done by establishing that animals have rights. If animals have rights the topic of down is pertinent because the slaughter of birds for their meat and feathers may be a violation of their rights. But what rights are we speaking of, the right to bare arms, the freedom of the press, or perhaps the right to vote? These notions are, as Singer noted, ridiculous (Singer *Applied Ethics* 217). Instead we ought to extend the right to equal consideration, meaning that we think about the animal before we use it, similar to how we would if a human was in the situation (Singer *Applied Ethics* 217). Instead of throwing lobsters into a boiling pot of water where they die slowly and painfully, one may consider either not eating the lobster if it is not necessary, or using a method that kills it instantly and painlessly before boiling it.

In his text Practical Ethics, Peter Singer (*Practical Ethics* 87) explained how a human may not be a person and that a person may be a non-human. Singer cites John Locke who wrote that a person is "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself the same thinking thing, in different times and places" (qtd. in Singer

Practical Ethics 87). The recent case of Terry Schiavo is an example of a human who was not a person. Rather, she was just a shell, neither a self-conscious nor rational being. On the other hand, various chimpanzees have learned American Sign Language and have used it in ways that show them to be self-conscious, rational beings, and thus persons (Singer *Practical Ethics* 111-2). Other animals also fall into the category of persons, such as dogs and cats. Because some animals are persons they must be allotted rights as human-persons are. Now one may say, "Ok, so some greater apes fall under the category of persons, how does this affect geese? They don't know sign language." Some may argue geese are persons anyways. However, some people may not agree with this view. It seems like this objection is a kink in the argument, however it is easily overcome.

Human-persons commonly extend the right of consideration to non-person humans, like Terry Schiavo. Therefore we should also extend the right of consideration from non-human persons to non-person animals that share the same characteristics as Schiavo, a lack of the ability to reason and lack of self-conscious. As Singer (*Applied Ethics* 222) wrote, "To mark this boundary [for this argument between non-human persons and non-person non-humans] by some characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary way. Why not choose some

other characteristic, like skin colour?" A new objection may arise. "But refusing to extend rights further than non-human persons is not an issue, because it is not about the color of one's skin, but rather about what species they are." This objection seems damning, but can easily be dismissed.

It seems that trying to extend rights from non-human persons to other species of animals that are not persons could have no justification. This, however, is simply not true. A more refined way of delegating what has rights was put forth by philosopher Jeremy Bentham (qtd. Singer *Applied Ethics* 221) who wrote "But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? Nor Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?" Singer (*Applied Ethics* 221) expounded on Bentham's assertion that consideration should be given to those that can suffer. Basically, Singer concludes that the ability to suffer is the cutoff for what creatures have interests and what creatures do not have interests. The ability to suffer is therefore the least common denominator of sentient beings. Creatures that can suffer have interests because they have the interest to not have to suffer (Singer *Applied Ethics* 221). As a result of this interest we should not simply write animals off, but we must

extend rights of consideration to these creatures. A religious radical, may then object, saying that God gave man dominion over the earth and all of its plants and animals, and that therefore we may do with them whatever we please. This may seem to be a hard argument to beat because of the involvement of religion, however, it is also easily dismissed.

Our environment is made up of ecosystems that are all connected to form one giant ecosystem (Smith and Smith 5). The ecosystem provides us with many services, "ecosystem services", that we need to survive (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 48). These services include such things as the production of oxygen, the removal of carbon dioxide and pollutants from the atmosphere, protection from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays, and clean drinking water, amongst many others (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 48-9). Such services are necessary for human existence and are in danger due to the tremendous impact the human population has on the ecosystem. Destruction in one part of the world can have serious consequences for both that area, and other parts of earth. For instance, PCBs that were in a transformer in southwestern America can make their way into whales and bears in Canada causing severe harm to their ability to reproduce (Colborn, Dumanoski, and Myers 91-104). Driving a car in China can contribute to the destruction of the ozone layer over southern Chile. No one could find that denying humans access to

the products of ecosystem services, such as oxygen and potable water is not unethical. In fact when people are denied water and other necessities for life, they, and others tend to get upset. To not protect the environment would be to further its destruction and to cut off the services that it provides. To do this, and not preserve the natural services of the world, would be to deny other humans access to clean air and water. This is clearly unethical. One may object, saying that we have machines that we can substitute in to do the work of the environment. This however, is false, as machines cannot do all the processes of the ecosystem and the ones they can do they can't do as well as nature can. The right of ethical consideration must be extended to animals because if we cannot give it to our pets, we will never be able to extend it to our environment. If we cannot allot animals that we love and cherish the right to consideration, how can one expect to extend consideration to an un-sentient being, such as a tree? Without consideration for the environment we will continue to destroy it and to deny ecosystem services to humans. To not extend the right of consideration to animals would thus cause great harm to other humans. No legitimate religious argument can make the denial of water, or the denial of the protection of the ozone layer, to other humans an ethical decision. The only way to prevent further environmental degradation is to give the

environment consideration. The extension of ethical consideration to soil and rocks will never happen without first, ethical consideration being extended to animals. So by not extending the right of ethical consideration to animals we are doing injustice to other humans, this great injustice may not be clearly visible today, but will become more and more visible in the coming years. It should be noted that this argument assumes that religion generally favors what is good for humans.

It has been clearly established that the right to ethical consideration must be extended to animals. Since animals ought to have this right, topics involving it, such as "is it okay to wear my down vest?" are pertinent and worthy of discussion.

Humans use animals for many purposes. Their meat becomes our food, their hides become our clothing as well as the covering for our car seats and furniture, their strength is used to pull plows and carts, and in the case of geese, their down is used as an insulator in our clothing, sleeping bags, comforters, and even pillows. Down is a superior insulator. High end down, while very expensive, is a necessity for many activities, such as hiking and mountaineering. It is lightweight, compressible, extremely warm, and has a long product life. Some people dismiss down and advocate the use of synthetic insulators as an alternative, which, according to marketing hype, are better because "they retain warmth when wet." The claimed superiority

of synthetic insulation is false, however. Down is far warmer, far lighter, far more compressible, and far more comfortable. Even a synthetic garment will be cold if it is soaked, however with good technique neither type of insulation should get wet very often on outdoors endeavors. Down seems necessary this day in age when adventurers are constantly pushing the limits of their sports. But a bird must be slaughtered in order to get the down necessary for these products. Since it has been established that animals should receive ethical consideration, the question, "is it okay to use down products?" must be asked. Unfortunately the answer is not a simple yes or no. Before we decide what products we can use and ought not to use, we must decide if the means of production are ethical or not. It should be noted that we are assuming that the individual cannot give up hiking, similar to how some people can not give up eating meat, and they must buy a down product. There are a number of ways to make this distinction. One method is to use the "veil of ignorance," where one makes their decision on what the correct choice is, by imagining that they were not yet born and had an equal chance of being born as either a human or a goose being raised for slaughter (Rawls 15). One would then not support practices such as live plucking of geese, or factory farming, because they, when they have a chance of becoming a goose, would see these methods as cruel and unethical. This process helps to

even the playing field and helps us to better take into consideration the animal. If under the veil of ignorance, a person accepts the method of production, it is probably an ethical choice and there is no issue with using the product. However, if they would not endorse the means of production under the veil of ignorance it is most likely unethical and one ought not to use the product.

Another way to judge whether the methods of production are ethical is to judge the happiness it takes away from the birds. If it is raised in an environment where, like in a factory farm, animals are stuffed into cages, some never seeing the light of day, one ought not wear the product that down goes into. Because of the conditions the bird will have a significantly less happiness than its potential happiness. If the bird is allowed to roam as free as reasonably possible while receiving good food, and is allowed to live a long happy life, there is no issue because the methods don't have a great impact on the level of happiness in the bird.

A third way to decide if the means of production are acceptable or unethical is to imagine that another species of animal is the dominant species. They need to use human skin for their clothing and human meat as their source of protein. Certainly no human would think otherwise than to want to be treated with respect, allowed to get exercise and to be killed

as quickly and as painlessly as possible and only if truly necessary. If we would not accept the treatment ourselves under these circumstances, then we ought not force animals that we are dominant over to live under these conditions. If we accept the treatment under this test there is no issue with using the down product, if we object then most likely there would be an ethical issue if one were to use it. One may object, saying that the animal would not want to be slaughtered at all. However, as noted earlier this thought experiment has taken place under the realistic assumption that no matter what the animal will be killed. In light of these circumstances one would rather live a long and healthy life, then a short miserable one. These tests allow us to determine whether or not we should have ethical concerns when using down products. The ethical concern being, that the animal lived and died in a cruel way.

This essay has shown that there is not a simple yes and no answer to the question "is it okay to wear my down vest?" Rather to determine if there are ethical concerns we must look into how the creature was raised and how it was killed. It is the responsibility of the consumer to demand means of production that are not unethical. Businesses will quickly respond to their customers' demands if they refuse to buy a product created through unethical means. Similarly even if one views it as the government's job to impose laws upon businesses to keep them in

line, it is the citizens job to demand this of the government, not the government's job to force such laws through on its own will. If the citizens demand such laws and the government is unresponsive then they are responsible for voting that government out of office. It is necessary for the individual to be actively involved in demanding that the products they use were not created by unethical means.

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