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Honors Introduction to Ethics

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**TITLE**

In his article “Moral Vegetarianism and the Philosophy of Mind,” C.J. Oswald argues for moral vegetarianism. Oswald evaluates in the article the premise that non-human animals can suffer. In so doing, he determines that the inability to prove Carruthers’s Higher-Order Thought theory in relation to animal suffering is sufficient enough to defend moral vegetarianism “in a Pascalian way” (Oswald 72). In this paper, I will first present Oswald’s argument; I will then explain higher-order thought, Carruthers’s theory, and what it means to defend something “in a Pascalian way” in order to show how Oswald uses the aforementioned to rationalize his argument for moral vegetarianism; finally, I will expose why Oswald’s first two premises in favor of moral vegetarianism are weak.

C.J. Oswald’s argument for moral vegetarianism is as follows:

1. If we assume animals can suffer, then we should not cause them unnecessary suffering by killing them to eat them.
2. If we assume animals cannot suffer, then we should act according to Pascal’s wager and still not kill them to eat them in order to avoid the risk of being wrong.
3. Since we cannot know for sure, we can only assume that animals can or assume that animals cannot suffer.
4. Therefore, we should not kill animals to eat them.

To understand what Oswald's assertion means, we must first understand higher-order thought. Paula Droege of Pennsylvania State University explains the concept of higher-order thought as relating to the practice of "a higher-order mental state [taking] another mental state, such as a thought or sensation, as its object" (IEP 1). Essentially, a higher-order thought is a thought about another thought or sensation. For example, slipping one's jacket off in reaction to sensing heat is a lower-order (unconscious) thought, but *thinking* about the fact that one needs to slip off his or her jacket *because* he or she is hot is a higher-order (conscious) thought.

Carruthers applied the concept of higher-order thought to animals; he "accepted the consequence that animals are not conscious on the higher-order account and...argued that our sympathy for animal suffering is motivated by the animal's pain sensation and its behavioral effects rather than by the animal's consciousness of pain" (IEP 1). Basically, Carruthers's Higher-Order Thought (HOT) theory states that animals cannot be conscious beings because they do not have the means to report their pain to others. Because so many opponents of moral vegetarianism used Carruthers's HOT theory to refute it, Oswald uses Carruthers's HOT theory to provide rationale for his first two premises. Oswald claims that 1) if Carruthers is wrong and animals do not need to be able to report their pain in order to suffer, we can justify moral vegetarianism, and 2) even if Carruthers is right and animals do need to be able to report their pain in order to suffer (which Carruthers says they do not have the capacity to do), we can still justify moral vegetarianism since "he discounts multiple forms of communication and language" (Oswald 69).

The next thing that needs to be understood is what it means to defend something "in a Pascalian way" (Oswald 72). An easy way to do just that is to take a look at Blaise Pascal's wager. Pascal wagered that when it came to deciding whether or not to believe in God, one's best bet is to believe even in the face of doubt. Pascal's rationale is that believing in God and

discovering that God exists will produce the greatest overall personal gain (welcomed to heaven), while not believing in God and then finding out God exists will produce the greatest personal loss (condemned to hell). Pascal's wager relates Oswald's argument for moral vegetarianism, wherein he asserts that since we cannot know and we can only make assumptions about whether animals are conscious/unconscious, "the preferable solution is to assume that animals have experiences [are conscious] to avoid the rather horrendous results of" treating them as if they are unconscious and then discovering that "they were conscious all along and we have unnecessarily caused them suffering" (Oswald 72).

I argue against Oswald's rationalization of justifying moral vegetarianism in light of the supposed flaws in Carruthers's HOT theory. Oswald asserts that even if Carruthers is right and animals do need to be able to report their pain in order to suffer, which they cannot do, we can still justify moral vegetarianism since "he discounts multiple forms of communication and language" (Oswald 69). Oswald uses a girl stubbing her toe as an example of what he means by this: "When one exclaims in pain after stubbing her toe, do we not infer that she is in pain—that she suffers?" I argue that human and animals cry out for different reasons, which discount's Oswald's claim. Oftentimes, humans cry out not in reaction to needing someone to come to their aid, but because they crave sympathy. Animals do not cry out for sympathy as humans might; they cry out in reaction to a stimuli in order to communicate that they have unmet survival-related needs. Take, for example, a cat whose tail is being stepped upon. The cat might biologically and instinctively meow or hiss in order to communicate that it is trapped and needs to be freed in order to continue to survive, but it is not meowing or hissing in order to elicit sympathy. Animals cannot experience pain because experiencing requires higher-order thought; they can only sense and react to pain stimuli. Oswald argues further that because "behavioral

dispositions are sufficient in the human case, they should also be taken as sufficient in the animal case” (Oswald 71). Again I argue that said “behavioral dispositions” (Oswald 71) are performed by animals solely out of biological instinct and survival purposes, like a puppy crying out in hunger, a form of discomfort, so that it’s mother will come to feed it, rather than for sympathy as humans so often do, such as when someone exclaims, “Ouch!” upon getting a paper cut.

In response to Oswald’s Pascalian view that we should not kill animals to eat them even upon the assumption that animals are unconscious, I ask, “Why should we care whether animals suffer?” The only rationale Oswald seem to even imply is golden-rule type rationale. The golden rule states that one should do unto others as he would have them do unto him. Philosopher Immanuel Kant proves that golden rule rationale cannot hold water. (\*\*elaborate more on Kant’s view here\*\*). Take the example of the masochist, who enjoys being hit. Just because a masochist likes it when people hit him does not mean that he should go around hitting people all of the time, especially considering that being hit is not something the majority of people enjoy. (textbook citation will go here). (\*\*some sort of transitional sentence will go here\*\*) Oswald goes so far as to say that people “lose relatively nothing of value by treating animals as conscious beings compared to the suffering they might be enduring otherwise” (Oswald 72). I argue that people do lose something of value; in order to ensure that we do not cause animals suffering, we have to give up meat, a primary source or nourishment for humans. Other than to imply that we should not cause animals pain because we would not want them to cause us pain, Oswald fails to provide any other rationale as to why vegetarianism ought to be morally required.

\*\*My conclusion will go here. My thoughts on what I’ve written so far need to marinate before writing this part\*\*\*