

Questioning Our Actions Towards Animals:
Animal-Related Ethical Dilemmas for Young People



Flying Free: Thinking about Our Winged Friends

Every Saturday, Halle heads to her local pet shop to stock up on a week’s supply of her dog’s favorite food. And, every Saturday, she is greeted by her Aunt Su, the shopkeeper. As soon as she walked through the front door, she was bombarded by her cheerful Aunt who took Halle by the arm and hurried her to the front counter.

“Halle! I have been waiting for you to come! Go look in the back of the store. There’s something I want you to see!” Excited and curious, Halle and Aunt Su headed to the back of the store. Before she even reached it, though, she could hear the high-pitched, sharp singing growing louder with every step. Halle gasped as she turned the corner. A large bird cage loomed before her, containing three small green birds. They chirped noisily as she approached, and one climbed up the cage with his beak to get a better view of the girl.

Halle had always loved birds—ever since she was little and her mom had given her a bird mobile to hang in her room. She recognized the birds in the cage as the ones in the center of the mobile—Yellow-headed parrots. Halle had read countless books on the birds and knew much about them. For one, they are quite friendly and make good pets. But Halle also knew that Yellow-headed parrots are native to Mexico and Central America. So how did her Aunt get them in her pet store?

Halle is thrilled to be able to see her favorite bird species in person, but something about the whole scene of the birds in a cage makes her feel uncomfortable. How can Halle be sure that the Yellow-headed parrots are safe, healthy, and rightfully in Aunt Su’s store?



Halle has a real mix of emotions. On one hand, she is thrilled to glimpse these beautiful, exotic birds that she has only seen before in pictures. But, on the other hand, she knows that the species isn’t easily bred in captivity and can be tricky to care for. She doesn’t want to offend her Aunt Su but feels compelled to have a conversation about the welfare of the birds.

For fundamental humane reasons, the MSPCA is opposed to the capture of native and exotic wild animals to be kept as pets. Wild animals should remain in the wild whenever possible.

Before she meets with her Aunt, Halle might want to gather and reflect on her thoughts, so waiting until the next week might be a good idea. Halle can even speak with a parent to see if she might get some additional advice on approaching her Aunt. When she is ready, Halle might ask Aunt Su if she can spare a half-hour over a hot chocolate or ask if she has a particular time at the store when it would be quiet and they could talk. Halle could begin by telling her Aunt how much she enjoys seeing her each week and how important it is to have good quality dog food available close to home. She might then mention the subject of the birds by reinforcing her life-long love of birds and the knowledge that she has gained from reading so much about them over the years. She may even bring a book or copy of an article about birds with her and say that she thinks the birds in the store are

amazing, but she is worried about how they got there. She knows they don't breed well in captivity and are prone to illegal trafficking, which threatens the species in the wild. Additionally, the birds may still be suffering because of the trauma associated with their capture, transport, and confinement.

Halle can respectfully recommend that Aunt Su be sure of the source of the birds and get to know the breeders. Even better would be if Aunt Su could refer all people wanting exotics to their local animal adoption center, since exotics needing homes often end up there because of the intense care they sometimes require. Adoption councilors are trained to screen potential adopters so that they feel confident the animal is going to an educated guardian who is ready and willing to take excellent care of the animal. For example, since Aunt Su's birds are from Mexico, they will likely need a constant warm environment in which to live. A thermo-regulated room is not always easy to find, and exotic animals often will get sick and even die because their needs can't be easily met. Additionally, the birds will need a very specific diet to maintain good health, so Aunt Su might have to tap into her specialty food resources to be able to meet the needs of her new birds.

Finally, there is the issue of keeping birds in cages, which Halle has the hardest time with; she hates to think of such magnificent creatures unable to naturally flex their wings. She might mention to Aunt Su that these birds are used to flying under the canopy of a forest, so the inability to fly at all might make them sad and weaken their state of health. She could suggest that, after hours, Aunt Su could let them fly around an area of the store where they would be safe and could return to their cage afterwards. A little flying is better than no flying at all. Halle might suggest that in the future Aunt Su leave birds to the wild where they are likely to be most happy and healthy, but perhaps she could partner up with an animal adoption center to help find homes for animals needing second chances at happiness.