Please note: this episode was originally scheduled to be released as a mini episode a month ago, we held onto it for a while in favor of releasing more pressing and timely content. We recorded a new intro and outro when we finally we released it but this transcript contains the original episode in full.

Paul: (00:00)
What's up, Beardos, you're listening to Episode 234 of The Bearded Vegans.

Bearded Vegans Music: (00:04)
[Intro Music]

Paul: (00:30)
Welcome to the show. I'm Paul.

Andy: (00:32)
And I'm Andy.

Paul: (00:34)
And we are The Bearded Vegans, a podcast featuring a dissection of all things vegan.

Andy: (00:38)
If you're just tuning in for the first time, you can find all of our previous episodes at thebeardedvegans.com, and you can reach us by emailing thebeardedvegans@gmail.com.

Paul: (00:48)
In today's mini episode, we're going to ask if it's okay to catapult squirrels, as long as they don't get hurt.

Andy: (00:53)
I put that in as kind of like a placeholder until we figured out our actual intro, but that really is the ethical question that the video we're going to talk about today is asking viewers to assess. And from the looks of it, judging by likes and views and comments, most people have watched this video and said, that's AOK with me.

Paul: (01:17)
And Andy, I was going to say, most people heard me read that intro and either know exactly what we're talking about [Andy laughing] or have no idea what we're talking about.

Andy: (01:27)
Yeah. If it was not based off of some internet video, they're like wow, they're really reaching for some kind of deep ethical conundrum now. [Both laughing]

Andy: (01:36)

But this is a mini episode so let's dive right into it. Paul, let me ask you a question. Are you familiar with this YouTuber, Mark Rober?

Paul: (01:43)
Not until yesterday, Andy. I saw this video, I watched it, and then mere like hours later, minutes maybe Andy messaged me, unbeknownst to him I had just seen this video, and he said we should talk about this tomorrow. And I said perfect cause I just watched it. But you know this was, I mean we've said this before Andy, we are not up on our, or at least I will only speak for myself. I am not up on the YouTube world. So there's plenty of people who I'm sure are incredibly famous who I have no idea who they are. So I had not heard of this person before. Although I will say like we are going to debate the merits of what happens in this specific video, but I like the idea of what his, I believe what his channel kind of represents.

Andy: (02:26)
Paul, I'm surprised you'd never heard of him before because he had a video that went very viral a year or two ago where he created a box for thieves to steal off of his porch. And when they opened it up, it shot confetti everywhere and sprayed like fart spray and made like alarm sounds like they're calling the police, and it's a very elaborate video and I just saw that everywhere.

Paul: (02:53)
Well, Andy, I think that video is referenced in this video, if I'm not mistaken. Like it shows clips from it. And I had not seen that before. That was the first time I saw that video before. I didn't even watch it, but that's the first time I heard of it.

Andy: (03:06)
Big recommend on that video. [Paul laughing] Yeah. I'm like generally, I have not watched every single Mark Rober video, but I am generally a fan of pretty much everything that I've seen him do. I do really appreciate his approach. You know, his background, I forget, he's like an engineer. He works with NASA. He's like a very smart guy that's really into deconstructing things, over-solving problems in a really entertaining and educational way, and his whole like online strategy is that he just puts out, I think it may have changed with the pandemic, it looks like he's been doing some live videos and stuff, but generally speaking he just puts out one video a month and he just makes that video really good. And he has almost 12 million followers I think, like subscribers on YouTube. This particular video that we're about to talk about is on the verge of hitting 13 million views. Like it's just been going up, up, up, and it's only been out for I think three or four days at this point. But in general, I really appreciate his approach. I think his videos typically have sort of a sense of fun and discovery and whimsy and a love of science and engineering and figuring out problems, and I have been a fan of his work that I've seen up until this point. But Paul, at this point, I guess we should really tell people what the heck is going on in this video. Although you have a really big smile on your face right now. Do you have something else you want to talk about?

Paul: (04:34)

I dunno, I was just going to say, Andy, I'm not surprised that you really enjoy this style of video because I feel like you're a type of person that loves this sort of like very analytic deconstruction of these sorts of things and being like, this is how this works and like I'm going to replicate this thing and all that stuff. So it's unsurprising to me that you like this, Andy, because you are like, I feel like you are very focused on like this, like taking things apart and that sort of thing. And of course the first thing that comes to mind when I think of deconstructing things is us talking regularly about deconstructing magic tricks.

Andy: (05:10)
So this video is called "Building the Perfect Squirrel-Proof Bird Feeder." We will put a link to this in the show notes if you do want to watch it. It was released May 24th and as I said, it's almost like, to give you an idea of how quickly these views are growing. Earlier today I put in the notes that it had 12 million views and when I went and checked again before recording like eight hours later, it was almost at 13 million views. So this video is growing, so we'll play a couple of clips from this video, we won't play the whole thing, it's like a little over 20 minutes long. But it starts like this laying out the very, I want to say "simple" premise of this whole video.

Mark Rober (audio clip): (05:52)
"This is a bird feeder and everything to my left is my attempt at making it squirrel-proof. If they want the bird seed, they will first need to pass through what is basically an eight part Ninja Warrior obstacle course for squirrels. This course is extremely challenging. It is not for the timid of heart, but out of the gate. I will admit that in hindsight that I completely underestimated my adversary."

Andy: (06:13)
And then it gives kind of like a why, a background for why is Mark trying to do this and talks about being safe at home and putting out a, like many people have bird feeders and witnessing that the squirrels are getting in there and pillaging all of the bird feed that was meant for birds, not for the squirrels and gives this whole rundown of all these various like, supposedly, squirrel-proof bird feeders that the squirrels were thwarting over and over again. [Paul chuckling] So as is his style, he comes up with the solution that is like an over-solve of the problem. So as he mentioned, he creates this obstacle course, he calls it his Ninja Warrior obstacle course and he gives a rundown of all the obstacles. The first thing that feels a little questionable, unless you find this whole premise questionable, is the pitchfork tumblers of which he says this:

Mark Rober (audio clip): (07:09)
We'll bring them to the pitchfork tumblers, which are inspired by the show Wipeout. But unlike Wipeout, I should point out that all these contraptions are squirrel friendly and even with a little back force they will break away and stop spinning.

Andy: (07:21)

And then the next obstacle is the "home wrecker," which is a platform that if the squirrel stands on this platform for more than three seconds, it drops them down about what? Like four or five feet or so? Onto a tiny little net. And there's like a distraction to keep the squirrels on this platform, which is a squirrel, like a stuffed squirrel, dressed up in a bikini holding a walnut, which as he explains early in the video, he scientifically tested to see which nut squirrels like the most. And then comes the thing that I think is the most controversial about this whole obstacle course, which is the "orbital assist platform."

Mark Rober (audio clip): (08:00)
And now for the last challenge, at this point, they are a mere few feet away from their ultimate goal. But if they're not careful, they'll have to deal with the orbital assist platform, AKA the final countdown, AKA, it's not a catapult. It's a squirrelapult. Which means they now have to go back and start all the way over from the beginning. Now if they want to avoid that fate, they just need to stand on this pad for less than three seconds. Now with regards to squirrel safety, I know I seem to have this reputation of improvised high-speed projectiles, and so this one might worry a few animal lovers out there, including my wife. We have five pets and one child, and the child was the only one I had a say in. So rest assured I can adjust the pressure on the piston and we'll be seeing way below any launch force that could hurt any of our adorable backyard contestants.

Andy: (08:48)
And so then the rest of the video is essentially just detailing squirrels trying to run this whole obstacle course to get to the bird feeder, which when they get to the bird feeder, it actually will drop like what looks like three pounds of walnuts for the squirrel.

Paul: (09:03)
Those walnuts ain't cheap!

Andy: (09:04)
No, seriously. And there's four squirrel contestants, and it documents like their trial and error of what they have to do to get to these nuts. And eventually he says, you know, after like a week or whatever, all four of these squirrels could run this course in about 40 seconds. Interestingly, when watching all that, you never actually see a squirrel get catapulted or as he names it, the squirrelapult. Now as a fan of puns, Paul, this one doesn't work for me.

Paul: (09:35)
Yeah. It's not really like a, it's not really a pun or a portmanteau or anything. It's just kind of two words that he put together.

Andy: (09:42)
Because it's not like catapults are typically used to like hurl cats, you know, it doesn't really make sense. It was a nice try on that one. So he does kind of detail these incidents at the end of the video here.

Mark Rober (audio clip): (09:57)
And while we're watching, you might be wondering what happened to the squirrelapult. Unfortunately, they didn't really fall for my illusion much, but I'm about to show you the two times they did. And as a promise to my wife, I turned the pressure to only 40% full power. So the acceleration a squirrel would feel is about half a G, which is 10 times less than a typical rollercoaster. Additionally, I never turned on either the homewrecker trap door or the launch platform when I wasn't actively watching from inside my house where I had a manual override button. Because as safe as it was, something about launching fantastic guests just didn't feel right. Now what you're about to see is going to look pretty chaotic, but when we check the slow-mo, amazingly, I'll show you how the squirrel is totally in control pretty much the whole time. [Launching noise] Alright. Now here's a second angle. [Launching noise] Also even if you don't trust my calculations, I can assure you that the squirrels did not care. In both launch cases. They were back up on the course in like five minutes.

Andy: (10:53)
And that kind of leads into this whole like physics lesson about squirrels' ability to land on their feet and how it's very similar to cats. And that that pretty much brings us to the end of this video, Paul. And as I said, it seems to be pretty beloved by the internet. I don't think I would have even brought this up as consideration for podcast fodder if it wasn't for the fact that I saw at least half a dozen vegans sharing this video without any sort of commentary. It just like, oh, this is really entertaining, let's look at this. So I want to talk about this with you because I feel like I have thoughts, but I also have a lot of questions and things that make me uncomfortable when I'm trying to wrestle with how I feel about this. And I think there's a lot of parallels to arguments people make about say, like backyard eggs and things like that where they're like, well, we're not hurting the animals, so what's, what is the harm in doing all of this? So I guess let's just start out and get your general thoughts on this video.

Paul: (11:50)
So Andy I think, I mean certainly there's like a few jokes he makes that I kind of eye rolled that, that are unrelated to I guess the like the animal issues. But in terms of like the animal stuff, I feel like the squirrelapult was the only thing that initially, like as of right now at the time of this recording, is the only thing that I was like, yeah, I would have done without that, definitely. Certainly it doesn't, as he put it and as it seems, it does not seem like it hurt the squirrels. And of course I don't think that that's the only, you know, that's not, that's not the only factor in it, but that is like a big factor. Like clearly if that had potential to hurt them, it would have been like an instant, this is not a good video, just for that reason. But I don't know, like the squirrel catapult was the only thing that I think gave me pause, because to me the rest of it was just a guy that built some things. And if the squirrels wanted to go on these things, they could. And if they didn't, they certainly didn't have to. Like there's nothing in the video that that gives me any sort of indication that he was, you know, forcing this squirrels to go on this or he was even like corralling the squirrels into going on it. It just seems like it's a person that built a bunch of things and let squirrels do what they wanted to on it. Now again, like if that was his thing, but like all of

the contraptions were harmful, then of course I would think that was a bad thing. But the fact that the squirrels, you know, continue to go across these courses, I think it leads me to believe that they're doing this like of their own volition, and therefore I don't think that that's like a terrible thing. Like it also kind of reminded me a little bit of another viral video, Andy, that's like, I've seen a few different variations of this, but it's someone with like a hedgehog or something, it seems to be a hedgehog like as a pet because it's in their home that they have like, you know, going across a little homemade course that they created in their home. It's not as elaborate as this, but there is a part that's like, you know, they have to climb up this slippery wall. And I actually don't know how they get the hedgehog to continue to keep attempting this thing and eventually the hedgehog does make it over. I don't know if I was the hedgehog, I would try it once and be like, well this isn't working so I'm just going to literally walk in another direction. But they get this, again I'm almost positive it's a hedgehog.

Andy: (14:25)
Paul, can I just say, if you were a hedgehog you would be adorable.

Paul: (14:29)
Thank you. I appreciate that Andy. But to me, I'm like, okay, is there any big differences between what I am watching with the squirrels and the hedgehogs here besides the catapult? Because I think most people also wouldn't find anything wrong with with the hedgehog video. And maybe the hedgehog video is even a little more like, manipulative isn't the right word maybe, but clearly the hedgehog lives in this place and the person has put these obstacles in the hedgehog's way, versus at least the squirrels. It's like they don't have to do this thing if they don't want to.

Andy: (15:06)
Well, Paul so that brings up an interesting argument to me, because I think that a lot of people would say that about like really demeaning work. You know, like, oh, they can always go somewhere else. But sometimes that is their best option. And so yeah, they could go out and scavenge all day long, but here's this huge cache of walnuts, their favorite nut, and in order to get it, you have to provide entertainment for somebody. It feels wrong to me, and I don't even know if I can articulate necessarily why, but something about the video just really kind of rubbed me the wrong way. And certainly the catapult is the thing that like sets off the alarm bells because I guess it has the feeling that it could cause harm. And as you heard in the clip, he, you know, reduced the, the piston pressure or whatever as a promise to his wife. And I'm like, what if he didn't have a wife? Would that be on a hundred percent catapult? [Paul laughing] Like it feels like a weird reason to diminish the harm that you're causing to these animals.

Paul: (16:13)
Yeah.

Andy: (16:14)
But I mean, I'm sure that was just for like comedic effect, you know, he's like saying these things I get, he's probably doing it for more hyperbole. He probably doesn't really want to hurt squirrels

maliciously. But still that sentence, I was like, ooh, that's kind of a weird reason to do that. But like I get that they're voluntarily entering into this, but something about it does just feel exploitive of these squirrels and their survival instincts and their need to eat. And I don't know, I mean I'm sure like obviously anyone could argue like, well they didn't get hurt, precautions were taken for them to not get hurt, and they got a great reward, and this guy got a great video out of it and he's going to make ad revenue and everyone wins. Like what's the problem in that? And I guess to me it just feels like it's kind of reinforcing this idea that we have that animals are ours to use and that as long as they aren't like harmed, as long as they aren't hurt, maimed, killed, whatever, that it's okay. And even though this feels more benign, I feel like it just kind of plays into a culture that animals are here for us to use. And I think that ultimately that's detrimental towards like goals of animal liberation.

Paul: (17:31)
I do get that, Andy. I have a couple of responses cause I think, yeah, even though I'm saying, and I do believe that he is not forcing the squirrels to do, to run this course. However, now I can't put myself in the squirrel's cute little paws, but like I'm sure you're right, like he's putting out their favorite walnut and I'm sure there is some cost benefit analysis that these squirrels are calculating in their head and they say, okay, we really want these walnuts more than some other like bird seed maybe. So we're willing to, you know, keep trying this thing until we get it. So in that sense, I guess maybe you could call it a little bit of, I don't want to use the word manipulation, but maybe you could call it some, you know, he's strongly encouraging them to do this thing that again, he knows is going to be ultimately beneficial for him and his ad revenue and all that stuff. So in that sense like yeah, even though the squirrels can choose not to do this, he's strongly incentivizing them to do it. So it's not a, you know, a 100% unbiased choice. And then the other thing I was going to say was like, I guess I think if he didn't include the squirrelapult and the like the homewrecker one, like the platform that dropped down, I think I would have been much more okay with this because those are the only two elements that are like traps, you know, and those are the two things where he is like trying to trick the squirrels into doing something, into standing on this platform for however long so that it then like does this quick thing. Because everything else is just the squirrels need to climb over something, jump over something, or scoot around something, or like figure out a very simple maze. Nothing else is a trap, you know? So I think those are the two things, and again, the squirrelapult much more than the other one, because the other one is, you know, dropping a squirrel a few feet, which clearly they're not going to be harmed, but I'm sure it still startles them, which like isn't cool. I wouldn't just go and startle a squirrel for fun. So again, like, Andy, I guess I would ask you if those two elements were in there, would you feel differently about it?

Andy: (19:58)
I mean, I think I certainly wouldn't have the kind of like the visceral reaction that I do to the course, because I think that there is, there's like some line that we walk and I know we've had discussions in this arena before certainly way early in the very, very early podcast days where we had a discussion about like, dressing up your companion animals. Right? And that led to discussions about putting a funny hat on a baby or something like that. Right. And then that like

I think my position was, as long as we're honest with ourselves that this is something for us and this is no benefit for the animals and that we are in some way using them for our own gain, if we're honest with ourselves about that it feels, I don't know, it doesn't feel as icky to me even though like ultimately I'm like, we probably shouldn't be doing that. They can't give their consent for it and yes, people can be like, but he loves wearing his vest or hat or wig or whatever. Maybe that's the case, but like ultimately it's like it's not a thing that like they give consent for, it's for our benefit, and even if it feels like kind of a benign thing, don't we want to live in a society where we respect the bodily autonomy and consent that is given by others? And if we can't obtain that, don't we want to err on the side of caution, even if it feels like a relatively mundane thing? And so with this obstacle course, it seems like, yeah, I guess even if those two things were removed, you're right. All the other obstacles are ones that the squirrels can look at and perceive what's going on. Maybe the slinky bridge is a little, you know, not quite as apparent to them or something, but they'll learn that pretty quickly. But the ones that are traps are not ones that they can go, okay, I have to jump off this and pivot off of that and squirrel under here or whatever. But I don't know, I guess it just feels like this does, I don't think this needs to be like the thing that vegans like, you know, grab the, the torches and pitchforks for. But I think like internally when we have these conversations, it feels weird to see vegans celebrating this and promoting this type of video. And I don't know, to me it seems like it runs counter to the end goal of like animal liberation.

Paul: (22:24)
Andy. So I'm bringing back, puttin' dogs in hats and stuff. So the one moment that was similar to that in this was the tourist trap when they, you know, they put a little walnut like on the other side of that hole, which caused the squirrel to put their head through the hole, and then there was like a funny hat kind of hovering above them and then there was a camera set up so you can get a good picture of that. [Laughing] Would it be different if, because I'm thinking in my mind I'm like, okay, well what if he had still set up the walnut there so that it was in front of the camera so that he got a really nice photo of the squirrel head-on and like is that different? You know, is the fact that we're making this into this silly thing and people will look at this picture of this squirrel that appears to be in a cowboy hat, that appears to be a cowboy. Like we find this thing silly and we're like, oh, that's so cute and silly. Is that different than like someone that just goes out into nature and maybe puts out like a few walnuts and then lays in the brush nearby and then gets like a really good closeup picture of the squirrel? And then people look at that picture and like, wow, this is a beautiful of a squirrel, like I've never seen a squirrel so close up, this is really cool! Because it seems like people are appreciating it for maybe a different reason, but if to the squirrel, it's exactly the same, does it, does it really make a difference, like the reason why people appreciate this thing?

Andy: (24:04)
Man, Paul, that's a good question that I don't know if I necessarily have an answer to. But I, you know, I think about recently there's, maybe they've been around for a really long time, I've only recently seen pictures of this and actually it's in this video at the end. There's the little like squirrel picnic table.

Paul: (24:20)
Yep.

Andy: (24:21)
That they have, that they mount can make a feeder out of or whatever. And like you're like, oh, that's really funny, seeing a squirrel sitting at a little squirrel size picnic table. And that seems very harmless. That's something that like we benefit from, cause it's funny to us and for the squirrels it's like a thing to sit on while they eat. And then you kind of move it up a little bit. And there's those, you know, like the uh, the horse head masks.

Paul: (24:46)
Yeah, yeah.

Andy: (24:47)
Right. Uh, the like, you know... Listeners at home, it's the horse head mask. You've seen one before. And they have those, there's like also like a unicorn variant, and they have those that are squirrel feeders that hang really low to the ground and the squirrel can go up in it. So then you can get a picture of a squirrel wearing a giant horse head mask. Right. And you're like, that also seems benign. Like it's a thing that's feeding the squirrel and we still get to like chuckle at it. Maybe get a picture of it occasionally. And I'm like, I don't think I have a problem with those, even though maybe at its heart it's like making fun of the squirrel a little bit. Like I know, I know this sounds silly. [Paul laughing] If you're not vegan and this is your first time listening to the show go listen do a different episode. I know it sounds silly, but I think that figuring out how we feel about these things that are almost like the extreme cases, you know, maybe on the fringe that really kind of test our philosophies and beliefs and ethics. I think it's important to have these discussions even if it seems silly, and like, you know, often I think we will ask, would it be okay if this happened to a human, and I feel like the closest analogy to this would be a prank show, you know? And maybe the person that had a prank done to them, they look like a fool and they get humiliated, but then they're given a hundred bucks. That's their version of these walnuts or something like that. Would we say it's okay? If I was in the squirrel shoes, I wouldn't feel good about it. Now do squirrels feel humiliation and all that? [Paul laughing] Probably not. So maybe the human analogy fails us, but I also just think if I wouldn't want it done to me, why would I do it to another living being?

Paul: (26:32)
I think the fact that I'm not sure that squirrels feel humiliation, to me that makes that analogy not as a one-to-one I guess because like, I dunno, I think the thing that's bad about this thing isn't the squirrel's feeling being humiliated. I mean the thing that's bad about this is the squirrel is possibly getting hurt by the squirrelapult. And then I guess the secondary thing--that that would be like the tier one thing that's bad, that could potentially be bad--and I think the tier two thing would be like, is this person exploiting these squirrels to make money off of his YouTube videos? Like I think that's, if I had to make the hierarchy of things that are like problematic about

this video, I think those are probably the top two things, but I don't think I would put squirrel humiliation on any of those. [Andy laughing] And I think, actually, I think, you know maybe tier three would be, is he maybe creating an unhealthy habit with the squirrels, where they're going to depend on the food, which he does address it at the end of the video he says, I took this down after a week because I did not want the squirrels to depend on this. Which I think is like, that is good. Like again, that doesn't necessarily justify any of the other maybe issues that we had about it, but I'm glad at least he thought of that, thought to address that. You know?

Andy: (27:58)
Is that just is altruistic sounding way of saying I don't want to keep spending money on walnuts?

Paul: (28:03)
No, I don't think so. He's probably, he could, Andy, he could have Squirrel Ninja Warrior season one, Squirrel Ninja Warrior season two, [Andy laughing] he could make this a whole thing.

Andy: (28:13)
Yeah, I guess so. He could continue to monetize. I'm sure in these trying times people would love a Squirrel Ninja Warrior series.

Paul: (28:22)
So, Andy, to me, this is a video where like I will see it, I will, if I'm being honest, I will obtain some enjoyment from this video. There are parts where I watched them, and I said, hmm, I dunno about that. And then after the video I said, okay, that's a video and I've seen it. I feel like for me, this is not something that I would even, you know, I would not bring this up to anyone but my closest friends and family who are like willing to, you know, hear some of my thoughts that are maybe not fully processed or things that I just want to muse on, something like that. But I don't think this is something that I would ever, these grievances that we have, I don't think this is something that I would ever air them publicly. That being said, I suppose that is exactly what we are doing on this podcast right now, but I don't think it's something that I would like go out in the public and be like, this is like, we need to, the United States needs to talk about these squirrel issues right now. Drop everything else. Like I think that the majority of people would think that that was a very silly thing to do, and it would probably be not looked upon very well, very highly.

Andy: (29:42)
Yeah. I mean, yeah, I guess it's from the PETA school of outrage. Find something that's so outrageous to be mad at that people go watch your video. But let me ask you this question Paul. What is the difference between Mark Rober using these squirrels for entertainment versus someone taking eggs from like a backyard chicken situation?

Paul: (30:03)
Well, the backyard chicken situation, the people are saying, you hear chickens, you are going to be here now. And like, this is where you have to be. I think that there is much less autonomy in the chicken situation than there is in the squirrel situation. The squirrels can go wherever they

want to go, but there is something that that they want that is here, so they are choosing to stay here. I don't think that that's the case with the chickens. The chickens are just kind of like, okay, someone put us here and I guess like...

Andy: (30:32)
Or mail ordered us.

Paul: (30:33)
Yeah, yeah. Someone put us here. There's cages or fences or something that prevents us from getting out anywhere else and the eggs are not something that they are doing because it, or I should say like this, us taking the eggs from them is not something that benefits them, you know?

Andy: (30:55)
But what if they get shelter and feed because of it? Just like the squirrels get nuts by engaging this obstacle course and they get fencing, they get protection from the foxes, all of that.

Paul: (31:07)
I would argue though, Andy, that in some like, I don't know, philosophical way, I would argue that the squirrels had more like consent in this situation than the chickens do. I would say that decision in the chicken situation was made 100% not by the chickens. Whereas in this situation there is some percentage where the squirrels, they entered into this contract and said, yes I would like to do this thing. Again, it's highly incentivized but like there is some percentage of their autonomy that's them saying I am going to do this thing. And that's why I think it's different than the chicken situation.

Andy: (31:51)
Yeah. I mean I definitely had not thought about that nearly as much as you had, that like the biggest difference is, the squirrels have the have the ability to walk away. Now again, I think a lot of people make that argument for people that have to engage in some really unhealthy or like unethical like professions or something like that. Or like you know, they make money in a way that is not in accordance with their values and you know like I'm thinking even like slaughterhouse workers or something. And that like, yeah, technically a lot of these people do have the ability to walk away, but this is kind of what they think is the best option for them at this moment. And so there's kind of like, Mark Rober is like the 1% or whatever who's orchestrating a system in which going through this maze of obstacles is more desirable than, than taking some other like course of action.

Paul: (32:51)
That's interesting, Andy. My gut reaction was to deconstruct that analogy and say, no, that's not a good analogy. But then I thought about it for a second and now I'm kind of like, okay, okay, I can, see where that analogy is coming from. again though, I think maybe the difference between those situations though is that it's like, I would argue, very different kinds of like the negative

stimulus that's happening in these two situations. I think they're very different. And also I think like the pro-con analysis, the costs-benefits analysis, that's going on between those two situations I think is also going to look a little bit different. But I do agree with you that by Mark specifically saying like, I'm going to get the favorite nut of theirs and like I'm going to really make them like really want to do this thing, it is in some, I think you are right that in some ways it is taking away some of their like autonomy, because there's something in their brain that's like overriding, okay, this thing could be potentially dangerous, but there's walnuts at the end of it. And so it's like, and because he specifically chose to put the walnuts there, like he does have a role in that. So, I don't know. Again, I think that in my mind, Andy, the squirrels had enough autonomy, and again, like the trap aspect of it, which I think is the bad aspect of it, I think is minimal enough that I'm not going to be like everyone needs to boycott this thing. I think the ratio of squirrel autonomy to traps is, high enough so that I'm okay with this.

Andy: (34:48)
Interesting. So do you see any distinction between like animal use and animal abuse? Like there's a phrase in the movement that like use is abuse. Would you say you don't agree with that statement then?

Paul: (35:01)
I guess I would have to not agree with that statement, Andy, because I would say that, to an extent. Mark is using these animals in order to make a profit for himself. Now, like...

Andy: (35:18)
I feel like the way you phrase that diminishes the fact like to an extent, like to the extent like that's the purpose of the videos that he makes. I'm sure he gets enjoyment out of creating, and I'm sure he likes educating people, but I don't think he would be making these extensive videos if he wasn't able to monetize.

Paul: (35:36)
But I think that like, yes, I do think that this is animal use. However, I think like the context matters as well. And maybe he masterminded this whole thing from the beginning, but from the way he presents it, he kind of stumbled upon this idea, it wasn't something where he said to himself, I'm going to sit down and think about ways I can exploit squirrels for money. It was him experimenting with bird feeders and then saying like, I wonder if these squirrels will go through this ridiculous obstacle course to get these walnuts.

Andy: (36:13)
And I will say, Paul, I do think that a potential upside of this video is that it could instill a greater sense of respect for squirrels and just how clever and resourceful they are.

Paul: (36:27)
And acrobatic.

Andy: (36:28)
Yes. Yes. And also even just the final remarks on all the nature, you know, all the possums and spiders and raccoons or whatever going through the backyard at night. I thought that was cool. I thought it was like, look at all of the beings that kind of rely on this system that's going on here. But, I do disagree with your premise, Paul, that this like naturally came up, because if he was truly just interested in just deterring the squirrels, he clearly came up with the solution very quickly. That worked perfectly, which was greasing the pole, which is how he made sure the squirrels didn't climb any of the obstacles except for the very first pole that he wanted them to.

Paul: (37:12)
Yes, no, I do agree with you Andy. I also want to, not knowing this person except for this one video, but kind of from this one video, getting a glimpse into how his mind works. It would not surprise me though if like after he saw the initial bird feeder thing he wanted to test out these other bird feeders. You know, cause the beginning of the video is him testing out a few different "squirrel-proof" feeders and then showing like how the squirrels got around it. Again, I don't know how much of that is him saying I know I can make a good video out of this, versus him saying like this is really interesting and I'm going to document it because it's fascinating and I want to show other people. And like, I think, I don't know, intention sometimes doesn't matter, but it seems to me that his intention is truly just like I'm exploring this thing as it kind of plays out and at the beginning of it certainly I don't think that there's anything that's like exploitative of the squirrels. If it's just him documenting like, hey cool, look at this bird feeder and like look how awesome it is how the squirrels were able to work around it. Like I don't think there's anything that's exploitative about that. Even though he is going to make money from these videos. And I don't know Andy, I also worry that the, the argument that you had kind of brought up, which I do agree with you, like at the end he's kind of saying or for throughout the whole video it's of the way he talks about the squirrels for the most part, is is him saying like look how intelligent they are and look how magnificent they are and look how they can, like when they are in the air, look how they can kind of turn themselves around and how they're able to prevent themselves from being harmed. Yes, it does promote, I think a greater respect of squirrels. I feel like it's getting uncomfortably close to like the zoo argument about why people are like, oh well like look at all the great appreciation people get when they come to zoos. Now I don't think what he's doing is a zoo, but I'm just saying like that argument is getting like a little teensy bit too close to me. Oh, Andy's itching to say something!

Andy: (39:15)
No, I'm just saying, did you just convince yourself to not like this video then? Or just not my assessment of that little last bit.

Paul: (39:22)
No, because Andy, I mean when I watched the video initially I also was like, oh, I'm glad that like for the most part, I appreciate the way that he's talking about these squirrels. Now I think, that in and of itself like does not excuse potentially problematic things, everything else that happens in the video, in the same way that yes, I'm sure people go to zoos and leave them and be like,

wow, lions are these magnificent animals, and of course that doesn't excuse that zoos exist because they shouldn't or a place like SeaWorld or something like that. I feel you that I'm to some extent conflicted about this. I think for me personally, if there was neither of the two trap aspects of it, I would acknowledge that yes, this person is using these squirrels for like profit. But I would think, in my mind, I would think that it's such a like, the harm to them is so minimal to non-existent, that I would be okay with it in the same way that you know, someone that's a nature photographer is also, I guess you could argue using animals for profit, right? Obviously I'm not saying that these two things are the same thing, but someone that takes pictures of birds and then sells them for thousands of dollars, I don't know if that's a thing, but I'm guessing it's a thing for some people, like, or takes pictures for like National Geographic or something, like they're also to some extent using these animals for their livelihood, and I would say they would also make the same argument of like, well, what I'm doing is letting people have a greater appreciation of these animals.

Andy: (41:03)
Well, that calls to mind the monkey selfie lawsuit that we covered on the podcast oh so many years ago.

Paul: (41:10)
That's right. PETA, at it again. It's only a matter of days before they comment on this video, Andy.

Andy: (41:21)
"Your honor, who owns a sefie?" [Both laughing] I do think it brings up interesting questions in terms of, is it exploitation to like, take a picture of an animal and then sell that picture when to the animal. You might well have been there or not and it doesn't matter if they never even noticed that you were there. That does just feel so much more benign than what we're talking about here. And I guess I still like, I don't know, I just, I would rather live in a society that errs on the side of caution for this and I think that if we only use the metric of how much physical pain or even death is this causing an animal to judge whether or not it's something that's ethically permissible. I don't know. I feel like that lets people get away with like lots of things. Whereas if we just say, I don't have the consent from this animal to do this and I have to respect their bodily autonomy and yeah, the fact that they're going to get like, what is it, like three walnuts a week from Mark after all of this. Whereas he's reaping like the lion's share of all of the profits here. I don't know, it just feels like he could be feeding those squirrels a little bit more.

Paul: (42:32)
But Andy, I think a lot of people, myself included, might argue that that would be worse for the squirrels. Like if they became completely dependent on him, and maybe maybe he's measured it out, like he's weighed out the calculations and three walnuts a day from him is like the, you know, the equivalent of millions and millions of dollars in a healthy way to these, to these squirrels, you know?

Andy: (42:58)
Hmm. But maybe it would've just been better to leave them alone this whole time.

Paul: (43:03)
[Laughing] And I will say this, Andy, with the, like the whole nature photographer thing, like when I think about nature photographers, you know, in the way that I feel like they usually are, which is not actually disturbing the animal in any way. And like you said, the animal like probably doesn't even notice if they're even there or not. Like, I don't find anything wrong with that, but it's just, as you also pointed out, it's interesting to bring up the comparison to that sort of thing and this sort of thing, and like certainly Mark's involvement in the squirrels' lives was more direct, than, than a nature photographer. But I think you can draw some similarities, so it's interesting things to think about.

Andy: (43:45)
Yeah. I guess at the end of the day, I still stand by that this isn't going to be the flagship cause for veganism, but that we should be questioning whether it's okay to be using animals for entertainment in this way. For me, as much as I did get plenty of enjoyment and learned some things from this video, I feel like I'd rather, this video didn't exist.

Paul: (44:05)
Yeah, I guess.

Andy: (44:06)
I'm not going to send an angry email. I'm not going to boycott him. Maybe I'd send a polite email. And I'm not going to post on Facebook and be like, everyone needs to email this guy right now, buh buh buh. You know, it has like 178,000 upvotes in like 8,000 downvotes or something like that. So there's some people that don't appreciate the video, but like going through the comments, like people love it. And I guess to me it's just sort of that unthinking love of this type of entertainment that worries me.

Paul: (44:35)
Yeah. I think that if he had taken it one or two steps further with the questionable aspects of the video, I think then it would become something where, I might be like, hmm, we gotta think about this. But you know, much like the bridge of instability, Andy, he is walking a tricky line right now.

Andy: (44:55)
[Laughing] Well, Paul, I think that's, that's, I think I've got all my thoughts out there. Certainly leaving with more questions than I am answers. But it's been a while since we've had a conversation like this.

Paul: (45:05)
It was, it was fun.

Andy: (45:05)
Paul, you should definitely go check out that a package thief video, and there was a followup that was done kind of like last holiday season or something. It was also worth watching.

Paul: (45:15)
I'll check that out Andy.

Andy: (45:16)
All right, well let's leave it there, Paul. Mini episode coming in under an hour. I feel pretty good about that. As I said, this brings up so many more questions than it does answers for us. Does this seem clear to you, dear listener? How do you weigh these things out? Is it harmless fun or is it really detrimental to animal liberation? Somewhere in between? Let us know your thoughts on all of these things, use versus abuse. I think this is something that I would be interested in continuing to explore and hearing from y'all. So you can send us emails to thebeardedvegans@gmail.com.

Paul: (45:50)
Andy, where can people get those beautiful, beautiful t-shirts of yours?

Andy: (45:54)
Well, people can go to compassionco.com if they want to pick up a shirt from dear me, Andy,

Paul: (46:02)
Or a great sticker.

Andy: (46:04)
Or a great sticker. We got a couple of buttons in there too. Yeah, just put out this new shirt says "Anything you can eat I can eat vegan." It's my third iteration of the design. I'm stoked on it. So compassionco.com if you want to pick up a shirt, help support me in these trying times, and you can always go to thebeardedvegans.com/beardo if you want to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and all that good stuff. In the meantime, you can find us here next week, I guess.

Paul: (46:29)
Yeah, Andy, we had a great time doing that Instagram live video. I think we should do another one sometime soon. Not the full episode, but another mini episode I think.

Andy: (46:39)
Yeah, I was almost thinking this would be a good one for it, except that there'd be like sound clips that wouldn't get played and all that stuff for the people.

Paul: (46:45)

Andy, I did not want to do this one because I don't think I had like fully fleshed out, opinions on this and I, you know, I feel a lot more solid in my opinions after having this discussion with you. So I don't think this would have been a good one to do.

Andy: (47:02)
Fair enough.

Paul: (47:03)
For me at least.

Andy: (47:03)
Uh, yeah, no, no, no, no. It'd probably be not so entertaining to watch us floundering. To use a probably not a vegan phrase. [Paul laughing] Well Paul, something that I don't think is exploitive is capturing you on camera saying the following seven words.

Paul: (47:21)
We are The Bearded Vegans, signing off.

Bearded Vegans Music: (47:34)
[Outro music]

Paul: (47:38)
the other obstacles in this, well now I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't want to say that. Uh, but so the problem that he, the man get it together, Andy, again, it's highly incentive incentive incentive. Again, it's highly, what's the word I'm trying to say? Incentivized. Incentivized. Andy, you know when you said, you said your honor, you know that, have you seen that new Netflix show? Sweet Magnolia's that's on Netflix? Nope. It's not good. But I watched the whole thing and, and like, I don't know the people in that, in that show all talk in my opinion, unrealistically Southern and they say like they say a lot of things like, I don't know, like I'm hotter than a teapot on 4th of July and like all these sayings that I'm like, is that a real thing? Or did this, did the script writer from, you know, New York city or something? Say, Oh, this is what people from, I don't know, South Carolina sound like, I've never heard of the show. Oh, it's, it's like the number five show on Netflix right now. Andy.