BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
*Hunting:
In Search of the Wild Life*

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At the start of 2011 Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg told Fortune magazine that his new personal challenge was to eat meat only from animals he had killed himself. Zuckerberg's resolution is perhaps the most high-profile in a recent trend toward smaller-scale farming and hunting of animals and away from factory farmed meat. The trend has gained impetus from the 'slow food' movement, popularized by Michael Pollan, as a way to eat well and healthfully for both oneself and the environment. Hunting has attained a new vogue and boasts a renewed environmentally responsible image.

Advocates maintain that hunted animals live in their natural habitats, expressing their various natures, and achieve their ends rather quickly at the hands of the human hunter compared with a more cruel demise from a less immediately deadly predator, or from disease, starvation, or the protracted antibiotic laden torture that is modern meat animal's life; therefore hunting and consuming personally hunted meat may be at least morally neutral or possibly even praise-worthy. This line of thought sets aside the notion that an individual animal might have an interest in continuing its life, choosing rather to focus on the manner in which the animal dies. The question becomes is there such a thing as a better death for an animal and, if so, does hunting provide it? Into this newly invigorated area of inquiry comes the Wiley-Blackwell collection *Hunting: In Search of the Wild Life*, part of the Philosophy for Everyone series.

For the most part, whether an animal is entitled in any way to its full complement of years is an issue of brief to no concern in the selections. There are two primary approaches to dismissing the question; the first is simply to assert that the problem is of no merit. The best example comes from the piece by Theodore Vitali (23-32) in his exploration of the 'fair chase' hunting

ethic. 'Fair chase' refers to a code of hunting ethics which, in its broadest form, requires a close contest between the hunter and the animal (for example, limiting the use of technology), allows for the possibility of escape and requires the hunter only to take a shot that will result in a clean kill. Vitali's piece examines the philosophical underpinnings of the movement and concludes: "[I]f it (the animal) has by nature the right to a fair chance to either escape or to avoid the hunter's attempt on its life—then it has the more basic right not to be hunted at all...It has the right to well-being and to life" (25). This can't possibly be true. Since all species are by their very nature only interested in fostering their own well-being, Vitali says, hunting fair chase must have its foundation in our own interests. At the level of the kill, fair chase makes hunting nicer for people and that's all that is required for ethics.

The second is what I call the "things die, therefore we should kill them" approach. Most of the articles take this tack, asserting that those with a concern for animal life and well-being are guilty of romanticizing nature or are naively horrified by and divorced from the reality of death. Here are only a few examples:

We may still take nature walks, even long hikes in the forest...But in all these latter instances, we remain "detached" from the life-death processes that define nature and our place in nature. The hunter, on the other hand, participated directly in nature as a predatory member and as such directly impacts the natural community by taking life (Vitali, 28).

The violence of hunting aside, and also beyond the modern resistance to acknowledging death in all forms,

this annihilation is perhaps one reason why urban people, including many cosmopolitan environmentalists are so uncomfortable with hunting (Seitz, 77) [Commenting on a quote from José Ortega y Gasset].

Anti-hunter environmentalists and anti-hunting animal lovers love a world and creature that are only possible due to the fact of predation. Remove this one element from our ecosystems and we would have a radically different world... (Parker, 168).

Unless [Tom] Regan was planning to sauté and eat his dog, the death of his carnivorous pet from a car accident makes sense in terms of a motivation for vegetarianism only if Regan conceived of it as a wider rebellion against natural mortality (Kover, 178).

These papers go on to make their separate points, for example, Vitali's argument about fair chase, but they share this background speculation about the ignorance, prejudices or subconscious motivations of animal advocates. One might just as easily suggest that hunters, by 'participating' in nature as predator rather than prey, attempt to master death by dealing it rather than succumbing to it. Their fear of death motivates the enactment of a 'kill or be killed' play in which wild animals are sacrificed to stave off the hunter's imagined imminent demise. But these are just-so stories. In truth animal advocates aren't ignorant of the fact of predation or of humanity's predatory heritage, nor do they fear death any more or less than anyone else.

First, it's uncontroversial that hunting is part of our natural history; that in itself does not provide a reason for an activity to continue. Such an argument would justify a variety of activities that no one would endorse. Likewise, though death is a

brute fact, it's difficult to see how that justifies a moral being killing another creature unprovoked and unthreatened. Even if one accepts the 'identification' one has with one's species, it simply is not that case that refraining from sport hunting somehow threatens our species; it costs us nothing to refrain; our past and present status as human beings remains unchanged. Hunting as an environmentalist activity is not supported by the facts since hunters frequently kill the best and healthiest members of a herd, kill and abandon animals that don't meet their standards, over-hunt predators to provide more game for themselves and so on (Allendorf & Hard 2009); the 'fair chase' ethic takes a stand against these common abuses. And the argument that one can only truly 'participate' in nature by killing things is specious and somewhat circular. None of these background justifications does much for the hunters' cause; rather they highlight the reason why this collection of essays never becomes a dialogue: the two sides can't get past the first premise, that an animal might have a considerable interest in continuing its life. There is one exception.

Tovar Cerulli "Hunting Like a Vegetarian" takes seriously the issue of loss of life, and in that way comes closest to opening the door to genuine discussion. Cerulli's paper is interesting not simply because it was written by a former vegetarian, but because he presents his case with both the philosophical principle of generosity and his empathy intact. Coming from the ethical eating perspective exemplified by Zuckerberg and Pollan above, Cerulli examines first his own motivations for becoming a vegetarian and how they then slowly transformed into a pro-hunting perspective which attempts to address thoughtfully issues of suffering and death. It is not a new argument; Singer (in)famously said in *Animal Liberation*: "Why, for instance, is the hunter who shoots deer for venison subject to more criticism

than the person who buys a ham at the supermarket? Overall, it is probably the intensively reared pig who has suffered more” (328). But it is an argument that, as stated previously, is undergoing a resurgence in the popular consciousness.

Pollan, for example, cites the Singer quote above to rationalize his already formulated plan to go hunting and continue eating meat; but Singer was comparing overall suffering and public censure, not opening hunting season. Cerulli is less disingenuous than Pollan, but takes a similar tack; he writes that, given even his local organic farmer was killing deer and woodchucks as pests, “[T]he consequences of my diet weren’t turning out to be as pure and harmless as I’d planned.” And therefore, “I couldn’t go on killing by proxy...keeping the truth at bay just as I had in my vegetarian days, eating tofu and rice... without seeing, or wanting to see, the whole picture” (49). Cerulli then decides that if killing is going to occur, he is going to “look directly at the living animal and take responsibility for its demise” (50). Later in the essay, Cerulli kills a buck with one well-aimed shot and butchers the animal himself.

I’m reminded here of Steven Davis’ response to Tom Regan in what has come to be known as the “till kill” argument, the upshot of which is that since intensive crop agriculture kills more creatures per hectare than grazing large ruminants on less cultivated land, Regan’s “least harm principle” would entail a diet containing, specifically, cattle. Micheal Pollan loves this argument, though he makes no mention of Davis, writing in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*: “If our goal is to kill as few animals as possible people should probably try to eat the largest possible animal that can live on the least cultivated land: grass-finished steaks for everyone” (326). Various writers, including Gaverick Matheny of Johns Hopkins University and Andy Lamey of

Monash University, have written compelling critiques of this argument which run from questioning the mathematics Davis uses to arrive at his conclusion to examining the non-trivial difference between unintended casualties and fully intentional ones.

So, where does that leave the “vegetarian hunter” who fully intentionally kills a deer to feed his family? He has avoided contributing to the suffering caused by factory farming, he is consuming a large, foraging ruminant on uncultivated land thereby minimizing an unknown number of small animal deaths, and he has given the animal the quickest death imaginable. He has, however, intentionally caused the death, which, as Lamey has pointed out, is the difference between murder and man slaughter, but he has done so with the intention of lessening his overall impact.

Even with this best case scenario, I remain unconvinced both of the necessity of the death at all and of the ‘goodness’ of it and that, in itself is telling. Hunting rarely involves a best case scenario; a quick read through the papers in *Hunting: In Search of the Wild Life* will confirm that. In addition to the abuses noted previously, and including the evolutionary impact of hunting on popular prey animals, the harm to individual animals is unquantified though often described: wounded animals are tracked for miles while slowly bleeding out, hunters kill smaller animals for the challenge and to stave off boredom when larger prey fails to show up, kids and less accomplished hunters take bad shots wounding animals and so on. And these are just the physical realities. Cerulli notes in his piece “[T]his dual attention—to both inner and outer consequences—is common among vegetarians. I won’t make a parallel claim on behalf of most hunters” (52). In, fact, no one in the book does. At

most they claim that some hunters have some concern that the creatures they kill receive a swift death, but even those don't consider the first premise.

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