

## BETWEEN THE SPECIES

### Francis Wolff's Flawed Philosophical Defense of Bullfighting

#### ABSTRACT

As a result of Catalonia's ban of bullfighting in 2011, in Spain there has been a renowned interest in the ethical debate about bullfighting. Most defenders of bullfighting are Spaniards, but the most systematic is French philosopher Francis Wolff. In this article, I review Wolff's most persistent arguments in favor of bullfighting, and I offer my own refutations. Wolff argues bullfighting is not torture, bulls do not suffer, bulls must die, and bullfighting tradition must be preserved. All of these claims are dubious, as they are based on shaky assumptions and fallacious reasoning.

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## Introduction

In 2011, Catalonia's Parliament introduced a ban on bullfighting (Edgar, 2011, 56). Although it was not the first Autonomous Region in Spain to do so (the Canary Islands had done it previously), it caused a major stir as it was seen as a momentous drive towards the definite abolition of bullfighting. As a result, the anti-bullfight movement in France, Portugal, Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela (the remaining countries with bullfighting traditions) grew in strength.

Predictably, managers, bullfighters, and the fans protested against the banning of bullfighting. But, surprisingly, the issue took a political and intellectual twist. The fact that Catalonia banned Spanish-style bullfighting, but not Catalanian festivities of dragging bulls (*correbous*), seems to support critics who argued that the ban of bullfighting was mostly a nationalist move by secessionist politicians, not a real concern over animal welfare.

Soon, throughout Spain, debates about the future of bullfighting developed. Ever since the so-called "Generation of 1898," most Spanish philosophers have derided bullfighting as a relic of the dark past, a symbol of everything that is wrong with Spain (Douglass 1999, 103). This spirit has prevailed. After the final collapse of the Spanish Empire in the Spanish-American War, most Spanish intellectuals insisted on the need for their country to modernize, and bullfighting was seen as a barbarous, archaic institution that was an obstacle to modernization.

However, not all Spanish philosophers were against bullfighting. Notably, Jose Ortega y Gasset defended the *corrida* (Lewine 2007, 56), and some other 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish intel-

lectuals upheld this tradition: Garcia Lorca, Picasso, etc. In the wake of the Catalonia controversy, a new wave of Spanish intellectuals has set to defend the *corrida*, most notably Fernando Savater (2011) and Mario Vargas Llosa (2012).

Yet the most systematic and persuasive of all more recent defenders of the *corrida* is not a Spaniard (this is not entirely surprising as perhaps the most famous of all intellectual defenders of the *corrida*, Ernest Hemingway, was an American). Francis Wolff is a French philosopher, who has written scholarly books on Postmodernism and other topics. As a result of the recent controversies, he has written books and articles presenting numerous arguments against the banning of bullfighting, and even in defense of bullfighting as a moral good (Wolff 2013). Although many of Wolff's arguments have also been put forth by organizations such as "Protorio" (based in Portugal), he presents them in a more philosophical manner. For that reason, he is the leading intellectual in this public debate. Therefore, in what follows, I will focus on Wolff's views by summarizing his most notorious arguments. Although Wolff's prose is very clear (something unfortunately not very common in French authors of the Postmodernist school) and his arguments may sometimes be ingenious, they are ultimately flawed, and bullfighting remains a morally indefensible activity.

### **Bullfighting as Torture**

Prior to making a moral case for bullfighting, Wolff usually prefers to address some of the common criticisms against *corridas*. The way he sets out to do this is by first denying that in bullfighting, there is any torture.

*Corridas* are divided in three *tercios*. In the first *tercio*, the bull is let loose on the ring, and the bullfighter lances it a few

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times with the cape until the picadors (men mounted on horses) come in. The bull charges the horses, and then, the picador strikes the animal with his lance on its neck muscles. The purpose of this is to weaken the bull, so that when the *torero* fights with the *muleta* (held with only one hand), the bull is more docile. Another goal is to weaken the bull's neck muscles, so it does not raise its head when charging the *muleta*. In the second *tercio*, a *banderillero* places six harpoons on the bull's back, to further cause damage. In the third *tercio*, the *matador* lances some passes and, finally, charges the bull by inserting a sword on its back. If it is well placed, it traverses the vital organs and kills the bull shortly. Most of the time, however, the sword is not well placed, and the bull's agony is prolonged. In those cases, either the matador or his assistants strike the bull's spinal cord to hasten its death.

These are undisputed facts. It is also alleged that, prior to the fight, bulls are struck hard in their testicles, given tranquilizers so they will not be overly aggressive, and oil is put on their eyes so as to obstruct their vision. However, these allegations have never been proven (Fiske-Harrison, 2011). It has also been claimed that the bull's horns are cut with razors (a very painful procedure); although this happens on occasions, it is forbidden by bullfighting's regulations.

Be that as it may, the undisputed facts are enough for common sense to dictate that, indeed, a great deal of torture goes on in bullfights. Yet, Wolff (2011, 127) claims this is not the case. He begins by claiming that bullfighting is not torture, because as opposed to what happens in, say, Guantanamo, the goal of bullfighting is not to make the victim suffer but, rather, to generate an artistic expression. Bullfighting, according to Wolff, is about entertainment and art, not about the intrinsic

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suffering of an animal, in the same manner that fishing is about the thrill of catching a fish, not about the pain of the fish itself.

This is not persuasive. If the goal is to entertain and create art with a bull, *corridas* do not need to be so violent. There are bloodless varieties of bullfighting, and crowds seem capable of enjoying them. In traditional bullfights, however, there seems to be a thrill with blood itself (the duplet “blood and sand” to describe the aesthetics of bullfighting is not accidental), and this seems to imply that, indeed, bullfighting is about the intrinsic pleasure of seeing the bull suffer. Bullfighter enthusiasts may claim that the death of the animal is needed because of its central position in the ritual, and for that reason, bloodless bullfights do not meet the demands of the crowd. Yet if that is the case, then torture is the purpose of bullfighting for the way the animal is killed (even by expert *matadors*) is not painless.

In any case, even if *corridas* did not have the ultimate goal of inflicting pain on an animal, that is not a sufficient defense. There may be rapists that do not want to harm their victims, they just want to have sex; but it would be morally monstrous to defend such rapists. A consequentialist ethical standard is needed in this regard. The fact that an action did not intend to generate harmful side effects does not imply that action is not immoral. Actions have consequences, and even if unintended, these consequences have some weight in determining the morality of the action.

Wolff (2011, 160) also argues that bullfighting is not about torture, because the bull is given a chance to fight back. Bullfighters and crowds want ferocity in the bull, whereas torturers never want their torturers to be defiant. This may be true, but ultimately no matter how much it fights, the bull will always

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lose. At any rate, the ferocity that the bullfighter wants to see in the bull is the same ferocity that a Roman would have wanted to see in a gladiator. In the Roman Circus, the crowd wanted the gladiator to fight. Would that have been a defense of the gladiatorial spectacles? Hardly.

Wolff (2011, 224) claims that although in the struggle between the bull and the matador the former always dies, it is a fair combat. This is so, because the struggle is between the brute force of the bull and the matador's skills. Wolff argues that, in order to avoid bloodshed and excessive human deaths, bullfighters need to protect themselves, and that is why they must have an advantage over the bull's immense strength. If, as Wolff claims, human lives must be protected, then why risk them in the first place in a violent spectacle?

Wolff (2011, 289) says that picadors incite the bull to be aggressive, so that they may fight even more. But, this should not be an argument in favor of bullfighting. It should actually be the opposite: to incite aggressive behavior in an animal is not doing that creature any favor. In fact, this incitation amounts to torture, because the aggressive behavior is a reaction to a very unpleasant stimulus which is one of the defining features of torture.

Furthermore, even if the picador's actions were not torture, they would still be ethically objectionable, inasmuch as violence ultimately has a harmful effect on the perpetrator himself. In fact, some studies have shown that bullfighting fans, themselves, are uncomfortable with the violence and suffer as a result (yet try to rationalize it), even though they are not the direct victims of the torture (Cordeiro Rodrigues and Achino, 2017).

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Wolff also makes the argument that bullfighting is not torture, because there is always the risk that the bullfighter will die. In real instances of torture, so the argument goes, the torturer is always safe. It is undeniably true that the bullfighter is always at risk, and there have been plenty of dead toreros as a result of goring. Even though it may technically be more a fight than torture, the bull is severely weakened and, ultimately, has no chance of winning. At any rate, even if it may not technically be torture, bullfighting is still on shaky moral ground. Some rapists have fantasies in which their victims fight against their aggression, and the rapist subdues them. In those cases, the victim may always have the remote possibility of killing the rapist. Again, under Wolff's definition, this may not be torture. But it is still a moral monstrosity.

In Wolff's estimation, if the bull were truly tortured, it would flee. Yet it does not; therefore, the bull is not tortured (Wolff 2011, 160). The argument is logically valid (via *modus tollens*), but its premise is wrong. The animal response to torture is not necessarily to flee. It could also be to fight. Physiologists have long known about the "fight or flight" response in many animals, including humans (Smith, 2006). If the bull charges as a reaction to the beatings, it is because the bull is undergoing a very unpleasant experience. The fact that the bull puts up a fight does not imply that the bull enjoys it. Furthermore, the bull does not flee, partly because it has nowhere to flee. It is enclosed in a ring which, although admittedly larger than, say, a cage, surrounds the bull and does not allow for the animal's escape. Therefore, Wolff's claim that the bull enjoys the *corrida* because it does not flee is flawed from the start, because the bull has no other option but to fight.

Wolff also argues that the use of the word ‘torture’ trivializes human suffering in the world which should be our prime concern. Wolff is right to point out that there is much misery in the world, and the case could be made that we should be more concerned about prisoners being tortured in Guantanamo than bulls being tortured in the ring. But just because some sentient beings have higher moral standing does not imply that the suffering of agents with lower moral standing is not torture. Furthermore, I may have a semantic discussion about what is the best wording to describe bullfighting, but the bottom line is that, in bullfighting, the bull suffers, and there is moral justification for it.

Throughout all these arguments, Wolff is basically trying to rationalize evil actions. This is typical of bullfighting enthusiasts. Cognitive dissonance seems to be at play, as it has been documented that fans on some level are aware of the indefensibility of the bullfight, yet try to come up with excuses and rationalizations to keep up with the violent spectacle (Cordeiro Rodrigues and Achino, 2017). Typically, this psychological process takes place as some form of moral disengagement from animals. In fact, this happens not only with bullfighting fans but also with meat consumers (Mitchell, 2011).

### **Bulls and Pain**

Even if Wolff were right that, strictly speaking, bullfighting is not torture, it would still be morally impermissible, because, alas, the bull suffers a great deal. Wolff (2011, 297) tries to counter this objection by arguing that, in fact, bulls enjoy *corridas*.

He begins by claiming that, in the ring, bulls undergo less stress than in conditions of confinement in the meat industry.

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The ring is far more similar to the bull's natural habitat. However, this is very dubious. In the ring, the bull's stress begins with the hemorrhages caused by the picadors. From then on, a long series of beatings that, for any organism with a complex nervous system (as it is certainly the case with bulls), poses an extremely stressful and unpleasant situation.

Wolff then argues that the bull's behavior is naturally aggressive, and this makes the bull's physiological reaction to the pain very different. The bull's endocrine and nervous systems releases hormones and opiates that allow the bull to charge. This argument is not impressive. Wolff's argument can also be extended to many other species, including human beings. We also have endorphins that, in the face of stressful and painful experiences, produce pleasant experiences. This may account for the pleasurable feelings many people report when undergoing near-death-experiences (Blackmore, 1993). But, the effect is temporary, and ultimately, pain kicks in. Admittedly, in some cases, organisms will die in a short period, and they will not feel pain once endorphins kick in. However in most *corridas*, the time that passes between the first injury and the moment of death is long (usually more than fifteen minutes), and this is enough time for the effects of the endorphins to go away and allow the bull to suffer pain again.

At any rate, it would be morally unjustified to submit human beings to extremely stressful situations, so they may "enjoy" adrenaline rushes and endorphins. By the same reasoning, even if the bull's organism may release chemicals that protect it from pain, that in no way justifies beating the bull to death. It is true that many human beings, inasmuch as they enjoy the physiological or psychological reaction to pain, ask to be tortured. Taking into account the ethical principle of autonomy

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(Schermer 2013), if they were inflicted pain (although it is debatable up to what degree) upon their own request, this would not be morally objectionable. However, the bull has clearly not consented to the treatment it is being given; therefore, the moral justification for inducing its release of endorphins is very weak.

Wolff (2011, 216) counters that, unlike humans, bulls do not need to be willing. Bulls have no capacity for reasoning, and in that sense, inasmuch as bulls behave out of pure instinct, bullfighters have the moral authority to beat the bull in order to arouse them, because after all, that is congruent with the bull's nature.

This argument is not sufficiently strong. Jeremy Bentham's famous quote is relevant here: "The question is not Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?" (Monamy 2000, 18). Even if the bull does not have the intellectual capacity of humans, that does not imply we are authorized to make it suffer. Wolff is right in claiming that the fighting bull is naturally aggressive. But that does not match the beatings the bull undergoes in the ring. If at all, in order to make the bull congruent with its natural state, the bull should be subject to mild fights. However, the beating and killing of the bull in the ring far surpasses any natural disposition of the bull's behavior.

In regards to pain, Wolff (2011, 160) goes back to his previous argument about torture: the bull does not feel pain, because otherwise, it would run away. Again, this is dubious. A robber may assault a victim, and the victim may react to the point that the robber runs away and the victim chases him. Is this robbery a pleasant experience? Should the robber be excused because the victim prolonged the fight? Of course not. The violent reac-

tion of a victim against an aggressor is not a justification for the original aggression.

### **The Killing of the Bulls**

The bottom line of the debate about bullfighting is whether or not we have a right to inflict pain on and kill animals. Wolff claims we do have that right, because in fact, many animals need to kill others to survive. He is right about that fact. Yet, in the case of human beings, there is still debate about whether meat consumption is a biological necessity for us. Be that as it may, for the sake of argument I may agree that, indeed, we have a right to kill other animals. But, I must ask: for what purpose? If the goal is to get proteins, the yes, maybe killing bulls is morally acceptable. If, somehow, bulls are apt for valuable experiments, then again, maybe killing them for the benefit of humanity would be acceptable. But if killing bulls only serves the purpose of entertainment, then its moral justifications are very dubious. Wolff claims that bulls of *corridas* are edible, and as such, bullfighting serves human nutritional needs, but many nutritionists agree that the meat of bulls after *corridas* is not very nutritive and it is high in acid, because during the fight, the bull is too weakened (Weil 2006).

At any rate, Wolff points out an undisputed fact: the conditions of industrial slaughter houses are not better than the conditions of the bullring during *corridas*. Charitably, I may even quote Peter Singer (2001, 161) in support of Wolff's point: "To protest about bullfighting in Spain ... while continuing to eat ... veal from calves who have been deprived of their mothers, their proper diet, and the freedom to lie down with their legs extended, is like denouncing apartheid in South Africa while asking your neighbors not to sell their houses to blacks." Yet this fact should not support an argument in defense of bullfighting,

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but rather, it should be used as a critique of the meat industry. Wolff is committing the *tu quoque* fallacy. This fallacy is an appeal to hypocrisy that typically attempts to discredit the point of view of an opponent by highlighting the failure to act consistently with the opponent's conclusion. But, this way of reasoning is fallacious, inasmuch as whether or not the opponent acts consistently, is irrelevant as to the validity and veracity of the claims. Animal rights activists may be hypocritical in some regards, but that does not invalidate their arguments.

Some reformists have proposed to ban bullfighting in its present form but to allow a bloodless alternative, as it in fact happens in the United States. Wolff, however, opposes such reforms, because according to him, death is the climax of artistic expression. His argument does not really work, as it raises further questions. Why is death needed for artistic expression? Can we not be aesthetically moved by animals without having to kill them? But even if the bull's death were truly the climax of artistic expression, that is not a sufficient moral justification for bullfighting. As opposed to Plato's belief (Parry 1996, 214), the good and the beautiful do not always need to be identical, and ethics is a higher calling than aesthetics.

Furthermore, there have already been humane reforms in the past, and a significant portion of bullfighting fans do not seem to mind. Perhaps the most important transformation of bullfighting in the 20th Century, was General Primo de Rivera's edict requiring picadors' horses to wear protective plates (Davis 2016, 186). Prior to this reform, bulls would charge against the unprotected horses, and many would die in the ring. Today, no horses die due to this protection. At the time, purists protested that reform. Yet, time has passed, bullfighting fans accommodated, and now, horse plates are totally accepted. If

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a significant portion of fans are not concerned about horses not dying, although initially they protested, why would they be concerned in the future about bulls not dying? It seems that bullfighting, as with any other form of entertainment, allows for reforms (as has been the case historically), and these reforms should be oriented towards a more humane treatment of the animal.

Wolff (2011, 388) claims that the bullfight represents the heroic struggle and the heroic defeat of an animal that must die. Again, this only raises further questions. Why does the animal have to die? If we want to theatrically represent man's struggle against nature, can bullfighters not just cape the bull without having to harm it? It does not seem that the suffering of an animal is necessary for displays of heroic deeds. Wolff also insists that, when a *matador* goes for the killing, this is the "moment of truth," the riskiest moment of the *corrida*. It also requires a great deal of technical knowledge and skill. Bullfighting, according to Wolff, is not about brute force; it is actually an intellectual game. He is right: killing a bull, as matadors do, is a great way for a bullfighter to show bravery and intelligence. But, how is this the bull's fault? If someone truly wants to show his bravery and intelligence, why can he not just do acrobatics with a bull, instead of killing it? Again, the display of heroic deeds does not need the typical violence of bullfighting.

In Portuguese-style bullfighting, bulls are killed, but not in the ring. Some reformers have proposed to follow this model, so the bullfight spectacle is not as violent. Wolff counters that hiding death does not make it go away, and again, claims that conditions in the ring are not worse than conditions in the slaughterhouse. Wolff even states that bullfighting has great respect for the bull, because of the nice conditions in which bulls

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live prior to their fight in the ring. This is very different from the miserable lives of bulls in farms and slaughterhouses. He also claims that, as opposed to slaughterhouses, bulls are given an opportunity to fight in the ring. He is right, but once again, he is committing the *tu quoque* fallacy. This fact should not be used in support of bullfighting, but rather, as a critique of the meat industry. As a matter of fact, because of these criticisms, for decades there has been a trend towards the construction of humane slaughterhouses (Curnutt 2001, 171). If this trend further develops and overtakes the entire meat industry, Wolff's favorite argument will completely collapse.

An additional show of respect for the bull, according to Wolff, is that *matadors* take great risks when fighting bulls. This is also hard to understand. If a *matador* wanted to respect the bull, he would just leave it alone. Again, I could extend Wolff's argument as *reductio ab absurdum*: a rapist may have a fantasy of struggling with a woman, until he rapes her. To fulfill that fantasy, he may even give the victim a knife. Certainly, the rapist would run the risk of being killed by the woman in self-defense. Yet, does that mean the rapist respects the woman? Hardly. The mere fact that a risk is taken in an act of violence does not justify that act of violence.

Wolff also says that, in the ring, the bull gets ovations from the crowds, and this is yet another sign of respect. This is more of the same sophistry. Victims of Aztec human sacrifice were also cheered on, because their deaths allegedly would ensure the sun would rise the next day. Does that morally excuse such a monstrous institution? What good are applauses and ovations, if at the same time, the agent being cheered on receives a brutal beating that ultimately leads to death? The reaction of

crowds and the apparent respect they may offer to the bull in no way justifies doing harm to the animal.

### **Bullfighting and Ecological Concerns**

Anti-bullfighting activists are usually represented in ecological groups that lobby for animal welfare. Yet, a strange twist in this debate is that bullfighting fans claim they are the real defenders of ecological concerns.

Wolff (2011, 311) argues that ecologist activists should defend bullfighting, because this tradition guarantees the preservation of wildernesses, inasmuch as fighting bull breeds need to be raised in extensive terrains. Without bullfighting, bull farms would give way to intensive and industrial agriculture. Wolff is right to claim that bullfighting does contribute to the preservation of wildernesses. But, he is wrong to think bullfighting is the only way it can be done. Bullfighting's fan base has been in decline, and it is no longer fully profitable. For that reason, in Spain, bullfighting stands on subsidies. Those subsidies could be redirected towards the preservation of natural parks where bulls roam freely (as they now do), but without having to kill them in a public spectacle.

Wolff also believes that, were bullfighting banned, the fighting bull breed would disappear. Fighting bulls would mix with other cattle breeds, and the fighting breed would die out. In that sense, bullfighting protects biodiversity. Again he is wrong, because governments could step in to protect and subsidize wildernesses as it in fact happens with natural parks that host endangered species in many other countries. In those natural parks, fighting bulls could be preserved.

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Be that as it may, there is no need to fully subscribe a defense of biodiversity. Preserving species and subspecies is a moral good, but not at all costs. If, in order to preserve a breed or subspecies, we must torture members of that breed or subspecies, then there is no moral justification for this. Let us use this simile. Suppose that, in the name of biodiversity, we wish to preserve the genetic stock of Mbuti pygmies in Congo. To do so, we imprison them and force them to remain in their forests, so they will not interbreed with other tribes, and thus, their gene pool for short stature is preserved. Even if this is done in the name of biodiversity, it would be an atrocity. In the same manner, it is morally objectionable to torture animals, with the pretext of preserving their genetic pool.

Wolff then claims that ecologists should support bullfighting, because it is the human activity that best treats animals. Again, it is true that, before going into the ring, fighting bulls have pleasant lives. But, it is extremely hard to understand how torturing is a way of offering respect. Wolff (2011, 359) claims that “the fighting bull is the only animal bred by humans that lives and dies according to its nature.” It is true that the fighting bull lives according to its nature, but again, it does *not* die according to its nature. Yes, fighting bulls are aggressive, but that does not imply that, under natural conditions, bulls die violently and after prolonged suffering as they do in the ring.

Wolff also argues that human beings are superior to animals, and therefore, we have no intrinsic obligations towards them. Our obligations towards animals only come up as an exchange for services they offer us. In the case of fighting bulls, according to Wolff, they do not offer us any particular service; therefore, our only duty is to breed them with their aggressive nature, and ultimately, kill them, because they serve no other

purpose. This is a very weird argument. Who has decided that the sole purpose of a bull's existence is to be killed by humans? Arbitrarily, bullfighting fans have decided that is the case. This argument is not altogether different from the master who arbitrarily decides that the slave's only purpose in life is to serve his master.

At any rate, philosophers like Peter Singer (2002) even question that human beings are superior agents; to believe so would be the position of *speciesism*, akin to racism. But even if humans are indeed superior to animals, what morally commendable purpose does bullfighting serve? I may agree that animal experiments are necessary to save human lives, but what is the point of torturing a bull in the ring? Bullfighting fans may reply that the purpose is artistic expression and human entertainment, but again, as opposed to animal experimentation, this justification is not sufficiently strong.

### **Bullfighting as a Spectacle**

Wolff (2011, 381) claims that bullfighting is not a barbarous practice, because it performs a sublime ritual and represents humans' domination of beasts. One may agree that, indeed, there is something exciting about bullfighting (see the final section of this article), but again, the ethical is a higher calling than the aesthetical. Wolff argues that the truly barbarous thing to do is to place humans and animals on the same level. Again, some philosophers disagree about humans' moral status over other species, but I do not need to place humans and animals on the same level, in order to oppose bullfighting. Even if they are inferior, there is no justification to beat and kill bulls in the ring. Intellectually disabled people do not have the same cognitive level as geniuses, but that does not imply that we are ethically authorized to beat them in a public square, for the

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aesthetic pleasure of the crowd. Indeed, bullfighting must be opposed for the same moral reason that *freak shows* were opposed.

Anti-bullfighting activists usually claim that matadors and fans are sadistic. Wolff counters this accusation by arguing that bullfighting fans are very loving towards animals, and indeed, there have been plenty of illustrious fans of bullfighting (Goya, Lorca, Picasso, Hemingway, etc.) who people were not sadists. He is right. But, it is absolutely possible to be nice to some sentient beings and be a moral monster with others. Someone may have loved German Shepard dogs and, at the same time, order the execution of six million Jews. At any rate, Wolff may be right in that bullfighting fans are not particularly sadistic individuals, and they may be very loving in their relationships, but that does not eclipse the fact that they support an immoral form of entertainment.

Wolff points out the curious fact that bullfighting fans are more pacific than fans of football, a sport with rampant hooliganism. This is one of the very few arguments to which no objections can be raised. But, it is important not to overstate this argument. Some fans claim bullfighting is necessary for society, because it channels violence towards the bull. This relies on the old Aristotelian theory of *catharsis*, yet it has been repeatedly refuted by empirical evidence. Violent media and spectacles actually increase social violence (Gunter, 2016, 72).

Wolff also defends bullfighting as a decent spectacle, because the crowd admires what goes on in the ring. This argument is absolutely irrelevant. Romans also admired gladiators in the arena. Did that morally excuse the barbarous things that

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took place in the circus? The bull does not want to be admired. The bull just wants to be left alone.

Prior to the ban in Catalonia, there was also a debate, in Spain, about whether or not children should be allowed to go to *corridos*. Wolff (2011, 426) says that they should, because bullfighting is not necessarily traumatic for children; in fact, by going together to *corridos*, parents can teach children about the cycle of life and death. Again, there is little room for objection here. It is undoubtedly true that in our overly sanitized culture, children do not seem to have a clear understanding of life and death, and they eat meat without ever wondering where their food comes from. To teach a young person about life and death should be no more traumatizing than to teach that same person an anatomy lesson with a cadaver in a lab. But, is it necessary to explain the reality of death with such cruelty? Would it not be better to take children to humane slaughterhouses? There are many creative and more humane ways of teaching children about the inevitability and irreversibility of death.

**Bullfighting and Culture**

Anti-bullfighting activists usually argue that *corridos* are a remnant of Spain's barbarous past, along with the Inquisition, conquistadors, the expulsion of the Jews, and other unpleasant things. Spain was always behind other Western European nations in terms of progress and enlightenment, and very much as the intellectuals of the generation of 1898. Critics today claim that Spain cannot enter modernity without banning bullfights, because it is a very archaic institution.

Wolff (2011, 436) counters that, in fact, bullfighting is not as ancient as it is usually thought. There were always rituals that included killing bulls, but the modern artistic version of bull-

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fighting goes back only two centuries. Moreover, the breeding of the bulls, in their present form, requires a great deal of modern techniques. Therefore, bullfighting is in fact a modern institution.

At the same time, Wolff admits that there is an archaic element to bullfighting, albeit a positive one. In bullfighting, there is something lost to the modern world: community life organized around the death of an animal and an awareness of death.

Wolff is right to mention that bullfighting has gone through some significant transformations, and in its present form, only goes back two centuries. But, that does not imply that bullfighting's essence, the torture and death of the animal, is an archaic institution very common in pre-Enlightenment societies unconcerned with both human and animal rights.

Wolff may also be right to claim that modern society has gone too far in its sanitizing of death and that some reminder of mortality would be welcome. But, why is it necessary to torture and kill an animal to remind us that we are mortal? Why can we not just do works of art with skulls and other such images as in *memento mori* styles? Reminders of death do not need to be violent themselves.

Critics of bullfighting also frequently mention that *corridos* played a central role during Francisco Franco's dictatorship, and in that sense, bullfighting is a celebration of fascism. Wolff counters that bullfighting is politically neutral and that there were many politically left leaning fans of bullfighting during the Spanish Civil War.

While defenders of *corridos* in contemporary Spain tend to align politically to the right, Wolff is right to claim that the

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political division in the bullfighting debate is not neat, and it would be inappropriate to attribute bullfighting to a particular ideology. According to Wolff, if Franco promoted bullfighting, it was only because he knew it was already popular among the Spanish people and used it to his political advantage.

We should not judge the morality of bullfighting on its political associations. Hitler was a vegetarian, but I should not claim that vegetarianism is a Nazi practice. Nevertheless, bullfighting does express some political values. Wolff claims that bullfighting is actually an expression of democracy. In the *corrida*, the community comes together with hardly class distinctions (that is why it is a ring, and not a square), and the President makes decisions and awards trophies only after having listened to the clamor of the crowd. Furthermore, in its present shape, bullfighters go on foot. This was a major social transformation as foot bullfighters were commoners. Prior to this, bullfighting was confined to the elite who rode horses. Today, horsemen (*picadors*) are assistants to the *matador*, representing a major democratic twist.

Wolff does make an interesting point. But on the other hand, bullfighting does retain some fascist elements. After all, it is a blood sport—a celebration and aestheticization of violence. The cape is as important as the sword. Bullfighting's origins go back to military exercises in the Middle Ages.

Traditionally, bullfighting enthusiasts try to defend *corridas* by appealing to cultural relativism. According to this argument, each culture has its own standards and should not be judged from the outside. Critics counter that cultural relativism should be no excuse to justify barbarous practices, such as *sati*, female genital mutilation, foot binding, and so on. Wolff

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is a philosopher, and he seems to know very well that cultural relativism is deeply problematic. Yet, he finds it hard to refrain from making this type of argument: “*corridas* are authorized, not because of tradition, but because they are there. Tradition has the effect of forging a cultural identity and a specific sensitivity” (Wolff 2011, 526). He seems to be saying that laws should allow local customs, but this is a flawed argument. Laws should be just, regardless of whether or not they follow local customs. The British outlawed *sati* in India, because it is morally wrong to throw widows into the fire. Fortunately, the British did not care about how widespread this custom was; if they did, they would not have outlawed it.

Of course, when dealing with practices coming from different cultures, some degree of cultural sensitivity is needed. We do not want to engage in ruthless ethnocentrism. As Herman Lelieveldt (2017) has persuasively argued, activists sometimes may protest against the poor treatment of animals, not out of real concern for them, but as an instrument to denigrate other cultures. For that very reason, animal rights activists must know the philosophical arguments in support of their ideological positions very well in order to be protected from criticisms of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism.

Wolff also claims that bullfighting represents resistance against the homogenization of globalization and that it upholds cultural diversity. Much like cultural relativists, Wolff erroneously assumes that diversity is intrinsically good. His argument is very similar to those who oppose universal human rights in the name of multiculturalism. Good things must be universalized and bad things must be eradicated, and if that erodes cultural diversity, so be it.

Wolff insists on the value of cultural diversity, by arguing that, although bullfighting is uniformly practiced throughout Spain, France, Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, it is interpreted differently in each region and that there are local varieties within a standardized framework. That may all be true, but it is hard to see how this is relevant for a defense of bullfighting. Yes, the articulation of unity and diversity is sublime, but that does not justify the torture and killing of an animal. Again, ethics is a higher calling than aesthetics.

### **Conclusion: Indefensible but Irresistible?**

Wolff's arguments in favor of bullfighting are well articulated, but they are not especially innovative. They have been put forth by numerous enthusiasts of bullfighting, and as I hope to have demonstrated above, they are mostly flawed. Wolff makes a series of argumentative fallacies that typically come up in debates about bullfighting.

Yet, I have a personal confession to make. Despite refuting Wolff's claims and detecting his reasoning errors, I have gone to many *corridas* myself, and to my horror, I have enjoyed them. This is in fact not so strange. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine (1998, VI, 8) told a story about his friend Alypius, who while in Rome went to watch the gladiators, thinking he could cover his eyes and resist the urge of the crowds. But once there, he found he was unable to control opening his eyes because of the cheers. Once he contemplated the violent spectacle, he enjoyed it a great deal—to the point of going back often.

Are bullfights “indefensible but irresistible” as Orson Welles once claimed? Perhaps. That does not imply that we are completely unable to resist the thrill and excitement of the bullfight. But, in order to do so, anti-bullfighting activists must begin by

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acknowledging that people like Wolff do not have psychopathic behavior. Indeed, there seems to be something about human nature that hijacks our instinctual drives and makes us crave violent entertainment, whether it is boxing, Grand Theft Auto, the NFL, or bullfighting.

Perhaps it is a deep desire to exert power over others because of our own inferiority complexes, as Alfred Adler's theory claimed (Adler, 1927). Perhaps we are moved by Thanatos, the death instinct, as Freud (2015) claimed. Perhaps coming together as crowds in the face of violence generates effervescence, as Durkheim (1995) theorized. Whatever it is, there is something deeply attractive about violence, and when we may not dare to inflict it onto a human being, we take satisfaction in inflicting it onto animals.

If we come to acknowledge this fact and work hard to understand better where it comes from, we will be in a better position to overcome it. Most importantly, when refuting philosophers like Wolff, we must acknowledge that their views do not exist in a vacuum but, rather, are expected. By making them understand that their views are incorrect but not altogether bizarre on account of the psychology behind them, we will be more successful in persuading bullfighting fans to change their minds and give animals the respect they deserve.

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