

Food for Thought

Arguably, it was only about 140 years ago that Darwin opened the door to our seeing that we humans are products of the same extraordinary, slow, and unpredictable process as are all living creatures-that we are not unique in the entire world in terms of our origins.¹ Despite the similarities we share with animals, we still find ourselves debating whether or not other species should be included in our society. In other words, should we extend them the same rights we all take for granted. Moreover, we still see animals being harvested for food and hunted for trophies regularly. Upon breaking down the idea that we all stem from the same process, how can one justify killing animals? There are indeed moral dilemmas that result from the debate of hunting animals, but this phenomenon has been persistent through the test of time. The theory of evolution is one that prescribes to the “survival of the fittest” ideology. But are we not all trying to survive the competition from within our own societies? Below I hope to clearly address the issues surrounding the ethics of hunting animals for food.² I will take a critical look at multiple schools of thought pertaining to this issue.

In order to determine whether animals are entitled to our rights under an economic perspective, they need to belong to our society. In the social sciences, *society* has been used to mean a grouping of individuals that form a semi-closed social system, in which most interactions are with other individuals belonging to that group.³ The definition above raises an interesting anecdote when applied towards animal inclusion in

¹ VanDeVeer, Pierce “The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book”: Chapter 1, 2008

² I will be excluding higher primates for the sake of my discussion because as we know it is illegal, even impossible to hunt gorillas, chimpanzee’s etc. in this country. I am not saying this doesn’t happen in other parts of the world, but I will be excluding these groups for the purpose of my analysis, as I will be limiting my discussion to the United States.

³ Wikipedia Encyclopedia Online, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>, 2008




society. Since hunting is limited to wild animals in their natural setting, most interactions of wild animals would be with other animals. I understand the fact that outdoor recreation and mountain top homes increases social interaction between humans and animals, but I would not claim that as most interactions. Consider this: a wild elk in downtown Chicago. I admit this is not exactly an animal's natural setting, but I would go ahead and say that the Elk could not survive city life on any level (moral, legal, social). If the animal, or Elk in my example, cannot survive let alone interact with the individuals belonging to the group, they do not belong. Under these assumptions an economist would view it as ~~terrible~~ able to kill animals not included in our society.


Another school of thought is that of Ethical Egoism, which states that each person ought to act in such a manner as to promote (or maximize) her or his self-interest.⁴

Ethical egoism is not unconnected with the idea of Social Darwinism. Generally speaking, Social Darwinists prescribe to the idea that only the fittest survive. From an evolutionary standpoint, flaws in ones adaptive characteristics rendered their extinction. If a particular species was weak, it did not survive. Technically speaking, the human ability to manufacture weapons and change their environment could be viewed as an adaptive characteristic, which propagates the idea of evolutionary survival of the fittest.

So when this concept is applied to the issue of hunting animals, someone of this school of thought would deem it permissible. In other words, if hunting another species is in ones best self-interest, then one who prescribes to Ethical Egoism would confirm this notion.

⁴ VanDeVeer, Pierce "The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book": Chapter 1 ,2008


From an economist viewpoint, one could see how survival of the fittest could drive competition. Besides, with the weak gone are we not  more efficient? Someone prescribing to Darwinian Theory might consider this fair, yet it doesn't seem right on equitable grounds. I am not saying hunting is a Pareto improvement, but if animals are not considered apart of our society, it would be if the benefits to the gainers are greater than the costs to the  losers. A supply and demand analysis of hunting might make a case for increased social welfare from hunting. The United States Fish and Wild Life Service collects information annually on the number of hunting licenses sold. In 2006 there were a reported 14 million licenses sold.⁵ If one assumes that hunting reduces meat consumption from commercial grocers, it would effectively reduce the market demand for meat. Upon this reduction, economics tells us we will see a relative increase in supply and thus a subsequent reduction in price. Now essential proteins have been made more affordable making other members of society better off. And since I would say there  are more meat eaters than vegetarians we may have a case for a potential Pareto improvement.



Animals rights activist support the claim that humans can survive without animal  proteins in their diet. Although this may be true, it is not a dietary choice recommended by the North American Health authority. According to the USDA dietary guidelines, the recommended diet is one with most of your calories coming from grain products, vegetables, fruits, low fat milk products, lean meats, fish and poultry.⁶ The United States Department of Agriculture includes red meat, fish, and poultry in our recommended




⁵ Remington, Tom "Continuing Misinformation about Declining Hunter Numbers"
<http://ushuntingtoday.com/news/?p=280> ,2008

⁶ Powlesland, Jim "Eating Meat is Natural" <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~powlesla/personal/hunting/rights/meat.txt> ,2008

healthy diet. If it is one's self-interest to be healthy, the USDA recommends eating meat. Although lacto-ovo-vegetarians, or vegetarians who enjoy milk products and eggs, eat a healthy diet, vegan diets rely on artificial supplements and by definition are incomplete and unnatural.⁷ When I asked my lacto-ovo-vegetarian friend why she chooses not to eat meat, she replied "because it is cruel to the animal". In rebuttal, isn't caging chickens and cows for their entire productive life for the use of their by products worse than

 hunting an animal who lived the majority of its life in its natural settings? This issue is debatable, and arguably a topic for another paper. Under what is considered natural from a dietary standpoint, a nutritionist would deem it allowable to eat meat for your own

 health. The animal rights activist would see killing animals as cruel and would recommend dietary supplements to compliment the nutrients you lack from abstaining from meat consumption in order to live a healthy life. As humans we have evolved over the past two million years as omnivorous hunters/gathers. We are entitled to the right to eat meat just as much as any other predator of the world. In fact, because of our moral capabilities we treat our prey more humanely  than a lion would.

In our dealings with animals, few will deny that we are at least obliged to act humanely - that is, to treat them with the decency and concern that we owe, as sensitive human beings, to other sentient creatures .⁸ It is my belief that animals are sentient beings  they are able to feel pleasure and pain and have some form of self-awareness . In addition, they are capable of conditioning, caring for their young, and communicating with one another. One argument against the case for animal rights is that they are not rational beings. To be rational, one must have ranking capabilities that are reflexive and

⁷ Powlesland, Jim "Eating Meat is Natural" <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~powlesla/personal/hunting/rights/meat.txt>, 2008

⁸ Cohen, Carl "The case for the use of animals in biomedical research" <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~powlesla/personal/hunting/rights/cohen.txt>, 2008

transitive, and acting in a manner consistent with that ranking. Take for example my dog, she has preferences and rankings. She prefers walks to staying inside, and people food to dog kibble. Albeit her rankings are not terribly sophisticated, they still exist. The reason that humans are fundamentally different from their wild kin is because they have the capacity to make choices, they possess free will and the responsibility to act ethically, and respect the rights of other human beings.⁹ There could be a case made for animals meeting this criterion, but only humans can apply a moral rule to a particular case and decide whether or not the act ought to be performed. I think the best way to look at this concept is through the use of an example. For instance, does a wolf have the right to eat a rabbit? It is hard to discern a distinction between right or wrong on behalf of the wolf's behavior. Moreover, in the wild, animals cannot commit crimes and raising such questions does not really make sense. The wolf's actions against a member of its society warrants no criminal action, no moral right or wrong, and therefore no claim to the rights we humans have.

The unique ability humans have to evaluate a situation outside of their own self-interests and act on a moral principle disassociates us with our animal counterpart. Animals are sentient beings, but do not fully grasp the concept of rights. Over the course of time man has been eating meat, and from a dietary standpoint nutritionists agree with this principle. From an economic perspective, if animals are not included in our society, then there is nothing wrong with killing them for food. The idea that animals in the wild act under the principle of kill or be killed without any judicial ramifications is reason enough to not extend them the right not to be killed. This idea further emphasizes the evolutionary standpoint of survival of the fittest. It is humans that have the unique ability

⁹Machan, Tibor "The Myth of Animal Rights" <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig/machan6.html>, 2008

to change their surroundings to be more accommodating and create history that entitles them to constitutional rights. 