



DOROTA PROBUCKA

Pedagogical University of Cracow  
Wydział Humanistyczny

## Ethical Condemnation of Recreational Hunting

People have been hunting for over half a million years, using very cruel, sophisticated killing techniques. Incidentally, cruelty belongs to a set of features characteristic of all hominids. Perhaps its primary function was to strengthen the motivation to hunt and kill prey. This led to a decrease in empathy, which might have inhibited this activity. Modern research in social psychology clearly shows the correlation between high levels of aggression and the tendency to hunt. This type of phenomenon has been described as appetency-based aggression, which consists in using violence and inflicting suffering in order to experience satisfaction, with total exclusion of empathy<sup>1</sup>. Let us bear in mind that in ethology, appetency means a specific behavior leading to the satisfaction of a specific individual's need, triggered by the so-called release mechanism that includes the functions of the central nervous system, important for the occurrence of motor response to a stimulus; this is the essence of modern hunting, especially recreational hunting – it is the practice of appetency-based aggression, based on the atavistic pleasure derived from the induction of fear and death; it is the atavistic game of killing. Let us emphasize that it is killing for the experience of primitive, sadistic satisfaction that is the essence of evil in hunting. For the purpose of hunting is not to participate in this practice, but to kill, murder and experience psychopathic euphoria. Hunting involves the thrill of killing. One may also say that hunting without killing is an oxymoron.

We should also pay attention to one more issue connected with the fact that hunters teach their children how to derive satisfaction from killing as well. Unfortunately, the presence of a hunter in the family increases the probability of

---

<sup>1</sup> T. ELBERT, J. MORAN, M. SCHAUER: *Lust for Violence: Appetitive Aggression as a Fundamental Part of Human Nature*. „Neuroforum” 2017, 23 (2), pp. 77–84.

raising another hunter<sup>2</sup> by early release of aggression in children. In this case, teaching involves teaching by a negative example. As we know, children learn with their eyes, and therefore, by repeating what they perceive, they mimic the behavior observed in their family. These behaviors are coded into their mental sphere, on the principle of imprinting, as permanent patterns of conduct, and are associated with everything that is obvious, i.e., undeniable, indisputable, and not subject to reflection.

Some more sophisticated hunters combine their aggression with biophilia, an innate, evolutionarily encoded bond with nature. They declare their sincere and profound love for the animals they kill. They proclaim that it is love for their victims that allows them to feel the wildness and even sexual passion and satisfaction that accompanies the act of killing. In addition, according to their arguments, the victim itself asks for being killed. In response to this Matt Cartmill, in the book "A View to a Death in the Morning. Hunting and Nature through History", compares hunters to rapists who would often discharge responsibility for their deed and blame the victim, justifying their behavior with a strong feeling for the said victim<sup>3</sup>. It is also worth mentioning the disgraceful position of the Spanish thinker Ortega y Gasset, according to whom it is the animal that urges the hunter to shoot – the animal asks the hunter to be killed. In 1943, fascinated by the phenomenon of hunting, Ortega y Gasset wrote a treatise on hunting and the motives of a hunter, entitled "Meditation on Hunting"<sup>4</sup>. In his paper, he put forward the thesis that a hunter is the happiest man because in the act of killing he becomes his true and authentic self, i.e., what we all once used to be. He becomes a being that finally gets to follow his instincts, the instinct for murder. Hunting would be an act of returning to where we all came from; it would be an act of bringing back a state of savagery and living in accordance with this state. Sadly, you may agree with this statement because hunting, especially recreational hunting, means a true regression in our humanity. In the act of killing an innocent being, a creature that has done nothing wrong to us, words, such as humanity, human dignity, goodness, compassion, mercy and even honor lose their meaning. At this point a question arises: are we still human after having lost these qualities? I believe we are not, because without these qualities we descend to the level of human monsters.

Above all, I would like to place my reflections on the moral condemnation of hunting in the context of the theory of moral development of man, which was developed by Albert Schweitzer, the doctor, theologian, ethicist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, according to whom moral development would consist in embracing

---

<sup>2</sup> C.P. FLYNN: *Hunting and Illegal Violence Against Humans and Other Animals: Exploring the Relationship*. "Society & Animals" 2002, no. 10 (2), pp. 137–154.

<sup>3</sup> M. CARTMILL: *A View to a Death in the Morning. Hunting and Nature Through History*. Harvard University Press 1996, pp. 230–240.

<sup>4</sup> J. ORTEGA Y GASSET: *Meditations on Hunting*. Wilderness Adventures Press 2007.

the moral respect of more and more people and other suffering beings by means of deepened empathy and consciously oriented sympathy. Moral evolution is the ability to emotionally go beyond oneself, and the associated sensitivity to the suffering of others. It is identification with more and more suffering beings, based on taking the same attitudes towards oneself and towards others. At the lowest tier, which we shall call a focus on "ego", the ability to feel pain (physical and mental) is limited only to the sphere of the individual. The suffering of others is neither taken into account nor emotionally perceived. The inability to go beyond oneself makes one a being that identifies only with itself, feels only its own suffering and cares about its own needs, allowing the abuse of others and inflicting suffering on them. The insensitivity and indifference to the tragic fate of others – people and animals alike – are the main features of the lowest tier of moral development. A higher stage of moral development would be connected with the widening of the circle of empathic feeling and identification with another human being. It would involve getting into the psychophysical dimension of the existence of every human being with whom we established direct or indirect relationships. The consequence would be the need to minimize their suffering and treat it as one's own. This attitude would result from attributing to each person a similar ability to feel pain. "Do not do unto others what you do not want others do to you" – this is the principle typical of this level of moral development. Let us emphasize that this rule contains a postulate of the universalization of a positive attitude towards oneself on all people, as a result of obtaining empathic ability to feel the pain of others. This attitude is accompanied by a sense of responsibility not only for oneself, not only for one's loved ones, but also for the harm done to anybody that we might inflict ourselves or witness. This stage of moral development is determined by the need to be helpful, generous and in solidarity with all suffering people. However, according to Schweitzer, the postulate of human solidarity is not the highest moral postulate, since we should not limit the moral community to the representatives of *Homo sapiens*. Why? That is because experiencing suffering is not limited to only one species. Suffering is not a human feature par excellence, but appears everywhere where the nervous system is present. Let us emphasize that people do not have a monopoly on suffering, which also accompanies the lives of animals. Schweitzer distinguishes the ability to feel pain as a special feature that connects people with other living beings and forms the basis of belonging to a community of suffering beings. The attainment of this level of moral consciousness enables mental and emotional surpassing beyond our belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*, and moral respect also for animals that become our brothers in suffering. A man with such a level of moral sensitivity does not want to hurt animals because he would never want to experience the same pain. In addition, his broadened sense of solidarity demands not only refraining from inflicting pain, but helping all those animals that have fallen victim to human sadism, cruelty, callousness and thoughtless-

ness<sup>5</sup>. Did Schweitzer allow the killing of animals? He did, but only where acting under necessity. Schweitzer even postulated that we should ask ourselves: was killing an animal necessary in that particular situation? Such a necessity may be, for example, extreme hunger or the defense of one's own life. In his opinion, in such situations, killing an animal would be acceptable, although it would still be evil. Schweitzer used to say that evil does not become good, even when it is necessary. One should still perceive it as evil and call it thus. The question then arises: does the recreational nature of hunting find any justification in Schweitzer's ethics? No; after all, it is evil in pure form. The hunter neither hunts for hunger, nor he kills in self defense. He kills for the thrill of it, for the atavistic experience, the primitive pleasure derived from hunting down and killing his prey.

In one of his books, clinical psychologist Richard Ryder suggests taking part in the following thought experiment – let us assume that aliens arrive on Earth, creatures whose nervous system development exceeds that of humans<sup>6</sup>. These beings are more intelligent than people and think that their intellectual advantage over people entitles them to do what they want. One of the ideas that aliens come up with is to organize hunts for people, both recreational and practical hunting to cut down the population of the human species, which in their view is breeding excessively. A question arises here: would we, people, the potential victims of such hunting, agree to this? Would we agree to the aliens' treating us in the same way we treat animals – victims of human hunting – on account of their intellectual, ontological, biological, and evolutionary superiority? This thought experiment is particularly convincing for those who are able to apply the supreme moral principle – the principle of universality – or imagine themselves in the place of their victims – defenseless, innocent animals. So, if you were an animal, would you agree to such cruel, savage treatment? If you yourself would not want to experience fear, horror, hurt, dying in suffering – do not do to others what is not pleasant to you. Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated, and stand against cruelty to animals, just as you would not agree to the cruelty of others towards you.

The American ethicist and veterinarian Bernard Rollin asks: what should be the primary purpose of ethics that treats people's moral responsibilities to non-human beings? In his opinion, the main goal should be to free man from the current traditional thinking patterns<sup>7</sup>. The aim of ethics is to cause a change in the human perspective to make a radical change in the perception of certain

---

<sup>5</sup> A. SCHWEITZER: *Ausgewählte Werke in 5 Bänden*. Bd. 5. Union Verlag, Berlin 1971, pp. 143–159.

<sup>6</sup> R.D. RYDER: *Victims of Science. The Use of Animals in Research*. Open Gate Press, London 1983, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> B.E. ROLLIN: *Animal Rights and Human Morality*. Prometheus Books, New York 1992, p. 82.

states of affairs in man. Thanks to this new perspective, we will start to look at the situation differently – we will get a different moral, and a different point of view. A new way of proceeding will come later as a result of changing the perception of a given situation, being a consequence of mental change. According to Rollin, a particularly emphatic example of this is people who at some point in their lives have abandoned what was once obvious to them, namely hunting, through realizing that it means nothing but killing for pleasure and pleasure of the most primitive, atavistic kind, since it results from the satisfaction of catching the escaping prey, from someone else's fear, suffering and death. These people ceased this practice because of the cry of an injured animal that they once had used to be indifferent to. What caused this change? Rollin believes that these people have been able to go beyond their current point of view and look at the situation from the perspective of the victim. They saw in a new light what they once had interpreted as part of one traditional mental scheme.

The American psychologist Paul Hauck puts forward the thesis that a cause of suffering for both humans and animals is so-called moral underdevelopment, characterizing a significant proportion of representatives of the species *Homo sapiens*<sup>8</sup>. In a similar manner as the level of intellectual development of a given person may be established on a scale, the level of one's moral development may also be determined. People who are egocentric, mean-hearted, sadistic, ruthless and indifferent to the suffering of others – in this development would occupy lower levels than those who are empathetic and actively respond to the tragic fate of others.

Hauck highlights that a person who is morally underdeveloped is not necessarily someone who is not very advanced in intellectual development. They are very often educated, polite and sociable people. However, despite this, they are retarded in moral development. Their low level of sensitivity, or the so-called selective sensitivity, which applies only to a certain group of people and no one else, places them below the moral level of empathic, compassionate people. Hauck asks the question: why are such people so limited in their moral sensitivity, even though they may be highly educated and occupy socially respectable professions? The psychologist answers: because no one taught them to put themselves in the situation of their victim, no one taught them to imagine themselves in the place of the one suffering. And that is why these people are simply handicapped in this area. Incidentally, according to Hauck, persuading such people to change their behavior, explaining and providing them with theoretical education will not have any positive effect. They would have to feel and experience the suffering of their victims themselves. Let us expand this thread and add that the hunter would have to be a fleeing, wounded, terrified deer for a moment. He would have to feel its suffering and experience its death. Will this happen in the

---

<sup>8</sup> P. HAUCK: *How to Love and be Loved*. Sheldon 1983, p. 95.

physical world? Probably not. A hunter who has not developed empathy – because if he had, he would not be a hunter – will never become a roe deer – this hunter will never see through the heart of the hunted animal. But here it would be worth watching and reflecting upon the 1995 American movie *Powder*. The film features a hunting plot, in which, owing to the main character (a boy with supernatural abilities who goes by the nickname of Powder), a hunter experiences the last moments of a dying roe deer, which he had mortally wounded. The animal's fear becomes his fear, its suffering becomes his suffering. The result of this mystical experience, based on a momentary sense of unity with the victim, is the hunter's spiritual transformation, as he drops his gun and decides he never wants to kill again. *Powder* is very important because it shows how the perception of the world changes in a man who is entering a higher level of moral and spiritual development.

One more question remains to be discussed: is it possible to reconcile hunting with authentic religiousness? After all, the vast majority of hunters in Poland declare their allegiance to the Catholic Church, calling themselves Christians and participating in religious rites. A question arises: Can a religious person kill innocent beings for nothing, for fun, for the sake of continuing a gruesome tradition, for the thrill of killing, for the primitive pleasure derived from pursuit, from catching one's prey and taking its life? Let us remind you that the word religiousness derives from the Latin word "religare" which means to connect. Thus, a religious person, not by rite but by spirit, is one who wants to connect and remain in connection with God. Therefore, is the practice based on the unnecessary killing of non-humans a path that leads to God? In the Great Catechism of the Catholic Church, one can find the following articles about human-animal relations. Allow me to quote a few selected passages – here is the first of them: *God is infinitely greater than all his works. However, since he is the independent, free Creator and the original cause of all that exists, he is also present in the innermost interior of all his creations* (Art. 300). Another excerpt: "*Various creatures, wanted in their own being, each reflect in their own way a splinter of the infinite wisdom and goodness of God. For this reason, man should respect the goodness of every creature* (Art. 339). *Animals are God's creatures. God surrounds them with His providential care. Through their very existence, they praise Him and give Him glory* (Art. 2416). *The unnecessary infliction of suffering to animals or killing them is contrary to human dignity* (Art. 2418)". This last sentence is very important. Let us repeat: "The unnecessary infliction of suffering to animals or killing them is contrary to human dignity". At this point I would like to refer to the well-known book by theologian Charles Sheldon entitled "In His Steps"<sup>9</sup>. A Christian is one who follows in the footsteps of Jesus. This book includes a moral practice consisting in asking the question: What would Jesus do? So

<sup>9</sup> Ch. SHELDON: *In His Steps. What Would Jesus Do?* Chicago Advance, Chicago 1896.

before making a decision regarding our behavior in a given situation, we should ask: What would Jesus do in my place? This can also be reduced to the question: What would the best part of our nature do? And here I am going back to hunting. Would Jesus take a firearm and run after a helpless, terrified deer, until he caught it, hurt it, and killed it, as a way of enjoying his free time? Would Jesus derive atavistic pleasure based on venting his aggression through the murder of an innocent, suffering being? I consider this question – what would Jesus do? – very important, because it is directly related to the issue of being a Christian. What does it mean to be a Christian? And every hunter should settle this issue in their conscience.

Concluding my article, I would like to quote the words of the Czech writer Milan Kundera from his book “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” – *True human goodness can be expressed in an absolutely pure and complete way only in relation to one who does not inflict any violence towards us. Therefore, the true moral test of humanity consists in the relationship of man to those who are dependent on his grace and disfavor – the animals. And this is where his fundamental defeat occurs, so basic that all others stem from there*<sup>10</sup>.

#### Abstrakt

##### Etyczne potępienie rekreacyjnego myślistwa

W artykule analizuję argumenty współczesnych etyków i psychologów na rzecz odrzucenia i etycznego potępienia myślistwa rekreacyjnego, określanego jako atawistyczna zabawa w zabijanie, jako praktyka oparta na czerpaniu satysfakcji z indukowania strachu, cierpienia i śmierci. Odwołuję się do teorii moralnego rozwoju człowieka autorstwa Alberta Schweitzera, poglądów psychologa klinicznego Richarda Rydera, etyki Bernarda Rollina i podstawowych tez psychologa Paula Haucka.

#### Słowa kluczowe:

etyka, myślistwo, rozwój moralny, cierpienie, prawa zwierząt

#### Абстракт

##### Этическое осуждение любительской охоты

В статье анализируются аргументы современных этиков и психологов в пользу непринятия и этического осуждения любительской охоты. Она определяется как атавистическая игра в убийство, как практика, основанная на черпании удовлетворения в сеянии страха, страдания и смерти. Автор работы ссылается на теорию нравственного развития человека Альберта Швейцера, взгляды клинического психолога Ричарда Райдера, этику Bernarda Rollina и главные тезисы психолога Пола Хока.

#### Ключевые слова:

этика, охота, нравственное развитие, страдание, права животных

<sup>10</sup> M. KUNDERA: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Trans. M.H. HEIM. Harper Perennial, New York 1999, p. 215.

