

Book Review

Hunting: Philosophy for Everyone (In Search of the Wild Life), Nathan Kowalsky (Ed.), 2010, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell

After recommending the anthropological documentary *Inuit Odyssey*,¹ I received a handful of emails from female “ecopsychologists” in particular who objected to the stabbing of a caribou in the heart by an Inuit hunter. This one scene, graphic and honest, appears within the context of an entire film that tells the fascinating and important story of the migration of a Siberian tribe, the Thule, the ancestors of the present-day Inuit. To my surprise, there were no comments about the rest of the documentary. My own reaction, in addition to feeling compassion for the slaughtered animal, was one of admiration and awe at the quick and expert hands who blessed and continued to prepare the butchered animal.

I am sharing these different responses to the same killing act because, editorially speaking, in kind, Nathan Kowalsky provides a forum of diverse ideas and voices about “hunting” that ensemble, becomes the most recent attempt that I am aware of at showcasing serious writers on the “topic.” Most of these essays are written with an intelligent audience in mind, although the reader need not be a philosopher. Because there are nineteen essays in the collection, including a fine forward by David Petersen, I decided that I could only focus my review on a few of these.

Lisa Kretz’s essay “A Shot in the Dark,” ably deconstructs key problems of referring to some hunting practices as “environmental.” For example, she deconstructs the description “natural” as applied to most modern hunting practices while accepting the value of subsistence hunters. Her arguments are for the most part convincing and accurate insofar as she exposes the hypocrisy of recreational hunters. In other parts the focus on “hunting” blinds the author to other practices that apparently are more permissible, if not natural, such as fishing, which can be equally exploitative and cruel. The book (her essay) is about hunting, not fishing, I understand, but by privileging one (very similar) class of human activities as being more dubious—less moral—than another, we might be oblivious to the fact that most economical important fisheries are now in critical decline. The negative privileging is

¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/natureofthings/2009/inuitodyssey>

subtle and possibly unintentional as when she quotes Thoreau's opinion (p. 37) that a perhaps more refined 'man of nature', would eventually grow out of both hunting and fishing. Fishing is never mentioned on par with hunting for the rest of the essay. In some cases, hunting and fishing blend as in the killing of cetaceans and pinnipeds.

As an alternative to hunting, and as a way to "renew awareness of our... relationship to nature," Kretz proposes activities such as "hiking, backpacking, camping, photography, wildlife research..." As a counter argument, the late Paul Shepard ² (1995, 1998) would have asked if any of these activities have the potential of teaching us the inner parts of life, the way the caribou, when dismembered, does. None of these activities are an apt substitute in Shepard's mind, to a potential metaphor and final identification with life, limb by limb. Photography is what psychoanalyst Ernest Schachtel (1903-1975) would have referred to as an *allocentric*, or distal activity (vision, hearing) as compared to *autocentric* or intimate-to-the-body experiences (touch, smell, taste).³ To have a complete understanding of life, both modalities require complementary functioning—critical in human development and to our understanding of natural processes. Jonathan Parker's essay, "The Camera or the Gun," makes this point precisely when after agreeing that wildlife photography can be, in its own right, a bona fide peering into nature, nevertheless, it cannot replace the complex coda (my phrase) of hunting: *tracking, stalking, killing, butchering, and sharing the kill*. He writes:

The danger lies in suggesting that all the benefits of sport hunting can be found within the activity photography hunting, and thus there is no justifiable reason for the continuance of sport hunting as a practice (p. 169).

Finally, to be a wildlife researcher presupposes an intimate knowledge of the inner parts of life as well. All and all, her essay remains fundamentally robust to act as a cantilever to the other essays that exalt the importance if not the exigency of hunting.

² Shepard, P. (1995). *The others: how animals made us human*. Island Press
Shepard, P. (1998). *The tender carnivore and the sacred game*. Athens: University of Georgia Press

³ Schachtel, E. (1959). *Metamorphosis*. NY: Basic books (pp. 81-84 and 96-115)

Debra Merskin's essay "The New Artemis?," focuses on the ancient and present-day role of women hunters. She asks the question: What attracts women to hunting? Accompanying her essay is a more complete questionnaire as part of an online research (plus a follow up) given to a forum of women hunters. Setting aside the problem of generalizing from a small and highly self-selected population, nevertheless, some of the responses are worth noting. If the reader did not know what the sex of the respondent was, if the pronouns and the relationship status were blinded in order to disguise the respondents', again, sex, it would be hard to know who they were. Take the following response to Merskin's question, "What does it feel like?" [to hunt] :

The feeling you get when you have spotted, targeted, and killed the animal is an un-describable. Your heart is racing in the beginning then you slow your breathing down to stay focus. Keeping your eye on the target without making noise or sudden movements, and then one he is down it feels like your heart will pound out of your chest, and the excitement is racing through your veins (p. 234).

This passage could mean, proving Kretz's point, that the excitement that comes from hunting can be orthogonal to other sensations and states that makes the hunt "good;" a more noble (and moral) enterprise. Rather than Kretz's introductory description of hunting as, "...more a testament to humanity's ability to dominate (p. 34)," it seems that *thrill seeking* is as much a part of killing, irrespective of sex. To take a complex life, an ecologically embedded history of life at that, the life of an athlete non-human animal simply for this thrill seeking experience seems very wrong no matter who does the deed.

A different but equally necessary perspective is Valerius Geist's "The Carnivorous Herbivore." Geist summarizes evolutionary evidence that points to our complex alimentary needs, which included long periods of time during which we hunted and ate meat—preyed and were preyed upon. If the scientific evidence he cites is sound, then his extension of these practices and their impact to human cognition and culture make our "original sin" an inescapable fact. Surely, we can on moral grounds switch to vegetarianism (I also recommend reading T. R. Kover's, "Flesh, Death and Tofu: Hunters, Vegetarians, and Carnal Knowledge"), but will that be "us" "then"? Is "us" "then" the real "us" "now"? If so, no Tofu for me please. During most of his

essay, Geist does not seem to take sides on the moral implications of hunting. To the extent that evolutionarily speaking we are human beings “because we hunted” (killed and ate meat), he concludes with the sobering, pre-argument and proposition that, “...before discussing the morality of hunting, we need to consider hunting and meat eating in our evolution. It may be that questioning the morality of hunting questions our humanity.” But, on the other hand, humanity (being human) is and has been changing and continues to change, toward a different sort of creature, more docile perhaps, bigger guts, smaller brains, stronger jaws...(?)

By far the most authentic essay is an Anishinabe perspective. I mean “authentic” because their exposition, Jacob Wawatie’s and Stephanie Pyne’s, circumvents and makes whole previous arguments about the morality, necessity, comedy, spirituality, or aesthetics of “hunting.” That is to say that if hunting was (is) like Wawatie and Pyne describe it, then many of the book’s essays are softened or even rendered less poignant. If the Anishinabe *understand themselves as predators* (p. 94), they may not need evolutionary scientific facts that argue their status in the food chain. If the Anishinabe believe, and not just Mr. Wawatie, and hunt in a way that honor these words:

For hundreds of years, the Anishinabe have been sought out as hunting guides due to their comprehensive knowledge of the patterns of the “natural” world. This knowledge includes an awareness of the particular animals’ experience of existence, and the ability to realize the depth of their relationships that exist between humans and the rest of creation (p. 94-95).

Then, they are not obligated to acknowledge the indictment that hunting is un-natural. If all hunters approached hunting this way, then there would be no shirking or accusatory voices. Those weekend suburban “green warriors” who have gentrified “green,” blood-red, and yellow-marrow would believe hunting to be whole and good. They would, in like-li-hood, be plunging the sacred knife after a prayer into the caribou’s heart deep and quickly for less suffering. They would sigh a soft murmur with its last breath—cry themselves too. But they would also feast, and feed their children. They would be ready, someday, to relinquish life to continue life—death not even worth mentioning at all.

Presenting all these diverse views in one relatively small book, a mere 258 pages, is a vision implemented, without which, most readers invested in learning more about hunting, would sorely miss if they knew their want.

[Reviewed by Jorge Conesa-Sevilla]

Disclaimer and acknowledgement: Prior to publishing book reviews, I make it a habit of sending a proof to the author/editor. I do not believe in “Got you” press. Nathan Kowalsky found factual errors that I have corrected on a final draft. I am thankful to him for catching these.