

# Valuing Predation in Rolston's Environmental Ethics: Bambi Lovers versus Tree Huggers

Ned Hettinger\*

Without modification, Rolston's environmental ethics is biased in favor of plants, since he gives them stronger protection than animals. Rolston can avoid this bias by extending his principle protecting plants (the principle of the nonloss of goods) to human interactions with animals. Were he to do so, however, he would risk undermining his acceptance of meat eating and certain types of hunting. I argue, nevertheless, that meat eating and hunting, properly conceived, are compatible with this extended ethics. As the quintessential natural process, carnivorous predation is rightfully valued and respected by such environmentalists as Rolston. Because the condemnation of human participation in predation by animal activists suggests a hatred of nature, the challenge for Rolston's animal activist critics is to show that one can properly appreciate natural predation while consistently and plausibly objecting to human participation in it.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Holmes Rolston's *Environmental Ethics* is a philosophically sophisticated defense of intuitions shared by many thoughtful environmentalists.<sup>1</sup> Animal activists, however, find his views troubling. In particular, they sense a prejudice in favor of plants and against animals. Rolston himself is worried by some of the implications of his views. For example, in response to one of his critics, Peter Wenz,<sup>2</sup> Rolston writes, "My theory leads to unexpected conclusions. If I need food, I will shoot and eat a deer; I will no longer cut a wild blue spruce for a Christmas tree. Wenz may be right that I am seriously confused! I welcome his thoughtful effort to disentangle my confusions. I need all the help I can get."<sup>3</sup> I, too, want to offer some help by exploring several difficult questions raised by Rolston's fine work.

---

\* Department of Philosophy, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424. Hettinger teaches courses in environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, and social and political philosophy. His published work includes articles on ecological sabotage, animal experimentation, intellectual property, and reverse discrimination. The author thanks Gary Comstock, Dale Jamieson, Eric Katz, Holmes Rolston, Bill Throop, and a referee for *Environmental Ethics* for stimulating comments and criticisms.

<sup>1</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers in the text and footnotes refer to this book.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wenz, "Treating Animals Naturally," *Between the Species* 5 (1989): 1-10.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, "Treating Animals Naturally?" *Between the Species* 5 (1989): 131-32.

## II. WHY PREFER TREES TO DEER?

Modifying Rolston's theory to avoid a bias in favor of plants and against animals brings into focus the conflict between animal activists and environmentalists over the nature and value of predation.<sup>4</sup> It appears odd to be willing to kill a deer but not a Colorado blue spruce because most people, including Rolston, accept the following value hierarchy: a person is intrinsically more important than an animal, an animal more important than a plant, and a plant more important than a rock.<sup>5</sup> Rolston posits increasing degrees of objective intrinsic value according to this ranking (pp. 223-25) mainly because a being higher up "realizes a greater range of values in its life" (p. 68), more fully expresses the ecosystem's "potential in value richness" (p. 68), and thus represents a greater "evolutionary achievement" (p. 73).<sup>6</sup> Rolston sees natural history and evolution as tending toward more sophisticated beings with higher quality and richness of life (p. 184-86). If the deer, as a greater ecological achievement, outranks the tree in intrinsic value, we should be more reluctant to destroy it.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a provocative discussion of the conflict between defenders of animals and environmentalists, see J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311-38. In a more recent article, "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again," *Between the Species* 4 (1988): 163-69, Callicott attempts to mitigate this conflict. Mark Sagoff also explores the tensions between members of groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the Sierra Club in "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 22 (1984): 297-307. See also Eugene Hargrove, ed., *The Animal Rights/Environmental Ethics Debate: The Environmental Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Rolston defends human superiority: humans "culminate" (p. 72) the ecosystem and are its "most sophisticated product" (p. 73). "Humans are of capstone value" (p. 339). Yet, Rolston does not advocate human domination of the Earth or arrogance toward it. For a forceful presentation opposing such a hierarchy (and one that specifically denies human superiority), see Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 129-56, particularly pp. 147-52.

<sup>6</sup> Rolston argues that anthropogenic intrinsic value (articulated by such writers as J. Baird Callicott) does not adequately account for the noninstrumental value of nature. The alleged virtue of valuing nature for its own sake (anthropogenic intrinsic value), in contrast to nature having value in its own right (objective intrinsic value), is that the former is consistent with the "no value without a valuer" emotivist bias of most twentieth-century Anglo-American axiology. Rolston argues that certain natural entities and processes (including all living beings and some nonbiotic entities) have objective intrinsic value apart from the existence of any conscious valuer. One of his arguments for this position is that without such value, there would be no *actual* noninstrumental value lost when, for example, an unknown species of plant goes extinct (p. 115). Rolston sometimes speaks as if nonsentient life "values" what is in its interests, thus unwittingly lending support to the "no value without a valuer" position he rejects (pp. 99-100). For a critique of Rolston's position on intrinsic value, see J. Baird Callicott, "Rolston on Intrinsic Value: A Deconstruction," *Environmental Ethics* 14 (1992): 129-43. For more on Callicott's alternative concept of "anthropogenic truncated intrinsic value," see his *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), chaps. 8 and 9.

Rolston offers several considerations to justify his reverse preference. First, when an organism is an endangered species, he argues, it should be given preference over a member of a nonendangered species. According to Rolston, species are real historical lineages (pp. 135-36) and are as much a locus of intrinsic value as are their individual members (p. 148). Rolston agrees with most environmentalists that it is more important to protect the integrity of a species than to protect the individual members of a species (p. 151). For example, killing exotic brown trout who are outcompeting the endangered California golden trout in their native ecosystem is justified by this preference for members of endangered species (pp. 142-43). This preference applies even when the members of endangered species are at a "lower" level of life: shooting feral goats to protect a plant species is justified even when it involves killing several goats for each known surviving plant (pp. 141-42). Individual human life as well may be outweighed by the value of preserving endangered species. Rolston's example is shooting poachers of endangered rhinoceroses or even endangered mosses—if they persist after being fully warned, and there are no other alternatives.<sup>7</sup> This consideration, however, cannot be used to favor Colorado blue spruce because it is not an endangered species.

Second, it may be necessary to shoot the deer but not cut down the tree to protect the surrounding ecosystem. Duties to ecosystems, Rolston argues, are stronger than duties to individual plants, animals, or species within them (pp. 182 and 188). Although an individual sentient animal has more intrinsic value than an individual nonsentient animal or plant, the latter collectively are instrumentally more valuable to the health of their ecosystems than sentient animals, individually or collectively (p. 223). The hierarchy of importance is reversed when considering the instrumental value of a population in terms of the health of an ecosystem: typically, plant populations have more instrumental value than animal populations and animals have more instrumental value than humans. Furthermore, Rolston insists, "there is nothing secondary about instrumental value" (p. 223). He allows that an organism's instrumental disvalue may outweigh its intrinsic value (pp. 101-02). Thus, Rolston's preference could be justified if a Colorado blue spruce contributes more to the integrity, stability, and beauty of a particular biotic community than a mule deer does.

A third relevant consideration is the nature of the goods for which we sacrifice these creatures. One of Rolston's main purposes in writing his book was to specify how and when we should follow nature. Following nature (in carefully circumscribed senses) is good. When an act appropriately follows

---

<sup>7</sup> These examples come from a videotaped classroom debate between Holmes Rolston and Bernard Rollin at Colorado State University. This tape (available from Rolston) is an excellent example of the differing perspectives of environmentalists and defenders of animals. Also, see *Environmental Ethics*, pp. 138-40, where Rolston discusses sacrificing human goods in order to preserve endangered species.

nature, it has some moral support.<sup>8</sup> Killing a deer for food is an appropriate following of nature because eating is a natural event (i.e., it is a biological process that humans share with nonhuman organisms). Also, killing to eat is an event that directly parallels how values are traded in nature. In contrast, cutting down a Colorado blue spruce for Christmas sacrifices a tree for a purely cultural good (a religious purpose that humans do not share with other organisms). Thus, the moral imperative to follow nature supports killing the deer for food but not cutting down the tree for Christmas.<sup>9</sup>

### III. PROBLEMS WITH ROLSTON'S PRINCIPLES

Rolston provides several principles to further specify the appropriate treatment of plants and animals. The main principle, introduced in chapter two, which governs our treatment of noncultural sentient life, is *the principle of the nonaddition of suffering*.<sup>10</sup> When we capture animals in culture (e.g., using domestic animals for food) or interact with animals in the wild (e.g., hunting), we have a strong duty not to inflict more pain on them than they would typically receive in a natural course of events (independent of human intervention). There is, however, no comparable strong duty of subtraction (to inflict less suffering), and no duty at all to avoid causing innocent suffering. According to Rolston, "The wild animal has no right or welfare claim to have from humans a kinder treatment than in nonhuman nature" (p. 59). Since "bullets inflict no more pain than do the fangs of a cougar but rather less" (p. 88), this principle

---

<sup>8</sup> Rolston has an intriguing response to the objection that the moral imperative to follow nature is absurd because it justifies morally outrageous behavior (such as, letting famine victims starve when they have overwhelmed the carrying capacity of their ecosystems). He argues that we should follow nature when interacting with nature, but ought not to follow nature in interhuman ethics. Just as we should not take cultural values and impose them on nature—for example, by taking our duty to each other to alleviate innocent suffering, applying it to animals, and rescuing them from the innocent pain they suffer—we should also not take natural values as guidelines for culture—for example, by killing and eating each other (see p. 81). Notice the tension between this restriction on following nature in our interactions with nature and Rolston's (and other environmentalists') desire to learn from nature in a "tutorial sense" (pp. 41–44). J. Baird Callicott's suggestion that we take Aldo Leopold's advice to "reappraise things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free" and use it to evaluate human culture is in direct opposition to Rolston's restriction. See Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," especially the section titled "Reappraising Domesticity."

<sup>9</sup> Rolston's ideas rely heavily on a distinction between nature and culture. In his writings, Rolston distinguishes between a half dozen or more senses of the term *natural* (see pp. 32–44). For a discussion of different ways that we might follow nature in our dealing with animals, see Rolston, "Treating Animals Naturally?"

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter, I refer to noncultural sentient life as "animals" even though doing so is misleading both because humans as cultural sentient life are animals and because many animals are (probably) not sentient (i.e., they cannot consciously feel sensations of pleasure and pain). For an argument that invertebrates (except for some cephalopods such as squid and octopus) cannot feel pain, see Patrick Bateson, *New Scientist*, 25 April 1992, pp. 30–33.

permits the killing of the deer.<sup>11</sup> A second related principle guiding our interaction with animals is *the duty to avoid ecologically pointless suffering*. Severing the blood vessels of a live animal for religiously acceptable eating is a form of ecologically pointless suffering, as is killing animals for the status of fur coats or alligator skin shoes and purses. These practices, unlike hunting for food, inflict pain on animals for purely cultural reasons and thus are ecologically pointless and impermissible.<sup>12</sup>

Rolston's principle specifying appropriate treatment of nonsentient animals and plants is *the principle of the nonloss of goods*.<sup>13</sup> The goods achieved in human life must outweigh the goods sacrificed by plants for such behavior to be justified (p. 120).<sup>14</sup> For example, creating drive-through sequoias and sizzling ants for amusement are not justified under this principle, but cutting timber for low-cost housing and eradicating mosquitoes for human health are.<sup>15</sup> If chopping down a Colorado blue spruce for Christmas festivities constitutes an overall loss of goods, this principle makes it impermissible.

Although these principles are plausible and helpful, they are problematic in some respects. The most striking problem is that the principle protecting plants is stronger than the principles protecting animals. In order to be justified in

---

<sup>11</sup> Rolston uses the same principles to specify appropriate treatment of wild and domestic animals. In short, we should treat animals naturally. It is especially difficult, however, to know what "treating animals naturally" means when they are caught up in culture and are, to some extent, cultural beings (see p. 79). Rolston's views may not take sufficient account of the morally relevant differences between wild and domestic animals.

<sup>12</sup> Rolston's examples may make one think that he simply wants to rule out *trivial* as opposed to *significant* uses of animals. However, in "Treating Animals Naturally?" (p. 135), he writes, "I am trying to prohibit cultural activities that exploit animals for culturally innovative reasons, even if these are culturally significant."

<sup>13</sup> Hereafter, I refer to nonsentient organisms as "plants," despite the fact that unicellular organisms, fungi, and (probably) many animals are nonsentient as well.

<sup>14</sup> Although Rolston uses the term *outweigh*, if this principle is really aimed at the "nonloss of goods," then what is required is only that value be produced which is equal to the value destroyed; it need not be greater. This principle of the "nonloss of goods" I call the principle of "the conservation of value," since that seems to be its aim.

<sup>15</sup> Assessing the relative moral importance of the goods of different species is a difficult task. Significant conceptual work is required to explain such interspecific judgments of value. Nevertheless, we frequently share intuitive judgments about such matters. The existence of borderline and controversial cases and the lack of conceptual grounding should not obscure this fact. In the cases just mentioned, Rolston makes the plausible particular judgments that the value of the integrity of sequoias exceeds the value of the pleasures gained by tourists in driving through them, that the value of lives of ants exceeds the value of the amusement provided by watching them burn, that the value of housing for the poor exceeds the value of the trees cut, and that the value of human health exceeds the value of lives of mosquitoes. Rolston can be interpreted as relying on two weighing principles in making these judgments: (1) interests basic to the life and well-being of plants outweigh frivolous or perverse human interests and (2) interests basic to the life and well-being of humans outweigh the interests of plants. For a useful discussion of such principles as they pertain to animals, see Donald VanDeVeer, "Interspecific Justice," *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 55-70.

taking plant life, one must achieve a parity in value: the value lost by a tree must be neutralized by, at a minimum, an equal value gained by a human. No such requirement must be met before taking the life of an animal. As long as the pain inflicted is not greater than what the animal is likely to have experienced apart from human intervention and the infliction of pain is not ecologically pointless, it can be killed. Rolston's principles do not require that the value gained by humans from hunting and eating meat equal the value lost in the death of a deer. Yet, in contrast, he does require that the value gained in picking flowers for a bouquet be at least equal to the goods of the flowers destroyed (p. 120).

In other words, although Rolston's theory includes a strong consequentialist principle that must be satisfied before one can take plant life, viz., the values achieved as a result of our behavior must at least equal the values lost, his principles protecting animals are weaker deontological ones, requiring only that we act in the right sort of way and for the right reasons. In general, the two principles protecting animals require that we treat animals naturally: we must inflict no more pain on them than nature might and do so only for natural, not culturally innovative, purposes. These principles are compatible with behavior that causes an overall loss of value in human interaction with animals, which Rolston prohibits in comparable interaction with plants.

Notice that Rolston provides no principle that protects animal *life*: the principles of the nonaddition of suffering and the prohibition of ecologically pointless suffering deal only with the *suffering* of animals. Their concern is narrowly hedonistic, a defect for which Rolston rightly criticizes those who deny the existence of value in plant life (p. 108). In contrast, the *lives* of plants are protected by the principle of the nonloss of goods. What justification could there be for protecting the lives of plants but not those of animals, especially if sentient beings have more intrinsic value than nonsentient ones? To provide a reasonable answer to this question, Rolston needs to strengthen his principles protecting animals. Otherwise, he is open to charges of inconsistency and bias in favor of plants.

Rolston's use of these principles raises methodological concerns as well. On the one hand, Rolston requires us to conserve value in our interactions with plants, but not with animals. On the other hand, he stresses behaving naturally toward animals, but not toward plants. In this way, Rolston's two sources of moral concern—his deontological naturalistic ethic, requiring us to follow nature, and his consequentialist conservation ethic, requiring us to conserve value—are kept separate. He uses one for our treatment of animals and the other to guide us in interactions with plants. Neither ethic is systematically applied in the other domain.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> I interpret the principle of the nonaddition of suffering as requiring not only that we cause animals no more pain than they would have suffered in the wild, but also that we conserve the balance of pleasure minus pain in the lives of culturally involved animals, when compared to its

Rolston needs to extend each ethic to the domain of the other and then provide some way of resolving potential conflicts between the two. In the next section, I discuss the implications of extending the conservation of value ethic to our treatment of animals. It is useful to explore the implications of applying the naturalistic ethic to our treatment of plants. What would treating plants naturally involve? Would it, for example, allow cutting trees to build log cabins (because shelter is an ecological good), but not for scenic enhancement (a purely cultural good without an analogue in nature)?

#### IV. CONSERVING VALUE IN INTERACTION WITH ANIMALS

By extending the principle of the nonloss of goods to the interaction of humans with animals (placing it together with the principle of nonaddition of suffering and the prohibition against ecologically pointless suffering), Rolston can solve these problems. However, this modification is not trouble free, for it threatens to undermine his belief in the legitimacy of meat eating and certain types of hunting. Once our treatment of animals is governed by a principle that requires us to conserve value, animal activist criticisms obtain a foothold in Rolston's theory that is not possible when animals are protected solely by the requirement to treat them naturally. In the context of this extension, we have to determine, first, if the value of eating beef (e.g., nourishment and pleasure of the palate) is sufficient to neutralize the total disvalue of the pain that the cow suffers, the loss of its freedom of movement, and the loss of its life. Second, we have to ask if the values achieved in hunting (e.g., nourishment, recreation, and possible spiritual values) are sufficient to compensate for the fear, pain, and loss of life of the deer.<sup>17</sup>

---

level in their natural lives. Even so, the principle fails not only to require the conservation of the multiplicity of other values relevant to animals (e.g., the value of freedom and of life), but also fails to require the conservation of *overall* hedonistic value. Because it accepts the natural status quo with respect to animal suffering, it allows us to cause the natural amount of (value decreasing) suffering in the lives of animals, whether or not it is balanced by an equal increase in pleasure in our own lives. Thus, it permits us to bring about a net decrease in the world's pleasure-pain balance. Moreover, it even permits us to cause a decrease in the world's pleasure-pain balance greater than what might have occurred in the natural world. The pain that a prey suffers in the wild could be offset by the pleasure of the predator. Rolston's principle does not require the same degree of offsetting pleasure in humans.

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the spiritual value of hunting, Rolston writes, "In this sense, hunting is not *sport*; it is a *sacrament* of the fundamental, mandatory seeking and taking possession of value that characterizes an ecosystem and from which no culture ever escapes" (p. 91). In "Treating Animals Naturally" (p. 6), Peter Wenz objects that if the justification for hunting is religious, then Rolston fails to meet his own requirement that animal suffering be imposed for ecological, but not culturally innovative purposes. Perhaps Rolston can respond as follows. Any human activity has meanings that are absent when the behavior occurs in spontaneous nature. In this sense, any human activity is cultural. Nevertheless, accepting the cultural nature of human activity should not lead us to deny that some human activities are ecological in character. Unlike Kosher slaughter, some hunting is appropriately described as direct participation in ecological processes

If our value destructive behavior toward animals nourishes human life and we accept Rolston's hierarchy of intrinsic value, then it is plausible to claim that value is conserved. As long as one eats what one kills (even if doing so is not one's purpose in hunting), the value one sustains (a human life) is then greater than the value lost (an animal life), and nonloss of value is achieved. Eating domestic livestock could also plausibly be judged to conserve value for similar reasons, as could the subclass of animal experiments that result in lifesaving medical technologies, assuming that a typical human life is worth numerous typical animal lives, a judgment many would be willing to make despite its controversial nature.

Applied in this way to our interaction with animals, the principle of the conservation of value may seem overly permissive. Note, however, the practices it is likely to prohibit: trophy hunting and fishing if the animal remains are not consumed, (perhaps) catch and release fishing, cosmetics testing on animals, bullfights, certain practices in zoos, and trade in endangered species. In these instances, the lives, well-being, and freedom of animals are sacrificed for—comparatively speaking—trivial human pleasures, thus resulting in a loss of value.

## V. MINIMIZING HARM IN ACHIEVING GOALS

Simply adding the requirement to conserve value in our interaction with animals, however, ignores the obvious fact that there are alternative ways of achieving the same goals. For example, even if eating animals does conserve value by sustaining human life, how can it be justified given the existence of less value destructive ways of nourishing human life? To resolve this problem, perhaps Rolston's principle of the nonloss of goods should be supplemented by a requirement to consider alternatives and to choose the least harmful means of obtaining a goal. In his illustrations of how the principle of nonloss of goods applies to plants, Rolston does consider alternatives to the proposed action. For example, he suggests taking along a foam pad instead of cutting fir trees for a more comfortable night in the woods (pp. 121-22) and he proposes using artificial trees for Christmas rather than blue spruces (p. 122).

Requiring the consideration of less costly alternatives significantly affects the principle of the nonloss of goods. With the addition of this requirement, the question is no longer simply, for example, whether a good night's sleep for a human has equal value to the value lost when a fir is cut for its soft boughs. If we determine that there are alternative, less value destructive ways of achieving what we are after, then we are required to use them instead. Thus, even if

---

(viz., predation). In this sense, hunting can be a natural (ecological) use of animals while having cultural (e.g., religious) significance as well.



the value destroyed by cutting a fir is equaled by the value of a good night's sleep, it is wrong to cut the fir if one can get that good night's sleep without the loss of the fir's value (and without creating other comparable disvalue).

It seems likely that Rolston implicitly accepts such a principle for our treatment of plants, which I call *the principle of minimum harm in achieving human goals*. If so, then in our interactions with plants not only must the value achieved, at a minimum, be equal to the value lost in harming the plants, but we must harm the plants as little as possible in achieving our goal.

If we extend the principle of nonloss of goods to our interactions with animals, as I have suggested above, it is not unreasonable to supplement it with a similar requirement to do the least harm necessary to animals when achieving a given goal.<sup>18</sup> However, once we do so, the animal activist objections are no longer so easily answered. A vegetarian diet achieves the same goals as meat eating: it is equally nutritious (in fact, vegetarian diets are often healthier) and can provide equal pleasure with regard to the palate. Thus, if in our interactions with animals we must not only conserve value but also achieve our goals with the least loss of value, then because of the greater intrinsic value of animals vis-à-vis plants, we should be vegetarians. The protein wasteful institution of animal agriculture certainly does not achieve our nutritional goals in the least value destructive way possible.<sup>19</sup> A similar argument can be made supporting such alternatives to hunting as tracking animals and photographing them.

As these reflections demonstrate, it is no simple matter for Rolston to avoid inconsistency and his bias in favor of plants by extending the principle of the nonloss of goods and the requirement to do the minimum harm necessary to achieve a goal to our interactions with animals. If he extends these principles to animals and continues to support meat eating and certain types of hunting, then he needs to show not only that these practices conserve value, but also that the alternatives proposed by animal activists do not achieve the same goals at less cost. Moreover, because these alternatives clearly involve less loss of value in animal lives, Rolston must show that some legitimate goal of meat eaters is not attainable by eating a vegetarian diet and that hunters have legitimate goals that are not achievable through wildlife photography.

---

<sup>18</sup> Even if we do not augment Rolston's principles for the treatment of animals with a requirement to conserve value, we still must minimize the degree to which we harm them in the pursuit of a given goal. Rolston partially acknowledges this point when he prohibits the infliction of "pointless pain" (see "Treating Animals Naturally?" p. 133). I here suggest prohibiting the infliction on animals of pointless *harm*.

<sup>19</sup> The most plausible environmentalist argument for vegetarianism is that eating crop-fed animals rather than eating plants directly is an inefficient and costly way of getting our protein. According to this argument, given the massive increase in destruction of habitat (and thus other organisms) that results from this style of nourishing ourselves, respect for nonhuman nature requires abolishing animal agriculture and developing a vegetarian human society. For a persuasive discussion of this argument, see Taylor's *Respect for Nature*, pp. 294-96.

## VI. IS CONSERVING VALUE WHILE MINIMIZING HARM IN THE PURSUIT OF GOALS A SUFFICIENTLY STRONG ETHIC?

Even with the addition of the requirement to choose the least costly means of achieving one's goals, significant questions about the plausibility of this modified environmental ethic can still arise. This ethic is stronger than one employing the unmodified principle of the nonloss of goods by itself, but it is still weaker than other possible ethics (e.g., an ethic maximizing good consequences). As long as the results of an act conserve value and the least costly means is utilized in achieving the goals that are being pursued, the agent's goals, whatever they may be, are acceptable. The ethic as modified here does not require that the goals be altered to minimize harm or to maximize net value gain. Nor does it require that the value-conserving result of the act be the agent's sole or even primary goal (though, of course, the agent must be willing to abandon the activity if it fails to conserve value).

Two questions naturally arise at this point. First, should we accept a person's goal as long as the activity involved conserves value? Second, shouldn't we require the alteration of goals so that value is maximized (or harm minimized) in our interactions with nature? My response is that an ethic requiring value maximization (or the minimization of harm) in our interactions with noncultural entities is excessive.<sup>20</sup> Although it could perhaps usefully function as an ethical ideal to be approximated by saints, it is unsuitable as a moral requirement to govern our ordinary lives.<sup>21</sup> Our duties to fellow humans more closely approximate a value maximization ethic than do our duties toward nature. The natural world, unlike the world of human culture, is an independent order for which we are not responsible. (In fact, in a causal sense, it is responsible for us.) In our dealings with nature, it seems sufficient to choose goals that conserve value and then to carry out these goals in such a way that our actions minimize the destruction of value. In contrast, human culture is a world that we have created

---

<sup>20</sup> Such a requirement may even be excessive in human ethics. Maximizing value in our interactions with other humans would require as duty acts generally accepted as supererogatory. For example, it would require us to feed starving people before sending our children to college. In a world as needy as ours, one would have to work full-time to meet the requirements of a value maximizing ethic.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Taylor's recent suggestion that the minimization of killing is an appropriate environmental ethical ideal illustrates the saint-like commitment required if we are to minimize harm. Taylor, like Albert Schweitzer before him, seeks to avoid the fundamental natural fact that life thrives at the expense of other life. He thus suggests eating habits that avoid killing (developed) living individuals. He points out that we can do this by eating, for example, nuts, seeds, berries, fruits, green beans, or tomatoes (all of which can be removed without killing the plant), rather than eating such foods as lettuce, carrots, cauliflower, or animals. These suggestions (and other practical ways to sustain human life with minimum killing of other life) are included in a letter from Taylor to Gary Comstock on the "Ethics of the Bioculture" (7 October 1990). The letter is available from Paul Taylor, Gary Comstock, or me.

and thus is a place where our responsibilities are greater.<sup>22</sup> A starving Somalian has a significantly greater claim to my attention than does a starving elk. (This point is independent of considerations concerning the alleged greater intrinsic value or higher degree of suffering of the human.) Thus, in our interactions with other humans, requiring that our activities conserve value is too weak. We have positive duties to benefit humanity that we do not have toward nature.<sup>23</sup>

## VII. A UNIQUE GOAL OF HUNTING AND MEAT EATING

Do meat eaters and hunters have legitimate goals that are not achievable through vegetarianism and wildlife photography? Rolston believes that there are positive values in the lives of (some) hunters and (all?) meat eaters that are lacking in the lives of vegetarians and nonhunters. "Meat eaters," he says, "know their ecology and natural history in a way that vegetarians do not. . . . I'm not sure a vegetarian even understands the way the world is built."<sup>24</sup> Eating meat involves "participating in the logic and biology of one's ecosystem" (p. 60). In other words, predation is a fundamental feature of the natural world manifest in the lives of meat eaters and hunters.<sup>25</sup>

According to Rolston, we would not have evolved into human beings without the evolution of the human mind and hand to hunt; if our ancestors had remained herbivores, he suggests, there would have been no human culture. Thus, Rolston holds, hunting and eating meat affirms human nature by participating in a process that made us what we are. To reject our predatory history and still try to value the human being isolates a product from its essential historical genesis.<sup>26</sup> Rolston repeatedly insists that the products and processes of natural history are interrelated in such a way that it is inappropriate

---

<sup>22</sup> In some respects, we have stronger duties to domestic than to wild animals and plants. I am responsible for my dog, my house plant, and my cow in a way that I am not responsible for a timber wolf, a columbine, or a dragon fly.

<sup>23</sup> This discussion ignores significant positive duties that we have toward nature that are required by restitutive justice.

<sup>24</sup> Rolston made these remarks on a draft of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> But can we not equally well participate in "the logic of ecology" by mimicking herbivores? (Herbivores are also predators, for they exploit other life to nourish their own.) Is there special value in mimicking the predation of animal life? Is it better to be like a falcon, a shark, or a bear than a goose, an anchovy, or a gorilla? Are the stealth and cunning of some carnivores "greater ecological achievements" than the alertness of some herbivores? If we assume that predators higher in the trophic pyramid are of greater intrinsic value (as Rolston's hierarchy suggests), then mimicking carnivores rather than herbivores permits us to participate in the logic of ecology at an elevated and more sophisticated level. Additionally, since humans have evolved as omnivores (i.e., we have the capacity to be nourished by both plants and animals), meat eating and hunting are truer to our *own* ecological history than is a vegetarian abstinence from taking and consuming animal life.

<sup>26</sup> One can imagine beings very much like us who came into existence without a predatory past. However, if we assume that the basic features of a species' evolutionary history are essential to

ate to value the former and not the latter.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, he argues, when the process that produces a product is essential to the *understanding* of what that product is, one cannot consistently affirm the value of the product while denying the value of the process that created it. One might as well try to value the culture of Native American plains tribes while rejecting their tradition of killing buffalo for food, clothing, and shelter.

Viewed in this way, the behavior of meat eaters and hunters can affirm dimensions of value in nature that it is difficult for animal activists to appreciate. If carnivorous predation in nature is *good*—and not merely an unpleasant fact that we must learn to live with—then human carnivorous predation can be seen as an affirmation of this valuable natural process. Respecting nature means respecting the ways in which nature trades values, and such respect includes painful killings for the purpose of life support.

The hunter does not show greater respect for the deer's life than does the photographer, for the former, but not the latter destroys that life.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the hunter can show greater respect for natural process by affirming through participation the violent sacrifice of sentient life for the sustenance of other sentient life. Although the meat-eating hunter turned vegetarian photographer embraces an ethic of respect for *individual* sentient life and a hedonistic utilitarian concern to minimize suffering, this caring and loving approach to wild animals is often in serious tension with a healthy respect for the sometimes violent, painful, and life-sacrificing *processes* of nature.

This respect for natural process involves the attainment of goals that cannot be achieved through the proposed alternatives of animal activists. For example, the goal of nourishing oneself by taking part in the painful sacrifice of sentient life for the sustenance of other life cannot be achieved by vegetarianism or wildlife photography. If one's goal is to participate in this fundamental feature of the natural world (viz., carnivorous predation), there are no less value destructive ways to do it.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the requirement to choose goals in our

---

what that species is, then these beings would not be human. Viewed as responses to openings in ecological resource relationships ("niche fillers"), species (including *Homo sapiens*) are essentially tied to their evolutionary history.

<sup>27</sup> In chapter four, valuing species really involves valuing the generative process of speciation. As a result, we have no duty to species to save the Pere David Deer. In chapter five, one reason to value ecosystems is that they are the creative context that produces the products we value (species and individuals). Individuals and species are what they are only in their ecosystems. A lion in a cage is hardly the same creature.

<sup>28</sup> Compare p. 88, where Rolston claims that a wildlife biologist who shoots a deer for management reasons can revere life as much as a Humane Society member who feeds the deer.

<sup>29</sup> Because carnivorous predation can be practiced on nonsentient animal life (e.g., on oysters or clams)—a practice that most animal activists would accept—why must sentient life be targeted? Hunters would surely deny that gathering oysters counts as hunting, but, biologically, it is a kind of carnivorous predation (as is some filter feeding, for that matter). To insist on killing and eating *sentient* life suggests that (the possibility of) the infliction of pain is essential and that only predation on sufficiently developed animals counts as authentic participation. Is such a view

interactions with nature that conserve value and are achieved in the least value destructive way possible is one that *can* be met by meat eaters and hunters.

Of course, the vast majority of meat eaters and hunters have no such goals in mind. Most meat eaters would rather not even think about the fact that they are consuming the flesh of another sentient being who has painfully died in order that they may live. The way meat is advertised, packaged, and consumed in our culture helps hide this fact from them. Similarly, numerous hunting practices suggest that many hunters are not trying to nourish themselves by participating in the painful value trading ways of the natural world. Thus, this argument suggests only that it is *possible* to hunt and eat meat in ways that are compatible with the requirement to choose goals that result in the conservation of value and to attain those goals in the least value destructive way possible. It does not justify these activities as they are typically practiced in our culture.<sup>30</sup>

### VIII. WHY VALUE PREDATION?

From the perspective of an animal activist, the desire to participate in carnivorous predation is likely to appear mysterious and illegitimate. Why, such an activist might ask, would any morally enlightened person want to cause sentient animals to suffer and die? Why participate in such a nasty and unpleasant business?

Environmentalists and animal activists disagree over how to conceptualize and value predation. By arguing that humans should not join other predators and must not kill animals for basic needs, animal activists risk being committed to the view that all carnivorous predation is intrinsically evil. On this view, a world without predation would be a better world, other things being equal. This view is one that no true lover of the wild can support, although animal activists frequently do endorse it.<sup>31</sup> For example, Gary Comstock has suggested that in a Christian heaven, even though there will be wild animals, there will be no

---

perverse? To insist on the use of nonsentient life suggests qualms about the value of natural predation involving sentient prey. The desire to participate in such predation can show that one values even this development of predatory relationships.

<sup>30</sup> Rolston's acceptance of certain types of hunting and his general endorsement of meat eating are broader than what is justified by the limited defense presented here. Additionally, eating meat—since it only partially participates in predation—is on weaker ground than is hunting and eating what one kills.

<sup>31</sup> It is often claimed that animal predation is a neutral fact without axiological significance. I do not think that this claim can be plausibly held either by an environmentalist who wants to value nature or by an animal activist whose concern is with sentient life and suffering. Note that axiological neutrality is not the same as moral neutrality. Animal predation is morally neutral because animals are not moral agents and their behavior cannot be evaluated *morally*. Just making this point, however, leaves the question of its axiological significance open. Although predation in nature is neither right nor wrong, I am suggesting that for the parties in this dispute, it is either good or bad.

predation, for “the wolf shall live with the sheep” and “the lion shall eat straw like cattle.”<sup>32</sup> Peter Singer has hinted that he too thinks a world without predation would be a better world:

Nonhuman animals are not capable of considering the alternatives, or of reflecting morally on the rights and wrongs of killing for food; they just do it. We may *regret* that this is the way the world is, but it makes no sense to hold nonhuman animals morally responsible.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, Steve Sapontzis has argued that “we are morally obligated to prevent predation whenever we can do so without occasioning as much or more unjustified suffering than the predation would create.”<sup>34</sup> These views are anathema to environmentalists whose major policy goals include the reintroduction of predators.

Rolston’s attitude toward predation stands in stark contrast to the attitudes of the animal activists:

Nature is bloody, the top trophic rungs are always raptors, cats, wolves, hunters, and I’m one of those, and unashamed of it. Eating meat continues that sacrificial nature, feeding even the life of culture in which we make much exodus otherwise from nature.<sup>35</sup>

Rolston’s metaphysics of nature underlies and supports this attitude.<sup>36</sup> The biological world—on Rolston’s interpretation—is “sacrificial” or “cruciform”: it involves struggling and suffering in the achievement of something higher. The evolutionary advancements that Rolston sees as the trend of natural history—from matter to microbes to plants to animals, from reflex to instinct to learning, and from nature to culture—have been earned at the price of extinction, death, and suffering. To attain the marvelous life forms that we find in nature today, millions of species and billions upon billions of individuals have been sacrificed. “Adaptation,” he writes, “is imperfect, but if it were

---

<sup>32</sup> Gary Comstock, “Must Mennonites be Vegetarians?” *The Mennonite* 107 (1992): 273. The quotes are from Isaiah 11:5-9. Nevertheless, a predatory lifestyle is essential to the natures of such animals as wolves and lions: a wolf would not be a wolf (and certainly not a “wild” wolf) if it peaceably coexisted with sheep.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), p. 237 (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> Steve Sapontzis, *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 247. Chapter thirteen is perhaps the most rigorous and careful discussion to date concerning what an animal activist should think about predation.

<sup>35</sup> These comments come from Rolston’s remarks on a draft of this paper.

<sup>36</sup> Although these ideas can be found in *Environmental Ethics*, Rolston develops them in depth in his *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). See chapter three on the biological sciences, especially pp. 133-46 where he interprets “the way of nature as the way of the Cross.” Also see pp. 286-93 where he explicitly deals with the problem of suffering.

perfect evolution would cease. . . . It is the imperfection that drives the world toward perfection, and in that sense it is a necessary evil.”<sup>37</sup> Rolston argues that suffering and death are *necessary* for advancing life:

We do not really have available to us any coherent alternative models by which, in a painless world, there might have come to pass anything like these dramas of nature and history that have happened, events that in their central thrusts we greatly treasure. . . . There are sorts of creation that cannot occur without death, and these include the highest created goods.<sup>38</sup>

Predation has the same dialectical character as natural history: death and pain of one individual turns into life and pleasure for another, all the while advancing the system. Evolutionary history is (as Rolston says of animal suffering) “a sad good” (p. 60), and predation, perhaps especially carnivorous predation, mirrors it and drives it. Although dissected and viewed myopically from the perspective of the prey who loses, predation does appear evil, it should be understood holistically as the process of advancement and flourishing of life. For Rolston, the most important goal of an environmental ethic is to defend the creative, fertile, and sacrificial process of natural history itself. As a result, Rolston must value predation; it is simply natural history writ small.

When animal activists oppose predation, they are opposing nature. For example, Albert Schweitzer, the sensitive and thoughtful advocate of revering life and minimizing killing, takes an attitude toward nature that I think many animal activists must share.

The world is indeed the grisly drama of will-to-live at variance with itself. One existence survives at the expense of another of which it yet knows nothing. . . . I have been cast by my reverence for life into a state of unrest foreign to the world. . . . I choose as my activity the removal of the self-contradiction of the will-to-live, as far as the influence of my own existence extends.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 289. In a world of limited resources, where evolution is the mechanism for life’s advancement, Rolston is surely right that “if nothing much had ever died, nothing much could have ever lived” (ibid., p. 135). However, the Earth need not have had limited resources, and life need not have advanced via evolution. Thus, in this sense, death is not *logically necessary* for the advancement and flourishing of life. Rolston may be right that a world in which life advances via evolution is the best of all possible worlds (a claim he needs for the theodicy presented in *Science and Religion*). Nevertheless, we need not accept this idea in order properly to value predation. What is important is that, in our world, suffering and death are mechanisms for the flourishing of life. The issue is whether or not to accept, value, and participate in this dimension of the natural world.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Schweitzer, “The Ethic of Reverence for Life,” in Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds., *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 35.

Schweitzer is tormented by the natural fact of predation. He feels “foreign” to the world and desires to transcend nature’s ways. In a very real sense, Schweitzer opposes and rejects nature. By rejecting the legitimacy of the desire to participate in carnivorous predation and by lamenting the existence of carnivores, animal activists are doing the same thing. Although what they oppose is a more particular instantiation of nature’s “grisly drama,” namely, carnivorous predation involving sentient prey, they are rejecting the extension of nature’s fundamental pattern into the realm of sentient creatures.

In contrast, environmentalists such as Rolston value and celebrate predation, including this quintessential development of it. They accept nature’s ways and desire to participate in them. Hunting and meat eating can be such an attempt to embrace the natural world and to participate in it.

### IX. CAN ANIMAL ACTIVISTS VALUE PREDATION?

To avoid the charge of rejecting nature, animal activists might consider embracing wild carnivorous predation as a good, while continuing to condemn human predation as immoral. Is this a consistent position, and if so, is it plausible?<sup>40</sup> The question is not about the consistency of claiming that animal predation is *morally neutral* and that human predation is *morally wrong*—that clearly is a consistent position. Rather, I am questioning the consistency of condemning human predation as immoral (as being disvaluable in a moral sense) while claiming that animal predation is positively good (as being valuable in a nonmoral sense).

There are important differences between the two sorts of predation. Human predators are moral agents and they have alternative means of nourishment, whereas no animal predators are moral agents and many have no alternative means of nourishment. Because of this difference, one might hold that there is moral evil in the painful taking of sentient life by a being who is aware of the awfulness of pain and the value of life (and who has alternative less costly means of nourishment), but good in the painful taking of sentient life by a being who has no such awareness or alternatives.

Although I do not think this position is strictly inconsistent, I do think that animal activists who accept animal predation as good and condemn human predation as immoral have a great deal of explaining to do. The usual tactic of simply pointing out that animals are not moral agents is certainly not a sufficient explanation. Animal activists who are consequentialists will especially have trouble defending this position. Consequentialists hold that it is the (nonmoral) value of the consequences of an act that determines the morality of

---

<sup>40</sup> Rolston thinks not: “Human predation on nature, more or less within the natural patterns, cannot be condemned simply because humans are moral agents, not if nonhuman predation has been accepted as a good in the system” (p. 59). But why not?



the act. However, for both kinds of predation, the results are much the same: animal pain and death transformed into pleasure and life for another.<sup>41</sup> If what results from animal predation is judged to be good, then the results of human predation on animals must also be judged to be good (in a nonmoral sense). Moreover, if the results of human predation are good, how can a consequentialist claim that the act that brings them about is nonetheless immoral?<sup>42</sup> Animal activists who are deontologists do not have this problem. Because deontologists divorce the morality of an act from the nonmoral value of its results, accepting that the results of both animal and human predation are good does not suggest (as it does for consequentialists) that one must accept human predation as morally legitimate. Still, deontologists have to explain why human predation is immoral, and it is not clear that any such account fits plausibly with the view that animal predation is good.

For example, the most prominent animal activist who condemns meat eating and hunting on deontological grounds is Tom Regan. He claims that such behavior is wrong because it violates the rights of animals.<sup>43</sup> Regan argues that because animals are not moral agents, they do not violate rights when they kill and eat each other. Thus, he claims, we have no obligation to protect prey from predators, though we must stop preying on animals ourselves.<sup>44</sup> Because he takes this position, it looks as if Regan could value animal predation while condemning human predation, since only the latter violates rights. However, several commentators have argued (successfully, I think) that Regan's views entail that humans do have duties to protect animals from the harmful behavior of other animals.<sup>45</sup> Such a position is not compatible with accepting predation in nature as a good.

---

<sup>41</sup> It is less clear that human predation on animals advances and elevates life, something that is part of our characterization of predation in nature. Here again hunting (and eating what one kills) has an advantage over eating the meat of domesticated animals. Certain types of hunting may lead to greater alertness, care, and wits in the prey species (as well as in the hunter), much as "the cougar's fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer, and vice versa" (Rolston, *Science and Religion*, p. 134). Perhaps it can be argued that human life has been advanced and elevated as the result of domestication and consumption of food animals, but no one is likely to argue that domestication of food animals has advanced and elevated these forms of life.

<sup>42</sup> A consequentialist who insists that moral acts *maximize* good results could take this position. On this view, producing good results is not enough; acts are immoral unless they produce the best possible results. Thus, even though the results of human predation are good, such a consequentialist could argue that it is wrong for humans to predate on animals on the grounds that there are other activities that produce an even greater balance of value over disvalue (e.g., gardening and eating vegetables). I have already explained why I think that a maximization of value ethic is inappropriate for regulating our dealings with nature.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>45</sup> Dale Jamieson has argued that Regan cannot successfully limit duties of assistance to those cases where harms are caused as a result of rights violations by moral agents. See his "Rights, Justice, and Duties to Provide Assistance: A Critique of Regan's Theory of Rights," *Ethics* 100 (1990): 349-62. J. Baird Callicott has pointed out that when Regan sanctions overriding the rights

In closing, I leave Rolston's animal activist opponents with the following options: either they must argue that animal predation is evil (and show that their arguments do not involve a hatred of nature) or demonstrate that there is some way to value animal predation as a good while consistently and plausibly condemning human predation. Until this challenge is met, a Rolstonian environmentalist should be able to hunt, eat meat, and still refuse to chop down blue spruces for Christmas without having to endure charges of inconsistency, bias in favor of plants, or the possession of perverse goals. When based on a desire to participate in carnivorous predation (when that desire is nature respecting), hunting and meat eating do conserve value while causing the least harm necessary to achieve this legitimate goal.

---

of innocent rabid foxes who threaten children, he opens the door to protecting rabbits who are threatened by healthy foxes. See J. Baird Callicott, "The Search for an Environmental Ethic," in Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death*, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 398-99.