

Ethics versus Preferences

When I give lectures on the topic of hunting, I find that there is a need to distinguish between hunting *ethics* and hunting *aesthetics*, or between *ethics* and *preferences*. Perhaps due to our underdeveloped understanding of ethics, most people today who think about hunting tend to lump all value questions together under the heading "ethics," without regard for whether that classification is accurate or not. Most of what passes for "hunting ethics" today is really hunting aesthetics. I believe that when hunters speak of a "right way" or a "wrong way" to hunt, they generally mean something more like "the way I like to hunt" versus "the way you like to hunt." (We see this in current disputes about the use of antique muzzleloader rifles versus modern inline muzzleloaders; about hunting with hounds versus dogless stalking; or about the merits of compound bows, recurved bows, longbows, and crossbows.)

Aside from hunter safety and the issue of killing animals cleanly, quickly, and humanely, there are very few ethical issues involved in *how* the practice of hunting is conducted. Hunters and anti-hunters need to be made more aware of this as well. Much anti-hunting legislation that has been passed so far, in the U.S. and elsewhere, has regulated essentially *aesthetic* aspects of the hunt: the practice of hunting over bait, the use of one type of technology over another, or the hunting of game with hounds. This is a bit like legislating one's preference for vanilla ice cream. If hunters and anti-hunters were more aware of the essentially *aesthetic* nature of these various hunting practices, I hazard the guess that there would probably be far less eagerness to regulate or ban certain forms of hunting on the part of either hunters or anti-hunters.

Examples illustrating "hunting ethics" versus "hunting preferences"

There is a difference between the "morality of hunting" and what many hunters refer to as "the ethics of hunting" (for an example of the latter, see e.g., Posewitz 1994) The first involves the moral discussion of the rightness or wrongness of hunting in general, the latter involves the ethics of a specific hunting practice. The morality of hunting covers all forms of hunting, each with its own individual set of traditions, unique customs, and particular "ethics of practice." In contrast, what most hunters think of as the "ethics of hunting" generally refers to the specific rules that govern a particular form or *genre* of hunting, or one might think in philosophical terms of different *styles* of hunting. Each style, genre, or form of hunting has a loyal following and, usually, an internally consistent set of ethical and aesthetic standards that typify the form.

I generally hesitate to weigh in on questions of "hunting ethics," which usually involve more aesthetic than ethical issues. One or two examples may illustrate the point. Shooting ducks on the wing is one case: true devotees of duck hunting insist upon the necessity of a "rule" to shoot ducks only on "the wing," i.e. in the air, and not while they are at rest on the water. The phrase "sitting duck" captures the essence of unsporting practice—the shooting at *any* target that is not "fair game." And yet, shooting a duck on the water may be a far more deadly shot, more likely to kill the bird cleanly, more guaranteed to put a bird "in the bag" than an ethically riskier shot at a duck flying straightaway at a high speed over forty yards distant. "Potting" ducks (as in killing a duck for the pot, i.e. as food) on the water in the latter case is simply a violation of the aesthetic norms that make duck hunting, duck hunting. The question of *how* ducks are shot during the course of duck hunting is thus largely (not entirely) an aesthetic issue and not an ethical one at all. This distinction is often misunderstood by hunters as well as by anti-hunters.

Another example may cement the point. The practice of "baiting" game animals is constantly debated among hunters as a question of "hunting ethics." (I will ignore for the moment concerns about CWD and the like.) Critics say that baiting is too easy and that it reduces the amount of effort and skills needed to successfully hunt game animals such as deer, bear, or moose. Practitioners of the art of baiting typically respond, "Don't knock it unless you've tried it." Aside from the moral issues surrounding the vice of *laziness* and related moral concerns about the lack of human character such a vice implies, baiting does not seem to be an "ethical" issue *per se* as much as it is an aesthetic issue. Let me explain.

In northern Wisconsin there is at least one individual that I know of who begins his daily baiting of deer at least two months before the beginning of deer season. Reasoning that he wants the deer to show up at his stand in the woods when *he* is there, he goes out to the woods twice a day: once in the morning to lay out his spread of corn, apples, sugar beets, and whatever else he uses to attract deer to his location, and then once again in the evening to take it all away. That's two trips a day, for two months: or 120 trips to the woods, all in the hopes that the deer become habituated to visiting his chosen site only in daylight (legal shooting) hours. During the two months of baiting, this individual also occasionally climbs in his tree stand over the bait pile for the pleasure of simply watching the deer that come by. His enjoyment of deer hunting is thus extended considerably in this way, and during the time period when he is simply a wildlife watcher certainly does not involve killing in any way. All of this is for the privilege of being able to select his own venison, "on the hoof" so to speak, come opening day.

Another deer hunter hunts his own land and sits under apple trees that the previous owners planted some seventy-five to a hundred years earlier. He shoots and kills the first deer that comes along on opening day.

Who is to say which hunter has the richer, more authentic hunting experience? If the primary objection against the practice of "baiting" is that it is too easy and requires little or no effort, then certainly the Wisconsin deer hunter has put far more effort into killing his deer than has his counterpart who has merely staked out his deer stand on opening day and rather opportunistically "hunted" the deer he knows beforehand will frequent his apple trees.

In the case of the habitual deer baiter, what outsiders would criticize as unfair advantage and unsporting practice actually contributes to a year round interest in deer. The deer baiter is probably more of a "hunter-naturalist" or "nature hunter" than most hunters. His shot at close range on opening day is almost assured of being a well-aimed, carefully selected, and quickly killing clean shot.

The second hunter may hunt only deer; and only hunt once a year. His hunting experience lasts approximately an hour, or two at the most, among the apple trees on opening day. He may not give much thought to nature, to deer biology, to the wind or the vagaries of scent, or to much else. (Perhaps he is a college professor who is in a hurry to get back into the office for a 9:30 appointment with a student advisee.) Nonetheless, his shot at close range on opening day is almost equally assured of being a well-aimed, carefully sighted, and quickly killing clean shot.

And yet at the moment of the kill, each of these two individuals may feel that pang of remorse: that momentary sense of pity and fear, of attraction and repulsion at what they have done—regret for having killed, but gladness for having done it well. That emotional response may in fact be partly what drives them each year to make the effort that they do make, to get up well before dawn on opening day and to go afield in pursuit of killing a deer. Each individual experiences the hunt in a different way. Each individual takes care to ensure that there is a high probability of killing the animal almost instantly if and when the opportunity to shoot presents itself.

Where these two hunters' experience differs is in the respective style or aesthetics of their hunts, not in the ethics of their hunts. "Ethics" generally is a term that is chronically misused in the popular hunting press. Each hunter follows his own ritual way of preparing for the hunt; each hunter conscientiously minimizes the chances of wounding and losing a deer; and each hunter enjoys the hunt in his own fashion. "Baiting" of game animals seems to attract the same type of criticisms that the potting of sitting ducks does, and for similar reasons. But I think it important to recognize that each form is simply a variation on a theme: the musical metaphor is apt.

Conclusion

For these and other reasons I believe that for the most part, the state and other people should stay out of these hunters' business. Each hunter experiences the hunt in his own idiosyncratic and highly personal way. Assuming the hunter is respecting the laws designed to protect game populations and human life and property, each hunter acts ethically. Neither hunter is hurting anyone else. (The deer, if well shot, certainly feels almost nothing.) Each hunter's choices, whether hunting over bait or hunting on one's own land, simply implies different aesthetic preferences, and little else. I cannot speak for either hunter's experience, nor would I want to impose my own idiosyncratic hunting values and force my aesthetic preferences on another hunter. I may choose to employ my full powers of aesthetic suasion to convert either or both hunters over to *my* way of thinking, but that's as far as my legitimate authority in either hunter's affairs should extend. In other words, as a matter of concern for social or governmental intrusion, hunting should be virtually "off the radar screen" for the moral or aesthetic police.

And as a group, hunters are their own worst enemy when it comes to pointing fingers at each other and saying, "My way is better than your way; so let's ban your way." Such arguments are often made by hunters who profess to wanting simply "to clean up hunting's image." In reality, such well-intended efforts by hunters may simply be hastening hunting's demise.

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