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*Human Beings' Moral Relations with Other Animals
and the Natural Environment*

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Is There a Moral Problem in Predation?

Francesco Allegri

Università degli Studi di Siena

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allegri2@unisi.it

One of the topics that is receiving increasing attention in the field of animal ethics is the question of the suffering of animals in nature due to predation. This theme is the subject (or one of the subjects) of several texts that have been published recently. I indicate for all three that appear particularly relevant: *Wild Animal Ethics: The Moral and Political Problem of Wild Animal Suffering*, by Kyle Johannsen; *Wilderness, Morality, and Value* by Joshua S. Duclos; and *Animal Ethics in the Wild: Wild Animal Suffering and Intervention in Nature* by Catia Faria (Johannsen 2021; Duclos 2022; Faria 2022). *Relations* already dedicated two special issues to this topic in 2015, which still remain highly important contributions on a matter that appears to be very intricate (Faria and Paez 2015)¹. As now I will try to show.

Reflection on the problem of animal suffering has for some decades now led to the questioning of human practices and habits such as intensive farming, experimentation using animals, the circus, the zoo, etc. But in recent years consideration for animal welfare has come to extend beyond the suffering caused by humans and their institutions. Questions have been asked about the conditions of animals in the wild and some have pointed out (in the wake of C. Darwin, J.S. Mill and S.J. Gould) how this *modus vivendi* is anything but idyllic: hunger, cold, diseases, adverse weather conditions, etc., are the dominant traits. Among the various problems non-human sentient beings face in the natural world is that of predation. Many animal species, in addition to having to defend themselves from the various hostile factors mentioned above, must face the onslaught of predatory animals, which cause them suffering and death. Is there anything wrong with this? Is man required to intervene to help the weakest? Or is there not a moral problem associated with predation,

¹ The second issue of *Relations* 2015 also contains the first comprehensive bibliography on the problem (see Dorado 2015).

which is an entirely natural phenomenon devoid of moral connotations? In this regard, animal ethics has divided and is dividing into two main fronts, one in favor of human intervention against predation (at least in principle, theoretically), the other against human intervention.

Historically, positions that see predation as an evil and call for human intervention to put an end to it can already be found in L. Gompertz (1824) and in J. Howard Moore (1895). Among the philosophers immediately following the pro-animal turn of the 1970s is worth mentioning S.F. Sapontzis (1984; 1987, 229-248). Today this kind of position is well exemplified by Jeff McMahan, for whom

predation causes vast suffering among its innumerable victims, and to deprive those victims of the good experiences they might had were they not killed. [...] The elimination of predation could therefore make the difference between an indefinitely extended future in which millions of animals die prematurely and in agony every day and an alternative future in which different animals would live longer and die in ways other than in terror and agony in the jaws of a predator. (McMahan 2016, 273)

What could be done to put an end to predation, or in any case reduce its extent (decrease its scale)? Proponents of human intervention against predation point to two main ways: the first consists in causing the extinction of some or all predatory species through sterilization; the second, rather futuristic and at present technically unfeasible, consists in a genetic modification (reprogramming) intervention that leads carnivorous species to gradually transform (evolve) into herbivorous animals (for example, McMahan 2016, 273-274)². The project of the proponents of human intervention against predation thus takes on the connotations of the biblical utopia outlined by the prophet Isaiah, who imagines that at the end of time the original idyllic situation in which animals and humans coexisted without killing each other will be restored. So

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and the little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. (*Isaiah*, 11, 6-8)

² Similar theses are supported by Mosquera: "The painless extinction of predators could be one way of proceeding. Genetically reprogramming the instincts of predators so that they stop being hunters, but also their metabolism so that they can survive with a meat-free diet, would be another possible way to proceed" (Mosquera 2015, 76).

But such a radical project, which sees predation as an evil and human intervention as a moral necessity, finds strong criticism of various kind and nature. They can be found in many environmental philosophers, but also in a significant part of animal rights defenders. Meanwhile, on the subject of suffering, the positions of environmental ethics are not so alarmist. For J.B. Callicott, one of the most eminent exponents of ecological or environmental ethics,

Pleasure and pain seem to have nothing at all to do with good and evil if our appraisal is taken from the vantage point of ecological biology. [...] The doctrine that life is happier the freer it is from pain and that the happiest life conceivable is one in which there is continuous pleasure uninterrupted by pain is biologically preposterous. (Callicott 1995, 52-53, 54)

But the value of pain to which Callicott seems to refer is an instrumental, extrinsic value. In this sense, the positive value of pain is not denied even by hedonists. What proponents of intervention against predation reject about pain is its *intrinsic* value, asserting that suffering, regardless of whether it can be good as a means, is bad as an end. Moreover, as McMahan's quotation reveal, the issue is not only the suffering that prey experience before dying, but also (and perhaps above all) the quantity (months, years) and quality (more sexual intercourse, more emotional ties, etc.) of the experiences that the killed animal loses by interrupting its life in advance. Predation, in addition to causing suffering, deprives the victim of its future. That is, the problem is also (and perhaps above all) the harm of death. As Oscar Horta points out in very clear terms, "Dying at a certain time t would harm us because it would deprive us of the positive things we would have had after that time t had not we died at t ". The same is true for all beings capable of having positive experiences. Hence the sentient animals

are not harmed only when they suffer in nature: the fact that they die prematurely is a disvalue as well. This entails that the total negative balance in nature caused by the vast prevalence of suffering over wellbeing is also increased by the enormous number of premature deaths taking place in it. (Horta 2015, 27)

Also another of the big names in environmental ethics, Holmes Roston III, does not evaluate the phenomenon of predation in negative terms and is skeptical about the pro-intervention option. In his view, if predation is bad for the prey, it is good for the predator. The harm caused by predation (suffering and death) to the moose is compensated by the good obtained by the wolf (pleasure and survival). One life is lost to make possible the survival of another. And the suffering of the prey is counter-

balanced by the pleasure of the predator. In predation rather than a loss of value, there is a *transfer* of value. Furthermore, according to Roston III, another positive aspect of predation is the following: if it is something negative for the individual specimen that undergoes it, it can be positive for the species object of predation, because, for a matter of natural selection, in the long term it favors the development of better perceptive and cognitive characteristics (Rolston III 1992).

But the merits of natural selection when shifted (evaluated) on the ethical level always arouse justified perplexities. Just think of so-called “social Darwinism”, which extends the principles of natural selection to the human world, giving them a positive connotation. On points like these, for example, McMahan criticizes Tom Regan, accusing him of oblique Darwinism, for arguing that animals should be left alone because they do not need our help in the struggle for survival (Regan 2004, XXXVII):

It is true that predators and prey *species* will continue to evolve through the competition for survival, but it is false that *individual* prey can do without our help in *their* struggles for survival. They would do much better were we to protect them than they do now when we leave them to deal with predators by themselves. The fact that predators tend to be well fed when there are prey around, together with the fact that in some species only about 1 percent of those born survive to adulthood, indicates that the “general competence” of prey “to get on with the business of living” is less impressive than Regan’s comment suggests. (McMahan 2016, 285-286)

But, as already mentioned, objections to the anti-predation line do not come only from the environmentalist front, but also arise from within the world of animal rights defenders. An often recurring argument in animal rights literature against human intervention in defense of predated species asserts that it violates the autonomy of animals; and appeals to their self-determination and to the fact that humans cannot impose a moral order on nature. Moral rules apply in the human world, not outside it. This thesis can be found for example in Lori Gruen, who criticizes the idea of some intervention as an unacceptable form of ethical paternalism: “Paternalism is appropriate in the case of children, but not so in the case of individuals who are capable of exercising their freedom to live their lives in their own ways” (Gruen 2011, 182). However, another important philosopher in defense of animals like Martha Nussbaum does not think so. In her view, if the general value of autonomy is beyond question, the problem is whether it fully applies to the animal world. Already in the human world it seems unwise to apply it in the case of children and people

with severe mental disabilities. For non-human animals, in her opinion, it is not wrong to combine respect for autonomy and a paternalistic attitude. This leads Nussbaum to take an intermediate position between Gruen and McMahan (Nussbaum 2006).

But a thesis not dissimilar to that asserted by Lori Gruen (as has already partially emerged from the previous reference) was articulated in a more complete and rigorous way by one of the fathers of animal ethics, Tom Regan, in his most important text, *The Case for Animal Rights*. According to Regan, since animals are not moral agents, it is wrong to attribute duties to them. Only people have duties. This means that animal predation poses no moral problem. Only acts performed by rational subjects, the only ones with the status of moral agents, have moral weight. If no rational beings are involved, there are no moral issues at stake. Regan develops his argument by responding to a possible objection to his rights-based deontological model. Faced with the observation that by accepting the deontological approach, animals would be the first to violate the rights of their fellow by killing and eating them, Regan replies by asserting that only those who possess duties can violate rights. But in order to have duties, cognitive capacities are necessary which animals are not endowed with, so that they, having no obligation, cannot violate anyone's rights. And consequently, in his opinion, another objection linked to the previous one also falls down: that for which we, having to intervene to protect the rights of animals, should prevent that, for example, the wolf attacks the sheep, with the paradoxical result that, by doing so, we would violate the legitimate right of predators to feed. But since the wolf in no way infringes on the rights of the sheep, we have no obligation to defend the latter from the former's attacks (Regan 2004, 357).

Regan's argumentative approach, however, raised many objections. His way of reasoning does not seem plausible, because he who has a right has the right to have it protected from wherever the threat comes from (e.g. I have the right to have my life protected, whether against the action of a moral agent – e.g. an unjust aggressor – or against that of someone who is not a moral agent – an animal – or against threats from natural events – e.g. a flood or a fire). If Regan's reasoning were well-founded, we would have to refrain from any intervention even if both aggressor and aggressor were handicapped or the aggressor was an animal and the aggressor a handicapped person. What does not appear cogent in the Reganian approach, therefore, is that it does not allow us to justify human intervention even in those cases where it appears manifestly obligatory. Criticism of Regan on this point is widespread. For example, Callicott notes that

If innocent vegetarian animals have a right to life, as Regan argues, they should be protected from all agents of destruction, whether moral or not. We regard criminally insane human beings as “not moral agents” either. Hence, we do not try them in court and punish them as we do those who are sane. But neither do we permit them to remain free in society. We protect innocent people by humanely incarcerating, in maximum-security psychiatric wards, destructive humans who are not moral agents. Likewise, then, shouldn't predators be humanely incarcerated in similar institutions (zoo or holding pens) to safeguard the rights of their would-be victims? Regan provides no reason to object to this proposal. (Callicott 1993, 352-353)

A more general criticism of Regan's theses is advanced by Torres, who, referring to Sapontzis, notes that Regan's argument misses the point:

Nobody is saying that animals have the moral duty to respect the rights of other animals. The point is to decide if we, moral agents, have the duty to intervene in nature to impede animals harming each other. Therefore to answer that animals are not moral agents and that, hence, there is no moral problem in predation is to refute a straw man. Of course, the attribution of moral agency to an individual is important to settle responsibility and punishment issues but it does not affect the rightness or wrongness of the harm itself. (Torres 2015, 37-38)

But even if the thesis that considers predation a moral evil (so much so that it would be desirable to put an end to it) were correct, when one moves on to the problem of the concrete realization of the project to defend prey animals and eliminate predator species, there is a convergence between proponents of intervention and critics on the impossibility (at least at present) of putting it into practice. Not only because of the technical difficulties (the option of genetic reprogramming is futuristic, i.e. currently unfeasible; in order to implement the sterilization project the problems to be resolved would be manifold, as well as requiring huge resources); but also because – as the intervention's supporters themselves recognize – at least at the moment, a human intervention aimed at reducing or eliminating predator species would result in an environmental catastrophe and would not benefit at all those species for which it was intended. In fact, let us imagine that a vast sterilization campaign could lead to the extinction of predatory species such as wolves, tigers, lions, etc.; what would presumably happen? There would be what in technical terms is called a *Malthusian dystopia*. Without predatory animals, herbivorous species would proliferate disproportionately and to such an extent that the environment would no longer be able to satisfy their food needs. With the consequence that the huge herbivorous populations, instead of facing a possible rapid killing by carnivorous animals, would

slowly die of starvation and diseases related to malnutrition. As McMahan himself admits: “Rather than diminishing the suffering and extending the lives of herbivores, the elimination of predation might increase their suffering overall and even diminish their average longevity” (McMahan 2016, 274). That is, the elimination of predation would produce the opposite of the desired result, worsening the situation of the animals currently preyed upon by carnivores. With chain negative effects because, in addition to this, with herbivores desperately looking for food, there would be a systematic destruction of the vegetation, of plants on which the life of many other animals depends, leading to the death of the latter too. A similar picture, albeit on a smaller scale, has occurred in those areas of the United States where deer, in the absence of predatory species, have experienced an abnormal increase in numbers and, in addition to damaging the environment in their desperate search for food, are at risk of starvation (Singer 2011, 121).

The point of convergence (the mediation point) between the two parties involved is therefore the practical obstacle to carrying out the project of eliminating predation, even if it were desirable from an ethical point of view. For the catastrophic consequences it would give rise to in terms of stability and harmony of the entire ecosystem and for the enormous difficulty of remedying them. So even if there were a moral reason (and perhaps there is) to prevent predation, it is outweighed (at least for now) by opposing reasons, of a consequentialist nature, that induce us not to intervene (reasons which, however, may no longer apply in the future). Obviously if the moral problem exists, it does not concern predators as much as predation (the negative judgment is not on the agent – that is not a moral agent – but on the action).

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