

Is hunting animals so much worse than eating them?

David Benatar

MELISSA Bachman, self-described “hard-core hunter” and presenter of an American television hunting show, *Winchester Deadly Passion*, has raised the ire of hundreds of thousands signatories of an online petition demanding that she be banned from visiting South Africa again.

She had posted a photograph of herself, with a beaming smile and holding a rifle, behind “a beautiful male lion” she had shot in South Africa. In the accompanying text she gushes about her “incredible day hunting”.

Capetonian Elan Burman, outraged at this spectacle, started the petition on Change.org. There was an outpouring of support for the petition. In response, supporters of Bachman came to her defence. The arguments for these opposing positions need evaluation.

Melissa Bachman kills. If her victims were human she would be severely punished. The delight and pride she takes in killing would be taken as aggravating factors.

However, her victims are not human. Many people think that this makes a big

moral difference. This position is difficult to justify. Having moral status cannot depend merely on one’s species. If it did, misanthropes could claim that it is wrong to kill dogs but not wrong to kill humans. Because mere species membership is an arbitrary basis for assigning moral status, those who seek to grant special status to humans typically appeal to humans’ heightened cognitive capacities.

The problem with this argument is that many humans lack these capacities. If the possession of those capacities really were what was wrong with killing, then it would not be wrong to hunt those cognitively impaired humans with the same or lesser cognitive capacity than lions. That disturbing thought focuses the mind. It is wrong to hunt such humans for the same reason it is wrong to hunt lions. Despite their lesser cognitive capacity, they have interests in continued life and well-being.

Perhaps the reason that killing the cognitively impaired is wrong is that they are fellow humans. But this argument does not explain why we should favour members of our own species rather than members of our own genus or phylum.

Racists think that the relevant category

for favouring is “race”. We rightly reject that category as arbitrarily restrictive. We should offer the same critique of the “speciesist” who thinks that the relevant category is species.

For these and many other reasons, we should judge Bachman’s hunts to be wrong. It is curious, though, that many of those condemning her – meat eaters – are themselves complicit in the killing of animals. Some of them will be quick to draw a distinction between killing animals for food and killing them for the sheer pleasure of killing.

However, the full significance of that distinction is hard to sustain. The overwhelming majority of humans can live healthily without eating animals. The only real benefit of eating meat that cannot be obtained from other foods is the pleasure of consuming animal flesh. It is hard to see why we should privilege that pleasure over the thrill of hunting.

This is not to suggest that the person who delights in tracking, killing and then jubilantly posing with the victim isn’t, in some ways, more grotesque than the person who supports killing indirectly by purchasing cellophane-wrapped flesh in a

supermarket. The former may be exhibiting greater callousness, but that does not mean that the actions of the latter are any more justifiable.

Moreover, most meat eating is worse than hunting in at least one way. Most hunted animals lead normal lives before they are killed, whereas most animals that are reared for food suffer unspeakably during the short lives that precede their slaughter.

Some defenders of Bachman have argued that she has done nothing illegal. This is an appallingly bad argument. Even cursory reflection should reveal that there is a difference between “legal” and “moral”. Antebellum Southern slave owners did nothing illegal. It does not follow that they did nothing immoral.

Other arguments that have been advanced in defence of Bachman are that permit-based hunting is an economic boon to the country and actually aids conservation by funding conservation efforts.

These arguments are question-begging. They assume that it is morally permissible to hunt an animal, yet this is the very matter under debate. If hunting were morally wrong, it would not matter how economi-

cally advantageous it were or how much it facilitated conservation. Nobody defends permit-based paedophilia on the grounds that we could attract lots of tourist dollars or benefit more children by funding child-welfare programmes.

Sentient animals have interests in not being harmed. Hunting or slaughtering them harms them – irrespective of whether they are then eaten. The outrage against the likes of Bachman is thus justified, but the logic of that outrage needs to be extended to the maltreatment of animals in the agricultural sector.

That extension is unlikely to gain the same traction as Burman’s petition, for a simple reason: there are relatively few hunters but billions of meat eaters, and it is much easier to be outraged at others’ callousness.

Introspection and the associated self-criticism is not easy, but if people today desist from rethinking human maltreatment of animals, they are sure to be judged as harshly by future generations as our generation judges the barbarities of the past.

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