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While we are standing away. Do we need to consider hunting as a bioethical issue?

ABSTRACT

How could we understand the phenomenon of hunting today? If we consider bioethics as the emerging area through which we want to give meaning to the role of human being towards his/her societal dimension as well as to all forms of life, it seems reasonable to assume that phenomenon of hunting should not stay out of our considerations. In the beginning we are faced with two very ambivalent positions: even though human was 90% of his/her history a hunter and gatherer, today hunting seems unnecessary rudiment of the past, since the hunting activity is understood as expression of direct killing and the supremacy of man over many life forms. But at the same time hunting is one of the most successful tools to control the population of certain animal species, which as a result of human intervention has come into a situation of imbalance. In addition, many theorists suggest contemporary lifestyle of post-industrial society in many ways denaturalize human while destroying the natural dimension of human existence, reducing it to a cognitive and sensitive flawed creature. Here we refer to the idea of the Spanish philosopher J. Ortega y Gasset who, in his famous writings *Meditations on Hunting*, wants to reach the deepest sense of the human being, and says that the hunting was that retrieving mechanism. In the end, in this bioethical survey we try to outline the problematic area of hunting while determining the appropriate measure of its existence within contemporary society.

Key words: hunting, bioethics, society, life, Ortega y Gasset.

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Introduction

„In our time—which is a rather stupid time—hunting is not considered a serious matter. It is thought that enough has been said on the subject by calling it a diversion, presupposing, of course, that diversion, as such, is not a serious matter. Yet serious examination should lead us to realize how distasteful existence in the universe must be for a creature—man, for example—who finds it essential to divert himself. To divert oneself is to separate oneself temporarily from what one usually is, to change for a while our usual personality for another which is more arbitrary, to attempt to escape for a moment from our real world to others which are not ours. Is this not strange?”

José Ortega y Gasset

Let me point out central idea of this paper:¹ we are not trying to question whether hunting, as it is currently done in contemporary society, is morally acceptable or unacceptable activity. We are interested in other, perhaps deeper dimension of the debate on hunting. Let me pose this question this way: can contemporary bioethics discuss on hunting today? Can this discussion be something different from the discussion on the admissibility or inadmissibility of the hunting? We will try to argue that hunting is very powerful subject for bioethics; I believe that there is a severe argument in favor of this thesis. First, let me point out the most important insight: if hunting as a nutritional tool and social mechanism formed more than 90% of human history, maybe the part of “humanity“ of today’s man can be “lost“ if we just ignore the debate about hunting and its importance for physical and mental development of human? Second, hunting was formative force for wide horizon of human spirituality which is nowadays, we may argue, reduced on technical or technological effectiveness. Third position, and maybe most insightful, is the one that that considers our understanding of life, human connections to various forms of life and role of human in web of being.²

So, first, in this paper we will try to show our insight in bioethics, its role in contemporary society and our understanding of human existence. Second, I will try to point out dimension of importance of hunting for exactly human existence showing the central position of our argument: a human thanks to hunting, which formed us on physical and spiritual level. Succeeding that I will present some most

¹ This article has been written on the basis of paper “Hunting as Bioethical Issue?” given at *EuroBioAct International Conference Declaring war on declarations: various bioethical theories respond to modern practical challenges*, Rijeka, June 12-13th, 2015. The problems presented in this article are somewhat presented in the author’s professional article “Dotaknuti život: (Ne)mogućnosti bioetičke rasprave o lovu” published in *Sarajevske sveske*, (47-48/2015), p. 189-195. Further research presented in this paper are made in the project “Political Issues in the Philosophy of Ortega y Gasset”, no. HP022, led by Tomislav Krznar, PhD, financed by the University of Zagreb.

² Tomislav Krznar, „Lov – sport ili destrukcija?“, in: Tomislav Krznar (ed.): Čovjek i priroda. Prilog određivanju odnosa, Pergamena, Zagreb., 2013. p. 261.

intriguing thoughts of hunting given by Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset and we will try to point out the essence of his argument and that is: hunting is a necessary departure of human condition in order to preserve the wholeness of human being. In the end we will try to answer the central question, and that is the following: should the bioethics be talking on the subject of hunting. In that matter we are using the metaphor given in the title of this paper (to stand away) and we try to argue that the hunting is most appreciative subject for bioethics while it shows complexity of human life and especially shows range of human interfering in structure of life. Paradoxically, we can use hunting, a very bloody activity, as a mirror of human destructiveness towards the life in whole.

Understandably, we hereby come astray because we may at least implicitly contradict the basic position, postulated on the acceptability of hunting. So one again we are not looking for the arguments in favor of hunting as human activity, we are rather trying to perceive hunting as a useful intellectual tool for considering role of human in contemporary world.

Note on bioethics

By its mere meaning something what is called note is short and informative. Contrary, bioethics is a growing area of knowledge which is rising not only in the area of scientific research, but in the cultural activities also as long as in the area of activism. We must add that we do not consider bioethics as a science, or not *just* as science³, it has a deeper meaning for contemporary human mostly to the fact that it does not want just to explain some phenomenon, or just to solve some problem, or just to make boundaries on some new human experiment with life, bioethics is all of that, but even more, it is a new planetary sensibility with spatial task of reduction of human destructive impact on life. So, let me point out a few fundamental insights on bioethics:

- 1) Bioethics deals with life trying to give explanations about the phenomena of transforming life, seeks to discern the reasons for this activity and detect the focus of the problems and wishes to offer solutions that could change the direction of movement or activity.
- 2) Bioethics is not a science, or more precisely, it is not just a science even though its core is truly scientific. Bioethics is the new world view, and possibly a new planetary sensibility and a new code of ethics, which seeks to give human,

³ Tomislav Krznar, *Znanje i destrukcija. Integrativna bioetika i problemi zaštite okoliša*, Pergamena – Učiteljski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb, 2011., p. 313.

from the individual level to the level of humanity, the ability to create themselves thought meaningful life.

- 3) Bioethics is not pleading for universally valid and the ultimate solutions, but it rather wishes to investigate phenomenon of life, and to bring insight that would solve the problems of specific situations, without pretending that this is always a solution to every following “same” situation.⁴

If we accept proposition outlined in previous lines, we must conclude that bioethics could have interests in hunting especially due to the following reasons. Hunting is a formative force of humankind and many things considering human physical or mental development are not understandable without wider picture and that picture is given by understanding of human past that is, as we said, determined with hunting. Second, if we consider human activity as a destructive we can usefully introspect hunting as a model of strong interventionism in the structures of life. Thirdly, if bioethics asks for *human condition* understood as a link with wholeness of life, which is impaired in technological society, we can consider hunting as mean of proximate maybe sustainable mechanism of human relation towards life. In considering of all these positions let us first realize mere phenomenon of hunting.

Hunting today?

When today we try to define what exactly hunting is, we are remaining in a significant doubt. Primary perception of hunting is such that tells us that the hunting is bloody and violent activity which only signifies human domination over various forms of life.⁵ At the same time that hunting is a pretty effective tool for population management especially in those situations where there is a population imbalance caused exclusively by human intervention in natural processes.⁶ When we talk about the hunting we are facing the list of many contradictions.⁷ Hunting today is not primarily an economic tool, but at the same time, many strategic documents (at different levels: local, national or international) advocate the role of hunting as a driver of rural development or even the mechanism of preserving the

⁴ Hrvoje Jurić, „Uporišta za integrativnu bioetiku u djelu Van Rensselaera Pottera“, u: Velimir Valjan (ed.) *Integrativna bioetika i izazovi suvremene civilizacije. Zbornik radova prvog međunarodnog bioetičkog simpozija u Bosni i Hercegovini, Sarajevo 31. III. – 1. IV. 2006.*, Bioetičko društvo u BiH, Sarajevo, 2007., p. 83ff.

⁵ Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning. Hunting and Nature through History*, Harvard University press, Cambridge – London, 1996., p. 15ff.

⁶ M. Bolton, (ed.) *Conservation and the Use of Wildlife Resources*. Chapman & Hall, London etc. 1997, p. 35.

⁷ Ted Kerasote, Bloodties. *Nature, Culture, and the Hunt*, Kodansha International, New York, 1993., p. 85.

existing cultural patterns.⁸ Hunting is often perceived as a “pastoral” activity and expression of economic power, directly or indirectly, economic, military or political elite. In addition, hunting is the subject of scientific study, in particular wildlife management.

In addition to our endeavor to understand what hunting is let us mention one significant “discovery” which has happened about ten thousand years ago, it is a process that started by “taming” of plant and animal species and resulted in the processes of urbanization, development of script and literacy, the emergence and development of science, the emergence of specific institutionalized forms of religion, durable gender construction and stable, mostly destructive, mechanisms of management and transformation of life. All these processes had only one purpose: to benefit human or better and more precisely, one part of humanity – men. All of these prior layers of history of humanity is essentially marked by hunting, not only as an economic mechanism of obtaining food, but rather hunting as a driving force of human development. In today’s action of hunting we see degradation and vulgarization of those formative forces of mankind which produced a being who calls himself a man in more than 90% of his past.⁹ Let me be clearer: before hunting man is really just an animal.¹⁰

The hunting was force of human creation in the area of spirituality and art, also in the level of cognitive and motor skills, and the level of social mechanisms. Caves of Altamira show us that the creature, whose sole activity was hunting and gathering, had a highly developed sense of the existence of different forms of life and that had a certain understanding of themselves as a part of life in whole.¹¹ Furthermore, the comparative history of religions shows us that many prevailing confessional forms were built at a time when man was a hunter. Through hunting man taught about life itself and was creating images and concepts, enhancing his cognitive and emotional abilities. It is likely to stress the insights of evolutionary biology, man through hunting practiced thought by perfecting the strategy of hunting, practicing the cooperation mechanisms, trying to overcome their prey stronger and more dangerous than themselves. For this he needed the word and thought, and he got the opportunity to express them through hunting. Social structures of the time of hunter and gatherers were infinitely different from those of the dominant today, and

⁸ Tomislav Krznar, „Utjecaj lova na razvoj čovjeka. Pokušaj ekohistorijskog uvida“, *Ekonomika i ekohistorija*, 5 (2009) 5, p. 72.

⁹ Sherwood L. Washburn – C. S. Lancaster “The Evolution of Hunting”, in: Richard B. Lee – Irven DeVore, (ed.) *Man the Hunter*, Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1968, p. 293ff.

¹⁰ David Peterson, *On the Wild Edge. In Search of a Natural Life*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2005.

¹¹ Max Oelschläger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, Yale University Press, New York, 1991., p. 9.

not only in terms of social complexity or technological equipment, but rather by the nature of the relationship, to other people and to life, and to the character of understanding of our own existence.¹² The central “idea” of modern human is domination, based on the knowledge that we have of hunters and gatherers; the central idea of their existence was survival, may be even survival through devoutness.

We said many things on the history of hunting and its importance for human development but this does not say anything on the importance of preserving of hunting in today’s world. Here we are on the sharp edge of ruining our first insight, on the subject of not validating hunting in ethical view. So let me stress my position: reflecting on hunting we have an opportunity to face the technological reductionism of our world. In that matter I used the metaphor in title of this paper with which I am trying to say that it is not wise to throw away a possibility that we learn something out of our past even if we do not appreciate its significance for our days. I believe that it is a reasonable position when we are speaking about hunting even if we do not accept position that hunting is appropriate tool for humans to communicate with their own nature. In another words we do not need to consider hunting as an acceptable tool for any part of human life but it would be unwise to ignore its significance, not only in the past, but as an instructive tool for knowing ourselves. In that mater I consider title of this paper, to use opportunity to learn about ourselves.

Let us illustrate this with the words of José Ortega y Gasset who wrote them in *Meditations on Hunting*.

Ortega y Gasset on hunting

The blade of Ortega’s criticism is directed against the efforts to understand a human being as “isolated” or one-dimensional being.¹³ In particular, it comes to criticism of “western” civilization and its needs, as reflects Ortega, to shape human life in a way that isolates him/her in commodity of technology away from contact with the whole of human existence. Let us mention Ortega’s claim that human is the builder of the worlds, but it is also the destroyer of life and the destroyer of the whole of its own existence. In this respect Ortega’s sharp criticism of Western thought is anchored in understanding that rational and technical efforts can’t be prosthetic replace of life. Of course, far from any naive understanding of life in vitalistic or

¹² James A. Swan, *Nature as Teacher and Healer. How to Reawaken Your Conection with Nature*, Villard Books, New York, 1992., p. 195ff.

¹³ José Ortega y Gasset: *Meditations on Hunting*, Wilderness Adventure press, Bonzeman, 1995. p. 32.

biologicistic perspective, Ortega's efforts are designed in theory of ratio-vitalism, by which he wants to create a new platform for the understanding of life and human's role in life. Life is understood as material being and existence at the same time.

Ortega says that human life is at the same time the effort and void. The effort turned to the achievement of making living conditions appropriate to man, and void because these conditions generate work and human essence is not work, but the search for the meaning of life. Thinking over this insight Ortega comes to the realization that in the history of mankind the most important tool of escape from work was hunting, of course, this does not take into account the period when hunting was a tool of survival. Ortega argues that hunting should enable us to get close to the deeper layers of our existence, at the same time it is a departure from reason, from the routine life of deception and of the comfort of the technology.¹⁴ To say that hunting is rational activity for Ortega is an insult, and it would be also an insult to say that hunting is the mechanism of destruction of life. Hunting is, says Ortega, something more delicate; it is ability, the effort that allows a human the immersion into himself. It is possible that here lies deeper Ortega's insight: if human life is a search for meaning, and hunting a mechanism of immersing in life, then we understand the hunting as a tool of search that indeed happens on the surface of life, but is essentially turned inside, into the man himself. The problem arises when to these insights we add the element of death, since without death, namely bloody and painful death, there is no hunting.¹⁵ In this matter Ortega convincingly reveals hypocrisy of our technical civilization that is build on the brutal, violent and destructive mechanisms turned against "other", namely various forms of humankind and life in general. Ortega argues, though not without the irony, why should we bother ourselves with death of an animal in the hunt, if we are cruel to the whole of life in general and to people who we do not consider as a part of our "civilized" circle? Here Ortega detected the problems of colonialism and the mass production of goods on which the West is built, but he did not convincingly tell us anything about the hunting itself. Except maybe one fact: humans are also a beings of instincts, they must practice closeness to death, even though it sounds brutality, if they wish to remain an integral being, otherwise we must without exception accept the brutality of technical civilization. Ortega supports these insights which point out brutality of dehumanized "civilized" life that is based on the domestication of plants and animals. But even this does not keep us from the obligation to conclude, as Ortega says that the hunter – that man who is looking for a whole self, is dealer of death.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 94.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 97.

It is not easy to agree with these positions, so let us only say that Ortega here highlights the hypocritical aversion to death as can be found in the “technical” cultures that are based on the transformation, and even the destruction of life. Escape from the insights of death will not erase the painful insight that the humans are also part of hierarchy of life. Hunting is not a “thing” of reason; it is rather a hint of a whole, because it is based on instinct, which is, says Ortega, the essential note of life, and if a human is a “natural being” it has the obligation to protect and that part of him, part of instinct. Hunting is as Ortega says, archaic phenomenon that reminds us that we are no more than the fugitives from nature, and thus perhaps a fugitive from ourselves.¹⁶ Perhaps hunting is opportunity to “capture” the life and thus preserve our unity of our own existence. Or easier: where there is no “nature” there is existence reduced to the effect of the technical “life”, or in Ortega’s words:

Man is a fugitive from Nature. He escaped from it and began to make history, which is trying to realize the imaginary, the improbable, perhaps the impossible. History is always made against the grain of Nature. The human being tries to rest from the enormous discomfort and all-embracing disquiet of history by ‘returning’ transitorily, artificially, to Nature in the sport of hunting. We are such paradoxical creatures that each day will require greater artifice to give us the pleasure of sometimes being ‘natural beings.’ But no matter how great and ingenious the artifice may be, it will be in vain if that ferocious instinct, already evanescent, is completely erased in our species.¹⁷

Conclusion or why bioethics should discuss hunting?

In this paper I have tried to bind various areas of human knowledge, or even in some ways, existence. In one insight we had hunting, and in another bioethics. At the first sight there is no reason to put these different positions in relation, but as I tried to show, hunting is not only a strong force of human development but also a reminder on the fact that human is also a natural being. In a way bioethics is trying to show this second fact by considering life in widest way of understanding of that term as its subject. But there is also a question: should the modern human hunt? A clear answer would be: probably not. If we understand the hunting as a declaration of masculine domination of life, then hunting is just another reminder of human power. But if hunting is a reminder, if only unwanted and pungent reminder that

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 111.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 129.

humans are beings that must built the meaning of their lives, as long as the relationship with those biological components of our life, then we must accept that the hunting is an issue that we must study.

Perhaps here lies the opportunity for bioethics to engage in those issues, such as hunting which alone does not tell a lot, but at the same time they provide insights into the many problems that plague modern man. The problem how to understand “life” is certainly one of the most important problems, and this problem often trap us with its unpredictability. Perhaps that is notch for bioethics so it can avoid tranquility of seemingly resolved “issues“, so let us not stand away.

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Tomislav Krznar

Stajati sa strane. Lov kao tema bioetike?

SAŽETAK

Bioetika pita o ulozi čovjeka u strukturi života. Možemo pretpostaviti da ni fenomen lova ne smije ostati izvan našeg razmatranja. Na početku smo suočeni s dvjema vrlo podvojenim pozicijama: iako ljudsko postojanje u više od 90 % vremena postojanja obilježava lov, danas se lov čini kao nepotreban rudiment prošlosti, budući da se lov primarno shvaća kao ubijanje i nadmoć čovjeka nad mnogim oblicima života. No istovremeno se može tvrditi da je lov jedan od najvažnijih alata za kontrolu populacije pojedinih životinjskih vrsta, što je rezultat čovjekove intervencije. K tomu, mnogi teoretičari ukazuju da suvremen način života postindustrijskog društva na mnogo načina nastoji denaturalizirati čovjeka, uništavajući prirodnu dimenziju ljudskog postojanja. Ovu poziciju nastojimo osvijetliti kroz uvide španjolskog filozofa J. Ortege y Gasseta koji u poznatom spisu *Meditacije o lovu* nastoji prikazati problem lova u ljudskom društvu i dati konkretna objašnjenja ljudske prirodnosti. Na kraju, u ovom članku nastojimo ocrtati problematično područje lova i istodobno odrediti odgovarajuću mjeru njegova postojanja u suvremenom društvu, dajući prostora bioetici za daljnja istraživanja.

Ključne riječi: lov, bioetika, društvo, život, Ortega y Gasset.