

---

# Sport Hunting, *Eudaimonia*, and Tragic Wisdom

JAMES A. TANTILLO

Department of Natural Resources  
Cornell University  
8 Fernow Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14853  
jat4@cornell.edu

**Abstract:** *Anti-hunters frequently overlook or underestimate the positive values associated with reflective sport hunting. In this essay I characterize the value of hunting in the context of an Aristotelian virtue ethic. Sport hunting done for the purpose of recreation contributes heavily to the eudaimonia (flourishing) of hunters. I employ Aristotelian insights about tragedy to defend hunting as an activity especially well-suited for promoting a range of crucial intellectual and emotional virtues. Reflective sport hunters develop a "realistic awareness of death" and experience what may be called "tragic" pleasure, which yields the important intellectual virtue of tragic wisdom.*

*And so I have stood by and watched a great animal die. And in the stillness that followed the last heave of the flanks, a bloody froth blew from the nostrils, staining the snow. And I who was practiced in death could sense that in that silence, that stillness into which a few faded and yellowing leaves were falling, that the hunt was over. I breathed in the damp, rich odor of mortality and stood for a moment in my own coming death, on the ground of death itself.*

*It was not a clinical death—the sudden stopping of pulse and breath, a gradual rigor in the limbs. It was something else: a sudden space and peace that came to the*

*woods. Before I put rifle and pack aside and prepared for the long job of butchering, I stood for a moment in the oldest stillness on earth. And in that moment, when for this one creature life ceased and its flesh settled into the fixed transience of decay, I could believe in the passage of the soul into another country.*

*And then there was no time to stand and muse upon the mystery; the animal was down, there was meat to save and work to do.*

*When the carcass had been gutted and skinned, and the meat cut into quarters, carried off, and hung in the air to age and keep, a stained and matted place in the moss kept for a while the imprint of death in life. Blood, body fluids soaked into the snow and the soil beneath; some stray whiskers—hairs that were long and hollow, shading from gray to brown at the roots, and black at the tips—these persisted, along with scraps of trimmed flesh, of fat encrusted with dried blood, freezing in the cold air.*

*After the kill, and the work of skinning and cutting was over, an odor remained—a warmth, a sweetness of blood and inner membrane, smelt on the hands and clothing, on the knife and ax. That which emerged steaming and hot from the interior of the*

*killed creature cooled to a faint displacement of the dry woods air. And now that I think of it, I cannot dispel completely the persistent odor of death that clings to the woods I have known and hunted* (Haines 1996, 295-96).

Hunting presents the philosopher with a paradox: how can it be moral to kill, and to take pleasure in killing? The pleasures of hunting seem to derive, at least in part, from the enjoyment and pleasure hunters get at the expense in pain, suffering, and death inflicted on the animal. Joyce Carol Oates speaks of "the awareness of life's tragic ambiguity that serious art provides," and she subsequently makes the argument that the sport of boxing should be considered a serious art (Oates 1994, 137). I argue here that the sport of hunting is a serious art as well.

Opponents of hunting focus on the killing act itself and tend to frame the hunting debate in terms of our duties or obligations not to kill. A virtue ethics approach, on the other hand, focuses on the character, intent, and motivation of the hunter. In my view, virtue ethics is pluralistic in that act-centered moral considerations as well as agent-centered moral considerations are equally important (Stocker 1973; Stocker 1990; Harris 1999). Neither trumps the other. The question is whether agent-centered considerations are strong enough to outweigh our common sense intuitions that killing is wrong.

Act-centered opponents of hunting ignore the importance of the emotions involved in ethical sport hunting. Part of what makes sport hunting emotionally engaging and morally rewarding is exactly this intuition that killing is ordinarily wrong. The hunter is ambivalent about his or her reaction to the kill; or at least the hunter should be. A hunter who doesn't feel at least some regret or sympathy for the animal killed is merely a killer and not a true sport hunter. So part of the moral evaluation of hunting involves an evaluation of the emotional response of the hunter to the kill. Even opponents of the hunt manifest this concern for the motivations and intentions of the hunter when they express a dislike for killing done with too casual an attitude—i.e. without a feeling of reverence or respect, a mark of authentic sport hunting. Some hunters go so far to argue, as does Roger Scruton, that the killed animal is raised to the level of a totem for the entire species (Scruton 1997). Many hunters report feelings of sadness, awe, regret, and other various conflicting emotions at the time of the kill. Such testimonials are a clue to the power of the experience and its ability to affect people emotionally as well as cognitively (Stocker and Hegeman 1996). These effects need to be weighed in

the ethical evaluation of hunting, not downplayed or ignored as in utilitarianism and Kantianism. By contrast, virtue ethics in an Aristotelian spirit values the emotional reaction of the hunter as an important part of the moral mix.

An important question is: Why does hunting give us pleasure? In my view, the closest analogy for this pleasure in human experience is tragedy, which has fascinated western philosophers from the time of the Greeks, and which provides a model for moral reasoning about the paradox of tragic pleasure (Nuttall 1996). Tragedy involves what Martha Nussbaum has labeled the "tragic emotions," the very ambiguity of which is a primary source of the pleasure experienced, as well as the knowledge produced, in tragedy. The ideals of tragic pleasure and tragic knowledge lead ultimately to my articulation and development of the idea of "tragic wisdom" in hunting.

The relations between emotion, pleasure, and knowledge in the Aristotelian tradition are extremely complex. Thus the phenomenon of sport hunting raises deep philosophical questions that go beyond the mere killing of animals. I contend that it is this quality of depth in the experience that also makes hunting morally and aesthetically worthwhile. Hunting is an aesthetic ritual the importance of which lies mostly within its interpretation. An hermeneutic approach that does justice to the interpretive aspects of the hunting experience will likely yield a more satisfying philosophical account of hunting than either of the dominant philosophical traditions of utilitarianism or Kantianism (see generally Rorty 1980; Gadamer 1982; Bruns 1992). In the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer the link between Aristotle and hermeneutics is especially pronounced (Gadamer 1982, 278-289).

In order to develop my argument that hunting can lead to tragic wisdom, I first examine the concept of tragedy itself.

### The concept of tragedy

Tragedy is a notoriously broad and ambiguous literary and philosophical term. Morris Weitz calls it an "open concept" (Weitz 1977, chapter 4). In Richard Palmer's perspicuous survey of tragic theory, dozens of theorists are discussed, none of whom agree on a definition. Some feel that tragedy applies only to dramatic plays of a certain form; others emphasize the subjective experience of tragedy from the spectator's perspective. This dispute resembles the one in aesthetics between formalists who emphasize works of art and aestheticians who emphasize aesthetic experience (Shusterman 1992). Palmer believes that the formalist insistence that the

concept "tragedy" applies only to tragic drama in the theater is itself "a taxonomic response to imprecision," one that prescribes "fixed and objective defining features" to a wide and inherently subjective range of human experience. In contrast, Palmer's own definition emphasizes that the perception and interpretation of tragedy depends on a subjective response rather than on a specific description of dramatic plays as a category or genre. "Tragedy is a dramatic form that stimulates a response of intense, interdependent, and inseparably balanced attraction and repulsion" (Palmer 1992, 4, 11-12). Palmer's analysis draws attention to the audience or participant, and this approach represents a difference from many others in the full spectrum of theories of tragedy. Yet as I explain below, even for formalists who insist on a rigorous conception of tragic structure, hunting in many ways provides a close parallel in terms of following a conventional "dramatic script."

Aristotle refers to the mixed emotions of *eleos* and *phobos* in the *Poetics*. This pity and fear in response to the death in tragedy is, for Aristotle, an *appropriate* response to the events portrayed in tragedy. Most of the commentators Palmer surveys agree on this mixed aspect of tragic response, i.e. the mixture of attraction and repulsion, or what is sometimes referred to as tragic ambivalence. Death is a necessary precondition for tragic response. "That someone must die in a tragedy," Iris Murdoch explains, "is not a mere convention like that which decrees deaths in detective stories." Instead, tragedy involves "the difference between suffering and death . . . Plays in which people suffer but do not die are not (strictly speaking) tragedies." Proponents of hunting often make a similar observation in relation to the idea of hunting with a camera: killing, or at least the possibility of killing, *must* occur in the hunt for it to be authentic hunting. A tragic view of hunting thus corresponds with Murdoch's conception of tragedy: in hunting, as in tragedy, "the compulsory nature of death is an image of its place in life. Such are the solemn thoughts which a contemplation of this great concept may inspire in us" (Murdoch 1993, 117).

It doesn't make sense, Murdoch insists, to speak of "tragedy," as is common in everyday usage, as applying to things like plane crashes or the deaths of people we know. There isn't the aesthetic attraction and the repulsion—just the death. Still, we know that sometimes a car crash attracts—on the side of the road, the tendency is to want to see the crash and to see the victim as we are driving by. It seems to be an aspect of human nature, that we have this morbid fascination with the spectacle of death, even though at the same time we feel slightly embarrassed or even ashamed to be attracted to the sight.

Plato comments on this macabre fascination in the *Republic* when describing Leontius witnessing the dead bodies outside the city wall: his eyes were simultaneously drawn to the bodies, and afraid to look. Leontius finally breaks down, and looks at the bodies, which he finds somewhat to his surprise, were "beautiful" (*Republic* 440a).

In some ways, this response captures the aesthetic essence of tragedy. Can death be beautiful? Can suffering or misery? The moral issue is raised when speaking of enjoying tragedy: "And if we praise the delights of reading and writing about *tragedy*, are we not seeking joy through the contemplation of the sufferings of our fellow men?" asks Walter Kaufmann (1979). And as the Haines passage above suggests, the contemplation of an animal's death in hunting can be a "tragic pleasure." The moral dilemma of tragic pleasure relates to our appropriate attitude toward death, and to our response to death as it is presented in the various tragic forms.

The emotional response to hunting is phenomenologically similar in many important ways to the response to tragedy, in that it necessarily involves the hunter in an ambiguous situation that is (quite possibly) irresolvable. Richard Palmer repeatedly emphasizes that tragedy "evokes an ambivalent response that simultaneously attracts and repels the audience" (1992, 11). This is why, as Palmer also notes, the tragic form generates an inexhaustible amount of discussion:

*An essential part of tragedy is unresolved and unresolvable emotional paradox. The equaling of pluses and minuses does not, in the scope of human emotion, add up to zero. To the contrary, our inability to resolve conflicting values holds our attention better than any unambivalent emotion. Tragedy produces an inexhaustible stream of discussion, analysis, and argument precisely because attempts to resolve its ambiguity never end. We can only describe, not resolve, true paradox, which leads to comprehension but not emotional quietude. If we can resolve our emotional response, the phenomenon is not tragic (Palmer 1992, 155).*

The ambivalence Palmer describes is common among hunters: in fact, many have commented on it directly, in both oral and written accounts. José Ortega y Gasset dwells on it at length in *Meditations on Hunting* (1972). The ambivalence takes many different forms. One is an oft-expressed sense of regret at having killed the animal. A well-

known Victorian era print shows a hunter, a dog at his feet, holding a dead bird in one hand and a shotgun in the other, staring pensively at the bird, entitled simply "The Moment of Regret."

No simple, reductionist description of hunting can even come close to doing justice to the activity of hunting if it stops short at the equation hunting=killing. As Erich Fromm writes: "The interpretation of the pleasure in hunting as a pleasure in killing rather than skill is characteristic for the impoverished person of our time for whom the only thing that counts is the *result* of an effort, in this case killing itself rather than the process of hunting itself" (Fromm 1973, 134). Hunters don't "take pleasure" in killing as such. Hunting is not sadism.<sup>1</sup> Elation at having successfully killed the prey is mixed with a certain bittersweet remorse or ambivalence at having taken its life. Ortega speaks of the "enchanted animal"—most hunters are passionate about a particular prey species, and pursue that particular game animal with a single-minded passion bordering on love. Thus hunters find it very easy to speak of the respect they feel for the animal they kill, and the love they feel for the species they hunt.

These notions may make little or no sense to anti-hunters. As Sydney Lea writes, "The anti-hunting propagandist is appalled by such a sacramental perspective, precisely because its icon is a bloodstain." Lea continues, "Nor will the hobbyist sportsman read me rightly. I speak only to and for the passionate hunter, the one who regards this business as more than mere sport" (Lea 1994, 25). Lea feels that only serious hunters, those passionate enough to dedicate themselves to the activity and who engage in at least a modicum of contemplative reflection about the activity, can understand.

Richard Palmer argues that all literature deals with death—the various forms simply differ in their approach to it. Socrates says that all philosophy is preparation for death. Epicurus says not to fear death. Religious traditions help people prepare for death. Art, aesthetics, and tragedy are all linked to the spiritual, although exactly how remains mysterious. The work of Hans-George Gadamer and Iris Murdoch discussed below provides clues.

### Tragedy, knowledge, and *eudaimonia*

"Aristotle has a high regard for tragedy," Martha Nussbaum observes (1986, 378). The examination of fear is central to Aristotle's account of tragedy in the *Poetics*, where tragedy and *eudaimonia* are treated together and seen as linked. This linkage of tragedy and ethics is no accident. Nussbaum argues

that within a virtue theory framework, an Aristotelian approach to ethics is naturally "hospitable to tragedy and its style as sources of illumination." Furthermore, she argues that Aristotle's emphasis on practical reason and judgment makes him critical of the view that there is a "neutral" philosophical style in which ethical claims can be "equally and impartially assessed" (1986, 391). This critical stance toward the alleged ethical neutrality of the dominant philosophical trends of our day is shared by modern virtue theorists.

One of the benefits of hunting, indeed, one of its pleasures, is a form of contemplative tragic knowledge that comes from a familiarity and intimacy with death. This often nonrational tragic knowledge is far more realistic than the oversimplified anti-killing moralism of many (not all) would-be animal liberators. Cleveland Amory once said that in his vision of an ideal world, he would go out into nature and stop predators in their tracks. But the desire to avoid death and to prevent its occurrence in nature is unrealistic when it is taken to such extremes.

One of the moral values at work in tragedy and in hunting is the value of epistemic responsibility: the virtue of "knowing well" (Code 1987). The vegetarian as well as the meat-eater lives at the expense of other life. This is true whether one is tilling the soil or pulling the trigger. As Alfred North Whitehead comments, "Life is robbery" (Whitehead 1979, 105). A form of self-deception can occur when individuals choose a vegetarian or "cruelty-free" lifestyle in the belief that such personal eating habits cause less harm and/or deaths to animals. Many people simply do not understand how the modern agricultural practices that support a vegetarian lifestyle may produce a significant number of animal deaths that compare with those in hunting or in certain forms of animal husbandry. Such self-deception is often easily perpetuated in a society where so few people have a direct hand in producing their own food. Primarily I am making a point about tragic awareness: whether one shops in the supermarket for tofu or for hamburger, both come wrapped in plastic, and both represent a similar emotional distance from the animal deaths caused by food production.

By virtue of literally taking responsibility for his or her own actions and pulling the trigger directly, the hunter may be more fully aware that life is possible only because of the death of others. Even Albert Schweitzer is aware of this tragic reality: "The world, however, offers us the horrible drama of Will-to-Live divided against itself. One existence holds its own at the cost of another: one destroys another. . . . [Man] is subject to the puzzling and horrible law of being obliged to live at the cost of another life, and to

incur again and again the guilt of destroying and injuring life" (Schweitzer 1933, 126). Dining on a plate of rice and beans (or on a store-bought roast), one is unlikely to know intimately the lives that were stolen to produce that meal. To the contrary, a reflective hunter "knows well" the origin of his meal, and the lives sacrificed for his benefit. And I believe such tragic knowledge is a good thing, in an objective sense.

Hunting allows for direct human responsibility and active human agency. Thus the moral justification of hunting must involve what Charles Taylor has called an ethics of context, not an ethics of absolutism (1989, 85-89). The role of discretion, which is an important aspect of theories of integrity (Halfon 1989, 166) and in Aristotelian ethics (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988, chapter 2), is among the relevant moral considerations in the defense of hunting. The hunter may or may not choose to pull the trigger in the end. An ethics of context treats humans as responsible individuals and trusts them to use their faculties of judgment, discretion, and wisdom, rather than treating them like animals or children by legislating their activity out of existence. An ethics of context also preserves the ideal of autonomy that figures in so many perfectionist accounts of well-being (Hurka 1993, 148-152).

This emphasis on autonomy highlights the importance of comprehensive projects such as hunting for well-being and *eudaimonia*. For example, Joseph Raz discusses the importance of autonomy in the choice of one's personal projects for personal well-being in *The Morality of Freedom*. Raz emphasizes that these projects generally embody clearly recognizable "existing social forms" such as hunting. These social forms or activities provide the necessary background for any individual having the kind of comprehensive goals that any conception of *eudaimonia* presupposes. One's "comprehensive goals" are therefore necessarily tied to these preexisting social forms. Raz explains: "Going bell-ringing every Sunday is not a comprehensive goal in itself, but when it is conceived as a complex activity with social, sightseeing, architectural, and other interests and when it assumes a significance which pervades other times than those when one is actually on a bell-ringing outing, then it is a comprehensive goal" (Raz 1986, 308-09). The idea of social forms dovetails with the idea of comprehensive goods or comprehensive projects in other theories of *eudaimonia* and well-being (see also Harris 1999, 351, 357).

John Rawls's discussion of the Aristotelian Principle in *A Theory of Justice* provides another example. Rawls asserts that "other things equal,

human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity." He continues, "The intuitive idea here is that human beings take more pleasure in doing something as they become more proficient at it, and of two activities they do equally well, they prefer the one calling on a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discrimination. For example, chess is a more complicated and subtle game than checkers, and algebra is more intricate than elementary arithmetic" (Rawls 1971, 426). Like chess, hunting is one such complex and subtle game, a social form that constitutes a comprehensive goal for many people.

This recognition that hunting is a social form that provides some people with their comprehensive goals means that hunting requires an appropriate moral, aesthetic, and political analysis. This is where hermeneutic skills of interpretation are most needed for understanding the value of hunting. Hunting is a comprehensive project for certain individuals in much the same way that music, art, and literature can be for others. Hunting is itself also a highly aesthetic activity and requires a mode of aesthetic appreciation for its interpretation in much the same way as do other forms of music, art, and literature.

Richard Miller's recent essay on aesthetic realism well represents current work in this area. Miller defines aesthetic experiences as contributing to a "learninglike" increase in our knowledge and understanding, which is intellectually virtuous—thus making aesthetic experience central to a perfectionist account of the good life (see also Eaton 1989). Aesthetic response is "learninglike," he stresses, in that its "goal" is not knowledge *per se*: "Aesthetic appreciation is the enjoyment of a process of responding to an object that is not directed at learning, but that is sufficiently like learning: this learninglike process might have elements of passive reception, surprise, exploration, imaginative construction, discovery, the achievement of coherence, or the perception of underlying normality" (Miller 1998, 38). Miller identifies aesthetic appreciation with the enjoyment of an activity or object that is primarily non-instrumental. "A work has some aesthetic value (roughly) because it is capable of prompting such enjoyment in someone," he writes (1998, 27). Aesthetic experience thus has the potential to engage the senses and provoke reflection in the contemplation of objects or activities we value for their own sake and not simply because they meet some basic need.

Miller argues that there must be some sort of intelligible form to the experience: "there must be aspects of order." But as noted earlier, this order need

not make the object of aesthetic appreciation a formal object of art, as some aesthetic theorists insist (e.g. Dickie 1988; Dickie 1997). The key element for Miller is what an intellectually and morally sincere individual could find intellectually and aesthetically pleasing: "Something that is *not* a work of art has aesthetic value if someone who is intellectually and morally mature could respond to it with aesthetic appreciation" (Miller 1998, 38). Thus aesthetic value presupposes active involvement on the part of the observer or participant, as well as an *appropriate* response on the part of the critic:

*Finally, one can enjoy the learninglike response in an emotional way, enjoying it sadly, perhaps, or with pity and terror. In more or less obvious ways, these varieties of aesthetic appreciation correspond to the terms of serious critical appraisal. . . . If someone enjoys the richer, more sustained, yet more unpredictable structure of Beethoven's op. 131 quartet as compared with his op. 18, no. 1, but doesn't care more about the former response, than either he is too tired for the more strenuous delights or he lacks interest in the solution of large problems, which marks him as intellectually sluggish. Here the cognitive helps to rationalize our aesthetic assessments. Similarly, if an appreciator isn't especially interested in the combination of terror and pity that Aristotle describes, he is not a morally serious person. So the moral also helps to rationalize our aesthetic assessments (40-41).*

It may just be that if the opponents of hunting aren't especially interested in the themes of tragic terror and pity, repulsion and attraction, distress and apprehension, then they might not qualify as "morally serious" critics of hunting. A perfectionist or Aristotelian ethics of character that places a high value on the intellectual virtues may mark just such critics as epistemically irresponsible or even "intellectually sluggish."

### Hunting, catharsis, and tragic affirmation

"Our concept of tragedy must contain some dreadful vision of the reality and significance of death," writes Iris Murdoch. "Here sin, evil, is the evasion of the idea of death" (Murdoch 1993, 104). The evasion of death is an illusory self-deception. Such realistic awareness of death, if nothing else, can

help us live: this is the message of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illich*. Many philosophers argue that it is death that gives life meaning. If we were to live forever, we would eventually grow tired of the tedium. I assume that realistic knowledge about death is good within a perfectionist framework of eudaimonism and that the concomitant vice of self-deception or intellectual *akrasia* is bad. *Akrasia* is willful incontinence—knowing the good thing, but doing the bad—and generally is taken as an indicator of weakness of will. In this context, intellectual *akrasia* is knowing at some level that death confronts us all, but evading that knowledge. In virtue terms, this evasion of knowledge is a vice, or, in religious terms, a sin.

Tragedy helps facilitate this tragic wisdom. Theorists who offer definitions of tragedy speak sometimes of the "collision" with impersonal forces (Philosophy 1997). The human protagonist or tragic hero who faces such forces learns he cannot control events; tragedy teaches humility in the face of cosmic indifference. Hunting literature sometimes even expresses these ideas in terms of "collision." Sydney Lea writes of "that one moment," when "the path of an elusive and superbly equipped prey intersects with a human predatory capacity . . . and for that one moment, the world reveals a gorgeous coherency" (Lea 1994, 25). Lea's use of the term "gorgeous" suggests the aesthetic dimension to his appreciative understanding in that one transitory moment. Yet out of tragic knowledge may also come a will to live and a will to achieve.

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that "pity" and "fear" are not adequate translations of Aristotle's *eleos* and *phobos*, that the terms are far too mild. In contrast, he argues that "both are events that overwhelm man and sweep him away. *Eleos* is the distress that comes over us in the face of what we call distressing." Pity and fear are not just inner emotions, but rather a more physical and emotional reaction that is outwardly manifested. Similarly, *phobos* "is not just a state of mind, but, as Aristotle says, a cold shudder that makes one's blood run cold, that makes one shiver." Gadamer describes the fate of Oedipus as distressing in this sense. "[I]n this definition of tragedy, *phobos* is combined with *eleos*, *phobos* means the shivers of apprehension which come over us for someone whom we see rushing to his destruction and for whom we fear" (Gadamer 1982, 115).

The emotional release or catharsis is a spiritual experience. "Distress and apprehension are modes of *ekstasis*, being outside oneself," Gadamer writes, "which testify to the power of what is taking place before us." The distress and apprehension lead

not to tragic resignation, or even to emotional purification, as scholars of tragedy have traditionally interpreted *catharsis*. Rather, the proper response to tragedy is a mood of what Gadamer calls "tragic pensiveness": "It seems clear to me that Aristotle is thinking of the tragic pensiveness that comes over the spectator at a tragedy. But pensiveness is a kind of relief and resolution, in which pain and pleasure are variously mixed" (115). The hunter's moment of regret is filled with such mixed emotions of pain and pleasure.

Gadamer's emphasis on the importance of distress in the experience of tragedy is very similar to Iris Murdoch's idea of "unselfing;" in fact, Murdoch uses the term "distress" as well. "Tragedy must cause us distress," she writes. "[I]ts subject matter is contingency and death, the profound difference between suffering and death, the connection of truth and justice with the apprehension of death, the elevation of morality to the religious level" (Murdoch 1993, 117). It could be argued that unselfing and catharsis are related psychological phenomena with parallels in feminist theory and in many religious traditions as well (Hauerwas 1981; Babbitt 1996, 58).

Contrary to traditional interpretations of catharsis, Gadamer's view is at odds with the translation of catharsis as "purification." How can Aristotle call this condition a purification? Gadamer asks: "What is the impure element in feeling, and how is this removed in the tragic emotion?"

*The answer seems to me the following: being overcome by distress and horror involves a painful division. There is a disjunction with what is happening, a refusal to accept, that rebels against the agonizing events. But it is precisely the effect of the tragic catastrophe that this disjunction with what exists is removed. The heart is freed from constraint. We are freed not only from the spell in which the painful and horrifying nature of the tragic destiny had held us, but at the same time we are free from everything that divides us from what is (Gadamer 1982, 116).*

Gadamer's account here resembles Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy as life-affirming in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the fact that this is a nonrational response counts in its favor (Nietzsche 1967, 59). In contrast to the purely rationalist evaluations of hunting made by utilitarians or Kantians, a tragic interpretation of hunting highlights the emotional power of tragic catharsis as what overwhelms us in hunting. What Gadamer refers to as "tragic pensiveness," then, "reflects a kind of

affirmation, a return to ourselves, and if, as is often the case in modern tragedy, the hero is affected in his own consciousness by the emotion, he himself shares a little in this affirmation, in that he accepts his fate" (1982, 116). Herein lies the intellectual virtue of tragic wisdom that is made available through tragedy and potentially through the activity of hunting.

This sense of tragic pensiveness is something many thoughtful hunters experience, albeit few may put it into words. Mike Gaddis's essay, "Taking a Life," exhibits such a mood:

*Things come back now, across the years: my Grandpa Betts, on the close of a day at quail, telling me, "I know more than a man probably ought to know about the how of things. What I need to know more of is the why."*

*Inescapably, our middle years become introspective. The edge is off; the fever of youth has become manageable. We can enjoy a few achievements but can't bask there, for there are miles left in the journey. The questions become larger, the answers more elusive.*

*Most sobering of all, perhaps, is that for maybe the first time we can look down the road and sense that it has to end. Death becomes a growing presence. We contemplate our own. Suddenly, it dawns that life is extremely fragile. Suddenly, it is evident that no one ever has a clear title to life. It's simply an open-ended loan, to be called without notice at fate's whim. But there are places yet to go, things left to do. Life grows dearer, is guarded more closely, savored more fully. For many who hunt, these revelations bring a deep quandary. There is a growing reluctance to take a life, faced with the enlightened appreciation of our own. . . .*

*We stand alone, though, in our ability to contemplate the loss of life, to understand its finality, to comprehend what's forever gone. Out of respect and self-respect, those of us who hunt must apply this greater wisdom on behalf of the wild things we pursue. This is the responsibility decency calls us to acknowledge and practice rather than push aside. For it is inescapable. The life we take is not all that different from our own (Gaddis 1996, 120-122).*

Skeptics may object that no hunter in the world has the concept of tragic pleasure in mind when

going out to hunt; and this may be so. On the other hand, there is a real distinction to be made between "dim and inchoate self-comprehension," to borrow Owen Flanagan's terms, and "epistemically misguided self-comprehension," which constitutes a genuine fault and an intellectual vice (Flanagan 1990, 44). Hunters may simply be *inarticulate* about these tragic themes. Instead of possessing the "epistemically misguided" self-comprehension that many anti-hunting writers tend to attribute to hunters—Joy Williams's portrayal of hunters as "blood-thirsty, piggish, and grossly incompetent" thrill-killers well represents the stereotype (Williams 1990, 112)—hunters may simply possess a "dim and inchoate" self-comprehension, but at the same time possess a very real degree of tragic wisdom. Tolstoy's peasants, as Flanagan observes, should remind us that the "truths of philosophical psychology or anthropology" to which any "acceptable moral or political theory must give articulate expression" differ substantially from the demand "we place on individual persons to know and articulate these same truths" (Flanagan 1990, 45). Flanagan compares this insight to Charles Taylor's discussion of the "ethics of inarticulacy" in *Sources of the Self*, where Taylor insists we still need to articulate our ideas of the good in "some kind of philosophical prose" regardless of its intelligibility (Taylor 1989, 103).

These truths about hunting can be articulated in philosophical prose or through other literary outlets, including traditional sporting literature. Social scientists have conducted research on the vicarious nature of living the hunt through literature and sporting magazines (Wegner 1984, 216). Such literature gives voice to some of the inchoate feelings that hunters have about hunting, but also facilitates the inculcation of the sporting code and sporting traditions. Truly great sporting literature rises above the level of pulp fiction, e.g. the stories of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cooper. Walter Sullivan comments,

*The fictional hunter is, in his small or not so small way, the Nietzschean tragic figure, the synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses. At his best, he lives in an equilibrium between his consciousness of himself as a unique individual and the knowledge that he is a part of a universal nature, to which ultimately his individual self will have to submit" (Sullivan 1990, 112).*

Philosophical analysis has its place as well. Gadamer helps explain why the hunter's presence at

the kill is so necessary: it contributes to the "hermeneutical experience" by which tragic knowledge is obtained firsthand. The knowledge is not purely abstract, as with a non-hunter "knowing" that death occurs in nature or that we all must die someday. Gerald Bruns, commenting on Gadamer, writes: "The point to understand is that tragic affirmation is not pretty; it means acknowledgement not just of the difficulty, but of the horror of life." The emancipatory potential of such experience is clear in Bruns' discussion of tragic knowledge: "It is emancipation from false consciousness achieved not by methodological application or analysis, but by hermeneutical experience, that is, by the encounter with the otherness of reality, or with that which refuses to be contained within—kept at bay by—our conceptual operations and results" (Brun 1992, 189). In hunting, "the otherness of reality" that hunters encounter is death itself.

The emotional costs of killing are real, but so are the emotional benefits. Many hunters make a point of saying that it is not the killing they enjoy, but the hunting. Steven Bissell, a Colorado wildlife researcher, calls the killing "distasteful": "I am going hunting for elk this fall and, although I find killing distasteful, it affords me an opportunity to act out my role in the ecosystem which eating bean sprouts doesn't." When asked to elaborate, Bissell replies:

*It's an emotional thing. Hunting is an emotionally charged experience. The best expression I've ever heard is a hunter who said that the killing was "God like." I'm sure someone will jump on that as hubris, but the fellow meant that taking a life of any sort was a very important act and to do it incorrectly or improperly was a very bad thing to do (Bissell 1999).*

As an expression of tragic emotion, such an account might appear inarticulate, but nonetheless it is still a thoughtful reflection about the *meaning* of hunting. I assume that the majority of hunters *are* thoughtful about hunting. Of course, this is a very different matter than expecting hunters to be articulate about their activity. It may be that hunters as a total set are among the most inarticulate groups in the general population, but there is no reason to believe that hunters are devoid of what Kevin Mulligan refers to as "appropriate emotion" (Mulligan 1998).

There is simply a need to put obscure ideas into "philosophical prose," as Charles Taylor suggests, and therefore there is a need for a full philosophical analysis of "tragic pleasure" as it applies to hunting.<sup>2</sup> The tragic emotions of fear and



pity, attraction and repulsion, are often felt by hunters, even if the conscious awareness of such emotion is inchoate, or even absent, from most hunters' discourse.

In a perfect world, with God-like knowledge, perhaps humans would be perfect. Death would not exist, nor pain and suffering. These are the dreams behind the ancient myths of the lion lying down with the lamb, and such dreams linger among anti-hunters today. But of course, the world does have pain, suffering, and death. It is the task of literature, philosophy, and religion to help us make sense of these aspects of existence. Walter Sullivan writes in connection to hunting literature:

*As Robert Penn Warren has remarked, "There will be no literature in Heaven." A race perfected and delivered from death will require no parables or images or correlatives. No accommodation need be struck with immortality, and in Paradise we will know things for what they essentially are. We will have the sort of angelic intelligence that Allen Tate castigated us for trying to exercise before we possessed it. But between the fall and the final judgment, we live with our limited powers of perception and with a knowledge of death that must be propitiated. This is what hunting at its best is about. This is the theme of the literature of hunting (Sullivan 1990, 106).*

Opponents of hunting can always claim that hunters' testimony about regret and remorse represent an affected piety, which is a genuine possibility, and one that Ortega acknowledges and warns against. Yet there is good reason to believe these accounts are sincere, as well as good reason to believe that many of the sentiments expressed in hunting literature are present in everyday life. As hunter Jim Cuda explains, "I don't know any real hunter that doesn't feel a twinge of sadness when he kills an animal" (Cuda 1997), and such sadness is the emotional foundation of tragic pensiveness and the bittersweet root of tragic wisdom.

It is easy for hunters' words to sound trite; and indeed, a consistent theme in the anti-hunting literature is criticism of what opponents see as the false piety of hunters. And yet, as Iris Murdoch explains, when dealing with themes of life and death, authors have a difficult task. "The tragic art form is rare because it is difficult to keep attention focused on the truth without the author slipping into an easier sentimental, abstract, melodramatic . . . mode." Most people who write or speak on hunting are not

Hemingway or Faulkner. They are individuals with a love of hunting who try to make a living writing about what they love most. And yet, even in the pages of the popular "hook and bullet" press, there may be the occasional glimpse at the truth that makes it all worthwhile. "In the truthful vision," Murdoch writes, "evil is justly judged and misery candidly surveyed. The language which can achieve this is a high poetic language. Tragedy is paradoxical art because to succeed it must really upset us while exhibiting, but not as a mere consolation, some orderly and comprehensive vista of evil and catastrophe. Death threatens the ego's dream of eternal life and happiness and power. Tragedy, like religion, must break the ego, destroying the illusory whole of the unified self" (Murdoch 1993, 104). In this way, the ego-shattering experience that aids the process of "unselfing" can lead to humility, the virtue that Murdoch describes as most necessary for authentic freedom (Murdoch 1970, 104).

Words, however, often fail us in describing experience. Sydney Lea, reflecting on the indeterminacy of language, quotes Tom McGuane gutting an antelope, "This is goddamned serious and you better always remember that." Lea comments on his own paltry efforts to express the truth as he knows it—as symbolized by his leaving the last grouse of the hunting season unshot, suggesting his awareness of indeterminacy: "We leave conclusions cloudy, as if all things to which we testify here were *too* damned serious—as often they are—for words alone" (Lea 1994, xiii-xiv).

## Conclusion

The contemplation of death in hunting can be a "tragic pleasure." Hunters and philosophers of the hunt consistently agree about the necessity of the kill in the hunt, but they often disagree about *why*. Why do we hunt and why is hunting a good thing? "Hunters may try to reduce their motives to such tangibles as trophies, meat, good dog-work, companionship, exercise, freedom in quality environments, or simply 'adventure,'" as Chris Madson observes, but "[underlying] all that . . . are deeply embedded reasons that neither hunter nor psychologist is really equipped to fathom" (Madson 1996, 134). Although skeptics and opponents of hunting might be tempted to interpret such a claim as an appeal to obscurity, I believe Madson is simply acknowledging the complexity of the hunting experience.

Can killing be virtuous? Whereas Aristotle refers to "mixed acts" in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,

many modern philosophers employ Sartre's metaphor of "dirty hands" to describe actions that are both good and bad simultaneously. Hunting may be an example of what Stocker describes as "moral immorality" (Stocker 1990).

Hunters have dirty hands in both the literal and in the philosophical sense. Despite the apparent evil of taking an animal's life, hunters gain an enriched human experience and a form of wisdom that counterbalances the bad. As Mary Anne Warren writes, "[The] human interests served by non-subsistence hunting are not always trivial." For many hunters, she explains, "the experience is important to their spiritual and psychological well-being" (Warren 1997, 237). For others, hunting is the primary way in which they come to enjoy and understand nature. Hunters "own" the deaths they cause. They possess a direct awareness of the fragility of life and the contingency of existence.

Sport hunting, properly conducted and properly understood, can therefore lead to wisdom and contribute to human flourishing or *eudaimonia*. The tragic affirmation of life that hunters experience through hunting is akin to the tacit knowledge more traditionally afforded by tragic drama. Hunting calls for an appropriate emotional and cognitive response on the part of both hunter and critic. Critics must know what it is they oppose before registering their complaints; and hunters must become more articulate and sensitive to the underlying or "embedded reasons" for hunting.

Historian Stuart Marks writes: "Hunting is not ephemera in a play world of little consequence. It is about life and death, about methods and means, about power and standing, about stories and myths, about buying and selling, about winning and losing, about economics and ecology, about people and the beasts within and without" (Marks 1991, 263). An analysis of hunting as tragic pleasure is only the first step to uncovering the true depths of the activity for some people. Some hunters are more advanced in their level of reflections than others, but all hunters are potentially capable of tapping into the wellspring of hunting's richness.

In the sporting literature, hunting and angling are often used as metaphors for contemplation. Sydney Lea explicitly draws this connection: "It's in a waterfowl blind that I do the only hunting that could rightly be so called. Physically stationary, however, I'm provoked to mental travel; and the fewer the ducks, the farther my range" (Lea 1994, 21). Hunting clearly can foster an occasion for such reflections, making those who hunt better people in the process. The experience of tragic pleasure is a perfectionist good and a worthwhile benefit derived from hunting

by many, albeit not all, hunters. As an ethical ideal, tragic wisdom is no more or less attainable than other ideals (Rescher 1987). Interpreted as a means of developing tragic wisdom, hunting contributes to human flourishing.

#### Works Cited

Alexander, Samuel. 1933. *Beauty and Other Forms of Value*. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited.

Babbitt, Susan E. 1996. *Impossible Dreams: Rationality, Integrity, and Moral Imagination*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Bissell, Steven J. 1999. "Re: Justified Hunting." Enviroethics listserv at enviroethics@mailbase.ac.uk. 20 March, 1999. <<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa.exe?A2=ind9903&L=enviroethics&F=&S=&P=12200>>. Date of last access July 1, 2001.

Bruns, Gerald L. 1992. *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Code, Lorraine. 1987. *Epistemic Responsibility*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Cuda, Jim. 1997. "Re: Giving up on a deer." Rec.hunting discussion list at hunting@tamu.edu. 14 November 1997. Date of last access 14 November 1997.

Dickie, George. 1988. *Evaluating Art*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Dickie, George. 1997. *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Eaton, Marcia Muelder. 1989. *Aesthetics and the Good Life*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses.

Flanagan, Owen J. 1990. "Identity and Strong and Weak Evaluation." In *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, eds. O. J. Flanagan and A. Rorty, 37-65. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Fromm, Erich. 1973. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gadamer, Hans Georg. 1982. *Truth and Method*. New

York: Crossroad.

Gaddis, Mike. 1996. "Taking a Life." In *A Hunter's Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport*, ed. David Petersen, 117-124. New York: Henry Holt.

Haines, John. 1996. "Another Country." In *A Hunter's Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport*, ed. David Petersen, 295-298. New York: Henry Holt.

Halfon, Mark S. 1989. *Integrity: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Harris, George W. 1999. *Agent-Centered Morality: An Aristotelian Alternative to Kantian Internalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hauerwas, Stanley. 1981. "The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic." In *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*, 30-47. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Hurka, Thomas. 1993. *Perfectionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jonsen, Albert R. and Stephen Toulmin. 1988. *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kaufmann, Walter Arnold. 1979. *Tragedy and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lea, Sydney. 1994. *Hunting the Whole Way Home*. Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England.

Madson, John. 1996. "Why Men Hunt." In *A Hunter's Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport*, ed. David Petersen, 130-135. New York: Henry Holt.

Marks, Stuart A. 1991. *Southern Hunting in Black and White: Nature, History, and Ritual in a Carolina Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Miller, Richard W. 1998. "Three Versions of Objectivity: Aesthetic, Moral, and Scientific." In *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, 26-58. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mulligan, Kevin. 1998. "From Appropriate Emotions to Values." *The Monist* 81, no. 1: 161-188.

Murdoch, Iris. 1970. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Murdoch, Iris. 1993. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. New York: Allen Lane Penguin Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 1967. *The Birth of Tragedy, and The Case of Wagner*. New York: Vintage Books.

Nussbaum, Martha. 1986. *The Fragility of Goodness*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nuttall, A. D. 1996. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 1994. *On Boxing*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press.

Ortega y Gasset, José. 1972. *Meditations on Hunting*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Palmer, Richard H. 1992. *Tragedy and Tragic Theory: An Analytic Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Philosophy, Internet Encyclopedia of. 1997. "Tragedy." <<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/t/tragedy.htm>>. Date of last access October 30, 2000.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Raz, Joseph. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rescher, Nicholas. 1987. *Ethical Idealism: An Inquiry into the Nature and Function of Ideals*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Rorty, Richard. 1980. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Schweitzer, Albert. 1933. *Out Of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*. Translated by C. T. Campion. New York: Henry Holt.

Scruton, Roger. 1997. "From a View to a Death: Culture, Nature and the Huntsman's Art." *Environmental Values* 6: 471-481.

Shusterman, Richard. 1992. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell.

Stocker, Michael. 1973. "Act and Agent Evaluations." *The Review of Metaphysics* 27, no. 1: 42-61.

- Stocker, Michael. 1990. *Plural and Conflicting Values*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stocker, Michael and Elizabeth Hegeman. 1996. *Valuing Emotions*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sullivan, Walter. 1990. "In Praise of Blood Sports." In *"In Praise of Blood Sports" and Other Essays*, 105-119. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Tantillo, James A. 2002. *The Morality of Hunting: "A Damnable Pleasure."* Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Warren, Mary Anne. 1997. *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wegner, Robert. 1984. *Deer and Deer Hunting: The Serious Hunter's Guide*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books.
- Weitz, Morris. 1977. *The Opening Mind: A Philosophical Study of Humanistic Concepts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1979. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. New York: Macmillan.
- Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen. 1973. *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, Joy. 1990. "The Killing Game." *Esquire* 113 (October): 112-128.

Notes

1. As Fromm comments, "The idea that hunting produces pleasure in torture is an unsubstantiated and most implausible statement. Hunters as a rule do not enjoy the suffering of the animal, and in fact a sadist who enjoys torture would make a poor hunter" (Fromm 1973, 131).
2. The Lockean-inspired philosophical framework of secondary qualities may provide a starting point for such an analysis. Elsewhere I evaluate the tragic emotions of pity and fear, attraction and repulsion as the appropriate emotional response to hunting. Employing Samuel Alexander's refinement of "tertiary aesthetic qualities" (Alexander 1933, 183), I defend the realist view that there is a measure of aesthetic objectivity available to us if we view tragic emotions as tertiary qualities of hunting (Tantillo 2002).