

Eating animals: An ecocentric perspective

Ecocentrism finds inherent value in all of nature, extending moral consideration to both biotic and abiotic components of ecosystems. This raises challenging questions concerning the ethics of food consumption. From an ecocentric perspective, what should humans eat? Our species is heterotrophic – we are consumers of other organisms – but which organisms should we consume? In particular, should humans eat non-human animals? This paper offers an ecocentric perspective on this question. This perspective is informed by an ethic of ‘flourishing’, which suggests that one should act in ways that contribute towards the flourishing of living organisms and the ecological systems in which they are embedded. Applying this ethic, the paper explores whether the consumption of animals can be understood as contributing towards, or cohering with, ecosystem flourishing, animal flourishing and human flourishing. The author examines each of these in turn, drawing out tensions and harmonies, to arrive at an ecocentric perspective on eating animals.

Ecocentrism finds inherent value in all of nature. It seeks the flourishing of both biotic and abiotic components of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. It goes beyond biocentrism, which extends moral consideration to living organisms, to include ecological systems as wholes, including their abiotic aspects, in the sphere of moral concern.

From an ecocentric perspective, what constitutes ethical consumption? Humans need to eat. We are animals, and all animals are *heterotrophic*: consumers of other organisms. But which organisms should we consume? What makes the consumption of one organism morally permissible and the consumption of another morally impermissible? In particular, should humans eat non-human animals?¹

This paper offers a perspective on this final question, oriented around an ethic of ‘flourishing’. This ethic suggests that one should act in ways that contribute towards the flourishing of living organisms and the ecological systems in which they are embedded. It understands ecosystem flourishing to be of overriding importance, but remains committed to the well-being of individual members of the biotic community.

Applying this ethic, I examine the degree to which the consumption of animals can be understood as contributing towards, or cohering with, ecosystem flourishing, animal flourishing and human flourishing. Examining each of these in turn – drawing out the tensions and harmonies that exist between them – I arrive at an ecocentric perspective on eating animals.

Ecosystem flourishing

Humans participate in a diverse range of ecosystems, and often affect these ecosystems through the consumption of animals. In one sense this is unremarkable, for consumption and predation are characteristic of ecosystem functioning. While autotrophs, such as plants and algae, obtain nutrients from the soil or oceans and manufacture their own food via photosynthesis, heterotrophs, such as humans and other animals, consume autotrophs or the animals that consume them. Detritivores, meanwhile, break down dead plant and animal material and release it again as nutrients into the ecosystem for recycling.

Consumption is constituent of life; and the cycling and recycling of energy and nutrients via consumption is constituent of

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ecosystem flourishing. Schlosberg (2007: 148) proposes that landscapes, habitats and ecosystems may be understood as “living entities with their own integrity” with “the potential [...] to flourish.” A *flourishing* ecosystem is one in which the recycling of energy and nutrients occurs in a manner that does not undermine the ecosystem’s integrity or diminish its complexity, thereby allowing for “the unfolding or realization of the potential of nature” (Schlosberg 2007: 152).

It is conceivable that a human population could consume animals in a manner that coheres with ecosystem flourishing; various indigenous hunting cultures more-or-less explicitly aspire to do so (Descola, 2013). And yet this is rarely the case. Our consumption of animals, both farmed and wild-caught, often does not cohere with ecosystem flourishing, but instead undermines it.

Consider our consumption of wild-caught animals. We are prone to consuming these animals either to extinction or in volumes that undermine the integrity and complexity of the ecosystems of which they are part. Our consumption of predatory fish, such as grouper, tuna, swordfish and shark, provides one such example. In the past century humans have reduced the biomass of such fish in the ocean by more than two-thirds (Christensen *et al.*, 2014). This overconsumption has cascading consequences for the ecosystems in which these fish are embedded. Sandin and colleagues (2008) have shown, for example, that the overconsumption of Caribbean sharks has resulted in the deterioration of the sharks’ coral ecosystems via processes of trophic cascade. Similar processes occur on land: over 300 terrestrial mammal species are threatened with extinction due to overexploitation for human consumption; “insidious alterations of ecosystems” are the ensuing result (Ripple *et al.*, 2016: 7).

Our consumption of farmed animals also adversely affects both local and global ecosystems. Consider, for example, the impact of meat production upon soil ecosystems. Soil comprises organic and inorganic matter. Soil organic

matter consists of plant material and animal residues at various stages of being decomposed, along with abundant microscopic biodiversity that is responsible for the decomposition processes that convert this organic matter into the nutrients that plants need to grow. Soil ecosystems, particularly their organic components, are fragile. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2015) reports that one-third of the world’s soils are ‘degraded’ or ‘highly degraded’, including by being reduced in organic matter. Intensive monocropping is one of the primary causes of soil degradation (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2009). In turn, one of the primary drivers of intensive monocropping is the need to produce feed-crops for farmed animals (WWF, 2017).

The degradation of soils is often framed as a food security issue: without soil we cannot feed a growing human population, and on one estimate we have only 60 years of food production left (Arsenault, 2014). But from an ecocentric perspective, the degradation of soil and the destruction of soil ecosystems is an ethical issue in itself. Soil is of intrinsic value; the flourishing of soil ecosystems is of intrinsic value. It can take a thousand years for a flourishing soil ecosystem to form and, globally, we are losing the equivalent of 30 hectares of these ecosystems every minute (Arsenault, 2014).

Animal farming is also a major driver of deforestation, biodiversity loss, ocean dead zones and species extinction (Machovina *et al.*, 2015). It is also responsible for greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to the entire global transport system (Wellesley *et al.*, 2015). Since ecocentrism recognizes forests, oceans, soils, animal life and flourishing ecosystems to be of intrinsic value, it is clear that the consumption of farmed animals poses grave ethical concerns.

Not all farming of animals raises these ethical concerns to the same degree, however. A very small proportion of animals are reared within agroecological systems, which contribute far less to

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these outcomes. The consumption of these animals could more reasonably be understood as cohering with ecosystem flourishing.

Agroecology is a science and a set of farming practices that seeks to mimic natural processes, creating beneficial biological interactions among the components of the farm agroecosystem. Agroecological farms are richer in soil organic matter, and are home to more wildlife, than ‘conventional’ farms (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2005; Leithold *et al.*, 2014). They also use fewer pesticides and less energy-intensive artificial fertilizer (Pimental *et al.*, 2005). Animals are often integral to agroecological systems as they provide natural fertilizer, and can stimulate the growth of leguminous plants by feeding on pasture, sequestering carbon and nurturing soil health (Muller *et al.*, 2017) – albeit with some negative pay-offs, such as the greenhouse gases that these animals emit into the atmosphere (Garnett *et al.*, 2017).

Critics of agroecological farming argue that widespread adoption of such systems might be worse for ecosystem flourishing, as agroecology requires more land to produce the same volume of food (Lynas, 2011). The debate between proponents of ‘land-sparing’ (in which food production is intensified in order to free up land for conservation and rewilding) and ‘land-sharing’ (in which agricultural land is ecologically managed and ‘shared’ with biodiversity) remains unresolved (*e.g.* Bennett, 2017). An ecocentric approach would propose that human population be brought into this debate. By curbing and reducing the current excessive human population – in ways that are ethical, equitable and respectful of human rights, and in synchrony with massive shifts in consumption patterns, particularly among high-consuming populations – the wide-scale adoption of agroecological farming could be achieved while simultaneously freeing up land for conservation and rewilding.

Within this hypothetical scenario, animals would still be farmed, though in

non-intensive systems and in massively reduced numbers. Even with a reduced human population, the consumption of meat would be relatively rare – especially when compared to today’s average *per capita* consumption levels in the wealthy nations of the world.

Animal flourishing

Ecocentrism finds inherent value in all of nature, but that does not mean that our ethical responsibilities extend uniformly to every facet of the natural world. When presented with a pig we encounter ethical responsibilities that do not arise when we are presented with a potato. This is because the pig is sapient (thinking) and sentient (feeling) and the potato (to the best of our knowledge) is not (though research may yet demonstrate degrees of plant sentience). Ecocentrism does not root moral value in sapience and sentience, but it recognizes that they provide grounds for a particular *type* of moral consideration. This moral consideration, I would suggest, derives from the potential of the animal to flourish in distinctive ways – that is, to express a spectrum of sapient and sentient species-specific capabilities (Nussbaum, 2006).

Sentience is a challenging area for scientific study as it pertains to subjective states that can be difficult or impossible to quantify, and appear to be irreducible to physiological processes or anatomical structures. Nevertheless, researchers have identified “overwhelming evidence” of sentience in many non-human animals (Proctor, 2012: 636).

Most animals farmed for food today are not permitted to express their full range of sapient and sentient species-specific capabilities. Jones (2013: 1) reviews the research into the sapience and sentience of a number of species and compares this research to animal welfare policies and regulations. He concludes that “the moral status of animals as reflected in almost all – even the most progressive – welfare policy is far behind, is ignorant of, or arbitrarily disregards our current and best science on sentience and cognition.”

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Animal welfare policy in the UK and in many other countries is founded on the ‘Five Freedoms’, which were formalized by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council in 1979 (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2012). These are:

- 1 **Freedom from hunger and thirst:** by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
- 2 **Freedom from discomfort:** by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
- 3 **Freedom from pain, injury or disease:** by prevention through rapid diagnosis and treatment.
- 4 **Freedom to express normal behaviour:** by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal’s own kind.
- 5 **Freedom from fear and distress:** by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

It is worth emphasizing that the fourth of these is the only ‘positive’ freedom on the list (that is, a ‘freedom to’ rather than a ‘freedom from’).

Bekoff and Pierce (2017: 23) note that animal welfare policy often begins from the position of a “welfare burden”. That is to say, the baseline from which such policy is generated is welfare conditions so poor that even minor improvements are seen as providing ‘higher welfare’ – even if the animals still live in very poor conditions overall. Consider 10,000 chickens living in a shed; an improvement in animal welfare in such a case would be to provide ‘enrichment’ – perhaps as straightforward as a perch to sit on. From an ecocentric perspective, however, one should ask the more difficult question of what it would mean for each of these chickens – sapient and sentient individuals as they are – to be provided with the opportunity to flourish.

In the UK, certified organic systems provide the highest potential levels of animal welfare (Compassion in World Farming, 2012), but challenging questions may still be asked of these systems. Consider, for example, the question of the longevity of each individual animal, and

its relation to that animal’s flourishing. Even under organic systems, few animals will reach sexual maturity. What does it mean for a pig to flourish as a sapient and sentient individual? What does it mean for the pig to have the opportunity to express its full range of species-specific capabilities? Would this require that the pig reach sexual maturity?

This is, of course, not the only challenging question that may be asked about how and whether animal farming can be consistent with animal flourishing. Pending further consideration of these questions, I would argue that, as a minimum, from an ecocentric perspective one would desire that levels of animal welfare commonly implemented today are advanced, with the aspiration of providing a life for farmed animals that allows for the full expression of their species-specific capabilities and their flourishing as sapient and sentient individuals.

Human flourishing

Philosophers have inquired into the meaning of human flourishing for millennia. A full account is not possible within the space provided here, but one facet of human flourishing may be noted, a facet that might be considered essential to ecocentrism, and which is importantly relevant to the consumption of animals – namely, our aptitude for *empathy*.

Empathy may be understood as the ability to inhabit the perspective of another. Many cognitive scientists, as well as philosophers, argue that empathetic perspective-taking is fundamental to the structure of human consciousness and integral to our social and moral sense (Thompson, 2001). What is more, empathy is often cited in the literature as facilitating an ecocentric outlook. “The greatest mentor is Nature herself,” writes Haydn Washington (2017: 5), to cite just one example from this Journal. “Empathy, and the ability to listen to place, is such a key part of becoming ecocentric.”

Empathy in this sense involves not only perspective-taking, but a sense of what could be called benevolence or compassion.

Various spiritual or religious traditions have placed high value on benevolence. ‘Love thy neighbour’ was at the heart of Jesus’s teaching. Various traditions have recognized the Golden Rule: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Armstrong, 2007).

In the Western tradition, empathy and benevolence have often been prioritized within human society, but their extension to the non-human world is central to the ideal of compassion for all sentient beings in various Buddhist traditions. Echoes of a more ecocentric outlook perhaps also arise within the philosophy of the Neo-Confucian Wang Yang Ming (1472–1529), who proposed – as quoted in Thompson (2001: 28) – that even when the ‘small man’...

sees a child about to fall into a well, he cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that his humanity forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when he observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, he cannot help feeling an ‘inability to bear’ their suffering. This shows that his humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as he is. But when he sees plants broken and destroyed, he cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that his humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as he is. Yet, even when he sees tiles and stones shattered and crushed, he cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that his humanity forms one body with tiles and stones. This means that even the mind of the small man necessarily has the humanity that forms one body with all.

As I now hope to show, this conception of human flourishing as rooted in empathy and benevolence can help to resolve some of the tensions that arise when we consider the eating of animals from an ecocentric perspective.

A nested hierarchy

Eating animals is complicated, for ethical conflict can arise. Should we prioritize the flourishing of the individual or the ecosystem? Is it better to eat a sustainably sourced wild-caught animal or a higher-welfare farmed animal? Such debates can quickly become emotionally charged.

Proponents of animal rights have, in particular, entered into heated debate with proponents of ecological ethics. Tom Regan (in)famously accused J Baird Callicott of “environmental fascism” for the latter’s prioritization of ecosystem flourishing over individual animal rights (Regan, 1983: 362). Callicott (1980: 311) was an advocate of Aldo Leopold’s famous Land Ethic, which declares that: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does otherwise” (Leopold, 1949: 242). One interpretation of this ethic would be that it sanctions the manipulation of individual animals in service to biotic wholes. Regan’s charge is that such instrumental treatment amounts to an ecological version of fascism, and that individual animal rights must be given the highest priority.

The perspective I am proposing provides an intermediary position between these two views. As an ecocentric perspective, it understands the flourishing of individual organisms to be dependent upon the flourishing of the wholes of which they are constituent parts. Ecological flourishing is thus the prerequisite for the flourishing of individual organisms. In a similar vein, the flourishing of the species is a prerequisite for the flourishing of individual organisms. As Rolston comments, “Every extinction is a kind of super-killing [...] It kills birth as well as death” (1992: 141). But ethical recognition of these dependencies does not license the disregard of individual interests. An understanding of human flourishing rooted in empathy and benevolence instills the imperative to act in a compassionate manner, including towards individual animals.

A kindred approach is embodied in the ‘compassionate conservation’ movement,

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which aspires to marry conservation practice with individual animal well-being. Compassionate conservation is not a rights position, but “a compassionate ethic [that] brings empathy into decision-making alongside other values” (Bekoff and Ramp, 2015: 325). It begins with the premise that conservation initiatives should ‘do least harm’. The ecocentric perspective I am advocating similarly suggests that when faced with competing ethical demands regarding the consumption of animals, one should recognize the primacy of ecosystem flourishing, whilst also aspiring to behave in a manner that is grounded in an empathetic respect for individual animals.

This ethical perspective will not always provide a straightforward answer to difficult questions, but that is not necessarily an objection to it. After all, as Curry (2011: 150) writes of ‘moral pluralism’, perhaps “our ethical life consists of a number of different principles or values which can conflict, and which cannot be boiled down to just one.” If this is correct, then one key task of an ecocentric ethic must be to help us to navigate through such conflicts, keeping the primacy of ecosystem flourishing in sight, while simultaneously remaining true to an ethic of respect for the individual, a commitment to compassion and to the flourishing of other animals. ■

Notes

- 1 To avoid linguistic awkwardness, in what follows the term ‘animal’ will sometimes be used to refer to non-human animals.

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Study series

by **Ben Walker**

Lamb and Buzzard

About the artwork: Oil on linen (41 x 58 cm; 2017).

From the artist: Since childhood I've had a strong interest in wildlife and the environment. The recent paintings I have made reflect this. They are based on British landscapes and are painted in thin layers of oil paint, which is scrubbed into the weave of the linen and often removed and repainted over and over. Within the landscapes I try to convey a sense both of fundamental continuity and of constant change. Man's impact on the ancient landscapes depicted can be seen in the hedges, paths and so on. Animals pictured are reminders of the livestock and wild species in the landscape or, in the case of the bears depicted, examples of what has disappeared from the British Isles.

Higher-resolution versions: <https://is.gd/ecoartwork>