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**An Environmentalist's Lament of Predation**

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**Ty Raterman**

Department of Philosophy  
University of the Pacific  
3601 Pacific Ave.  
Stockton, CA 95211

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### **Abstract**

I lament the fact that some animals need to prey on others in order to live. While I obviously do not want predators to die of starvation, I nonetheless think that a world in which no animal needed to prey on others would, in some meaningful sense, be a better world. Furthermore, I believe that this position is not based in mere sentimentalism, but rather can be rationally defended. This paper attempts to provide such a defense. After articulating numerous reasons for taking predation to be lamentable, I argue that one can lament predation even while acknowledging certain respects in which predation is genuinely praiseworthy. Further, I maintain that holding the position I do does not disqualify me as an environmentalist. Finally, I explore what the implications of my position are for human behavior; and I argue that they are acceptable.

# **An Environmentalist's Lament of Predation**

## **I. Introduction**

I recently witnessed the famous wildlife migration over the Serengeti plains in East Africa.\* Like most people with access to at least broadcast television, I had seen footage of predatory animals in places such as this pursuing, seizing upon, and ultimately killing and consuming their prey. However, it was not until witnessing this up close and in person that I fully understood what predation is capable of looking and sounding like. Hans Kruuk, one of the first scientists to study predatory animals of the Serengeti in a sustained fashion, provides perhaps as vivid a written account as one will encounter. In his still-highly-regarded writings, he describes four spotted hyenas who pursue an adult male wildebeest at speeds between 40 and 50 kilometers per hour over a three kilometer distance:

The hyenas tried to bite him in the hindquarters, sides, and especially the testicles, while he in turn struggled to horn his attackers... All four [hyenas] bit him simultaneously at the loins, testicles, and anal region of the wildebeest, paying little attention to his horns. The mobility of the victim was much impaired by the four pursuers hanging onto his hindquarters. Another two minutes later the wildebeest had a large gash in the right loin, the testicles had been bitten off, and he stood as if in a state of shock. Occasionally he made some frantic movements and was able to struggle free from the hyenas, but then some member of the pack

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would renew the attack... Eight minutes after the wildebeest had stopped running he went down and the hyenas stood over him pulling out his insides. Another two minutes later, the wildebeest died.<sup>1</sup>

The spotted hyena is of course only one of many carnivorous species encountered here. Others can be just as brutal. While hyenas “kill the victim by eating it,”<sup>2</sup> lions “kill by slow strangulation, biting the throat of the prey: death is rapid for small prey but may take an hour for an adult wildebeest... while it struggles to escape.”<sup>3</sup> Not all of the Serengeti's predators are mammals—there are also crocodiles, cobras, puff adders, eagles, vultures, and many more. And the predators with representatives in the Serengeti comprise only a small fraction of the world's predatory species. The sea contains many: barracudas, kraits, sharks, whales, etc. Indeed, most people have predatory creatures living right in their homes: spiders, aided by hanging webs, silky wraps, and sometimes venom, can be efficient killers. So too, for that matter, can common house cats.

I saw much on my trip that left with me a feeling of unadulterated joyfulness, but this feeling abandoned me when I witnessed acts of predation. I suppose it is possible for someone to witness such predation with total indifference—though this will as a matter of psychological fact probably be quite rare. Such observers may say simply that for many – though obviously not all – animals, the choice is between killing and starving to death. There is no getting around this and no reason to be particularly excited or concerned about it; this is the way it has always been, and indeed the way it will always be. On this kind of view, the fact of predation is regarded like the fact of gravitation. When objects are dropped, they fall—this is neither good nor bad,

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Kruuk, *The Spotted Hyena: A Study of Predation and Social Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Nell, “Cruelty's Rewards: The Gratifications of Perpetrators and Spectators,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29 (2006): 211-57 (p. 213).

praiseworthy or lamentable. And similarly, when certain animals are hungry, they kill other animals—again, this is neither good nor bad. Another possible response – and this one seems to me to be much more common – is fascination, wonderment, enthusiasm, praise, and so on. Some people are thrilled to see a lion chase down a wildebeest. They will excitedly train their binoculars and cameras on the scene. While they (presumably) have nothing against wildebeests, they want to see the lion kill. Those who embrace this view would not feel differently – at least not substantially so – were the prey cuter and cuddlier than a wildebeest (which is, after all, in African legend purported to have been built out of “spare parts”). That life depends on death is (at least part of) what they admire in nature.

Neither of these responses was mine. Even where I personally felt perfectly safe, I was uneasy. I was filled with a kind of regret. The suffering and death I saw seemed to me in some meaningful respect lamentable—that is, unfortunate, the kind of thing it would be better if the world did not involve, etc. What can be said for such a response, and what against it? Was my sadness, my regret, my lamentation, rationally defensible – appropriate even – or must it be viewed as nothing more than mawkish sentimentalism? How should we view the fact that some animals need to kill other animals in order to live? Can a world in which animals did not kill each other, and indeed did not need to do so in order to live, plausibly be called a better one? In this paper, I argue that lamentation can be a reasonable and healthy response to predation, and that is so even for someone who counts himself or herself as an environmentalist, as I do.

## **II. Setting the Stage**

While the question I am asking is no doubt a somewhat peculiar one, the basic kind of appraisal called for and contained in this paper is familiar. Consider, by way of rough analogy, the phenomenon of sexual trafficking. No doubt all readers of this essay are saddened by the fact

that there is sexual trafficking in the world. They will say that it is appropriate to lament the existence of sexual trafficking, and that a world without sexual trafficking would be better than a world with it. To respond otherwise – for example, to be made joyful by, to praise, to prefer a world with, sexual trafficking – would be a moral failing, a mark of a morally deficient individual. So too, for that matter, would sheer indifference toward this phenomenon. And if pressed, reasons could be provided explaining why this is something to lament. Now, predation of the kind I have in mind is of course different in important respects from sexual trafficking. Sexual trafficking involves a wrong committed by humans against humans. But the fact that predation is not like that does not entail that there is nothing to lament. In any case, whether the phenomenon of one animal preying on another is lamentable is at least a reasonable question to pose and to which to seek answers.

It may be objected that the question is in fact one that can be seen as reasonable only by a nonreligious person. According to this view, no devoutly religious person can lament predation. Predation is part of the world God designed, and to lament predation is to view God's design as flawed. However, God is flawless and no flawed design could come from a flawless designer. I am not convinced by this objection. Many religious people lament the fact that tornados, tidal waves, hurricanes, earthquakes, and the like sometimes destroy people's property and even people themselves. The existence of disasters of this sort typically vex the religious. The same can be said about the existence of, say, cancer. Whereas the religious frequently turn to human "free will" in order to avoid having to attribute many of the evils that surround us – corporate fraud, rape, genocide, etc. – to God, natural disasters and diseases resist this treatment. Now, there may well be a satisfactory account of why natural disasters and diseases exist in a world designed by a perfect being—I have no reason here to suggest that there is not. The important

point here is simply that if there *is* such an account, it will presumably be possible to embrace it without having to celebrate, or even be indifferent to, natural disasters and diseases. We might even say that if the religion contains the notion of a perfect afterlife, the adherents surely believe that the afterlife will not contain ravaging natural disasters or diseases. My question, then, can be construed as a question of whether predation should be regarded in at least roughly the way we *all* – religious and nonreligious alike – regard natural disasters and diseases; and what I hope to establish is that it should.<sup>4</sup>

### III. Why Predation is Lamentable

A disclaimer: As will become clear, explaining why predation is lamentable requires making contact with some of the most venerable and vexing topics in moral philosophy. This is part of what makes the issue – and, I would add, much of environmental philosophy – exciting; but it also must thus be understood that any article-sized treatment of predation will necessarily be unable fully to explore every nuance, consider every objection, and so on.

Now, I do not regard animals as moral agents and so do not believe the predator fails in some moral duty when it hunts and kills.<sup>5</sup> I do, however, wish that no animals had to die in order for the predator to live. This wish is not based in a belief that death is always a misfortune. Death is *not* always a misfortune; it is not always lamentable. It is, for example, possible for a human to be reduced to a condition where it makes sense for her to prefer death to a continued

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as numerous commentators have pointed out, there are reasons for those religious people who put stock in the words of the prophet Isaiah to regard predation as somehow less than ideal. Anticipating a better era, Isaiah says “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9, King James translation). For more, see Gary Comstock, “Must Mennonites be Vegetarians?” *The Mennonite* 107 (1992): 273; Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); and J. R. Hyland, *God's Covenant With the Animals* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> I hope it is clear by now that when I say “animals” in this paper, I mean “non-human animals.”

existence. If death comes, it can, in such a case, be counted as a blessing. Similarly, if, say, a pet dog is suffering from a tumor in her throat that makes swallowing, and increasingly even breathing, difficult, then euthanizing the dog is probably the appropriate response. The paradigmatic case of a non-lamentable human death is, roughly, one where the person has lived a long, full life and is content that she accomplished the major goals she set for herself, but where she now lives – and indeed has for some time lived – in a seriously and irreversibly deteriorated condition that has kept her from truly enjoying herself; and where death, when it comes, finds her peacefully surrounded by her loved ones and takes her quickly and painlessly. Animals likely do not set “major goals” for themselves; and many do not live in families at all, let alone families they would prefer to be surrounded by at the time of death. So, the paradigmatic case of a non-lamentable animal death will be meaningfully different from the paradigmatic case of a non-lamentable human death. Nonetheless, we can all imagine an animal that lives a good, full life and dies peacefully; and this death need not be lamented. It follows from this that it is not the case that I lament all acts of predation. If the animal being preyed upon is, in the important respects, like the tumor-ridden dog – that is, if it is in such a condition that benevolent people would favor euthanizing it for its own sake – then there is nothing to lament when this animal is killed by a predator, assuming the predator kills very quickly. However, the painful death of an animal in its prime at the jaws and paws of a predator is quite different in kind. In that latter case, there *is* something to lament.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The philosophical literature on the broad topic of whether/when death counts as a misfortune/harm is large. I will mention just a few of what I take to be the most worthwhile pieces. In chronological order, pithy discussions include Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Thomas Nagel, “Death,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); F. M. Kamm, “Why Is Death Bad and Worse than Pre-Natal Non-Existence,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (1988): 161-4; Fred Feldman, “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death,” *The Philosophical Review* 100 (1991): 205-27; and Ben Bradley, “When Is Death Bad for the One Who Dies?” *Nous* 38 (2004): 1-28.

An extremely important challenge must be entertained at this point. One may ask, returning to my case of the non-lamentable human death, why my tendency to lament stops where it does. Why not lament the very fact that people get old, that the human body eventually breaks down and keeps people from enjoying themselves in all the ways they were able to when they were younger, and so on? If these things are lamentable, then the case I described above *is* in fact one where something is to be lamented. And if that is true, then it looks like what I lament, ultimately, is not so much predation as it is death itself. In truth, I do not think that the fact that the body breaks down over time and renders continued existence unpleasant and unfulfilling would be an altogether absurd thing to lament. But we should be clear: lamenting this much does come very close to lamenting death itself, and lamenting death itself is considerably more extreme than simply lamenting predation. A world in which nothing dies is a dramatically different world from the one where things die but no sentient creature that would otherwise have a pleasant enough life ahead of it is killed by predators. I can at least picture the latter. The former, on the other hand, stretches the limits of my imagination to a breaking point. And while I generally disfavor trying to wrestle too much out of semantic points, I will say that where literally nothing dies, I am not convinced that we can meaningfully say that anything lives. This all provides some reason for stopping short of saying that death itself – always and in every case – is lamentable.

What the foregoing has at least alluded to is that *part* of my lamentation of predation is based in that fact that predation frequently involves pain. This does not mean that my lament of predation reduces to regretting the fact that there is pain in the world. In fact, I neither regret that there is pain in the world nor regret that there has been pain in *my* life! I truly would not trade my life for a pain-free one. There are plenty of painful experiences I do wish I had not had; but

not all of them are like this. Pain is not bad through-and-through when my hand is sitting on a hot burner, for it is precisely this pain that leads me to move my hand and thereby preserve its functionality. (Here, though, it should be noted that in such a situation we all wish that we could receive the signal that we must move our hand without this signal hurting so much.) Equally important is the fact that I genuinely reflect with fondness on, say, my heart-wrenching junior high breakup. That is a painful experience that I would not trade. (Here, though, it should be noted that it is much easier to look back and say a painful experience was not so bad than it is to look forward to some painful experience and welcome it.) Nothing in this, though, suggests that the pain an animal feels when others prey on it is to be celebrated, or even regarded with indifference. No doubt part of what we lament about a human getting cancer is that this will be painful for that person. I see no good reason for discounting the badness of pain just because it is experienced by a non-human; and so I regret predation (at least partly) for the reason – or one of the reasons – I lament the human getting cancer: it involves suffering, and I wish there were not so much of that. I recognize, of course, that the predator's infliction of pain produces experiences of pleasure in the predator—not because the predator enjoys inflicting pain, but because the predator enjoys eating. So, my lament of predation should be understood, in part, as a lament of the fact that the pleasure of some animals depends on the suffering of others.<sup>7</sup>

It may be asked at this point why I lament predation rather than the fact that prey are constituted so as to feel pain. First, again note that lamenting that animals are constituted so as to be able to feel pain involves taking issue with much more than does lamenting predation, i.e.,

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<sup>7</sup> Again, even within just the realm of moral philosophy – to say nothing of philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology – there is a huge literature on pain. Because I am trying to keep things as intuitive as possible, because my view is not heavily indebted to any other, and because randomly citing a few influential texts feels both fruitless (like trying to illuminate the night sky with a few candles) and unnecessary (since readers are likely to know the importance of works by Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick, Singer, Frey, Ryder, and so), I will not cite particular sources.

lamenting the fact that some animals must inflict suffering on others in order to live. Second, I am not sure that the prey's experience of pain can be considered as so separate from the predation that one can lament the former without lamenting the latter. (I will return to this issue – what is part-and-parcel of predation and what is conceptually separable from it – at the end of Section IV.) Most importantly, though, I would regret predation even if animals did not feel pain. This is because part of what is lamentable about predation is not only that (many) animals desire to avoid pain, but that they have *many* desires the satisfaction of which is made impossible by death.<sup>8</sup> The satisfaction or frustration of desires is morally relevant. In fact, if someone genuinely desired to experience pain, I may well not be wrong to inflict pain on her/him. I must be careful here, though. Admittedly, some desires are such that their being frustrated is not to be lamented. Those are desires that are: (1) ill-informed, e.g., the desire to cross a bridge when one has no idea that the bridge is about to collapse; and/or (2) irrational, by which I simply mean inconsistent with one's other desires, e.g., the desire to eat greasy fast food on a daily basis at the same time that one desires to live a long and healthy life; and/or (3) unstable, e.g., a desire to kill that driver who just cut you off in traffic that arises suddenly but then fades very quickly. This is all undoubtedly very complicated, and fully unpacking this view would take a paper – probably even a book – of its own; but the preceding helps clarify why it is that desire-frustration is not always bad. Animals' desires do not generally present us with these same kinds of complications; in any case, many of the desires that death would frustrate will not involve such

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<sup>8</sup> There is a question as to whether the desire to live is among these desires. According to some, having such a desire requires both a concept of oneself and of death, i.e., of existence and non-existence, which (at least many) non-human animals lack. I agree that many non-human animals probably lack a deep understanding of what death is, but I do not think this precludes attributing to many animals a desire to live. Animals, and young humans for that matter, also lack a deep understanding of what pain is; but no reasonable person would say that animals and young humans therefore are incapable of desiring to avoid pain. Roughly, (certain) animals have desires that motivate them to do certain things and refrain from doing certain other things in order to continue living, and it seems natural to call these desires to live. However, for the purposes of this paper I do not insist on any of this, and instead talk generally about the many other desires that animals plainly do have and that are frustrated by death. Thanks to Paul Moriarty for pushing me to be clearer about this.

complications. Again, at least part of what we lament about a human getting cancer is that the cancer poses a threat to this person's ability to satisfy her (informed, rational, stable) desires.

Similarly, we have reason to lament that which frustrates animals' desires, as predation does.

Two objections should be entertained here. First, one may suggest – in a manner akin to thoughtful objections pressed above – that what I should regret is the very fact that animals have desires at all. This objection is a non-starter. I think every serious person will concede that the fact that death frustrates many desires is part of why death, generally, is lamentable, and will do so without feeling any pressure to lament the very existence of these desires. A life without any desires would hardly be a life worth living. Second, one may observe that plants “endeavor,” they “strive,” to live, and then ask why I feel no compulsion to lament the eating of plants. This objection goes to the heart of a longstanding debate in environmental ethics, and I am afraid I have nothing brand new to add. In short, plants' “striving” seems to be morally different from humans' and animals' desires. I search my conscience and get no indication of what claim plants' striving makes on me (or on any human). That plants strive to live means essentially just that they expend energy to live, and that they do so tells me nothing about whether I should, e.g., rip up the weed growing in the crack in my driveway. What claim animals' desires make is much more apparent. At the very least, my expectation that others will not contravene *my* (informed, rational, and stable) fundamental desires does not require me, on pain of consistency, to lament that which is contrary to plant strivings.<sup>9</sup> It would be disingenuous to say the same thing in respect to animal desires. I must concede, however, that not all animals clearly have

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this, I especially recommend Joel Feinberg, “The Rights of Animals and Future Generations,” in *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis*, William Blackstone (ed.) (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974). I agree with much that Feinberg says, though we part ways when he denies that the plant has interests of its own. Feinberg says that a plant “flourishes” only when it does well relative to *humans'* interests. I disagree, for reasons given in Robin Attfield, “The Good of Trees,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 15 (1981): 35-54. When (say) a weed sprouts up, to my dismay, in my garden, there can be no doubt that it is flourishing. However, as I have said, it is far from obvious that this entails that I may not uproot that weed or that I, if/when it dies, this is lamentable.

desires. It is, for example, far from obvious that a fly has desires. The fly endeavors to stay alive, but this is perhaps on a par with the plant's striving; and so it is not clear that such a desire could be successfully appealed to in order to show that the spider's preying on the fly is lamentable. Indeed, it is partly on account of this, and also partly on account of the fact that there is no overwhelmingly good reason to believe that flies feel pain, that I do not particularly lament the spider's preying on the fly.

There are two more reasons why I am disposed to lament predation. One is because it is unlikely (though perhaps not a logical impossibility) that anyone who so admires one animal killing another would be sensitive to all the other hardships around one – those plaguing family and friends, co-workers, children, the generally downtrodden both inside and outside of one's country's borders, and so on – to which we think a decent person should be attuned. I would be greatly surprised if the mechanisms – psychological faculties, lines of reasoning, and so on – that allow someone to disregard suffering anytime it is experienced by members of other species (including in cases where the suffering is caused by other animals, not by humans) did not also kick in to diminish this person's concern for suffering in other humans, at least where this suffering was not being experienced by one's immediate family or group of friends. Admittedly, though, it is more difficult to identify with some animals than others. For whatever reason, it is easier to identify with a deer than a field mouse, so it is not terribly difficult to imagine that someone could be a deeply compassionate humanitarian but relatively unfazed by the mouse's death at the beak and talons of the hawk. But surely this humanitarian would not celebrate the hawk's predatory act, and would not even be merely indifferent if the preyed-upon animal were one of the many animals with whom the average person rather easily identifies.

This kind of view echoes Kant's famous – and famously implausible – claim that the reason one should not be cruel to animals is because such cruelty “damages in [oneself] that humanity it is [one's] duty to show toward mankind. If [one] is not to stifle [one's] human feelings, [one] must practice kindness toward animals, for [one] who is hard in [one's] treatment of animals becomes hard also in [one's] treatment of men.”<sup>10</sup> “Tender feelings toward dumb animals,” Kant says, “develop humane feelings toward mankind.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the audible echo, the view I am advancing is different from Kant's in several respects. First, Kant is talking about why one ought not to treat animals in certain ways, while I am talking about how one ought to feel about one particular way that animals sometimes treat one another. Second, whereas Kant clearly claims a causal connection, I do not. Rather, my point is simply that savoring, relishing, praising (etc.) predation is inconsistent with a patently praiseworthy sensitivity to suffering all around one. Third, while the reason Kant pointed to was what he took to be the sole reason to be kind to animals, I do not think this reason for lamenting predation is the only one—I have already mentioned others, and will now discuss one more.

Finally, irrespective of one's tendency to be sensitive to the needs and suffering of those around one, I also lament predation because to do otherwise seems incompatible with a genuinely gentle disposition. In humans, I count gentleness as a virtue—one of the most under-esteemed virtues, at that. Buddhist monks in Burma who stand defiantly but non-violently in the face of oppression by a military junta are truly praiseworthy. How much better the world would be if more people were so gentle. In certain limited contexts, such as particular kinds of sporting events, I do not mind some roughness and aggressiveness, but even here it is not the roughness, in itself, that I esteem, but rather the skill, speed, finesse, determination, etc., demanded and

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, translated by Louis Infield (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrated. In any event, the claim here of incompatibility is again not a causal claim—it is not the claim that one who relishes predation will (tend to) be caused to be less gentle; and it is, I believe, more plausible than that causal claim would be. It may be objected here that I have begged the question by explaining the lamentability of predation by appealing to the virtue of gentleness. This would be question-begging if I had maintained that gentleness is a virtue for non-human animals; but this is not what I claimed.<sup>12</sup> My suggestion is instead that gentleness is a virtue for humans, and one that demands from its possessors a particular attitude toward predation, namely one of lamentation.

#### **IV. Acknowledging Respects in Which Predation is Praiseworthy**

Even though I lament predation, I would never claim that there is nothing praiseworthy about it. First, there is a meaningful sense in which the predator provides a service to the prey—not, of course, to the individual animals who are killed, but to the species of which these individual animals are a part. If, for example, the wildebeest that the lion kills is among the least strong, swift, clever, etc., and the lion kills it before it has had an opportunity to reproduce, then this weak disposition/constitution is not propagated through the gene pool. As a result, future wildebeests will be stronger, swifter, more clever, and so on, than ever before. Now, it is fair to ask why, if it were not for the fact that there are dangerous predators lurking, it would be unfortunate that less fit individuals were reproducing. In other words, what reason would there be, in a world without predation, for wanting wildebeests to be as strong, swift, and clever as possible? I suppose that one answer is that the fitness that is nurtured by the predator is a general kind of fitness that may make individuals better able to survive many kinds of threats to survival—since surely not all such threats come from predators. Another – and perhaps more

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<sup>12</sup> Just as I denied that the predator fails in some moral duty when it hunts and kills, so too do I deny that the predator is morally deficient on account of lacking the virtue of gentleness. Only moral agents can be said to be virtuous or vicious.

interesting – answer is that we admire these traits for their own sake, not merely insofar as they enable those animals who possess them to survive (predators or the aforementioned other threats). Speed, strength, craftiness, and so on are fascinating and admirable traits, and they would be so even if there were no predators; but if there were no predators, these traits would not be refined again and again as they are now. In fact, this goes not only for the preyed-upon species, but also for the predatory ones. Thus, the charge against me is that if I esteem those traits of either the predator or prey (or both) that are developed or honed through predation, I must esteem the mechanism through which it has come to be this way.

As it turns out, the charge is false. Consider a case where someone is gripped by addiction and endures terrible hardship on account of this. After years of committing crimes (including theft and prostitution) in the service of her addiction, spending some time in jail, bouncing between jobs, alienating her friends, and so on, this person makes a remarkable turnaround. In fact, in virtue of her experiences, she is (or at least I take her to be) a better (wiser, stronger, more circumspect) person than she would have been had she not endured the aforementioned hardships. Still, when I care about this person it is not crazy for me to appreciate deeply the person she became through those hardships and at the same time lament the fact that she had to experience them. I can reasonably think: I wish she had been able to become precisely who she is without enduring those hardships. No one would ever claim that if I esteem the traits that this person developed through her hardships then I must esteem drug addiction.

A thoughtful rejoinder should be mentioned here. Perhaps the drug addiction example suffices to refute the claim that predation must be esteemed if one is to esteem those traits that are *developed through* predation. But, it will be claimed, these admirable traits are also *displayed in* predation, and this is different from the drug addiction case I imagined. The

character traits developed through drug addiction – wisdom, strength, circumspection – are (in my imagined case) not manifest until years down the line; they are *not* displayed in the act of taking the drugs. The point is well taken. So let us develop another example. I lament bank robberies, although I esteem (some of) the very traits that are *displayed in* bank robbing, including – at least sometimes – courage, ingenuity, adaptivity to quickly changing circumstances, and so on. (Though this example shows that the rejoinder is not ultimately a successful one, it does point to one important conceptual question that I mentioned in Section III and will address more fully below, and that is: what is part-and-parcel of predation, and what is separable from it?)

That it is through predation that admirable traits develop, or in predation that admirable traits are displayed, are not the only reasons why one might think predation worthy of esteem. A related virtue of predation is that it keeps under control the population of the preyed-upon species. That predatory species occupy certain niches within an ecosystem contributes to – may even be called constitutive of – the health of the ecosystem. It is well understood, for example, that the overpopulation of deer – especially white-tailed deer – plaguing much of the United States is in large part a result of the absence of predators, which includes coyotes, wolves, bobcats, cougars, lynxes, and bears. The populations of these predatory animals were diminished significantly by human beings. In their overpopulated state, deer voraciously eat many saplings, which can thus stunt forest growth, or, given deer's predilection for certain types of saplings (sugar maple, pin cherry, and black and yellow birch, for example) and not others, at least change forest composition. Deer destroy native vegetation, which in turn allows non-native (invasive) species of plants to insinuate themselves and further undermine the health of

ecosystems.<sup>13</sup> When overpopulated, competition among deer for food and space becomes fiercer, which means deer are also more likely to encounter suffering and death due to starvation and disease (such as epizootic hemorrhagic disease), more likely to transmit Lyme disease to humans, and more likely to be involved in automobile accidents. All of this, my critics will note, serves as a reason to praise predation. Again it will be said that if I value the effect I must value the cause—a variant on the old maxim that one who wills the end must will the means.<sup>14</sup>

Again, however, it can be plainly illustrated that the criticism is overstated. Many people worry that the human species is overpopulated; and even those who do not will concede that there is a conceivable human population that counts as too large. Factors that help check the human population include, of course, the voluntary decision by many to engage in family planning and to use birth control; but they also include disease and famine. The effect of disease and famine, namely that the human population is not even larger than it is already, is a valued one. This does not, though, keep all of us from lamenting the fact that the world is filled with starving and disease-infected people. When we lament famine and disease, we can appreciate the check on population they provide but wish that this check could be made by other means. Similarly, when we lament predation, we can appreciate the role it plays in checking populations and maintaining ecosystem health but wish that this could come about through other means.

At this point, some may charge that I am stripping away everything that is good about predation and *then* asking “What is so good about predation?” I am, according to this worry, treating everything good about predation as separable from predation but insisting that

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<sup>13</sup> Let us be slightly cautious here, though, as ecosystem health is often understood in suspect anthropocentric terms.

<sup>14</sup> In “Valuing Predation in Rolston’s Environmental Ethics: Bambi Lovers versus Tree Huggers,” *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994): 3-20 (p. 14), Ned Hettinger uses language along these lines. He approvingly cites Holmes Rolston, III – *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988) – who, according to Hettinger, “argues [that] when the process that produces a product is essential to the understanding of what that product is, one cannot consistently affirm the value of the product while denying the value of the process that created it. One might as well try to value the culture of Native American plains tribes while rejecting their tradition of killing buffalo for food, clothing, and shelter.”

everything negative – especially pain and death – associated with predation is intrinsically part of it. The suspicion is not a crazy one, but the charge ultimately misses the mark. What is part-and-parcel of some concept, phenomenon, activity, etc. and what can be thought of as separable from it is, in general, difficult to determine. But let us look back at the preceding examples. They show that we consider any good traits that develop, somehow, through drug addiction to be separate from – at least to be *capable of evaluation* separate from – the drug addiction; that we consider the traits that are displayed in bank robbing to be (capable of evaluation) separate from the bank robbing; and that we consider the check on overpopulation to be (capable of evaluation) separate from the diseases and famines. At the same time, we believe that the drug addiction *cannot* be evaluated separate from the damage it does to the addict's body and mind; that the bank robbing *cannot* be evaluated separate from the danger it imposes upon bank patrons/employees and the harm it does to the financial institution; and that the diseases and natural disasters *cannot* be evaluated separate from the pain and death they cause. This all seems to me undeniable. Unless one is willing, incredibly, to deny it, or can produce reasons why predation is different, then the tack I have taken vis-à-vis predation is a legitimate one. No one would ever say of one who laments drug addiction, famine, or disease that the lament is only plausible once all these other things are illegitimately stripped away; and one should not say this about my lament of predation.<sup>15</sup>

## V. Predation and Environmentalism

There is another tack that is taken to impugn those who lament predation. In his powerful book *Dominion*, Matthew Scully – a *bona fide* conservative, for what it is worth – calls

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Ned Hettinger, who rightly pushed me to think harder about this issue.

predation an “intrinsic evil in nature’s design” and “among the hardest of things to fathom.”<sup>16</sup>

Michael Pollan, responding directly to this quote, incredulously counters by saying:

Really?... A deep current of Puritanism runs through the writings of the animal philosophers, an abiding discomfort not just with our animality, but with the animals’ animality, too. [The animal philosophers] would like nothing better than to airlift us out from nature’s “intrinsic evil”—and then take the animals with us.

You begin to wonder if their quarrel isn’t with nature itself.<sup>17</sup>

Ned Hettinger says something similar: “When animal activists oppose predation, they are opposing nature.”<sup>18</sup>

One strategy for replying to these charges is to deny them, to maintain that finding the fact of predation lamentable is not quarreling with or opposing nature. This will not be my strategy. It seems to me that Pollan is right in thinking that those who lament predation have a quarrel with nature itself, and that Hettinger is correct in thinking that opposing predation is (at least in a sense) opposing nature. My strategy is instead a deflationary one. That is, my response is that there is nothing wrong with quarreling with or opposing nature itself. As Mill made crystal clear more than a century and a half ago, “nature” is a vexed, ambiguous concept. But there is an intuitive sense of the word – and, importantly, it seems to be the same sense that Pollan and Hettinger have in mind – according to which we *all* regularly oppose nature. When we put screens on our windows to keep the bugs out, we oppose nature. But so what? Putting up screens so as to avoid needless bites is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. All of us who do not like being on the receiving end of an insect’s bite can be counted as having a kind of quarrel with

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), p. 318.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), p. 321.

<sup>18</sup> Hettinger, “Valuing Predation in Rolston’s Environmental Ethics: Bambi Lovers versus Tree Huggers,” p. 17.

nature itself, but nature is in this respect at least annoying, and given the threat of malaria, West Nile virus, Lyme disease, etc., dangerous even. We oppose nature when we prune back shrubs in our yards. We quarrel with nature when we put on water-resistant boots before going out in the rain. We do this kind of thing in countless ways; but it is not in itself morally wrong.

One might press the general objection by saying that anyone who laments predation does not “value [predators] for what they are.”<sup>19</sup> It is true that one who laments predation does not value predators for *all* of what they are; but one might still value them for much of what they are. Just as one can be a terrific parent without valuing *every one* of one's child's attributes – I might reasonably wish that my child were different in any of a number of significant respects: a more serious student, or more sociable, or not possessed of such a sickly constitution, or did not have that huge, hairy wart on the end of his nose – so too can one be an enthusiastic admirer of (say) lions without valuing every one of their attributes. In respect to lions, I count myself as an admirer of precisely this sort. Having seen lions up close in their native habitat, I say without hesitation that they are amazing creatures. I certainly do not lament their existence; but I do lament that they are carnivorously constituted.

A related charge is that to find predation lamentable is necessarily anti-environmentalist. I am not especially interested in getting involved in an entirely semantic debate. It would be a shame to allow the substantive question of what to think about predation devolve into a question about how to define environmentalism. I do appreciate the need to use language clearly, to get straight on terminology, but this can be taken too far. I will simply say that I see no reason to insist that a “genuine” environmentalist will admire predation. There is no logical impossibility involved in both (on the one hand) loving to hike and camp, encouraging the preservation of

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<sup>19</sup> This quote comes from Rolston's *Environmental Ethics*, though he mentions it in connection with one who treats “sheep and cougars as the moral equivalents of humans,” which is obviously not what I have done – certainly not what I have intended to do – in this paper.

undeveloped spaces, being wary of persistent bioaccumulative toxins, wanting to use resources lightly, finding a hobby in the identification of plants (insects, birds, etc.), being fascinated by biodiversity, etc., and (on the other hand) lamenting predation. And yet doing all of the former, even where one does not do the latter, is surely sufficient to count as an environmentalist. In all respects, this is how I think of myself. It is for essentially these reasons that I believe Hettinger is mistaken when he maintains that the view that “a world without predation would be a better world, other things being equal... is one that no true lover of the wild can support.”<sup>20</sup> Again, the point is that there is much about “the wild” that one can love, even if one does not love it all.

## VI. Implications for Human Behavior

My final task in this paper is to explore what implications, if any, my view regarding the lamentableness of predation has for human behavior. To be sure, getting into a position where I can make certain inferences to human behavior – where I can say, “Humans therefore must do this, or must not do that” – is *not* guiding my general appraisal of predation. Nonetheless, considering implications is important. At least one *putative* implication is typically treated as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of my view. Specifically, it is sometimes said that it is absurd to lament predation because doing so requires committing oneself to intervening wherever possible to prevent one animal from preying on another—something we patently are not committed to doing, and indeed should not do. I will agree that if my argument has the implication that we should always, or even regularly, intervene in predation, then it is an unsound argument. But I do not believe it has this implication.

The first and most obvious reason why lamenting predation does not entail interfering so as to prevent or disrupt it is that interfering is costly, in multiple senses. The first sense is the most literal: “policing nature,” as some have called it, is resource intensive. That is, such efforts

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<sup>20</sup> Hettinger, “Valuing Predation in Rolston’s Environmental Ethics,” p. 15.

will require a great deal of time, energy, and money to fund.<sup>21</sup> Interfering in predation is also costly in the sense that it is very difficult to do so without this having significant negative consequences somewhere: the predator itself is killed by the policing humans, or dies of starvation, or the prey species becomes overpopulated (resulting in further negative consequences, such as those I discussed in Section IV in connection with white-tailed deer), etc. These costs function as reasons for those who lament predation to refrain from interfering in it.

The reasons provided by the appeal to costs are not trivial, but they are also not thoroughly conclusive—as Tyler Cowen, for one, has demonstrated. In respect to monetary cost, Cowen asks us to “consider tigers,” the hunting of which, he says, “involves zero net cost to humans and in fact involves significant net benefits to humans, given that tiger products can be sold for profit... Every time [hunters] kill a tiger, they stop that tiger from pursuing a life of violent aggression against other animals, many of which... are relatively intelligent animals.”<sup>22</sup> At the least, he adds, we could “limit or eliminate” those programs that, “at real financial cost” to humans, help carnivores live and breed.<sup>23</sup> In respect to the other negative consequences of interfering in predation, Cowen says that such considerations:

at most, [militate] against some forms of policing nature. But in many cases, the most obvious, low-cost means of nature policing does not seem to involve any significant probability of ecological catastrophe. Shooting one tiger or reintroducing one less wolf into a national park is unlikely to noticeably affect the

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<sup>21</sup> I am certainly not the first to have made this point. See, e.g., Steve F. Sapontzis, *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Tyler Cowen, “Policing Nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 25 (2003):169-82 (p. 173).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

environment. So considerations of ecological catastrophe may curtail the amount of policing we wish to do, but they do not remove the issue from the agenda.<sup>24</sup>

I could quibble with Cowen's argument, but it cannot on the whole be dismissed as crazy. Nonetheless, it does not make real trouble for my view. What Cowen shows, at best, is that there will be occasions in which the costs of interfering in predation are not high. However, I did not insist that appeals to costs would suffice to show that we should *never* interfere in predation. Though Cowen is right that the costs of interfering in predation are not always high, the appeal to costs should still be regarded as justifying a general reluctance to interfere in predation; and indeed it still provides – in many cases – sufficient reason for actually refraining from so interfering. This is all I need an appeal to cost to do. This is partly because I am not committed to saying that we should never, ever interfere in predation—only that I would be upset if my lament of predation entailed that we should always, or even regularly, interfere in predation. But it is also partly because an appeal to costs is only one of the two reasons I have for believing that lamenting predation does not entail that predation should be disrupted.

The appeal to costs provides a kind of contingent reason why lamenting predation does not require supporting interference with predation. The second, and frankly more important, reason is more principled. It has to do with the logical relationship – or the lack thereof – between lamenting something and intervening so as to prevent or disrupt that thing. Consider, for example, that I might believe that the person to whom my adult child has gotten engaged is not good for him and in turn privately lament his decision; and yet I might refrain from intervening to (attempt to) end the engagement. In this case, though I love him and want him to be well off, I respect his autonomy and so do not interfere. This does not mean that I could never be so concerned about this relationship as to intervene. But my concerns would have to be

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 179.

extremely grave. So it is – at least roughly – in the case of my lamenting predation. The mere fact of my regret does not entail that I must intervene. Just as my respect for my son's autonomy suffices to keep me out of "his business," so too might something like my respect for nature's autonomy create a strong and legitimate reluctance in me to meddle in "nature's affairs"—or, if that is too vague a notion, in any individual predator's affairs. Again, the reason I have for not interfering with predation – at least whatever instances of predation I am physically able to interfere with – is not an infeasible one. It could be overridden if (say) a wolf were attacking my family's puppy; but this will be the exceptional case and in most cases I will refrain from intervening. In any case, the central point is that my regret that predation exists does not obligate me to intervene so as to prevent it.<sup>25</sup>

It is also worth considering what implications my argument for the lamentableness of predation – by which I have meant the killing and eating of one non-human animal by another – has for humans' dietary decisions. When I say that it would be better if animals did not have to prey on one another, am I saying (or am I required to say) also that it would be better if humans did not eat meat? Must one who laments predation believe, on pain of consistency, that humans may not permissibly eat meat? An argument given by Paul Moriarty and Mark Woods could be construed as having the effect of entailing a no answer to these questions—in spite of Moriarty and Woods not (I suspect) intending this effect.<sup>26</sup> They have no truck whatsoever with animal predation, since they claim to "recognize intrinsic value in natural processes qua natural

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<sup>25</sup> For an elaborate argument against the view that regarding predation as in some meaningful sense bad requires, on pain of consistency, committing oneself to intervening so as to prevent predatory animals from killing, see Jennifer Everett, "Environmental Ethics, Animal Welfarism, and the Problem of Predation: A Bambi Lover's Respect for Nature," *Ethics & the Environment* 6 (2001): 42-67. I will neither endorse nor oppose Everett's argument. Rather, I will simply say that the argument I have given seems to do a good bit of the work her argument sets out to do, and does so in a much simpler way.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Veatch Moriarty and Mark Woods, "Hunting ≠ Predation," *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1997): 391-404.

processes<sup>27</sup> and take animal predation to be a natural process. They are concerned with hunting, however, and believe they can criticize it without lamenting animal predation. They do so not quite by arguing that hunting is not predation; in spite of the title of their piece – to wit: “Hunting ≠ Predation” – they recognize that predation simply involves one organism feeding off another and so concede that hunting (at least where it is for food, not merely for sport or trophy) *is* in a strict sense predation. Rather, at the end of their paper, they say – again favoring the use of a symbol – that “hunting ≠ *natural* predation.”<sup>28</sup> While apparently not strict nature/culture dualists, Moriarty and Woods do distinguish “natural” from “cultural”; and they believe this allows them to value animal predation without approving of hunting. If they are right that human predation and natural predation are different, and right that approving of natural predation therefore does not entail approving of human meat-eating<sup>29</sup>, then perhaps they would say also that lamenting animal predation has no implications for human meat-eating.

I actually doubt that the claim that human eating of animal meat is not natural predation can be made good. As I discussed earlier, “nature” and “natural” are such tricky notions. Even Moriarty and Woods themselves concede that “it is difficult to say precisely what the term natural means.”<sup>30</sup> Though elements of the story they tell of the deer hunter do seem in some intuitive sense unnatural, it is not clear to me that hunting – and human meat-eating, more generally – could never count as natural predation. However, even if human meat-eating is not “natural” predation, it is not clear that what I have said about predation throughout the paper does not have implications for human meat-eating. In other words, if we stop focusing on labels and start focusing on the substance behind them, it will be surprising if a view holding that the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 394.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 404 (my emphasis).

<sup>29</sup> Just to be 100% clear: this means the eating of the meat of non-human animals by humans, not the eating of human meat by humans or non-human animals.

<sup>30</sup> Moriarty and Woods, “Hunting ≠ Predation,” p. 395.

fact that some animals must kill and eat other in order to live is lamentable has no implications for humans' killing and eating animals.

It seems to me that if one laments the fact that some animals need to kill and eat others in order to live, then, in respect to humans' diet, one is at least committed to the view that a world in which humans were not even attracted to eating meat, or a world in which non-meat foods were more enticing to our palette than meat is, would be superior to one in which humans are so attracted, *ceteris paribus*. I think it would be disingenuous, however, for someone to endorse all of this but say that because so many people *are* in fact attracted to eating meat, there is nothing lamentable about people killing and eating animals. The reasons I articulated earlier regarding why predation of one (non-human) animal by another is lamentable will, if they are taken seriously, also count as reasons why human meat-eating is lamentable. They will, in other words, count as reasons for thinking that among humans – at least humans who have access to a healthy meat-free diet – vegetarianism is the ideal. If there is an exception to this, it will only be a case where the animal has lived a life that counts for such an animal as a full one, where the death is reasonably painless, where it is brought about in a way that is not in tension with a kind of dispositional sensitivity to the needs and suffering of other humans, and, somehow, where killing the animal is an act of gentleness—which, as I have argued, is a virtue. Again, though, I want to reiterate: my motivation in making the case that predation, in general, is lamentable was not to get into a position to criticize human meat-eating.

## **VII. Conclusion**

My thoughts now return squarely to the predators of the Serengeti. Many of them are gorgeous, majestic, impressive creatures. I am sure that some readers will take what I have said to demean these animals. This was certainly not my intention; and I do not think my argument

genuinely has this effect. I respect all creatures—predators and prey alike. I admire much about predators, and do not believe that we should disrupt their attempts to feed themselves and their families. But when they kill other animals, I will feel a kind of sadness; and henceforth, when this happens, I will embrace the feeling. I will wish things operated differently. I will wish that they were – like so many of the planet's remarkable kinds of animals, including the hippopotamus, elephant, giraffe, rhinoceros, zebra, gazelle, antelope, deer, rabbit, and many others – herbivores. And I certainly will not regard my sense of regret as in any way a threat to my credentials as an environmentalist.