

WHO IS THE REAL SNAKE? ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF KILLING INVASIVE SPECIES

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The kitschy, yet dramatic music plays. A reporter stands in a random marsh vaguely reminiscent of the story she is about to tell. You see some home-video quality clips, and of course, you hear the iconic closing line: “I’m Janine Stanwood. Local 10 News” (Pythons 2:22). Yes, local news segments can sometimes appear to be pointless time-fillers, but they do occasionally hit on controversial topics, such as the segment referenced here on “python hunters,” mercenaries paid by Florida’s government to catch and kill invasive Burmese pythons in the Florida Everglades.

Although the hunters make sure to emphasize that their primary objective is ecological, emphatically stating, “every single python that we take out is one less consuming our native wildlife” (Pythons 1:55), watching the clip, one gets the sense that the python hunters are not solely committed to preserving South Florida’s native wildlife, and may even have some less-than-savory opinions regarding the humane treatment of animals. As videos play of the hunters wrestling their catch, a record-setting 18-foot python, they provide their commentary, with lines like “That is so much bigger than anything I’ve ever caught before” and “I don’t know if I could sleep at night losing one that big” (1:33, 1:48). It is tough to miss the massive thrill that the hunters get from wrangling the snakes, especially as they dramatically describe their python-catching process and the “tricked-out Ford Escape” that they use to catch the animals (1:00). The local reporter, Janine Stanwood, glosses over this contradiction, ending the segment by reminding viewers that every python caught is “humanely euthanized” (2:15). This assuring, even academic phrase seems out of place next to the epic action shots of men wearing sleeveless t-shirts battling minivan-sized poisonous snakes. The news clip implies that despite the enjoyment that these men derive from wrestling enormous snakes and the compensation that they receive for it, the hunters are thoughtful ethical actors who are so concerned for native wildlife that they go to the trouble to capture and humanely euthanize pythons (0:16, 2:12). The phrase “humanely euthanized” immediately grounds the clip away from the exciting hunt and down into the ethical debate about animal rights, and that is where the local news editors decide to cut the clip.

One could argue that the mixed motives this clip captures invite a broader discussion about the ethics of killing invasive species. In 1975, Peter Singer, a famous ethicist, published a controversial book titled *Animal Liberation* in which he used principles of equal rights (typically applied to humans) to persuasively argue against killing animals under any circumstance. In the chapter titled “All Animals Are Equal,”

Singer does not distinguish between invasive species and native species, arguing that causing any animal suffering should be seen as equal to causing the equivalent suffering to a human, and should therefore be forbidden. Michael Pollan, a science journalist and critic of Singer, responded to *Animal Liberation* in his 2002 article in the *New York Times* titled “An Animal’s Place.” In this article, Pollan grants Singer’s general point regarding inhumanely killing domesticated animals for food, but argues that invasive species belong in a separate category. Pollan cites a parallel example to that of the Burmese pythons in South Florida, writing about a herd of escaped goats on Wrightson Island that have decimated the local plant life. Pollan then goes on to attack the moral basis behind the idea of favoring individual animals over species, writing, “The story of Wrightson Island . . . suggests at the very least that a human morality based on individual rights makes for an awkward fit when applied to the natural world.” Pollan seems to imply that Singer and his ideological allies are likely to disagree with killing invasive animals, and simply by looking at the title of Singer’s chapter “All Animals Are Equal,” it is hard to disagree. In this case, Pollan’s arguments upend a significant implication of Singer’s application of utilitarian philosophy to animal rights. As a self-described utilitarian, Singer’s mission is to reduce the net suffering of individuals. However, by prioritizing the experiences of Burmese pythons in the Everglades, Singer’s strict adherence to utilitarian philosophy risks destroying an entire ecosystem. As Pollan’s argument shows, surely the rational move is to remove the invasive species and save the others.

However, even with this ethical principle in hand, watching the python hunters marvel at their catch does not feel guiltless. The hunters—who upload videos of their catches on *YouTube*, sport shirts that say “Feel the Burn” and “Snakeaholic,” and, in one shot, show the camera the snake’s jaws opening as they clutch its neck—are a far cry from Pollan and Singer’s carefully considered ethics. The hunters do make sure to say that “every single python that we take out is one less consuming our native wildlife, and that’s what it’s all about,” but this assertion comes only as a conclusion to their descriptions of the intensity and excitement of their innovative python catching techniques (Pythons 1:55). So, while the “snakeaholics” point to their ecological commitments, they simultaneously demonstrate that saving native wildlife is only one aspect of their rationale. The question, then, is one of motives. As established above, it is ethical to kill off invasive species that are causing immense suffering to other populations. But, what if those acting out this heavy decision are using it as cover to have fun, hunt without a license, and get featured as heroes on the local news?

This question brings up the interesting connection, or lack thereof, between action and motivation. To the ethicists Singer and Pollan, these aspects are far more tangential to each other than intrinsically linked. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer writes

ordinary human beings—not a few exceptionally cruel or heartless humans, but the overwhelming majority of humans—take an active part in, acquiesce

in, and allow their taxes to pay for practices that require the sacrifice of the most important interests of members of other species in order to promote the most trivial interests of our own species. (Singer 9)

Singer connects the active—“take an active part in”—and the passive—“acquiesce in, and allow their taxes to pay for”—placing them under the same unethical tent. It follows that this equivalence between actions taken with pure ethical motivations and those taken without them should extend to the inverse case of Singer’s. Thus, the python hunters act ethically even though ethics may not necessarily be their primary motivation. The hunters in this news clip, like most people, act for a multitude of reasons: payment, enjoyment, fame, maybe even a sense of duty to the environment. While the optics might not be great, when it comes to ethics the hunters’ internal motivations are irrelevant. People act for lots of reasons, and while sometimes the reasoning neatly aligns with the moral implications of their actions, it often does not. Even Peter Singer, ardent utilitarian and animal rights activist, agrees: if we want to judge actions, we need to look only at the results.

Pollan also attacks the connection between action and motivation but frames the dilemma differently. Rather than asking whether it matters if one acts with non-ethical motives, Pollan encourages his reader to consider situations where they may act while only partially considering the ethics of their behavior. Throughout “An Animal’s Place,” Pollan threads a personal anecdote of a dinner in which he eats a rib-eye steak while reading Singer’s pro-vegan article. At one point, Pollan writes about how he stops eating his steak, momentarily paralyzed by Singer’s persuasive arguments. Then Pollan writes, “If I believe in equality, and equality is based on interests rather than characteristics, then either I have to take the interests of the steer I’m eating into account or concede that I am a speciesist. For the time being, I decided to plead guilty as charged. I finished my steak” (Pollan). By restating Singer’s convincing arguments about speciesism, yet still eating his steak, Pollan seems to be blatantly disregarding the category of ethics altogether. However, by writing “for the time being,” Pollan hits on a powerful point. Pollan chooses to finish his steak not because he simply does not care about Singer’s arguments, but because he is confident that his lack of a fully formed argument is only temporary, and that he has ethical footing to stand on.

Similarly, the python hunters wrestle and kill the snakes not because they do not care about the ethical implications, but because they can justify their actions by relying on the half-baked claim that “every single python that we take out is one less consuming our native wildlife,” knowing that other ethicists (like Pollan) have done the ethical legwork for them (Pythons 1:55). This allowance for action based on partially developed ethical claims is slightly different from Singer’s answer, which relies on the idea that one’s rationale is totally distinct from one’s actions. Pollan, on the other hand, actually momentarily changes his actions due to his thinking, yet he continues, knowing that he has an ethical basis that can be developed later. Though

they tackle the separation between eventual action and prior ethical consideration differently, both of these approaches are essential to everyday life, at least for those who are uninterested in reading or writing treatises on utilitarian animal rights ideology. Like the python hunters and Pollan, people often rely on place-holding claims and proceed with actions anyway. Encouraging this kind of behavior is what allows society to progress, as people can better the world even while their actions and ethics are not exactly aligned.

As much as the local news clip depicts the python hunters as otherworldly heroic figures, they are surprisingly similar to most people in their ethical viewpoints, both in their shortcomings and their successes. In an ideal world, everyone would carefully consider each action before they take it, and then act only out of the purest motivations. However, like the python hunters exemplify, we can encourage people to act ethically, even if they lack or ignore a full sense of the ethical implications. If we wait around for some sort of ethical utopia, we won't make much-needed progress.

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