

# **IS IT MORALLY OR ETHICALLY RIGHT TO HUNT WHALES?**

## ***The contemporary whaling issue***

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Ethical principles, assumptions and analysis are probably one of the most difficult and unstable fields of “research” to explore; it is often shaken by extreme and opposite positions regarding a particular situation.

Ethics is a general term for what is often described as the "science (study) of morality". In philosophy, ethical behavior is that which is "good" or "right." The Western tradition of ethics is sometimes called moral philosophy. This is one part of value theory (axiology) – the other part is aesthetics – of the four major branches of philosophy, alongside metaphysics, epistemology, and logic (as in Wikipedia, 2005).

Due to such expansion over aesthetics, ethics become the vastest social science in operation nowadays. This essay aims to give an account of the rightness or wrongness of whaling; however an account of ethics as a whole must be given in order to take the global concept and not be narrowed, the most important principle is to take ethics into a multidisciplinary order.

Most major scientific discoveries have affected ethics. The discoveries of Isaac Newton, the 17th-century English natural philosopher, provide one of the earliest and clearest examples. Newton's laws were generally taken as evidence of a divine order that is rational. The English poet Alexander Pope in the line in this regard expressed contemporary thinking succinctly, “God said, Let Newton be! And all was light”. Newton's discoveries caused philosophers to gain confidence in an ethical system as rational and orderly as nature was assumed to be (Broad *et al.* 1985; Goldberg, 1995, Encarta 2001).

The scientific development that most affected ethics after the time of Newton was the theory of evolution advanced by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). Darwin's findings provided documentary support for the system, sometimes termed evolutionary ethics, propounded by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer, according to whom morality is merely the result of certain habits acquired by humanity in the course of evolution. A startling but logical elaboration of the Darwinian thesis that survival of the fittest is a basic law of nature was advanced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who held that so-called moral conduct is necessary only for the weak. Moral conduct – especially such as is advocated in Jewish and Christian ethics, which in his view is a slave ethic – tends to allow the weak to inhibit the self-realization of the strong. According to Nietzsche, “every action should be directed towards the development of the superior individual”, his famous Übermensch (“overman” or “superman”), who will be able to realize the noblest possibilities of life. Nietzsche found this ideal individual best exemplified in the ancient Greek philosophers before Plato and in military dictators such as Julius Caesar and Napoleon (Moore, 1967; Billington, 1993).

In Britain, R. M. Hare argued for a prescriptive account of ethics, that is, if a person utters a moral judgement, he or she is prescribing a course of action or inaction. He also argued that moral judgements are universal. When a person makes a moral judgement in a particular situation, therefore, he or she is prescribing a course of action that anyone in similar circumstances should follow (Singer, 1986; Wikipedia, 2005).

Anthropologists applied evolutionary principles to the study of human societies and cultures. These studies re-emphasized the different concepts of right and wrong held by different societies; therefore, it was believed, most such concepts had a relative rather than universal validity. Outstanding among ethical concepts based on an anthropological approach are those of the Finnish anthropologist Edvard A. Westermarck in *Ethical Relativity* (1932) (LaFollette, 2000).

As Edvard A. Westermarck pointed out in his anthropological approach to ethics culture plays an important role on what is “right” or “wrong” (i.e. what is accepted in some societies is rejected or even taboo in others); science however is not bound to such dogmas. Therefore, the whaling issue must be analysed in two separated perspectives, the ethic as a cultural process and the scientific ethics achieved by means of methodology, reason, and experimentation.

The most obvious problem when trying to evaluate whether or not is ethically right to hunt whales is falling into *speciesism*, Peter Singer defines it as being “*a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species*” (Singer, 1986). Animals should therefore treat as equal and so this discussion is therefore of general nature, taking whales as a case study. However, it is undeniable that the world’s population (mostly due to what is shown in delphinariums) takes whale-like animals as superior, with a higher level of intelligence and consciousness, thus making them more “humanized”. In such terms a case study would be biased, incorrect and would abide to speciesism. Furthermore, not just whales are hunted, also others close related members like dolphins and porpoises are also culled, for this reason the term cetacean (in reference to the biological order Cetacea = whales, dolphins and porpoises) will be used instead of just whale and whaling the process of hunting and killing cetaceans.

The point now is to discuss it in cultural ethical perspective, if it is right to kill cetaceans or not. There is a chain of arguments to discuss the rightness (or not) of killing whales, however, we cannot put aside that cultures are driven by social values and moral judgments and so different cultures would have different perspectives. The discussion chain may start with the fact that whaling is an important mean for the survival of certain indigenous communities in Alaska, Greenland, Russia and the Caribbean without which would probably endure famine or starvation. This is a reasonable justification, but one can say that with the technological advances those communities could be fed in with some other type of food that not whales meat. Other current of thought may say that tradition plays an important role in the identity of such communities culture and whaling should be kept as part of society and that whaling is not only a source of meat but also of blubber, oil (in fact the spacecrafts sent to space my NASA had whale oil because it is so fine and permits accurate adjustments), bone and also amber (used in perfumery) so it is a important resource indeed. So if whaling is so important it can be argued about the humaneness of killing and that the techniques and methods show be improved to minimize the suffering of the animal. The chain can go on and on discussing the facts by means of Contractualism (as proposed by Kant), Sentientism or even Holism. The stance is that to go around culture values is a complex and normally unsuccessful way of dealing with the problem. Whatever the culture and the line of thought a person may have when it comes to protect an animal of overexploitation and eventual extinction cultural values have to be revised and sometimes changed in order to preserve that species place on earth, and that was exactly what happened to Cetaceans. All this events lead the problem of whaling to a second stage where ethic is ruled by scientific evidence rather than social values and moral judgments.

From the 1870’s to 1986 nearly 3 million whales (no dolphins or porpoises accounted) were taken with the highest peak being reached during 1960’s (Gambell, 1999).

The extreme overexploitation whales were subjected left a huge concern for the welfare, consistency and survival, of the remaining populations with the “stocks” reaching catastrophic declines. Soon enough the whaling nations realised that to maintain their industry they had to

implement measures to prevent the ultimate extinction of the major whale stocks. Thus the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was formed.

The IWC was formed under the specifications of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), initially signed by 15 countries in Washington DC on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1946. The purpose of the convention was and still is to protect whales from over-exploitation and provide a proper means for the conservation of whale species, in all waters they inhabit. This is achieved by keeping under review and revision the necessary measures adopted under the convention schedule. These revisions may lead to the adoption of measures resulting in the complete protection of certain species or areas/regions. The convention designates specific areas and whale sanctuaries, sets limits to the species, size and number of whales which may be taken, prescribes whaling grounds and their open and closed seasons and prohibits the capture of suckling calves and female whales accompanying them (IWC, 2004).

By 1961 the commission formed what is nowadays seen as its cornerstone - the Scientific Committee (SC). This has the duty of carrying out analysis of whale stocks and making recommendations to the commission regarding the state of these stocks and measures to adopt (IWC, 2004).

The IWC has now 60 country members (Kiribati just joined in), the present chair is Com. Henrik Fisher from Denmark and the Vice-Chair is Horst Kleinschmidt from South Africa. The SC comprises over 200 leading whale biologists in charge of who devised the Revised Management Procedure (RMP), considered to be the most rigorously tested management procedure for a natural resource yet developed. It publishes a wide range of papers relating to the biology of cetaceans, including guidelines for countries and operators of whale watching if they so decide, and the Journal of Cetacean Research and Management (IWC, 2004).

The response to the global crisis faced by Cetacean populations poses a challenge for scientists and advocates of wildlife conservation and ecological sustainability.

The SC was set up exactly to assess the Cetacean abundance and distribution through the RMP and then take conclusions regarding the ethical and moral implications regarding whaling. Ethics and Science have a different "relation" than ethics and culture. The issue surrounding whaling is not that cetaceans are superior animals and show be protected the issue is that cetaceans have been aim of a massive killing driven by the demand of human consumption and economical opportunities. It would seem logical to conclude that when a animals faces extinction it is not appropriate to let it happen; this is one basic principle of ethics, because an animal species is not property of a few thousands individuals involved in catching and consuming cetacean products.

The standard response to the challenge of saving cetaceans (because that was really the aim) is to emphasize sound science, demand science-based environmental policies, and redouble efforts at research and education. At a minimum, this response is conditioned on three presuppositions, according with William Lynn. First, science provides an objective knowledge of nature, and of our human interactions with nature. Second, this knowledge should be the basis for public policy. Third, education in the methods and facts of science will produce the political and social paradigm shift to motivate and guide a sustainable relationship in relation to cetacean stock management. Thus sound science is the evidence-based, theory rich baseline for managing cetacean biodiversity in wild and humanized scenarios, from which research agendas, education and policy follow (Lynn, 2004).

Following the thought line above IWC took a few measures to create a safety net for cetaceans around the globe using the RMP. A good example of the scientific assessment is the proposal for a Southern Ocean Sanctuary. Quoting the text of the proposal: *"The RMP will be implemented on a species by species, stock by stock basis, whereas a sanctuary for all species of whales would have as its focus the restoration, as a whole, of the complex of species populations. Such complexes have been much damaged and distorted by industrial whaling, and nowhere more so than in the Southern Hemisphere. It might be thought that humans could manipulate and thus assist restoration while continuing to kill some whale species in commercial numbers. It has even been suggested that a resumption of minke whaling is needed in order to assist the recovery of the Blue whale. But scientists do not agree about whether there is evidence – as distinct from mere speculation – for substantial interactions between these*

*species, and between them and other species. Furthermore, even if some evidence were to appear, we certainly are far from being able to calculate the consequences of continued selective whaling or of assessing objectively the consequences of such intervention. So, if the Southern Ocean is, as a matter of long-term policy to be restored – as far as whales are concerned – close to its state before the most destructive whaling began in 1930's, then we have no option but to protect all whales there and monitor the changes in that ecosystem as best as we can.”* (Mulvaney, 2003)

Without at all diminishing the importance of sound science, the standard response invokes an overly simple understanding of science and the scientific methods, ignores our historical and philosophical knowledge about science and wildlife, and fails to grasp the tight connection between science and ethics.

Some NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations) however didn't ignore the roots and initial philosophy of science, those to mention are IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare), WDCS (Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society) and the most notorious Greenpeace. This last NGO did several campaigns with the purpose of awareness and sensitization to the problem of whaling, it was in-loco providing evidence and knowledge of what was happening in whaling grounds. Using their boat MV Arctic Sunrise they tracked followed whaling fleets to the confined waters of the Arctic Circle and Antarctica. Ethical though as viewed in science as little effect in society (the fact being that academia and scientific knowledge of high standards doesn't reach the general public and even if it did most of people wouldn't have the knowledge to understand it). Scientific ethic must be combined with cultural ethic (in mass) to produce visible results of a change of mentality.

This can also be explained and as described in the RMP proposal above, that science is not a means for obtaining certain and predictive knowledge about our world; the hope for a unitary method conciliates theory is a caricature and pipe dream, respectively. Science is rather a set of theories and methods for seeking casual explanation of natural and/or human phenomena. These theories and methods necessarily differ with respect to the phenomena at hand, and modelling all the sciences in a single method (such as experimental method) as been proved illusory. We can certainly distinguish right from wrong casual explanations on the basis of reason and evidence. Even so, scientific knowledge is always contingent, value-laden, informed by larger worldviews, and behold by a system of power (Lynn, 2004).

Moreover, science alone cannot speak to the origin of the biodiversity crisis in cetacean populations. Instead, the origin lays in a deeply rooted cultural conflict over our coexistence with other forms of life such as cetaceans. These fundamentally ethical questions are sparking a “moral turn” in the debate over cetacean exploitation. The reasons for taking this moral turn are straightforward. Human land use and wildlife management has direct consequences for the well being of all life and ecosystems. So too our motivations for learning to live in a more than human world in deeply informed by our moral sensibilities and worldviews about non-human life (Billington, 1993; Mann *et al.*, 2000).

Furthermore, science and ethics are indispensable to one another. Ethics is intrinsic to any science involving human beings. We cannot explain what we do, much less to justify our actions, without some casual reference to the ethics-based norms that inform our individual and collective identity. Ethics provide insight into the ‘moral causation’ of the cetacean populations exploitation and general biodiversity crisis. And science provides both theoretical and empirical insights that can help us choose the best values to adjust our moral compass. Thus for either science or ethics to be sound, they require each other as complements (Lynn, 2004).

Ethics and moralities often include rules and regulations that do not have obvious reasons for existing, (i.e. no immediate harmful results of transgression are apparent). This is sometimes because the harmful effects of such actions are largely indirect, but real nonetheless. Alternatively, the ethical and morality may derive from historical circumstances no longer common or relevant in society. Either way, the need for the particular aspect of morality may be questioned. It is not unusual for wide scale changes in views on morality to occur, especially by younger generations in society. At times, this questioning extends to the society in general, even to the extent of liberalizing laws, which prohibited certain behaviours such as the act of whaling as a commercial process (Lynn, 2004; Benn, 1998).

Finally and quoting Singer: *“The whole assumption of the field of ethics is that agreement is possible. And since agreement is possible, ethics is possible. The term ethics is actually derived from the ancient Greek ethos, meaning moral character. Mores, from which morality is derived, meant social rules or etiquette or inhibitions from the society. In modern times, these meanings are often somewhat reversed, with ethics being the “science” and morals referring to one’s conduct and character. But it is significant that the origins of the words reflect the tension between an inner-driven (character) and an outer-driven (conduct) view of what constitutes morality.”* (Singer, 1986)

The goal here is not to give a fundamentalist reason of why is wrong to kill whales. Nor it is to demonstrate such as authors like Singer that because of speciesism humans should become vegetarians. The point here is also not to discuss the rightness of eating meat or using animal products, it is whether to case study a problem that could (if not stopped) mean the eradication of several species of cetaceans from the earth’s surface. The same principle could be applied to cod, species that have been overexploited in industrial demands, resulting in 99% of their initial population to be taken for human consumption.

We have been shaping the earth’s surface for a long time and along the process we came to realise that earth did not evolved to be used and consumed by us, *Homo sapiens*, that is not so *sapiens* sometimes.

Attending to the state of cetacean stocks and it population figures the answer to the question is NO; we don’t have the right to hunt whales (or any endangered species for that matter).

*“When you kill the greatest, you do not become the greatest. You only lose the greatest.”*

SANDRA LEE

Former New Zealand Minister of conservation

53<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the IWC

London, 2001

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