



**THE STOIC
PHILOSOPHER**

Stoic Ethics and the Ancient Practice of Hunting

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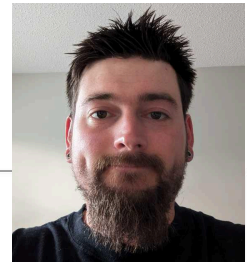
Preface

In recent years, the debate over whether or not the consumption of meat, and indeed hunting by human beings is ethical or necessary has often been a focal point of the public consciousness. Epictetus himself appears to have supported the consumption of meat, as is stated in Discourses 1.6.18: "What of the animals? God has constituted each according to its intended purpose, one to be eaten, another to be used in the fields, another to produce cheese, and another for some comparable use". However, his stance on the act of hunting in particular is unclear. In his translation of 'Meditations', Gregory Hays notes that Marcus Aurelius enjoyed hunting in his youth, writing: "He was a serious child, but also that he loved boxing, wrestling, running and falconry, that he was a good ballplayer and loved to hunt" (Aurelius, Hays, 2003, pg. viii). In his book 'The Inner Citadel' French philosopher Pierre Hadot writes of Marcus: "The future emperor liked physical exercise - especially hunting" (Aurelius, Hadot, 1998, pg. 6).

In the following essay, I intend to argue that not only is the consumption of meat very much inline with our human nature, but that the act of hunting is the most natural and ethical way to obtain meat, and that it may even have been what has made us humans, well, human!

Hunting: A Very Human Pursuit?

Throughout the majority of human history and the entirety of the existence of certain pre-human species, we survived entirely on a lifestyle of hunting and gathering. We have all heard the stories of our distant ancestors leaving the safety of their caves to chase down the mighty woolly mammoth with flint-tipped spears and gut-string bows and arrows. The mere mention of cavemen conjures up images of brave hunters fighting to survive harsh climates. But I believe that these activities go much deeper than simply a method of survival, that not only did our ancestors owe their continuity to the pursuit of meat, but we today owe a big part of who we are to those ancient practices, as we will explore below.



Cliff Kliewer is an architectural sheet metal worker residing in British Columbia, Canada, currently working his way through an apprenticeship. He first encountered Stoicism in 2021, and after reading several books on the subject and realizing the immense value of a philosophical way of life, he enrolled in the Stoic Essential Studies course in April of 2023. Shortly after graduating from the SES program, he enrolled in the Marcus Aurelius Program, which he is currently in the process of completing. Besides hunting and studying philosophy, he enjoys spending his free time hiking and learning about history.

The Human Brain: Our Link to the Logos

The human brain is truly a marvel of evolution. Uniquely in the animal kingdom, we have the ability to think abstractly, feel emotions on a level unknown to other creatures, and



deliberately direct our thoughts and efforts to a limitless range of goals and ideals. In a Stoic context, the complexity of our brains is what allows us to share a part of the divine Logos, to be rational beings on a level far above any other we have observed.

But what is it that led to the development of such miraculous operating systems to begin with? An essential chemical associated with brain growth is Nicotinamide, a form of vitamin B3, which is commonly found in meat and is the likely cause for our extraordinary evolution. Archeological evidence indicates that human ancestors first began to increase their meat intake, along with the production of rudimentary stone tools, roughly around 3 million years ago (Williams, Hill, 2017). This is supported by an archeological discovery in Ethiopia in 2009, coinciding with the emergence of the ancestor species *Australopithecus Afarensis*, of cut marks on the bones of hooved animals which may indicate the practice of butchering (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). The chain of evolution continued since that point 3 million years ago and as hominid cranial capacities grew and we became more complex organisms (Wikipedia Foundation, 2019), we began to gain more and more of our grasp on our individual shares of the Logos.

A Catalyst for Social Cooperation

At the root of Stoic ethics are human social connections. How we treat each other, how we cooperate, how we develop our personal moral character and see ourselves and our roles in a larger society, these things are not just traits exhibited by humans, they are an essential part of what it means to be human. In this section, I intend to argue that the ancient human practice of hunting played a major role in the development of human social structure, and by extension, led to moral and virtuous thought and action amongst humans.

Successfully hunting large and dangerous game required complex, cooperative social skills, as well as a sense of altruism and willingness to sacrifice in order to protect those who hunted alongside one. It is my belief that this marked the beginnings of what we today would call virtue. Courage would have been an absolutely vital trait in the hunting of large game, in that it would be necessary for participants to have the bravery necessary to look out for one another and ensure that everyone goes home alive. Wisdom and discipline would have been of the utmost importance when it came to following a pre-formulated strategy.

The necessity of virtue did not end with the completion of the hunt, however. Once the harvest had been brought back to the cave, it was time to divide up and distribute the spoils of the hunt. Many species, such as wolves tend to unevenly distribute food, with the majority going to the dominant animals (Wikipedia, 2021). It is believed that this was not the case amongst humans, with it being likely that everyone in the tribe got their fair share (Williams, Hill, 2017). I believe that this brings us to the final of the four Cardinal Virtues, Justice. The fact that everyone received what they needed shows a sense of fairness in early humans, something that may not have developed had they not lived a lifestyle that relied so heavily on strong social bonds and community for survival.



Hunting as Self-Development

I have spent the majority of this essay covering the role that hunting played in molding human nature and virtue in the past, but how can hunting be applied to our personal growth in this modern age? Hunting is a practice in patience. From spending hours with a set of binoculars on the lookout for deer, to trekking kilometers of logging roads looking for grouse, there are few activities that require a more sustained, quiet focus. Being far out in the woods, away from civilization with only the sounds of birds and the wind in the trees to break the silence, hunting cultivates an awareness of the present moment that is very difficult to find elsewhere. It is a fantastic place to gain some mindfulness, a state which, in my experience, follows you back to civilisation when you leave.

The demands of attention certainly do not end once an animal is spotted, and this is where the Stoic virtues of wisdom, self-control, and justice come into play. Firstly, one must have the wisdom to assess whether it is safe to take the shot, so that no other people or animals are put in any danger, and you must be aware of your own capabilities and your own ability to make an accurate shot. Second, it must be determined if it is just to take the shot. Of course there are legal and regulatory factors that come into play, but I believe the most important part is judging whether or not it is fair to the animal to take the shot. If you are not in a position to make a clean shot, you very well may cause undue pain and suffering, something the vast majority of hunters would agree is a grave injustice, so much so that many fish and game clubs have codified their stance on "Fair Chase" (Boone & Crockett Club, 2016). This brings us to the third of the applicable virtues, which is self-control. It is vital to have the discipline to wait until the proper moment to pull the trigger, and in the very possible event that moment never comes, have the temperance to abstain from taking a shot at all.

Hunting is also an excellent exercise in voluntary suffering. The Stoics teach that it is important to deliberately put oneself in situations of discomfort, so that we may practice and develop both physical and mental fortitude through exposure. Musonius Rufus is quoted as saying "One might with reason consider some animals' ability to endure pain, and this ought to encourage us to do the same" (Rufus, Lecture 7).. This differs from merely building physical endurance in the sense that putting ourselves through situations of voluntary suffering builds both psychological and physical resilience, better preparing us for the quite often multi-faceted difficulties that life will inevitably throw at us. The backwoods are full of opportunities to test, strain, and build one's physical and mental fortitude, whether the challenge is the weather, a long hike, a steep climb up a mountain, or remaining patient, quiet and still in an uncomfortable place. These situations present us with an opportunity to keep the words of Epictetus in mind, when he advised us to "undergo thirst, may you undergo it in the right spirit; to undergo hunger, may you undergo it in the right spirit" (Epictetus, Discourse 3.10.8).

A situation I found myself in last October involved several of these tests. A friend and I travelled to a spot he had visited a few times before, up a narrow valley northbound from a town south of the city I live in. It was early morning, fall was in full swing, and there was frost on the grass and trees. From our starting point we hiked up the steep hillside of the valley, stopping occasionally to sit on the cold ground and search for deer with our binoculars. A couple of hours later we made it to the top of the ridge, around the same time the sun was rising, and with it, the temperature began to rise as well. The late morning heat quickly became uncomfortable. It was not ideal conditions for long johns and wool



socks anymore I discovered. But unless one is willing to pack a change of clothes up the mountain, uncomfortable warmth is just part of the experience.

We searched for deer from the top of that ridge for 6 hours, sitting on logs or leaning against trees, binoculars held to our eyes constantly searching the woods below and the adjacent hillsides for signs of our target. As the sun began to set, and the weather began to get cold and windy, we started our long trek back down the mountain. Although we went home empty handed, the experience in itself is of great value. These adventures take one out of their comfort zone and force them to face the discomfort of the elements and strenuous physical exertion, building a resilience that makes the day-to-day experiences of city living feel like a walk in the park.

Moral Obligations

Although rare, while hunting one may find oneself in a situation in which you are obligated to uphold the law. Anywhere there are wild animals, there are some people who are willing to harvest them while ignoring the rules in the process. Poaching is not immoral simply because it is illegal, it can have serious negative impacts on wildlife populations, conservation of wild spaces, and the experiences of law-abiding hunters.

The Stoics are clear on the moral aspects of poaching. It is severely unjust to engage in any such activity, and if one encounters such behavior being perpetrated by others, it is the courageous route of action to either report said party or convince them to cease their wrongful activities. The specifics of the correct course of action boil down to using one's own rationality to assess the situation and act appropriately. Although I have never found myself in a situation that necessitates its use, the government of British Columbia has a program called RAPP, an acronym for 'Report All Poachers and Polluters' (Province of British Columbia, 2024), which I suggest that anyone who witnesses any poaching activity utilize.

Conclusion

My original intention in writing this essay was to demonstrate that eating meat is in alignment with our nature as humans, despite Musonius Rufus' apparent objections, his views written of as "He argued that a meat-based diet was too crude for humans, and more suitable for wild beasts" (Rufus, Lecture 18). It is also my belief that hunting is the most ethical approach to procuring meat, as the animals one hunts have spent their lives living in the wild, which is in alignment with their nature. However, in the process of writing, I found that many Stoic principles can be both applied to and nourished by hunting to a farther degree than I had initially realized. From developing one's virtue and discipline, to cultivating compassion and a sense of gratitude for the bounty of nature, hunting can be a great way to advance moral character.

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