An Essay on Life, Death and Extinction

One day, I looked outside my window to find a large spider web obstructing my view (and what a great view it is- to see the charcoal grey rooftops of endless paper houses). So large was this web in fact, that it spanned from one edge of the window to the other- approximately a meter and a half wide. Right in the middle was the creator of the magical web- a large oak-wooden brown Garden Orb Weaver, clearly playing dead. Over the course of the day, I would glance up from my desk and look at this creature and wonder whether he was hungry and just patiently waiting for a moth to happen upon his web. I developed a fascination with this spider, naming him Peter Parker- your friendly neighbour Spiderman, however other members of my family, after finding out about this ‘beast’, were quick to spray it with bug spray. And so I watched Peter Parker jerk out of his play-dead posture, his eight legs contracting and twitching sporadically, scampering from the human-manufactured chemical spray that would eventually lead to his inevitable death. I took a moment and hoped that if ever there was such a place called spider heaven, that he was there, eating all the moths he so desired.

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Our economy of desire has made us estranged and detached from the understanding of oblivion, of extinction and of the impact of death upon the interconnected web that is life. In order to engage society in the discussion of extinction and death impacts, stories and explanations of these deaths must be told in a manner that directly relates to the individual and sparks a social responsibility grounded by human morality and ethics.

This essay will analyse the work of Van Dooren (2010) and his reading Pain of Extinction: The Death of a Vulture. It will draw out key themes represented in his text
and relate it to discussions and ideas of death in the contexts of economy of desire, interconnectivity and relationality, and the need for ethical storytelling. It will also draw on related works and case studies.

**Point 1: Economy of Desire**

I first begin by looking at death and extinction through what some might believe to be the centre of all being— that is, humans. The terms human and kindness, and human and cruelty somewhat coincide with each other. When one thinks of human, one may think of kindness, and on the other side of the spectrum, one may think of cruelty. But perhaps our cruelty is justified, or reasoned by the survival of our individualistic self in a society constructed by ideals of economisation. Van Dooren (2010) uses the example of cattle in India and how the human need for survival amongst the populace has led to the use of the drug *diclofenac* in cattle in order to lengthen their working lives far beyond its frail state.

> “The widespread use of diclofenac in India is made possible by very low prices, but it is also sometimes made virtually unavoidable by poverty and a need to continue working animals even when they are unwell or approaching death… In allowing cattle to go on working, diclofenac also helps provide milk and labour for some of India’s poorest people— inevitably dispelling further pain and discomfort” (p.274)

In many ways, what Van Dooren explains is reflective of the mechanical world view—that is, human dominion of the natural world through science and technology. Along with this is the incorporation of *price* and *value* upon a commodity that ensures the continuous livelihood of those in poverty. Therefore, what may objectively be seen as an act of human cruelty— by injecting the unnatural into the natural— may be reasoned by the intrinsic need for human survival.

However, in many other cases, the ‘human survival’ reason cannot be used as a reason to justify acts of cruelty and ignorance that inevitably lead to dwindling
numbers and potential extinctions for animal species. The human condition that has been fabricated by economic constructions makes us desire things, and arguably, all things have a value- extrinsic or intrinsic. In the economy of desire, individuals are set on a path to success and status by means of acquisition. Many of us flounder about city streets wearing the latest Nikes and other branded goods. Commercialisation and commodity acquirement has become an embedded lifestyle that is used as a measure of success. Carter (2006) explores the concept of ‘economy of desire’ by referring to the dwindling numbers of parrots in the wild, compared to the rising numbers of parrots bred and held in captivity. He states, “so, it’s true that we love parrots to death” (p.90) and that “to know is to consume and destroy” (p.90). The same can be said for endangered species such as the rhinoceros- many poached illegally for their horns that are sold and valued at the same price as gold on the black market. The demand for rhino horns is “driven by sudden wealth and medicinal misinformation” (Langfitt, 2013). Living in the economy of desire as a means of fulfilling human survival needs has thus made society accustomed to consumption and desensitised and ignorant to the anthropogenic destruction left in its wake. We begin to see everything with dollar signs etched across our eyes.

**Point 2: Interconnectivity and Relationality - Web of Life**

When we look deeper into the anthropogenic impacts upon animals, we see that there is a domino effect. Returning to Van Dooren’s work, we see that the use of diclofenac not only effects cattle in India, but the vultures that depend on cattle carcasses as food. The vultures are “primarily relied upon in India to ‘take care’ of an estimated five to ten million cow, camel and buffalo carcasses each year” (Van Dooren, 2010, p.274) and thus have become a central part of India’s farming practice and ecology. However, the diclofenac causes vultures to die a painful death by kidney failure when they consume the carcasses of the treated animal. The carcasses disposed are left to rot, or are left to scavenging dogs and rats that are increasing in numbers due to the absence and death of vultures. As the stray scavengers do not
clean up the carcass as thorough as the vulture, diseases and contamination is rampant, impacting waterways, soil and effecting the human population.

What Van Dooren illustrates is that there are intricate links and relations between organisms and what happens to one, will impact the other. He states that all species are interdependent and relational, and death and extinction of a whole species “unmakes these relationships on which life depends, often amplifying suffering and death for a whole host of others” (p.273). This is echoed by Rose (2011), who states that, “the death of an animal creates a loss in the fabric of life, a loss that reverberates across other living beings, humans and others” (p.22). These relationships are seen in every environment and ecosystem, such as the rhino’s role in controlling grazing spots in parklands that help keep a balance between predator and prey (Nuwer, 2014). Therefore, a total annihilation of a species has severe consequences and impacts on inextricably interconnected ecosystems- connections to which, at a glance, we may not be attentive.

If we take the instance of death and all that it encompasses, and view it from the perspective of the human relationships, we can begin to understand the concept of interconnectivity and relationality on a more personal level. Butler (2004) discusses the powers of loss and mourning in human relationships, stating that our loss or displacement may feel temporary, but inevitably there are ties and bonds that constitute who we are and what composes us.

“It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and them simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor
you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related” (Butler, 2004, p.22)

Seemingly, one cannot ‘be’ without the other and this sentiment echoes in all aspects of life and death. As Butler states, we are “undone by each other [...] and if we’re not, we’re missing something” (p.23). The same can be said for human and animal relationships.

**Point 3: The Need for Storytelling**

The crucial question then is- how do we begin to foster the urgency and need to protect and conserve endangered species that are left blindly in the peripheral of society’s vision? Van Dooren (2010) emphasises throughout his essay that there needs to be more ethical writing when discussing the extinctions and deaths of species. It is true, that when we look at articles about dwindling numbers of endangered species, that there is a lack of emotive writing that describes and details the pain which an animal goes through in it’s final days. In a world of quick and fleeting information, we often tend to turn a blind eye to the numbers and statistics that are given in context. As Rose (2011) affirms, “we know about the monstrosity, but most of us don’t experience it” (p.27) and therefore writing in a manner about the struggle and pain which species go through- a manner that directly speaks and relates to the audience, will be the first step in bringing about a sense of urgency and social responsibility.

Kariega Game Reserve (2015) published the story of Themba and Thandi, two rhinos in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, who were left to die after a brutal poaching attack. Unfortunately, Themba’s fight for life ended shortly after the attack. With the help of veterinarians, Thandi was able to live and eventually, give birth to a calf. The story of Themba, Thandi and her calf, through documentation and storytelling, has become a catalyst for hope and social responsibility.
"You need to take the story of Themba and the story of Thandi, and you need to tell the world what these animals are going through..." (Kariega Game Reserve, 2015, 1:34).

Van Dooren speaks of ethical writing as a means to motivate society to help conserve endangered species. Perhaps it goes beyond just ‘writing’, and what is really needed is ethical storytelling. We need to give a voice to the voiceless, to help the helpless.

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I return once again to the Garden Orb Weaver that once lived outside my window. I gave him a name- Peter Parker. I personified him in a way that gave him a story and it made me feel as though there was an unspoken connection. Upon his death, I lamented and felt guilt. And to this day, I still see Peter Parker’s web, collecting dried leaves and debris, a home that houses no inhabitants. It’s a reflection of sorts, on the gaping hole of life that was once there, but destroyed and left haunted by a societal construct to conquer through acquisition. Much like the gaping hole that will be left by vultures, by wild parrots, by rhinos and every other living being that stands in the way of human desire and ignorance. But if we give them a narrative, a name, and a story to tell, surely we can become motivated to give them a living chance and understand that we are all, in many inextricable and intricate ways, connected.
References


