

Humans' Best Friend? The Ethical Dilemma of Pets ¹

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate the need for a reassessment of the moral status of pets. I argue that pets rest on an undefined ethical borderline, which brings several puzzling problems to both human-centered ethics and animal ethics and that neither of these fields adequately handles these issues. I focus specifically on human relationships with companion animals as one of the most significant interspecific relationship involving humans and pets. I also show that a deeper questioning of the moral status of pets is a required step toward the moral rethinking of human-animal relationships.

Keywords: Pets, companion animals, animal welfare, animal liberation, animal rights, impartialism, partialism, intrinsic value, special duties, relational ethics, contextual ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last fifteen years, several authors have highlighted that, despite the lively debate among moral philosophers concerning the extent of our responsibility to nonhuman animals (henceforth animals), literature about animal welfare, liberation, and rights contains an undeniable omission (Burgess-Jackson 1998; Varner 2002; Spencer et al. 2006). Since the 1970s, there has been ample philosophical literature considering the moral considerability, relevance, and significance of animals. However, philosophers have had little to say about pets specifically, despite the evident importance that these animals have in many humans' daily lives. Upon

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closer examination, it is evident that pets rest on an unexplored and currently undefined ethical borderline.

Anthropologist Edmund Leach refers to pets as “man-animals”: “[...] an ambiguous (and taboo-loaded) intermediate category” between humans and not-humans (animals) (Leach 1966, 45). This dichotomy illustrates the philosophical borderline that divides human-centered ethicists and the animal ethicists over how to morally consider pets. In order to understand the moral status of pets, we need to know how to categorize them: are they ‘persons’, like humans, or ‘animals’, just like any other animals? Human-centered ethicists consider only humans – or rather persons – as moral subjects and ends in themselves. If we subscribe to this perspective, how is it possible to argue that we need to give respect to pets? Meanwhile, animal ethicists present a separate issue: they claim that all animals (humans included) have the same intrinsic value, inherent value, or inherent worth (henceforth intrinsic value) and generally reject any unnecessary or disrespectful constraints to the liberty of either domesticated or wild animals. By this perspective, there is no question about our responsibilities to pets. The problem in the animal ethics paradigm comes when considering the moral implications of pet-keeping itself – this is true both for impartialist and partialist points of view. Impartialist animal ethicists rarely criticize the custom of keeping of pets and almost never do so if the pets at issue are companion animals. But if animal ethics claims that all animals are equal, why do impartialists reserve more respect for pets than for other animals? Even those ethicists who address these issues and often criticize the keeping of both domesticated animals (such as working animals) and domestic animals (such as partly or fully caged animals), usually legitimize the practice of keeping companion animals (such as dogs and cats). Partialists ethicists tend to take a larger issue with pet-keeping customs. However, the partialist authors who are most active in consolidating our special duties to these animals only defend the *fair keeping* of these animals but do not consider whether or not they should be kept (Midgley 1983; Burgess-Jackson 1998; Palmer 2010). They usually do not question whether the phenomenon of keeping companion animals is actually in the best interest of these animals or if it is truly compatible with showing respect to these or other animals. From now on, I will refer to the puzzling situation described above as *the ethical dilemma of pets*.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the implications of this dilemma, by delineating several arguments for the reassessment of the moral status of pets. I focus my inquiry specifically on our relationship with companion animals as one of the most significant yet simultaneously ambiguous interspecific relationship involving humans and pets. Because

pets (in general) and companion animals (especially) are among the most interactive and widespread links that connect us with the nonhuman world, I claim that a deeper questioning of the ethical dilemma of pets is a required step toward the moral rethinking of human-animal relationships.

The paper has the following structure: in section 2, I suggest broad definitions of both the terms 'pet' and 'companion animal'; in section 3 and 4, I consider human-centered and animal ethics paradigms respectively, exploring some of the problems in their approaches to companion animals; lastly, in section 5, I display some important implications of these problems and provide suggestions to handle them.

2. DEFINING PETS AND COMPANION ANIMALS

Drawing on Gary Varner's readjustments of Deborah Barnbaum's set of conditions for something to be called a pet, and partly reordering and reviewing them, I suggest that, in order for an entity to be considered a pet, it must meet the following five criteria:

1. *The affection criterion*: while a pet may not necessarily feel affection towards the pet-owner, the pet-owner must feel affection towards the pet (Barnbaum 1998, 41; Varner 2002, 452-3).
2. *The interest criterion*: pets are living beings who have an interest in pursuing their own good (Barnbaum 1998, 41) in the sense that the fulfillment of their needs and desires creates non-instrumental value (Varner 2002, 454).
3. *The dependency criterion*: the fulfillment of the majority of the pet's most basic needs and desires depends on humans (Barnbaum 1998, 41; Varner 2002, 454).
4. *The domicile criterion*: pets must live in an area that is significantly under human control or influence (Barnbaum 1998, 42), furthermore they must either be prevented from leaving that area or voluntarily choose to remain there (Varner 2002, 454).
5. *The discontinuity criterion*: pets must be profoundly different animals from their owners and thus live different kinds of lives than humans do (Barnbaum 1998, 41; Varner 2002, 453).

Although, from a human point of view, affection is the central element that defines whether or not an entity is a pet, this criterion is not sufficient. It is implicit even in this emotionally minimizing characterization of pets that pets are animals with interests that, although different from human needs and desires, can mostly be fulfilled by those humans who decide to take charge of them. I highlight that pets have interests that *can mostly* be

fulfilled by humans, and not that they *need* to be fulfilled by humans. I do so because I want to underline that it is almost always a *human* choice to create this relationship, but that it is yet to be proven that this choice is necessary for the survival of the pet. This is also the main reason why I have distinguished the ideas of 'dependency' and 'interest' in two different criteria: I claim that by joining them in the dependency criterion (as Barnbaum and Varner do) something important is left unsaid (Barnbaum 1998, 41; Varner 2002, 454). Indeed, I claim that, while pets do have *interests* for which fulfillment does *depend* mostly on the attention of those humans who *keep* them under their control, it does not follow that these animals *need* to live such kind of lives.

For the purposes of this paper, I adopt the above presented set of criteria to define pets. From this criteria, it follows that it is not only dogs or cats who can be called pets, but also some 'domesticated animals' who are not kept in houses (i.e. working animals such as draft horses, milk cows, and service dogs) and even some 'domestic animals' who are kept in houses but who are not properly domesticated (i.e. partly or fully caged animals, such as rodents, birds, reptiles, insects, and fishes), because they all meet the set of conditions. Therefore, all of these animals fall into the ethical dilemma of pets. However, there are significant distinctions between 'mere pets' and 'companion animals' that should be underlined. Although I agree with Varner in defining 'mere pets' as those animals who simply meet the set of conditions, but I break away from the importance he gives to companionship in his definition of 'companion animals' (Varner 2002, 460, 463). Indeed, I claim that we can only say that it *seems* that these animals enjoy our companionship, but we cannot state for sure that it *is* so. Thus, I suggest that only those pets who have significant social interaction with their owners and would voluntarily chose to stay with them (at least *seemingly* for the sake of companionship) be considered 'companion animals'. I suggest that only cats and dogs are companion animals in a strict sense ².

Despite the growing concern about pets and the high esteem given to companion animals in many communities, I claim that undeniable contradictions arise from arguing for the moral status of these animals. In the next sections, I will examine human-centered ethics and animal ethics in turn, showing the several contradictions within the arguments they present

² I should add as a parenthetical note that despite I would agree with Varner in drawing further distinctions between 'companion animals' (cats and dogs) and 'domesticated partners' (dogs), I do not want to spread myself too thin in my argumentation (Varner 2002, 456-63). In fact, for my present purposes I do not need to go into this matter and its possible implications.

to justify both the keeping of pets and our special duties to companion animals. As most of these arguments concern mainly companion animals, and because these animals seem to remain untouched by most of animal ethicists' arguments against the keeping of pets, the majority of my analysis will address dogs and cats specifically.

3. EXPLORING THE HUMAN-CENTERED DILEMMA

Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan's analysis (1984), Erica Fudge states that "modern pets are different from, say, the pets of the ancient world, because they are a product of industrialization and urbanization" (Fudge 2008, 16-7). In fact, the huge influx of dogs and cats that exists in the Western developed world is a recent phenomenon and is strictly connected with another phenomenon: the companion animal industry (ASPCA 2012; IFAH-Europe 2012). Unfortunately, the industrialization of companion animals has negative implications. For one thing, the desire of breeders and pet-owners alike for specific traits in their companion animals has led to the breeding of animals with physical disadvantages and health problems (like respiratory difficulties and osteoporosis) (Spencer et al. 2006, 23). Also, the mass production of pets has caused the number of pets to reach huge quantities; according to the data collected by *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, in 1998, approximately 2,500 kittens and puppies are born each hour in the United States alone – that is 70,000 animals each day (PETA 1998). Furthermore, this mass production brings inconceivable consequences: since the number of animals being created far exceeds their demand, millions of homeless cats and dogs suffer from abandonment, starvation, disease, freezing, highway death, or laboratory procurement (PETA 1998). Lastly, more than 70 percent of US residents who acquire animals eventually give them away, abandon them, or take them to shelters. Shelters receive about 27 million animals annually: more than half of which (about 17 millions) must be destroyed for lack of homes (most of them are under 18 months of age and 90 percent are healthy and adoptable). In today's post-industrial environment, companion animals are treated analogously with 'things' and it is no coincidence that those humans who keep these pets are referred to as 'pet-owners'.

Tuan claims that the sentimentalized view of pets was developed in Western Europe in the 19th Century and, later, in North America (1984). He explains that "humans needed an outlet for their gestures of affection [as] this was becoming more difficult to find in modern society as it began to segment and isolate people into their private spheres" (Tuan 1984, 112).

Unfortunately, our relationships with these domesticated affection-surrogates are usually also relationships of domination (Tuan 1984, 99). Fudge (2008, 16-23) suggests that the subordination of dogs and cats provides us psychological security in an insecure world: these animals reassure us that, whatever happens outside the home, inside our homes we humans are the absolute masters and mistresses of our own domains. Stuart Spencer et al. (2006, 20) add that of the most common reasons for keeping companion animals is the human desire to constitute and project our own identity through the things we possess. In short, it is clear throughout history that we bring companion animals to our homes for *our own* companionship; we use them for *our own* thwarted needs to receive or express affection; we control them for *our own* psychological security; and we constitute and project *our own* identity through them.

There are certainly exceptions to these conditions. One could bring home dogs and cats who were neither selected by breeding nor produced by the pet industry, but that were instead obtained from shelters, rescues, or acquaintances and family members who could not (or could no longer) take care of them. It is also possible for someone to adopt this kind of pet only after careful consideration of both the reasons why he or she chose to bring the pet home and his or her disposition to provide for their needs. Nevertheless, I argue that the status of companion animals is not itself an exception to the *things-properties-means* status that widespread human-centered ethical framework usually reserves to whatever is not a human being – or rather, is not a person. This status is not only a side effect of our willingness to love these animals: it is the required premise of it. Even though pet-owners assert that they love and respect their companion animals as friends or members of their families, by adopting these pets, pet-owners implicitly endorse a system that produces *things* that become *properties*. And by bringing these animals home, pet-owners are likely to view at these animals as *means* to their ends. As a result, they embrace an *anthropocentric perspective* to view at a *product of anthropocentrism*: the modern phenomenon of companion animals.

Because human-centered duties toward companion animals are indirectly aimed at other humans, these duties have no resemblance to a moral obligation toward animals. The ethical framework presented by human-centered ethics does not offer a legitimate argument for the respect of these animals as moral patients, neither as individuals nor as species. Indeed, in this framework, we can defend the keeping of companion animals only by demanding special moral consideration for those means that persons take toward their ends (if *y* is of value to *x*, and *x* has intrinsic value, then there is a *prima facie* ethical duty not to deprive *x* of *y*). In short, the problem

of defending the moral status of these animals cannot be solved from the same perspective that created the phenomenon: the only way to defend the moral status of companion animals is by adopting an animal ethics perspective which argues for the intrinsic value of all animals.

4. EXPLORING THE ANIMAL ETHICS DILEMMA

Keith Burgess-Jackson claims that some of the most active defenders of the moral status of animals are afraid to handle the full extent to which humans are responsible to companion animals mainly because these individuals are impartialists (Burgess-Jackson 1998, 171-3). Usually grounding their arguments either on the 'sentience' or the 'consciousness' criterion, impartialist animal ethicists like Peter Singer and Tom Regan claim that those same reasons that cause us to respect all humans also necessitate that we reserve an identical respect for all animals, or rather, for all mammals (Singer 1975; Regan 1983). However, since companion animals are not more conscious, clever, complex or sensitive than other mammals, impartialist animal ethicists have no arguments to claim that we have special responsibilities toward them.

The few fearless authors who defend both the intrinsic value of all animals and our special duties to companion animals claim that, despite our having a general obligation not to harm *any* animals, we also have affirmative partialist responsibilities to promote the interests of *some* of them, a principle that could override the former duty (Midgley 1983; Burgess-Jackson 1998; Palmer 2010). The special duties described above depend on three different kinds of relational responsibilities: the relational responsibility that human communities have to the animals who co-evolved with them as member of the same "mixed community" (Midgley 1983); the relational responsibility that human societies have to those animals they have caused to be in the non-natural situation in which they are (Palmer 2010); and the relational responsibility that pet-owners have "to the animals they voluntarily bring into their lives – precisely *because* they bring them into their lives" (Burgess-Jackson 1998, 161). Grounding our special duties to companion animals in these contextual relationships, partialist authors are able to overcome the problems and contradictions that human-centered ethics and impartialist animal ethics bring to the dilemma. Indeed, by creating these distinct scenarios, it is possible for them to argue against the *things-properties-means* status of pets and in favor of our *special duties* to companion animals, both as species and as individuals. Nevertheless, all of these authors assume that keeping companion animals is morally licit and

so defend the *fair keeping* of these animals. Because this facet of the argument goes untouched, it is safe to say that none of these partialist authors entirely handles the problem of defending the moral status of companion animals.

These authors usually legitimize the keeping of companion animals by assuming that the practice of domesticating dogs and cats has existed for a long time; that these animals enjoy our companionship, and so enjoy their status; and that both the owners and the companion animals genuinely benefit from the relationship – when it is respectful. I argue that all of these assumptions are misleading and convey an anthropocentric bias. I claim that while creating a relationship with a companion animal benefits the keeper in many ways, this relationship is *not* compatible with the goal of respecting animals at all.

Even though dogs and cats have been domesticated for a long time, it does not follow that these species have lost any ‘natural’ behavior. When unleashed into ‘the wild’ domesticated species usually revert to their ‘natural’ behavior very rapidly, indicating neither that these animals *need* to be domesticated in order to survive nor that humans are required to take charge of the interests of dogs and cats for the protection of these animals (Jensen 2005). Also, although it *seems* that companion animals accept or enjoy their role and status, it is possible that these animals are either only described or understood through an anthropomorphic misperception or that they are actually expressing frustrated feelings they would prefer to have for members of their own family, group, or pack. It is absolutely true that we do not have enough information to know which of these scenarios is true. Finally, despite their remarkable effort to please their companion animals, by even keeping these animals as pets, pet-owners often thwart many of these animals’ needs. In fact, companion animals would need to belong to their family or group (or pack for dogs), to mate freely, to run freely, and to relieve themselves whenever and wherever they want (Jensen 2005; Aerts et al. 2006). However, pet-owners usually bring home only one or a few animals, but almost never a family, a group, or a pack of them. They are also encouraged to spay or neuter their dogs and cats, and often decide when or at least where to let these animals get their exercise and perform bodily functions. There are certainly many exceptions to these forms of *domestication*, *subordination*, *domination* and *deprivation of liberties*. However, even if pet-owners allow companion animals as much freedom as possible, there is at least one interest that should not be philosophically underestimated: their interest to eat other animals, possibly hunting for them. If pet-owners allow their animals to hunt their own food (as these animals seem to prefer), then pet-owners can reasonably be held responsi-

ble for allowing their animals to cause harm or to violate the rights of other animals (Callicott 1985; Sapontzis 1998). Although it seems that dogs and cats could live well eating only vegetarian food this is controversial (especially in regard to cats) (Dzanis 2009; Hawn 2011). But if pet-owners serve their companion animals meat, as it is usually recommended, then they are in some way contributing to the oppression of the animals sacrificed to the meat industry. In keeping companion animals, there is (at least in most scenarios) a tradeoff between the oppression of the welfare-interests of the pet at issue and the oppression of other animals.

In short: it is not necessary that companion animals be kept by humans; we cannot say whether they truly enjoy our companionship and their status; it is not easy to respect their interests; and, even though it may be possible to meet all of their needs, doing so would require that humans not only discriminate against other animals, but also that they allow the killing of other animals. Taking these issues into account, I argue that the special duties to companion animals suggested by partialist authors are valid only as forms of reparation or compensation, which imply that a harm was done. Indeed, I suggest to bring these special duties down to affirmative duties which try to restore the balance of justice that had held between humans and companion animals before the general obligation not to harm them was transgressed by historical, social, or individual relationships (Midgley 1983; Burgess-Jackson 1998; Palmer 2010). Even though humans have certain special relational responsibilities toward companion animals, I claim that to really restore the balance of justice it is necessary to recognize that the harm at issue is caused by the practice of keeping companion animals at all. As a matter of fact, understanding and addressing this specific form of mistreatment is the only way to entirely handle the problem of defending the moral status of these animals.

5. CONCLUSION

In a short essay like this one, it is possible only to begin to touch upon the ethical dilemma of pets and its implications. Nevertheless, delving into this topic is not simply an exploration of puzzling ethical issues: it is the realization of bewildering conclusions. Neither the human centered ethics lens nor the impartialist animal ethics lens gives us sufficient insight with which to deal with this dilemma. Indeed, both lenses have serious roadblocks that prevent philosophers from considering the fundamental (im)morality of keeping pets. According to human-centered ethics, it is not viable to view pets as persons or ends in themselves. At the same time, using impartialist

animal ethics allows us no argument to assure to companion animals more respect than to all the other animals. Nevertheless, we usually claim to love pets in a different way than the way we claim to love mere objects, such as a smartphone or a car. Furthermore, we generally reserve much more ethical concern to companion animals than to other animals: even some pet-owners who claim to be advocates of animal liberation and/or rights, and who adopt for themselves a veg(etari)an diet often serve meat to their dogs and cats. Some authors suggest that the best way to determine the extent to which humans have special responsibilities to – at least some kinds of – pets is to adopt a partialist and relations-based ethical perspective. However, I claim that a fundamental flaw lies in this argument. The argument rests on the assumption that the keeping of companion animals truly benefits both pet-owners and pets, but this assumption is not supported by facts.

Only a few authors have explored the ethical dilemma of pets beyond this anthropocentric bias. Making a comparison between the main arguments of animal ethics against the keeping of farm animals and the history of keeping pets, Stuart Spencer et al. argue that the only “logical conclusion is that it is unethical to keep pets” (Spencer et al. 2006, 24). Exploring the inherent problems of domestication of pets, Gary L. Francione claims that “we cannot justify the perpetuation of domestication for the purpose of keeping ‘pets’” (Francione 2012). Digging deeper into what I call the ethical dilemma of pets, I argue that the keeping of pets is not compatible with promoting the welfare of these (and other) animals. Even though it does follow that, *if* we have special duties to pets, then these duties do not rest on their living *with us*, I claim that this line of logic implies neither that that we do not have special duties to pets nor that companion animals cannot live *among us*. In regard to our special duties to them, I formally agree with partialist authors’ main arguments: while societies have special responsibilities toward pet species, both because humans have forced most of these species to co-evolve with them, and also because humans have historically caused these animals to be in the dependent and vulnerable situation in which they live today, individuals have special duties to pets whenever they decide to take care of them (Midgley 1983; Burgess-Jackson 1998; Palmer 2010). In regard to putting these special duties into practice, I claim that arguing against the keeping of pets is both necessary and potentially misleading. Although the end of the phenomenon of pet-keeping should be a long-term moral goal, we also and above all need to have short-term ethical guidance. While pondering how to gradually create a world that does not yet exist, we must confront the immediate situation in which these animals already live among us. Since most of them – companion animals especially – do not even have a habitat, they cannot simply be pushed into the wild.

Fudge argues that, while other animals usually offer food both for humans' tables and pets' bowls, "pets offer philosophers food for thought"; the potency of pets may not be the same kind of potency of wild animals, "but it is a philosophical potency that should not be underestimated" (Fudge 2008, 8-9). I claim that there are two philosophical potencies. The first potency has to do with human-animal relationships. Since humans have built a closer relationship with pets (and with companion animals especially) than with other animals, these animals can play a key role in changing the way in which humans think and feel about animals in general. Indeed, philosophers and advocates for animals alike often use the question 'if you love animals called pets, why do you eat animals called dinner?' to stimulate in their audiences thoughts and feelings about animals. Furthermore, one's relationship with his or her own pet is the most common starting point for the individual rethinking of the ethics of human-animal relationships. Paul Littlefair (2006), for example, writes that, as the pet phenomenon has grown in China, so has grown a corresponding increase in concern for animal welfare and rights.

The second potency is broader than the first; it is more hidden and almost unchallenged. This potency is the power that philosophical questioning has to (re)connect animal ethics and environmental ethics on their shared life-centered perspective (Attfield 1983; Taylor 1986; Sterba 1995 and 1998; Varner 1998). Indeed, the phenomenon of pets offers a fundamental opportunity to reassess the moral status of animals from a non-anthropomorphic point of view. While it reveals the inconsistency of human-centered ethics and impartialist animal ethics, it also reveals the inadequacies of partialist animal ethics and its anthropocentric bias. In other words, it shows that the way in which we interpret the interest criterion is crucial. Hence, ascribing moral significance either to the entity who is 'interested in something' (like anthropomorphic ethics usually do) or on what is 'in the interest of the entity' (like biocentric environmental ethicists suggest to do) could make a powerful difference.

This paper has focused on a deeper questioning of the moral status of pets as a required step toward the moral rethinking of human-animal relationships, but there are certainly many other ethical issues related to this topic that should be further discussed. Having explored the ethical dilemma of pets does not mean having solved it. I hope that, from this essay, one point has been made clear: before one can truly *love* another as a friend, one must be sure to know how to *respect* that beloved one.

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