

Précis of *Wild Animal Ethics*

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The purpose of my book *Wild Animal Ethics* (WAE) is to defend a deontological and yet interventionist approach to the problem of wild animal suffering (Johannsen, 2021). Though consequentialists have tended to be sympathetic to intervention,¹ deontologists have tended to argue against a duty to intervene. They've argued that the special relationship we have with domesticated animals is absent in the case of wild animals (Palmer, 2010), that intervention is impermissibly paternalistic (Regan, 2004; Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011), and that intervention is too demanding (Hadley, 2006). Though any deontological approach should take these concerns seriously, I argue that neither they, nor the other concerns I address in my book, undermine the claim that we owe a collective duty to research, and eventually provide, large-scale humanitarian assistance to wild animals.

The above description perhaps makes WAE sound like it's about the ethics of conventional disaster relief, e.g., the ethics of assisting animals after forest fires or hurricanes. However, the sort of assistance I envision goes far beyond what's conventional. Stable, functioning eco-systems contain astronomical amounts of suffering, and the natural processes that cause this suffering shouldn't be taken for granted. Considerations of beneficence strongly support intervening in those processes, so long as we've done the research necessary to make intervention safe and effective.

Consider the primary source of wild animal suffering: the r-strategy. Unlike K-strategist animals, who protect their genes by having few offspring and devoting considerable energy to

¹ In *Animal Liberation* (1975), Peter Singer suggests that intervening in predation would, in principle, be morally justified, but that our fallibility militates against doing so in practice. For consequentialists who endorse intervention both in principle and in practice, see Cowen, 2003; Horta, 2010; and Faria and Paez, 2015.

each individual, r-strategist animals do the opposite: they protect their genes by producing many offspring but devoting little energy to each individual (MacArthur and Wilson, 1967; Pianka, 1970). Though some r-strategist offspring manage to reach adulthood and reproduce, most die during infancy. What's more, the causes they die from are terribly painful: predation, starvation, exposure, disease, etc. Since (a) the r-strategy is common among many types of animal, e.g., fish, lizards, amphibians, and mammals; (b) r-strategists have far higher birth-rates than K-strategists; and (c) most r-strategists die during infancy; it follows that the lives of r-strategist infants are representative of life in the wild. Since the lives of r-strategist infants are quite terrible, the life of a typical wild animal is quite terrible, too.

One of the most striking features of wild animal suffering is the sheer scale of the problem. To see this, compare wild animal suffering to global poverty and animal agriculture. Global poverty is a very large problem: by the end of 2021, a significant portion of the world's human population – between 730.9 and 751.5 million people – are expected to be living on less than \$1.90 per day (Lakner et al., 2021). Animal agriculture is bigger yet: it's responsible for the slaughter of at least 70 billion terrestrial animals each year (Schlottmann and Sebo, 2019). Wild animal suffering, however, is considerably larger than either of these problems, since the life of a typical wild animal is quite terrible, and since wild animals are incredibly numerous. According to one estimate, the world's population of wild, terrestrial vertebrates is about a trillion (Tomasik, 2019), a number which only represents the (wild, terrestrial) vertebrates alive at any given moment. Were we to include in our count the many r-strategist infants who die over a few-year period, or were we to include the world's populations of wild birds, invertebrates, and marine vertebrates, our number would be orders of magnitude higher.

Although huge in scale, wild animal suffering is a very neglected issue.² This might seem like an odd claim given the considerable level of interest in environmental matters such as protecting natural ecosystems and natural habitat, but a concern for wild animals' wellbeing is different from either of these. As we noted above, naturogenic harms are responsible for a tremendous amount of suffering, and the life of a typical wild animal is consequently pretty terrible. Indeed, since some natural processes are quite harmful, concern for wild animals' wellbeing obliges us to intervene in nature.

In the book's first body chapter, I critique what I call 'the positive view of nature'. This view - the view that nature is good - is comprised of at least two claims: (a) that wild animals tend to live good lives, and (b) that naturalness is a valuable property. I've already explained why (a) is false, but (b) is another matter. Naturalness can be predicated of many things, e.g., consumer products, spaces (wilderness areas), and motives. To say that naturalness is valuable is to say that, in some sense, it confers goodness. However, it certainly isn't true that naturalness is necessary for goodness. Many artificial things are good, after all: great works of art, synthetic but life-saving medicine, etc. Nor is it true that naturalness is sufficient for goodness. Many natural things, such as disease, parasitism, hunger, etc., are not good. Though it might seem that, all things equal, naturalness at least increases value, i.e., that it's a source of intrinsic value, I construct a couple of thought experiments that show otherwise. I argue that the only kind of value naturalness possesses is extrinsic. More specifically, naturalness derives a kind of counterfactual value from our epistemic limitations: natural states of affairs are good relative to non-natural states of affairs produced by botched interventions. Of course, this sort of value is

² There are some notable exceptions, however. Effective altruist groups working on wild animal suffering include Wild Animal Initiative, Animal Ethics, and Rethink Priorities.

contingent upon our state of knowledge, and thus it dissipates when we know enough to intervene intelligently.

In the next two chapters (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), I defend the claim that we have a collective duty to research, and then cautiously provide, large-scale assistance to wild animals. Unlike duties of care, duties of beneficence are not contingent upon the presence of special relationships. Though we don't owe wild animals the same care we owe domesticated animals, that doesn't mean we don't have a collective duty to aid them. This duty is, of course, constrained in various ways: we shouldn't deprive competent animals of their liberty, since doing so is impermissibly paternalistic, and when beneficent intervention is very costly for the intervenor, then it isn't obligatory. Within these constraints, however, there's still considerable room for obligatory beneficence. Since most individual r-strategists (and thus most individual wild animals) lack the competence needed to survive, coercive intervention is, if necessary, justified in their case. What's more, some interventions, such as vaccinating wild animals against disease via feeding stations or baits (Rupprecht et al., 2004), don't involve any coercion at all. Nor must intervention be especially costly for anyone. Gene editing – a means of intervention I advocate for in the book – would involve some initial research costs, but it doesn't require any maintenance. Nor would any single person have to shoulder those costs. The obligation to intervene is a collective one, and thus the costs of intervention would be paid for via taxation or some other institutional mechanism.

A major issue with respect to intervention is whether, and if so, how carefully we should avoid ecological damage. On one view, we should actually intend to cause ecological damage. Since the total level of wellbeing in nature is (allegedly) net negative, we should prevent wild animals from reproducing by intentionally destroying their habitats (Tomasik, 2017). On another

view, we should be exceedingly (paralyzingly) careful, as our knowledge of ecosystems is too poor for us to accurately determine what harms we may be risking or what their probabilities are. In reply, I argue that even if we assume that most r-strategist offspring live net negative lives and that the level of wellbeing in nature is consequently net negative, from a deontological perspective, we should never destroy habitat intentionally. After all, it's impermissible to intentionally kill existing net positive animals (most r-strategist parents) for the sake of preventing future net negative animals from being born (most r-strategist offspring). However, I also argue that we shouldn't let our epistemic limitations prevent us from acting at all. The possibility that unintended ecological damage would have a net positive outcome, particularly if it lowers r-strategist populations, counts in favor of being less risk averse. Furthermore, I argue that we shouldn't be too concerned about unforeseeable risks, since harms caused unintentionally and unforeseeably are excusable in circumstances where action is needed to prevent death and/or significant suffering from occurring.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the merits of using gene editing to assist wild animals. I focus in particular on a relatively new form of gene editing called CRISPR (Ledford, 2015). CRISPR is far cheaper than earlier forms of gene editing, and it can be used to spread beneficial traits through wild populations via 'gene drive': a technique that can increase a trait's inheritability to the extent that nearly all of an edited organism's descendants will inherit it. Since editing a population in this way only requires releasing a proportionately small number of edited organisms into the wild, only a tiny fraction of the target population need ever be experimented upon or otherwise operated upon. And though the harms of genetic experimentation should be taken seriously, they can also be mitigated by incorporating a capacity building phase in which only animals who are incapable of suffering are involved in initial experiments.

In the last section of Chapter 5, I compare a number of goals that gene editing could be used to try to achieve. On the one hand, it's clear that an ideal ecosystem is one where all animals have (or have a significant opportunity to live) flourishing lives. For this ideal to be achieved, it's necessary that animal parents devote considerable energy to each offspring born, and that animals not be preying upon one another. The upshot, it would seem, is that we should seek to modify animals' reproductive and dietary behavior. On the other hand, I acknowledge that behavior change may turn out to be infeasible to safely achieve, or that it may turn out to be feasible, and safe, in only some ecosystems. In light of this uncertainty, I argue that genetic painkillers are a second-best option worth researching. Of particular interest is temporarily reducing the extent to which r-strategists' pain bothers them (dulling the affective dimension of their pain) for the first few weeks or so of their life: the period where they're most vulnerable and most likely to die painfully.

In the final chapter (Chapter 6), I discuss a number of issues concerning animal rights advocacy. Since our collective obligation to assist wild animals is not currently being satisfied, advocacy is needed to bring about political change and to create an assistance program. Following Peter Singer, I argue that we have a personal duty to devote some of our resources to beneficence-related causes (Singer, 1972). However, I also argue that from a deontological perspective, duties of beneficence end when the costs of beneficence become significant. Though assisting others at great cost to one's self is certainly praiseworthy, it isn't obligatory.

Establishing that we have a personal duty to devote some of our resources to beneficence isn't enough to establish that resources should be devoted to addressing wild animal suffering, since other cause areas compete with it. Animal advocates, in particular, might reasonably worry that devoting resources to wild animal suffering diverts resources away from traditional animal

rights cause areas, such as animal agriculture. However, I argue that the tension between addressing wild animal suffering and addressing traditional cause areas, is far less stark than it seems. Convincing others that sentient animals are our moral equals, and that we should change many of our practices out of respect for animals' moral status (that we should go vegan, for example), helps to foster beliefs and attitudes that make people far more likely to care about wild animal suffering when confronted with it. As a result, direct work on traditional causes often indirectly addresses wild animal suffering. Still, since wild animal suffering is an exceedingly neglected area, I do think that some people should work on it directly. They shouldn't be advocating for anything too dramatic right now, though, e.g., they probably shouldn't advocate for genetic editing. Efforts to raise awareness about the scale of wild animal suffering and to build support for familiar, less ambitious interventions, such as vaccinating wild animals or reducing parasite populations, are more likely to be successful. Such efforts also help to create the conditions needed for more ambitious advocacy to be effective in the future. Once much of the world sees sentient animals as our moral equals, has gone vegan, is aware of the scale of wild animal suffering, and accepts that we have a duty to intervene, much of it will also be open to ambitious interventions such as delivering genetic painkillers to r-strategist infants.

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