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THE MORAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TREATMENT OF DOMESTICATED ANIMALS AND WILDLIFE

Are we equally responsible for the wellbeing of domesticated animals and of wildlife? In other words, do we have the same moral obligations toward domesticated animals that we do toward wildlife? I believe we do not. In this short essay I will try to convince you of it and explain my reasons for such a belief.

First, a few clarifications. Throughout my discussion I will assume that we do, generally speaking, have moral obligations toward animals (that is, that animals can be morally wronged). I will not be trying to justify this view here because it requires a separate article. Rather, I will focus on a more fine-grained discussion about the specific reasons why humans are responsible for the wellbeing of domesticated animals and for the wellbeing of wildlife respectively.

In order to address the main question of this essay, we need to understand the differences between domestic and wild animals: that is, what it is that makes an animal 'domesticated'. Domestication is a long-term process involving artificial selection controlled by (or at least influenced by) humans. From an evolutionary-genetic point of view, domesticated animals are not the result of a selection for fitness, strength, or fertility level (as is the case with wildlife), but the result of a selection for whichever characteristics humans have found useful and attractive in animals. Some examples of these characteristics are: calmness, lack of aggression, submissiveness, friendliness, and an aesthetically pleasing look (pets); muscle mass, body fat content, and size (farming animals). One consequence of this is that domesticated animals are very unlikely to survive 'in the wild' if abandoned by humans simply because they are not capable of the sort of responses and behaviors that would be advantageous for a life in the wild.

One important consequence of being artificially selected and bred under human control is that domesticated animals differ from their wild counterparts in the way they behave toward human beings. Not only are they genetically predisposed not to display aggression toward humans, but they are also tamed (rendered friendly) from the moment they are

born. When approached by a human, they typically do not respond with the ‘fight or flight’ reaction in the way non-domesticated, wild animals do.

But what do these differences between domesticated animals and wildlife mean for us and our treatment of them? I believe that these differences are indeed morally relevant: specifically, I believe that we have stronger moral obligations toward domesticated animals than toward wildlife, and that there are at least two distinct reasons for this.

Firstly, domesticated animals have a greater disposition to suffer than wild animals. By “a greater disposition to suffer” I mean that they are less prepared and less skilled to protect and fend for themselves than their wild counterparts. In other words, if we do not take care of them by providing them with shelter, food, and medication, they will fare much worse than wild animals in the same circumstances. This dependence on others – on human beings – makes them more disposed to various forms of suffering than wildlife.

For many philosophers, such as for the utilitarian Princeton ethicist Peter Singer, the very fact that domesticated animals have a greater disposition to suffer than wild animals is enough to conclude that we have stronger moral obligations toward domesticated animals. If there is a threshold of wellbeing, then domesticated animals need our help to reach this threshold more than wild animals do. For those who do not feel convinced by this argument, let me offer another one. The second reason for which I believe that we have stronger moral obligations toward domesticated animals than toward wildlife is because the inability of domesticated animals to fend for themselves is *the result* of past human actions and decisions, and not something that happened independently of our actions. Because we ‘created’ domesticated animals – notably, to *our* own advantage – and hence caused them to have a greater disposition to suffer, we are now obligated to take care of them in appropriate ways. Humanity’s decision (even unconscious) to render some species less capable (or indeed incapable) of survival on their own is a source for greater moral responsibility for these beings.

But what specific obligations do we have toward various types of animals? To answer this question, many more distinctions have to be made. When it comes to the distinction between pets and wildlife, for example, we certainly do have an obligation to take to the vet our dog that looks ill, but we do not have such obligation if we see an injured fox running across the forest when we happen to be hiking. In this case, our obligation to take

care of our pet stems from the fact that we intentionally assumed ownership over the pet in question, thus making ourselves responsible for its wellbeing; the fox's injury, on the other hand, has nothing to do with our being there or our actions. But things can get much more complicated than this. For example, simply stumbling upon an injured or orphaned wild animal is arguably the source of an obligation to take it to the nearest wildlife rehabilitation clinic, even if there is absolutely nothing that connects us to this animal.

Further pondering the differences in the obligations we have toward domesticated animals and toward wildlife would require many more fine-grained distinctions than I have made here. For one, there are numerous types of domesticated animals – pets, emotional support animals, farming animals, entertainment animals, rescue animals, and so forth – each of whom will require different treatment and relationship with us. (Arguably, some such types of animals should not have been created in the first place.) It is also important to remember that we owe more to wildlife than just protecting them from random suffering: after all, we ourselves are the source of a big amount of such suffering through humanity's collective forces such as climate change, urbanization, or deforestation.