

Introduction

Helping Animals

Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above.

Katherine Hepburn, in the *African Queen*

It seems to me that many theories of the universe may be dismissed at once, not as too good, but as too cosy, to be true. One feels sure that they could have arisen only among people living a peculiarly sheltered life at a peculiarly favourable period of the world's history. No theory need be seriously considered unless it recognises that the world has always been for most [humans] and all animals other than domestic pets a scene of desperate struggle in which great evils are suffered and inflicted.

C. D. Broad¹

Comparisons, sad as they are, must be made to recognize where a great opportunity lies to prevent or mitigate suffering. The misery of animals in nature – which humans can do much to relieve – makes every other form of suffering pale in comparison. Mother Nature is so cruel to her children she makes Frank Perdue look like a saint.

Marc Sagoff²

This book relies on two main assumptions. Here is the first one: suffering is bad. Being burned alive or starving to death make you suffer. They feel bad. If you could do something to prevent bad things from happening, or otherwise alleviate their impact on individuals, without thereby bringing about more bad things in the world, and without jeopardizing anything of similar or greater importance, you ought to do it. This is the second assumption.

The moral case for helping others in need is very much premised on these two assumptions. It has been famously described in the literature by Peter Singer³ in *The Drowning Child* experiment. Here is how it goes:

¹ Broad (1938, vol. 2, p. 774).

² Sagoff (1984, p. 303). Frank Perdue is the founder and CEO of Perdue Farms, one of the biggest chicken-producing corporations in the United States.

³ See also Singer (1971) and Unger (1996).

To challenge my students to think about the ethics of what we owe to people in need, I ask them to imagine that their route to the university takes them past a shallow pond. One morning, I say to them, you notice a child has fallen in and appears to be drowning. To wade in and pull the child out would be easy but it will mean that you get your clothes wet and muddy, and by the time you go home and change you will have missed your first class. I then ask the students: do you have any obligation to rescue the child? Unanimously, the students say they do. The importance of saving a child so far outweighs the cost of getting one's clothes muddy and missing a class that they refuse to consider it any kind of excuse for not saving the child.⁴

Despite the students' reluctance to consider possible reasons for not saving the child, they (and the reader) are then asked to contemplate several variations on the original example that may change their intuitions. For instance, what if there are other bystanders who could also save the child, but nevertheless fail to do so? Do you still have reasons to pull the child out? The widespread intuition seems to be, again, that you ought to do it, no matter what others around you decide to do. But, then, Singer asks, would it make a difference if the child were not right in front of you but farther away, say, in a distant foreign country? Similarly, the common reaction is that, in itself, distance cannot ground a morally relevant difference between the two cases. Irrespective of distance or nationality, we should help that child in need.

The power of Singer's experiment is that it describes a real-world scenario. That is, in Singer's words, "we are all in that situation of the person passing the shallow pond: we can all save lives of people, both children and adults, who would otherwise die, and we can do so at a very small cost to us."⁵ Therefore, we ought to do it, for instance, by donating to effective aid agencies. That seems right. To be sure, there are additional complications in the example. Yet, for present purposes, I will leave them aside.

Now consider a further variation on Singer's experiment. Imagine that instead of a human child, the individual in the pond is now a chimpanzee. We can call this *The Drowning Chimpanzee*. Would *that* make a difference? One may confidently say that it would not. The fact that the child is *not human* is no reason for failing to help her. Appealing to species membership in order to justify responding differently in this case would be as unjustified as appealing to the child's sex or nationality in the previous one. For moral

⁴ Singer (1997). ⁵ Ibid.

purposes, they are all equally irrelevant criteria (for the time being, we can assume that this is indeed the case. I will provide support for this claim in Chapters 1 and 2).

As before, we can provide real-world analogs to this hypothetical scenario. Consider the following situation described by primatologist Jane Goodall:

That polio outbreak in 1996 was one of the most traumatic times (. . .). It was just this one chimpanzee, Mr. McGregor, coming in, dragging with both paralyzed legs, and finally falling out of the tree and dislocating one arm (. . .). Gradually, other chimps appeared that we hadn't seen for a while, and they'd be dragging an arm or dragging a leg, or they never came back. It was an absolute terrible time. The doctor in Kigoma – the European doctor – knew there was an outbreak among people. He should have been administering the polio prevention drops. He hadn't done it. He should have (. . .). As soon as we realized, we immediately got the whole dose of the vaccine from Nairobi, and we would put the required number of drops into a banana (. . .). [I]t was a horrible, horrible time, and we lost many wonderful chimpanzees.⁶

Goodall had the vaccine. Her position was – in line with what we have seen before – that since she was capable of helping the sick chimpanzees and preventing many others from suffering the same fate, that is what she ought to do. In fact, as she states, “the European doctor” acted wrongly by failing to administer the polio prevention drops to the chimpanzees. Surely, Goodall did not believe that because they were not human beings, she did not have an obligation to help them. Rather, one might say, she had the belief that independently of considerations about species membership, their well-being and lives mattered to the extent that it provided her with compelling reasons to act on their behalf.

Many people would agree that Goodall did the right thing, while the European doctor acted wrongly. But then, again, it cannot make a difference whether the chimpanzee is right in front of you or farther away – for example, suffering and struggling in the wild. Distance and geographical situation are not, in themselves, morally relevant criteria. Thus, they cannot justify different responses in cases that are similar in all the important respects.

Yet some might object that Singer's and Goodall's are not relevantly analogous cases and thus do not allow us to infer the same conclusion. First, while in *The Drowning Child* we are all in a position to prevent or

⁶ Academy of Achievement (2009). See also Goodall (1986).

alleviate some very bad things from happening to individuals in need, it is not the case that we are in a similarly suitable position regarding animals that suffer in the wild. Of course, not everyone is, as Jane Goodall, *in the wild*. Furthermore, there are not – or rather there are not as many⁷ – aid agencies for wild animals. So, it could be argued, in the case of wild animals, the distance factor constitutes an insurmountable difficulty. Then, it might be added, perhaps no such agencies exist precisely because there is no need for that aid. While it is beyond any reasonable doubt that *these* particular animals are suffering and in need, these conditions are not representative of how animals fare in nature. Usually, wild animals live fairly well. Thus, it might be concluded, whereas there are indeed many distant human beings in need, and we therefore have an obligation to help them, often the best we can do for the majority of wild animals is just “to leave them alone.”

This book is partly motivated by the aim to show that this is not the case. As a matter of fact, there are strong reasons to believe that the last objection is largely based on an idealized view of wild animals’ lives. I will call this *the idyllic view of nature*.

One might distinguish between a strong and a weak version of the idyllic view as follows:

The strong idyllic view of nature: the claim that wild animals typically have highly net positive lives.

The weak idyllic view of nature: the claim that wild animals typically have good lives.

Although some may endorse the strong thesis, it is sufficient to consider the weaker thesis for the purposes of this analysis. I will show that we have reasons to believe that the weak idyllic view of nature is false, which entails a fortiori that the strong version of the view is so as well. A majority of wild animals *probably* have lives of intense suffering and a premature death. Additionally, whatever the truth about the predominance of suffering in nature, it is still the case that many wild animals experience a tremendous amount of suffering in their lives. Or so I will argue.

If the idyllic view is false, then we have as much reason to extrapolate from helping a particular chimpanzee in need to helping other wild animals in similar circumstances as we had to extend our positive obligations to help the drowning human child to help distant human beings in need. Of course, one might say, it would still have to be shown that in

⁷ The Gorilla Doctors (www.gorilladoctors.org) constitutes a salient example.

both cases we are in an equally suitable position to help. For the moment, however, let us just proceed by formulating our problem in the following way:

The problem of wild animal suffering and intervention in nature: ought we to prevent, or alleviate, the harms wild animals suffer in the wild?

The problem of wild animal suffering and intervention in nature has been, until some years ago, almost completely absent from the literature. Debates in animal ethics have predominantly focused on the reasons we may have to refrain from harming animals that are currently under human control.⁸ There are apparently good reasons for this. Human action causes significant harm to an appalling number of animals that come into existence only to experience the daily suffering and the excruciating deaths associated with systemic animal exploitation.⁹ If animal well-being is morally relevant and animals are made to suffer and killed while we could otherwise prevent it, then we ought to stop doing so.

In contrast, the situation of animals in the wild has not been seen as problematic. As a matter of fact, the belief that animal well-being is morally relevant has often been combined with the belief in a strong obligation of non-intervention in the wild – in turn, usually grounded, to a greater or lesser extent, on the aforementioned idyllic view of nature.¹⁰

Until very recently, few philosophers had challenged the compatibility of such beliefs and addressed the moral problem of wild animal suffering and intervention in nature. Some of them have done this by focusing on the moral problem of predation,¹¹ that is, the discussion about our reasons to intervene in the wild to prevent or reduce the harms inflicted on wild animals by their predators.

⁸ See, for instance, Ryder (1975); Singer (2009 [1974]); Regan (1975, 2004 [1983]); LaFollette and Shanks (1996); Spiegel (1988); Fox (1999); Francione (2000, 2008); Cavalieri (2001); Cohen and Regan (2001); Nobis (2002); Rowlands (2002); Dunayer (2004); Sapontzis (ed.) (2004); Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011a); McPherson (2014); Bruers (2015).

⁹ It is estimated that over sixty billion land animals and one to three trillion marine animals are bred or captured and brutally killed every year so that they can be converted into food products and clothing. Many more millions of animals are killed annually in worldwide experiments, after enduring painful and distressful experiences, such as incarceration and vivisection. Many others are in agony or desolation, confined, forced – and often killed – to entertain human populations in a wide array of circumstances. See FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2019); Mood and Brooke (2012); fishcount.org.uk (2012).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Regan (2004 [1983]); Clark. (1977); Benton (1993); Gaard (ed.) (1993); Adams and Donovan (eds.) (1995, 2007); Donovan and Adams (eds.) (1996); Francione (2000); Dunayer (2004); Balcombe (2006); Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011a); Hadley (2015).

¹¹ Sapontzis (1984, 1987); Everett (2001); Cowen (2003); Fink (2005); McMahan (2010a, 2010b, 2015); Ebert and Machan (2012); Bramble (2021); Monsó (2021).

However, although it is the case that many wild animals are severely harmed by predatory activity, there are further causes of wild animal suffering in nature. Predation-induced harms only account for a fraction of the harms wild animals suffer. Notwithstanding that, it is true that many of the conclusions reached through investigating the moral problem of predation can be expanded to include other causes of wild animal suffering.¹²

Awareness about other forms of wild animal suffering, and especially by how they are determined by population ecology, has been triggered by the crucial work of Yew-Kwang Ng.¹³ He claimed that the dynamics of animal populations in nature generates disvalue from the point of view of the individuals involved for the sake of natural processes. An increasing number of animal ethicists have been following the path opened by Ng's work and have offered more sustained philosophical arguments about the implications of accepting the magnitude of the disvalue that exists in nature. Others have also considered whether we should aid wild animals without necessarily assuming that natural disvalue is so high.¹⁴

Notwithstanding this, objections to aiding animals in nature based on a "laissez-faire intuition" according to which we should let nature be are still prevalent in the literature. Some of them are put forward by appealing to the nonexistence of morally relevant entanglements between human beings and wild animals in order to justify simply letting them be.¹⁵ Others, while challenging the more traditional approaches to the wild as a "flat moral landscape," have nevertheless been reluctant to accept more pervasive interventions in nature for the sake of wild animals. According to these authors, because wild animals are part of separate and sovereign "communities," there is an obligation of non-interference, which implies a duty to preserve the ecosystems they inhabit.¹⁶ This book will address these views and consider whether they are sound.

Another way in which intervention to aid wild animals may be opposed is by claiming that it conflicts with environmentalist aims. In fact, the relatively scarce work on wild animal suffering must be clearly demarcated

¹² Faria (2015).

¹³ Ng (1995). Later popularized by Tomasik (2015a [2009]) and Horta (2010a, 2015).

¹⁴ See Kirkwood and Sainsbury (1996); Bovenkerk et al. (2003); Clarke and Ng (2006); Hadley (2006); Morris and Thornhill (2006); Nussbaum (2006); Horta (2010a, 2015, 2017); Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011a); Dorado (2015); Faria and Paez (2015); Pearce (2015); Torres (2015); Faria (2018); Cochrane (2018); Faria and Horta (2019); Groff and Ng (2019); Johannsen (2020). This debate was pioneered by Victorian vegan avant la lettre and animal advocate Lewis Gompertz (1997 [1824]).

¹⁵ Palmer (2010). ¹⁶ Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011a).

from the extensive literature in environmental ethics, which endorses the moral considerability of other nonhuman contents of the natural world, such as species or ecosystems. The profound axiological and normative discrepancies between the main views in animal and environmental ethics have been conclusively established in the literature.¹⁷ This book will not focus on such discrepancies but will address some of these environmentalist positions insofar as they are used as part of the case against intervention in the wild.

Animal Ethics in the Wild

We might think that, even if the problem of wild animal suffering and intervention in nature has been traditionally neglected, that should not worry us since it is not a very important problem. However, this is a moral issue that may seriously affect a great number of individuals. The number of animals in the wild vastly surpasses the number of animals under human control.¹⁸ Thus, considering both the work that needs to be done and the billions that can benefit from it, a few other issues may be considered, on the same criteria, more important.¹⁹

I proceed as follows. I start by examining two traditional debates in animal ethics: Chapter 1 discusses the reasons why nonhuman animals are morally considerable, and Chapter 2 explains the concept and justification of speciesism. I will work under the assumption that, other things being equal, the conclusions reached throughout these chapters will apply similarly both to nonhuman animals under human control and nonhuman animals living in the wild. In Chapter 3, I examine the empirical evidence about wild animal suffering – in particular, data from population dynamics – in order to determine the magnitude of the problem. I will then assess the extent to which the available evidence, together with the normative views defended in the previous two chapters, gives us reasons to intervene in nature on behalf of wild animals.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Callicott (1980); Sagoff (1984); Hargrove (ed.) (1992); Crisp (1998), Faria and Paez (2019).

¹⁸ In a rough estimate, the number of sentient animals living in the wild could rise to 10^{21} or 10^{22} according to Tomasik (2015a [2009]).

¹⁹ Peter Singer himself has suggested that this is one of the most pressing moral issues and encouraged moral philosophers to do research on it, and others to find ways that will make it increasingly more feasible to help animals in the wild, for instance, at the International Conference on Ethics at the University of Porto, June 21, 2019.

Having cleared the ground, both philosophically and empirically, I provisionally claim that there are decisive reasons to aid animals in nature. The main goal of this book is not to elaborate a complete argument for intervention in nature from one or several normative perspectives. Instead, it presents a very broad and minimal case for reducing wild animal suffering and then focuses on what I consider to be the most salient objections that might be raised against it. The minimal case for intervention in nature is based primarily on a series of plausible moral and factual claims about wild animal suffering. It is compatible with most important ethical theories (or, at least, with those that accept the existence of positive obligations) and can therefore – or so I hope – attract wide support. I will deal with this latter point in the conclusion of the book.

Since the number of possible objections to this view is very large, it was necessary to develop a taxonomy to organize them. I elaborate on Albert O. Hirschman's classification of the arguments against social progress (the arguments from perversity, futility, and jeopardy) in *The Rhetoric of Reaction*.²⁰ In Chapter 4, I then discuss perversity and futility objections to intervention, while in chapter 5 I analyze jeopardy objections. Three types of objections to intervention, however, do not sit comfortably in Hirschman's taxonomy and are discussed in three separate chapters. In Chapter 6, I debate relational objections, while in Chapter 7 I focus on what one may term priority objections. Finally, Chapter 8 deals with objections that arise from tractability concerns.

I conclude that if it is feasible to prevent or alleviate wild animal suffering by intervening in nature, without thereby bringing about an expected worse state of affairs for the individuals affected, we ought to do it. Moreover, for those interventions currently infeasible, we should put ourselves in a position to achieve them, both individually and collectively.

Finally, "nonhuman animals that live in nature" is quite the cumbersome locution. It would be awkward to employ it every time I refer to the individuals I am discussing. Thus, I will sometimes refer to them, loosely and variously, as "animals in nature," "animals in the wild," or even "wild animals." I am aware, however, that the terms are not strictly speaking co-extensive. Worse still, referring to wild animals may suggest that they are fierce or aggressive. Nevertheless, my use of this term is to be understood without that particular connotation. Furthermore, also for linguistic economy, I will often use simply "animals" to refer to nonhuman animals. Finally, someone may wonder why not simply use the expression "free-living

²⁰ Hirschman (1991).

animals,” now so much in vogue. My answer is that the expression should be avoided inasmuch as it remains an open question whether wild animals are free at all.²¹ Moreover, unless there is evidence of an individual’s self-identified pronoun, I will use “they” as a generic third-person singular pronoun to refer to any individual (human and nonhuman) whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context of the usage.²²

²¹ For the view that wild animals are socially, or politically, unfree, see, for instance, Paez (2021).

²² See APA Style and Grammar Guidelines from the American Psychological Association (2020).