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NONHUMAN ANIMAL ETHICS: OUTLINING A DUTY OF CARE FOR THE DEPENDENT

The authors examine the ethical foundations of humanity's responsibilities toward nonhuman animals, emphasizing the intuition that special duties arise toward beings unable to protect or provide for themselves. Contemporary variants of traditional theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology, have made notable progress in extending moral concern to animals by recognizing their sentience, interests, and inherent worth. The authors argue that such theories still fall short of fully capturing the relational and context-sensitive obligations humans feel toward vulnerable beings: utilitarianism reduces moral claims to aggregate calculations that risk justifying exploitation, while deontological and rights-based approaches often frame duties in abstract or hierarchical terms. The authors contend that care ethics provides a stronger foundation, by foregrounding dependence and empathetic responsibility. By integrating rational reflection with moral emotions and imagination, care ethics better aligns with human moral sentiments and offers a framework of guardianship that extends duties of care beyond merely proximate relationships.

Key words: *Animal ethics. – Animal rights. – Utilitarianism. – Deontology. – Care ethics.*

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1. INTRODUCTION: OUR SHARED SENTIMENTS TOWARD NONHUMAN ANIMALS

Humanity's moral relationship with nonhuman animals has become an important topic in contemporary ethics. We share the world with countless sentient creatures, yet our treatment of them often stands in stark contrast with how we believe fellow humans ought to be treated. We routinely exploit animals for food, labor, research, and entertainment, causing immense suffering and depriving them of natural lives. The ambiguity of our attitudes and actions is detected in the empirical research on our relationship toward nonhuman animals. Europeans overwhelmingly endorse stricter animal-welfare rules, yet continue to consume products from intensive farming.[1] Americans remain divided on animal experimentation, while meat consumption remains steady,[2] even though nearly all profess strong affection for their companion animals.[3] Psychological scales confirm this inconsistency. We calibrate our concern depending on whether an animal is perceived as a friend, food, or tool.[4] These findings reveal that our moral sentiments are fragmented, situational, and often self-serving – providing a sociological backdrop to the philosophical question whether prevailing ethical theories can truly capture our responsibilities toward those who are able to fend for themselves. On the one hand, survey data reveals that pets are regarded as family members, with emotional bonds rivaling those

[1] The 2023 Eurobarometer on animal welfare reported that 84% of Europeans believe farmed animals deserve better protection (European Commission, 2023), yet consumer demand for low-cost animal products produced in industrial systems remains strong.

[2] Gallup's long-term polling in the United States (2003–2015) shows that around one-third of Americans affirm that animals should have *the same rights as humans* (Riffkin 2015). Pew Research Center (Strauss 2018) found Americans almost evenly split, with 52% opposing and 47% supporting the use of animals in scientific studies.

[3] A more recent Pew Research Center study (Brown 2023) found that 97% of American pet owners consider their pets part of their family, with 51% reporting that they view their pets "*as much a part of their family as a human member*" (emphasis in original).

[4] People often downplay the intelligence or sentience of animals they eat, rating livestock as less sentient than pets or charismatic wild animals, which is called the meat paradox phenomenon (Piazza *et al.* 2015; Bastian *et al.* 2012). Instruments such as the Animal Attitude Scale (Herzog, Grayson, McCord 2015) and the Animal Purpose Questionnaire (Higgs, Bipin, Cassaday 2020) further confirm that people calibrate their concern according to an animal's perceived "purpose" – for example, treating pigs as food but dogs as family.

of toward humans. On the other hand, people tolerate or directly support practices that cause immense suffering to farm and laboratory animals, often justifying this by denying their sentience or by redefining their purpose.

The prevailing normative frameworks in Western ethics – utilitarianism and deontology – have each sought to define duties toward other beings. Traditionally, theoretical developments have centered around three stances. *Indirect stances*, classically attributed to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, argue that animals do not have value in themselves and that duties toward them are derivatives of duties toward human beings. *Direct-but-unequal stances* claim that animals have moral standing, given the fact that they are sentient. Still, in case of conflict with human interests, these interests prevail because of distinctive human traits. *Moral equality stances* have been clear that the criterion for moral duties toward animals is the capacity to suffer and enjoy life, with a strong tendency to equate the interests of humans and nonhuman animals (Wilson 2002, 15; Allegri 2018).[5]

Still, in recent ethical sources, it has become appealing to argue that these traditional theories fail to capture a key moral intuition in our relation toward other beings. Namely, we tend to have a heightened sense of duty to care for beings who are unable to care for themselves. In general, it is evidenced that the appearance and attractiveness of animals play a significant role in our evaluations and practical rationality,[6] while attractiveness can increase slightly when a species is endangered (Gunnthorsdottir 2001).

This paper: 1) provides an overview of how utilitarian and deontological ethical theories address nonhuman animal ethics, examining influential contemporary developments (most notably the work of Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Christine Korsgaard, Martha Nussbaum, and others) and evaluating their alignment with the intuition of special obligations toward vulnerable beings; 2) argues that while each framework offers important insights, none of them fully encapsulates the moral urgency many feel to protect and care for those sentient beings who are at our mercy; and finally, it 3) considers emerging approaches – including Nussbaum's capabilities approach and feminist care ethics – which explicitly emphasize relationships of dependence and vulnerability as central to moral responsibilities.

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5 This is in line with the findings of empirical studies (e.g., Hopwood *et al.* 2025), which show how stronger belief in sentience of nonhuman animals leads to less speciesist attitudes. The results also show that such beliefs cooccur with a greater mental effort required to justify the consumption of animals.

6 We tend to be more affectionate and caring for nonhuman animals that are aesthetically appealing, or behaviorally, physically, and cognitively resemble humans (Kellert, Berry 1980).

2. UTILITARIANISM: NONHUMAN ANIMAL NET WORTH

The cornerstone of Peter Singer's ([1975] 2015, 33) view on animal ethics is the principle of equality, which is a moral idea that does not allude to any (f) actual equality among compared beings, but instead functions as a normative guideline for treating others. Following Bentham ([1781] 2000), Singer ([1975] 2015, 36) adopts sentience, i.e., the potential for feeling pain and suffering, as the sole criterion for the right to equal consideration. In order to be an appropriate object of equal consideration, one must have the general capability of having interests, which is secured through sentience.[7] Thus, the principle of equality does not imply that all beings are morally equal in every respect; rather, it requires that the interests of beings capable of suffering be given equal consideration. In other words, a utilitarian treats every relevant individual being's interest as equally important and comparatively measurable. Consequentialism is primarily associated with utilitarianism, which, in its classical hedonistic form, takes the good to be a pleasure and requires the agent to promote pleasure (Brink 2006, 381). This includes the avoidance or mitigation of pain or unhappiness (Mill [1859] 2001, 12). Hence, utility means the property that "tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness" or "to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness" (Bentham [1781] 2000, 14–15). It is not about the greatest happiness of one individual, but "the greatest amount of happiness altogether" – both quantitative and qualitative (Mill [1863] 2001, 11).

Even without a precise definition of consciousness, there are obvious behavioral and neurological similarities between human and nonhuman animals that indicate conscious mental states (Chan, Harris 2011, 314).[8] Having a nervous system, pain/pleasure responses, and sensory capabilities is sufficient for imputing conscious and deliberate action to animals,[9] which

[7] All vertebrates (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish) are considered sentient. Among them, mammals and birds are typically pointed out as having highly developed mental capacities that resemble those of humans, whereas some argue that even bees, wasps, and spiders possess a "similar sort of mental architecture" (Carruthers 2011, 380).

[8] Interestingly, there are several types of legal (civil law) regulations of animal rights with regard to sentience. Some legal systems (e.g., Austria, Germany, Czechia, and Switzerland) explicitly deny that nonhuman animals are objects, some (e.g., Belgium, France, Columbia, the UK, and Spain) treat them as things but acknowledge their sentience and biological needs, whereas some (e.g., Croatia) neither explicitly consider them things nor sentient (Nedić, Klasiček 2023, 63–64).

[9] This is also confirmed in the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness (2012), *https://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf*, last visited November 21, 2025.

consequently leads to a possession of interests. Although not all movements of living creatures toward fulfilling an evolutionary purpose, such as a bacteria moving away from negative chemical stimuli, could (should) be interpreted as "intentional", there is still good reason to claim that animals with a mental life do act intentionally, have desires, and basic beliefs (Chan, Harris 2011, 319). Even if we were to accept the claim that consciousness (not necessarily self-consciousness[10]) is required for a right to "continued existence", it is nevertheless possible to acknowledge nonhuman animals the capability of consciously thinking in images, despite lacking the ability to use language (Tooley 2011, 358). A dog can form a basic belief that chewing a bone tastes a certain way based on past experiences, which can lead to the action of getting a bone to satisfy its desire for the taste (Regan 1983, 58–75). It seems difficult to exclude intentionality from such actions.

Beings that can suffer have an interest in not suffering, and such an interest cannot be interpreted differently in accordance with potential differences among species. In other words, a core biological principle is that the nature of pain is the same for all sentient species, although there are differences in the way it is manifested. For instance, it could be argued that a higher level of cognitive development allows for higher levels of pain. One might distinguish between an objective, "body-representing" aspect of pain and a subjective, experiential, and conscious aspect (Carruthers 2011, 376). It might follow that human animals are susceptible to a psychological, "second-order" type of pain that nonhuman animals lacking self-consciousness[11] cannot experience. An example of an extreme case would be existential suffering caused by abstract thinking about the meaning of life. On the other hand, cognitive superiority can also lead to the opposite conclusion in certain circumstances. Singer ([1975] 2015, 48) depicts a wartime situation in which humans can be comforted through promises of being unharmed, despite being taken prisoner, which would not be the case for nonhuman animals that can only experience pain due to confinement. Hence, higher-order cognition seems to open possibilities in both directions, although the intuitive expectation might be that greater suffering is the more likely overall consequence of self-awareness.

Going back to utilitarianism and the aim of this paper, it is necessary to assess the extent to which consequential reasoning based on utility can support the initial intuitive claim of the existence of a special duty of care

[10] Although some nonhuman animal species might possess it (see Andrews 2015).

[11] Planning for the future and having meaningful relationships with others are some of the elements that are commonly said to stem from self-awareness, which distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals.

toward those unable to care for themselves. The classical utilitarian defenses of animal welfare come from Bentham and Mill, who offer a consequentialist, welfarist, aggregative, maximizing, and impersonal model (Frey 2011, 172). This means that goodness is evaluated through both human and nonhuman animal welfare, i.e., within the category of sentient beings, by a simple sum of pain and pleasure. However, as we have seen, more weight can easily be given to human beings. If the goodness of an action (e.g., eating meat) is analyzed only with reference to the overall sum of pain and pleasure, then the quality of one's experience of pain or pleasure can figure in the equation. Some scholars (e.g., Frey 2011, 186) assert that "the value of life is a function of its quality", which is further dependent on its richness. Stemming from this, if one argues that human animals generally have richer experiences (due to self-awareness, meaningful relations with others, and hopes for the future), much space is given to practices that go against the interests of nonhuman animals and consequently human duties of care toward them.

Singer notes that conclusions with regard to pain and suffering cannot be fully extended to problems related to life and death.

> While self-awareness, the capacity to think ahead and have hopes and aspirations for the future, the capacity for meaningful relations with others and so on are not relevant to the question of inflicting pain – since pain is pain, whatever other capacities, beyond the capacity to feel pain, the being may have – these capacities are relevant to the question of taking life. It is not arbitrary to hold that the life of a self-aware being, capable of abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities. [...] If we had to choose to save the life of a normal human being or an intellectually disabled human being, we would probably choose to save the life of a normal human being; [...] The same is true when we consider other species. (Singer [1975] 2015, 54)

Therefore, he treats the question of life differently from the question of pain. We will come back to this problem later, but for now it suffices to say that his approach seems deal primarily with balancing between moral values. He asserts that balancing between two beings in equal pain is different ("not nearly so clear how we ought to choose") from juxtaposing two lives that can be measured in their richness, as well as that, exceptionally, nonhuman animal lives can sometimes have more worth than human lives (Singer [1975] 2015, 55). However, if the question is posed beyond such cases, then his conclusions might be less convincing. Although he rejects speciesism, as

a view that draws the moral lines in accordance with species membership, Singer (1993, 132–135) nevertheless conceives of painless killing of non-self-conscious animals as potentially justified. He adopts the "replacement argument", which states that nonhuman animals are individually replaceable due to their lesser mental capacities, unlike human animals, who possess irreplaceable personalities and experiences. Hence, "[i]n some circumstances – when animals lead pleasant lives, are killed painlessly, their deaths do not cause suffering to other animals, and the killing of one animal makes possible its replacement by another who would not otherwise have lived – the killing of non-self-conscious animals may not be wrong" (Singer 1993, 133).[12]

From a utilitarianism standpoint, who is to say that the pleasure achieved through eating meat does not outweigh the pain caused to animals under existing conditions of life and their eventual demise? The question has even more weight if we imagine a better world in which living conditions of all animal life are as good as they could be and in which no pain is caused to them, other than the final (painless) taking of life. The replacement argument allows painless killing for food because the net worth of such practices is positive, given the quality of life of those animals, as well as their infinite replacement through breeding for more food. Interestingly, the fact that an animal lacking self-consciousness leads a miserable life could even be taken as a utilitarian argument in favor of killing it (Singer 1993, 132). Further, to take the case of nonhuman animal experimentation, how could we plausibly deny the overall net positive result in cases where the discovery of a medical cure leads to a massive increase in human pleasure, where humans are taken to have richer lives? Suppose our utilitarian ethical perspective takes into account the richness of one's inner life. In that case, we can easily end up with even more counterintuitive conclusions, such as that many human animals (e.g., those with severe mental disorders) have lesser value than many nonhuman animals.

In conclusion, while utilitarianism's calculus of pleasure and pain potentially has the power to defend the interests of nonhuman animals (provided everything falls into place), it nevertheless fails to align with our deeply held moral intuition that we owe a special duty to protect and nurture those who cannot fend for themselves. This intuition recognizes the inherent

[12] This does not prevent Singer (1993, 135) from taking a pragmatic stance with regard to eating animals: "[A]t the level of practical moral principles, it would be better to reject altogether the killing of animals for food, unless one must do so to survive. Killing animals for food makes us think of them as objects that we can use as we please. Their lives then count for little when weighed against our mere wants. As long as we continue to use animals in this way, to change our attitudes to animals in the way that they should be changed will be an impossible task."

value in relationships of dependence, where the strong are ethically bound to care for the weak, not merely for aggregate utility, but out of a fundamental relational obligation that transcends impersonal calculations. Ultimately, by overlooking these relational duties, utilitarianism risks neglecting the most defenseless beings by preferring the cold maximization of happiness.

3. DEONTOLOGY AND RIGHTS ETHICS: FROM MEANS TO ENDS

In contrast to outcome-oriented utilitarianism, deontological ethics judges morality by adherence to duties or rules. The paradigmatic deontological thinker Immanuel Kant held that moral agents must act according to rational principles ("categorical imperative") that respect the intrinsic value of rational beings. Kant's (1996, 87) ethics famously centers on the injunction to treat humanity "in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." However, Kant did not extend this respect to nonhuman animals; in fact, he made stark statements excluding animals from the community of ends. Since only men can be ends, "our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity" (Kant 2001, 239). According to the classic Kantian view, animals lack the rational autonomy that would make them "ends in themselves". We ought not be cruel to animals solely because cruelty might dull our feelings and lead us to mistreat humans, or because someone's pet is their property and harming it wrongs the owner. This view of indirect duty implies that harming an animal is not a wrong against the animal itself, but rather a wrong against humanity's own moral virtue or the animal's owner. Such a position goes against the common intuition that the animal itself is wronged by abuse – that kicking a dog is wrong primarily because of the harm to the dog, not just because it might make the kicker more callous or upset the dog's owner.

Kant's exclusion of animals (and other nonrational beings, e.g., infants and disabled persons) from direct moral standing exposes a stark problem of "marginal cases". If full and direct moral rights are tied solely to rational agency, then human beings who lack higher rational capacities (newborns, persons with severe cognitive impairments) would seemingly fall outside the scope of direct moral duty as well (Tanner 2009; Korsgaard 2018, 77–96). Yet we emphatically believe that it is wrong to treat such individuals as mere means or to deny them their rights. This inconsistency suggests that Kant's criterion – strict rational autonomy – is too narrow and misses two morally salient factors: the capacity for subjective experience and vulnerability. An infant or a cognitively disabled person cannot reason or

take care of themselves, but we consider them morally important because they can be harmed, they can suffer, and they depend on our care. The same is true of many animals. Thus, many philosophers after Kant have revised deontological ethics to better account for the moral claims of beings who are sentient but not autonomous.[13]

Already in 1983, Tom Regan developed an influential deontological argument for animal rights. He starkly disagrees with Kant about which beings qualify as ends in themselves. Instead of rationality as a criterion for inclusion, Regan (1983, 175) proposes the quality of being "subject-of-a-life". Any being having perception, desires, memories, a sense of future, emotional life, preferences and welfare is a subject-of-a-life in this sense (Regan 1983, 243). By this criterion, all adult mammals and many other animals are not objects or resources, but are beings who experience the world. A subject-of-a-life has inherent value, and if we accord this value to all human subjects, consistency demands that we extend the same recognition to nonhuman animals. Regan concludes that many nonhuman animals have basic moral rights, including the right to be treated with respect and not to be harmed or killed as a means to human ends. In his own words, "the fundamental wrong is the system that allows us to view animals as our resources, here for us – to be eaten, or surgically manipulated, or exploited for sport or money." (Regan 1985). This abolitionist stance holds that our entire framework of using animals as commodities is unethical,[14] not just because of the suffering

[13] In this paper, we mainly discuss the elaborations of Kant's positions by Tom Regan and Christine Korsgaard. However, his position on animal rights has been reinterpreted in the works of many other authors. Lara Denis argues that the animal ethics in Kant, properly understood, are far stricter than they might appear. Her position entails that the duties toward animals include perfect and imperfect duties. According to Kant, perfect duties are moral obligations that do not allow for discretion, while imperfect duties are general moral obligations that allow for exceptions (Denis 2020, 408–410). Research on Kant's stance in the domain of nonhuman animal ethics has been the topic of an important recent edited volume entitled *Kant and Animals* (Callanan, Allais 2020).

[14] As a potential catalogue of animal rights, one could distinguish four main categories: (1) rights to nonmaleficent treatment, (2) rights to have basic needs met, (3) rights to nonconstraint, and (4) rights from human agreements (Beauchamp 2011, 212–219). The first two categories encompass basic rights regarding harm, such as a right to life, without suffering and with a pursuit of the basic goods of life (e.g., food, rest, and housing). Interpreted in their most radical form, they might go against all practices that take away animal life. Further, rights of nonconstraint refer to the freedom of animals, which, in our current practices, includes avoiding small cages in zoos, factory farms, rodeos, and circuses. In contrast, a more radical understanding might imply a duty not to confine at all. Finally, rights stemming from human agreements mean being allowed to receive benefits from all human legal arrangements, such as wills and regulations.

caused (though that exacerbates the wrong), but because it denies the animal's inherent worth. According to this account, we have direct duties toward animals that are grounded in their intrinsic value. Stating that a being has interests for its own sake implies that correlativity is direct – we have obligations to a nonhuman animal, rather than regarding the animal (Beauchamp 2011, 207). For Regan, just as we consider it inherently wrong to exploit a defenseless human (even one with no ability to reciprocate or defend themselves), it is intrinsically wrong to exploit a defenseless animal. Both are entitled to care and protection as a matter of rights, not simply compassion or benefit. Regan's approach marked a departure from Kant by explicitly including nonautonomous, vulnerable beings in the circle of those to whom we owe duties – not indirectly for someone else's sake, but to them in their own right.

However, invoking rights might seem redundant in ethics. Acknowledging rights follows only after providing arguments in favor of protecting the interests of certain beings, i.e., after recognizing human obligations regarding the treatment of nonhuman animals. So, invoking animal rights has a pragmatic purpose, and it is to "block appeals to the human collective good" (Frey 2011, 176) that would potentially have the power to override animals' interests. On the other hand, some scholars point out that calling upon rights hinders our debates about animal ethics, due to the authoritative nature of rights. Be that as it may, rights theories still have their internal requirements, which often have to do with membership in the moral community. Asserting and exercising a right can be viewed independently from possessing a right (Beauchamp 2011, 202). Not knowing about having a right does not necessarily prevent one from actually having it. It is a plausible assumption that a being can have a right if it is capable of having an interest for its own sake (Beauchamp 2011, 203), which unquestionable for all sentient animals. One way to support a theory of rights is to claim that rights cannot be understood without reference to correlation. To assert "X has a right to do or have Y" implies that someone else either has a duty not to interfere with X doing Y or a duty to provide X with Y (Beauchamp 2011, 206). A right not to suffer means that others have a duty not to cause suffering, just as when there is a right to decent life – a zoo has a duty to provide food and roaming space for animals. In other words, a right entails an obligation, just as an obligation entails a right. This is a standard perspective of rights. Still, it confirms the remark that rights only follow from a defense of human duties toward beings that have interests for their own sake.

On the other hand, "will theories" assert that only entities that are capable of demanding or waiving the enforcement of a duty can be rights-holders, which typically excludes nonhuman animals, as well as infants

(Kurki 2017, 79). It seems that the contemporary legal status of nonhuman animals remains somewhere in between objects (things) and subjects (persons) (Pietrzykowski 2017, 56). It is obvious that at least vertebrate animals possess morally relevant interests, although this does not have to imply that granting them legal personhood is the best solution. Some authors (Pietrzykowski 2017, 57) believe that due to significant interspecies differences, the existing legal conceptions of juristic and natural persons are still not fitting for nonhuman animals. An alternative solution might be to consider them nonpersonal subjects of law. This could introduce a distinction between subjects and persons, where the former does not necessarily imply the latter (Pietrzykowski 2017, 58). The idea is to establish sets of legal rights that correspond to the overall capabilities and interests of their holders. Personal and nonpersonal subjects of law would thus have different sets of rights that would be based on the main difference between human and nonhuman animals – freedom of choice[15] (Pietrzykowski 2017, 59). Consequently, this view might entail legal recognition of only one right of nonpersonal legal subjects, which is "to have one's own individual interests considered as relevant in all decisions that may affect their realisation"[16] (Pietrzykowski 2017, 59). Nevertheless, some authors (e.g., Kurki 2017, 84) disagree with the possibility of making a clear distinction between legal personality and non-personality; in their view, legal personality is a cluster concept that is composed of different entitlements and burdens ("incidents") that vary across particular cases (Kurki 2017, 84).

A more recent development in deontological thought comes from Christine Korsgaard, a Kantian philosopher who argues that properly understood Kantian ethics supports strong obligations toward animals. In *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (2018), Korsgaard acknowledges Kant's original stance but seeks to reinterpret its foundations. She suggests that it is not the mere fact of rationality that gives any being moral status, but the fact of having a subjective good, i.e., being an entity for whom things can be good or bad, from its own point of view. Humans, as rational beings, value our own good (our life and wellbeing) and recognize that rational nature lets us set and pursue ends. But Korsgaard (2018, 148) argues that nonrational animals also have a good of their own: as conscious, feeling creatures, their lives can go better or worse for them, depending on their nature and capacities. They pursue ends (albeit in instinctual or less

[15] This paper does not allow the space to delve into the intriguing debate on the freedom of will.

[16] This is much more paternalistic compared to a person's rights, due to the absence of preferences and free choice.

reflective ways) such as finding food, avoiding pain, caring for offspring – in essence, they value their own lives through their natural impulses. If we take a step back, from a moral perspective, we can see that each animal "matters to itself" just as we matter to ourselves (Korsgaard 2018, 276). Humans possess the additional faculty of reflective empathy and reason, which allows us to grasp this fact. Korsgaard writes: "What is special about us is the empathy that enables us to grasp that other creatures are important to themselves in just the way that we are important to ourselves, and the reason that enables us to draw the conclusion that follows: that every animal must be regarded as an end in herself, whose fate matters, and matters absolutely, if anything matters at all" (Korsgaard 2018, 133). In her reinterpretation of the Kantian approach, animals become ends in themselves, not in the same way as rational agents who can moralize, but in the sense of having intrinsic worth that our own moral law must respect. Korsgaard essentially bridges Kant and Regan; she agrees that using animals merely as means – as in factory farming or vivisection – is inconsistent with recognizing their value as ends. She even suggests that Kant's framework, shorn of Kant's specific assumptions, compels the conclusion that we have direct duties to any creature with a subjective good (Korsgaard 2015).

In its most developed form, such a view might entail a deontological duty not only to refrain from killing animals or causing them suffering, but also to tend to their needs to the greatest extent. However, how would these moral obligations be applied in practice, i.e., how are they manifested? Since deontological obligations do not refer in their evaluation to the consequences of an action, it appears evident that all practices against the interests of animals should be forbidden in general. Nevertheless, in accordance with the assumption that resources are scarce and limited, i.e., in insufficient quantities to satisfy all needs and wants, there is always a need for balancing. Going back to intuition, it is commonly asserted that human animals (with self-awareness, abstract thought, and planning for the future) have a higher value of some sort, compared to nonhuman species. As was pointed out, Singer ([1975] 2015, 54) asserts that "If we had to choose to save the life of a normal human being or an intellectually disabled human being, we would probably choose to save the life of a normal human being; [...] The same is true when we consider other species." And this intuition seems hard to refute. To take the most radical and straightforward case – few people would deny the rightness of choosing to save the life of millions over one life.

Now, one might think that any type of balancing between moral values, as illustrated above, leads to consequentialist reasoning. For instance, balancing between the value of human health (and potentially human life) and the

value of animal life, via conducting experiments on nonhuman animals, might be considered to be on par with the utilitarian analysis of the overall result stemming from an action that is assessed in light of pain/pleasure or happiness/misery criteria. Nonetheless, following William D. Ross (1930), it is possible to reject this sort of equalization between balancing and consequentialism since a pluralistic deontological account of moral values can encompass balancing. Ross (1930, 22, 24) rejects the utilitarian depersonalized character of moral duties, where it does not matter "who is to have the good", and advocates for the existence of intrinsically good (and self-evident) properties (such as virtue, knowledge, and pleasure) that form a prima facie moral duty to produce them, rather than not to do so. Still, because these moral duties are prima facie, they can be justifiably overridden in certain circumstances, without forfeiting their deontological basis. Few authors agree with Kant's position that, for example, lying is an absolute moral prohibition, i.e., it cannot be overridden even when conflicting with the value of life. No one disputes the (prima facie) duty to tell the truth or uphold a promise even when deciding to lie or go back on one's word, but we nevertheless do so when conflicting higher values require that of us (Ross 1930, 28).

Having said that, a refined deontological approach favoring nonhuman animals would probably result in the abandonment of all existing practices that go against basic animal interests, with a stronger emphasis on creating policies that enhance their status and quality of life, while allowing certain departures or deviations in exceptional, crisis-like situations. As a brief illustration of the possible consequences of this view, we could impose the moral duty to become vegetarians and make our governments invest as much money as possible (*pro tanto* – in accordance with the possibilities in the given circumstances) into taking care of as many sentient animals as possible, where animal experimentation (with the least possible pain infliction) would be justified only if there are no human volunteers available and the research is highly likely to result in saving human life. Using nonhuman animals for entertainment, cosmetics or fashion would not even be considered. Lastly, when it comes to balancing between rights, a distinction could be made between violation and infringement, where the former is the unjustified action against a right and the latter is the legitimate overriding of a right (Beauchamp 2011, 220).[17]

[17] A simple example of a violation is the apparent imbalance of values in sport hunting, where human enjoyment is juxtaposed with animal life. Respectively, management hunting in cases of overpopulation might be an example of an

Korsgaard's work is a powerful example of a contemporary deontological development affirming duties toward nonhuman animals. Notably, it grounds these duties partly in human moral capacities: only humans can reflect on the moral law and act from it, so humans bear the responsibility to act on behalf of animals who cannot argue or stand up for themselves in the "kingdom of ends". Martha Nussbaum (2023) praises Korsgaard for discarding the worst historical ideas (the obsession with strict human rationality) and recognizing animals as fellow creatures with ends. However, she criticizes Korsgaard for ultimately maintaining a sharp human/animal distinction when it comes to capacities like ethical deliberation. Nevertheless, Korsgaard squarely rejects the notion that an animal's inability to care for itself or to participate in contracts negates our obligations toward it. On the contrary, her Kantian stance implies that the very fact that animals cannot obligate us through reciprocal agreement is morally irrelevant – and even that it puts the onus on us, as the only moral agents, to champion their claims (Nussbaum 2023, 33).

In sum, deontological ethics has undergone a significant evolution in recent decades. Historically, it provided a rationale for human superiority and lessened duties toward animals. It also had to confront the ambiguity of application amid scarce resources, forcing a hierarchical balancing that privileges self-aware beings like humans over others, which can diminish the intuitive imperative for responsive care. Today, leading deontologists argue for elevated duties toward nonhuman animals grounded in their inherent worth and our responsibility to protect them. The notion that we have special obligations toward those who cannot care for or defend themselves is present in rights-based ethical positions. Rights are, in a sense, society's promise to safeguard the individual, and the more an individual cannot safeguard their own interests, the more crucial it is that others respect their rights. Hence, while newer deontological ethics compellingly invokes empathy to recognize animals as ends in themselves, whose fates absolutely matter, it often falls short of fully capturing our moral intuitions about the special relational duties we owe to those who cannot care for themselves, as it struggles to delineate the scope of positive obligations beyond mere noninterference or protection from harm. Thus, the challenge for rights-based and deontological theories is to specify what duties of care we have.[18] This challenge highlights how rights-based theories risk reducing

infringement because it serves a compelling public interest, such as maintaining ecological balance, preventing habitat destruction, or averting widespread starvation among the animal population.

[18] Arguably, taking into account recent reinterpretations of Kant in the domain of nonhuman animal ethics, it could be argued that the duties that we have toward other animals are specified within the category of imperfect duties, such as the duty

moral obligations to abstract rules or prohibitions, potentially overlooking the contextual, empathetic bonds. Ultimately, as we shall argue, care ethics better aligns with these intuitions by centering on relational responsiveness and the cultivation of dependence-based connections.

4. CARE ETHICS: DEPENDING ON OTHERS

The basic moral intuition underlying our relationship with nonhuman animals is the same one behind our sense of duty toward humans who are less able to take care of their own wellbeing. Namely, morally speaking, the less a valued being can take care of itself, the more there is a moral sense that someone should take care of that being. Theories arguing for animal rights that have been considered so far capture this basic intuition to varying degrees. Utilitarianism contributes by recognizing animals' suffering as morally significant and demanding that suffering be counted alike, whether of a human or a mouse. Yet utilitarianism's very impartiality and aggregative logic can conflict with the intuition that we owe extra care and moral protection to the most vulnerable. It does not inherently prioritize caring for those who cannot care for themselves, beyond the calculation that they may have more to gain from assistance. The view developed by contemporary deontology resonates with the intuitive idea that the strong have a special duty to protect the weak. Under the Korsgaard-esque view, a rational being has no license to exploit a nonrational one; rather, rational beings have the unique responsibility to recognize and respect the value of the lives of those who cannot speak for themselves. However, none of the discussed theories directly address the central moral intuition that we share, for the most part, regarding our relations with beings who are less capable of taking care of their own interests.

One framework that explicitly centers relations of dependence and vulnerability is the ethics of care (Gilligan 1993, xix). Originating from feminist positions, care ethics argues that traditional moral theories neglect the moral significance of our emotional attachments and the responsibilities that arise from interpersonal relationships. Care ethicists maintain that ethical reasoning should not be modeled on an impartial bureaucracy of duty or utility, but on the model of the caregiver attending those who rely on them. In care ethics, morality begins with the recognition of vulnerability

of love, which entail the requirement to adopt and promote others' happiness (Denis 2020, 410). We are grateful to the reviewer for pointing out these interpretations.

and the motivation to respond to it with care.[19] According to Nel Noddings, care ethics builds upon the attitude of natural caring and develops this attitude into "our best picture of ourselves caring and being cared for" (Noddings 1984, 80). The caring impulse arises naturally (absent pathology) and gives rise to a requirement of commitment in the form of acting or thinking (Noddings 1984, 82). By itself, the natural sentiment of caring leads to the evaluation of the caring relation as good, so the source of the ethical obligation in the strict sense is the value that one places, upon reflection, on the relation of caring and being cared for (Noddings 1984, 83–84). Similarly, and more recently, Daniel Engster argues for the following principle of care ethics, which emphasizes reciprocity, relationship, and dependence:

> Since all human beings depend upon the care of others for our survival and basic functioning and at least implicitly claim that capable individuals should care for individuals in need when they can do so, we must logically recognize as morally valid the claims that others make upon us for care when they need it, and should endeavor to provide care to them when we are capable of doing so without significant danger to ourselves, seriously compromising our long-term well-being or undermining our ability to care for other individuals who depend upon us (Engster 2006, 525).

The early authors in care ethics either disregarded (Gilligan 1993) or relativized the applicability of care ethics in relation to nonhuman animals (Noddings 1984). Most authors in both utilitarianism and deontology make a point of excluding emotive elements from their ethical considerations, both in the process of ethical inquiry and in the grounding of their ethical positions (Kelch 1999, 26). Alternatively, care ethics provides a more stable foundation for moral obligations toward animals, based on love and compassion, and is contextual and nuanced (Donovan, Adams 2007).

In our understanding of care ethics, a special relationship with someone creates a greater responsibility toward that entity. We naturally feel more obligated to care for our own child than for a stranger's child, not because our child has more moral rights or greater utility, but because we stand in a relationship of dependence with them. This is not seen as a bias to overcome, but as a moral reality: real-life responsibilities are often particular

[19] Granted, care is notoriously difficult to define even within the tradition of care ethics. However, most theorists agree that it at least encompasses helping others to meet their basic needs, develop their basic capabilities, and avoid unwanted suffering and pain (Engster 2006, 522).

and relationship-bound (Gilligan 1993, 24). Vulnerability and dependence are central because the basis for our ethical concerns is our emotional responses to others with whom we have personal relationships, which is confirmed by empirical studies that show how, for instance, dog owners have "very high levels of animal-directed empathy and equally high levels of positive attitudes toward pets" (Ellingsen *et al.* 2010). Our moral emotions – empathy, compassion, care – attune us to the needs of those who cannot meet their own needs. Care theorists insist that these emotions are a source of moral feeling, guiding us to what truly matters – the wellbeing of those we love and those in need.

Regarding nonhuman animals, care ethics emphasizes that many animals exist in a state of heightened dependence on human caregivers. Wild animals are often capable of fending for themselves, but domestic animals are largely dependent on humans (Engster 2006, 528). They rely on humans for food, shelter, and relations with other animals. Care ethicists argue that this gives rise to an obligation to actively care for the wellbeing of animals and the responsibility of avoiding the exploitation of their helplessness. In this way, many nonhuman animals are vulnerable creatures in need of care and protection, much like human children. Furthermore, the ethics of care and the fact that the inequality of powers and capabilities between human and nonhuman animals renders domestic animals one-sidedly at our mercy dictate that this intensifies our obligation not to betray their trust and dependence.

The second important point in care ethics is the value attributed to context and relationship. Moral action preserves, nurtures and restores healthy relationships. The fact that one adopted a dog, and that they developed a bond with it, which usually means developing awareness of its needs and specificities, makes the relationship between the caregiver and the pet morally significant. Betraying or neglecting the pet is a moral failing that extends beyond the idea that it is wrong to harm animals. In this sense, it is care ethics that implies that our moral motivation starts with caring for individuals and can extend outward.

Care ethics emphasizes our close relationships and downplays our sensibilities outside of this restrictive circle. Thereby, it becomes limited in scope and even excludes wild animals from the circle of care.[20] These positions

[20] Indeed, care ethicists tended to emphasize the moral significance of only those relations to animals that are proximate and reciprocal (Noddings 1984, 148), whereas some have developed elaborate dialogical views on care ethics, only to depart from them to make dubious analogies between animal and human communication (Donovan 2006, 317).

emphasize the limitations of care ethics rather than developing it in line with our intuitions about our own emotions of care. Namely, supposing we stick to the limited scope given to care in classic writing, we would be bound to admit that the destruction of wildlife habitats, wild-animal keeping practices, as well as the ethical status of ecosystems, would fall entirely outside of the scope of our duty of care. In the following part of the paper, we will argue that this position differs from our intuition regarding our duties toward other beings. While it is true that the closeness of a relationship can be a basis for the sense of duty to care, this is not necessarily the case. Feeling empathy and compassion for a lamb stuck in a barbed wire or an abandoned cat in a shelter is a general appropriate moral response, which should spur action. Psychologically, we are wired (at least in cases of healthy development) to respond protectively to signs of dependence (a crying baby, a whimpering injured animal). In other words, the specific care relation that we have with close kin, friends, and domestic animals intuitively gives way to a generic sense of care for the worse off, the victimized, the defenseless. In fact, some care ethicists, such as James Gabarino, rightly argue for a generic approach to care aimed at protecting the vulnerable (Donovan, Adams 2007, 253).

Our suggestion is to avoid the notion of vulnerability, because the natural food chain seems to put most animals in states of constant vulnerability – making our duty of care potentially too broad. Instead, the concept of dependence seems more appropriate. Being dependent on someone means relying on their help and support to maintain an adequate quality of life. In this sense, dependence is not necessarily confined to relationships of emotional closeness, but it also does not imply crude deontological commitments to care for all animals in all contexts. In other words, our core idea is to offer a moderate and contextualized form of a duty of care.

5. FORMULATING THE ARGUMENT

We have identified some of the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional and recent approaches to nonhuman animal ethics within normative ethical theories, in relation to the central intuition of the paper's authors. Recent ethical developments show an apparent inclination to include animals in our moral community. Utilitarianism has made significant strides by insisting that animal suffering is on par with human suffering and by condemning cruel practices based on their impact on animal welfare. Deontology has reformulated rights and duties to recognize animals as beings of inherent worth and to address imperfect duties toward nonhuman animals. To set standards for our relations toward animals, care ethics has emphasized

empathy and kindness, context, and relationships. The unifying thread is that our duties toward nonhuman animals are more robust than described in earlier ethical writing.

However, we can clearly see that the theorization of our relations to nonhuman animals is an afterthought in each of these approaches. The theorist approaches the problem of grounding their sense of obligation to feed their dog or not to kill a bird in the wild, to a greater or lesser degree, on their relations to other human beings. Advocates of animal welfare hold that sentience is the fundamental criterion of moral consideration. Advocates of animal rights mostly hold that subjecthood is the ultimate criterion of moral consideration, whereas advocates of environmental ethics hold that pertinence to a natural environment is the ultimate criterion for moral consideration of entities (Anderson 2005, 278–79).

It is easy to dismiss most of these views as speciesism, as is often done. However, a more fruitful approach entails the identification of the reasons for this cognitive distortion.

(1) The first reason for this stance is that theorists often tend to model our moral relations based on strong ideas of legal relations. As adequately captured by Kantian deontology, legal relations entail a correlation between rights and obligations. Moral relations, on the other hand, eschew this reciprocity altogether and entail only obligations or duties. In other words, in legal contexts, it is often considered relevant whether a being is capable of bearing duties, since legal rights are usually correlated with the capacity to assume obligations. However, our moral duties are entirely independent of other's ability to have moral rights. It is entirely plausible for one to have the moral duty to take care of, for instance, a garden that was passed down to them by their late parents, without any imaginable correlative right. Likewise, a moral duty to our pets, another's pet, or wounded animal in the wild may hold regardless of the animal's possession of rights, because the duty arises from our own moral commitments.

(2) The second reason is the conflation of the rationality of inquiry with the rationality of the topic in question. To base their ethical considerations on rational arguments, ethicists often exclude the emotive character inherent to the subject of inquiry. Still, to rationally discuss our moral relations toward nonhuman animals, it is necessary – even essential – to include considerations of our emotional reactions to other entities. If we disregard these emotions, as is often done, we remove a large part of our ethical life from rational discussion.

(3) Furthermore, the development of these ethical positions abounds with hypotheticals, but dispenses with our inner reflexive life and moral imagination. When dependence and care are discussed, it is often the case that only proximate relationships are considered, thereby eliminating the very human possibility of rationally and emotionally empathizing – and even establishing relationships – with entities that are not in our vicinity, one-sidedly and without reciprocity. Needless to say, care of imagined entities still requires rational grounding and moral justification in order to become part of a critical rational account of morality. However, dismissing these sensibilities to purify a theory of all irrational elements yields poor theories with modest explanatory potential, omitting from consideration an entire area of human sensibilities and interests that are often crucial for motivating moral action.

(4) Finally, in most, if not all, moral theories our moral sensibilities are modeled starting from moral relations with humans. However, our intuitions do not support the special position of humans in the web of our moral relations. In fact, the closeness of our relationships with nonhuman animals demonstrates that our sense of duty to care for them is not derived from a similar sense of duty toward humans. It arises as a result of our special relation toward a being in a special relation with us, and the need to make analogies with humans is contingent at best. Namely, one's sentiments toward one's pet dog are not derived from one's sentiments toward one's child, other children, or humans at large. They are promoted and maintained within the authentic emotional relationship between a potential caregiver and a nonhuman animal, which has potentially strong moral consequences.

Arguably, the widened approach to care ethics, supplemented by insights from deontology and utilitarianism, best supports our intuitions about stronger moral duties toward those who depend on others. This alternative argument can be developed in the following steps:

1. *Knowledge and experience:* Our expanding knowledge of nonhuman animals (their sentience, agency, intelligence, and capacity for wellbeing) shapes our understanding of them as conscious "fellow creatures" with subjective experiences. This understanding is grounded both by scientific advances in natural sciences and by our lived relationships with animals. Through direct encounters and forms of care that naturally emerge from them, we come to recognize animals as beings who can be dependent and responsive to care.

2. *Sentiments of care:* The sentiments of care result in moral action toward the animals that are the closest to us. This particular care that we feel we owe to our pets, wounded and defenseless animals on the street, as well as animals seeking shelter, precisely mirrors our relation to humans in similar conditions, who are equally proximate to us. Our sentiments of care toward those who are worse off most often naturally expand to all nonhuman animals that we come in contact with and are in a state of powerlessness.

3. *Critical rational reflection:* The mere sentiment does not give rise to an obligation, but it strongly supports the development of one. Rational reflection on situations of failing to act when we are confronted with a being in need of care points to both internal and external moral sanction – if we fail to provide aid, we feel that we have acted wrongly toward that being, in a morally significant sense. Conversely, rational reflection strongly points to the conclusion that moral action resulting from care for other beings is a moral good that gives rise to moral obligations.

4. *Moral imagination:* The confines of our duty are most often the confines of the beings with whom we have close relationships. In fact, we are more emotionally attached to beings in our proximity: our care for them is stronger, and our rational reflection on these emotions leads us to perform moral actions more often. However, moral imagination confronts us with the same or similar sentiments and correlative duties whenever we engage with beings beyond our immediate proximity. This duty is, however, limited by the actual possibility of aiding those in need.

> *(C) Warranted duty*: Based on common knowledge, closeness, care, and moral imagination, we infer a duty to care of nonhuman animals, to be guardians, caretakers, and to provide aid to the degree in which nonhuman animals are not able to care for themselves. The duty is analogous to the duties we owe to human counterparts and are morally actionable to the degree to which we can actually undertake the moral action.

The naturalistic basis for these perspectives is the fact that all sentient beings have some level of consciousness and pursue ends, therefore valuing their own lives through their natural tendencies. Having a nervous system, pain/pleasure responses, and sensory capabilities is sufficient for imputing conscious and deliberate action on animals, which consequently leads to the possession of interests. To reiterate, conscious mental states can be attributed to nonhuman animals in part because of obvious behavioral and neurological similarities with humans (Chan, Harris 2011, 314). In other

words, sentient animals with a mental life act intentionally, have desires, and basic beliefs. It has already been noted that stronger belief in the sentience of nonhuman animals is associated with less speciesist attitudes (Hopwood *et al.* 2025). This suggests that we can form two-way bonds with many animal species, as our experience clearly shows.

Empirical research indicates that human empathy toward animals depends on our familiarity and the frequency of interaction with them, which means that pet owners display higher empathy (Gómez-Leal *et al.* 2011; McConnell *et al.* 2011). Levels of empathy, attachment, and anthropomorphism are all relevant for caring about animals: the higher the levels, the stronger the concern for their wellbeing (Prato-Previde, Ricci, Colombo 2022). Further, initial protective instincts toward vulnerable humans, such as children or the elderly, naturally extend to nonhuman animals in states of heightened direct reliance, such as domestic pets who are utterly dependent on humans for sustenance and shelter. To reiterate – our initial moral intuition that we have a heightened sense of duty to care for beings who are unable to care for themselves revolves around the central case of a psychologically stable and emotionally responsive agent. Deficits of compassion should be viewed not as refutations of care ethics but as psychological distortions.

Hence, knowledge and experience reveal many nonhuman animals as conscious beings endowed with basic feelings, which care ethics amplifies by insisting that moral insight begins with our emotional engagements rather than detached observation. The "natural caring impulse" arises spontaneously when we encounter dependence and vulnerability, transforming mere factual awareness into a moral attunement evoking compassion. This is a type of relational knowledge, where a growing understanding of animals' inner lives fosters human empathy, replacing the traditional theories' neglect of emotions in favor of a contextual ethic that values the "flesh-and-blood" realities of dependence. Critical rational reflection endorses relations of caring and being cared for as a moral good, meaning that reason and emotion ought to be integrated in such a way as to bring about a normative assertion. In other words, care ethics treats the caring relation as intrinsically valuable, transforming natural sentiments into ethical obligations through thoughtful commitment – it compels us to recognize many nonhuman animals as dependent creatures deserving protection, consequently turning the alleviation of their helplessness into a moral duty.

However, as has been pointed out, the criterion of dependence does not necessarily confine us to the most apparent cases of moral obligation toward the nonhuman animals we are in contact with, although they are undoubtedly our primary practical concern. Rather, it should allow for a

more inclusive concordance to aloof dependencies.[21] Potential compassion for the sentient animals that we might come into contact with guides us to nurture bonds that preserve wellbeing, even one-sidedly, and intensify obligations where power imbalances leave animals at our mercy. This is an imposition stemming from moral imagination, which confronts us with the same or similar sentiments and correlative duties, even regarding beings outside of our emotional closeness. The background of this imagination is determined by the factual conditions of the world we live in, where survival and flourishing are inconceivably more difficult to achieve without caring for one another.

Finite resources foster the evolutionary imperative for symbiosis and mutualism, while our shared biological structures and challenges enable mutual understanding and empathy to expand to a wide(r) circle. Of course, although this sort of interdependence takes us from factual care to a duty to provide it for others, it should not be interpreted as unconditional. One must be contextually or realistically capable of providing care for those in need. Having in mind the moderateness of our theoretical model of care, duties should extend beyond obvious cases (such as domestic pets) but remain within the realistic boundaries of human capabilities. Crude deontological duties encompassing the whole animal world cannot fit this description. In other words, moral imagination has its factual limits.

When applied to practical action and discussions on the treatment of nonhuman animals, structural relations of dependence between domestic animals and humans are the most common case within the meat industry, for example. In other words, the survival and conditions of life of animals bred for meat are fully reliant on human care. Having a duty of care entails compassion for one's overall wellbeing, which cannot be compatible with taking the life of those who have an interest in living. The primary addressees of such moral duties are those persons who are in direct contact with the animals, whereas all others who can reasonably contribute to the reduction of such practices are secondary addressees. The same conclusions seem to follow in other cases of human exploitation of nonhuman animals, particularly given that, in most cases, it is humans who initiate contact with the animals in their habitats.

Additionally, more detached issues, such as environmental care, do not create a universal or indiscriminate duty to all beings, but rather reflect an indirect responsibility. Duties for nonanimal entities, environments, ecosystems, or even mere objects and places can be understood as a

[21] Especially in light of humanity's unique position of power.

reflexive extension of our duties toward dependent beings, because they constitute the structural conditions on which the survival and quality of life of many nonhuman animals depend. These ecosystems and habitats do not have emotional needs, but their preservation requires action, even more so when their state of endangerment is caused by destructive human action. Humans are often in a position to affect these conditions, for example by reducing pollution or managing resources responsibly. Nonetheless, such claims do not necessarily undermine the contextual nature of care duties, because each particular situation sets the limits of our action, and balancing is always potentially required.

Ultimately, all previous insights imply a duty to care for nonhuman animals as guardians and caretakers. Drawing from the outlined emotional and contextual foundations, duty emerges not as an afterthought but as a central claim, obligating us to avoid betraying animals' trust related to their dependence.

6. CONCLUSION

The development of the field of animal ethics shows us that, as a consequence of anthropocentric reasoning, animals can no longer be placed on the periphery of moral theory. If we take seriously the fact that our duties toward animals are neither derivative of human relations nor contingent on their human-like cognitive capacities, then our moral landscape expands to include them as genuine recipients of duties. The mistake of much of traditional theorizing has been to exclude moral emotions, thereby overlooking the very forces that most reliably propel us toward compassionate action. Our affective responses to dependence, such as compassion and concern, can best develop into a duty of care when they are supported by reason and moral imagination.

To acknowledge many nonhuman animals as conscious and dependent beings is to recognize that our moral life cannot be confined within the human community. Animals are not merely "like" children, the elderly, or other dependents; they are themselves special and often reliant beings to whom we are bound as guardians and caretakers. In this sense, the true advance in animal ethics is not a mere extension of rights or a calculation of suffering, but the affirmation of our shared world of interdependence. A humane ethical approach must therefore be rooted in both reason and feeling, not only condemning cruelty but cultivating the bonds of trust and care into which animals already invite us.

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