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Keywords: animal rights, animal sacrifice, sacrifice, religious sacrifice, patriarchy,

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Key words: Sentience, Discipline, Meatpacking, Meat, Animals, Slaughter, Grandin, Humane

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Keywords: Equal Rights, Terrorism, Cultural Comparisons, Economy, Politics

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Pampered or Enslaved? The Moral Dilemmas of Pets

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Abstract

This essay discusses whether the practice of keeping pets, defined as a class of animals existing for human purposes, is morally acceptable. Clouding the issue is the claim that humans have always had pets. Selected historical examples show that this is not the case. Instead, the doctrine of human supremacy has meant that close relationships with animals have often been ideologically impossible. Today, however, increasing knowledge about animals' intellectual and emotional capacities blurs the once-distinct boundary between humans and other animals. Given this knowledge, treatment of animals must also be reassessed. In particular, the essay argues that animals have the basic right not to be treated as the property of others. Although a world without pets is unpleasant to consider, the perpetuation of our pleasure is not sufficient reason to enslave other animals.

In a morally perfect world, would we have pets? After all, pets are essentially a class of beings who exist for our pleasure and companionship. Even if we choose to call them "companion animals" rather than pets, the law defines them as our property. In recent years, we have learned that other animals have emotions (Goodall, 1990; Bekoff, 2000), cognitive capacities (Griffin, 1976, 1992; Pepperberg, 1991) and culture (Alger and Alger, 1997, 1999, 2003) and may even possess some of the capacities that, in people, constitute personhood (Sanders, 1999, Irvine, in press a). Given all this, does it make moral sense to keep them as pets?

To be clear from the outset, I am in no position to be sanctimonious. Currently, the cat population of my household stands at five and the dogs number two. For most of my life, I have enjoyed the company of dogs and cats. Indeed, I can scarcely imagine living without them. However, all the animal members of my family were rescued; each one of them lives with my husband and me because he or she was once unwanted for one reason or another. Knowledge of this often pushes me to think beyond the considerable pleasures of my relationships with animals. In addition, through five years

of volunteer work at an animal shelter, I have seen an unending stream of dogs and cats who have simply become inconveniences. At the same time, through my research on human/animal relationships, I have thought seriously about animals' mental and emotional capacities and come to question the line that supposedly exists between us and other animals. Because of this combination of experiences, I have often questioned the moral implications of keeping sentient beings as pets, even as I enjoy the pleasures of their company.

One of the obstacles to thinking clearly about this issue is that it is difficult to envision the human world without pets. In this essay, I attempt to portray such a world. More specifically, I will use two illustrative cases, one from the Middle Ages and another from the late nineteenth century, to show that the keeping of pets is historically contingent. Moreover, these cases suggest that petkeeping has been circumscribed by social class. My point is a sociological one. I aim to show that relationships between humans and animals have depended on how a given society defines animals and what it means to associate with them. In the end, I will argue the same must apply today: what we currently know about animals demands wrestling with the moral implications of keeping them as pets.

Medieval Attitudes: Enforcing Anthropocentrism

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Church denounced petkeeping as a form of heresy. Close companionship with animals meant bringing animals dangerously close to the ontological boundary between humans and animals, which threatened the foundations of Christian belief. Interestingly, however, certain groups of people could defy theological dogma and enjoy companionship with animals (see Menache, 2000). Those who could do so needed the resources to support animals who had no economic function and the social status to protect them from the consequences of their actions. Only the ecclesiastical elite and the nobility had these qualifications. Thus, monks and nuns kept animals of all kinds as companions. Images of dogs and other animals appear frequently in illuminated manuscripts. Some monasteries even produced their own dog breeds (see Menache, 2000). The devotion with which religious authorities pursued the issue

of animals in holy orders indicates the difficulty of enforcing rules about human supremacy among their own ranks.

The nobility also avoided the stigma of association with animals, particularly dogs. As hunting became a sport rather than a necessity for survival (at least among elites), it legitimized the dog's presence among humans (see Menache, 2000). Dogs were associated with successful hunting, and successful hunting was a compulsory status symbol of the elite. Illuminated manuscripts dating from this era depict how, "after the dog had become a condition sine-qua-non for this success, it was dissociated from other animals and invested with a unique place in human society" (Menache, 2000:56). Dogs were effectively promoted out of the animal kingdom and into a place in the nobility purely because of their ability to improve the chances of a successful hunt. After hunting dogs achieved this privileged status, it dispersed to those who did not hunt. Dogs of all breeds quickly became ubiquitous in the upper ranks of society. Lap dogs, obviously useless for hunting, gained popularity until "no well-to-do woman was complete" without one (Thomas, 1983:108).

The situation was different for those without money or rank. For the poor, hunting remained a necessity, although new laws increasingly determined when, where, and how it could take place (see Cartmill, 1997; Menache, 2000). As the lower classes were gradually prohibited from hunting legally, laws also prohibited them from having particular kinds of dogs, especially the breeds used for hunting (see Derr, 1997; Menache, 2000). In twelfth-century England, for instance, laws prohibited anyone except the nobility from owning mastiffs, spaniels, or greyhounds. The loophole in these laws was shockingly inhumane. Non-elites could keep mastiff-type dogs for protection only if the dogs were made lame by chopping off the middle toes of the front paws (see Derr, 1997). After this, the dogs could not chase the forest owner's game. To be sure, many people simply could not afford to keep animals who were not functional, but even those who could do so faced risks. Accusations of witchcraft were often made solely because a person, especially a woman, "possessed and displayed affection for one or more animal companions" (Serpell, 1986:57). Thus, animals were impli-

cated in the social construction of gender as well as class. This was especially the case for cats, who had retained an association with fertility and female sexuality attributed to them by the ancient Egyptians. The combination made cats doubly threatening to the Church. The cats were accused of being “familiaris” who performed evil deeds in exchange for food and shelter. They were killed along with their human companions.

In sum, medieval and early modern attitudes toward animals reflect a powerful Church whose doctrine was threatened by the kind of relationship implicit in petkeeping. Christianity could not officially tolerate close contact between humans, created in God’s image, and animals, created to serve humans. The pervasiveness of the doctrine of anthropocentrism and the sanctions for violating it leave little reason to think that people felt affection for animals in the sense that we understand it today. To be sure, the elite clearly appreciated their dogs, but the distance between the human and animal kingdoms most likely precluded any efforts to understand what dogs thought or felt, or even to imagine that they could think or feel at all. For the most part, cats were considered too “other” and thus too dangerous.

Modern Attitudes: Pets and Social Class

During the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous factors combined to make petkeeping possible for people of all classes. Science and technology had helped make animals less threatening and more interesting. As people relied less on the labor of animals, they could begin to engage in new kinds of relationships with them. Rates of petkeeping increased dramatically in Europe and the United States. Among the evidence suggesting this is the appearance of the first pet stores. In Kathleen Kete’s (1994) study of pets in Paris, she found that until about 1880, people who wanted dogs either bought them at the Sunday horse market or from private breeders. By 1910, however, the newspapers were peppered with advertisements for shops that sold purebred puppies and the necessary accouterments. The first commercially prepared dog food appeared around the same time. A British company blended cereal, vegetables, and a small amount of beef into a biscuit for dogs. The pellet or “dog chow” form known today appeared much later. In the United States, Purina® first began selling commercial dog food

in 1920. Kitty litter, a necessity for life with pet cats, did not appear until after World War II (see Maggitti, 1996). Before cat litter, people used sand or ashes in their cats' boxes.

The establishment of the first humane animal shelters is another artifact of the late nineteenth-century. Their appearance represents acceptance of the belief that dogs and cats belonged in homes, with families, and that stray animals had become a social problem, which illuminates the ideological underpinnings of urban life (Irvine, in press b). Shelters also increased petkeeping among people who were not of the upper classes (see Coleman, 1924). People who could not afford the pet stores and breeders or who preferred to rescue a dog or cat turned to shelters. Nevertheless, animals conveyed vastly different meanings depending on the status of the owner. Purebred dogs were *de rigueur* among the middle and upper classes. The breeding of dogs and cats itself became popular, and most of the breeds known today date from the Victorian era.

By all appearances, at the turn of the century, people of all classes could enjoy companionship with dogs and cats. To some degree, they did. However, the lower classes still faced economic, social, and ideological obstacles to doing so. For example, historian Harriet Ritvo (1987) argues that the pets of the poor were often scapegoats for class tensions. The dogs of the English poor were accused of being more vulnerable to rabies than "well-bred dogs" (1987:179). To combat rabies and control the numbers of stray dogs, licensing became standard practice in many American and European cities. The regulations usually applied to dogs over six months of age (see Thomas, 1983; Ritvo, 1987; Kete, 1994). To avoid the fees, many people let their dogs run loose once they passed the endearing puppy stage. As a result, packs of dogs ran free in most towns and cities, creating numerous problems. Although the guilty parties came from all classes, the pets of the lower classes were most often blamed. Ritvo offers accounts from London newspapers that accuse working-class strays of behaving as badly as the people who had released them. Another obstacle faced by people of lower incomes was the prohibition of pets in rental apartments. Public housing forbade tenants from keeping dogs, implying that the poor could not responsibly care

for them (see Jones, 1971:186). It seems that although “the family dog became a cliché of modern life” in the nineteenth century (Kete, 1994:1), it was most often middle-class families that could enjoy the cliché.

Discussion

The relationship we know as petkeeping is not simply the result of a natural affinity between humans and animals. It is a socially constructed practice. The degree to which people could engage in the practice has depended on how a given society defined the boundary between humans and animals. The boundary not only manifests the power we humans have over other species, but also the power that one class (or gender) has over another. Animals have long been the “other” used to make particular groups guilty by association. Those without power were susceptible to the stigma of associating with animals. Today, the human/animal boundary is contested. What we know about the cognitive and emotional capacities of animals makes it harder to justify drawing a distinct line between “them” and “us.” In the industrialized world, we do not depend on the labor of animals in everyday life, so we can redefine (some) animals as companions and keep them as pets. However, this raises the question of whether, given what we know about animals, we should morally do so.

There are two possible positions on the question of the morality of petkeeping. Both positions acknowledge that animals are self-aware, which, at the most basic level, means that they can feel pain. Both positions also agree that, given their self-awareness, animals have an interest in not suffering. One position argues that because animals cannot plan their lives, as humans can, they lack the capacity to care whether they live or die. While alive, animals have an interest in avoiding suffering. Their physical needs should be met. However, during that life, it does not matter to them whether they are someone’s property. This is the “animal welfarist” position. Perhaps its most famous expression appeared in the words of Jeremy Bentham ([1781] 1988), who emphasized animals’ capacity to suffer, *regardless* of their inability to think or speak.

A full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month,

old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?

Bentham's view pointed out that we have an obligation *not* to cause unnecessary suffering. Bentham held that the morally correct action was always that which maximized pleasure for those involved. His argument contended that, because suffering is undesirable, the moral choice is not to inflict it on creatures who have the capacity to suffer. The contemporary version of his utilitarian argument comes from philosopher Peter Singer. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer agrees that animals have an interest in not suffering. However, because they lack the kind of self-awareness possessed by humans, their interests are secondary to ours. Therefore, we may use animals for our purposes, including keeping them as property, so long as we treat them humanely. When we kill them, we must minimize the suffering involved.

On the face of it, the welfarist view seems to accommodate petkeeping nicely. After all, most pets are so pampered that the idea of suffering seems absurd. However, animals can suffer in many different ways, and the obligation not to cause suffering must go beyond simply giving a dog or a cat a home. The welfarist would abandon inhumane training practices, such as choke or shock collars for dogs. The welfarist should also reconsider the question of purebred dogs and cats, because breeding can perpetuate disease through "aesthetically-based dysfunctional 'breed standards'" (Rollin and Rollin 2001). In addition, anyone concerned with the welfare of dogs and cats must reject the practices of docking the tails and ears of dogs and removing the claws of cats. Because an animal's welfare depends on many things, it is not enough to avoid inflicting direct physical pain. Suffering can also come from fear and loneliness. Every animal left alone in a garage or tied in the yard suffers. Therefore, the welfarist agenda must include educating people about responsible guardianship of animals. The effort will have to begin with children, who must learn from sources more reliable than "101 Dalmatians." In short, the welfarist view must influence how the human members of our moral community treat other animals.

The second position goes further than this. It agrees that animals have the ability to feel pain and, presumably, pleasure. However, it contends that they can feel *for some reason* beyond just having the sensations as ends in themselves. One reason for having the capacity to feel pain and pleasure could be to pursue the former and avoid the latter, and to continue being able to do so. In this case, the sentient creature also has an interest in life, because staying alive makes additional feelings possible. This is the animal rights view. In emphasizing animals' interest in life, it contends that animals have the basic right not to be treated as things, particularly as the property of others.

In *The Case for Animal Rights*, philosopher Tom Regan rejects the utilitarian view because it claims that some interests are at least potentially more relevant than others are. For example, utilitarianism maintains that human interests in using animals as food or property can outweigh animals' interests simply because former interests are held by humans. The view does not include the principle of *equal inherent value*. This principle maintains that the individuals under consideration have unconditional and equal value, *independent of their value as a resource to others*. The principle of equal inherent value is what prevents us from treating other human beings as things. It is "pre-legal," in that it is a prerequisite to additional rights. Regan extends equal inherent value to animals because of their status as "subjects-of-a-life," a category that includes all normal mammals over one year old. In Regan's perspective, this means giving equal consideration to animals' relevantly similar interests. It means we cannot devalue animals' interests simply because animals hold them. It means that an animal's interest in not suffering is no less significant than a human being's interest in doing so. Equal consideration is the foundation of all moral theories, in that it guides us to treat like cases alike. We acknowledge and apply equal consideration when we say that neither race nor religion can justify devaluing the interests of certain people. In advocating equal consideration for subjects-of-a-life, Regan calls for sweeping changes, including the abolition of commercial animal agriculture, trapping, hunting, and the use of animals in research.

Gary Francione (1995, 1996, 2000) offers a different argument in favor of animal rights. In his *Introduction to Animal Rights* (2000), Francione agrees with Regan about the importance of equal inherent value. However, he points out that attributions of equal value are meaningless where animals are concerned because animals are considered property. He explains that, “animals lose because their status as property is *always* a good reason not to respect their interests in not suffering. *The interests of property will almost never be judged as similar to the interests of property owners*” (86; emphasis in the original). Francione focuses on the basic right not to be treated as a thing or a resource. He argues that *this* is the precursor to additional rights; it is “the minimal condition for membership in the moral community” (95). The idea of basic rights assumes the corollary idea of equal inherent value, which Francione would extend to all sentient beings. As he explains:

Sentient beings use sensations of pain and suffering to escape situations that threaten their lives and sensations of pleasure to pursue situations that enhance their lives...Sentience is what evolution has produced in order to ensure the survival of certain complex organisms. To deny that a being who has evolved to develop a consciousness of pain and pleasure has no interest in remaining alive is to say that conscious beings have no interest in remaining conscious, a most peculiar position to take. (138)

In these terms, it makes moral sense to extend the right not to be treated as things to animals based on their sentience. Western societies have long endorsed this through laws about humane treatment, which assume that animals are *not* things without interests. At the very least, animals have an interest in not suffering; most people already accept that we have the moral obligation not to cause unnecessary harm. However, to justify this obligation, we must apply the principle of equal consideration to animals, for we cannot have moral obligations to things. Equal consideration means that animals’ interests cannot be judged as less important simply because animals hold them. If animals have equal inherent value, we cannot treat them as property. Admitting animals to the moral community will not mean the same thing for animals as it does for humans, Francione explains, “except insofar as such membership rules out the treatment of any member exclusively as the resource of others” (127). Granting this basic right to animals

will mean abolishing institutionalized forms of animal exploitation, including the use of animals as food, clothing, and research subjects. It will also mean the end of pets and even companion animals. For if animals have the right not to be treated as things, then we cannot justify breeding them simply to serve as our companions. If we recognize the intrinsic value of animals' lives, then it is immoral to keep them for our pleasure, regardless of whether we call them companions or pets.

I realize the gravity of this claim. I dread the thought of coming home to an empty house, no tails wagging in excitement to see me. I also dread the thought of napping unaccompanied by a warm cat. But my pleasure in being greeted and kept company does not justify keeping a supply of animals for that purpose. To be sure, the dogs and cats in my household live well, as do many other pets. They eat high quality food, enjoy the company of other members of their species, receive veterinary care, and generally seem to want for nothing. Within our household, the animals are not considered property. However, outside of the household, that is exactly their status. I am free to pamper them or ignore them, as long as I am not caught inflicting intentional cruelty.

In this essay, I have attempted to show that petkeeping has a history. It is not a manifestation of a "natural" human affinity for animals. My aim has been to show that we cannot justify petkeeping simply by saying that humans have always had pets. This is historically inaccurate. It also misrepresents our power to define and exploit animals under the guise of defending the human/animal boundary. Even if it *were* the case that people have always had pets, this does not make it morally acceptable. Numerous forms of oppression, including slavery, racism, and sexism, have "always" existed. This does not justify their continuation. Just as we can hope for a world without racism, we can also envision a world without animal exploitation. Our growing knowledge of animals brings profound obligations. As it becomes clear that other animals are more like us than not, we must reconsider our treatment of them, even that which appears benign.

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