

The Moral Impermissibility of Pet Ownership

Humans have long sought companionship in the company of animals, from times of early domestication for agricultural purposes to the modern practice of keeping animals as pets. In the wake of the 21st century's animal rights movements, philosophical discourse has casted doubt as to whether or not it is morally permissible to keep animals in captivity, depriving them of their natural freedom and autonomy for human pleasure. For the purposes of this paper, I define "pet ownership" as the practice of humans assuming guardianship and responsibility for the care and well-being of non-human animals in a domestic setting; "pets" will henceforth refer to any non-human animal that is kept by humans for the purpose of satisfying needs of companionship and entertainment. I contend that pet ownership is not morally permissible, as it undermines the animal's inherent moral worth.

To begin the discussion, it is essential to discuss the moral status of animals to understand the basis for attributing rights to them. Philosophers such as Kant have argued that the only consideration for one's treatment of animals is how it will affect the treatment of other humans. However, while animals are not able to engage in complex thinking and reasoning in the same way as humans, their undeniable sentience — their ability to experience pain and emotions, as well as have their own interests and desires — compel us to accord at least some level of moral consideration towards their well-being. As stated by Bentham in his book *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, "[T]he question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?" (Bentham 143) In the same way that human infants and people with some types of cognitive disabilities have unalienable rights even though they also do not meet the

requirement of cognitive ability, animals must also have intrinsic moral worth independent of the value arbitrarily ascribed to them by humans. Additionally, as humans and animals have the same capacity to suffer, their interests must be weighed equally.

The implications of this are two-fold. Firstly, when making decisions, humans are morally obligated to act in a way that does not cause animals unnecessary suffering or pain. That is to say, when balancing human interests with animal interests, it is only morally justifiable to cause animals to suffer if humans will suffer more otherwise, for example in the case of animal experimentation for pharmaceutical purposes. In contrast, pet ownership is inherently painful to the animal, as it deprives them of freedom of movement as well as the fulfillment of biological needs such as reproduction, while not being a requirement for human well-being. Even under the best-scenario assumption that the owners will meet the animals' needs and desires as best as possible while avoiding intentional neglect or mistreatment, they still suffer under conditions of captivity in homes or small spaces that deny their natural instincts. Moreover, due to selective breeding, many pets suffer from genetic issues that significantly reduce their quality of life, such as in the case of bulldogs.

Secondly, as animals are sentient creatures with moral worth, they are fundamentally entitled to not be treated as property. Pet ownership inevitably violates this right, as it commodifies animals as objects that can be bought, sold, and bred for entertainment and profit. Even if the treatment of pets is humane, the treatment would not stem from the rights of the animal, but rather the choice of the owner — put simply, they would only have extrinsic value and contingent

upon the benefits that it offers to humans. As animals have moral status, using them solely as an end to a means cannot be justified, as it would be morally identical to human slavery. In the same way that the practice of keeping humans as slaves is morally abhorrent, the moral impermissibility of pet ownership stands even if the animals' needs are adequately met. Moreover, it is also morally impermissible to deliberately breed domesticated animals with traits that are pleasing and convenient to humans. Pets are bred to be docile and perpetually dependent on humans for their basic needs in every aspect of their life, which is unjustifiable as they cannot consent to their conditions or opt out of them. While some critics argue that humans are also dependent on one another, it is only justifiable for humans as they have the power to consent to their dependency, either implicitly through the social contract, or explicitly — whereas animals cannot communicate their preferences or enter into agreements. In cases that they cannot consent, such as for infants, it is morally justifiable because it is understood that they will develop autonomy in the future. As well, intuitively, it would be undeniably unjustifiable to intentionally impair humans in ways that ensures a state of perpetual dependence and vulnerability. Thus, it can be concluded that pet ownership is morally impermissible as an institution as it causes unnecessary suffering on the animal for human benefit and subjects animals to treatment as a commodity.

It is said that pet ownership is morally permissible as it is in the best interests of animals. Domesticated animals face worse conditions in the wild, especially as centuries of selective breeding make them poorly-equipped to survive; hence, the practice of keeping pets is argued to be beneficial for the animal, providing longevity and comfort it would not otherwise have. However, insofar as the only reason that animals cannot survive in the wild is because of being genetically

modified to be dependent on humans, this cannot justify the institution of pet ownership as a whole. While there is a moral responsibility to ensure that domesticated animals that already exist in the status quo are well-cared for, the continued breeding of animals is not justifiable given the implications of animals having intrinsic moral value. Accordingly, society ought to take steps to slowly abolish this practice by placing the focus on improving the living conditions of existing pets while ensuring that no new companion animals are brought into existence. It is also posited that if a pet is healthy, happy and content with its condition, pet ownership can be justified. However, this argument operates under the assumption that animals are happy with their condition, which is based on projections of human standards. More importantly, the fundamental injustice lies in the deprivation of freedom and inherent rights — this is why human slavery is unethical regardless of whether or not slaves are happy.

In conclusion, the moral impermissibility of pet ownership is clear, as it is an institution rooted in exploitation that inherently undermines the moral rights of sentient creatures. Regardless of the well-being of the animal being kept as a pet, treating animals as property devoid of moral agency as well as prioritizing human pleasure and enjoyment at the expense of animal suffering cannot be morally justifiable. Thus, a society that truly values not only the well-being, but moral worth of animals must put an end to the practice of pet ownership.

Works Cited

Jeremy, Bentham. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. The University of Adelaide Library, 2010. Accessed June 24, 2024.