

A Sentiocentric Argument for Intervention in Nature

Why We Have Moral Obligations Towards Wild Animals



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1. Introduction

Today it is not controversial to claim that most vertebrates are sentient beings¹. To claim that we have moral obligations towards all such sentient beings is perhaps more controversial. To be sentient is to be able to have positive or negative experiences. A crucial ability for moral status is whether a being is capable of suffering. This is because suffering is intrinsically bad and well-being is intrinsically good. The fundamental starting point for this text rests on a sentiocentric² view.

Most people would agree that pain is bad and that we have reason to alleviate another person's pain if possible. A closer look at nature shows how suffering is ubiquitous through predation, starvation, exposure, parasitism etc. Considering this, the question of whether we should intervene and try to prevent this suffering is not as farfetched as one might think. Yet the idea of intervening in nature on moral grounds, with the aim of trying to prevent and minimize the overall and substantial amount of suffering present, remains highly controversial and has not received much interest. However, in more recent years, the question has caught the attention of certain philosophers. Some of these argue that we have an obligation to prevent suffering in nature and some claim that we do not. The different views on this topic can, somewhat crudely, be divided into three groups:

1. We have moral obligations towards non-humans animals regardless of whether they live within human confinement or in the wild.
2. We ought to consider domesticated and other animals that live within human confinement, but not wild ones.
3. We do not have moral obligations towards animals at all.

From the idea that animals have moral status and anti-speciesist reasoning there is a strong inference to the idea that we ought to prevent suffering in the wild when possible. For example, if one accepts that we should not maltreat and kill domesticated animals for the consumption of meat³ because the well-being of these animals matters morally, then one should have little issues with accepting that the well-being of animals in the wild also matters morally.

A particularly difficult issue to tackle, regarding wild animal suffering, is that of predation. There are many other reasons for the suffering of animals in the wild such as starvation, disease, parasitism etc., but predation, as we will see later in the text, poses a particular problem.

¹ This has been declared by The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness

² Sentiocentrism or Sentientism is the view that sentient beings are morally important in their own.

³ Many are becoming aware of the suffering factory farming causes domesticated animals and realize it is wrong. However, it is not only the production meat that causes suffering to animals, many other industries such as egg, dairy, cosmetic etc. are also causing disvalue.

However, in the other cases, if there are effective and relatively inexpensive⁴ ways to help animals suffering from these conditions, then ought we not to administer such help?

Common objections to aiding wild animals focus on the practical problems. However, what this text seeks to investigate is whether we ought to expand our moral obligations to include the well-being of animals in the wild. The question is a normative one. Therefore, this text does not provide practical guidelines on how such an intervention should be organized merely whether it can be said that humans, as moral agents, have certain obligations towards wild animals.

The aim of this text is twofold. The first is that I argue for the moral status of all sentient beings. This claim requires two things. First, it needs to be established what beings are sentient and this can be done empirically. The second is that it needs to be explained why sentient beings matter morally. After having established this I will investigate if consequentialism is a suitable normative theory for intervention in nature. The text is structured in several different parts. I will start with looking at the concepts *well-being* and *natural*. Well-being is an important and not completely unproblematic concept when discussing this topic. What is natural is sometimes used as an argument for what is permissible or not and therefore in need of careful scrutiny. Section 3.3 deals with disvalue in nature and tries to establish an accurate account of the balance between value and disvalue in nature. Section 3.4 will deal with sentientism and why sentience is relevant when considering moral duties towards wild animals. Section 3.5 discusses whether relationships are relevant for our moral obligations. Section 3.6 and 3.7 pits environmentalism against animal welfarism as two different approaches to how to view nature, moral status and our moral duties. Section 3.8 examines the difficult topic of predation. Section 3.9 questions futility and priority. Finally, 3.10 provides some concrete examples of aiding wild animals to show that it is not futile. In the analysis I summarize seven different counter-arguments to my thesis that we have moral obligations towards wild animals, and analyze whether they are persuasive or not. Then I present an argument from analogy to show that moral intuition can be helpful in establishing obligations to different beings. Lastly, I consider what actions are to be taken and bring up consequentialism as a prospective normative theory for intervention.

2. Thesis

I will argue for the thesis that we have moral obligations towards wild animals⁵. Furthermore, I argue that this implies that we ought to aid wild animals that suffer.

⁴ Expenses can be measured in many different ways such as economic, time, effort etc. Here I mainly mean economic cost since that is usually a primary concern but that is not to say that the other aspects of cost would not factor in.

⁵ "Wild animals" or "Animals in the wild" are animals that are neither domesticated nor tame and they live their lives outside of human restraints or care.

3. Background

3.1 Well-being

The term *well-being* relates to what it means for an individual to be well-off. A basic definition of *well-being* would be the presence of pleasure and absence of pain. This is fundamental *hedonism* and as such is a theory of mental states. An important issue in this text is whether a being is capable of suffering. The bottom line I wish to draw for moral considerability is essentially whether the life of a being can be better or worse, whether a being can suffer or be well-off. Another important term for this is *experiential harm*, meaning that one must be conscious to suffer in the relevant sense. In this way a plant, which is not conscious but alive, cannot suffer in the relevant sense were it to, for example, wither. The basic definition of hedonism above might be too narrow since the importance of a mental state is not necessarily solely determined by whether it is pleasurable or not⁶. I adopt a broader theory of mental states but do not wish to go as far as claiming that it is desire and satisfaction or a kind of externalism that determine how well-off one is. In the end, what really determines how well-off one is, is one's subjective experiences.

Well-being as the ultimate goal is a consequentialist notion and according to this we should strive to prevent pain and suffering and promote well-being when possible. If one were to ask what world is better, the one with more total amount of suffering or the one with more total amount of well-being the latter is, quite uncontroversially, preferable.

It is possible to talk about a sentient being's well-being separated from that being's subjective experience. One can talk about what is good for sentient beings without regard for their subjective experience. In cases regarding animals in the wild, one often does this by discussing behavior that allows the individual to "flourish"⁷. This term seems to carry an idea of autonomy as well as objective list theory where there are certain things that determine what make a life better or worse separated from a being's subjective experience⁸. For this text the main focus is on the subjective experience of the individual beings and whether this experience is a positive or a negative one. Writers such as McMahan⁹ consider suffering as intrinsically bad which is also the view for this text. Suffering is bad not just because it matters to me or that I care about the being that suffers. Suffering is bad in itself and as McMahan puts it "[...] it is in the nature of suffering that it ought not to be" (The Moral Problem of Predation p.10). This is so regardless of what being is experiencing the suffering.

⁶ See Kagan on *mental statism* 1992

⁷ See for example Nussbaum 2006

⁸ For more on well-being see Roger Crisp 2017

⁹ McMahan 2014

3.2 What is Natural?

The issue of wild animal suffering is commonly met with arguments that “it is natural” for wild animals to experience pain and other types of displeasure. The idea appears to be that suffering is a natural part of the world and therefore nothing that requires critical scrutiny and remedy. Arguments like these sometimes seem to blur the difference in calling something natural and calling something unproblematic in a normative sense. However, such arguments prompt the question of what ‘natural’ means in these kinds of arguments, and whether these definitions can be used as valid arguments when considering disvalue in nature as ground for intervention. The concept of ‘natural’ is used, at least to some extent, in the philosophical discourse between environmentalists and animal welfarists, where the former critique the latter for failing to affirm and appreciate a part of nature that made us humans who we are, namely predation. These environmentalists argue that eating meat was a necessary part of evolution and the survival of our species, without which we would not be here. According to this line of argument, wanting to e.g. minimize the suffering caused by predation is to turn away from nature and fail to affirm a necessary part of it. Viewing the suffering in nature as regrettable (something animal welfarists are committed to do) is thus to want to separate from nature or transcend it. However, philosophers such as Jennifer Everett¹⁰ reject this kind of reasoning. She reasons that arguments based on historical practices and evolution do not necessarily provide any reason for contemporary moral agents to continue and endorse such behavior if not necessary. If it indeed was necessary for our survival it would be difficult to argue that it was wrong at the time. However, it is not the case that anything that has been part of human practice is also permissible. As famously stated by Hume one cannot on good grounds derive an ought based on what is¹¹. It is also not the case that anything that seems natural in the sense of ‘normal’ or a widely spread practice is beyond critical examination.

We, humans, are able to realize the possible ethical issues present in our dietary habits in a way that animals do not seem to be. A wolf or a lion is first of all dependent on eating meat since they are carnivores, they need meat to survive. Also the wolf or the lion are not able to reflect on their own behavior to realize that their dietary needs regrettably require the lives of other living sentient beings. They are unable to change their ways. We therefore often give animals a pass in moral matters since they are not like us humans, moral agents capable of critical moral reasoning. However it might be too much to say that although we cannot blame the wolf or the lion for their predatory behavior there is nothing morally wrong with it. That an action has negative consequences is important to a normative theory such as consequentialism not whether the actor can be blamed or not. Sapontzis¹² brings this to attention and argues that it is quite

¹⁰ Everett 2001

¹¹ Cohon 2018

¹² Sapontzis 1984

possible to consider an act of a being that is not a moral agent as still morally wrong. He makes this very clear with an example of a small child torturing a cat. The child is not mature enough to understand moral obligations or separate right from wrong, this however does not make the act of torturing the cat and the pain it suffers any less bad or the act any less wrong. Perhaps we cannot in a genuine sense blame the child since it does not understand any better, but we can still evaluate the action and determine the consequences to be bad and morally wrong. In the same way we cannot hold the wolf or the lion responsible but we, as moral agents, can still evaluate their action and determine it as morally wrong in terms of value or disvalue. This clarification by Sapontzis also shows why arguments put forth by philosophers such as, for instance, Regan¹³ are unsatisfactory in relieving us from obligations towards wild animals. Regan focuses on rights and argues that since the wolf is not a moral agent it cannot violate any rights, simply because it is incapable of understanding the concepts of rights and if we have duties to intervene in cases where animals' rights are violated, the case where a wolf kills and eats a sheep is not such a case. This hinges on the presumption that we have a duty to intervene only when animals' rights are being violated and not just more general perspectives of recognizing disvalue and possible prevention of suffering or acting based on moral intuition. Sapontzis' view explains exactly what we do when we consider an act that creates disvalue. Regan's view can be challenged by considering the same example but switching the sheep with a human. If the aim is to minimize disvalue this line of reasoning is unsatisfactory.

Some view nature as something that warrants our respect and something humans should not intervene in. This non-intervention argument is used very inconsistently. There is usually little hesitation interfering and changing nature when we can benefit from it in some way, mostly economically. Take deforestation as an example. There is less and less natural forest in the world and more and more planted forest. This can be good for timber production but is usually bad for biodiversity due to loss of natural habitat. Today about 7% of all forest is so called planted forest meaning it was planted by humans, usually to produce timber¹⁴. Mankind leaves huge marks on nature in the pursuit of goods and economical gain. One of the most obvious ones is the Athabasca oil sands in Alberta, Canada¹⁵. Here oil is extracted through surface mining which means complete clearing of the area mined. Another example is that we are currently living in what has been called the sixth mass extinction¹⁶. Mankind is an extremely destructive species and in more modern times this has accelerated in an alarming way. According to WWF's "Living Planet Index" the world's population of wild vertebrates has more than halved in only the last 40

¹³ Regan 1983

¹⁴ <http://www.fao.org/forestry/plantedforests/en/>

¹⁵ <https://www.energy.alberta.ca/OS/AOS/Pages/FAS.aspx>

¹⁶ Ceballos, Ehrlich and Dirzo 2017

years¹⁷. Whether we actively intervene or not, our species is hardly leaving nature alone, we have a huge impact on the world around us.

Some philosophers might agree that there are certain interventions possible to aid animals suffering in nature. However, the matter of predation is too complex and too big for us to even attempt any intervention. To escape obligations of policing nature on account of predation, one has to present convincing arguments for why predation must be left alone. Bruers¹⁸ attempts to explain why we must accept predation as a part of nature. He formulates an interesting theory of his “three-N-principle”. The three N:s stand for naturalness, normalcy and necessity and he argues that behavior that includes all three aspects must always be allowed. This suggests that predation would always be allowed as long as it checks the three criteria. If certain behavior must always be allowed due to the three N:s then we must allow predation by nonhuman carnivores to continue even though it contributes to disvalue in nature. This allows for us to call predation unfortunate and regrettable, but ultimately we should let it continue as long as it follows the three Ns. It is worth noting here that one may still argue that nature would be a better place without predation and this provides reason to eliminate it even if it does fulfill the three-N-criteria. From certain normative perspectives such as consequentialism the three Ns have little bearing since it is the result that matters and predation seems to contribute to disvalue in nature.

3.3 Disvalue in Nature

Nature is ultimately contingent on the passing on of genes. The fight for survival is all about getting the information present in your genetic material on to the next generation. Due to this and the fact that resources in nature are finite (and hardly fairly distributed) it is quite simple to understand that suffering is a large part of nature.

Living organisms such as animals need a number of things such as food, water, shelter etc. These do not come freely and without them one cannot sustain life. From an evolutionary perspective the individual’s reason for the struggle to stay alive is so one has the chance to procreate and pass on one’s genes. It is common to have lots of offspring in order to maximize the chances of at least some of them reaching adulthood and sexual maturity so that they in turn can procreate and continue the passing of genes. This results in more individuals than resources necessary to sustain such a large number of beings. At least some, if not a lot of the beings brought into this world, will starve, suffer and perish. One can in this way claim that the way nature is set up is ultimately a system with an appalling amount of suffering present in it. Oscar Horta writes in his text *Evil in Nature*: “The maximization of the transmission of genetic

¹⁷ https://www.panda.org/knowledge_hub/all_publications/living_planet_index2/

¹⁸ Bruers 2015

material implies, in most cases, a process that also maximizes disvalue” (p.22, 2015). With nature comes disvalue.

This prompts the question of whether nature is overall good or bad. This is a matter of aggregation which might be important for normative theories, particularly, consequentialism. However, it is strictly only necessary to show that some disvalue exist in order to formulate an argument for intervention. Nevertheless, if one consider nature and imagine a set of scales and add the total amount of suffering present in nature on a daily basis, and the total amount of well-being present on a daily basis, to which side would the scales tip? This is an empirical question and probably impossible to get an exact answer to. Not only because it is hard to quantify and calculate suffering and well-being, but also because of the sheer amount of sentient beings. It is, however, possible to get a somewhat representative idea of whether nature is good or bad in terms of value or disvalue. Oscar Horta¹⁹ argues that if one were to sum up all the suffering and pit it against the well-being present in nature, then suffering would be much greater. In other words, disvalue is most common in nature. This can be argued for by looking at population figures and the fact that they remain roughly the same. As mentioned, evolutionary strategy often makes it so that many individuals are brought into this world. This is to secure one's genes will be carried on. The effect this has is that many individuals die early and often painfully because there is not enough resources for everyone to survive. But even if we contemplate a world where there was enough resources for every individual right now, this would soon change since most species would use these resources to reproduce as much as possible and soon the situation of too many individuals with not enough resources would present itself. In this way, nature is evolutionarily conditioned to contain a lot of suffering for at least a certain amount of individuals, i.e. those that do not “make it”.

Tomasik²⁰ discusses whether newborn or newly hatched animals have the capability to suffer. The question is when sentience actually emerges in a newly formed living being. For mammals who give birth to well-developed offspring, so called *precocial*, (an exception would be species that are *altricial* such as marsupials) it seems that the newborn is quite well-developed and capable of suffering. Regarding species that lay eggs, for example birds, Tomasik argues that also these animals have the capacity to suffer, if not from the moment of hatching, then at least early in life due to rapid development. This would further strengthen the picture of nature as a place of immense suffering since many of these new formed lives are fighting to survive from the start, and often perish early in life.

Not all species function the same way when it comes to reproduction. There is a difference in strategies for reproduction where a small amount of animals are K-selective and a great amount of animals are R-selective²¹. K-selection means that one typically has few offspring and invests a

¹⁹ Horta 2015

²⁰ Tomasik 2015

²¹ Horta 2015

great deal of effort and time to care for them while they grow up. This means, if not good, at least decent chances for survival until one has reached sexual maturity. R-selective strategy on the other hand, is a strategy where a large amount of offspring is produced, but where it is not possible to care for the offspring in the same way K-selective parents are able to. In many cases no care is invested at all, for example when a bunch of eggs are laid and then left to hatch on their own. In these cases the newly hatched offspring is alone to fight for its survival already from the first moments of its life. This of course means that most of them do not make it and that an early and possibly painful death is a reality for the great majority of individuals born in nature. This is proven by the fact that population numbers remain roughly the same. In this way it is possible to argue that disvalue, death and suffering outweighs well-being in nature even without having exact empirical data²².

Consequentialism traditionally sees individuals as vessels for pleasure or pain and this means that one individual is completely exchangeable for another. If one does not accept this one has to show why death is something bad for the individual. If there is nothing bad in the death of the individual then one could speculate whether the well-being of those individuals that survive to live long and possibly good lives could, in total, outweigh the suffering of those that perish early in life. Once dead, they do not suffer anymore whereas those that make it and live good life experience a lot of good. On the whole there would be more positive experiences than negative ones. There is however no way to definitively show this. Even if this could be proven there would still exist reason to consider intervention in nature as long as there is some disvalue present that could be prevented.

3.3.1 Death

In order to argue that nature is a place of disvalue one needs to show that suffering is part of it. As we have seen there is good reason to believe that suffering is in fact a large part of the lives of wild animals. If we accept that suffering is intrinsically bad, this gives us reason to try to alleviate suffering and prevent it. This does not, however, provide us with a reason to save the lives of those who suffer. Disease, starvation and predation can be said to be bad and should be stopped because it causes suffering among sentient beings. If these factors, somehow, lead to the death of sentient creatures without causing them to suffer, death in itself would not necessarily be bad. Imagine a disease that painlessly kills its host or a case of predation where the predator kills its prey without causing it any suffering. If one wishes to argue that it still would be bad to die, one has to show why death is something bad. I will argue for the badness of death in virtue of it being an extrinsic harm. It deprives a being capable of future good experiences of the possibility to have those experiences²³. This would mean that death would be something bad for at least most vertebrate animals since they are capable of having good experiences. Only in cases

²² Horta 2015

²³ For more on this see Singer 1993 chapter "What's wrong with killing?"

where it could be definitively proven that the future held no good experiences whatsoever could death be a preferable alternative. Perhaps one even could argue death would be preferable over a life where there were some good experience but a predominant amount of negative experiences. This is a simple case of comparativism, we simply compare whether not dying and continuing to live for a certain amount of time would have included more well-being²⁴. In this sense, it would be bad to die an early death but not necessarily bad or at least not as bad as living a full life and dying of old age. It is not that death harms us (causes suffering), it is that it deprives us of goods we would have had if death had not occurred. This makes it possible for death to not only be bad but actually something good for a being if the occurrence of death prevents a continued existence that would have been filled with only or mostly suffering. This also serves as an argument to why disvalue is more prevalent in nature than value, it is due to the vast amount of individual animals that die an early death and are robbed of future good experiences.

3.4 Sentience

All sentient beings who have experienced suffering and wellbeing, know intuitively/instinctively that the latter is preferred over the former. The value assessment seems built into the experience of these states themselves. If the line for moral considerability is drawn at sentience, this makes it easier to grasp than trying to assign certain values, as in deontological theories, that often are supposed to be absolute and therefore have to be justified in some further way.

There remain practical difficulties to determine exactly all the beings who actually are sentient in a relevant manner. We grant a cow moral consideration but perhaps not a clam since the sentience of the latter seems uncertain. More research is needed to determine exactly what beings are sentient in the relevant manner. Today there is a consensus around the fact that vertebrates are sentient but when it comes to invertebrates it is less clear. For example, studies of fish anatomy as well as experiments of negative stimulus have shown that fish have the basic physiology to experience pain and show behavioral patterns consistent with experiencing pain²⁵. In contrast, it is much less certain whether insects experience pain at all. There are not enough studies and the ones conducted have proven inconclusive. It seems that certain insects do behave in a way that could be interpreted as experiencing pain when presented with a negative stimuli but this is not always consistent. So the status of insects is unclear, however, similar studies have shown that it is very plausible that crustacean such as lobsters or crabs can experience pain²⁶. It seems then that a variety of animals are definitely sentient in a relevant manner for moral consideration. Even though, there are still many cases where scientists are not sure and more studies need to be conducted. Pain is a problematic phenomenon since it is a mental state and

²⁴ Luper 2016

²⁵ Jones, R. C. 2013

²⁶ Jones, R. C. 2013

difficult to study since we cannot have firsthand access to the subjective experience and in the case of animals we cannot ask them to explain their experience. Instead scientists are forced to study the anatomy of certain animals and their behavior and reactions to certain stimuli and draw conclusions from there. What is important for this text is that we already today can show that many vertebrates are in fact sentient in a relevant manner to matter morally. We can look to ourselves and understand the importance of whether our life is going well or poorly, it is also easy for us to understand that this is equally important to all sentient beings capable of having a life that can be better or worse. It seems intuitively true that pain is bad and pleasure good.

3.5 The Importance of Relations

Writers such as Clare Palmer²⁷ concede the notion that we have duties towards animals but seek to draw a line that ultimately only requires us to morally consider domesticated animals within our care. The way they do this is by arguing that certain relationships generate certain obligations. This kind of thinking makes a lot of sense when one considers a mother's obligation to care for her child as opposed to her having obligations towards another mother's child. Palmer argues that we have obligations to care about domesticated animals' well-being since we are in a way responsible for the dependent position they are in. In this way I am responsible for my pet since it is dependent on me in a way a wild animal is not. This dependency creates a moral obligation that does not translate to animals in the wild that we have no relationship with. Granted that writers such as Palmer have a point in arguing that we have a strong obligation towards domesticated animals it does not necessarily follow that we have no obligations towards wild animals.

The obligations to domesticated animals, who are dependent on us humans, might be stronger than obligations owed to wild animals which are independent. However, this point becomes less obvious if we consider the same idea but swap animals with humans. Catia Faria²⁸ does this and argues that the intuitive response is that I would have an equal obligation no matter if we are talking about helping a person with whom I stand in relation to or a person I do not. Perhaps a case can be made that there is a stronger case for helping if I have a relationship with the person and this would explain why it would be morally permissible to prioritize helping one's family member over helping a stranger. This makes sense due to the meaningful relationship I have with one of these beings which affects the moral balance in the situation. However, this does not mean one does not have any obligation to the stranger. So, comparing animals and human beings makes it difficult to argue for a clear difference in obligations towards them without becoming guilty of speciesism²⁹. Faria also brings up another way of getting out of obligation towards wild

²⁷ Palmer 2015

²⁸ Faria 2015

²⁹ Speciesism is the practice of arbitrary discrimination based on species affiliation.

animals. She presents the idea of responsibility and formulates what one might call the responsibility argument. She argues that if I am directly responsible or even indirectly responsible for another individual's suffering then I am obligated to help that individual. Something along the line of: if I have caused you pain then I am obligated to make amends by helping you alleviate or compensate that pain. This also means that since I did not cause any of the suffering many of the animals in the wild experience, then I am not under any moral obligation to alleviate it. Faria maintains that one is allowed to help them if one wants to, but not required. Real moral obligation only comes with responsibility. This would draw a line where we have to consider the well-being of other people around us and our domesticated animals but not that of wild animals, since we have no interaction with them and therefore have not caused their situation. It is however, not very clear what we are responsible for. There are many wild animals living in our cities or close to our societies. Surely we affect them with our behavior in many ways. The way our societies extend their territories and enclose wild animals' habitats is another example. Furthermore, the way humans affect the climate has an impact on animals in the wild and in many cases seems to create difficulties for them. Recent studies show that the human population only makes out about 0,01% of life on earth in terms of biomass. From this perspective mankind is a very small part of the world, compared to bacteria which make out 13% or plants at 82%. In fact, the remaining five percent is shared by animals, fungi and humans. In this way mankind may seem insignificant, but that is far from the truth. The same study shows that since the rise of civilization, humans are responsible for the undoing of more than 80% of wild animals. For example today 70% of the world's birds are poultry, mostly chickens. Only 30% are wild species. Even more staggering, 96% of all the mammals on earth are either humans or livestock kept by humans. Only 4% are wild. In this way the insignificant human has an enormous impact on the world and the animals living in it^{30 31}. According to WWF's Living Planet Index the number of land living animals has decreased by 40% since 1970³². Based on these facts one could argue that we ought to help these animals since it seems we as a species are responsible for the fate of many other beings. Mankind has a substantial impact on nature in numerous ways, so there may be many ways to argue that we are directly or indirectly responsible for the future of animals living in the wild. Ultimately, establishing what obligations we have based solely on what we have caused might be very difficult.

A different approach on how to view our responsibilities and relationship to animals is presented by Donaldson & Kymlicka³³. They suggest making use of political theory in our decisions on how to act towards animals. This would yield similar result as those Palmer advocates but on different grounds. For example, we ought to, according to Donaldson & Kymlicka, care for our

³⁰<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/21/human-race-just-001-of-all-life-but-has-destroyed-over-80-of-wild-mammals-study>

³¹ Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips, Ron Milo 2018

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>

³³ Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011

domesticated animals since they are part of our society and dependent on us. Truly wild animals are different. The wild could be seen as a sovereign state where we have no authority to meddle. This ascribes a certain competence and grants certain autonomy to wild animals. We can therefore see our society as one state and the wild as another. They are independent and one is not allowed to interfere with the other. There is also a middle point between truly wild and domesticated. They call these kinds of animals “liminal animals” and they are the type of animals that are not tame but live in our cities in close proximity and contact with us. Donaldson & Kymlicka argue that these liminal animals do not earn the same obligations as domesticated ones, but that we at least ought to consider them since our actions without a doubt affect them.

3.6 Environmentalism

The topic of intervention in nature is split in two sides - environmentalism and animal welfarism. The first one, environmentalism, argues that it is not the sentient individuals living in nature and the individual experience in their lives that are important. Instead, it is the system that they are a part of that is valued. The well-being of individual sentient beings is not prioritized; it is the function and protection of natural systems or processes, for example, an ecosystem. The individuals living in that ecosystem can actually be said to have an instrumental value in that they contribute to keeping the ecosystem intact. In other words, it is completely justifiable to sacrifice sentient individuals in nature if it serves to protect and conserve a natural process or ecosystem.

A central concern for the environmentalist position seems to be that an ethical theory based on sentience such as that of animal welfarism (see next section) would fail in ascribing obligations and restrictions that are necessary in order to protect nature. It would be difficult to build an appropriate environmental ethical theory while focusing solely on sentientism. If we take the example of cutting down a forest, the way an animal welfarist would argue against this would be because the forest holds an instrumental value in that there are sentient creatures, whose well-being matters morally, who are dependent on it. We should not cut down the forest because it would impact the lives of those creatures negatively. The forest itself does not suffer and therefore its well-being cannot be the direct reason for not cutting it down. The environmentalist view does not accept this as a sufficient reason to protect the forest. The environmentalist would argue that the forest itself holds intrinsic value and therefore should not be cut down even if there are no sentient creatures whose well-being depends on it. So sentientism, according to environmentalists, will be too permissive and endorse many environmentally destructive practices.

Another environmentalist argument against animal welfarism is to point out the consequences of putting such emphasis on sentience and well-being. When this reasoning is taken all the way, it

seems to imply that we ought to intervene in all aspects of nature that create disvalue, even predation. This would be too demanding. This argument takes the form of a classical *reductio ad absurdum*. Overall, part of the critique aimed at animal welfarism by environmentalists is that it is anti-environmental or that it leads to a conclusion that is too demanding and absurd.

There is usually a conflict between giving importance to a whole or to individuals. It is difficult to do both at the same time. In nature we find food chains based on predation and prey and complicated balances of ecosystems where the different parts are dependent on each other. If focus lies on the bigger picture it is often required to neglect certain individuals for the greater good. In the same way, if focus is put on individuals it is often hard to satisfy their needs as well as benefiting the whole. For example, if we were to put out food for wild animals, so called “supplemental feeding,”³⁴ this would likely have a positive effect on certain individuals who would benefit from this extra resource. However, such a simple thing can have many consequences that affect the bigger picture. It is hard to predict these effects exactly. Brennan³⁵ discusses some of the possible effects of supplemental feeding. It might cause an increase in predation since animals would concentrate in a certain area where the food was placed or it might lead to a decrease in predation since there would be more eyes present able to look out for predators. Animals congregating in this way around feed might also be a cause of disease spreading. Supplemental feeding might also have long term effects on population numbers where more individuals survive or have more offspring. These are just some examples that could benefit the individuals but might offset the balance of the ecosystem which could have long lasting effects on individuals as well as the bigger picture.

An important critique of the environmental holistic view is that the same way of thinking does not seem to be applied to humans. We usually refuse to sacrifice an individual to benefit the whole. This can be motivated by various reasons, such as, it would be unfair or that would be treating individuals as means to an end which is forbidden. Arguing that this should be allowed with animals but not humans seems speciesist.

Environmentalists argue that an ethical theory solely based on sentientism and assigning merely instrumental value to nature and natural processes would not sufficiently protect nature and the environment. In order to not endorse environmentally destructive practices we need to consider nature itself morally. This is problematic since it raises the question of on what grounds one can ascribe intrinsic value to something non-sentient. Different theories for nature or natural processes holding objective intrinsic value have been presented, most notable are the *inherent worth view* and the *natural-historical value view*. The first assigns value to natural entities based on their independence from human design and control. The second claim that all living

³⁴ Brennan 2018

³⁵ Brennan 2018

organisms or even natural systems have a good of their own so called inherent worth³⁶. Both views have received criticism in how they justify this value.

3.7 Animal Welfarism

Supporters of animal welfarism hold that if we reject speciesism then we are justified and even obligated to intervene in nature to promote the well-being of wild nonhuman sentient beings. This is argued for using arguments that compare human and nonhuman suffering. If we have a moral obligation to intervene and help humans suffering from, for instance a natural disaster, then we are obliged to help nonhuman sentient beings in similar situations. Since both humans and animals are equal in the relevant sense, namely that they can suffer, it would be inconsistent and speciesist of us to argue that we ought to help only humans. This is an argument based on reason, for it would be inconsistent to concede that two different beings are equal in the relevant sense and then treat them differently without having good reason to do so. Animal welfarists argue that there is no such reason and therefore we must consider them equally regarding suffering and well-being. It might be that our intuition is stronger when we consider our obligation to help a human suffering. We perhaps have a stronger feeling of obligation or guilt if we ignore a suffering human being than if we do the same with a sentient nonhuman being. However, here reason checks intuition and gives us reason to question it. There are many differences between humans and animals but it is hard to pinpoint one that would justify inconsistent treatment of the two when we are considering well-being/suffering.

It is often the case that animal welfarists are criticized by environmentalist for endorsing a view that entails absurd obligations, such as having to police nature to prevent predation and the suffering it causes. Writers such as Everett³⁷ have argued that it is not true that animal welfarists are necessarily committed to such an extent. She argues that some of the critique confuses value gained and value lost in different situations. She means that there are significant differences in the cases that environmentalists often use as examples. These differences weaken their arguments considerably.

Part of the critique is that it is inconsistent to condemn recreational hunting on a consequentialist basis since it contributes to disvalue (animals die), and then to not condemn predation where animals also die. Everett argues that this simple way of looking at it might be persuasive but that is because one is focused on the loss in both cases. What one also needs to consider is the gain in each case. In the case of predation it is a necessity to sustain the life of the predator, in the case of recreational hunting it is not done out of necessity since there are other options available to the hunter to sustain a life of the same quality. In this sense, the hunting

³⁶ <https://www.nature.com/scitable/knowledge/library/intrinsic-value-ecology-and-conservation-25815400>

³⁷ Everett 2001

seems unnecessary and it is difficult to justify the disvalue that it creates, whereas in the case of the predator killing its prey is based on necessity for the continued survival of that predator³⁸. Everett argues that the suffering caused by predation in the wild might very well be, all things considered, outweighed by the flourishing of predators in nature that would otherwise not survive. This might be so even if the suffering in the different cases is quite different, since a skilled hunter may kill an animal painlessly and predation rarely is as clean as the shot of a well-aimed rifle. These kinds of examples confuse what is gained and what is lost and Everett therefore maintains that they do not show that animal welfarists are committed to condemn predation as environmentalists often claim. Everett writes: “It is no excuse for the human hunter to claim, “what I am doing to this animal is no worse than what would probably be done to it eventually by some other animal.” The relevant question is whether what he or she is doing is worse than what he or she otherwise could do” (Environmental Ethics, Animals Welfarism and the Problem of Predation p.8).

Another way to get out of the obligation of policing nature would be to, on a consequentialist basis and in terms of aggregation, argue that the system in nature of predators and prey, essentially, “survival of the fittest” is the one that as a whole is the best one in terms of contribution to a balance of both ecosystem and individual well-being. It is a way to agree with the environmentalist side that ecosystems can be valuable, but the argument is based on consequences and not any intrinsic value of such natural entities. This might however be stretching it a bit far, since writers such as Horta³⁹ have showed that just by a quick contemplation of the mechanism prevalent in nature, where predation plays a big part, suffering and disvalue seem to heavily outweigh well-being. This seems to indicate that nature without predation would be a better place.

MacClellan⁴⁰ makes the tension between the two views very clear by identifying two different intuitions. One he gets from Scanlon while the other was coined by Palmer:

“Welfarist Intuition: Pain – whether that of rational creatures or nonrational ones – is something we have prima facie reason to prevent, and stronger reason not to cause.

Laissez-Faire Intuition: [W]hile we should care for and assist domesticated animals, we should just leave wild animals alone” (Minding Nature p.4).

However, MacClellan maintains that they do not always have to be in contention over every issue. For example, intervention in cases of natural disaster or injury with the aim of aiding suffering animals can easily be conjoined with an environmentalist agenda. Often an environmentalist would advocate the same action merely based on different reasons such as preservation of biodiversity. In other cases where animal welfarists advocate the elimination of

³⁸ Oscar Horta gives an excellent example of the gains and losses in different cases in his example of “the fox, the rabbit and the two vegan food rations” in “Disvalue in Nature and Intervention” 2010

³⁹ Horta 2015

⁴⁰ MacClellan 2012

predators or even the domestication of all animals for their own wellbeing, environmentalists are hard set against such ideas.

3.8 Problematic Predation

As mentioned before, predation poses a particularly challenging problem when considering disvalue in nature. It would seem easier to administer food or shelter to animals than to protect prey from predator and still satisfy the predator's needs. The suffering caused by predation is hardly our fault and therefore many would say we do not need to bother, but due to the disvalue it creates we have to ask seriously whether we ought to prevent it.

It seems clear that human beings, as moral agents, should give up predation and turn vegan if we value the well-being of sentient beings. The problem lies in predation in nature between predator and prey that are not moral agents. Common objection to such an idea is a practical one: "how could we ever possibly manage to actually prevent predation in the wild?" But there are options available. We could for instance exterminate all predators. This, however, might not be a feasible option since many typical prey animals tend to reproduce in large numbers so that at least some of the individuals being born will survive and reach adulthood. This would mean that if predators were removed, we would probably see issues with overpopulation in many species and this might end up causing more suffering than predation did. For instance, a world without predators might lead to mass starvation due to lack of resources caused by a massive population growth. McMahan calls this argument "the counterproductivity argument"⁴¹ and concedes that this might be a valid argument in current time but also points towards possible ways around it in the future with advancement in research and technology. In certain ways predation might be preferable to other outcomes when one considers the overall well-being in nature.

One way to control the herbivore population if predation was removed would be to sterilize a certain amount of individuals so that the species did not exceed the level of sustainable numbers. This, however, would require advancements in medicine since most options today are based on surgery. There are other methods available such as injection, implants or oral bait, but these suffer from the impracticality of not being permanent solutions and would require regular administration to be effective⁴².

It can also be difficult to establish exactly which animals are predators. There are the obvious examples of lions and tigers but the reality is that many animals that typically are not thought of as predator will not pass on the chance to prey on other animals if the opportunity presents itself. For example, deer that are typically regarded as herbivores have been observed eating snails at times.

⁴¹ McMahan 2014

⁴² Hampton JO, Hyndman TH, Barnes A, Collins T. 2015

Predation is a very complex issue when considering nature in terms of well-being and disvalue. The three-N-principle (discussed in 3.2) would suggest that most of it (not predation by humans since it strictly is not necessary) must be allowed. If one accepts this, it has large consequences of what kind of interventions we ought to make in nature. It would still be possible to argue that we ought to help animals in the wild when they suffer from disease, starvation or natural disaster of various kinds, but not predation. Some philosophers, such as MacClellan⁴³, have tried to argue for intervention in nature but try to circumvent the conclusion that a commitment to eliminate predation is necessary. Others such as McMahan⁴⁴ seriously suggest the elimination of predation but point out that more research and advancement in technology is needed before we can proceed.

3.9 Futility and Priority

The notion of intervention in nature can come across completely futile. One could with good reason argue that there is simply no way we could ever prevent all the suffering in nature, least of all, suffering caused by predation. It is simply not feasible. Only God could do something like that and we are not God. However, there are those that claim that such arguments are unpersuasive. To look at the project as a whole and give up is to give up too easily. Sapontzis⁴⁵ writes: “That a condition is one we cannot attain does not disqualify it from being a useful moral ideal”.

There might be a relevant question of how we justify putting resources into helping animals in the wild when there are people in our world suffering from, for example, starvation or extreme poverty. This is a complicated question since this text claims that animals and humans should be considered in the same way regarding suffering. However, this question seems to carry some intuitive weight. It is not unreasonable to ask whether we should prioritize members of our own species. I believe this has to do with relation and how we sympathize with a being that is suffering. It is simple to argue that it is easier to relate and sympathize with another human being than for instance a deer, and if we swap the deer with a fish or frog this point becomes even clearer. Quite naturally we have less in common with these beings than we do with beings of our own species. Also, our way of expressing, for instance, distress is clearer in cases between beings of the same species. However, is there a legitimate argument here? Does my relating more easily to a member of my own species work as a legitimate argument for prioritizing them over beings of other species or is it merely a form of speciesism? This question is indeed problematic if one wants to argue that there should be no such priority given whatsoever. That might be unrealistic and too far from how human emotions such as compassion or empathy

⁴³ MacClellan 2012

⁴⁴ McMahan 2014

⁴⁵ Sapontzis 1984

actually function. On the other hand, accepting such priority seems dangerously speciesist. As in the case where there is nothing morally out of place with a mother caring for her child and prioritizing her child's well-being over other children, there might be a similarity here where one cares more for other humans and would prioritize their well-being over other animals.

Consider the following quandary; I got myself into a situation where I have to prioritize. The stakes are the lives and well-being of a human and a non-human animal; let's say a mammal of some sort. I have the option to save and spare one of them a great deal of suffering, but only one. I save the animal and let the human die. This would be perfectly fine from a consequentialist point of view as long as it could be shown that the amount of well-being or suffering would be the same no matter what choice was made or that in fact the animal would experience more well-being than the human. In spite of leaning on a normative theory that give a distinct answer in this case even the most concerned advocates of animal welfare would probably have a hard time defending and explaining such action to general inquiry of why the human was not saved instead. Maybe there is something important in how we relate to another being and how we empathize with it. Could this be used as a legitimate argument or does one collapse into speciesism? Either way, what is important for this text is that since both beings are sentient they deserve the same status and considerations before we decide how to act. It is important to keep in mind that in cases where one has to prioritize, such prioritization does not mean that the neglected part does not share equal moral status, merely that it was not possible to act in way that fulfilled one's moral obligation to both parties. As in the example given before the mother is allowed to prioritize her own baby but this only goes for extreme cases where circumstances force prioritization, the same would not be morally acceptable in other cases. A mother would be allowed to save her child from danger over saving someone else's child, however, were that other child and danger and the mother could intervene and did not, this would be wrong.

3.10 Examples of Aiding in a Concrete way

Sometimes the idea of aiding wild animals is seen as futile. Such views fail to notice the different projects already taking place. Even though the aim was perhaps not always the reduction of suffering in nature, there are plenty of examples where humans have done some excellent work for the benefit of certain animals in the wild. One such example is the vaccination of rabies. Rabies is a viral disease that animals and humans can incur. The disease causes fever and inflammation of the brain which has various effects such as anxiety, agitation, paralysis of throat (difficulties swallowing) etc. Rabies is almost always fatal. Although there is no treatment to cure rabies once one has contracted the disease, there is a vaccine to prevent the spreading of it⁴⁶. There have been several successful vaccination projects to prevent the spreading of rabies not just to humans but among animals as well. In the US it has been successfully eliminated in

⁴⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabies>

several regions. With humans or with domestic pets the vaccine is easily administered through a shot but it is also possible to administer orally. This has been done by putting out bait that contained the vaccine for wild animals to eat to acquire immunity. This has successfully eradicated or severely reduced the disease among animal populations such as raccoons or coyotes in the US⁴⁷. The motivation for this was perhaps more for the benefit and safety for us humans and our pets, but there can be no denying that this also benefits the wild animals that otherwise might have contracted such an awful and deadly disease. Putting the question of motive aside, this is a clear example of how we can do concrete and substantial work to reduce suffering in nature.

Another example is the research and identification of the PDV virus that caused an epidemic among harbor seals in the North and Baltic Sea in 1988. The infectious disease killed over 17 000 harbor seals in that year alone. However, with some serious effort, solid research and several nations working together, the mysterious epidemic was found out to have been caused by a virus closely related to one previously known to infect dogs called CDV. This closely related but still different virus was called PDV and there were successful tests done using the already known CDV vaccine to immunize seals for PDV⁴⁸. It was also shown that seals were able to produce antibodies naturally to fight off the virus. Today seals living in the wild are not vaccinated due to the difficulties involved when administering the vaccine to wild marine animals, however, the vaccine for CDV can be used successfully on individual seals in rehabilitation centers to prevent them from future contagion⁴⁹.

A third example is WWF's "flagship species" the gorilla. Today WWF is working to protect all great apes since they are facing many threats. Some of the largest threats to gorillas are loss of habitat and hunting. The forest area is shrinking due to expansion in logging, agriculture and road building. The hunting of gorillas is mostly for meat⁵⁰. Efforts are being made to protect both the gorillas' habitat as well as their lives. In 2002 the WWF set up the "African Great Apes Programme" which aims, through cooperation of several African nations, to protect these animals. Again, this work seems to be motivated mainly on conservational grounds but that does not mean the individual gorilla's well-being is not increased when having enough habitat to sustain its way of life and enjoying protection from poachers. One cannot deny that the work being done is important from an environmentalist as well as an animal welfarist view.

Examples like these show that it is not only very possible to aid wild animals in meaningful ways but also that it is not as farfetched as one might first think. The two first examples mentioned are

⁴⁷<http://www.animal-ethics.org/wild-animal-suffering-section/helping-animals-in-the-wild/vaccinating-healing-sick-injured-animals/>

⁴⁸ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/19186428.pdf> (Mass Mortality in Seals Caused by a Newly Discovered Virus-like Morbillivirus)

⁴⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4276944/>

⁵⁰ http://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/endangered_species/great_apes/gorillas/threats/

disease related and the third has to do with protection, but they all go a long way to show that we can make a difference for other sentient beings beside ourselves. This also goes for other cases such as malnutrition/starvation, injury or natural disasters etc.

4. Analysis

4.1 The argumentation

The fact that many animals are sentient beings coupled with the intrinsic badness of suffering, forms the basis for intervention in nature, intervention to alleviate suffering and thus reduce disvalue. The argumentation for this thesis is quite straightforward. The first part simply stipulates the badness of suffering. Then, if one can show animals can suffer in a relevant sense the subsequent conclusion would be that it is bad when animals are subjected to circumstances causing them to suffer.

Furthermore, one can argue, not only that suffering is bad, but also that we have an obligation to intervene and aid a suffering human being if possible. Based on this, again if one can show that animals can suffer in a relevant sense then one should accept a third premise that; animals are equal to humans in the relevant moral sense regarding suffering.

Here one can draw the conclusion that: there exists an obligation⁵¹ to help animals in the same sense as we should help humans. To argue otherwise would need a conclusive argument that shows some significant and relevant difference between humans and animals, anything else would be speciesist. I cannot find any such argument. From this, one can gather that there are two options available: either we give up on trying to establish certain moral obligations to those in need or we expand the circle to include all sentient beings.

In spite of this, many believe and argue that we ought not to intervene in nature. Let us look at some common views and arguments which oppose intervention in nature with the aim of aiding animal suffering and analyze and answer them accordingly. The counter-arguments I have tried to account for earlier can be listed as follows:

1. The argument that nature is a neutral moral landscape.
2. The argument of nonintervention.
3. The argument of animals' competence and autonomy.
4. The sentience argument.
5. The responsibility argument.
6. The argument of relation.
7. The reductio ad absurdum argument.

I believe that none of the presented arguments effectively dismiss the notion of aiding suffering animals in the wild.

1. The argument that nature is a neutral moral landscape.

⁵¹ Here obligation means prima facie reason.

Nature is natural but it is not neutral if one refers to value versus disvalue in terms of well-being and suffering. It can be shown even without exact empirical data that the mechanisms of evolution create an abundance of disvalue. It is a misconception to claim that what is natural is also neutral. It all depends on how one defines neutral, and if what we are concerned about is the suffering of sentient beings, then nature is far from neutral.

2. The argument of non-intervention

Mankind has evolved into what it is today as part of nature. To want to fundamentally change nature is to try to transcend it, something we should not do since we are part of it, not above it. This argument depends on what it refers to, to simply change nature is something humans have always been trying to do. We manipulate it to benefit or profit from it in many ways.

Sometimes notions such as these are met with the simple argument: “mankind should not play God”. One can really wonder what it means to play God. If it is as simple as changing nature, then we humans play God all the time. Maybe it has to do more with changing the fundamental system that seems to be built into nature? Again, we seem to do this in various ways already. So, why should we not play God? If the aim is to maximize well-being and minimize suffering then intervention would be the right thing to do. From a consequentialist perspective there is no wrong with acting this way as long as it leads to good consequences.

The way Donaldson and Kymlicka propose to approach the idea of nonintervention is to view the wild animal kingdom as a sovereign state. We do not have the authority to intervene or interfere in its business. This argument is certainly interesting but also problematic. To change the view from a moral to a political one does not make it any simpler and one risks losing certain important elements. First of all, how do we determine the wild? Wild animals are to be considered part of their own sovereign state but what exactly defines the wild and its wild inhabitants? There is most likely no clear definition for this which makes it practically problematic. It is one thing to refer to wild animals as animals living outside of human care/constraints and another to try and define the wild as something similar to a state. Secondly, in cases of intervention between political states, there are times when such intervention might very well be justified. For example, in cases of famine, natural disasters or when a regime is oppressing its inhabitants and force them to live in conditions of great suffering, intervention might be called for.

3. The argument of animals' competence and autonomy.

Another way to argue for non-interference in nature would be to point to animals' competence to fend for themselves. Something along the line of: Why should we concern ourselves with animals when they are fit to fend for themselves and do not need us to babysit them? Wild animals are free and independent creatures. This, however, does not make them invulnerable. There is an enormous amount of suffering in nature. Wild animals have the ability to fend for

themselves but that does not mean that they always manage to successfully do so. If they fail to fend for themselves we ought not to ignore their misfortunes and suffering on the technicality that they have this ability. One sometimes speaks of competence, meaning that wild animals have the competence to look after themselves and survive in nature. While this is true to some extent it is also misguided. Every day there are uncountable examples of individual animals losing the “fight for survival” and falling prey to predation, starvation, disease etc. Even the most well adapted still struggle periodically due to the many unfortunate circumstances and strenuous trials nature presents.

4. The sentience argument.

Perhaps some animals are sentient beings but far from all of them. It is notoriously hard to empirically measure the experience of pain. Even so, many tests indicate that many living creatures are sentient. There are cases that are more difficult, such as determining the sentience of clams or jellyfish, but in many other cases it seems clear that vertebrates do in fact experience pain and can suffer. This is supported by the Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness.⁵²

Another version of the sentience argument is: even if many non-human animals are sentient they cannot compare to humans in regards to suffering, therefore we should mainly focus our moral attention to humans. This might be a sound argument if we can show that this is the case. However, it still gives us no reason to ignore wild animals that actually do suffer, it merely allows a certain priority as to where we put most of our effort in aiding and alleviating suffering.

5. The responsibility argument.

We have not caused the suffering of wild animals and are therefore not obligated to aid them. If I have caused you harm I am obligated to help you but if I have not caused your suffering I am permitted to help but not required. This is a suspicious notion of only being obligated as long as one is responsible. It is easy to show that this is not the case if we think about a scenario where a human being is suffering from a disease. If I have medicine to cure the disease of another person it seems untenable to argue that since I did not cause the disease I am not obliged to give him or her the medicine. One might even go as far as to say that it would be cruel of me to deny him or her the medicine. To seriously state that I am allowed to help but not required, even though providing the medicine would increase the sick person’s well-being, seems too liberal. I believe we all would condemn such behavior and reject a moral theory that condoned it. It is backwards to think that an obligation comes from having done something to or for someone. So, if this is what intuition tells us when we consider human beings, and this moral intuition is based on the fact that human beings are sentient beings, then it seems difficult to escape the same conclusion

⁵² <http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf>

when it comes to other sentient animals. On the basis of sentientism there should be no difference in the case if we swap the suffering human for a sentient animal. Granted that if I am in fact responsible for another being's misfortune that being may have an even stronger claim on me than if I was not responsible, but that is not to say that there is no obligation if I am not the cause just that there might an even stronger claim if I am.

6. The argument of relation.

Some argue that obligations come with relations. This is somewhat similar to the previous argument but instead of focusing on whether I am responsible for having caused your misfortune it focuses on the whether we stand in a meaningful relationship that entail certain obligations. If we have no relation to truly wild animals then there exist no obligations towards them. There can exist obligation towards animals that I stand in relation to in some relevant sense, say pets or animals I share the close environment with. The line can be drawn a bit differently, but as we have seen above, there are those like Palmer⁵³ who argue that domesticated animals stand in a dependent position to us and therefore we have a special relationship to them that comes with certain moral obligations. Wild animals are not dependent on us in this sense and therefore we do not have the same obligations to them.

The issue with such a view is that it might seem clear if we consider for example my dog (a dependent pet) and a polar bear (a truly wild animal living in the remote wilderness), however, it becomes a lot less clear when we consider other animals, the kind of animals Kymlicka call "liminal animals".⁵⁴ These are the kind of animals that live close to us but are not domesticated, many types of birds, rodents like rats and squirrels and other mammals such as deer and raccoon. These are just some examples of animals that are wild in the sense that they are not domesticated but live in or in close proximity to our society. We can hardly claim that our habits and actions do not affect these animals. Many of these animals adapt to our lifestyle and make use of it, like rats and raccoons living off what we throw away, or birds and deer seizing the opportunity to feed in our gardens. In this way it is truly difficult to maintain that I have no relation to these wild animals. And as we have seen, the practices of humans have come to have a truly global impact on almost all wild environments of the planet. This creates a relation to wild animals such as polar bears as well.

More importantly, the underlying reason for aiding a domesticated or wild animal is its well-being. Furthermore, the thesis of this text is that we should care for the well-being of sentient beings in virtue of nothing else than their sentience. Therefore, Palmer's argument is

⁵³ Palmer 2015

⁵⁴ Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011

hardly persuasive. If we are to be consistent and base our view on sentientism, then we should care about the well-being of sentient beings regardless of if they are wild or domesticated.

7. The reductio ad absurdum argument.

If we actually were to agree to the idea of an existing obligation to minimize suffering among sentient beings, there would be no end to the cost of such a project. Simply put, it is too demanding practically and too much to ask of us as moral agents. It would be absurd.

I believe this is a serious challenge to the idea of aiding animals in the wild. It would be very demanding. One could very well claim that it would be too demanding and absurd. However, doing the right thing often is demanding. The argument based on a reductio is not the classical Kantian notion of ought implying can. We are not powerless or completely incapable when it comes to making meaningful changes in the lives of animals in the wild. We can do a lot, perhaps not everything, but still a lot. When dealing with moral questions there sometimes seems to be a trade-off between effort/costs and the desired result. I do not think that one should dismiss the desired result as impossible just because it might be hard to reach. It is a cop out to give up before one has started because it is too hard. It is also a mistake to try to do all at once, a thousand mile journey begins with a single step. McMahan puts this well in the following quote:

“But unlike political action, moral philosophy is not a matter of strategic calculation, manipulation, and compromise. Its aim, as I conceive it, is to discover the truth about matters of morality. If we are ultimately to act in conformity with the real demands of morality, we must know whether we have moral reason to try to reduce the incidence of predation or perhaps even to eliminate it, if that becomes possible. The fact that the vast majority of people worldwide would now find it preposterous to suppose that we have such a reason provides little reason to suppose that they are right, just as the uniformity of opinion about the ethics of slavery among whites in the antebellum South provided little reason for supposing that it can be permissible to kidnap and enslave other people.” (The Moral Problem of Predation p. 4)

Moral progress is an important aspect of the aim of moral philosophy. Progress in general is often demanding and takes effort. To care about the well-being of animals in the wild will require more of us than what we are doing right now, but that should not be a reason to shirk certain obligations that comes with being moral agents. As mentioned earlier in the text, it might be useful to regard certain moral obligations which are especially burdensome as Sapontzis calls

it “useful moral ideal”⁵⁵. It might be near impossible to realize these ideals but we should still strive to get closer to them.

None of the arguments above give us definitive reason to ignore wild animal suffering and to exclude wild animals from the sphere of moral considerability. In many cases the supposed disagreement and dissension between environmentalists and animal welfarists poses no practical problems. If one argues that we ought to intervene in nature in cases such as disease or disaster relief, there is little tension between the two views. In fact, many projects have been undertaken to aid animals and certain species with the aim of preservation and environmental aims. This can be done with the aim of preservation or promotion of well-being or both at the same time. So, there is common ground for the two views and one can argue for conjoined efforts based on correlations in nature that would suggest an interest both in nature and in individual well-being. For example a study published in PNAS⁵⁶ by Ceballos et al⁵⁷ shows that population of wildlife is decreasing and that this has negative effects on ecosystems as a whole. The issues seems to lie in how far we ought to go. Meddling in predation would be going too far according to environmentalists while that is not necessarily so for animal welfarists.

4.2 Is Preventing Predation Futile?

As mentioned, predation poses a particular problem to minimizing disvalue in nature. The abolishment of predation often gets written off as a pipe dream. Considering how widespread predation is, a project to just minimize it easily comes across as futile. There are three main ways of looking at the problem of predation:

1. We weigh the wellbeing of the predators versus that of their prey and conclude that the overall value gained outweighs the disvalue. This might be hard to show. It seems that the relative gain in wellbeing for the predator does not outweigh the suffering and death of its prey. Especially since the gain is only temporary and the predator soon has to kill and feed again to survive.
2. One might argue that predation does contribute more to disvalue than value in nature and that we ought to remedy this for an overall better world. However, there is no feasible way to do this and it seems unlikely that there will be one in the foreseeable future. Due to this, we might argue that we do have obligations to aid animals that suffer from for example curable diseases or starvation where we can provide food, but that it is too much to ask of us to put a stop to predation. This is a conclusion based on pragmatic reasons.
3. We argue that we ought to do what we can to, in fact, put an end to predation in nature. This is a rather radical stance since the most feasible way to do this with current methods would be to

⁵⁵ Sapontzis 1984

⁵⁶ Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America.

⁵⁷ Ceballos, Ehrlich, Dirzo 2017

exterminate predators. This can be done painlessly by sterilization and would take some time but ultimately it could be done. This option, however, strikes me as too grand of an idea and comes with many issues. To consider all the different consequences of exterminating a species is extremely difficult. There is also a problem with how the food chain works to keep populations in check. If predators diminish and go away, we can expect a rise in numbers of other species that would create new problems with resources. Then mankind will have the task of controlling population so that they do not exceed the limit of sustainability. If we are to entertain this notion we need to be incredibly careful and research all the possible outcomes meticulously before taking action.

If the minimization of predation seems futile with the technology we currently possess, maybe that is not where we ought to focus our efforts. If our aim is maximize well-being or at least minimize suffering. Where can this be done most effectively? Where can we do most good? As stated earlier, studies have shown that in today's world, wild mammals only make out a small part of the total amount of living beings. Is this where we ought to focus our efforts? Maybe we could improve the total aggregated well-being more if we improve the lives of domesticated animals and humans. This could be a strong argument for where we should focus our efforts and that in fact wild animals is not the point of focus. Wild animals still matter in the same sense as domesticated but their numbers are fewer and therefore less impactful in the overall picture.

4.3 Three Animals and Three Intuitions

I think we have different intuitions in different cases and it would therefore be helpful to try and clarify these since they might serve as ground for how we chose to act. I shall try to illustrate this with the following argument from analogy.

If I came across another person in distress, say he or she has been in an accident, and I am capable of aiding him/her, most of us would agree that I ought to help. The very least I could do would be to call for help so he or she gets taken care of. This is because this person is a sentient being who at the moment is in pain and is suffering. With aid, his/her suffering could be alleviated. If I were to simply ignore his/her condition even though I am capable of improving it most, if not all, of us would say that what I did was wrong.

If we use the same example and switch the person with an animal, our intuitions might change. If the animal that is suffering is some kind of domesticated animal, let's say a pet of some sort, most of us would probably say that we ought to act and aid the pet. To do otherwise would be wrong.

But what if I find a bird, a wild animal, with an injured wing on my Sunday walk or in my garden? This bird is clearly in pain and is suffering. Is it reasonable to argue that I should try to aid this bird and alleviate its pain? I believe so. In fact I think most of us would want to aid the bird somehow when it is sitting there on the ground in front of us clearly in need.

Then what about animals in the wild? Say that the same bird is no longer in my neighborhood but in the vast wilderness, but equally injured and equally destitute. Does this change our intuitions? Our obligations? Our reasoning? One injured bird somewhere in nature is of course a straw in a haystack and how are we supposed to know it is in need and even more so how are we to find it and help it? But let's take a more obvious example: there is an unusually harsh drought on the savanna in Kenya. Animals are suffering from dehydration and are starting to succumb to the heat. We can keep track of this since we have noticed the drought ourselves. We have water supplies so we are not in any immediate danger but there are more and more evidence that the animals in the wild need aid, this evidence comes in the form of dead animals. We could start a rescue and relief project where we would pump water to the local waterhole where the animals come in search of water. Is this something we should do? Would it be wrong not to act? What does intuition tell us?

Even if one did not live anywhere near the drought and therefore did not experience the intense heat or witness the corpses of the animals that succumb to it, one could still help. If a project was started to provide wild animals with water in this time of need and it would need funding. Should one donate to such a project?⁵⁸ Could it be argued that one is obliged to contribute? This might be contested but it might be difficult for the opponent to come up with convincing arguments for their contention. Based on the fact that the animals suffering are sentient beings and that we could alleviate their suffering, then we ought to do this in order minimize suffering. The best way to proceed can be discussed, perhaps this is something that should be handled by the government or certain specially created organisations. The point is, if our intuition tells us we ought to help the pet and we have a similar intuition regarding the injured bird, then we ought to help the wild animals suffering in the drought as well.

4.4 Action

The argument from analogy seems to provide us with reason to intervene in nature to aid suffering animals. This argument draws its force from intuition in cases that are equal when considered rationally. I believe this argument supports the claim that we do have moral obligation towards wild animals. However, there is one more aspect that needs to be considered if one wishes to go a step further and claim that we should intervene in nature. Such a claim is ultimately stating that we should carry out certain acts. Even if a moral obligation can be

⁵⁸ There is in fact such a project today driven by Patrick Kilonzo Mwalua. He delivers water to wild animals in times of drought and has a gofundme page to raise money for his project.
<https://www.gofundme.com/tsavoelephantguardian>

established one can still ask whether an act that intervenes in nature is the right one. The argument from analogy gives us a moral obligation but would intervention be the right act? This is a question that requires one to take a normative stance and commit to a normative theory. Previously in this text many examples have been considered from a consequentialist view and this is not a coincidence. It is common for animal welfarists to subscribe to consequentialism of some form since what they value is the subjective experience of good. This is also the criteria for the rightness of an act according to classical consequentialism, an act is right if it brings about the best possible consequences, i.e. that which creates the most good. What would consequentialism say in the case of intervention in nature then? The badness of pain and the fact that vertebrates are sentient beings able to have good or bad experience give us reason to intervene, but would it be the right action according to consequentialism? Before one tries to answer this we need to distinguish between positive and negative consequentialism since they are likely to reach different conclusion.

Positive consequentialism is concerned with maximizing the good. I have previously defined the good as well-being, essentially, meaning good experiences. Considering the suffering present in nature one might hastily draw the conclusion that we ought to intervene and not only try to alleviate this suffering but also actively do something to increase the amount of well-being sentient animals experience. This could be done in many ways, such as, building shelters, putting out feed or creating organisations that deal with animal disaster relief.

This might seem straightforward enough. However, positive consequentialism also seems to give unwanted results when aggregation is considered. One of the most famous examples of this is Parfit's repugnant conclusion. Parfit reached the conclusion that: "For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better even though its members have lives that are barely worth living" (Parfit 1984). This is a serious challenge since it seems overall counterintuitive.

Would negative consequentialism fare any better? If we assert that it is not the maximization of the good that is the aim, rather it is the reduction of the bad, suffering in this case; do we get a more plausible path? Again there are many options available to alleviate suffering among sentient beings in nature, but it seems that negative consequentialism also run into counter intuitive conclusions, such as exterminating all animals in the wild. One could argue that if there were no animals then there would be no suffering and this would be the best possible world. The reasoning would be that if the conditions in nature are so awful, then not existing would be preferable. If we are not to completely eradicate wild animals as a whole then at least maybe we ought to painlessly euthanize those who suffer. A way to oppose this line of reasoning is to argue for death as an extrinsic harm. It seems incompatible to argue that we should end the lives of animals to spare them harm if we by doing so would harm them by robbing them of future possible good. Then again, a negative consequentialist might not value any such good and therefore oppose this line of reasoning. One could also consider mankind confining wild animals

and make sure that their needs are seen to so that they live good lives. Maybe the consequentialist view can be modified in some way to escape counter intuitive conclusion such as the ones mentioned above, but if one were to reach the conclusion that consequentialism is not a favorable theory for arguing for intervention nature then what are the alternatives? One could turn to other normative theories based on rights or care, or consider a welfare state for wild animals. To find the most suitable normative theory for the advocacy of intervention in nature will be a philosophical project for the future. For now, it is possible to argue that the argument from analogy gives us sufficient reason in itself. It is enough to show that we do have obligations towards wild animals and this makes it plausible to argue that an act that fulfills that obligation is the right one. If aggregation and maximization of the good lead to counterintuitive results but we can affirm a strong intuition in the argument from analogy this is enough to criticise today's anthropocentrism.

5. Conclusion

Should we intervene in nature to prevent suffering in the wild? It seems so. After all, intervention in nature is not a completely new idea. Vaccination or conservation programs are not foreign ideas. There are many examples of such programs taking place in today's world. Such examples of possible intervention show that there are ways we can aid and benefit wild animals. The view that intervention in nature is futile can be somewhat countered by showing that it is very possible to make a meaningful and concrete difference for the well-being of wild animals. On top of that, it seems to be our intuitive reaction to care about sentient beings that are suffering. Most of us would, when finding a bird with an injured wing, pick it up and try to help it in some way.

The thesis of this text is rather cautious. I claim that if one accepts sentience as a baseline for moral considerability, we do have moral obligations towards wild animals (as well as domesticated ones). The normative and epistemological starting points for this text suggest we ought to, at the very least, consider wild animals in the overall moral calculation. This seems clear regarding vertebrates. In order to pinpoint our moral obligations it is essential to affirm what beings are sentient in a relevant manner. Therefore, it is a crucial task for scientist to continue their research in this field in the future. This will ultimately determine what beings are within our moral scope. As it stands today, I believe that for now we should focus on aiding vertebrates. This is because we can establish that they are sentient in a relevant sense and therefore matter morally. That is not to say that invertebrates do not matter at all. Whether they are sentient in a relevant sense requires more research. If they prove to be sentient that may very well change everything since invertebrates outnumber vertebrates in nature. However, in order to make meaningful strides we need to start somewhere and I believe we can make a real impactful change to the well-being of vertebrates.

The topic of intervention in nature on moral grounds will have widespread consequences for us as moral agents and on society as a whole, depending on what conclusion is reached. We might be heading towards a future where the circle of our moral considerations is wider and will include all sentient beings. This would mean that there will be a heavier moral responsibility to shoulder. In present time we can find many practical problems with intervention in nature and some argue that it would not be feasible. There are limitations to what we can achieve with current methods and knowledge but that is not to say it is hopeless. There is a lot we can already do and with research there will be even more we can achieve in the future.

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