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Welcoming, Wild Animals, and Obligations to Assist

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Abstract

What we could call ‘relational non-interventionism’ holds that we have no *general* obligation to alleviate animal suffering, and that we do not typically have *special* obligations to alleviate wild animals’ suffering. Therefore, we do not usually have a duty to intervene in nature to alleviate wild animal suffering. However, there are a range of relationships that we may have with wild animals that do generate special obligations to aid—and the consequences of these obligations can be surprising. In this paper, it is argued that we have special obligations to those animals we have historically welcomed or encouraged into our spaces. This includes many wild animals. One of the consequences of this is that we may sometimes possess obligations to actively prevent rewilding—or even to *dewild*—for the sake of welcomed animals who thrive in human-controlled spaces.

Keywords Animal ethics · Wild animal suffering · Dewilding · Rewilding · Urban animals · Welcoming · Encouragement · Hospitality · Special obligations

Introduction

Over the past decade, a philosophical case that we have strong obligations to aid wild animals in need has emerged (see, e.g., Faria, 2016; Horta, 2017; Johannsen, 2021). After all, it is argued, there is a great deal of suffering in nature, animals’ suffering matters, and we could be doing something to alleviate that suffering. So, we should.

This is far from a solely theoretical endeavour. Activist organisations have begun to support providing aid to wild animals. This is not to conserve species or ecosystems, nor to protect wild animals from human encroachment. It is to help wild animals overcome the challenges they face in the natural course of their lives. At time of writing, Wild Animal Initiative is one of Animal Charity Evaluators’s ‘Top’ charities (ACE, 2021). Part of the reason for this is the relative neglect of wild animals

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among activists, but its inclusion nonetheless indicates that wild animal suffering is far from a niche concern among activists.

Nonetheless, lots of animal ethicists and activists are surprised by conclusion that we should be intervening to alleviate the suffering of wild animals.¹ If we want to resist the conclusion, there are several strategies we could adopt. We could argue that wild animals may have relatively good lives (cf. Browning & Veit, 2021), that harm to animals should not motivate us to act (cf. Ebert & Machan, 2012, pp. 152–4),² or that harm to animals is outweighed by the value of natural relationships (cf. Sagoff, 1984). Or, we could acknowledge the *theoretical* viability of intervention, but challenge the feasibility, practicality, or utility of championing intervention (cf. Purves & Delon, 2018).

Some of the most interesting challenges to intervention, however, have come from people who affirm the value of animals, yet offer principled arguments against intervention. They affirm the significance of the different relationships that humans have with animals, arguing that the relationships that humans have with wild animals justify (or demand) a hands-off policy—we should, in the words of Tom Regan, ‘let them be’ (2004, p. xxxvii). Champions of this approach include Clare Palmer (2010) in ethics, and Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) in political theory.

In this paper, I begin with this ‘relational non-interventionism’, and explore where it might take us. Strikingly, there are a range of possible relationships that people can have with wild animals that—even on this apparently non-interventionist account—justify strong positive duties. My focus will be on one that has been overlooked. Many wild animals have been historically encouraged and welcomed into spaces by humans. And this creates a relationship between humans and those animals that could ground strong duties to aid. These duties may have surprising consequences, even though they arise from an apparently conservative theoretical approach. Contrary to the claims of many environmentalists, who champion *rewilding*, we may have a *prima facie* duty to *dewild* certain spaces—or keep them from being rewilded. That is, we may have a duty to create or maintain artificial, apparently human-dominated spaces for the sake of wild animals. Among the many and various proposals for what taking animals seriously might require of us, this is one that has gone unexplored.

Note, incidentally, that this is not a proposal simply arguing that dewilded spaces will involve less animal suffering than wild or rewilded spaces, so we have a duty to dewild. So-called *pavers* argue that we should ‘pav[e] paradise and put up a parking lot’, as sung by Jodi Michell. The argument is that

we have very good reason to believe that destroying habitat will reduce the number of wild animals who come into existence, and if most wild animals have net negative lives, then reducing the number of wild animals who come into existence will increase total utility. So, insofar as we ought to increase

¹ Indeed, it has traditionally been used as something of a *reductio* of pro-animal positions (Sagoff, 1984).

² Rainer Ebert and Tibor Machan do not commit to the claim that we have no duties to animals, though Machan (e.g., 2004) has defended something like this.

total utility, we have moral reason to destroy animals' habitats. (Fischer, 2021, p. 1)

I am no paver. Nor am I arguing that we should take control of habitats and ecosystems to minimise suffering, such as by favouring ecosystems replete with large herbivores (Horta, 2017, 275). That may be a kind of dewilding. Instead, I argue that the obligations we have to *particular* wild animals sometimes give us a reason to create or preserve non-wild spaces. This argument is independent of any claim about minimising suffering.

The paper will advance as follows. I will begin by outlining the theoretical background of the argument. I will then defend my core claim: That A's historical welcoming or encouragement of B grounds certain key *prima facie* positive duties towards B for A. Examples follow, illustrating how this innocuous-sounding duty provides support for a surprising conclusion: We are sometimes obliged to dewild spaces for the sake of animals who do (or would) live there.

Interventionism and non-interventionism

Many defences of intervention to limit the suffering of wild animals—hereafter, *interventionism*—are consequentialist in character (see, e.g., Horta, 2017; Sebo, Forthcoming). It is easy to see why. There is much suffering in nature. We could lessen that suffering. And if we are consequentialists³ we will believe, roughly, that if we can do something to lessen suffering, then, all else equal, we should. The devil is in the details—for example, it might not be clear that we *could* do something to lessen this suffering. But even if a particular consequentialist is a non-interventionist in practice, they should support intervention in principle. Perhaps, indeed, there is good reason to think that they should today support tentative first steps towards future intervention (see Ng, 1995). Examples of these first steps might include research on ecology, genetic editing, political practicalities, veterinary epidemiology, and so forth.

Other non-interventionists are non-interventionist in principle, as well as in practice. That is, they oppose intervention (or permit non-intervention) not because of worries about feasibility, effectiveness, or similar, but because they do not think that suffering alone is a sufficient reason for intervention.

Some principled defences of non-interventionism can be put aside. For example, we could think that the suffering of animals is not a particularly compelling reason to act, and reject interventionism for that reason (cf. Ebert & Machan, 2012, pp. 152–4). Some others might affirm that the value of 'the natural' (or similar) is sufficient to give us decisive reason *not* to intervene in nature (cf. Sagoff, 1984). Other defences of non-interventionism, however, do not seek to either diminish the significance of animal suffering, or to argue that it is justified by some other value. It is these defences with which I am presently concerned.

³ I am imagining utilitarianism, or a close relative.

The argument goes like this. All animal suffering matters. But the extent to which a particular instance of animal suffering grounds a duty for a particular agent to act depends upon the relationship that said agent has to the suffering or the animal experiencing it. To be obligated (or even permitted) to aid, the agent must have a particular kind of normatively salient relationship to the suffering or animal. To put it another way: There is no *general* obligation to aid animals in need, but facts about our relationships with particular animals may generate *special* obligations to aid them when they are in need.

This may sound abstract, but it is perfectly familiar. My failure to aid my dog when she is suffering because I have chained her in a barren yard without food or water seems monstrous. My failure to aid a stray dog who frequents my street when she is suffering because she is without food or water may seem heartless, but it is hardly monstrous. My failure to aid a wolf I see upon a hike who is clearly starving is unlikely to evoke much moral disapproval at all. In each case—beloved companion, homeless stray, wild wolf—the suffering is comparable, and the suffering beings themselves are comparable. (There are not many differences between companion dogs, stray dogs, and wild wolves—all are sentient, all have similar intellectual and emotional complexity, and so forth.) But the relationship between the suffering (or the suffering being) and me are different in each case, and thus the special obligations I possess are different.

In the case of the companion, there are a host of relevant relationships, and all could be special-obligation-generating. The companion's suffering has been caused by me. The companion's dependence on me has been caused by me. The companion's *existence* may have been caused by me. There are likely to be certain affective relationships (love, friendship, admiration) between me and the companion—or there may once have been. And so on.

When it comes to the wolf, there are no such relationships. I have no straightforward causal relationship with the suffering of the wolf, and nor do I have any straightforward causal relationship with the wolf herself. (That is, and perhaps in sharp contrast to my companion dog, I am not straightforwardly responsible for her existence, the vulnerabilities/dependencies fostered by her genetics,⁴ or similar.) I have no affective relationship beyond the one created by my seeing her at this instant. Thus, it is possible that I have, at most, very few special obligations concerning this wolf.

The other case falls somewhere in the middle. I have *some* relationship with the stray—I know her as a neighbour of sorts, and perhaps recognise that I am part of a community that has led to her being in need. These may generate weak special obligations. Perhaps, then, we might think the following: I am *required* to aid my dog, and it would be *unjust* for me not to do so. It would be *good* for me to feed the stray, and *bad* for me not to. It would be *supererogatory* for me to feed the wolf, but it would *not be wrong* for me to fail to do so.

⁴ Compare Palmer (2010, p. 92) on 'internal dependencies'.

I do not commit to that conclusion⁵—my point is that such a conclusion makes sense. But it makes sense even though the level of suffering and facts about the suffering being herself are comparable in each case. An argument like this gives us a non-consequentialist response to the interventionist. It gives us a non-interventionism that, first, is principled (i.e., it is not opposed to interventionism in practice only), and, second, affirms the high value of animals.

But perhaps this is too quick. Why deny that we have general obligations to aid wild animals? Incidentally, one does not need to be a consequentialist to recognise such obligations. Perhaps we have a duty of beneficence to aid wild animals in need (Johannsen, 2021). Denying such a duty forces a dilemma upon the animal ethicist. It seems to entail that *either* there is no duty of beneficence to humans in need, *or* it entails that we have different kinds of obligations to humans and animals. The former horn of the dilemma sounds surprisingly libertarian—relatively few ethicists will embrace the conclusion that we have no obligations to aid distant human strangers in need.⁶ (That said, the libertarian can endorse duties to aid distant strangers. They will just deny that they are duties of justice.) The latter sounds surprisingly speciesist—relatively few animal liberationists will embrace the idea that there is a bright moral line between humans and animals.⁷

Palmer (2010) defends relational non-interventionism. A close look at her response to the possibility of a duty of beneficence will be instructive. She borrows from Samuel Scheffler (1997) to argue that moral responsibilities can ‘emerge out of membership in some common group’ (Scheffler, 1997, p. 190), and from Leslie Pickering Francis and Richard Norman (1978) to identify the common group created by the ‘network of rich interhuman relations’ (Palmer, 2010, p. 121). The problem⁸ is that this common group seems to include many animals. The ‘global human community should, to be consistent, be extended to a global “mixed” social community, including all humans and the nonhuman sentient animals with whom humans have strong social relations’ (Palmer, 2010, p. 123). Thus, the global mixed social community may include wild animals, undermining Palmer’s principled non-interventionism: If duties of beneficence are owed to other humans because they belong to the global social community, but wild animals *also* belong to that community, duties of beneficence are owed to wild animals—and thus relational non-interventionism ends up advocating intervention.

The question becomes whether wild animals are a part of this mixed social community. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) stress the *particular* community formed by the co-relations between humans and domesticated animals (see also Smith, 2012; Valentini, 2013). Alasdair Cochrane (2018), meanwhile, argues that humans, domesticated animals, and wild animals *all* share in a ‘community of fate’, and thus that, to paraphrase Palmer, ‘strong social bonds’ are formed between humans and

⁵ Maybe there are other sensible readings. Perhaps I am required *not* to feed the wolf—in so doing, I may illegitimately interfere with nature, or put other humans at risk.

⁶ We could adopt a libertarian approach to animal rights (Milburn, 2018).

⁷ Tzachi Zamir (2007) is one self-confessed speciesist animal liberationist.

⁸ It is a problem both for non-interventionists and speciesists.

wild animals. How much Palmer's affirmation of a mixed human/animal social community undermines her support for non-interventionism depends on how large the social community is appropriately thought to be.

Bonds between (potential) members of a social community are not the only special-obligation-generating relationship that may be important in responding to relational non-interventionism. In many cases, humans have morally salient relationships with the harm experienced by wild animals, as they have *caused* the harm. A significant—albeit complicated—example is anthropogenic climate change (Palmer, 2021). Due to climate change, particular animals lose food and habitat; are impacted by extreme weather; are displaced or predated by animals fleeing other habitats; and so on. At the extreme, species are driven to extinction. Given the causal relationship between the harm experienced by these animals and humans, the animals have a claim to human assistance. The case is difficult (partly) because it is impossible to identify *particular* humans who are responsible. Questions about putting right the wrongs of climate change to humans, let alone animals, have prompted a complex and contentious academic literature.

Beka Jalagania (2021) explores another relationship that can maintain between humans and wild animals in need. Many humans *benefit from* wild animals. We have a responsibility to share benefits with those who contribute to their production, and we can share benefits with wild animals through minimising their suffering. The examples that Jalagania draws upon include photographers benefitting from charismatic wildlife; stressed people benefitting from birdsong; and documentary-watchers benefitting from the wildlife profiled. But the argument could be expanded. Given that humans benefit from the 'ecosystem services' animals provide, we may have special obligations to assist many different wild animals (cf. Blattner, 2020).

These arguments—drawing upon social bonds with wild animals, causal responsibility for wild animals' plight, and benefitting from wild animals—show the following. Even if we accept the relational non-interventionist's claim that there is no *general* obligation to aid wild animals, there are a range of *special* obligations that may ground a duty to intervene.⁹ Thus, the relational non-interventionist position turns out to be not nearly as non-interventionist as it first seemed.

My objective in the remainder of the paper is to draw attention to another such relationship. This is a worthwhile activity for two reasons. First, it outlines another set of circumstances in which intervention to aid wild animals may be required, even for the relational non-interventionist. Second, this special-obligation-grounding relationship has some surprising consequences. In particular, it sometimes offers a justification for what we might call *dewilding*: The creation or maintenance of artificial spaces, for animals' benefit. More on that later.

⁹ *May* because the special-obligation-generating relationships may not pertain, and because we may want to challenge the claim that a particular relationship *is* special-obligation generating.

Historical Encouragement

My proposal is that one special-obligation-grounding relationship between humans and some wild animals is that the latter have been *historically welcomed* by humans. By this, I mean that these wild animals have been deliberately encouraged to inhabit certain areas or behave in certain ways; I do not simply mean that humans have created a space that happens to be attractive to them.

If I invite someone into my home, I gain some responsibility for their wellbeing. If I open my garden to the public, I gain some responsibility for visitors' wellbeing. If I build a park for local children, I have some responsibility for the wellbeing of the children while they play. If my house is decrepit, my garden overrun with biting insects, or my park prone to fall apart, visitors have some claim against me. I would not have the same level of responsibility if people just started visiting my house, garden, or park without my knowledge or blessing, *even if* there is a clear sense in which I share in some *causal* responsibility for any injuries that befall the visitors. (If I did not have an enticing home, garden, or park, no one would have entered.)

But there is also a stronger sense in which individuals might have a claim against someone who has encouraged their presence. Imagine a landowner creates a campsite for people to live in, giving every impression that this space will be theirs to live in indefinitely into the future. She does not cede ownership rights or anything so extreme, but she encourages people to join her in this space, gives no sign that the space will change uses, and welcomes them there with things they like—food, amenities, protection. Imagine that the landowner is so welcoming that some of her guests 'sell up' and move in permanently, siting mobile homes and similar. The residents would have a claim against the landowner were she to declare one day that the site was going to become a lake. (Indeed, there is a chance they would have such a claim in law, and not 'merely' a moral claim—but legal rights are not my focus here.) This might be *in part* because the campers have become dependent on the landowner. In this case, that would include, but not be limited to, a dependence on her inaction. But it is deeper than this; it is because the landowner has *encouraged* them to be present at this site that there is a special obligation that she seems to be violating in turning the site into a lake.

To see why, consider the case of the individuals who set up caravans without the landowner's blessing—without her knowledge, perhaps. In this case, the residents foster a dependency on the landowner; it is her land, they (let us say) take food from her stores, and so on. With or without permission, the residents are dependent upon the landowner, but in one case there seems to be a particular wrong in the landowner turning the site into a lake. This is because of the particular relationship she has with the residents and/or their current situation. Not only do the residents rely upon her in some sense, but she seems to be responsible for this, through her positive action.¹⁰

Might the wrong be explained in terms of 'legitimate expectations' (Brown, 2017)? The thought is that A's legitimate expectation about B's future conduct is

¹⁰ Is being responsible for dependence the same thing as inviting someone? No – there are cases in which they come apart. Both, it seems, are plausibly special-obligation-generating relationships.

something that should influence B's decision-making. So, in this case, the residents' legitimate expectations about the landowner's maintenance of the site should influence the landowner's decision about the lake. *Prima facie*, the residents would be wronged, as the landowner would act against their legitimate expectations, and thus disrupt their life in significant and morally questionable ways. But the residents need good grounds for their expectations about the site to be *legitimate* expectations. The landowner's welcoming provides this.

Another way to think about the landowner's wrong is in terms of trust—the residents trust that the landowner will maintain the site, and her wrong is violating that trust. But why do the residents trust the landowner? It is precisely because she has welcomed them. Trust, like legitimate expectations, seems to be another way to underline the moral significance of welcoming.

So, invitation, welcoming, and explicit encouragement seem to form a special-obligation-grounding relationship. I have left open the precise nature and strength of the special obligation created. For example, it is consistent with what I have argued that only a limited obligation is created. Take my landowner case: it is possible that the strength of the special obligation pales in comparison with the strength of the landowner's right to do what she will with her land.¹¹ Or perhaps the special obligation can be discharged relatively easily. In the case of the open garden, perhaps I could discharge my obligation by putting up a warning sign or providing medicinal cream. The obligation being comparatively weak or easily discharged differs, however, from it not existing.

It is my contention that the duty I have outlined applies to many cases of interactions between wild animals and humans. That is, humans have encouraged the presence of particular wild animals, and thus have some responsibility for their well-being, and a *prima facie* duty to aid them. Not only is this consistent with the relational approaches associated with non-interventionism, but it has some surprising consequences.

Objections

Distinctiveness

Perhaps I have not identified a distinctive obligation. It may sound like I am not arguing that we have an obligation to aid certain others, but that we have an obligation not to harm certain others. This is not so. In the case of the creation of a lake, I am plausibly talking about something harmful. (My reason for this case will become clear later.) But in the case of the biting insects, I am talking about taking actions to prevent the harm of irritating bites (like hanging a sign) or acting to alleviate it (like providing abirritants). While historical encouragement may generate special

¹¹ This is consistent with the claim that, though permissible, it would be morally suboptimal for her to turn the campsite into a lake.

obligations not to harm that supplement existing duties not to harm,¹² it also generates special obligations to aid. For example, I have a *prima facie* duty to aid those invited into my garden when they are hurt—I do not have the same duty to aid those who hurt themselves in my garden when they have not been invited. If a passing pedestrian wanders across my lawn and twists her ankle, there is a sense in which it is not my problem. If, however, I invite the pedestrian to see my flower beds, and she twists her ankle, I have a *prima facie* duty to offer her aid: fetch her a chair, prepare a cold compress, or similar. While the proposed special obligation can manifest in duties of non-maleficence, it can also manifest in duties of beneficence.

It may also sound like I am simply reiterating the already-discussed special obligation generated when an agent is responsible for the harm experienced by another. In a limited sense, this is true. Saying that A encourages B to do an action that leads to harm to B is not the same thing as saying that A is causally or morally responsible for the harm that befalls B. But it is usually to say that A has *some* causal or moral responsibility for B's harm. If an invited visitor to my decrepit house falls down the stairs, I have some moral and causal responsibility for the harm of the fall, even if not as much as if I literally pushed her.¹³ But these things exist on a continuum. It would be a stretch to say that I did not kill a mouse but merely 'encouraged' her into a trap by placing some cheese. Equally, though at the other end of the spectrum, it would be implausible to say that I killed a mouse by laying out cheese for her, if, on the 100th night I had put out food, she was killed by an owl I had no reason to believe visited my garden.

Understanding

Is there any reason to believe that we would not have obligations of this sort to wild animals, even while we do with humans? One potentially relevant difference is that wild animals do not understand, we may think, what it means to be welcomed or invited. Many humans, on the other hand, do.

The first thing to say is that individual wild animals can and do interpret cues regarding invitations and welcomes—and, on the flip side, rejections and warnings. And this can lead to personal relationships between individual humans and individual wild animals developing. But I do not want to rest on the potential for clear communication between humans and animals to make sense of obligation I am proposing.

This leads to the second response. We can make sense of the idea that encouraging or welcoming individuals into our spaces generates obligations to those

¹² Or create new ways in which we can harm. Perhaps replacing the campsite with a lake harms in the case in which the landowner has encouraged the presence of the campers, but not in the case in which she has not—in the latter, the campers have no right to the space. Perhaps we cannot be harmed by losing access to that to which we have no right: The mugger harms by taking a wallet; the victim does not harm by taking it back.

¹³ There are counterexamples. If I welcome or encourage someone to enter my property but they do not know this and they enter—they believe against my wishes, and then injure themselves, it seems that I am not *causally* responsible for their injury (or not because of my invitation).

individuals regardless of whether the individuals understand the welcoming and/or encouragement. If I am socialising with a mixed-species group of humans and dogs, I do not need to worry much about whether the dogs *understand* or *appreciate* my invitation when I place a collection of toys on a lawn. I am doing something wrong if I place the toys in a place that will be harmful for them—say, if the lawn has been treated with aggressive pesticides—precisely because, in welcoming them, I am assuming some level of responsibility for their safety. (The degree to which we take on this responsibility depends on a multitude of factors.) One way of putting this is the language of *hospitality*. When one welcomes another into their space, one takes ‘responsibility for the overall welfare’ of the guest. ‘Traditionally the most important responsibility of all was for the guest’s safety—hospitality was a kind of sanctuary, and the host was thought of as having undertaken a solemn obligation to make sure no harm came to his guest while under his roof’ (Telfer, 1996, p. 83). But nothing about the ‘solemn obligation’ of hospitality depends upon the object of hospitality understanding herself to be an object of hospitality.

It might sound odd to talk about extending hospitality to animals, but this is not so. Hospitality is ‘the giving of food, drink, and sometimes accommodation to people who are not regular members of a household’ (Telfer, 1996, 83). If we allow a sufficiently flexible account of ‘people’, then the welcoming of animals into our spaces—say, feeding garden birds—seems like a paradigm example of hospitality (Milburn, forthcoming, chap. 4). Indeed, a close look at hospitality tells us much of interest about the present case. Hospitality carries with it a certain kind of intimacy (Telfer, 1996, 93). The extension of hospitality is not about company in general—it is about company with the particular other to whom hospitality is extended. And so it carries with it particular obligations to that other, and not just to anyone. Indeed, we are not obliged to extend hospitality to everyone. Hospitableness is, at best, an imperfect duty, or optional virtue (Telfer, 1996, 96); it cannot be offered to everyone. It may be right to refuse to extend it in some cases (Boisvert, 2014, 1184). For instance, my duties of hospitality towards the lamb prevent me from extending hospitality to the wolf (Milburn, forthcoming, chap. 4).

But, might say my critic, if an idea of trust is doing work in the examples I am forwarding, animal understanding does seem to be presupposed. In important senses, it *does* seem like animals can trust us, that we can violate that trust, and that this violation entails important wrongs (Cooke, 2019). So, it is plausible that a trust-based account could be applied to animals, including wild animals.

Something similar could be true of legitimate expectations. Does *this* idea not presuppose understanding? It is the legitimacy of the expectation, rather than the expectation itself, that grounds the normative salience of the legitimate expectation—it is the legitimacy of the expectation that means that one has been *prima facie* wronged when the metaphorical rug is pulled from under one’s feet. The wrong comes from the fact that someone has planned around the expectation—up to and including ordering their life around the expectation (think of the campers who ‘sell up’). Yet, through no fault of their own, this expectation is shattered. Let us be clear that animals can structure their lives around expectations that they will continue to be able to utilise a certain space, just as humans can. And let us observe, once again, that to welcome another—human or animal—is to offer them some assurance that

they may safely use space. It seems, therefore, that the idea of legitimate expectations can make sense of both the special obligation that intuitively exists in the cases explored, and the importance of the welcoming as an explanatory factor—even without positing full understanding on the animals' part.

Those wanting to argue that animals' lack of understanding undermines my argument may find that their objection backfires. It is conceivable that animals' lack of understanding means that we are *more* likely to have obligations towards them. This is a possibility offered by Gary O'Brien (personal correspondence). He allows that inviting human adults into a space grounds duties in a way that merely enticing them (say, by cultivating a particularly attractive space) does not. However, when it comes to animals, he says, it is

plausible that I have strong duties towards them even if I merely enticed, but didn't invite, them in. This is because (i) animals aren't moral agents—they can't be held responsible for 'trespassing' on my property in the way that adult humans can and (ii) animals are generally less competent to navigate dangers (especially unfamiliar manmade dangers) than adult humans are, and hence they are more vulnerable. (personal correspondence)

This means that, assuming I have built a very attractive playground in my back garden, I am not morally responsible for injuries experienced by adults who invite themselves in. But children lack moral agency, have lower capacities to resist, and are more vulnerable to harm than most adults. Thus, if a child enters—thinks O'Brien—I may be morally responsible for any harm she faces. Many animals are relevantly like children in these regards: that is, they lack moral agency, they have lower capacities to resist temptation than do adult humans, and could be more vulnerable to harm than adult humans. (Of course, this is not to deny that there may be many *other* morally salient differences between human children and animals, and it is not to say that all animals are alike when it comes to, say, their vulnerability.) If this train of thought is heading in the right direction, then one may gain obligations towards children, animals, and other relevantly similar individuals merely through enticing, even if not actively inviting, them. The line between (say) the birds I have *invited* through hanging feeders and the mice I have *enticed* through planting beans is blurred, morally speaking. But let us put this possibility to one side, and remain with the idea that it is inviting, and not merely enticing, that is special-obligation-grounding.¹⁴

Countervailing Considerations

Might we have other reasons to be sceptical about extending this duty to wild animals? Proposals to aid wild animals are frequently met with scepticism because of humans' poor track record when it comes to intervening in nature. Let us concede that human interventions in nature have often had very bad results for animals.

¹⁴ Of course, they may both be.

Donaldson and Kymlicka point to a case of mass-culling, supposedly in the interests of conservation, when the choice to cull was based upon a model of populations that did not account for natural patterns of population growth and decline (2011, p. 163). In this case, humans' limited understanding of ecology had bad results both for animals and for conservation goals.

This does not undermine my argument. It is possible that the wrong of imposing risks on animals through ham-fisted interventions outweighs the *prima facie* duty to aid generated by our relationships when our understanding is limited. But this is not to deny that there is a *prima facie* duty to aid. It is simply to argue that, in some cases, it would be inappropriate to act upon the *prima facie* duty, as there are weighty countervailing concerns. Indeed, it might suggest that we have reason to actively improve our understanding, so that we are in a better position to aid in the future.

Does this suggest that the proposed special obligation is impotent? It is one obligation among many. And its strength and reach will vary. Putting out seeds for birds in our garden does not oblige us to care for those birds for the rest of their lives, but it does carry with it obligations to make sure that our spaces are minimally bird-friendly. For example, it would be wrong to put out seed when we know that there are multiple bird-hungry cats in the garden. It would even be wrong—though perhaps excusable, given people's ignorance—to put out bird seed when doing so will spread disease, because feeders are not regularly cleaned.

Garden birds—typically—have plenty of other options than eating in *this* garden. Small obligations are generated by one-off or intermittent welcomes. Weightier obligations are generated by welcoming someone indefinitely. Weightier obligations still are generated by welcoming someone when said welcoming leads to them having few or no other options. Indeed, there may be a fine line between indefinite welcoming of a wild animal and domestication. Intuitively, we have small obligations to an occasional houseguest while she is a houseguest. We have greater obligations to someone who we have invited to live in our house. And we have greater obligations still concerning the person who, in accepting our invitation to come and live in our house, burns metaphorical bridges. Short of serious countervailing considerations, it would be monstrous for (to retell the Parable¹⁵ for present purposes) a Samaritan to welcome a man into his home, knowing that this means that the man now faces indefinite ostracism from his people, only to cast him out again a few days later. What is striking, however, is that this precisely what we do with some wild animals.

There is another complicating factor, too. It is one thing to talk about the welcoming of a particular discrete individual by a particular discrete agent, and this agent's consequent obligations towards the invitee. But what is often going on in

¹⁵ In Christian tradition, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is told by Jesus in response to the question of what one must do to be granted eternal life. (It is recorded in chapter 10 in the Gospel of Luke.) Jesus tells of a traveller attacked and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest and a Levite pass him by, but a Samaritan bandages his wounds and puts him on a donkey. The Samaritan takes the man to an inn, cares for him, and pays for his stay. To be granted eternal life, Jesus says, one must do likewise, and love one's neighbour. The significance of the rescuer's identity is that Jesus' Jewish audience had a hostile relationship with the Samaritans—but thought highly of priests and Levites.

the case of wild animals is that *groups* of wild animals have been invited and/or welcomed by *groups* of humans—sometimes recently, sometimes historically. While considerations like this certainly seem to *lessen* the obligations owed to particular wild animals (and make identifying the agents responsible for these duties difficult), it is surely plausible that the invitation and/or welcoming continues to carry normative weight.¹⁶

Indeed, it is *precisely* this sort of historical, population-level interaction that motivates the relational non-interventionist's claims that we have duties to domesticated animals that we do not have to wild animals. In an important passage (cf. Sachs, 2019, pp. 94–95), Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, pp. 79–80) compare the history of domestication to the North Atlantic slave trade, arguing that even if domestication was unjust, it grounds continuing positive obligations to domesticated animals.

Case Studies

The special obligation defended in this paper could have some surprising results. The fact is that we have *not* encouraged or welcomed all wild animals. But we have encouraged some—and we have encouraged them into very particular spaces. What this means is that we might have an obligation not to 'rewild' these spaces, even when the opportunity arises. Instead, we have at least *prima facie* reason to *dewild* them—to preserve them as, or make them into, or return them to, human-controlled spaces, *for the sake of the animals who live there*.

In this section, I will offer two case studies displaying the starkness of this proposal, demonstrating what a relational approach could mean for duties to wild animals. These animals are not paradigmatic wild animals—Donaldson and Kymlicka would frame them as *liminal* animals—but they live outside of human control. They are free to come and go; they are 'unowned'; they are not *domesticated* in the Latin sense (that is, they are rarely present in houses).

Urban Animals

Historically and contemporaneously, certain wild animals have been welcomed and encouraged in urban environments. Ponds are dug in parks to attract ducks, where they are fed by children. Birds of prey take up residence in boxes on towers and cathedrals, where they are monitored to the delight of naturalists. Cats and dogs roam streets, sometimes fed, sometimes befriended, sometimes sheltered. What is clear is that some wild animals are welcomed into urban environments; their presence is encouraged. As argued above, this creates a particular kind of relationship between humans and these animals, grounding a *prima facie* duty to aid the animals when they are facing hardship.

¹⁶ Issues of non-identity also enter, as our actions in aiding living animals will lead to the creation of animals who would not otherwise exist. The duties that we possess might translate into duties to the descendants of those we had initial obligations to—whoever these descendants turn out to be.

One kind of hardship faced by these animals comes about when their relationship with humans is artificially severed—if, for example, new by-laws prohibit the feeding of pigeons in places where they were previously encouraged (Palmer, 2003). Now, this is not to say that we necessarily wrong pigeons with such bylaws. But it is to say that we owe them consideration when these laws are being crafted—alternatives should be offered. If this a matter of a few pigeons no longer being fed in a particular location (say, a hospital deciding to no longer hang feeders in a courtyard), then that is one thing. The pigeons can find food elsewhere, and so are not in particular need of aid. But if it is a case of many pigeons, or pigeons over a large area, no longer being fed, the duty grounded by the historical relationship calls for more attention, precisely because these pigeons may now find themselves in need. Could the feeding be phased out gradually? Could the pigeons be welcomed elsewhere? Could contraception humanely control pigeon populations to ensure minimal harm? I am not saying that these options are uncontroversial—but they are the sorts of things that need to be considered, precisely because of the historical welcoming.

In contrast, those urban animals who have *not* been historically welcomed—rats, say¹⁷—need not be considered to the same extent. Consider a change in food-waste disposal practices, leading to rats having less access to food. This may adversely impact rats, but the different kind of relationship we have with them provides at least *a* reason to say that we do not need to be *as* concerned as we are obliged to be about the pigeons. Or consider gulls, who often thrive at landfill sites, feeding on scraps. They are not welcomed at these sites, and so we should not be concerned about our impact on the gulls if we change our landfill practices. Or if we should, it is not because we have welcomed them.

Of course, many animals are welcomed by some humans, and actively discouraged by others. While urban pigeons (descendants of domesticated birds, complicating matters further) are fed by tourists and cared for by activists, they also face hostile architecture designed to keep them off buildings and bird feeders designed to keep them out. Are these animals welcomed, in the morally salient sense? Surely, the fact they have been welcomed by *some* people gives them a claim to assistance, even if not as much as more universally welcomed animals. Responsibilities, too, are going to lie more strongly with those involved in welcoming than with those who have not welcomed them—though this may not be to deny that we all have *some* responsibility towards urban pigeons that we do not have towards wild rock doves. There is a messiness, here. But that messiness reflects the complicated and paradoxical relationships and history that we have with these animals.

But changes impacting welcomed urban wildlife could be much broader than simply a change in bylaws around feeding. Let us envision a particularly stark possibility. Imagine we saw massive, rapid human depopulation, in response to a pandemic,

¹⁷ There are two complicating factors. First, many people feel some disgust towards rats, meaning that this may do some work in the intuitive plausibility of excluding rats. Second, some people *do* welcome rats, even if it may be much less common than welcoming (say) garden birds. It is hard to think of urban animals who would *not* be welcomed by at least some people. Small fish or (sentient) invertebrates living in urban waterways may provide examples of animals neither welcomed nor considered aversive.

changing birth trends, or similar. Imagine this rapid decline in population saw some cities almost entirely depopulated. This would be a bad thing for the urban wildlife depending upon our presence in cities. This includes those we have welcomed, who may have come to rely on the warmth, light, shelter, and especially food generated by our presence.

Normally, the idea of depopulated cities raises the prospect of *rewilding* spaces—making these spaces ‘natural’, allowing animals to live free from human interference. But what I am suggesting is that, given the special obligations we have to certain urban animals, we have at least some reason to be opposed to rewilding these spaces. Instead, we have *prima facie* reason to continue to ‘use’ these spaces: to continue to put up nest boxes, spread food, heat buildings in the heart of winter, and prop up collapsing roofs. In a word, there is good reason to think that we should *dewild* these spaces, *for the sake of the animals who inhabit them*. After all, they benefit from having access to these non-wild spaces, and might not have any other (potential) home—and we have special obligations, because we have historically welcomed them.

Farmland Animals

One might worry that many of the animals who thrive in urban environments—invited or otherwise—are highly adaptable. Indeed, that is the point; they have been able to move from the ‘natural’ environments favoured by their ancestors to develop new ways of life in cities.¹⁸ Even if humans were to stop using these urban spaces, these animals—it may be thought—would move on to new environments where they could thrive.¹⁹ But some animals living in human-controlled spaces are specialised, meaning that changes in human practices leave them in danger. Take farmland birds. These are animals who have traditionally thrived in ecological niches created by human farming practices. Changing agricultural methods—such as changing use of pesticides and other chemical interventions, more intensive land use, mechanisation, and so on—present threats to individuals and whole populations. In the United Kingdom, for example, farmland specialist species such as corncrakes and grey partridges underwent dramatic declines in the latter half of the twentieth century, moving from familiar rural birds to localised populations under threat of extinction.

In response to population decline, some conservationists, landowners, and farmers have sought to change farming practices to explicitly encourage the animals to come back. So, for example, certain farmers have left larger areas uncultivated, or even simply changed how they utilise farming machinery.²⁰ Now, actions like this

¹⁸ Some urban animals, though, have ‘internal dependencies’ (Palmer, 2010, p. 92), meaning they have little prospect of life away from humans. The existence of these internal dependencies is surely itself normatively significant.

¹⁹ This answer is too quick many would suffer and die in the transition.

²⁰ A stark example is the introduction of corncrake-friendly mowing practices. Ploughing from the inside of fields moving outwards rather than the reverse, for example, is more corncrake friendly—it gives chicks chance to escape, especially when combined with green spaces around the edge of fields. This is something that some Scottish farmers, working with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, have adopted, leading to an increase of corncrake numbers. See Barrett 2017.

could be taken to simply prevent adverse effects on wildlife. That would surely be commendable. But when it comes to the ‘conservation’ of charismatic birds like partridges, buntings, and larks, actions stretch beyond nonmaleficence to an explicit encouragement of the animals’ presence and a welcoming if/when they arrive. Actively encouraging the presence of these animals, as argued, generates special obligations towards them.

This historical encouragement of farmland birds gives us *prima facie* reason to support dewilding of a different kind. Imagine if we were to collectively move away from agriculture as it is currently practiced, and towards indoor, vertical agriculture. This term refers to a range of agricultural practices from space-saving techniques used by home growers to proposals to grow food in skyscrapers. At its core is the idea that more efficient use of growing space can be made by growing *up*. In time, suggest indoor agriculture’s optimistic proponents, all of the plant food needed by humans could be grown efficiently, safely, and reliably indoors.

There are a range of reasons that we might support indoor vertical agriculture, tied to concerns about food security, food sovereignty, food safety, climate change, and more. But it is worth mentioning that indoor agriculture has been occasionally championed because it could limit harms to wild animals (e.g., Lamey, 2019, p. 89). Agriculture, even organic arable agriculture, causes harm to wild animals, such as those who are killed by farming machinery. A move to indoor arable agriculture, therefore, has the potential to limit harms to wild animals. One of the other putative advantages of indoor agriculture is that it allows space for rewilding. Once people are fed by space-saving indoor agriculture, agricultural land can be rewilded, with farmers retrained as caretakers (Platt, 2007).

But if we have special obligations to the animals encouraged to live in outdoor farmland—to corncrakes, buntings, partridges, larks, curlews, and the rest—this gives us a good reason to *not* rewild this land. (Of course, such a reason must be balanced against reasons we might have to rewild.) The argument against rewilding is bolstered by the fact that many of these historically welcomed animals are niche specialists. Unlike, it might be thought, the pigeons, foxes, peregrines, and so forth who have been encouraged and welcomed in cities, the farmland specialists need something very like *this* space. To rewild their spaces seems to be a wrong to them unless it is rewilded to a space suitable to them. This might entail *dewilding*, insofar as it is farmland to which they are, it seems, suited. At the very least, if *this* space is going to be rewilded, duties to those animals who have been encouraged could be discharged by the dewilding of some *other* space for their benefit. Maybe the land currently utilised as conservation-friendly farmland could be rewilded, while some other space could be dewilded, becoming an animal-friendly ‘working’ arable ‘farm’.

Why the scarequotes around ‘working’ and ‘farm’? I am not trying to argue against indoor agriculture, of which I am an advocate (Milburn, forthcoming, chap. 5). The reversal or prevention of rewilding—or even the complete dewilding of currently ‘wild’ spaces—for the sake of farmland animals is compatible with indoor agriculture. Farmers could continue to grow particular crops and manage the land, but primarily for the benefit of ‘farmland’ birds. Though this land has the

appearance of a working farm, it is really a kind of simulation: A dewilded space for animals' benefit.

This will cost money, but that should not be a problem. First, any *rewilding* activity requires funding—and the proposals of indoor agriculture's proponents are no exception. If some of that rewilding money should be allocated to dewilding, so be it. Second, agriculture, and especially wildlife-conservation-friendly agriculture, is already subsidised. Again, if some of that money should be reallocated to dewilding, that need not be a negative. Third, collectively, we are already willing to fund schemes to help farmland birds. While dewilding might sound like a curious way to spend conservation money, that will mostly be a matter of framing. The difference between a 'rewilded' farmland and 'dewilded' nature is surely one of degree.

Conclusion: A Case for Dewilding?

Not only can a relational non-interventionist approach ground strong duties towards certain wild animals—thus challenging interventionism—it can ground very surprising duties. Namely, it can ground duties to dewild, here understood as the active prevention of rewilding, the active maintenance of non-wild spaces for the benefit of the animals who live there, and, at the extreme, the turning of 'natural' spaces into human-controlled, 'unnatural' spaces.

My focus here has been on the creation/maintenance of certain kinds of habitats for animals' benefit. These are environments in which food, water, shelter, and more are provided for the animals to access if they so choose. But a separate conversation needs to be had about the extent to which historical encouragement justifies, requires, supports (etc.) more hands-on forms of aid: vaccination and medical intervention; the 'adoption' of orphaned young; intervention in food cycles; genetic editing; and so on (cf. Johannsen, 2021). Further, though my case studies focussed on large-scale, population-level relationships of encouragement, it should be clear that many of them can be adapted to an individual level. To repeat, nothing I have said here implies that anyone who feeds birds in their garden is obliged to care for these birds indefinitely into the future—not least because these birds surely have other options open to them. But perhaps people owe a little more to 'their' birds than they might to others.

Questions remain to be answered, especially about the strength of the obligations generated by (historical) welcoming. For example, I concede that I have conflated two different arguments. In one, the animals formerly encouraged to live in the land are the ancestors of the animals who currently live on the land. In the other, some of the animals formerly encouraged to live on the land are the *actual* animals who today live on the land. I think the obligation is clearly greater in the latter case. But there is plausibly a considerable obligation in the former case, too. After all, due to this historical welcoming, these animals may have nowhere else to go (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, p. 79), and they may be vulnerable and dependent because of human action (Palmer, 2010, p. 92). Indeed, some of these animals could exist because of us, which may be obligation-generating (O'Brien,

2021). But if this historical welcoming carries less weight, how much less? Just how beholden to our ancestors' welcoming of wild animals should we be?

I have also passed over complicated questions about the responsibility we might bear for the harm caused by the animals we have welcomed. Indeed, maybe the welcoming of predatory animals carries with it obligations to aid those prey animals they would otherwise harm (cf. Milburn, forthcoming, *passim*). More broadly, this opens contentious questions about conflicts between the interests of wild animals. What if helping the animals we have historically encouraged will be bad for *other* animals? I cannot offer formulas for working out what we should do in these cases. But I can point out that the duty I have defended here is a *prima facie* duty. It is entirely possible that other considerations will outweigh it in many real-world cases. But to work out whether they do, we need a fuller theory of our duties towards wild animals than I can offer here.

There is also further work to be done about the different kinds of encouragement and welcoming that humans have engaged in. For example, a particularly stark form of invitation and welcoming is the (deliberate) *introduction*. However, introductions are frequently disastrous. The ecological damage caused by cane toads and small Indian mongooses, for example, are well known. The treatment of 'invasive' species like these is a typical point of contention dividing animal and environmental advocates. But if, as I have argued, historical welcoming grounds a special obligation to aid welcomed individuals, it is possible that a double wrong is being committed against these animals if they are killed. Not only does the killing itself raise serious questions, but these are animals to whom, it seems, we owe particular *prima facie* duties of aid. It is my suggestion that we have at least some reason to hope that, in the future, rather than exterminating 'invasives', we will recognise that we have particular obligations to *aid* those invasives here at our invitation.

The starkest contribution of the present paper has been to recognise that we will sometimes have reason to dewild spaces, specifically for the benefit of animals. This is not because we need more space to look after or support animals directly under human care. Nor is it an attempt to reduce suffering among wild animals by reducing the number of wild animals. Instead, it is because dewilded spaces are exactly where certain wild animals to whom we owe special obligations will thrive. In conversations about our duties to wild animals, this possibility has been overlooked. That, perhaps, is regrettable.

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