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Version: Published Version

Article:

Pala, D. and Perry, M.W. (2026) Licensing pet-keeping. Ethics, Policy & Environment.
ISSN: 2155-0085

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2026.2682996>

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To cite this article: Davide Pala & Matthew Wray Perry (14 Jun 2026): Licensing Pet-keeping, Ethics, Policy & Environment, DOI: [10.1080/21550085.2026.2682996](https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2026.2682996)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2026.2682996>



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Published online: 14 Jun 2026.



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Licensing Pet-keeping

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ABSTRACT

Pet-keeping is one of the most widespread human-animal relationships in the world. Despite its prevalence, this practice frequently results in animal welfare violations, including neglect, abuse, and abandonment. Pet-keepers often fail to adequately understand how to care for and interact with their pet. This article defends a novel proposal to regulate pet-keeping: a scheme of state licensing. On this proposal, prospective pet-keepers would be required to obtain a license by demonstrating competence in caring for a domesticated animal before acquiring one. The article makes two significant contributions. First, it provides a robust theoretical defense of pet-keeping licenses. Second, it defends the feasibility of licensing, details the requirements it would impose, and suggests guidelines for plausible implementation. By extending regulation into the private sphere and setting enforceable standards for care, licensing can significantly reduce preventable harms to domesticated animals and better protect their interests.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 November 2025
Accepted 5 May 2026

KEYWORDS

Pet-keeping; pets; licensing;
animal ethics; animal rights

1. Introduction

Pet-keeping is one of the most widespread human-animal social relationships in the world.¹ One estimate is that over a billion pets are living in human households (HealthforAnimals, 2022).² Yet, violations of animal welfare, including abuse, neglect and abandonment, are ubiquitous. In the UK, the RSPCA reported that it received 61,000 complaints of abused or neglected pets in 2025 (RSPCA, 2026).³ Moreover, pet-keeping is a demanding and time-consuming practice that pet-keepers often engage in without adequate awareness of the costs, with a lack of knowledge of pets' basic needs, and insufficient preparation and research (PDSA, 2023).

This article argues that the state should implement a scheme of licensing to regulate pet-keeping and prevent pets from experiencing potential harms. Under this novel proposal, the state would require that prospective pet-keepers demonstrate adequate

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competence in caring for a domesticated animal. The article argues that this policy would significantly improve the lives of the billions of animals living in human homes worldwide.

Some jurisdictions have successfully implemented a limited form of licensing for pet-keeping. In Vancouver, Canada, dog-owners must obtain a license for regulatory purposes by simply paying a fee.⁴ In Lower Saxony, Germany, dog-owners must pass a 30-question theory exam and a practical demonstration that their dog is well-trained.⁵ In the UK, while there is not licensing for pet-keepers, the introduction of Lucy's Law in 2020 now means a license is required to breed and sell pets. This legislation requires businesses to meet several welfare conditions, including proving they abide by the Animal Welfare Act (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2020). These developments speak in favor of the feasibility of licensing regulations concerning animals.

Despite this, surprisingly few theorists have devoted attention to licensing pet-keeping.⁶ Cochrane (2012, pp. 131–136) and Milburn (2022, pp. 74–75) are the sole exceptions, yet neither offers a full defense of licensing nor specifies in detail the requirements it should involve. We fill these gaps. Our claim is that pet-keeping mirrors many practices already requiring a license, such as driving, practicing healthcare, selling certain drugs and alcohol, and to some extent the adoption of children. Our argument draws on LaFollette's (1980, 2010) claim that parenting should require a license, although we take no stance on that question. In this regard, it is worth noting that many of the objections to parental licensing either do not apply in the case of pet-keeping, or their force is far weaker, as we explain in due course.

Of course, animal ethicists and activists have widely discussed other ways in which domesticated animal interests might be protected. Measures include introducing legal personhood (Francione, 2008; Kurki, 2019), citizenship in human communities (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011) and political representation (Cochrane, 2018). However, one important advantage of our *non-ideal* proposal is that it is more readily implementable: it does not require dramatic changes to the status quo – though it also does not preclude the further changes just mentioned and can in fact pave the way for them, as we outline below.

Greater legislation is urgently required to *prevent* harms to animals' interests from taking place. Although animal welfare laws exist worldwide, these do not significantly help to stop animals from entering risky pet-keeping arrangements.⁷ In addition, regulations should extend into the private sphere where most pet-keeping takes place. In short, greater emphasis is needed on the standards that should be upheld in pet-keeping.

The article makes two significant contributions. The first is theoretical. In what follows, we argue that (i) pet-keeping involves a high risk of serious harms to pets, and (ii) ensuring adequate competence – through a scheme of licensing – will reduce the likelihood that pet-keeping results in these harms. LaFollette (1980, 2010) maintains that similar considerations already justify licensing activities like becoming a doctor, a lawyer, or a psychologist, but not activities such as cooking, skiing, or teaching in higher education, which carry both a lower risk and degree of serious harm. Unlike these lower risk activities, pet-keeping exposes animals to substantial potential harms, which should be prevented before they occur. Achieving this requires several forms of competence: adequate knowledge about the pet, an adequate ability to communicate with them, adequate living conditions, precautionary measures (such as pet insurance), and the right dispositions and attitudes. Licensing is an effective measure to ensure these forms of competence.

Moreover, while there are good countervailing reasons against licensing some activities – like sports or teaching, where less intrusive and equally effective regulations exist – the reduction in potential serious harm from licensing pet-keeping outweighs countervailing concerns. In the latter part of the article, we show that objections that might challenge similar proposals (such as LaFollette’s (1980) proposal to license parenting) do not apply in this case.

The second contribution of the article is practical. We outline the general form that a pet-keeping license should adopt, leaving context-specific details to local authorities. We also argue that pet-keeping licenses are feasible, even in the short term, and that this policy is defensible from a range of ideal theoretical standpoints. We conclude that licensing is a desirable, feasible, and plausible measure to protect domesticated animals kept as pets.

2. The Argument for Licensing Pet-Keeping

This section defends the claims that (i) pet-keeping involves potential serious harms and (ii) ensuring adequate competence in performing pet-keeping through licensing reduces the risk of harm. Therefore, pet-keeping ought to be licensed, mirroring other practices that are already regulated in this way, such as driving. In the subsequent section, we outline the criteria that a scheme of licensing for pet-keeping ought to respect, offering some examples and highlighting its feasibility in the short and medium term. In the final section, we respond to six objections, and in doing so show that no countervailing reasons outweigh the proposal to license pet-keeping.

2.1. Potential Harm

We assume that all sentient beings have an inherent moral worth based on their possession of interests. Since sentient creatures experience subjective mental states and thus have a stake in how their own lives are going, we owe them certain treatments for their own sake (Regan, 1983; Singer, 1975).⁸ The scientific consensus is that a wide number of animals are sentient (Andrews, 2024; Andrews et al., 2024). The public tends to recognize this, especially when it comes to pets.⁹

The interests of animals are of such importance that they ground duties on the part of moral agents (Cochrane, 2018; Regan, 1983). These interests amount to rights on a classical understanding (Raz, 1988). For instance, animals have an interest in continued life and in not being made to suffer, which are sufficiently important to ground duties on our part not to kill them and not to make them suffer. Importantly, these duties do not merely describe states of affairs which it would be good to bring about; instead, they are duties of justice which we should expect political communities to protect and uphold.¹⁰

The capacity for sentience is sufficient on its own to ground duties to pets (Perry, 2026a). However, it is supplemented by domesticated animals’ relationships of dependency on us.¹¹ As we illustrate below, domestication has made most pets dependent on humans for their very survival, and so being a pet-keeper triggers further, positive duties of adequate care. Political communities are therefore duty-bound to ensure that pet-keepers discharge these obligations. In particular, they are duty-bound not only to

sanction abusers but also to prevent abuse from occurring, in order to take animals' interests and rights seriously.

Pets have a wide range of interests that generate rights, and they are vulnerable to a wide array of potential harms. For simplicity, let us distinguish between two types of right-generating interests: *welfare* and *agency* interests.¹² Welfare interests concern domesticated animals' interests in those things essential to their welfare, including, notably, food, shelter, exercise, security, and healthcare, as well as adequate socialization and the avoidance of stressors. Welfare interests and the corresponding rights are widely recognized in the literature (Cochrane, 2012; Garner, 2013; Regan, 1983).

Less well-recognized is that most domesticated animals also have rights-generating agency interests, namely, interests in making and pursuing their own choices (Blattner, 2019, pp. 99–102; Healey & Pepper, 2021; Kurki & Siemienieć, 2025).¹³ Most of the animals we keep as pets are individuals with their own lives. Although they may lack the complex agential capacities of adult humans, such as those needed to form and pursue a certain conception of the good, they do possess intentional agency, defined as the capacity to act for reasons (Sebo, 2017; Wilcox, 2020, p. 1886). To illustrate, pets such as cats or dogs have preferences for certain kinds of food and not others, and they act purposely to satisfy those preferences – some cats, for example, may leave their bowl filled with food they dislike. Pets have rights to have their agency respected and protected by their pet-keepers (within certain limits we expand on below). Furthermore, our pets frequently communicate their choices to us through the use of non-linguistic behaviors, including auditory acts (barking, hissing, howling), non-auditory acts (tail whips, pacing, jumping), and attitudinal signals (changes in hairs, tensing of muscles, focal points in the animal's line of sight).¹⁴ It is therefore important that pet-keepers are equipped to understand these communications.

Pet-keeping can cause serious potential harms to both types of interest, thus putting pets' rights at risk. Take welfare first. Pets are vulnerable to both direct acts of cruelty and abuse, as well as to neglect, both of which undermine their welfare. Direct acts of cruelty or abuse are acts which subject animals to physical and emotional violence, including kicking or beating animals, burning or mutilating them, using shock collars or other aversive devices that inflict pain and discomfort, and confining them in conditions that cause pain or distress, to mention only a few examples. Since much pet-keeping occurs within the confines of the home, it is challenging to gather exact data. However, the RSPCA (2023) claims that in the UK on average one dog is 'abused every hour.' And in British Columbia, Canada, the BCSPCA (2025) reports that in 2025 they launched 6,105 new animal protection investigations. While we do not delve into the underlying causes of these wrongs, it is worth noticing that some forms of cruelty may stem from mistaken ideas surrounding training. For instance, the dominance theory of canine behavior (i.e. the theory that dogs strive to establish a hierarchy within social groups) has been used to justify punitive training techniques such as the use of force, intimidation and hitting or shocking. These forms of training are questionable for their own sake because they are harmful, yet the dominance theory and its application to training domestic dogs is also highly disputed (Bradshaw et al., 2009, 2016; Westgarth, 2016), and positive reinforcement has been shown as more effective (Ziv, 2017).

Pet abuse also commonly occurs through neglect, which involves the pet-keeper's failure to act in ways necessary to protect the pet's basic interests. As mentioned, most

pets cannot independently satisfy the full range of their interests. These include the most basic needs, such as obtaining sufficient food or water, which often requires human assistance, to a wide array of more complex but necessary welfare interests, including play, mental stimulation, entertainment, relationships with others, interesting and stable routines, sufficient forms of stimulating exercise, adequate living space, and time alone (Cochrane, 2012, p. 130). Because pets are morally valuable welfare-subjects that depend on their pet-keepers, pet-keepers have a duty of adequate care, namely, a duty to ensure a sufficient level of welfare (as opposed to a duty to maximize animals' welfare or provide optimal care (cf. Nussbaum, 2006, 2023)). Furthermore, since these duties are matters of justice, the failure to discharge one's duty of care should trigger state intervention, in a way analogous to neglectful parenting. This standard is best stated in sufficientarian terms, in order to ensure it is neither over-demanding nor requires excessive intrusion into pet-keepers' lives.¹⁵ In practice, neglect may materialize in different forms. Often, it stems from a lack of adequate knowledge. For instance, 48% of the 1.1 million rabbits living in the UK in 2023 lived without a conspecific (PDSA, 2023), despite socialization with conspecifics being one of rabbits' essential welfare needs (Burn & Shields, 2020). Similarly, a lack of knowledge might mean a pet-keeper fails to recognize a relatively common disease, feeds their pet the wrong food, or does not offer the right kinds of stimulating play. Alternatively, neglect may result from inadequate attention. For instance, a UK Cheshire-based study found that 22.1% of a sample of dog-owners walk their dog less than once per day (Westgarth et al., 2015). Other forms of neglect stemming from a lack of attention might include inadequate socialization, inadequate enrichment activities, or failure to notice signs of distress. In the worst cases, neglect leads to abandonment: in the US, for example, owners relinquish roughly twice as many domestic animals to shelters compared with those who arrive as strays (ASPCA, n.d.).

Turn now to pets' agency interests. Animals have been historically perceived in a 'minimal' sense as lacking capacities relevant to the exercise of agency (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2025, p. 10). Although there is still uncertainty about the complexity of agency possessed by animals frequently kept as pets, more evidence is emerging that animals possess more complex choice-abilities than traditionally recognized (Ibid, chap. 5). For reasons of space, we briefly identify a minimum core of agency that ought to be respected that includes: a presumption of the presence of agency interests, sensitivity to basic competence, knowledge of communication, and consideration of objective risks.

Pet-keepers ought to adopt a presumption of the presence of basic agency in pets, and this presumption should affect the attitude with which we humans engage with them.¹⁶ The absence of this presumption can lead to pets having their capacity to make choices directly curtailed, with certain treatments undeniably neglecting their agency. For instance, many pets are left alone at home for extended periods with limited opportunities to exercise choices over how to spend their time. In addition, crates are frequently used for training and behavioral management without sufficient justification. One study found this practice prevalent among 25.4% of dog owners (Bleuer-Elsner & Masson, 2024). Yet evidence shows that crates are not always effective and can even be harmful when used as behavioral management tools (Bleuer-Elsner & Masson, 2024). Hence, a basic requirement is that pet-keepers avoid wronging their pets by failing to recognize that they even have agency interests in the first place.

Moreover, pets ought to be treated as possessing a basic competence to gather information, make decisions on that basis, and communicate those decisions to others, including humans. Many pets can function as competent decision-makers in many domains, such as when to interact with humans, eat, sleep, or nurse their young. In these domains, their decisions ought therefore to be regarded as authoritative and respected as far as possible. Systematically ignoring them undermines pets' capacity to pursue their good on their own terms. As we note shortly, respecting animal agency ought not to extend to domains of objective risk, where pets lack the ability to grasp the relevant information and reason accordingly (Healey & Pepper, 2021; see also Yeates, 2018). This includes certain significant welfare considerations in the pet's own interests, as well as the interests of others, such as whether to receive an inoculation, when to cross a trafficked street, or the protection of wildlife.

Next, pet-keepers can fail to respect their pet's agency interests if they lack knowledge about how their pet communicates. Beyond knowledge of their welfare needs, pet-keepers must at a minimum be able to read and understand their pets' most obvious communicative signals and react appropriately to these (for example recognizing stress signals and the communication of basic preferences). Because this requires only a minimal degree of knowledge, it is not a demanding requirement. Yet it is likely that few pet-keepers adequately understand what pets are communicating to them, and many pet-keepers only learn how to interpret and understand nonhuman communication after having lived with an animal – if ever. Indicatively, in the UK, 1/3 of people do not even believe that it is possible for dogs to communicate with humans (RSPCA, 2024). It is likely that far more do not respect or understand the forms of communication that dogs engage in. For instance, dogs display higher stress-related behaviors when petting is forced (Sarrafchi et al., 2025), but it is not uncommon to see humans failing to seek assent from a dog before petting them, such as by offering an open hand.¹⁷ Pet-keepers can prevent these types of agential harms by improving their interactional and communication skills with pets.

Of course, failures to adequately respect pets' choices may also exist even if pet-keepers have the capacity to read their pets' communications. For instance, pet-keepers may deliberately ignore such communications, or prioritize their own interests – for instance, they may continue petting despite clear attempts to resist. This underscores why the presumptive attitude in favor of agential interests is an essential starting point.

Importantly, this minimum core allows that, in some contexts, pets' choices must be restricted with good reason. Not all interferences should count as violations of agency interests. Instead, certain permissible constraints narrow this minimum core. The most uncontroversial ones concern *objective risks* (for example considerations of safety, the environment, or both human and animal welfare). These risks arise from considerations of the pet's own or other animal's basic welfare interests. For instance, some pets, such as guinea pigs, ought not to free roam for their own safety, and free-roaming cats must be prevented from predation to protect wildlife (see below). Crates may also be necessary during travel or medical care (PETA, 2025). Furthermore, although pets may express dissent at receiving an inoculation, it is intuitive to think that such dissent must be rejected. Other constraints might be based on human welfare – whether that of pet-keepers' or external parties'. For instance, dogs should often be kept on leads around children. Moreover, the demands of daily life may require pet-keepers to sometimes

overrule pets' choices, for instance, by keeping them at home alone for a short time while they attend an event.¹⁸ Crucially, these considerations should include only the most serious welfare risks of the relevant parties.

In line with our sufficientarian approach, then, the goal is that pet-keepers avoid thwarting such a minimum core of animals' agency – not that they satisfy all of a pet's choices. Indeed, beyond this minimum core there will be a degree of reasonable pluralism concerning the threshold at which pets are in fact competent in making certain decisions, and whether agency or welfare considerations ought to prevail.¹⁹ After ensuring these essential welfare and agency interests are met, pet-keepers might make their own decisions over how to best respond to animals' agency, including the activities they engage in with their pet, when and how often to interact, and how to balance agency with welfare. We discuss this further below. It is relevant to note here that this minimum core does not place an unassailable burden on pet-keepers. Each of the key factors – a presumption of agency, sensitivity to basic competence, knowledge of communication, and consideration of objective risks to serious welfare violations – can be learnt and readily applied to interactions with pets, as we clarify shortly.

In summary, we have argued that pets have especially important welfare and agency interests and rights that ought to be respected, yet pet-keepers often undermine them despite existing animal welfare laws. As we show below, improving the status quo requires pet-keepers to obtain a certain level of competence, which we argue can be delivered effectively through a licensing scheme.

2.2. Competence

The status quo places a heavy burden on the charitable work of animal shelters, such as the ASPCA and RSPCA, both to regulate candidates for animal adoption, and protect animal interests after they have already been violated. In this subsection, we outline why pet-keeping licenses ought to be implemented to better protect animal interests *ex ante*. Licensing pet-keeping will plausibly prevent the potential harms canvassed above because it would require the state to enforce standards of best practice in pet-keeping. Our claim is that because it likewise involves a risk of potential harm, pet-keeping should mirror other practices that require a license enforced by the state, such as driving, healthcare, or practicing law.

Any scheme for licensing pet-keeping must include an assessment of potential pet-keepers' competence as a necessary condition for obtaining a license, preceded by independent or guided study. The precise nature of the assessment mechanisms and the supporting educational resources may vary, provided that certain constraints addressed below are respected. However, the current courses offered by driving schools, along with their theoretical and perhaps even practical tests, provide a suitable model for developing these mechanisms.²⁰ The assessment should evaluate four key areas of competency.

First, pet-keeping requires an adequate degree of knowledge about the pet being cared for. Pet-keepers should understand their pet's key welfare and agency interests. In other words, they should know what a *minimally decent life* for their pet looks like. Moreover, pet-keepers should also practically demonstrate that they know how to satisfy these interests – much as healthcare requires theoretical knowledge about the body and

practical knowledge about how to treat specific ailments. For instance, they should not just understand that their pet has a basic interest in play; they should also understand what forms of play their pet engages in and the ways these are stimulating for them.

Of course, different species and breeds have different interests based on the kind of animal they are. Obtaining and demonstrating competence in caring for a dog may be different from demonstrating competence in caring for a cat or a rabbit. Although we make no suggestions for how policy makers might accommodate these differences, any plausible licensing scheme should include sensitivity to them. Consider a comparison with motorized vehicles. In most countries, obtaining a license to drive a car does not and should not permit you to get behind the wheel of a bus.²¹

Second, this knowledge requirement also has an interactional element. Recall that pet-keepers must be able to understand their pets' communicative signals and respond appropriately to these, demonstrating competence at building and engaging in a relationship with the domesticated animal in their care. Prospective pet-keepers should also be able to teach their pet essential commands, with the sole aim of preventing harm to the pet or others. For instance, training certain pets to have a good recall or to stay in one place can be important in keeping them safe around traffic. Such training requirement should sufficiently cohere with the pets' agency interests; it ought not be performed as an objectionable form of control (Bok, 2011, pp. 782–784).²²

Third, pet-keepers should be able to demonstrate certain basic attitudes and dispositions that evidence their willingness to care for the animal and take on the responsibilities involved. This should require a basic background and behavioral check. For instance, prospective pet-keepers must be able to prove no history of abuse. Furthermore, prospective pet-keepers should understand the long-term burden that caring for a pet brings, and that doing so requires significant changes to their lifestyle, to reduce the risk of relinquishment or abandonment of pets. Requiring this would bring pet-keeping in line with standards that already exist in children's adoption, or in work involving vulnerable people.

Finally, adequate competence also imposes certain situational and financial requirements. Pet-keepers must have the sufficient financial resources and living circumstances to adequately care for a pet. They should have sufficient time to feed, exercise, and socialize their pet. They should demonstrate adequate provisions for veterinary care, including obtaining pet health insurance, ensuring inoculations are kept up to date, and that regular health checks are performed (Cochrane, 2012, p. 132). Pet-keepers should also be made to take on liability insurance in case of abandonment (Bernete Perdomo et al., 2021). This requirement may raise concerns about the potentially unjust exclusion of well-intentioned individuals who lack adequate financial resources – a worry we address as one of six objections below. Before we turn to these, it is important to outline what a good licensing scheme should look like.

3. Features of a Plausible Scheme of Licensing

We now delineate four general features that a suitable licensing scheme ought to possess. Our aim is not to develop detailed policy guidelines. Citizens, policymakers and local governments should determine the further details of a scheme they believe will best prevent harm to pets.

- (i) *Mandatory, Not Optional.* Much like licenses for the operation of motorized vehicles, medicine, or practicing law, pet-keeping licenses should be mandatory rather than optional. An optional scheme – such as one based purely on tax-breaks or fines – would not sufficiently acknowledge pets’ interests and runs the risk of reinforcing existing injustices. Some potentially inadequate pet-keepers might simply avoid applying for a license. Additionally, it would be likely to disproportionately affect people on lower incomes.²³ A scheme based on fines might also reduce the already limited resources that those on lower incomes can spend on their pets and so worsen pets’ welfare.
- (ii) *Ex Ante and Ex Post Regulations.* We have insisted that the primary aim of licensing is to prevent harm, with a competence test as a necessary step toward this goal. Yet, it would be naive to assume that licensed pet-keepers will *always* behave in line with the minimum standards of best practice. Therefore, a suitable licensing scheme must also include additional regulations to effectively protect pets’ welfare and agency – both before harm occurs and after. Two kinds of regulation appear crucial. First, a *monitoring* program should check whether licensed pet-keepers are providing adequate care. Here, two desiderata pull in opposite directions: the need for effective monitoring on the one hand, and to limit financial burdens on the state on the other. Policymakers should aim for a balance, rather than sacrificing one goal for the other. One solution might involve periodic visits by state agencies, or by private associations and shelters co-financed by the state and modeled on post-adoption checks used by shelters.²⁴ Second, there should be a state-run system for reporting mistreatment, for sanctioning violations of animal welfare standards, and for helping harmed pets.²⁵
- (iii) *Sanctions and Remedies.* By acknowledging the centrality of pets’ interests, a licensing scheme would give the state a clear and unambiguous mandate to seize pets subjected to serious mistreatment (for instance, violent abuse, confinement in cages, inadequate food) and to punish offenders. In such cases, pets should be rehomed, and the offender’s license should be revoked, alongside possible legal consequences such as fines or, in the most severe cases, imprisonment. For minor violations, such as failing to have their pet vaccinated, offenders might receive a warning, a fine, or have ‘points’ deducted from their license. Systems for reporting animal abuse already exist in many states through the charitable work of animal shelters. Rather than replacing these, a scheme of licensing for pet-keeping should provide additional state support and resources to increase the effectiveness, reach and legitimate authority of existing measures.
- (iv) *Feasibility.* No policy proposal, however well-designed, can succeed without consideration of feasibility. When compared to ideal approaches to animal justice, licensing is more readily implementable. It does not necessitate dramatic changes to the status quo, such as eliminating animals’ property status (Francione, 2008, 2010), although it might pave the way for such changes (see below). This is because an animal’s property status is a collection of incidents that vary in different contexts, and not all of them are necessarily at odds with animals’ moral status and rights (Cochrane, 2009b), even if there may be a tension here. For instance, the production of foie gras is prevented in the UK, protecting the interests of geese in not being subject to severe harm, even though geese may well still be owned (ibid,

p. 433). In a similar vein, licensing would introduce further legal measures for the protection of animals' rights, in a way that need not be inconsistent with their property status, much like existing animal welfare laws (Kurki, 2019, pp. 103–106; Sunstein, 1999). We are not suggesting here that ownership of animals is ultimately justified – it may well not be. Instead, the point is that licensing is feasible because it does not necessarily contradict the legal status quo.

Licensing would build upon existing animal welfare laws, for instance, in its definition of cruelty or neglect, while still allowing room for improvement. Licensing can also draw on legislators' expertise in licensing potentially harmful activities such as driving, as well as existing limited forms of pet licensing (recall Lower Saxony's *Sachkundenachweis-Hunde* and Vancouver's dog licensing scheme). In addition, policymakers can borrow from the adoption requirements enforced by animal shelters. As we discuss further below, many of the competency standards that we suggest mirror those already used to screen would-be adopters. However, to ensure feasibility, three further considerations should shape implementation.

First, licensing must be financially sustainable, avoiding excessive strain on public resources. This can be achieved by requiring pet-keepers to cover a portion of the program's costs through licensing fees and fines for harm – much like driving license regulations.

Second, the scheme must secure sufficient public support for both its introduction and long-term viability. While data remains limited, two considerations suggest cautious optimism. Most people are already familiar with licensing in other contexts and may not perceive this proposal as disruptive. Moreover, one of the few public surveys on pet-keeping licenses, conducted in Scotland, found that 66% of respondents expressed support (Scottish Government, 2015, p. 55). Even so, public support should be actively fostered through education campaigns, advertising, and animal advocacy.

Third, the scheme should be introduced gradually to minimize risks to pets and ensure broad compliance. A transitional phase might involve financial incentives to encourage voluntary participation before moving to mandatory licensing. Alternatively, licensing could be mandatory from the outset but allow a grace period for compliance. It should also include the use of provisional licenses, as we discuss further below. Lighter enforcement measures might also be used temporarily – for instance, issuing fines instead of immediately seizing animals in cases of noncompliance. While suboptimal from the perspective of animal welfare, such temporary concessions may be necessary to secure the policy's long-term success.

4. Objections and Further Considerations

We now show that there are no sufficiently weighty countervailing reasons against the proposal to license pet-keeping. The six questions we consider alert us to the need to design a licensing scheme that avoids entrenching existing injustices or creating new ones. By responding to these, we detail some guidelines to increase the desirability and feasibility of licensing.

4.1. *Would Licensing Jeopardize the Human Interest in Having a Pet?*

A first consideration parallels the most common objection to parental licensing: that it could jeopardize interests in parenting and therefore violate the right to parent (Liao, 2015, chap. 6). This is because licensing would allow excessive interference in the lives of prospective parents. A similar charge could be pressed against licensing pet-keeping: humans have an interest in establishing social relationships with member(s) of other species.²⁶ Licensing pet-keeping may jeopardize this interest by excessively constraining the conditions in which people can form relationships with domesticated animals.

There are important reasons why proposals to license parenting and pet-keeping are distinct (recall that we take no stance on the plausibility of the former). Notably, while many arguments support a right of at least adequate parents to parent – appealing, for instance, to procreative rights and the bodily autonomy of carers, as well as the role of parenting in fostering the autonomy of the cared-for (Brighouse & Swift, 2014) – such arguments have little, if any, force when it comes to a supposed right to keep pets, the existence of which remains contested.²⁷ State laws partly acknowledge this by envisaging a claim-right to parent (a right correlated with duties on others to help them parent), whereas individuals have only a liberty-right with regard to pet-keeping (individuals are exempt from a duty not to do so).²⁸ Thus, even if pet-keepers have interests in pet-keeping they have at most only a liberty right to satisfy that interest. Moreover, even if we take such a liberty right as a given (to ensure we are in line with a non-ideal approach), that permission ought not be without restriction. Pets have their own morally weighty interests which frequently override the human liberty to pet-keep. Take pets' interest in avoiding abusive environments, in having enough food of decent quality, or in remaining with their mother during infancy. These interests ought not to be sacrificed merely to please humans. Properly understood, then, the human liberty to pet-keep is consistent with all state interferences whose aim is to ensure that pets' significant interests do not go unmet. Since these are the constraints on pet-keeping that licensing would introduce, the human interest in having a pet is not unjustly thwarted by licensing – instead, it becomes permissible under certain conditions.

One possible rejoinder is that if licensing is implemented the state will prevent at least some people – namely, those who fail the assessment – from having a pet even if they have not (yet) done any harm. This concern focuses on the use of *prior* restraints as unfair threats to the human interest in having a pet. LaFollette (1980, pp. 188–189) offers a reply to objections of this sort. Prior restraints are unproblematic if (a) inadequate keepers can be reliably identified, and (b) the restraints imposed on them are not too onerous.

We address (a) below, so let us focus on (b): in our view, licensing does not impose constraints that are too onerous. While people subject to prior restraints may sometimes be deprived of some of their basic liberties (for example, consider people who are forcibly hospitalized for justified reason), those denied a license will preserve all their basic liberties, except for the liberty to have a pet – a liberty which seems non-basic in the first place. Moreover, this loss may only be temporary, because those who want to satisfy their interest in pet-keeping may obtain a license. Furthermore, it might be mitigated by the form that a licensing scheme adopts. For instance, a just licensing scheme should allow people to make appeals, and to reapply if they are denied a license. As in the case of

driving, individuals might also apply for a *provisional* license, i.e. a temporary license which requires increased state monitoring, and which could be upgraded to a standard license upon passing the assessment. It is up to policymakers to specify these particulars. The important point is that licensing offers a plausible way to balance the human liberty to pet-keep with the adequate protection of pets' interests.

4.2. *Would Licensing Unjustifiably Exclude Some Good Pet-Keepers?*

We claimed above that a licensing scheme is justified only if it can reliably identify inadequate pet-keepers. As in the case of parental licensing, one could dispute this claim, and object that licensing runs the risk of unjustifiably excluding good pet-keepers, depriving them of a valuable opportunity.

In response, note first that all licensing schemes will have some exclusionary effects, and some of these will be undesirable since they limit access to a good – even if this is for justified reasons. Many of these exclusionary effects will also interact with background issues of social justice in a way that ought to be limited, as we discuss below. But it should by now be clear that this is the very point of a licensing scheme. Consider driving. Although this requires passing a test, which acts as a restriction on who has access to this good, these exclusionary effects are justified despite their undesirable dimensions precisely because driving requires adequate competence, without which it would otherwise result in serious harm. Pet-keeping is no different in this respect.

The concern about exclusion therefore needs to be specified. It might take two forms. The first states that there is reasonable disagreement on the notion of good pet-keeping. For instance, what should a pet-keeper do when the pet's welfare and agency interests conflict? Even animal ethicists disagree on this issue.²⁹ The risk is that licensing requirements could impose a standard which will unjustly exclude some reasonable conceptions of good pet-keeping.

This version of the objection can be addressed by further examining the notion of *adequate* at work.³⁰ An adequate standard of pet-keeping would only appeal to 'presently accepted general beliefs ... and the conclusions of science when these are not controversial' (Rawls, 2005, p. 224). Concerning welfare interests, for instance, pet-keepers should accept that declawing cats is harmful and that dogs need at least two meals a day. Concerning agency interests, they ought to recognize that most pets are agents with their own preferences, which they are able to satisfy intentionally, and that confinement, the denial of social interactions, or the systematic failure to respond to clear signals of distress, such as a cat hissing or striking out, a dog whining or pacing, or a parrot plucking their feathers, can seriously compromise their agency. Departures from a standard of this kind are not matters of reasonable disagreement but rather count as *unreasonable*. Hence, this standard is unlikely to produce unjust exclusions. It is true that reasonable disagreements concerning the priority of animal welfare or agency may arise in some contexts. Yet, the role of a licensing scheme is simply, as suggested, to encourage pet-keepers to respect pets' minimum core of agency as far as possible, notably given its long and still ongoing history of neglect – unless doing so would foreseeably and significantly harm the pet's welfare. Beyond this, the scheme will not provide substantive guidance in cases of reasonable disagreement, so as to be publicly justifiable; instead, it

should only aim to ensure that those making such decisions have sufficient competence to do so.³¹

A second version of the objection holds that the assessments used to screen prospective pet-keepers may be unreliable and so may wrongly exclude adequate pet-keepers. Sandmire and Wald (1990) substantiate this worry in the case of parental licensing by arguing that the assessments designed to screen prospective parents are likely to produce many false positives – that is, adequate parents are wrongly classified as inadequate. This is especially worrisome when the events to be predicted are rare, as in the case of abuse. Why should the assessments that are used for pet-keepers fare any better?

To start, note that no predictive assessment can aim for 100% accuracy, where accuracy is the proportion of cases a test classifies correctly out of all cases (i.e. the proportion of true positives and true negatives). What matters is that the assessments that are used to screen pet-keepers are *moderately* accurate, meaning that they lead to a scenario in which fewer inadequate pet-keepers are able to mistreat pets than would be the case without assessments. This is justified since pets' interest in not being mistreated outweighs the human interest in having pets. Importantly, it has been argued that assessments designed to screen out inadequate parents may reach this level of accuracy (Mangel, 1988). The same level could be attained by the assessments yet to be developed to predict inadequate pet-keepers (see Van Wijk et al., 2018).

Furthermore, licensing tests can also be designed in a way that is sensitive to the so-called base rate problem – i.e. the problem that when the condition to be predicted is rare (for instance, serious animal abuses) even accurate tests may still produce many false positives. To address this, screening should rely not only on accuracy but also on further metrics aimed at reducing false positives. One example is precision, or positive predictive value (PPV), which measures the proportion of those identified as high risk who actually are high risk (true positives out of predicted positives). A suitable screening test could therefore require, as a reliability condition, that its level of precision not fall below a certain relatively high threshold (cf. Trevethan, 2017).

To minimize the risk of false positives, the test should also be designed to avoid criteria based on contested aspects of abusers' psychology and instead adopt criteria based on facts that are easier to verify and less open to contestation (Vopat, 2015, pp. 131, 136). In the case of pet-keeping, criteria of this kind ought to include: past abuse of animals (past abusers tend to abuse again (Reid & Alleyne, 2024)); dependency on drugs or alcohol (dependency creates an inadequate basis to care for another being); severe body or mental impairments;³² basic knowledge of pets' interests; and as anticipated, possession of *some* financial resources (see below). Most of these criteria are already employed in animal shelters to screen would-be adopters (Giroux & Voigt, 2023). As mentioned, the criteria used for adoption by shelters – and the swathes of experience that shelter personnel possess – should be drawn on and incorporated into a plausible licensing scheme.

Finally, there must also be institutional safeguards in place. In particular, the rules, procedures, and metrics governing the assessments should be: transparent and public to minimize arbitrariness; involve multiple checks to ensure that all procedures are followed and that the test is properly administered; include regular audits; and accommodate appeals processes to ensure that decisions can be reviewed and modified when

necessary. Despite these precautions, some false positives will likely remain, but this cost should be justified given the benefits that licensing would bring to pets' lives.

4.3. *Would Licensing Negatively Impact Animal Shelters?*

A third major consideration is the effect that licensing will have on shelters. Most shelters have limited human and economic resources, while also being overburdened. In the US, for instance, shelters are often understaffed,³³ yet in 2024 they took in about 5.8 million animals (ASPCA, [n.d.](#)). Given this, most shelters have the capacity to host animals for only a few weeks, and sometimes only a few days (Giroux & Voigt, 2023, p. 250). Animals may end up staying for longer periods, though. For instance, the average length of stay for a cat in a Dutch shelter is 16 days, but for some it increases to 64 (Van Der Leij et al., 2023). Consequently, in some shelters, animals are euthanized to create space for newcomers – in the US, this happened to about 607,000 sheltered animals in 2024 (ASPCA, [n.d.](#)). The worry is that licensing pet-keeping might worsen this situation. One reason for this is that licensing could disincentivize adoptions. Indeed, adoption would become conditional on obtaining a license, which might cause some to give up on adopting an animal altogether. Another reason is that the pets of unlicensed pet-keepers might have to be moved to shelters, thus further burdening them.

However, there are good reasons why a scheme of licensing would both effectively relieve the burden placed on shelters and produce comparably better outcomes for pets in the long term. First note that the disincentivising effect of licensing would likely be relatively minor. This is because licensing would both formalize and standardize assessment procedures that tend to be already present in the adoption process.³⁴ Most shelters employ diverse methods to screen would-be adopters, including questionnaires, interviews, home-visits, checks on past abuses, and references (PetPartners, 2021). Shelter personnel may also deny an adoption if they see a risk that the would-be adopter might not adequately take care of the adoptee. This suggests that implementing these measures at a state level will have relatively limited deterrence effects on adoption.³⁵

Nonetheless, some US based charities support an 'open' approach to adoption as a means to relieve the burden on shelters (Humane World for Animals, 2020). Such an approach imposes very minimally selective constraints on who can adopt.³⁶ One might argue that, if we are concerned with shelters and animals' well-being, then perhaps an open approach might fare better than licensing. Now, the arguments above already provide a robust normative case in support of ex ante regulations, and there are also good reasons why a *fully* open approach ought not to be the norm.³⁷ Yet it is worth considering precisely why licensing also independently improves on this proposal.

Proponents of an open approach point out that prospective pet-keepers who are turned away by animal shelters often turn to private or commercial sellers. Their argument is that if shelters adopt an open approach this will ensure animals are still adopted, rather than being purchased from breeders.³⁸ However, a scheme of licensing would neutralize this worry. This is because the positive effects of licensing would obtain *irrespective* of shelter policies – whether they are 'open' or more restrictive. Licensing would constrain all possible means of obtaining a pet, not just adoption.³⁹ That is, a license would be ultimately required irrespective of whether pets are adopted from a shelter or from a private or commercial seller. For this reason, the

incentive to pursue the latter because there is no application procedure is radically reduced. Shelters and private breeders will share a more equal playing field. Shelters might even permissibly adopt more open approaches if licensing is introduced because the state will have vetted prospective pet-keepers for them in advance. In the long term, this will effectively reduce the burden on animal shelters and streamline the process of adoptions.

Yet it is also worth emphasizing that certain measures should be implemented alongside licensing to increase the effectiveness of the scheme for animal shelter adoptions, and some of these can be drawn from what works well in the case of an open approach.

Consider the short term first. During the initial rollout of a licensing scheme, many pets could face prolonged shelter stress if a large number of pet owners fail to meet the new requirements. Furthermore, there is also a significant risk of an adverse impact on animals in need of assistance who are not already in shelters. If shelters are overburdened, then their capacity to help animals will be negatively impacted, including their capacities to deliver services to free-roaming animals in need, to respond to reports of distress, and to retrieve animals for transfer to shelters.

To prevent this, close collaboration between the state, policymakers, and shelters is essential. As previously mentioned, provisional licenses could also be issued to current pet owners, provided they have not committed serious abuses. This approach would help to avoid the stress of rehoming or shelter placement and prevent shelters from becoming overwhelmed. Additionally, regarding adoptions, various measures can be drawn from what works in the case of ‘open’ approaches, including simplification of the procedure, reduction of costs, reduction of delays, and introduction of incentives. For instance, studies show that younger, lighter colored pets are more likely to be adopted than older, darker colored ones (Bradley & Rajendran, 2021; Brown & Morgan, 2015). To combat this, shelters can introduce a variable pricing model, or even no-fee adoptions to incentivize less popular traits or breeds (such as mixed-breed or older pets) and impose a premium on others (such as more popular breeds, younger pets, or those that have already been microchipped) (Reese et al., 2017). Not only is licensing consistent with measures of this sort, but it should help to achieve them. If adoptions are disrupted or disincentivised by factors such as response-time from shelters, lengthy application processes, home-checks, or processing times (Holland, 2019), licensing can alleviate this by streamlining the procedure. As noted above, individuals with a license to pet-keep would effectively be pre-approved.

Next, consider the long term. Many animals end up in shelters due to overpopulation, ‘incompatibility’ with the pet, moving, abandonment, inability to provide care, and lack of financial resources (Salman et al., 1998). Licensing would help address most of these issues, thereby reducing the number of pets needing shelter support to begin with. For example, licensed pet-keepers would be more aware of their responsibilities, and so less likely to provide inadequate care. Those who return pets to shelters reflect that they should have devoted ‘more time, thought, and planning’ to the decision and process of adoption (Shore, 2005, p. 192).⁴⁰ Likewise, basic knowledge of pet behavior and health could prevent abandonments linked to unrealistic expectations or minor, treatable, conditions. Furthermore, recall that licensing would give the state a mandate to remove animals from inadequate keepers. Should this lead to increased shelter intake, it will also create a corresponding duty for the state to strengthen its financial support for shelters.

Licensing pet-keeping should help provide the institutional – and potentially financial – resources for the state to better support them.⁴¹

4.4. Would Licensing Reinforce Socio-Economic Injustices?

One crucial objection to the above is that licensing might still reinforce existing socio-economic injustices. Licensing requires that pet-keepers possess adequate financial resources to satisfy their pets' interests. Yet people with low or no income may lack these resources and so may be frequently denied a license. People on low incomes may also lack access to adequate education, and this might generate additional difficulties in acquiring the knowledge necessary to pass the assessment. Moreover, the costs of obtaining a license may be prohibitive.

Although the financial requirements entailed by licensing can and should be kept minimal, we concede that even such requirements will have some exclusionary effects. Individuals with very low incomes (e.g. near or below the poverty line), temporary low earners (e.g. seasonal workers), and those with no income at all, such as the homeless, may rarely meet them. Hence, as the objection rightly notes, these people could be denied a license. Yet we contend that this is not a sufficiently weighty reason to reject licensing altogether.

Some exclusionary effects can be mitigated through careful policy design. Consider license fees. Reasons of fairness suggest that fees should be proportional to pet-keepers' income, with the worst off paying little or nothing. Precedents for this already exist: in Italy, for instance, low-income individuals can apply for up to €2,500 to cover the cost of obtaining a driving license (Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti, 2024). Moreover, to provide fair opportunities to pass the assessment, the government could provide free online resources, and a course on the subject as a part of high school education or run by the government or private associations.

Yet, such measures are unlikely to eradicate inequalities altogether. By way of example, let us focus on the homeless – though our considerations apply in similar ways to the other groups mentioned. First, pets living with homeless people do not necessarily fare significantly worse than pets living in houses (Williams & Hogg, 2016) – and it is well-established that homeless people derive substantial benefits from such companionship (Fred Victor, 2025). Yet these studies overlook one crucial point: when pet-keepers lack financial means, the animal's welfare depends almost entirely on the pet-keeper's goodwill to prioritize the pet's needs, and on the contingencies of them obtaining the resources to do so. While goodwill is important, as we indicated above, it is not on its own sufficient since it may change over time, or can be overwhelmed by unforeseen circumstances. If pet-keeping licenses are to effectively prevent harm, they cannot rely solely on subjective dispositions.⁴² They must also incorporate objective criteria, such as financial capacity. Compare this with the case of child adoption. One reason children are not placed with well-intentioned families living in poverty is concern for the child's welfare. This is not to deny that refusing a license may involve a genuine loss – the loss of an opportunity to form a potentially valuable human-animal relationship. But this is necessary if we are serious about robustly protecting pets from harm.

That said, any monitoring and enforcement system (whether through visits, reporting, sanctions, or removals) will be exposed to the risk of asymmetric implementation,

potentially tracking lines of class, social marginalization, and other vulnerabilities and inequalities as well. Such a system must therefore incorporate institutional safeguards, such as transparency mechanisms, regular audits, anti-bias training, clear appeal procedures, and rotation of inspection personnel. Furthermore, a good licensing scheme should also allow for some limited exceptions. For instance, if a pet is already living with an unlicensed keeper with limited financial means, and separation would likely cause serious harm to both the animal and the person, a provisional license may be warranted.

If the above holds, we must look elsewhere to identify what is problematic in cases of financial exclusion. The root of the problem, we suggest, lies in the state's failure to discharge its responsibility to support those who lack the means to care for themselves and their dependents, including their pets. Rather than abandoning licensing, the state's support for those on low or no incomes should be extended or reformed.

4.5. Would Licensing Worsen the Environmental Costs of Pet-Keeping?

A further concern is that licensing might further entrench the environmental costs of pet-keeping. For instance, pet food production, notably when it includes meat, consumes significant land, water, and fossil fuels, and contributes substantially to greenhouse gas emissions. In the United States, dogs and cats account for about 25% of the environmental impacts related to animal-based diets, and pet food production releases up to 64 million tons of CO₂-equivalent emissions annually (Okin, 2017; see also Martens et al., 2019). Free-roaming pets, such as cats, also contribute to biodiversity loss by preying on millions of birds, mammals, and reptiles each year (Lepczyk et al., 2023). Additionally, untreated pet waste can release pathogens into waterways, thereby contaminating them (Mori et al., 2023). Furthermore, the widespread use of plastic in pet food packaging is another obvious environmental problem. The worry is that, by legitimizing pet-keeping, licensing might entrench these environmentally harmful practices, imposing significant ecological costs and further straining already vulnerable ecosystems.

However, rather than further entrenching the environmental costs of pet-keeping, our view is that licensing would help mitigate them. Many pet-keepers currently lack knowledge about, or tend to underestimate, the environmental impact of their pets (Lu, 2025). A licensing scheme could be designed in a way that raises awareness by requiring prospective pet-keepers to learn about the topic as part of the training required to obtain a license. Pet-keepers could be made aware of the main ways in which pets may affect the environment and provide simple yet effective tips on how to reduce this impact. Prospective pet-keepers should also be informed that nutritionally appropriate plant-based diets are healthy alternatives for some pets, such as dogs, while lowering the use of land and water, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.⁴³ Pet keepers should also be educated about the ecological risks posed by free-roaming cats and required to put bells or other anti-predation devices on their collars, or even providing enclosed outdoor spaces where feasible, to reduce biodiversity loss while preserving animals' interests.⁴⁴ Further, pet keepers should be reminded to collect dog waste and dispose of it properly, and advised to choose pet food packaging made from recyclable or low-plastic materials. For such measures to be effective, however, a suitable licensing scheme should also assign more direct responsibilities to state authorities. For instance, governments should launch awareness campaigns about the ecological footprint of pets, better enforce existing regulations

on pet waste disposal, and introduce new ones addressing free-roaming pets. In the most severe cases of non-compliance, fines might be introduced to further mitigate environmental costs. If implemented in this way, licensing would become an additional instrument for advancing environmental justice, rather than worsening injustice.⁴⁵

4.6. *Would Licensing Help or Hinder the Realization of Multi-Species Justice?*

A final concern addresses the relationship between licensing pet-keeping and the achievement of multispecies justice more broadly. On a reformist view, multispecies justice is consistent with the maintenance of at least some of our social practices involving animals (even if it rejects others, such as farming), but these practices must be regulated in ways that protect animals' rights (Cochrane, 2009b, 2012; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011; Garner, 2013). Most reformists would therefore accept that licensing will help the achievement of multispecies justice, because most reformists are likely to agree with our claims that pets' rights bear further *ex ante* protection, and they are unlikely to think that pet-keeping should be entirely phased out.

In contrast, an abolitionist approach will argue licensing could hinder multispecies justice.⁴⁶ This is because abolitionists will argue that even when humans treat animals well, it is still wrongful for us to engage in certain social practices with them such as pet-keeping. On this view, the core demand of multispecies justice is to abolish animal use and thus to attain animals' liberation from human power and control (Francione, 2008; Healey & Pepper, 2025). The abolitionist objection may therefore be that there are better policy options available for achieving multispecies justice for animals currently kept as pets, such as those which work toward phasing out pet-keeping entirely.

There two good reasons why abolitionists should be onboard with licensing, nonetheless. First, given the current status quo, animal interests demand urgent protection here and now. Licensing has the motivational and political feasibility that policies focused on phasing out pet-keeping likely lack. As noted, some states are already experimenting with some limited forms of licensing pet-keeping, and data suggests that the general public might be receptive to licensing (Scottish Government, 2015, p. 55) – whereas abolitionist policies would lack this motivational and political support. So, abolitionists could endorse licensing as a practical way to protect animals' interests at least in the short to medium term.

Second, it is an open question as to whether licensing would help or hinder the achievement of an abolitionist vision of multispecies justice. The abolitionist's concern might be that licensing will implicitly condone animal use and make it more socially acceptable (Francione, 2010, p. 51). While possible, it could equally have the opposite effect, and help to more widely improve the way animals kept as pets are treated, socially perceived and culturally represented. For instance, by influencing norms on asking for a pet's permission before touching them. In principle, it is therefore consistent with long term policies that would phase out pet-keeping. Consider the comparable case of the welfare state: it might be true that the welfare state has made the advent of socialism less likely, yet equally sound reasons speak in favor of the opposite thesis – i.e. that it is an important step toward socialism. Likewise, it

seems too hasty for abolitionists to dismiss licensing without more robust evidence of its alleged conservative or regressive implications. Indeed, our proposal centers knowledge about pets, including their agential interests. In the long run, this could change public perception and help rather than hinder the achievement of even an abolitionist vision of multispecies justice.

In short, while licensing is clearly desirable from a reformist perspective, it is also possible that it is desirable from an abolitionist one. Not only does it help to protect animal interests here and now, but it could pave the way for even more radical reforms down the line.

5. Conclusion

Pet-keeping involves a significant risk of harm. Requiring adequate competence in pet-keeping practices through a scheme of state licensing would avert those potential harms. Competence entails knowledge of pets' basic interests and how to satisfy them, adequate interactional and communicative skills, the willingness to assume the responsibilities of care, and sufficient financial and living resources to discharge these responsibilities effectively. We have suggested that imposing these competence requirements through licensing has an important advantage over ideal approaches to animal justice: it is feasible here and now. It does not presuppose a radical departure from current legal norms, although it can pave the way to ameliorating them. We have finally shown that there are no sufficiently weighty countervailing reasons against licensing.

We conclude that pet-keeping licenses should be implemented as a matter of priority. This points to at least three consequences for further work. First, more research is needed into the nature of pets' welfare and agency interests and the best way for humans to fulfill these. Second, collaboration with local governments, animal shelters, charities, and policy experts is required to accurately and plausibly specify the form that pet-keeping licenses should take – consistent with the considerations outlined above. Finally, the range and diversity of risks that pets face speak in favor of urgent advocacy in support of licensing.

Notes

1. We use the terms 'pet,' 'pet-keeping,' and 'pet-keeper' to reflect the legal, social, and political status quo.
2. In the UK in 2024, 36% of households had a dog and 29% a cat (UK Pet Food, 2025). In the US, figures were even higher: 45.5% of households had a dog and 32.1% a cat (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2024).
3. Real figures of abuse and cruelty are likely much higher, given that the vast majority will go unreported. For instance, Shelter Animals Count (2025) predict that in the US just 0.01% of incidents of animal abuse or cruelty are reported.
4. This practice has a range of benefits, including ensuring that 97% of missing dogs are returned (City of Vancouver, n.d.).
5. This license is not required *ex ante* and its main goal is to ensure public safety, rather than prioritizing the dog's welfare. The questions cover 20 different topics, including dog behavior, training, health, and legal regulations. Candidates must correctly answer at least 20 questions to pass. See Sachkundenachweis-Hunde (n.d.). Thanks to Tobias Blase for making us aware of this.

6. Three areas of related scholarship are worth mentioning. First, Tyson (2021) assesses current practices of licensing concerning wild animals and defends their legal effectiveness. Second, Birch (2024, pp. 287–90) suggests licensing schemes might ensure codes of good practice for the farming of ‘sentience candidates’ (such as insects and crustaceans). Finally, Bernete Perdomo et al. (2021) propose mandatory liability insurance schemes for the prevention of abandonment and control of pet overpopulation.
7. In the US, the Animal Welfare Act sets minimum standards for the treatment of pets (USDA, 2025). Similarly, the UK Animal Welfare Act legally requires owners to provide sufficient care to their pet, and criminalizes animal cruelty (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, and Animal and Plant Health Agency, 2024).
8. We understand the capacity for sentience in capacious terms (Korsgaard, 2018, chap. 9; Shepherd, 2018, chap. 10).
9. In response to a US YouGov (2024) poll, asking ‘do you think that animals are conscious?’, 53% of people responded with ‘definitely’ and 30% responded ‘probably.’ Additionally, the RSPCA (2024) reports that 86% of people recognize that dogs are sentient.
10. A rights-based account is the most robust in our view, for familiar reasons: it justifies licensing non-contingently. However, a licensing scheme might be justified on other grounds, such as utilitarian. If this follows there will be some degree of difference in the shape of the measures that follow. For instance, a rights-based approach may be more concerned by animals’ reproductive interests if it holds that animals have relevant rights, whereas a utilitarian approach may not.
11. See, for instance, Cooke (2011), Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 76–78), Healey and Pepper (2025), Milburn (2022, pp. 71–73) and Palmer (2010, pp. 91–92).
12. The taxonomy we rely on here is not intended to be exhaustive, and the distinction between welfare and agency interests is not clear-cut. For instance, freedom of movement can be described both as a welfare and as an agency interest. Moreover, although animals’ agency interests matter, a skeptic might still focus solely on animals’ welfare interests. These are sufficient for the argument in support of licensing to succeed.
13. There is a debate over whether animals’ agency interests are instrumentally or non-instrumentally valuable (Cochrane, 2009a; Garner, 2011; Giroux, 2016; Healey & Pepper, 2021; Wilcox, 2021). Recognizing that animals have agency interests does not require us to take a stance here.
14. For instance, studies show that dogs can proficiently communicate with humans (Huber, 2016; Kaminski & Nitzschner, 2013).
15. For an overview of sufficientarianism see Shields (2020).
16. An expanded version of this ‘presumption of subjectivity’ is defended in Perry (2026b).
17. Importantly, this is distinct from consent. For an account of nonhuman animal assent (as ‘willful affirmation’) and dissent (as ‘refusal’), see Healey and Pepper (2021).
18. The RSPCA recommends dogs are not left alone for longer than 4 hours, that time alone is gradually introduced, and that measures are taken to ensure it does not undermine their welfare (RSPCA, 2015).
19. We recognize that some controversial issues remain, such as what to do concerning pets’ reproductive lives. Issues of this sort demand further research, and as we discuss below, fall into the realm of ‘reasonable disagreement.’
20. A tangential consideration concerns the extension of one individual’s license to other members of their household or social circle. For instance, parents frequently adopt pets for their children. Here, it seems natural for the responsibility for the pet’s interests to fall on a relevantly responsible adult caregiver as the license-holder.
21. This is consistent with also holding that it should not be possible to obtain a license to keep some animals as pets, particularly non-domesticated exotic animals, such as monkeys.
22. Some pets may willingly choose to engage in some forms of training. See Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 149–150).
23. For similar remarks in the context of parental licensing, see De Wispelaere and Weinstock (2012, p. 203).

24. See, for example, PetPartners (2021).
25. In his discussion of parental licensing, Archard (2008, pp. 190–91) has argued that ex post regulations and monitoring would do all the work that licensing is supposed to do, making licensing redundant. This criticism overlooks what we have already emphasised: licensing has a prospective rationale, which ex-post regulations lack. Additionally, licensing would reduce the need for such ex-post regulations over time, thus also reducing the associated costs and interferences.
26. For instance, Nussbaum (2006, pp. 399–400) holds that having relationships with other species is a basic human capability. Scientific studies hold that pets have several health benefits (Healthline, 2025).
27. Contrast reformists, who hold that it is permissible for good pet-keepers to have pets (Cochrane, 2012, pp. 129–36), with abolitionists, who reject it as an unjustly asymmetrical relationship (Francione, 2008, chap. 1). We return to this debate below. On the permissibility of pet-keeping see also Du Toit (2016).
28. On the distinction between claim-rights and liberty-rights, see Wenar (2005).
29. Contrast Cochrane (2009a) with Wilcox (2021).
30. There is a parallel in discussions of parenting. See Shields (2016)
31. A controversial question concerns how the state and pet-keepers should regulate animal reproduction. On the one hand, the degree of control that humans currently have over pets' reproductive lives seems problematic, extending as it does to almost every aspect of their sexual lives (whether, when, and with whom they have sex). On the other hand, pets' reproduction cannot be left entirely unregulated, given the risks of overpopulation and the financial burden of caring for large numbers of offspring. Since this is an area of reasonable disagreement, a licensing scheme may not advance substantive proposals. More minimally, it might simply require that any regulation concerning this (a) acknowledges the need to address it, (b) is as minimally invasive, coercive, and restrictive as possible, guided by the recognition that sexual choices on the part of pets may sometimes be expressive of their agency, and (c) is ecologically and socially sustainable (cf. Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011: 154–158).
32. One worry is that some individuals with mild impairments could be unfairly denied the opportunity to have a pet. To ensure fairness, the assessment process must be tailored to accommodate different capacities – for example, offering conversations instead of written tests (Weiss et al., 2014), allowing additional time, or providing other forms of support. Individuals with more severe impairments could still spend time with pets if their carer or family are licensed.
33. 87% of U.S. shelters are understaffed (Best Friends Animal Society, n.d.).
34. Although this is the present norm, assessments need not follow a one-size-fits-all model but could be conversation-based between a prospective owner and a counselor to assess adequate fit. One study found that a more conversation-based approach to assessment had little negative impact on differences in attachment, where pets sleep, vet visits, and several other key factors concerning animal care (Weiss et al., 2014).
35. Some people may be discouraged from buying a pet, at least in the initial rollout of licensing. However, this speaks in favor of licensing. If there were a decrease in the number of pets sold and bought, less pets would be exposed to the harms that breeders often cause, and the risk of commodification inherent to the practice of buying and selling them would be reduced.
36. For instance, prospective pet-keepers might still be excluded if they have abused animals in the past. For a discussion of the differences between open and selective approaches see: Balcom and Arluke (2001).
37. Giroux and Voigt (2023) object, for instance, that an open approach underestimates the risks of inadequate pet-keeping, and could reinforce the view that animals are merchandise, rather than sentient beings with their own intrinsic worth.
38. For a more detailed discussion, see Giroux and Voigt (2023)

39. We thank an anonymous reviewer for alerting us to this implication. Notably, even if shelters adopt more restrictive policies than what licensing requires, a licensing scheme would still disincentive turning to private or commercial sellers.
40. Shore (2005, p. 196) also reports that increased forethought may not have prevented problems arising from failed adoption. Many difficulties only emerge post-adoption. However, if properly implemented, licensing should help prospective pet-keepers manage their expectations and anticipate difficulties in advance. In this sense, a disincentivising effect might benefit shelters by reducing the number of animals that are returned.
41. A related concern is that even if it relieves the burden on animal shelters, licensing could negatively impact pets by creating a black market. While possible, this risk is common to all state-regulated activities and depends more on the design of regulations than their mere existence. In the context of child adoptions, for instance, black markets tend to thrive when it is particularly hard to adopt a child legally – procedures may be too stringent, costly, slow, or complex (Udechukwu, 2019) – or when the norms prohibiting illegal adoptions are poorly enforced. As should be clear, our proposed licensing scheme is well-equipped to avoid these pitfalls: costs are moderate, requirements safeguard pets' well-being without being excessive, and robust regulation, enforcement, and public education further reduce black market incentives (in the context of adoptions, see United Nations General Assembly (2016)).
42. This is a classical republican concern. On the republican view, rights whose enjoyment is a function of the continued goodwill of another no longer count as rights proper. See Pala (2024).
43. Some cats require a carnivorous diet. In these cases, a more sustainable alternative could be a mixed diet that minimizes meat consumption. For further discussion, see Milburn (2017). More broadly, for an ethics of feeding humans and animals in a way that respects animals' rights while balancing environmental concerns, see Milburn (2023).
44. In environments where this risk is particularly high, cats might be kept indoors. Although this will set back agency interests, it is a potentially justifiable constraint for the protection of welfare, as discussed above.
45. One might still counter that licensing pet-keeping could encourage more pets to come into existence, thereby increasing the environmental impact of pet-keeping. Though we cannot address this issue at length, it is worth noting that licensing might instead reduce pet populations in the long term – by, for instance, discouraging individuals from buying a pet, thus reducing breeding.
46. On the debate between reformism and abolitionism, see Francione and Garner (2010).

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for helpful comments we received during several workshops at which we presented prior versions of this article, including: the 2024 Animal Politics MANCEPT Workshop co-organized with Josh Milburn, Angie Pepper and Sara Van Goozen; the 2025 Animal Ethics workshop at the Centre for Research in Ethics (CRÉ) ran by Kristin Voigt and Valéry Giroux; the Colloquium in Social and Political Philosophy at Laura Valentini's Chair of Philosophy and Political Theory at LMU Munich; a discussion at the UBC Animal Welfare Lab; and a presentation at a small working group in ethics and political & social philosophy at UBC facilitated by Kimberley Brownlee. For particularly helpful comments, we thank Kimberley Brownlee, Alasdair Cochrane and Liam Shields. We also appreciate the very useful feedback of two anonymous reviewers for the journal.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Davide Pala: This work was supported by the fund Pnrr Age-It. Matt Perry: This article was primarily completed during my Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in Ethics and Political & Social Philosophy at the University of British Columbia, affiliated with the Canada Research Chair held by Prof. Kimberley Brownlee. It was finished during the start of a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship at University of Sheffield.

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