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## The Moral Basis of Animal-Assisted Therapy

### ABSTRACT

Is nonhuman animal-assisted therapy (AAT) a form of exploitation? After exploring possible moral vindications of AAT and after establishing a distinction between “use” and “exploitation,” the essay distinguishes between forms of animal-assisted therapy that are morally unobjectionable and those modes of it that ought to be abolished.

Nonhuman animal-assisted therapy (AAT)<sup>2</sup> is becoming increasingly popular. Expositors claim that its roots go back to the eighteenth century when Tuke, one of the originators of modern psychiatry, introduced its use in his work with his patients. Nowadays, AAT encompasses interventions incorporating dogs, cats, rodents, birds, reptiles, horses, monkeys, and even dolphins. The goals of such therapy are extremely varied, including psychological, therapeutic objectives as well as other forms of assistance.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I will ignore the prudential questions that plague almost all AAT literature that I have come across; that is, whether the benefits of AAT can be shown conclusively over and against more conventional modes of therapy. I will assume—what is

in fact highly controversial—that AAT is therapeutically effective generally and, for some individuals, is advantageous when compared with other forms of therapy. Can such uses of nonhuman animals be morally justified from a “liberationist” perspective, a perspective that acknowledges that animals are not merely a resource to be exploited by humans?<sup>4</sup> Practitioners of AAT often say that they work with animals rather than “use” them. The primary distinction that this essay formulates is the one between use and exploitation. I then pursue the implications of this distinction to the moral status of AAT.

### The Case Against AAT

AAT literature does not ignore the moral dimension of the work that it advocates. Yet the remarks on ethics appear to be limited to considerations of welfare. The *Delta Society's* website, for example, warns its readers that AAT may be inappropriate for the animals when

1. injuries from rough handling or from other animals may occur;
2. basic animal welfare cannot be assured (this includes veterinary care and access to water and exercise areas; and
3. the animal does not enjoy visiting.

In a different publication by the same organization, it is maintained that “At all times the rights of the animals shall be respected and ensured. This includes humane treatment, protection from undue stress, and availability of water and exercise area” (Grammonley et al., 1997, p. 2). One proposed code of ethics for animal-assisted therapy includes requirements:

1. The animal’s welfare must be the priority of the therapy facilitator;
2. The therapy animal must “never be forced to leave the home to go to work” or to perform actions that it is reluctant to perform; and
3. Animals are to be given adjustment time and quiet time periods before sessions and be protected from individuals carrying diseases that may be transmitted to them. (Preziosi, 1997, pp. 5-6)

Yet from a broader liberationist perspective, such remarks barely scratch the surface of the moral questions that AAT raises. A liberationist stance ascribes value not only to the life of the animal but also to the quality of such a life—as well as to the value of the animal’s freedom—in the sense that lack of

freedom requires a moral justification. For liberationists, using animals to treat humans is potentially immoral in six distinct ways:

#### *Limitations of Freedom*

Companion animals need to be kept by the therapists or be temporary companion animals of the individual being treated. In some cases, when the animals are in effect modified pets (like guide dogs), the limitations of freedom are the same as those involved in all pet-owner relationships (relationships that are themselves immoral for some liberationists, regardless of their quality). In the case of animals who are not pets or modified pets (rabbits, hamsters, chinchillas, snakes, birds, all of whom respond to human beings but, unlike alarm or service dogs, do not appear to derive pleasure from such interaction and seem incapable of transferring their social needs onto humans), the loss of freedom may be much more severe.

#### *Life Determination*

Freedom can be curtailed for a temporary period (confining a wounded animal in the wild and then releasing the animal once the animal has healed). But unlike limitation-of-freedom actions, some actions with regard to animals are total and life-determining. Turning an animal into a companion animal, into an animal in the zoo, into a race horse, a jumper, or an event horse are life-determining actions. The decision to employ an animal therapeutically involves making such a total decision regarding a particular animal.

#### *Training*

Getting dogs or monkeys to assist humans efficiently in numerous tasks involves a prolonged period of training, which itself includes various violations of the animal's well being. Creating horses for therapy (therapy-horses) requires "breaking" them. Moreover, unlike cats and dogs, many of the other animals used in AAT are frightened by human presence, and they have to undergo periods in which they get accustomed to humans around them.

### *Social Disconnection*

Simians live in packs. By turning them into nursing entities, one disconnects them from whatever it is that they maintain through their social context. The same holds for rabbits or other rodents who are isolated from their kin. There is, to be sure, a certain degree of mystery here both regarding the nature of the social needs and the way they might be internally experienced as a loss by the animal. Yet it is morally safe to make the probable assumption that such disconnection (or bringing up the animal without contact with the animal's kin) is a form of deprivation.

### *Injury*

Animals for therapy (therapy-animals) can be (and are) routinely manhandled. Even when gently handled, exposing them to strangers who pet them can itself create anxieties in them. A small percentage of such animals are injured during these sessions.<sup>5</sup>

### *Instrumentalization*

Liberationists tend to tacitly or explicitly model ideal human-nonhuman relations on analogies with human-human ethics. While few extend to animals—the same range of moral considerability that befits humans—liberationists turn the human-non human model from the thoughtless instrumentalization that is typical of human relations with objects into forms of interaction that approximate human-human relations. From this perspective, since it is unimaginable to retain a sub-group of human beings as therapeutic aids of other human beings even if proved as facilitating extremely effective therapy (say that the tactile quality of touching members of this subgroup is proved to have therapeutic merits), doing this to animals is wrong in a similar way. Animals are not out there to be used, even when the use is important or worthy.

Liberationists would be quick to identify these six potential violations of the moral status of animals and would accordingly be concerned about the moral legitimacy of AAT as such. The fact that much more serious violations than the six noted above occur does not abrogate the moral questions that relate to the six violations. It matters not that billions of animals are routinely killed

for negligible reasons or that they are institutionally used and exploited in large-scale industries all over the world. If these six violations cannot be vindicated, liberationists should censor these modalities of therapy and assistance.

### **A Paternalistic Case for AAT?**

Analyzing the moral status of the six potential violations invites an exploration of the pet-owner relationship. If pet-owner relationships can be morally justified, some of the therapeutic uses of animals sketched above might be vindicated as well.<sup>6</sup> I have elsewhere proposed a utilitarian-based justification of the pet-owner relationship that can morally legitimate the practice of keeping some animals as pets. In a nutshell, my claim was that the hands-off approach advocated by some liberationists—the idea that the lives of animals are better the less paternalistic they are—is morally sound though, ironically, not always in the interest of the animals themselves. Accordingly, I urged liberationists to avoid the hands-off approach.<sup>7</sup> With regard to companion animals, some pet-owner relationships are an overall good for human as well as for nonhuman animals. The paternalistic framework of such relations is a potential wrong but is exonerated because it makes for a better world for small animals: It is an overall better alternative for them than a life in the wild. Success stories of feral populations of horses and dogs would modify such an impression only in few examples but are less impressive when thinking about highly populated countries in which such animals would turn into “pests” and would be treated accordingly. Cats and dogs get to lead longer, safer, and more comfortable lives. While they lose through this exchange too (loss of freedom, being subjected to various operative interventions), such losses are offset by the benefits to them in the long run (limiting movement can prolong the life of the pet since it diminishes the risks of accidents and injury from fighting other animals—a neutered animal lives longer).<sup>8</sup>

In other cases, such losses help preserve the pet-owner relations as such (most owners would refuse to keep animals who can freely reproduce), relations the existence of which is an overall good for the pets. Such welfare-based thinking can also generate welfare-based distinctions that can tell us when pet abuse takes place and can guide some moral decision-making within small animal veterinary medicine. Some paternalistic, invasive, owner actions are justified on welfare ground, as the overall good for companion animals

trumps their inability to understand the action (vaccination). Other such actions are obviously immoral, as they do not promote any animal interest and advance a marginal interest of the owner (ear docking). Most other actions fall in the middle and should be assessed in terms of the overall good for the animal, the owner, and in terms of available alternatives to the examined action.

For some animals, turning them into companion animals is not a benefit to them in any obvious way (wild animals and birds); so, welfare considerations urge us to banish the attempt to keep such animals as pets. Yet the same considerations suggest that the practice of keeping companion animals is not objectionable as such: An ideal liberationist world will include pet-owner relationships, and such relations—at their best—also show us that a paternalistic, yet non-exploitative, human-animal relation is both possible and actual.

Can animal-therapy be justified in a similar way? “Service” animals such as signal and guide dogs easily fall into the pet-owner category; so, such practices are, in principle, justified. Dogs do pay a price for such lives: They are spayed or neutered, trained for long periods (in the case of guide dogs much longer than other dogs), and isolated from their kin. But dogs seem to be able to transfer their social needs onto humans, and some of the prolonged training can arguably be an advantage, providing important (and pleasurable) mental stimulation to these dogs. If humanity were to endorse a hands-off approach with regard to animals, such dogs would appear to lead qualitatively inferior (and probably shorter) lives in the wild—even in the few countries in the world in which the notion of “the wild” still makes sense.

Some AAT programs strive to connect animal interests and human needs by placing shelter-abandoned animals with elderly people, thus benefiting particular animals in an even more immediate way.<sup>9</sup> Is a capuchin monkey, captured in the wild, isolated from the pack, trained using electric shocks, had teeth extracted—all of these prior to placing the monkey as a nurse of a handicapped person, better off than living in the wild?<sup>10</sup> The answer is here negative. Such an animal is better off having nothing to do with humans. In such examples, the hands-off approach is not only morally sound but is also continuous with the animal’s welfare. The same holds for other forms of AAT: Maintaining stressed rodents in petting areas in educational and therapeutic

institutions for the projected benefit of children, psychiatric patients, or prisoners who may enjoy various therapeutic benefits through this connection does not appear to promote any of the rodent's own interests.<sup>11</sup> The lives of these rodents apart from humans appear to be a better alternative for them.

The same considerations help make sense of horse-assisted therapy. Justifying hippotherapy brings up the range of moral issues relating to equine husbandry and the moral status of the diverse practices it involves (racing, show jumping, hunting, riding as such). Horses require lengthy training periods and demand the use of bits and harnesses. Many of them are then kept in very small locks. They are subjected to all of the medical interventions that cats and dogs undergo. All of these practices would disturb liberationists. Yet where and how would horses exist in an ideal liberationist world? Reserves might be an option in some countries in which feral populations of horses might be feasible. But in many parts of the world, a puritanical decision to let horses be would boil down to a horseless environment.

Liberationists would know that the argument from the animal's projected welfare is a risky one to make, since the idea that the animal's existence justifies exploiting the animal is routinely used in various forms, supposedly vindicating all kinds of animal abuse. However, I believe that in the context of AAT this justification is viable.<sup>12</sup> I do, however, wish to add that since equine husbandry appears to be economically driven through and through, the idea that some relations between humans and horses are justified in the sense that they ultimately benefit horses does not morally cleanse all such relationships. It is not obvious to me that practices such as racing, dressage, or show jumping are morally justified, as they involve pain and risk of injury to the animal, and—according to one veterinarian I have consulted, Orit Zamir DVM—they can radically curtail the life-span of the horses and diminish its quality. Hippotherapy, by contrast, is not a form of human-animal connection that appears detrimental to the horse. The utilitarian benefits for such horses—they get to exist,<sup>13</sup> lead safe and relatively comfortable lives, are not abused or exploited—outweigh the prices they pay.

## Use versus Exploitation

I have so far argued that for some animals AAT cannot be vindicated through appeals to the overall good for the animal through the animal's forced participation in a paternalistic relationship with humans. Could some other framework justify using animals for therapeutic purposes? In this section, I will discuss (and reject) two such possible justifications: Cartesianism and Kantianism. Later in this essay, I address Utilitarianism and Speciesism.

Cartesians claim that animals lack moral considerability. For a Cartesian, it is senseless to draw a morally relevant distinction between animals and objects (for Descartes, this also involved a denial of animal pain). Since animals lack moral considerability, any action done to them—AAT included—is morally permissible. Kantians are fig-leaf Cartesians. They agree with Cartesians that animals lack any kind of intrinsic moral status. But they also claim that some actions with respect to animals are morally reprehensible. This stems not from anything having to do with the animal but from how such actions determine the agents that performed them:—from what these actions say about them or about humanity in general. Cartesians would have no problem with any form of AAT since, for them, animals are no more than means to an end. Kantians would concur with this, adding the restriction that no abuse or cruelty should take place as part of AAT (consistent Cartesians would have no problem with cruelty to therapy animals, if it is shown to be therapeutically beneficial to human patients.<sup>14</sup>)

The more general issue of the moral considerability of animals cannot be broached here. Liberationists have offered detailed criticisms of the Cartesian and Kantian frameworks. My own arguments against these positions, as well as my own position regarding the moral considerability of animals as such, is available elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> In our context, both positions constitute a theoretical, not a practical, opposition. By this, I mean that judging by the literature that they produce and by their concern with animal welfare, people involved in offering AAT appear to be both sensitive and concerned about the well being of the animals on whom they rely. They would find it odd to think that one may do anything one likes to an animal (Cartesianism) or that torturing a dog is wrong, not because of the dog but only because of what this says about the torturer (Kantianism).<sup>16</sup>

Short of a categorical denial of moral status, AAT advocates may favor weaker forms of these positions. They might try to defend the idea that using animals is permissible, even when detrimental to their welfare, so long as no abuse takes place. They will argue that such use does not constitute exploitation. The liberationism I have outlined above, in which some instrumental human-animal relations are morally legitimate, although they constitute a use of animals, is close to this position—but importantly different not only in general moral categories but also in terms of the consequences for particular species in the context of AAT.

To palpably perceive this difference, we need to draw some distinctions regarding instrumentalization. We now approach the conceptual heart of this essay: the distinction between use and exploitation and the manner by which this distinction affects the moral status (or lack of it) of AAT.

Actual practice pressurizes those who would like to relate to avoiding instrumentalization as a morally meaningful value. We routinely use our friends and relations for emotional or physical support. We use other people for their abilities, knowledge, and work power. And since give-and-take relations are a legitimate part of life, the relevant moral distinction is not the one between instrumentalization and non-instrumentalization but the one between use and exploitation. Kant was unhelpful regarding this, holding that whereas in some contexts it is permissible to treat another person as a means, it is immoral to perceive another person *merely* as a means. This position is notoriously vague, since it appeals to private motivations that are easily given to manipulation and rationalization. People can and do exploit others while commending themselves for negligible concessions that they make for the benefit of the exploited party.

Fortunately, the distinction between use and exploitation is not hard to draw. X uses Y when X perceives Y as a means of furthering X's own financial (or other) well being. This turns into exploitation when X is willing to act in a way that is substantially detrimental to Y's own well being in order to further X's own. By "substantial," I mean that the action predictably carries consequences such as shortening Y's life, damaging Y's health, limiting Y's freedom, abusing what Y is (some forms of prostitution), systematically thwarting Y's potential (child labor), and subjecting Y to pain or to a strongly undesired

life (demanding inhuman workloads and thus creating human-slavery). In addition, exploitation usually suggests lack of consent by the exploited party (or a consent predicated on a highly limited choice or on choosing among impossible alternatives). Exploitation is also mostly related to the existence of unequal power-relations or some dependency relations between the parties, favoring the exploiting party in an institutional and systematic way.

To know for certain that X is not exploiting Y, merely using Y, X must repeatedly make choices that substantively further Y's welfare even when in conflict with X's own prudential motives. This need not mean that X is to become irrational or altruistic. It merely suggests how persons can actually verify that they are not involved in an exploitative relationship. I believe that people can legitimately fall short of this ideal. That is, they can be uncertain as to whether a particular relationship that they have is exploitative. Give-and-take relations can be vague in this sense. For example, immigrants in well-off countries sometimes offer to overwork themselves so as to provide for the families in their home countries. Fantasizing about global justice is nice as a thought-experiment, but it does not help one when compelled to choose between cooperating with such requests or not. One does not always know. And provided that one does not knowingly participate in, or cooperate with, clear-cut exploitative relations, I believe that it is morally permissible to have relations over which one has some misgivings.

How can one tell whether one is in a "clear-cut" exploitative relationship? Generally, you are exploiting an entity if your relationship with it predictably benefits you and harms the entity. More specifically and in light of the various characterizations of exploitative relationships mentioned above, the answer is both quantitative and qualitative: Relationships become more exploitative if they share more of the characteristics spelled out above (this is the "quantitative" answer). At the same time, a relationship can manifest only one of the characteristics mentioned above in some substantial way and be clearly exploitative (the "qualitative" answer). If, for example, I provide an entity with a comfortable life in which it is not abused in any way yet aim to kill it when it is very young the relationship is clearly exploitative. If, on the other hand, I intend to terminate the entity's life only if it becomes old or incurably ill, I am not exploiting it, even if I would not act in the same way with regard to a human being. This is why pet-owner relationships can

be non-exploitative (although they might constitute use) and why the same cannot be said concerning the lamb industry. I am not claiming that distinguishing between use and exploitation is always simple. Indeed, animal-ethics provide many vague cases (free roaming, de-beaked hens, for instance). But the considerations that could lead us in deciding these issues are not mysterious and many times indicate decisive answers.

We are now in a position to assess the modified Cartesian/Kantian counterargument to my proposal. I have argued that animals may be used but may not be exploited and have tried to unpack this distinction. Applied to AAT, this means that service dogs are used, though not exploited, since their welfare is promoted by the relationship. Horses too gain much from their relations with humans. The same cannot be said for rodents, snakes, birds, aquarium-kept dolphins, or monkeys who gain little or nothing through AAT and lose a lot.<sup>17</sup> Unlike horses or dogs, all of these creatures can easily exist in the wild in large numbers; by turning them into vehicles for therapy, both their freedom and their social needs are radically curtailed. Counter to my opponent's claims, AAT that uses these creatures is exploitative, even if no abuse takes place.

## Two Objections

Before examining whether exploiting animals can be defended as such, I need to respond to two counterarguments to what I have just said. The first is that I am downplaying the significance of the price horses and dogs pay for their existence in the company of humans. Watching a horse struggle with the bit in his mouth is a difficult sight. "Breaking" horses or the prolonged training periods that service dogs undergo can boil down to painful activities and deprivation, especially when the training system is not (or is not only) reward-based. Moreover, the import of thwarting the procreative potential of these animals by neutering them cannot be ignored.

The second objection has to do with the argument from non-existence on which I relied when claiming that dogs and horses gain from their relations with humans, since this relationship means that they exist. I have said that I defend the metaphysical plausibility of such an argument elsewhere. In a nutshell, I argue that a non-existent entity cannot be harmed by not bringing

“it” into existence, yet it—now without the quotes—can benefit from a decision to bring it into existence. There is nothing contradictory about an entity having both these properties. But there is a non-metaphysically based objection to this move having to do with species as opposed to particular entities. I have said that, in most countries, horses and dogs are not likely to exist outside of use-based human relations and that abrogating all such relations will, in any case, imply a radical reduction in the number of such beings. But an AAT therapist can choose to breed particular rodents for the purpose of using them in therapeutic sessions, claiming that—like horses or dogs—these *particular* animals gain their existence from entering this exchange. Why, then, am I legitimating the former relations and prohibiting the latter?

Beginning with the substantial prices that horses and dogs pay for living their lives with humans, here a liberationist is compelled to factor in moral, political, and strategic considerations. Consider two versions of a liberationist ideal world: The first is based on the hands-off approach. Here, human animals live alongside nonhuman animals. Some interaction between the species might occur, but it would never be achieved through coercing animals. Pet-owner relations would probably not exist as such. People may take in injured animals for short periods, or, if they can afford the space needed, may allow animals to live and breed in an unlimited way in their homes. Cows, sheep, horses, dogs, cats, and pigs would roam freely in large areas that are fenced off from humans. They would never be killed for their flesh or hides. Nor would they be used to obtain eggs and milk: Protein substitutes would replace these, since collective moral veganism would make such replacement mandatory (and affordable). This ideal obviously involves a radical shrinking in numbers for these creatures, as there will be no financial incentive to breed them. But the ones who will exist would lead uninterrupted lives. Humans will occasionally visit these reserves (zoos would be abolished) so as to watch those animals from afar.

Here is another, less serene, liberationist ideal world: In this world, animals are never killed in order to satisfy human interests (including culinary, scientific, or recreational interests). Protein substitutes and alternative research models have been devised, activities like hunting or fishing have been outlawed, and zoos have been banished. Yet animals do live with humans in various relationships that promote some human interests. Free-roaming

animals are maintained by humans so as to obtain milk and eggs. When such animals die, their flesh and hides are used. Cats, dogs, and horses are kept by humans; this does mean that they are spayed and neutered, vaccinated, and subjected to training. The animals are well kept, and some cosmetic interventions done to them today are banned.

I submit that this second ideal world is overall better for animals than the first. Many more animals would exist (millions more would exist), the lives they would lead would be qualitatively good ones and would not constitute a debasing of what having a life means—a debasement that exists when animals are perceived merely as means for producing this or that. And it is such a world that liberationists should strive to create. This does not obviously legitimize everything done to dogs or horses. Aesthetic surgery for dogs cannot be legitimated, and some modes of keeping and using horses will disappear. But this position involves embracing a quasi-paternalistic relationship with these beings, holding that doing so is beneficial to them. For a liberationist, the moral price of accepting this position is upholding the moral legitimacy of bits, harnesses, and invasive surgery. Yet for liberationists such as I, the moral price that the first world implies, although more abstract in nature, is higher: One has to, in this case, swallow the implication of a petless world, both in terms of ourselves and of these beings. And since the lives of many horses and pets are qualitatively good ones, I do not subscribe to the morally purer stance, which will make all of these disappear.

Responding to the second counter-argument requires specifying when and where the argument from non-existence can be legitimately employed. Merely bringing a being into existence is not, *ipso facto*, a benefit to it. Two additional considerations have to be brought into play before one can conclude that an entity benefits from bringing it into existence. First, the qualitative consideration: If the entity's future life is predicted to be qualitatively bad in a significant way, then bringing it into existence is not a benefit to it. The negative quality has to, of course, be significant. An obvious example is that of bringing a person into a long life of perpetual torture.<sup>18</sup> The second consideration is "teleological." Bringing a being into a life form, which debases the very idea of having a life, is wrong, even if the life offered is qualitatively reasonable. For example, bringing some people into the world with the sole purpose of using them as organ banks later (while providing them with a qualitatively

reasonable existence) abuses what having a life means. I call this abuse “teleological,” because here the problem is the distorted, projected goal for a life.

I have claimed that in the case of rodents, birds, reptiles, fish, and monkeys, there is no species-related, welfare-based justification that enables perceiving AAT as a practice that helps these beings *qua* members of a potentially extinct species. The counter-argument has granted this, yet claimed that bringing a particular member of these animals into existence for the purpose of AAT benefits the member. In response, I admit that the AAT therapist who brings a particular rodent to life for the purpose of AAT does not necessarily abuse the rodent. The life of the rodent may be comfortable, and it need not constitute a debasement of what having a life means in the same manner in which, say, factory farming abuses the lives of the animals whose lives it takes.

However, that a particular rodent does benefit from the decision to bring the rodent into existence should not change the conclusion for a liberationist. The reason for this is that when a particular AAT animal’s welfare is genuinely considered, it seems overall best for the animal to be set free after being brought into existence by the therapist. And so, if the technician is truly concerned with the particular animal’s welfare, the technician should hypothetically release the animal from captivity as soon as possible.

Unlike dogs or horses,—the release of whom either is not feasible in most areas (horses) or appears to compromise their welfare—mice, hamsters, and chinchillas on the whole express no particular attachment to human contact (unlike dogs) or seek their company (unlike some cats). And so, a particular, welfare-based justification from non-existence can only work if one is willing to accept the implication that the same welfare considerations, which justify bringing the particular animal into existence, would then undermine maintaining an AAT-based relationship with this particular animal, since releasing the animal is overall better for the animal.

### **An Exploitation-based Case for AAT?**

A defender of AAT may now concede that some forms of AAT are exploitative but assert that it is morally permissible to exploit animals. This position need not be coupled with a Cartesian or a Kantian categorical denial of moral

considerability to animals. The defender of AAT will here follow what appears to be the consensus in many countries: Animals are entitled to some moral considerability (and this basically means that cruelty to animals ought to be prevented). Yet nothing stands in the way of exploiting animals for all kinds of purposes, AAT included. The response to this argument (“But if it is wrong to be cruel to an entity how can it be right to exploit it?”) will be rejected by this defender of AAT by adopting a “degrees” view of moral considerability: The defender of AAT will claim that animals have some degree of moral considerability, which justifies preventing abuse of them—but not enough to prohibit exploiting them.

Yet the degrees view cannot be accepted. First, it is questionable whether it can be successfully formulated at all, though this is less important for our purposes.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the morally relevant properties that generate the prohibition on cruelty—the animal’s capacity to suffer as well as the animal’s possession of an interest/desire not to be subjected to some actions—are shared by humans too. In the case of humans, it is partly these properties that underlie the condemnation of exploiting them. It would therefore appear mysterious why, if one is willing to admit these properties into an analysis (and condemnation) of one kind of conduct, one dismisses these very same properties when analyzing another. If, for example, one opposes cruelty to animals because their suffering is morally relevant (and not just because cruelty is reprehensible as such), one is obligated to avoid actions that create such suffering.

What this means, morally, is that when human interests appear to require animal suffering, one cannot just allow these interests to trump one’s obligation to avoid creating suffering. One is morally required to seriously strive at first to devise alternatives to these conflicts of interests. Many (not all) human-animal conflicts of interests can be finessed, meaning that it is possible to meet the human need in a substantial—though sometimes not maximal—way without compromising the well being of animals. Recognizing this makes it possible to avoid a host of second-order questions regarding the relative importance of human interests as well as the plausibility (or lack of it) of mobilizing this importance in order to thwart particular animal interests.<sup>20</sup>

One does not have to exploit animals so as to have eggs or milk. The same applies to AAT: There are numerous effective modes of therapy that do not

exploit animals; so there is no reason to institutionalize the latter. Moreover, since this essay's analysis justifies some modes of AAT—while disallowing others—if therapeutic considerations favor the use of animals, this can still be done through deploying dogs or horses. It seems strained to claim that the value of using, specifically, rodents or birds for some patients is of such additional therapeutic value (over, say, employing dogs) as to render void the desire to avoid exploitation.

### Two Further Objections (and Conclusion)

The argument I have just used regarding the moral obligation to circumvent either-or conflicts of interests between humans and animals, applies also to speciesist or utilitarian objections to my general claim. "Speciesism" is a confused term and, under most of its renderings, is not opposed to liberationism.<sup>21</sup> In our context, a speciesist rejoinder would boil down to saying that since human interests are more important than the interests of animals, various forms of exploitation (such as the forms of AAT that rely on rodents, birds, dolphins, reptiles, and monkeys) are morally legitimate. The argument in *Two Objections* above adequately answers this objection: The question is not whose interests are more important but whether a particular conflict of interests can be avoided. Since the either-or nature of the question of some forms of AAT is a mirage, speciesism is continuous with abrogating forms of AAT that involve exploitation and can be easily replaced.

Utilitarian objections to the foregoing conclusion are similar, basically claiming that the overall good achieved in a world in which exploitative forms of AAT occur is greater than the overall good in a world that does not contain such therapeutic options. Unpacking "overall good" shows that, in the AAT context, there are three possible variants of the utilitarian claim, two of which are speciesist; the third, liberationist. The two speciesist variants of this utilitarian argument would hold that human interests are more important than animal interests. They would differ on what "more important" should mean in practice, the first variant holding that any human interest categorically trumps any animal one. The second variant maintains that some human interests trump some (though not all) animal ones.<sup>22</sup> The liberationist variant of a utilitarian objection, which is actually continuous with classical utilitar-

ianism, is that human and nonhuman interests count equally; yet it may be the case that some disutility to animals, caused by exploitative forms of AAT, substantially promotes the well being of some humans in a way that makes for a better world than one in which exploitation does not occur.

Responding to these objections need not invoke the complex evaluation of utilitarianism as such or the difficulties involved in weighing interests. If my previous argument is sound, considerations of an overall good only superficially imply that anyone's interests should be compromised, so all three utilitarian variants miss the mark. The therapeutic benefits to humans could be met without exploitation. Accordingly, avoiding some forms of AAT does not diminish the projected, overall good.

In conclusion: Forms of AAT that rely on horses and dogs are continuous with the welfare of these animals. Without a relationship with humans, an overwhelming number of these beings would not exist. Their lives with human beings exact a price from them. But given responsible human owners, such lives are qualitatively comfortable and safe, and they need not frustrate the social needs of these creatures. A world in which practices like AAT exist is an overall better world for these beings than one that does not include them, and this provides a broad, moral vindication of forms of AAT that rely on these beings. On the other hand, rodents, birds, monkeys, reptiles, and dolphins gain little by coercing them into AAT. Such practices are therefore exploitative. Since the human interests that are involved can be easily met without exploiting these beings, the moral conclusion is that such forms of AAT should be abolished.

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#### Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> The literature deploys a finer terminology here, distinguishing AAT from AAA (animal-assisted activities), the latter covering non-therapeutic work done with animals, which is nevertheless deemed as potentially beneficial for humans. This

distinction is not pertinent to the following analysis, so I will use AAT as an umbrella term covering various modalities of therapy and assistance incorporating the use of animals.

- <sup>3</sup> Psychologically oriented AAT includes child-oriented interventions that rely on animals to achieve wide-ranging goals. These include boosting the self-esteem of insecure children: therapeutic horseback riding (hippotherapy), creating oblique communication over the child's own problems through her interaction with animals, cultivating self-control and curtailing impulsive behavior in children with ADHD, enhancing empathy, responsibility, and furthering the child's capacity to nurse through creating controlled child-animal relationships. Aside from children, psychological branches of AAT also include interventions with clinically depressed individuals, with the elderly, and with incarcerated inmates in some prisons. In all, advocates of AAT claim that the ability of the animal to generate what is many times perceived as unconditional acceptance and to facilitate dialogue that is non-threatening, their capacity to enforce on depressives or recuperating individuals a compelling "here and now," even the tactile sensations that their touch induces, turn animals into invaluable helpers in creating therapeutically meaningful interventions. Apart from allowing people to relate to themselves through projection, some psychotherapists believe that the animals tap into various unconscious drives that they embody or archetypically signify, thus creating analytically deep therapy that could not be achieved through non-animal targeted projections. Apart from psychology, forms of AAT have been introduced in assisting the handicapped ("service animals," such as dogs for the hearing impaired, guide dogs for the blind, monkeys for quadriplegic individuals). Animals feature in programs designed to assist the mentally handicapped. They are deployed as part of new modalities of speech therapy. Animals are also relied upon to function as organic alarm systems (dogs) who can help with specific medical conditions such as epilepsy and diabetes by alerting the owner to an oncoming seizure. Specialized animal-assisted therapy programs exist for retarded individuals, for autistic people, and for patients suffering from fatal, incurable diseases. There are many available expositions of the current extent of AAT, as well as summaries of research that attempts to validate it. For some of these, see Shalev, 1996; Grammonley and Howie et al. 1997; Cusack, 1988, and Gilshtrom, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> The terms "liberationist perspective" or "liberationist stance" are my own (drawing from Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*). Throughout this essay such terms stipulate what I believe to be a shared consensus among various pro-animal advocates (who, needless to say, differ on many details), who would agree that the status of non-human animals today demands immediate reform, stemming from a prior belief that animals are not merely a resource for human usage.

- <sup>5</sup> Most surveys on AAT given above (see note 3) describe cases of manhandling and injury.
- <sup>6</sup> A different possible moral extension of considerations, which I will not attempt, relates to zoos. If keeping animals in zoos is not immoral, curtailing their movement when they are in pet centers and making life-determining decisions for them when turning them into therapeutic means will surely pass as moral too. I will avoid this direction because reversing these transitive relations does not work: A justification of animal therapy is not, *a fortiori*, a vindication of zoos, and I wish to retain the possibility that animal therapy is a justified practice, whereas the other is not.
- <sup>7</sup> My argument was made in the context of the debate among liberationists whether moral veganism or moral vegetarianism is the morally adequate response to current exploitative practice. See Zamir, 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> This claim and some of the assertions regarding horses in the next section are based on a conversation with Orit Zamir DVM.
- <sup>9</sup> A program discussed in Lannuzi and Rowan, 1991.
- <sup>10</sup> For details of this program, see Lannuzi & Rowan, 1991.
- <sup>11</sup> The surveys on AAT above usually comment on the stress and anxiety that may be involved in such programs (see, in particular on this, Lannuzi & Rowan, 1991). Animals have desires and needs, though some philosophers doubt whether these constitute interests. This subtlety does not affect my argument throughout this paper.
- <sup>12</sup> In Zamir, 2004a, I argue why the use of this argument in order to justify raising animals and killing them for their flesh is wrong. In Zamir, 2004, I suggest three restrictions on the use of this argument, which could distinguish between right and wrong applications of this argument.
- <sup>13</sup> Some philosophers would oppose this, saying that existence cannot be a benefit since this assumes a meaningless position, prior to its present existence, in which the non-existent animal could be harmed or helped by human decisions. See Zamir, 2004, for a reply to this. Later in this essay, I summarize this reply.
- <sup>14</sup> While Cartesians seem to be more hostile than Kantians to the liberationist cause, it is interesting to note that Descartes' own position, resting as it did on the denial of animal pain, is thus conditional on an empirical belief which, when informed (and transformed) by our modern understanding regarding pain, would change the moral attitude to animals. By contrast, the Kantian indirect duties approach thoroughly repudiates the moral status of animals, and this dismissal is unconnected to the existence or non-existence of animal pain. The awareness that animals produce, and respond to, endorphins, that they respond to pain-relievers would have probably persuaded Descartes to modify his position. Kant, on the other

hand, would have been unimpressed. Yet for the purposes of this essay, “Cartesians” covers all who deny that animals possess moral standing (with or without connection to pain).

- <sup>15</sup> See Zamir (2004b) “Why Animals Matter?,” forthcoming in *Between the Species*.
- <sup>16</sup> Kantians and Cartesians would (rightly) charge me with an *ad hominem* reasoning here, claiming that even if AAT practitioners are likely to avoid Kantianism and Cartesianism, this predilection is no argument against these positions as being right. I admit the topical nature of my argument here and refer readers who may be interested in a more detailed response to these to Zamir, 2000b.
- <sup>17</sup> It was pointed out to me that in some dolphin-related AAT programs the dolphins are actually free and the therapeutic objectives are obtained without moving the dolphins from their natural habitat and without coercion. My remarks throughout this essay regarding dolphins do not apply to such programs.
- <sup>18</sup> This claim has no implication for discussions of euthanasia (assuming that animal-ethics discussions carry over into human-ethics). The considerations that pertain to a future life that no one yet has are different from those that are relevant to a life already possessed by a particular person. One cannot be said to benefit a future, potential life by bringing it into a projected life of perpetual fear, isolation, and pain. This does not imply that someone who already lives such a life is better off dead. The claim is also disconnected from the abortion debate, which includes its own claims regarding the relative quality of a future life. An existing zygote is a particular, potential/actual life, while we are here considering abstract, potential ones. Moreover, the negative quality of a future life of disability, of being adopted (since one’s natural parents cannot responsibly function as parents), the two considerations that prompt future quality-of-a-life arguments within the abortion debate are categorically distinct from issues of projected future exploitation that are relevant here.
- <sup>19</sup> For arguments against the plausibility of a degrees view, see Rowland, 2002, Ch. 2, 3; DeGrazia, 1996, Ch. 3; Regan, 1985, Ch. 7, p. 2.
- <sup>20</sup> For discussion of the dubiousness of this move, see Zamir, 2006.
- <sup>21</sup> See Zamir, forthcomingb.
- <sup>22</sup> The terminology, which has been suggested for this distinction (by Brody, 2001), is “lexical priority” of human over nonhuman interests (any human interest overmasters any animal interest) and “discounting of interests” (extremely important animal interests can take preference over negligible human interests).

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