

CHAPTER TEN

ATTFIELD AND ANIMALS: CAPACITIES AND RELATIONS IN ATTFIELD'S ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Robin Attfield's work has been central to the development of environmental philosophy in a number of key areas, including stewardship, population, human development and the moral standing of living organisms. In this paper, I'll focus primarily on just one aspect of Attfield's work: human moral obligations to sentient animals. I'll first outline how, and in what ways, Attfield has argued that such animals are morally important. I'll then suggest that—while providing a good grounding for some central concerns of animal ethics—Attfield's focus on animals' capacities, in the context of a consequentialist approach to ethics, doesn't obviously accommodate other relational concerns that we might think are important. I'll consider how a consequentialist such as Attfield might respond to this concern, and I'll conclude by explaining why this still leaves some residual worries about what I'll call "capacity-oriented" consequentialist approaches to animal ethics.

Attfield's animal ethics: an outline

Attfield's ethical framework is complex and carefully developed. Here, I'll only be able to give a very basic outline of his approach to ethics in general, and to animal ethics in particular. First, and most importantly, Attfield is a consequentialist. That is, what's central on his account is to act, or to follow practices, that bring about the best possible outcomes. Best outcomes, for Attfield, are measured in terms of *flourishing*, or perhaps *well-being*, broadly understood. Attfield takes flourishing to refer not only to subjective, experiential states such as pleasure and pain, nor just to preference satisfaction or frustration (as would be standard in

utilitarianism); his sense of flourishing is much more expansive. All living beings have a good of their own; they can do well or badly, they have basic needs that they must meet in order to stay alive, and in this sense they can all flourish. Admittedly, some few lives might “lack any features which make them worthwhile to anyone or anything, including the creature the life of which is in question”. (Attfield 1994b, 164) But normally, all living beings can be in states of flourishing, whether or not they can consciously experience anything at all. A tree, Attfield famously argues, has a good of its own, and can flourish or otherwise; for this reason, the tree has *interests*—in receiving sufficient water, and nutrition, for instance. Non-human animals, like trees, have interests in water and nutrition, but also possess *other* interests such as not feeling pain; while humans have all these interests, plus additional interests, such as in making autonomous decisions about their own lives. Having interests and being able to flourish, then, emerges from the possession of certain *capacities*; capacities lie at the heart of Attfield’s ethics. Attfield maintains: “Let the ‘essential’ capacities of an x be capacities in the absence of which from most members of a species that species would not be the species of x ’s, and let ‘ x ’ range over terms for living organisms. Then the flourishing of an x entails the development in it of the essential capacities of x ’s.” (Attfield 1994b, 160) The development of essential capacities is what constitutes flourishing for living beings. For Attfield, ethical actions and practices are those that bring about the best outcomes in terms of developing such essential capacities by promoting and protecting organisms’ interests, and thereby maximizing flourishing. Following this pattern then, in the case of animals, humans should act to (or follow practices that) maximize animals’ flourishing, or, at least, maximize animals’ flourishing taking into account the impact such flourishing would have on other (present or future) animal or human interests, or the interests of living but non-sentient beings such as trees.

This outline of Attfield’s ethical framework is very basic—in particular with respect to animal ethics. Before moving on, I need to provide some elaborations and refinements, for Attfield carefully specifies his position, thereby pre-empting a number of potential criticisms.

First, on Attfield’s account of ethics, only individual and living things can have moral standing. Although ecosystems, for instance, may be essential for the good of the living creatures that compose them, they themselves cannot be described as flourishing in a morally-relevant way. “Neither inanimate entities nor systems of living creatures have interests at all in anything other than a strained and metaphorical sense”. (Attfield 1994a, 138)

Secondly, Attfield does not maintain that the flourishing of (for instance) a plant is of the same moral significance as the flourishing of a sentient animal; nor that the flourishing of a sentient animal (normally) has the same value as the flourishing of a human being. There “is much more of value in the flourishing of a sentient creature as such than in the flourishing of an individual tree as such”. (Attfield 1994a, 139) Humans have a much wider range of interests than trees; promoting the flourishing of a human is more important than promoting the flourishing of a tree. As Attfield notes: “The satisfaction (or, where appropriate, non-frustration) of greater interests is of greater value than the satisfaction (or non-frustration) of lesser interests...for what is of greater value ...is precisely what there is more reason for a rational agent to bring about or promote or preserve...”. This doesn’t mean, though, that the basic interests of an animal can be sacrificed for some relatively trivial interest of a human; an animal’s interest in continuing life, for instance, is normally of more importance than the interest a human has in eating meat. The fulfillment of those interests most basic to well-being should normally have priority. (Attfield 1987, 144)

Third, Attfield’s form of consequentialism is fairly closely specified. He argues for a maximizing form of consequentialism; it’s the *total sum* of flourishing that should be maximized (rather than *average* flourishing). (Attfield 1991, 107) And importantly, Attfield adopts a form of *indirect* consequentialism. That is, we should not think of bringing about the best consequences primarily in terms of each individual *act*. Rather we should follow *practices* that, if they are widely followed or likely to become widely followed, would bring about best outcomes (even though in some particular case it might appear as though the best outcome would come about by *not* following the practice). So, Attfield maintains: “there are practices general recognition of which makes for, or would make for, a much better world than would be possible either in their absence or through alternative practices.” (Attfield 1987, 107) So, for instance, we should keep promises, because promise-making is a practice that maximizes flourishing overall and makes for a better world; even if on some particular occasion, breaking a promise might bring about better “local” consequences, promise-breaking would undermine the socially optimistic practice of promise-making.

Having given this—admittedly rather brief—outline of Attfield’s ethical framework, I’ll now turn to the question in which I’m particularly interested: the moral significance of capacities and relations in animal ethics.

Capacities and Relations in Attfield's Ethics

It's widely argued that moral responsibilities to others arise either on the basis of certain capacities that beings possess, or certain relations in which they stand (as Attfield himself accepts [1994c, 175]). However, Attfield's focus—as the outline of his views above suggests—is entirely on capacities, most crucially on the capacity to flourish. It's the possession of certain morally-relevant capacities that both gives a living being moral standing at all, and that provides the basis for an account of how morally significant it is, particularly important where the interests of different beings conflict. Attfield doesn't provide an account of the possible moral importance of relations at all. Indeed, he expresses a number of worries about the role that relations can play if they are given a place in ethics. For instance, he's concerned that if relations are thought to be of moral relevance, beings that lack such purportedly morally relevant relations, but that do have morally significant capacities, might be disregarded. He's also concerned that beings with “capacities of radically different types” may be treated “as if they were of equal value”, on the basis of their relations, rather than their capacities. (Attfield 1991, 176) Additionally, there are some kinds of beings, he maintains, that have moral standing—such as future generations—with whom we just can't have relations (Attfield 1987, 8). And other kinds of relations—such as being someone's “kin”—are, he insists, not of moral relevance at all. (Attfield 1987, 6) Indeed, Attfield claims, “the criterion of standing in particular relationships cannot in itself be other than arbitrary”. (Attfield 1991, 178) What matters for Attfield is the possession of certain capacities, capacities that ground interests and provide the basis for flourishing, not the relation in which we might stand to the beings that have these capacities.

Of course, this isn't to say that Attfield must deny that relations are *important*. After all, many relations are critical for flourishing, and should be cultivated for that reason (for instance, the relations between parent and child). But the relation is, as it were, secondary to the flourishing; it's not the relation in itself that creates particular obligations. That is, a parent should care for his or her child because such care is central to the child's flourishing and the parent is (usually) in the best position to promote their own child's flourishing, not because the relation of being someone's parent creates special caring obligations towards that child.

Attfield's view, then, is essentially *capacity-oriented*. Moral standing, and what constitutes ethical practice, is based on the flourishing that can flow from the intrinsic capacities that living beings have, independently of these beings' relations to others. This kind of capacity-oriented view is

common among consequentialists, in particular in the field of animal ethics (Peter Singer and R.G. Frey, for instance, equally focus on capacities). However, it's worth noting that it's not necessarily the case that consequentialist ethical approaches *must* focus solely on capacities. Just as Attfield's ethical framework diverges from standard forms of utilitarianism by proposing a form of consequentialism in which the possession of value doesn't depend on the capacity for conscious experiences, so it would be possible to propose a form of consequentialism in which maximizing the fulfillment of certain kinds of relations carries value. I'm not going to propose such a view, though, because it doesn't obviously capture what I want to argue is morally important about certain kinds of relations. It's not that certain relations should be maximally developed or fulfilled, I'll suggest. It's rather that the existence of some kinds of special relations create some kinds of special obligations—additional responsibilities that we have towards some beings that we don't have towards others—even though those beings may have *very similar capacities*. I'll explore this idea further in the next section.

Special Relations and Obligations

Scheffler (1997, 190) identifies three possible ways in which special moral responsibilities are sometimes argued to be created by special relations. These are: (a) moral responsibilities that emerge out of past interactions (eg. promises, agreements, debts, harms); (b) moral responsibilities that emerge out of special relationships (eg. children, parents, siblings, friends) and (c) special responsibilities that emerge out of membership of some common group. I've already considered Attfield's response to several of these kinds of relations. Relations based on past interactions, such as promises, may be important on Attfield's account, but not directly because promises create special moral relations and therefore obligations. Rather, promises shouldn't be broken because this would undermine the optimific social practice of promise-making. And relations such as "being kin" are, on Attfield's view, an inadmissible basis for moral significance; the particular configuration of someone's genetic material alone is irrelevant to our moral obligations. (And after all, if we accept that just-being-kin has moral significance, it's going to be difficult to deny acceptance of less-savoury moral preferences, such as those that can be embedded in racism and sexism).

As long as one thinks of relations such as kinship in the very "bare" sense Attfield suggests, he seems to be right. Sharing a certain sort of genetic configuration with someone else, in itself, *doesn't* seem to be a

good basis for morally privileging them over others who lack this configuration. But there are other kinds of relations that, I'll argue, can hold between kin (but not only between kin) and look much more plausibly to be of moral significance. And such relations, in various forms, can extend beyond the exclusively human sphere into our moral obligations towards animals.

Let's return to parents and children, and the widely-accepted idea (in most current societies at least) that a parent has special responsibility to care for his or her own child. We've seen two possible reasons for thinking this. One is based on bare kinship; but I've accepted Attfield's view that bare kinship—genetic configuration alone—isn't morally relevant. A second reason flows from Attfield's capacity-oriented view: that we should maximize flourishing, especially human flourishing; and that a parent is usually best placed to promote their own child's flourishing. So, parents should promote the flourishing of their own children (we could think of this as one of Attfield's optimistic social practices). This, of course, is plausible.

But it's not necessary to deny *this* reason to accept an *additional* reason for parental special responsibility: that the parents have decided to create, between them, a vulnerable and dependent being; that they are causally responsible for this child's existence; and that this gives them special moral obligations towards that child that they don't have towards children in general. As Onora O'Neill (1979, 26) maintains: "a standard way of acquiring obligations is to undertake them, and a standard way of undertaking parental obligations is to decide to procreate". Suppose someone decides to procreate, but denies any obligations to the infant, neglecting it or failing to provide for its basic needs. The neglectful parent is morally culpable, we normally think, in a way that would not apply to some other adult who, though knowing that there are neglected infants nearby, and being able to adopt one of them and promote its flourishing, nonetheless chooses not to do so.

Having said that we would normally think this, it's not obvious that Attfield would endorse this view, for these kinds of backward looking special obligations fit uncomfortably into a consequentialist framework. Attfield might conclude that, since the goal is to maximize flourishing, any adults should adopt needy children that they could help to flourish (provided that this did, in fact, maximize flourishing) and that such adults fail morally if they don't do so. Indeed, since Attfield (1991, 178) has argued that "the criterion of standing in particular relationships cannot be other than arbitrary", it looks as though he's likely to maintain that adults generally have just the same obligations to unrelated neglected children as

parents do to their own children, even though such unrelated adults have no causal responsibility for these children's existence or their current state of well-being, provided that the unrelated adults are best placed to promote the children's flourishing. However, I want to argue, instead, that there is a relationship that generates special moral obligations in such cases, obligations that don't just flow from the child's capacity to flourish and the parents' ability to promote that flourishing.

This kind of special relationship, I suggest, combines several features. First, the child is a being that has—on the basis of capacities he or she possesses—moral status. (So, I'm not attempting to deny the highly plausible claim that particular capacities—such as sentience—are what *gives* a being moral status in the first place). Second, this relationship concerns a moral agent acting to bring a being with moral status into existence. And third, it concerns bringing a being with moral status into existence *in a particular way*—a state of vulnerability and dependence. (After all, children can be brought into the world in no other state.) It's this combination—not bare kinship, nor just the promotion of flourishing in the world—that, I suggest, gives parents special obligations to care for their children, or to arrange for other appropriate care for them.

Why am I focusing on this case? Because, I want to maintain, *some* human relations with animals are similar in form. Such human-animal relations likewise concern sentient beings with moral status that humans are largely responsible for bringing into the world, beings that are dependent on humans (indeed, have been made to *be* dependent by humans) and that are vulnerable in a variety of ways. Primarily, these are domesticated animals, although a version of this argument can be extended to include other animals rendered vulnerable by human actions, such as by displacement from their habitat.

Let's work this claim through in more detail. First, I'm following Attfield (and, of course, many others) in taking the view that sentient animals have moral status, based on particular capacities that they possess. This is relatively uncontroversial, and I'll just assume it here (one need not follow Attfield as far as the moral standing of trees to accept the moral standing of sentient animals). Second, humans are largely responsible for the actual existence of most individual domesticated animals, since they are deliberately bred. And third, domesticated animals are deliberately created in particular ways by humans that render them peculiarly vulnerable and dependent: moulding body shapes, fur or hair production, susceptibility to disease, reproductive capacity, temperament, presence or absence of horns or claws, and so on. These kinds of vulnerabilities, and

the dependency that often results from them, are permanent as opposed to developmental (as is normally the case with children).

It's this deliberate causal responsibility for the creation of sentient animals in dependent states that, I suggest, means that we have special moral obligations towards them. This doesn't mean that such relational obligations hold towards all animals; for humans usually have quite different relations with wild animals; wild animals normally come into being independently of people and can provide for themselves. The argument here, then, is that while we have *some* duties towards all animals based on their possession of morally-relevant capacities, we have additional moral obligations to those animals with whom we have relevant special relations.

Admittedly, there are a number of difficulties with this argument. For instance, it might be objected that the relation of parents and children is not really parallel in form to the relations of humans to domesticated animals, since the parent/child case concerns the creation of particular individuals by other particular individuals, but most people *don't* themselves breed domesticated animals. And, of course, it's true that the parallel is not exact. However, most humans are, in various ways, *entangled with* the creation of, and certainly benefit from, the breeding of domesticated animals; and this is, I've argued elsewhere, enough to generate at least weak special moral responsibilities towards these animals. Unfortunately, I don't have space to pursue these problems further here (but see Palmer 2010 for further discussion of this, and other, objections). What I want to do now is to think about how an advocate of capacity-oriented consequentialism, such as Attfield, might respond to this argument.

Attfield and the Rejection of Special Relations/Obligations

As I've already indicated, Attfield is not obviously sympathetic to the idea that any relations are in themselves morally significant. But there are several ways in which the kinds of relations I've outlined above don't raise the problems about which Attfield actually expresses concern. First, I'm not suggesting that moral status itself is based on relations; rather that relations may create special, *additional* obligations, where beings already have moral status on the basis of their capacities. Second, a relationship that involves making a being vulnerable and dependent (whether creating the being that way, or subsequently rendering it that way) is not arbitrary in any normal sense of the term. It would be odd to call it arbitrary, for instance, were I required to compensate someone for some past harm I did

to them; what's owed to this person now is directly linked to what I took from them before. The two of us are bound together in a direct historical relationship; the kinds of relations in which I'm interested are linked in a similarly non-arbitrary way.

Nonetheless, it's very difficult for a consequentialist to accept these kinds of special obligations, partly because of the forward-looking nature of consequentialism. As we've already seen, Attfield maintains that we should keep promises for forward-looking, not backward-looking reasons. Likewise, from a consequentialist point of view, the purpose of compensation or other forms of "making good" the past is to bring about the best outcome, not to engage in backward-looking reparative justice. On a forward-looking account, a human role in creating and rendering animals vulnerable and dependent is not relevant to what's owed to them. Rather, we should consider how to bring about best consequences with respect to the flourishing of animals in general, not look backwards to our causal responsibility for the present circumstances of some of them.

If this is the aim, though, the distinction I've been suggesting between what might be owed to domesticated and wild animals—or, more accurately, towards animals on whose natures or states humans have had some kind of causal impact, and animals where this isn't the case—collapses. And this is the standard consequentialist view, the view that I think should be attributed to Attfield, though he doesn't say this explicitly. We should take the flourishing of all sentient animals equally into account in our moral decision-making, whatever their history and relation to us; and aim to maximize it (taking into account the impact this would have on the flourishing of [present or future] humans, or other living but non-sentient organisms such as trees).

This consequentialist approach—at first sight at least—seems to commit those who hold it to some strong—and apparently implausible—positions. One reason for this just is the implausibility of disregarding all moral claims that arise from the past (whether or not we want to call these "justice" claims in animal cases) unless responding to such claims would anyway contribute towards the best outcome in the future. For the idea of *desert*, as James Rachels (2007) argues, is fundamentally important both to the ways we structure society and the ways in which we act in it; but desert seems to have no significant place in a wholly forward-looking ethical approach. Secondly, since the focus of consequentialism is on future states of affairs, rather than on the actors that produce such states of affairs, no distinction can be made between (for instance) states caused by actively harming, and states allowed by omitting to assist when one could have done so, leading to standard concerns about the over-demanding

nature of consequentialism. Attfield (1987, 98) is explicit about this in the case of distant *people*: “The *consequences of omissions* should be recognized as including, most obviously, those states of the world (eg. avoidable starvation) which the omitted action would predictably have prevented...and the nonoccurrence of those states (eg famine relief) which the omitted action would predictably have caused.” (Emphasis mine.) Attfield doesn’t maintain here (unlike Thomas Pogge [2002] for instance) that the moral responsibility for relieving poverty has any relationship to one’s own, or one’s society’s, role in causing it, or one’s benefiting from it. It doesn’t matter how the suffering or misery of some stranger is caused, nor how distant he or she is in time or space; if one could have prevented it, and failed to do so, one is morally responsible for it. In not acting when one could have, the total amount of flourishing in the world is less than it otherwise would have been.

But preventable distant *human* suffering is not all that’s at stake here. We seem to become morally responsible, too, for distant animal suffering, if we could have prevented it: for wild animals that starve in winter storms or in droughts when we could have provided for them, or for animals with diseases against which we could vaccinate them. In not acting in the wild to increase animal flourishing when we could have, we’re responsible for the fact that the total amount of flourishing in the world is less than it otherwise would have been. Yet this is surely an over-demanding view, one that both potentially commits us to constant action in the wild to promote flourishing, while having no place for the claim that we have special obligations to assist in cases of vulnerabilities we have ourselves created, in a way that we don’t have towards vulnerabilities that have come about independently of us.

Arguments about implications for intervention in the wild are often leveled at capacity-oriented forms of consequentialism such as Attfield’s. Of course, a capacity-oriented consequentialist might just bite the bullet on these arguments and accept that this is, indeed, an implication of the position. However, more commonly, consequentialists argue that their view doesn’t necessarily commit them to negative responsibility for avoidable wild suffering; I’ll briefly consider such responses below. I’ll also consider whether Attfield’s particular form of consequentialism—in particular his *practice*-consequentialism, rather than act-consequentialism—gives him extra tools that might provide a way of addressing these kinds of relational concerns.

Capacity-Oriented Consequentialist Responses

There are, then, two possible problems here for capacity-oriented consequentialist approaches such as Attfield's. One is that there's a strong commitment to acting in the wild to improve animal flourishing. And the other is that even where humans have been deliberately causally involved in creating animals to be dependent and vulnerable, or putting them into such states (for instance, by destroying their habitat) there's no obvious way of accommodating any special kind of moral responsibility towards them.

The first problem has attracted much more attention than the second. Consequentialists have responded to it in several ways. One possible response is to accept the implication of the view, but to maintain that, as a matter of priority, since each individual human can only do so much, and there's plenty of human and animal need around, it's unlikely that wild animal suffering will get much priority. It's likely, in practice, to be easier and more effective to relieve pain and to promote flourishing in the context of the industrial farm than the wilderness; in a world of limited resources, the farm may thus be prioritized over the forest. A second response—made by Peter Singer (1973) for instance—is to argue that we don't know the longer-term consequences of acting in the wild. What we think, in the short term, would contribute to the maximization of overall flourishing might well, in the long term, reduce it. Given our ignorance about the workings of ecosystems, it's better not to act to protect animal welfare in the wild at all.

Attfield could accept both these arguments, and combine them with his practice-consequentialism to create an even more plausible argument. After all, for an act-utilitarian, there might be any number of particular cases where neither of these concerns would hold. It's not difficult to imagine situations where assisting wild animals is relatively easy and where we've a sufficiently well-informed idea about the possible outcome of such actions, that an act-utilitarian could argue that such acts were morally required. Attfield, though, could base an argument on practices, rather than on individual acts. Generally, he could argue: following a practice of non-intervention in the wild to promote flourishing would tend to bring about the best consequences; this would create a better world than one based on any alternative practices; and it's plausible that such a practice would be adopted; so we should follow this practice. However, I'm not entirely convinced by this argument, as I'll suggest below.

In terms of the second problem—special relations to domesticated animals, or animals in other ways made vulnerable or dependent by human

activities—a consequentialist can just deny that such relations are of any particular moral significance. If domesticated animals are dependent and needy, then assisting them just will promote their flourishing, and failing to do so will set their interests back; their needs are likely to be more pressing than those of wild animals that can fend for themselves; so a consequentialist would, in practice, tend to domesticated animals first. What need do we have, then, of special, backward-looking commitments? A forward-looking commitment to maximizing flourishing will still, in most cases at least, prescribe that we should take care of dependent and vulnerable domesticated animals.

Perhaps these responses—especially the proposed practice-consequentialist one—*do* suffice to settle the worry that capacity-oriented consequentialism can't accommodate important relational considerations. After all, a practice-consequentialist approach, it can be argued, would not be over-demanding, and would, in fact, deliver very similar recommendations for action as an ethical approach that attributed moral significance to such "special relations" in themselves. Yet such a conclusion leaves me residually uneasy; and in the final section I'll attempt to explain why.

Residual Uneasiness about Capacity-Oriented Consequentialism

Let's start with the question of acting in the wild to promote animal flourishing. I've suggested that a practice-consequentialist such as Attfield could argue that following the practice of non-intervention in the wild would bring about best overall consequences in terms of maximizing flourishing. But I'm not sure, on reflection, that this is obviously the case. For practice-consequentialism, in particular, is not just concerned with how individuals should act in their daily lives. It's also concerned with what practices should govern policy-making, including, for instance, what policies should govern the management of national parks, wildlife reserves and so on. In these cases, arguments that attending to the needs of starving people or domesticated animals would have priority are really irrelevant; parks will have management policies whatever the state of affairs in those other spheres might be. So, a *priorities* argument wouldn't hold. And in the last couple of decades, wildlife managers have acquired an entirely new arsenal of technology to assist them in (often literally) keeping tabs on and controlling wild animals; and there has been significant development in wild animal contraception, disease prevention and genetic modification. Given this technological advance, it's not implausible to think that wild animal flourishing in the long term may well best be

achieved by intervention rather than by standing back; and after all, as Attfield insists, if there is suffering out there that we could have relieved without creating worse consequences, and we fail to relieve it, then we are morally responsible for it. Peter Singer (1973)—perhaps the best known capacity-oriented consequentialist writing about animals—himself accepts that if reducing suffering were really to result, then wildlife management would be the best strategy: “If, in some way, we could be reasonably certain that interfering with wildlife in a particular way would, in the long run, greatly reduce the amount of killing and suffering in the animal world, it would, I think, be right to interfere”. It’s at least an open question what practice should best be adopted as the basis for policy-making in the wild from a capacity-oriented practice-consequentialist perspective such as Attfield’s.

This conclusion only generates unease, of course, if there’s a concern for *other* reasons about acting to promote the flourishing of animals in the wild. Someone concerned about the protection of wildness in itself might have just such a concern, and for this reason strongly resist an interventionist conclusion. My uneasiness, however, is based on something rather weaker than this: that human duties *just don’t extend* to promoting the flourishing of wild animals; except in cases where their lives have already been compromised by certain kinds of human activities (as I’ll mention below) generally speaking, we should just leave them alone. This is not because by leaving them alone their flourishing is best promoted, nor because assisting them compromises their wildness or the wildness of wild places, but because what goes on with them is not our moral business. For obvious reasons, though, this view is not one to which capacity-oriented consequentialism could easily be hospitable.

A second element of my residual worry concerns those animals with whom, I’ve suggested, we *do* have special relations: vulnerable and dependent domesticated animals, but also (for example) wild animals that have been made vulnerable by habitat destruction. For consequentialists, the *origin* of vulnerability and dependence is irrelevant; it’s current states, not past stories, on which we should focus. Yet the idea that actions in the past can create special responsibilities in the present is difficult to dismiss, and is, after all, critical to many accounts of justice. More specifically, in the animal case, if we don’t look back, we can’t discriminate between what we owe to (for instance) a hungry cat that we have bred and kept as a house cat, and hungry mice that have chewed their way into the house, and are scabbling around for food as winter closes in. On a consequentialist account, we should do what promotes the most flourishing, cat and mice alike, irrespective of the ways in which we are responsible for the cat’s

situation and not for that of the mice. In questioning this approach, I'm not suggesting that killing such mice would be a matter of moral *indifference*, nor that there would be something morally *wrong* were we to feed them. My worry lies in the suggestion, first, that we morally *should* promote the mice's flourishing at all, and second, that our responsibility to promote the mice's flourishing is *just the same* as it is to a domestic cat for whose existence we were responsible, and whom we brought into the house and confined there.

To conclude

In this paper, I've accepted several of Attfield's key ideas: for instance that the possession of certain capacities is what gives beings moral standing, and that moral standing is possessed by individual beings rather than by species or ecosystems. However, I've also tried to argue that, alongside *capacities*, some kinds of *relations* are of moral significance in both human and animal cases, in particular, where humans are deliberately responsible for creating or inducing dependence and vulnerability in beings that have moral status. I suggested that it was very difficult for consequentialists such as Attfield to accept such relational claims, both because these claims entail looking back to the origin of particular states such as vulnerability, dependence or suffering; and because to accept such claims is to accept that factors other than bringing about the best consequences are relevant to our moral obligations. Of course, it's open to consequentialists just to reject such relational claims. But I hope that by raising them in this context, I have at least suggested some plausible difficulties with capacity-oriented consequentialist approaches to animal ethics.

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