

Pets, Companion Animals, and Domesticated Partners

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Gary Varner's paper addresses both conceptual and normative questions about pets. Answering the conceptual question—"What are pets?"—is essential, he says, for grappling with the normative questions—such as "What do we owe pets?" Drawing with only minor modification on Deborah Barnbaum's treatment of the conceptual issues, he suggests (with some reservation and qualification) that for something to be one's pet it must meet four conditions: (a) One must have affection for it. (b) It must live in an area that is significantly under one's control and must either be prevented from leaving that area or voluntarily choose to remain there. (c) It must lead a dramatically different kind of life from one's own, and not be simply smaller and furrrier than oneself. (d) It must be dependent on one and have an interest in its continued existence.

The author then distinguishes pets from companion animals and domesticated partners.

Turning to the normative questions, the author first argues that for at least some kinds of animals the practice of pet-keeping is morally justified. This is because it genuinely benefits the pets and the humans that keep them. The author then considers the content of one's obligations to one's pets. He concludes that those who keep pets should: (a) provide for pets' psychological and physical needs; (b) ensure that the pets have a life that compares favorably with the life they would likely have had had they not been pets; (c) all things being equal, keep pets that are also domesticated partners or companion animals; and (d) cultivate a domestic partnership with their companion animals, insofar as this is practicable.

Gary Varner wrote "Pets, Companion Animals, and Domesticated Partners" for this volume.

INTRODUCTION

Pets are ubiquitous in human society. Most domesticated species are agricultural, and we tend to think of the first domestication, of the dog between 12,000 and 14,000 years ago, as a practical part of the transition from paleolithic hunter-gathering to neolithic agriculture. However, in his excellent overview of pet ownership, ethologist James Serpell notes that in one early burial site, dated to about 12,000 years ago in what is now northern Israel, an elderly human was buried with a five month old domesticated dog. "The most striking thing about these remains," he says, "was the fact that whoever presided over the original burial had carefully arranged the dead person's left hand so that it rested, in a timeless and eloquent gesture of attachment, on the puppy's shoulder" (Serpell 1996, p. 58). By three to four thousand years ago, the Egyptians were worshipping cats in ways that would make the most eccentric contemporary pet owner look ordinary by comparison. And, as Serpell notes, almost all "tribal peoples" studied in modern times have kept pets of various kinds. He concludes that "The existence of pet-keeping among so called 'primitive' peoples poses a problem for those who choose to believe that such behaviour is the product of Western wealth, decadence and bourgeois sentimentality" (p. 53).

Although philosophers have written much about the moral status of non-human animals (henceforth animals) since the 1970s, they have had little to say about pets specifically, despite the fact that over half of all households in the developed nations today include pets.¹ Of the three best-known books on animal welfare and animal rights, only Bernard Rollin's *Animal Rights and Human Morality* (1992 [1981]) contains more than a passing reference to pets. In *The Case for Animal Rights*, Tom Regan mentions pets only in the course of discussing the concept of euthanasia (1983, p. 114), and the index to the book does not even mention pets or companion animals. And in the preface to *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer (1990 [1975]) went out of his way to emphasize that he was not "inordinately fond of dogs, cats, or horses in the way that many people are: (p. ii), later mentioning pets only when giving the address of an organization to contact concerning vegetarian diets for them (p. 257) and in relation to the U.S. Animal Welfare Act (pp. 72, 76), which was originally motivated by concern about pets being stolen and sold as research animals.

A computerized search of *The Philosopher's Index* for 1940 through July 2000 returned only 13 titles or abstracts of English language works including the words "pet" or "pets."² Ten of these contained no discussion of pet animals:

¹Serpell cites European Pet Food Federation statistics for 1994 indicating that over half of European Union households included pets. In August of 2000, I gathered the following statistics from internet sources. According to The American Veterinary Medical Association's Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook, <http://www.avma.org/pubinfo/pidemosb.htm>, 58.9% of U.S. households own pets. And "Pet Net" of Australia, <http://www.petnet.com.au/statistics.html>, brags that the nation leads the world with 64% of all households owning pets and 53% of those without pets wishing they had one or more.

²A search in all languages returned only one additional hit, an article on the general question of interspecific justice, published in Dutch and Flemish: Wouter Achterberg, "Interspecificke Rechtvaardigheid," *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte*, 74 (1982), pp. 77-98.

three referred to medical "PET scans," one to "polynomial-time equivalence types," two to "pet peeves" or "pet theories," and four merely used pet animals in examples not directly concerned with the ethics of keeping them. Two (Adams 1994 and Pateman 1996) concerned parallels between mistreatment of women and of animals. Only one, Deborah Barnbaum's short piece, "Why Tamagatchis Are Not Pets" (1998), was a philosophical analysis of what it means for something to be a pet. A search for "companion animals" returned only three hits,³ one of which consisted of unsystematic reflections by a non-philosopher (Fullberg 1988 is the text of an address given by the ASPCA President to the New York State Humane Association Conference on Pet Overpopulation, September 12, 1987) and one of which (Clark 1995) was primarily historical. Only Keith Burgess-Jackson's recent essay, "Doing Right by Our Animal Companions" (1998), directly addressed philosophical questions about the content and basis of moral responsibilities to pets.

Aside from Barnbaum's analysis of what it means for something to be a pet, and Burgess-Jackson's and Rollin's discussions of the content and basis of our obligations to pets, I know of only one other systematic treatment of such conceptual and normative questions by an academic philosopher. David DeGrazia formulates a two part principle describing the obligations of pet owners in *Taking Animals Seriously: Mental Life and Moral Status* (1996, pp. 274–275). In this essay, I take up the conceptual and normative questions in turn, focusing in each case on what has been said by these four philosophers. The conceptual issues which I spend a great deal of time on first are not "merely semantic." What pets are is essential to a complete understanding of who owes them what, and when assessing the morality of pet ownership it is important to keep in mind the different kinds of pets there are.

CONCEPTUAL QUESTIONS: WHAT ARE PETS?

To date, only Barnbaum has discussed such conceptual questions in the philosophical literature. In "Why Tamagatchis Are Not Pets," she defends the following set of conditions which she argues are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for something being a pet (I have reordered them for purposes of exposition here).

1. *The affection criterion*: "While a pet may not necessarily feel affection towards the one who has it as a pet, the one who has a pet feels affection towards it" (p. 41).

It is hard to imagine a spider feeling affection for its owner, but the pet keeper's feeling affection for his or her charge seems central to our notion of having a pet. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of the noun in

³Searches for "companion animal" and for the term "companion" with either "animal" or "animals" anywhere in the same title or abstract revealed no additional, relevant articles.

modern English: "Any animal that is domesticated or tamed and kept as a favorite, or treated with indulgence and fondness." While the etymology of the noun is uncertain, the verb "to pet—a gesture of affection—was formed from it, and the noun was originally applied to "cade lambs," lambs abandoned by their mothers and reared by hand. The centrality of affection to our notion of a pet explains why it seems wrong to call an animal one keeps only for work or profit, like a draft horse or a milk cow, a pet. Similarly, a dog who has been abandoned to a tether in the back yard and for whom no one any longer feels affection hardly seems to be a pet anymore.

Implicit in the OED's characterization of pets are two of Barnbaum's other conditions:

2. *The domicile criterion*: "The domicile criterion implies that many pets live 'unnatural lives', for they must live in our world. If they continue to live in their natural habitats, they fail to be pets" (p. 42).

Pets are "kept"—they don't "run wild" (except temporarily)—they typically are kept around the home, and even cade lambs on a farm are "made part of the household" by being hand-raised. But, as Barnbaum correctly observes, a child is not one's pet, because pets are profoundly different from us.

3. *The discontinuity criterion*: "Pets lead dramatically different lives than we do. The differences are not merely differences in quantity—they are differences in kind. I could not have a pet that was capable of doing all the same kinds of things that I do—read philosophy, go to the movies, order food in restaurants—but was merely smaller than me, or furrrier than me, or had a shorter lifespan" (p. 41).

To call a member of our own species "a pet" is considered profoundly insulting. But Barnbaum is correct to call this "the discontinuity criterion," rather than, say, "the different species criterion," because if there were now another species on earth with capacities sufficiently similar to those of humans, it would be similarly insulting to talk of us keeping them as pets. Recent evolutionary history suggests how a real-world example could actually have arisen. In paleolithic times, Cro-Magnons (the immediate progenitors of modern humans) and Neanderthals (a subspecies of *Homo sapiens* which was either driven extinct or absorbed by Cro-Magnons) coexisted in Europe (Richards 1987, pp. 31, 284–91). But to call Neanderthals kept in captivity by Cro-Magnons (or vice-versa) "pets" would be to understate what was being done to these prisoners or slaves. Barnbaum also correctly observes that this criterion does not rule out humans being made the pets of a profoundly different species (p. 43).⁴

⁴A related question, which Barnbaum does not broach, is whether it makes sense to call profoundly retarded human beings pets, because they do meet all three criteria discussed so far as well as the fourth criterion, discussed below. One tack would be to claim that the domicile condition implies that pets' natural habitat is in non-human nature. But that is dead wrong about fully domesticated species like the dog and numerous agricultural animals. My own intuition is that just as being a member of a *different* species is not what makes an individual pass the discontinuity criterion, neither is being a member of the *same* species what makes an individual fail it. But since nothing of substance regarding non-human pets hangs on this question, I leave it unanswered here.

However, not just any profoundly different thing that one is fond of and keeps in the house can literally be said to be a pet. Several years ago “pet rocks” and “Tamagotchis” were marked as “pets” in the United States. Barnbaum herself owns a Tamagotchi for which she proclaims affection:

The Tamagotchi has a liquid-crystal display, which shows a small creature. My Tamagotchi has several functions, all controllable via three buttons. I can push buttons that allow the small creature [to] appear to eat sandwiches and candy, play games, and give it medicine if it appears to be sick. The Tamagotchi beeps at me if it wants attention. If I fail to attend to the Tamagotchi in the proper fashion, the display will tell me that I have killed the small creature. I admit that I have gotten attached to my Tamagotchi, and if the display tells me that I have killed it, I will feel sad, feel that I have failed it somehow. (p. 41)

As a non-living thing, Barnbaum notes, a Tamagotchi has no interests which its owner affects. It fails what she proposes as a fourth and final criterion for pethood:

4. *The dependency criterion*: “The dependency criterion requires that there is something external to me which depends on me, and which has an interest in its continued existence.”

However fond one is of a Tamagotchi, or a computer or a car, and however inclined one is to feel sad if one fails to meet its needs, these things are not really pets, and the explanation seems to be, as Barnbaum’s characterization of the dependency criterion suggests, that their needs do not define interests. Barnbaum does not analyze the notions of “need” and “interest,” but an interest, I take it, is any *morally significant* need or desire. More precisely, one has an interest in the fulfillment of one’s needs and desires if and only if their fulfillment creates intrinsic value. Fulfilling the needs of a car is a good thing, but only because cars are of value to humans—fulfilling the needs of artefacts creates only instrumental value. To have interests, a thing must have a good of its own which makes the world a better place when life goes well for it (Varner 1998, pp. 6, 25).

Barnbaum assumes that all living things have interests in this sense. Elsewhere I have defended this claim at length (1998, chapter three), but I disagree with Barnbaum about one implication she draws from it. At one point she writes, “By my mind, plants and fish are equally dull pets. A Venus Flytrap is a slightly more interesting pet than a Ficus Tree, but not by much (but that is merely a personal bias)” (p. 42). By Barnbaum’s criteria, houseplants are pets, because they are profoundly different than us, we are fond of them, we keep them in the house, and they have interests, the fulfillment of which depends on us tending to their needs. But to me it sounds like a category mistake to call a Ficus tree, or even a Venus Flytrap, a pet. Why? I think it is because plants cannot *move*, in the sense of voluntarily deciding to go, nor does it make sense to speak of holding them captive. This is why I would modify Barnbaum’s domicile criterion in the following way:

2'. *The modified domicile criterion*: If something is your pet, it must live in an area that is significantly under your control or influence, and it must either be prevented from leaving that area or voluntarily choose to remain there.

A horse in a barn farm from its owner's house meets this condition, as do housecats who return after being let outside, and fish in a livingroom tank. The cats stay voluntarily. The horse might or might not choose to stay, but it is every bit as much prevented from leaving as the fish. Still, it is not literally a category mistake to call a plant a pet. For if an extraordinary species of plant were found which did occasionally pull up its roots and go, it would not seem to me like a misuse of the term to talk about such plants being kept as pets. Indeed, among what have not been classified as animals since the taxonomic revisions of the 1980s, members of both the Monera and Protista Kingdoms are capable of motion, and while they would make very unusual pets, both bacteria (in the Monera Kingdom) and paramecia (in the Protista Kingdom) could satisfy the modified domicile condition. And among what remain classified as animals, some fail the modified domicile criterion, for instance barnacles and sponges. So it seems to me that while an animal as simple as a starfish can be a pet, the barnacles and sponges it shares a tank with cannot.

For the purposes of this paper, I adopt Barnbaum's four criteria with the above modification to the domicile criterion. It is notoriously difficult to define words in a natural language in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and the above criteria might seem to imply the wrong thing in some cases. For instance, are fish who have been breeding for generations in a backyard pond pets? I am inclined to say that they are, but others think this stretches the notion of a pet too far. Are the anoles, spiders and cockroaches inhabiting my house pets? I think that stretches the notion too far, but these animals have been breeding for generations right inside the house, and if the house were sealed well, they would be prevented from leaving. So the above conditions may not be, strictly speaking, individually necessary and jointly sufficient. We could try to handle such cases in various ways, e.g., by specifying in the modified domicile criterion that someone must intend to prevent them from leaving. That would take care of my cockroach problem (at least conceptually), but many contemporary philosophers doubt that specifying necessary and sufficient conditions is the right way to go about defining terms in natural languages. Nevertheless, the four criteria discussed above characterize a "family resemblance" among paradigm examples of pets (domestic⁵ dogs and cats, caged birds and fish, and horses or agricultural animals who are treated like pets), and although they imply that a broad range of other things can be pets—including lizards, spiders, lobsters, starfish, insects, and even slugs—it seems to me that calling these animals pets does not do violence to our pre-theoretic conception of a pet.

Still, these criteria raise a number of interesting conceptual questions, two of which it is important to discuss here, because they are directly relevant to the question of what we owe pets. One question is: Are there non-conscious pets? I believe the answer to this is "yes." I cannot go into my reasons here, but I

⁵Although authors (e.g. Waring 1983) commonly use "domestic" and "domesticated" interchangeably, strictly speaking, a "domestic animal" would be an animal kept in the house, which may or may not be domesticated. Thus many working animals, and farm animals, even if they are treated as pets, are not "domestic" animals, and some domestic animals, e.g., tamed wild ones, are not "domesticated."

believe that slugs, insects, starfish, lobsters, and spiders all lack consciousness of any kind. Obviously they perceive things in their environments and react to them, but I believe that they do so non-consciously. In particular, I believe that all invertebrates, with the exception of cephalopods (octopus, squid, and cuttlefish) probably do not feel pain, and among vertebrates, I believe that while mammals and birds have conscious desires, fish may well not (Varner 1998, chapter two). I know that many readers will disagree; some will draw lines regarding consciousness of pain and desire elsewhere in the animal kingdom. But for the sake of discussion in the next section, I will assume the truth of the foregoing claims about fish and invertebrates, and most will agree that at least *some* animals kept as pets (if only insects or starfish) lack consciousness. The significance is that on such a view morally appropriate treatment of a pet mammal or bird may involve much more than morally appropriate treatment of an invertebrate, or even a fish. Most obviously, there cannot be a duty not to cause pain to a non-sentient organism, and there cannot be a duty to fulfill the desires of an organism that has none.

Another question is whether working animals, like draft horses and service dogs, but also those who perform in zoos or theme parks, are pets. I say yes, at least to the extent that their owners, handlers or trainers feel genuine affection for them. For they clearly meet the discontinuity, dependency and modified domicile criteria, so to the extent that their owners, keepers or trainers feel genuine affection for them, they are indeed pets, albeit "working" ones (as are their non-working conspecifics to the extent that they are the objects of similar affection).

The answers I have given to these two questions motivate the introduction of two additional terms, in part because the associated concepts help to chart further the conceptual space that pets occupy, but also because, in the next section, I want to make some claims about the relative value of keeping pets of various kinds.

The first additional term is suggested by the point made just above about working animals. Working animals sometimes have a special kind of partnership with their trainers and handlers. The clearest example of this is the working dog, and to understand why, we must remember that dogs are the paradigm case of a fully domesticated animal, they are highly social, and they readily accept the dominance of humans in a hierarchical command structure. To say that the dog is fully domesticated is to say that it is natural for dogs to live among humans, and although individual wolves and coyotes can sometimes be tamed and coexist fruitfully with humans, dogs need humans in a way their wild cousins do not. As Rollin puts it,

[M]an is responsible for the shape the dog has taken—physically, psychologically, and behaviorally. The dog is our creation. And just as God is alleged in the Catholic tradition to be not only the initial creator of the universe, but also its sustaining cause at each moment of time, so too are humans to the dog. If dogs were suddenly turned loose into a world devoid of people, they would be decimated. Aside from the obvious case of chihuahuas, bulldogs, and others who could simply not withstand the elements or who are too small, slow, or clumsy to be successful predators, the vast majority of dogs of any sort would not do

well. We know from cases of dogs who have gone feral that they still live primarily on the periphery of human society, existing on handouts, garbage, and vulnerable livestock such as poultry and lambs. Without vaccination, overwhelming numbers would succumb to disease. The dog in short has been developed to be dependent on us . . . (Rollin 1992, p. 220)

And owned dogs who escape and run in packs illustrate how much they need humans as surrogates of alpha canids:

All evidence indicates that it is packs of owned dogs rather than feral animals that are most dangerous to people and, most tragically, to children, who are most often severely maimed and even killed in unprovoked dog attacks. . . . These packs of owned dogs are often responsible for savage attacks on livestock in which the dogs pathologically, and unlike any wild canids, kill for no reason. . . . A pack of pet dogs can be very much like a mob or ordinary citizens—totally benign when taken singly, but literally possessed by mindless destructiveness when formed into a group. In domesticating the dog, man has assumed the role of pack leader; to allow the formation of random packs is an abrogation of biological as well as moral responsibility. (Rollin 1992, pp. 226–27)

Indeed, one of the most common sources of “misbehavior” among pet dogs is their owners’ failure to understand this. To avoid certain behavior problems, owners must understand that dogs expect to live in and act in accordance with a dominance hierarchy. When family members adopt what appears to the dog as a submissive attitude, problems ranging from unruly behavior to mauling are liable to arise (Serpell 1996, pp. 127–28; Rollin 1992 [1981], p. 226 and 1999, pp. 159–61).

Because they are fully domesticated and readily adopt a subordinate attitude in a command structure, working with humans can be very good for dogs. Regarding hunting and herding, specifically, Serpell writes:

The dog, after all, is descended from a wild predator, and it therefore shows a natural inclination to chase or hunt other animals. Dogs do not need to be forced to do these things, although they do require discipline and training to perform the tasks well. In other words, the aims and objectives of the hunter or the shepherd and his dog are roughly compatible. The animal seems to enjoy the work, so the person has little reason to feel guilty about using it. (Serpell 1996, p. 175)

And more generally, dogs who are highly trained and appropriately supervised compare to untrained and undisciplined “lap dogs” the way industrious humans compare to “couch potatoes.” In an essay with an ultimately epistemological focus which is well beyond the scope of this paper, Vicki Hearne describes animals as working “at liberty” when they voluntarily cooperate with their handlers or trainers based on a mutual understanding of rules and goals.

The term “at liberty” here does not mean “free.” Indeed, an animal at liberty, whose condition frees her to make the fullest use of some or all of her powers—in, say, search and rescue or in a “clever disobedience act”—may seem to be the most restrained of animals, just as the person whose submission to discipline may, paradoxically, free him to otherwise unattainable achievements. (Hearne 1995, p. 25)

She characterizes this as “a constraint in the way understanding of music is a constraint on the violinist who is not at war with herself” (p. 27). There is evidence of such profound understanding of constraints during cooperative pursuit of a goal in so-called “clever disobedience acts,” as an example of which she describes how one of her dogs “created” the “strategic down” of police and military dogs:

One day I was teaching a lesson and had my Airedale, Texas, with me for backup. The handler was having trouble with her dog, a Mastiff, so I had to take over. The Mastiff went for me. Texas left his “down” and put himself between me and the Mastiff. Once things were under control again, he, without prompting from me, returned to his “down” position at the edge of the training area. Here the simple “down” exercise became a lively and thoughtful posture police dog handlers sometimes call the “strategic down.” It was the dog’s grasping and acting on his own understanding that here expanded meaning. Before the incident, “Down” for this young dog has simple meant, “Lie down and hold still until you hear from me again.” In the course of the incident with the Mastiff, Texas both created and learned a strategic down. A police officer, or a soldier, or a robber might leave her dog on a down with a view of one entrance while she went to cover the other; with a little experience, dogs come to understand the strategy in question. Once they grasp the point of the arrangement, they are controlled by their own understanding of the strategy, just as their handlers are. (Hearne, pp. 28–29)

And for animals to do such creative work “at liberty,” the work must itself be interesting and gratifying, as Hearne says it is for search dogs: “For a dog with the capacity for it, search work is thrilling, transcending . . .” (Hearne 1995, p. 31).

Dogs working “at liberty,” and in ways that emphasize and exercise the animal’s mental and/or physical faculties in a healthy and satisfying way (for the dog), are the paradigm case of what I call *domesticated partners*. The partnership they have with their humans includes the affection and care owners typically give to pets, but the working dog exercises its faculties in a setting and command structure that are both natural to and healthy for it.

Aside from the dog, a range of animals seem more or less suited to becoming domesticated partners. Because they are widely used in a variety of ways—agriculture (as draft animals, cutting horses, etc.), for transportation, and in entertainment—horses are, along with dogs, the most visible working animals, and like dogs they are well suited to becoming fully fledged domesticated partners. Horses were domesticated in various places between 1500 and 6000 years ago (cf. Clabby 1976, p. 52, Waring 1983, p. 10, and Budiansky 1997, p. 40). By modern times the wild horse (*Equus przewalskii*, the progenitor of the domesticated horse) was left only in Mongolia (Clabby 1976, photo caption opposite p. 52), and now only in zoos (Waring 1983, p. 2). Although people sometimes think of horses as solitary animals, they are intensely social, living in herds of from three or four to twenty or so in the wild (Waring 1983, p. 142). Indeed, so-called “stable vices” (behaviors such as gnawing on wood, excessive water consumption, stereotypes, and “cribbing” the upper incisors against fence posts [Budiansky 1997, pp. 102–03]) may result from solitary life being imposed on such a highly social

animal (Clabby 1976, p. 78).⁶ Horses develop a variety of relationships with other horses. Mares and their foals groom and play (Waring 1983, p. 61), but all horses normally develop long-lasting peer relationships in the herd. Peer group "friends" engage in mutual grooming and generally spend time close together (Waring 1983, pp. 155–56).

Horses removed from a herd will also readily form attachments to surrogates, including their human owners or even a barn cat. It is this instinct that humans draw upon in establishing their relationship with domesticated horses. An extreme, but extremely effective, method used by some trainers to deal with recalcitrant or aggressive horses that refuse to accept human control is to deprive them of any social companionship for as much as 23 hours a day; social contact (even with a nonequine) becomes so valuable to a socially deprived horse that it very quickly comes to accept and bond with its trainer. Our horses' affection for us, their owners, is unquestionably real, grounded in a basic instinct to form friendship bonds; it is slightly bruising to our egos, though, to realize that they bond with us only for lack of better company. (Budiansky 1997, pp. 84–85)

Horses also understand and act in accordance with dominance hierarchies. Mares are herded by stallions in the wild, and in captivity mares sometimes take over this function (Waring 1983, p. 146). Training horses is easy if started while they are young, and the direction a rider gives the horse is at least loosely analogous to mares being herded and to horses' general tendency to "follow the leader" in dangerous situations (Clabby 1976, pp. 78, 84). Thus although feral horses fare better than feral dogs and, unlike dogs, horses typically require restraint to prevent them from straying at least temporarily (especially in the company of other horses), horses are well suited to becoming domesticated partners. While I doubt that draft horses much enjoy their work, I find it entirely plausible that other sorts of working horses, for instance dressage horses and thoroughbreds, do, at least sometimes or under the best circumstances. Budiansky observes that both thoroughbreds and dressage horses appear to be playing when they work: "Training and learning may explain why a horse can be made to perform these tasks, but seem inadequate to explain the undeniable enthusiasm that many horses show for these pursuits" (Budiansky 1997, pp. 99–101).

Some tamed wild animals probably also enjoy, and genuinely benefit from, working with humans. For instance, Sea World San Antonio features performing orcas, dolphins, and sea lions, but they also have both sea lions and dolphins who do not "perform" aside from begging for fish from visitors during designated feeding hours. After comparing the lot of the two during a visit, I feel confident that the performing animals are far better off. First, because the training process provides far more mental stimulation than does begging from tourists. To learn a complex performance routine, an animal must solve a long series of problems over the course of months of training. The begging animals,

⁶Another factor probably is that confinement prevents horses from spending most of their time foraging and walking. Wild horses spend half or more of their time grazing and nearly 10% of it walking or running (Budiansky 1997, p. 105 and Waring 1983, p. 222).

by contrast, gets only one puzzle to solve. And especially given the kinds of shows dolphins and orcas are typically trained to put on—involving lots of fast swimming and jumping high out of the water—these performing animals get enormously more physical exercise than their begging cousins. Also, to the extent that captive animals enjoy contact with their trainers, the trained animals enjoy some additional contact which the beggars miss out on. However, such animals may never become fully fledged domesticated partners, for two reasons. First, they may leave if allowed unrestrained access to the ocean. As Serpell notes, dogs and cats are uniquely suited to be pets in part because they are almost unique among captive animals in their willingness to remain with their human keepers when not fenced in, caged, or tethered (Serpell 1996, p. 126). Second, even if these tamed wild animals enjoy their work and are better off for doing it, they may die younger than their wild conspecifics (although reliable statistics are still not available—Reeves and Mead 1999, pp. 426–27), in contrast to horses, who live much longer in domestication than in the wild, where their life expectancy is as low as five or six years (Waring 1983, p. 144).

A related point is that the goals of humans and their domesticated partners may be similar or different. Hunting dogs probably share their handlers' goal of subduing prey, and rescue dogs seem to genuinely understand that they are helping to save people. Maybe to the extent that dressage and racing horses are playing, they have at least a roughly similar goal while working as the humans who train and ride them. But just as clearly, the goals of human trainers and their animals often diverge. A trainer of circus lions may not think of what he is doing as "play" at all, and presumably the lions have nothing about mass entertainment in mind. So the goals of the animals and their humans may diverge, but insofar as the animal is still the object of genuine affection and the work in question exercises the animal's mental and/or physical faculties in a healthy way, I still call the pets in question domesticated partners.

I continue to refer generally to "pets," rather than using the politically correct "companion animals," because the latter term suggests a level of interaction which, although much less sophisticated than the partnerships described above, is unattainable with many pets. I have known a number of people who kept fish as pets, some who keep snakes, and one who keeps tarantulas. Some of these people talk to their pets and claim that the animals respond to them in various ways. But surely it is a stretch to call a fish or a spider a "companion." Healthy companionship is a two-way street, and I doubt that either spiders or fish would stay with their owners for the sake of human companionship the way dogs, cats, and horses commonly do. Although I cannot say exactly what criteria must be met for an individual animal's relationship with human beings to qualify, by a *companion animal* I mean, roughly, a pet who receives the affection and care owners typically give to pets, but who also has significant social interaction and would voluntarily choose to stay with the owner, in part for the sake of this companionship (rather than, say, just to get food and shelter).

As dogs working "at liberty" are the paradigm case of what I call domesticated partners, cats are the paradigm example of pets who are well suited to be companion animals, but who rarely become domesticated partners. Although

cats are not as robustly social as dogs and horses, the popular image of cats as aloof exaggerates the extent to which they are asocial. When food and shelter are plentiful, cats both domestic and feral form friendly, cooperative communities (including females “babysitting” each others’ kittens and bringing food to nursing mothers), they maintain complicated dominance and territorial arrangements, and, as anyone who has had several cats “get along” with each other in a household knows, these relationships are not always a Hobbesian war of all against all—cat “friends” groom each other regularly and often play good naturedly with each other, although with males this depends to some extent on their being castrated (Wright and Walters 1980, pp.126–29). Feral cats probably fare better than feral dogs, in part because selective breeding has not (yet) been used to change the physical form of the cat or its behavioral repertoire as much as it has been used to change the dog’s, so cats do not *need* humans in the same way dogs do (Fox 1974, p. 81). Nevertheless, cats can be companions for humans in ways no fish can, and cats can live very healthy, satisfying lives in a kind of partnership with humans.

Cats have large eyes and small chins, giving their faces the cherubal look of neonatal humans, which naturally evokes human expressions of care and affection. Cats appear to reciprocate, in part because their pupils are large and dilated pupils are a sign of affection between human beings (Serpell 1996, p. 138), but they also behave in ways humans do when attentive to each other. Cats, like dogs, greet their owners, welcoming them home with “chirps,” meows and leg-rubbing. They appear to enjoy being in the company of humans, and they sometimes favor certain humans. They purr, cuddle and nuzzle, and they appear to enjoy physical contact with humans, such as being petted and sleeping together. Cats clearly give the impression that they feel affection for their keepers. But is cats’ affection for us genuine? Some of these apparent expressions of affection may be misinterpreted by humans, because some of these behaviors are said to be neoteny (a neoteny is a “retention of infantile or juvenile behavior patterns into adulthood”—Serpell 1996, p. 82). Kittens purr and knead around their mothers’ teats at nursing time, and this is thought to signal the mother to “let down” her milk. So although most owners probably think that their cats are expressing a general affection, the cats could be seen as treating their keepers as surrogate mothers at an age when any normal cat should be independent of its mother. It could even be said that cats’ habit of sticking their tails straight up upon greeting humans is a neoteny, because kittens greet their mothers this way. And I have frequently read popular accounts of cat behavior making the similarly deflationary claim that their repetitive rubbing of their humans’ legs, and of their whisker pads against legs, faces, etc., are “merely” marking behaviors, since cats scent mark using various glands by behaving analogously in the wild.⁷

⁷Wright and Walters 1980 offer a less deflationary explanation of the leg rubbing: they say it is a modification of the way cats gather odors from each other for future recognition (p. 129). Similarly, they note that “Adult cats raise their tails as a greeting gesture towards friendly humans and other cats” (p. 127) and that “Within any cat group, individual members greet each other affectionately with nose kisses, body-rubbing and sniffing at anal regions” (p. 126).

Nevertheless, my own view, based on the lack of scientific evidence to the contrary, coupled with my own fairly extensive experience with cats, is that their affection for their humans is genuine. The fact that cats' apparently affectionate behavior has biological functions unrelated to affection entails neither that the behavior is not affectionate nor that it is misplaced. Remember that cats (and all other domesticated animals) lack the expressive potential afforded by the syntactic structure of language. So if cats do seek to express affection for their human keepers, they must use whatever vocabulary of expressive sounds and gestures they have at their disposal, and this vocabulary is limited to a range of signals that evolved to manage relations among cats prior to domestication. Consequently, in evaluating deflationary claims like those in the preceding paragraph, it is significant to note which such signals cats do in fact use with their humans. First, note that we do not hear of tom cats marking their humans with urine, the way they mark territory in the wild (and household objects when confined). Cats "marking" of humans with scent glands on their faces and necks, that would be reserved for marking landmarks in the wild, should hardly be dismissed as unaffectionate behaviors, given that cats in domestic settings are dealing with animals with whom they entered into communal living very recently in evolutionary terms. Similarly, that they adapted other parts of their limited expressive vocabulary to a new use, including behaviors previously reserved for kitten-mother interactions, should hardly surprise us, given the domestic cat's heavy dependence on us and their species' relatively recent domestication.

So I believe that cats really feel affection for their human keepers, but I also know that cats are more difficult to train than dogs and many other animals. Cats do not readily accept command hierarchies the way dogs and horses do, they are most effectively trained with rewards rather than punishments, and, when punishment is used, it is best arranged so that it looks unrelated to the human administering it (Wright and Walters 1980, p. 153), which makes it hardly count as "punishment" at all. Cats *can* be trained, though. Although I have never heard of rescue cats or drug sniffing cats, skilled trainers do turn them into movie "actors," and an owner with enough patience and a good understanding of how to train them can teach cats to respond to simple commands like "no," "come," "get down," "collar on," etc.; not to do certain things, like jump up on the kitchen counters or try to go out the front door of the house; and even where to sleep on the bed, e.g. next to the non-allergic partner in a human couple (all of these are things I have taught my own cats). Cats who have access to a safe outdoor environment or a sufficiently interesting indoor environment can be endlessly stimulated mentally and physically, so while cats are less likely to become fully fledged domesticated partners, they are eminently suited to be companion animals.

The discussion in this section reveals that the notion of a pet is surprisingly complex. So far I have made the following distinctions:

A pet is any entity which meets the affection, discontinuity, dependence and modified domicile criteria.

A *companion animal* is a pet who receives the affection and care owners typically give to pets, but who also has significant social interaction with its owner and would voluntarily choose to stay with the owner, in part for the sake of the companionship.

A *domesticated partner* is a companion animal who works with humans in ways that emphasize and exercise the pet's mental and/or physical faculties in a healthy way.

Here I add just one more:

A *mere pet* is a pet which⁸ is neither a companion animal nor a domesticated partner.

Some animals, like spiders and fish, are congenitally incapable of being more than "mere pets" for humans. Spiders and fish, I am assuming, have no conscious desires, and so if they stay with their human keepers, it is not out of any conscious desire for human companionship. Other animals are quite capable of being companion animals, or even domesticated partners, but fail to be only because their relationship with their human keepers is insufficiently friendly and caring. For instance, the dog abandoned to a tether in the back yard, for whom no one feels affection, may very well crave human companionship, but the affection is not reciprocated. And a human could love a dog who, through previous mistreatment perhaps, is incapable of reciprocal affection.

NORMATIVE QUESTIONS: WHAT DO WE OWE PETS AND WHICH KINDS ARE PREFERABLE?

In approaching normative questions about pet keeping, it is important to keep the above distinctions in mind. For I think that some of the above kinds of relationships we can have with pets are morally preferable to others, and of the philosophers who have directly addressed the normative questions of what principle(s) ought to govern our treatment of pets and why, none has had much to say about animals other than dogs, or about dogs as anything other than companion animals. In this section, I will summarize Rollin's, Burgess-Jackson's and DeGrazia's discussions of the content and basis of owners' obligations to pets, noting how what they say might apply to a wider range of animals, and then clarify and defend my claim that some kinds of relationships we can have with pets are preferable to others.

First, however, something should be said about the general question of whether keeping pets is justifiable at all. In light of the foregoing discussion, the answer would seem to be yes, for at least *some* kind of pets. This is not the place to stake out a stance among traditional ethical theories such as utilitarianism versus rights views. Although not a rights theorist myself, elsewhere I have

⁸I say "a pet *who*" when speaking of a pet whom I believe to have a robust conscious life. I say "a pet *which*" when speaking of a pet which I believe lacks such a robust conscious life.

argued that various uses of animals, including some medical research, can be justified even on a strong animals rights view (Varner 1994), and I have myself adopted a roughly utilitarian stance on evaluating various claims about animals and the rest of non-human nature (Varner 1998). But on any plausible ethical theory, the keeping of pets who meet the conditions for being companion animals and domesticated partners is almost surely going to be permissible. At a bare minimum, dogs to a significant degree *need* to live among humans in order to live well. Where the animals enjoy genuine companionship with humans, and especially when they work with humans in ways that exercise their native physical or mental faculties, it is hard to see how pet ownership could be condemned, especially when the benefits to humans are significant, as they often are.

Humans obviously benefit from domesticated partners insofar as “service dogs” help the visually and hearing impaired, and the physically disabled function day to day; they help locate victims amid rubble, sniff out drugs and so on; and horses perform all manner of tasks. But recently, scientific studies have begun to confirm diverse benefits of interactions with companion animals. The term “pet therapy” was coined in 1964 when psychiatrist Boris Levinson noticed that severely withdrawn children readily struck up relationships with his dog (Serpell 1996, p. 89). In the 1970’s, careful statistical studies first showed that heart attack survival rates were positively affected by pet ownership (Serpell 1996, pp. 97ff.). Since then “animal facilitated therapies” (AFTs) or “pet facilitated therapies” (PFTs) have been developed for a broad range of clients, including the elderly, victims of Alzheimer’s disease, cerebral palsy and seizures, psychiatric patients, patients recovering from surgery, prison inmates, and developmentally challenged youths (Beck 2000); and the benefits of these therapies have been scientifically confirmed (see generally Fine 2000).

Outside of the clinical milieu, pet animals may be of significant value to human families, although scientists have so far devoted relatively little time to studying the benefits of companion animals in domestic settings, and, to my knowledge, none to the benefits of working with domesticated partners. Sandra Triebenbacher, a professor of child development and family relations, writes:

Given the obvious visibility of companion animals in families, it seems odd that considerable research has focused on the psychological, social, and physical benefits of dyadic human-animal interactions, but limited attention has focused on the roles and functions of companion animals within the family unit. . . . Albert and Bulcroft surmise that perhaps pets have been overlooked in family studies because some social scientists have difficulty considering these companion animals as members of the family system. (Triebebacher, p. 358)

But, she argues, the family is legitimately regarded as an evolving system, within which companion animals commonly play diverse roles during various stages of family development: from newly weds’ “dress rehearsal” for parenthood, through education of various kinds for children, to “surrogate children” for the childless or elderly. I would add one related speculation: whatever benefits humans get from living with companion animals, living and *working* with domesticated partners probably is, for those who do it, far more satisfying in certain ways than merely keeping an animal companion around the house.

The burgeoning literature on animal assisted therapies, coupled with this call for research on the role of pets in human families, clearly indicates that pets are of significant value to human beings, and both companion animals and domesticated partners—at least as defined in the foregoing section—themselves get a lot out of the bargain. Obviously there will be disputes about which species of animals are suited to becoming companion animals or domesticated partners, but these questions are more empirical than philosophical. Are working elephants in India really domesticated partners? What about camels among Bedouins, and sled dogs among Inuits? I do not know enough to say, but at a minimum, we cannot say, *a priori*, that they never are. Similarly, the question of whether some wild animals kept as pets are true companion animals is not analytic. Maybe tamed wolves often count as companion animals while the average captured opossum does not. In any event, there are complex empirical questions here. In terms of the above definitions, the answers hinge on to what extent the animals value the human companionship enough to stay, and, in the case of domesticated partners, whether their work with humans exercises the animals' mental or physical faculties in a healthy way.

It seems then, on the face of it, that the keeping of companion animals and domesticated partners can be justified to the extent that both keeper and pet genuinely benefit from the relationship. As Evelyn Pluhar puts it: "Companion animals can benefit at least as much as the human animals who are lucky enough to offer them homes (often, the non-human is the one who does the choosing)" (1995, p. 271). And as Budiansky points out, domesticated animals in general are said to have "chosen" us as much as we chose them, because domestication has been attempted unsuccessfully with other species such as antelope and hyenas (1997, p. 10). The scare quotes are necessary around "chosen," because the choice was made at the level of an evolving species, not any conscious individual. Still, the metaphor is apt because it conveys how the *telos* of a species changes to accommodate cohabitation with humans during the process of domestication.

I turn now to the content and basis of owners' obligations to their pets. Rollin (1992 [1981]), Burgess-Jackson (1998), and DeGrazia (1996) are in broad agreement about both. Regarding the basis of owners' obligations to their pets, the three agree that, roughly speaking, we acquire special obligations as a result of taking animals in as pets, obligations which we have to no other animals (neither wild animals nor other peoples' pets). The three differ, however, on some related details. Rollin chooses to describe the special obligations as grounded in an almost literal "social contract" in which dogs, for instance, "gave up their free, wild, pack nature to live in human society in return for care, leadership, and food, which people 'agreed' to provide in return for the dog's role as sentinel, guardian, hunting companion, and friend" (pp. 216–17). Burgess-Jackson intentionally eschews this language of contract (p. 164), and, noting that some ethicists are loathe to recognize duties grounded in relational properties, spends much of the article developing an argument to this conclusion (pp. 167–71). For his part, DeGrazia grounds part of owners' duties to pets in the general

“principle of nonmaleficence” (pp. 259, 274). These differences of detail on the basis of obligations to pets need not concern us here; Burgess-Jackson speculates that part of the reason philosophers writing on animal rights issues have tended to ignore pets is a worry that pointing up special obligations to pets would de-emphasize obligations to “‘stranger’ animals” (p. 166), but the general idea that we acquire special duties to the animals we keep as pets comports with common sense.

As to the content of these duties, the three are again in broad agreement, but here the differences of detail are interesting in various ways. Burgess-Jackson characterizes the duty of pet owners as simply to “provide for their needs” (p. 179), which he illustrates using dogs as his only example. “Not every human need is a dog need” (p. 181), he emphasizes, distinguishing between basic biological needs for nutrition, shelter, exercise, and medical care (179–180), and things like privacy and full-blown education, which are genuine social needs for humans, but have no strict analog among dogs. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that

Dogs need the sort of stimulation that humans refer to as attention, entertainment, or recreation. Dogs need to be rubbed, scratched, petted, and hugged (forms of tactile stimulation); they need to be engaged in various forms of play (structured or unstructured) with their human companions; they need to develop and use their senses; and most importantly, they need to interact with other dogs. Dogs are social beings. They are no less social than humans are, and while it is *possible* for a human or a dog to survive without interaction (think of a human being in solitary confinement), no human would count it an adequate existence, let alone a fulfilled one. It is a sad fact about our world that many dogs are kept penned or chained in back yards with no chance of seeing, much less sniffing, touching, or playing with, other canines. (pp. 180–81)

Here I think Burgess-Jackson overstates dogs’ need for contact with conspecifics. To the extent that humans really substitute for alpha animals in dogs’ social environment, dogs may be able to lead perfectly healthy lives (at least as adults) without regular contact with other dogs. To some extent he may be conflating isolation per se with isolation from conspecifics, because in a footnote to the above passage Burgess-Jackson quotes an essay in which James Serpell and coauthor J. A. Jagoe say that “Long periods of daily social isolation or abandonment *by the owner* may . . . provoke adult separation problems and excessive barking” (p. 181, note #67—emphasis added).

Doubtless contact with conspecifics is good for dogs, as I believe it is for cats, and it may be a more important need for some other animals. My cats initiate play with each other more frequently than with the humans they are familiar with, and although my cats spend time nearby and sleep with us at night, they spend a great deal more time in close contact with each other. Not all cats learn to get along in these ways, but they commonly do, and for this reason it is generally good to have two or three cats rather than just one. And if the remarks about horses quoted in the preceding section are correct, they may have a more deep-seated need than dogs for contact with conspecifics. Commenting on horses’ formation of peer relationships with members of other species, Budiansky states

that they do this only when isolated from other horses or trained by humans, concluding that “they bond with us only for lack of better company” (Budiansky 1997, p. 85).

DeGrazia’s treatment of pets runs less than two pages (1996, pp. 274–75). Like Burgess-Jackson, he acknowledges a general duty to “Provide for the basic physical and psychological needs of your pet,” but he adds that by acquiring a pet, one takes on an additional duty to “ensure that she has a comparably good life to what she would likely have if she were not a pet.” He argues that the general “principle of nonmaleficence” implies this additional duty, because “animals should not be made worse off for becoming a pet, since making them worse off would be an unnecessary harm.” As DeGrazia recognizes, this “comparable-life requirement” could have strikingly different implications for different animals: “A hopelessly domesticated poodle might simply starve if she were not a pet—in which case, a pretty crummy domesticated life could meet this standard,” but “A flourishing monkey . . . might lose a lot by being captured and domesticated.” However, he notes, the other obligation, to take care of pets’ physical and psychological needs, “picks up the ethical slack” in the case of misshapen animals like the poodle.

Rollin’s chapter on pets in *Animal Rights and Human Morality* (1992 [1981], pp. 213–240) is largely anecdotal, and does not articulate any specific principles describing the duties of pet owners. However, his chapter builds directly on his discussion, earlier on the book, of the (roughly Aristotelian) notion of a “*telos*,” and how this can be used to articulate contemporary common sense views about how we ought to treat animals—what he came to call in later works “the new social ethic”⁹ for our treatment of animals (1995a, pp. 139–168; 1995b, pp. 4–22; and 1999, pp. 35–44). So before discussing Rollin’s anecdotes, we should recall his general account of the new social ethic for animals.

Rollin argues that until this century, the ways humans lived and worked with animals basically forced us to respect animals’ biological needs and natural desires. Most use of animals was agricultural until recently, and the extensive methods of animal husbandry which predominated made it impossible to systematically neglect animals’ needs without also sacrificing profits. In the second half of the 20th century, however, two things changed. First, agriculture moved towards more intensive and confinement-based systems, in poultry, egg, and swine production, but also to some extent in other areas where specialized feeds, hormones, and genetic engineering were used to significantly increase yields. Second, the use of animals in scientific research, including but not limited to biomedical research, blossomed and was increasingly subject to public scrutiny. As a result of these changes, the old social ethic regarding animals, which Rollin characterizes as simply forbidding *cruelty* (“that is, deliberate, sadistic, useless, unnecessary infliction of pain, suffering, and neglect on animals”—1995b, p. 5) became outmoded and has been replaced. The new social ethic

⁹By a “social ethic” Rollin means, “The portions of ethical rules that we believe to be universally binding on all members of society, and socially objective” (1999, p. 9).

is not opposed to animal use; it is opposed to animal use that goes against the animal's natures and tries to force square pegs into round holes, leading to friction and suffering. If animals are to be used for food and labor, they should, as they traditionally did, live lives that respect their natures. If animals are to be used to probe nature and cure disease for human benefit, they should not suffer in the process. Thus this new ethic is conservative, not radical, harking back to the animal use that necessitated and thus entailed respect for the animals' nature. (1995b, p. 18)

In his earlier book, Rollin made extensive use of the notion of a *telos* in articulating the new social ethic. The basic idea is that each living thing has "a nature, a function, a set of activities intrinsic to it, evolutionarily determined and genetically imprinted" (1992 [1981], p. 75). The new social ethic condemns agricultural practices which violate this *telos*, and scientific research which does so without good reason. Similarly, according to this new social ethic, keeping a pet is impermissible if the way it is treated seriously violates the *telos* of the animal in question.

Rollin's chapter on pets is basically a catalogue of practices that violate the *telos* of pet animals and of suggestions for associated reforms, with the vast majority of his examples involving dogs. The practices Rollin sees as inconsistent with the emerging new social ethic for animals fall into four categories. First, there is what he characterizes as "the mass extermination of pet animals" (p. 223). He notes that estimates of the number of pet animals killed yearly range from 6 to 14 million (p. 220), and he claims that they commonly are killed for trivial reasons:

People bring animals in to be killed because they are moving and do not want the trouble of traveling with a pet. People kill animals because they are moving to a place where it will be difficult to keep an animal or where animals are not allowed. People kill animals because they are going on vacation and do not want to pay for boarding and, anyway, can always get another one. People kill animals because their son or daughter is going away to college and can't take care of it. People kill animals because they are getting divorced or separated and cannot agree on who will keep the animal. People kill animals, rather than attempt to place them in other homes, because "the animal could not bear to live without me." People kill animals because they cannot housebreak them, or train them not to jump on the furniture, or not to chew on it, or not to bark. People kill animals because they have moved or redecorated and the animals no longer match the color scheme. People kill animals because the animals are not mean enough or too mean. People kill animals because they bark at strangers, or don't bark at strangers. People kill animals because they feel themselves getting old and are afraid of dying before the animal. People kill animals because the semester is over and Mom and Dad would not appreciate a new dog. People kill animals because they only wanted their children to witness the "miracle of birth" and have no use for the puppies or kittens. People kill animals because they have heard that when Doberman pinschers get old, their brain gets too big for their skills, and they go crazy. People kill animals because they have heard that when Great Danes get old, they get mean. People kill animals because they are no longer puppies and kittens and are no longer cute, or are too big. (1992 [1981], pp. 220–21)

Every time Rollin mentions specific animals above, they are either dogs or cats, but what he says clearly applies to many other kinds of pets, including the proverbial flushing of unwanted, but still very much alive, fish.

Presumably Rollin would regard true cases of euthanasia as *telos*-respecting, but none of the above cases can fairly be characterized as such. The one time Regan mentions pets in *The Case for Animal Rights* is during his discussion of euthanasia, where he proposes the following necessary conditions for a killing to qualify:

1. The individual must be killed by the least painful means available.
2. The one who kills must believe that the death of the one who is killed is in the interests of the latter.
3. The one who kills must be motivated to end the life of the one who is killed out of concern for the latter's interests, good, or welfare. (1983, p. 110)

Regan characterizes animal euthanasia as "paternalistic" because animals lack long-term preferences about their futures and we must substitute our own judgments about what is in their best interests. When the judgment that it would be in the animal's best interests to die is reasonable, killing it painlessly counts as paternalistic euthanasia. However, when the judgment is not reasonable, "we have (at most) well-intentioned killing, not euthanasia" (p. 115). The only example in Rollin's litany which could even qualify as "well-intentioned killing" would be the Doberman pinschers example, but in that case the owner's decision is based on the kind of "outrageously false information" about animals which Rollin notes is woefully widespread (1992 [1981], p. 223). And, Regan argues, even if shelters were full only of strays, killing animals because they are overcrowded and there is no place to send them would not constitute euthanasia, for:

The question at issue is not which policy is *morally* preferable—the one where healthy animals are, or the one where they are not, routinely killed, if they have not been adopted in a given length of time. The question at issue is *conceptual*. It is *whether* animals are *euthanized* when shelters rely on the practice of killing animals if they have not been adopted after a given length of time. The answer must be, no. (p. 115—italics in original)

It may be unfeasible for us to do what is best for them, but killing unadopted pound animals is not in those individual's best interests.

The second general way Rollin describes owners commonly violating their pets' *telos* involves restricting their natural behavioral repertoire, as when small, high-strung dogs like poodles are kept in small apartments or where they cannot be constantly active (situations more suited to much larger, but lethargic dogs like Great Danes—p. 224), or when people fail to understand how to train and discipline dogs (p. 226). Here again, Rollin's examples involve dogs, but equally or more striking examples are afforded by other pets, for instance confining birds to small cages.

Third, animals are routinely mutilated in various ways for their owners' convenience or vanity. Rollin mentions debarking of dogs, declawing of cats, and docking of dogs' tails to meet American Kennel Club standards (p. 225), but here again striking examples are afforded by other kinds of pets, e.g., clipping

birds' wings. A few pages later, Rollin mentions castration and spaying¹⁰ in a similar tone, reminding us that "animals probably enjoy sexual congress as much as we do, and it is for this reason that I support vasectomies for male pet animals, rather than castration, and the development of effective contraceptives" (p. 227). Although Rollin does not mention it, an analogous option is available for females: tying off their fallopian tubes v. removing their ovaries ("spaying" them). I am skeptical, however, that neutering is as serious a violation of animals' *telos* as Rollin suggests by effectively comparing it with the declawing of cats and debarking of dogs. I do not doubt that intact animals enjoy sexual congress. However, humans probably tend to exaggerate what the loss of sexual activity means to animals like dogs and cats, first and foremost, because animals like dogs and cats are not sexually active all the time the way we are. Usually female cats and dogs only show an interest in sex when in heat, and males usually only become sexually aroused around females who are in heat. But there are also various health benefits of neutering. Regarding cats, specifically, intact females are seven times more likely than spayed females to develop mammary cancer (Shojai 1998, p. 360), and toms wander and fight much more than castrated males. Apart from war wounds, I believe that access to the outdoors, especially more "natural" areas, is particularly psychologically stimulating to cats, so an intact male's being prone to wander farther from home is a distinct liability, if there are roads and other hazards in the area. All in all, then, it seems to me that what cats lose through neutering may be less than they gain, and this could well be the case for other animals, for similar reasons. So although neutering is a clear example of the violation of animals' *telos*, it may well be a violation that is justified, all things considered. By contrast, declawing cats deprives them of parts of their anatomy (not only their claws, but part or all of their terminal toe bones—Wright and Walters 1980, p. 157) which they use daily in diverse ways, and the problems which lead to declawing (scratching where humans would prefer they not, aggression, etc.) can themselves be handled in a variety of other, less invasive ways. Similar things could be said about debarking dogs.

Finally, Rollin notes that many purebred lines perpetuate harmful genetic defects, including breathing difficulties and heart problems in bulldogs, hip problems in German shepherds, spinal disease in Dachshunds and Manx cats, deafness and bladder stones in Dalmations, cross-eyes in Siamese cats, and plain stupidity in Irish setters (p. 162). Here again Rollin's examples involve dogs and less so cats. This makes sense insofar as there are far more standardized breeds of dogs than of cats, but other animals kept as pets may also suffer from selective breeding. For instance, the stud book for thoroughbreds was "closed" in 1791, meaning that only horses descended from horses then in the book count as thoroughbreds. As a result, two thoroughbreds picked at random will on average have more genes in common than half-siblings, and the costs of 200+ years of inbreeding are apparent in several ways. First, despite premium

¹⁰It is only squeamishness that makes us refer to "neutering" males rather than castrating them. "Spay" is indeed easier to pronounce than "ovariectomy," but "castrate" rolls right off the tongue, so we should only say "neuter" when referring to both castration and spaying.

prices being paid for outstanding studs, the winning times for thoroughbreds have not improved for over a hundred years. Second, "More than 80 percent of yearlings show some signs of congenital cartilage deterioration at the joints, and more than 95 percent have upper respiratory problems that can affect breathing" (Budiansky 1997, p. 248).¹¹

In my discussions of Burgess-Jackson, DeGrazia, and Rollin, I have emphasized how restricted their examples are: they focus almost exclusively on dogs. I have indicated in passing how some of what they say might apply to cats, horses, and a few other animals, but it is also significant that none of the three distinguishes, as I did in the preceding section, among companion animals, domesticated partners, and mere pets. First, because there are good reasons to think that domesticated partners are preferable in a way to companion animals, and that companion animals are similarly preferable to mere pets. And second, pets capable of being companion animals who are treated like mere pets lead worse lives than those who become fully fledged companion animals or domesticated partners.

As I have defined the terms, what distinguishes a companion animal from a mere pet is that the former gets social interaction with its owner significant enough to make it want to stay for that reason. And as defined above, a domesticated partner is "a companion animal who works with humans in ways that emphasize and exercise the pet's mental and/or physical faculties in a healthy way." Thus a domesticated partner gets all the benefits of being a companion animal, and then some, and a companion animal gets all the benefits of being a mere pet, and then some. So, other things being equal, keeping a companion animal is better than keeping a mere pet, and keeping a domesticated partner is preferable to keeping a companion animal who fails to be a domesticated partner.¹²

Burgess-Jackson and DeGrazia both hold that pet owners should:

1. Provide for pets' psychological and physical needs.

And, DeGrazia adds:

2. Ensure that they have a comparably good life to what they would likely have if they were not pets.

For the above reasons, I believe we should add that:

3. Other things being equal, it is better to keep a domesticated partner or a companion animal than a mere pet, and
4. Pet owners should cultivate a domestic partnership with their companion animals to the extent practicable.

¹¹The information on horses in this paragraph is all drawn from Budiansky 1997, pp. 242–43 and 248. Budiansky notes that inbreeding is also a problem in Przewalski's horse, which is the only truly wild horse and exists today only in zoos, but he describes the problem for *Equus Przewalski* in terms of lost diversity (the entire population is descended from 13 individuals) without mentioning any specific health problems (Budiansky 1997, pp. 265–66).

¹²In Varner 1998, chapter four, I defend a variant of Ralph Barton Perry's (1926) "principle of inclusiveness" which underwrites such judgements.

Of course, “other things” are almost never “equal,” and what is “practicable” varies.

Some people who don’t have the time required to turn a dog into any kind of domesticated partner could still get a lot out of a companion animal relationship, and I used cats as my paradigm example of pets who are eminently suited to being companion animals but rarely become domesticated partners, in part because they are more difficult to train than dogs. But do I think that therefore cat owners err in their selection of pets, or that dog owners who fail to develop domesticated partnerships with their dogs are morally remiss? No. Responsible people balance many commitments in their lives, almost never giving all they could to any one of them, and just as it is not necessarily unreasonable to devote extra time to work at the expense of family (or vice versa) it is not necessarily unreasonable to keep cats as companion animals because dogs are more trouble to keep, or to have a dog without spending a great deal of time training it. However, it is regrettable if a dog or cat ends up spending less time or less quality time with its keepers because they haven’t bothered to train it in basic ways, since with proper basic training both the pet and its humans would get more out of the relationship. I am loathe to say that such keepers *violate an obligation* to their pets, but they are open to reasonable criticism: it is reasonable to expect owners of dogs and cats to learn enough about their pets to avoid or correct common behavior problems which can detract from their relationships with their pets.

Similarly, some people lack the time or facilities to maintain fully fledged companion animals. I noted that on the criteria adopted in the preceding section, lizards, fish, lobsters, starfish, insects, and slugs can all be pets, but that none of these are capable of being fully fledged companion animals (let alone domesticated partners). I do not think it wrong for people to keep such animals as pets, so long as in doing so they live up to the minimal criteria articulated by Burgess-Jackson and DeGrazia. Animals incapable of becoming fully fledged companions range from vertebrates with highly sophisticated central nervous systems (e.g. lizards and fish), to invertebrates with very simple ones (e.g. spiders and slugs). Their psychological needs will vary accordingly. I assume that lizards are capable of simple desires, but fish may not be. Nevertheless, both can feel pain and have a basic psychological need to avoid it. However, I assume that the neurologically simplest animals under discussion, e.g. spiders and slugs, are not conscious in any way, shape, or form, and thus have no psychological needs whatsoever.¹³ Especially when animals lack psychological needs, I think it is easy to justify keeping them as pets. So long as such animals’ physical needs are met at least as well as in their native habitats, I see nothing wrong with keeping them (other things being equal—e.g. they are not members of endangered species), even if the benefits humans get from doing so are no more significant than the benefits of having a waterfall or fireplace in the house. Studies show that some of the health benefits of keeping pets can be had from such distractions, or even from working with plants (Serpell 1996, p. 102; Nebbe

¹³Again, these things are simply assumed in this essay, but my reasons are given in Varner 1998, chapter two.

2000, pp. 388–91). But if the needs of animals incapable of being more than mere pets are met, as well or better than in their native habitats, then I see nothing wrong with keeping them.

It must be emphasized, however, that owners are probably as or more likely to be ignorant of such animals' basic needs as they are to be ignorant of the natural history of and training strategies for cats and dogs. Relatedly, it would be interesting to compare the life expectancies of fish, lizards, spiders, etc. when kept as pets by knowledgeable owners, when kept by the average (presumably much less knowledgeable) owner, and in their native habitats. This might tell us something about how difficult it really is to meet their physical needs in captivity.

CONCLUSION

Much has been omitted from this already lengthy essay. I have not discussed what legal arrangements might be appropriate in light of the moral considerations advanced here, and I have left out other, more philosophical questions of some import. I have not discussed the connotations and possible effects of thinking of pets as "owned" rather than "kept" or "cared for." In talking about the consciousness of fish and lizards I have not distinguished between "pain" and "suffering" (compare DeGrazia 1996, pp. 116ff). I have not discussed environmental reasons against keeping certain kinds of pets, e.g. outdoor cats, especially in Australia, or animals collected from the wild in environmentally harmful ways. And just as people sometimes stay in abusive relationships, in part out of real—but pathological—affection for their abusers, we can imagine some pets' status as companion animals or domesticated partners resting on pathological affection for their keepers. Obviously I do not mean to condone the keeping of such pets.

Certainly there are many other philosophical issues I have not even touched on here. Nevertheless, as detailed in the introduction, philosophers writing on the moral status of animals have so far generally neglected conceptual and normative questions about pets, despite the evident importance of pets in many (indeed most) humans' daily lives. I therefore hope that the present discussion, as tentative and incomplete as it is, will encourage more attention to what I think is an important practical issue with legitimate philosophical dimensions.¹⁴

Questions

1. Would the four conditions for something's being a pet be met by human infants or profoundly retarded humans? Why?
2. Do you agree with Gary Varner that a nonconscious thing can be a pet? Why?
3. What are the differences between pets, companion animals, and domesticated partners, as Gary Varner describes these?

¹⁴Colin Allen, Deborah Barnbaum, Heather Gert, and Jason Mallory read drafts of this paper and gave me valuable feedback. Mallory also tells me that he once kept a slug as a pet.

4. Do you think that the following practices are morally acceptable? If so, why? If not, why not? (a) Docking dogs' tails. (b) Declawing cats. (c) Preserving "thoroughbred" lines. (d) Spaying or neutering pets. What do the normative principles Gary Varner outlines imply about these practices?

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Suggestions for Further Reading on Pets

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