

Born to be Wild? On “Wildness” Objections to Preventing Wild Animal Suffering

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Conversations in animal ethics have largely focused on those areas closest to human intervention into animal lives. The ethics of vegetarianism, animal testing, and keeping pets all centre on whether the ways we treat animals are morally justifiable. Mostly, philosophers have discussed the negative duties owed to animals—whether there is a requirement to refrain from eating them, for example. More recently, philosophers have also begun to ask questions about the positive duties we owe to wild animals whose suffering is not anthropogenic. Despite the massive scale of suffering that does exist, Wild Animal Suffering (WAS) is seen by most as an issue beyond human concern. However, we have good reason to think that we have strong duties to limit WAS through beneficence.¹

On the face of it, this is a radical and counterintuitive conclusion. Philosophers have offered many arguments against it, ranging from practical

¹Johannsen, Kyle, *Wild Animal Ethics: The moral and political problem of wild animal suffering*, Routledge, 2021

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concerns,² to principled moral objections.³ In my view, many of the moral objections against intervention stem from an intuition that intervention is wrong because it is unnatural. To be clear, this is not just a fallacious appeal to nature, and instead contains sophisticated arguments worthy of consideration. In this essay, I do not take a stance on whether we have a moral duty to intervene. Instead I aim for the more limited conclusion that objections from the value of wildness fail to show we do not have such a duty. This is because of a dilemma concerning whether the value of wild nature is to be understood as lexically prior (or morally prior even in the face of conflicting moral concerns) to the value of preventing WAS.

In (I) I set out a typical pro-intervention argument and speculate as to why we find its conclusion so unappealing. In (II) I respond to an argument from Tom Regan that intervention is unnecessary because animals lack moral agency, concluding that natural states of affairs can still be morally relevant.⁴ In (III) I set out a more sophisticated objection based on the intrinsic value of wildness, showing how this view can be defended from the counterargument that wildness is illusory. Finally, in (IV) I set out the aforementioned lexical priority dilemma, arguing that this poses a severe problem for those opposing intervention on wildness grounds. Specifically, I argue that when faced with the question of whether the value of wildness is lexically prior to the moral importance of WAS, those who oppose intervention on wildness grounds can't easily accept either option. This is significant because it threatens the core of many of the moral arguments used to oppose intervention.

(I) An Argument for Intervention

Many arguments defending a duty to limit WAS follow a similar structure. Typically, these begin by noting that most animals are “r-strategist”

²Delon, Nicolas and Purves, Duncan, *Wild Animal Suffering is Intractable*, Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics, 2018. Even though there are many practical difficulties that might prevent us from safely intervening to reduce WAS, this has no bearing on the wider moral question of whether we ought to intervene if we could. Indeed, clarifying our moral obligations will influence practical matters since it will likely determine how many resources we are willing to spend on researching technologies that would enable us to intervene in the future. Given this, I won't spend any time addressing practical objections to intervention and will instead focus exclusively on straightforward moral objections.

³Palmer, Clare, *The Value of Wild Nature: Comments on Kyle Johannsen's Wild Animal Ethics*, Philosophia, 2021 and Hettinger, Ned, Naturalness, Wild Animal Suffering and Palmer on Laissez-Faire, The Ethics Forum, 2018

⁴Regan, Tom, *The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004

reproducers. This means that they preserve their genetic material by having large numbers of offspring that they are relatively uninvested in. As a result, most offspring fail to reach maturity and instead die young.

Importantly, I am not concerned here with rectificatory duties to intervene to save animals from anthropogenic harms, such as saving wild animals from bushfires caused by climate change or cleaning up oil spills. Rather, I am talking about the stronger claim that we owe a duty of beneficence to reduce the suffering of wild animals, even if we had no role in causing it. Here is a typical argument for this claim:⁵

Typical Pro-intervention Argument:

1. If an animal's life is dominated by suffering and ends in premature death, it is not a flourishing one and might not be worth living.⁶
2. Most animals that are r-strategists lead lives dominated by suffering which end in premature death.
3. Most sentient animals are r-strategists.
- C₁. Most sentient animals don't lead flourishing lives and these lives might not be worth living.
4. If we can alleviate great amounts of suffering by intervening in natural processes, without incurring excessive cost to ourselves, we have a collective duty to do so.
5. We can alleviate great amounts of suffering by intervening in natural processes, without incurring excessive cost to ourselves. (If we cannot presently intervene then we have a duty to pursue intervention strategies through research).

⁵My exegesis here draws heavily from p2 of Johannsen's *Wild Animal Ethics*.

⁶It is worth noting here that a weaker version of P1 (with the other premises adjusted accordingly) can be employed and still give a completely functional argument if we are uncomfortable making strong claims about whether the lives of specific animals are worth living. For example, we might instead opt for something like "It is morally bad if an animal's life is dominated by suffering and ends in premature death." I use this formulation since it is common in the literature, but the argument doesn't hinge on it.

- C₂. Therefore, we have a collective duty to intervene in natural processes to reduce WAS.

I won't seek to defend these premises fully since my intervention is primarily focused on rebutting a specific critique of the position. However, I will give some brief support to the controversial premises, which I take to be P2, P4 and P5.

P2: Whilst the r-strategy is effective at ensuring genes are passed onto future generations, it is extraordinarily bad at maximising the wellbeing of individual animals. The offspring of r-strategists typically receive minimal protection from their parents, leaving many of them to die young. Methods of death for wild animals range from the quick and painful, such as being eaten by a predator, to the slow and painful, such as a protracted death from starvation, exposure, injury, or disease. Furthermore, we have good reason to believe that many animals in the wild suffer persistent psychological stresses throughout their lives as well (Johannsen 14). Once we take notice of these factors, it becomes clear that for most wild animals, the natural world is far from idyllic, as it is often presented in nature documentaries which often focus exclusively on large adult mammals that are not r-strategists.

P4: We can compare this proposed duty with similar duties owed to human beings who are suffering. Here I take it as given that the question is not whether we have any duties of beneficence towards human strangers at all—most people feel strongly that we do—but, rather when it becomes excusable for us not to assist. Singer famously argued that we have a strong duty of beneficence to help people suffering from poverty, even when we don't have any personal relationship with them.⁷ Consider a version of Singer's drowning child case where a wild animal is drowning instead of the human child. Assuming we knew that we wouldn't be incurring excessive costs to ourselves, many of us would surely feel a similar compulsion to save the wild animal. At the very least, we would feel deeply uncomfortable if we chose not to help. So long as we agree wild animals have any moral status whatsoever, it seems hard to deny P4 on grounds that aren't simple speciesism.

Finally, we can bolster P5 by noting that there have already been many plans proposed as to how intervention might work, some of which

⁷Singer, Peter, *Famine Affluence and Morality*, Philosophy and Public Affairs, 1972. One key difference here is that I've chosen to frame the issue in terms of collective duty, whereas Singer's article famously focuses on the duties of individuals. This is primarily because I take it that meaningful reductions in WAS will require the kind of large-scale interference that necessitates collective action through governments and other public bodies.

are more feasible at present than others (more on this in the next section). However, even if it were the case that we did not know how to intervene safely, the practicality objection should still have little purchase on us. For example, we might accept that due to our limited expertise in ecosystem management, we are not able to radically intervene at present without facing huge risks of upsetting the delicate balance already found in ecological communities (Delon and Purves 3). This is why documentary filmmakers normally do not interfere with predator-prey relationships, since in doing so they would likely be creating more harm than good. If they kept predators from their prey every time, the predators would go hungry and the unchecked prey population would rapidly multiply and outstrip their food supply, likely leading to mass starvation. However, this shouldn't cause us to reject P5 wholesale. Indeed, all we need to accept in order to accept P5 in a more limited form is that we could plausibly alleviate WAS to some degree in the future through intervention even if we couldn't do this right away. To the extent that we aren't in a position to intervene safely already, we ought to take steps to get closer to that position, such as through prioritising research and raising public consciousness of the issue.

Having accepted this collective duty, how should we achieve it in practice? It is worth briefly noting some potential means of intervention here so we can get a better grasp on what acceptance of this duty might require from us. I do not defend any of these proposed actions here but instead simply present some options that have been suggested, getting progressively more radical:

- Vaccination programmes for wild animals to alleviate harms from preventable disease.
- Food and medical care for wild animals in need.
- Sterilisation in cases of overpopulation to prevent starvation.
- Removing parasitic species such as screw flies, which cause very painful deaths.
- Using CRISPR to lessen wild animals' ability to suffer ("genetic painkillers," Johannsen 74).
- Using CRISPR to make r-strategist animals behave more like k-strategists in their reproductive habits, thereby reducing rates of juvenile mortality.
- Removing the need for predation altogether, such as through the distribution of mass-produced synthetic meat.
- Allowing animal habitats to be destroyed so that fewer will come into existence, thereby reducing overall suffering (Johannsen 57).

Intervention to reduce WAS is not a popular position. Part of this is surely due to the practical worries we have already noted—scientists rightly recoil in horror at the thought of the cascading harms that would occur if radical options were pursued right away. However, I believe that a deeper and more principled moral objection is also at work. Consider what would happen if intervention suddenly became possible in a way that was guaranteed to reduce the suffering of wild animals without causing these cascading harms. I take it that even in this case, most people would likely still have reservations. I believe that a lot of this scepticism draws from a deep intuition that intervention of any kind would be disrupting the rightful course of nature in a problematic way; overstepping our role in a way that is akin to playing God. This is represented in popular environmentalist attitudes towards the wild such as the slogan “take only photos, leave only footprints.” Ned Hettinger sums up this view nicely, writing, “We are not boss . . . A proper human relation with nature should be based on proper humility, not grandiosity” (8). We could uncharitably interpret the intuitions these thinkers are drawing from as a misguided, tacit equating of the natural with the good. This equation would clearly be fallacious, but there are stronger possible interpretations which I believe have been dismissed too quickly by some of those who defend intervention to reduce WAS. The remainder of this essay details these stronger versions and shows how they can be dealt with in a more satisfactory way.

(II) Regan’s Version

One way of cashing out this “wildness” intuition is that we should not intervene in the behaviours of animals because they aren’t moral agents and so cannot cause moral harm. This reflects the intuition that the natural world is amoral and that to think differently is to make the mistake of projecting human morality onto it. Regan offers us a form of this when he says that “animals are not moral agents and so can have none of the same duties moral agents have” (Regan 357). I take it that his argument can be put roughly as follows:

Moral Agency Argument:

- a. Only when an action is performed by a moral agent does that action have moral weight.
- b. Animals are not moral agents.

- C₁. Therefore, the suffering that animals cause one another does not have moral weight and so it is not morally bad.
- c. If there is no moral badness to prevent, then we cannot have a duty to intervene.
- C₂. Therefore, we do not have a duty to intervene.

Regan concludes that, “The total amount of suffering animals cause one another in nature is not the concern of morally enlightened wildlife management” (Regan 357). Regan would therefore reject P1 of the earlier pro-intervention argument, since the suffering of animals when caused by other animals doesn’t generate any moral badness.

The problem with Regan’s view is that it confuses the moral status of animals and their actions with the moral status of the consequences that arise as a result. Specifically, Regan’s position is implausible since it forces us to concede that suffering in nature is neither good nor bad. If moral agents were always required for there to be appreciably moral states of affairs, it seems we would be unable to say, for example, that it is morally bad that animals should die in a naturally occurring wildfire, since there are no moral agents involved. Yet, this seems to stray wildly from our intuitions since most of us would surely hold that the animals ought to be saved and spared their suffering, or at least that it would be better if they didn’t have to suffer at all.

To further see the implausibility of Regan’s view, consider a case of a wild dog biting a human. In this instance we can grant that it would not be appropriate to call the dog morally bad, but it seems obvious that we can assign moral weight to the resulting situation. It would clearly be better if the human hadn’t been bitten. Similarly, regarding the case of predation, we cannot blame the lion for eating a zebra in order to survive. However, we might lament that it is necessary for the lion’s survival to be contingent upon a practice that causes so much suffering. So long as we accept that there are agent independent reasons why something might be good or bad, we can make these vital distinctions and avoid this confusion. As a result, Regan’s argument gives us no reason why we shouldn’t be concerned with WAS—just because animals aren’t moral agents doesn’t change the fact that we are.

Mikel Torres summarises this response when he says that the point is not to be concerned with the moral duties of animals themselves; rather, “the point is to decide if we, moral agents, have the duty to intervene in nature to impede animals harming each other” (Torres 5).

(III) The Intrinsic Value Version

A better “wildness” reply to the pro-intervention argument would involve accepting that WAS is morally bad but then arguing that this is outweighed by, or at least weighed against, the intrinsic value of wildness.⁸ Johannsen dismisses this argument quickly by saying that “naturalness is not sufficient for goodness, nor an intrinsic source of value” (29). I think he makes too strong a claim here. If we take his view seriously, it entails that it would be permissible for us to meddle in nature for any reason, just so long as this wouldn’t cause any disvalue, such as by harming any individual animals. Whether Johannsen recognises it or not, this result is highly unappealing. To see why, consider the following thought experiment:

Virgin rainforest: The Brazilian government has decided to build a new motorway which requires felling a portion of the Amazon rainforest, which has until now been undisturbed by human activity. Government scientists have developed a foolproof plan to painlessly relocate all the animals in the area into a new area of rainforest, which has been planted and genetically engineered to speedily grow to have the same physical characteristics as the area that has been felled.

On Johannsen’s view, the government’s actions seem unproblematic, as no sentient life is harmed. Yet, intuitively there is something deeply wrong here. Specifically, something seems to be lost in the replacement of the area of virgin rainforest with the copy. Based on this case, it certainly seems plausible that there is some intrinsic value to wildness since this

⁸The intrinsic value claim at play here is much more complex than it may first appear. Naturalness doesn’t fit easily into Moore’s isolation test, which is the traditional way of understanding intrinsic value, since it is a property of how states of affairs come about rather than the states themselves (Moore, G.E, *The Conception of Intrinsic Value in his Philosophical Studies*, 1922). Furthermore, it is unclear whether we ought to understand intrinsic value in the strongly objective sense that Moore seems to, or in a more subjective sense where intrinsic value is related to those things that human’s value (Langton, Rae, *Objective and Unconditioned Value*, *Philosophical Review*, 2007). If we opt for the latter, this seems to cause some tension since a more anthropocentric conception of value seems radically at odds with the spirit of the objection that value is independent of humans. These issues are worth investigating and don’t get the attention they deserve in this literature, but to do so would go beyond the scope of this paper. As such, I’m going to take a common sense understanding of the intrinsic value claim. Roughly, this is to say that there is at least some value conferred on a thing or process by its having been produced by the “correct” causal process i.e., naturally. We might therefore liken the value of naturalness in things and relations to the value of originality in pieces of art.

is required to explain why the Brazilian government acts wrongly in this instance.⁹ From here, we can proceed as follows:

Intrinsic Value Precludes Intervention Argument:

- I. It is intrinsically valuable that things be wild.
- II. Intervening to reduce WAS will significantly disrupt the wildness found in nature.
- C. Therefore, it is wrong to intervene to prevent WAS.

Before offering my response, it is worth digging deeper into the concept of wildness, since it plays a major role in this argument. Firstly, wildness as such is perhaps most easily understood as independence from human influence. However, this cannot be the whole story, since not all human intervention makes things less wild. Consider rewilding programmes which aim to restore natural processes, such as by replanting trees in areas of deforestation. This isn't puzzling since in these cases human intervention serves to undo the results of earlier human intervention. Accordingly, it seems like we need to build some kind of modal notion into our understanding of wildness, i.e., wild states of affairs are those that would have obtained had it not been for human actions.

One objection here is that there is no such thing as wild nature due to pervasive human impact on the environment. Hettinger dubs this view "Age of Man Environmentalism," according to which, appealing to the intrinsic value of wildness is universally misguided since it relies on "the illusory ideal of pristine nature" (75). For example, we might appeal to the huge influence that human activity has on the environment, even over relatively undisturbed wild animals. Consider the fact that we have found microplastics present in the stomachs of the deepest marine organisms. The broader claim here is that we cannot appeal to a value of wildness because human impact is so widespread that there is no longer any such thing. As a result, intervention to reduce WAS is unproblematic on this score since "there's no wildness left to lose" (Palmer 8).

⁹Whether or not you find this particular argument convincing, as I happen to, is largely immaterial to the rest of my argument, as will become clear. The point is rather to give some indication as to how the "wildness" intuition might be operationalised and why some find this convincing.

The best response here is that wildness comes in degrees rather than being a binary property. For example, an ocean would be considered more or less wild based on the quantity of microplastic within it. It is not that an ocean with one piece of plastic in it is somehow tainted to the same degree as another with millions. When talking about wild animals, it seems like even if we have influenced animals in many ways, they still maintain various wild properties, such as whether they are r-strategists or not. To change this through genetic engineering would be to make those animals, in a meaningful sense, less wild. To summarise then, wild states of affairs are those that *would* have obtained had it not been for human intervention, and states of affairs can be meaningfully understood as more or less wild based on the extent of human influence. Having cleared up the concept of wildness and seen off the “Age of Man” argument, the rest of the paper focuses on a dilemma showing why the intrinsic value of wildness cannot give good reasons against radical interventions.

(IV) The Lexical Priority Dilemma

It is worth noting from the offset that we already intervene in nature, typically for anthropocentric reasons, in ways which are largely held to be unproblematic. For example, the UK government has engaged in various large-scale vaccination programmes to inoculate badgers against tuberculosis to prevent the disease spreading to domesticated cattle. I take it that these vaccination schemes are good even if we disregard the instrumental value that this creates for human agricultural projects and focus solely on the welfare of the animals involved. A crude argument here is to accuse those who oppose intervention on “wildness” grounds of hypocrisy: it seems like we can intervene in wild nature when it is for our own benefit in ways that are morally innocuous, so why should we feel any differently when we are trying to prevent WAS? By itself this is a poor argument since defenders of wildness value can happily accept small-scale interventions like vaccinations, with the justification that they will barely disrupt natural processes and so are only marginally harmful. By contrast, more radical proposals like those favoured by Johannsen threaten to radically alter ecosystems beyond all recognition.

The defender of intervention can do better here. Opponents of intervention who argue on wildness grounds face a dilemma concerning how their intrinsic value claim is to be understood in terms of lexical priority. Here lexical priority refers to a way of thinking about how to compare different morally important things if they conflict. Specifically, if A has lexical priority over B, then no amount of B will be sufficient

to outweigh the importance of A. In other words, A will always have to come first, just as words beginning with “A” must always come before those beginning with “B” in a dictionary. For example, some people think that the moral importance of a human life is lexically prior to the moral importance of a headache. As such, it would always be wrong to sacrifice a human life to alleviate headaches, no matter the amount of headaches in question. When properly considered, a focus on the lexical priority of wildness reveals that the intrinsic value of wildness can’t give us good reasons to oppose radical interventions to prevent WAS.

Having accepted that wildness has some intrinsic value, and that WAS is also morally important, we need some framework to decide between the two kinds of value in trade off cases, such as scenarios where reducing WAS would require compromising the wildness of a given area. We have two options here in deciding how this framework should operate:

1. The intrinsic value of wildness is lexically prior to the value of preventing WAS.
2. The intrinsic value of wildness is not lexically prior to the value of preventing WAS.

If we accept the first option, the importance of preserving wildness would trump preventing WAS in all instances. This is very difficult for the opponent of intervention to accept. For example, upon accepting this lexical priority claim, it seems we would have to give up on the permissibility of vaccinating badgers. However, this is far from the only problematic case. Consider the following:

Destructive Algae: An algal bloom has been detected in a large lake full of fish. The bloom is driven solely by natural factors. If the algae continues to multiply, the lake will become anoxic, and all the fish will suffer and die of asphyxiation. Luckily, scientists have determined that placing a small amount of chemical XYZ into the lake will get rid of the algae without impacting any other organisms.

All other things being equal, it seems obvious that we are morally obliged to remove the algae and save the fish. However, accepting the lexical priority of wildness value prohibits this. The algae has come about naturally, and we would be interfering with this through our intervention. Cases like these show that accepting the lexical priority claim forces us to buy that our intuitions in these cases are not only wrong, but radically so. As such, option 1 is plainly unacceptable.

On the other hand, if we reject the lexical priority claim and accept that wildness value and WAS can be traded off against one another, it seems unclear how wildness value could possibly win out in cases of radical

intervention. Estimates vary wildly as to how many sentient animals there are in the wild, but it is obvious that the number is massive. For example, Tomasik cites an upper bound of a trillion mammals in the world at a given time, to which we must add all of the non-mammals.¹⁰ If we are to truly give the suffering of each of these animals the moral consideration it is worthy of in a way that is consistent with our intuitions in other cases, it seems ridiculous to think this can be outweighed by the contingent fact that this state of affairs was generated without human interference. In other words, if we were able to reduce the suffering of billions of animals by using gene drives to introduce genetic painkillers in the first few weeks of life (a point of high concentration of WAS), then the fact that this is disrupting a natural process surely pales in comparison to these aggregated harms. If this weren't the case, it would seem to reduce the importance of each animal's suffering to near nothing.

In cases of individual wild animal suffering, we are capable of correctly diagnosing these as being seriously morally bad. However, when we multiply the scale of the harm to cover hundreds of billions of wild animals, our intuitions do not adjust at the same rate. Our unreflective judgements are biased due to scope insensitivity.¹¹ Cognitive biases don't reflect genuine moral reasons, but rather, failures in our own processes of reasoning. If we were to appreciate the moral weight of WAS in a non-biased way, the sheer scale would mean it must win out over the value of wild nature if they are indeed comparable to one another. In other words, if our intervention into nature was in any sense proportional to the suffering we would prevent, as it would likely be in even the most radical options proposed, the value of reducing WAS would win out. Therefore, due to the lexical priority dilemma, it seems like the intrinsic value of wildness could never give a good reason why we shouldn't pursue even the most radical intervention strategies.

(V) Conclusion

The intrinsic value of wildness cannot be used to oppose large-scale interventions to reduce WAS. In (I) I gave a pro-intervention argument and speculated that much of the opposition to these arguments comes from "naturalness" concerns. In (II) I showed that Regan's argument from moral agency is unsound and mislocates where the moral action is, since it does

¹⁰Tomasik, Brian, *How Many Wild Animals Are There?*, <https://reducing-suffering.org/>, 2009

¹¹Yudkowsky, Eleanor, *Scope Insensitivity*, <https://www.lesswrong.com/>, 2007

not have space for agent independent reasons why things might be good or bad. In (III) I considered a stronger argument from the intrinsic value of wildness. I endorsed the conclusion that wildness has some intrinsic value and showed how this can be defended from the objection that wildness no longer exists. Finally, in (IV) I set out the lexical priority dilemma concerning how we understand the intrinsic value of wildness. Accepting the lexical priority of wildness value forces us to abandon intuitions about the permissibility of intervention in benign circumstances. If we reject the idea that wildness is lexically prior to suffering and instead accept that the two can be traded-off against one another, it seems like the suffering of trillions of sentient beings must always trump wildness value if we are to take their moral worth into account consistently. The lexical priority dilemma therefore shows that the intrinsic value of wildness cannot be usefully deployed to oppose interventions to reduce WAS.

My findings are significant because they defuse the “naturalness” intuition which we considered earlier. When operationalised and made clearer, wildness objections to intervention run into intractable difficulties. This suggests that we should reject our intuitions rather than the duty to intervene. The lexical priority dilemma is especially significant because it shows that defenders of intervention aren’t forced to implausibly hold that wild nature has no intrinsic value at all. The key finding is that those seeking to reject pro-intervention arguments to reduce WAS will have to do so for reasons that do not stem from wildness concerns.

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