Ethics & Companion Animals

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1. Introduction

It’s estimated that there are around 70 million dogs, and more cats, in the United States. In 2012, 36.5% of US households owned at least one dog, and 30.4% at least one cat (AVMA 2012), and ownership figures are only slightly lower in the European Union. In most Western countries, the numbers of households keeping dogs and cats has been steadily growing for decades. On the face of it, this is surprising. After all, keeping dogs and cats in the home can be both expensive and inconvenient. Yet, obviously, for many people, the gains from living with animals are so significant that they outweigh the costs (Serpell & Paul 2011). Surveys repeatedly show that living with animals normally gives their owners pleasure; well over half of owners say that they perceive dogs and cats to be “members of the family”; and an even higher percentage describe their dogs and cats as companions (AMVA 2012).

While it may be the case that companion animals are normally good for their owners, keeping them, it’s often argued, nonetheless raises ethical concerns. We will consider two kinds of ethical concern here. The first relates to the creation and keeping of animals as human companions at all. “Companionship” is usually taken to be a two-way relationship, one of positive, non-coercive interaction between two parties. However, it’s recently been argued that the term “companionship” brushes over the darker side of keeping animals in our homes, and that the practice of breeding and keeping companion
animals might instead be seen as perpetuating a relationship based on human domination and non-human vulnerability—a traditional concern within environmental ethics. This concern is magnified by the fact that in many Western nations, companion animals are, like other elements of the non-human world, technically human property, lacking legal standing and representation. After explaining how we are using the term “companion animals,” we will discuss such arguments, maintaining that animal companionship need not, in principle, be understood as coercive and exploitative, and outlining two recently proposed positive frameworks for living ethically with animal companions.

While keeping companion animals may not be intrinsically ethically problematic, it inevitably raises ethical questions, dilemmas, and conflicts in practice. The second group of ethical concerns we will discuss here relates to the broader impacts of companion animals on the environment. We will focus in particular on concerns about resource use, pollution, and predation. While these are traditional concerns of environmental ethics, they have not yet been much explored in the context of companion animals

2. Key terminology: animal companions

The most straightforward way of explaining how we will be using “companion animals” is to relate it to the widely-used term “pet.” Varner (2002) describes a “pet” as a being that is affectionately regarded by its owner (so not a pest); lives in or close to the home; is mobile (so not a plant); lives a life different in kind from its owner’s (so not a human); possesses its own interests—that is, its life can go better or worse for it, and it has a
welfare or a good of its own; and it depends on its owner in significant ways to help fulfill its interests.

This characterization includes most animals voluntarily kept by people in their homes: mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. We take “companion animals” to be a subset of this broader group of pets, and understand companionship as a kind of interactive bond, where humans and animals recognize and are responsive to one another, and seek one another’s company for comfort, consolation, play, and so on. This clearly describes the relationships many people have with their dogs and cats; dogs and cats are, as it were, paradigm animal companions, though sometimes people have similar relations with birds, rabbits and other small mammals. Insects, fish, reptiles, and amphibians, though also voluntarily kept in the home, are rarely companions in this sense (and, some may argue, because of the kinds of beings they are, they cannot be). So, our discussion of companion animals here will focus on dogs and cats, as our most common non-human companions, including their impacts on the environment.

3. Is it wrong to keep companion animals?

From some ethical perspectives, the practice of keeping animal companions is intrinsically ethically problematic. As noted above, this worry is exacerbated by the fact that, in most places, companion animals are legally just property. We will begin by evaluating the claim that keeping companion animals is intrinsically wrong, and then consider arguments concerning companion animals as property, and conclude by briefly outlining two recent proposals for living ethically with companion animals.
The most well-known argument against breeding and keeping animals as companions has been developed by Gary Francione. Francione (2012) argues that animals bred to be companions “exist forever in a netherworld of vulnerability, dependent on us for everything, and at risk of harm from an environment that they do not really understand. We have bred them to be compliant and servile, or to have characteristics that are actually harmful to them but are pleasing to us.” Breeding and keeping animals as companions seems to be understood here as a form of human domination of nature, where humans create nonhumans that are essentially—and so inescapably—servile, and are unable to flourish without human support.

Francione argues that creating this built-in dependence is wrong, so much so that we should stop breeding such animals. It’s worth emphasizing that the moral concern here is with the state of created dependence itself; it’s not directly related to animals’ subjective experiences, preferences, or desires. The concern persists “however well we treat our nonhuman companions” (Francione & Garner 2010: 79).

This is an interestingly different worry from the ethical concerns more commonly encountered in animal and environmental ethics. In the case of agricultural and laboratory animals, and wild animals in captivity, ethical concerns usually focus on animals’ negative mental states (such as fear and suffering), and on the inability of animals, especially ones that are confined, to fully express natural, species-specific behaviors. For Francione, though, the objection concerns the state of dependence itself; we just should not create animals that have such essentially dependent natures, however happy and free to express natural behaviors they are.

But why should created dependence, in itself, be ethically problematic? (If it is,
this may be part of a much bigger problem in environmental ethics, given how much responses to global environmental change rely on highly interventionist conservation strategies that may well generate dependence on humans). One obvious concern might be that the vulnerability created by dependence necessarily leads to exploitation. A second concern may just be that there’s a sense in which it’s just better not to be dependent, and instead to be self-sufficient and autonomous. But both of these concerns are problematic. While it’s true that dependence does increase vulnerability, vulnerability does not necessarily lead to exploitation. After all, children are highly dependent on their parents, but we don’t think that parent-child relationships are necessarily exploitative. Certainly companion animals are vulnerable to those with whom they live, and that vulnerability can lead to welfare issues if their owners fail to properly meet their needs; but it’s not clear why this must define the relationship.

So is the problem with the condition of dependence itself? It’s not clear why this would be intrinsically problematic either. After all, all humans are highly dependent on others for some of the time (when infants, when elderly, when sick); some humans are highly dependent on others all of the time; and all of us are at least somewhat dependent on other humans in our daily lives. Should we try, then, to eliminate dependence between humans? Or to aim to create a society that doesn’t contain dependent adult humans? As Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011: 83) argue, dependency is not, in itself, “inherently undignified or unnatural”; and there’s clearly a risk that condemning dependency will have “pernicious consequences” for humans as well as animals.

The more obvious conclusion, in the case of companion animals, is that their created dependence gives them a special relationship to human beings—a relationship
that’s different from the one humans normally have with wild animals, for instance. Palmer (2010) argues that while, other things being equal, we have duties not to harm all sentient animals, we may have different responsibilities to care for animals in different contexts. Since we have made companion animals significantly dependent on us, and therefore vulnerable to our treatment, we have special responsibilities to care for them, responsibilities that we don’t generally have to wild animals (unless they have also been made vulnerable and dependent due to some human activity).

A further concern—also expressed by Francione—is that companion animals are, almost everywhere, merely the legal property of their owners; and that as long as this is the case, keeping them is morally problematic. As property, it’s argued, animals cannot have independent legal standing, which means that they are entitled to few legal protections (though many places do have anti-cruelty laws, which provide some restraint on what can legally be done to them). Korsgaard (2013: 629) notes: “Persons are the subjects of both rights and obligations, including the right to own property, while objects of property, being by their very nature for the use of persons, have no rights at all.”

The worry that non-humans are not legal persons, and cannot therefore have independent legal standing, representation, or rights, has been an enduring concern of environmental ethics. Christopher Stone (1973) argued that natural objects such as streams or mountains should have some kind of legal standing, “rather like the standing of legal incompetents – human beings who have become vegetable” (p.17). This would allow trustees, or guardians, to be appointed on their behalf. The property status of companion animals is a particularly acute instance of such concerns about property within environmental ethics, for three reasons. First, since companion animals are
sentient, it can more obviously be claimed that they, unlike mountains or streams, have “interests,” and that a change in their legal status may protect them from suffering.

Second, since companion animals are commonly regarded as family members, the idea of buying and selling them seems incongruous, in a way that’s less true of mountains and streams. And third, mere property status means that if someone harms or kills a companion animal, the owner is only likely to succeed in suing for the animal’s fair market value, rather than (for instance) for damages for emotional harm, however important the animal was to them. For all these reasons, there’s currently lively debate about the legal status of animal companions. Alternative legal regimes in which companion animals are at least not solely property are possible (and may to some degree already exist; for instance, in Norway and France, companion animals do have some kind of independent legal standing as “sentient beings”).

However, not all ethicists, even those who take animals’ independent moral status seriously, are troubled by the idea of companion animals being property. Cochrane (2012), for instance, argues that because animals don’t understand what “being property” is, unlike humans, they don’t have an interest in not being owned or in not being human companions:

Some practices that are objectionable when done to humans are not objectionable when done to animals: keeping an animal as a pet is quite unlike keeping a human as a slave; using animals to undertake certain types of work is quite unlike coercing humans to labor; buying and selling animals is quite unlike trading human beings; and so on (Cochrane 2012: 11).
On this view, animals aren’t harmed by states such as “being property,” of which they, in contrast to humans, can’t be aware. However, Cochrane is clear that animals can still be harmed by states of which they are aware, such as pain and frustration; accepting this position does not necessarily lead to opposition to increased legal protections for companion animals.

So, neither created dependence nor property status seem to be, in themselves, insuperable objections to keeping companion animals. But both of these concerns do highlight the importance of thinking carefully about appropriate ethical frameworks for living with animals as companions.

4. Ethical frameworks for keeping companion animals

Companion animals fit awkwardly into existing ethical, political, and legal frameworks, both those designed for humans and for animals. On the one hand, frameworks designed for people often presuppose certain capacities that nonhumans are thought to lack, such as the ability to reflect on actions and to make moral decisions. On the other hand, frameworks designed for animals generally focus on animals with whom we have very different relationships from companionship—in particular farm and laboratory animals, kept for production and use. And unlike wild animals, companion animals are not independent and self-supporting, so we need to think about what’s owed to them in ways that move beyond just non-intervention. This complex situation has led to proposals for new frameworks through which to think about positive ways of living with animal companions. Here we will briefly outline two of these: Favre’s idea of “living property” and Donaldson and Kymlicka’s account of companion animal citizens.
Companion animals as living property

As we’ve already noted, in most countries, companion animals are legal property. However, in general, people treat their animal companions as much more than mere property. Research suggests that owners are highly attached to their companions, and invest significant resources in taking care of them. Companion animals now support a massive industry—estimated to be worth $58.51 billion in the US alone in 2014—producing tailor-made feed, litter, and accessories, and supplying services such as boarding, veterinary care, and grooming (APPA 2014).

For these reasons, it’s sometimes argued that companion animals are more like family members than property (e.g., Milligan 2009; Milligan 2010)—a view reflected, as pointed out earlier in this paper, by the responses of US dog and cat owners in surveys. Perhaps the most natural comparison within the family is between companion animals and human children. Burgess-Jackson (1998), for instance, argues that people have similar duties to the animals they take into their homes as they do their own children, because they have (normally) chosen to bring vulnerable, sentient beings into relations of dependence with them.

Yet this family framework fits very awkwardly with the idea of companion animals as property, since, as noted above, we cannot own, buy, or sell our family members. Favre (2010) proposes that we can think of companion animals as both family members and property by considering animals to fall into a new category of what he calls “living property.” Living property is still property; it can be kept, owned, and used. However, it also has its own interests, and should therefore be assigned some legal
rights—for instance, access to sufficient space, protection from harm, and appropriate care.

The owners of animal companions, Favre suggests, should have similar legal responsibilities to meet their animals’ basic needs as parents do their own children. This means that “the rights of owners will have to be limited to some degree to accommodate some of the interests that their property asserts against them”; that those who don’t own companion animals will still have some duties towards other people’s animal companions; and that companion animals will have some rights themselves (Favre 2010: 1053). As Smith (2012: 85) notes, in this proposal Favre takes advantage of a distinction between legal title and equitable title. Someone with legal title has control of the property, but someone with equitable title should benefit from it; the titleholder (in this case, the human owner) has a legal duty to take the interests of the beneficiary (the owned animal companion) into account.

Favre’s framework, in contrast with Francione’s, is built on ethical foundations that allow for the possibility that “positive human communities can include animals that are owned and used by humans” (Favre 2010: 1023). Both ownership and use, though, are constrained by the interests of the animals concerned. Companion animals have a distinct relationship with those who own them, and this relationship generates special responsibilities of provision and protection, some aspects of which should be governed by law.

*Companion animals as citizens*

Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) propose that we understand companion animals within
the framework of citizenship theory. Here, companion animals are best thought of as citizens, while wild animals have territorial sovereignty, and “liminal” animals (such as feral animals and those wild animals that live in urban areas) should be thought of as denizens. Donaldson and Kymlicka argue that since companion animals (and domesticated animals more generally) have been brought into our society, and don’t have other possible forms of existence, we should include them in our social and political arrangements “on fair terms” (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011: 101). Citizenship, they argue, is the appropriate social and political framework for companion animals: they should be granted residency and their interests should count in determining the public good.

While Donaldson & Kymlicka certainly agree that companion animals’ interests should be represented in the law and that owners have special responsibilities to their companions, their claims are far more ambitious and controversial than Favre’s. Rather than drawing primarily on the family as a model, Donaldson and Kymlicka turn instead to disability theories of citizenship.

Typically, citizenship is thought to require reflective agency, where agents are expected not only to comply with laws and social norms but to be able to understand and deliberate about them. Donaldson and Kymlicka deny that this conception of citizenship is adequate in the case of either humans or animals. Rather, what is crucial to citizenship is that agents have a “subjective good”—that is, that they can have good or bad experiences such as pain, frustration, pleasure, and excitement—and are able to communicate that good. They argue that, “Domesticated animals may not reflect on the good, but they have a good—interests, preferences, desires—and an ability to act, or
communicate, in order to achieve their good” (p. 112). Since animals have goods—for instance, in the case of dogs, the desire for space to run and play—the key goal is to find a way in which these goods can meaningfully enter the political process. This is where Donaldson and Kymlicka make the crucial link to human disabilities. As with some disabled human beings, nonhuman agents require intermediaries to contribute to social and political decision-making (a process that, drawing on disability theory, Donaldson and Kymlicka call “dependent agency”). And as beings with subjective goods, they should be provided with such support, so that their needs and interests can be better understood and incorporated into democratic decision-making processes.

Donaldson and Kymlicka’s framework, then, looks very different from both Francione’s and Favre’s, and entails the recognition that companion animals have certain positive rights as co-citizens, as well as basic rights not to be harmed. Their citizenship framework has implications for a wide range of ethical issues raised by companion animals: selective breeding, acquisition, feeding, training, neutering, convenience surgeries such as declawing, exercise, medical care, relinquishment, and euthanasia (see Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011 for more discussion).

However, keeping companion animals raises ethical issues that go beyond the moral significance of the animals themselves, the special obligations we (as individuals or as a society) may have towards them, and the ethical and legal frameworks through which they are understood. Companion animals also have much broader and (it’s often argued) negative social and environmental impacts in terms of resource use, pollution, and impacts on wildlife. These impacts raise questions about how and whether we should keep animal companions—not because the companion animal relationship is intrinsically
wrong, but because in practice companion animals have negative environmental impacts that we should attempt to reduce or eliminate.

5. Environmental impacts of companion animals

In 2014, the Guardian published a story entitled “Are pets bad for the environment?” which made a series of claims about the negative impacts of companion animals on resource use and the environment. According to the author, Erik Assardourian of the Worldwatch Institute, “Two German Shepherds use more resources just for their annual food needs than the average Bangladeshi uses each year in total.” Here we’ll consider some key claims of this kind, focusing first on worries about companion animals and resources, in particular food resources; second, on pollution and waste from feces; and third, worries about the impacts of companion animal predation on wildlife.

Food consumption

As the numbers of companion animals has grown, so, obviously, has their demand for food. As cats are obligate carnivores, and dog diets frequently contain high quantities of meat, companion animal meat and fish consumption has become an area of particular concern. This is both because companion animals might compete for food humans could eat, thus reducing total human food supply and/or accessibility to food for some human populations, and on the grounds that companion animal food may have significant negative impacts on the environment. (There are also concerns about the welfare of the animals used to produce cat and dog food, but we’ll put these on one side here).
Most cats and dogs in Western countries eat commercially produced food. The ingredients usually include animal products, water, binders and thickeners, preservatives, grains or starches, animal meals (see below), and species-specific nutrients (such as taurine in the case of cats). In *Time to eat the dog? The real guide to sustainable living*, Brenda and Robert Vale (2009) tried to calculate the environmental cost of feeding pets of different sizes in terms of their “eco footprints”—the amount of land that would be needed to support them. They concluded, for instance, that a big dog like a German shepherd would need the equivalent of 1.1 acres of land a year to supply it with food; while a cat had a lower (but still fairly substantial) eco-footprint of 0.15 hectares.

However, as the Vales note in passing, these calculations may be somewhat misleading, as few of the meat products in commercial cat and dog food come from animals kept for the purpose of feeding companion animals. Commercial dog and cat food generally contains secondary meat from the human food chain, including remains from mechanical deboning (Nestle and Nesheim 2010); animal by-products, such as brains and beaks, which are not widely eaten in Western countries; and rendered animal meals. Rendered animal meals may include 4D meat (classified as being from animals that were dead, dying, diseased, or disabled at the time they were inspected), used cooking oil, and expired meat from retail sources, which are ground, heated, sterilized, and dehydrated to kill viruses and bacteria. Rendered protein meal provides 5-40% of the protein and fats in most commercial cat and dog foods (Aldrich 2013).

Many of these ingredients are not intended for human consumption, and few of them are normally part of the human food supply. So they don’t seem to raise direct concerns about competition or price pressure for human food resources, and they also
raise fewer environmental concerns than if the meat was from animals kept for this purpose. In fact, The National Renderers Association (n.d.) in the USA claims that rendering performs an important environmental function by “recycling animals and inedible materials” into usable commodities—11 billion pounds of reclaimed animal fat annually.

However, this isn’t the whole story. Fish-based dog and cat foods include not only fish by-products but whole fish, especially anchovies, herring, mackerel, and sardines (Nestle & Nesheim 2010). These pelagic fish are an important protein source in many developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, and are also widely used in aquaculture. So, their use in animal feed may directly reduce availability to local fishing communities who rely on small pelagic fish for protein, and may also, indirectly, be a factor constraining the growth of global farmed salmon production (DeSilva & Turchini 2008). In addition, while small and medium-sized pelagic fish such as anchovy and mackerel have generally been regarded as having more sustainable populations than other large ocean fish (such as tuna), concerns have been expressed about overfishing, especially since the populations of these pelagic fish are both highly variable and unstable (Freon et al. 2005).

The growth in the market for ultra-premium dog and cat food also raises questions here. Some owners don’t want to feed their companions rendered meals, animal by-products, and other substances that they would not eat themselves, especially if they suspect the ingredients threaten their animal companions’ health. So instead they choose ultra-premium commercial dog and cat food, or make their own food, using meat and fish of a quality they would be willing to eat themselves.
How far this “ultra-premium” demand, and the use of whole fish, impacts on human food resources and the environment is very difficult to judge. In absolute terms, there is “enough food in the world today for everyone to have the nourishment necessary for a healthy and productive life” (WFP 2014). But there are still significant limitations in access to food, and even those with sufficient access to food can’t always afford it. There is also a problem with wasting food, in production, transportation, and in homes. Moreover, human populations are growing, and climate change may impact on future food security (Wheeler & von Braun 2013). So even if there is no absolute shortage of food, some individuals and communities, now and in the future, will not have enough; and dog and cat food, especially when ultra-premium or hand-made, may have an impact on global food supply and/or prices. Cat and dog food that includes high quality meat rather than rendered meals may also exact higher environmental as well as human costs, although the environmental (if not the human) costs may be offset if the animals used for meat are kept “organically”.

*Excretion*

One area in which cats and dogs present significant environmental problems is in terms of excretion, though these concerns vary to some degree between cats and dogs.

Indoor cats present a problem because they need litter trays, and the production of most litters has negative environmental impacts. Traditionally, and still popularly, cat litter is made from strip-mined and processed bentonite clay or fuller’s earth. Reclamation and re-vegetation of these strip-mined sites has been difficult to achieve (Schuman 1999). Silica for silica gel litter may also be mined in damaging ways; and
even more recent “environmentally friendly” litters made from reclaimed sawdust, corn, wheat, and recycled paper require processing and transportation that have environmental costs.

Disposal of both cat and dog waste is a yet more significant problem. Cat feces in particular are a potential source of zoonotic disease. Most problematic is *Toxoplasma gondii*, which can infect humans, and may well also have played a role in fatal outbreaks of toxoplasmosis in threatened southern sea otters off California (Conrad et al. 2005). When cats defecate outdoors, toxoplasmosis remains in the soil and can be washed out in rainwater; so outdoor disposal of feces is not recommended. Toxoplasmosis is also not destroyed by normal sewage treatment. This means that both flushing and composting of indoor cat feces is environmentally problematic. The alternative is to seal it in plastic and send it to landfill. But this is, obviously, also environmentally problematic, and prevents even biodegradable litter from decomposing as intended. So, cat feces appear to pose an environmental choice between the potential spreading of zoonotic disease or the creation of a significant waste burden.

Dog feces does not carry *Toxoplasma gondii* (although it does carry worms) and for this reason can, in principle, be flushed or digested in a small dog waste disposal system. But in practice, many owners don’t dispose of dog feces safely—or pick it up at all—creating both a health hazard and a public nuisance.

Cat and dog feces thus present some risks to human health, and in some cases also to the health of wildlife populations. These concerns alone, though, given that there are so many other vectors of disease, don’t seem significant enough to suggest that we should no longer keep companion animals; in addition, the challenges posed by companion
animal excretion may be amenable to technological solutions. In contrast, the final issue we’ll consider here—predation—seems to be more environmentally significant, and much less amenable to technological solutions.

_Companion animal predation_

The most significant environmental problem widely associated with companion animals is predation on wildlife. There’s considerable research evidence to suggest that dogs can be effective predators; for instance, they harass and hunt rabbits, squirrels, deer, kit foxes, and wild turkeys in the USA (Young et al. 2011) and beach-nesting birds and koalas in Australia (Lunney et al. 2007; Williams et al. 2009). However, there are far fewer free-roaming owned or feral dogs than cats in Western industrialized societies, and cats are a much bigger predation concern. So, we will focus here on companion cats with outdoor access.

Chasing, pouncing, and hunting behavior is normal for cats. One study in Georgia, USA, using “kitty cams” found that 44% of owned cats with outdoor access actively engaged in hunting (Loyd et al. 2013). Cats’ predatory behavior kills significant numbers of small mammals (in particular mice and rabbits), birds, and lizards (see, for instance, Woods, McDonald & Harris 2003) and causes alarm and disturbance to other wildlife.

The main ethical concerns raised by cat predation are, first, the suffering and death of individual wild animals, and, second, the potential impact on environmental values caused by cat predation in wild ecosystems and on threatened species. Ethical perspectives that place particular value on subjective animal experience are likely to view
cat predation as significantly problematic because of the fear, pain, and suffering it causes (on some views, death may also be of concern, independently of suffering). From these perspectives, it’s the negative experiences of prey animals, not the value of the species to which they belong that is directly ethically relevant; what matters is that cats increase suffering and death in the world. (It’s sometimes argued, though, that cats mostly take the “doomed surplus” (Smith, 2009)—wildlife that would not survive anyway—and thereby don’t, in practice, actually increase total suffering.)

From more holistic perspectives in environmental ethics—ones that emphasize the value of species and of healthy, functioning ecosystems—cat predation may also be perceived as ethically problematic. While a cat catching a common grackle, for instance, may not be of much concern, stalking an endangered sandpiper would be highly problematic. Where cats have been introduced to oceanic islands with endemic and vulnerable populations, predation has had major effects (Nogales et al 2004); this is also true where cats are located close to endangered species of ground-nesting birds or rodents. It’s less clear how to assess cats’ ecological effects elsewhere. Suburban environments, for instance, can be key stopping places for migratory bird populations vulnerable to cats (Jessup 2004; Lepczyk et al. 2010; Longcore, Rich, & Sullivan, 2009). But on the other hand, many of these places have already undergone major ecological changes to create the suburbs in the first place (Dickman 2009).

Cat predation thus appears problematic for different reasons. But there are also potentially significant ethical concerns in keeping cats away from wildlife. If subjective experience matters ethically, the subjective experiences of cats—not just their prey—must matter as well. But the only effective way to keep owned cats away from wildlife is
to confine them indoors, and this may have significant experiential welfare impacts, at least in terms of depriving cats of positive experiences they otherwise would have had (see Palmer and Sandoe [2014] for further discussion). And there are even fewer options for cats who lack homes and are unlikely to find them. The only way to separate unowned cats, especially feral cats, from wildlife is likely by killing them. This obviously raises a further set of complex ethical issues.

The predatory activity of cats—especially where threatened species are involved—raises extremely difficult ethical questions. It brings together—and into conflict—ethical concerns about subjective animal welfare, the value of animal lives, and more holistic environmental values in a context where many people have very deeply held attachments and commitments. Heated debate about this issue is unlikely to be resolved very soon.

6. In conclusion
The widespread practice of keeping animals as companions generates a range of ethical questions and concerns, only some of which we have been able to tackle here. One main concern is that keeping animals as companions is fundamentally unethical, because it is based on a relationship of dependence and vulnerability. Another important concern is that companion animals have a negative impact on resource availability and the environment. Yet despite these very different ethical concerns, the practice of keeping companion animals is growing and globalizing: between 2002 and 2012 there was an estimated 34% average combined increase in dog and cat ownership in Russia, Mexico, the Philippines, China, and Brazil (USDA 2013). These significant increases are likely to
exacerbate existing ethical concerns. And while citizenship proposals such as Donaldson and Kymlicka’s may help address ethical worries about animal domination and animal property, they don’t obviously ease (and may exacerbate) environmental concerns. Given all these conflicting factors, we predict that companion animals will be a growing area of research—and of concern—in environmental ethics in the near future.

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