Relations and Moral Obligations towards Other Animals

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ABSTRACT

Relational accounts acknowledge and emphasise the intersubjective nature of selfhood and argue that focusing solely on the capacities of animals cannot account for all moral obligations towards them. My argument is concerned with the move from the premise of intersubjectivity to differential positive duties. Relationality here functions as a means of differentiating and refining our positive duties towards some animals, but this refinement often also functions as an exclusion of others, e.g. in the differential treatment of domesticated and wild animals. A similar danger lies in diminishing human moral obligation by arguing for accepting some cases of suffering and death as unavoidable tragedies. I argue that the debate about the nature and scope of our relational duties towards other animals can profit from the relational ethics of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Buber and Levinas develop relational accounts, in which the fundamental ethical element is not knowledge of the capacities of the other but rather the encounter, out of which moral selfhood emerges. By applying Buber and Levinas we can refine the way relationality is used in animal ethics today without dismissing our positive duties towards individual animals, in the wild or otherwise.

Keywords: Buber, Levinas, ethics, animal ethics, responsibility, obligation, suffering, encounter, relational ethics, animals in the wild.

One reason why the problem of wild animals is such a challenge to animal ethics today is because it points directly at the core question of not only animal ethics but ethics in general: what are our moral obligations towards the other? The case of wild animals is where many common moral intuitions seem to cluster around a set of seemingly unsolvable problems: respecting sovereignty and autonomy seems to clash with duties of care and beneficence while these in turn raise concerns about human fallibility.

An influential approach to the problem of wild animals is one that recognizes the importance of relations. While there is a wide variety of relational accounts, many acknowledge and emphasize the intersubjective

nature of selfhood and argue that focusing solely on the capacities of the other cannot account for all moral obligations towards her. Both negative duties of respecting the basic rights of others and positive duties, which take into account the nature and history of existing relations are understood as a matter of the intersubjective recognition of selfhood.

Relational accounts of human moral obligations towards other animals thus share the premise that considering the capabilities of an animal is not sufficient for determining the right attitude or action towards an animal other. Using terms of interests or rights, taking into account the capacities of animals is necessary – whether an entity is sentient, has a subjective first-person view on life, a sense of self etc. are all directly relevant to the question what can make her life go better or worse. Relations, especially with human moral agents add to these considerations, they are not rivals to the capacities account (Palmer 2010). In the following I shall take this comprehensive and complementary moral approach as my starting point.

Relations between agents and patients can cover anything from individual companionship to membership in a common polity. Proponents argue that while capacity oriented accounts can and must be used for establishing our basic duties towards other animals, they are not capable of accounting for specific, additional duties, which emerge out of relations with them. Individual animals (including humans) are not only "members of a species, but they are also members of an interspecies community" (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 97) and taking the social and historical context of our group memberships and relations into account is required for justice. An example is Donaldson and Kymlicka's account of our positive duties to domesticated animals: we have to take the history of that relation into account, which has bred certain traits into animals "which increase both their dependency on humans and their utility for humans, with no attention to the animals' own interests" (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 75). Clare Palmer argues that humans can have special obligations on the basis of "human/animal entanglements, histories, and shared institutional frameworks where humans are, or have been, either responsible for harms to animals or for the generation of particular vulnerabilities in animals" (Palmer 2010, 89). Such histories found positive duties to assist other animals but without these we have no such obligation (ibid.).

My argument is concerned with the move from the premise of intersubjectivity to differential positive duties on the basis of our relations to other animals. Relationality here functions as a means of differentiating and refining our positive duties towards some animals but this refinement often also functions as an exclusion of others. The paradigmatic example for this is the different moral treatment of domesticated and wild animals

with the endorsement of *laissez-faire* attitudes in varying degrees when it comes to the latter. At times, these choices are based on legitimate concerns such as fallibility, i.e. the concern that even with the best intentions, human agency is fallible and we may end up causing more harm than that we are trying to combat. The result of such considerations is that our duties of non-maleficence take precedence over duties of beneficence and that in cases of potential conflict, we should not intervene to assist wild animals in need.

The different moral intuitions underlying negative and positive duties reflect our limited resources as moral-problem-solvers:

> In general, our negative obligations to others (not to kill, confine, torture, enslave them, or rob them of the necessities of life) are "compossible" – that is, these obligations do not conflict with one another. […] Many positive obligations, on the other hand, are not compossible. Assisting one animal in relation to one potential harm is likely to compete with other ways of helping other animals. (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 162)

It is here that discretion is often put forward as the solution. We do not seem to have developed a moral framework in which we can satisfactorily respond to the problem of wild animals so that in many cases

> It is also argued that equal consideration does not generate an obligation to benefit wild animals by rescuing them from harm (as some have supposed); our general obligation to benefit those in need is discretionary in the sense that we may choose, among the many worthy causes, which ones to support. (DeGrazia 1999, 124)

The problem I see here is that the move from a relational or intersubjective foundation of ethics to a differentiated account of our specific obligations can lead to too wide and arbitrary a use of discretion. Often this goes together with a sort of moral dismissal of what may be due to others as in cases such as wild animals in what I shall call grandmother ethics.

In the following I shall argue that the debate around the source, nature and scope of our relational duties towards other animals in general and wild animals in particular can profit from the relational ethics of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. This is because in Buber and Levinas we have two examples of precisely the move from the relation or encounter as the fundamental ethical category to moral obligations without an acceptance of discretion as a legitimate solution.

It may be surprising that I turn to Buber and Levinas because neither is free of anthropocentrism and Levinas is in fact notorious for his persistent agnosticism regarding the place of other animals in ethics. Nevertheless,

by turning to Buber and Levinas I think that we can refine the way relations are used in animal ethics today. A relational account of our obligations towards animal others informed by them would recognize the most fundamental relationship of being face to face, of knowing of the other, as sufficient to ground many (but not all) positive duties. Some duties would remain bound more formally to the relationship; e.g. in cases of obligations based on explicit commitments or contracts, when there is a certain compensation to be made, etc. In other cases however, while many relational accounts run the danger of dismissing some positive duties we have towards individuals, Buber and Levinas' ethics of relation allow us to counter the danger of partiality and do more justice to our moral obligations towards the individual animal.

1. The emergence of responsibility in the encounter

Buber and Levinas both develop relational accounts, in which the fundamental ethical element is not knowledge of the capacities of the other but rather the encounter. As such they both recognize that the relation is central for moral and political considerations but not in the traditional liberal sense that my concern for the other limits my freedom to act as I wish and thereby draws the line of my own (private) actions. Rather the relation is where both moral agent and moral patient emerge as such and it is thereby foundational for ethics.

Martin Buber considers relations to be central because of their fundamental role in selfhood. For Buber, there is no I outside of a relation. This goes beyond the role of intersubjectivity in the recognition of the subjectivity of the other. For Buber the relation is the beginning and the fundament of ethics: "[…] in the beginning was the relation" (Buber 1970, 69). He rejects the idea of the atomic I that exists independently and then gets into a relation – rather it is being in a relation that is constitutive of selfhood.

In Buber's moral ontology there are two modes of being in a relation: the I-It and the I-You. The realm of the I-It is that of goal-directed attitudes, judgements and actions, of perception, emotion, imagination, volition, sensation and cognition (Buber 1970, 54). In an I-It relation, the I experiences the other as an It, i.e., it experiences, perceives and recognizes aspects of the other as an object. Ethically, this corresponds to encountering the other as a being with properties and capacities.

The I-You on the other hand is the realm of encounter and relation and can be situated in three spheres – in life with nature, with human beings and with "spiritual beings" (*geistige Wesenheiten*) (Buber 1970, 56). What

is meant by the latter sphere is not that of spirits and esoteric phantasm but the area of human creativity; most paradigmatically art.

Being the I of an I-You relation does not depend on the qualities – in animal ethics we can think of capabilities – of the other. It is rather my saying of You, of being in the ethical stance that makes an I out of me and this in turn is what makes a moral agent of me:

> Only in the relation is he my You, outside the relation between us this You does not exist. […] Neither is my You identical with the It of the other nor is his You identical with my I. What I owe the person of the other is that I have this You; but my I – which should be understood as the I of this I-You relation – I owe to the saying of you, not to the person to whom I say You. (Buber 1963, 596)

What characterizes this encounter and distinguishes it from the experience of the other as an It is that here one is faced with a moral demand, one is addressed by the other or by the situation. Experiencing the other or the situation in the realm of the I-It is not amoral but it is the saying of You, the attentiveness towards what the situation demands of me as a moral agent is what turns me into one. The sphere of the I-It is also ethically relevant – it is here that the agent has to take into account the properties of the actors and elements of the situation when deciding how to act. Applied to animal ethics this means that for moral agency the relation is a condition sine qua non, without which the person does not exist as a moral agent and similarly taking into account the capacities of the other is a condition, without which she cannot act. Both relation and capacities are necessary conditions, neither is sufficient by itself.

Levinas, Buber's junior by nearly thirty years, was inspired and influenced by him. Like Buber, Levinas considers relations to be foundational for human selfhood and moral agency. The human emerges from the encounter with the Other: "It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (Levinas 1991, 213). As in Buber then, it is not that I am first faced with a knowledge of properties but rather in the face-to-face with the other I have the opportunity of opening to the ethical [1].

[1] When asked if animals have a face Levinas falters: "You ask at what moment one becomes a face. I do not know at what moment the human appears but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being. This is my principal thesis. A being is something that is attached to being, to its own being. That is Darwin's idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics" (Levinas 1988, 172).

Levinas dismisses the attempt to understand the Other on the basis of their capacities as a presumption. The Other cannot be grasped by her qualities because she is "infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign" (Levinas 1991, 194) – it is not possible to understand her. In Buberian language, my access to the Other is not exhausted by experiencing her in an I-It relation and in attempting to do so we leave out something necessary for Ethics. Rather the recognition of the Face comes before and is constitutive of humanity and more specifically of moral agency. For Levinas, Ethics not Ontology is first philosophy, because Ethics breaks with Being; the encounter with the Other is the transcendent origin of my responsibility.

Hilary Putnam clarifies the Levinasian understanding of the moral agent by applying the term "mensch", a thick description of what a human being is as a moral agent:

> […] for Levinas, to be a human being in the normative sense (to be what Jews call a *mensch*) involves recognizing that I am commanded to say *hineni* – Here I am. […] If you have to ask, "*Why* should I put myself out for him/her?" you are not yet *human*. (Putnam 2008, 75)

In a similar vein, Buber writes of "being there" as the moral stance, the state of being open and attentive to the moral demand that founds my responsibility in the given situation. The attentiveness to recognize and the readiness to respond to the need of the other is a positive duty that adds to negative duties of abstaining from harming her. Thus it is a stronger moral demand; not simply a letting be but an active being, an active doing:

> If I withstand, if I move towards it, if I encounter it genuinely, i.e., with the verity of my whole *Wesen* (being), then, and only then am I "actually" there. […] If I am not really there, then I am guilty. […] The original state of being guilty is the Remaining-by-oneself. [2]

Being in a relation is thus the origin of my responsibility and obligation towards the other, without it being evident what this responsibility and obligation require me to do in a particular case. General principles and ready-made answers may not only not help me but positively hinder me from responding to the moral demand of the situation, if they hold me back from saying *hineni*, being at the service of the other and being there (Buber [1939] 2002, 136). While this may sound like a version of the discretionary argument, in fact it runs counter to it, for here the agent is not absolved of her responsibility towards the other. Where she withholds herself, she moves out of the sphere of ethics.

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[2] Buber, Martin. "Das Problem des Menschen". In *Werke. Erster Band: Schriften zur Philosophie*, translated by B.I.S., 363. München - Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider Verlag.

In these fundamental elements of their moral philosophies, Levinas and Buber are in agreement with each other [3]. They appear to be precursors of contemporary animal ethicists who point to inter-subjective recognition as foundational for our (negative) duties. Donaldson and Kymlicka for example write:

> We believe that respecting inviolability is, first and foremost, a process of intersubjective recognition – that is, the first question is simply whether there is a "subject" there, whether there is "someone home". This process of intersubjective recognition precedes any attempt to enumerate his or her capacities or interests. (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 30)

However, while Buber and Levinas thus share the starting point of relational animal ethicist, they come to different conclusions. A common move in contemporary relational animal ethics is to move from the role of relationality to differential rights and duties such as membership rights. While the family member, the companion, the friend, or even the compatriot can be situated in more or less central in concentric circles of moral obligation in relational theories, for Buber and Levinas the recognition of the fundamental nature of the relation for ethics has no such implication. Here we have a relational ethics, which does not refer to membership rights and where the relationship I have with the other, while it is foundational for my responsibility and obligation, is not foundational for what is due to the other.

In other words, what Buber and Levinas' accounts enable us to do is to use the premise of inter-subjectivity not to found special or additional obligations based on the relation between the agent and the patient but rather to bring out the moral agent as such in the encounter. We are constituted as an agent in the moment of the encounter and the relation is constitutive of our moral selfhood because we are faced with the demand of the situation and we become moral agents if we respond to that demand. If our moral selfhood and agency were constituted only in an encounter with the friend or the neighbor, co-citizen or in other forms of shared membership relations, we would still be far off from the moral encounter. We would in fact still be un-faced by the Other or in Buber's words, we would still be *with us*, remaining with ourselves, we would not have gone ourselves to meet the needy other.

This should not be understood as an unrealistically demanding, almost religious call to the moral agent. It rather touches upon something very elementary: the moral situation only comes about when I respond to the

[3] For a detailed discussion of their convergence and divergence compare Atterton, Peter, Matthew Calarco, and Maurice Friedman, eds. 2004. *Levinas & Buber. Dialogue and Difference*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

demand of the situation and that demand is to be found in my saying of You, in my letting myself be addressed by the other in her need, prior to investigating her properties. A narrower relational account of positive duties loses sight of this claim about moral agency.

The link between the emergence of the moral agent and the moral demand is the moral obligation or the responsibility as the readiness to respond to that demand. Both Buber and Levinas consider intersubjectivity as central in becoming a moral agent in that the encounter gives me infinite responsibility. It is infinite because I am called, I am addressed by the situation and the call is infinite whereas I am not. This I think is the central corrective that the debate about relationality in animal ethics can gain from Buber and Levinas: the relation, the encounter is where Ethics and the moral agent emerge from and what this emergences does is to make the moral agent fully responsible: the agent is at the service of the other, in Buber's terms she is "there" with her whole being, in Levinas' terms she comes *après vous*. That she is not able to respond to that demand fully in her human finiteness does not diminish the obligation.

2. Grandmother ethics

Arguing by using Buber and Levinas, the discretionary argument in the problem of wild animals runs the danger of pausing ethics by making a distinction between our duties of non-maleficence and beneficence and restricting the scope of the latter by relations rather than by the need of the moral patient. Another common objection to considering humans as fully obligated to respond to the problem of animals in the wild revolves around practicability, i.e. the difficulty and perhaps even impossibility of coming up with a system of action that would enable non-human animals in the wild to avoid suffering and death. Related to this objection is a common reminder that we should accept some cases of suffering and/or death as facts of life, rather than seeing them as a moral tragedy. Donaldson and Kymlicka for example write:

> This is not just because the scientific task of solving the problem of death seems enormous, but also because theories of justice must operate within certain defined parameters, including the acceptance that we are embodied, mortal beings. We need to start with an acceptance of human nature as it is (or might plausibly become), not a conception which is no longer recognizably human. If in the future we become "post-human", then we will need a new theory of justice to deal with the new beings we have become. But for now, we need a theory of justice for us as we are.

> Similarly, we need a theory of justice for wild animals as they are. Viewed this way, predation amongst wild animals, who are outside the circumstances of justice with respect to one another's flourishing, should be seen, not as the kind of tragedy we should seek to overcome, but as the kind of tragedy we should accept as a parameter of their lives for the foreseeable future (Hailwood 2012: 312). (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2013, 159)

This is an important point and often appears in a strand of moral reasoning, which is quite widespread in folk philosophy and which I shall refer to as "grandmother ethics" [4]. According to this stance there are certain facts of life like the inevitability of suffering and death. It is a sign of (moral) immaturity and naiveté not to come to terms with these and instead argue that there should be certain mechanisms to keep these aspects of life in check as much as possible. Certain things, grandmothers argue, are the way they are and to rebel, protest or try to fight the inevitable is immature and pointless. Wild animal suffering seems to be just such a case. The little fish is doomed to be eaten by the big fish; this is the case in nature outside the sphere of justice, and is even required by balance, by the way life just is. Attempting to find alternative ways is not only difficult, but positively dangerous, as it could endanger the perfect equilibrium, which supports life [5].

The analogy to the appearance of grandmother ethics in politics is perhaps one possible way to evaluate it. The view that the world is the stage for immense suffering and death may be shown to be an empirical fact but it is by no means clear why this fact should lead moral agents to accept it as a necessity or as a positive good. One example of alternative ways of reacting to these facts of life comes from the Buddhist tradition, which also takes the vast amount of suffering on earth as its starting point. Its response is that the morally worthy way of life is the way of life that reduces suffering and goes on to explicate what such a life consists in. A very different tradition likewise takes as its starting point the fact of life that humans are rivals for resources, recognition and safety. Hobbesian contractarianism and its successors take this fact of life to be a given and argue for the need to

[4] Donaldson and Kymlicka make it very clear that their group-differentiated model does not exclude non-members from the scope of justice or political decision making (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; 2013). However in the theory of justice for wild animals a plea for accepting the suffering of animals as a tragedy to be accepted rather than one to be overcome, does not appear in the same way in the case of domesticated and liminal animals.

[5] For some, this stance corresponds to the environmentalist position, in particular to adherents of Aldo Leopold's Land Ethics or Arne Naess' Deep Ecology. Mark Sagoff (1984) argues that the gap between animal liberation advocates, who put individual moral patients in the centre of their ethics and environmental ethicists, who argue for a holistic position, which puts the biotic community in the centre of their ethics, is insurmountable.

overcome this state of affairs by organizing communities under a common contract, aiming to protect citizens from each other and guaranteeing basic rights. While these approaches also focus more on negative duties, grandmother ethics seem to be neither a necessary response to the facts-of-life nor is it what has historically been put forward and politically developed into various forms of state and society.

Are these examples enough for a dismissal of the crux of the grandmother ethics? Is our resistance against what the facts-of-life dictate in fact misguided? Is a life that embraces the facts-of-life as both unavoidable and exhilarating a life better lived? Robert Nozick's thought experiment of the experience machine for example aims to demonstrate that many humans consider a life sheltered from unwanted experiences not preferable to what they consider to be a life more authentic in the reality of the experience, of the person we are and an unsimulated world, i.e. in touch with the facts-of-life [6].

Turning to Buber and Levinas might also help us here. Authenticity or an acceptance of the facts of life, as highly we might value them, seems to be a good that may or may not be selected as the ultimate one by the moral agent herself. It does not rattle at the responsibility that she has towards the moral patient in need, as it is the encounter with the patient that both founds and specifies her obligation towards the other. What precisely follows as a guide to action is left unspecified but in contrast to a relativisation or dismissal of moral obligation, a relational ethics informed by Buber and Levinas would remain committed to considering the situation as belonging to the realms of ethics and in cases where no assistance is possible, as a moral tragedy.

3. Considerations for animal ethics

A relational animal ethics informed by a Buberian and Levinasian understanding of moral obligation together with a cautious approach to grandmother ethics would not agree with other relational theories that we have no or few positive duties towards animals in the wild. Even if we agree that as moral agents our membership to the human community informs

[6] This interpretation of Nozick's experience machine does not go uncontested. In a recent paper, De Brigard developed an alternative explanation of the effect, arguing that the intuition to remain in the virtual world or to opt for the real one, depends not so much on an independent evaluation of the two, but rather on an aversion to abandon the life one had before being offered the choice or conversely a psychological bias on retaining the *status quo* (De Brigard 2010).

some of our moral obligations depending on the history of relationships and entanglements (Palmer 2010, 89), taking into account these elements help specify what our duties are in a given situation, not whether or not we have them.

Palmer uses the example of kittens who were left in a dumpster by a pedigree-valuing cat breeder. She argues that because "kittens are members of a breed and species from which humans derive benefit", the person who finds these kittens has a weak moral reason to assist: "[…] the kittens have been harmed by a human and have been created, more generally, within a human-directed institutional framework that brings gains to people through making vulnerable animals". According to Palmer, our responsibility as moral agents to assist other animals in need in this case comes from two sources: firstly, we profit by the traditional use of cat-production and secondly, we share a species with the harmer of the kittens. Outside of these relations, we have no duties to assist.

In a relational framework informed by Buber however, our responsibility comes from our capability of responding to the moral demand of this situation, we are obligated to help because we know of the plight of the kittens and we are receptive to the moral demand. Our membership to the species of the culprit is irrelevant. A hypothetical alien in the same situation must be, in Palmer's account, under no obligation to assist the kittens, even if it were a moral agent superior to humans. Dishing out rights and responsibilities according to group membership might be (as yet) unavoidable in some contexts like citizenship but in this case such considerations seem to lead us to neglect the individuality of beings, not only as moral agents but also as moral patients.

Levinas and Buber's accounts help us to distinguish between the descriptive and normative elements of relationality. As diverse relational accounts are, they seem to agree that humans are embedded in a network of relations, and are not the atomistic, calculating moral accountants which utilitarians are sometimes accused of imagining. Relationality is constitutive of our selfhood, both as agents and patients. However, arguing with Levinas and Buber we must be wary of taking the implications of descriptive relationality too far into our normative theories. Relationality founds our special responsibility in special cases but it also cuts into our responsibility in other, more impersonal cases. This means that the very choice of which relationships are nurtured to what degree (in as much as we have control over this) becomes itself a moral question. Having children, having many children are accordingly not only personal life choices, they are also moral questions by not only by adding to the number of beings who consume the resources of the earth but also by creating responsibilities and obligations

that take away from our individual capacities to honor other moral obligations.

Relations are constitutive of moral selfhood and agency in a very fundamental way. But they are not constitutive of what is due to the moral patient. The moral demand emanating from the moral patient can be boundless. Relations are among the practical factors that determine which of the infinity of demands can be met. They might add to the already existing factors, e.g. in a case of two comparable demands, the fact that I have a relationship with one, be it only the fact that I know of her, adds to my obligation but it doesn't found it. In Buberian terms I remain guilty for not answering to the other. But what makes all the difference is whether this is recognised as a moral tragedy or dismissed from the moral sphere as a fact of life to be accepted; whether the moral agent is exempt of responsibility or incapable of answering the demand. If we opt for the language of grandmother ethics, we run the risk of stopping doing ethics.

4. Open questions

The benefit of bringing Buber and Levinas into the discussion about relational ethics in general and in animal ethics in particular is that they help us to distinguish between the descriptive claim that relations are foundational for human selfhood and agency and the normative claim that certain obligations exist only in the context of certain relations. While both claims are well-founded, I take the case of animal suffering in the wild to show that relations may add to obligations but not take away from them.

Some of these relational obligations are straightforward: if I am in the relation of contract, say, then I committed myself to certain obligations and it is morally wrong of me to neglect or dismiss these. If as the member of a certain race, sex, species or polity I profit from a history of the exploitation of others, this adds to my positive obligations towards them, as in cases of compensation or positive discrimination. If I am responsible for the existence of certain beings, this likewise gives me certain obligations than towards other beings. Relations in short can be the foundation of obligations both voluntary and involuntary, both explicitly undertaken and implicitly.

However, there is a danger in relational ethics, of making arbitrary qualities relevant beyond such cases of obligation. And, since we have limited resources, is it not morally questionable to favor the lesser interests of the other in a (close) relation to the more fundamental interests of others we know not of? Has not the socio-political history of achievements had in

its core precisely the overcoming of chauvinism, favoritism, nepotism for the sake of a more egalitarian distribution of resources and justice?

The application of relational ethics to the problem of animals in the wild thus opens two questions not just about this particular problem but ethics in general. Firstly, is not cold impartiality far too valuable an attainment to risk, both in ethics and in politics? What Buberian and Levinasian accounts of moral obligation seem to indicate is that we need to fine-tune our moral sensibilities to respond to both elements of the moral situation: the moral demand emanating from the need of the other as the source of my moral agency and cold impartiality to counteract the danger of arbitrary moral responses.

Secondly, if we agree that relations are constitutive of selfhood and that we have limited resources in how effective a moral agent we can become, then what sort of relations should be created becomes a moral question itself. Ought we to have children as this keeps us from responding to other moral demands? Is it permissible to cultivate exclusive friendships or partnerships, which leave us little room to respond to the needs of strangers?

5. Conclusion

Relational approaches in animal ethics are varied and propose very different ideas about the ways relations are relevant to the question of human obligations towards other animals in general and animals in the wild in particular. While Donaldson and Kymlicka for example, develop a group-differentiated account, which includes a theory of negative and positive obligations for animals in the wild, for Palmer "What goes on in the wild is not our moral business" (Palmer 2011). My concern in this paper was with two elements of relational ethics, which appear in different forms in relational accounts as different as these two examples: the tendency to attribute moral obligation in a differentiated way depending on group-memberships of both the moral agents and patients and the persuasiveness of what I call grandmother ethics. The result of these elements is a dismissal in varying degrees of human moral responsibility towards some groups or individuals of animals according to their group membership.

I have argued that both relations and capacities are necessary to determine our moral obligations towards other animals. In doing so, we need to distinguish the political question of how resources and duties are allocated from the question of what the rights are – and capacity accounts remain central in determining these (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). The capacities of a moral patient remain necessary for establishing what state of affairs

is preferable for her life to go better rather than worse, even if we may not always be in the position to find moral agents whom we could call to duty. Relations are part of a moral situation but they are not constitutive of it in the sense that a moral demand exists only if there is an agent with a relationship that it can latch onto. Taking relations as the starting point of a description of a situation with a moral demand puts not the patient who is the object of possible harm or benefice in the center of the moral situation but the moral agent. But the demand on the moral agent and therefore the real obligation she has emanates from the situation in general and the patient in particular. In a moral situation with a recognizable moral demand therefore, the moral obligation of the agent cannot be argued away by recourse to (special) relations.

Rather such considerations can only add to morally relevant factors in certain cases as in obligations which have been undertaken, a history of exploitation or compensation, or e.g. in an extreme life-boat situation, where a choice between a companion animal and a hitherto unknown wild animal is required. In contrast a relational approach informed by Buber and Levinas remains patient-centred and gives precedence to the need of the patient rather than to the relationship between the agent and the patient.

Whether we subscribe to the view that the suffering of animals in the wild is a moral tragedy or a fact of life to be accepted might seem to be a matter of definition which makes no real difference. However I believe that grandmother ethics involves the danger of neglect and dismissal. It can support the decision not to channel resources and research into the possibilities of making the lives of animals in the wild go better, which is in itself an open moral question. We should be wary of the danger that the "facts of life" as they are now, should restrict and impoverish our moral outlook. Our responsibility, to stay with Buber and Levinas, remains infinite.

How can this really help us in animal ethics? My answer is that it helps us to differentiate more clearly between the source of our responsibility and the content of moral principles. Relational ethics often tries to find answers to normative questions on what to do on the relations and relations are indeed an element of the moral situation that have to be taken into account. However, relations in Buber and Levinas' account are the source of our responsibility without answering the question of what this responsibility requires in a given particular case. What they do to our debate in animal ethics is to provide a warning of the danger of confusing relations in these two functions and thereby of excluding some animals in practice from the moral sphere. They show that referring to relations can make sense only in certain respects and that the encounter is misused if the resulting normative stance is one of diminished responsibility.

My conclusion is in fact quite modest: relational theories that argue from intersubjectivity to discretion are not without alternatives and Buber and Levinas make strong cases for not confusing the source of our moral responsibility with the normative question of what we should do. A critique of grandmother ethics also goes against the discretionary argument, which might tend to lead to a premature dismissal of the problem of wild animals. Neither of these are sufficient to justify such a dismissal or even the neglect of this problem.

Siding with Buber and Levinas we can argue that the problem of wild animals is in fact central not only in animal ethics but in ethics precisely because here we are faced with whatever responsibility humans have as informed moral agents in the face of a tragedy that seems insurmountable. Taking on this task might not only enable us to make progress in this moral tragedy but it also promises to be rewarding in that it will help us refine our wider moral positions.

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